



Response to Network Rail's Merseyside Route Utilisation Strategy Draft for Consultation

February 2009

Passenger Focus is the independent national rail consumer watchdog. It is an executive non-departmental public body sponsored by the Department for Transport.

Our mission is to get the best deal for Britain's rail passengers. We have two main aims: to influence both long and short term decisions and issues that affect passengers; and to help passengers through advice, advocacy and empowerment.

With a strong emphasis on evidence-based campaigning and research, we ensure that we know what is happening on the ground. We use our knowledge to influence decisions on behalf of rail passengers and we work with the rail industry, other passenger groups and Government to secure journey improvements.

Our vision is to ensure that the rail industry and Government are always

‘putting rail passengers first’

This will be achieved through our mission of

‘getting the best deal for passengers’

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1. Executive summary

Rail travel has seen unprecedented growth in passenger numbers. Performance on the railways is steadily improving and passenger satisfaction is rising. Passenger Focus expects the programme of Route Utilisation Strategies (RUSs) across the rail network to build on this; to allow for continued passenger growth, to further improve performance and to improve passenger satisfaction.

The RUS objective is defined as “*the effective and efficient use and development of the capacity available, consistent with funding that is, or is reasonably likely to become, available during the period of the RUS and with the licence holder’s performance of the duty.*”¹

Passenger Focus has a wealth of research material regarding what passengers want, and adds to this as the RUS programme rolls out across the network. This evidence informs our input to specific RUS consultations at route level. Drivers of passenger satisfaction change over time, but punctuality and reliability have been the main drivers of passenger satisfaction since the National Passenger Survey (NPS) began in 1999. Issues such as facilities for car parking, frequency of train services and connections with other train services are also important to passengers. Passenger Focus expects RUSs to address the link between passenger satisfaction and the development of capacity.

Our submission is based on comprehensive research with 2119² passengers, and includes their views on the options proposed for inclusion in the final RUS, as well as on wider rail issues. We also conducted specific research for this RUS on two routes within the RUS area. Our researchers focussed on passengers using the Northern Line between Liverpool and Southport, and the section of the City Line between Bidston and Liverpool. We have also been mindful of the knowledge and experience of local rail user groups who use services in Merseyside regularly and have included their views where appropriate.

It is clear from rising passenger demand that the Merseyside rail network is performing with a considerable degree of success. Passengers are generally happy - 90% of Merseyrail’s passengers said they were, on the whole, satisfied with the service they receive.³ There are, however, some areas that clearly need improvement. For example, passengers tell us they are unhappy with the upkeep, repair and overall environment offered by stations. Ease of getting a parking space at some stations is also a problem for many passengers. It is therefore pleasing that this RUS seeks to tackle these issues.

The Merseyside Route Utilisation Strategy Draft for Consultation sets out a number of actions intended to ensure that the railway in this region continues to cater for increasing passenger demand, whilst ensuring that service levels remain good. Passengers’ value

¹ ORR Guidelines on Route Utilisation Strategies, June 2005

² Specific research undertaken for this RUS with 960 passengers on the Northern Line Southport branch and 633 passengers on the Wirral Line between Bidston – Liverpool plus National Passenger Survey Autumn 2008 research with 526 Merseyrail passengers.

³ National Passenger Survey, Autumn 2008, Passenger Focus.

frequent, reliable and punctual services which offer sufficient room for them to get a seat. On the whole, the provisions within this RUS are therefore good news for passengers, who will be reassured to know that considerations are being made now to ensure that their rail network continues to meet their demands in the future whilst maintaining – or bettering – the standard of service they have already come to expect.

The RUS proposes many sensible options to make “*efficient use and development of the capacity available*” which we support. We welcome and acknowledge the attempts made in the draft RUS to tackle the problems passengers face when using Liverpool Central station, which, given the impact this station has on the delivery of the whole network, we agree is one of the most important issues for the Merseyside RUS to address.

Passenger Focus takes the view that the passenger viewpoint should be at the heart of the decision-making process when decisions about the railway are made. This would ensure that train services meet passenger expectations, and avoids the scenario that the RUS provides an operational solution to improve capacity and performance which creates changes in service patterns that do not meet the needs of passengers.

It is pleasing that the RUS acknowledges that rail is only one part of a passenger’s overall journey, and that growth in numbers of passengers means the number of people driving to the station will also steadily increase. Car parking at the station is therefore an important issue and passengers will be reassured that this RUS also embraces ‘getting to the train’. Passenger Focus has therefore specifically focussed on this aspect in its research with passengers. We also conducted further research with non-rail users to determine if lack of car parking is a barrier to rail travel and we expect the results to inform planning, development and inclusion of any partnership funding.

Passengers will want to know how the proposals identified in the draft RUS will be prioritised, delivered and funded. If the RUS is to avoid becoming just another planning document that sits on the shelf it needs to provide a mechanism for taking forward its longer term requirements and it must include an estimate of costings, when the work might be done, and possible sources of funding.

2. Recommendations

Our key recommendations for inclusion in the final RUS reflect the aspirations of passengers in the Merseyside region:

- options that ensure passengers’ ability to get a seat is delivered well into the future
- options that deliver improved service frequency to meet passengers’ needs, whilst ensuring that existing performance levels are met or bettered
- a commitment to ensure that rolling stock on the network continues to meet passengers needs and aspirations
- a commitment to consider how stations and interchange facilities are developed to meet present and future demand

- options to improve car parking at stations where proposed capacity improvements will lead to an increase in passenger numbers.

3. Introduction

Passenger Focus welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Merseyside RUS Draft for Consultation. Passenger Focus supports the broad objectives behind the RUS process and welcomes the consultative approach adopted by Network Rail. Passenger Focus believes that the RUS is a vital component which will inform the development and delivery of strategies key to Merseyside, such as Regional Spatial Strategies and Local Transport Plans.

We understand there are practicalities around funding some of the proposed RUS options. However, we make no apologies for having an aspirational vision of the future of the rail network in Merseyside.

Around 1.2 billion passenger journeys were made on the UK rail network in 2007–08. This was a 7.1% increase on 2006–07 compared to a 6.3% increase between 2005–06 and 2006–07⁴. Demand forecasts for the Merseyside area predict that passenger numbers will grow by about 40% by 2020⁵.

