

Annual Review 2024-2025



Avanti Evero train passing Clitheroe on a proving run for Settle-Carlisle diversions (see paragraph 2.3.17).

Photo: David Butterworth

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

TravelWatch NorthWest Annual Review 2024-2025

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Chair's Foreword

Twelve months ago I commenced my annual report with the word '*Change*'. It was the keyword of the moment. A brand-new Labour government promised to remedy the public transport ills of the previous incumbents.

Twelve months on I have to question 'what has happened?' Yes, London transport providers gloat over the success of the Elizabeth Line which, if accounts are to be true, has passenger numbers which match more or less the whole of the rest of England! Because it was down in London, multi-millions were ploughed into a 'gold plated' scheme which has since proved to be money well spent.

At the same time the creation of HS2 trundles on. Fantastic structures at a fantastic price but still no absolute guarantee that the route will reach Euston, instead of being stranded miles away at Old Oak Common. The residents of Birmingham will be well served (in due course) by a super-high-speed railway (most of which will be through un-scenic tunnels) but many millions of would-be travellers in the north of England have will still be patiently waiting.

Messrs Burnham and Rotherham are doing sterling work as they bang the drum for the north. They insist, quite rightly, that the North West needs (even demands) the continuation of HS2 north of Birmingham to reach Manchester, whilst there needs to be a thoroughly modern railway linking Liverpool, Manchester Airport, Manchester city and settlements further east.

We applaud the good work being done in Yorkshire to create a more efficient trans-Pennine link, with additional tracks, new stations, electrification and, in effect, a brand-new Huddersfield station. However, apart from the recently electrified line between Manchester Victoria and Stalybridge, there is precious little for us to see under the label 'Northern Powerhouse Rail' at present.

Following on from the creation of the Bee Network in Greater Manchester, with its increasingly successful control of bus routes, timetables and fares, there is a determined intention to incorporate the web of railway routes across Manchester, together with the existing Metrolink network, into a region-wide public transport hub. Gone will be the days of separate payments for each individual section of a multi-modal journey. The key phrase will be '*swipe in – swipe out*', with a single charge being created for the whole journey. The recently unveiled master plan for further improvements in Greater Manchester, including a Metrolink extension to Stockport as well as better connections between Bolton, Bury and Rochdale, is welcomed. Speedy introduction, rather than the typical interminable wait, will gain extra Brownie Points – or should that be Burnham Points?

The creation of efficient public transport networks is happening in both Greater Manchester and the Liverpool City Region, but little is said about the long-term structure and efficiency of public transport in all the rest of the socially widely varied North West. At present the governing bodies within Cumbria, Lancashire, Cheshire and our part of Derbyshire have no direct legislative say in bus and train operations. Yes, there is some influence in those cases where bus services are individually financially supported, and

counties have officers who liaise with operators, but ultimately overall bus and train provision still remains with the relevant operators who determine timetables and fares.

In last year's report I mentioned the introduction of the maximum £2 fare on buses. This has now become £3 maximum per journey (a 50% increase in one fell-swoop) but at least this is a statement of support by the present government, clearly indicating that affordable bus fares are crucial to the lives of many people.

In many respects, people's opinion of public transport services is born out of their own experiences. When one has had a good journey it is positively accepted and quickly forgotten, in the knowledge that such an experience should be the norm. A journey with problems is rarely forgotten.

By way of example, along with TWNW Secretary, John Moorhouse, I was invited to go to Chester station to discuss alterations to passenger facilities at the station with representatives of Transport for Wales. The outward journey from Clitheroe – train to Manchester Victoria, followed by train to Chester – was uneventful and long-since forgotten. However, this was not the case on the journey home.

The journey back to 'Vic' was comfortable and on-time. Riding in the Class 195 train was a pleasant experience (in contrast to a train ride on the Ribble Valley Line – see below) and we arrived in Manchester on-time. I knew I would have to wait around 30 minutes for my train to Clitheroe, normally tolerable, except that during the journey from Chester I discovered that my Clitheroe train was cancelled. That then required a wait, not for 30 minutes but 90 minutes, at Manchester Victoria, a station now well known for its lack of customer facilities.

