Richard Clinnick
richard.clinnick@keypublishing.com

123

London continues to surprise

As you may expect, I travel through London a lot. I'm usually in the capital at least twice a week, if not more. When Norwich City are playing in the south, that increases at weekends.

It's well-documented on this page that I use the Great Eastern main line to reach London, and from there are a variety of ways to get around the city from Liverpool Street - the Elizabeth Line, Central Line and the Sub-Surface Lines.

The station is now the busiest in Britain thanks to the opening of the Elizabeth Line, and it is no surprise that it is successful – it is a wonderful piece of railway which takes me right where I need to be, something I am sure many using it agree with.

Yes, there are issues. There isn't enough luggage space on the trains considering many serve Heathrow Airport and, in the future, more trains could be doing so. When it goes wrong, the central section could become a nightmare to use although, so far, I have not encountered major problems.

Signposting around some of the stations could be improved, while at Paddington, reaching the Elizabeth Line platforms often involves crossing the crowded concourse which is not always a fun experience.

Ahead of our Railway Innovation Awards (see pages 74-76), I stayed in London and took a look at the new railway. It was busy. I was grateful for the air-conditioning on the Class 345s and trains were running to time. It shows that, while the project was some four years late, after it entered use and people became familiar with it, the problems faded into history. That is not to say that we should forgive and forget what happened, and that lessons should not be taken forward, but it shows that if you build it, they will come – or rather, that they may well do so.

That is why it was heartening to visit Derby Litchurch Lane a few days later to see progress building the latest, and last, batch of Class 345s. As the feature on pages 64-66 in our London section this issue shows, they are needed due to the volumes of passengers their classmates carry. But they also show a willingness by Alstom to learn and improve its processes. Again, it is well-documented that the Aventra program has had issues - just look at the delayed introduction for so many of the fleets - but speaking to those in charge of the production line, those lessons have been learned and Transport for London suggests that the relationship has never been better. The prospects for Alstom's next generation of trains – the Adessias – look promising.

These ten new units will, ultimately, serve the new station at Old Oak Common. Andy-Bowes Roden spent a day there recently looking around the site. As you pass it by rail, as I did shortly after his visit, you can see the station and the railway infrastructure taking shape. It's not just the high-rise flats rising from the ground at the west London site, this station is too, and it will be some facility when open. Andy's feature on pages 56-62 is well worth reading and showcases what is being achieved against a stormy political background where some of the requirements built into the original design, such as UIC loading gauge, are not needed. Well, not now, but who knows in the future if decisions are reversed?

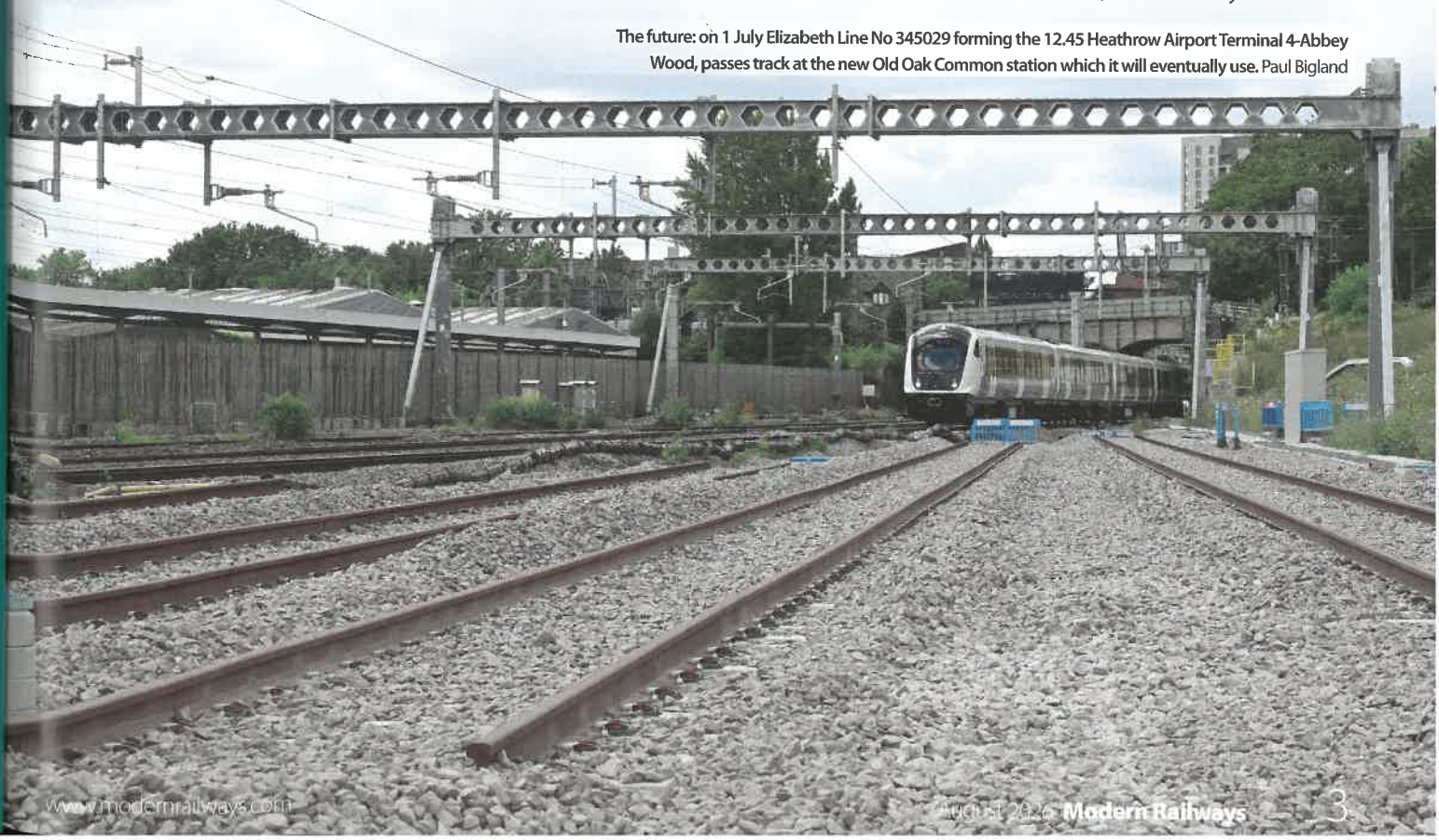
HEROIC

Putting this issue together has been against the backdrop of the tragic accident at Elstow on 19 June. That happened on a Friday evening a week after the previous issue had gone to press but before we hit the shelves, although subscribers were receiving their copies. Andy and Tony Miles were both requested to do many television interviews and they both did this with aplomb. I am especially proud of Andy for batting away requests to speculate what happened on the Midland main line; over that weekend there was little in the way of hard information and he and Tony both had to use what they knew or had been told by sources. *Modern Railways* has a reputation for professionalism and accuracy which I am keen we uphold, so I want to take this opportunity to thank them both for their work under trying circumstances. When you saw the wild speculation in the press, online and on social media, it made it all the better.

