



The Weaver Valley Visitor Product

Final Report

Phase 1 and 2

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Prepared by:

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The Weaver Valley Visitor Product

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The Weaver Valley Visitor Product

1. Introduction

This is Phase 1 and 2 of a report commissioned by the Environmental Planning Service of Cheshire County Council which seeks to identify the Weaver Valley Visitor product and its opportunity to contribute to the development of the Weaver Valley Regional Park concept.

Phase 1 is an audit of the current visitor product within the Weaver Valley area.

Phase 2 of the study seeks to analyse the findings of the Phase 1 audit in terms of identifying the potentially strongest areas for future visitor growth and development. This information will be used to inform the future master planning process for the Weaver Valley Regional Park.

This report concentrates on the visitor product within the proposed Regional Park boundary identified by Cheshire County Council in the original proposal documents. In addition a review will be undertaken of the visitor product within the 'halo' surrounding the core area to ascertain opportunities for linkages and even realignment of the Regional Park boundary.

The 'halo' around the core area stretches for approximately 2 -3 miles around the proposed Regional Park area. Also in addition, it includes attractions and accommodation that are likely to have a significant tourism influence/benefit to the core area itself.

Phase 1

The Weaver Valley Visitor Product

2. Visitor Infrastructure

The Weaver Valley Regional Park boundary is skirted by the M6 and the M56. These motorways link directly into the core area at a number of points; Junction 17 of the M6 close to Sandbach, and Junctions 11 and 12 of the M56 at Runcorn /Frodsham.

A number of roads criss-cross the Regional Park area. The A533 stretches from Sandbach in the south to Runcorn in the north, via Middlewich and Northwich. The A 49 from Junction 10 of the M56 crosses the River Weaver at Acton Bridge before travelling out of the Regional Park towards Whitchurch. The A 556 from Junction 18 of the M6 is also another important access route into the Regional Park from the north, while the A559 into Northwich provides another route for motorists from the north of the county. The A54 from Junction 17 of the M6 provides direct access into Middlewich, while the A500 to the south of the Regional Park provides access to Nantwich from Junction 16 of the M6.

While the access into the Regional Park from the motorway network is relatively good, the internal road network connecting the various towns is not. 'A' road access from the south, both from Sandbach and Nantwich has to negotiate the perceived 'pinch-point' of Middlewich. The A533 from Middlewich then has to travel through the centre of Northwich which can also cause problems particularly at the crossing points across the River Weaver. Frodsham has only 'B' road direct links to Northwich.

One of the key issues for visitor use of the river course itself is that there are very few points where the river itself can be accessed apart from by footpaths and other public rights of way. While this needs to be welcomed in terms of creating a more 'natural', traffic free environment, it does nevertheless mean that for most people who visit the area the occasions they witness the river itself is relatively few. Also at the points where visitors in cars can actually access the river, there is limited car parking and other visitor facilities.

The Regional Park's link to the national train network is through Crewe Station. There are also stations at Frodsham, Northwich, Greenbank, Hartford, Winsford and Sandbach. These stations offer connections from Manchester and Merseyside, however internal rail links between these stations are extremely poor with no direct connections between the towns. Access from the south of the Regional Park area by train is also not particularly good with any links into the Regional Park having to travel via Crewe or other stations outside the area. Middlewich does not have a rail station although proposals have been put forward to reinstate passenger services between Sandbach and Northwich, which includes the town.

In terms of bus routes within the Regional Park area, again the internal routes between the towns are poor.

With regard to information provision for visitors, there are 2 networked Tourist Information Centres in the Regional Park, Northwich and Nantwich. There are three service areas on the motorway network which have potential importance for the regional park in terms of information provision. In particular the service areas at Sandbach Services on the M6 where there is a touch screen information kiosk, and the visitor information area at the Chester Services on the M56 close to Frodsham, provide opportunities to promote the area and its attractions.

There are examples of a number of attractions being signed by white on brown tourism directional signing around the Regional Park area. Probably the main concentration of white on brown signing is in the Northwich area where the Anderton Boat Lift, Marbury Country Park, Lion Salt Works and the Salt Museum are signed from various locations in and around the town. There is no 'area' visitor signing in any part of the Regional Park.

2.1 Accessibility

The Regional park area offers at the present time a range of accessible visitor facilities and products. Attractions such as the Northwich Community

Woodlands with excellent quality, flat footpaths and other routes offer a wide range of accessible visitor opportunities for visitors with a number of different disabilities to enjoy active open space recreation. Work by the British Waterways Board along the Shropshire Union Canal near Nantwich to provide improved access onto the towpath for people especially with wheelchairs is another example of good practice. The planned tactile routes through Long Acre Woods near Dutton, and the work by Frodsham Town Council to provide an 'easy route' on to the Weaver Navigation towpath close to the town are further examples. Many of the attractions and facilities as well as at least two of the accommodation establishments within the Regional Park area also provide accessible facilities for visitors.

2.2 Visitor Management and Promotion

Each of the 3 District authorities has a tourism/visitor management and promotion function. A wide range of leaflets and other promotional pieces of print have been produced by these authorities promoting the towns, villages, accommodation and attractions in their area. There are two 'micro sites' which are part of the 'visitchester.com' Destination Management System (DMS) managed by CWTB. These sites are maintained by Vale Royal Borough Council and Congleton Borough Council, while Crewe and Nantwich Borough Council also have web pages linked to the CWTB DMS which are promoting their areas.

