

North Cheshire Rail Users Group

News Bulletin



Beyond Ellesmere Port.

Those who attended the NCRUG AGM in April will have seen the presentation by Steve Dodd, CFO of Merseyrail detailing the expansion plans for Merseyrail services beyond Ellesmere Port. Following on from the AGM, Elton Parish Council invited the MP for Runcorn and Helsby to visit the village and used the opportunity to impress upon her the need for improved rail services. This has resulted in a formal letter to the Secretary of State, Heidi Alexander, to push for such.

Although the basic track and signalling will support more frequent services from Ellesmere Port to at least as far as Helsby, possibly at 30 minute intervals, there were some wide-ranging issues identified that will need resolution – some sooner than others:

- Will the 'Barrow' style crossing at Ince and Elton Station be compliant with the long term stated ambition of 2 trains per hour in each direction?
- How will Access for All (AfA) be provided at Ince, Helsby, and to a lesser extent Frodsham?
- When services progress to the new station at Daresbury, will battery powered trains be compliant in the Sutton Weaver tunnel? (They are in the current Merseyrail network, although these were built to different standards).
- In the original strategic Outline Business Case a new station was mooted to the west of the Essar refinery site. Would re-establishment of the mothballed station within the site not be more cost effective, or a completely new station to replace Ince and Elton?
- Given the current DfT embargo on 3rd rail expansion, where will the battery recharge points be located? How long will a 'fast charge' take? (Blocking the North Cheshire and West Coast Main Line tracks will not be an option.)

The subject of Access for All was the single biggest issue raised and as such has become one of NCRUG's lead campaigns. There is much happening in the background in parallel with the Merseyrail expansion, although very little seems co-ordinated at this stage: Starting with the station at Ince and Elton; this is currently managed by Northern although presumably this would change if the line becomes part of the Merseyrail network as expected. Precedent has already been set elsewhere for Merseyrail station management at points not currently served by Merseyrail trains. AfA funding as it currently stands is normally applied for by the Station Operator (Northern), with the support of, inter alia, the local MP. Even if a bid for AfA funds were to be put in tomorrow, they might not become available until Network Rail 'Control Period' (spending window) 8; April 2029 – April 2034!

The same applies at Helsby, although here the current operator is Transport for Wales (TfW). TfW seem to have no vested interest at this time to install extra facilities at Helsby; TfW services currently use Platforms 1 and 2 and although Platform 1 has direct access to the Station, disabled passengers wishing to board or disembark on Platform 2 currently have the option of travelling on to Frodsham or Chester as necessary to connect with a train / platform that suits, or possibly a TfW supplied taxi.

It will likely fall on Metro (formerly Merseytravel) to develop the Stations to the required standard, which assumes the funding will come from the Liverpool City Region. The second development in the background is Cheshire Devolution: The 3 local Authorities of Cheshire West, Cheshire East and Warrington are set to be incorporated into a greater authority in much the same style as West Midlands, South Yorkshire, Liverpool City

Region. The creation of this Devolved Authority brings many opportunities, one of which is long term and meaningful funding settlement for devolved matters of transport. Many aspects of transport will be under the control of the new Authority that the existing smaller councils currently cannot touch, either through regulatory or resource constraints. Will the new Cheshire Devolved Authority seek to have its own 'branding' for local transport, in the same way as Manchester is doing with the Bee Network? Will the Merseyrail brand conflict with this? Finally, will the establishment of Great British Railways see harmonised branding for all trains and stations in England outside the City Regions? Discussions with Metro (formerly Merseytravel) are ongoing...

As of the 20th August Merseyrail have officially rolled out the 'Tap on Tap off' system of payment network wide. Using this ticketless system, the passenger uses a Metro Card in the same manner as an Oyster Card, but directly linked to a bank account. Merseyrail state the 'Tap on Tap off' system will guarantee the lowest available fare.