Of course, what they were doing paled into insignificance compared with what the railway family was going through. The work carried out by recovery teams in the immediate aftermath was impressive. To identify what was needed, build access roads, recover the Class 360 and '810', get them clear, rebuild the overhead line electrification on the Midland main line and reopen this vital route during one of the hottest weeks this country has ever endured was a heroic task, and one that should be applauded by all.

On behalf of the whole *Modern Railways* team, our very sincere condolences go to the family of driver Shaun Burton, who died in this tragic accident, and our warmest wishes to all of those recovering from injuries sustained in it. mr

Richard Clinnick
Editor, *Modern Railways*



The future: on 1 July Elizabeth Line No 345029 forming the 12.45 Heathrow Airport Terminal 4-Abbey Wood, passes track at the new Old Oak Common station which it will eventually use. Paul Bigland

Contents

CAPITAL FOCUS

50 **London Overground builds on success**
First Rail London MD David Statham and TfL General Manager for LO Rory O'Neill go on the record with Tony Miles

56 **An uncommonly useful station**
HS2's Old Oak Common station is taking shape and revealing its emerging character. Andy Bowes-Roden reports on developments – above and below ground

64 **Alstom's Aventra arrivederci**
As Alstom builds its last batch of Aventras, Richard Clinnick visits Derby to see how the final Class 345s are being built

NEWS

8 **News Front**
The latest on the Elstow crash; Alexander warns on reducing subsidy; First's Steve Montgomery reflects

20 **Rail Freight**
Freightliner warns on Manchester United's new ground

22 **Infrastructure News**
Transpennine Route Upgrade makes progress; new control centre in Yoker; HS2 progress

78 **Moving Wheels**
July start date for '99s', GBRf to retain '60s', no more HydroFlex conversions

84 **Europe View**
Keith Fender reveals the latest news from across the Continent

FEATURES

68 **Cardiff's Crossrail 2**
Rhodri Clark explains how Wales is looking to develop Cardiff's rail network

70 **Stewartby now goal of EWR2**
James Abbott reports on East West Rail's latest plans

74 **Railway innovations recognised**
Modern Railways reveals the winners of the 3 July Railway Innovation Awards

REGULARS

3 **Welcome**
Editor Richard Clinnick introduces the latest issue

6 **Railtalk**
Talk of matching capacity to demand may presage damaging cuts

26 **Informed Sources**
Roger Ford reveals what is known about the Elstow crash, warns on Government funding comments and outlines what's next for ETCS

42 **Pan Up**
Ian Walmsley tours Switzerland and France to take the temperature of railways in Europe

80 **Forum**
Readers' views and opinions

88 **Blood and Custard**
Our diary column

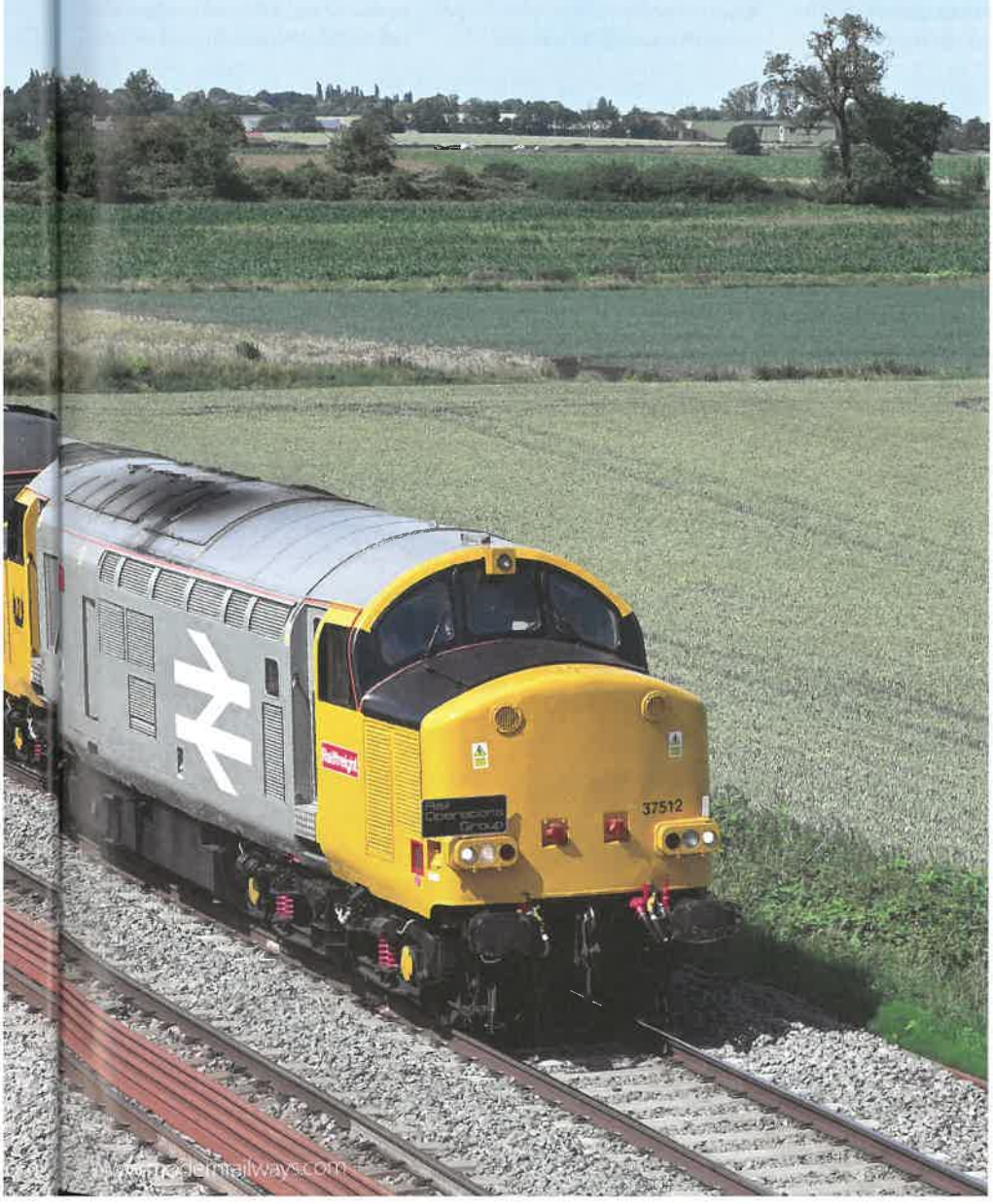
91 **People**
The latest arrivals and departures on Britain's railway network

