MID-CHESHIRE RAIL USERS ASSOCIATION

RESPONSE TO DRAFT NORTH WEST RAIL UTILISATION STRATEGY

1. Introduction

1.1 The Mid-Cheshire Rail Users Association (MCRUA) is the rail user group for the Manchester-Northwich-Chester and Crewe-Hartford-Liverpool lines. The association was founded in 1987. MCRUA is very pleased to be given this opportunity to contribute to the future strategy for transport and in particular rail in the North West of England.

1.2 The association has over 550 members being the largest rail user group in the North West of England after The Friends of the Settle to Carlisle Line.

1.3 We have seen significant growth in the usage of the Northwich (Mid-Cheshire) line service particularly in the last three years since the train service has become far more reliable and punctual.

1.4 This response concentrates on factors that primarily affect the service provided to passengers on the Mid-Cheshire Line. Whilst there are many others areas covered in the Draft RUS, no comment in this response does not necessarily imply agreement or disagreement with the comments made in the Draft RUS in respect of those areas.

2. Executive Summary

Our main comments are summarised in this section. Section 3 then develops these points.

2.1 The opportunity to comment on the Draft RUS is welcomed.

2.2 Rail usage in the area including the catchment area of the Mid-Cheshire Line is growing strongly despite the serious disruption that has occurred over the last two years and continues to occur in relation to the WCML upgrade.

2.3 We are very disappointed that the Draft RUS appears to put forward no useful suggestions for the users and potential users of the line for the short-term apart from that of a possible additional service each hour between Altrincham and Northwich.

2.4 We consider that the base passenger usage data used in the Draft RUS is not credible being understated by up to 50%. This argument is developed in section 3.1 below.

2.5 We believe there is significant latent demand for services on the line. This argument is developed in section 3.2.

2.6 It is our view that integration with the Metrolink service from the line is at best poor. This is discussed further in sections 3.3 and 3.7 and options are put forward to improve this integration and to increase its attractiveness to users and potential users.

2.7 We believe that the growth projections used in the Draft RUS are unrealistically low and are inappropriate for use in the planning of future strategy. The argument for this is developed in section 3.4.

2.8 We consider that it is too early a stage to confirm the draft RUS given the surrounding uncertainties including the 2008 WCML timetable and the potential introduction of road charging to Greater Manchester. However, we consider there to be a number of aspects within the RUS that should be taken forward in the meantime. This is discussed in section 3.5.

2.9 We consider there to be a number of line speed initiatives that could be put in place to reduce timings to make the service more attractive. This is discussed in section 3.6.

2.10 We consider that the suggestion to reduce the service at the so-called "low footfall stations" has arisen through the analysis of flawed base passenger usage data and would generate few benefits but significant disbenefits. This is discussed further in section 3.8.

2.11 It is our view that a very good case could be made for an additional service in between the peaks between Altrincham, Hale, Knutsford and Northwich as put forward in the Draft RUS. Ideally, we would like this extended to Greenbank. This is Option 1 for the Northwich corridor in the Draft RUS and is discussed further below from paragraph 3.9.1.

2.12 We would be very surprised once the WCML 2008 timetable is developed if Option 2 for the Northwich corridor in the Draft RUS of terminating trains at Stockport is seen as meeting appraisal criteria. This is discussed further below from paragraph 3.9.8.

2.13 We do not believe that the option discussed in 6.3.1 of the Draft RUS of diverting the service away from Manchester Piccadilly to Manchester Victoria is credible, this due to the excessive additional journey time and also due to the likely operational difficulties on the single line section in the Denton area.

2.14 We recommend that the option for Cheadle station be developed for the purposes of appraisal due to the very high level of demand likely to arise for services to and from Cheadle village and the adjacent hospital. This is developed further from paragraph 3.9.17 below.

2.15 We believe line speed improvements should be identified now and those with little cost implemented quickly. This is discussed further in paragraphs 3.9.24 & 3.9.25.

2.16 We recommend that a full proposal be worked up for the operation of "trains" from the line onto the Metrolink tracks to extend at least as far as G-Mex. This is discussed further from paragraph 3.9.26.

2.17 We also believe it would be instructive to work up a proposal on the provision of a service from Altrincham to Crewe via Northwich, Rudheath, Middlewich and Sandbach. This is discussed further from paragraph 3.9.29.

3. Response to detailed points in the Draft RUS

3.1 Base Data

The base data used in the Draft RUS is not credible.

3.1.1 The data used covers a period of significant disruption due to the rebuilding work being carried out on WCML in the Stockport area. During the period covered the direct route from the Mid-Cheshire Line into Manchester was closed for a period of two months. This caused a significant reduction in usage over a summer holiday period when the alternative of driving was more attractive than at other times of the year. Normal usage levels then took some months to recover.

3.1.2 The data used which is called "footfall" is not actually footfall (i.e. based on the numbers travelling on services) but rather substantially comprised of data based on ticket sales sourced from the rail industry through LENNON.

