

Issue 72 Spring 2022

Rail Wales

Newsletter of Railfuture in Wales



A GB Railfreight class 60 loco hauls a train of empty stone wagons past Penmaenmawr en route to the nearby quarry on December 21 2021. The train originated at Tuebrook, Liverpool and is the first regular freight service on the North Wales mainline since 2014. Photo: skimpler@flickr

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WELCOME

Welcome to the latest issue of Rail Wales, the magazine for members of Railfuture Wales. This issue aims to bring you news and thought provoking comment on the ever evolving rail scene in Wales as well as Railfuture's activities to achieve its core goal of bigger and better rail services.

Firstly, I am pleased to confirm that the first face-to-face Railfuture Wales events for two years will be taking place this spring. The members annual meeting will be held at Shrewsbury station on Saturday 23rd April with Mike Dalton the Transport for Wales stakeholder manager for the Borders rail routes as the guest speaker. Further details below.

Prior to that on Friday 8th April, there will be an opportunity to visit the mock ups of the new rolling stock destined for Welsh railways on display at Taffs Well, near Cardiff. If you have not booked and are interested there are a few spaces available. See notice below (page 4).

Railfuture continues to respond to and support the recovery of rail transport from the ravages of Covid-19. The situation in Wales and the rest of Britain is that freight traffic and passenger journeys made for leisure purposes have recovered all or most of the demand lost during the various lockdowns. However, work related passenger traffic has not returned to pre pandemic levels and, in my and the opinion of many commentators, will not do so in the near future.

The pandemic provided a large stimulus for the greater use of electronic communication for office type work, a shift in behaviour which would have probably happened regardless of public health, but which Covid-19 accelerated. Therefore, some rail journeys made pre pandemic will not return but this can be regarded as a positive change with regard to decarbonisation.

However, the bad news is that overall private car use has returned to near pre-pandemic levels. The challenge for rail is to persuade more people to use it (and others forms of public transport and active travel) rather than the car for some of their journeys. This will ameliorate the impact of climate change and other negative environmental impacts as even if battery cars become the predominant means of powering cars in a decade's time, there are many negative impacts associated with battery production as well as air pollution created by tyre wear and brake use.

A relatively small number of journeys transferring from car to public transport would have the potential to greatly increase the use of the rail system, the infrastructure of large parts of which has spare capacity.

The rail system has received a large input of public money to keep it going during the pandemic and it is to be hoped that the UK and Welsh governments do not now seek to recover some of this expenditure by reducing operational subsidies or spending on infrastructure improvements. So far, the Welsh Government/Transport for Wales is continuing with its investment programme in the electrification of the Cardiff Valleys routes and provision of new rolling stock. This is welcome but a watch is required on the longer term where many hoped for further improvements have been put back to the 2030s - see page 7.

Peter Kingsbury

RAILFUTURE WALES ANNUAL MEETING 2022

Railfuture Wales is pleased to hold a face-to-face meeting for its 2022 AGM, the first time the event has been held non virtually since 2019.

The event will take place at Shrewsbury station at 2pm (14.00 hrs) on Saturday 23rd April. There will be an opportunity to look back at the organisation's activities over the past year, ask questions and discuss our future direction including priorities for campaigning.

We are pleased to welcome Mike Dalton (right), the Transport for Wales stakeholder manager for the Borders routes to give a short talk to the meeting. The meeting will also elect the committee for 2022/23.



Please meet outside the door which provides access to the British Transport Police office on the left-hand side of station building (viewed facing the main entrance) at 13.55 from where directions will be provided to the meeting room.

There is no need to pre-book attendance at the AGM but if you require further information, please email peter.kingsbury@railfuturewales.org.uk.

VISIT TO NEW TRAIN MOCK UPS

Transport for Wales has constructed full size models of its new rail rolling stock to show to the public. These train 'mock ups' are displayed in a warehouse adjacent to Taffs Well station. All four types of new rolling stock to come into use over the next few years are exhibited.



Railfuture Wales has arranged a visit to the mock ups on Friday 8th April. As a result of the easing of Covid 19 restrictions, several more spaces have become available for the visit. This begins at 13.00 hrs. If you have not registered for the event and would like to attend, please contact Peter Kingsbury (email address on previous page) to show your interest.