Railway 200: The Inspiration Train, the Railway Touring Company, and Pete Waterman returns to Chester Cathedral.

As part of the Railway 200 celebrations the **Inspiration Train** is touring the country showcasing railway achievements, science and engineering and railway careers. Inspiration started its tour down in southern England on 27th June and after a tour of the Midlands, the North and Scotland comes closer to our area later in Autumn, with a planned stop at Blackpool North station 4th-7th November and Llandudno shortly after (dates to be confirmed). For a day or two out over the summer holidays, Inspiration will be at the National Railway Museum in York from 23rd-31st August. Travelling to York by train from the North Cheshire area is straightforward and with split ticketing can be surprisingly cheap.

Also coming up as part of the Railway 200 celebrations is **The Railway Touring Company special train** on September 27th running from Carnforth to as far as Stanhope with steam hauled planned from York. The train will stop at various historic railway points along the way and offers several passenger pick up points. For more details check out <https://railway200.co.uk/activity/>

The **Making Tracks 200** exhibition is once again at Chester Cathedral and finishes on 30th August. Featuring a return of music entrepreneur and rail enthusiast Pete Waterman's trainset – this year a 72' long recreation of Watford Junction amongst other railway exhibitions that include a virtual visit to the Llangollen Railway and information on the Thomas Brassey Society. Pete Waterman (OBE) himself will be at the exhibition from time to time and visitors will have the opportunity to drive the trains. While at Chester Station, visitors might wish to view the Thomas Brassey statue outside the main entrance. Unveiled in May this year, the statue commemorates the work of an incredible yet somewhat overlooked engineer, key to the development of many railways around the world, the North Cheshire Line included.

Railway 200 commemoration is evident at many stations around the country now; users of the Mid Cheshire line will have noted the Railway 200 bunting adorning the passenger approaches to some stations, however surprisingly there has been no effort made at Helsby, Frodsham and Runcorn East. Given the holidays coincide with much of the Railway 200 celebrations, this seems an opportunity missed.



Volunteering at our stations and the North Cheshire Community Rail Partnership.

At our April AGM, Chris Kimberely, Chair of the North Cheshire Community Rail Partnership (NCCRP) briefly presented on the aims and objectives of the Partnership going forward and how Community Rail will embed in our area with some interesting projects to connect the community and railway through various partnership projects.

As part of the 'Stations in their Place' strategy, the North Cheshire Community Rail Partnership is actively working in partnership with Merseyrail and Transport for Wales in forming a volunteer corps, initially to focus on Ellesmere Port and Helsby, with ambitions to give the stations a real welcoming and vibrant feel, improving the connection to the relative communities while providing opportunities for health and wellbeing.

