



From the Chair

I'm pleased to present a short news bulletin just as the May timetable change comes into force. There's more within about how the new timetable affects our area and teething troubles from the off. Also within contributions from Committee Members David Evans and an article from Roy Desouza about the new information kiosk at Chester Station.

Included is the 2026 AGM pack for our June 25th AGM. This year's AGM will be preceded by a presentation by Nick Smith, Regional Growth Manager for Avanti West Coast. As with previous AGM Presentations there will be an opportunity for a Q&A session afterwards and I'm sure there will be considerable interest in subjects such as ticketing, new fleets and HS2 interface.

As stated in the Autumn news bulletin (and last year's AGM), I will be stepping down as Chair of the group at the forthcoming AGM. In advance of this, the current tasks performed by the Chair have been broken down into small constituent parts by the NCRUG Committee, and these are listed with the AGM agenda. Please have a careful look and consider what small item you might be able to take on as the group goes forward. Such things as stakeholder engagement and fellow Rail User Group meetings can give an interesting and deep insight into what's happening both locally and nationally. Full support for anyone wishing to take on any of the roles will be given.

MW

May 17th timetable change: Some gains, some losses and some disappointments.

The May 17th timetable change saw the much anticipated introduction of Liverpool direct Llandudno services and Manchester services extend through to Holyhead. Not only do the extended services open up a new market beyond Llandudno, but provide an opportunity for passengers from Merseyside to travel seamlessly to North Wales without the need to change trains at Chester. This will mean extra demand on Halton Curve services as the direct train will for many be preferred over a slower Merseyrail service with a change at Chester.

It's deeply disappointing that Transport for Wales did not seem prepared for what was to come. Although in theory the 'right amount' of TfW rolling stock is in place to support the new services (2 car units will be insufficient over the summer holidays), long standing serviceability issues with the Class197 fleet, mainly pertaining to door functions and engine reliability, meant multiple cancellations just days into the new schedule. Reminiscent of the pattern of post covid mass cancellations, these have mainly affected the Liverpool – Chester services with the continuation from Chester – Llandudno being largely untouched. This situation is disappointing to say the least and one wonders what lessons have been taken on board at TfW following previous promised improvements without the rolling stock to back them up.

I personally view the Liverpool-Chester service as an essential service, more so given the link to LJLA – catching a flight does not make a train journey to the airport discretionary! Perhaps a short term solution for TfW to ensure stabilisation would be a reversion of Liverpool services to Chester only and the provision of a shuttle bus from Llandudno Junction to Llandudno town to pick up passengers on the Manchester – Holyhead service.

Having introduced an additional hourly service from Liverpool to London in December, Avanti West Coast have announced a reduction in services for a trial period 20th July – 28th August as a response to Department for Transport (DfT) calls for cost savings. This reduction, or change to a 'demand led timetable' will, for our area, lead to the loss of 5 daily Liverpool – London services, however Avanti are quick to point out that in accordance with the new timetable philosophy there will be extra services available to meet points of increased demand such as football fixtures etc. The affected services have been withdrawn pre-market availability meaning minimum ticket holding passengers will be affected. The new stopping services at Liverpool South Parkway will not be affected.

Amongst these changes it must be borne in mind the Train Operating Companies (TOCs) (England) are paid a fee for running services irrespective of whether they are 'profitable' or not. In fact, Avanti is one of the few TOCs that actually returns an overall profit to the DfT on the services they run. If the DfT is determined to save costs by asking the TOCs to pare back on unprofitable services, it begs the old question: Who are the railways for and for what purpose do they exist?

MW

In Brief:

Frodsham:

The issue of parking on the double yellow lines on road to Morrisons Supermarket and Platform 2 at Frodsham has been raised again with Transport for Wales (TfW). Although the road falls within the TfW lease area Network Rail are now also aware. The fact the Local Stakeholder Manager for TfW has recently changed hasn't helped, as information simply doesn't seem to be passed on. We have been assured action will now be taken on the issue.

The stop points on Platform 1 for Diesel Multiple Units have also been raised. Although the current 2/4 car stop point (the sign hung off the pedestrian overbridge) is adequate for 4 cars, this is only by virtue of the fact there are 3 (rear) cars that are properly accessible. For a 2 car service (Llandudno), the front car requires a step up of over 14 inches to get in the door. When the matter was raised with TfW the response was that the Stop Sign is affixed at the only point they could think of. This seems banal. Affixing a 2 car stop sign further up the platform, say on the end of the electronic CIS screen would not only make all doors more accessible but centre the train with the shelter. TfW's response to this suggestion was that 'it hasn't been done before'.

Helsby:

Following on from the fantastic work done by the NCRUG station adopters, volunteers are active again at Helsby and visitors to the station will have no doubt noticed the difference on Platform 1. The volunteers are now signed up to the TfW Station Volunteer Scheme and registered independently as 'Friends of Helsby Station' with the Community Rail Network.

