

# PUTTING ST HELENS ON THE RAIL MAP

By Andrew Brownlow, transport spokesman for the St Helens Green Party

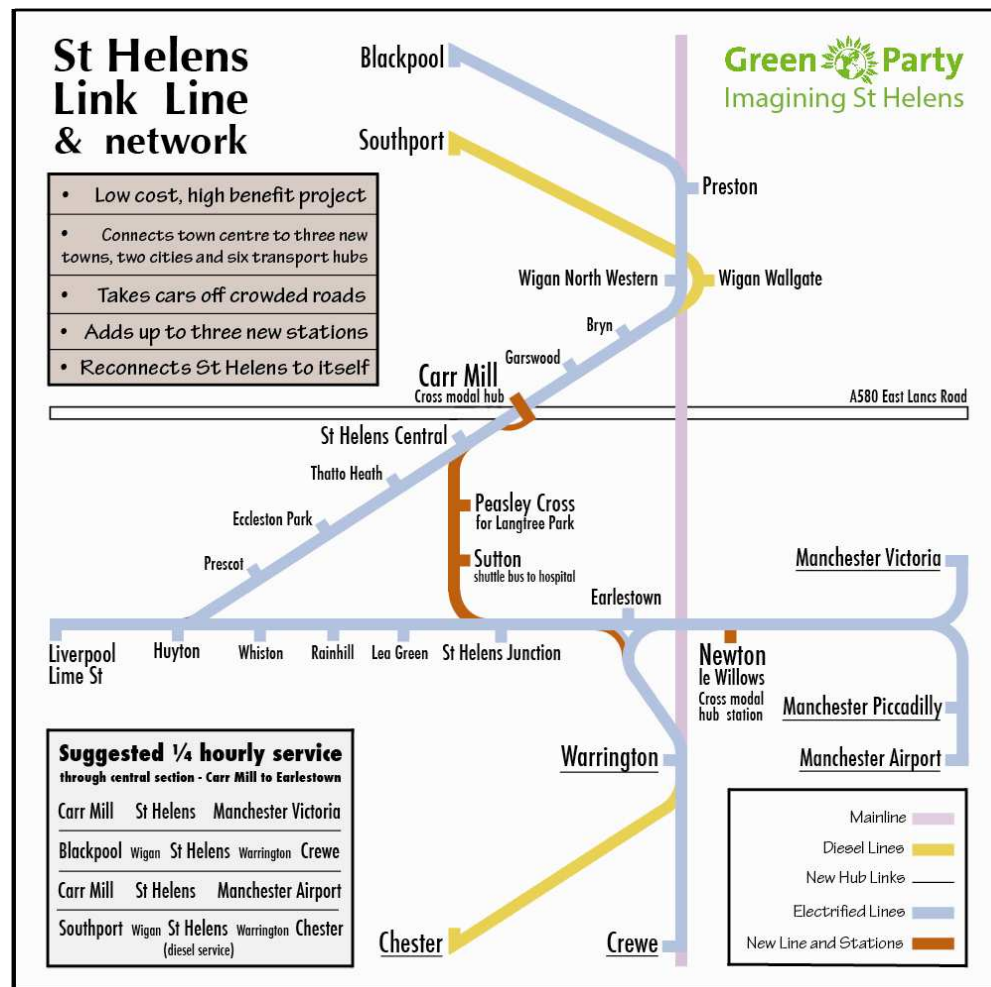
Currently, if you travel from St Helens Central rail station, you can go direct to four major destinations: Liverpool, Wigan, Preston and Blackpool. But, if things go right, you could soon be able to get to as many as ten. And from those, many more.

For fifty years, St Helens has been sidelined and forgotten in transport terms. Accidentally off the mainline and subject to harsh Beeching cuts, it lost its historic links to Widnes, Southport and, from the town centre at least, Manchester.

Due to road and house building, some of these old links may sadly never be restored. Half of the old line to Widnes is now a road. The dismantled route through Rainford has had houses built on it in two different clusters. And the harsh reality is that only routes with strategic, regional significance stand any chance of getting government funding.

But just such a route runs right through the heart of St Helens. And rail, at long last, is back in fashion. For a surprisingly small price tag, St Helens could soon be back on the rail map, sitting at the heart of its very own network.

You read that right. Not Liverpool. St Helens!



