RESEARCH BRIEF • UNDERSTANDING ENGLISH PLACES

Life on the Line: Why railway stations might define the future of England's towns.

By Matthew Hopkinson, Co-creator of Understanding English Places (www.uep.org.uk)



> *"The railway station was the gateway to the town, built with the civic pride of a cathedral."*
>
> **— Sir John Betjeman**

In England’s urban landscape, railway stations are far more than stopping points for trains; they are economic heartbeats and community anchors. A town's connection to the rail network dictates its ability to attract investment, retain talent, and support sustainable local businesses. However, for decades, policymaking for towns has suffered from a critical blind spot—treating settlements as isolated entities or aggregating them into broad local authority district averages that hide hyper-local realities. Across the universe of 3,463 places within the data tool Understanding English Places (UEP) there are 1,770 stations located in 1,022 of the UEP places (29.2%). If one excludes London, then the number of stations drop to 990 across 1,430 places. This means that in England 42% of places outside of London have one or more train stations.

To build stronger, more resilient places, local authorities, businesses, and community leaders must understand towns in the context of transport. Understanding passenger movements—how many people enter, exit, commute, or travel for leisure—reveals a town's true functional identity. A hub dominated by season-ticket commuters requires vastly different housing, commercial, and high-street strategies than a station powered by leisure or off-peak travellers.

The arrival of Great British Railways presents an excellent opportunity for England's rail network to be optimised and for towns to harness the opportunity of growth from the presence of passengers – residents, visitors and workers.

Unlocking transport insights with Understanding English Places (UEP)

UEP (www.uep.org.uk) bridges the data gap by providing settlement-level insights designed for local decision-making. Rather than sifting through fragmented national datasets, you can directly access key transport indicators for individual towns.

Using UEP I have analysed smaller towns where the population is less than 25,000. There are 664 towns under 25,000 in England that have one or more rail stations.

I analysed the data from a number of angles to better understand the opportunity that existing train infrastructure has to support the growth of towns both socially and economically. To simplify the outputs, I have selected the top 10 towns and bottom 10 towns based on the relationship between the number of passengers that pass through the station and the population of the 'train town'. In the case of places with more than one station (some 113 – 17% of the total sample towns) the numbers for the largest station by passenger numbers has been taken. The passenger counts do not represent individual people but passenger activity so one should focus on the indicative ratio and not the actual number. In many cases location of the station and the town might determine passenger levels based on its road network and therefore its wider catchment that use the station.

The purpose of this research is to better understand the relationship between a town and its rail station. This is particularly pertinent with the arrival of Great British Railways (GBR) which was formally established in November 2025.

Top train passenger towns relative to the size of the town's population

The chart below shows the top 10 'station towns' all of which have a population less than 9,000 (average population size 3,639) and the ratio of station passengers to the town population. As you can see this top tier of 'train towns' has a significant number of passengers that use their stations relative to the resident population. The average number of passengers across these top tier stations is 891,047.

