

Annual Review 2022-2023



Planned to close – Manchester Piccadilly Ticket Office (photo John Moorhouse)

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

TravelWatch NorthWest Annual Review 2022-2023

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Chair's Foreword

The proverbial Curate's Egg is reported to be 'good and bad in parts'. The same could rightly be said of public transport in the North West of England – and, in truth, across the rest of Great Britain. When it works it's very good but it can be so badly horrid!

I recently went by bus from Clitheroe to Burnley (operated by Burnley Bus Company, part of the massive Transdev company) and thoroughly enjoyed the ride. Yes, the ride was 'bouncy' at times, but I blame that on the parlous state of Lancashire's roads, but otherwise I could not find fault. The driver was pleasant, with at least a smile for new passengers, the spoken and visual announcements were helpful, but not too intrusive, and the bus got me to my destination on time. This particular public transport provision ticked all the boxes.

Across the country bus services continue to be under threat of nothing less than complete extinction, as the operators claim that they are commercially non-viable. Generally, without much in the way of consultation, services just disappear. Regular users – the ones who may well have relied on the bus service for access to their place of work – suddenly have an emergency situation on their hands. They may not have a car to fall back on, it's too far to walk or cycle, so they are literally stranded. Many have lost their jobs as a result. Whilst the managers of the commercial bus operations may be 'nice people' the accountants say 'no' so that's that.

It may just be possible for a local authority to step in and provide a bare-bones service funded by the public purse but this has not always been the case due to the parlous financial state in which county councils, etc find themselves. It remains to be seen whether the recent flat fare of £2 per single journey will have saved marginal services.

It is still the case that people occasionally wishing to use a bus service cannot readily find out what their journey will normally cost prior to boarding. On the web it is easy to find out the cost of a weekly or monthly ticket but the cost of single point-to-point trips cannot normally be found – except that Stagecoach very sensibly publish theirs.

And now to the trains . . . oh dear, where do I start? In short it's not been a good year, for many reasons. In last year's annual report I noted 'Strikes have already started and may well increase'. I must repeat that consideration of the necessity or otherwise of strike action is outside the remit of TravelWatch NorthWest but we can report that the regular strikes by members of RMT and ASLEV have had a destructive effect on the public's perception of train travel as a whole and their opportunities to use trains on days of their choosing. The absence of any meaningful discussions between the unions and government ministers is regrettable – and that's an understatement.

It's not just the formally announced strikes which cause annoyance. It is known that much of the railway industry relies on 'rest day working' as a means of running the complete timetabled schedule. However, many railway workers who would normally receive enhanced pay for working their rest days have chosen to take time off instead, thus leading to widespread cancellations

across the North West. Some routes have suffered very badly indeed from staffing (and maybe other) issues. For example the Lancaster to Morecambe service has been decimated. Over a 10 day period at the end of August 2023 out of 260 possible journeys from Lancaster to Morecambe just 156 single journeys actually ran, a mere 60%. On a more positive note 97% of trains ran between Clitheroe and Blackburn in the same period.

Official strike action days have always been announced well ahead but many of the 104 cancellations on the Morecambe line were listed at short notice on parts of web pages which were not immediately visible. Haphazard cancellations of this nature make forward journey planning impossible and prevent regular users from going to/from their place of work.

Notwithstanding the effect on individual train users the effect on local economies can be serious if trains are regularly cancelled. The branch from Oxenholme to Windermere is a vital artery bringing visitors to the Lake District from many parts of the world. A lack of trust in the reliability of this vital feeder service will result in loss of income for the facility providers in the destination area.

Despite the above, there are many positive aspects regarding public transport in the North West. Determined work by 'King' Andy Burnham and his team is resulting in the steady introduction of the 'Bee Network' across the whole of the Greater Manchester region. Limited to bus operations for the time being the ambition is to have a co-ordinated network incorporating buses, trams and trains in a unified, connected structure. After many years of aspiration Manchester may at long last achieve what has been the norm in Greater London (and the whole of Switzerland) for many years. The plan will incorporate point-to-point fares across modes, the provision of bus, tram and hopefully trains' routes and services which suit the needs of people rather than the operators, and a single journey planner which covers all transport modes.

