

Annual Review 2023-2024



*Launch of the Yorkshire Dales Explorer Manchester Victoria 08.06.24
(photo Owain Roberts)*

***Working for an integrated and
seamless public transport network
across the North West of England***

TravelWatch NorthWest Annual Review 2023-2024

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Chair's Foreword

'Change' is the keyword of the moment – or so it would seem. This was certainly the case when it was instrumental in securing an overwhelming Labour victory in the recent general election.

In the world of public transport there is a general understanding that present systems are inadequate, especially among those who actively subscribe to the desired achievement of an eco-friendly world. During the last 12 months there have been significant developments (not always for the good – see below), whilst the new government is determined that there will be more changes in the world of public transport (and elsewhere) as soon as possible.

Starting on a positive note, there are reports that bus patronage has significantly increased in most areas as a result of the £2 single fare system. Sometimes overwhelmingly so, as the Stagecoach service 555 (from Lancaster to Kendal and then on to Keswick) has shown. Operators across the country will surely realise that it is better to have buses full of £2'ers that carry a select few who previously paid much higher prices.

Many years ago it was possible to travel by bus from Clitheroe to the Hodder Valley villages of Dunsop Bridge, Newton and Slaidburn by bus. Eventually the LCC sponsored bus service suddenly disappeared, leaving residents without cars totally stranded. It is good to see that the service, which continues onwards to Settle and Horton in Ribblesdale, has been re-instated – and long may it last.

In the 'big city' the Bee Network continues to spread its wings, with more local areas seeing the bright yellow buses. As with many such activities there have been teething problems but the future should be more stable than the initial 'honey'moon. It is also pleasing to see that Greater Manchester is planning extensions to the successful Metrolink network, with an extension from East Didsbury to Stockport and the hopeful introduction of tram-trains.

At the same time Merseyside residents are enjoying the brand-new Stadler level-access trains and, hopefully, will be looking forward to the creation of a Merseyside-operated bus network which will replace the commercial systems of Arriva, Stagecoach and others. Locally determined bus routes must always be an improvement on those operated for purely commercial reasons.

Having 'fixed it' for Greater Manchester and Merseyside the bus transport needs of the residents of the sprawling counties of Cheshire, Lancashire and Cumbria will need to be addressed. Perhaps a more difficult nut to crack.

During the last twelve months change for the region's railway operation has regrettably been for the worse, rather than the better. In addition to numerous breakdowns among ancient rolling stock the whole network has been seriously affected by the programme of systematic industrial warfare initiated by the rail unions.

On Northern Trains' patch to the west of the Pennines Sunday does not formally exist. In order to provide a Sunday service the train staffs are invited to work, but cannot be required to do so. Despite the obvious attraction of being paid overtime rates for Sunday work many staff have chosen to fill their Sundays in other ways, hence the widespread cancellation or severely

reduced workings on many routes. This, and the ever ongoing campaign for more pay by members of RMT and ASLEF, manifested by countless strike days affecting the whole network, creates a negative view of the railway system as a whole among existing and would-be users.

Talking about would-be users, it beggars belief that a plan is being hatched to discourage train travel. It would seem that the 'spur of the moment' decision by our ex PM, Rishi Sunak, to insist on the abandonment of the HS2 section north of Birmingham without any discussion with affected potential operators and users, will result in there being less capacity (17% fewer seats) north of Birmingham towards Manchester than there is currently.

The rumoured bright idea is that fares on the affected stretch of track will be inflated to the extent that enough intending passengers will be deterred by the fares on offer. The Guardian (23/07/24) reported *'the DfT would need to assess options to manage demand by incentivising people to travel at different times or not to travel by rail'*. It is incredible that so-called transport professionals in the DfT (assuming there are such people in those ivory towers) would ever consider talking down a modern form of mass transit. Exactly the opposite has happened in recent years in Spain, where high speed lines have been built and fares pitched at affordable levels with the result that users are flocking to the system. Spain clearly looks upon its railway provision as a 'public good' rather than one where commercial profit is essential.

'ere up north' the wheels of progress turn inexorably slowly. The magnificent scheme to link Liverpool, Manchester, Leeds and the east coast with a modern railway fit for purpose is yet to be achieved. However, there is now some hope as the indomitable 'backside kickers', Burnham and Rotherham, are actively urging progress, as they realise that, as in Spain, the provision of an efficient, fit for purpose railway link (useable by both passengers and freight) is crucial if the economic aims of the Northern Powerhouse are to be achieved. People still around in the 2040s and maybe as late as the 2050s could perhaps have the opportunity to enjoy a brand new high-speed ride from Liverpool, via a newly created underground station in Manchester, to ride on the long awaited Leeds trams. Was that a flying pig I saw just then?

In the meantime transport planners need to focus their minds on the concept of complete public transport integration. If it can be done in London (and in countless cities abroad) it must be possible in northern cities and even shire counties. A recent repeat survey by TWNW has highlighted the continuing separation between bus and train operations. Train station screens or posters rarely refer to adjacent bus services just as bus timetables do not mention onward train travel. My local bus arrives at Clitheroe station just late enough to prevent an onward train user to purchase a ticket for the instantly departing train.