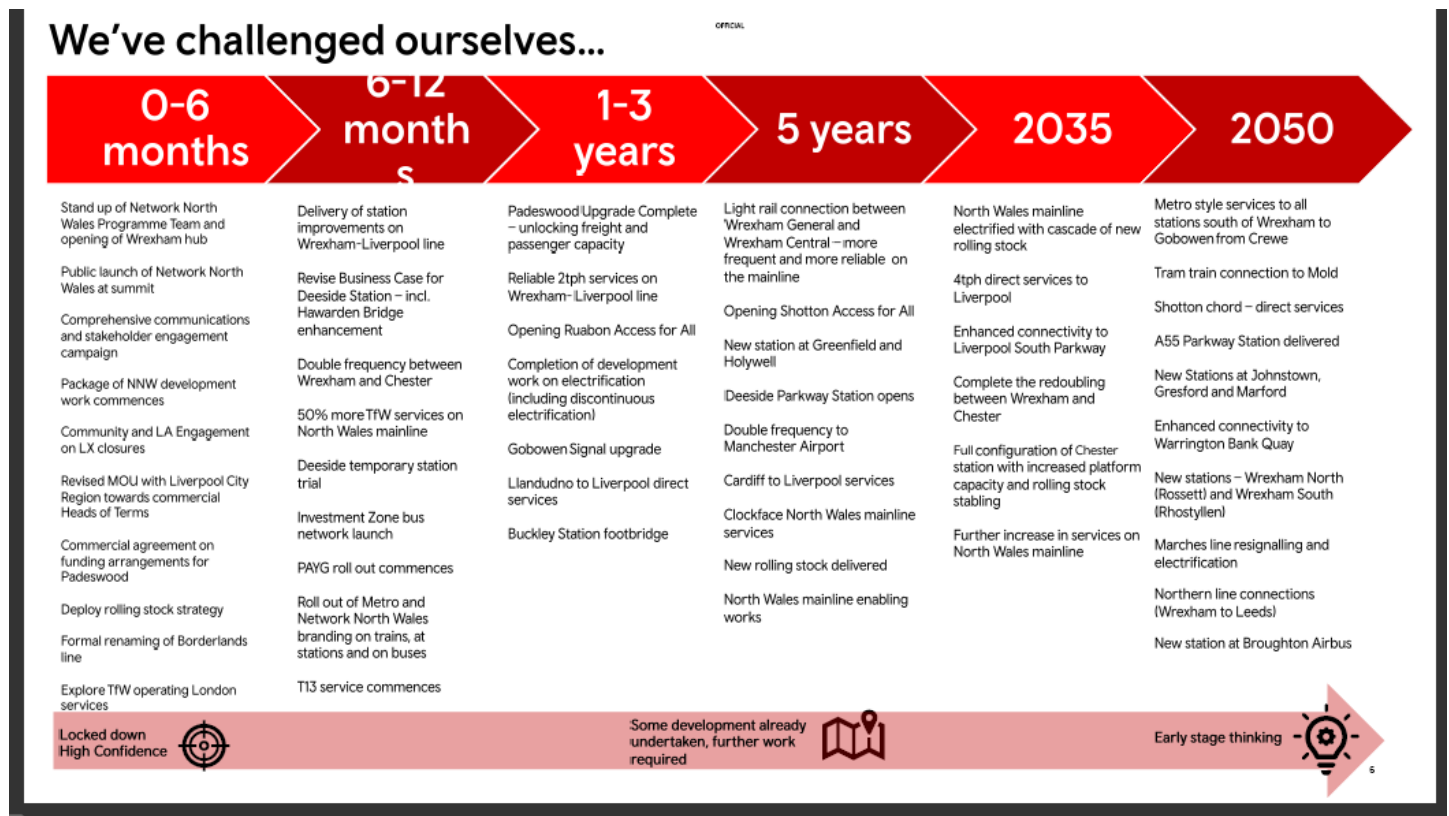
Looking to the future; opportunities will exist beyond the station gardens and in the case of Helsby this could include the recently refurbished but now vacant station buildings. Other projects underway involve History displays (remembering the railways of the 1960's), Active Travel and Visitor Information boards, and Travel with Confidence schemes, to name a few.

If you want to get involved with volunteering or seek more information on the Partnership itself, please email the Community Rail Development Officer: enquiries@northcheshirecrp.org



Above: One of the Active Travel and Visitor Information signs at Frodsham Station; a partnership project funded by the North Cheshire Community Rail Partnership.

Transport for Wales ambitions.



The above snip was taken from a recent TfW Stakeholder Bulletin. Much of it is eye catching, and some schemes certainly sound ambitious, but key is the fact they are being considered, even if only part of a long-term TfW vision. As far as schemes go, tram-train connections to Mold and a new station at Airbus Broughton won't be without their challenges!

In the near future; Liverpool direct Llandudno services are waiting on interventions on the North Wales mainline to increase capacity (level crossing improvements) but remain a core focus for TfW. When established, it is expected there will be significantly increased passenger numbers over the Halton Curve as the direct services will be a more attractive option for travellers from the Liverpool City Region to North Wales, in addition to increased passenger traffic from Liverpool Airport.

