# Elizabeth line's small timetable gains put pressure on the Treasury to fund more transformational rail



Another week, another small but telling upgrade: from December 2025 the Elizabeth line’s core central section will run 20 trains an hour on Saturdays between Paddington and Whitechapel, giving passengers a service every three minutes. According to the reporting, that will raise weekend frequencies above the previous off‑peak level and comes after TfL had already introduced a full peak timetable in 2023 that pushed peak frequencies even higher. This is the kind of incremental capacity gain that matters for city life — for commuters, shoppers and the shops themselves — even if it feels modest next to the project’s earlier controversies.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/aug/11/britain-elizabeth-line-railway-treasury-birmingham-manchester-leeds), [[4]](https://tfl.gov.uk/info-for/media/press-releases/2023/may/full-peak-elizabeth-line-timetable-introduced-as-railway-celebrates-remarkable-success-in-its-first-year)

The controversy is part of the story. The railway that opened as the Elizabeth line in 2022 grew out of a plan that had been discussed for decades and that, as the National Audit Office later documented, ran seriously into trouble in delivery. The NAO concluded that a December 2018 opening target was unrealistic, contractual and programme management arrangements amplified delays, and additional public funding was required as costs escalated. Those shortcomings remain a cautionary tale for whoever designs the next big transport programme.
- Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/aug/11/britain-elizabeth-line-railway-treasury-birmingham-manchester-leeds), [[3]](https://www.nao.org.uk/reports/crossrail/)

Yet the counter‑narrative — that this has been a transformational piece of urban transport — has proved increasingly hard to dispute. TfL reported more than a million journeys in the line’s first five days and, by 10 January 2025, said the railway had carried more than 500 million passenger journeys in its first two and a half years. TfL also highlights very large peak‑day volumes and sustained customer satisfaction levels, evidence that the demand the project sought to unlock materialised quickly once the central tunnels and stations began to operate.
- Paragraph 3 – [[5]](https://tfl.gov.uk/info-for/media/press-releases/2022/may/the-transformational-elizabeth-line-clocks-more-than-one-million-passenger-journeys-in-first-week), [[2]](https://tfl.gov.uk/info-for/media/press-releases/2025/january/transformational-elizabeth-line-reaches-500-million-passenger-journeys), [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/aug/11/britain-elizabeth-line-railway-treasury-birmingham-manchester-leeds)

Independent and jointly produced evaluations have backed that picture. Analysis from consultants working with TfL and the Department for Transport finds measurable gains in job accessibility, housing growth around stations, and a clear modal shift in some corridors — with a non‑trivial share of journey demand new to public transport rather than simply diverted from other services. Those studies are the basis for arguing that the line is not merely a London convenience but a piece of national infrastructure that has generated economic and social value.
- Paragraph 4 – [[6]](https://www.arup.com/projects/crossrail-elizabeth-line/), [[2]](https://tfl.gov.uk/info-for/media/press-releases/2025/january/transformational-elizabeth-line-reaches-500-million-passenger-journeys), [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/aug/11/britain-elizabeth-line-railway-treasury-birmingham-manchester-leeds)

On the ground the benefits are tangible: journey times have been slashed between key suburbs and central destinations, Heathrow is for many passengers a single‑seat rail journey to far larger parts of the city than before, and areas that once felt on the periphery are suddenly connected to big employment centres. TfL’s timetable changes since opening have steadily sought to convert that latent demand into usable capacity, and the statistics on passenger growth and peak loads suggest those adjustments have generally kept pace with demand.
- Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/aug/11/britain-elizabeth-line-railway-treasury-birmingham-manchester-leeds), [[5]](https://tfl.gov.uk/info-for/media/press-releases/2022/may/the-transformational-elizabeth-line-clocks-more-than-one-million-passenger-journeys-in-first-week), [[6]](https://www.arup.com/projects/crossrail-elizabeth-line/), [[4]](https://tfl.gov.uk/info-for/media/press-releases/2023/may/full-peak-elizabeth-line-timetable-introduced-as-railway-celebrates-remarkable-success-in-its-first-year)

If the Elizabeth line demonstrates what investment can do for a metropolis, the obvious question is why the same logic is not being applied elsewhere. Proposals long mooted — from a Birmingham cross‑city through route to a northern east–west route variously branded Northern Powerhouse Rail, High Speed 3 or Crossrail for the North, and even extensions to existing London lines — remain politically contested and often underfunded. The government’s 2025 Spending Review does make capital commitments to regional projects and increases multi‑year city‑region funding, but the headline pledge for the north has been a £3.5 billion package for upgrades to the existing TransPennine route rather than a fully new through corridor. That is a far smaller quantum than some proponents had argued was needed to deliver a genuinely transformative new line.
- Paragraph 6 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/aug/11/britain-elizabeth-line-railway-treasury-birmingham-manchester-leeds), [[6]](https://www.arup.com/projects/crossrail-elizabeth-line/), [[7]](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/spending-review-2025-document/spending-review-2025-html)

Part of the explanation lies in Treasury priorities and the way projects are appraised. The Spending Review frames a tougher prioritisation of capital and signals that day‑to‑day transport resource budgets will be trimmed in real terms as passenger revenues recover; in practice that has made ministers more cautious about large new starts. Critics say this treats rail too readily as a near‑term cost centre rather than a long‑term investment whose benefits — higher productivity, new jobs, denser housing around stations — can be hard to capture in conventional short‑horizon accounting. The NAO’s lessons about risk management and realism in planning also underline why Treasuries can be wary of repeating past mistakes.
- Paragraph 7 – [[7]](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/spending-review-2025-document/spending-review-2025-html), [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/aug/11/britain-elizabeth-line-railway-treasury-birmingham-manchester-leeds), [[3]](https://www.nao.org.uk/reports/crossrail/)