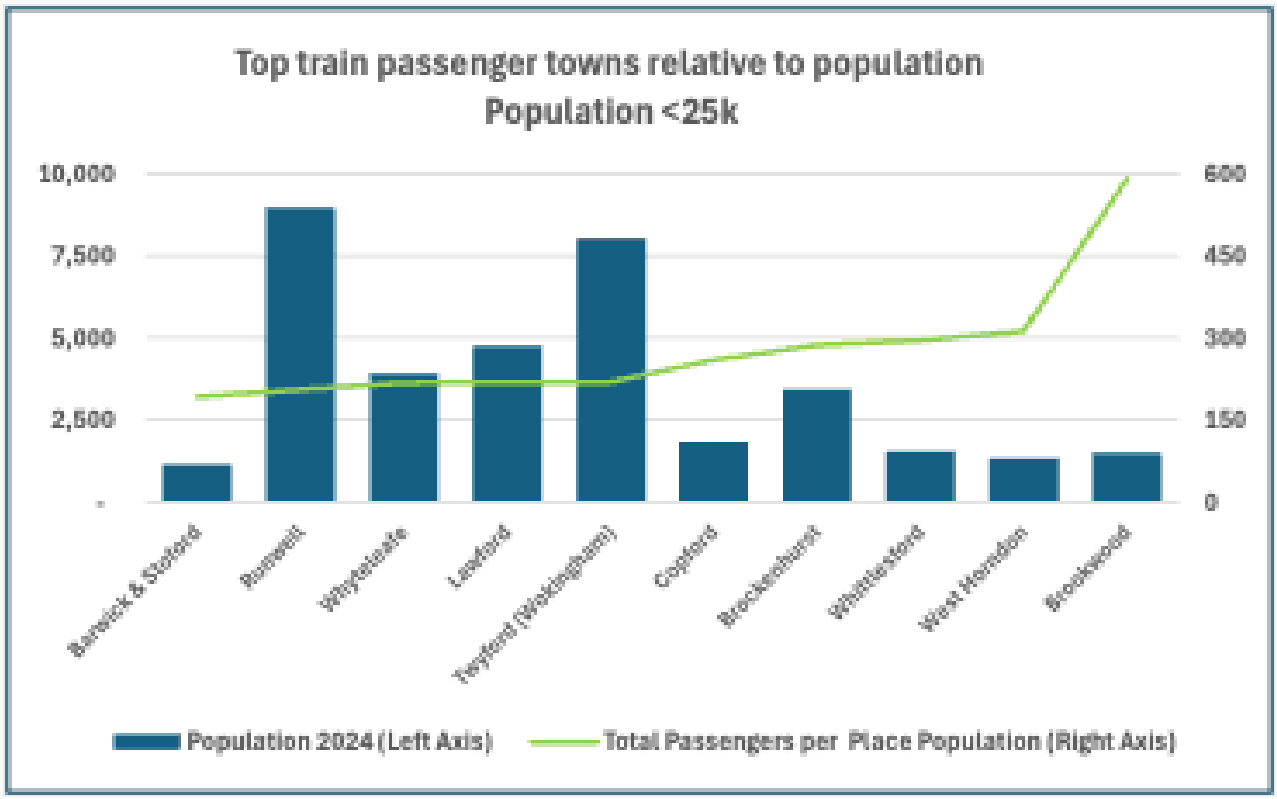


Figure 1: Top 10 train passenger towns relative to place population (Population <25k).

> **Total Passengers per Place Population:** e.g. Lawford has a population of 4,761 and 1,043,404 train passengers. Lawford has an associated Total Passengers per Place Population of 219 (1,043,404 divided by 4,761).

The chart below shows the other end of the scale where one might question the purpose of a station at all. In the case of Elton (Cheshire West and Chester) there are just 98 passengers. The largest number of passengers in this group is 1,636 in Brigg (North Lincolnshire).