## **DEVOLVED TRANSPORT POWERS**

Under 2008's Local Transport Act, city regions - in practice, groups of Metropolitan Borough Councils – can apply to the Department for Transport (DfT) for devolved powers to invest in major transport projects. Our

region, the Liverpool City Region, will include the five metropolitan boroughs of Merseyside - Liverpool, Sefton, Wirral, Knowsley and St Helens – plus Halton (Widnes and Runcorn.)

The Liverpool City Region ITA (Integrated Transport Authority) will soon take devolved control of major transport scheme monies from the DfT. This already happens in two other places: TfL (Transport for London) has been investing heavily in London's transport since 2000. TfGM (Transport for Greater Manchester) now does the same for Greater Manchester, and is overseeing the expansion of their tram :

Our local equivalent, for the moment, is still known as Mersey Travel. They have sent the first stage of the Liverpool City Region's application for devolved powers, an "assurance framework," on time and in good shape to the DfT. The DfT have said that their submission was one of the best in the country. So things look to be on track.

## **THREE RAIL SCHEMES FOR ST HELENS**

Thirty six schemes in total have been suggested. These break down into 25 road, bridge and one streetcar scheme, and 10 heavy rail schemes. The road schemes have been submitted by the boroughs, while the rail schemes have been submitted by Mersey Travel themselves.

Three rail schemes have been put forward by Mersey Travel for St Helens Borough.

- Rebuilding the disused railway line between St Helens Central and St Helens Junction has been
- costed at £28 million.
- The building of Carr Mill Railway Station in Laffak, south of Carr Mill dam on the East Lancs Road,
- has been costed at £6.9 million.
- The Newton le Willows transport hub would link feeder buses and an expanded park and ride to the
- newly electrified Liverpool-Manchester line. This has been costed at £16 million.

## **RAIL vs. TRAMS**

What chance would St Helens have of getting these projects built when competing with Liverpool's pre-existing plans for tram lines? Liverpool's application for its tram system was rejected by the DfT in 2007 when the original cost estimates for the Kirkby-Liverpool line escalated. When the DfT refused to give more, the councils (Liverpool and Knowsley) tried to provide assurances that they would find the missing monies themselves. Their assurances did not convince the DfT, who pulled the plug on the project.

DfT rules state that schemes that it has previously rejected on cost-benefit grounds cannot be resubmitted. So the Liverpool tram lines have not been included with the recent batch of schemes.

Of the new schemes, the ones which, under DfT rules, will rise to the top of the pile are the ones with the best cost-to-benefit ratio. Though several factors are taken into account, roughly speaking, the lower the cost relative to the number of people who will benefit, the better value for money the scheme is judged to be. And the new Integrated Authority, by the rules of the act, must advance the schemes with the best cost-to-benefit ratio first, no matter which body sponsors them.

## **CHEAP AS CHIPS**

To give some idea of the monies involved, the Kirkby-Liverpool tram line 1 was originally costed at £225 million. After bids to build the line were submitted, total scheme costs rose to £325 million. The tram line was to be 12 miles long and needed to be built from scratch.

St Helens Central to St Helens Junction, by comparison, is roughly 2.2 miles long. It will be built on an existing track bed which is in fair condition. Its estimated £28 million construction cost is eleven times cheaper than the final costing for the Liverpool-Kirkby tram project. Add in both the Carr Mill and Newton le Willows schemes, and the total estimate is still just one sixth of that total.

It would be hard to find a cheaper major rail project with equivalent benefits. The onward links that the St Helens Link Line would make possible - including, with an added station at Carr Mill, for the poorly served north the town - would surely prove a one-hit game changer. It would give St Helens its own rail network, with new or improved access from one part of the borough or another to no fewer than nine towns or cities and an international airport.

## **CARR MILL CROSS-MODAL**

The new Carr Mill Station, meanwhile, would sit on a major junction of the A580 East Lancs Road. Added to the Link Line project, the new station takes on strategic importance - it would be far from just another stop on the line to Wigan.

The existing rail deck at Carr Mill - on the site of a historic station called Laffak Halt - is surprisingly wide, equivalent to six track widths. Imagine, as an example, a low glass structure spanning two through lines, with their own platforms, plus a third line and platform for terminating trains to Manchester, and to allow faster trains to pass slower ones. Cover the roof with photo voltaic panels so that the station generates its own energy and more. Add cycle lockups, seats, a café and rest rooms, CCTV, elevators for step-free access, perhaps even escalators.

