



# Newsletter

Dear NCRUG Member, please find herewith our newsletter with the latest news developments and a summary of work of NCRUG over the last 10 months. Included is a short article from committee member Roy Desouza as a follow up to his guided tour of the new Queen Elizabeth line and stands as a testimony, despite the overruns, to what can be achieved in the end with the railways when sufficient investment is made.

The NCRUG 2023 AGM: The AGM was scheduled for Tuesday October 17<sup>th</sup> in the Large Committee Room at the Frodsham Community Centre however our guest presenter has had to withdraw at short notice. Another presenter is being sought and as you have elected to receive your NCRUG newsletter by post, notification will be sent to your home address.

*Mark*

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## **Transport for Wales and Lime St services.**

Following a 2 year long yo-yo of commitments, retractions, renewed commitments and last minute changes, TfW have firmly committed to re-establishing hourly services over the Halton Curve to Liverpool Lime St with the December 2023 timetable change.

A short summary of the journey so far:

The reality is we only enjoyed 12 months of hourly services after the line re-opened for 2-way traffic in May 2019 before the pandemic set in. At that time the reduction to 2 hourly services was cited as a result of reduced pandemic demand although presumably staffing issues also played a part. Coming out of the pandemic normal services were expected to resume but shortages of rolling stock primarily due to the late introduction of the CAF Class 197 units delayed this commitment - initially restoration to the original schedule was expected in December *last* year. December was pushed back to May 2023 at which time a new problem arose with the maintenance of the TfW Class 175 fleet – the mainstay of longer distance services including Manchester Airport via the North Cheshire Line. To what degree these maintenance issues were preventable has been the subject to debate, however the change in maintenance contractors and subsequent turnover of experienced staff have been cited as major factors.

TfW's initial action was to cancel services that weren't seen as essential (in their opinion) and where an alternative of some sort existed - and that led to a complete cancellation of Liverpool Lime St services in April and early May this year. The rolling stock shortages were exacerbated by the delayed introduction of the 'bi-mode' Class 230 units on the Wrexham-Bidston line due a string of technical challenges uncovered in the introduction process, the most recent of which is pollen contamination of the air filter unit, although these teething issues are now largely resolved.

To add insult to injury a bus replacement service was not provided for Lime St services unlike other lines and temporary signage announcing the cancellations was not put up at the stations. The CIS (electronic Customer Information Screens) merely announced 'Cancelled' resulting in some passengers waiting at the stations hour by hour in the expectation the following service would operate. Services to Manchester Airport

were short-formed, mostly 2 car units and the subsequent overcrowding was followed by horrific accounts of wheelchair passengers being left on platforms and long journeys with no operative toilets. All completely unacceptable. The deep dissatisfaction in the affected communities along with copies of the excoriating comments on social media were robustly communicated to TfW by NCRUG at the time.

Continued delays in Class 197 deliveries led to TfW announcing in June this year that hourly services to Lime St would be reinstated 'some time in 2024'. This statement led to a number of media articles, produced with the assistance of NCRUG, and a meeting in Cardiff between a consortium of our local MP's and TfW senior management whereby a firm commitment was made that hourly services will be re-established in December this year.

This commitment, welcome that it is, has come at a cost in that the TfW December timetable plans for Manchester Airport services to run through to Bangor and Liverpool Lime St services to Llandudno have been put into abeyance. A recent request from NCRUG to have TfW services to Lime St re-timed to run 15 minutes earlier and thus connect with West Coast Mainline services at Runcorn was denied on the basis that it involved additional conflict with existing Chester workings.

The current situation is the new Class 197 units are now providing the majority of services to Manchester Airport and Liverpool Lime St as older rolling stock is retired. The services to Manchester Airport are frequently 3 car (or more) and paradoxically over the current phase of industrial action TfW services are almost the only services available in our region on strike days!



The new shelter on Platform 1 at Frodsham, installed as part of the TfW Station Improvement Plan. It represents a vast improvement over the old brick shelter which was periodically patronised by rough sleepers.