There are two active tourism associations supported by Vale Royal Borough Council and Crewe and Nantwich Borough Council. The latter association has been entitled the 'Upper Weaver Valley Tourism Association', which is increasingly being used as a marketing brand for their area. Congleton Borough Council also works closely with their tourism industry, and promotes their area under the 'brand' of 'South Cheshire'.

Apart from the role of the District authorities there are a number of Town and Parish Council's who play an important role in assisting the development of the visitor economy for their area. Of most note is the role played by Middlewich Town Council in supporting the development of the 'Middlewich Vision' initiative, while also supporting the promotion of major events and other visitor development opportunities.

'Frodsham Forward' is a partnership agency which has been established to lead and progress the market town proposals for the town. Sandbach has also developed a market town partnership.

Cheshire County Council provides strategic support and management of a number of important visitor functions. In particular through their Countryside Management Services they manage country parks and picnic areas across the county as well as improving, protecting and promoting the rights of way network. This section produces a very wide range of leaflets and other literature linked to rights of way routes, including the long distance routes and the countryside resources managed by the County Council. The County Council through their tourism section is also producing a web site,

'discovercheshire.com', which will provide a comprehensive listing of the visitor facilities across Cheshire. This section also manages and leads on the diversity and accessibility function for the County Council and the county as a whole. 'Cheshire for all.com', a web site specifically targeting the accessible visitor facilities within the county, provides an excellent resource for promoting Cheshire's strength as an accessible county.

Visit Chester and Cheshire provides the strategic tourism leadership, management and promotional function for the Cheshire and Warrington sub-region. Their lead promotional tool is 'visitchester.com', which promotes the range of products and themes which are key to growing the Cheshire and Warrington visitor economy. Of most note in the context of the Weaver Valley Regional Park, is the 'Rural Escape' theme which is the lead campaign promoting the sub-region's rural destinations. One of the key aspects of this campaign is the development of a series of rural tourism product offerings which will provide the sub-region with the opportunity to package and promote a number of important Cheshire themes such as equestrianism, spa breaks etc.

3. Accommodation

Table 1a and 1b identifies the situation regarding the state of play of accommodation in the Weaver Valley Regional Park's indicative boundary and in the 'halo' around this area.

Serviced accommodation within the Weaver Valley Regional Park Boundary

Area	No. serviced businesses	Serviced no. rooms	no. graded*
Northwich	24	236	9
Frodsham	4	95	3
Winsford	6	25	2
Nantwich	20	344	10
Sandbach	7	54	1
Middlewich	5	40	3
Totals	66	794	28

Self Catering accommodation within the Weaver Valley Regional Park Boundary

Area	No. self catering businesses	Self catering no. units	no. graded	No. Caravan Parks	No. pitches	no. graded*
Northwich	0	0	0	0	0	0
Frodsham	0	0	0	1	9	0
Winsford	1	1	0	2	25	1
Nantwich	7	10	3	2	65	0
Sandbach	0	0	0	0	0	0
Middlewich	1	2	1	1	25	1
Totals	9	13	4	6	124	2

* Graded with VisitBritain; AA or RAC

Table 1a

Serviced accommodation within the wider 'halo' area.

Area	No. serviced businesses	Serviced no.rooms	no. graded*
Northwich	5	102	3
Frodsham	5	22	1
Winsford	2	0	1
Nantwich	4	416	0
Sandbach	5	79	3
Middlewich	1	32	0
Totals	22	248	8

Self Catering accommodation within the wider 'halo' area.

Area	No. self catering businesses	Self catering no. units	no. graded	No. Caravan Parks	No. pitches	no. graded*
Northwich	4	8	4	3	60	1
Frodsham	0	0	0	4	25	0
Winsford	0	0	0	1	18	1

Nantwich	1	1	1	0	0	0
Sandbach	0	0	0	0	0	0
Middlewich	0	0	0	0	0	0
Totals	5	9	5	8	103	2

* Graded with VisitBritain; AA or RAC

Table 1b

3.1 Serviced Accommodation

In total there are 794 serviced bedrooms (66 establishments) within the boundary of the Regional Park. 43% are in Nantwich and 30% in Northwich. The 794 bedrooms account for 10% of all bedrooms in Cheshire and Warrington and 14 % of the serviced accommodation establishments.

Within the 'halo' area used for this study there are a further 248 rooms in 22 establishments. Of these just over 40% are in the Northwich area, while just over 30% are in the wider Sandbach area.

In terms of whether these establishments are graded 28 or 42% of all establishments are in a scheme. This accounts for approximately 7% of all inspected properties (inspected by VisitBritain, AA or RAC) in the Cheshire and Warrington area. With regard to the halo area 8 are graded or 36% of all establishments in these areas.

3.2 Self-catering Accommodation

In terms of self catering, there are only 9 self catering businesses in the Regional park boundary, offering 13 individual units. Nearly 80% are in the Nantwich area. There are also 6 caravan sites offering 124 pitches; most of these are in the Winsford and Nantwich area. There are very few camping pitches. In addition to these sites there are also a number of 5 van 'certificated' sites which have not been quantified.