I must however close this intro on positive notes. After plenty of encouragement by the hill walking fraternity and the professional understanding by Northern Trains' managers the *Yorkshire Dales Explorer* train became a reality in early June. Running from Rochdale, via Manchester, Bolton, Blackburn and Clitheroe to Ribbleshead, the twice each Saturday service provides opportunities for people to enjoy the great outdoors

(whatever the weather) and let the train take the transport strain. This is a welcome alternative to the original Sunday *Dales Rail* trains which failed due to those issues over rest-day working.

In stark contrast to the world of buses, train operators are so lucky in that there are countless groups of people across the patch who continue to voluntarily care for their local stations. A neat and tidy rural or small-town station gives the right impression to the train passenger. A clean and tidy, punctual train then becomes the icing on the cake.

Last, but not least, TravelWatch NorthWest members and friends acknowledge with thanks the positive involvement in conferences and other activities of public transport professionals across the North West region. I personally add my thanks to John Moorhouse, our secretary, and board members who have contributed to the work of this organisation. The Community Room at Bolton station has provided a convenient welcoming base for our deliberations.

David J Butterworth
August 2024

1. Introduction & Background

1.1 TravelWatch NorthWest (TWNW) originated as the North West Public Transport Users Forum (NWPTUF). The NWPTUF was formed in October 2003 and its public name became TravelWatch NorthWest in 2006. It is an independent organisation representing all users of public transport in the North West. Membership is open to any not for profit organisation representing the interests of users or potential users of public transport. TravelWatch holds regular conferences open to the public at various locations in the North West that debate issues of interest and concern to public transport users who have the opportunity to contribute and raise their concerns. TravelWatch groups have also been established in other parts of the country.

1.2 TWNW's chief purpose is to influence, by research and campaigning, public transport policy in the North West always with passengers' interests foremost.

1.3 TWNW's mission statement is: -

Facilitating an integrated and seamless quality public transport network for North West England.

1.4 The vision of TWNW is to champion the interests of public transport users in the North West so the network can become: -

- Accessible to everyone
- Affordable and socially inclusive
- Available where and when it is needed
- Acceptable to all
- Attractive to users

1.5 The key objectives of TWNW are to: -

- Give users a platform to express their concerns and needs
- Promote the use of public transport in the North West
- Contribute to the development of regional transport strategies
- Produce influential best practice reports based on evidence

1.6 TWNW has established a good relationship with a wide range of stakeholders and has addressed several key issues within the transport agenda in the region. It is increasingly being seen as an important sounding board for consultation on regional transport policies.

1.7 TravelWatch NorthWest was formally incorporated as a Community Interest Company in March 2007. The Company is made up of members who each agree to a liability of £1 and is run by a Board of Directors (***see Appendices A and C***).

2. Annual Review 2023/24

2.1 Conferences

2.1.1 TWNW held three conferences during the year as follows -

- Carnforth 20th June 2023
- Preston 17th October 2023
- Stockport 12th March 2024

2.1.2. The conference in Carnforth, kindly supported by Stagecoach Cumbria, Transport Focus and the Friends of the Settle Carlisle line was opened by the Mayor of Lancaster City, Cllr Roger Dennison and featured the following speakers –

- ***Tom Waterhouse, Operations Director, Stagecoach Cumbria.***
- ***David Beer, Transport Focus***
- ***Gerald Townson, Chair Bentham Line CRP***
- ***Jim Davies, Chair Lancaster Bus Users***
- ***Tim Owen, Chair & Dawn McGough, Manager, Cumbria CRP***

2.1.3 The conference in Preston, kindly hosted by Lancashire County Council and further supported by Cumbria LEP, concentrated on the theme “a better future for public transport”. The conference was opened by Cllr Scott Smith, Lead Member Highways and Active Travel Lancs CC, and speakers were –

- ***Andrew Varley, Public Transport Manager Lancashire CC.***
- ***Craig Alexander, Great British Railways Transition Team***
- ***Tony Miles, Railway Journalist***
- ***Owen Wilson, Transport for the North***
- ***Mark Barker, Rail Reform Group***

2.1.4 In Stockport we were fortunate to obtain generous support from TransPennine Express and again from Cumbria LEP. The conference was opened by the Mayor of Stockport, Cllr Graham Greenhalgh and speakers were –

- ***Alison Chew, Deputy Director of Bus, Transport for Greater Manchester***
- ***Chris Jackson, Managing Director, TransPennine Express***
- ***Robert Fickling, Rail Strategy Manager, Transport for Greater Manchester***
- ***Keith Whitmore, Chairman SE Manchester CRP***

2.2 Bus Services

2.2.1 In the Spring of 2023 we welcomed a Ministerial announcement about developing a plan to help the bus sector to a more sustainable footing, later in the year. A government plan to introduce a meaningful long term way of supporting buses seemed like good news against a background of declining services especially in rural areas. However it is not clear to what extent this has developed further.