## **Beyond Ellesmere Port.**

The SOBC (Strategic Outline Business Case) commissioned by Cheshire West and Chester Council (CWaC) in conjunction with the Liverpool City Region supported the concept of regular services beyond Ellesmere Port using Merseyrail battery fitted Class 777 units. Gerard Rhodes, Strategic Rail Officer with CWaC was quick to point out the future service is no longer being termed 'Ellesmere Port to Helsby' as the likelihood is that Merseyrail will extend the service to beyond Runcorn East or Runcorn (depending on routing beyond Frodsham) and the long term vision for a circular 'Metro' styled service around the Mersey estuary must be maintained. AECOM, the consultancy contracted to provide the SOBC have been conducting detailed post-code analysis of demand and meetings have taken place with the major employers around the Essar refinery site to promote the advantages of a regular rail service.

All this positivity is with the backdrop of the limitations of the current service; Northern Trains have a franchise commitment of 4 trains (2 each way) per day. In recent months this meagre service has suffered a cancellation rate of an astonishing 56%. When challenged over this Northern stated that staff shortages necessitate borrowing staff from services that result in least overall disruption to the core of the network. Or to put it another way; Ellesmere port – Helsby services are being pilfered from because they're seen as the least important services in their network.

The station at the Essar Site has been 'mothballed' following the closure of the overhead footbridge. This represents a better outcome than complete closure would although it's hard to see where the funds will come from for footbridge reinstatement unless significant investment is made by the refinery owners.

Merseyrail expect to be running their new Class 777 units to both Ellesmere Port and Helsby by the end of this year.

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## **North Wales Metro scheme.**

NCRUG attended an interesting briefing and update on the North Wales Metro scheme earlier in Spring.

The North Wales Metro Scheme, conceived well over a decade ago is quite nebulous in nature but within the defined geographical boundary of the North Wales Coast line from Bangor to Crewe and Wrexham to Bidston line. Individual schemes that constitute the North Wales Metro include the Shotton Interchange, Chester upgrades, 4 new stations and various line improvements. Many of these individual schemes are in abeyance or have stalled at the SOBC stage due to funding constraints however the Chester Station upgrade work continues in 2 phases; the initial makeover which involves superficial facelift work and rearrangement of the concourse area followed by the re-development of the land around the station area and station itself including station frontage, surrounding housing, an active travel bridge at Hoole and ultimately an extra through path and platform and raising of the Hoole bridge to accommodate larger freight workings and electrification. This second phase has been approved by CWaC and external funding is being sought with a total cost estimate of approx. £158m.

New stations are earmarked for Woodchurch on the Wirral, Greenfield (Holywell) in North Wales, Saltney and Beeston. Woodchurch came from proposals initially put forward last century and the Greenfield and Beeston schemes would involve redevelopment of existing disused platforms. None of the proposed stations have progressed beyond the SOBC except for Greenfield which is ½ way to the next Business Case stage, however the funding for any further progress has been stopped for the time being.

Interestingly enough TfW re-iterated through the course of the presentation that they are 'operator ambivalent' with respect to which Train operating Company supports the scheme. This, in theory, leaves the door open for an operator such as Merseyrail to get a toehold on the Wrexham-Bidston service with no resistance, or another operator to challenge TfW on services from England on the North Wales Coast line. I suspect the reality will prove somewhat different.

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## The Western Link to Manchester Airport, Castlefield Corridor and HS2.

A Western Link connection to Manchester Airport has been mooted for many years. In theory there is a corridor established for the link which would connect Manchester Airport Station with the Mid Cheshire line near Mobberley although development of Manchester Airport T2 probably no longer leaves an over-ground line viable.

The Western Link could conceivably, along with some interventions on the Mid Cheshire Line, connect Chester and North Wales with Manchester Airport in 40 minutes by train. The scheme has by and large been sidelined with the focus on the development of the Northern Hub and HS2 Phase 2b.

The Northern Hub is effectively 2/3rds complete, the remaining (and probably most significant) component being additional platform capacity at Piccadilly to allow 16 trains per hour to pass through the Castlefield Corridor. This is unlikely to be addressed anytime soon; the last official statement was that the plans (originally costed at £800m in 2010) have been dropped in favour of a £79m upgrade to the platforms at Oxford Rd and a new turnback at Victoria. This has incensed local leaders but the decision should come as no surprise; as far back as 2016 the then Transport Secretary, Chris Grayling stated that digitalisation of signalling was the best solution to increase capacity (digitalisation might bring capacity up to 13 trains per hour – MW). Network Rail have stated the original scheme might be reconsidered at a later time although the ‘costs are significant’.

