

CABINET

6 SEPTEMBER 2011

CONSULTATION RESPONSE – REVISING THE CHARGES AT THE DARTFORD-THURROCK RIVER CROSSING

Portfolio: Councillor Rodney Chambers, Leader
Holders: Councillor Phil Filmer, Front Line Services

Report from: Robin Cooper, Director of Regeneration, Community and Culture

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Summary

The report seeks Cabinet views on the Department for Transport's (DfT) consultation on proposed changes to charges for vehicles using the existing Dartford crossing.

1. Budget and Policy Framework

1.1 This report seeks views on the DfT consultation concerning changes to the charges for vehicles using the existing Dartford crossing. Whilst this does not directly affect the council's policy and budget framework the proposed new toll charges would place an increased financial burden on local Medway businesses and will lead to further congestion. The responses included within this report are therefore consistent with the Council's aims contained within the Local Transport Plan and Council Plan.

2. Background

2.1 The Dartford-Thurrock River Crossing is a key part of the strategic road network. It consists of two two-lane tunnels carrying traffic to the north, and a four-lane cable stayed bridge (the Queen Elizabeth II Bridge) carrying traffic to the south. The Crossing spans the River Thames between Dartford and Thurrock, forming a trunk road link (the A282 Trunk Road) on the M25 orbital motorway.

2.2 On 30 June 2011 the DfT published a consultation document entitled *Revising the Charges at the Dartford-Thurrock River Crossing*. The consultation period closes on 23 September 2011.

- 2.3 This report informs Members of the DfT consultation and puts forward suggested wording for a formal response to the consultation. In summary, there is concern that the local and sub regional economy is under extreme pressure and any further increases in toll charges put an additional burden on local businesses including local freight and haulage companies together with local household budgets. In addition there is no short term benefit to users in terms of improved reliability or reduced journey times. It is considered that charges should only be reviewed once free flow technology is in place and operational. Furthermore, the consultation does not give clear assurance that any increase in tolls will be ring fenced for the development of mitigation measures to alleviate congestion or to contribute to a new crossing on the preferred route.

3. DfT Consultation Charging Proposals

- 3.1 In developing the proposals, Government states that it has taken a number of factors into account:

- (a) Prior to the implementation of a free-flow charging scheme which makes better use of newer charging technologies, there is a need to keep cash transactions as simple as possible. Rounding prices enables the payment to be made more easily and avoids increasing the time taken for the transaction.
- (b) In order to facilitate a move to non-cash (account) payment methods prior to the introduction of a free-flow charging scheme, there is a need to encourage further take-up of Dart-Tags.
- (c) There is a need to maintain the fairness of the Crossing charge for local residents who continue to suffer the adverse effects of the Crossing in their vicinity.

- 3.2 The Government therefore propose to:

- (a) Increase the charges in two successive steps to assist users in adjusting to the overall increase.
- (b) Increased charge rates to be rounded to the nearest 50p to keep transaction costs low.
- (c) Apply existing discount levels by category of vehicle for those choosing to pay in advance using Dart-Tag.
- (d) Retain the other elements of the current charging regime at least until such time as newer charging technologies are introduced.

Proposed increases in charge rates

- 3.3 The DfT have confirmed that providing improvements to the performance of the Crossing is a priority in view of the importance of the Crossing for the movement of goods and people, and its contribution to the economy. At the spending review in autumn 2010, the DfT announced its intention to increase the charges as part of a package of short, medium and long term measures for the Crossing, which also included:
- suspension of charges at times of severe congestion - this is defined by the Highways Agency as queuing traffic (stationary or slow moving traffic, travelling less than approximately 10 mph) which extends continuously from the Dartford Crossing to M25 J28 centre (A12 junction) for southbound traffic or to M25 J4 centre (A224) for northbound traffic.
 - the use of newer charging technology;
 - review of options for additional Crossing capacity.
- 3.4 Subject to consideration of the consultation response, the proposal is to implement the first increase in late 2011. The second increase would then take effect in spring 2012, taking account of the need to avoid public holidays when traffic volumes are likely to be greater and the desirability of tying in with the new financial year.
- 3.5 Details of the current and proposed charging levels are set out in the Table 1.

