MOTT MACDONALD

ST HELENS BOROUGH COUNCIL

ST HELENS SUTTON OAK LINK

FEASIBILITY STUDY – EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

FOREWORD

The Sutton Oak Link repurposing proposal supports the Borough Strategy by improving connectivity between growth areas and green spaces, while advancing the Inclusive Growth Strategy through better access to jobs, education, and services, particularly for communities facing transport barriers.

Aligned with the Active Lives Strategy and the Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP), the scheme promotes active travel and inclusive design. It also contributes to the Climate Change Response Plan by encouraging a shift away from car use, reducing emissions, and supporting our net-zero goals.

Once a strategic rail link between St Helens Central and St Helens Junction via Sutton Oak Station, the line ceased operations in the mid-20th century. Recognising its long-term value, the Council has safeguarded the corridor through the Local Plan.

Without intervention, the route risks further decline. However, it presents a major opportunity to reconnect key destinations, including the Totally Wicked Stadium, St Helens Hospital emerging strategic development opportunities and green spaces and deliver tangible benefits to local communities and businesses.

While reinstating heavy rail remains challenging, this feasibility study explores a range of options including light rail, bus, and active travel. It marks a vital first step in revitalising a neglected asset and ensuring its future potential is protected.

Following the Council's 2019 Climate Emergency declaration, promoting low-carbon travel is central to our sustainability agenda. This study supports that ambition by identifying how the Sutton Oak Line can be repurposed to improve connectivity, support regeneration, and encourage healthier travel choices.

We thank all contributors for their input. The findings will guide future development and ensure investment reflects both strategic priorities and community aspirations.

Together, we can deliver a transport solution that reflects our borough's values and builds a more sustainable future for St Helens.

Councillor Kate Groucutt
Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member Business and Inclusive Growth
St Helens Borough Council

PROJECT OVERVIEW

There is a long-standing ambition to re-open the disused Sutton Oak Line between St Helens Central and St Helens Junction railway stations.

Several studies have been undertaken in the past, which focused mainly on reinstating a heavy rail connection to improve wider regional connectivity to St Helens Town Centre. Significant challenges for this option were identified.

This study (2024/2025) has sought to review and build on previous work, identifying any changes to the case for rail or a fixed transport link. Importantly, given previous study findings, it has applied a greater focus on potential Active Travel uses for the corridor to recommend a way forward. The study is structured around five key stages:

- A Sutton Oak Link Baseline Review
- An Option Development and Review,
- A Rail Reinstatement Review
- Active Travel Concepts
- An Economic, Regeneration and Connectivity Benefit Assessment

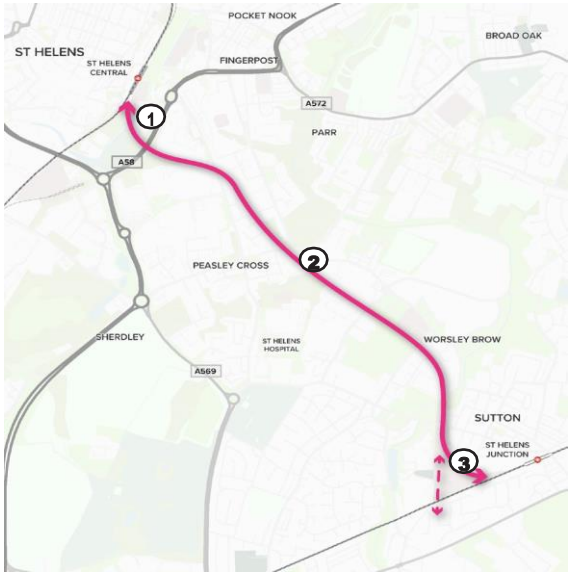

Fig. 1 Sutton Oak Link Location & Current Condition (Mott MacDonald, 2024).

STUDY AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The corridor has long been identified as a strategic opportunity to improve connectivity. The study is shaped by national and regional policies promoting sustainable transport, decarbonisation, public health, and inclusive economic growth.

Spatial analysis has highlighted several key challenges, including infrastructural barriers, poor public transport coverage, and limited active travel infrastructure. At the same time, the corridor presents significant opportunities to connect new housing and employment developments, improve access to key services and destinations, and support healthier travel choices.

To address these issues and unlock the corridor's potential, the study proposes a phased, multi-modal approach that balances local needs with wider strategic benefits. The resulting aims and objectives are structured around seven themes, articulated through SMART targets, designed to guide the appraisal of future transport options and support a robust business case. Collectively, they aim to deliver improved accessibility, environmental sustainability, economic opportunity, and quality of life for local communities.

