

REPORT TO: Environment and Urban Renewal Policy & Performance Board

DATE: 15 February 2023

REPORTING OFFICER: Operational Director, Economy, Enterprise & Property

PORTFOLIO: Leadership on Cheshire Sub-Regional matters and Major Projects

SUBJECT: Update on Mersey Gateway Regeneration

WARD(S) Boroughwide

1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide an update to the Environment and Urban Renewal PPB on how the construction of the Mersey Gateway is contributing to the development and delivery of the borough's regeneration priorities

2.0 RECOMMENDED: That the report be noted.

3.0 SUPPORTING INFORMATION

3.1 Prior to the opening of the Mersey Gateway, the Council approved the Mersey Gateway Regeneration Plan (MGRP). The purpose of the Plan is to facilitate the development of a steady pipeline of regeneration and development opportunities over a 10–15-year period. The project pipeline also seeks to use the Mersey Gateway branding as more than the construction of a bridge but an opportunity to present a series of interrelated projects and programmes in a coherent and consistent way. It has served as a framework and provides focus for the Council and its partners to make effective investment decisions relating to a wide range of potential economic regeneration opportunities in the Borough. It has enabled the Council to balance long-term objectives with shorter term necessities and opportunities (such as funding). This has ultimately made it easier to promote the Borough's regeneration opportunities to potential future investors.

3.2 Eight priority impact areas were identified. Given the long-term nature of the Plan, these areas are at different stages of development. A copy of the MGRP and a description of the priority impact areas is contained within appendix 1. The main outputs and outcomes of the MGRP are to deliver economic prosperity to the borough through the creation of jobs (20,000) and bringing forward of employment land (200 hectares); new homes (3,000). Appendix 2

summarises the wider economic benefits that have been generated by the opening of the Mersey Gateway.

3.3 There are also a number of strategic benefits that have emerged post Mersey Gateway construction which should not be understated.

3.4 The construction of a 'new' bridge presented an opportunity to 'reimagine' the 'old' Silver Jubilee Bridge leading to successful bids for sustainable transport as well as funding for the regeneration of Runcorn and the 'Runcorn Station Quarter' to include a new Runcorn Station building. In parallel, the delinking of the former Silver Jubilee Bridge Trumpet Loop has enabled the Council to repurpose Weston Point Expressway, therefore, strengthening the business case for reenergising West Runcorn (including improved access to the Port of Weston) through the approval of the Freeport.

3.5 The construction of the Mersey Gateway and MGRP have provided the backdrop for shaping and integrating the borough's spatial plan (the Delivery Allocations and Land Plan) through the following:

The designation of Employment Renewal Areas to protect and prioritise these locations for renewal, investment and local job creation (i.e., Astmoor, Port of Weston and Port of Runcorn Expansion Land, Everite Road).

This has helped to ensure that the borough is regarded as a living and working borough, with a balance of homes and jobs. The MGRP provided the basis for the designation of three Regeneration Areas within the Spatial Plan:

- Halebank and Ditton Corridor, Widnes (expanded 3MG area of influence/opportunity).
- South Widnes (incorporating Waterfront, West Bank and Moor Lane Area).
- West Runcorn (employment growth areas).

Within these areas, the MGRP has also directly led to the allocation of specific priority sites / projects such as Foundry Lane Residential Allocation, 3MG North Employment Allocation (Back 9 of Widnes Golf Course) and West Bank Local Centre.

3.6 Feedback from business has been positive. For example, improvements in nimble and rapid movement within and beyond Halton are reported by business which subsequently improve economic activity. Anecdotally, businesses are reporting that the Gateway impacts on transport journey times and facilitates "just-in-time" technologies, thus reducing production costs.

There are also reports of positive Impacts on individuals and the labour market particularly by supporting attracting highly skilled individuals to highly skilled vacancies and reinforcing workforce resilience with retaining those individuals in the post.

There has been an impact on competition in local markets increasing aggregate salaries, but this issue could be distorted by wider labour market issues impacting in a post-pandemic world with the impact of Brexit.

Immediately following the opening of the Gateway, a baseline for the immediate impact on inward investment was not provided. However, five years since the construction of the Mersey Gateway, there are no reports of a mass-exodus of businesses from Halton which was feared by some commentators. Quite the opposite is true when it comes to available commercial units where there is a notable shortage for some units. Therefore, it appears that the option and desire to stay in Halton is strong.

Journey times are reported to be on average 10 minutes shorter now than they were before the opening of the Gateway improving quality of life for residents, increasing efficiency for business and making the journey to and through Halton much better and easier to plan.

3.7 Work is ongoing to deliver the Key Impact Areas as follows:

3.7.1 **West Runcorn Employment Growth Area** – this comprises a coastal arc of existing employment areas sitting between the Weston Point Expressway and the Manchester Ship Canal / Weaver Navigation, all with waterfront aspects.

It contains a number of strategic assets which can catalyse growth: Port of Runcorn, Port of Weston and Inovyn Campus.

Work has focused on the potential to deliver ‘green growth’ through a multi-modal logistics, supply chain and business cluster centred on the Ports of Runcorn and Weston, complemented by opportunities for advanced manufacturing and high energy end users within the adjoining INOVYN Campus.

A Masterplan has been adopted for the area and it forms part of the Freeport proposition outlined above.

3.7.2 **Astmoor** - A 1960’s planned industrial estate, built as part of Runcorn New Town. Compared to the wider employment offer in East Runcorn, Astmoor has underperformed for a number of years. Prominence and accessibility brought by the Mersey Gateway Crossing can act as catalyst to address its underperformance and create a modern business park environment.