92 **Trackwatch**
The latest changes on the rail network

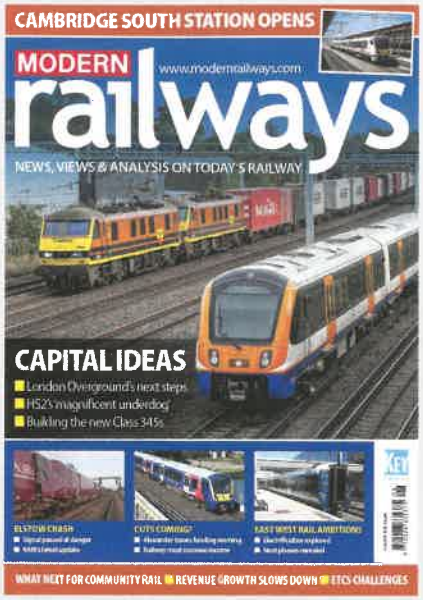
93 **In Business**
Contracts and developments in the rail supply chain

94 **Alan Williams**
As GBR moves closer, Alan Williams asks what it means for Community Rail

'Castle' convoy: No 37512 hauls Nos 43187/188 on the 10.48 Doncaster Works-Ely Papworth sidings at Ely West Junction on 22 June. Jamie Squibbs



ON THE COVER



Capital challenges: Freightliner Nos 90004/013 haul the 09.32 Felixstowe North FLT to Ditton while London Overground No 710377 powers the 14.30 Watford Junction-Euston at Headstone Lane on 15 October 2024. Alex Ayre
Insets: GBR Anglia/RAIB/Jamie Squibbs/Mike Cooper

10 Cambridge South
50 London Overground's next steps
56 HS2's 'magnificent underdog'
64 Building the '345s'
8 Elstow crash
14 Cuts coming
70 East West Rail
94 Community Rail
30 Revenue growth
34 ETCS challenges

A SUBSCRIPTION TO **MODERN RAILWAYS** OFFERS GREAT SAVINGS ON THE COVER PRICE. SEE PAGES 24 & 25 FOR DETAILS

A vote of 'no confidence' in our industry

"We probably do need to reduce public subsidy. Therefore, we do need to match the capacity to demand on services, and I think sensible operational decisions have to be made on things."

Seldom have words from a Secretary of State for Transport (Heidi Alexander at the Transport Committee on 17 June) been received so ominously by the *Modern Railways* team. That the Government wants to reduce the subsidy paid to the railway is no secret – a paper on precisely what level is regarded as 'sustainable' currently remains locked in some Treasury filing cabinet. This goes further. Worryingly further.

The optimistic view, of course, is that the Government genuinely wants to uplift capacity where there is excess demand: CrossCountry is clearly the standout candidate here, and surplus Voyagers which must have its name on them have been deteriorating in store waiting for their forever owner. But with hardly a surfeit of spare trains to boost capacity elsewhere (witness GWR's ongoing trials and tribulations getting the long-stored Class 175s to work reliably), and revenue reflecting the new, post-pandemic market, a degree of scepticism may be warranted on Ms Alexander's comments to the Transport Committee.

Because that 'need to match the capacity to demand on services' also works the other way around. In a business led railway, which believed in its future, the aim would be to match demand to capacity and grow the market.

Contrarily, talk of matching capacity to demand shows that early 1980s Serpellism is alive and well and living in Whitehall. With contra-peak flows out of London carrying copious amounts of fresh air, and many vital rural and regional services less than full and standing, how tempting might it be for government to try and match capacity to demand by cutting services?

MR readers, inside the industry and without, surely appreciate that the most effective way of cutting subsidy is to grow revenue. That will take investment in marketing, fares initiatives and much more. But, if DfTO coordinated its operators, a marketing campaign, pulling together 'Autumn offers' could be put in place quickly and give the railway some much needed pizzaz. DfTO CEO Alex Hynes could, with advantage, consult industry legend Chris Green on how he marketed InterCity in the depths of the 1990s recession.

But such an initiative would also require the defeatist DfT to relinquish the control it has so dominantly exercised over the railway for many years now. Under pressure from a Treasury understandably scarred from backing projects such as High Speed 2 and the Great Western Route Modernisation, does it really seem likely the DfT will loosen its grip?

REPEATED HISTORY

Longer-standing readers of our predecessor *Trains Illustrated* will remember the splurge on the Modernisation Plan which failed to turn around the railway's fortunes. They will also remember vividly what followed from 1963 to try and restore the railway's finances. Has HS2 become the 2020s equivalent of the Modernisation Plan in the minds at 11 Downing Street?

In the 2000s, franchises such as Northern and Wales and Borders were let on a 'no growth' basis

Few spare trains for growth – are cuts in prospect? GWR No 175007 passes Torquay on the 07.50 Paignton-Exeter St Davids training run on 15 June. Colin J. Marsden

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which has hobbled those transport networks to the present day. Only latterly is Wales addressing these with new and expanded fleets plus the transformation of the Core Valley Lines network.

And yet the lesson from the likes of West Coast main line electrification in the 1960s and 1970s, Network SouthEast and the East Coast main line electrification in the 1980s, and Chiltern in the 2000s is that investment in major improvements in services will deliver growth on the all-important bottom line. Investment is better than neglect, or worse, cuts.

And as we explain on pages 38-39, DfT has very little scope for cost cutting, since the bulk of that 'unsustainable' £12 billion subsidy is untouchable within Network Rail's Control Period 7 settlement. Savings from service cuts are likely to barely reach seven figures. One per cent growth on £12.4 billion revenue, however, would bring in serious money.

Despite this sense check, Government cost-cutters at this point will look towards heavily loss-making services as an easy target for cutbacks. After all, if only a handful of people use the 10.15 from the Shires to the Big City, what does it matter if that train is axed? They'll use an earlier or later service, surely.

They won't if the journey isn't convenient for them. They'll either use a different mode or simply not travel at all. The cost saving to the railway will be minuscule in the context of a multi-billion pound industry, but significantly more revenue will be at risk. Amplify this across England and the adverse bottom line impact on the net subsidy will be palpable.

The alternative, of course, once Great British Railways is established, is to use its fare-setting freedom for some commercially viable above-inflation fares increases generating a net revenue gain. Politically undesirable perhaps, but the Government can always disown its involvement by pointing out GBR's operational independence, whether true in actuality or not.

GUNS OR BUTTER?

In fairness to Ms Alexander and Rail Minister Lord Hendy, the wider economic and geopolitical situation places them in a very difficult position. We've seen vital projects such as Midland main line electrification paused due to a lack of funding (we won't mention Ely and Haughley Junction, whose case has now been clear for decades), so what chance is there, really, of transformative investment other than that committed?

