

Mid-Cheshire: victim of its own success?

If you were suddenly to awake to find yourself on a train, unsure of where you were, and you then looked out of the carriage window at a well-kept station with carefully tended flowerbeds and hanging baskets, you'd be safe to assume you were on a line that boasted a Community Rail Partnership.

You look further, and notice station displays of excellent art works, and boxes handily containing timetables and information on local walks and facilities.

If the countryside is rolling, green and pleasant, you might well be travelling on the Mid-Cheshire Line, on which hourly trains clatter and amble from the urban areas of Manchester and Stockport through what the newspapers traditionally call the 'Cheshire stockbroker belt' to Northwich and Chester.

Add the enthusiastic and wide-ranging work of the line's Community Rail Partnership (CRP) to the constructive approach and passionate engagement of the Mid-Cheshire Rail Users Association (MCRUA, with over

STEVE BROADBENT visits the Mid-Cheshire Line, where patronage is being boosted by volunteer efforts, but with such success that its antiquated trains are often overcrowded

600 members, it is probably the second biggest in the country after the Friends of the Settle & Carlisle), and the sum is a train full of all sorts of travellers - shoppers, tourists, students and commuters.

That's what CRPs and good rail user groups do - attract to the railway significant business that the train operator could not otherwise attract.

The Mid-Cheshire CRP, led by Sally Buttifant and chaired by John Oates, has a reputation for achievement.

Alongside it the MCRUA, also under Oates' chairmanship and with its positive approach, is making a real difference. Rail industry bodies, local councils and other local

groups readily engage with the Mid-Cheshire campaigners (for want of a better word), for the real benefit of the line.

But there is a sting in the tail - especially in the North of England, but also in many of the semi-rural areas that are home to CRPs.

If you are on the train during the morning or evening 'rush hours', you may well find yourself standing, emulating a canned sardine. As the train's conductor releases the lid on your sardine can, you are unwittingly swept onto the platform by the tide of the sardines behind you, seeking the sanctuary of home, school or office.

Despite the huge success of CRPs, and of the Mid-Cheshire groups in particular,

packed trains and tidy stations rarely lead to improvements in train comfort, seat numbers or train frequency. In a world where the cascade of quality trains from the busier lines to the more rural has almost stopped, volunteer efforts are going unrewarded.

Buttifant and Oates are working hard to promote the Mid-Cheshire, against challenges that put a brake on success.

In March 2013 Transport for Greater Manchester, Cheshire West & Chester Council, and Cheshire East Council commissioned a study into the line's future from consultant JMP. Originally due for publication in the summer, the report had still to be published as this issue of *RAIL* closed for press.

Buttifant emphasises the partnership nature of the CRP/MCRUA work, and the way everyone works together: "We're all about creating partnership working, and asking people to bring their skills to our different projects. While money is limited, more often than not people will help when asked."

The idea of having art works, plants and information is to "bring a sense of ownership to a station", she continues.

Such simple touches not only help make the station environment more pleasant, they also help eliminate graffiti and lower forms of anti-social behaviour. They also help lay the foundations for growing passenger numbers and revenue, which in turn helps with the prosperity of local businesses and the use of the train for travelling to jobs, education or healthcare.

Oates points to the number of schools that are located close to stations on the line, and the fact that given the rural nature of the area's roads and the congestion in nearby towns, "kids use the train to go to school".



Above: Mid-Cheshire Line passengers disembark from Northern 156440 at Chester in May 2012. MID-CHESHIRE CRP.

Left: The Mid-Cheshire Line is a combination of urban stations, market towns and rural villages. In typically scenic surroundings, Northern 156482 stands at Ashley station in June 2011. MID-CHESHIRE CRP.

Below: Northern 156423 arrives at Navigation Road with a Manchester-Chester train on July 19 2012. The wires that are visible are for Manchester Metrolink trains. The Metrolink and the Mid-Cheshire Line each use one platform at the station. CHRIS POOLE.





Northern 150218 and 150145 approach Ashley with a train for Manchester Piccadilly on July 19 2012. CHRIS POOLE.

Passenger numbers and investment

Spending money on improving rail services is tied to current and forecast passenger numbers and revenue, and to the prediction of future increases if that spending is committed.

However, the passenger numbers published by the Office of Rail Regulation can sometimes be inaccurate, owing to shortcomings in the railway's data capture processes rather than to those who analyse the data.

Inaccuracies can appear as a result of ticketless travel. If the train is packed, it can be impossible for tickets to be checked and fares taken.