2.2.2 We welcomed the £2 Flat fare initiative for buses throughout the country, launched towards the end of 2022, though not all operators took this up and we noted examples of poor publicity for the scheme. An announcement of extending the arrangements to 31st October 2023 and further beyond November 2023 with a price increase to £2.50 was good news. Even better was the decision to allay this and the cap remains at £2.00 until at least the end of 2024. Ridership is continuing to be buoyant, with noteworthy success in the Lake District.

Bus franchising

2.2.3 In January 2023 we were made aware of an announcement on the start of the franchising process in Greater Manchester. We supported the concept of franchising and indeed we feel there is need for wider enhanced public control of buses. Privatisation has not always worked in favour of the passenger. However, we acknowledge that a danger of franchising is parochialism fostered by politics.

2.2.4 Tranche 1 of the “Bee Network” covering Wigan, Bolton & Bury came into operation in September 2023. Tranche 2 - Oldham, Rochdale, with parts of Bury, Salford and north Manchester in March 2024. Tranche 2 was aimed to see more frequent and earlier and later services with a reversal of pre-franchise service reductions and plans developed to improve performance on the worst performing routes.

2.2.5 We have received reports of the Bee Network undergoing some teething difficulties, comprising a shortage of adequately trained drivers, old age and breaking down of buses transferred from operators. At our conference in Stockport in March 2024 we were assured that whilst it would take time to resolve these initial quality issues with buses and drivers there would be more new buses and an increased focus on reliability.

2.2.6 In the summer of 2023 Liverpool City Region Combined Authority consulted on bus franchising proposals in Merseyside. We responded broadly in favour. We look to franchising to bring about the following benefits for passengers -

- Integrated and multi operator ticketing, including the opportunity to break journeys with single journey legs and with a simpler and, in some cases, cheaper fares.
- Bus priority measures to improve journey times
- The ability to cross subsidise to maintain less used but socially essential routes
- A sea change in information provision – real time visual and audible information on buses, real time information at bus stations and stops.
- Improved procedures for passenger input including a properly publicised complaints procedure on buses and elsewhere (see below).
- Better more easily available advance information about bus fares
- Impartial Information offices at bus stations covering all operators.
- Making it much easier for **all** to travel by bus.

(Response available on our website www.travelwatch-northwest.org.uk)

2.2.7 Greater potential for local authorities to take to take more control over bus services has at the time of writing emerged in the new Labour government's Better Buses Bill. The bill aims to 'accelerate' the bus franchising process, allowing local leaders to take buses under public control faster. It would also remove the ban on setting up publicly owned bus companies and giving local leaders more control and flexibility over bus funding.

Bus Passenger Charters

2.2.8 We also commented in our response on a lack of reference to passenger representation in the Merseyside bus franchising consultation document. We felt that complaints procedures regarding buses in Merseyside could be better publicised. There should be accessible information for passengers on buses and elsewhere not only how to complain but also how to appeal if the complaint is not dealt with satisfactorily. We said that we would be very happy to contribute our experience in passenger representation and advise on complaints and redress matters.

2.2.9 It was pleasing therefore to be consulted by both Lancashire County Council (in November 2023) and Liverpool City Region Combined Authority (in April 2024) on their plans to introduce Bus Passenger Charters.

2.2.10 In both cases we stressed the need for clear procedures on how to complain. Advice on how to complain is vital and we emphasised that there should be accessible information for passengers on buses and elsewhere not only how to complain but also how and whom to appeal to if the complaint is not dealt with satisfactorily. One simple step would be to provide "how to comment/ complain" information on board buses and at bus stations.

(Responses available on our website www.travelwatch-northwest.org.uk)

Rural & other bus services

2.2.11 As referred to in para 2.2.7, following the examples of Manchester and Merseyside taking more local control and strategic co-ordinated planning of bus services, more similar attention will be welcomed to the rural areas of our region which have seen catastrophic decline in bus service provision over the years.

2.2.12 It is worth noting though that in mainly rural North Lancashire, there have been in recent years some shifts against this trend. Improved services by Kirkby Lonsdale coaches, subsidised by Lancs CC, now include a new service via Garstang to Knott End and through buses to Ingleton and Skipton, including an hourly Sunday bus from Lancaster to Kirkby Lonsdale. Stagecoach have also improved their services with expansion of their Lancaster to Keswick via Kendal service. It is also noteworthy that printed timetables have started to re-appear in this area with timetable racks at Lancaster bus station and on Kirkby Lonsdale coach services buses.

2.2.13 In the Garstang – Knott End case we did receive a concern about some reroutings in the Stakepool area of Pilling, affecting Knott End to Lancaster

services. In correspondence with Lancashire County Council, we did accept that overall, with the new Garstang link, a majority of passengers had benefited.

2.2.14 Another example has been the reinstatement in April 2024 of bus services in the Hodder valley by 21 Transport Ltd. This is a step in the right direction following the withdrawal of services on this corridor some years ago.

2.2.15 Changes to local government in Cumbria have given rise to splitting the county into two Unitary Authorities – Westmorland & Furness and Cumberland Councils. Transport for both Authorities is led by Westmorland & Furness Council which is welcome.