CAN YOU HELP RAILFUTURE WALES?

Railfuture Wales has plenty of challenges ahead as it seeks to influence decisions made by government and rail operators to provide the country with the highest quality train services. Rail has a bright future, despite Covid, in light of the increasing recognition of the existential impact of climate change and other environmental issues.

Could you assist Railfuture Wales in helping ensure rail is developed to fulfil its maximum potential. The committee which runs the branch activities and campaigns is seeking new members to introduce fresh thinking and help expand the range of actions undertaken. The committee meets every two months, with the majority of meetings being virtual.

Please contact Peter Kingsbury if you wish to find out more or simply attend the AGM when the committee for 2022/23 will be elected.

THE BUSIEST STATIONS IN WALES: COVID'S IMPACT

The annual look at station usage in the spring issue of Rail Wales takes on a vividly different focus this year as the latest statistics from the Office of Rail & Road cover the first year affected by the pandemic, April 2020 to March 2021. Nevertheless, the data is reproduced below where the impact of the various lockdowns over these 12 months can be seen. Overall, passenger journeys in Wales were down 82%, which is slightly more than the British average of 77% but a slightly smaller loss than

Scotland (84%). Both Celtic nations had longer periods of work from home restrictions which may explain much of the difference.

The station usage is ranked in terms of 2020-21 figures. New entrants to the top 20 include Abergavenny, Cwmbran, Llandudno Junc and Prestatyn. They replace four stops on the Cardiff Valleys network: Penarth, Radyr, Treforest and Aberdare, whose dependence on commuting traffic would explain their disproportionate loss of passengers. Cardiff Bay just managed to remain in the top 20 despite losing 94% of its passengers, a station highly dependent on journeys to work. Rhyl moves up the table from the 20th busiest station to 8th with the smallest decline (70%) no doubt reflecting the busy summer of 2020 after the end of the first lockdown and ‘staycation’ boom. It replaced Bangor as the busiest station in North Wales.

Station	2020/21	2019/20	Decline (%)
Cardiff Central	1,975,000	13,141,000	84
Newport	543,000	2,814,000	80
Cardiff Queen St	473,000	2,784,000	82
Swansea	469,000	2,134,000	77
Bridgend	322,000	1,557,000	79
Neath	185,000	832,000	77
Pontypridd	153,000	841,000	81
Rhyl	152,000	519,000	70
Cathays	136,000	1,002,000	86
Port Talbot Parkway	129,000	561,000	76
Wrexham General	128,000	521,000	74
Caerphilly	119,000	739,000	83
Barry Island	110,000	787,000	86
Barry	109,000	537,000	79
Bangor	107,000	652,000	83
Cwmbran	107,000	413,000	74
Abergavenny	102,000	415,000	75
Prestatyn	94,000	325,000	71
Cardiff Bay	88,000	1,522,000	94
Llandudno Junc	75,000	301,000	75

Source: Office of Rail and Road (ORR)

The next data is due to be published in late 2022 covering 2021/22 when the rail system had started to recover from the effects of the pandemic.

FREIGHT NEWS

Travelling from East to West, a new trial of moving timber by rail from Newton Abbot to Abergavenny was recently operated, with the prospect of a regular flow, which is operated by Colas Rail.

Steel traffic runs from Llanwern to various destinations, including I am told to Portbury operated by DB, apparently with slabs rather than coil. The steel arrives at Llanwern from either Port Talbot or Scunthorpe; if the latter arriving Llanwern and reversing direction, and steel traffic through Birdport at Newport also continues.

The Machen branch serving a stone quarry has started seeing use again in the last few weeks, with a Wednesday and Saturday working to Appelford, for use on HS2 construction.

Rail borne scrap traffic continues to Sims Metals at Newport docks with various EMUs, including Class 365s, being cut up.

Discussions continue on a possible freight hub at Cwm, just south of Ebbw Vale, where aggregates and possibly other traffic, could be loaded. A loop or sidings would be required, so hopefully this will go ahead.

The daily Tesco Daventry to Wentloog multi modal trains continue, with the additional prospect of more Tesco refrigerated flows. Other Freightliner container workings also keep Wentloog busy.

I believe Celsa traffic to Cardiff still uses rail, although not confirmed.