Ominously for all transport investment, Ms Alexander also said at that Transport Committee session: "When the Prime Minister says to me 'the scale of spending that we need for defence and national security of our country is bigger than we anticipated 12/18 months ago', I think, as a responsible member of the Cabinet I should look hard at what funds I have yet to allocate, and whether there are any adjustments and tweaks that can be made."

Whether she actually has any funds to allocate is a moot point. And what they should be spent on is another.

UNDER PRESSURE

To be clear, at this stage, we do not know for certain that the Government will seek further, deeper, cuts to services – or even routes – but the signs are ominous. Cuts are quick and easy even if they don't deliver significant savings. The current service cuts smack of that traditional Government approach – 'something must be done, so let's show we have done something'.

Meanwhile, such cuts invariably impose wider socio-economic costs – witness the public transport isolation of areas such as east Lincolnshire and much of East Anglia, and north Devon and Cornwall. That these surely exceed the savings is beside the point. If savings are what is demanded, then cuts are the near-inevitable result. But how does - at the time of writing, Prime Minister -in-waiting - Andy Burnham's localism sit with such a scorched earth approach to regional transport outside the metropolitan areas.?

We hope to be able to look back and view this 'Railtalk' as overly alarmist. But in discussions across the industry since mid-June, there's been little pushback against these concerns. DfTO can no longer afford to be the railway's sleeping giant,

Otherwise, worrying times may lie ahead. mr

Investigations ongoing: East Midlands Railway Nos 360115 and 810015 after the collision at Elstow, near Bedford. Courtesy RAIB

RAIB probes signal passed at danger in Bedford crash

THE EAST Midlands Railway Class 810 bi-mode unit involved in the collision near Bedford on 19 June was standing next to a signal after developing an Automatic Warning System fault, the Rail Accident Investigation Branch (RAIB) said on 24 June, and the train which hit it apparently passed a red signal protecting the unit.

Shaun Burton, the driver of train 1H46 – the 16.40 Corby-St Pancras International – died in the accident, while 162 people were injured of which 102 required hospital treatment. At the time RAIB issued its initial findings, 53 people remained in hospital, eight of whom were in a critical condition.

In the update, RAIB reported that No 810015 – forming the 15.50 Nottingham-St Pancras International (1B67) was hit in the rear by EMR No 360115 working the 16.40 Corby-St Pancras on the Up Fast line on the approach to signal WH152, located at 47 miles, 29 chains – around 2.5 miles south of Bedford station. The maximum speed on the line is between 100mph and 125mph depending on the type of train.

The AWS fault on No 810015 had caused the train's brakes to apply, and it came to a stand next to signal WH152. This signal is a four-aspect automatic signal whose aspect changes automatically depending on the occupation of track circuits by trains without the intervention of the signaller. It is fitted with AWS. The track circuit on which the '810' was standing was shown as occupied, meaning signal WH154, the next signal behind the train, would have displayed a danger aspect to protect the Hitachi bi-mode unit from other movements.

DATA

Data shows that the Class 360 departed Bedford station platform 1 at 17.10 on the Up Slow line. It passed a yellow signal and continued until Bedford South Junction where it crossed onto the Up Fast line. This signal was also displaying a yellow aspect. It approached signal WH154, displaying a red aspect and then passed it. The On-Train Data Recorder (OTDR) is still being analysed as it could not be accessed until the lead vehicle of No 360115 was recovered. The OTDR from the rear vehicle has been recovered and downloaded, and while this does not record AWS activity, it shows there was a brake activation around nine seconds before the collision while the train was travelling at approximately 76mph. It slowed to approximately 49mph at the point of collision.

Investigators say they have obtained CCTV recordings, signalling data and recordings of radio communications. The vehicles involved have been surveyed for internal and external damage using laser scanning and an aerial survey. RAIB inspectors are also overseeing testing of signalling equipment in the area.

RAIB says it continues to analyse evidence relating to the sequence of events, the performance of the signalling system and the speed at which the collision occurred. The investigation will also consider:

- the actions of those involved and any factors that may have influenced them
- the status and performance of the braking, AWS and other safety systems on train 1H46
- the reason train 1B67 stopped
- the status of signal WH154 and its AWS equipment, as well as its positioning, visibility, and conspicuity
- the crashworthiness performance of both trains during the collision
- the emergency response to the accident
- the processes used to assess the risk of overrun at this location, and the effectiveness of any control measures intended to address this
- any relevant underlying factors, including any actions taken in response to previous relevant safety recommendations.

RAIB's investigation continues.

RECOVERY

The vehicles were recovered by the middle of the following week after Network Rail constructed a temporary road to gain access to the site. Both the Class 360 and the Class 810 have been taken by road to Derby Litchurch Lane.

The Midland main line was reopened on 29 June following infrastructure repairs which included removing and reinstalled overhead line equipment to access the stricken vehicles.

Speaking on 26 June, Mark Budden, Network Rail East Midlands Route Director, said: "This has been a complex and challenging recovery operation, and I'd like to thank our engineers and colleagues across the railway for the professionalism, skill, and dedication they've shown in safely completing the work as quickly as possible to get passengers moving again.

"Our thoughts remain with everyone affected by the incident, including driver Shaun Burton's loved ones, and those still recovering."

RESPONSE

Responding to the update, Transport Secretary Heidi Alexander said: "My deepest sympathies remain with everyone affected by the tragic collision, and in particular with the family of the driver who lost his life and those who remain in hospital. My heartfelt thanks go to every person who responded so bravely and professionally in the most difficult of circumstances."

She thanked RAIB for providing its update which she said would help the industry begin to understand the sequence of events that led to the incident.

"Our railway is one of the safest in the world, and while incidents like this are incredibly rare, when they do occur, we will leave no stone unturned to understand what happened.

"The RAIB will publish its full report in due course, and I will consider those findings with the utmost care and take any action necessary. Until then I ask the RAIB be given the space to complete its work thoroughly and speculation is avoided so we can establish the full picture and ensure the right steps are taken in response," she said.

East Midlands Railway Managing Director Will Rogers added: "We are deeply sorry that this has happened on our railway. Our thoughts and heartfelt condolences remain with those affected, particularly EMR driver Shaun Burton, who tragically lost his life.

"Given the complexity of the issues being examined, it is important that the independent investigation is allowed to reach its conclusions. As the investigation remains ongoing, it would be inappropriate to comment on specific findings or speculate on the circumstances surrounding the accident before all of the evidence has been examined.

"We will continue to cooperate fully with the Rail Accident Investigation Branch (RAIB) and Office of Rail and Road (ORR) and await the findings of the final report before commenting further.