HS2 Phase 2b (North or Crewe) is subject to Parliamentary Select Committee Scrutiny as an ‘Additional Provision’, basically an amendment to the HS2 hybrid bill is going through parliament. Such Additional Provisions are commonplace where legislation needs tweaking to accommodate additional land purchases, environmental considerations, further consultations and other such things. CWaC Council has submitted 2 substantial submissions to the select committee; firstly on the impact of the Crewe North Rolling Stock Depot – the main stabling and maintenance facility on the Western leg of Phase 2b. The proposed depot would have 27 400m long sidings and occupy an area of some 65ha. The depot itself is not being objected to (it will create 300 jobs) however the environmental impacts must be fully considered. The second substantial submission was based on environmental and community consequences of a portion of the HS2 alignment that will pass close to a school and village.

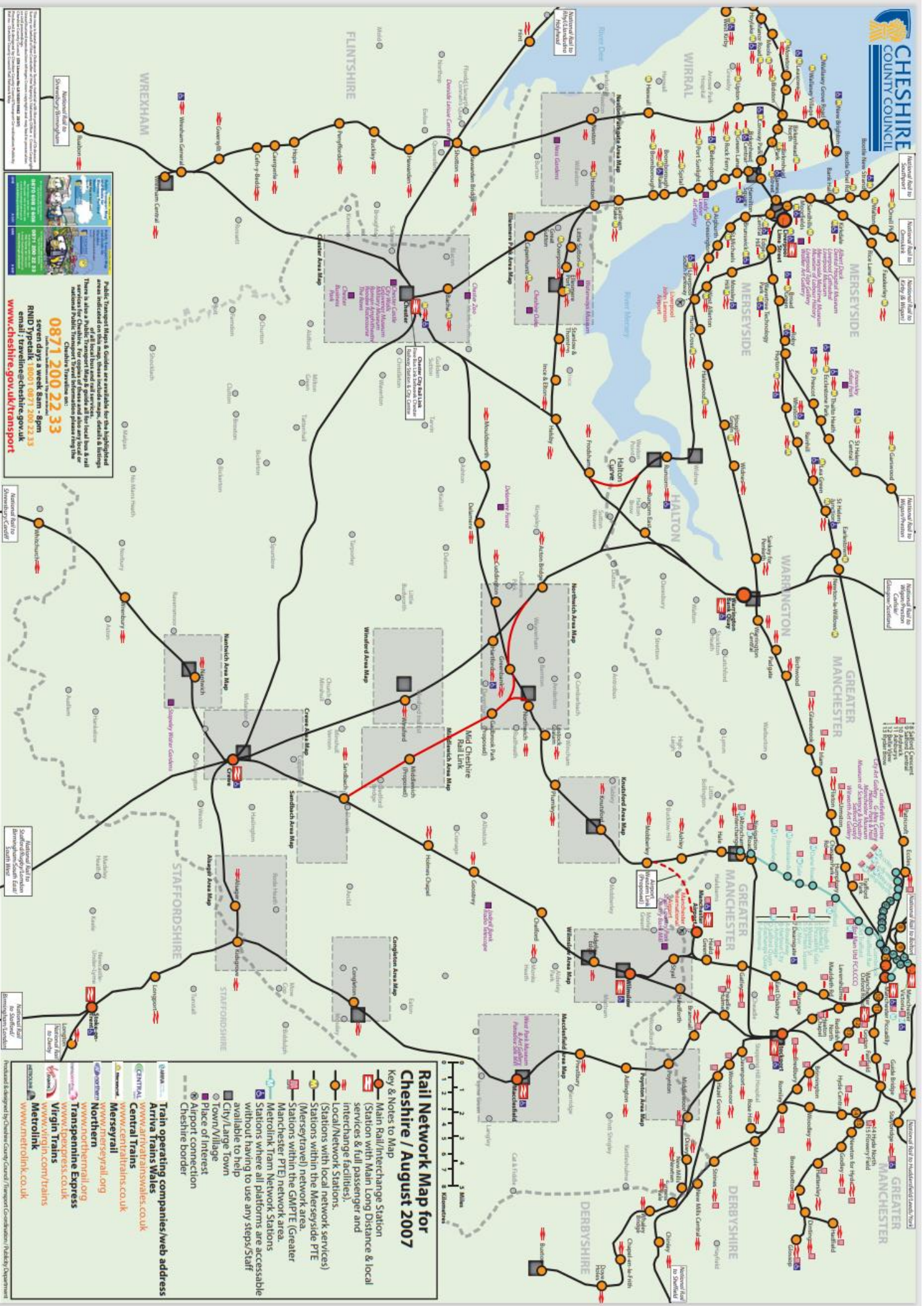
Further on HS2; it was recently decided that a new underground station at Manchester will not now go ahead and Piccadilly will be upgraded instead. This decision, cited on cost (£5-12b extra) has been met with deep disappointment. It’s difficult to see how Piccadilly, given its current physical constraints can in any way be configured to accommodate high speed rail and even if a way through is found, the disruption to regular services while the interventions are made will take years.