And on routes such as the Mid-Cheshire, where there are few staffed stations and no automatic barriers (not even at Manchester Piccadilly and Stockport), dishonest passengers soon realise that omission.

Mid-Cheshire Line passenger numbers

(ORR official data for 2011/12 compared with MCRUA's own head counts for September 2012 to September 2013.)

	ORR	MCRUA	% difference
Piccadilly	-	551,463	-
Stockport	-	297,911	-
Navigation Road	84,510	116,284	38%
Altrincham	462,576	348,495	-
Hale	140,620	190,679	36%
Ashley	6,676	9,238	38%
Mobberley	17,406	33,866	95%
Knutsford	398,596	461,006	16%
Plumley	21,486	30,785	43%
Lostock Gralam	26,126	52,116	99%
Northwich	190,010	217,793	15%
Greenbank	116,812	198,806	70%
Cuddington	58,976	76,140	29%
Delamere	38,120	39,205	3%
Mouldsworth	31,552	24,390	-23%
Chester	-	326,343	-

So over a whole year, Mid-Cheshire Rail Users Association committed a large number of volunteer hours to carrying out manual counts of passengers on over 1,000 trains.

MCRUA Chairman John Oates says the data ties in well with that recorded by the on-train passenger counting system. "In some cases our figures are 30%-50% higher than the ORR's," he says.

Mid-Cheshire Community Rail Partnership Officer Sally Buttifant adds: "It became clear this is a real issue, particularly on a line like this, which is perhaps not receiving the priority it should as a key route serving central Manchester.

"If we can't say definitively how well our trains are being used, how can we lobby for the investment our passengers deserve?" We want everybody to see how well our trains are used."

Notes (supplied by MCRUA):

■ The Piccadilly, Stockport and Chester figures are the MCRUA counts of Mid-Cheshire line boardings and alightings at those stations.

■ The ORR figures for Altrincham are accepted by the industry as incorrect, as they are thought to include tickets for Manchester Metrolink trains sold by Northern at Altrincham using National Rail equipment - hence no percentage difference is given.

■ The small percentage differences at Knutsford and Northwich can probably be explained by these stations having ticket offices and ticket checking staff.

■ Several stations west of Altrincham are unstaffed with no ticket machines, and are only two to three minutes apart. Conductors therefore have little time to sell tickets before many passengers leave the train, again at stations where there are no barriers. Thus, they have little or no opportunity to buy tickets and be recorded in the ORR data.

► And they continue to use it at weekends. Given the high costs that teenagers face in insuring a car, he adds: "We see far more young people using the train, where in previous times they would already have had their first car. There is a video taken in 2002, and the first thing that strikes you is how empty the trains were then - you'll see five or ten passengers where today there are 60 or 70."

More and more school classes are also using the railway as part of their studies. And even in this area of high incomes and smart cars, there is a strong trend to use the railway, to avoid traffic jams and high in-town parking charges.

This merely scratches the surface of the role played by the CRP and MCRUA, with more than 3,000 volunteer hours dedicated each year to supporting the line and its development. They also pride themselves on positive relationships with the local press, which greatly boosts their cause.

Knutsford, the busiest station on the Cheshire part of the line (other than Chester itself), is worthy of particular attention.

Here, a long strip of previously derelict land between the car park and the platform has been transformed. After Buttifant had tried everybody she could think of to help with the work, the Knutsford in Bloom volunteer group stepped in to clear the site and provide an array of flowers.

The site is now maintained by the local school, which also displays art works. "Vandalism has disappeared," says Oates.

Train operator Northern Rail, which supports CRPs and user groups extensively, helped with site clearance. It has also erected an in-keeping fence, which helps deter ticketless travel by blocking an 'escape route'.

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John Oates, Chairman, Mid-Cheshire Rail Users Association

Of course, this success brings a severe downside - gross overcrowding at times, something that Oates prefers to describe as "leaving passengers behind".

But with just an hourly service, which is perversely slightly worse in the peak time, that's no joke.

Oates says that a local council is saving £250,000 a year by withdrawing bus and taxi travel for some students, so they all go by train. And they pack a train that is 'contraflow' - away from Manchester in the mornings (the 0717 Piccadilly departure).

"This is a major headache," says Oates. He says Northern would very much like to add a carriage or two to the busiest services, but simply doesn't have even one available here (or, indeed, anywhere else).

The nature of the Mid-Cheshire Line adds to the overcrowding problems - Manchester and Stockport at one end, market towns and splendid countryside in the middle, and another important regional city (Chester) at the other end.