On Merseyside Steve Rotherham and his team are hot on the heels of GM as they steadily introduce the wonderful fleet of new Merseyrail trains and work towards a similar integrated public transport system. Despite a few teething troubles in these early days the new Stadler produced trains will revolutionise rail transport across the Merseyrail network. They even have level boarding!

Merseyside is seeing brand new trains, just as they are 'down south', but at the moment most of us have to endure some of the oldest trains across the National Rail network. Northern are proud operators of Class 195 diesel and Class 331 electric trains (which are wonderful, apart from their rough riding when the track is not super-smooth) but most of us remain saddled with trains some of which are rapidly approaching their 40th birthday. The Class 150 and 156 trains are now proving to be a liability as they are contributing to far too many cancellations due to mechanical issues. There is however a glimmer of hope in that it is rumoured that Northern are 'going shopping' big time! Among other aspirations, can we please have level boarding and smooth riding? Just copy the standard of the new Merseyrail stock.

Looking at wider matters – HS2 seems to be digging itself into an even bigger hole. There are plans as to how HS2 will reach Manchester. Sorry, that 'will'

should be 'may', as I have serious doubts as to whether the route will ever extend beyond Birmingham. Massive cost over-runs, not helped by inflationary pressures, are resulting in some serious head scratching. A recent 'bright idea' thought up by our national politicians, is that all southbound HS2 trains will terminate at Old Oak Common, resulting in a different train for the last leg to Euston. The politicians won't care – they'll just travel by helicopter.

If HS2 should ever reach Manchester, why on earth have a terminal station when, by that time, the Northern Powerhouse Line from Liverpool to Hull will be able to offer onward routeing? The Belgium city of Antwerp used to be a terminal station but the operators saw the light (as it were) and turned the main station into a through station by tunnelling northwards, offering direct onward journeys. In Germany, Frankfurt HB is to become a through station in a few years' time. Brexit Britain has to be different, it seems.

On behalf of my colleagues on the TWNW board I again offer thanks to our secretary John Moorhouse who continues to excel in organising conferences, responding to discussion documents, liaising face-to-face with transport operators and generally keeping his board members focussed on representing all users of public transport in the North West of England.

David J Butterworth
September 2023

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 2022/23

2.1 Conferences

2.1.1 TWNW held three conferences during the year as follows -

- Blackpool 16th June 2022
- Liverpool 20th October 2022
- Manchester 2nd March 2023

2.1.2. The conference in Blackpool, kindly supported by Blackpool Transport Services and Blackpool Council featured the following speakers -

- ***David Simper, Transport Projects Leader, Blackpool Council***
- ***Jane Cole, Managing Director, Blackpool Transport Services***
- ***Cllr Charlie Edwards, Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport, Lancashire County Council***
- ***David Butterworth, Chairman TWNW (on Integration)***

2.1.3 The conference in Liverpool, kindly hosted by Merseytravel and further supported by Merseyrail, Arriva North West and Cumbria LEP, concentrated mainly on the Liverpool City Region. Speakers were –

- ***Cllr Liam Robinson, Chair of Merseytravel,***
- ***David Hoggarth, Strategic Rail Director, Transport for the North,***
- ***Jane English, Acting Managing Director, Merseyrail,***
- ***Matthew Goggins, Assistant Director for Bus, Merseytravel***
- ***Kris Beuret, Chair, Social Research Associates***

2.1.4 In Manchester we were pleased to take advantage of the superb hospitality of Transport for Greater Manchester (TfGM), with further support from Northern Trains, Avanti West Coast and Cumbria LEP. Greater Manchester of course featured highly and speakers were –

- ***Vernon Everitt, Transport Commissioner, GM Combined Authority.***
- ***Chris Jackson, Regional Director, Northern Rail.***
- ***Jonathan Orriss, TransPennine Express***
- ***Alison Chew, TfGM***
- ***Nick Smith, Regional Growth Manager, Avanti West Coast***
- ***Danny Vaughan, Metrolink Manager, TfGM.***

2.2 Bus Services

National Bus Strategy

2.2.1 Back in March 2021, the government launched the National Bus Strategy (“Bus Back Better”). Although the total funding package appeared to have fallen from £5 billion previously mooted to £3 billion, we gave a cautious welcome to the strategy. We emphasised that rural areas must benefit following the many bus routes which have vanished in recent years due to cuts in Local Council funding.

