



Leaves on the Tracks Fact Sheet

We know that being on time is important to you, so we're working hard to keep you moving this Autumn.

Did you know?

We have hundreds of Extreme Weather Action Teams on standby across the country, ready to respond quickly to fix any problems that might cause delays.

Autumn weather can make it harder to safely run trains on the railway

There are over 13 million trees on and next to the railway in the UK and, every Autumn, thousands of tonnes of leaves fall onto the tracks. Windy conditions can cause heavy leaf-fall in a short space of time and rain means they are more likely to stick to the rails.

When trains pass over leaves, the heat and weight of the trains bake them into a thin, slippery layer on the rail. This is the black ice of the railway.

Sometimes trains need to slow down to keep you safe

Slippery rails make it hard for trains to accelerate and brake effectively. Safety is our priority, so when this happens, drivers have to pull out of stations more slowly and brake much earlier for stations and signals to make sure they stop in time.

This can lead to longer journey times and delays.

A build-up of leaves on the tracks can also cause delays by forming a barrier between the train wheels and the electrical parts of the track that help us to pin-point where trains are. When we aren't sure exactly where a train is, the trains behind will be delayed at red signals until the first train's location is established so our control rooms can be confident there is always a safe distance between trains.

We work all year round to prepare for Autumn so that we can minimise delays for passengers and freight.

Managing trees and plants near the railway

Throughout the year we carefully manage the trees and plants that grow next to the railway so that we can minimise train delays caused by leaf-fall.

We manage the lineside environment in a way that allows us to run a safe and reliable service for passengers and promotes natural biodiversity along the railway. You can find out more about our approach at www.networkrail.co.uk/vegetation.

Autumn timetables

In areas with very heavy leaf-fall some train operators publish special Autumn timetables with revised journey timings. These timetables allow extra time for train drivers to drive more cautiously than at other times of the year, so that they can get passengers to where they need to go safely and reliably.

Leaf-busting trains

Even with the best preparation, leaves fall onto the lines. We work hard throughout the season to minimise delays and get passengers safely to their destinations.

We have 67 leaf-busting trains, which move around the network, cleaning the top of the rail by spraying it with a high-pressured water jet to blast away leaf mulch.

These trains also apply a gel, containing a mix of sand and steel grains, to help the train wheels run along the tracks as they normally would.

Routes have numerous leaf-busting teams who are on-hand 24/7 at key locations across the network to scrub the top of the rails by hand with a sand-based treatment, so that trains can run safely and reliably on the tracks.

Our specialist weather forecasters monitor weather conditions and help us make the best use of our resources. Between October and December we receive forecasts twice a day that include estimates of leaf-fall and highlights locations needing more attention. This means that we can target our leaf-busting machines and teams most effectively, and keep the network running as smoothly and safely as possible.

Did you know?

This year our leaf-busting trains will treat 1.04 million miles to keep the rail network clear. This is equivalent to travelling to the moon and back twice.