Back then to the Western Link: This project, which is being championed by Mid Cheshire Rail Users’ Association (MCRUA) almost disappeared from view as the other 2 big schemes in the North West stole the headlines. No SOBC has been conducted yet and the LEP (Local Enterprise Partnership) who would normally push this forward are having their funding models changed. Notwithstanding this, CWaC Council along with other Local Authorities are supporting a new case for the Link. Manchester Airport, up until a few years ago, were in favour of the Link but the current policy is not known and revenue considerations from car parking could influence the current thinking.

As HS2 gets repeatedly paused and other big schemes are cancelled, having shovel ready off the shelf local schemes like the Western Link would be advantageous.

Below is a Cheshire County Council map dating from 2007 showing the current and proposed county rail lines at that time. Note the Halton Curve (existing line but dormant), the Middlewich Line (likewise) and the dashed red line showing the proposed Western Link from Manchester Airport.

Map courtesy of MCRUA



**Rail Network Map for Cheshire / August 2007**

- Key & Notes to Map**
- Main Rail/Interchange Station (Station with Main Long Distance & local services & full passenger and interchange facilities).
  - Local/Network Stations. (Stations with local network services)
  - Stations within the Merseyside PTE (Merseytravel) network area.
  - Stations within the GM/PTA (Greater Manchester PTE) network area.
  - Metrolink Tram Network Stations (Stations where all platforms are accessible without having to use any steps/staff available to help)
  - City/Large Town
  - Place of Interest
  - Airport connection
  - Cheshire border

**Train operating companies/web address**

- Arriva Trains Wales [www.arrivatrainswales.co.uk](http://www.arrivatrainswales.co.uk)
- Central Trains [www.centraltrains.co.uk](http://www.centraltrains.co.uk)
- Merseyrail [www.merseyrail.org](http://www.merseyrail.org)
- Northern [www.northernrail.org](http://www.northernrail.org)
- Transpennine Express [www.transpennine.co.uk](http://www.transpennine.co.uk)
- Virgin Trains [www.virgintrains.com](http://www.virgintrains.com)
- Metrolink [www.metrolink.co.uk](http://www.metrolink.co.uk)

Public Transport Maps & Guides are available for the highlighted areas indicated on this map. These include maps, details & listings of local bus and rail services, and information on how to use national Public Transport Travel Information phone ring the

**0871 200 22 33**  
seven days a week Sun - 8pm  
RIND Typetalk 18001 0871 200 22 33  
email: [travelinfo@cheshire.gov.uk](mailto:travelinfo@cheshire.gov.uk)  
[www.cheshire.gov.uk/transport](http://www.cheshire.gov.uk/transport)

**WREXHAM**

**FLINTSHIRE**

**WIRRAL**

**MERSEYSIDE**

**HALTON**

**WARRINGTON**

**GREATER MANCHESTER**

**STAFFORDSHIRE**

**DERBYSHIRE**

**GREATER MANCHESTER**

## **Ticket Office closures.**

The current consultation on the proposed closure of many of the ticket offices in England is set to close imminently. There has been much correspondence on the issue and considerable adverse reaction from passenger representative groups, especially those championing the needs of those with reduced mobility or hidden disabilities. It is claimed that network wide only 12 % of tickets are sold through ticket offices now, the remainder from vending machines or on-line. Of course this obscures the detail of who makes up the 12%; mainly those unable to use a machine or without the confidence / capability of an on-line purchase. Add to that the fact ticket offices are not just points for ticket sales but many provide additional help point and customer service functions as well.