Within the halo area there a further 5 self catering businesses, offering 9 individual units. The vast majority of these units are in the wider Frodsham area. In terms of caravan sites there are a further 9 sites, with 103 pitches.

Within the halo area all self catering businesses are part of an inspection scheme, while a quarter of the caravan sites are inspected.

3.3 Quality Grading

Within the Weaver Valley boundary an average of 42% of the known serviced properties have a recognised quality grading ie AA, RAC or VisitBritain. This compares with approximately 59% of all the establishments across Cheshire and Warrington.

All the quality graded businesses (serviced and self catering) hold a grading of two star/diamond or more.

29% hold a 3 diamond grade
 21% hold a 4 diamond grade
 6% hold a 5 diamond grade

21% hold a 2 star grade
 12% hold a 3 star grade
 9% hold a 4 star grade
 3% hold a 5 star grade

3.4 Quality of Weaver Valley accommodation compared to Cheshire.

Table 2 shows percentage of each grade out of all graded properties.

Grade	Weaver Valley	Cheshire
1 star/diamond	0	1%
2 star/diamond	21%	9%
3 star/diamond	41%	40%
4 star/diamond	30%	45%
5 star/diamond	6%	5%

Table 2

Within the 'halo', a similar number (43%) of the establishments are inspected, however 66% of those inspected are of a 4 star/diamond category.

Conclusions – Accommodation

- While the graded properties in the Weaver Valley area match the whole of the sub-region in terms of 'middle range' accommodation it has a higher percentage of 2 star/diamond establishments and a lower percentage of 4 star establishments. It does however compare favourably with the rest of Cheshire and Warrington in terms of 5 star/diamond establishments. There are also 60% of properties which are un-graded and could potentially be of a substandard quality.
- Within the Regional Park boundary Nantwich has the largest number of bed spaces and some of the highest quality establishments – it has 2 of the 3, '5 diamond' establishments in Cheshire and Warrington – The Limes and Oakland House; Rookery Hall probably the most 'prestigious' hotel (only 3 stars, but offering a '4 star' experience) in the Regional Park boundary, and the only 5 star self catering unit in the Regional Park area, the 'Old Cart House'.
- No hotels have spa facilities within the Regional Park boundary although Rookery Hall is seeking to develop such facilities in the future.
- Much of the quality across the core area is in the smaller hotel/b&b and self catering units category.

- The largest hotel in the Regional Park boundary is the Alvaston Hall Hotel with 156 rooms.
- The ‘highest quality’ hotel in the halo area is Nunsmere Hall, and overall the quality of the accommodation in this area is of a higher standard. To the west of Audlem, within the halo, lies Combermere Abbey Cottages, a complex of 11, very high quality, 5 star self catering cottages.
- There is a relatively low number of caravan/camping pitches in the core area

3.5 Conference and meetings facilities

The conference and meetings facilities within the Park boundary are relatively limited. To the north of the core area Forest Hills Hotel offers facilities for small to medium size meetings and banqueting. Catton Hall, close to the river, south of Frodsham, offers small day syndicate rooms as part of corporate entertainment facilities. In Northwich, Winnington Hall provides relatively large facilities for medium size meetings but on the whole the facilities are not of a high quality and no rooms are available. The Oaklands Hotel also offers meeting facilities. To the south of the core area Rookery Hall offers small meeting facilities for up to 90 delegates. There are also meetings and banqueting facilities offered at Vale Royal Abbey Golf Club, and Reaseheath College as well as various Municipal buildings including facilities at Northwich, Windsford, Nantwich, Middlewich and Sandbach.

Outside the core area there are significantly larger facilities; these include facilities at Portal Championship Golf and Country Club, Crewe Hall, Tatton Park and Wychwood Park, south of Crewe.

4. Visitor Attractions

Weaver Valley Attractions

Attraction	Town	VAQAS*	Theme 1
Anderton Boat Lift	Northwich	Yes	Industrial heritage
Boosey’s Garden Centre & Coffee Shop	Middlewich		Garden Centre
Castle Park Arts Centre	Frodsham		Arts & Crafts
Dorford Hall	Nantwich		Historic house
Hack Green Secret Nuclear Bunker	Nantwich	Yes	Local History
Lady Heyes Craft & Antique Restoration Centre	Frodsham		Arts & Crafts
Lion Salt Works	Northwich		Industrial Heritage
Nantwich Museum	Nantwich		Local History
Reaseheath College	Nantwich		Garden Centre/Maze
Salt Museum	Northwich	Yes	Industrial Heritage
Weavervale Garden Centre	Northwich		Garden centre
Bluebell Cottage Gardens & Nursery			Garden
Edwardian Pumping Station	Northwich		Industrial heritage
Northwich Community Woodlands (incl. Marbury Country Park)	Northwich		Countryside Recreation
Stapeley Water Gardens	Nantwich	Yes	Gardens/Garden

Halo Area

Attraction	Town	VAQAS*	Theme
Arley Hall	Northwich	Yes	Historic house
Blakemere Craft Centre	Northwich	Yes	Craft Centre
Bridgemere Garden World	Nantwich		Garden Centre
Cotebrook Shire Horse Centre	Cotebrook	Yes	Shire horse centre and countryside park
Dagfields Craft & Antique Centre	Nantwich		Craft Centre
Delamere Forest Park	Northwich		Countryside Recreation
Great Budworth Real Dairy Ice Cream	Northwich		Ice Cream Farm
Mouldsworth Motor Museum	Nr Frodsham		Motor history
Norton Priory	Runcorn	Yes	Museum and Gardens
Oulton Park	Tarporley		Motorsport
Potters Barn	Hassell Green		Pottery
Stockley Farm	Northwich	Yes	Farm attraction
Tabley House	Knutsford		Historic house
Tatton Park	Knutsford	Yes	Historic house

* Visitor Attraction Quality Assurance Service. It is a consumer focused quality assessment service for visitor attractions.