Approximately 7 hectares of residual project land have been handed back to the Council following completion of the construction phase. This represents a significant asset for the Council. A Masterplan and Delivery Plan has been developed and a Development Partner has been appointed. Funding from the Capital Programme has been secured to bring forward development sites to the market and commence works to Astmoor Road.

3.7.3 Halton Lea – Halton Lea is an integral part of Runcorn, but whilst the local economy has continued to grow, Halton Lea faces specific challenges around a lack of economic activity amongst residents, lack of connectivity within the area, and poor health outcomes. An Investment Plan was produced which sets out a package of interventions to create a healthier, greener and more connected Halton Lea. This plan enacts and builds on the Halton Healthy New Town Masterplan, and we have engaged with the community and with businesses to identify how to achieve the opportunities that are available. The Investment Plan formed the basis for a bid to the Levelling Up Fund which was unsuccessful. Nevertheless, partners are now seeking funding from the Liverpool City Region Strategic Investment Fund, Sustainable Transport Fund and One Public Estate Brown Field Land Fund to deliver: the delivery of 464 new homes in four regenerated neighbourhoods; a new multi-purpose community hub in the local shopping centre delivering health and wellbeing services that will facilitate another 29,000 sessions of clinical treatment, support, and advice; improved cycling and pedestrian access to nearby employment sites.

3.7.4 West Bank – West Bank forms a peninsula that benefits from an extensive waterfront. It sits to the south of Widnes Town Centre but is also close to Runcorn Old Town Centre and Runcorn Mainline Station which are accessible via the Silver Jubilee Bridge. It has a rich history and identity which provide the ingredients for a successful mixed use urban neighbourhood; but it also has challenges holding back its potential.

The Mersey Gateway Project is changing and breathing new life into West Bank through the development and delivery of the handback sites, and the new link road between the Widnes Loops and West Bank with improved connectivity to West Bank, 3MG East/Viking Park. Regarding the handback sites, the Council is undertaking feasibility work to determine improved accessibility to sites and has facilitated a land exchange with a local business to allow for a housing development to progress in another part of the borough.

3.7.5 Widnes Waterfront – Widnes Waterfront was designated as an Economic Development Zone which allowed for physical infrastructure improvements to take place. The Council's role has been to work with local businesses to market sites within the area from the perspective of enhanced connections and connectivity

arising from the close proximity to the Mersey Gateway.

- 3.7.6 **3MG Ditton Corridor** – occupies a strategic location on the ‘Speke Approaches’ and encompasses the Mersey Multimodal Gateway logistics hub, it also has a number of areas of vacant and underutilised land and buildings in need of renewal and modernisation.

The distinctive residential community of Halebank provides a complementary housing offer within the immediate locality with opportunities to growth.

The impact area also includes the former Ditton Railway Station, located on the Liverpool Branch of the West Coast Main Line; it has been a long-standing aspiration of the Council to see this station reopened. The Council’s investment in the area is producing results and aligned with improved road connections, sites have been sold for speculative development. Work is also focusing on transforming former employment land for residential use, as is the case with Foundry Lane which has secured funding from the Brownfield Land Fund.

- 3.7.7 **Runcorn Old Town** – as mentioned above, the construction of the Mersey Gateway has presented an opportunity to repurpose the Silver Jubilee Bridge. However, in addition, the Mersey Gateway Bridge has emphasised the latent potential of Runcorn Old Town in terms of communications, connections and connectivity and helped to strengthen a robust proposition to Government to secure Town Deal Funding. 7 projects have been identified to support the regeneration of the town, which are at various stages of development.

- 3.7.8 **Southern Widnes** - sits between the Town Centre and strategic entry points into Widnes. Despite this, the area does not have a clear role, has fragmented land ownership and has developed in an ad hoc way.

As a prominent arrival point into Widnes, it is crucial that this area presents a good first impression for visitors. Consequently, the Council has commenced the development of the Halton Leisure Centre on Moor Lane and is currently considering options for the development of the ‘Kingsway Quarter’, land comprising the former Magistrates Court and Police Station, as well as the existing leisure centre site.

4.0 **POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

- 4.1 Sections 3.1 to 3.7 serve to demonstrate that the Council’s main policy objective was to ensure that the Mersey Gateway project was ‘more than the construction of a bridge’. Whilst there have been

undoubted productivity gains and improved journey times resulting from the construction of the bridge, it has served as the catalyst for wider regeneration and investment in the Borough.

5.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

5.1 There are no financial implications arising from this report

6.0 IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COUNCIL'S PRIORITIES

6.1 Children & Young People in Halton

None

6.2 Employment, Learning & Skills in Halton

None

6.3 A Healthy Halton

None

6.4 A Safer Halton

None

6.5 Halton's Urban Renewal

None

7.0 RISK ANALYSIS

7.1 There are no risks associated with this update report.

8.0 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY ISSUES

8.1 There are no Equality and Diversity implications arising from this report.

9.0 CLIMATE CHANGE IMPLICATIONS

9.1 As reported above, the Mersey Gateway bridge has improved journey times, resulting in less carbon emissions being produced by vehicles. The MRGP also contains a section on promoting connections with the borough's green assets through 'a necklace of existing green spaces, promenades and visitor destinations, connected by circular trails for cycling and walking, with key access points...By improving access and stimulating increased leisure use, this will introduce greater numbers to the landscape of the Estuary, challenging perceptions and creating an improved environment for investment.

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

None under the meaning of the Act.