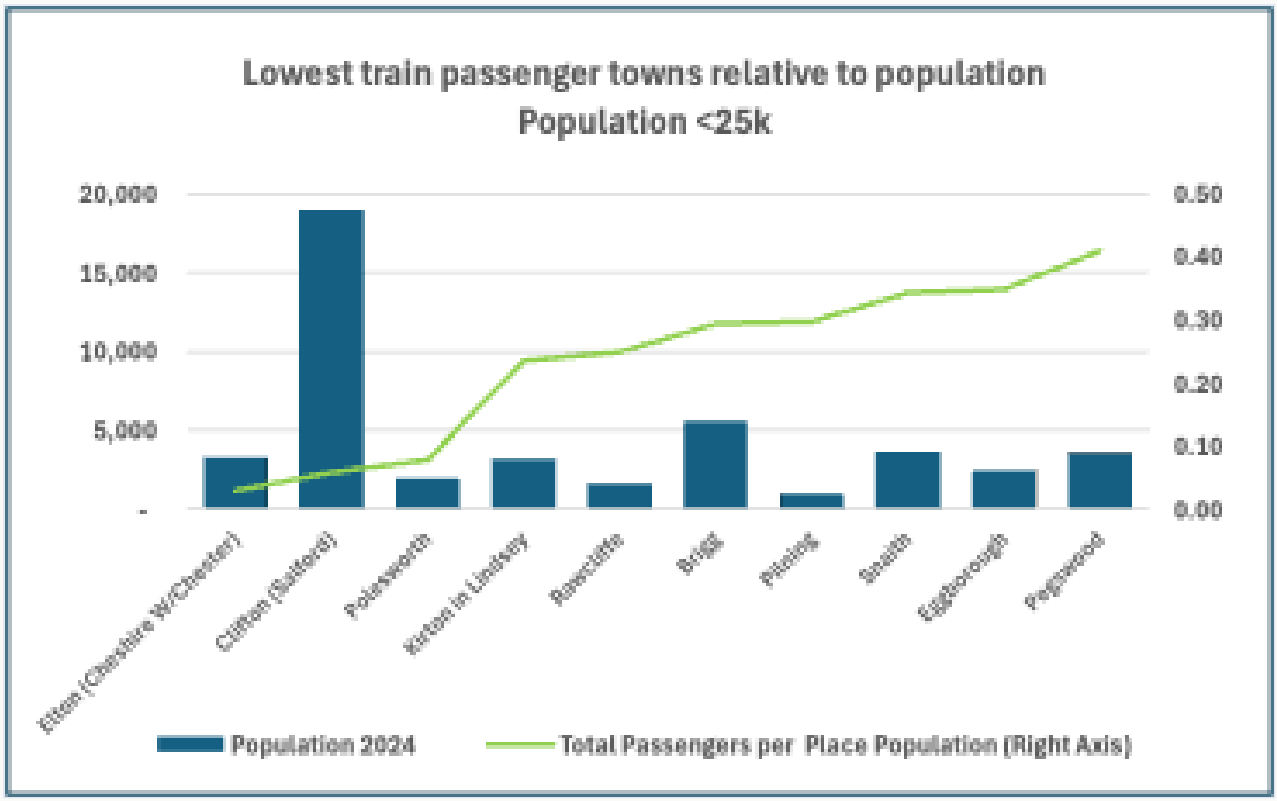


Figure 2: Lowest 10 train passenger towns relative to place population (Population <25k).

The next piece of analysis was to look at the change in population of the sub 25,000 population towns to see if the presence of a station was a catalyst for a change in population of the town. It should be noted that this is only looking at town where the station is and not analysis of a wider drivetime catchment that might benefit from the presence of a train station.

Analysis of the same groups (top 10 highest and lowest) out of the possible 664 towns shows that the towns with the greatest number of train passengers to their population saw a group average increase of 10.6% in their population (2011–24). The variance in the change in population across these ten towns is broad with Runwell (Essex) seeing an increase of 35.1% to 8,953 and Brockenhurst (Hampshire) actually seeing a decline in population of –3.2% to 3,440.