Victoria station may well have had an upgrade in recent years, primarily the construction of an arched roof to cover the Metrolink part of the station, together with a gateline and train running information. What was not on the 'improvements list' was comfortable waiting space for stranded passengers. In short, there is nothing! There are a few seats in the 'modernised' concourse and, likewise, a few seats on the platforms. Fine for a brief wait of 10 minutes, but clearly not for 90. Platform seats provide the added bonus of train engine noise and significant air pollution. I decided to employ Plan B.

My Plan B choice was to leave the station and catch the X43 bus to Burnley and then a further bus to Clitheroe. Far better to be riding rather than sitting in an unwelcoming station. Due to roadworks the bus shelter near the Printworks was out of action, with an unfathomable map attached, so I walked up to Shudehill Interchange and boarded a packed bus bound for Burnley. 90 minutes later I waited for the connection at Burnley Bus Station and finally arrived in Clitheroe. I had not saved any time but at least the seats on the bus were comfortable and the environment acceptable.

I recently had to take my electric car for its service to the Kia garage near to Rose Grove station (Burnley) so, when it came to collecting it in the late afternoon I decided to take the train from Clitheroe, change at Blackburn (5

minute wait – a Swiss style interchange) and then walk the short distance to the garage from Rose Grove. Luckily, prior to leaving Clitheroe station I checked that the onward train to Rose Grove was running to time. In fact, it was not running at all. It was lucky I checked (using the Android app titled *Fasteroute*) as I would have missed my connection at Blackburn, with the next ‘stopper’ to Rose Grove being an hour later.

I decided to take the bus instead, from Clitheroe Interchange to Burnley and then a connecting bus to collect the car. Oh dear! What an experience. The first bus was, in theory, very comfortable. But the problem was the condition our local roads. The countless potholes took their toll on the single-deck bus, such that every part of it rattled, with accompanying horrendous noises. There was no pleasure in such a journey. Even a ride on our typical 40-year-old local train would have been smoother and more comfortable.

Talking about local trains, it was pleasing a few years ago to see the introduction of Northern’s Class 195 units which, apart from frequent juddering due to badly designed suspension, provide a pleasant environment for their users. Main lines are served by them but most rural lines west of the Pennines are not. Such lines remain being served by Class 15x trains (and other hand-me-downs) which are increasing becoming unfit for service after near enough 40 years of hard life. We applaud the planned introduction of new trains, but we may well have to wait until 2030 before we can ride in local trains fit for the modern age and passenger expectation.

On 20th August there was a novel sight on the Clitheroe Line as a 5+5 coach Avanti Evero unit made lively progress northwards. This was a clear indication that the powers that be in Avanti are now seriously planning to run a diverted service between Preston and Carlisle, using both the Ribble Valley and Settle-Carlisle lines, during the winter period of reconstruction of Clifton railway bridge south of Penrith. If it all comes to fruition long distance passengers will not be required to use a rail replacement bus service covering the gap between Preston and Carlisle, with all the typical lugging of luggage at each end. Cyclists will not become stranded and mobility impaired passengers will continue their journeys in comfort.

Finally, on behalf of colleagues on the board of TravelWatch NorthWest, I offer sincere thanks to the transport professionals who have given positive talks and responded to challenging questions. Their presence has underlined the positive relationship between professionals and supportive amateurs. We are grateful particularly for the close relationship between railway managers, especially in Northern Trains (which has responsibility for the countryside stations) and the many Friends of Stations across the patch. There is no doubt that passengers appreciate being able to use stations which are clearly cared for, with flowering plants, litter-free platforms and local information. Over the whole patch bus services do not generally get the supportive attention that railways enjoy, except for the stand-out voluntary involvement of the Lancaster and District Bus Users group. Long may you thrive!

