# Elizabeth line to run every three minutes off‑peak — a test case for Crossrail‑style projects outside London



Another small but unmistakable victory for London’s newest railway arrived this week: the Elizabeth line’s core Saturday service will rise from 16 to 20 trains an hour, and from December there will be a train every three minutes between Paddington and Whitechapel — a higher off‑peak frequency just in time for the Christmas rush. According to Transport for London, the incremental timetable changes follow earlier capacity increases introduced at peak times and mark a steady programme of service improvements as the route beds in.

The line’s success is all the more striking given how long the idea took to reach reality. Proposals for an east–west cross‑London tunnel have surfaced intermittently since the post‑war era and in the 1990s were already being promoted to commuters on the suburbs’ platforms; the modern project secured statutory approval only with the Crossrail Act of 2008. That slow gestation helps explain why the eventual delivery felt, to many, both overdue and politically freighted.

That sense of overdue delivery hardened into public frustration in the years before opening when the programme slipped repeatedly and costs ballooned. The Crossrail programme’s governance and scheduling problems were the subject of formal scrutiny, and official analysis set out how the estimated price and timetable moved well beyond original plans. The line did, in the end, open, but not without a very public accounting of what went wrong and why.

And yet the operational evidence of benefit has been hard to deny. TfL reported that the Elizabeth line had carried more than 500 million passenger journeys by January 2025, making it the busiest single railway service in the country, and its evaluation work with consultants underlines gains in access to jobs and housing, shorter journey times and high customer satisfaction. Independent national statistics make the scale clear: the central section’s patronage now represents a disproportionate share of rail travel in Great Britain.

Those numbers translate into practical changes across the capital. Journey times between suburbs and key employment districts have been slashed, Heathrow has been stitched more directly into the city’s rail network, and stations from Abbey Wood to Paddington have become focal points for development and new housing. TfL’s own surveys register strong local approval, and the line’s ridership has nudged people out of cars onto public transport in meaningful numbers.

If that payoff seems self‑evident, it prompts an uncomfortable question for national transport strategy: why stop at London? Large parts of the country still suffer the congestion and economic drag that through‑running rail capacity can cure. Proposals that were floated during the Crossrail debate — from extending branches to linking outer suburbs further afield — remain on the table in different guises, yet many have not moved beyond planning discussions.

Outside the capital the problem is especially acute. Birmingham New Street remains constrained by platform capacity that limits how many suburban and intercity services can run, prompting renewed interest in a city‑centre Crossrail to separate local and long‑distance flows. Across the M62 corridor, the four great city regions that together rival London’s population have long argued for a transformational east–west link — variously called Northern Powerhouse Rail, HS3 or Crossrail for the North — yet promised interventions have repeatedly stalled or been pared back. Local leaders in Manchester, for example, have continued to press for additional through platforms at Piccadilly after plans were put on hold amid cost and delivery worries, a move that highlights how difficult even modest capacity upgrades have become.

The political arithmetic helps explain this. Treasury officials and successive spending rounds have tended to treat rail projects as cost centres rather than investments in growth, while road budgets and other capital lines have been handled differently. That mindset, coupled with tight fiscal discipline, has produced an environment in which service cuts and cautious, incremental upgrades are more likely than the big, through‑running projects that remade parts of London.

Evidence from the Elizabeth line suggests that approach is false economy. The route’s early operational headaches and cost escalation are lessons not to be repeated; they do not, however, negate the wider returns. If the transport narrative of recent years teaches anything it is that when you build the right cross‑city connections — and sustain the political will to see them through — passengers, employers and developers follow. Someone in Whitehall should therefore try taking the Treasury on the Elizabeth line’s promise.