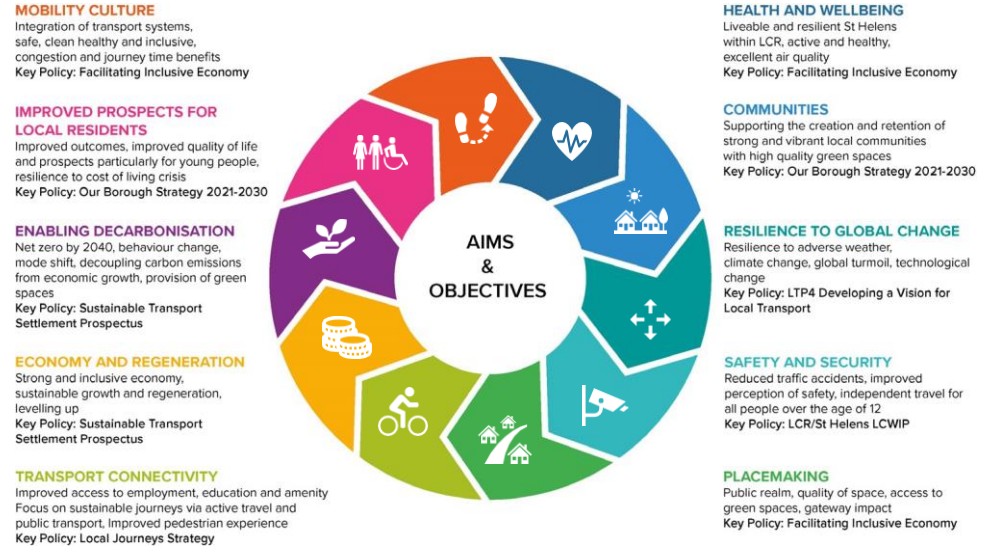

Fig. 2 Study Aims & Objectives (Mott MacDonald, 2024).

LOGIC MAP

The emerging themes for the aims and objectives of this study have been developed alongside the findings of the policy review, spatial analysis, and issues and opportunities workshop with SHBC Officers.

Inputs

Policy Review:

- LCR Policy Review
- SHBC Policy Review

Spatial Analysis:

- Strategic Context
- Local Contextual Analysis

Issues & Opportunities Workshop:

- Issues & Opportunities
- Aims & Objectives

Key Issues

- Infrequent Public Transport
- High Car Dependency
- Poor Connectivity to Manchester
- Increase in Short Car Journeys
- Longer Trips Produce More Emissions
- High Numbers of Road Traffic Collisions
- Low Levels of Walking and Cycling
- Inertia To Behaviour Change
- Funding Constraints
- Existing Investment Focus on Lea Green
- Rail Corridor and Major Road Severance
- Infrastructural Challenges
- Poor Corridor Crossings
- High Levels of Crime
- Low Perceptions of Safety
- Flooding
- Extreme Weather and Climate Change
- Impacts on Woodlands and Biodiversity
- Poor Air Quality
- Poor Health
- Economic and Health Inequalities
- High Deprivation Levels
- Declining Town Centre Footfall
- Ageing Population
- Local Labour Market Inactivity
- Lasting Impacts of COVID-19
- Low Educational Attainment Levels

Key Opportunities

- Improve Activity Levels, Air Quality and Health
- Better Integration of Transport, Housing and Land Use
- Develop a Cohesive Transport Network
- Provide Safer More Direct Journeys
- Increase Multi-Modal Journeys
- Access to Green Spaces
- Reduce Road Traffic Collisions
- Facilitate Sustainable Local Journeys
- Improve Accessibility to Jobs, Homes and Services
- Ensure Communities are Well Connected
- Create a High-Quality Local Environment and Better Sense of Place
- Link Destinations between St Helens Town Centre and Sutton
- Increase Town Centre Footfall
- Integration with Key Projects in St Helens
- Reduce Severance Due to Existing Transport Infrastructure
- Enhance Biodiversity
- Connectivity to Housing Developments
- Enhance Quality of Life
- Deliver Innovative Transport Solutions
- Develop a Mobility Culture
- Increase Productivity Across The Borough
- Access Future Funding Both Nationally and Regionally

Aims and Objectives Themes

Mobility Culture
Integration of transport systems, safe, clean healthy and inclusive

Improved Prospects for Local Residents
Improved outcomes, quality of life and prospects, particularly for young people, creating resilience to cost of living crisis

Enabling Decarbonisation
Net zero by 2040, behaviour change leading to mode shift, decoupling carbon emissions from economic growth, provision of access to green spaces

Economy and Regeneration
Strong and inclusive local economy, sustainable growth and regeneration, levelling up

Health and Wellbeing
Liveable and resilient St Helens within LCR, active and healthy, excellent air quality

Communities
Supporting the creation and retention of strong and vibrant local communities with high quality green spaces

Safety and Security
Reduced traffic accidents, improved perception of safety, safe independent travel for all people over the age of 12.