Responding to the interim report ASLEF General Secretary Dave Calfe said: "The investigation is not concluded, and has a long way to go, but it appears that the 16:40 East Midlands Railway service from Corby to London St Pancras passed a signal at danger and it is now important to understand how and why this happened.

"We welcome the news that the RAIB is to investigate the crashworthiness of both trains; the reason the other train, the 15:50 East Midlands Railway service from Nottingham to London St Pancras, came to an unexpected stop; and the risk assessment at this location and why TPWS was not in place.

"Because what will concern passengers, and what concerns us, is that there are safety systems that can be put in place to prevent such accidents happening and the network should have been able to cope.

"TPWS – train protection and warning system – has been installed throughout much of Britain's railway network. Unfortunately, TPWS had not been installed here.

"If TPWS had been installed, this accident would not have happened, the driver would not have died, and no passengers would have been injured.

"We now need to wait for the full RAIB report to understand, in detail, what happened, and what went wrong, and what lessons there are to learn."

Mr Calfe reiterated the safety record of the UK's railway but said to keep it that way investment was needed, particularly in safety systems and technology.

■ 'Informed Sources', pages 26-29.

Cambrian ETCS depended on functioning sanders says RAIB

A LACK of appreciation of the importance of correctly functioning sanding systems for the reduced overlaps associated with European Train Control System (ETCS) signalling was one of the contributing factors to the October 21 2024 accident at Talerddig, which led to the death of one passenger.

The Rail Accident Investigation Branch's full report, published on 18 June, confirms that the sanders on the leading vehicle of TfW Rail No 158841, working the 18.31 Shrewsbury-Aberystwyth, were not working properly and failed to prevent the train running away downhill. It collided with No 158824 (working the 19.09 Machynlleth-Shrewsbury) at a speed of around 24mph; the second '158' was travelling at around 6mph.

On the ETCS installation, the RAIB said: "The accident at Talerddig demonstrates that the reduced overlaps and absence of detailed overrun risk assessments, which were permitted when the ETCS signalling system was introduced, meant that the importance of correctly functioning sanding systems was increased for trains operating on the Cambrian lines. RAIB found no evidence that this increased reliance on the integrity of the sanding system in such circumstances was recognised by any of the duty holders directly involved in implementing the ERTMS project, managing the Cambrian lines infrastructure, or operating the trains involved in this accident. An alignment of the system safety models would have recognised the critical contribution that a train's sanding system had to make in ensuring the safe operation of trains in low adhesion conditions. Such recognition would possibly have resulted in enhanced maintenance for the sanders, or a system analysis which could have exposed the potential for dormant electrical failures to inhibit the operation of the sanders with no indication of sander failure provided to train drivers."

Investigations show that the wheel slide protection system on No 158841 was functioning properly, but that the automatic sanders were not working. Neither did its driver use the emergency sanding equipment. Both sand delivery hoses on vehicle No 57841 were found to be blocked, and compounding this, the sander isolation switch and low speed relay were both defective. The orifice plates – part of the sander pneumatic system – were found to be installed incorrectly. RAIB concludes that the blockages would "probably have been ejected" had the sanding system functioned normally. "TfW Rail's processes intended to ensure the operation of the automatic sanding system were not sufficiently effective," says the RAIB.

A Rail Head Treatment Train (RHTT) had passed site of the collision the day before and water jetted the rail. Met Office analysis suggests the rails at the site were likely to have been damp at the time of the accident. A Track Gel Applicator west of Talerddig loop was not operational, but even if it had been, RAIB says it would likely not have prevented the collision. A similar conclusion was drawn on the effects had the RHTT applied Sandite-type gel on the rails.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Nine recommendations were made in the report.

The first is that The Rail Safety and Standards Board (RSSB), "working in conjunction with the owners and operators of rolling stock fitted with sanding equipment, and using recognised rail industry processes, should review and update the standards and guidance relevant to the design, maintenance, and testing of train borne sanding equipment. This review should consider the critical nature of sanding systems in ensuring the safe operation of trains. It should also consider how such systems can be designed to eliminate potential modes of failure such as those detailed in this report or, where this is not possible, to make such failures readily identifiable to staff during routine preparation for service and during operational use. The review should also specifically consider the requirements around sanding system testing, and the need for testing functions to fully prove the electrical circuitry necessary for the correct operation of this equipment. It should also ensure that appropriate provisions exist for managing sanding equipment found to be defective. The Rail Safety and Standards Board should develop a timebound programme for the implementation of any appropriate improvements to standards and guidance identified by this review."

The second applies to Angel Trains, which owns the two '158s' involved and other owners and operators of the type. RAIB says they should review the design and maintenance of automatic sanding systems, seek to eliminate potential failure modes, and consider the requirements around sanding system testing. It should also consider if the Class 158 sanders are delivering optimum sand rates. A timebound programme should be developed to implement improvements to the design, maintenance and testing arrangements of automatic sanders.

Network Rail in conjunction with TfW Rail should review the assumptions which formed the basis for the decision to undertake a simple overrun risk assessment on the Cambrian line, considering the validity of those assumptions against the circumstances of the accident, including the reliance on automatic sanders to achieve the intended brake performance.

Network Rail should consider the opportunity to protect trains approaching the location of a potential exceedance of movement authority at the earliest opportunity as part of its client requirements specification for software-based train control systems. This could include features such as targeted stop commands being automatically issued to other trains approaching a potentially conflicting location at the point the system has had to intervene with an emergency brake application.

TfW Rail, Network Rail and other industry bodies should better understand how drivers are interacting with the European Rail Traffic Management System (ERTMS), undertake a risk based review of policies, procedures, guidance, training and competency management systems related to driving in ERTMS areas, and ensure all relevant data from ERTMS sub-systems is made available and considered when carrying out post-incident investigations and reviews of driver performance.

Other recommendations are that TfW rail should undertake a risk-based review of training, development and assessment processes for drivers, that NR should continue research and development on the effectiveness and longevity of rail head treatments, and that the RSSB should review Railway Group Standard GMRT2100 – Rail Vehicle Structures and Passive Safety.

Finally, the Rail Accident Investigation Branch recommends that TfW Rail should undertake a risk-based review of the competencies required of staff whose duties require them to regularly work on trains and interact with passengers, including staff undertaking non-safety-critical duties.

Open for business: Greater Anglia No 720536 at Cambridge South on 28 June, the first day the station was open. Courtesy GBR Anglia

Cambridge South station opens

CAMBRIDGE SOUTH station opened on 28 June, with the Greater Thameslink Railway 06.31 Cambridge-London King's Cross formed of No 700012 the first train to serve it.

The station features four through platforms and is served by up to nine trains per hour off-peak and 20tph during peak periods. It is expected to be used by at least 1.8 million passengers per year and serves the adjacent biomedical campus, hospital and residential areas.

