

REPORT TO: Executive Board

DATE: 5 March 2009

REPORTING OFFICER: Strategic Director, Environment

SUBJECT: Mersey Gateway – Sustainable Transport Strategy
– KEY DECISION

WARDS: Boroughwide

1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

1.1 This report seeks approval by the Board, of the Mersey Gateway Sustainable Transport Strategy (MGSTS), which sets out how the proposed Mersey Gateway Project (The Project) can enable improvements in integrated transport across the Borough that will further the economic, transport and sustainability objectives of the Council. By adopting this report as Council policy, the document will have significant weight in the consideration of the various planning applications for Mersey Gateway that are now with Government.

2.0 RECOMMENDATION: That

(1) The Board approves the Mersey Gateway Sustainable Transport Strategy to support the delivery of the Mersey Gateway Project, subject to any minor amendments being delegated to the Strategic Director Environment, in consultation with the Executive Board Member for Planning, Transportation, Regeneration & Renewal

3.0 BACKGROUND

3.1 The Project is central to the achievement of the environmental and economic regeneration aspirations of Halton and is key to those of the sub-region.

3.2 At the local level the Project will bring about a step change in improvements to the transport connections between Runcorn and Widnes via the Silver Jubilee Bridge (SJB). By transferring around 80 percent of traffic from SJB to the New Crossing, the existing SJB will be available for local transport services and facilities. The Project will also deliver amendments to the SJB carriageway and approach roads that are in part intended to improve the integrity of the bus network by reducing journey times, improving reliability and supporting and underpinning improved bus services across the Mersey between Runcorn and Widnes.

- 3.3 Although the key changes to the road system in Halton will be delivered through the Mersey Gateway scheme, as submitted to the Secretary of State for planning approval, to take full advantage of the opportunity presented by these changes will require coordinated intervention in the form of better connecting bus services and improved facilities for cycling and walking.
- 3.4 The combined programme within the MGSTS will also address existing concerns over accessibility and connectivity as part of the wider sustainable transport and sustainability agenda for all residents of Halton, particularly those living in the most deprived wards in the Borough.
- 3.5 The MGSTS and the Mersey Gateway Regeneration Strategy (MGRS) are integrated initiatives by the Council to support the delivery of the Project objectives and together set out a rigorous and clear approach to maximising the benefits across the borough. The Project has seven high level strategic objectives, two of which relate directly to sustainable transport as follows:-
- To improve public transport links across the River Mersey; and
 - Encourage the increased use of cycling and walking
- 3.6 The MGSTS aims to deliver the following key vision for sustainable travel options within Halton:-
- To identify and promote a network of high quality, safe, affordable, accessible and environmentally friendly travel measures for local residents, businesses and visitors to Halton, which support the key objectives of the LTP and the Project

4.0 KEY SECTIONS OF THE STRATEGY

4.1 The full strategy is at **Appendix 1** and comprises 5 key sections:-

1. Setting the Scene.
2. Halton's Story of Place and its Existing Transport Network.
3. National, Regional and Local Policy Context.
4. Mersey Gateway Sustainable Transport Strategy (MGSTS).
5. Measuring progress for the Sustainable Transport Strategy.

4.2 Setting the Scene

This section emphasises the significance of the MGSTS in relation to the Mersey Gateway Regeneration Strategy in the context of economic development/regeneration. It also summarises the improvements to

transport connections between Runcorn and Widnes and the development of sustainable travel via public transport, cycling and walking, as well as setting out how the MGSTS has been developed.

4.3 **Halton's Story of Place and its Existing Transport Network**

This section explores the historical context of Halton, its transport system and key issues that it faces, and how addressing the issues will be key to the Project.

- 4.4 The section also includes analysis of socio-economic and demographic trends and an assessment of existing public transport provision in the borough and associated infrastructure. Existing cycling, walking and equestrian provision are assessed and opportunities for introducing road safety measures and opportunities to enhance waterways are explored.

4.5 **National, Regional and Local Policy Context**

The MGSTS has been developed to be fully aligned with the wider transportation and planning policies, strategies and frameworks at the national, regional and local levels.

- 4.6 At the national level this has included the highly important discussion document entitled: *Towards a Sustainable Transport System Supporting Economic Growth in a Low Carbon World (TaSTS)*. TaSTS sets out the Government's response to the Stern Review on the Economics of climate change (October 2006) and The Eddington Transport Study -The Case for Action (December 2006).