Table 1			
Dartford Crossing Day Charges - 6am-10pm			
(no charges apply 10pm-6am)			
	Current	Proposed	
		2011	2012
Motorbikes	Free	Free	Free
Cash charge			
Cars	£1.50	£2.00	£2.50
2 Axle Goods	£2.00	£2.50	£3.00
Multi Axle Goods	£3.70	£5.00	£6.00
Dart-Tag charge			
Cars	£1.00 (33%)	£1.33(33%)	£1.67(33%)
2 Axle Goods	£1.75(12%)	£2.19(12%)	£2.63(12%)
Multi Axle Goods	£3.20 (13%)	£4.33 (13%)	£5.19(13%)
Note: The percentage saved by using Dart-Tag as compared to the normal cash price is shown in brackets			

4. Consultation response

4.1 The DfT lists a number of questions as part of the consultation. Table 2 reproduces the questions together with our suggested response.

4.2 It is considered that the consultation does not set out an adequate case for justifying increasing tolls in the present economic climate. Through the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP), it has been established that the current net annual income of £44m from the tolls would rise to £80m should the increase in tolls be implemented.

Table 2 DfT consultation questions and suggested Medway Council response	
1. Do you agree or disagree with the approach of increasing the charges for cash payments for all categories of vehicle by broadly equivalent rates?	<p>Disagree. <i>The local and sub regional economy is under extreme pressure and any further increase puts an additional burden on local companies (in particular local freight and haulage companies) and household budgets. In addition, there is no short term benefit to users in terms of improved reliability or reduced journey times, and therefore does not satisfy the objectives of the scheme. Furthermore, increased charges could lead to traffic migration onto river crossing points closer to London such as Blackwall Tunnel.</i></p> <p><i>It is considered that charges should only be reviewed once free flow technology is in place and operational.</i></p> <p><i>In the event that DfT increase the toll charges then the additional income should be 'ring fenced' for the provision of a new crossing.</i></p>
2. Do you agree or disagree that current rates of discount should continue to apply for Dart-Tag account holders?	<p>Disagree. <i>Following the scheme objective to further encourage take up of Dart-Tag, if toll charges are increased, then the Dart-Tag cost for car users should remain at £1.00 and percentage discount for all other vehicles using Dart-Tag to be increased to that of car users. Furthermore, increased promotion is required to encourage this type of payment for regular users.</i></p>
3. Do you agree or disagree with the approach of introducing changes in 2011 and 2012?	<p>Disagree. <i>This approach is contradictory to the scheme objective of making transactions as simple as possible. i.e rounding up to £2.00 simplifies transactions, but then increasing to £2.50 introduces a further complexity and time delay.</i></p>

<p>4. Do you have specific comments on the draft Order (at Appendix B)? If so, please add.</p> <p><i>No comment</i></p>
<p>5. Do you agree or disagree that the current terms of the Local Residents Discount Scheme should remain unchanged?</p> <p><i>No comments (Note: paragraph 6.3 provides summary details on the local residents scheme)</i></p>
<p>6. Do you agree or disagree that other details of the charging regime (i.e. times of operation, vehicle categories and exemptions) should remain unchanged?</p> <p><i>Agree. Times that the charges are in operation between 6am to 10.00pm should remain. 10.00pm through the night to 6.00am to remain free of any charges.</i></p>
<p>7. Do you agree or disagree with our assessment of the impacts of the proposals particularly on small firms and protected equality groups?</p> <p><i>Disagree. The local and sub regional economy is under extreme pressure and any further increases put an additional burden on local companies in particular freight and haulage companies and household budgets.</i></p>
<p>General comments (refers to sections 5 and 6)</p> <p><i>Medway Council considers that suspension of charges at times of severe congestion should become automatically operational when the queue reaches a distance of approximately 3 miles on either side.</i></p> <p><i>Medway Council is supportive of developing newer technologies that will reduce delays at the toll booths and ultimately allow their removal so free-flow charging at the Crossing can be installed.</i></p>

5. Other issues raised by the consultation document

5.1 The following issues are also detailed in the consultation document.

Suspension of charges at times of severe congestion

5.2 Suspension of charges is an option in emergency situations and may occur at times of congestion when the level of delay is also increased by the process of the collection of the charge. The Highways Agency have developed an operation protocol which sees the suspension of the charge when circumstances are such as to constitute to an emergency. Situations are to be considered by the Highways Agency on a case by case basis and will involve the toll charge being suspended in either one or both directions

until such time as traffic conditions return to agreed levels. The protocol trial commenced for six months as from 1 July 2011.