Cwmbargoed coal flows continue normally to run twice daily weekdays, and once Saturdays, mostly to TATA at Port Talbot, although this is likely to be the final year for this traffic.

Steel coil traffic from Port Talbot to Trostre operate twice daily, even at weekends, as do the flows of products to Llanwern, Dee Marsh, Round Oak, and their returns.

The Neath valley branch remains out of use, but coal workings are continuing from Onllwyn, normally Tuesdays and Thursdays, one of which I saw recently, and apparently, sometimes on Saturdays to Immingham I am told. However, this traffic is due to cease during 2022 as the site closes, but the branch will be kept for the Global Rail Excellence Centre access from 2023.

Further west, the Robeston, Pembs oil trains continue; roughly two loaded and two return empties, for Westerleigh and Theale terminals on weekdays and sometimes a Saturday working occurs.

Finally, the North Wales main line has seen a freight flow restart with trains carrying stone from the quarry at Penmaenmawr to England (see front cover). This is the first such service since 2014.

Rhodri Evans

RAILFUTURE SPOTLIGHTS NORTH WALES SERVICES AND PLANS

Railfuture Wales has recently written to Transport for Wales regarding its plans for services in North Wales in 2022 and the longer-term infrastructure investment timetable.

The first communication expressed concern that as a result of some pre-Covid services not having been restored (Llandudno to Manchester) the main line between Llandudno and Prestatyn is likely to see a repeat of the overcrowding which occurred last summer during the peak season. This will possibly be exacerbated if the class 197 trains start to be introduced as 2- and 3-car trains will provide fewer seats than the class 175 trains which they will replace.

In reply, TfW's Stakeholder Director of Communications and Engagement Lewis Brencher advised that the improved services promised for N Wales as part of the 2018 franchise award including a new Llandudno to Liverpool service, will be introduced by December 2023. In the meantime, the December 2021 timetable, curtailed by Omicron, would be operated in full from the end of March.

Mr Brencher also suggested that the new 197 fleet will provide more flexibility of train size as having one fleet will allow trains to be coupled together while it is not possible to combine a class 158 and 175 unit.

Railfuture Wales has also more recently written to TfW regarding the longer-term plans for improving rail shown under the Metro pages on its website: <https://tfw.wales/projects/metro>. The maps indicate that apart from new three stations in NE Wales (Broughton, Deeside and Greenfield) all the other suggested new major infrastructure in North Wales will be delivered after 2029 in contrast to South Wales, where, for example,

seven new stations and a new service over the Swansea District Line will begin in the 2020s. A reply is awaited.



A Holyhead bound two car class 158 train calls at Prestatyn in February. Railfuture Wales has written to Transport for Wales to express concern about the capacity of passenger services on this route which serves several seaside resorts in the forthcoming holiday season. Photo: Richard Wilcock

LETTER

Following his visit to the new train mock ups in December, Pembrokeshire based Railfuture Wales member Peter Absolon has recently written to Transport for Wales about the new class 197 units, which will operate all long-distance services in Wales, including Milford Haven to Manchester.

Below is an edited version of Peter's comments:

In this note, I restrict comments to the Class 197s, but for the benefit of doubt, I assume that

1. The level of service of trains that run in/to/from Pembrokeshire will return to what it was early in December 2019 (date confirming when this will happen would be welcome)
2. All TfW services in Pembrokeshire will be taken over by class 197s (that was recent news – when is it expected to be complete?)
3. Subsequently the service level will be improved, perhaps with a much-needed hourly service to Milford Haven and additional long distance trains. (What improvements and when?)
4. Probably TfW really don't believe they (197s) are a class act for Milford to Manchester trains, as they have bought several Mk 4 sets (proper inter-city coaches) and diesel locomotives to run some of the Swansea to Manchester trains. This frees up the 197s mentioned in point 2
5. At the time of the Taffs Well mock up visit, the Mk 4s were not 'cleared' to run into Pembrokeshire, but presumably they could be. In any case IEPs are cleared down to Pembroke Dock at least, and as HSTs have run right down all three lines over the years, and now appear in short form sets between Cardiff and Taunton, Castle HST sets should not need much testing.

1. What did I observe?

Seat spacing looked good.