Passenger Focus is conscious of the difficulties in accurately forecasting demand and that existing industry models have been criticised for not ‘keeping pace’ with actual growth rates experienced.

For example, the North West Route Utilisation Strategy (RUS) consultation document outlined two growth forecasts – the ‘reference’ and ‘alternative’ scenarios, which were based on central Government data sources and the Northern Way growth strategy respectively. The reference scenario predicted 6 percent total growth over the period 2007 – 2017 compared to the alternative scenario’s 14 percent. It was recognised that both scenarios significantly under-predicted actual experience, which equated to approximately 10 percent over the single year 2005/06. A new methodology was later devised which predicted 44 percent growth over the RUS period.

Concerns over the accuracy and sophistication of forecasting were also raised by the House of Commons Transport Select Committee in its report, ‘Delivering a sustainable railway: a 30-year strategy for the railways.’ Passengers will therefore want to be reassured that the industry is basing its strategy and decisions on robust forecasting and Passenger Focus would ask that Network Rail does all it can to satisfy itself that the concerns raised by the Transport Committee have been addressed.

An aspirational approach is required to manage current and predicted demand for rail travel and to meet the stated transport objectives to promote economic growth, social inclusion, health and protection of our environment through a safe, integrated, effective and efficient transport system.

Our response to this consultation is informed by liaison with stakeholders and user groups, our postbag, existing research, and bespoke research commissioned by Passenger Focus.

⁴ National Rail Trends Year Book 2007-8

⁵ Merseyside Route Utilisation Strategy Draft for Consultation, 2008

As an evidence-based organisation, the Passenger Focus response to the consultation incorporates research with 2119⁶ passengers, including findings obtained from new passenger research conducted on rail services in Merseyside.

Passenger Focus research with passengers in the North West shows passengers' top six priorities for improvements to rail services are⁷:

1. value for money
2. ability to get a seat
3. a timetable that delivers services that are convenient for passengers needs
4. train service performance
5. good connectivity with other rail services
6. good quality rolling stock which offers high passenger comfort.

Passenger Focus recognises that value for money is not solely a concern for passengers in the Merseyside region - nationally, value for money is passengers' top priority for improvement. In April 2008 the Secretary of State for Transport asked Passenger Focus to carry out a fares and ticketing study in the light of concern about continuing low passenger satisfaction with value for money for the price of rail tickets, as measured by the National Passenger Survey. This work was released in February 2009.

4. Scope: Merseyside Geography

The Merseyside RUS covers the Merseyside 'journey to work' area plus adjacent North West Urban, North West Rural and North Wales and borders routes where service patterns interface. The RUS also develops further a number of the cross boundary issues that were identified and partly analysed by the Wales RUS and the Lancashire and Cumbria RUS, including analysis of the Burscough curves, the potential electrification of the Wrexham – Bidston line and the possible reintroduction of passenger services on the Halton Curve. Our response therefore seeks to comment on these issues.

The Merseyside RUS also has linkages to the North West RUS and Yorkshire and Humber RUS and our response draws on our previous responses to these respective RUSs. This RUS also considers outputs of the Freight RUS, and there will no doubt be issues from the Network RUS and West Coast Mainline RUS which will impact on Merseyside.

It is our view that a holistic approach is required when deciding future investment on the rail network, and we suggest that Network Rail Stakeholder Management Groups remain mindful of options that overlap two or more RUS areas and ensure that the whole picture is taken into account when determining gaps, options and strategies for RUSs.

⁶ Specific research undertaken for this RUS with 960 passengers on the Northern Line Southport branch and 633 passengers on the Wirral Line between Bidston – Liverpool plus National Passenger Survey Autumn 2008 research with 526 Merseyrail passengers.

⁷ Passengers' priorities for improvements in rail services, 2007, MVA Consultancy for Passenger Focus.

Our response reflects comments we previously made on routes that were covered in the Wales RUS, Lancashire and Cumbria RUS and North West RUS where there is a linkage between these and Merseyside.

5. General comments

In addition to the gaps and options set out in the RUS, Passenger Focus would like to make further specific comment about the following key issues.

5.1 Providing a seven day railway (Engineering access)

It is understandable that, any RUS or development of the railway is likely to incur service disruption for passengers whilst engineering work is undertaken. Passenger Focus takes the view that passengers' needs must be considered when such work is planned and executed.

Travel patterns have changed over the past decade and there is now much more passenger demand for later evening services during the week and more frequent services at weekends and on Sundays. The Government's White Paper *Delivering a Sustainable Railway* (July 2007) talks about the need for Network Rail to increase the availability of the network to allow a near seven day operation. Furthermore, research with passengers shows that demand for a rail service on Sundays is increasing⁸.

Passenger Focus research shows that passengers in the North West rank 'Sufficient train services at times I use the train' as their third priority for improvement. Nationally, this is ranked as passengers' second priority for improvement⁹.

The frequency of services on the Merseyside network already meets passengers' needs and expectations quite well - 89% of Merseyrail's passengers are satisfied with the frequency of train services¹⁰. It is therefore important to passengers that the Merseyside network continues to deliver a robust service for passengers at the times they need it throughout the life of the RUS. This is particularly important given that the draft RUS mentions a number of engineering improvements and enhancements that will be required. It is clear that in order to deliver these projects passenger services will potentially be disrupted.

Passengers' immediate reaction to the prospect of service disruption is that any disruption is inconvenient – passengers expect that works should be completed with minimum disruption and on time.¹¹

However, passengers tell us that the least inconvenient options for engineering works are smaller disruptions that result in trains starting late or finishing early or taking a break in the

⁸ Bespoke research undertaken to inform Passenger Focus response to the Department for Transport proposals for the Cross Country franchise, August 2006

⁹ Passengers' priorities for improvements in rail services, 2007, MVA Consultancy for Passenger Focus

¹⁰ National Passenger Survey Autumn 2008, Passenger Focus.