As always, thanks again to John Moorhouse, our hard-working secretary. Thanks also to my fellow board members, many of whom travel many miles

by public transport to meetings which are normally held in the Community Space on Platform 5 of Bolton Station. It is a harsh fact of life that board members are getting older (but still remain enthusiastic) so we hold out a welcoming hand to somewhat younger people who may wish to discover more of what we do and hopefully join us.

David J Butterworth
August 2025

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 2024/25

2.1 Conferences

2.1.1 TWNW held two conferences during the year as follows -

- Blackburn 27th June 2024
- Warrington 24th October 2024

A conference planned for March 2025 was postponed to September 2025

2.1.2. The conference in Blackburn Cathedral, supported by Avanti West Coast and Cumbria LEP was opened by **Councillor Brian Taylor, Mayor of Blackburn** and speakers were -

- ***Danielle Lahan, Customer Account Manager, Network Rail NW Route***
- ***Mark Osborne, Regional Growth Manager, Avanti West Coast***
- ***Paul Turner, TransDev***
- ***Katie Douglas, Community Rail Lancashire***
- ***John Carey, Dales & Bowland Community Transport.***

2.1.3 The Warrington conference, kindly supported by Northern Rail, was held in the Masonic Hall, Winmarleigh House. It was opened by **Councillor Mo Hussain, the Deputy Mayor of Warrington** and speakers were –

- ***Owain Roberts, Regional Stakeholder Manager and Alberti Benson, Head of Trains and Stations, Northern Rail***
- ***Chris Hook, Specialist Transport Services Manager, Warrington Borough Council***
- ***David Hoggarth, Head of Strategic Rail, Transport for the North***
- ***Roy Chapman, Director Community Rail Network***

After lunch delegates visited the new Electric Vehicle bus depot in Dallam Lane Warrington. We were grateful to Warrington Borough Council for arranging this. All proceeds from the conference were donated to the Railway Children Charity.

2.2 Bus Services

2.2.1 Reliability is a vital concern for passengers. The ongoing increase in general traffic levels and associated perturbations do not help. Bus services will never be reliable until roadworks and on street parking/loading are managed to enable the road traffic to flow more freely. Major road closures resulting in protracted diversions can effectively dismantle bus networks for a period of time.

2.2.2 We welcomed the £2 Flat fare initiative for buses throughout the country, launched towards the end of 2022. This is now set at £3.00 but is still a welcome initiative for passengers. Ridership is continuing to be buoyant, with noteworthy success in the Lake District.

2.2.3 Unlike rail, local representation of bus passengers is thin on the ground. We commend the work of the Lancaster and District Bus Users Group which has done much to help bus passengers in that part of the world. We give our support and encouragement to anyone wishing to form such a body within our region.

Bus franchising

2.2.4 We have supported the concept of franchising in both Greater Manchester and Merseyside

2.2.5 Tranche 2 of the “Bee Network” covering Oldham, Rochdale, with parts of Bury, Salford and north Manchester came into operation in March 2024. In the early days of the Manchester scheme we 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. This has now improved.

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 Progress appears to be rather slow, St Helens was to be the first of 5 franchise areas to be proceeded with.

2.2.8 Greater potential for local authorities to take more control over bus services has emerged in the Bus Services Bill introduced in December 2024 and moving through parliament in the summer of 2025. The Bill -

- Lifts the ban on local authorities setting up their own bus companies;
- Reduces complexity in the franchising process to shorten implementation times;
- Strengthens partnerships between authorities and private operators;

- Introduces mandatory training for staff to help tackle anti-social and criminal behaviour, including violence against women and girls.

We look forward to the ensuing legislation with interest.

Bus Passenger Charters

2.2.9 In our response to the Merseyside bus franchising consultation we commented on a lack of reference to passenger representation. 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.

2.2.10 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.

2.2.11 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)

Lancashire County Council Bus Service Improvement Plan

2.2.12 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 inter-available 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)

Rural & other bus services

2.2.13 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.