The use of newer charging technology

- 5.3 Current arrangements largely involve drivers being required to stop and pay the road user charge within a barrier plaza environment at the Dartford Crossing. The current collection process has been used since the early 1990's, and provides for a mixture of payment methods. The majority of payments for the crossing charge are cash-based, with almost 70% of payments made by cash compared with around 30% made by the Dart-Tag account.
- 5.4 Over the last decade, there has been a vast improvement in the technology being used to collect road user charges, with newer technology now delivering a free-flow charging option for the collection of the road user charge.
- 5.5 The Highways Agency is developing options and the business case for the implementation of such an arrangement at Dartford. The introduction of free flow charging provides the opportunity to re-design the road layout to improve the flow of traffic, thereby reducing delays and providing a better service to road users. The new charging option would see the introduction of new payment methods for pre-registered users of the Crossing, physical lay-out changes and the use of automatic number plate recognition cameras to enable free-flow charging at the Crossing. The Highways Agency will be the lead on the delivery of a free-flow charging option. The DfT are committed to introducing free flow charging by the end of 2013, as set out in the Departmental Business Plan.

Future additional crossing capacity

- 5.6 The 2009 DfT study into current and future capacity constraints at Dartford Crossing recognised that although some improvements could be made to the performance of the Crossing in the short and medium term, the main cause of the congestion at the Crossing is its physical capacity. Ultimately, at some point in the future there is a need to provide additional crossing capacity.
- 5.7 Ministers have accepted the case for additional capacity and are committed to the development of future crossing options. The DfT has reviewed potential crossing options identified in the 2009 report and are proposing to develop these options further.
- 5.8 The future crossing options proposed to be developed are:
- Option A - At the site of the existing Dartford-Thurrock River Crossing
 - Option B - Between the Swanscombe Peninsula and the A1089
 - Option C - Between the east of Gravesend and the east of Tilbury

- 5.9 DfT are due to commission the work necessary to develop the potential crossing options in more detail as yet a date is not known. This would allow an assessment of their potential costs and also of their benefits in terms of additional capacity, and their impacts on the environment and potential increases in carbon emissions. The development and review of future crossing options is a major undertaking by DfT. The first phase of design, cost estimating, traffic modelling and economic and environmental assessment is planned to take around 12 to 18 months to complete. This assessment will allow merits and potential dis-benefits of the proposed options to be considered as part of a public consultation process to gather views on the most appropriate option to pursue.

Response to the potential crossing options.

- 5.10 Cabinet considered DfT's 2009 report on options for a Lower Thames Crossing on 2 June 2009 (minute 88/2009). The report discounted options D1 and D2 (which passed through Medway).
- 5.11 Option D1 lies within the boundaries of Basildon, Thurrock, Medway and Gravesham Councils. Option D2 lies within the boundaries of Basildon, Castle Point, Thurrock, Medway and Gravesham Councils. Both options commence north of the Thames at an improved A13/A130 junction.
- 5.12 Option D1 skirts the western edge of the forthcoming London Gateway development and approximately 4.4 miles (7km) of the route crosses flood plain to the north of the river. It then crosses the River Thames in a south-easterly direction across 1.6 miles (2.5km) of open water and mud flats. The route then continues in a south-easterly direction, crossing a further 1.6 miles (2.5km) of flood plain, a Special Protection Area, a RAMSAR site and a SSSI. The route would then swing south westwards to the east of Cliffe and pass to the west of Cliffe Woods. It would then continue south west to an improved junction with the A289/A226 to the south west of Higham. The A289 would be widened from this point to the M2.
- 5.13 Option D2 turns south east across Bowers Marshes before passing over East Haven Creek. South east of the creek, the route would cross a SSSI and then pass between Thames Haven Oil refinery and Canvey Island to cross the River Thames in a south easterly direction. Approximately 3.1 miles (5km) of the route crosses flood plain to the north of the river. It then crosses 1.9 miles (3km) of open water and mud flats. The route then continues in a south westerly direction crossing a further 1.9 miles (3km) of flood plain, then passing to the west of High Halstow, turning west passing to the north west of Cliffe Woods before turning south west to an improved junction with the A289/A226 to the south west of Higham. The A289 would be widened from this point to the M2.