Add a bus terminus with feeder routes from the north of the borough.

Add a free car park: space can probably be found for a multi-storey.

The new station has now become a "cross-modal hub." Local people from Billinge, Haydock, Haresfinch Eccleston, Rainford and Moss Bank would be able to quickly access the station by car or by bus. For Clinkham Wood and Laffak, it's an easy walk.

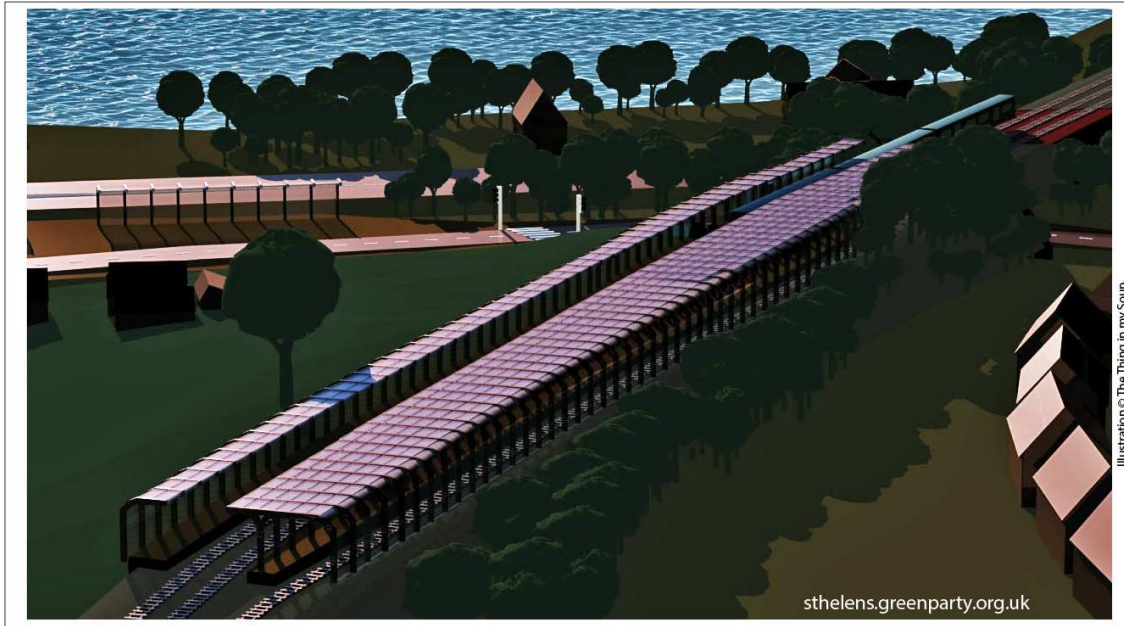


Illustration © The Thing in my Soup

*Carr Mill Station (artist's impression)*

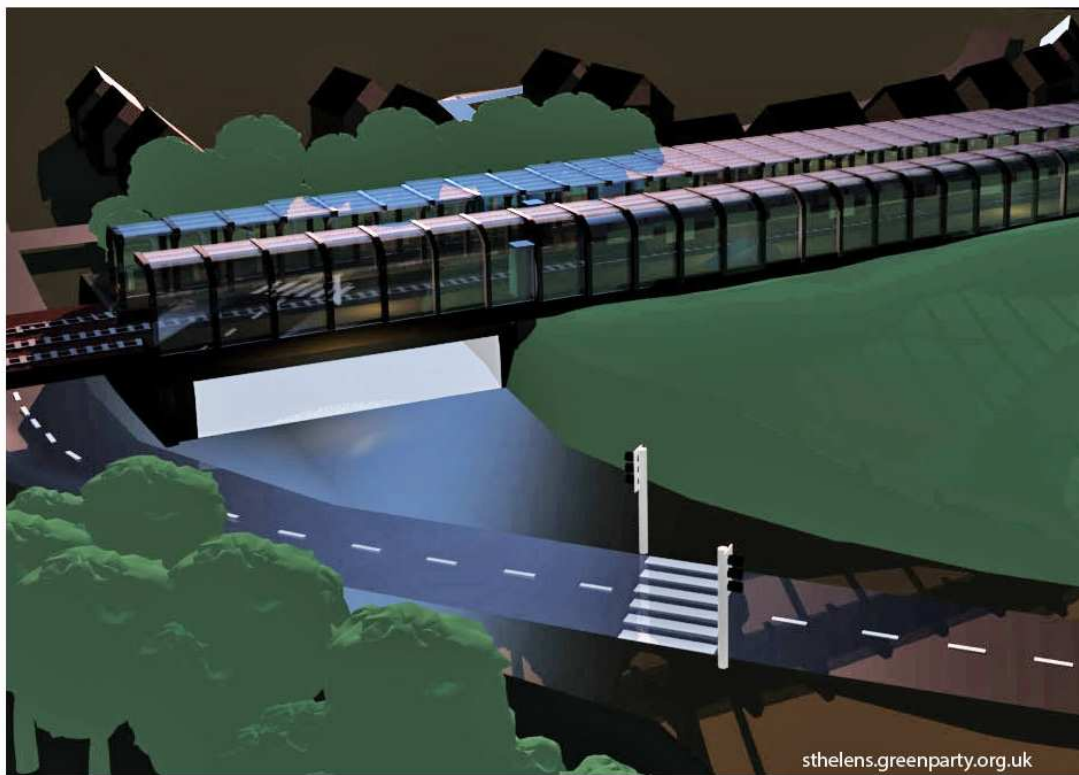


Illustration © The Thing in my Soup

*Entrance to Carr Mill Station (artist's impression)*

## **CONNECTIONS, SPEED!**

Carr Mill, if combined with the link line, could give all of these travellers fast connections to as many as eleven destinations: Manchester, Manchester Airport, Warrington, Crewe, Chester, Liverpool, Southport, Wigan, Preston, Blackpool and St Helens itself (including Sutton, Earlestown and Newton.)

Many travellers currently going by car could get to where they're going faster by train. Cars should come off the busy A580, M6 and M62. CO<sup>2</sup> could stay in petrol tanks.

The existing lines through St Helens - Liverpool to Manchester and Huyton to Wigan - are already being electrified. The new link line would also be electrified. Modern electric trains go much faster than the decrepit diesel trains which ply these lines now - while also using less energy, and clean energy at that. So most of these new destinations would be fast and efficient to get to: this new service would use state-of-the-art electric train sets. In fact, adding the link line increases the value of the current electrification projects by linking them in a third configuration.

## **NEWTON LE WILLOWS**

The Newton le Willows scheme, meanwhile, proposes making the existing Newton Station into another cross-modal hub, with a bus interchange and an expanded park-and-ride feeding traffic from Parr and the substantial Newton into, perhaps, a remodelled or extended station. Newton le Willows already connects to Liverpool, Manchester, Warrington and North Wales. But here again, the link line comes up - it would also connect Newton to St Helens town centre.

With the Newton le Willows scheme added to the Link Line and Carr Mill schemes, rail connections for the whole of the borough would be radically, and permanently, improved.

