

## Cheshire & Warrington Local Transport Body

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**Date of Meeting:** 23 June 2014  
**Report of:** Andrew Ross – Head of Strategic Infrastructure (Cheshire East Council)  
Chris Hindle – Head of Planning & Infrastructure (Cheshire West & Chester Council)  
**Subject/Title:** Mid Cheshire Rail Line – Growth Aspirations

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### 1. Report Summary

- 1.1 The Mid Cheshire Rail Line provides east-west connectivity across the sub region linking Chester, Northwich and Knutsford with Altrincham, Stockport and Manchester. Since 2001 there has been a 164% growth in passenger numbers (to over 1.7 million) at stations solely served by the line.
- 1.2 The vision for the Mid Cheshire Line (MCL) is to support and enable growth through improved connectivity between key centres. The re-franchising of Northern services represents a significant opportunity to make the case for additional investment. The critical issues for the MCL include:
- Increasing the frequency from hourly to half hourly at principal stations.
  - Increasing the Sunday service frequency from two-hourly to hourly.
  - Investigate service provision at lesser-used local stations to inform franchising decisions.
- 1.3 In addition to the re-franchising process, there are other medium term opportunities for investment in the classic rail network to enhance current services (e.g. electrification programme and Northern Hub), as well as long term opportunities (e.g. HS2), so the time is now right to make the case for investment that is long overdue.

### 2. Recommendations

That the CWLTB:

1. Seek to influence Rail North and the DfT to investigate the business case for introducing a half hourly service for the Mid Cheshire Line as part of the new Northern franchise;

2. Support a detailed investigation into rail service provision at lesser-used stations to influence Rail North's future franchise specification;
3. Continue to work with our key stakeholders and community rail partners to explore opportunities to improve rail services, stations and rolling stock and wider longer term goals for the Mid Cheshire Line corridor.

### **3. The Current Position**

- 2.1 All trains call at all 16 stations along the line. This is excellent for local connectivity, but at the cost of lengthy journey times from the principal stations to Manchester or Chester.
- 2.2 Knutsford is the busiest intermediate station with over 450,000 passengers a year (167% growth over 10 years) and only an hourly service. The Greater Manchester Rail Policy (2012-2024) states that for stations with over 50,000 trips per annum a half hourly service is suggested as a minimum aspiration – this includes the principal stations on the MCL into Manchester.
- 2.3 The current constraint of an hourly service and the impact of growth in passenger numbers had led to significant capacity issues with overloading at peak times, particularly from Manchester/Stockport to Knutsford, as well as strong patronage figures in the off-peak period. The quality of the rolling stock, is believed to impact on the image, perception and use of the service.
- 2.4 The MCL is different from other routes serving Manchester as the largest peak flow is currently away from Manchester in the morning and correspondingly towards Manchester in the evening peak. This happens because the route into Manchester is indirect (via Stockport), leading to slow journey times.
- 2.5 Despite the slow journey time, the MCL tops Northern Rail's Area West routes in to Manchester in terms of the rate of growth. The line is key in providing access to strategic employment sites, including Barclays Technology Centre Radbroke who operates a rail shuttle bus service to Knutsford station. There is also evidence of suppressed demand for commuter rail services following the detrimental timetable changes in 2008 which meant many commuters had to stop using the train as services arrived too late for peak start times.
- 2.6 Additionally, young people use the service in both directions to access schools, college and further education – a growing market. Events in Chester, Manchester and along the line add to the passenger loadings particularly on Saturdays and Sundays (e.g. Chester Races, RHS Tatton show, Christmas and artisan markets, musical concerts, cricket and football matches).

### **3. Enabling Growth along the Line**

- 3.1 As a key connection across the sub region between Chester and Manchester, the MCL can support and enable future housing and employment growth

through improved connectivity between key centres. The key growth locations along the line are outlined in the table below (as identified in Local Plans).

| <b>Location</b>       | <b>Housing</b>        | <b>Employment Growth Sites</b>  |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|---|
| Chester               | 5,200 new dwellings   | Development of key business sites, including Chester Business Quarter, Chester West Employment Park and Sealand Industrial Estate |
| Northwich             | 4,300 new dwellings   | Development of key business sites, including Gadbrook Park  |
| Cuddington & Sandiway | 200-300 new dwellings | N/A   |
| Knutsford             | 650 new dwellings     | Development of key business sites, including Parkgate Industrial Estate Extension and Booths Park                                 |

#### **4. Vision and Objectives**

- 4.1 The MCL has a role to play in helping Cheshire and Warrington meet its economic potential. The vision for the MCL is that it develops into a key strategic route delivering improved connectivity to support and enable growth.

##### Short Term Objectives

- 4.2 The key aspiration in the short term is to improve service frequency from an hourly to a half hourly service (2 trains per hour) on a weekday. The extra hourly train should call at principal stations only, which are Altrincham, Knutsford, Northwich and Greenbank. This would bring much improved journey times in key areas, as well as reducing overcrowding on the existing all-stations services, which would continue.
- 4.3 In addition, the Sunday service should be increased in frequency from the present two-hourly to hourly. The Sunday trains are, on average, as heavily loaded as weekday trains despite the infrequent service, and a better service is clearly justified by usage. Sunday demand arises because of the number of leisure and tourist destinations served by the line.
- 4.4 The benefits of increasing the service frequency include:
- Enable easier access to work encouraging more commuters to use the line
  - Releasing suppressed demand for MCL rail services by addressing the issues of infrequent, overcrowded and slow trains
  - Ease congestion in the Knutsford area and improve connectivity
- 4.5 In 2013 a study of the future options for the MCL (commissioned by Transport for Greater Manchester) looked into an hourly Sunday service, an extra peak service in the morning and skip stopping at Ashley, Mobberley, Plumey and Lostock Gralam. The proposal for skip stopping would reduce local accessibility and therefore needs to be carefully considered.

- 4.6 In addition, Rail North is looking into service provision at stations with <25,000 passengers per annum and has invited local authorities to supplement Office of Rail Regulation (ORR) statistics with local data, which may include local surveys or Automatic Passenger Count (APC) data.
- 4.7 Rail North has invited local data submissions for Ashley and Mobberley stations as they fall below the threshold based on ORR data. Positive data showing higher patronage is available for Mobberley and will be collated and shared. The figures for Plumey and Lostock Gralam are slightly higher than the 25,000 passengers per annum threshold, but should also be considered in terms of the future sustainability of services at these stations.

#### Longer Term Goals

- 4.7 The longer term rail aspirations for Mid Cheshire include re-opening the Sandbach to Northwich line to passenger services including a station at Middlewich. There is also an aspiration for a direct link from the MCL to the Airport and a rail spur north of Mobberley could deliver this missing link.