The overhead luggage racks were more spacious than the 175s and would carry thicker items of luggage but

- One of the party I was with, whilst not a giant, seemed to have to bend his head to avoid the rack as he stood up out of the window seat. It might be worth checking how far from the floor the luggage rack is situated and what warning signs will be required
- On the 175s, there is space between back to back seats to slide in luggage upright on the floor where you can watch it during the journey. I didn't see such space on the 197. Is it intended that all big luggage will need to be put on the rack? The same member of the party suggested that there was space beneath the seats for luggage, but the luggage items would certainly need to be turned on their faces to achieve this. I think it would be worth imagining one of these units filling up with wrinklies (A term of endearment, as I consider myself to be one now) on a summer Saturday at Tenby at the end of a week's holiday, each with their own wheeled suitcase. What will they do? Better still might be to engage a set of such people on the mock-up and see what they do!

Back in 2018, we noted that the 197 would be 1/3 2/3 opening, and complained because the long distance traveller would prefer a full saloon with two levels of separation from the outside world, rather than a draughty barn where a door opens to the world at every station. The response seemed to be that the 197s would be fitted with transparent screening to separate the external doors from the internal seating areas. I was therefore surprised not to see this on the mock-up. Is it to appear later?

Corridor end connection was noted. This will make it easier for

- people to walk along the train to find a seat (if you have not told them where the spaces are whilst they are waiting for the train). I am told by our local newspaper editor that Japanese trains have detectors so that the conductor knows when a seat becomes occupied and can immediately go and check the new passenger's ticket. (The current policy seems to be that when a train leaves a station like Haverfordwest where lots of people have just got on, the conductor goes along with a merry cry of 'Tickets from Haverfordwest, please' and relies entirely on passengers' honesty to put a hand up to attract his/her attention)
- people to move from a second class only unit to one with first class, if this is still the plan (a better plan to have first class available from Pembrokeshire).
- the refreshment trolley to serve the whole train (a real traveller benefit!)
- Conductor to pass along the whole train (with 175s, if two units are joined, there is no corridor connection, and the conductor must wait for a station stop to change units). This will help reduce fraudulent travel, and ticket prices
- Trains will be able to join up and become one train en route. Joining trains from different Pembrokeshire starting points could help give extra destinations without significant extra cost. They used to do this in the 60s, but we have advanced so much since then!

Sadly, they do look a bit ugly, but that is a small price to pay for the increased flexibility.

2. What could I not observe?

There are some important things that just can't be evaluated from a static exhibit. Draughts have already been mentioned but others include:

- Height of coach floor relative to platform height – the mock-up was static and the coach floor was level with the platform. Some platforms on the Pembroke Dock branch are especially low, and some have even been fitted with Harrington humps
- Mechanism for wheelchair access between train and platform
- Ride quality (New does not always mean better - the railway press suggests that some families of new units have been worse (less smooth) rather than better than their predecessors)
- Journey duration, as influenced by better acceleration and deceleration.
- Noise and disturbance due to people leaving and joining the train.
- Noise level in the saloon (recent trips on 150 and 153 units were noisy in the saloons, and the 175 should be the comparator – air conditioning sound is a frequent problem, but noise and vibration from the under-floor engines may also be louder than existing stock)
- Noise level outside the train (some modern trains, like the voyager, are amazingly noisy)
- Toilet occupation indicators you can see from your seat
- Temperature control
- the ease with which the refreshment trolley can serve passengers throughout
- the ease with which passengers can move from coach to coach
- acceleration and braking (how will this affect journey time between Milford and Manchester?)

- What is it like to spend six hours on one of these? Is it better than a 175? Is it better than a 158?

When all of these are taken into account, will the 197s be good enough. Will they be better than the 175s. Will all these features be the current best? WAG wants people to use the train in preference to the car more than now. Taking the train is a free choice. The railway has to do more than just run class 150s to Manchester, and expect people to choose them.

TfW is fortunate. It already has a new class 197 on test, it has several class 175s in service and could perform some objective tests on the above factors. Then it would have results to announce to promote the train when the time comes.

3. Suitability for the Pembrokeshire-Manchester service?

The journey from Milford Haven to Manchester takes about six hours. UK journeys of a similar length include London to Dundee and London to Penzance. These are operated using IEP stock with end vestibules. Are the 197s fit for purpose, assuming that purpose is the one I defined earlier – running the pre Dec 2019 timetable and any improved timetable.