- 4.7 *Delivering a Sustainable Transport System (DaSTS)* is the Government's consultation document on the transport goals, challenges and process involved in taking TaSTS forward, and sets out how regions can influence Government decision making on transport investment from 2014 onwards. The consultation ends on 27 February 2009.

- 4.8 The development of the MGSTS has considered the LTP policies of neighbouring authorities including Cheshire County Council, Warrington Borough Council and the 5 Merseyside Authorities as well as Merseytravel.

- 4.9 At the local level the MGSTS has drawn upon a number of comprehensive and integrated local policy and strategy documents. Key to these were the Halton Local Transport Plan 2006/2007-2010/11 and the Halton Unitary Development Plan (UDP) which was adopted by Halton in April 2005.

- 4.10 Other key local policy and strategy documents included the Local Development Framework (LDF), which will eventually replace the

saved UDP policies to become Halton's statutory development plan.

4.11 Finally, at the local level, both the Halton Local Area Agreement (LAA) (June 2008 - April 2011) and Halton Draft Economic Review 2008 have also been considered.

4.12 **Mersey Gateway Sustainable Transport Strategy**

This section sets out how the MGSTS aims to deliver the key vision for sustainable travel options within Halton by:

- further improving accessibility for residents living in the most deprived wards in Halton;
- reducing the future reliance on carbon intensive modes of travel through encouraging promotion of greater use of public transport, walking and cycling options; supporting the continued regeneration of Halton, by ensuring that new, high quality, sustainable transport opportunities are delivered as part of the Project and associated MGRS;
- improving the mode share of journeys into the 3 main commercial centres of Halton (Runcorn town centre, Widnes town centre and Halton Lea) by sustainable forms of transport, thereby, supporting the regeneration of the centres
- further developing new, strategic, high quality, sustainable transport links/corridors through Halton utilising the opportunities provided by the Project and, thereby, improving key Mersey Belt and Liverpool City Region linkages; and
- mitigating the impact of tolls on vulnerable groups by providing attractive alternatives to private vehicles for cross-river travel within Halton and neighbouring communities.

4.13 The MGSTS has drawn upon the findings of the First Stage Public Transport Options Study (PTOS) for Halton. A key conclusion of the PTOS was that a bus based strategy is the most effective, affordable and deliverable option for Halton that builds on existing and valuable transport facilities, particularly the Runcorn Busway (the Busway).

4.14 Tolling provides an opportunity to fund sustainable transport improvements. The impact of tolls on the New Bridge and the SJB has been forecast using the Mersey Gateway Variable Demand Transport Model. The model has been used to assess the impact of congestion and reflect the re-assignment and behavioural changes brought about

by increasing congestion over the traffic evaluation period of the Project (15 years after opening) and the effects of imposing tolls.

- 4.15 The Project delivery objective is to base toll charges at levels similar to those imposed by the Mersey Tunnels. The procurement process will determine the success of this objective and Halton is required to take a prudent view on the amount of toll revenue likely to be available to fund discount schemes for local and regular users of SJB and for sustainable transport initiatives.
- 4.16 The implementation of the MGSTS covers two distinct phases. Phase One includes initiatives that, potentially, could be funded through the minimum tolling share from the Project, the LTP, private developers and bus operators over years 2014/15 to 2024/25. Phase Two will incorporate the longer-term projects that will draw on the variety of public and private sector funding that may be available at the time, after 2024/25 although Phase Two projects may be brought forward should funding become available in the meantime (as is currently expected to be the case for the Halton Curve – Improvement Theme 9).

4.17 **Proposed Improvement Themes**

A total of 9 improvement themes have been developed and these are summarised below.

Phase One for implementation 2014/2015 to 2024/25

- 4.18 **Improvement Theme 1: First stage bus based rapid transit network for Halton.** The focus of this Improvement Theme is the development of the first stage of a new bus based rapid transit network for Halton, based on the foundation of the Busway (marketed as *Halton Rapid Transit Network - HRTN*).
- 4.19 **Improvement Theme 2: The further development of proposed new Halton Rapid Transit Network (HRTN).** This will include the introduction of a new network of complementary public transport service improvements designed to better connect key development and regeneration areas.

A key component of Improvement Themes 1 and 2 is the provision of step change improvements to cross river bus services, using the SJB.

- 4.20 **Improvement Theme 3: The further development and launch of an integrated ITSO (Integrated Transport Smartcard Organisation) compatible mobility Smartcard.** This will be developed for use by local residents and users of the SJB and the New Bridge, enabling residents, visitors and transit vehicles/passengers to easily access and use the sustainable transport network.