4.1 Range of attractions

There are fourteen facilities within the Weaver Valley Regional Park area which can be classed as a visitor attraction.

<u>Theme</u>	<u>Number</u>
Industrial Heritage	4
Garden/Garden centres	2
Arts & Crafts	2
Local History	2
Historic House	1
Countryside Recreation	1
Gardens/Gardens Centre	1

Most of the attractions are relatively small, and will attract visitors from a relatively narrow catchment area. The most widely recognised attraction is the Stapeley Water Gardens which attracts over 1 million visitors a year from across the north of England and the Midlands. The Anderton Boat Lift attracted 122,574 visitors in 2004. These visitors come from a catchment incorporating Liverpool, Manchester, Crewe and Stoke. The Northwich Community Woodlands, which incorporates Marbury Country Park, is one of the largest areas of managed countryside open space in Cheshire and probably attracts in the range of between 100,000 and 200,000 visitors a year, many again from a relatively narrow catchment area at the present time.

The fourteen attractions in the halo area are on a much large scale. A number with significant visitor attendances - all 2004 - Tatton Park (750,000), Delamere Forest Park (150,000 +), Bridgemere Garden World (1 million +),

Arley Hall. These attractions can be categorised similarly to those within the Weaver Valley area.

<u>Theme</u>	<u>Number</u>
Historic House	3
Arts and Crafts	3
Farm based attraction	2
Museum	1
Garden/Garden centres	1
Motor History	1
Motorsport	1
Ice Cream Farm	1
Countryside Recreation	1

4.2 Quality Grading

VAQAS (Visitor Attractions Quality Assurance Scheme) is the nationally recognised quality scheme for attractions.

4 attractions within the area participate in the VAQAS scheme

6 attractions within the halo participate in the VAQAS scheme

Conclusion - Attractions

Within the boundary of the Regional Park the majority of visitor attractions are relatively small in terms of visitor numbers, except for Stapeley Water Gardens, the Anderton Boat Lift and the Northwich Community Woodlands. They also do not attract a significant audience from beyond the local area, apart from Stapeley, and the Anderton Boat Lift. Within the halo area however there are some of the biggest open air attractions in Cheshire including Tatton Park, Delamere Forest Park, Arley Hall, and Bridgemere Garden World. These attractions attract visitors from Greater Manchester and Merseyside as well as beyond.

5. Water Based Recreational Activity.

Cheshire has more miles of navigable waterways than any other county in the country and a substantial length of these waterways is within the proposed Regional Park boundaries.

The Shropshire Union Canal within the Regional Park boundary is the best north – south waterway route in the country linking canals north of Cheshire to those in the south of the country. It also probably has some of the highest boat movements than any other stretch of canal in the country, apart from the Llangollen Canal. Certainly the water way network in the core area is central to a number of circular routes in particularly the Cheshire Ring, while it is also an important link to the Llangollen Canal itself as well as the Cheshire branch of the Shropshire Union Canal which is also extremely busy. There is also a

significant amount of boat movements along the Trent and Mersey Canal, some 7- 8,000 a year.

There are seven companies on the waterway network within the proposed Regional Park boundary who hire out narrow boats for long holidays as well as the increasingly popular short break holiday market; a day hire boat is also hired out by 'Boating Days'. These operators are -

- Middlewich Narrow Boats
- Cheshire Cat
- Alvechurch Marine
- Boating Days
- Andersen Boats
- Empress Boats
- Black Prince Narrow Boat Holidays

Apart from the boats from these marinas, boats from hire boat centres outside of the Regional Park, also move along these stretches of waterway, as do 'Hotel Boats' from marinas outside of the core area.

There are also a small number of trips boats that ply the River Weaver and the Trent and Mersey Canal within the core area including 'Vale Royal Cruises', the 'Weaver Princess', the 'Canal Explorer', as well as the trip boat from the Anderton Boat lift that travels along the Weaver to Northwich. Despite the large number of narrow boats using the waterway network, the number of moorings and other facilities particularly along the River Weaver is very poor. There is also only one pump out station along the river, while there are no chandler's.

While there is permission to develop a 300 berth marina at Swanley along the Shropshire Union Canal, the overall provision of moorings facilities across the whole network needs to be improved. The urban environment bordering the waterways particularly through Middlewich, but also Northwich is also relatively poor and needs to be improved. In the case of Northwich, the 'Northwich Vision' seeks to radically improve the river side environment as a result of the re-development of the whole area.

The locks on certain parts of the waterway network are also in need of attention, while the quality of the portages particularly along the River Weaver also needs to be addressed.