2.2.2 It became clearer that under the strategy Local Transport Authorities (LAs) were being directed to produce a timescale to commit to greater involvement in buses, as per the following -

- A requirement to commit to an Enhanced Partnership with all bus operators by the end of June 2021 or begin the statutory process of franchising services.
- By the end of October 2021 each LA had to publish a Bus Improvement Plan (BSIP) to be updated annually.
- By April 2022 each LA needed to have an Enhanced Partnership in place, or be following the statutory process to decide whether to implement a franchising scheme, to access the new discretionary streams of bus funding.

2.2.3 We could not find any reference in the strategy document to consultation with passengers or their representatives. We did though welcome the comments in the document on passenger representation and on complaints procedures, including a passengers charter and “mechanisms for redress at a local level and means to ensure these standards are met, which could include forums such as Bus Advisory Boards being set up”. Transport Focus is currently the statutory body representing bus passengers but unresolved complaints are dealt with by the Bus Appeals Body, run by Bus Users UK.

2.2.4 Just how the suggested Bus Advisory Boards would fit into this process remains to be seen. We said we would be very happy to contribute our experience in passenger representation and advise on complaints and redress matters. One simple step would be to provide “how to comment/complain” information on board buses and at bus stations. We are uncertain of the current status of the Bus Advisory Board proposal.

2.2.5 In March 2022 we responded to the HOCTC’s enquiry into the “National Bus Strategy One Year On.” We commented on slow progress with little to be seen on the ground. In spite of much time and effort being expended by LAs to produce the BSIPs by 31st October 2021 a disappointingly partial pausing of the scheme was announced, halting the implementation date of 1st April 2022.

2.2.6 In June 2022 allocations to local transport authorities under the BSIP transformation funding were revealed. None had received the amounts asked for and there were worrying disparities e.g Lancashire including Blackburn with Darwen received 75% but Liverpool City Region only 2% of the ask! Cumbria supported no bus services at all and this was reflected in no BSIP funding for that LA.

2.2.7 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. Again more publicity needed!

2.2.8 We also welcomed, in the Spring of 2023, a Ministerial announcement about developing a plan to help the bus sector to a more sustainable footing, later in the year. Perhaps there is at last a government plan to introduce a meaningful long term way of supporting buses. We will watch developments with interest.

2.2.9 The year has seen changes to local government in Cumbria splitting the county into two Unitary Authorities – Westmorland & Furness and Cumberland Councils. It was expected that the former would oversee public transport across Cumbria. We hoped that the new Authority would be more receptive to using tendered services which in itself brought benefits. We also voiced our concerns about the inadequacies of community transport in rural areas being unable to cope with passenger numbers (often vehicles with just 16 seats) and availability being restricted to local people.

Bus franchising

2.2.10 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.

2.2.11 In the summer 2023 Liverpool City Region Combined Authority consulted on bus franchising proposals 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
- 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 also 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.

2.2.12 We also commented on a lack of reference to passenger representation in the 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. One simple step would be to provide “how to comment/complain” information on board buses and at bus stations.

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

2.2.13 Following the examples of Manchester and Merseyside taking more local control and strategic co-ordinated planning of bus services, more attention should be given to the rural areas of our region which have seen catastrophic decline in bus service provision over the years.

2.2.14 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

2.3 Rail Matters

Operational issues

2.3.1 The year has been dominated by shockingly poor performance. In March 2022 we met with TransPennine Express (TPE) to voice our concerns at the high level of short notice cancellations but 5 months later they were still happening. To add to the woes Avanti West Coast announced swingeing cuts to service frequency in an effort to improve reliability, including just one train an hour between Manchester and London – in normal times it should be 3! There were also severe repercussions on the West Coast Main Line north of Preston, especially given unreliability of TPE’s Anglo Scottish services. Northern Rail in our part of the world was also not perfect.