- 5.14 At the time Cabinet requested the Director of Regeneration, Community and Culture write to the Department for Transport to:
- a) Seek agreement for Medway Council to actively participate in any project group set up to influence the study brief for the detailed assessment of the proposed crossing options;
 - b) Support the Study recommendation that options D1 and D2 should not be taken forward for future examination for the reasons given in the report;
 - c) Provide early feedback on factual inaccuracies in the report.
- 5.15 Subsequently, officers attended one meeting with the DfT to discuss the study brief, representing the North Kent Multi Area Agreement partnership.
- 5.16 To date, the DfT have not altered any previous recommendations and at present there are no plans to site any options through the Medway Council area.

6. Additional operational aspects covered in the consultation document

- 6.1 The Department intends to retain other details of the charging regime unchanged at least until such time as the free-flow charging scheme and the use of newer charging technologies are introduced, other details of the charging regime include the following.

6.2 Discounts for Dart-Tags

Discounts from the level of cash charge at the Crossing are provided currently to all vehicle classes where users have pre-paid the relevant charge through the Dart-Tag system. DfT intends to maintain the existing level of discount to such users, to continue to encourage the use of Dart-Tag. It will also help to prepare users of the Crossing for the introduction of free-flow charging technology at the Crossing. There is a higher discount rate for cars (33%) than for other vehicles (12 - 13%) as the take up of Dart-Tag accounts is proportionately lower among car drivers. Currently only 23% of car trips across the Crossing are paid in this way compared with approximately 40% of vans and 70% of HGVs.

6.3 Discounts for local residents

In amending the charging regime at the Crossing in 2008, and following public consultation, the DfT introduced enhanced discounts for local residents living within the Dartford and Thurrock Council boundaries. Private car drivers registered on this discount scheme are entitled to 50 free crossings, followed by a discounted crossing charge of 20 pence per trip.

6.4 Vehicle Classifications

The DfT is making no proposals to amend the current arrangements of vehicle classification in use at the Crossing.

6.5 Exemptions

Similarly, the DfT do not intend to make any amendments to the current list of classes of vehicles exempt from the Crossing charge.

6.6 The LEP Board have agreed to formulate a joint response and as a result, a request for our views has been received from the LEP Secretariat. The request acknowledges that each local authority, business and individual should be encouraged to make their own responses directly to the DfT. However, the LEP Board considered that a formal response on behalf of the LEP would also be appropriate and carry more weight than individual authorities.

7. Diversity Impact Assessment

7.1 It is considered there is no need for Medway Council to undertake a Diversity Impact Assessment because DfT are the promoters of the scheme.

8. Risk Management

8.1 Risk management is an integral part of good governance. As this is not a scheme being promoted by the Council, there is no responsibility to identify and manage threats or risks to achieve its strategic objectives of the scheme. However, failure to respond to the consultation document will result in Medway Council's views not being taken into account when DfT consider their future charging regime.

9. Financial and legal implications

9.1 There are no financial or legal implications as the consultation refers to a scheme promoted by DfT.

10. Recommendations

10.1 Cabinet supports the proposed responses to the consultation as set out in Table 2 of this report.

10.2 Cabinet requests the Director of Regeneration, Community and Culture, in consultation with the Leader, to write directly to the Department for Transport and to the LEP Board to express Medway Council's views on the consultation.

11. Suggested reasons for decision

11.1 The proposed new toll charges place increase financial burden on local Medway businesses and will lead to further congestion.

11.2 To ensure Medway Council's views are known.

Background Papers:

DfT Revising the Charges at the Dartford -Thurrock River Crossing - Consultation Document June 2011