The Mersey Gateway Project is a major project to build a new toll bridge over the Mersey between the towns of Runcorn and Widnes.

The project also includes or facilitates:

- plans to develop and integrate public transport, cycle and pedestrian links across Halton
- plans to kick start a major 20-year regeneration programme for Halton
- improving regional transport links to encourage new and inward investment and
- road user charges on the existing Silver Jubilee Bridge between the two towns.

The new bridge will:

- cross the river around 1.5 kilometres to the east of the Silver Jubilee Bridge
- be a tolled crossing with a suggested speed limit of 60mph
- have three lanes across the Mersey in each direction
- link the Central Expressway in Runcorn with the Eastern Bypass and Speke Road in Widnes
- mean an estimated 4,640 new jobs through direct employment, regeneration activity and inward investment
- generate an estimated £61.9 million a year in Gross Value Added from the new jobs by 2030.
Key benefits

- reduced congestion and improved journey times
- new jobs, homes and business opportunities
- more reliable journeys
- improved health and reduced air pollution
- improved public transport.
The Silver Jubilee Bridge

Built in 1961, and now crossed by over 30 million users every year - more than ten times the amount it initially carried - the Silver Jubilee Bridge (SJB) is the only route for cars to cross the Mersey through Halton and a notorious traffic bottleneck.

When the new bridge opens, the SJB will be subject to road user charges, but it will be free for buses, cyclists and pedestrians.

Around 80% of traffic will use the new bridge and the SJB will be reconfigured with one lane of traffic in each direction alongside dedicated space for cyclists and pedestrians.

Objectives

The objectives of the Project are to:

- relieve the congested Silver Jubilee Bridge (SJB) and better provide for local transport needs
- apply minimum toll charges to both the new bridge and the SJB to allow the project to be funded
- improve accessibility to maximise local development and regional economic growth opportunities
- improve local air quality and enhance the general urban environment
- improve public transport links across the river
- encourage the increased use of cycling and walking, and
- restore effective network resilience for transport across the River Mersey.

Benefits

The project will bring huge estimated benefits for people and businesses in Halton, the Liverpool city-region, Cheshire and across the north west. This includes:

Economic benefits:
- 470 permanent full time equivalent jobs during the construction phase
- 4,640 permanent new jobs as a result of the operation of the Mersey Gateway, regeneration activity and inward investment

The jobs will come in 3 areas:
- 98 direct jobs operating and maintaining the bridge and tolling system
- 1,500 new jobs through inward investment, and
- 3,040 new jobs from activities through the Mersey Gateway Regeneration Strategy

- £61.9 million a year in Gross Value Added from the new jobs by 2030.

It will also support sustained growth at Liverpool Ports and Liverpool John Lennon Airport.

Transport benefits
- reductions in journey times of up to 10 minutes in peak periods
- increase in journey time reliability
- less congestion resulting in lower carbon emissions
- reductions in the cost of accidents of up to £39 million
- 85% less traffic using the Silver Jubilee Bridge, freeing it up for use as a local bridge
- increased network resilience and civil contingencies
- reductions in maintenance delays as a result of reduced congestion, and
- a major strategic new transport route linking the Liverpool city-region and the north west to the rest of the country.

Social benefits
- improvements to public transport facilities
- improvements to walking and cycling facilities
- improved health as a result of reduced air pollution, and
- safer new routes for cyclists, and pedestrians across and around the river.

The new bridge

The proposed bridge design is based on a cable-stay structure similar to the second Severn Crossing, but with three towers. It will be 2300m long with a river span of 1000m. The main bridge spans will be supported by cable stays attached to the towers rising up to a maximum of 135m above the river bed.
Sustainable transport
A long-term, sustainable transport strategy has been commissioned to identify alternative means of transport not subject to tolls to ensure that accessibility and links across Halton are maintained.

The proposed options, which will be partly funded by toll revenue, include:

- a green sustainable transport corridor across SJB
- enhancement of borough wide walking and cycling facilities
- improvements to the Runcorn Busway
- branding of popular bus routes
- a ‘smart card’ ticketing system for all forms of transport
- reviewing bus stop locations to link services more effectively and
- expanding real-time information displays at bus stops.

Tolling
Once it opens in 2014, both the new bridge and the existing Silver Jubilee Bridge will be subject to tolls/charges. The exact toll/charge levels are still to be determined but they are likely to be similar to the cost of travelling through one of the Mersey Tunnels.

Costs and funding
The cost of the Mersey Gateway is £431 million (using March 2007 prices). The outturn cost will be subject to inflation. The funding package agreed with Government provides for inflation at around 6% per annum.

Central government is providing funding of £86 million and £123 million in Private Finance Initiative (PFI) credits, with the remainder being raised through private finance.

In overall terms, the private sector is funding the majority of the project. The company appointed to build and operate the bridge will use toll revenue from a 30-year concession to pay off a loan that funds the construction of the scheme.

The project team is actively investigating the best way to provide discounts to groups like local people and regular users.

Although it is not practical to confirm exactly what opening toll/charge levels will be until 2010 or 2011, the funding agreement with the government includes a significant sum to subsidise revenue, which will help to minimise tolls/charges.

About Halton
Halton is part of the Liverpool City-Region in North West England. It sits on either side of the River Mersey at its lowest bridging point.

It is made up of the twin towns of Widnes and Runcorn together with the villages of Hale, Moore, Daresbury and Preston Brook.

Regeneration areas
The Mersey Gateway Project is a unique opportunity to kick-start a long-term regeneration programme in Halton.

The regeneration strategy covers five of the borough’s most deprived areas (see map right). It spreads across 20 square kilometers and provides a bold and challenging 20-year vision for regeneration in Halton.

Timetable
If everything is approved, the new bridge is due to open in 2014. Before that happens, there are a number of important stepping stones along the way:

- May 2009: Public inquiry begins
- early 2010: Outcome of public inquiry announced
- 2010: Invite tenders from companies interested in building and operating the project
- 2011: Appoint the successful company and begin construction
- 2014: Mersey Gateway Bridge opens

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