¹¹ Passengers' attitudes towards engineering works – Rail Passengers Council August 2003

middle of the day¹¹. Passengers are more likely to accept their services being disrupted if they understand the reasons for the work, the benefits it will bring and if they believe the works are being planned efficiently and in a way that reduces the overall timescale of the disruption. Passengers generally prefer works to be completed as quickly as possible but failing this, they are happier if they can make an informed choice about their travel plans. Therefore, information about alternative arrangements, length of disruption and increased journey time should be made available well in advance (a month or more) of any works taking place.

5.2 Freight capability

From a passenger perspective, Passenger Focus has no specific view on this area of the RUS and therefore makes no comment. However, we would welcome assurances from Network Rail that passenger services are not subjected to delays because the current or proposed operating arrangements for freight, cause operational difficulties for Network Rail and Train Operating Companies.

Passenger Focus would welcome reassurances that alterations to freight services will not have a detrimental effect on passenger services.

5.3 Rolling stock

The current electric Class 507 and 508 units in operation on the Merseyside network offer a reasonable standard of passenger comfort which, given that most passengers mainly make short distance journeys in the area¹², appear to be sufficient. Passenger Focus research shows that 83% of Merseyrail's passengers are satisfied with the general upkeep and repair of the trains that they use and 80% are satisfied with the comfort that they offer.¹³

Passengers in Merseyside are considerably happier with the quality of rolling stock than those in comparable networks in other parts of the country. National Passenger Survey results for London Overground, which is broadly similar in terms of type of rolling stock used and nature of journey, show that 48% of passengers are satisfied with upkeep and repair of trains and 47% are satisfied with the comfort of the rolling stock¹¹.

The existing Merseyrail electric rolling stock will be at the end of its useful life by 2014 and will need to be replaced.¹⁴ This creates the potential for a new type of rolling stock to be brought onto the Merseyside network. Given the levels of service and comfort passengers in the area are already accustomed to, any new rolling stock should seek to match or better the levels of passenger comfort already provided by the current Class 507 and 508 units.

We know from recent research¹⁵ that passengers do not like many of the older rolling stock types currently in operation across the national rail network and Passenger Focus has long

¹² Merseyside Route Utilisation Strategy Draft for Consultation, Network Rail 2008

¹³ National Passenger Survey, Autumn 2008, Passenger Focus

¹⁴ Merseyside Route Utilisation Strategy Draft for Consultation, Network Rail 2008

¹⁵ Specific research with passengers undertaken to inform the Lancashire and Cumbria RUS.

argued that there is a need for some standardisation of rolling stock design. We also believe it is vital for passengers to be involved in the design of new trains at the earliest opportunity as initial input at the mock-up stage is far too late and retrofitting is costly and sometimes impossible. Failure to consult at the right level at the right time can condemn a generation of passengers to travelling in trains that are unsuitable or less suitable than those they might otherwise have had. We therefore recommend that Passenger Focus should be consulted in the design of any new rolling stock.

Passenger Focus has experience in researching what passengers expect and need from new trains and has advised on various rolling stock procurement programmes including Thameslink, where specific research was undertaken to gain an understanding of passengers' views on the internal design and passenger facilities, as shown in the indicative design of new trains for the Thameslink routes from 2015¹⁶.

The choice and specification of Merseyside's rolling stock will be key to the network's ability to continue delivering a service that meets passengers' needs. Rolling stock technology should be explored as a solution to resolving some of the network's key, long standing passenger issues. For example, whether usage of a hybrid joint electric and diesel train could allow through services to operate between Wrexham–Bidston–Liverpool.

5.4 Integrated transport

Passenger Focus has long maintained that few passengers' journeys start or finish with the train; reaching the station and completing one's journey at the destination end involves another mode of transport, or walking. Passengers will therefore be reassured that the RUS specifically looks at how passengers get to the train. Section 6.4 looks at this in more detail.

Our specific research for this RUS with 935 passengers in Merseyside on the Northern Line shows that, whilst the majority (66%) of passengers walk to the station, bus is the next most popular way of getting to the station.

Passenger Focus takes the view that transport integration is not just about physical integration. The principle of ensuring transport modes operate in conjunction with one another is important but is just one vital element of the bigger transport picture. Other forms of integration include ensuring that transport policy is better linked with wider Government objectives for economic prosperity, environmental protection, health and social inclusion.

The 2007 White Paper 'Delivering a sustainable railway' acknowledges the importance of improving links to and from the station and promotes the idea of Station Travel Plans. Passenger Focus supports the concept of Station Travel Plans and is working with the industry on a pilot programme of sites.

¹⁶ Thameslink Rolling Stock Qualitative Research commissioned by Passenger Focus, in partnership with the Department for Transport and London TravelWatch, April 2008

Nationally, just 73% of passengers are satisfied with how the railway connects with other forms of public transport at stations - this drops to just 66% for Merseyrail's passengers¹⁷. There is clearly more work to be done before the level of integration between the railway and other forms of transport fully meets passengers' expectations and Passenger Focus takes the view that there must be better integration between stations and other forms of transport such as bus, car, taxi and cycles.

In relation to bus provision, as far as possible there should be improved co-ordination between bus and rail timetables and joined up thinking should be encouraged between all operators using a station.

Cycle provisions need to be provided at stations and on the approaches to stations and the industry should work closely with Local Authorities to ensure that the best possible provisions are in place for pedestrians.

6. Analysis of gaps and options

6.1. Gap One: Capacity at stations

The facilities and standards at stations are important to passengers, particularly in the North West of England where, out of 30 factors for improvement, passengers rated it as their fifteenth most important priority¹⁸. As passenger usage of the rail network increases, it is likely that passengers' expectations of stations will also rise.

Consumers today are already seeing ever increasing standards in other aspects of their daily lives – more modern high street facilities, shopping centres, airports and motorway services which all offer modern and accessible fixtures, fittings and facilities.

Passengers therefore rightly expect – and deserve - a similar experience when they travel by rail.

Passenger Focus expects stations to be welcoming and convenient, providing a suitable and pleasant gateway to the railway and to the town/place of destination. Stations have for too long been the Cinderella of the network, with vital refurbishment funding held back during lean years when almost all available funding was spent on maintaining train services. There is still a backlog of neglect to rectify, to bring stations' fabric and facilities up to passengers' expectations and to make them more accessible.