Resilience to Global Change
Resilience to climate change, global turmoil and wider technological change

Placemaking
Public Realm, quality of space, access to green spaces, gateway impact

Transport & Connectivity
Improved access to employment, education and amenity, focus on sustainable journeys, improved pedestrian experience.

SMART AIMS & OBJECTIVES

Theme	Objective	Measurable Metric	Target	Timescale	Reference Source
Mobility Culture	Facilitate a fully integrated public transport network with multi-modal journeys undertaken seamlessly	Increase in use of sustainable multi-modal journeys to access destinations across the borough, and longer distance journeys to destinations outside the borough.	**Double** the proportion of people using sustainable modes to travel to work who currently drive. *(Excluding those working from home, and those not in employment, this implies:* *- Walking increases from 7.5% - 15%* *- Cycling increases from 1.5% - 3%* *- Bus use increases from 4.6% - 9.2%* *- Rail use increases from 1.5% - 3%)*	By 2030	Travel to Work data
	Reduce traffic congestion in Sutton Oak and wider St Helens by fostering mode shift away from the private car	Reduction in the proportion of journeys made by private car within the borough			
	Reduce social isolation within the Sutton Oak area by providing safe and inclusive modes of transport to provide a real alternative for those unable or unwilling to drive	Increase in the proportion of people within employment, education and training without access to a car.	Bring **all** Sutton Oak residents within a **practical and useful** journey time by sustainable modes of employment, education, health and training opportunities		TRACC mapping
	Reduce sustainable journey times for those starting and/or finishing their journeys within Sutton Oak	Reduction in door-to-door sustainable journey times for Sutton Oak residents by improving accessibility to and from both St Helens Central and St Helens Junction rail stations	Reduce sustainable last-mile journey times to or from St Helens Central or St Helens Junction stations to **no more than 40 minutes walking or 10 minutes cycling**		Isochrone mapping
Improved Prospects for Local Residents	Improve life outcomes for Sutton Oak area residents by improving access to education, employment and health opportunities	Increase in the proportion of people within 15 minutes of education, employment and health opportunities	Bring **all** Sutton Oak residents within a **practical and useful** journey time by sustainable modes of employment, education, health and training opportunities	By 2030	TRACC mapping
	Raise average income levels for St Helens residents	Increase in annual average salaries in St Helens to the North West regional average.	Contribute, alongside other local policy initiatives, to an increase in the average annual salary of residents in St Helens from £26,000 to the North West average of **£33,000 (2023 prices)**	As soon as possible	ONS and Nomis
	Reduce the cost of travel by reducing dependence on fossil fuels to complete journeys	Increase in the proportion of active travel trips made by residents of Sutton Oak to access work, education, leisure and retail	Increase in Active Travel mode share for travel-to-work trips from **9% to 18%** (of travel to work trips excluding those working from home or not in employment) to bring these closer to the highest mode shares nationally	By 2030	Travel to Work data
Enabling Decarbon-isation	Reduce greenhouse gas emissions by reducing the number of private car journeys undertaken within and around St Helens	Reduction in St Helens carbon emissions measured in tonnes of CO2 to net zero by 2040	Reduce St Helens carbon emissions to **net zero**	By 2040	CO_2
	Reduce carbon impact and increase carbon capture by increasing the amount of green-space within the Sutton Oak area		**Reduce** car dependency and enable mode shift from private car to more sustainable modes (up to 30% of travel to work trips)		Travel to Work data
Economy & Regeneration	Foster a strong and inclusive economy by increasing the attractiveness of the Sutton Oak area for people to live and invest in	Increase in population and GVA of the Sutton Oak area	Increase population and GVA of the Sutton Oak area by **5%** each	As soon as possible	ONS and Nomis

