

Significant improvements in autumn reliability on the Abbey Line in 2018

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Rail passengers on the Abbey Line had a significantly more reliable service during autumn 2018, compared to previous years.

The number of seasonal-related cancellations between Watford Junction and St Albans Abbey was nearly 80% lower in 2018, compared to the same period in 2017.

This follows improved working practices by Network Rail and London Northwestern Railway, to manage leaves on the line between October and December each year. A new facility was opened in the maintenance yard at Watford Junction, enabling trains to be topped up daily with sand to assist with adhesion on slippery rails.

As a result, there were 36 fewer cancellations due to a shortage of sand, and 30 fewer cancellations due to slippery rails. These two issues combined resulted in just 18 cancellations on the route between 15 October and 7 December 2018, compared to 84 cancellations over a similar period in 2017.

Autumnal weather creates significant challenges for train drivers, as wheels and rails can often become coated with a hard residue. As a result, trains often need to slow down to adapt to the driving conditions.

In previous years a special autumn timetable has been implemented on the Abbey Line, which involves

skipping some stops to allow for a change in driving style and to create paths for maintenance trains to operate throughout the day. However, in 2018, conditions were managed without the need for this to be implemented, with a significant improvement in performance.

The rail industry is constantly looking for new ways of tackling the challenges posed by autumn weather, in order to provide a more reliable service to customers.

Jonny Wiseman, head of stations for London Northwestern Railway said: “We made considerable investment into our preparation for autumn in 2018, working with Network Rail to manage rail conditions. This has in turn enabled us to operate a much better service for our customers. We are constantly working to improve in this area and will be taking what we have learnt on the Abbey Line, to inform future decisions made elsewhere on the network.”

Martin Colmey, current operations manager for Network Rail’s London North Western route, said: “The efforts Network Rail and London Northwestern Railway made to keep the Abbey Line moving over autumn made a big difference to passengers’ journeys. Our leaf busting trains covered a total of 25,000 miles on the lines out of London Euston, through Watford and St Albans, and up to the West Midlands. We’ll build on 2018’s success on the Abbey Line, to deliver an even better service to passengers in autumn 2019”.