Lancashire County Council Bus Service Improvement Plan

2.2.16 We responded to consultation on this in April 2024 commenting on, inter alia –

- The need for improved advance information
- Real time information at bus stations and stops
- Need for integrated, multi operator and interavailable ticketing
- Better Integration with other modes e.g.rail.
- Bus Priority Measures
- Enhanced Passenger Engagement.

(Response available on our website www.travelwatch-west.org.uk)

2.3 Rail Matters

Operational issues

2.3.1 In May 2023, the Transport Secretary announced that TransPennine Express's (TPE) contract would not be renewed, bringing the company into operator of last resort (OLR) from 28 May 2023. The decision followed months of significant disruption and regular cancellations across TransPennine Express's network, resulting in a considerable decline in confidence by passengers.

2.3.2 Notwithstanding this move it was obvious there would be no quick fix to the deep seated problems. However the appointment later in 2023 of Chris Jackson as Managing Director has been a positive step and following a new agreement of Rest Day working and changes in the December timetable the situation improved considerably.

2.3.3 Northern and Avanti West Coast services have had their problems. Regarding the former, the Morecambe line and Cumbria service saw cancellations and disruption with, reportedly, staff absenteeism playing a part. Avanti has been severely criticised by Transport for the North amongst others for unreliability. The continuation of Sundays as an optional working day for Northern train crews has meant high rates of train cancellations on that day hitting leisure travel. At the time of writing this does not appear to have been resolved.

2.3.4 An ongoing issue with Avanti West Coast in our region has been the termination of Anglo Scottish services at Preston because of disruption further North. This has been linked to the customary train crew change at Preston and route knowledge constraints. Thus, even if the disruption is north of Carlisle, Lancaster, Oxenholme, Penrith as well as Carlisle, are left out in the cold with the inexorable replacement bus/coach. We are hopeful that changes to train crew depot arrangements will help matters.

Ticket Office closures

2.3.5 In July 2023 proposals emerged on a national basis for a swingeing closure of most station ticket offices throughout England (not Scotland or Wales!). The reasons given were a significant reduction of purchase at ticket offices as passengers had been moving to alternative ways of buying train tickets, such as through on line systems or from ticket machines at stations.

2.3.6 Each operator set out their plans in their own consultation document with a miserly 3 week period (subsequently extended) to respond to Transport Focus. We cast grave doubts on the legality of the process. We presumed that the consultation was founded on the basis that complete closure of ticket offices was deemed by the Secretary of State to be a minor modification. We considered that the scale of these proposals should in no way constitute a minor modification. Our view was and is that there should have been a formal statutory closure procedure for each station on a case by case basis.

2.3.7 In addition we noted significant anomalies in the proposals with, for example, a startling contrast in the approach of Avanti compared with train operators in the South/South East. No less than 100% of Avanti operated stations in our region were proposed for ticket office closure compared with an average of 26% for operators in the South/ South East. In our own region many ticket offices smaller or much smaller than the to be closed Manchester Piccadilly would remain open, including Manchester Victoria and Manchester Oxford Road (both rather less used than Piccadilly!).

2.3.8 Whilst accepting the fall in numbers of tickets sold at offices, we pointed out that ticket offices did much more than simply sell tickets. They gave information, and public feedback invariably pointed to passengers appreciating the ticket office because they could get help and advice there. There are also issues with Ticket Vending Machines – they sell a limited range of tickets and for other than for simple journeys they are complicated to use.

2.3.9 After the close of the consultation period on 1st September 2023 Transport Focus had received no less than 750,000 objections to the proposals! The watchdog published its report on 31st October 2023 in which it fundamentally objected “to all the current proposals to close ticket offices” Astonishingly, following Transport Focus’ report the proposals were abandoned completely. What a deplorable waste of time and money!

Fares

2.3.10 The complexity of the rail fares system and anomalies entailed is notorious. In April 2024, TWNW Chairman David Butterworth produced a report on the subject. Entitled “Train Ticket Minefield” it demonstrated that whereas on routes served by a single train operator there is just one single off-peak fare for all journeys, this is not the case on a number of routes which are served by more than one operator. On these routes it is common practice for each operator to set its own fares, which may differ from those of other operators.

2.3.11 A number of routes were examined –

- Stockport to Manchester Piccadilly, served by no less than six train operators, each of which have a (differing) set fare for the single leg.
- Manchester Airport to Manchester Piccadilly served by three operators
- Lancaster to Preston also served by three operators
- Manchester to Sheffield three operators again
- Crewe to Stockport again three operators

In all cases David found that the disparity in the level of fares for each operator was at best confusing and in worst case scenarios could lead to the imposition of penalty fares.

2.3.12 We understand that this plethora of fares arises because of the requirements monitored by the Competition and Markets Authority whose duty is to ensure healthy competition between companies in the UK for the benefit of companies, customers and the economy. In the examples given in the report this has created a baffled customer base and a disincentive to passengers.

(Report available on our website www.travelwatch-west.org.uk)

Great British Railways

2.3.13 On the surface there appears to have been very slow progress in the creation of this body, designed to give more strategic control to our railway system. A presentation from the GBRTT to our conference in Preston in October 2023 did not give much enlightenment on organisational details.