Theme	Objective	Measurable Metric	Target	Timescale	Reference Source
Transport Connectivity	Improve access to employment, education and amenity for the residents of the Sutton Oak area	Increase in the proportion of people within 15 minutes of education, employment and other opportunities	Bring **all** Sutton Oak residents within a **practical and useful** journey time by sustainable modes of employment, education, health and training opportunities	By 2030	TRACC mapping
	Improve access to major neighbouring employment areas by better connecting St Helens town centre with Manchester City Centre	Reduction in journey times to Manchester City Centre by sustainable modes	Reduce journey times to Manchester City Centre by sustainable modes **to less than an hour on average**		
	Improve the walk and cycle-ability of the Sutton Oak area by improving the experience of so-doing	Increase in the mode share of walking and cycling for travel-to-work	Increase in Active Travel mode share for travel-to-work trips from **9% to 18%** (of travel to work trips excluding those working from home or not in employment) to bring these closer to the highest mode shares nationally		Travel to Work data
Health and Wellbeing	Improve the air quality within the Sutton Oak area by reducing the number of private car trips	Reduction in the emission of harmful local pollutants such as NOx, SO_2 and particulates	Improve air quality at local monitor sites to bring the Sutton Oak area **below required limits** at all sites	As soon as possible	AQ monitoring data
	Increase levels of physical activity across the borough, improving physical and mental health and wellbeing	Reduction in treatments for clinical obesity in local health facilities	**Reduce** levels of obesity and obesity related illness by increasing the take-up of walking and cycling for short journeys	2030	Local health data
Communities	Support the creation and retention of strong and vibrant local communities through the creation of high-quality public spaces (including green spaces)	Increase in the proportion of the local population within easy access of high-quality greenspace	Increase the proportion of people in the Sutton Oak area within 10 minutes of high-quality greenspace to **100%**	By 2030	TRACC mapping
Resilience to Global Change	Increase the resilience of the population of St Helens to adverse weather by reducing the risk of localised flooding and wider climate change	Reduction in the incidences of flooding and other climate-related issues by reducing climate-change causing greenhouse gases and mitigating against the worst of the impacts through good design.	Reduce the amount of network hours lost to flooding and other climate-related issues to **2000s levels**	By 2040	Flood event and highway closure records
Safety and Security	Reduce the number of road traffic accidents in the Sutton Oak area by reducing the number of private car trips, and by providing a safe traffic-free route for pedestrians and cyclists	Reduction in the number of road-traffic collisions in the Sutton Oak area by reducing the number of vehicles on the network	Reduce the number of road traffic collisions within the Sutton Oak area by **25%**	As soon as possible	Traffic Accident Data
	Improve the perception of safety within the Sutton Oak area by providing a safe and secure, well-lit and well-overlooked public space	Increase in the proportion of walking and cycling trips made during evening and night-time hours within the Sutton Oak area	**Double** the proportion of people choosing to walk or cycle to their destination between the hours of 19:00 and 23:00 from the Sutton Oak area	By 2030	Bespoke before-and-after interview surveys
Placemaking	Improve the quality of the public realm and publicly accessible space within the Sutton Oak area	Improvement in the performance of the Sutton Oak Area against the 10 Healthy Streets Indicators	Record a **significant improvement** in the performance of the area in a Healthy Streets assessment, particularly in the number of people choosing to walk, cycle and spend time.	By 2030	Healthy Streets Assessment

SUTTON OAK LINK BASELINE REVIEW

The baseline review establishes the strategic context, identifies key challenges and opportunities, and lays the groundwork for the appraisal of future transport options. Evidence and analysis from the review can also support the development of a future business case, should a preferred option be taken forward.

Strategic and Policy Context

There is strong alignment across national, regional, and local policy in support of sustainable transport, decarbonisation, and inclusive economic growth. The corridor is well-positioned to contribute to these goals by enhancing connectivity, supporting regeneration, and enabling modal shift away from private car use.

Spatial Analysis

The corridor is strategically located but underutilised, lacking a direct rail link to Manchester and offering limited public transport connectivity. The corridor can connect key destinations such as St Helens town centre, St Helens Hospital, the Totally Wicked Stadium, and the Glass Futures development, and intersects areas of planned housing and employment growth, including the Bold Forest Garden Suburb (3,000 homes). While the corridor faces challenges such as severance, poor accessibility, and flood risk, it also presents significant opportunities for green infrastructure and active travel.