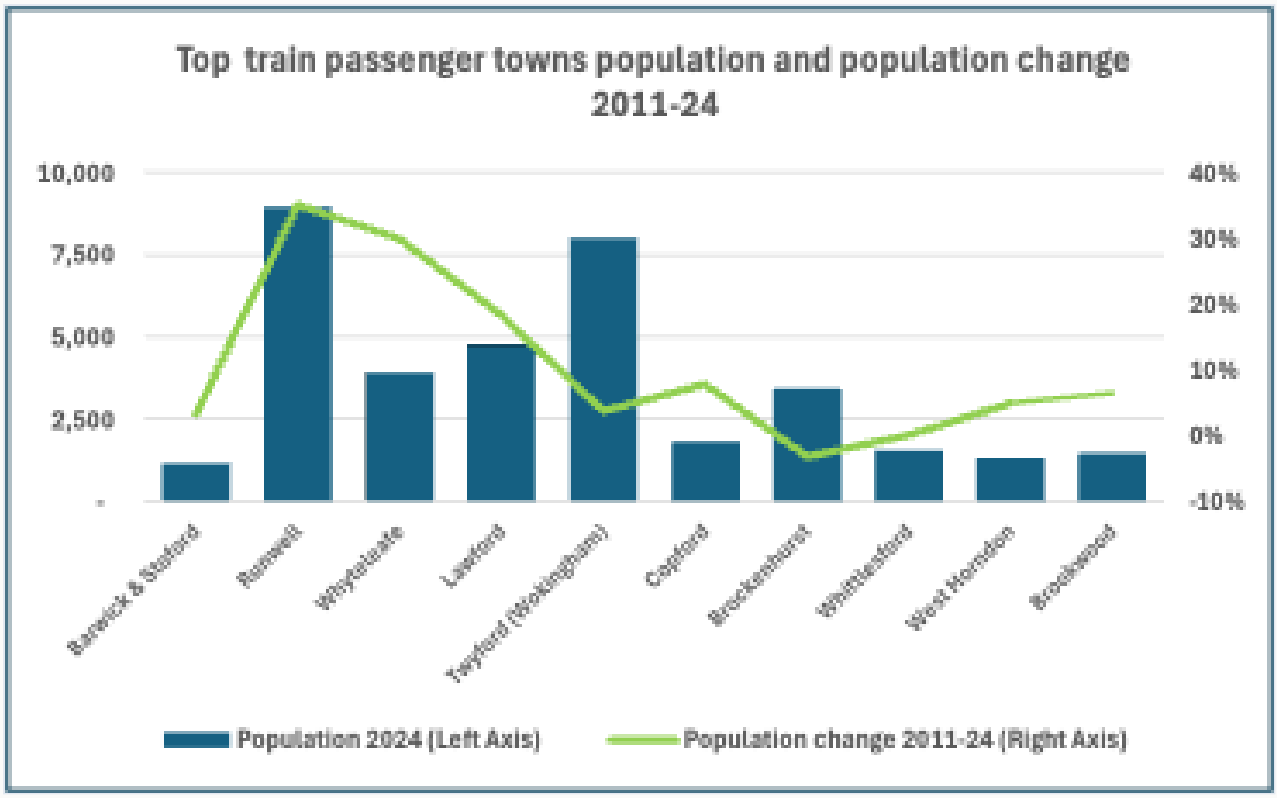


Figure 3: Top 10 train passenger towns — 2024 population and population change (2011–24).

The lowest passenger to population towns saw an average increase in population between 2011–2024 at a rate which was half that of the high passenger towns at 5.4%. The variance in population change in these ten towns was also much broader than the high passenger towns with Eggborough (North Yorkshire) seeing a population increase of 26.6% to 2,471 and Pilning (South Gloucestershire) seeing a decline of –9.7% to 990.