3.1.3 On the Mid-Cheshire Line a significant proportion of fares are not collected.

3.1.4 In explanation of lack of fare collection, the busiest part of the line is between Greenbank and Altrincham, the next busiest being between Altrincham and Stockport. Most of the stations on the section between Greenbank and Navigation Road are unstaffed and there are no ticket machines for passengers to buy tickets in advance except for one at Navigation Road; we understand this machine is about to be removed. At each station the conductor needs to carry out his/her station duties. These duties include returning to the cab prior to each station, putting down the ticket machine, opening the doors, watching as passengers unload and load, assisting as required, closing the doors, giving the driver the "right away", watching the train until it has left the platform and then returning to the back cab to retrieve the ticket machine to recommence ticket sales. On this section there is a station every two, three or four minutes. The staffed stations on this section are Northwich (mornings only), Knutsford, Hale (mornings only) and Altrincham (where the ticket office is a long way from the rail platforms), the other six being unstaffed. In most cases there is no advantage in passengers buying a ticket in advance of joining the train. When the conductor sells tickets each takes about a minute to sell and two minutes when credit/debit cards are used. Thus, a conductor can sell at most only 3-4 tickets between stations and so on full trains many fares remain uncollected. There are no ticket barriers or alternative fare collection

systems in place at the busiest stations for passengers, namely Altrincham and Knutsford. At Stockport which is the next busiest the Revenue Protection Personnel who are occasionally present tend to staff the "Up" side in the mornings, thus missing most of the passengers from our line. On very full trains (150+ passengers on a class 142) which are mainly on Saturdays the conductor can hardly sell any tickets since he/she cannot move away from the area of the rear cab.

3.1.5 We estimate based on regular observation that the revenue loss from lack of fare collection is somewhere between 30% and 50%. For the services on the line between the peaks most fares are collected; in the peaks many fares are not collected; on heavily loaded Saturday trains well over 50% of fares remain uncollected.

3.1.6 To illustrate this point, we note in the Draft RUS the statement that no train in the morning peak loads to more than 70% (Draft RUS, table 3.7). In fact, Monday to Friday in term time there are 5 trains on the line that load to over or well over 100%. Table 3.1 below gives passenger counts taken on the line in late November / early December 2006. This shows that some trains load to up to 150%, more than twice the maximum suggested by the Draft RUS. On these trains we believe that a very significant proportion of fares goes uncollected.

Table 3.1 Passengers counts November/December 2006 between Ashley and Hale and vice versa on the busiest Monday to Friday trains

Date	Service – time from Chester or M'cr	Unit	Reference stations for passengers numbers	Number	Surveyor	Mobberley, No.passengers alighting, where logged (3.8.12 refers)		Mobberley, No.passengers boarding, where logged (3.8.12 refers)	
17-Nov	1500	142.xxx	pax ASY/HAL	152	AS				
21-Nov	0653	142.058	pax ASY/HAL	136	JO	Mobberley off	0	Mobberley on	6
27-Nov	0653	142.067	pax ASY/HAL	148	JO	Mobberley off	0	Mobberley on	8
28-Nov	0653	142.070	pax ASY/HAL	130	JO	Mobberley off	0	Mobberley on	7
28-Nov	1500	142.xxx	pax ASY/HAL	156	AS				
29-Nov	0653	142.018	pax ASY/HAL	113	JO	Mobberley off	0	Mobberley on	5
01-Dec	0653	150.141	pax ASY/HAL	142	JO	Mobberley off	0	Mobberley on	7
04-Dec	0653	142.0xx	pax ASY/HAL	168	CB				
04-Dec	0724	142.060	pax ASY/HAL	102	JO	Mobberley off	0	Mobberley on	4
05-Dec	0724	142.067	pax ASY/HAL	104	JO	Mobberley off	0	Mobberley on	2
`06-Dec	0653	142.032	pax ASY/HAL	106	JO	Mobberley off	0	Mobberley on	5
07-Dec	0653	142.005	pax ASY/HAL	136	JO	Mobberley off	0	Mobberley on	7
08-Dec	0653	142.064	pax ASY/HAL	139	JO	Mobberley off	0	Mobberley on	7
11-Dec	0654	142.049	pax ASY/HAL	105	JO	Mobberley off	0	Mobberley on	9
11-Dec	0739	150.xxx	pax HAL/ASY	180	DM				
12-Dec	0654	142.027	pax ASY/HAL	113	JO	Mobberley off	0	Mobberley on	4
12-Dec	0730	142.xxx	pax ASY/HAL	114	DM				
13-Dec	0654	142.044	pax ASY/HAL	125	AS				
13-Dec	0739	150.274	pax HAL/ASY	166	AS				
13-Dec	1504	150.274	pax ASY/HAL	157	PD	Mobberley off	1	Mobberley on	0

3.1.7 It should be noted that the class 142 Pacer units, the trains normally used on the line, have between 102 and 120 seats depending on the seating configuration (there are 4 types). As will be seen, many of the above services are operating at well over 100% of seating capacity.

3.1.8 Page 32 of the Draft RUS states "The least crowded corridors are Northwich (which in the high peak hour has a load factor of 60% on departure from Stockport),….." This comment demonstrates a misunderstanding of the traffic flows on the Mid-Cheshire Line since as will be understood from paragraph 3.1.4 above the load factor from Stockport towards Manchester is not on the busiest or even on the second busiest section of the line. Table 3.7 in the Draft RUS acknowledges this showing the peak loading to be between Ashley and Hale which is 35 minutes away from Piccadilly by train. If the Ashley to Hale section were taken as the comparator the 70% figure given in table 3.7 would state 150% making the line the 3rd most heavily loaded corridor in the RUS area.

3.1.9 Table 3.8 in the Draft RUS continues to portray the Northwich corridor as lightly loaded again based on the section between Stockport and Piccadilly rather than on the heavily loaded section of the line. Table 5.3 displays a similarly-flawed picture for the future.