Issues and Opportunities

The study identifies key issues including high car dependency, poor walking and cycling infrastructure, flooding risks, and environmental sensitivities. Broader challenges such as economic and health inequalities, environmental concerns, and declining town centre footfall further underscore the need for intervention. There are substantial opportunities to transform the corridor into a greenway, improve access to employment and education, and support new housing developments. There are opportunities to consider modal options including heavy rail, light rail, guided bus, active travel, and emerging technologies like autonomous pods.

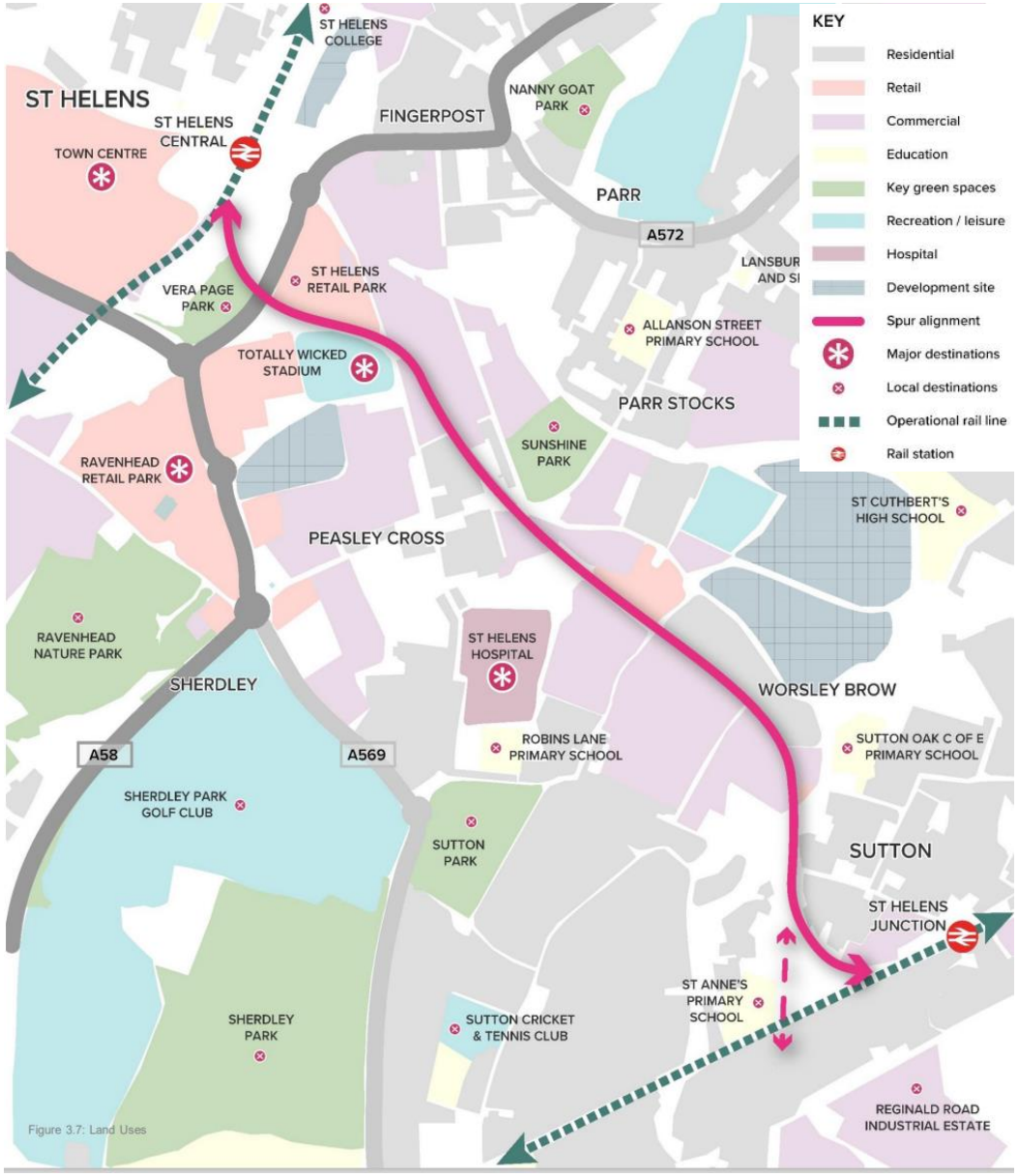

Fig. 3 Sutton Oak Link – Strategic Context (Mott MacDonald, 2024).