Passengers' very basic needs include being able to get to and from the station, the need to feel safe, with adequate light and shelter, and information. Once these have been satisfied, passengers' attention turns to what might be termed 'comfort' factors which make the station more pleasant to use, including, at larger stations aspirational cosmetic or luxury elements

¹⁷ National Passenger Survey, Autumn 2008, Passenger Focus, showing that 66% of Merseyrail's passengers are satisfied with connections with other forms of public transport at stations.

¹⁸ Passengers' priorities for improvements in rail services, 2007, MVA Consultancy for Passenger Focus.

which make the station more attractive to people (such as plasma screens, wireless internet and healthy food options)¹⁹.

Nationally, passengers' expectations of stations are generally met quite well, with passengers feeling that they are receiving a better service than they reasonably expect from stations. However, in the North West, passengers' expectations of stations are only just being met²⁰.

The National Passenger Survey for Autumn 2008 measures passengers' satisfaction with many different aspects of facilities and services at stations as well as a rating for overall station environment. The scores for Merseyrail demonstrate poor levels of passenger satisfaction with stations. Just 63% of Merseyrail's passengers said they were satisfied with the upkeep and repair of stations. 65% said they were satisfied with the overall environment of the stations they use on Merseyrail's network.

Some of the underground stations on the Merseyrail network in central Liverpool are already overcrowded at certain times of the day and, given the predicted growth levels expected for the network, this is likely to get worse.²¹

Passenger Focus is therefore pleased to see that capacity at stations is specifically addressed by this RUS. The proposals set out by the RUS will go some way to ensuring that the facilities and offered by stations in the region better meet passenger demand and expectations.

Many stations on the Merseyside network have accessibility issues (such as steps to some or all of the platforms or a large step between the platform and train, or a small lift that doesn't accommodate a large wheelchair or double buggy) that need to be tackled to increase access to the network. We hope that any station development plans that come as a result of the strategy take into account the needs of passengers with accessibility needs. In 2007, Passenger Focus undertook reviews of the accessibility of the stations at Crewe and Chester. These found that there are many measures that could be undertaken in all aspects of the stations that would improve the ability of disabled users to access rail services more effectively.

By addressing the needs of those least able to access the station, all rail passengers, disabled or otherwise, would benefit. For example, those passengers who are carrying bulky luggage, or are accompanied by small children, would be assisted by improvements to facilities such as station lifts, lighting and improved waiting facilities, whilst passengers unfamiliar with the station layout would benefit from an improved signing strategy.

¹⁹ Steer Davies Gleave for Rail Passengers Council – What passengers want from stations, June 2005.

²⁰ Passengers' priorities for improvements in rail services, 2007, MVA Consultancy for Passenger Focus.

²¹ Merseyside Route Utilisation Strategy Draft for Consultation, Network Rail 2008.

Network Rail has developed its National Stations Improvement Programme as a means to improve the standard of stations and Passenger Focus welcomes any moves to make stations more accessible and of a higher quality for passengers. A set of fact sheets for station access requirements is available from Passenger Focus on request.

6.1.1 Liverpool Central

Passenger Focus welcomes the commitment by the RUS to increase capacity at Liverpool Central station. As only 65% of Merseyrail's passengers are satisfied with the station environment offered by many of Merseyrail's stations²², Passenger Focus takes the view that action to improve the station should:

- enhance the station environment and facilities
- ensure that the station meets current and future demand
- be taken sooner rather than later.

Short term measures such as the deployment of staff to manage crowd control are just that, and should not be assumed to be suitable in the longer term. It is pleasing that the RUS recognises this.

The RUS outlines a number of short to medium term solutions that appear to provide a 'quick fix' to the problems that passengers are facing at this station. Actions such as removal of pipes and cladding around pillars, or changing the roof to remove them completely, will clearly provide some additional capacity but we are doubtful that they will actually enhance the overall station environment to bring the station up to meet the already high standards passengers expect and deserve – expectations that are likely to increase further in future.

Indeed, it is unlikely that the disruption and inconvenience that these short term enhancements causes passengers while work is carried out will be popular with passengers. Passengers are more tolerant of planned engineering works that will deliver long-term improvements and, following disruption to services, expect to feel the benefit of the improvements.²³

Passenger Focus therefore welcomes the commitment to address the problems passengers face when using Liverpool Central but feel that passengers are more likely to react positively if they can see a step change in the quality of the service provided once the works are complete.

Ultimately, within the next 12 years the station will need to be completely redeveloped in order to meet future demand - either by way of widening the bore of the existing tunnel to accommodate an additional platform, or by building a new station on an alternative site²⁴. Therefore, we see little point in investing in short – medium term solutions that will simply patch up a station that is already not fit for purpose.

²² National Passenger Survey, Autumn 2008, Passenger Focus

²³ Passengers Attitudes toward engineering works, Rail Passengers Council, August 2003.

²⁴ Merseyside Route Utilisation Strategy Draft for Consultation, Network Rail 2008

Passenger Focus is of the view that the issue of how to deal with Liverpool Central should not simply be one of financial efficiency but one of passenger benefit. Passengers deserve a solution that will meet their needs for the next 50 years growth and beyond. It is therefore important that passengers are involved in the design, specification and location of any new or largely redeveloped station to ensure that their needs are met.

The RUS questions whether investment in infrastructure at Moorfields in conjunction with temporary measures to divert passengers from Liverpool Central, would allow for a less disruptive transitional period while major enhancements at Liverpool Central are completed. We specifically comment on the management of service disruption during times of engineering work in Section 5.1.

Ultimately, in relation to the provision of services during engineering works passengers prefer a solution that allows them to stay on the train once they have boarded rather than having to take rail replacement buses²². However, whilst Moorfields station *may* be a suitable alternative for many passengers²⁵, during any period of closure at Liverpool Central, provisions must be made for those passengers that find the station unsuitable for their needs.

The long term solution to solving the problems that passengers face at Liverpool Central must be based on passenger requirements rather than operational convenience.