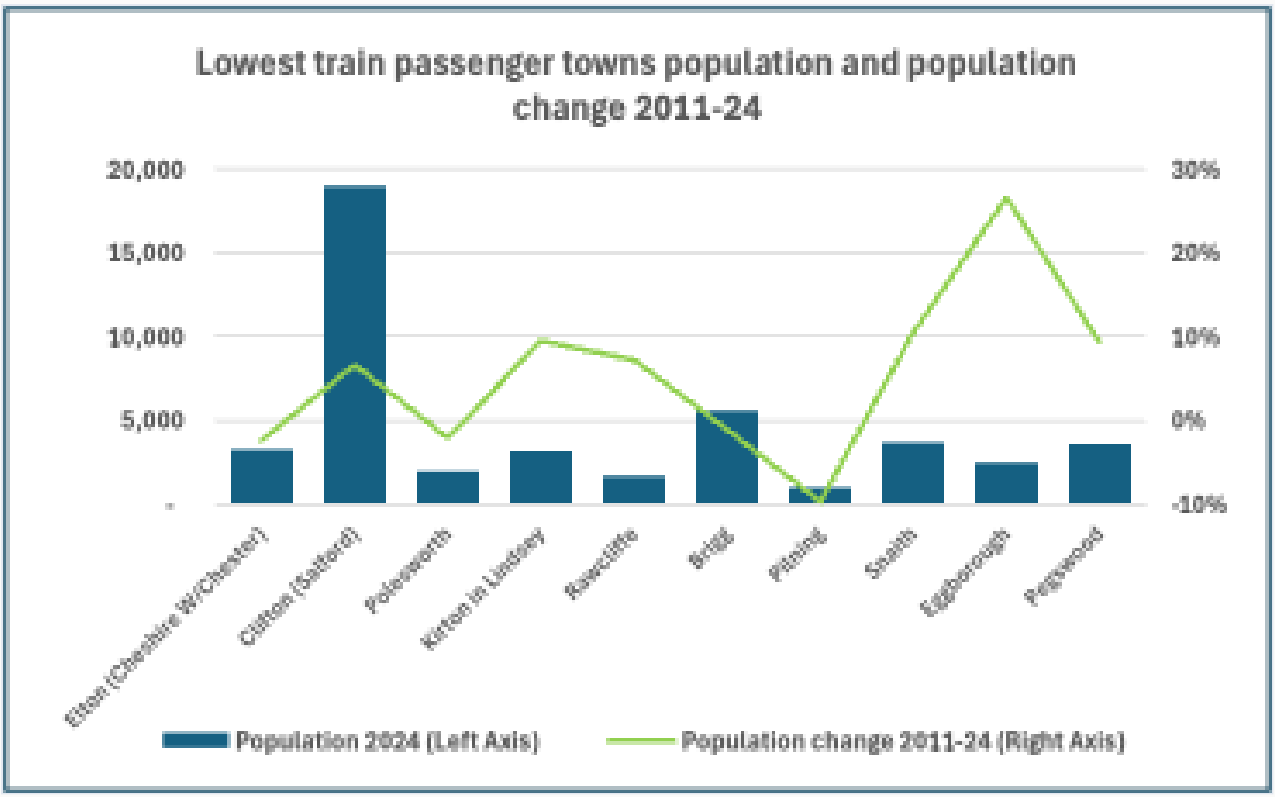


Figure 4: Lowest 10 train passenger towns — 2024 population and population change (2011–24).

The final analysis was to look at the breakdown of passengers based on ticket type – Full Fare, Reduced Fare (Railcards or planned in advance journeys) and season tickets. The top passenger to population towns are, on average, equally split between full fare (49%) and reduced fare (46%) with just 5% season tickets. Conversely, the lowest passenger to population towns have 20% season tickets, 45% reduced fare and 35% full fare.