The Milford to Manchester trains run 290 miles with 24 intermediate stops- about twice as long in duration as anything the Civity family (class 195, 196 and 197) has been used for in the UK. The busy stations include Milford Haven where you have plenty of time to board as it is a terminus. Many stops en route to Swansea have only a small number of passengers. At Haverfordwest, passengers are mainly joining eastbound trains and leaving westbound ones, so little conflict of flows. Carmarthen, Swansea and Cardiff all have flows entering and leaving the train, but Carmarthen and Swansea have long stops anyway, as trains reverse there. Are 1/3 2/3 double doors really necessary on these ‘international’ services?

In summary, it appears that using 197s between Milford and Manchester would take them more than twice as far as other UK operators . It also appears that TfW have some doubts, as they have bought some Mk 4 sets but have been a bit cagey where they would operate. HST castle sets or continued use of 175s might be better till the route transfers to electric traction.

Peter Absolon

Editor’s Comment

The Railfuture Wales committee has previously made representations to TfW about the design of the new 197 units and their suitability for longer distance services. Reference was made to the number of toilets and the mix of ‘airline’ style and table seats. Other members have expressed concern that the apparent lack of ability to adapt the units to operate any form of electric traction will hinder the decarbonisation timetable. However, TfW has continued to pursue its programme to introduce the trains on all its medium and long-distance services in the near future. It is hoped that the various concerns prove to be unfounded.

Members will have the opportunity to judge the 197 units for themselves by joining the visit to the mock up display on 8th April - see page 4.

NEWSLINES

Buy a train ticket at the local shops

An opportunity to purchase everyday train tickets from the local shops has been introduced in the South Wales metro area. A number of small retailers are now selling tickets such as local singles and returns over the counter, enabling your rail ticket to be purchased with the morning paper. The shops are called Payzones and are set up to provide other services such as payment of utility bills.

This initiative is welcomed by Railfuture Wales but it is doubtful to what extent this will encourage additional use of rail given that ticket machines exist at all stations. The result will be watched with interest.

Wales on Rails

A new tourism project called 'Wales on Rails' was launched in March with TV rail celebrity Tim Dunn attending the event. The project aims to encourage more people to travel around Wales sustainably using the national rail network, heritage railways and buses.

Transport for Wales's Community Rail Partnerships and Visit Wales have jointly funded the new initiative that promotes the use of public transport to link key tourist attractions and offers visitors the chance to experience some of the most scenic rail networks in the world.

Through using the website www.walesonrails.co.uk, visitors are able to plan their trip around Wales and choose from visitor attraction themes such as fantastic food, awesome adventures, heroic heritage, glorious gardens and obtainable outdoors.

Railfuture Wales wishes the project well as it has long considered that more should be done to encourage the use of rail and bus by the large number of people visiting Wales for holidays. However, it is regrettable that the website does not provide any information on or links to other websites where ticketing information is available to potentially reduce the cost of travel for people following the itineraries. For example, people looking at Wales on Rails would not be made aware of the Explore North and Mid Wales Pass which provides rail and bus travel throughout the areas most popular with tourists arriving from England.

Cardiff to Severn Tunnel Junction

Network Rail studies are progressing to assess the extent of works required to the four tracks between the Severn Tunnel and Cardiff Central to accommodate more frequent passenger services as well as the existing freight trains. The extra trains arise from the Burns report which recommended a new local service and stations along this 25 mile route to help remove cars from the parallel M4 motorway.

Whilst a four-track railway exists for the entire route, two of the tracks have a 40-60 mph speed limit and are primarily used for freight. This speed limit would prevent the required frequency passenger service being operated so a significant speed upgrade will be required.

Meanwhile, Cardiff council continues to assess plans for a major business park on the eastern outskirts of the city which include a Parkway station on the route. This is privately funded and not directly dependent on the M4 traffic reduction (Burns) proposals but would benefit from any work to increase capacity on the route.

Ebbw Vale improvements to finally begin

Blaenau Gwent council and Network Rail announced in late February that the long expected improvements to the Ebbw Vale branch north of Cross Keys will start in April. This follows the funding of the work by the council aided by a Welsh Government loan.