2.3.2 Reasons given for the chaos included severe staff shortages, unofficial strike action and training backlogs (going back to the pandemic) We would also comment that there appears to have been undue reliance on rest day working, relating back to the days when wages were lower. To add to this has been ongoing official industrial action. Whatever the reasons, all this misery is really bad news for passengers at a time when the railway is crying out for people to take the train.

2.3.3 In October 2022 following little improvement we recorded our disappointment that in many parts of our region train services could not be relied upon to be punctual or even to exist at all. Avanti West Coast services were a shadow of their former selves and TransPennine Express trains ran to a timetable which often showed little relationship with the official one. Northern Trains had also been affected by serious under-staffing at key times.

2.3.4 A serious distortment of train performance figures meant that cancellations announced the day before they were due to run were not included in cancellation figures for that day. In January 2023 it was reported that ORR had at last resolved that issue so a truer picture emerged.

2.3.5 The problems and the strikes are still around at the time of writing! 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.

2.3.6 Notwithstanding this move it was obvious there would be no quick fix to the deep seated problems. Indeed our members were reporting short notice cancellations up to the time of writing. In 40 years of passenger representation our Secretary has never witnessed a worse time for rail service reliability than the 18 months from early in 2022.

Train Journey Survey 2022

2.3.7 Notwithstanding the disruption and strikes, during the summer of 2022 TWNW contrived to survey 150 passenger train journeys selected at random mainly in our region. The purpose of the survey was to obtain a snapshot of service provision as it directly affected passengers. The majority of journeys sampled were operated by Northern Trains with additional journeys being provided by Avanti West Coast, TransPennine Express, Merseyrail, East Midlands Trains and Transport for Wales.

2.3.8 Amongst the report's conclusions were a reference to the long awaited introduction of modern rolling stock and the withdrawal of the generally unloved Pacer trains, bringing about a significant improvement in journey standards. We also noted that the introduction of consistent on-train announcements (route, calling points, arrival time, etc.) had improved passenger confidence and the pleasant attitude of many on-board staff was to be commended.

2.3.9 On the critical side we noted –

- The continuing provision of trains which are approaching 40 years old.
- The absence of regular ticket checks, leading to ticketless travel and loss of vital revenue.
- The increasing absence of poster timetables at stations.
- Continuing concern regarding the lack of direct access at some stations (or particular platforms) by mobility impaired persons.
- The lack of highly visual and/or spoken warnings about the Penalty Fares rules.

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

Ticket Office closures

2.3.10 There had been rumours for some time that the government in seeking economies from rail operation was pressurising rail companies to close ticket offices at stations. We have always recognised the need for face to face staff especially taking into account the needs of inexperienced travellers, the elderly and otherwise disadvantaged and those with restricted access to the internet (which cannot always give comprehensive help for many journeys anyway). Ticket machines at stations are limited in journey options available.

2.3.11 The bombshell hit 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 have been moving to alternative ways of buying train tickets, such as through on line systems or from ticket machines at stations. Clearly this is a government agenda to save costs and the rail operators are having to play ball.

2.3.12 Each operator set out their plans in their own consultation document with a miserly 3 week period (since extended) to respond to Transport Focus. A massive if not unrealistic task for Transport Focus to deal with a short time horizon and a likely overwhelming number of objections.

2.3.13 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 disagreed that this should be considered a reasonable interpretation. We considered that the scale of these proposals should in no way constitute a minor modification. In addition the notices at stations made no mention of the (statutory) procedure to be followed following any representations made.

2.3.14 Our view was and is that there should be a formal statutory closure procedure for each station on a case by case basis. We felt that there would be a good case for a legal challenge/ judicial review of the reasonableness of the Secretary of State's decision to deem these proposals as minor modifications.