Ahead of its official opening, which was delayed from December 2025 due to resignalling schemes, timetables and, latterly, one of the contractors encountering financial problems, Secretary of State for Transport Heidi Alexander said: "The newly-opened station cuts journey times, improves access to jobs and makes everyday life that little bit easier for thousands of people."

CrossCountry, Greater Anglia and GTR (Great Northern and Thameslink) all serve the station.

Jamie Burles, GBR Anglia Managing Director, said: "Cambridge South will be a game-changer, providing a more sustainable travel option for workers and visitors at the biomedical campus and for local residents too, supporting regional growth and boosting connection to major cities and transport hubs across the UK."

The station has no car park and is designed to blend in with its surroundings, integrating with the Hobson's Park nature reserve. It features a 'green roof' which includes a wildflower meadow environment and rainwater catchment system that will store and slowly discharge rain water back into the environment and nearby brook. The overall design and construction efficiencies are said to have reduced the station's carbon footprint by 22%.

Cambridge South is connected to the local cycle network and there are 1,000 spaces for cycles and blue badge bays while the city's guided busway serves the city.

Longer-term, the station will be served by East West Rail services. Ahead of that, loops will have to be extended to enable an increase in capacity.

Passenger journeys soar above pre-pandemic levels

THERE WAS a 4% year-on-year increase in passenger journeys between January and March, according to the Office of Rail and Road's latest quarter statistics, published on 18 June.

Some 447 million journeys were made during that period, the ORR said, however, while revenue grew, to £2.9 billion, the increase of 1% represented a lower rate of growth.

Full year figures for 2025/26 show a 6% increase in passenger journeys to 1.829 billion, the highest figure recorded since 1920 and now well above pre-pandemic levels. Full year revenue was £12.3 billion, which adjusted for inflation is 4% more than the £11.9 billion recorded in 2024/25.

Of the franchised operators, Greater Anglia recorded the strongest growth in passenger journeys between January and March, up 10% to 21.8 million. TfW Rail (up 8% to 8.3 million), Merseyrail (up 6% to 7.7 million), ScotRail (up 6% to 21.5 million) and CrossCountry (up 5% to 10.5 million) rounded off the top five. Lumo recorded the strongest growth of all, up 23% to 0.4 million journeys.

Four operators recorded fewer journeys over the quarter – Hull Trains (down 1% to 0.4 million), LNER (down 3% to 6.7 million), Grand Central (down 3% to 0.4 million) and Caledonian Sleeper (down 7% to 0.1 million).

Usage increased for all ticket types over the quarter, including season tickets, where there was a marginal 0.2% increase in passenger journeys. Revenue also rose for all sectors – by 1.8% in London and the South East, 0.6% for long-distance and 1% for regional. However, passenger revenue per kilometre also fell, suggesting passengers are making longer journeys. The open access operators recorded their lowest combined revenue since the October 2022 to December 2022 period. Open access operators accounted for 2% of total Great Britain passenger revenue.

Performing well: Greater Anglia No 745003 passes Dunston on 25 April, with the 11.00 Norwich-London Liverpool Street. GA recorded the strongest growth of any operator during the first three months of 2026. Ryan Hayward

Uncertainty clouds Northern Powerhouse

CONSIDERABLE UNCERTAINTY still clouds the Northern Powerhouse Rail project, says a Public Accounts Committee (PAC) report published on 1 July.

It highlights 'echoes' of failures seen in HS2's governance as areas of particular concern and the PAC also questions how NPR will be delivered to budget.

Clive Betts, Deputy Chair of PAC, said: "The spectre of HS2 hangs over Northern Powerhouse Rail. Our committee has heard troubling echoes of the same mistakes in loose governance that HS2 made early on, and so much of the project remains almost impressionistic, 12 years on.

"HS2 has even been brought on board to develop NPR's own plans. As HS2 has been a casebook example of how not to run a major project, so its involvement in NPR does not fill us with confidence.

"Both the Treasury and DfT have questions to answer about the project's £45 billion funding cap. Given the fact that this project has not been fully scoped or designed, it is hard to see how the government was able to arrive at a hard £45 billion cap."

PAC has made six recommendations regarding the NPR project (see box), while it said that despite more than 12 years of planning, NPR remains at an early stage and that there remains considerable uncertainty surrounding the project. Journey times, frequency, capacity, the exact route of the new line, who will build the new lines and how investment in urban and industrial regeneration will be prioritised are not yet determined. The report calls on the DfT to set out how it will keep Parliament updated throughout the programme.

Concern was also raised that while NPR is expected to support future work to improve north-south connections on the West Coast main line into Manchester, the PAC said it had previously heard that this would be at capacity by the 2030s yet the DfT does not expect the relevant phase of NPR to be complete until the mid-2040s. PAC said there is no clarity as to how DfT intends to bridge that gap.

While NPR has all but one of the characteristics of a mega-project based on the Office of Value for Money's definition, the committee says the government is not yet treating it as one. It added: "Whether it is formally a mega-project or not, the Department must ensure governance is as clear and effective as possible".

DfT lacks formal governance arrangements for joint decision-making with other departments, said the PAC, which also raised concerns that the system for working with local government will prove insufficient when difficult trade-offs are required; it highlighted the desire to construct an underground station at Manchester Piccadilly which would enable more development opportunities above the station than alternative construction at surface level. This is expected to be more costly and could reduce the budget available for additional development in other areas.

Questions have also been raised regarding DfT's decision to appoint HS2 Ltd to develop plans for the Liverpool to Manchester line, given its track record of poor cost estimation. The report calls on government to explain how it will make sure HS2 Ltd's plans and costs for Phase 2 of NPR are realistic. PAC said it considers HS2 Ltd's involvement as "heightening the serious risk to the final phase of NPR", which is needed for the full connectivity and benefits, if DfT cannot scope NPR within its £45 billion funding cap, or if early cost estimates prove unrealistic.

Phase 1, expected to be completed in the mid-2030s, is the upgrade and electrification of existing railways, with Network Rail currently responsible for this.

The report says there was "no convincing DfT plan" for managing spending or prioritising benefits to remain within the £45 billion cap, and there are further concerns that areas less able to self-fund or provide private investment will be left behind. The cap was also determined before the entire project was designed, scoped and costed – which the PAC says makes it unclear how the Treasury arrived at the £45 billion cap. It says the DfT must set out how it will manage its spending envelope while the Treasury must explain how the cap was determined. "Capping a project's funding before it was even designed or costed feels like putting a roof on a house before the foundations are even laid," PAC said in a statement.

A DfT spokesperson told *Modern Railways*: "NPR will deliver the biggest investment in rail connectivity in a generation, giving the North the transport links it deserves and driving growth, jobs and investment across the region.

