1. **Introduction**

1.1 Merseytravel, in conjunction with other parties such as the Welsh Government, Halton Borough Council and TAITH (which is a legally constituted joint committee of the six North Wales county authorities established for the purpose of developing and implementing actions and strategies for transport in north Wales), is keen to develop the Halton Curve to allow the provision of improved links between the Liverpool City Region, the wider North West and North Wales.

1.2 This report seeks to take the project forward and provide up to £500,000 for the development of a modified GRIP* 3 (single option selection) design for the project.

* GRIP: Network Rail’s internal process “Guide to Rail Investment in Projects”

2. **Background**

2.1 The Curve links the Chester/Manchester and Liverpool/Crewe lines at Frodsham Junction. It is a single line, signalled for northbound trains only, with only a limited service. This is specifically a parliamentary service, (these are train services which are operated very infrequently to avoid the cost of formal closure of the route). The Halton Curve is identified in Merseytravel's Rail Strategy (2006) as a possible development of the network. Appendix A provides a map showing the location of the Curve in relation to other rail lines and the North West. Appendix B provides details of the sporadic level of service which has existed on the Link in recent years.

2.2 The development of the Link will improve connectivity between the Liverpool City Region, Cheshire West and Chester and North Wales. This will improve access to employment, educational and recreational activities and improve the regions links to Liverpool Airport.

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2.3 The development of the link will allow the further development of freight links and could also be used as a diversionary route for West Coast services.

2.4 The work undertaken to date includes:

(a) A GRIP 3 single option study, undertaken in 2007, which identifies the preferred option and the cost to deliver this. This does not, to date, include any design work and

(b) A demand study, undertaken in 2009, which included some operational cost work indicated that there is a reasonable business case to reopen the line to two way passenger operation.

2.5 The cost to deliver the project is expected to be approximately £10.5m and has been submitted as a major project within Merseyside. This is less than the £16m recently suggested by Network Rail, and the £12.4m included in the Devolved Major Scheme bid, but is dependent on the work being undertaken alongside other Network Rail route work which is due to take place in 2016.

2.6 The project has been identified as a potential devolved major project; the project ranked 28 out of 36 proposed projects. The project did not perform well within the prioritisation process mainly due to the fact that the prioritisation methodology focuses on benefits only within the Liverpool City Region. This creates a problem with respect to the Halton Curve project as a significant element of the benefits lie outside of the Liverpool City Region and are, therefore, not considered when prioritised.

2.7 A further demand study is currently being procured which will refresh the 2009 study. Due to specific economic data not being available until February 2014 this work has yet to commence but is expected to be complete in the first quarter of 2014. This work is being funded jointly by Merseytravel and the Welsh Government.

2.8 The demand work being undertaken will include the following workstreams:

(a) assess the economic case for reopening the Halton Curve to new passenger services between:
   - Liverpool, Runcorn, Frodsham, Chester.
   - Liverpool, Runcorn, Frodsham, Chester and Llandudno; and
(b) gain an up to date understanding of the cost and operational implications of delivering the above services.

2.9 The study work will be based on 2011 census data and will consider future developments which are likely to take place alongside the line. It will specifically focus on the information required to fulfil the needs of the devolved major scheme process and will identify the areas which will benefit from the project being delivered - including those areas outside of the City Region.

3. **Proposal**

3.1 It is proposed that alongside the demand work the infrastructure work should be developed to a modified GRIP 3 level, single option selection, level and will effectively provide an outline design for the project. This work will be close to GRIP 4 level.

3.2 The proposed scheme to develop this line to allow trains to operate in both directions would involve the installation of new crossovers at Halton and Frodsham junctions with some upgrade to the track. Network Rail has recently priced this work at £16m which is higher than originally envisaged. However they have suggested that if the work could be delivered alongside their own work being undertaken between Weaver and Wavertree Junctions in 2016 then the work could be delivered for £10.5m.

3.3 The cost to deliver the modified GRIP 3 study is expected to be in the region of £500,000. Merseytravel intends to meet in early 2014 with interested parties regarding the development of the project including Halton Borough Council, the Welsh Government, TAITH, the Liverpool City Region LEP and the Warrington and Cheshire LEP. These stakeholders, who have all shown an interest in the development of the Curve, will be asked to provide financial support for the project.

3.4 However, in order to ensure that the project is progressed with some urgency and to meet with the required Network Rail timescales for delivery of the project in 2016, it is proposed that Merseytravel should initially underwrite this element of the project. This will allow Network Rail to undertake the necessary internal approvals process to take the project forward.

3.5 It has been suggested that one of the reasons for difficulty in developing wider support for this project is the name of the project. The use of the project title “Halton Curve” suggests that the project benefits fall to Halton and Halton alone. Clearly this is not the case and it is suggested therefore that the project
should be known as the Mersey Dee Link to demonstrate that
the benefits from the project fall to a much wider area. This will
be discussed with other stakeholders to ensure a consensus is
reached on the preferred name.

3.6 The GRIP study will be taken forward through Network Rail. A
Basic Services Agreement will be required to be put in place for
the work.

4. **Timescales**

4.1 The demand study will be complete in the first quarter of 2014.

4.2 The modified GRIP 3 work is expected to take approximately 6 to 12
months to deliver. This is a complex piece of work which will take
some time to design up as well as obtaining the necessary approvals
to take forward within Network Rail.

5. **Financial Implications**

5.1 The cost of the updated GRIP 3 study is expected to cost £500,000
as advised contributions will be sought from other interested parties.

5.2 It is possible that a small element of the work will fall in 2013/14,
however the majority of the work will fall in 2014/15 and it is expected
that the full costs will fall in 2014/15. This will be included in the
budgeted expenditure for 1214/15

6. **Equality Impact Assessment**

An equality impact assessment will be undertaken as part of the project
where required.

7. **Environmental Implications**

The project will promote the use of rail travel and also enhance the
development of freight links.

8. **Risk Assessment**

8.1 The project cost has been estimated at £500,000. It is possible that
this might increase if, during the design process, there are particularly
difficult issues to deal with. However this is unlikely to be the case at
this stage of the development process.

8.2 The design process will play an integral part in the development of a
risk register for the actual delivery of the improvement.
9. **Conclusions**

9.1 The development of the Halton Curve/Mersey Dee Link will allow an improved service to operate between Liverpool and North Wales and surrounding areas.

9.2 It is important that a design is developed in order to take possible advantage of the track work which Network Rail will be undertaking in 2016. Merseytravel has previously funded a GRIP 3 option development study and the next step in this process is development of a GRIP 4 single option selection.

9.3 The development of this project is identified in the Merseyside Rail Strategy 2006 and aims to improve public transport links into the Liverpool City Region and across the north west.

10. **Recommendations**

It is recommended that the Authority:

(a) approve the release of £500,000 from the capital programme to undertake the updated GRIP 3 single option selection study, £140,000 to be funded in 2013/14 and £360,000 in 2014/15;

(b) instruct officers to seek contributions to the study work from organisations across the north west; and

(c) to provide update reports as appropriate to the Authority

**Background Papers**

None.

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