As a significant water course, the River Weaver and its associated canal network, as well as the areas of open water in the core area, provide a base for a large number of different clubs and organisations. These include –

- Runcorn Rowing Club
- Runcorn Canoeing Club
- Weaver Sailing Club
- Frodsham Watersports

- Frodsham and Weaver Motor Boat Club
- Budworth Mere Sailing Club
- Windsford Flash Sailing Club
- Frodsham and Barton Anglers
- Acton Bridge Cruising Club
- Acton Bridge Motor Boat Club
- Northwich Anglers Association
- Broken Cross Boat Club
- Winsford Anglers
- Grange School Rowing Club, Acton Bridge
- Winsford Youth Forum
- Cheshire Schools Sailing and Canoeing Association

The activities undertaken by these clubs and bodies include rowing (sculling); canoeing (Sprint and Marathon Kayaking plus Canadian canoes); Jet skiing; water skiing; motor cruisers; Angling; and Dinghy sailing. These clubs and organisations use the complete water way network within the regional park area apart from the upper reaches of the Weaver. The River Dane, a tributary of the Weaver is also used by anglers. Both the rowing and the canoeing clubs view the River Weaver as a high quality resource on which to carry out their sport, while the angling clubs also view the waterway network as providing excellent fishing opportunities.

Despite this significant club use, public access onto the river itself is extremely poor with only one public access point onto the River Weaver at Lower Flash just south of Winsford. The quality of the water is also variable. Many users of the water network are of the opinion that the quality is not as bad as many observers have suggested. The upper reaches however are seen to be poor due to agricultural run off, while the industrial uses along the centre of the river are thought to contribute to a potential problem in the middle of the system. The problem of 'weed' inhabiting large stretches of the river is also seen as an issue for many users.

There is also a concern regarding the lack of facilities for fisherman along stretches of the Trent and Mersey and Shropshire Union Canals in the Middlewich area, particularly in terms of car parking, toilet, café facilities etc.

Outside the core area there is a significant private water sports centre at Manley Mere.

6. Sports Facilities

There are five golfing facilities in the core area. By far the most prestigious is Vale Royal Abbey Golf Course, bordering the river between Northwich and Winsford. There is also golfing facilities at Frodsham, Hartford, Winsford and in the Sandbach area.

There is rock climbing on Frodsham and Helsby Hill. There are also a number of leisure centres and other local sporting facilities.

Outside the core area there are the significant facilities of the Portal Championship Golf Course, while there is also a good quality course at Sandiway. There is also Oulton Park, a major motor sport facility. There is also the oldest and most northerly Polo ground in Britain near Tarporley.

7. Built Heritage

In visitor terms the built heritage offers a range of experiences. The quality of this experience is variable. The Market towns of Nantwich, Frodsham and Sandbach offers on the whole a pleasing visitor experience, with attractive traditional street frontages, listed buildings offering original features, pedestrianised areas, individual shops and a range of reasonably good catering and drink offers. Apart from Nantwich however, the other two towns do not have a river frontage.

The other towns within the boundary do not offer such a good visitor environment. Northwich despite having a close relationship with the River Weaver and its tributaries has been blighted by 1960's development which will be substantially addressed through the Northwich Vision proposals. The communities of Weaverham, Barnton and Hartford are very much part of the Northwich 'conurbation', and while their environment is relatively good they are not particularly notable areas in visitor terms. Winsford has an attractive river frontage, however the town itself is not appealing, with areas of relatively serious deprivation in some locations. Middlewich also has a long canal frontage, but the urban environment, particularly close to the waterway, is not good in a number of locations.

The villages within the boundary are relatively small apart from Audlem. Audlem offers an attractive village environment with the Shropshire Union Canal flowing through it. Other villages of note include Great Budworth on the fringe of the boundary, probably one of the most attractive villages in Cheshire.

Distinctive buildings include St Marys Church in Nantwich, the 'Cathedral of South Cheshire', a number of attractive and distinctive Black and white buildings in Nantwich and Northwich, some medieval, as well as a number of buildings in other towns including Sandbach. The Town Bridge in Northwich is the first electric powered swing bridge to be built in this country. The Saxon Crosses in Sandbach are of particular note, offering one of the finest Saxon monuments in Britain.

The area surrounding the core in terms of the built environment is dominated in the south by the large urban areas of Crewe and in the north, Runcorn.

8. Natural Heritage

Again with regard to visitors the area offers a variety of experiences in terms of its natural heritage. The River Weaver is very attractive in parts. The stretch between Frodsham and Northwich is particularly attractive, offering a quiet

river valley bordered by ancient woodlands and agricultural land. The stretch of the river between Northwich and Winsford is also attractive in parts, while the river above the flashes is again quite remote and is characterised by relatively attractive agriculture land. Along the river there are various important habitats and areas of landscape which have nature conservation/ ecological designations. The canal network also flows through some attractive agricultural landscapes.

Away from the waterway network areas such as the Northwich Community Woodlands offer attractive and important areas of managed countryside. The areas of ancient woodlands in the northern part of the Regional Park area also offers important landscapes and habitats, while the area of attractive rolling agricultural land to the south of Frodsham provide views across the Cheshire plains and beyond.

At Frodsham the sandstone outcrops of Frodsham Hill provides a dramatic and dominant viewpoint across the whole of the Mersey estuary.