LJLA:

Although the Airport has reached a record 5.6 million passengers it was disappointing to note the percentage of passengers travelling to the Airport by public transport had dropped from 19% (2017) to 16%. This falls well below the 22.5% Surface Access Strategy Target for 2022, but it must be noted that

target was set pre-Covid and the increase in package holidays sold by the airlines serving the Airport was probably responsible.

As an aside; a last minute train journey to LJLA earlier in May saw me get to the Departure Lounge from Frodsham Station in 58 minutes – that included the bus connection from Liverpool South Parkway and security processing at the Airport. A journey from Crewe on the new Avanti service direct to Liverpool South Parkway is around 24 minutes, leaving a clear travel time advantage to the train.

Platform Three at Frodsham.

Those local to Frodsham will have noted the re-development of the former Frodsham Goods Shed on the land surrounded by the Cheshire West and Chester car park. Platform Three is being developed as a self storage facility with the old shed receiving a refurbishment inside and out. A sneak peak inside the new facility a fortnight ago revealed how much had been expended into re-configuration of the inside space with a new mezzanine floor into lock ups and storage cubicles. The new owner is keen to have Platform Three integrate sympathetically into the surrounding architecture and improvements around the structure such as cobble setts and planting of native species. Much of the heritage palisade styled fence around the site has been refurbished and future plans include secure cycle storage (with platform access) and in the long term, possibly a coffee bar.



The old Frodsham Goods Shed being redeveloped into Platform Three. The style of the wooden loading doors has been preserved.

Liverpool City Region commits to a new station at Daresbury.

In conjunction with a transport funding settlement of £1.6bn the Liverpool City Region (LCR) has committed to new stations at Woodchurch on the Wirral and Daresbury in Halton Borough. Plans for Carrs Mill station in St Helens are already underway and this will be in conjunction with a new interchange for the town. The importance of committed funding for these schemes means the plans for Merseyrail services beyond Ellesmere Port move a step closer. A short video produced by the LCR setting out some of their transport objectives in conjunction with Local Transport Plan 4 can be found here: <https://youtu.be/5-KSWq5TDk4?si=kXIsUpyXvpbAnfMj>

Ditton Station: Back on the radar.

Ditton Station was last reported on in a NCRUG Newsletter some 7 years ago. Back then, it was discussed in the same space as the disused stop at Beechwood in Runcorn; could the re-opening of the Halton Curve support the reopening of these 2 long closed stations? In the case of Ditton, this would support a fast-growing industrial area and permit direct access to Widnes from both Cheshire and North Wales (as of the May timetable change).

Halton Council has allocated some £3m of funding for a 'Green Growth' project which involves improving Halebank accessibility to unlock future growth in the area and reinstating Ditton Station is listed as an aspiration. Additionally, amongst other programs, Ditton Station reinstatement appears in the aspirations (although some way down the list) in overall transport and infrastructure projects in the region featured in the Liverpool City Region Local Transport Plan (LTP4) with its associated £1.6bn settlement agreed with Central Government. It will be essential that any future plans for Ditton fit with the new 'Liverpool Gateway' station proposed for the area.

The opportunity to alight a train at Ditton Station will be many years hence, but an important milestone has been passed pre-Business Case development.

Mourners' RIP for dearly-departed trains



Rail station's loss lamented with 'funeral'

RAIL campaigners bid a mournful farewell to the last train to leave the platform at Ditton Station yesterday.

The station is the first to be closed following news of railway privatisation, despite massive public protests.

Regional Railways says it is too costly to maintain, in light of its limited use.

Fall leavers representing local action groups led a mock funeral procession on to the last Liverpool train at 6pm yesterday.

"We want to draw the public's attention to the potential destruction of the station structures," said Trevor Gauslett of the North Cheshire Rail Users Group.

While John MacGregor has placed a requirement on the British Railways Board to retain land at the site for three years, there is no requirement on Railtrack to retain any structures.

He went on: "The local

By Cath Steward
Daily Post Staff

authorities seem to have no powers to protect the station site.

Cheshire County Council has recommended councillors write to Railtrack, but has taken no further action.

Thus, a serviceable foot-bridge and platforms may be destroyed, which would make the re-opening of Ditton far more expensive.

Transport Secretary John MacGregor's consent to closure came 54 weeks after a public inquiry at Widnes, which found in favour of the objectors.

Community
Rosemary Healey, chairman of the NCRUG, said: "It's a sad day when a community loses its station. Local residents have indicated they would use the service if it were continued."

Viv Mountford of Hatton Friends of the Earth said the area's population was expected to grow in the next few years.

There will be many people who would use that station and they are losing a valuable service," she said.

"More importantly, this is going to put more traffic back on the roads at a time when we are trying to promote public transport."

A spokesman for Regional Railways said the decision to close the station and stop the nine-trains-a-day service had not been taken lightly.

"The decision has followed a long consultation process.

"It was considered that the capital expenditure required to bring the station up to a reasonable standard, compared with the light and low usage of the service, was too costly.