3.1.10 Para 3.8.10 of the Draft RUS states that the journey times by rail from Altrincham to Piccadilly are slightly longer by rail than by tram. This statement is arguably incorrect and in any case is misleading. A tram leaving Piccadilly takes around 26 minutes to travel to Altrincham; a train also takes 26 minutes. However, passengers travelling beyond Altrincham who commence their journey by tram will have to allow adequate connection time at Altrincham and this makes a significant difference, see section 3.3 below.

3.1.11 Continuing the above point, a train towards Manchester is far more convenient for passengers going to the Piccadilly area of Manchester (no need to change mode of transport and then wait for a crowded tram on Metrolink which is acknowledged to be running at well over 100% capacity), to the Manchester Oxford Road area (significant traffic for the universities) and to Piccadilly station to change into connecting trains mainly towards Leeds, Liverpool or Salford Crescent.

3.1.12 Para 3.8.10 of the Draft RUS states that journey times are often uncompetitive with road. This is not so during either the Monday to Friday peaks or on Saturdays; indeed the opposite is the case, since the train is much quicker than the parallel road system. This is backed up by a study carried out by the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) published in *The Independent* on 14 April 2006. This states that the heaviest delays in the morning peak in the whole of the UK are caused to travellers on the A556 from Knutsford to Altrincham. For the evening rush hour the heaviest delays are again on the A556 from Knutsford to Altrincham with the 3rd heaviest delays being on the A556 from Altrincham to Knutsford. This is

also a very dangerous section of single carriageway road with tragic accidents featured in the local press almost weekly.

3.1.13 Figure 3.13 in the Draft RUS shows the prevailing line speed between Skelton Junction (just after Navigation Road) and Edgeley Junction (just before Stockport) as being between 5-25 mph. In fact this is the fastest section of the line with a 75mph ruling line speed with a slow to 50mph to traverse Northenden Junction.

3.1.14 Figure 3.13 also shows the section from Mouldsworth towards Chester to have an average line speed of 30-45 mph per hour. In fact the ruling line speed on the section is 60mph, the same as it is on the rest of the line from Deansgate Junction (near Navigation Road) to Mouldsworth.

3.2 Current Latent Demand

The area of North Cheshire to the immediate south of the Greater Manchester boundary is one of the most prosperous in the UK. It also suffers from some of the most congested roads in the peaks in the UK (paragraph 3.1.12 above).

3.2.1 Until May 1989 and the closure of the line from Altrincham towards Manchester for conversion to Metrolink the average journey time from Manchester Oxford Road to Knutsford in the evening peak was 33 minutes calling at Sale (8 minutes), Altrincham (16 minutes) and then all stations to Knutsford. Trains left Oxford Road every 20 minutes in the evening peak (1700, 1720, 1740, 1800), being made up of 2 or 4-coach diesel multiple units (DMUs).

3.2.2 Train journey times from Piccadilly to Altrincham and beyond now take about one third (12 minutes) longer than in 1990 and with only two extra trains over the "standard pattern" making the evening peak half-hourly from 1624 to 1824. Journey time using a connecting tram takes a similar or longer length of time.

3.2.3 The quality of the rolling stock provided is now much poorer than that up to the early 1990s (airy class 108 DMUs) in the main being 2-car 4-wheel class 142 bench-seated Pacers (1980's modified bus body design mounted on a modified high-speed freight wagon chassis).

3.2.4 A parallel rail corridor to the Mid-Cheshire Line also in this affluent area of North Cheshire is the route through Alderley Edge and Wilmslow to Manchester. The journey time from Wilmslow to Manchester Piccadilly is 26 minutes and the quality of the rolling stock is far superior to the class 142 Pacers, being class 323 electrics, class 158 and 175 DMUs and occasional long-distance Voyagers or Pendolinos.

3.2.5 The parallel Wilmslow route is well used by business people. The Mid-Cheshire Line is used by a much lesser proportion of business people, most of them being prepared to put up with the appalling traffic congestion on the

A556 rather than the cramped and poor conditions on the class 142 Pacers and then optionally a very cramped Metrolink tram system running at well over 100% capacity.

3.2.6 It is estimated that if only 2-3% of those in cars on the A556 transferred to rail, then rail usage would increase by around 25%. However, the trains in the morning peak already operate at over or well over 100% of seating capacity.

3.2.7 During the period of the large increase in fuel prices in late summer 2006 there was a significant increase in patronage on the line. Many of the new users commented on the poor rolling stock in use and how unattractive it was with its 1960's bus bench seating compared to a modern private car. They also noted the fact that trains were running quite full even though it was during the summer holiday period. Many of these users returned to the A556 on the return of the scholars to the train in early September with the attendant full and standing services. Instead they now use the train only as a matter of last resort.

3.2.8 If some trains from the Mid-Cheshire Line were able to continue over the Metrolink line into Manchester the direct journey times to Manchester from North Cheshire would return to near their 1989 levels potentially providing again the previously well-patronised service. (MCRUA estimated in the early 1990s that the line lost a significant percentage of its passengers on the opening of Metrolink, many previous users instead driving to Altrincham directly for Metrolink or else abandoning public transport completely and driving "all the way"). Use of the Metrolink route could be possible and is explored in section 5.4 of the Association of Community Rail Partnership's September 2004 publication, "Trains, Trams, Tram/trains" written by AEA Technology Rail – ISBN 1 900497 19 0. It is appreciated that it may be more difficult for these trains to continue onto the street-running sections in Manchester. However, if turnback sidings were provided in the car park area at G-Mex we estimate this would suffice for many business people since this is only a 5-10 minute walk to the major employment areas as well as being adjacent to the number 3 route of the Metroshuttle buses and giving a potential to change into the Metrolink system.