Detailed feasibility work is proposed to establish the estimated cost of this improvement theme.

- 4.21 **Improvement Theme 4: The further development of mobility management initiatives.** This theme focuses on the on-going development of further mobility management measures across the Borough to be delivered by Halton's award winning Neighbourhood Travel Team.
- 4.22 **Improvement Theme 5: Walking and cycling improvements.** The development of step change improvements to facilities and routes for pedestrians and cyclists across Halton. Integral to this is the development of improved links to key centres in neighbouring authorities. This theme includes the proposed Sustainable Transport Corridor between Widnes West Bank and Runcorn Old Town on the SJB and the linking of NCN62 and NCN5.
- 4.23 **Improvement Theme 6: Improvements to bus/rail interchange and railway stations in Halton.** This will include improved booking office facilities, passenger infrastructure, information, signage and secure cycle parking.

Phase Two for implementation beyond 2024/25

- 4.24 **Improvement Theme 7: The development of new strategic Park and Ride facilities across Halton**

Halton, in partnership with the Concessionaire and other key stakeholders including Warrington Borough Council, propose to carry out a comprehensive set of feasibility studies to evaluate the potential to introduce new strategic P&R sites across Halton, taking advantage of enhanced levels of local and regional accessibility afforded by the opening of the Project.

- 4.25 **Improvement Theme 8: Canal and waterway improvements**

The MGSTS also identifies further improvements to canals and waterways to support the development of further strategic transport/access improvements for passengers and freight during the longer time frame of the Strategy.

- 4.26 **Improvement Theme 9: Improvements to the Halton Curve**

In addition, to the above themes, the Strategy has identified improvements to the Halton Curve as a further theme important to the objectives of the Project. Halton Curve links Halton Junction (on the West Coast Main Line) to Frodsham Junction on the Manchester to North Wales coast line. The proposal involves the introduction of a new local passenger service linking to Liverpool Lime Street, Liverpool

South Parkway, Widnes Waterfront, Runcorn, Beechwood, Frodsham and Chester.

4.27 **Consultation**

The MGSTS was the subject of a stakeholder consultation during September and October 2008. More than 160 stakeholders, representing a wide range of interests were invited to engage in this key stakeholder exercise. An integral component of the stakeholder consultation was a consultation seminar held at the Stobart Stadium in September 2008. The consultation seminar which was well attended, included comprehensive presentations covering the MGSTS in the context of the Project, and a workshop and feedback session.

4.28 The final part of Section 4 discusses the Mersey Gateway Regeneration Strategy (MGRS). This explores a wide range of economic, social, physical and environmental opportunities for Halton that result as a direct consequence of the Project. Significantly, the MGRS recognises that the Project is much more than just a bridge across the River. The MGRS identifies five specific areas of the borough, of which two – Widnes West Bank and Runcorn Old Town have been designated as key regeneration areas.

4.29 **Measuring Progress for the Sustainable Transport Strategy**

The final section of the strategy identifies a framework for measuring the effectiveness of the MGSTS, both in terms of outputs and inputs. To assist with the measuring of progress, the output indicators and impact targets are grouped under each of the key objectives of the MGSTS.

5.0 **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

5.1 The cost of modifying the SJB and approach roads is allowed for in the Project financial model. In addition it is proposed that a contribution of £500k per annum towards delivering the proposed MGSTS is included in the costs to be met from toll revenue combined with the PFI Credits agreed with government. The financial analysis undertaken using the model based on these proposals forecast that the Project remains affordable assuming toll charges are similar to those for Mersey Tunnels but at this stage it would not be prudent to commit any higher contribution towards the MGSTS than the £500k per annum proposed. During procurement the Council will have a clearer view of the overall toll revenue that could be available for MGSTS and toll discount schemes.

5.2 The projected total costs of the various Improvement Themes which constitute Phase One of the Strategy are £24.57 million, of which £9.145m would be provided through the LTP bid process. The

£500,000 per annum contribution from tolling revenue would be dedicated towards the Improvement Themes.

- 5.3 The second phase of Improvement Themes for implementation beyond 2024/25 incorporates the longer-term projects that will draw on the variety of public and private sector funding that may be available at the time. The opportunity, will be taken however to accelerate all themes, where new funding sources become available.
- 5.4 The Project when combined with the proposed MGSTS would deliver improvements across all transport modes, assisted by a road charging regime that is very similar to a package of measures required to qualify for government funding under the Transport Innovation Fund (TIF). The Project team is investigating the merits of making a formal bid for TIF funding and the results of this investigation are expected to be reported to the Mersey Gateway Executive Board later in the year.

