

House of Commons: Written Statement (HCWS434)

Department for Transport

Written Statement made by: **Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones)** on 24 Jan 2017.

Mersey Gateway Transport

The Government supports investment in the transport network given the benefits it provides to the economy. That is why we are providing substantial funding for the Mersey Gateway Bridge scheme in Halton.

In addition, the Government is delivering a number of transport improvements in and around Halton. These include:

- the Halton Curve which will enable passenger services from North Wales and West Cheshire to directly access Liverpool City Centre and Liverpool John Lennon airport;
- Warrington Waterfront Transport Infrastructure Scheme, a package of highway investment, including a bridge over the River Mersey, which opens up commercial land and alleviates congestion to the south of Warrington Town Centre;
- the Omega J8 (M62) Highway Improvements to support the rapid and significant expansion of the Omega employment site now employing over 5,000 people; and
- access Improvements to Knowsley Industrial Park and A5300 Knowsley Expressway Improvements, highway investments to support access to one of the major employment sites in Liverpool City Region.

As part of the Department for Transport's Road Investment Strategy, Highways England will deliver the M56 J11a scheme to provide a new junction with the Mersey Gateway Bridge which will support the Daresbury Enterprise Zone, key to the Knowledge economy in the North West.

In 2015 the Government announced it would look at the feasibility of extending Mersey Gateway bridge toll discounts to residents of Cheshire West & Chester and Warrington. The Department has undertaken detailed work and evaluated options for how this could happen, what the costs would be and what this would do to the contracts already signed by Halton Borough Council to deliver the scheme and the tolling infrastructure.

The feasibility work, considered the legal position and the costs to the taxpayer and concluded that free tolling will not be extended beyond Halton Borough Council.

The Government has already provided £86m to Halton to develop the scheme, to pay for land and to deal with land contamination. Once the scheme opens, the Government will also be providing a further substantial contribution of £288m to help fund both the cost of the bridge and also to increase the funds available to enable residents of Halton to use the bridge for free.

It is Government policy that users of estuarial crossings should help pay for the benefits they receive. The Mersey Gateway is no different. As is the case with the Dartford Crossings, an exception is to be made for residents of Halton given that the existing Silver Jubilee Crossing is the only road link between the two halves of the Borough. Other users will have a range of frequent user discounts available to them to use a crossing that will deliver considerable congestion and journey time improvements to boost the region's economy.

In evaluating the options open to the Government we have considered a number of issues. On the legal side, the feasibility work showed there would be a significant risk of a successful legal challenge to a decision to extend free tolling to some local Councils and not others. On the cost side extending free tolling to only a handful of local Councils would still be at a substantial cost to the taxpayer. An extension of user discounts to not just Cheshire West & Chester and Warrington, as originally suggested, but also to the other three authorities that neighbour Halton (Knowsley, Liverpool City Council and St Helens), would be at an estimated cost of £604m to the public purse. If, as is the case with Halton, the cost was to be split between the Government and local authorities, £377m would fall to the five local Councils. For all these reasons we have taken the decision not to extend free tolling beyond Halton.

The Mersey Gateway Bridge is on target for opening in autumn 2017 which is a great testimony to the hard work that all parties including Halton Borough Council have put into this scheme.