3.2.9 Services on Saturdays on the section between Greenbank and Stockport suffer from very heavy crowding. In the main passengers on these trains are made up of teenagers, shoppers, those travelling to sporting events (Manchester United and Cricket at Old Trafford involving a change onto Metrolink at Altrincham, as well as Sale Sharks at Stockport).

3.2.10 To illustrate the above point, on Saturday 9 December 2006 Manchester United were playing Manchester City at Old Trafford. Realising there would be capacity issues Northern Rail put on replacement road coaches from Chester direct to Manchester to carry those passengers who would normally use the service via Warrington Bank Quay which was closed that day, this in order to ensure the trains on the line were not also having to cope with the extra demand normally carried by those other services via

Warrington. The 1000 train from Chester was strengthened to a 4-car class 142 and ran full with 60 standing on the busiest Ashley/Hale section, the 1100 was a 2-car class 142 running with 50 standing. In the other direction, the 1024 from Piccadilly ran with 28 standing on that section and the 1124 was around 90% full with no standing.

3.2.11 Services on Sundays are very poor indeed. Prior to 1992 the line had a train every two hours in each direction. In 1992 as a temporary GMPTE budgetary measure the service was reduced to three trains each way, these only running between Chester and Altrincham with tickets to Manchester valid on connecting Metrolink services and with no direct service to Stockport. Unfortunately this "temporary" situation then became permanent. Since then the service has improved slightly to five trains each way every Sunday, in effect one train approximately every 3 hours. With the increased importance of Sundays for leisure, sport and shopping and given that Saturdays produce the busiest daytime usage on the line, the latent demand for a full hourly Sunday service from Chester is considered to be very high.

3.3 Metrolink Integration

The impression given by the Draft RUS is that the interface with Metrolink to/from the line at Altrincham is good. It is actually very poor.

3.3.1 The interchange from the train onto Metrolink is poor. Trains arrive into platform 3. Passengers have to negotiate two sets of stairs and a footbridge to reach platform 1 from where the trams normally depart. There is level access from platform 3 to platform 1 though this takes 3-4 times longer than using the footbridge. In theory the wait for a tram is for no more than 3-4 minutes but in practice it is longer since when Metrolink encounters late running which it commonly does alternate trams from Bury and Manchester Piccadilly bound for Altrincham are terminated at Timperley and sent back to Manchester in an attempt to maintain the service towards Manchester. Thus a 10 minute wait is common.

3.3.2 Far more problematical is the integration in the Cheshire-bound direction. The unreliability of the connection at Altrincham into the train due to trams terminating at Timperley as noted above generates concerns with travellers as does a regular inability to board trams in central Manchester and at Cornbrook in the Altrincham direction due them being too full to accommodate further passengers. This particularly affects those travelling from St Peters Square, G-Mex and also those at Cornbrook interchanging from the Eccles line with its large Salford Quays employment/leisure area. Indeed the problem to/from Salford Quays is so severe that few people from the line use the service to this large employment/leisure area due to the severe unreliability of the homebound journey preferring instead to endure the serious road traffic congestion.

3.3.3 Passengers arriving at Altrincham by Metrolink who miss their connecting train have to wait 30 – 60 minutes for the following train (3 hours on

Sundays). No attempt is made to hold trams or trains for passengers from one to the other or to integrate the timetables of the two systems. Railcard discounts are not available on trams. Passengers with railcards have to choose between a through ticket with no discount or a discounted rail ticket and re-booking at Altrincham.

3.3.4 The effect of the poor Metrolink integration at Altrincham was felt soon after Metrolink opened with patronage on the Mid-Cheshire Line plummeting. Loadings have now returned to their 1989 levels though with fewer and lower capacity trains in the peak. It is evident from discussions with occasional users of the train that large numbers of potential passengers who would have used the train prior to the opening of Metrolink now railhead to Altrincham or drive "all the way".

3.3.5 It is not possible to buy tickets from Metrolink stations to destinations on the Mid-Cheshire Line and beyond though it is possible to buy tickets in the opposite direction. Furthermore, tickets from stations on the Mid-Cheshire Line to Manchester are not interavailable by either route reducing the attractiveness of this option compared to the private car.

3.3.6 The Mid-Cheshire Rail Users Association receives more complaints about the Metrolink Interface with the line than all the other subjects of complaint combined.

3.4 Growth Projections

The growth projections used in the Draft RUS are unrealistically low and are not appropriate for use in planning a future strategy.

3.4.1 The current growth on the line for stations in Cheshire based on figures from LENNON for the two years to 31 March 2006 is well over 10% for all the stations with the exception of Ashley. Indeed the growth from one of the major stations on the line, Knutsford, is 27%.

3.4.2 The economy is North Cheshire is growing strongly. The roads are heavily congested in the morning and evening peaks and on Saturdays and there is significant latent demand for a railway where the train capacity provided is already utilised to over 100% in the morning peak and on Saturdays. There are no signs at present of a slow down in the growth of the economy of North Cheshire.