The paradox is stark. Independent evaluation and the railway’s own performance suggest the Elizabeth line has delivered much of what its supporters promised: capacity, faster journeys, regeneration and measurable shifts in access to jobs and housing. The policy challenge now is to translate that success into a credible national programme of similar investments elsewhere, while applying the NAO’s lessons so future projects do not repeat the governance failings of the past. If the experience of east–west London shows anything, it is that building the railway creates the demand; the argument for replication is less a technical one than a political and fiscal choice that ministers and the Treasury must make. Whoever wins that argument will determine whether Britain treats modern railways as an investment in growth or simply an item on a shrinking balance sheet.
- Paragraph 8 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/aug/11/britain-elizabeth-line-railway-treasury-birmingham-manchester-leeds), [[3]](https://www.nao.org.uk/reports/crossrail/), [[2]](https://tfl.gov.uk/info-for/media/press-releases/2025/january/transformational-elizabeth-line-reaches-500-million-passenger-journeys), [[6]](https://www.arup.com/projects/crossrail-elizabeth-line/), [[7]](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/spending-review-2025-document/spending-review-2025-html)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/aug/11/britain-elizabeth-line-railway-treasury-birmingham-manchester-leeds> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://tfl.gov.uk/info-for/media/press-releases/2025/january/transformational-elizabeth-line-reaches-500-million-passenger-journeys> - The Transport for London press release of 10 January 2025 announces that the Elizabeth line has carried over 500 million passenger journeys in its first two and a half years. It summarises findings from TfL and Arup evaluation reports, highlighting job and housing growth, improved accessibility, and regeneration along the route. TfL notes high customer satisfaction and peak-day volumes exceeding 800,000 journeys, and reports marked increases in access to employment on branches such as Abbey Wood and Heathrow. The release stresses the line’s central section’s contribution to capacity and connectivity across London and the wider south‑east and national economy benefits.
3. <https://www.nao.org.uk/reports/crossrail/> - The National Audit Office report on Crossrail reviews why the programme ran into difficulty, documenting delays and rising costs up to 2019. It explains that the December 2018 opening target was unrealistic, that programme management and contractual arrangements contributed to escalating compensation events, and that additional funding of around £2.8 billion was required including government loans to TfL and the Greater London Authority. The NAO highlights shortcomings in planning, risk management and delivery oversight, and sets out lessons for future megaprojects. The report cautions that final costs and value for money could be judged when the railway was fully operational.
4. <https://tfl.gov.uk/info-for/media/press-releases/2023/may/full-peak-elizabeth-line-timetable-introduced-as-railway-celebrates-remarkable-success-in-its-first-year> - TfL’s 22 May 2023 press release describes the introduction of the Elizabeth line’s full peak timetable, increasing peak frequencies to up to 24 trains per hour between Paddington and Whitechapel and running 16 trains per hour off‑peak. The change completed the Crossrail project’s central section timetable, extended peak periods, and enabled new direct services such as Shenfield to Heathrow. TfL highlighted passenger growth of about 150 million journeys in the first year and noted capacity and journey time benefits, while stressing timetables would be reviewed regularly to optimise services as demand and operational conditions evolved to meet passenger needs effectively.
5. <https://tfl.gov.uk/info-for/media/press-releases/2022/may/the-transformational-elizabeth-line-clocks-more-than-one-million-passenger-journeys-in-first-week> - Transport for London’s 30 May 2022 release reported that the Elizabeth line recorded more than one million passenger journeys in its first five days. The statement emphasised immediate demand and early benefits, including a near halving of journey times between Abbey Wood and Paddington to about twenty‑nine minutes and major reductions elsewhere such as Farringdon to Canary Wharf. TfL highlighted that the line added roughly ten per cent extra central London rail capacity, improved cross‑city links, and supported business and events by connecting key centres such as Heathrow, the West End, Canary Wharf and the Royal Docks from day one.
6. <https://www.arup.com/projects/crossrail-elizabeth-line/> - Arup’s project page and evaluation summarise the Elizabeth line’s post‑opening findings, produced with TfL and the Department for Transport. The report describes significant transport, economic and social effects including increased job accessibility, housing growth near stations, and evidence of modal shift with a notable share of demand generated rather than merely transferred. Arup highlights local case studies such as Abbey Wood where access to employment increased, and stresses the line’s role in urban regeneration and in providing a data‑driven benefits framework intended to inform future major transport investments across the UK and internationally. It recommends replicating successful elements elsewhere nationally.
7. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/spending-review-2025-document/spending-review-2025-html> - The UK Government’s Spending Review 2025 document (GOV.UK) sets out capital and resource allocations, including a specific commitment of £3.5 billion for the TransPennine Route Upgrade to improve connectivity between Manchester and Leeds. The review also increases multi‑year city region transport funding while signalling that day‑to‑day Department for Transport resource budgets will fall in real terms, citing a declining rail passenger services subsidy as ridership recovers. The publication summarises capital commitments to East‑West Rail, the Midlands Rail Hub and other projects and frames investment decisions within a revised Treasury approach to appraisal and prioritisation. It changes how projects are assessed.