2.2.14 It is refreshing to note that we are seeing 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.

2.2.15 In Cumbria also, there has also been some expansion in rural areas e.g. Kirkby Stephen station to Penrith. The new unitary authority arrangements seem more favourably disposed to providing subsidy than the erstwhile County Council.

2.2.16 Another example has been the reinstatement in April 2024 of bus services in the Hodder Valley by North Yorkshire Council. This is a step in the right direction following the withdrawal of services on this corridor some years ago.

2.3 Rail Matters

Operational issues

2.3.1 The early part of the year was bedevilled with strikes. 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 still does not appear to have been resolved.

2.3.2 Avanti West Coast services have seen unacceptable unreliability recently. Cumbria has been and is being particularly affected and our Cumbria based colleagues have been in constant touch with the rail operators pressing for improvements. Avanti recognise their shortcomings which include timetable issues and have committed to action. The major internationally acclaimed tourist area of the Lake District with its important railhead at Oxenholme is especially affected and we will continue to keep a close watch on the situation.

2.3.3 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. Following an assurance from Avanti we were hopeful that changes to train crew depot arrangements would be made to help matters. Recent reports suggest that this does not seem to have happened.

Fares

2.3.4 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.

2.3.5 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.

2.3.6 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.

2.3.7 Contrast this with the situation in Switzerland. The Swiss public transport system involves numerous operators, often occupying multi operator routes or sections of routes, where there is an underlying concept of ‘co-operation’ rather than ‘competition’. Hence the opportunity for consistent set fares for each journey, regardless of who provides the transport.

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

Great British Railways

2.3.8 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. Following Labour taking power progress has been slow. South Western Railway became the first planned nationalisation in May 2025.

2.3.9 It is still unclear, though, how the many disparate components of the present railway organisation will be co-ordinated under a single unifying hierarchy. Continuation of privately run Open Access services which do not meet their full costs and the retention of the private profit seeking cartel of the Rolling Stock provider companies will continue to muddy the waters.

2.3.10 However, 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 2.3.4 to 2.3.7).

Engineering work disruption

2.3.11 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.

2.3.12 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.

2.3.13 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 West Coast Main Line (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.

2.3.14 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.

2.3.15 Coming up in the not too distant future there will be a big programme of work modernising the northern part of the WCML. This will include re-signalling and track and overhead line renewals. An early example of this will be a major bridge replacement across the M6 in January 2026 at Clifton south of Penrith. With this and other work programmes we advocate the need to keep passengers on trains as much as possible during any disruption.

2.3.16 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. For many years we have painstakingly pushed for the use of the Settle - Carlisle line (and other diversionary routes) and the minimisation of distance of road replacement

services. Though this might have repercussions for train crew knowledge/costs but the minimisation of inconvenience, indeed vexation, for the passenger cannot be overemphasised.

2.3.17 *Mirabile dictu*, we have learnt that the Settle – Carlisle line (S&C) is planned to be used for diversions during the Clifton bridge replacement in January 2026. The plan we understand is for a shuttle train service between Preston or Wigan and Carlisle via the S&C with cross platform interchange wherever possible. For a period during the rail closure the M6 is also to be closed road so coach services would have been useless anyway.

Electrification

2.3.18 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.

2.3.19 Progress has, though, been made on rail electrification between Wigan and Bolton. Indeed the project was completed in July 2025 and electrically powered trains are using it.

2.3.20 The TransPennine Route Upgrade, which will not be completed until the 2030s, 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.

2.3.21 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.

2.3.22 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

2.3.23 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.

2.3.24 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.

2.3.25 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. Such a station would have enabled connections between the two High Speed services as well enabling through running.

2.3.26 We are not aware of any concrete plans to reinstate the Crewe – Manchester HS2 rail link, but the government has promised funding to progress its long-term strategic rail ambitions, in the North of England, with details set out through the government's 10-year Infrastructure Strategy launched in June 2025

2.3.27 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.