3.4.3 New housing for 1750 people is planned for Northwich much of it in the vicinity of Northwich station. Northwich station is situated adjacent to East Northwich currently a depressed employment area and an area where significant European funds have been and continue to be invested to improve the lives of those living there and its attractiveness to others. These improvements are already generating increased demand leading to improved usage of Northwich station.

3.4.4 A large employment park for 2500 jobs is planned and is substantially approved for "Lostock Triangle" adjacent to Lostock Gralam station. It is expected the railway will feature strongly in delivering the workforce to and from the employment park.

3.4.5 Lostock Gralam is the only station on the line having a large area of land adjacent to it which can be developed for car parking. Lostock Gralam is close to the A556 just before the very heavily congested section which is from where the road from Knutsford joins through to Altrincham. There are well advanced plans in conjunction with Vale Royal Borough Council and Network Rail to develop a park and ride facility at Lostock Gralam. If as seems likely this happens in the next few years a transfer of users from the A556 to the train will cause trains arriving at Knutsford from the Northwich direction to be already full leaving no space for Knutsford passengers to join in the peak.

3.4.6 The lead time for road and rail transport infrastructure projects to be planned, funded, developed and implemented is long.

3.4.7 Taking the above into account, it is our view that basing the strategy on the projections used in the Draft RUS of the "Reference Scenario" of around 1% per annum or on the "Alternative Scenario" projections of around 2% per annum means that services on the line will exceed their 10 years growth planned within 1-2 years of the publication of the RUS. We consider that planning strategically on this basis is seriously flawed and will lead to restricting the future economic growth of North Cheshire.

3.5 The Draft RUS is premature

We consider that it is too early a stage to confirm the Draft RUS given the surrounding uncertainties. However, we also consider there to be a number of aspects within the RUS that should be taken forward in the meantime.

3.5.1 There is much discussion in the Draft RUS of the effect of the new timetable for the West Coast Main Line from December 2008. For many of the subjects identified in the Draft RUS consideration for discussion is shown as deferred until the WCML 2008 timetable is agreed. We understand that agreement will not substantially be in place until February 2008.

3.5.2 Crucially, the section of line between Stockport and Slade Lane Junction is operating at a capacity above that able to produce a sustainable, reliable service. From Slade Lane Junction to Ardwick Junction it is more heavily congested and thereafter into Piccadilly and along the two track Manchester South Junction section it is operating at full capacity. Demands on this capacity are bound to rise not only from passenger services but also from the increasing freight traffic that currently needs to use this section to access Trafford Park. The freight trains are long, there can be two or three in each direction even in the peaks, the freight trains can occupy up to four signalling sections and have to travel slowly through stations, two of which

(Piccadilly platforms 13 & 14 and Oxford Road) have platforms that are very full with passengers in the evening peak.

3.5.3 The Draft RUS states at page 15 that the assumptions upon which it is based will need to be reconsidered if road pricing comes to Greater Manchester. Since the Draft RUS was published it has been announced by the Transport Minister that road pricing is likely to come to Manchester within 5 years.

3.5.4 It is our view that apart from the immediate short-term wins which for The Mid-Cheshire Line are noted in section 3.9 of this report, consideration of the RUS should be suspended and instead a revised draft should be produced for consideration once the WCML 2008 timetable is agreed.

3.6 Improving Line Speeds

The prevailing line speed on the main section of the line between Deansgate Junction and Mickle Trafford (1½ miles prior to Chester) is 60mph. That between Deansgate Junction and Edgeley Junction (Stockport) is 75mph. The top speed of the rolling stock used on the line is 75mph. There are a number of initiatives that could be put in place to reduce timings to make the service more attractive.

3.6.1 There is some discussion in the Draft RUS about improving line speeds on the line. As noted above in 3.1.13 and 3.1.14 some of the average line speeds quoted in the Draft RUS are incorrect. The ruling line speed between Navigation Road and Stockport is 75mph as opposed to 5-25mph as quoted in the Draft RUS; the ruling line speed between Mouldsworth and Mickle Trafford is 60mph as opposed to 30-45mph quoted in the Draft RUS.

3.6.2 The longest speed restriction on the line is over Leftwich Viaduct west of Northwich where the speed restriction is 20mph for about ¼ mile. This is due to subsidence now stabilised arising from the brine workings in the Northwich area. In 2002 the then TOC, First North Western, commissioned a study from Railtrack into whether this line speed could be increased. The report from Railtrack stated that due to the transverse timbers used on the two steel bridges connecting the different parts of the viaduct the line speed could not be raised for the 2-axle class 142 units used but could be raised to 50mph for all other passenger trains. At that stage around half the units used on the line were class 142s, the others being Sprinter class 150, 153 and 156 units, class 175 units and class 101 units. Since Northern Rail have taken over as TOC most of the units used are now of the class 142 variety. If the TOC agreed to the use of only Sprinter units on the line, we understand these could travel over Leftwich Viaduct at 50mph reducing end-to-end timings by up to 2 minutes.

3.6.3 There is a proposal to amend the service in between the morning and evening peaks to one that calls at what are defined as “the low-footfall stations” only once every two hours. This proposal is considered in more detail in section 3.8 below. It is worth noting at this point that we estimate introducing this would save less than 3-4 minutes on the busiest section of

the line between Altrincham and Greenbank making little difference therefore to those travelling to/from Greenbank and Northwich to/from the east. However it would introduce significant inconvenience to many passengers. This is discussed further from paragraph 3.9.11.