OPTION DEVELOPMENT AND REVIEW

The option development and review evaluated a wide range of potential uses for the corridor, including public transport, active travel (walking, cycling), and environmental enhancements. The study assessed options across three categories:

1. **Corridor Treatments** – physical changes to the corridor (e.g., clearing, re-wilding, structural upgrades)
2. **Origin-Destination Routes** – potential start and end points for travel (e.g., St Helens Town Centre to Lea Green or Warrington)
3. **Transport Modes** – types of transport (e.g., heavy rail, light rail, e-scooters, walking)

Option Scoring

Each option was scored using a multi-criteria assessment tool based on Department for Transport (DfT) guidelines, considering factors like mobility, health, economy, safety, and deliverability. The highest-performing options within each category were:

- Corridor Treatment: Biodiversity corridor with active travel (walking, cycling)
- Origin-Destination: St Helens Town Centre to St Helens Junction and Lea Green via Bold Forest Garden Suburb
- Mode: Active travel with e-scooters

Four final options were selected for further development:

Option	Corridor Treatment	Route	Mode
A	Biodiversity corridor (minimal intervention)	Town Centre to Junction	No transport (environmental focus)
B	Landscape + Active Travel	Town Centre to Junction and Bold Forest Garden Suburb (Lea Green)	Walking, cycling, e-scooters
C	Clear and fill corridor	Same as B	Active travel + potential light rail or tram-train
D	Clear, fill, and upgrade structures	Same as B	Active travel + potential heavy rail

Option Progressed to Concept Development

Option B - a landscaped corridor with active travel - was selected for initial concept design (Active Travel Concepts). This option balances environmental enhancement with improved local connectivity and aligns with broader regional transport and sustainability goals.

Fig. 4 Illustrative landscaping with active travel, and some preserved space for light rail (Mott MacDonald, 2024).

RAIL REINSTATEMENT REVIEW

The rail reinstatement review revisits the conclusions of previous studies conducted in 1996, 2006, and 2019, taking into account significant changes in rail demand, service patterns, infrastructure, and policy since the earlier reports. The study evaluates whether the Sutton Oak Line should be preserved for future rail use or repurposed for other transport modes.

Current Situation & Recent Developments

- The line remains in Network Rail ownership but is in poor condition.
- There is local interest in improving the corridor's appearance and utility.
- Existing rail services in the area are limited, and freight use of the corridor is unlikely.
- Passenger demand has grown since 1996 but was impacted by COVID-19.
- Electrification and service changes have altered network dynamics.
- New stations are proposed at Carr Mill on the St Helens to Wigan line, and Golborne on the line between Wigan and Manchester via Eccles.
- Northern Powerhouse Rail (NPR) may influence future connectivity.

Key Findings

1. Rail Reinstatement Potential

- Reopening the Sutton Oak Line for rail use would require significant capital investment but offers the most competitive journey times between St Helens Central and Manchester.
- A single-track railway with one intermediate station is deemed sufficient for an hourly service.
- Battery-electric or hybrid trains may reduce the need for full electrification.

2. Alternative Rail Options

- Routes via Golborne and Carr Mill perform slightly better overall in terms of cost-effectiveness and feasibility.
- These alternatives require minimal new infrastructure and could serve both St Helens and Manchester with fewer operational constraints.

3. Active Travel Considerations

- The corridor is currently underutilised and presents environmental and safety concerns.
- Repurposing it for walking and cycling could deliver immediate community benefits.
- However, if future rail use is anticipated, investment in active travel infrastructure may be at risk of becoming abortive.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Sutton Oak options are competitive but costly.
- Further feasibility work is needed to assess non-Sutton Oak alternatives (e.g., via Carr Mill and Golborne).
- If future rail use is to be preserved, a detailed design must ensure space for both rail and active travel.
- A business case comparison between rail and active travel-only uses is essential before committing to a long-term strategy.