Avanti is proposing closure of all ticket offices; closest to us that includes Runcorn and Warrington Bank Quay but also Manchester Piccadilly. Northern Trains are proposing some closures but that does not include Manchester Oxford Rd or Manchester Victoria, so if the proposals do go ahead Piccadilly will close but Oxford Rd and Victoria remain open! TfW have no proposed closures, although the Chester Station makeover will include a multi-service help desk. Manchester Airport ticket office will stay open for the time being although on reduced opening hours.

The matter of ticket office closures got quite an airing at the last NCRUG committee meeting and the point was made that whatever the outcome for the traditional ticket office (that horse bolted many years ago as evidenced by the number of stations that are now actually staffed) there has to be easier access for a greater number of people to journey by train. Whether that means roving customer assistance personnel, help desks, passenger champions or even utilising existing retail outlets at 'unstaffed' stations to provide ticket sales and transport advice (some would welcome the additional revenue), there has to be a way to make travel easier. A personal case in point: Recently while trying to journey from Manchester Oxford Rd to Liverpool South Parkway, the Trans Pennine Express service I had booked, normally an hourly service, was cancelled (this early afternoon service is the favoured TPE cancellation). The following service was announced as running some 20 minutes late due points failure further east. At the last minute I noticed a Northern service sitting in the bay platform on the other side of the station imminently to depart for Liverpool Lime St. Calling at more stops It was a slower service than TPE, however it occurred to me that the Northern service would surely block the path of the faster TPE train and therefore get me to South Parkway quicker in any event. Without at least a limited knowledge of the railways and full understanding of the fare basis of the ticket I had bought what chance would an ordinary member of the public have? No-one at the station had the initiative or capacity to present the alternative and there were many people now waiting on the platform for the delayed, presumably overcrowded TPE service that was running on the tails of the one cancelled from the previous hour.

The complex issue of fares can't be ignored either. Buying fares online through the Train Operating Company's website or app doesn't guarantee the cheapest or most convenient fare. Some 3<sup>rd</sup> party apps, such as the Trainline will automatically split the tickets when there is a saving to be had by doing so, however one has to have a good knowledge of peak and off-peak definitions as well as 'valid on any permitted route', valid on specific carriers only, etc. It's a complete labyrinth that should have been sorted many years ago, and for some it's easier to just deal with a human being at the start of the process.

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## **The Cheshire West On Demand bus service.**

This innovative service, provided by itravel on behalf of CWaC council is a result of a central government grant applied for as part of a national scheme to trial on-demand bus services in various rural localities. The bus connects the communities of Frodsham and Helsby with the hinterland extending to Crowton, Delamere, Ashton Heyes and Manley. Bookable either online or through a dedicated telephone number the bus must be booked at least one hour in advance but provides a service between any nominated bus stop capped at the £2 per journey standard fare.

The service has been publicised locally, including direct support by one of our committee members however NCRUG has been approached by CWaC to identify ways the service can be more widely publicised especially with a connection to the stations with the rail user in mind. Initial uptake of the service has been good although how much of this is short term demand over the school holidays remains to be seen.

For more information on this service or to book a journey: [www.cheshirewestandchester.gov.uk/itravel](http://www.cheshirewestandchester.gov.uk/itravel) or 0330 678 1545

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## **Community Rail Partnership.**

NCRUG is working with the North Cheshire Community Rail Partnership on delivery of 2 key local projects:

Active Travel information boards are to be installed in Frodsham; two in the vicinity of the station and one on Main St. These information boards will include active travel routes to local attractions and services in an intuitive style with journeys marked up in time rather than distance. The project, initiated by Frodsham Town Council is a collaborative effort intended to mark up the highlights of the area such that a rail passenger alighting at Frodsham can immediately plan a journey without having to resort to Google or seek other help.