3.6.4 For the option in 3.6.3 to have more than a very marginal effect the ruling line speed on the whole of the line would need to be increased from 60mph to 75mph. The trains currently used on the line have a top speed of 75mph. Their acceleration profile is such that given the number of stations on the section between Greenbank and Navigation Road trains barely reach a speed of 60mph before starting to slow for the following station. The line between Navigation Road and Greenbank is used by a number of heavy freight trains each day and the track is of a good standard. Advice would have to be received from Network Rail of the costs that would be incurred in raising the line speed between Navigation Road and Mickle Trafford for passenger trains from 60mph to 75mph but we believe these could be low. We estimate that such an improvement would improve transit time over the whole length of the line by 2 minutes for trains running to the current service pattern and for more for those passenger trains using the line as a diversionary route.

3.7 Railheading to Altrincham for Metrolink

As noted in section 3.2 there is a significant flow of passengers from mid and northern Cheshire which travels in private cars to Altrincham then parking and travelling by Metrolink into and out of Manchester or to the Trafford Centre or Salford Quays. If the rail/Metrolink interface at Altrincham were reliable and the fare differential between the PTE area and the shire county area more favourable much of this traffic would transfer back to the railway where much of it was prior to 1990.

3.7.1 As with many PTE areas there is a significant fare differential in the rates charged per distance covered between tickets sold for travel wholly within the PTE area and those sold which cover both the Cheshire and PTE areas. This causes traffic to "railhead" to Altrincham reducing passenger flows on the Mid-Cheshire Line and adding to the very heavy congestion on the parallel A556.

3.7.2 The poor integration with Metrolink at Altrincham particularly for passengers on a return journey from Manchester or Salford Quays is discussed in 3.3 above. This causes much passenger dissatisfaction and contributes to the railheading and often to potential passengers deciding to drive "all the way" especially on days when it is wet as it often is in this part of the country.

3.8 Reducing frequency at lightly-used stations

Under section 6.3.11 of the Draft RUS, Option 3, the suggestion is put forward of reducing the frequency of service at lightly-used stations. The inference we have taken is that this refers to Ashley, Lostock Gralam and

Mobberley. We consider that this suggestion has arisen from the analysis of flawed base passenger usage data. It is our view that implementing this suggestion would generate little benefit for most users of the line and would cause significant hardship and dissatisfaction for users of the stations selected, as well as some disbenefit for other users.

3.8.1 A "skip-stop" service was operated over the line from May 1989 to May 1990 and from May 1993 to May 1995 primarily in order to get the units to Chester quicker to lengthen the turnaround time by 4 minutes. This was to make the service more punctual in an attempt to operate the service between the morning and evening peaks with only 3 units. This proved to be very unpopular and failed in its objective since operating the service with a 4 minute turnaround at Chester and a 2 minute turnaround at Piccadilly in practice led to a lot of late running.

3.8.2 The quality of service on the line plummeted to such an extent that it became the worst performer within the whole of First North Western's portfolio. During late 1999 / early 2000 reliability was running at around 97% (target 99%) and punctuality at around 45% (target 90%).

3.8.3 In January 2000 First North Western set up a Quality Improvement Team (QIT) for the line involving not only TOC and Railtrack representatives but also a representative from GMPTE and a regular user.

3.8.4 Initiatives were moved forward including resourcing 4 units for the service in between the morning and evening peaks, changing crew diagrams, making 5 of the lesser-used stations request stops though without changing the timings, relaying parts of the then very poor track, introducing TRUST monitoring to intermediate points, changing the "leaf fall" arrangements and regulating the freight trains such that they ran in agreed paths.

3.8.5 Although the service on the line still does not achieve target it is much improved since 1999 and is continuing to improve; the current moving annual average shows it to have a reliability of 99.3% and a punctuality of 82%.

3.8.6 During the operation of the "skip-stop" service a number of effects were noted.

3.8.7 Patronage at those stations only served every two hours declined markedly. Unlike a number of other services in the RUS area there is much travel on the line in between the peaks. Passengers finding that they had just missed a train and having to wait two hours for the next one subsequently mainly deserted the service. Many users in between the peaks are shoppers, leisure travellers or scholars/students returning from their studies.

3.8.8 The above patronage patterns were partly illustrated by the passenger counts carried out on the line in late-November / December 2006. As an example on Friday 22 December, the last working day before Christmas, the 1004 from Chester was noted by surveyor "AS" as follows: -

Knutsford	40 boarded, number alighted not counted	
Mobberley	2 alighted, 3 boarded	
Ashley	2 alighted, none boarded	
Loadings	Ashley – Hale	151
Loadings	Navigation Road – Stockport	79.

3.8.9 The "skip-stop" service also destroyed the even-interval departure times that the line had enjoyed up until that period. Thus users from other stations often found that they just missed trains when compared to the "standard pattern" they remembered which generated a lot of complaints.

3.8.10 The "skip-stop" service was abandoned by British Rail once they were able to resource an extra unit to operate over the line between the peaks. This was achieved through a combination of an improved maintenance regime and also agreeing to stable a spare unit in Manchester Piccadilly main station in between the peaks rather than at Longsight.

3.8.11 Patronage has since returned strongly at Lostock Gralam and Mobberley and continues to do so, both registering growth in excess of 10% in the two year period to 31 March 2006.