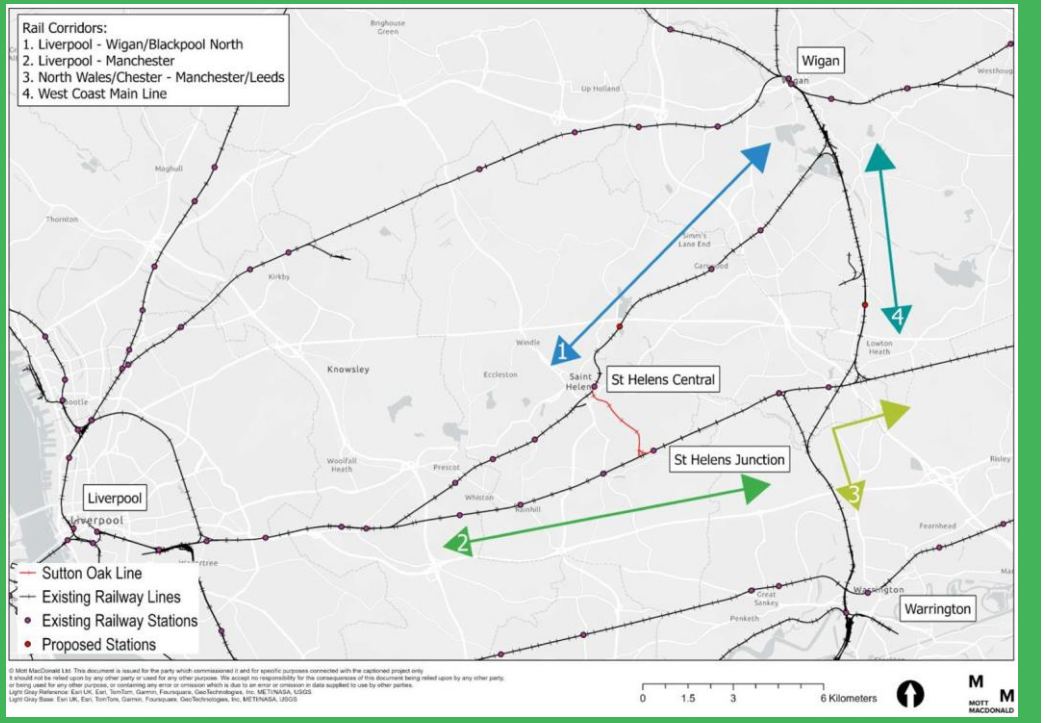

Fig. 5 Location of Sutton Oak line in the railway network (Mott MacDonald, 2024).

ACTIVE TRAVEL CONCEPTS

The potential to transform the corridor into an active travel route was explored, to provide a space for walking, cycling, and other non-motorised transport while preserving the possibility of future rail use.

Key Proposals

- Active Travel Corridor: A 3.2 km route designed for walking, cycling, and micro-mobility, connecting key destinations like St Helens Town Centre, the Totally Wicked Stadium, St Helens Hospital, and new residential areas.
- Character Areas: The corridor could be divided into seven themed zones (e.g., “Sunshine Park,” “Sutton Gateway”), each reflecting local identity and character, and offering unique public spaces and green areas.
- Highway Access: Eight new or improved access points could be provided to integrate the corridor with surrounding communities and improve safety and accessibility.
- Rail Integration Option: A hybrid design (see Task D) could accommodate both active travel and a single-track light rail or tram-train, though this would reduce space and quality for pedestrians and cyclists.

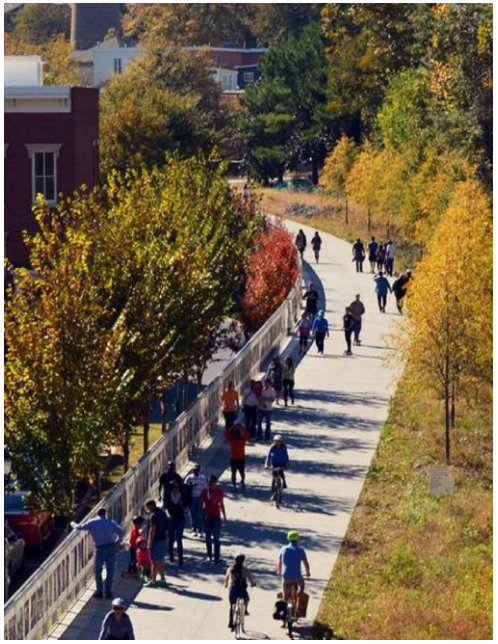

Fig. 6 Sutton Oak Link - Character Areas (Mott MacDonald, 2024).