9. Visitor Themes and Products

There are range of themes and products which are potentially important as visitor assets for the proposed Weaver Valley Regional Park.

9.1 Salt

Salt has been produced in Cheshire for over 2000 years, and it is the only place in Britain where it is still produced on a large scale. A significant amount of the landscape, particularly around Northwich has been influenced by salt extraction while each of the major towns within the core area associate this mineral with their growth and development. The opening up of the Weaver as a navigable waterway in the 18th Century is directly contributable to the discovery of rock salt in the Northwich area. Historically it is therefore an important heritage theme for the whole of the Weaver Valley area.

In terms of visitor assets connected to this theme the Lion Salt Works is the last existing significant reminder of this heritage in the whole of the Regional Park area. The last open-pan salt works working in this country up until 1986, the site is presently being restored and is the subject of a significant Heritage Lottery application. Also within Northwich is The Salt Museum. This museum tells the story of salt working in Cheshire since Roman times and is Britain's only museum dedicated to salt.

Apart from these two assets, there are no other dedicated facilities or artefacts of visitor significance which can be associated with the salt heritage within the proposed Regional Park area. Perhaps the most 'exciting' visitor experience could be created by developing underground trips down the rock salt mine near Winsford. This would be nationally, a unique experience, however the high costs of opening up the mine to visitors at the present time has so far made this opportunity un-viable.

Elsewhere in the Weaver Valley there are landscapes which have been shaped by salt extraction. There are areas of open water which have been created as a result of salt extraction, such as the 'flashes' south of Winsford, plus other 'unusual' areas of water such as the lake just south of Nantwich which has an incredibly high salt content which could potentially create the possibility of developing new habitats etc. Some of the plant life along the River Weaver itself also exhibits clear association with the high salt content in the area. There is also an example of a 'brine bath' in Nantwich, plus artefacts which have been excavated in the area which are or could be displayed in local museums.

The towns themselves in the area have also grown very much as a result of the extraction and development of the salt trade over the centuries. While the development of the Weaver Navigation and the canal network in the area has direct links to the salt trade also.

Despite these examples of the salt heritage of the area, none of them are significant enough to develop a strong visitor theme based on salt for the Weaver Valley area. This is not to say that the salt heritage could not be used as a subject that could be interpreted in many locations across the Weaver Valley area, but at the present time due to the lack of a range of tangible 'salt visitor assets' it does not provide a strong visitor product for the Weaver Valley area.

9.2 Roman, Norman and Civil War

There are links and historical connections to a number of historical periods across the Weaver Valley. The towns of Middlewich and Nantwich, and to a certain extent Northwich, can clearly identify their history back to the Romans, while the Norman history of the area is also strong. The Romans were in fact attracted to this part of Cheshire because of the salt deposits, and developed a number of forts in the area. A large number of archaeological finds connected to the Roman period has been discovered particularly in the Nantwich and Middlewich area. The Weaver Valley was also a site for many Civil War battles. These historical periods are commemorated primarily through a series of popular historical re-enactments in Middlewich, Nantwich and Sandbach. Apart from these events however there is little actual tangible evidence of these periods within the Regional Park area which could be developed as visitor assets.

9.3 Bird watching

There are a number of sites of importance for bird watching within the Regional Park boundary. As a result of the range of habitats present within the core area, the number of different bird species that can be viewed at different locations, at different times of the year is considerable. These sites include -

- Mersey Estuary
- Frodsham Marshes/mouth of the Weaver
- River Weaver

- Budworth Mere
- Northwich Community Woodlands/Ashton's and Neumann's Flash
- Winsford Flashes
- Sandbach Flashes
- Nantwich Flash

Probably the most important site for bird watching within the boundary is Frodsham Marsh and the mouth of the Weaver. The marsh is an area of sludge-beds from the River Weaver attracting an excellent range of both breeding and wintering birds, with a fair selection of rarities. Here too the embankments afford good views of the massed ranks of waders and duck on the Mersey Estuary itself.

Another good site for bird watching is Budworth Mere and Northwich Community Woodlands. This area offers an attractive area of mixed wetland and woodland. Bitterns can be viewed in the area of the mere while Great Crested Grebes breed there also. The other areas of water in the area such as Ashton's and Neumann's Flash can attract a good selection of species at many times of the year.

The Mid Cheshire Ornithological Society has taken a lease on a 29 acre stretch of the River Weaver near Kingsley (Hatton's Hey) to create their own reserve where a wide variety of birds can be viewed particularly over an open water lagoon close to the river. The River Weaver offers opportunities for bird watching along its whole length while the flashes and other areas of open water are also important birding sites.

There are also bird watching opportunities on the various flashes around Winsford, Sandbach and Nantwich.

9.4 Walking

The proposed Regional Park benefits from a wide range of public rights of way and other permissive routes throughout the area. These routes are primarily footpaths. There are footpath routes along the length of the lower Weaver Valley down to Winsford, as well as towpath routes along the Trent and Mersey and the Shropshire Union Canal. While there are footpath routes along the Weaver up until Winsford, between Winsford and Nantwich there are currently no rights of way along the actual river course itself.

While there are a number of north-south routes, there are also routes and footpaths that radiate into and out of the core area. The proposed North Cheshire Way will be crossing the area on its way from Chester to Disley at Northwich while a number of other footpaths link the area with the surrounding area.