So even 'off-peak' trains are busy with

Mid-Cheshire Line

Key
 ● Stations
 — NR lines
 — Manchester Metrolink
 ... Closed line

Note: For clarity some lines/stations are omitted



shoppers and tourists, probably busier than any other 'local' route in the North West.

Also, the major road that parallels the line (the A556) is among the busiest in the North West, so there is considerable latent demand for the railway to cope with, if it could provide an attractive alternative service for motorists.

The other radial routes into Manchester have at least two, and often four or more, trains per hour, although most are overcrowded Pacers and Sprinters.

Before work started in 1990 on the Manchester Metrolink line to Altrincham, Mid-Cheshire services into Manchester ran

on the route via Sale now taken by the trams. After Metrolink was introduced, they were diverted along the previously freight-only (and still single-track) line to Stockport.

After Stockport, the Mid-Cheshire services have to find a way into Piccadilly. But the 2008 timetable change gave express services more paths into Piccadilly, and the Mid-Cheshire was the loser, with a reduced service that was not offset by having additional carriages.

In the mornings two Mid-Cheshire trains terminate at Stockport (they are timed to hold for nine minutes outside the station, awaiting a platform), requiring Manchester-bound



Above: Direct Rail Services 37607, with 37259 on the rear, heads a Network Rail test train through Northwich on September 21 2013. Re-opening the line from Northwich to Middlewich would offer increased services towards Manchester. CHRIS POOLE.

Left: A crowded lunchtime music train to Ashley, and passengers on a Northern Class 142 enjoy the free entertainment. This is an off-peak service, but the train is full - a frequent problem on the Mid-Cheshire. MID-CHESHIRE CRP.

Re-opening the Middlewich line

Support is growing for the campaign to re-open the nine-mile line through Middlewich, which is currently used by freight and diverted passenger trains, but not timetabled ones.

For example, Knutsford Town Council sees the benefits such a link would bring to a town, where the crowded nature of both the roads and the trains is blocking increased prosperity.

Cheshire West & Chester and Cheshire East Councils (through which areas the line passes), the Local Enterprise Partnership and local MP Fiona Bruce also support re-opening.

Primarily, the line would put Middlewich (the largest settlement in Cheshire without a station) on the railway map. But it would also give a route from the West Coast Main Line at Crewe via Sandbach to Northwich, Knutsford and Altrincham, greatly improving those towns' connectivity while also providing extra capacity in the Manchester direction.

The proposed site for a new Middlewich

station, probably with an island platform, is protected in the Town Plan.

Mid-Cheshire Rail Users Association Chairman John Oates says: "The biggest problem is that there are so many other railway things going on that those who ought to be looking at this more carefully are looking elsewhere."

"But I am sure if the powers-that-be decided it ought to go forward, the resources would be found, and the business case is strong."

A major hurdle to overcome is the cost of Network Rail's project evaluation process (GRIP - Governance for Railway Investment Projects) and the timescales put on the process. This is not helped by the small budgets that Local Enterprise Partnerships have, compared with those of the former Regional Development Agencies.

About one-third of the line is double track, but the whole formation can take two tracks. The line speed is 40mph, but Oates believes this could easily be increased to 60mph, with just one bridge needing improvement works.



A Compass Tours charter from Skipton to Blaenau Ffestiniog, headed by 47270 Swift, heads eastbound through Northwich on June 30 2012. CHRIS POOLE.



Freight also uses the Mid-Cheshire Line. On July 24 2013, DB Schenker 60040 passes Lostock Gralam with a Tunstead-Northwich aggregates train. CHRIS POOLE.



Passengers alight at Delamere, heading for the *Spellbound Forest* event that took place in May 2012 in nearby Delamere Forest. They are having their tickets checked by Northern Rail, but on regular services several stations west of Altrincham are unstaffed, and have no ticket barriers. The close proximity of the stations also means that conductors have little opportunity to check and sell tickets on the train. MID-CHESHIRE CRP.

passengers to either change there or board the Metrolink tram at Altrincham.

In the evenings two trains start from Stockport, adding to the crush on the connecting services from Piccadilly. Such is the crowded nature of the lines into Piccadilly, that since 2008 the 0729 arrival from Chester cannot find a path back towards Stockport until 0917.

Oates explains that the focus of the CRP and MCRUA's work is to fill the off-peak seats that are empty. And it is very successful, although it has little influence on councils' travel-to-school policies or the employment demands of central Manchester or Chester.