Though as a small warning, my guess is that the Newton project might not make it into the 2015-19 wave. But hopefully it could be included with a second wave of projects.

## **THE GREEN PERSPECTIVE**

The reason that we in the St Helens Green Party are speaking now is to ensure that all of this potential is given one clear, coherent voice. The combined St Helens rail project, if we make it happen, would take a sidelined town and give it regional relevance. Decades of decline and deprivation caused by the disappearance or mechanisation of local industries might be reversed with the regional work, travel and opportunities that the project makes possible.

With this new connectivity, St Helens' regional place and standing would be visibly transformed, from forgotten and irrelevant to connected and growing. A connected town is a significantly more attractive place to live in and commute from.

But transport works both ways. These projects would turn St Helens itself into a hub town: with such great connections, investment and work opportunities should be encouraged to flow towards us. What a great place to set up a business! A willing, underemployed population living cheek by jowl to inexpensive business rentals, in a town from which you'd quickly be able to get to anywhere in the country - anywhere in the world?

## **TOO GOOD TO MISS**

By connecting to the towns highlighted on the rail map, connections beyond our local region are formed.

is in on the mainline south, so travelling south to get there makes south-bound journeys quicker. Crewe, accesses mainline and regional trains from Liverpool. Chester is the gateway to the North Wales run. The Manchester stations give access to the rest of the North West, and to cities east and north-east of the Pennines. Manchester Airport, meanwhile, connects us to the rest of the world.

All of this, for such an astonishingly small price tag? It's difficult to imagine a more cost-effective game changer for St Helens. The benefit-to-cost ratio of a combined Link Line and Carr Mill project must surely be very high. Major transport projects normally have price tags in the order of hundreds of millions (remember the cost of that Kirkby tram line,) or even in the billions. Just £35 million to connect 176,000 people to everywhere else?