2.3.15 There are significant anomalies in the proposals e.g analysis of the proposals shows 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 are proposed for ticket office closure compared with an average of 26% for operators in the South/ South East. But, even more telling, we have to look no further than within our own region where many ticket offices smaller or much smaller than the to be closed Manchester Piccadilly will remain open. These are the 18 Northern stations which include Manchester Victoria and Manchester Oxford Road (both less used than Piccadilly!). What an indictment of railway fragmentation and incoherent passenger rail strategy!.

2.3.16 Whilst accepting the fall in numbers of tickets sold at offices (and the average figure of 12% is misleading when looking at the age profile split), 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 did not appear to have been any demographic profiling of users of ticket offices undertaken showing lack of analysis and value placed on the extent and time taken up by travel enquiries and planning.

2.3.17 There are issues with Ticket Vending Machines – they sell a limited range of tickets and for other than for simple journeys they are complicated to use. In addition, proposals to provide staff assistance in open areas where there is no open ticket office will be for very restricted periods of time at many stations particularly at numerous Northern stations. Here designated “Journey Makers” will be on hand to assist passengers but present for times much shorter than current staffing hours

2.3.18 Following external pressure including lobbying by TfGM the consultation period was extended to 1st September. Towards the end of August we understood that the number of objections had reached colossal proportions with a figure of over 400,000 quoted by a source.

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

2.3.19 Contrast these proposals with the approach of Transport for Wales who, bizarrely, operate Chester station. We met with them, Transport Focus and the Wirral Transport Users Association at Chester in March 2023 to review proposals to close the existing ticket windows.

2.3.20 At the meeting, we were reassured that the scheme, which involved relocating staff to a more conveniently located sales and customer advice area, would potentially give a better service for passengers than current arrangements.

Printed timetables

2.3.21 We deplore the cessation of printed timetables for rail services. Although there is an increasing number of passengers gaining online information, there still remains a significant number of users/potential users who require access to printed timetables. They can of course be used for marketing purposes – as in the case of many Cumbria services. This timetable was in fact only achieved by the injection of significant funding and distribution resource by Cumbria CRP with the aid of Northern Rail.

Fares

2.3.22 The complexity of the fares system is notorious. TWNW Chairman David Butterworth produced two reports on the anomalies of the fares structure in November 2022 and January 2023, entitled “Are Fares Fair on North Wests Trains” and “Are Fares Fair on GB trains” respectively. The studies demonstrated variations in cost per mile and the confusion created when a variety of fares are set by individual operators who serve the route.

The route from Preston to Lancaster is a good example. David's work formed the basis of a piece by Barry Doe in RAIL magazine.

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

Williams-Shapps Plan for Rail

2.3.23 In July 2022 we responded to consultation on Legislative Changes to be brought about as a result of the Williams – Shapps Plan. One positive measure would be the continuation of the role of Transport Focus as the independent passenger champion. In our original response to the Plan we had advocated the restoration of the regional statutory bodies representing passengers which would be in line with a greater emphasis on an increasing role for local stakeholders and such bodies as Transport for the North. We argued that TWNW would be well placed to fill this role.

2.3.24 One element we were uneasy about was the continuing need for the involvement of the Office of Rail and Road (ORR) in the new organisation. Given the quasi-regulatory role of Great British Railways (GBR) and the Department of Transport in the new regime, to say nothing of the roles of Transport Focus and the Ombudsman, we asked how would the ORR fit into the scheme of things without duplication? There would be a danger of more bureaucracy rather than less!

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

2.3.25 At the time of writing, other than determining the location of its HQ (Derby,) there still seem to be uncertainties about the transition to GBR (still awaiting parliamentary time?) and there have been hints that the whole, process may not come to fulfilment before the next general election. Currently two of our franchises – Northern and TPE are operating under government control anyway under the Operator of Last Resort arrangements.

2.3.26 One feature that does need attention that a GBR type structure should insist on is greater co-operation between operators on the same line of route especially when disruption occurs. 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 scenarios such as Preston-Lancaster anomalies as referred to above (paragraph 2.4.17).

Engineering work disruption

2.3.27 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.

2.3.28 We have long campaigned 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.

2.3.29 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.