Passenger Focus welcomes the RUS's recommendation of an immediate package of investment and takes the view that the major long-term investment for the station redevelopment should be brought forward and executed as soon as is reasonably possible.

6.1.2 Moorfields

The RUS makes no recommendation for action at Moorfields station and Passenger Focus therefore makes no specific comment.

However, the RUS must be mindful of the potential impact that the options and recommendations made for Liverpool Central could have on passengers who use Moorfields station, for example if passenger numbers at Moorfields increase as a result of the temporary closure of Liverpool Central.

Any development required at Moorfields to accommodate passengers from Liverpool Central must ensure that passengers' needs continue to be met during any such time that the station is used as an alternative to Liverpool Central. It is therefore important that passengers continue to be consulted at each stage when any such arrangements are made.

6.1.3 James Street

²⁵ Passenger Focus does not hold any data relating to passenger preferences between Moorfields or Liverpool Central and is therefore not in a position to make a specific recommendation in this respect.

The concourse and ticket barrier areas at James Street are likely to be over capacity within the next few years²⁶.

Passenger Focus takes the view that ticket barriers are an effective way of capturing much needed lost revenue and is supportive of actions to prevent ticketless travel – so long as they do not impact on the quality of passengers' journeys. Ticket barriers should not cause a pinch point for crowding and this matter really must be addressed. Passenger Focus therefore welcomes the RUS's commitment to better understand the likely capacity problems that passengers using this station may face in future and we look forward to more detail in future.

Additionally, the RUS must be mindful of the potential impact that the options and recommendations made for Liverpool Central could have on passengers who use James Street station and whether the potential temporary closure of Liverpool Central could cause an increase in the number of passengers using James Street. It is therefore important that passengers continue to be consulted at each stage when any such arrangements are made.

6.2. Gap Two: Capacity, trains and infrastructure

At present, capacity on the Merseyrail network is not a significant problem – with the exception of the Southport and Hunts Cross branches during the evening peak, there are generally more seats available than passengers on almost all parts of the network. However, it is anticipated that within the next 10 – 12 years a number of routes into and out of Liverpool will be severely overcrowded at peak times²⁷.

Passengers place great importance on their ability to get a seat – particularly in the North West, where passengers rank it as their second priority for improvement, the first priority being value for money²⁸. Passenger perception of whether their train ticket offers excellent value for money is affected by many factors, for example, whether the service ran to time or whether they were able to get a seat or had to stand during their journey.

At present, Merseyrail's passengers are generally quite satisfied with the amount of space they have to sit or stand on the train. National Passenger Survey results show that 72% of Merseyrail's passengers surveyed were satisfied with this aspect of their journey, against a figure of 64% of passengers satisfied nationally.²⁹ It is therefore important that the rail network in Merseyside continues to meet passenger expectations now and in future if passengers are to remain satisfied with their rail services.

Passenger Focus is therefore pleased that this RUS addresses the short, medium and long term capacity problems that are anticipated on the Merseyside network. We need to ensure that the network is developed to meet existing and future passenger demand.

²⁶ Merseyside Route Utilisation Strategy Draft for Consultation, Network Rail 2008.

²⁷ Merseyside Route Utilisation Strategy Draft for Consultation, Network Rail 2008.

²⁸ Passengers' priorities for improvements in rail services, 2007, MVA Consultancy for Passenger Focus.

²⁹ National Passenger Survey, Autumn 2008, Passenger Focus.

6.2.1 Peak train capacity short and medium term

The RUS sets out a range of capacity enhancements deliverable by strengthening existing services with additional carriages. The RUS recognises that the alternative option of increasing the frequency of peak services is, in the short and medium term, an unnecessary performance risk.

Passengers will be pleased to hear that plans are being made to continue strengthening services without putting performance at risk. The rail industry has traditionally been judged in terms of the reliability and punctuality of train services and Passenger Focus research shows that performance (i.e. punctuality and reliability) is one of the key issues for passengers.

Multivariate analysis on National Passenger Survey satisfaction scores shows that punctuality is the main driver of overall satisfaction. As actual performance improves, satisfaction scores improve across a range of other criteria. Likewise when punctuality decreases, satisfaction is likely to decrease overall. In other words punctuality is the key determinant of overall satisfaction.

Our research 'Passengers priorities for improvements in rail services' found that punctuality was the third highest priority for improvement nationally – out of 30 different station and train based criteria (top were value for money and frequency of service). In the North West, performance of services is passengers' fourth priority for improvement. Passenger Focus comments on the provisions in the RUS for punctuality and performance in more detail in Section 6.5.

Passenger Focus therefore welcomes the short and medium term provisions within the RUS to ensure that services continue to meet passenger demand without putting performance at risk.

6.2.2 Peak train capacity long term

Northern Line

Passenger Focus supports any attempts to ensure that services continue to meet passenger demand well into the future. However, given our comments under Section 6.2.1 and the significant impact that poor performance of services has on passengers, we view with caution any commitments which might put performance of services at risk. Service levels on the Merseyrail network are currently good with the company achieving 90.3% of trains arriving on time in Quarter 4 2007-8³⁰ and, in a climate where rail fares are increasing year on year, passengers – who already struggle to see value for money in the railway³¹ - will find it hard to accept a degradation of service in future. The industry must therefore find ways to continue meeting passenger demand without putting performance at risk.

³⁰ National Rail Trends 2007 – 2008 Yearbook, Office of Rail Regulation.

³¹ Passengers' priorities for improvements in rail services, 2007, MVA Consultancy for Passenger Focus.

The RUS highlights the infrastructure work required to allow sufficient extra services to be run on the Northern Line. This includes development required at Liverpool Central either by way of an additional platform or a new station. Clearly this adds further weight to the case for a complete redevelopment of this station. Our comments under Section 6.1.1 deal with this in more detail.

The RUS implies that within 20 – 25 years time, the constraints in delivering sufficient capacity, and the cost of the infrastructure work required to do so, will be sufficiently high so as to warrant exploring alternatives to the current service arrangements, such as routing services into Liverpool Lime Street via the North Mersey Branch, or investment in an alternative mode of transport. Clearly at this stage and without further detail, it is not possible to fully appreciate what this might mean for passengers. Passenger Focus is therefore not able to comment in detail but points out that consideration must be given to passengers' needs, aspirations and views when such decisions about future services are made.

