

Leaf blasting trains start clearing rail routes across North West

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A fleet of 'leaf-busting' trains have started blasting leaves off the line to help keep passengers and freight moving across the North West this autumn.

From 1st October until 12th December, seven specialist trains will wash leaf debris from a total of 97,000 miles of track across the region while trees are shedding their leaves.

<https://fast.wistia.net/embed/iframe/8tgmxbqfw>

Network Rail's seasonal delivery depot at Wigan Springs Branch is the North West's nerve centre for keeping tracks clear between Crewe and Carlisle this autumn.

Six trains known as MPVs (multi-purpose vehicles) will work from Wigan, while another train known as an RHHT (rail head treatment train) will operate from Carlisle Kingmoor depot in Cumbria.

The total miles of track treated over this time will be equivalent to going 3.81 times around the equator.

After railway lines have been cleared with high pressure water jets the machines then apply rails with a sand-like gel to help passenger and freight train wheels grip the tracks.

Regarded as the railway's equivalent of black ice on the roads, leaves on the line can create issues when

they stick to damp rails and are compressed by moving trains into a thin, black layer which can affect train braking and acceleration.

The build-up of leaf mulch can also make it harder for signallers to detect a train's location, causing delays.

Last year Network Rail spent £4.5 million on the North West route during its autumn efforts to keep passengers moving.

This year, 170 traction gel applicators have been positioned across the routes rail network. They spray a special sand-like gel onto the rails to help provide extra grip for train wheels.

Specialist teams will be positioned across the North West to check that our autumn treatment programme is working effectively and provide additional support where necessary.

Talisa Fletcher, Network Rail service delivery manager, said: "Leaves on the line are a big problem for the railway. It disrupts services and inconveniences people's journeys and every year, Network Rail and train operators work together to battle against the elements to get passengers and freight to their destinations.

"Even more work has gone into getting prepared for autumn this year because of the challenges posed by the coronavirus pandemic, including how we operate the trains themselves. We are ready to keep people and goods moving across the North West by running a reliable service for our customers as they return to the railway as a safe and green way to travel."

Rob Cummings, seasonal improvement manager at Northern, said: "Large numbers of leaves on the track, combined with other autumnal conditions, can cause damage to train wheels as the track become slippery. When wheels are severely damaged the affected carriage has to be taken out of service and the wheel repaired before the problem becomes even more serious.

"We are working hard as an industry to clear leaves from the line and to keep disruption to a minimum during the autumn period. Our trains are fitted with sand blasters which treat the tracks as they move, and we have introduced special timetables on problematic routes to give our customers a more reliable service. Our drivers also have advanced training to help develop techniques which further reduce the impact of slippery rails."

Paul Watson, operations director for TransPennine Express, said: "Autumn is always a challenge for our drivers as leaves on the line can create difficult driving conditions and have an impact on our punctuality. Our trains are fitted with devices that spray sand down on the tracks, providing extra grip when required. However, occasionally our drivers will have to be cautious and drive slower than usual. If you are travelling this Autumn, please check before you travel and allow extra time when travelling."

For more information on how we deal with leaves on the line visit www.networkrail.co.uk/leaves