2.3.14 In April 2024 the Labour Party produced its plan for the future of the railways – “Getting Britain Moving”. The changes envisaged, including the confirmation of Great British Railways and the taking back of franchises to public control as their contracts expire, would hopefully work in passengers’ interests. Now Labour is in power we look forward to further developments with interest. The King’s Speech broadly confirmed Labour’s plans.

2.3.15 We trust that the new structure will ensure greater co-operation between operators on the same line of route especially when disruption occurs. In the past there have been frequent instances on the many occasions when TPE Anglo Scottish services have been cancelled of passengers not

being allowed to use alternative Avanti services. And of course there are the fare anomalies as referred to in our “Train Ticket Minefield “report referred to above (paragraphs 2.3.10 to 2.3.12).

Engineering work disruption

2.3.16 One area that does cry out for greater co-ordination is the arrangements for passenger journeys when disruption resulting from engineering work takes place. We have previously drawn attention to fragmented arrangements for the management of rail replacement services, with each TOC organising its own coaches, leading to sub-optimal use of the coaches and duplication of personnel. This is another area where we would expect the creation of GBR to pave the way for one overall organisation to provide the coordinating staff and manage the whole rail replacement operation.

2.3.17 We continue to campaign for leisure travel to take a higher priority when rail engineering work and associated disruption to passengers' journeys is planned. In the North West we have what is probably the foremost area of scenic beauty in England – the Lake District National Park - recently given international recognition, quite rightly, as a world heritage site. Its main rail link between Oxenholme and Windermere sadly does not cater well for the crowds of tourists visiting the Park, in spite of the best efforts of the local user group and community rail partnership.

2.3.18 In addition this part of the world has been and still is bedevilled by engineering work on the West Coast Main Line, especially at holiday times. Given that most passengers on feeder WCML and other local services are primarily leisure travellers this can hit very hard. Bank Holiday weekends are a favourite target and the scale of disruption for passengers visiting the Lake District can be shocking.

2.3.19 We have attended meetings with rail operators and Network Rail on WCML engineering possessions going forward. In spite of assurances that we have received about minimising bank holiday disruption there appears to be little prospect of this in future planning.

2.3.20 In the not too distant future there will be a big programme of work modernising the northern part of the WCML - whatever happens with HS2 (see below). This will include resignalling and track and Overhead Line renewals. An early example of this will be a major bridge replacement across the M6 in January 2026. With this and other work programmes we advocate the need to keep passengers on trains as much as possible during any disruption.

2.3.21 We have in the past emphasised and reiterated that research by Transport Focus has shown that wherever possible passengers are prepared to accept a longer journey time by staying on a train to avoid using a replacement bus or coach. In recent times, TOCs have seemed reluctant to use diversionary rail routes to circumvent line blockages. We would like to see

a combination of using the Settle Carlisle line (and other diversionary routes) and minimising distances of road replacement services. This will no doubt have repercussions for train crew knowledge/ costs but the minimisation of inconvenience, indeed vexation, for the passenger cannot be overemphasised.

Electrification

2.3.22 It is a long, long time ago but the “Northern Sparks” report of 2015 which recommended a programme of electrification priorities is still worthwhile reading. For example, the short but vital branch line between Oxenholme to Windermere should have been electrified years ago, and indeed it was assumed it would be completed in that 2015 report. However there has been typical obfuscation and no progress made.

2.3.23 Progress has, though, been made on rail electrification between Wigan and Bolton. One unfortunate element of the work was the demolition and replacement of a key road bridge in Hindley to allow space for the overhead catenary. This resulted in a severe downside for local businesses and it was regrettable that track lowering had been rejected. Otherwise this is essentially good news though progress has been slow and is still ongoing at the time of writing.

2.3.24 The TransPennine Route Upgrade, which is going to take “years” (2035?) to complete, is planned to -

- Electrify the whole route between Manchester and York via Huddersfield and Leeds
- Deliver more frequent, faster train journeys between key towns and cities with six fast trains per hour between Leeds and Manchester
- Reduce journey times between Manchester – Leeds and York
- Give greener, cleaner travel on low emission trains.
- Provide a better travel experience through improved, more accessible stations
- Install a new digital signalling system
- Double the number of tracks from two to four between Huddersfield and Dewsbury

2.3.25 There will of course be significant disruption to passengers’ journeys at times when the work is taking place and we urge TPE and other operators to minimise passenger inconvenience as much as possible.

2.3.26 The case for electrifying the short branch from Lancaster to Morecambe has surely been boosted by plans for the Eden North development in Morecambe. At the time of writing we are unaware of planned enhancements to rail and public transport to bring potentially thousands of people to this considerable venture. Given that car users will be discouraged by the lack of on-site parking, the need for much improved public transport is paramount.

High Speed Rail/ Northern Powerhouse Rail

2.3.27 We have in the past always supported the concept of High Speed Rail, though with reservations about its sub-optimal effects on our region and integration with conventional services.

2.3.28 Cancellation of the Manchester link of HS2 by the then Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak, in October 2023 was a blow to many. Promises were made to reinvest the money saved in transport projects across the country including the northern city regions.

