

THE MERSEY GATEWAY BRIDGE PROJECT: CHARGING AHEAD AND REDUCING CARBON EMISSIONS



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A major new road building scheme that is largely paid for by its users, has survived the Government Spending Review and is set to reduce carbon emissions sounds too good to be true. The Mersey Gateway Project proves otherwise.

The disciplines of engineering, architecture, and traffic management are regular partners when it comes to constructing new bridges.

Add to that regeneration, management of contaminated land and the creation of a 28.5 hectare nature reserve and you have a complex project.

The Mersey Gateway Project is a major scheme that is bringing together all these disciplines to build a new six-lane toll bridge over the Mersey between the towns of Runcorn and Widnes.

The two towns both lie in the borough of Halton, in north west England, which is somewhat unusual amongst local authorities in that it is effectively split in two by a major geographical feature (in this case the River Mersey), with the two halves currently linked by just a single road bridge.

Therefore, when there is any kind of problem with this bridge, the two halves of the borough

are effectively cut off from each other. The idea of adding a second bridge to boost capacity and provide greater resilience to the road network has been around for the best part of two decades.

Since successfully negotiating the Spending Review and being granted Planning Approval in the last two months of 2010 the project stands at the cusp of delivery.

Halton Borough Council, which is the main promoter of the Mersey Gateway project, has launched the first stage in its procurement strategy that will lead to the appointment of a Design, Build, Finance, and Operate contractor who will work in partnership with the Council in a relationship expected to last for thirty years.

The challenging project is to be funded through toll revenue supported by government grants, which are sufficient to keep toll charges affordable in a region of relatively high social

deprivation. This mix of funding has proved to be resilient against the economic downturn and the deficit reduction measures now taking place.

THE PROBLEM

Halton, and its neighbours in south Merseyside and north Cheshire, straddle the river but currently only have one bridge (the Silver Jubilee Bridge) covering the 30 miles between the tolled tunnels connecting Liverpool with the Wirral, and the crossings near Warrington, which include the M6 motorway viaduct at Thelwall. Improvements to this failing transport system are now well overdue.

The existing crossing was originally built in 1961 and, despite work to upgrade it in 1977 (hence its name), still carries daily volumes in excess of 80,000 vehicles. Congestion is, therefore, a frequent occurrence, which causes obvious problems in terms of pollution, as well as delays to the general public and businesses. There are also problems associated with the fact that, as a borough split in two by a major river, Halton tends to have its major resources (such as its main hospital) on either one side of the Mersey or the other, leading to access issues if there is any problem with the existing bridge.

The poor resilience of the local transport system is also a



serious concern to the region's emergency planning team that routinely assesses risk arising from 20 significant industrial sites in the area. If there is an incident at one of these sites and the existing bridge is unavailable due to an accident, or congestion, then this has a significant impact for the fire and police services. The chief constables of both Merseyside and Cheshire are consequently very strong supporters of the new bridge.

The poor transport performance and reliability concerns combine to produce a powerful economic case for the new bridge. There are also considerable environmental benefits by keeping traffic moving and by managing the growth in traffic through the tolling proposals.

Tolling even at the relatively modest cost we envisage, at £1.50 for a car journey – which will have resonance with users as it is the same as today's Mersey Tunnel rates – does moderate the use of the private car, particularly reducing the number of the short distance car trips crossing the river. To improve the alternative public transport options, part of the project funding will be used to support bus services. Overall, the combination of removing congestion and moving some car travel to improved public transport is expected to reduce carbon emissions – perhaps a unique outcome for a major road project in the UK?

The Council's enthusiasm for the economic benefits of the new bridge is backed up by several major business enterprises in the region. One of the UK's biggest road haulage and logistics companies, Eddie Stobart, for example (which is the owner of a major intermodal terminal – the Mersey

Multimodal Gateway – in Halton), is a prominent advocate of the new bridge (tolls and all), as is Peel Holdings, the owner and operator of the Manchester Ship Canal (which the new bridge would span) and Liverpool's John Lennon Airport.

The new bridge will:

- be scheduled to open in 2016
- be over 70% funded by the private sector through toll revenues
- mean an estimated 4,640 new jobs through direct employment, regeneration activity and inward investment
- be a tolled crossing with a speed limit of 60mph
- allow the creation of a green, sustainable transport corridor across the existing Silver Jubilee Bridge
- be a major strategic new transport route linking the Liverpool city-region and the north west to the rest of the country.

PROCUREMENT BEGINS AS PLANNING APPROVAL IS GRANTED

In December 2010, Halton Borough Council received planning approval from the Secretaries of State and the Council is in the process of concluding final funding considerations with the Department for Transport. Procurement preparation commenced in spring 2011, following a final consultation with interested suppliers. We expect to begin the dialogue phase in September of this year and appoint a partner in April-June of 2012.

The plan is to commence construction with the advanced works starting towards the end of next year and the new bridge opening in 2016.



The delivery cost, of over £600m, will support the construction sector and a private sector led economic recovery in an area likely to feel the spending cuts more than most. The Council and Government are about to embark on a much needed infrastructure scheme funded mainly by those benefiting from the improvements.

Exhaustive contaminated land studies, traffic modelling and legal procedures were required to get this far, but as our thoughts turn towards the construction period itself the focus returns to the practical impact that this project will have on the ground. Disruption is inevitable during construction, and we must prepare and work with local communities to ensure they are involved and

forewarned about the detailed plans.

The successful private sector partner will have a key role to play in working alongside the Council to ensure that the delivery of the project meets the aspirations of the authority and the demands of local people.

Mersey Gateway has the potential to be a great example of science and technology combining with policy innovation and on the ground regeneration to create jobs and revive local communities. This could be an example of modern localism that can be considered elsewhere. Our challenge over the next four years is to take that potential and make it a reality.

You can find out more about the progress of the Mersey Gateway Project at www.merseygateway.co.uk.