Passenger Focus therefore looks forward to hearing more in future about how the industry proposes to tackle these future problems, well in advance, so that it can ensure that passengers' needs and views are sufficiently represented.

Wirral Line

The Wirral Line is not expected to face the same capacity challenge as the Northern Line³² and the RUS sets out sensible options to increase capacity through the provision of additional and longer trains.

Passenger Focus therefore reiterates its previous comments, in that enhancements to consistently deliver additional capacity over the life of the RUS without putting performance at risk are welcome news for passengers.

The RUS points out that, by the end of the 30 year RUS period, the frequency of trains running on the Wirral Line will need to be 18 trains per hour in order to meet demand. Given that this is the maximum trains that can be run per hour without putting performance at risk, consideration must soon be given to how the network will meet demand beyond the life of the RUS and whether infrastructure enhancements could be made within the RUS period to ensure that the line continues to deliver for passengers well into the future.

6.3. Gap Three: Connectivity and Journey Time

The RUS consultation document highlights the areas where rail links are weak or non-existent; for example, there are currently no direct rail services between North Wales and the majority of Merseyside, particularly Liverpool. The RUS identifies that the frequency of

³² Merseyside Route Utilisation Strategy Draft for Consultation, Network Rail 2008.

services between Chester and Liverpool is viewed as inappropriate given the size of both conurbations, as is the frequency of inter-peak services between Liverpool and St Helens / Wigan.

The RUS identifies a number of routes from Liverpool where, currently, it is not possible to travel without the need to change trains. Nationally, passengers tell us that having good connections with other train services is their fifteenth priority for improvement. However, in the North West this is their fifth priority for improvement - clearly demonstrating the need to improve connectivity where possible if passengers in the North West are ever to be provided with a service that meets their needs and aspirations.

It is therefore pleasing that the RUS seeks to tackle a number of routes where current rail services are inadequate. However, Passenger Focus takes the view that, where possible, skip stopping should be avoided as it reduces connectivity and confuses passengers.

Of the total North West rail market, more than a quarter of trips, 17.4 million annually, are to/from destinations outside the region. However, of all the regions in the North West, Merseyside has the most internal rail journeys (23.2 million trips per annum). Merseyside is also the North West's second significant location with 2.6 million passenger journeys either originating or terminating in the region. From Merseyside the top four most popular destinations are London, Yorkshire and Humber, West Midlands and Wales³³.

Passenger Focus believes it essential that inter-regional rail links are strengthened where they are deemed to be poor and established where they are currently missing to enable people to travel more easily between areas.

6.3.1 Connectivity between Chester and Liverpool

Passenger Focus supports the increase in services between Chester and Liverpool. This is also supported by the North Cheshire Rail User Group (NCRUG) who aspire to see services increased from two to four trains per hour.

The RUS suggests that these additional two services per hour would not impact on train service performance levels. However, it also suggests that, should there be a performance risk, this could be mitigated by replacing the current half hourly inter-peak Ellesmere Port – Chester services with a quarter hourly Ellesmere Port – Hooton shuttle service with a five minute connection time with the quarter hourly Chester – Liverpool service. This proposal is not recommended by the RUS at this time but clearly would, if implemented, impact on those passengers who travel between Ellesmere Port and Chester by forcing them to change trains in order to complete their journey.

Passenger Focus research on the Wirral Line also shows that not having to change trains is passengers' eighth priority³⁴. However, the Chester and Ellesmere Port branch is the worst

³³ North West Regional Planning Assessment for the Railway, October 2006.

³⁴ Specific research undertaken for this RUS with 633 passengers on the Wirral Line between Bidston – Liverpool

performing line on the Merseyrail network³⁵ and passengers on this line also told us that the performance of services is their top priority³⁵.

There will always be winners and losers when changes to services are made and, ultimately Passenger Focus takes the view that enhancements to the network should benefit the majority of passengers. Given the importance of good train service performance, when service frequencies are increased, this should be protected as much as possible. We urge Network Rail and the industry to keep a close eye on the performance of services following increases to the timetable and, if there is a risk to performance, then options that do not inconvenience other passengers should be explored.

Passengers' on the Wirral line told us that frequency of service is their third most important priority for improvement and it is therefore pleasing that the RUS tackles service frequency between these two significant locations in a way that would appear to have least impact on service performance.

That said, any decisions to increase the frequency of services on this line must also consider the impact on the availability of paths around the Liverpool 'loop' for trains from the Borderlands line. Because of the way these two lines interlink, any final decision must be taken jointly to ensure that the needs of passengers using both lines are considered.

6.3.2 Connectivity and journey times between North Wales and Merseyside including John Lennon Airport

There are no direct rail services between North Wales and the majority of Merseyside. Passengers currently need to change at Bidston, Chester or Crewe.

Passenger Focus's response to the Wales RUS sets out our aspirations for this line. This response therefore shadows the comments we made in our response to Network Rail's consultation on the Wales RUS in August 2008.

The draft RUS for consultation explains that cost of extending the Merseyside third-rail electric network from Bidston to Shotton and Wrexham is so high that this option would not be value for money or affordable. However, Merseytravel is considering the potential for electrification using overhead wires to allow through services to be operated with dual voltage rolling stock. Alternatively, the RUS suggests that modern tram-train technology might provide a solution. The RUS also sets out other possible options, but these are not yet sufficiently developed to allow further specific comment.

Stakeholders have high expectations of the "Borderlands" line, and have engaged consultancies to report on it; in March 2006 Faber Maunsell presented their study of the line and its potential for development to the Borderlands Partnership. In October 2007 the Welsh Assembly Government was criticised for not progressing plans for electrifying the line. In

³⁵ Merseyside Route Utilisation Strategy Draft for Consultation, Network Rail 2008

March 2008 the Welsh Assembly's Transport Minister met Merseytravel's chief executive to discuss the latest steps in achieving the aspirations for the line.