3.8.12 Indeed it is argued that Lostock Gralam and Mobberley in particular are not actually low in footfall but suffer from many of the fares on offer from those travelling to/from these stations not being collected as discussed in 3.1 above. See also table 3.1 for patronage to/from Mobberley on the busiest services. It is our experience that the nearer that unstaffed stations are to Altrincham the less likelihood there is of fares from passengers using them being collected this then contributing to the low LENNON figures for those stations.

3.9 Future Options – Northwich corridor

Section 6.3.11 of the Draft RUS puts forward a number of options for the Northwich corridor. We discuss each of these below.

3.9.1 **Option 1** - the provision of an extra off-peak service between Northwich-Knutsford-Altrincham. This is seen as rolling stock neutral if combined with terminating services at Stockport. The recommendation in the Draft RUS is that it would be unlikely to meet appraisal criteria and in any case the option to terminate at Stockport is also seen in the Draft RUS as unlikely to meet appraisal criteria.

3.9.2 We believe there would be significant demand for such a service. We recommend that its provision is appraised against criteria using correct footfall base data and realistic likely future growth figures.

3.9.3 We see such a service as capable of being operated with one unit only and as such this option is rolling stock neutral. The service would run from Northwich calling only at Knutsford and Hale, terminating at Altrincham.

The transit time for such a service running approximately half an hour after the main Chester to Manchester via Altrincham service would be 22 minutes, the time taken by the current 1549 Monday-Friday Chester to Manchester service which calls to the same pattern between Northwich and Altrincham. The unit can cross over to the other line at Altrincham being in the Chester-bound platform within 5 minutes.

3.9.4 At Northwich we see that with minimal infrastructure changes the service could run into the unused platform 3, the low metal fence erected in the early 1990s between platform 2 and 3 having to be removed. A signal would be required at the Altrincham end of platform 3. Pointwork is already in place to allow access to the Altrincham-bound direction and is used by freight trains as well as passenger trains diverted over the Middlewich branch.

3.9.5 Thus on arrival at Northwich the crew would change ends, say 5 minutes, before returning to Altrincham. This adds to 54 minutes. On this basis an hourly service should be resilient with 6 minutes recovery time, as well as the 3 minutes recovery time already in the schedule in each direction between Hale and Altrincham, giving in effect 12 minutes recovery time in every 60 minutes.

3.9.6 We see it as very important that the Northwich to Altrincham shuttle is the one that misses the less used stations between Northwich and Altrincham rather than the service from Chester to Manchester. This way those at the smaller stations retain their through services in the off peak. The alternative makes the service to these less used stations very unattractive off peak since anyone from/to these stations would in effect have to wait for half an hour at Northwich or Altrincham.

3.9.7 Ideally we think it would be most beneficial for the service to run from Greenbank to Altrincham since Greenbank station is almost as busy as Northwich. However, we appreciate this could not at present be operated on an hourly cycle with only one unit and train crew unless the speed limit were raised over Leftwich Viaduct (see 3.9.24 below) and the signalling changed as mentioned in the Draft RUS table 4.1 to allow trains from the Northwich direction to arrive into the Manchester-bound platform at Greenbank.

3.9.8 **Option 2** – the termination of Manchester-bound trains at Stockport. This is seen as unlikely given the associated infrastructure costs though the suggestion is this should be developed further once the WCML 2008 timetable is known.

3.9.9 We would be very surprised once the WCML 2008 timetable is developed if this scheme is seen as meeting appraisal criteria.

3.9.10 In any case we believe it would be unpopular with passengers and potential passengers who use the service to access the area around Piccadilly station or the universities or else look to change trains at Piccadilly for the North Trans Pennine service or towards Liverpool, Bolton or Preston. We estimate based on observation that around 20% of those using the line prior to

Altrincham continue their travel past Altrincham and travel to/from Piccadilly with further passengers joining at Altrincham and Navigation Road (as well as Stockport though these passengers have other services available to them). *(The Metrolink service to Manchester does not accommodate heavy luggage or bicycles and in the peaks and on Saturdays is often so full that potential customers cannot join services. Through tickets from the line to places such as Leeds, Liverpool and Preston are not valid via Metrolink under normal circumstances except on Sundays. Changing trains at Stockport would lengthen journey times and be disruptive for passengers).*

3.9.11 **Option 3** – fewer stops at the "low footfall" stations, the recommendation being that this be developed further and is likely to be included in the strategy.

3.9.12 We believe that this option has only been considered since those drafting the RUS were not provided with actual footfall data. It is our contention that the usage at the lower footfall stations between Greenbank and Navigation Road is at least 50% higher than suggested and possibly much more. This appears to have arisen as noted above in section 3.8 since many fares from those travelling from these stations are not collected.

3.9.13 We believe that by providing the Northwich (or Greenbank) to Altrincham shuttle as discussed in option 1 patronage would significantly increase on the line off-peak. The line is already well used off peak with trains often being loaded to 50% or more.

3.9.14 For a number of the so called "low footfall" stations there is no alternative public transport within a few miles.

3.9.15 Further comments in relation to this option have already been made and developed in section 3.8.

3.9.16 We believe very strongly that this option should not be taken forward.

3.9.17 **Option 4** – develop Stockport to Northenden Junction capacity, the recommendation being this should not be developed as it does not appear to constitute value for money.