Reference to the 2tph on the Wrexham-Liverpool line (1-3years) in fact refers to the Borderlands line through Bidston. TfW have long stated their ambition to have services run all the way into the centre of Liverpool rather than necessitating a change on to Merseyrail services at Bidston, as is currently the case. The 4tph direct services to Liverpool (2035) presumably means 2tph on the Borderlands line and 2tph via the Halton Curve, but originating where? Llandudno and Cardiff? In any event; combining the increased TfW services on the North Cheshire line with proposed Merseyrail expansion beyond Ellesmere Port will bring the North Cheshire line to theoretical maximum capacity without a significant signalling upgrade.

The Northern Arc.

Following the publicity of the Manchester-Liverpool component of the proposed Northern Arc scheme earlier this year, the concept has certainly stirred some debate. The proposal was also extensively discussed at the last NCRUG Committee meeting. For those not in receipt of the last News Bulletin, the Manchester – Liverpool proposal as depicted on the front cover of *Rail Future* magazine is reproduced below.

Rail North West



Northern Mayors launch Northern ARC

Points:

- The 2 options depicted from the proposed Liverpool Gateway station to Liverpool Lime St include either use of the existing West Coast Main Line (WCML) or alternatively a completely new underground connection. Use of the WCML, although significantly less costly and quicker to implement would put more rail traffic on a line that is nearly at capacity. Could the scheme be staged?
- The new Liverpool Gateway station location has not been decided. It could act as a replacement for the now closed Ditton platforms and serve the South Widnes area for local traffic, but it is essential it includes WCML and (therefore Halton Curve traffic).
- From Widnes the line follows the old Fiddlers Ferry freight line which runs under the WCML at Warrington Bank Quay and becomes an active travel corridor a few miles east.
- Terminal 2 development at Manchester Airport completely blocks the rail corridor earmarked for the Western Link; a short stretch of line that would connect Manchester Airport with the Mid Cheshire

Line. The new line proposed from Warrington Bank Quay to Manchester Airport will have to go underground at some point, presumably to a new (underground) station at the Airport.

- There is no proposed chord to join the North Cheshire Line with the new line at Warrington Bank Quay. Connecting to Manchester Airport will require a change at Bank Quay as it is unlikely through services will continue.
- 'Enhanced Services' on the North Cheshire Line to Chester could include electrification in concurrence with the North Wales Mainline. This would result in a prolonged period of major disruption involve considerable engineering challenges.
- It would be folly to market the proposal as 'high speed'. In fact the new line would shave no more than a few minutes off the current fastest journey from Liverpool to Manchester. The real benefits are relieving congestion in the Castlefield Corridor, improved freight paths and connecting Manchester Airport to the WCML as well as directly to Liverpool.

Avanti West Coast Services.

The long awaited second Liverpool – London Euston hourly service will commence this December / January. Extra hourlies won't come in immediately however; initially the services will be daily from September using Class 807 trains calling at Liverpool South Parkway, Crewe and Milton Keynes. These services are scheduled to depart Lime Street at 43 minutes past the hour so there won't be a meaningful connection at Liverpool South Parkway from Helsby and Frodsham. The weekend schedule is yet to be announced.

Frodsham Station access.

Problems with the access road to Platform 2 and the Station Buildings have been repeatedly raised with Transport for Wales. These complaints resulted in some additional signage on the wall beside the road however this has been completely ineffective in dissuading drivers from parking on the double yellow lines and resultant traffic chaos. The TfW commitment to remove vegetation and repaint the partly obscured double yellow lines has not been honoured. TfW have stated they are unable to provide parking enforcement in England (why, if they can enforce fares?). A solution proposed to TfW would be to have the double yellow lines replaced with pedestrian footway and a marked crossing to the Morrisons side. This has been forwarded to the TfW Station management team.



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Website: Visit our Facebook page to catch up on any developments and leave your comments.

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