Manchester Oxford Road Station

2.3.28 In March 2025 we responded to Network Rail's consultation changes to the layout at this important station. We were astounded that the nub of the proposals was a reduction in the number of through platforms from three to two.

2.3.29 We stressed that the reduction in through platforms was just not acceptable and that three through platforms at least must be provided. The proposed middle (turnback) platform was short-sighted and counterproductive, neither meeting the rail user/line-of-route requirements of easy access to Piccadilly and the airport nor enhancing operational resilience over current arrangements.

2.3.30 We said that we were not convinced that adequate consideration had been devoted to the issues of capacity and reliability, not just at Oxford Road, but along the full Castlefield Corridor and beyond.

2.3.31 In summary, we strongly supported the need for Oxford Road station to be redeveloped and welcomed improvements to passenger facilities and

accessibility. However the operational proposals were felt to be untenable and should be revisited. At the time of writing no further information has been made available other than an undertaking to a further round of consultation.

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

Manchester Victoria Station

2.3.32 We have long been aware of the inadequacies and inauspicious environment of Manchester's second station. We decided to undertake a survey of the station in the Spring of 2025 and published our report in June.

2.3.33 Constraints of platform capacity add to the general gloomy semi underground environment of the 4 through platforms. Waiting and seating facilities are unappealing and inadequate. We gave the example of platform 6 - a dreary place to wait, with poor lighting and a lack of artwork and bright colours. We made particular reference to the parsimonious seating provision , in spite of a recent improvement engendered by TWNW.

2.3.34 Poor air quality is a major problem. Whereas we did recognise the constraints of funding and the many other priorities competing for limited resources, there is room for improvement. In the report we recommended the formation of a small working group to investigate the feasibility of practical steps to enhance the passenger experience. As well as TWNW this could include representatives from Northern, Network Rail and Transport Focus.

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

Blackburn - Hellifield line

2.3.35 Following the suspension of the Sunday DalesRail service from Lancashire stations (starting at Blackpool) to Carlisle via the S&C in 2023, the summer of 2024 saw 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 runs 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.

2.3.36 On the subject of new links and services it is disappointing that the Restoring your Railway scheme was dropped by the 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)

2.3.37 TWNW 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 2024 and again in 2025. The winner of the "Chris Dale TravelWatch Award", named in

memory of our late Chairman was Stalybridge in 2024. Stations in this category in 2025 are – Chester, Crewe, Macclesfield, Manchester Airport, Runcorn, Stalybridge, Stockport, Warrington Bank Quay and Warrington Central.

2.4 Integration

2.4.1 TWNW 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 It is pleasing to see support for and action towards improving integration in Greater Manchester (the Bee network) and Merseyside fostered by the respective Mayors and Combined Authorities. There will be a number of hurdles to overcome but we laud their initiative. In Manchester all local bus and tram services are now part of the Bee Network. Eight commuter rail lines are planned to join the Bee Network in three phases through to 2028, with improved services, stations and a better journey experience. This is a positive step towards multi-mode integration in Greater Manchester.

2.4.3 In the summer of 2024 Avanti West Coast launched a through ticketing initiative utilising Stagecoach buses between Penrith and Keswick. A new “station” – Keswick Bus appeared on National Rail with times and through tickets via Penrith. By no means every national rail station were included in the initial exercise which was discontinued after that summer, However the scheme has been repeated in the summer of 1925 with much wider availability.

2.4.4 We hope the scheme is successful and we would like to see it become permanent and year round. A key element will be raising awareness as widely as possible.

2.4.5 In 2023 TWNW carried out a survey of bus/rail integration as a follow up to an exercise undertaken in 2016 at 42 mainly medium sized stations in the NorthWest. 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.

2.4.6 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.

2.4.7 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.

2.4.8 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.

2.4.9 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 also in the CRPs sights we understand, and we wish them well. Burnley Central, described as “a very unwelcoming station” by our surveyor is very much in need of attention

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

Manchester – Birmingham Travel Options

2.4.10 In the summer of 2024, 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.

2.4.11 The report concluded that whilst coach travel was often the cheapest journey between Manchester and Birmingham compared to rail and private car it was not considered sufficiently as an option. There were several reasons for this and improved marketing, passenger facilities and more appropriate departure/arrival times would help to close the gap.