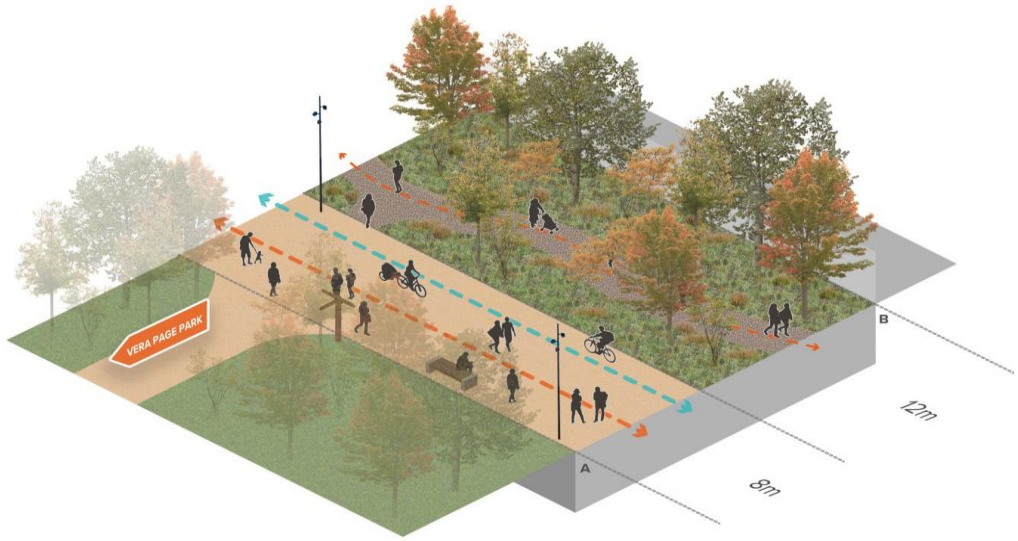

Fig. 7 Concept Visual (Mott MacDonald, 2024).

ECONOMIC, REGENERATION AND CONNECTIVITY BENEFIT ASSESSMENT

The economic, regeneration and connectivity benefit assessment explores the potential economic benefits associated with the creation of an active travel link along the Sutton Oak Line.

Key Benefits

1. **Land Value Uplift (LVU)**
   - The cycleway is expected to increase nearby house prices by an estimated £3.7 million over 10 years. This is based on conservative assumptions, including a modest 1.8% uplift in property values.

2. **Crime Reduction**
   - Improved lighting and natural surveillance from increased foot and cycle traffic could reduce crime by 30%.
   - This translates to an estimated £0.2 million in economic benefits over 10 years.

3. **Health and Environmental Gains**
   - Using the Department for Transport's Active Mode Appraisal Tool (AMAT), the scheme could deliver:
     - £10.5 million in health benefits from reduced premature deaths.
     - £2 million from reduced workplace absenteeism.
     - Additional benefits from reduced congestion, emissions, and improved journey quality.

4. **Safety Improvements**
   - A segregated route could reduce pedestrian and cyclist accidents, saving £7 million in accident-related costs.

5. **Social and Economic Impacts**
   - Better access to schools, healthcare, and jobs.
   - Encouragement of local development and tourism.
   - Potential job creation during construction and maintenance phases.

Scheme Costs and Benefit-Cost Ratio

Estimated Scheme Cost: £30 million (2024 prices).

After applying a 46% optimism bias and adjusting for inflation and discounting, the present value of costs (PVC) is estimated at £17.1 million.

Total Benefits (Present Value, 2010 Prices): £28.0 million.

- Health benefits (e.g. reduced premature deaths, absenteeism): £12.5m
- Journey quality and ambience: £3.5m
- Accident prevention: £7.0m
- Congestion and emissions reduction: £1.1m
- Land Value Uplift (LVU): £3.7m
- Crime reduction: £0.2m

An initial **Benefit-Cost Ratio (BCR) of 1.6** has been identified; however, further detailed analysis is required to validate and confirm the final BCR.

This places the scheme in the "Medium Value for Money" category according to the Department for Transport (DfT) guidelines, and is based on benefits derived from the AMAT assessment and quantitative wider economic benefits. This assessment does not capture additional benefits, such as improvements to the highway network which, when excluded from costs, results in a BCR of 2.0 - representing a high value for money.

NEXT STEPS

To progress the Sutton Oak Link project beyond the feasibility stage, pre-development funding is required to support the next phases of the business case process, in line with the Liverpool City Region (LCR) Combined Authority's Gateway Assurance Framework. This includes the development of a Strategic Outline Business Case (SOBC), an Outline Business Case (OBC) and finally a Full Business Case (FBC), to determine the preferred option and encompassing detailed design work, stakeholder and public consultation, cost verification, and a robust procurement strategy.

Securing this funding will enable the project to refine its preferred option, ensure alignment with regional transport and sustainability objectives, and position it for future capital investment.

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ST HELENS BOROUGH COUNCIL

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