As a second word of warning, the cost estimates that I quote here from Mersey Travel will likely not include train sets. The Carr Mill station that we have visualised may perhaps come in at a higher price tag than 6.9 million: we've pitched the visual to reflect the transforming ambition that it represents. But even with train sets and a more ambitious Carr Mill, the cost for the project must surely still be low when compared to equivalent projects elsewhere. Because even at double the price tag, this would still be a bargain basement transport project.

## **TRACK RECORDS**

One possible worry is that the local track record on rail projects is poor. Liverpool's attempt to get its tram project off the ground fell flat on its face as recently as 2007. While in St Helens, the local understanding of the big transport picture has till now been noticeably missing.

I am someone who grew up here, then lived in London for many years, before returning about six years ago. Since my return, I've been struck many, many times by a local assumption that, because St Helens has been dealt such a poor hand so relentlessly for so long, it will always be that way.

This automatic negativity is especially ingrained in local politics, such that our long-incumbent Labour, Lib Dem and Tory representatives can themselves imagine little more than small improvements to the town. The overall mindset is that St Helens never gets a break. It's always been that way. It will always be that way.

This long-held assumption that the status quo will continue has been self-fulfilling.

## **PREGNANT POSSIBILITY**

Yet right here and now is a project so pregnant with possibility, and so possible in reality, that if we don't demand it as our right and due - if we don't shout long and loud until we get it - then we'll only have ourselves to blame.

This project could be built between 2015 and 2019 in the Liverpool City Region's first wave of transport projects. So tell your councillor that you want the project and all of its connections. Hound your MP for the same result. Let Mersey Travel, our Integrated Transport Authority, know what a difference this project, in this form, would make to you.

And perhaps, if you feel so moved, you might also let the new St Helens Green Party know that you support our initiative, so that we can pass your wishes on directly. Why not join us in our campaign?

Our advice? We all need to take action to make sure that this happens. We should demand that St Helens finally gets dealt a decent hand.

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## **SELECTION AND FUNDING OPTIONS**

The 36 transport schemes already submitted by Mersey Travel and the six boroughs are being ranked by an independent consultancy, Waterman Consultants, against a DfT scoring system. The schemes' rankings will be revealed when the Local Transport Body next meets in mid July.

The estimated cost of all 36 submitted schemes is £380 million. The major schemes fund currently being offered by the DfT, for the 2015-2019 period, is just £35.5 million, roughly 10% of the total of all submitted schemes. But this may not mean that only the very top-ranked schemes can go forward.

10% of each scheme's costs must come direct from the proposing authority - in this case, from Mersey Travel, which is itself funded from ticket revenues, government and the boroughs. But further funding can be found from other sources. There is no reason why St Helens itself might not contribute extra to a scheme that the town would benefit so markedly from. Other funding might be found from Europe, which has a remit to counter regional deprivation.

Separate government funds, "capital programs," can also be bid for. The country, for instance, has CO<sup>2</sup> targets to meet, and taking cars off roads in the North West would help us get there. Relieving road congestion on busy motorways (the M6 just to the south clogs up pretty much every rush hour) should also trigger government match funding.

There's also the possibility of developer funding. As an example of this, a new station sited on the St Helens Link Line at Sutton (next to Morrison's) might be built with help from the developers of the Hayes Chemicals site: they would directly benefit from such a station through increased house prices induced by the convenience of having such a well-connected station right next door.

Next, all new services in the city region would have to go through the rail franchising process. Some of the money invested might be clawed back from the bidders, though presumably it's the government who would be the main beneficiary here.

In fact, clever funding might allow for a fair clutch of the City Region schemes to be forwarded in the first wave. Manchester's TfGM, for instance, has found enough money from one source or another to keep multiple new tram schemes moving forward. Meanwhile Leeds, which is travelling the same path as the Liverpool City Region, is looking to raise £200 million itself in order to trigger match funding from various sources of £1 billion.

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## **HOW THE REST ARE DOING IT**

### **MANCHESTER**

Manchester is already ahead of the game, having become one of two trial Integrated Transport Authorities in 2010. This has enabled the Greater Manchester city region to take control of its own transport in much the same way as Transport for London governs London's buses, light rail and tube lines, and part controls the franchising of London's remaining heavy rail network. Though work on Manchester's tram network began several years ago, its continued expansion is now overseen by Transport for Greater Manchester (TfGM.) Manchester is currently enjoying the biggest regional investment in transport anywhere in the country outside of London.