Groups taking part in the "funeral" yesterday were the North Cheshire Rail Users Group, the Railway Development Society, Transport 2000, Halebank Community Action Group, Friends of the Earth and Widnes Railway Circle.

□ A grave undertaking for piper Colin Watson



□ Express grief - an InterCity train files through Ditton Station as the procession mourns the passing of stopping trains

Picture: DAVE KENDALL

Left: A 1994 newspaper article featuring the ceremonial 'funeral' that took place on the day of closure of Ditton Station.

Days out on the railways. (David Evans)

I attended the recent Branchline Gala at the Llangollen & Corwen Railway in April. Powered mostly by steam locomotives the well-attended event was a great success.

One of the unusual highlights was a steam train formed of several brake vans where the passengers were able to stand outside in the open air on the verandas. I was one of those lucky ones and enjoyed a very refreshing but rattling ride through the valley.

However on leaving Berwyn station the line approaches the 689 yard Berwyn Tunnel which was built on an uphill gradient of 1 in 75 so the climbing steam loco has to work really hard during the ascent. As we plunged into the tunnel in total darkness we were soon enveloped in smoke and steam and couldn't see a thing until someone turned on the light from their mobile phone. I revelled in the atmosphere but one or two found the atmosphere rather overwhelming. The return journey wasn't as much fun as the train coasted downhill with a conspicuous lack of steam invading the van.

Settle & Carlisle Railway

Last summer whilst staying in the lovely market town of Skipton I decided to take a trip on the famous line. Skipton is an earlier stop on the line and fortunately the line is normally operated by class 158 DMUs which, unlike some classes I can think of, have generally good seat/window alignment. I managed to grab a forward facing table seat and the views on a gloriously sunny day were fantastic. This was not the case several years' ago as some bright spark at Northern decided to plaster the exterior of one of the coaches with vinyl advertising. No problem you might think. However the advertising also covered the windows on one of the most scenic train rides in the UK. In mitigation the vinyls did contain lots of small holes so you

could just about see out but what were they thinking! Fortunately after much protest the vinyls were removed and the views restored.

I found out recently that lots of tourists don't realise that the trains start their journey at Leeds and travel by car from that area to Settle to start their journey believing that's where the train starts. Perhaps being named the Leeds and Carlisle Railway doesn't have the same impact.

Chester station. (Roy Desouza)

New helpdesk now open at Chester station.

The new customer helpdesk has now been open for several weeks - it stands prominently on the station concourse and in part replaces the former rather remote traditional ticket office, seen some way behind the two officers in the picture below.



In its favour one can say this is a lot more visible to people arriving at the station compared to the old office and on the day in question (a weekday), it wasn't particularly busy. It will be interesting to see how the arrangements cope at busier times, particularly those summer weekends when the station needs to handle large flows of both in and outbound passengers, a fair number of whom won't know about what ticket or train they need or where they're going in the city.

Though designed as a service + information desk rather than a traditional ticket office, you can buy a ticket here and seeing as this was still a pretty commonplace activity despite the alternatives now available, this will probably remain the case in Chester for a while.

Quite often a queue would build up at the old ticket office where a complement of 2 or 3 staff would be available at busy times. There are three places available for staff at the new desk, so it should perform similarly in theory. However one place is partly hidden behind the large grey pillar – you can see the rail person at the desk but not any customers waiting or being served by them. Also it's a bit disappointing to see 'temporary' queue control barriers in place already.

Let's hope this facility performs as well as Transport for Wales hope. There's no doubt that a staff presence is needed at this important location.

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Newsletter: If you wish to contribute to the next newsletter, including any rail journeys you've made or photos of workings of interest, please email your submission to chairman@ncrug.org.uk

Website: Visit our Facebook page to catch up on any developments and leave your comments.

MW 01/06/2026

2026 NCRUG AGM



Dear NCRUG Member,

You are cordially invited to the AGM of the North Cheshire Rail Users' Group at the Frodsham Community Centre, **19.30hrs Thursday 25th June**. The formal business will be preceded by a presentation by **Nick Smith, Regional Growth Manager for Avanti North West** on current and future growth, and fleet replacement.

This will be a discussion of great interest to many members and followed by a full Q&A session.

I look Forward to your attendance.

Mark Warren

Agenda: 19.30hrs, Large Committee Room (upstairs)

1. Presentation by Avanti West Coast.
2. Minutes of 2025 AGM (to be presented).
3. Chair's / Treasurer's / Membership reports (To Follow).
4. Appointment of officers / assignment of tasks*

Officer vacancies for election / re-election:

Chairman
Treasurer
Secretary
Website / Social Media

Representatives for external organisations:

TfW Stakeholders (2pa)
Liverpool City RUG (4pa)
Community Rail Partnership (6pa)
LJLA Surface Access (4pa)
Northern (2pa)
Mersey Dee Consortium (2pa)

5. Consider NCRUG amended Constitution for adoption..
6. AOB.