2.4.12 Marketing is certainly something that needs to be improved in the Coach industry with a focus on attracting new customers. Other recommended actions included -

- Improved Passenger Facilities at pick-up points in major cities;
- Convince Local Transport Authorities that coach travel is important and a key part of the public transport offer;
- Tackle coach driver shortages with a focus on attracting younger people to the industry;
- The need to promote coach services more in order to compete with Rail. Coaches do well at retaining existing/returning customers but there is a feeling that there is an opportunity for Coach to cast its net wider beyond its traditional markets.

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.
- Community Rail Cumbria - £500 towards the May 2025 timetable guide.

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 and integration with 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 until 2024. Now fully operational there is now a new tram hub at Blackpool North – the Talbot Gateway. A feature is improved connections with the heavy rail station.

2.7 Ferries

2.7.1 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, but this would be of no benefit for passengers wishing to connect with trains.

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

2.7.3 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 achieve since its inception in 2007 under its Chairman Brendan O’Friel.

2.8 Consultations

- *Bus Passenger Charter (Liverpool City Region 19.04.24) – see paragraphs 2.2.9 - 2.2.10 above*
- *Bus Service Improvement Plan (Lancashire County Council 26.04.24) – see paragraph 2.2.12.*
- *Cumbria Bus Passenger Charter (Cumberland & Westmorland Councils 10.10.24)*
- *Rail Investment Pipelines (House of Commons Transport Committee 05.02.25)*
- *Integrated National Transport Strategy (Department for Transport 20.02.25)*
- *Manchester Oxford Road Remodelling (Network Rail 03.03.25) – see paragraphs 2.3.28 -2.3.31)*
- *A Railway Fit for Britain’s Future (DfT 15.04.25) -we commented on the future role of Great British Railways.*

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

3. Plans for 2025/27

3.1 In June 2025 we held a conference in the Masonic Hall in Southport. Speakers were -

- ***Simon Finnie, Head of Network Performance, Merseytravel***
- ***Chris Nutton, Director Major Projects TransPennine Express, on TransPennine Route Upgrade***
- ***Matt Davies, MD Stagecoach Merseyside, Cheshire, S Lancs***
- ***Alan Fantom, Ormskirk Preston Southport Travellers Assoc.***

3.2 We are planning a further conference in the current financial year – at The Storey Institute, Lancaster on 25th September 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 TOWNW 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 statutory 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.

Directors who served on the Board during 2024/25 –

Mr David J Butterworth
Mr Malcolm Conway
Mr David Culshaw
Ms Hazel Ellis (from 15.10.24)
Mr Colin Kennington
Mr Richard Lysons
Mr John A Moorhouse
Mrs Roma Patten
Mr Robert Talbot
Mr 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 2024/25

DETAILED PROFIT AND LOSS ACCOUNT YEAR ENDED 31 MARCH 2025

	2025		2024
	£	£	£
TURNOVER		3600	6146
<i>COST OF SALES</i>			
Project fees	2700		0
Administration fees	0		0
Totals		<u>0</u>	
GROSS PROFIT/(LOSS)		900	6146
<i>OVERHEADS</i>			
Travel and subsistence	482		468
Conferences & Meetings	2076		1128
Office costs	550		779
Accommodation	2481		2916
Insurance	245		246
Website/web hosting	197		252
Grants scheme & donations	2300		2850
Totals		8331	8639
		-7431	-2493
<i>OTHER OPERATING INCOME</i>			
Members income	465		730
Sundry donations	1060		1660
Totals		1525	2390
OPERATING PROFIT/(LOSS)		-5906	-103
Interest receivable		547	595
PROFIT/(LOSS) ON ORDINARY ACTIVITIES		-5359	492

Appendix C Membership (at September 2025)

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
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