## LONDON

London itself has, through its own transport authority, Transport for London (TfL) had direct, integrated control of its transport since 2000. This overview has allowed TfL to engage in an incredibly successful long-term upgrade of London's transport systems. On the roads, it has completely renewed its stock of buses, introduced the Oyster Card system to speed passenger boarding, and increased bus priority over other traffic. Oyster Cards also allow passengers to change transport modes between bus, tube and surface trains using a simple prepay system, making passenger flows much faster. TfL oversees the rolling upgrade of the tube system. It has extend the Docklands Light Railway four times. It has built the East London Line extension, upgraded the North London Line (together now known as the London Overground), and successfully supported the Crossrail mega project and the huge Thameslink upgrade.

## LEEDS

The proposed new Leeds Integrated Authority is looking to raise its own funds of £200 million, in order to attract match-funding from the DfT and other sources of a further £1 billion pounds.

## LIVERPOOL (MERSEYSIDE AND HALTON)

The total estimated cost of all 36 proposed Liverpool City Region schemes, for comparison, is £380 million. Though the Leeds target is ambitious, the examples of Manchester and London shows that it pays to be ambitious. So even if the new Merseyside and Halton authority was to aim to raise just one third of the Leeds target sum, they could still cover the cost of all three St Helens rail projects and many besides.

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## **SOUTHPORT TO CHESTER - A CASE FOR ELECTRIFICATION?**

The most speculative train service on the map is Southport to Chester. At the present time, the Southport and Chester lines are not scheduled for electrification. So any trains coming from Southport, via St Helens, and ending in Chester would have to be diesel for now.

Southport is the one big Beeching Cut destination that it's possible to re-access - albeit via a different route - with the Link Line scheme. And there's something inherently attractive about a service that would aim for a different resort town at both ends. Both Chester and Southport, of course, would themselves benefit from extra business coming up the line towards them.

In fact, it's technically possible to reach Southport now. A rolling set of points crosses the mainline just south of Wigan from the Huyton / St Helens line, giving direct access to Wigan North Western's terminating platforms 2 and 3, and to Wigan Wallgate. This chain of points just isn't used much. Adding two hourly diesel trains (one up and one down) for St Helens puts an added demand on the mainline. But my sense is that two extra train crossings per hour might be safely scheduled in: the Main Line is not particularly busy at Wigan. Though there may perhaps be problems caused by Virgin's rolling-stagger of a schedule through Wigan North Western, which could make predictable slots for trains crossing to Wallgate hard to maintain through the course of a day.

There's also the problem of diesel trains going slower than fast electric trains. But my guess is that one train in each direction each hour could probably be scheduled in. If a third platform was built at Carr Mill, used as a passing platform where the hourly diesel trains could pause while faster electric trains passed

My hope is that Southport and Chester could be included in the scheme from the start, as my spider



sense tells me that there'd be enough demand to support an hourly slot. People like shopping, people like nice days out, people like to party. Plus Southport is in Sefton, part of the Liverpool City Region ITA, connecting to it gives even more bang for Mersey Travel's buck.

In the meantime, it's clear that after the current round of electrification (in our region, the "Northern Hub" what's getting both existing lines through St Helens electrified) will be followed by further rounds. 850 more miles of rail electrification were promised in the government's spending review just last week. Some added demand from Southport through St Helens might help tip the case for the Southport to Manchester, via both the Wigan-Bolton and Wigan-Salford Crescent runs, to be electrified next.

Chester, meanwhile, is already likely to be picked: it's the gateway to the North Wales coast line, which as a strategic long distance route should be a logical target for upgrade.

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## **AT A GLANCE**

- 2.2 mile rail restoration is ultra low cost for a major transport scheme
  - Connects St Helens to up to six new destinations
  - Carr Mill hub station gives rail access for north of borough
  - Newton le Willows project improves rail access for south of borough
  - Connects Newton, Earlestown and Sutton to town centre
  - Combined scheme reduces congestion on the A580, M6 and M62
  - Connects to mainline south at Warrington
  - Could connect to Crewe for mainline trains from Liverpool
  - Could connect Southport and Chester with a single through service
  - Makes international connections Via Manchester Airport
-