Passenger numbers are currently growing by around 10% a year, and the line is "dramatically outperforming" the rest of Northern's western sector, says Oates.

Even so, there are still memories of ten years ago, when trains were empty and unreliable, and the line has the reputation of being "the slow train" or "the trundle train". Buttifant points out that the 'all stations' nature of the services is actually a positive - it links the smaller towns on the route with the larger ones, whatever the reason for travel.

While the worst overcrowding is at peak commuting times, there are also problems at weekends, when the many events held close to the line - such as cricket and football at Old Trafford, horse racing at Chester or flower shows at Tatton Park - are often best reached by train. Loadings on Sundays are also very high, when the service is just two-hourly (although it can be strengthened to four-cars when needed).

Put simply, in terms of seats, comfort, speed or frequency, the railway cannot respond to the demand generated by support groups' enthusiasm.

So what is needed? And what can be done? The Mid-Cheshire's needs are simple and

not expensive, but require a broader realisation of the benefits that accrue to local economies from relatively small expenditure.

Says Buttifant: "What we'd like in an ideal world is the current hourly all-stations service supplemented by an hourly limited stop service to speed journeys between the major stations. It would tick all the boxes and give a fast service between Chester and Manchester." (The alternative Arriva Trains Wales service via Warrington is also relatively slow, and well patronised.)

Two other service improvements are in the longer-term vision.

Transport for Greater Manchester (TfGM) has voiced an aspiration to see the Metrolink line extend south, as a tram-train operation, to Hale and Knutsford.

Secondly, re-opening the line through Middlewich would not only give increased services towards Manchester from Northwich, it would also change the strategic nature of the Mid-Cheshire Line.

Knutsford Town Council supports this concept, but TfGM is looking at the Marple line for its first tram-train project, and considers converting the line to Knutsford to be low value-for-money (RAIL 736).

With devolution, electrification and new franchises on the agenda for the next two to three years, these are times of great change (and opportunity) for the region's railways.

Rail North, the body that hopes to specify

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Mid-Cheshire Community Rail Partnership

The Community Rail Partnership was established in 2004, at a time when patronage on the line was poor, partly because the service was unreliable.

The current MCCR partners are Transport for Greater Manchester, Cheshire Association of Local Councils, Cheshire East Council, Cheshire West & Chester Council, Knutsford Town Council, Northwich Town Council, Stockport Council, Trafford Council, the Forestry Commission, Mid-Cheshire Rail Users Association and Northern Rail.

In addition, some 25 bodies - typically Friends groups and parish councils - help the line through volunteer effort. There are also station adopters at each station.

The CRP's vision is: "An effective busy train service, linking Chester and Manchester through its intermediate stations, that encourages people to live in, work in and visit Mid-Cheshire destinations."

Aided by direct contributions from several bodies, the DfT's

Designated Community Rail Development Fund and 'in kind' work, the CRP has an annual budget of around £40,000.



A pair of Northern Class 150s cross the Northwich Viaduct on August 3 2013. CHRIS POOLE.



Northern 150205 stands at Northwich on July 23 2013, with a Manchester Piccadilly-bound train. CHRIS POOLE.



At Altrincham in June 2013, the Mayor of Trafford joins volunteers and Friends of the Mid-Cheshire Line to launch the Greater Manchester Rail Walks booklet. MID-CHESHIRE CRP.

► and manage the next pan-North franchise, has said it may well order brand new trains (RAIL 729, 730), while the electrification of the trans-Pennine route and lines in the North West will cascade urgently needed diesel units for use elsewhere.

Clearly the CRP and MCRUA hope that the line will be among the biggest beneficiaries from these changes, but Oates sounds a note of caution.

Even if electric trains come to the North West when the next of these electrification schemes (Liverpool-Manchester and Wigan) is complete in December 2014, the diesel units that could be released to help bolster lines such as the Mid-Cheshire will be Classes 142 and 150.

But these are the same type that currently serves the Mid-Cheshire - old, noisy and uncomfortable, not at all the kind of trains that will tempt drivers off the A556. (Such a cascade of diesels also assumes that the DfT will fund the extra costs involved, which is far from certain.)

It is therefore certain that should Rail North go the 'new trains route', the CRP and MCRUA will be pushing hard for them to come first to this long-neglected line, which has so much potential to unlock. But it is just as certain that the North's many other support groups will be fighting their corners, too.

Buttiffant expresses concerns about the changes devolution might bring, fearing that some may see the Mid-Cheshire as "a rural line, a community line", and thus not a priority for investment compared with those in suburban Manchester. Her role is thus "as an ambassador, ensuring people know just how valuable the line is".