NCRUG is also working with the CRP on the design and production of flyers publicising the destinations and highlights of Halton Curve services from South Liverpool and Runcorn. Although recent loadings have been good, especially for leisure travel, since the Halton Curve was re-opened to passenger services there has been virtually no marketing of the new destinations one can reach with the direct service and this is especially true for those originating their journeys in Merseyside and Runcorn. Art work, in the style of the railway posters of 100 years ago that advertised destinations such as ‘the Cornish Riviera’ but with our own local themes are also being planned.

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## **The Elizabeth Line control centre (Roy Desouza)**

In a follow-up to a visit to London sampling the new line last year, your correspondent has now had an opportunity to visit the line’s impressive control centre, located near Romford station, in the east London-Essex commuter lands.

Outwardly, it’s a fairly anonymous modern building, with no outward signs that it is anything particular, although the necessary security measures might suggest something special is contained within, which indeed it is.



For those familiar with railway signal boxes, this is definitely not normal, but then again, it isn’t really a signal box either – “Control Centre” is the correct description, as the facility offers oversight on what is otherwise an automatically-signalled and driven railway.

In total, the building contains everything necessary to run this railway, from the operational aspects to the related management and support facilities for the Elizabeth line. This includes signal IT, power supply and maintenance control for both infrastructure and trains, as well as station management and control for staff based at various points out on the railway itself.

The Control function would usually imply overall timetable management and higher-level planning and this is the core function of the centre. Staff based there have the ability to manually intervene when incidents occur, which they certainly do with this being such an intensively worked piece of infrastructure: train and station operations can be guided by the centre to smooth out any difficulties and ensure safety if anything out of the ordinary occurs.



The centrepiece of the building is the main control room, dominated by the large overall electronic line diagram of the core section of route (i.e. not the Network Rail sections) on the wall acting as a handy reference of the line's condition and with rows of controllers' desks facing it, each controller using banks of monitors to do their work. The large display also features CCTV camera output, useful to immediately show if anything is amiss at the central area stations. The current Right Time and PPM figures are prominently displayed – there's nothing like knowing how well your day is going after all.

Other than the main signalling centre function, the centre contains suites of offices for line management and training as well as a Gold Command centre for handling serious incidents.

Thinking about the way the Elizabeth Line functions, it is hard to imagine that it could be controlled in any way other than the way it is. The pressures resulting from high frequency operations, high volumes of passengers, large station buildings and automatic train operation interfacing with conventional driving demands a well-resourced, fully integrated centre, adding the critical bit of extra intelligence to what is already a sophisticated set of technologies to ensure smooth running, good customer service and to manage any eventualities that occur, so they don't quickly build up into major problems.

An obvious point is that this is effectively 'vertical integration' in action and even though operations are run by MTR and the central London infrastructure is run by a part of TfL, this is about as close as it gets to both being part of the same organisation.

The overall operation runs over 117km of route, with critical locations at the points where automatic operation on the core route switches over to conventional signalling and driving on the branches; although even here, the Elizabeth line occupies separate tracks from National Rail services.



Romford itself lies on the former Great Eastern line from Liverpool St out into Essex and East Anglia: the Elizabeth line has taken over the former suburban service to Shenfield, but even without the improvement this represents, Greater Anglia's operations along here are impressive, with not an old train in sight and non-stop services whistling through the station at regular intervals.

One interesting footnote – returning from the visit coincided with school home time and the train filled with large numbers of children heading from the wilds of East London to Stratford and the West End, doubtless to cause havoc there for a while before going home for tea! Such is the change in possibilities brought about by the Elizabeth line's metro style service as well as illustrating the way regular train use is habitual in Greater London. It is a huge contrast with our experience in North West England.



## LATEST NEWS - Northern Rail sale!

Northern Trains have just announced a flash sale of 5 million seats priced from 50p - £2 for sale between September 11<sup>th</sup> – October 20<sup>th</sup>.

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