"NPR will not repeat the mistakes of HS2 which is why we accepted all the recommendations of the James Stewart Review and are taking a disciplined, phased approach - completing detailed technical work with all stakeholders before fixing precise choices for major infrastructure.

"Since announcing NPR in January, we have worked closely with Mayors to take the project forward. New joint partnership forums are already overseeing the next stage of development and Network Rail has begun developing engineering designs."

PAC RECOMMENDATIONS

1. DfT must ensure the NPR business case is clear in how it aligns with the Northern Growth Strategy priorities; DfT should set how it will keep Parliament updated on progress through the programme,
2. 2 - The DfT should set out how much funding it will allocate to each phase and how it will support local government to raise additional funds; the Treasury should explain in detail how it determined the £45 billion funding cap before the entire project is designed, scoped and costed; the DfT should clearly set out how it will manage its spending with the £45 billion including how it will control costs, prioritise benefits and decide what to descope if cost pressures emerge; within six months the DfT should write to PAC to set out what it is doing to ensure HS2 Ltd's plans and cost estimates for Phase 2 are realistic.
3. Within six months the DfT should write to the PAC to confirm whether NPR is a mega-project or not; within six months the DfT should write to PAC explaining how the governance arrangements in place are appropriate for the programme's scale, longevity and dependence on other central government bodies for success,
4. The DfT should set out the principles by which it will work with local government and confirm by when it will update PAC on the arrangements in place,
5. The DfT should clarify how it will work with local areas to support the development of local transport networks across the route while ensuring they integrate with the NPR plans; and how NPR will help it meet WCML capacity requirements,
6. Within six months, the DfT should set out how it is ensuring lessons from other rail programmes are consistently shared and embedded into its management of NPR; how DfT will use recent planning reforms to reduce costs on NPT; how DfT will address the findings of the Government Internal Audit Agency (GIAA) that programme and project teams across the DfT were not consistently applying the lessons the Department had identified.

Lumo increases WCML service frequency

WITH THREE six-car Class 222/6 units now available, Lumo is increasing the number of trains running on the West Coast main line.

From 5 July until 25 July, there will be two departures from Stirling on Sundays at 10.06 and 16.34, and one from Preston at 10.40, with London Euston to Stirling trains departing from the capital at 08.22 and 17.18 along with a 14.18 departure for Preston.

From 6 July, a weekday frequency will see trains leave Stirling at 08.50, 12.22 and 17.09, with a Preston-Euston train departing at 06.41. Northbound weekday trains leave Euston at 06.11, 10.19 and 16.36 for Stirling and 19.19 for Preston.

On Saturdays, trains depart from Stirling at 08.49, 13.21 and 17.51, while there is also a 06.04 Preston-Euston; northbound trains leave Euston for Scotland at 06.10, 10.19 and 16.19.

Three Class 222s, cascaded from East Midlands Railway and reformed into six-car formations with standard class interiors, are being used by the open access operator on the WCML. The trains, Nos 222601/603/604, will be joined by Nos 222602/605, which are being refreshed by Alstom at its Widnes Technical Centre.

Lumo launched its WCML trains on 25 May (*Modern Railways*, July 2026), using solo No 222601. In the longer term, the operator wants to replace its diesel '222s' with battery-electric trains (*MR*, July 2026).

Lords debate Railways Bill

THE RAILWAYS Bill started its Second Reading in the House of Lords on 7 July.

Opening the debate, Rail Minister Lord Hendy said the Bill will: "give the Secretary of State the powers to create Great British Railways, one public body that will act as the directing mind for the railway. GBR will bring together 17 different organisations involved in the day-to-day running of the railway, harmonising track and train and seizing opportunities that would not be possible under the current system."

He highlighted the role of an enhanced passenger watchdog, GBR's accessibility duty, and simplification of ticketing as benefits. He also pointed out the requirement for the Secretary of State to publish a long-term railway strategy and said that GBR's control of the timetable would allow it to "strategically plan access to the network and implement a reliable, achievable timetable to make the best use of our limited capacity". Lord Hendy also referred to the devolution elements of the Bill.

Baroness May – a former Prime Minister – said privatisation created an environment where "the service to passengers mattered… I was able to work with the train operating companies to ensure that services were improved, timetables were changed, and new trains were put on in the interests of local people. That ability is going to be wiped away by this Bill and by the creation of Great British Railways."

She also expressed concerns that the Bill "is removing yet further the powers of the Office of Rail and Road to hold the railways and Great British Railways to account," adding: "The Bill gives considerable opportunities for the Secretary of State to interfere with Great British Railways and to make determinations which otherwise should be being made in the interests of passengers."

Baroness May also criticised the Bill for reducing the regional identity of the railway."

However, Lord Bradshaw (Liberal Democrat) – former General Manager of British Rail's Western Region, expressed support, saying: "The aim is for a railway that operates express services to and from the capital; fast inter-regional services; local services planned together with regional mayors; better connections; an ambitious freight growth target; and some elbow room in the timetable to cater for the occasional aberrations, together with some engineering work.

"All this can be achieved and still leave room for open-access operators which are able to pay a fair price for access, and that abstraction of revenue from other operators must be compensated for."

However, he raised concerns about the Bill's provisions for the Secretary of State for Transport "to reduce the amount of money set aside for the railways."

Other concerns raised by speakers included treatment of open access operators, rail freight and independent ticket retailers, accessibility including level boarding, the need for a statutory passenger growth target, long-term funding certainty and the future relationship between GBR and devolved governments.

Liverpool plans to bring Merseyrail in-house

LIVERPOOL MAYOR Steve Rotheram is to present a report to the City Region Combined Authority recommending Merseyrail services are brought in house when the current concession operated by Serco expires in 2028.

A Serco/Abellio joint venture has operated Merseyrail services since July 2003 under a 25-year concession: Abellio sold its UK operations to the Transport UK Group in February 2023.

Mayor Rotheram said: "We've already introduced the country's first publicly owned train fleet in a generation, delivered new rail stations, taken back control of our buses, rolled out tap-and-go ticketing and started laying the foundations for a rapid transit network.

"Now we have the opportunity to take back control of our trains too.

"Merseyrail is already one of the best-performing rail networks in the country and that's a credit to the people who run it every day. But the challenge now isn't simply running a successful railway - it's bringing together all the different parts of our transport network so they work as one…

"…My ambition is simple: one network, one vision, working in the interests of the 1.6 million people who call our city region home.

"Taking back control of our trains will help us do exactly that. It will give us greater freedom to join up services, improve connections, reinvest more money back into the network and make decisions based on what works for passengers."

Mr Rotheram argues that bringing Merseyrail into public ownership would make it easier to invest as part of a single network.

Railway staff recognised in King's Birthday Honours

FORMER DEPARTMENT for Transport Operator (DfTO) Chief Executive Robin Gisby is amongst railway staff honoured in the King's Birthday Honours in mid-June.