2.3.29 A key related element in our region is of course Northern Powerhouse Rail (NPR). We had hoped for the Manchester HS2 line to link up with NPR ideally involving an underground station in Manchester. Ideally such a station would enable connections between the two High Speed services as well enabling through running.

2.3.30 At the time of writing the new Labour government has apparently decided not to reinstate the Crewe – Manchester HS2 rail link, but will promote West – East rail connectivity across the North of England. This would include “new stations at Manchester Piccadilly and Manchester Airport to ensure vastly improved rail services between Liverpool and Manchester and through to West Yorkshire.”

2.3.31 The fortunes and ambitions of Northern Powerhouse Rail do seem to ebb and flow and it seems that serving Bradford on the Liverpool to Leeds route is back on the agenda. Whatever does happen, timescales are a cause for concern. Here in the North West and wider North we have waited long for radical improvements to rail infrastructure. Now time horizons appear to be alarmingly stretched for these improvements to the 2040s. There is a lack of urgency for what are vital projects benefiting local economies and the environment.

2.3.32 At the time of writing there are further concerns about the commitment of the new Labour government to transport infrastructure spending. These include the Old Oak Common – Euston link and, in our part of the country, several schemes listed as part of the previous government's Network North package of transport upgrades, which were to be funded by scrapping phase 2a and 2b of HS2.

Blackburn - Hellifield line

2.3.33 The summer of 2023 saw the suspension of the Sunday DalesRail service from Lancashire stations (starting at Blackpool) to Carlisle via the Settle Carlisle, following several cancellations of this service, down mainly to train crew availability.

2.3.34 The summer of 2024 has seen the introduction of a regular Saturday service between Manchester and Ribbleshead, constituting a de facto replacement for Dalesrail. The service, called the Yorkshire Dales Explorer,

comprises two return trips and is planned to run year round. Not only does this open up the opportunity for the huge numbers of people in the North West to visit the Dales and the iconic Settle Carlisle Railway, it also gives those in Settle and other parts of North Yorkshire a direct link with the Manchester conurbation.

2.3.35 On the subject of new links and services it is disappointing that the Restoring your Railway scheme has been dropped by the new Labour government on cost saving grounds. The Ribbleshead service in no small part owes its existence to this initiative. In this country we do not appear to appreciate the importance of planning railway investment schemes well ahead and looking forward to at least 20/30 years.

Cheshire Best Kept Stations (CBKS)

2.3.36 TOWNW was once more asked to carry out the judging of the 10 large stations in Cheshire as part of the CBKS exercise in the summer of 2023 and again in 2024. The winner of the “Chris Dale TravelWatch Award”, named in memory of our late Chairman was Macclesfield in 2023. Stations in this category in 2024 are – Birchwood, Chester, Crewe, Macclesfield, Manchester Airport, Runcorn, Stalybridge, Stockport, Warrington Bank Quay and Warrington Central.

2.4 Integration

2.4.1 TOWNW recognises the importance of multi modal integration - essential to encourage shift from cars - and we have continually emphasised our approach over the years. There should be a commitment to integration with other modes, both in timetable planning and ticketing, as on the continent, but in this country this is not a funding priority. In the absence of a proper policy on integration car owners should be encouraged to use park and ride or rail for the majority of their journeys.

2.4.2 In 2016, TOWNW had carried out a survey of bus/rail integration at 42 mainly medium sized stations in the NorthWest. During 2023 we felt it would be opportune to repeat the exercise at the same stations to ascertain if any changes had been made (both positive and negative) to the provision of guidance for passengers when changing from train to bus at rail stations.

2.4.3 The survey of stations was delayed and the report published in June 2024. In the report we concluded that at most of the stations we visited there **was** information to be found about where to catch a bus but in general where information was lacking there had been little change since 2016.

2.4.4 We acknowledged that there had been some material improvements -

- Some Avanti stations had seen the introduction of a digital screen in the concourse showing real time bus departure information from nearby bus stops.
- New interchanges such as Bolton and improved bus stations such as Wigan had been built with better facilities including real time bus running information.

2.4.5 We again recommended that train & station operators and where appropriate Local Transport Authorities, including Combined Authorities and Unitary Authorities undertake a comprehensive review of all stations in our region to assess the provision of this information. This review should aspire to maximising as far as possible the accessibility, standard and appropriateness of information at stations relating to the availability and location of onward bus service facilities.

2.4.6 Following publication of the report we were pleased to learn of improvements to signage at Accrington rail and bus stations instigated by Community Rail Lancashire. Burnley Manchester Road and Burnley Central stations are in the CRPs sights at the time of writing and we wish them well. Burnley Central, described as “a very unwelcoming station” by our surveyor is very much in need of attention

Manchester – Birmingham Travel Options

2.4.7 Following a kind donation from the former TravelWatch West Midlands following its winding up, we commissioned the TAS Partnership to undertake a comparative survey of travel options between Manchester and Birmingham – Coach, Rail and Private Car. Coach travel was perceived as a relatively uncommon choice for such journeys.