East-west routes are constricted by the lack of crossing points across the River Weaver. Initiatives such as the Greenways Strategy for Vale Royal, has attempted to identify a series of routes to assist recreational activity, linking the core area, with destinations such as Delamere Forest.

The area of rolling agricultural land south of Frodsham, including Frodsham and Helsby Hills, is an extremely popular walking area. Frodsham has a number of routes including the Sandstone Trail starting from the town and its potential importance as a centre for walking should not be underestimated. Northwich Community Woodlands also has a range of well maintained, relatively flat footpaths.

There are a large number of different walking leaflets and publications primarily produced by Cheshire County Council, but also by Town and Parish Councils such as Frodsham Town Council which promote a wide series of routes and circular walks. There are also a number of publications produced by private publishers, highlighting key walking opportunities in the area.

The quality of the footpath network in the area is variable, in many areas the surfaces are well maintained on the more popular routes, while stretches such as the footpath along the River Weaver between Frodsham and Northwich has collapsed into the river in some places which has meant detours having to be found primarily by the walkers themselves. Another issue is the lack of appropriate car parking at certain locations which will enable easy access to these routes.

9.5 Cycling

Road cycling is by far the most popular cycling activity within the Regional Park boundary at the present time. Areas around Middlewich and Frodsham are particularly popular due to their accessibility from surrounding areas, while a number of local clubs also use the core area in relatively large numbers. Road racing and time trials particularly occur in the area around Middlewich. The Cheshire Cycle Way traverses the north of the area crossing the river at Action Bridge. A number of leaflets have also been produced by Cheshire County Council promoting a series of circular riding routes along quiet lanes in a number of locations.

Off road cycling within the core area is confined to certain parts of the proposed Regional Park area. Northwich Community Woodlands has a wide network of flat, well maintained cycle routes, while routes between Winsford and the Northwich area along the river is also well used by cyclists. These areas are probably the only stretches of off road cycleway suitable for family use in the Regional Park Boundary. The stretch of bridleway along the River Weaver above Dutton is also a relatively popular off road route for primarily adult cyclists.

Off road cycling is constrained within the Regional Park area by the lack of bridleways and other multi-user routes. Proposals for a Weaver Valley Cycle Way utilising the National Cycle Route 5 has been developed which seeks to expand the range of off-road cycling opportunities. The development of links from Delamere Forest particularly along the Whitegate Way into the core area, as well as Quite Lane initiatives such as the project presently being developed in the Norley area, are all seeking to assist the development of this activity.

A small number of businesses in the core area presently benefit from cyclists using the area. The café at the Lady Hayes Craft and Antique Centre regularly hosts large groups of cyclists from the Merseyside area for instance.

Delamere Forest outside the Regional Park Boundary is the most important area for off road cycling in the county.

9.6 Equestrianism

Cheshire has a high horse ownership and this is no different within the proposed Regional Park area. As identified above one of the main problems in developing the opportunity for the horse rider to visit the area is the lack of bridleways and other suitable routes. The Northwich Community Woodlands has a wide number of routes suitable for horse riders however access into the Community Woodlands itself by bridleways is extremely poor. There is also an initiative at Dutton to develop circular equestrian routes in the area. This will hopefully be aided by the proposed improvement to the footbridge at Dutton Locks which will be upgraded to allow horses to cross the Weaver at that point.

To assist the development of this market as well as developing new footpaths and quiet road initiatives, there is a need to develop more circular routes, including links to the long distance route being developed to the west of the Weaver Valley by the CREATE initiative supported by Cheshire County Council.

There is also the issue of a shortage of suitable facilities to park horse boxes which will allow riders from outside the Regional Park to more easily visit the area.

Equestrian activity is also important outside the Regional Park area. Apart from a number of yards and other equestrian facilities there is also the polo ground near to Tarporley. Arley is also developing as an important equestrian centre.

10. Events and Festivals

Table 3 identifies the range of events and festivals within the boundary of the regional park.

Events and festivals in the Weaver Valley

Location	Event/ Festival	Theme	Date	Attendance Figures
Runcorn	Fireworks Festival	Fireworks	November	35,000
Frodsham	Christmas Festival	Christmas event	December	10,000
Northwich	Thundersprint	Vintage motorcycles	April	100,000+

	Farmers market		Every second Saturday	
Middlewich	Middlewich Folk and Boat Festival	Boating/Music	June	40,000
	The Norman (Heritage) Middlewich Festival	Historical/re-enactment	September (Bi-annual)	12,000
	Farmers Market		Monthly	
Nantwich	Nantwich Food and Drink Festival	Food and Drink	End of September	26,000
	Nantwich Jazz and Blues Festival	Music	Easter	40,000
	Holly Holy Day	Historical/re-enactment	January	10,000
	Nantwich Transport Festival	Transport	August	N/A
	Farmers market		Last Saturday in each month	
	Nantwich and South Cheshire Show	Agriculture/Cheese	July	32,000
	Shropshire Union Canal Boat Rally	Canal boats	June	N/A
	Nantwich Folk Festival	Music	August	N/A
Audlem	Audlem Festival of Transport	Transport	July	N/A
	Proms Night	Music	June	N/A
Sandbach	Elizabethan re-enactment 1651	Historical/re-enactment	September	N/A
	Sandbach Festival of Transport	Transport	April	N/A

Note – In addition to these events there are a number of other more 'local' events around the area, many are relatively small and 'quirky' ie The World Worm Charming Championships; Wybunbury Fig Pie Wakes; Scarecrow competitions etc. Many of these happen to the south of the area. Reaseheath College also hosts a large number of events.