And she sees the dire shortage of rolling stock as a national issue. "I want to see the Government address this, with investment in new trains, so that our line can have longer and better trains."

Oates explains to RAIL: "The 1746 Knutsford train for Manchester loads with almost 200 passengers, on a three-door-per-side Pacer with 120 seats, and that also makes getting off very hard indeed. The previous train, an hour earlier, loads to around 170."

"The 0717 from Manchester loads about 260 into Knutsford (unless it's a Class 142, in which case many are left behind); 190 alight at Knutsford and 90 board; others board en route, and well over 100 alight at Greenbank station, which is close to several schools."

In May 2013 Northern added three minutes to the schedule, to allow for the impact that these long station stops have on punctuality figures. New stock would be intrinsically faster and have shorter dwell times, speeding up journeys and attracting more custom.

Metrolink line to Manchester Airport) more practicable.

A third single-line section is the 4.2 miles between Mouldsworth and Mickle Trafford, east of Chester.

The implementation of the Northern Hub's Ordsall Chord will help the Piccadilly pathing problem, if Mid-Cheshire's voice is loud enough (again, many will be seeking the same benefits).

Oates cites the "serious money" that the three councils put into the JMP report, to show how much things have changed. But can the report's findings be turned into solutions for the line's problems?

Buttiffant is optimistic: "There is more and more interest across all the councils - borough, town and parish - along the line to see improvements, and I see that continuing to build, not falling away. I would expect the Partnership members to continue working together to find creative solutions to the issues of providing the much-needed improvements."

Perhaps one such solution is the western rail link from Manchester Airport, a project that was well up the order of priorities ten years ago but which is now all but dormant.

It would join the Mid-Cheshire just southwest of Ashley station, and provide an excellent public transport service for both travel and jobs from the line's wealthy towns (and much further beyond) to the airport, as well as a new route into central Manchester.

The proposed HS2 route is close to this link, so it could be part of the wider connectivity HS2 will need.

The coming together of the three bodies who sponsored the JMP report marks a major change for the better for the Mid-Cheshire Line - ten years ago this would not have

"We need more trains now," adds Oates. "And we ask: where is the plan? Where is it coming from? As far as we can see, if there is a plan it is not evident. People are being left behind at stations because our peak trains are so full, and the next train is an hour later."

The Mid-Cheshire Line does not require great sums spending on its infrastructure. But improving punctuality and frequency is hampered not only by the lack of paths into Piccadilly, but also by two single-line sections - at Navigation Road, and then between there and Stockport (Cheadle Village Junction to Sharston Junction, 2.3 miles).

The line at Navigation Road cannot be doubled (unless the Metrolink line is converted to tram-train) - one line of the former double-track is used by Metrolink, and the other by Mid-Cheshire services (both bi-directionally).

But partial doubling of the line towards Stockport would help, as well as making a case for building the long campaigned-for station at Baguley (with an interchange with the

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John Oates, Chairman, Mid-Cheshire Rail Users Association

happened, but today there is much more focus on rail travel.

The sponsors, backed by other groups (in particular the CRP and MCRUA), will need to embrace the report and work with the Local Enterprise Partnerships and many others to secure the improvements this line urgently needs.

Buttiffant concludes that while the Mid-Cheshire's overcrowding can be seen as a negative: "It is also a real positive, because we want to say our trains are really busy with people wanting to use the network."

"If we can capitalise on Northern Hub and the other big rail developments, then we'll end up with the service that we want. It's a very exciting time, and who knows what we'll be saying about our services in five years' time."

Twenty-five years ago there were three trains between Knutsford and Manchester in the peak hours. Now there is one, yet traffic is soaring.

Are the jigsaw pieces ready to fall into place for a revival in the Mid-Cheshire's fortunes? ■

Mid Cheshire Line timetable

(Mondays-Fridays, Summer 2013)
All Chester-bound trains run from Manchester Piccadilly, calling at all 14 intermediate stations to Chester, and generally taking 93 minutes.

Departures from Piccadilly are 0618, then 0717 and every hour until 1617, 1709, and then 1817 and every hour until 2317.

In addition, two services start from Stockport, at 1658 and 1758.

Trains leave Chester at 0600, 0633 (to Stockport), 0658, 0735 (to Stockport), then at 0802 and every hour until 1502 (these xx02 departures also call at Heaton Chapel and Levenshulme), then 1804, 1904, 2002, 2133 and 2248.