2.3.30 We have used the example of the Lake District but it is not of course the only leisure destination in our fascinating region. For example Blackpool, probably the North West's other major visitor destination, has been similarly affected during industrial action, cancellations and engineering work.

2.3.31 We have been given to understand in the past that Network Rail is committed to opening up the network in future to try to avoid the predilection of disrupting the important leisure business at holiday times. However, 2022 did not see any moves to fulfilling that undertaking.

2.3.32 In June 2022, along with Cumbria CRPs and the Lakes Line Rail Users Group, we attended a meeting with rail operators and Network Rail on WCML engineering possessions in 2023. It appeared at that time that there could be some amelioration in 2023 with just the Sunday of Bank Holiday weekends taking the hit at least for the northern section of the WCML.

2.3.33 A further meeting of this group took place in March 2023. We raised concerns about the forthcoming Easter weekend for the Lakes Line and in the event there were significant problems that weekend, with other service disruptions contributing to passenger perturbation. Other Bank Holiday weekends this year have seen similar service failings at of course a time of high demand of leisure traffic.

2.3.34 Plans for 2024 appear to include a block at Carnforth at Easter and Spring Bank Holiday weekend possessions from Oxenholme northwards. It seems that notwithstanding previous assurances the demands of the freight lobby continue to place engineering work at times of high leisure passenger use particularly on Bank Holidays.

2.3.35 Another area that GBR should give direction on is the long-standing need to keep passengers on trains as much as possible during disruption. 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.

2.3.36 In our part of the world, for example, we have for many years decried the lack of use of the Settle to Carlisle line when the West Coast main line is blocked between Preston and Carlisle. Years of engagement with train operators and government ministers on the subject has been well documented in our previous reports. Suffice to say that cost considerations have been a fundamental part of the reluctance to divert trains.

Electrification

2.3.37 It is a 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.

2.3.38 Progress has though been made on rail electrification between Wigan and Bolton. One unfortunate element of the work has been 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 and hopefully a step towards the electrification of the lines from Salford Crescent to Hindley via Atherton and indeed beyond Wigan to Southport and Kirkby, the third priority in the Northern Sparks report.

2.3.39 The case for electrifying the short branch from Lancaster to Morecambe has surely been boosted by plans for the Eden North development in Morecambe. This £100 million project scheduled to open in 2026, would be a significant catalyst for future development of the resort.

2.3.40 We consider that, with no plans for on site car parking and the impracticality of a M6 Park & Ride idea (Junction 34), the opportunities for doubling and electrifying the line with a 30 minute service and through services from Manchester should be a “no brainer”. Consideration of transport issues around Eden North has been deferred to the Transport Authority (Lancashire CC), with no proposals evident at the time of writing. We await with interest!

High Speed Rail/ Northern Powerhouse Rail

2.3.41 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.

2.3.42 In April 2022 we became aware of a threat to drop the HS2 link line from the Manchester High Speed line to the WCML north of Warrington (the Golborne Link). This link line would enable Scottish bound High Speed trains to avoid the two track section of the WCML north of Winsford and would help the provision of through services between WCML stations north of Preston (e.g. Oxenholme) and London.

2.3.43 In August 2022 we responded to HS2 Ltd on the decision to remove this link, with the removal of the HS2 WCML connection. It had been stated that HS2 trains would continue on the conventional rail network from Crewe to the North West and Scotland with one HS2 service per hour from London Euston to Glasgow.

2.3.44 We said that we had grave misgivings about this statement. The 2-track railway between Winsford and Golborne is a bottleneck. There was no mention of HS2 trains to Liverpool which we understood would have connected directly with the Northern Powerhouse Rail route (in the Warrington area). We also expressed concerns about the crucial importance of providing for the huge leisure market that is the Lake District which must have through HS2 links with London - changing trains not acceptable.

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

2.3.45 Whereas there was also a hint that a link could indeed be provided more recent discussions about the cost of HS2 have cast some doubts about its extension to Manchester at all! Notwithstanding all this, the debate about the possibility of an underground station in Manchester, combining HS2 and Northern Powerhouse Rail, goes on. Ideally such a station would enable connections between the two High Speed services as well enabling through running. It is interesting to note that cities on the High Speed network in Europe which operate on the turnback principle are progressively being converted to through stations to give greater flexibility.