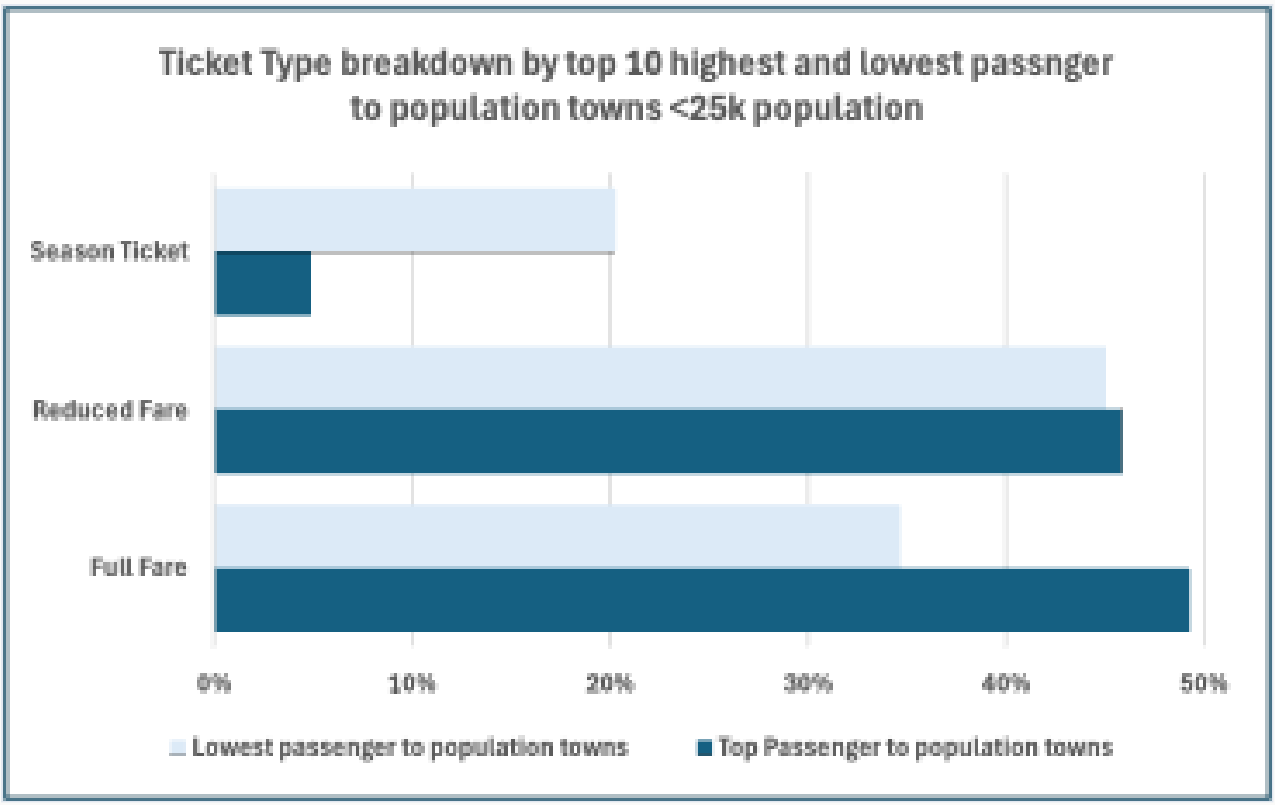


Figure 5: Ticket type breakdown across the top 10 highest and lowest passenger-to-population towns (<25k population).

Conclusion

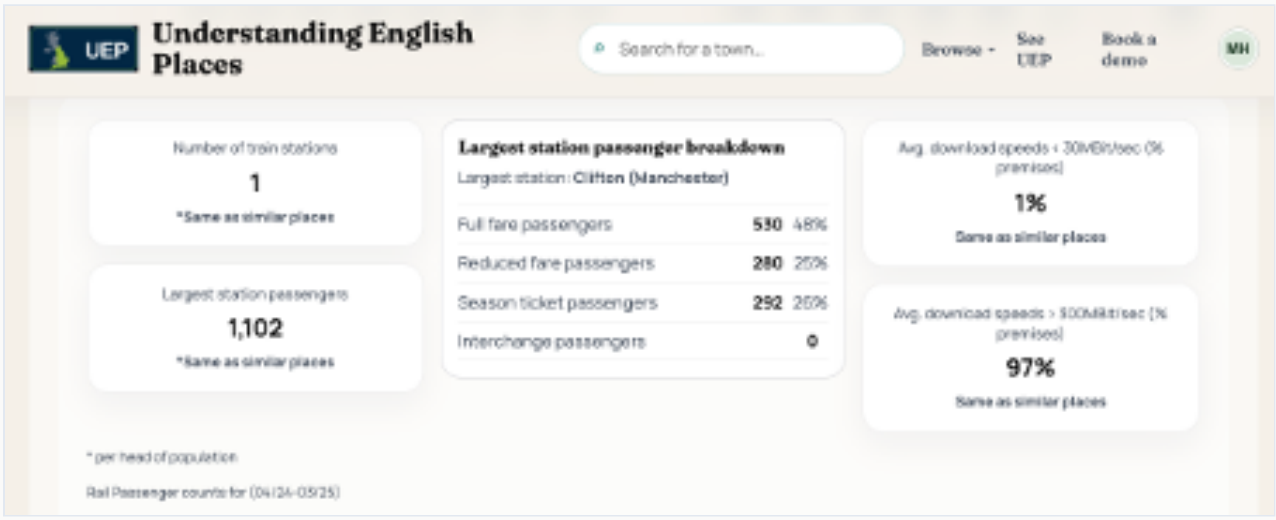
This analysis shows the significant presence of train stations in places with very low populations and therefore the opportunity that the presence of a train station might have in terms of the growth opportunity for these places subject to the accessibility and frequency of service that that line might afford to passengers.