2.4.8 The draft report is being considered at the time of writing. Indications are that coach travel is indeed not considered sufficiently as a travel option between Manchester and Birmingham, yet is often the cheapest option compared to Rail and Private Car. There are several reasons for this and improved marketing, passenger facilities and more appropriate departure/arrival times would help to close the gap.

2.5 TWNW Grant Funding

2.5.1 In 2023, as a way of encouraging improved public transport passenger amenities, we decided to set up a small fund aimed at financially assisting projects that bring benefit to passengers both using and considering use of public transport. Grants were limited to a maximum of £1000 and the sums have been designed, inter alia, to help bridge funding gaps in order to help bring projects to final achievement

2.5.2 Thus far the beneficiaries have been -

- Kents Station Library - £800 towards passenger information improvements.
- Friends of Prestbury station - £500 towards improved signage
- Lancaster & Skipton Rail User Group - £500 towards trialling a refreshment trolley service on the Bentham line.
- Lancaster District Bus Users Group - £700 towards a “Days Out by Bus from Lancaster” Promotional Leaflet.
- The Settle Carlisle Railway Development Company - £1000 towards the purchase of new refreshment trolleys.

2.6 Light Rail

2.6.1 We are generally supportive of Light Rail and, undoubtedly, Manchester Metrolink is a success story. There are further possibilities of expansion and we particularly welcome plans for an extension to Stockport. In overall terms we would counsel that, going forward, better cognisance is taken of maintaining the passenger facility advantages of the national rail network as far as possible.

2.6.2 On the aspect of integration with Metrolink there are continuing inadequacies with through ticketing between the light rail system and other public transport modes as we have pointed out above. Hopefully the expansion of the Greater Manchester Bee Network with its emphasis on improved integration will provide the impetus to resolve some of these longstanding issues.

2.6.3 The Blackpool Tramway extension to Blackpool North station was scheduled to open in 2019. However the completion of the project was held up by building demolition and new construction of a hotel close to Blackpool North station and it did not open until2024!

2.7 Ferries

2.7.1 In June 2023 we responded to consultation from developers about the potential effects of the development of the three wind farms in the Irish Sea – Morecambe, Morgan and Mona on ferry shipping routes between North West England and the Isle of Man.

2.7.2 Supporting our colleagues in the Isle of Man we said that the impact of the 3 windfarms - taken together – would be of utmost concern to passengers using the Isle of Man Steam Packet services. Those concerns included the danger of shipping having to take longer routes with the consequent cost and time penalties; the difficulties that could arise in poor weather when existing weather diversionary routes were no longer available because of the Windfarm developments; and the damage to the Isle of Man shipping trade if the service as a result became more unreliable, less punctual and more costly.

2.7.3 In June 2024 we were made aware of an issue with connecting bus services to/from the new IOM Ferry Terminal in Liverpool. It had been anticipated that a connecting bus service would be provided to Lime Street Station. However we were informed that this had not happened. There is a service to Liverpool ONE bus station has been put in place, but this would be of no benefit for passengers wishing to connect with trains.

2.7.4 We agreed that this was an unsatisfactory situation and have made representations to the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority

2.7.5 TravelWatch Isle of Man is regrettably no longer functioning. We pay tribute to that group for the many successes on behalf of passengers that it

has helped to achieved since its inception in 2007 under its Chairman Brendan O’Friel.

2.8 Consultations

- *Irish Sea Offshore wind developments (Morecambe & Morgan 2022 & June 2023)* - see paragraphs 2.6.1 & 2.6.2 above.
- *Closure of station ticket offices (Northern Trains, Avanti West Coast, TransPennine Express 21.07.23)* – see paragraphs 2.3.5 – 2.3.9 above.
- *Bus Franchising (Liverpool City Region Combined Authority 4.8.23)* - see paragraph 2.2.6 above).
- *Bus Passenger Charter (Lancashire County Council 3.11.23)* – see paragraphs 2.2.9 & 2.2.10 above.
- *Places for Everyone (Manchester Combined Authority 6.1.23)* – we emphasised the vital necessity of centring developments on brown field sites, taking account of sustainable access by public transport.
- *Bus Passenger Charter (Liverpool City Region 19.04.24)* – see paragraphs 2.2.8 - 2.2.10 above
- *Bus Service Improvement Plan (Lancashire County Council 26.04.24)* – see paragraph 2.2.16.

3. Plans for 2024/26

3.1 In June 2024 we held a conference in Blackburn Cathedral. The conference was opened by the Mayor of Blackburn with Darwen, Councillor Brian Taylor and speakers were -

- **Mark Osborne, Regional Growth Manager, Avanti West Coast**
- **Danielle Lahan, Customer Account Manager, Network Rail**
- **Paul Turner, Commercial Director, TransDev Blazefield**
- **Katie Douglas, Accessibility & Inclusion Officer, Community Rail Lancashire**
- **John Carey, Dales & Bowland Community Transport.**

3.2 We are planning two further conferences in the current financial year – Warrington in October and possibly Liverpool in March 2025. As customary we intend to feature presentations and discussion on relevant transport issues and of course opportunities will be presented for users to make representations on any public transport issue.