### 📌 Reference Map:

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/aug/11/britain-elizabeth-line-railway-treasury-birmingham-manchester-leeds), [[3]](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)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/aug/11/britain-elizabeth-line-railway-treasury-birmingham-manchester-leeds), [[5]](https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/2007-08/crossrail.html)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/aug/11/britain-elizabeth-line-railway-treasury-birmingham-manchester-leeds), [[6]](https://www.nao.org.uk/press-releases/crossrail/)
* Paragraph 4 – [[2]](https://tfl.gov.uk/info-for/media/press-releases/2025/january/transformational-elizabeth-line-reaches-500-million-passenger-journeys), [[4]](https://dataportal.orr.gov.uk/statistics/usage/passenger-rail-usage/table-1223-passenger-journeys-by-operator/)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/aug/11/britain-elizabeth-line-railway-treasury-birmingham-manchester-leeds), [[2]](https://tfl.gov.uk/info-for/media/press-releases/2025/january/transformational-elizabeth-line-reaches-500-million-passenger-journeys)
* Paragraph 6 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/aug/11/britain-elizabeth-line-railway-treasury-birmingham-manchester-leeds)
* Paragraph 7 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/aug/11/britain-elizabeth-line-railway-treasury-birmingham-manchester-leeds), [[7]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-manchester-66942707)
* Paragraph 8 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/aug/11/britain-elizabeth-line-railway-treasury-birmingham-manchester-leeds)
* Paragraph 9 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/aug/11/britain-elizabeth-line-railway-treasury-birmingham-manchester-leeds), [[2]](https://tfl.gov.uk/info-for/media/press-releases/2025/january/transformational-elizabeth-line-reaches-500-million-passenger-journeys), [[4]](https://dataportal.orr.gov.uk/statistics/usage/passenger-rail-usage/table-1223-passenger-journeys-by-operator/), [[6]](https://www.nao.org.uk/press-releases/crossrail/)

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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> - Transport for London announced in January 2025 that the Elizabeth line had carried more than 500 million passenger journeys since opening, making it the busiest single railway service in the UK. The TfL release summarises new evaluation work with Arup showing the line has boosted access to jobs and housing, shortened journey times, and improved cross‑city connectivity including direct links to Heathrow. TfL reported high customer satisfaction — over 90 per cent of surveyed users said the railway had a positive local impact — and highlighted peak daily ridership figures and regeneration benefits around stations such as Abbey Wood.
3. <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 May 2023 press release announced the Elizabeth line’s full peak timetable, increasing peak frequencies between Paddington and Whitechapel to up to 24 trains per hour and retaining an off‑peak provision of 16 trains per hour. The change, introduced in the May timetable, extended peak periods, added capacity and introduced through services from Shenfield to Heathrow for the first time. The release noted that more than 150 million journeys had been made in the railway’s first year and highlighted reduced journey times and improved connectivity across London, framing the timetable as a key milestone in delivering the benefits promised by the Crossrail project.
4. <https://dataportal.orr.gov.uk/statistics/usage/passenger-rail-usage/table-1223-passenger-journeys-by-operator/> - The Office of Rail and Road’s statistical table on passenger journeys by operator provides authoritative numbers used to compare rail usage across Britain. The dataset lists annual passenger journey totals for operators including the Elizabeth line and national franchises, enabling calculation of the Elizabeth line’s share of UK rail trips. ORR figures underpin claims about the Elizabeth line’s unusually large patronage for a single operator and support statements such as the line accounting for around one in seven rail journeys nationally, by comparing its passenger totals with the overall Great Britain rail passenger total in the same period.
5. <https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/2007-08/crossrail.html> - The Crossrail Bill entry on the UK Parliament website documents the legislative approval process that authorised what became the Crossrail project. The Crossrail Act 2008 received Royal Assent in July 2008, granting powers for the construction of the east–west tunnels and associated works between Maidenhead/Heathrow and Shenfield/Abbey Wood. The parliamentary record and related materials set out the project’s legal authorisation and route, corroborating accounts that while proposals for a cross‑London rail tunnel date back many decades, the statutory go‑ahead for the modern Crossrail scheme only arrived in 2008.
6. <https://www.nao.org.uk/press-releases/crossrail/> - The National Audit Office’s work on Crossrail (published while the programme faced delays) examined the project’s management, funding and completion risks. The NAO press materials and report detail how Crossrail’s estimated costs rose significantly beyond the original funding package and identify governance and planning shortcomings that contributed to schedule slips and cost increases. NAO analysis and commentary explain why the central section required extra funding and why delivery dates moved repeatedly, providing an official scrutiny perspective that supports descriptions of Crossrail having been late and substantially over budget.
7. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-manchester-66942707> - BBC coverage from September 2023 reports on Manchester leaders continuing to press for the long‑promised additional through platforms at Manchester Piccadilly, describing how plans for new platforms (often cited as platforms 15 and 16) were withdrawn from planning in 2023 amid cost and disruption concerns. The article quotes local politicians and taskforce representatives explaining why the scheme was put back for reappraisal and records the wider local frustration that promised infrastructure interventions to increase capacity and resilience in the north of England have proved difficult to deliver in practice.