Local groups such as the Wrexham-Birkenhead Rail Users' Association and the Borderlands Line Rail Partnership are actively promoting the line, despite the difficulties of promoting a train service with intrinsic short-comings. The minimum turn rounds at the line's termini (typically two minutes at Wrexham Central, and three at Bidston) result in the not infrequent need to terminate trains short of their destinations, so as to get them back on time for their next trip. The hourly train service is useful for passengers, but operating it with the barest minimum of resources is almost a plan for failure.

It is clear that there is a need for improvement. The best option would be to electrify the entire line, but if the costs caused the adoption of the scheme to electrify only to Shotton, many benefits would be possible. Through services between the Wirral stations and Liverpool, more frequent services on both sections of the route and a robust timetable would be the main benefits. Interchange at Shotton to and from the North Wales line (option 22B in the Wales RUS) would also improve.

Failing full electrification, Passenger Focus welcomes the commitment to explore alternative rolling stock technology to allow direct services to be operated. Passengers on the Borderlands line should not have to wait years for improvements to their train service and we urge all those involved in operating and supporting the line to act together now to develop affordable and quick to implement improvements for passengers on the route from Wrexham.

Liverpool John Lennon Airport

Liverpool John Lennon Airport has seen rapid growth in recent years in air traffic movements and has the capacity to sustain further growth³⁶. The airport is projected to grow from 5.3 million passengers in 2006 to 6.5 million in 2008 and 10 million in 2016, with the current staffing of 2,500 expected to grow in the same proportion³⁷. Liverpool South Parkway is a relatively new and important gateway to the airport, connecting it to both the local market and the national market via the rail network.

Liverpool South Parkway station provides access to the airport via dedicated commercial bus services and is currently the principle link from the airport to the rail network. Good connections to the airport are therefore important for passengers, who clearly would benefit from direct, frequent and good performing services.

Merseytravel are currently investigating the potential demand for new services running Chester – Liverpool via a reinstated curve at Halton, south of Runcorn. This would have the benefits of serving Liverpool South Parkway and allowing through services from North Wales. Whilst the draft RUS does not investigate this proposal as studies are ongoing, Passenger Focus welcomes the commitment by the RUS to report on Merseyrail's analysis

³⁶ North West Regional Planning Assessment for the railway, Department for Transport, October 2006

³⁷ North West Route Utilisation Strategy Draft for Consultation, Network Rail

and supports any moves that will see links between the airport and the rail network improved for passengers.

Additionally, the local Rail User Group (RUG) feels that the reinstatement of the Halton Curve would eliminate the currently existing social exclusion in the South Mersey Basin and enable the area to participate fully in the economic growth on the north side of the river.

“...make the reinstatement of the Halton Curve an issue requiring top priority. We urge all parties involved in this project to work towards completion well before 2012.”

North Cheshire Rail Users Group, August 2007.

6.3.3 Connectivity and journey times between Wigan, St Helens and Liverpool

The RUS proposes that an additional hourly inter-peak service is run with limited stops between Wigan, St Helens and Liverpool.

The provision of additional services is good news for passengers who tell us that frequency of service is one of their top priorities.³⁸

6.3.4 Connectivity between Tower Hill (east of Kirkby) and Liverpool

Passenger Focus fully endorses efforts to improve connectivity between Tower Hill and Liverpool.

6.3.5 Connectivity between Skelmersdale and Liverpool

Skelmersdale is the second most populous town in the North West without a railway station³⁹. The Draft Regional Spatial Strategy for the North West, published in January 2006, aims to maintain and enhance the role of a number of regional towns and local centres to provide community facilities, services and employment, including Skelmersdale.⁴⁰

Passenger Focus therefore fully endorses efforts to improve connectivity between Skelmersdale and the railway network.

Passenger Focus research shows that passengers prefer not to have to change trains⁴³ and therefore would prefer to see options developed which provide for a direct link to the centre of the town. Passenger Focus therefore supports Option S1 to extend existing Liverpool Central services into a new station at the centre of Skelmersdale.

6.3.6 Connectivity between Liverpool suburbs and the city centre

³⁸ Passengers' priorities for improvements in rail services, 2007, MVA Consultancy for Passenger Focus.

³⁹ Merseyside Route Utilisation Strategy Draft for Consultation, Network Rail 2008.

⁴⁰ Draft Regional Spatial Strategy for the North West, North West Regional Assembly, January 2006.

The RUS outlines a number of potential options that would connect the residential areas of Anfield and Everton to the rail network and provide a link to the site of a proposed new football stadium in the area. However, the RUS does not recommend development of any of the viable options due to poor business case.

Passenger Focus accepts that it is not reasonably possible to deliver these proposals at this time. However, the industry should continue to review its position and respond to future market demands to ensure that the railway continues to meet passengers' needs in future. This should involve liaison and joint working with other stakeholders and key funders to seek alternative or joint funding opportunities where appropriate.

6.3.7 Connectivity between the Ormskirk area and Liverpool

Passenger Focus fully endorses efforts to improve connectivity between central Liverpool and towns north of Ormskirk, where it is currently not possible to travel without changing trains.

6.3.8 Connectivity between Birkenhead Docks and the Midlands

6.3.9 Connectivity between Canada Docks and the rail network

From a passenger perspective, Passenger Focus has no specific view on this area of the RUS and therefore makes no comment. However, we would welcome assurances from Network Rail that passenger services are not subjected to delays because the current or proposed operating arrangements for freight, cause operational difficulties for Network Rail and train operating companies.

6.4. Gap Four: Getting to the train

Most rail passengers in Merseyside walk to stations on the network. However, a significant proportion (22 per cent and six per cent respectively) use a car⁴¹ or bus to access stations⁴².

In the North West, station car parks are not meeting passenger expectations⁴³. Our own research with passengers on the Northern and Wirral lines shows just 62% of passengers are satisfied with the number of spaces available for parking at the station they used.⁴⁴ Indeed, National Passenger Survey results for Merseyrail show that only 57% of passengers are satisfied with facilities for car parking at stations and whilst this has increased in the last year, there is still much to be done before this reaches a satisfactory level.⁴⁵

For many rail passengers, driving to the station remains the most viable and practical means of travel. The increasing length of a working day and the shift towards a '24-7' week means

⁴¹ Excluding passengers who are dropped off or collected by car.