Across England 42% of UEP places outside of London have one or more train stations and if one looks at smaller towns and villages then 664 villages and towns with a population less than 25,000 have one or more train stations in England.

The variance in the relationship between the population of a place and the use of its local station is huge. For example, Brookwood (Surrey) has a population of 1,485 and has shown a marginal increase in population of 6.5% since 2011, yet the number of passengers that use the train station is 874,760 – nearly 600 passengers for every person in the town's population. Whilst the number of passengers is not the same as population due to multiple usage by individuals, the numbers are still huge for such a small place. At the other end of the scale, Elton (Cheshire West and Chester) with a population of 3,272—which has decreased by –2.4% since 2011—has just 98 passengers, which is only 0.3 passengers per head of town population. A further look into UEP shows that Brookwood is very much less deprived with an Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) score of 9.5 relative to Elton whose IMD score is 4.7.

Finally, the purpose of this research is to illustrate the importance of bringing multiple datasets under one roof, in this case Understanding English Places (www.uep.org.uk), to create an understanding of our villages, towns and cities and to enable evidence-based conversations to take place based on facts and not perception or misinformation. This research in itself creates many questions around the variance in the numbers of passengers to population across places. With a growing population, a need for enhanced connectivity that is affordable and net zero, optimisation of the rail network is key—and this is why Great British Railways has been created and tasked to deliver on. Knowing data on every place in England that has a train station or one nearby should be the starting point. The screenshot below shows how UEP presents this clearly and comprehensively.

Democratising access to data on English places is the sole purpose of the creators of Understanding English Places.



Understanding English Places (UEP) Town Dashboard: Settlement-level view displaying station counts, largest station passenger ticket breakdowns (04/24–03/25), and local infrastructure benchmarks.

Where to Find Station & Passenger Ticket Data on UEP

- **Navigate to the Town Dashboard:** Visit www.uep.org.uk and search for your town of interest.
- **Transport & Infrastructure Module:** Scroll down to the Transport & Infrastructure module within the town's detailed profile.
- **Station Count & Profile:** In the station count and station profile section, you will find the total count of operational rail stations serving the immediate town footprint.
- **Passenger Ticket Breakdown:** Under the station usage dataset, review the visual breakdown of passenger ticket types, derived from Office of Rail and Road (ORR) data:
  - **Season Tickets:** Indicates workforce mobility, traditional commuter dependency, and hybrid-work trends.
  - **Anytime / Peak Fares:** Highlights business travel and time-sensitive movement.
  - **Reduced Fares (Off-Peak & Advance Fares):** Reflects leisure, tourism, retail footfall and regional visits.

Why UEP Empowers Local Stakeholders

By mapping spatial data to actual town boundaries rather than administrative regions, UEP helps stakeholders translate transport facts into actionable strategies:

- **For Policymakers:** Enables baseline assessments for targeted infrastructure investment, active travel connections (bus/bike hubs around stations), and evidence-based grant applications.
- **For Local Businesses:** Provides clear data on passenger origin profiles, helping retailers, hospitality venues, and developers align operating hours, services, and locations with actual footfall flows.
- **For Communities & Civic Groups:** Gives local residents and advocacy groups objective, visual data to articulate local needs, support station revitalization efforts, and champion local connectivity.

Understanding a town through its rail connectivity ensures that regeneration efforts are grounded in how people actually live, work, and move.

THINK YOU KNOW YOUR TOWN? THINK AGAIN.

Matthew Hopkinson is a co-creator of Understanding English Places • www.uep.org.uk