Mr Gisby received an Order of the British Empire, as did former Govia Thameslink Railway Chief Executive Angie Doll.

DfTO Head of Rolling Stock Contracts and Policy Delivery Brian Freemantle was awarded with a Member of the British Empire, as was transport analyst, consultant and economist – and contributor to *The Modern Railway* – Chris Cheek.

British Empire Medals were awarded to TPE Safeguarding and Crime Prevention Lead Stephen O'Callaghan, former South Western Railway railwayman Darren Ward, TfL's Claire Allequen and Evren Altinok, and Network Rail's Esther Ladgen and Tyron Woodford.

Network Rail Chief Executive Jeremy Westlake paid tribute to Esther Lagden and Tyron Woodford, saying: "Esther and Tyron exemplify the very best of Network Rail.

"Their commitment to public service goes far beyond their day jobs, making a real, lasting difference. From supporting young people to championing inclusion and participation, their contributions to the community reflect the values we stand for as an organisation.

"We are incredibly proud to see them recognised in The King's Birthday Honours."

TfL Commissioner Andy Lord said of Ms Allequen and Mr Altinok: "Both Claire and Evren have done amazing work to support communities and under-represented groups, both here in London and further afield. I am proud to see them both recognised for their tireless work to make London a more sustainable and inclusive city."

Recognised for his service: Robin Gisby (right) is now an OBE. He was recognised at the *MR* Golden Whistles with a Lifetime Achievement award. Tony Miles

In service: TfW Rail No 398028 arrives at Radyr on 23 June, the first day the '398s' were in traffic, forming the 06.55 Pontypridd-Cardiff Bay. Kieran Marshall

Class 398s enter traffic

TFW RAIL Class 398 tram-trains entered traffic via a soft launch on 23 June, when No 398028 formed the 06.55 Pontypridd-Cardiff Bay.

TfW Rail has 36x3-car sets on order from Stadler, which built them in Valencia. The '398s' are based at Taff's Well and while they are 25kV powered, they do feature batteries thus allowing them to operate on parts of the CVL network where there is discontinuous electrification. As this issue of *Modern Railways* went to press there was yet to be a formal launch for the units, but more were entering service, albeit only one operating per day. Sources have confirmed that there is an option for more units, but that that has yet to be exercised. Introducing the '398s' will allow TfW Rail to withdraw its final Class 150/2s.

Nelson succeeds Montgomery at First Rail

MIKE NELSON has been appointed Managing Director of First Rail, replacing Steve Montgomery who has retired from role.

Mr Nelson was previously Finance and Strategic Development Director at First Rail from June 2020. Before that he was Finance Director – European Business at MTR from October 2016 until moving to FirstGroup. His career also includes five years at British Airways in various roles and 12 years at First Great Western in financial positions.

Mr Nelson said: "My focus will be on continued close collaboration with the DfT on the handover of GWR and WCP, following SWR last year, the growth of our open access business, including our new Stirling service, and building on the successful launch of First Rail London."

Metro trains finally replaced in the North East

THE FINAL Class 599 Metro trains on the Tyne and Wear Metro ran at the end of June, almost 36 years after they entered service in 1980. The 90x2-car trains were built between 1978 and 1981 by Metro-Cammell and have mostly operated in two-train formations.

They have been replaced by 46x5-car Stadler Class 555 articulated trains, which began entering service in December 2024.

104,000 visit *Inspiration*

MORE THAN 104,000 people visited the Inspiration train during its year-long trip around the country, Network Rail has confirmed.

Its final exhibition was at Scarborough on 22 June. Two of the four Mk 3 coaches NR acquired for it are being redeployed while no decision regarding the other two vehicles has been confirmed.

The train made 65 stops across the country, covering 12,000 miles and offering 273 bespoke tours for 6,000 students from 188 schools including 35 Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) schools. NR said more than 44,000 litres of recycled vegetable oil were used to power the generator.

Emma Roberts, Railway 200 Programme Manager, confirmed that the Wonderlab on Wheels coach, Mk 3 No 11093, which features interactive engineering challenges designed by the National Railway Museum, will move to Locomotion at Shildon where it continue its role as an exhibition coach. She also confirmed that NR is retaining the Your Railway Future coach, No 11101, at the Test Track facility, Melton, where it will be used by visitors.

GB Railfreight operated the train and the two Class 66s it used will now return to everyday service, while the Mk 3 generator van leased from Eastern Rail Services has been returned to its owner and has already lost its livery.

New Welsh transport minister explains rail funding approach

NEW WELSH transport minister Mark Hooper says that the new Plaid Cymru government will not rule out, as a matter of principle, funding some enhancement schemes on Network Rail lines.

Since winning the Senedd election in May, Plaid Cymru – in both Cardiff and Westminster – has stepped up its demands for more funding for Wales and the Borders and devolution of rail infrastructure. Currently only the Core Valley Lines are devolved.

Plaid Cymru and other political parties in Wales have argued for many years that the UK government is wrong to classify HS2 as an "England and Wales" scheme because no part of HS2 will be in Wales. Scotland receives HS2 consequential funding from the Treasury under the Barnett Formula but Wales does not.

Speaking to *Modern Railways* on a Class 158 on the Cambrian main line, Mr Hooper said he would not let the UK government off the hook. "We're looking at a Barnett consequential of something like £5.2 billion for Wales, based on HS2 now. That sort of money would make a massive difference."

The previous Labour Welsh government was dissatisfied with rail infrastructure funding but funded many capital projects, including reopening the Ebbw Vale line and double tracking from Rossett to Chester (primarily in England). This reduced the capital funding available for health, education and other devolved subjects.

Asked whether the Plaid Cymru government would refuse to fund rail schemes outside the CVL as a matter of principle, he said: "Previously the Welsh Government has invested, and I think if the need to invest again was the case, then it would be ready to do it for the right schemes." However, this was not where he started from by default. "My default starting point is to negotiate from a position of fairness, frankly.

"I think this strength that we have now is 3.1 million people who, I think, agree with me. The UK Government need to recognise that Wales is now standing up, and we are going into these conversations eyes wide open."

He acknowledged that if HS2 were to be reclassified as "England only", the consequential funding for Wales would not be ring-fenced for rail. He would argue for as much as possible to be devoted to transport.

Welsh rail enhancement funding has been heavily biased towards South East Wales. This is repeated in the Plaid Cymru government's rail priorities. Mr Hooper, who was previously a Vale of Glamorgan councillor, said rebalancing could be achieved through funding other forms of transport in other regions, including a two-hourly coach service which will commence this autumn to improve comfort and reduce bus journey times between Bangor, Aberystwyth and Carmarthen. The new government has allocated £2 million for the coach service's first year of operation. *Rhodri Clark*