2.3.46 The fortunes and ambitions of Northern Powerhouse Rail 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.

2.3.47 As an interim measure there are hopes that the long needed TPE Route Upgrade between Liverpool, Manchester and Leeds featuring full electrification will be with us before then – the 2030s?

Restoring lost rail links

2.3.48 Back in January 2020, the Government pledged £500million for the Restoring Your Railway (RYR) Fund as a kick start to reopening lines and stations formerly on the rail network.

2.3.49 In our region, one scheme to introduce regular services between Clitheroe and Hellifield, possibly extending to the Settle-Carlisle railway, appeared to be making good headway. However, in June 2022 a government update on the fund programme announced, disappointingly, that this scheme would not be progressed to delivery. However a welcome part of the update was that the scheme to restore the line to Fleetwood had been selected to progress beyond the Strategic Outline Business Case (SOBC).

2.3.50 A related issue on this line has been the suspension of the Sunday DalesRail service from Lancashire stations (starting at Blackpool) to Carlisle via the Settle Carlisle line for the summer of 2023. There were several cancellations of this service in 2022, down mainly to train crew availability. This problem (of Sunday working being voluntary) has evidently not yet been resolved.

2.3.51 Inevitably the question of statutory closure was raised by the interested parties as this was the only passenger service between Clitheroe and Hellifield. The message from Northern is that the service will be reinstated in 2024 thus rendering it a suspension rather than a closure. We have made our views known to the statutory body, Transport Focus and will be closely monitoring the situation.

Cheshire Best Kept Stations (CBKS)

2.3.52 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 2022 and again in 2023. The winner of the “Chris Dale TravelWatch Award”, named in memory of our late Chairman was Stalybridge in 2022. Stations in this category in 2023 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 Williams – Shapps promised better integration with other transport services with links to the National Bus Strategy. We understood that the GBR website and app would become a means of accessing all public transport services, showing bus and light rail information and able to sell integrated tickets across different services to support easy journeys. However as noted earlier, there appeared to be little reference to integration in the consultation on the Whole Industry Strategic Plan.

2.4.3 In our response to the legislative changes (see 2.4.18) we reiterated our views on integration. Much more could be done to improve the availability of

integrated ticketing for varying modes to allow "complete journey" purchases. We gave the examples of inadequacies with through ticketing between Manchester Metrolink and other public transport modes which have been in existence ever since the system opened in the 1990s and have been exacerbated as the system grows.

2.4.4 In January 2023 the House of Commons Transport Committee asked interested parties to submit a 500 word proposal on what the Committee should investigate for its next in depth inquiry. We made a submission to the Committee on the subject of Transport Integration in the UK.

2.4.5 We said that compared with Europe our country is very dilatory in working towards (or even identifying the need for) an integrated public transport system. We made comparisons with the continent where a more enlightened view is invariably taken e.g in Switzerland.

2.4.6 We emphasised that climate change and wider environmental issues demanded that everything possible should be done to encourage people to use public transport and making integrated journeys easier was a no brainer. Though some efforts were being made in the larger urban conurbations (against ingrained dogmatic resistance) large tracts of our region and no doubt the rest of the country were bereft. Now was the time to thoroughly assess and press for realising the potential for implementing a practical transport integration policy.

2.4.7 In March 2023 the Transport Committee let us know that having received a total of 227 proposals, spanning a wide range of subjects we had not been shortlisted to pitch to the Committee in person. The Committee did say that it was considering other ways in which proposals that were not shortlisted might be incorporated into future work.

2.4.8 In 2016, TWNW 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.

2.4.9 The survey of stations has been delayed but we aim to complete the project within the next 6 months.

2.5 Light Rail

2.5.1 We are generally supportive of Light Rail and, undoubtedly, Manchester Metrolink is a success story. There are further possibilities of expansion. We would counsel that in that event better cognisance is taken of maintaining the advantages of the national rail network as far as possible

2.5.2 On the aspect of integration with Metrolink there are 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.

2.5.3 The Blackpool Tramway extension to Blackpool North station was scheduled to open in 2019. However the completion of the project has been held up by building demolition and new construction of a hotel close to Blackpool North station and is still not in operation! The date for opening is now scheduled for 2024.