3.3 TWNW is committed to work in partnership with other user bodies including Transport Focus, Bus Users UK, the Campaign for Better Transport, Railfuture, Community Rail Partnerships and passenger users’ groups.

3.4 The following areas of work are being considered for 2025/2026 -

- Bus services - information and quality, accessibility including bus stops.

- Monitoring of the rail passenger experience including on train, station facilities and modal integration, engineering disruption (including the quality of replacement road services) and connections at interchanges.
- Continued liaison with all rail operators and Network Rail, including specific monitoring of changes/improvements to rail services.
- The availability and accuracy of journey planning and multi modal information on websites and on the ground.
- Community Transport

3.5 TOWNW will respond to consultation on public transport developments on behalf of users. In determining its responses TOWNW has the capacity to conduct independent passenger-based research as appropriate.

3.6 TOWNW will continue to be well placed to feed user input into consultations on regional and local government planning issues. TOWNW will continue to strive to bring forward passenger concerns to the attention of the appropriate providers and procurers and to achieve improvements on their behalf

Appendix A Administration

TravelWatch NorthWest (TWNW) is managed by a Board of Directors. The Board considers topical issues for debate at conferences and manages actions arising from each conference. It also considers and determines the issues that the company should consider.

TWNW is chaired by **David Butterworth**. David is a retired senior teacher in secondary education, living in Clitheroe. He was secretary of Ribble Valley Rail, which successfully campaigned over a period of eight years for the re-introduction in 1994 of a passenger service on the Ribble Valley Line. For many years he was a member of the North West TUCC, later the Rail Passengers Committee. For a while David was national treasurer for the Railway Development Society (now RailFuture) and he is a board member of the Settle-Carlisle Railway Development Company. From its inception he has been an active director of TWNW.

The Company Secretary is **John Moorhouse**. John was Secretary of the Rail Passengers Committee for North West England from 1985 until 2004. He is also a Director of the Settle-Carlisle Railway Development Company.

Roy Chapman acts as Advisory Assistant (Rail). Having spent some 37 years in the railway and tramway industries, including 15 years with Transport for Greater Manchester, he has considerable experience with transport management, customer service, community rail initiatives and consultancy.

Directors who served on the Board during 2023/24 –

David Butterworth
Malcolm Conway
David Culshaw
Colin Kennington
Richard Lysons
John Moorhouse

John Owen
Richard Rollins
Robert Talbot
Roma Patten
Tim Young

TravelWatch NorthWest is most grateful for the generous support it has received and receives from various sponsors as follows-

- Arriva NW, Avanti West Coast, Blackburn with Darwen Council, Blackpool Council, Blackpool Transport Services Ltd., Cumbria LEP, First TransPennine Express, First UK Bus, Foundation for Integrated Transport, Lancashire County Council, Merseytravel, Preston Bus, Stagecoach NW, Manchester & Merseyside, Northern Rail, TransDev Blazefield Ltd., Transport Focus, Transport for Greater Manchester.

Website – www.travelwatch-northwest.org.uk

Email - admin@travelwatch-northwest.org.uk **or** - johnamoorhouse@gmail.com

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/140883850225860/>

Appendix B Accounts 2023/24

DETAILED PROFIT AND LOSS ACCOUNT YEAR ENDED 31 MARCH 2024

	2024		2023
	£		£
TURNOVER	6146		3000
<i>COST OF SALES</i>			
Administration fees	0		0
Totals	0		0
GROSS PROFIT	6146		3000
<i>OVERHEADS</i>			
Travel and subsistence	468		67
Conferences & Meetings	1128		1286
Office costs	779		104
Accommodation	2916		2772
Insurance	246		241
Website/ web hosting	252		194
Grants scheme & donations	2850		0
Totals	8639		4664
	-2493		-1664
<i>OTHER OPERATING INCOME</i>			
Members income	730		705
Sundry donations	1660		1396
Totals		2390	2101
OPERATING PROFIT/LOSS		-103	437
Interest receivable		595	38
PROFIT/(LOSS) ON ORDINARY ACTIVITIES	492		475

Appendix C Membership (at September 2024)

Organisation/Name

Blackpool & Fylde Rail Users Association (RUA)
Chinley & Buxworth Transport Group
Cumbria Coast Rail Users Group (RUG)
Friends of Eccles Station
Friends of Reddish South Station
Friends of the Settle-Carlisle Line
Goyt Valley RUA
Lakes Line RUG
Lancaster & District Bus Users Group
Lancaster & Skipton RUG
Merseytravel
Mid Cheshire RUG
North Cheshire RUG
Ormskirk Preston Southport Travellers Association
Railfuture NW
Ribble Valley Rail
Skipton East Lancashire Rail Action Partnership
Support the Oldham Rochdale Line Association
Wirral Transport Users Association
Wrexham Bidston RUA
David Butterworth
Malcolm Conway
David Culshaw
Adrian Dunning
Hazel Ellis
Philip Harrison
Alan Hurst
Colin Kennington
Andrew MacFarlane
Brendan O'Friel
John Owen
Roma Patten
Malcolm Richardson
Ian Stuart
Ian Watson
Keith Whitmore
Tim Young
Tony Young