3.9.18 As already noted in section 3.6, the Draft RUS states the ruling line speed on this section is between 5mph and 25 mph. In fact it is on the fastest section of the line with a ruling line speed of 75mph.

3.9.19 Cheadle station (as was) is on this section of the line. It is adjacent to the very busy suburban Cheadle village as well as also being adjacent to the private Alexandra Hospital, one of the largest in the North West of England.

3.9.20 If a station were re-instated at Cheadle it would be a much faster way for those from the Cheadle area to access central Manchester by rail. We

estimate that a journey by rail would probably be 20-25 minutes as opposed to a much longer trip by car or bus over very congested roads.

3.9.21 Many of those visiting the Alexandra Hospital come from Manchester, south west Manchester (Altrincham or the vicinity) and north Cheshire (Knutsford, Wilmslow, etc). The hospital generates a very large amount of road traffic through visitors, the car parks regularly overflowing and the hospital continually looking to expand these. Cheadle station would be less than 5 minutes walk from the hospital.

3.9.22 Unless double track were re-instated through Cheadle station returning a station to Cheadle would very likely lead to less resilience in the service as already happens at Navigation Road, the next station, which is sited on a single track section. It is appreciated that there would be significant cost in replacing one of the single track bridges on the single track section with a double track one to achieve a double-track station at Cheadle. However, we recommend this option for Cheadle station be developed for the purposes of appraisal.

3.9.23 **Further options**. We suggest there are a number of further options that should be developed.

3.9.24 **Raising the line speed over Leftwich Viaduct for all passenger trains except Pacers.** We understand from the report produced for First North Western noted at 3.6.2 above that the line speed over Leftwich Viaduct could be raised to 50mph at no cost so long as the Pacer units were cascaded away from the line. We understand this would lead to a saving of up to 2 minutes in transit time.

3.9.25 **Raising the ruling line speed between Altrincham and Mickle Trafford Junction from 60mph to 75mph.** We understand that there would be little cost to raising the line speed for passenger trains to 75mph. This would improve the transit times for normal passenger trains on the line between Greenbank and Mickle Trafford saving 2-3 minutes as well as probably saving over 5 minutes for the regular diversions of the North Wales Coast services over the line from Chester to Piccadilly.

3.9.26 **Running one to two "trains" an hour from the line over Metrolink tracks.** Prior to the opening of Metrolink the Altrincham to Manchester line had a peak frequency of 10 minutes for stopping trains with the Mid-Cheshire services slotted in between with one stop at Sale.

3.9.27 If appropriate rolling stock were acquired this could likely operate to G-Mex reversing in part of the current car park area in such a way that there would be no need to negotiate the sharp curve immediately after G-Mex station or the street-running sections of Metrolink. Further, there would be a minimal infrastructure cost at Altrincham reconnecting the link from the heavy rail to Metrolink for passenger train usage; this infrastructure already exists for engineering trains though is rarely used.

3.9.28 Such a service would provide useful extra capacity on the Altrincham to G-Mex section with Cornbrook as a useful interchange for Salford Quays. G-Mex would be convenient for many business people who could walk to the commercial heart and for shoppers who could walk to the Market Street area. Alternatively both could interchange with the route 3 Metroshuttle bus or transfer to Metrolink trams.

3.9.29 **Services from Northwich towards Crewe via Middlewich.** It would be instructive to develop a proposal for the option of extending the Altrincham to Northwich shuttle to Crewe via Middlewich.

3.9.30 Middlewich has for a number of years been the fastest growing town in Cheshire and is the largest without a rail link. There is significant road commuting from Middlewich to the Greater Manchester area mostly along the heavily congested A556.

3.9.31 Those within the catchment area of the stations on the line between Altrincham and Northwich who desire to travel south find that to do so by train usually leads to them having to take a train in the other direction to Stockport and then to change. This makes the train alternative unattractive in terms of time as well as expensive since fares are calculated via Stockport rather than more directly. We know that many travellers railhead directly to Crewe adding to road congestion.

3.9.32 A service from Crewe towards Altrincham via Middlewich would put Northwich, Vale Royal's largest town and one where significant funds are being invested in regeneration, at little more than 2 hours from London.

3.9.33 In an agreement with Congleton Borough Council the developer of the new housing site around Middlewich station has left land available for a station car park and a bus turning circle. There is also space available for a station at Rudheath just south of Northwich and adjacent to the large business park.

4. Conclusion

4.1 Mid-Cheshire has a fast-growing economy where there is significant latent demand for rail services to further contribute to that growth.

4.2 The Draft RUS has been produced based on significantly underestimated passenger figures, on the assumption that road charging will not come to Greater Manchester in the next 10 years when we now know it will, and also cannot reasonably be completed until the 2008 WCML timetable is announced, expected in February 2008.

4.3 We believe the North West RUS should be the next step towards satisfying the latent demand for rail services in the area and that the draft should be reworked after February 2008.

4.4 Meanwhile, we believe certain short-term gains should be identified for imminent implementation, such as the Altrincham-Northwich or Greenbank shuttle, the line speed improvements and actions to alleviate the crowding.

4.5 By making accommodation for the latent demand the railway will make a real contribution to improving the local economy as well as improving the railway's own financial performance.

4.6 For all these reasons we believe the RUS should be revised in line with our comments.

4.7 We would welcome the opportunity to discuss our comments and proposals with you.

Mid-Cheshire Rail Users Association
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2 January 2007