2.6 Ferries

2.6.1 In November 2022 and again in June 2023 we responded to consultation from developers about the potential effects of the development of the three wind farms – Morecambe, Morgan and Mona on ferry shipping routes between North West England and the Isle of Man.

2.6.2 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 Consultations

- *National Bus Strategy One Year On (HOCTC 29.03.22)* - see paragraph 2.2.5 above.
- *Williams-Shapps GBR legislative changes (DfT 21.07.22)* - see paragraphs 2.3.23 - 2.3.24 above.
- *HS2 Crewe – Manchester Issues (HS2 Ltd 30.08.22)* – see paragraphs 2.3.42 – 2.3.45 above
- *Irish Sea Offshore wind developments (Morecambe & Morgan Nov 2022 & June 2023)* - see paragraphs 2.6.1 & 2.6.2 above.
- *Accessible Transport: Legal Obligations (House of Commons Transport Committee 20.3.23)* – we highlighted the difficulties faced by disabled travellers when using trains or buses. On the latter for example deaf/blind people are often reliant on drivers telling them when they are approaching their destination. Many rail stations do not have level access to all platforms and the universal provision of this is slow in coming about. (Report available on our website www.travelwatch-west.org.uk)
- *Closure of station ticket offices (Northern Trains, Avanti West Coast, TransPennine Express 21.07.23)* – see paragraphs 2.3.10 – 2.3.20 above.
- *Bus Franchising (Liverpool City Region Combined Authority 4.8.23)* - see paragraphs 2.2.11 – 2.2.12 above).

3. Plans for 2023/25

3.1 In June 2023 we held a conference in Carnforth with an emphasis on public transport uses representation. The conference was opened by the Mayor of Lancaster City, Councillor Roger Dennison and speakers were -

- ***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***

3.2 We are planning two further conferences in the current financial year – Preston in October and possibly Stockport in March. 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 2023/2025 -

- 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 passenger experience at airports including public transport connectivity and the delays caused by check in and security.
- The availability and accuracy of journey planning and multi modal information on websites and on the ground.
- Community Transport

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

3.6 TWNW will continue to be well placed to feed user input into consultations on regional and local government planning issues. TWNW 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

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.

TravelWatch NorthWest 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 2022/23 –

David Butterworth
Malcolm Conway
David Culshaw
John Hart
Colin Kennington

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-

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Website – www.travelwatch-northwest.org.uk

Email - admin@travelwatch-northwest.org.uk

Or - johnamoorhouse@gmail.com

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/1408838502725860/>

Appendix B Accounts 2022/23

DETAILED PROFIT AND LOSS ACCOUNT YEAR ENDED 31 MARCH 2023

	2023	2022
	£	£
TURNOVER	3000	2450
<i>COST OF SALES</i>		
Administration fees	0	0
Totals	0	0
GROSS PROFIT	3000	2450
<i>OVERHEADS</i>		
Travel and subsistence	67	29
Conferences & Meetings	1286	2653
Office costs	104	37
Accommodation	2772	2520
Insurance	241	236
C Dale Bench		864
Website/ web hosting	194	770
Publicity	0	0
Totals	4664	7109
	-1664	-4659
<i>OTHER OPERATING INCOME</i>		
Members income	705	805
C Dale Memorial donations		1290
Sundry donations	1396	1598
Totals	2101	3693
OPERATING PROFIT/LOSS	437	-966
Interest receivable	38	2
PROFIT/(LOSS) ON ORDINARY ACTIVITIES	475	-964

Appendix C Membership (at August 2023)

Organisation/Name

Blackburn & District CTC
Blackpool & Fylde Rail Users Association (RUA)
Chinley & Buxworth Transport Group
Cumbria Coast Rail Users Group (RUG)
Friends of Eccles Station
Friends of Hindley 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
Adrian Dunning
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