6.0 MERSEY GATEWAY SUSTAINABLE TRANSPORT STRATEGY SUSTAINABILITY APPRAISAL

- 6.1 The purpose of Sustainability Appraisal (SA) is to promote sustainable development through the integration of social, environmental and economic considerations into the preparation of revisions of Regional Spatial Strategies (RSS) and for new or revised Development Plan Documents (DPD) and Supplementary Planning Documents (SPD).
- 6.2 Although not a statutory requirement for the Project, an SA of the MGSTS was commissioned as a way of checking that the objectives of the MGSTS are likely to contribute to sustainability.
- 6.3 As part of the SA process, two options were assessed:
- Option One – ‘Do Nothing’ – business as usual/without MGSTS option. If the Project does not proceed, this scenario would result in adoption of the Local Transport Plan (LTP2)
 - Option Two – Implement MGSTS – assumes that the Project goes ahead
- 6.4 As statutory consultees, the SA scoping report was considered by the Environment Agency; English Heritage; and Natural England and details of their responses are included in the full Sustainability Appraisal report in **Appendix 2**.
- 6.5 The SA of MGSTS, suggests that implementation will have mainly positive impacts. The appraisal process has prompted a number of enhancements to the MGSTS, including increased emphasis on the issue of air quality and climate change and; the proposed introduction of a SMART card to facilitate flexible travel to help address issues of

deprivation and low incomes in Halton.

7.0 POLICY IMPLICATIONS

7.1 The Project is supported by local policy contained in the UDP and, in particular, strategic policy S14 which states:

“A scheme for a new crossing of the River Mersey east of the existing SJB will be promoted to relieve congestion on the existing bridge as part of an integrated transport system for Halton and the wider regional transport network. Any proposed route of the new crossing will be the subject of an environmental assessment.”

8.0 OTHER IMPLICATIONS

8.1 There are no other implications arising from this report.

9.0 IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COUNCIL'S PRIORITIES

9.1 Children and Young People in Halton

The enhancements to public transport will improve accessibility and mobility for children and young people in the borough and the enhanced cycling and walking provision will contribute to improving their health.

9.2 Employment, Learning and Skills in Halton

The delinking of the SJB and improvements to public transport will assist in removing any real or perceived barriers to employment opportunities for residents.

9.3 A Healthy Halton

The enhanced walking and cycling provision, arising from the MGSTS, will have a direct bearing on influencing the health and physical wellbeing of the boroughs residents, regardless of their age.

The MGSTS also has an important part to play in reducing vehicle emissions by encouraging the use of more sustainable forms of transport.

9.4 A Safer Halton

The reduction in demand on the SJB, brought about by the delinking, will assist in reducing accidents and resultant casualties.

9.5 Halton's Urban Renewal

The proposed MGSTS will further the Council's Urban Renewal overall aim:

"To transform the urban fabric and infrastructure, to develop exciting places and spaces and to create a vibrant and accessible borough that makes Halton a place where people are proud to live and see a promising future for themselves and their families."

10.0 RISK ANALYSIS

10.1 The MGSTS provides a one-off opportunity to create the step change improvements and the development of a sustainable transport corridor across the SJB. Without the new bridge this core component of the proposed improvements will not happen.

10.2 The proposed improvements to public transport and facilities for cycling and walking will mitigate the adverse impact of tolling on the Council's social inclusion objectives by offering better travel choices for all residents of Halton and particularly those who do not have access to private vehicles.

10.3 During the construction phase, consideration will need to be given to maintaining effective transport links within the borough to minimise disruption for both the borough's residents and businesses.

11.0 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY ISSUES

11.1 The new Mersey Crossing will improve accessibility to services, education and employment opportunities for all.

12.0 REASON FOR DECISION

12.1 By adopting this report as Council policy, the document will have significant weight in the consideration of the various planning applications for Mersey Gateway that are now with Government.

13.0 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED AND REJECTED

13.1 The recommended strategy embraces a range of transport interventions and initiatives, which have been prioritised based on funding projections and assumptions. Implementation will be flexible taking into account a more detailed assessment of specific projects and options prior to committing proposals.

14.0 IMPLEMENTATION DATE

14.1 MGSTS is designed to deliver integrated transport improvements facilitated by the new crossing due to open in late 2014.

**15.0 LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS UNDER SECTION 100D OF THE
LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972**

15.1 None.