The work comprises laying a second track for a number of miles on the upper part of the branch and the provision of new platforms at Newbridge and Llanhilleth. This will allow the extension of the recently commenced hourly service from Newport to Cross Keys north to Ebbw Vale, doubling frequency to 30 minutes along the entire branch, with trains alternating between Cardiff and Newport.

Meanwhile at the southern end of the branch, the semaphore signalling illustrated in the autumn 2021 issue of Rail Wales will disappear as a £17m investment by Network Rail brings the branch under the control of the Cardiff route operating centre.

The 19 mile branch reopened in 2008 after nearly 50 years without passenger services, and, apart from the Tweedbank line south of Edinburgh, is one of the longest rail reopenings in Britain.

Swansea Metro Prospects

A study carried out of various rail based public transport projects in Swansea and south west Wales showed that operating a regular passenger service on the existing largely freight only route from Pontarddulais to Neath with several new intermediate stations would provide the best return on the investment measured using cost benefit methodology. The project would involve trains turning west on reaching the main line near Neath (a new chord is required) and terminating at Swansea station following a call at a further new station at Landore which would serve the nearby rugby and football Swansea.com stadium.

Railfuture Wales has long supported the reintroduction of passenger services on the Pontarddulais-Neath route (the Swansea District line) and this proposal is identified in our development strategy for Welsh rail: 'On Track for the 21st Century'.

SENEDD COMMITTEE INVESTIGATES BUS AND RAIL CHALLENGES

Railfuture Wales committee member John Hanahoe took part in a meeting organised by the Welsh Senedd's Climate Change, Environment and Infrastructure committee in mid-March. The event was held to assist the committee's scrutiny of Transport for Wales, and the Senedd's public transport policies and impending Bus Bill. John summarises the outcome:

"There were about 50 attendees from various stakeholder organisations and some Welsh Senedd politicians and civil servants. It was chaired by Llyr Gruffydd the Plaid Cymru member for North Wales. The meeting did not involve any big reveals but was geared around attendees' opinions of the current state of transport and public transport in Wales and gleaning ideas for improvement particularly with regard to fulfilling climate change objectives.

Opinions on the state of transport were very much as one might expect with negative comments around accessibility to the rail network from much of Wales, poor railway connections to such areas as the North West of England, lack of trustworthy timetables in relation to buses and frequent changes to services with regard to buses and trains. One contributor pointed out that the current service on the Chepstow line had buses

replacing trains four times a day, which he felt was due to failure to reinstate after Covid problems earlier in the year. (This is a theme which Railfuture committee members have highlighted in their discussions relating to several other parts of the network.)

There was a series of polls on questions designed to illicit opinions. 57% thought that the rail and bus infrastructure does not meet the public's needs in Wales. In a series of options, the most popular barriers to use of public transport were thought to be lack of integrated services (bus and train) and unreliable services (bus and train). The attendees were asked to pick their top areas for improvement and commuting for work and education came out as being thought the most important. In a further exercise the attendees were invited to list their ideas for improving public transport in Wales. These ideas were submitted via Zoom chat and so given that people were invited to list up to 10 it would be a bit difficult to encompass the results here. But we were assured that they would be read and considered as part of the follow up to the exercise. As a flavour of the kinds of things that were put forward (by me at least) following consultation with the committee before the meeting, they were things like: integrated timetables of buses and trains and integrated ticketing, more frequent long distance bus services on those part of the network that are not served by rail, buses to be nationally organised in Wales rather than left in the hands of local authorities. I also chucked in: better and more reliable bike carrying on all trains and (big one), why not make public transport free at the point of use to encourage its use over private transport."

Thanks are extended to all who contributed to this issue. In all cases, any opinions expressed are those of the contributors, and do not necessarily represent *Railfuture* policy. Material for the next issue – articles, letters, photos or comments – should be sent to the editor, Peter Kingsbury at peter.kingsbury@railfuturewales.org.uk or by post to 22 Winchester Avenue, Penylan, Cardiff CF23 9BT, by 31st August 2022 for the autumn 2022 issue. The editor may edit letters for publication.

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Progress continues with the electrification of the Cardiff Valleys routes despite some delays resulting from the Covid 19 pandemic. A Class 150 Sprinter in Transport for Wales livery travels away from Treforest station in early March framed by masts on both sides of the track. Tram trains manufactured by Stadler are scheduled to operate on this route from 2024. Photo: Julian Langston

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