Table 3

The Weaver Valley has a relatively large number of events and festivals. A number have common themes -

Themes

Transport Related	4
Historical re-enactments	3
Music	3
Food and Drink	2
Boating	2
Others	3

The largest event in terms of visitor numbers is 'Thundersprint' in Northwich, with over 100,000 visitors estimated over the two day event. Anecdotal and some visitor research has indicated that a number of these events attracts visitors and enthusiasts from quite a significant catchment area. In particular Thundersprint, the Nantwich Food and Drink Festival, and some of the transport, boat and music festivals certainly attract visits from beyond Cheshire. The Cheese Show which is part of the Nantwich and South Cheshire Show, (which in its own right is identified as the largest one day agricultural show in the country), is renowned as the largest Cheese Show in the World. The majority of the shows and events happen to the south of the Regional Park area with only a minority happening during the spring/summer months.

Within the halo there are a large number of significant events and festivals attracting visitors from a wide catchment, these include the RHS show at Tatton, the music concerts at Delamere; Steam events at Crewe, as well as a range of events at Arley and Combermere Abbey.

Canoeing, Rowing and Sailing Races and Events in the Weaver Valley

Race	Club	Date
Canoeing		
• Northwich Canoeing Event		February
• Weaver 10km	Runcorn Canoe Club	March
• Weaver Descent	Runcorn Canoe Club	April
• Cheshire Ring Race (Trent and Mersey Canal)	Macclesfield & District Canoe Club	June
• Runcorn Marathon Race	Runcorn Canoe Club	July
Rowing		
• North of England Junior Head	Northwich Rowing Club	February
• Runcorn Spring Eights Head (Open)	Runcorn Rowing Club	March
• Northwich Easter	Northwich Rowing Club	March/April

Head		
• Northwich Regatta	Northwich Rowing Club	May
• Ball Cup (North)	Runcorn Rowing Club	May
• Runcorn Junior Regatta	Northwich Rowing Club	June
• Runcorn Autumn Head (Open)	Northwich Rowing Club	September
• Head of the River Race	Northwich Rowing Club	October
Sailing		
• Handicapped class racing	Weaver Sailing Club	March to November
• Class Open Meetings	Winsford Flash Sailing Club	March to October
• Handicapped and class open events	Budworth Mere	March to October

The River Weaver hosts a number of rowing, canoeing and sailing events through out the year, particularly on its lower reaches. A number of these races are significant in terms of gaining points for national competitions and attracts teams from across northern England. These events bring visitors in to the Regional Park area as competitors and while the numbers of spectators may be relatively small the potential to grow this area is potential significant.

There is also a range of important fishing matches along the river and canal network close to Middlewich which can attract competitors from a wide catchment area. Cycling road races also take place particularly in the area around Middlewich.

11. Cultural Activity

Apart from the festivals and events there is a range of cultural activities which occur across the Weaver Valley area. These are primarily community orientated and as such are not targeted at the visitor to the area.

12. Food Offer

12.1 Eating Out in the Weaver Valley

The food offer is an important asset to any area. As diners become more and more discerning so the quality of food offer must increase.

There are over 220 eating establishments in the Yellow Pages for the Weaver Valley area, ranging from pubs to cafes to restaurants. The Eating Out section of www.visitchester.com lists 14 establishments in the Weaver Valley. British Waterways have listed a number of pubs along the waterways as being suitable for visitors using the network. There are also 11 pubs mentioned in the Good Pub Guide – the recommendations coming from customers rather than a formal assessment.

The quality of eating out establishments has yet to be graded in a nationally recognisable way. There are a wide number of accolades but not one scheme that all establishments can be graded against. Consequently it has been historically difficult for tourist organisations to list and advertise eating out establishments when their quality could not be guaranteed.

While there are no means to grade restaurants and eating houses in an independent way at the present time, the measures that are available suggests that while there are some relatively good restaurants in Nantwich, Sandbach and Frodsham, there are no outstanding, destination restaurants or pubs within the core area.

It is also a factor in the area that in most locations, apart from pubs and restaurants there are very few cafes in the towns which are open for instance on Sundays.

12.2 Local Producers, Retailers and Farmers Markets

The food offer of an area is not just about eating out establishments; it is also about producers and retailers offering fresh local produce. Fresh, organic, home produced/reared are words today's shoppers are looking for. As farms find it necessary to diversify to maintain a living farm shops and farmers markets are becoming an increasingly strong attraction.

Table 3 above indicate that there are three regular Farmers Markets in the area – Middlewich, Nantwich and Northwich. The Made in Cheshire directory lists 12 local producers with outlets in the area and a further 9 in the halo.

The core area is relatively strong in retail outlets offering local produce from master butchers, speciality food shops, farm shops, and micro breweries. Apart from cheese production in the Nantwich area there is also honey production in the area surrounding Frodsham.

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