⁴² Merseyside Route Utilisation Strategy Draft for Consultation, Network Rail 2008

⁴³ Passengers' priorities for improvements in rail services, 2007, MVA Consultancy for Passenger Focus

⁴⁴ Specific research undertaken for this RUS with 960 passengers on the Northern Line Southport branch and 633 passengers on the Wirral Line between Bidston – Liverpool

⁴⁵ National Passenger Survey, Autumn 2008, Passenger Focus.

that it is hard to provide a comprehensive rail-bus service that meets the needs of commuters and/or weekend travellers. Fears over personal security could also inhibit the use of alternative transport or walking. For these reasons, car parking facilities at stations remain important.

An analysis of the comments we receive about car parking (nationally) through our post bag shows that so far this year⁴⁶ 23% are about availability of parking / congestion / illegal parking.

Passenger Focus examined the size of the impact that the lack of car parking has on rail passengers in a March 2007 report *Getting to the Station*⁴⁷. This case study of stations in the East of England found that the lack of parking was suppressing demand for rail services by 19%. Additionally, for those passengers still prepared to use the rail network, it was resulting in a significant increase in the number and length of car journeys, as people were being driven to and from the station, potentially doubling the number of car trips compared with somebody parking at the station. It is also notable that 38% of people indicated they would drive to a more distant station if they were unable to park at their local station.

Nearly a quarter of passengers would travel earlier in order to get a parking space⁴⁷, which then further adds to peak time crowding as people travel at busier periods when they shouldn't need to. Nationally, Passenger Focus research with 9671 passengers shows that only 44% are satisfied with facilities for car parking and this figure is declining.⁴⁸ When Passenger Focus asked passengers who said they would like to drive to the station more often, why they don't, the majority said because there is no room to park.⁴⁹

We asked passengers on the Northern and Wirral lines if they would have preferred to have started their journey at a different station to the one they used. On the Northern Line 5%, and on the Wirral line 8%, of passengers said yes. When asked why they didn't use their preferred station, the majority (62% of passengers on the Northern line and 68% on the Wirral line⁵⁰) said because they can't park at their preferred station. Other reasons why passengers didn't use their preferred station included frequency of trains / ability to get a seat (12%) and poor connections (2%) – demonstrating the importance of car parking on passengers' arrangements.

We asked passengers on the Northern and Wirral lines what they would do if they couldn't park at the station, the majority (63%) said they would park in the street for free. Indeed, when we asked passengers on these lines how they travelled to the station, of those that said they drove, 21% said they parked in the street.

⁴⁶ April 2008 – January 2009 inclusive.

⁴⁷ *Getting to the Station*, March 2007 – Passenger Focus / Steer Davis Gleave.

⁴⁸ National Passenger Survey, Autumn 2008 showing a 2% decline from Autumn 2007.

⁴⁹ Specific research undertaken for this RUS with 168 passengers on the Northern Line Southport branch and Wirral Line between Bidston – Liverpool.

⁵⁰ Based on a sample size of 51 passengers across both routes.

When Passenger Focus asked non-users of public transport in the Merseyside and Yorkshire and Humber regions, why they don't park at their local station, 48% said because they can never get a space. If potential passengers can't park at their station then the majority will drive all the way to their destination⁵¹ - the net effect being to increase car use.

Passenger Focus therefore believes that the adequate provision of car parking should be given thorough consideration when long term strategic decisions about the railway are made. Indeed, we have long maintained that the provision of car parking at railway stations should be seen as a separate issue in its own right and not part of more general discussions on car parking. It is also important that parking spaces at stations are used by rail users and not by other drivers and this may become a particular issue if local authorities use road pricing and parking measures to reduce car usage.

Passenger Focus is therefore pleased that this RUS embraces 'getting to the train' and calls on all relevant parties and funders to ensure that a robust study into the problems that passengers face when attempting to park at stations is undertaken with a view to identifying areas for further investment and improvement.

6.5. Gap Five: Punctuality and performance

6.5.1 Significant causes of delay and reactionary delay

Although drivers of passenger satisfaction change over time, punctuality and reliability have been the main drivers of passenger satisfaction since the National Passenger Survey (NPS) began in 1999. Train service performance has a huge impact on passengers' perception of their journey and continues to have a high rating on lists of priorities in our research.

Research into passengers' priorities for improving rail services in the North West shows that performance is ranked as the fourth most important aspect for passengers. The number one priority is value for money but this perception can be greatly impacted by whether the train departs and arrives on time or whether the passenger can get a seat, which unsurprisingly, is second on the list of priorities⁵².

Punctuality and performance in the Merseyside RUS area is higher than the national average⁵³. When we asked passengers who use the Merseyside network what improvements they would most like to see, punctuality / reliability of the train came out top. However, only 4% of passengers on the Northern line and 3% of passengers on the Wirral line said that service reliability deterred them from using the railway more often.

The National Passenger Survey results for Autumn 2008 show that Merseyrail achieved a satisfaction rating of 88% of passengers surveyed satisfied with the punctuality and reliability

⁵¹ Specific research undertaken for this report shows that 49% of non public transport users would abandon their journey by public transport and drive all the way to their destination if they cannot park at the station.

⁵² Passengers' priorities for improvements in rail services, 2007, MVA Consultancy for Passenger Focus.

⁵³ Merseyside Route Utilisation Strategy Draft for Consultation, Network Rail 2008.

of trains. This is a 2% increase on the previous Autumn. However, the scores for how well the company dealt with delays have shown a dramatic decrease, down from 54% in Autumn 2007 to 23% in Autumn 2008.

This tends to support the inferences made by the RUS which recognises that, although performance is generally good, significant delays to services occur for a number of reasons. It would therefore seem that it is these few, but significant, delays that are affecting passenger perception – particularly as the way they are handled clearly falls short of passenger expectation.

Passenger Focus therefore welcomes the commitments made in the RUS to better understand the causes of delays on the Merseyside network and expects the industry to take action where appropriate to tackle them, to ensure that service levels remain strong for passengers.

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