

# **Report to Neighbourhoods and Communities Select Committee**

**Date of meeting: 15 March 2016**

**Subject:** Response to Lower Thames Crossing Consultation

**Officer contact for further information:** Ken Bean (x4610)

**Committee Secretary:** Adrian Hendry (x4246)



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## **Recommendations/Decisions Required:**

**To consider and agree the Council's response to the Highways England consultation on options for the proposed location and route for construction of a new Lower Thames crossing linking north Kent and south Essex.**

### **Summary:**

- Highways England is consulting on proposals for a new road crossing of the River Thames connecting Kent and Essex. It is considered that a new crossing is needed to reduce congestion at the existing Dartford crossing and unlock economic growth, supporting the development of new homes and jobs in the region.
- The proposal is the culmination of lengthy investigations into options for a new Lower Thames Crossing which has been lobbied for by Kent and Essex County Councils and business leaders. The consultation period commenced on 11<sup>th</sup> February and runs until 24<sup>th</sup> March 2016. There are three options north of the Thames contained with the consultation paper explained below and upon which views are sought.
- Members are asked to note the consultation as summarised below and agree that the Council's response to the consultation is expressed in terms of:
  - a. Support for the principle of constructing a new Lower Thames Crossing;
  - b. Preference for the new crossing at Location C as a twin bore tunnel; and
  - c. Preference for the line of the connector roads following Route 3 north of the Thames linking onto the M25 between junctions 29 and 30.

### **Background**

1. For over 50 years, the Dartford Crossing has provided the only road crossing of the Thames east of London. It is a critical part of the UK's major road network carrying local, national and international traffic. The proposed multi-billion pound road tunnel across the Thames connecting Essex and Kent will provide a valuable alternative to the existing congested Dartford Crossing and assist regeneration plans on both sides of the estuary.

2. In 2009 the Department for Transport (DfT) commissioned a study identifying five locations for a crossing to potentially alleviate congestion at the existing Dartford Crossing. The two most easterly of these were found to be too far from the existing crossing to ease the problems at Dartford and were eliminated from further consideration.

3. In 2012 the DfT commissioned a study to assess three remaining location options:

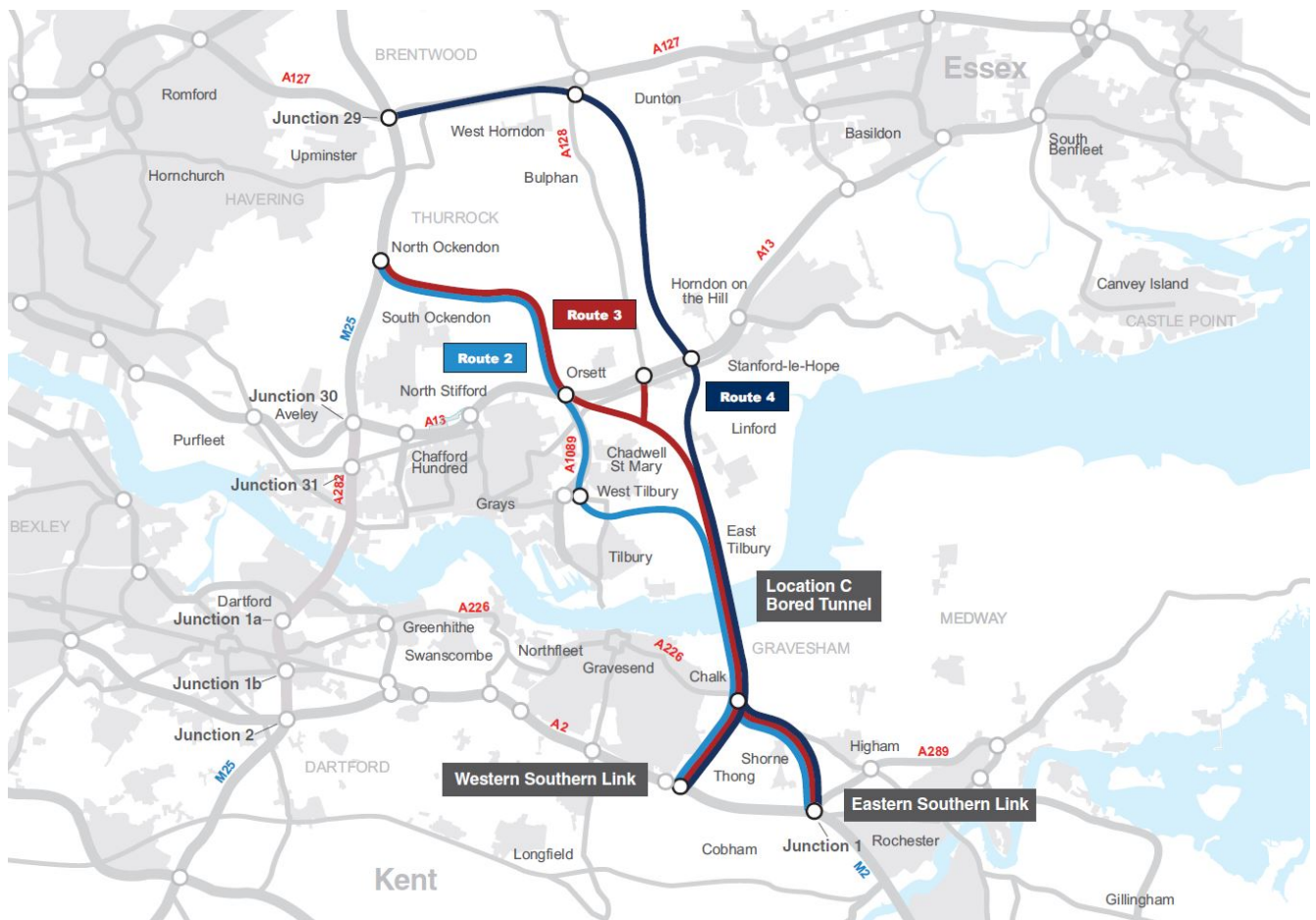
- Option A: located close to the existing crossing;

- Option B: connecting the A2 Swanscombe Peninsula with the A1089;
- Location Option C: connecting the A2/M2 with the M25 between junctions 29 and 30;
- Location Option C variation: which would additionally widen the A229 between the M2 and M20;

4. In 2013 the DfT held a public consultation inviting views on the need for a crossing and where to locate a new crossing. Later that year the Government announced its decision not to proceed with Location Option B because of the impact on local development plans and the limited transport benefits. The Government published its response to the consultation in July 2014, confirming that there is a need for an additional crossing between Essex and Kent, but that there was no consensus about where it should be.

5. Following a series of studies and a public consultation in 2013, the Government commissioned Highways England, (HE) the operator of the country's motorways and major roads, to carry out a more detailed assessment of the remaining options (A and C). These are at the site of the current Dartford crossing, known as Location A, or a new crossing location further east, shown on the map below and known as Location C.

6. At both locations HE have developed engineering solutions and assessed them in terms of their economic, traffic, environmental and community impacts. The assessment has also taken into account the significant growth and development plans for the region. At Location C, three potential route options have been identified north of the river in Essex and two south of the river in Kent.



*The case for a new crossing*

7. Congestion and closure of the existing Dartford crossing occurs frequently and this, together with a lack of alternative transport links, creates significant disruption and pollution. This in turn impacts communities and businesses locally, regionally and elsewhere within the UK. It is considered that whilst the removal of payment barriers and the introduction of electronic payments at the Dartford Crossings have recently improved traffic flow and journey times, this has not addressed the need for increased capacity. Already carrying 50 million vehicles a year and with traffic volumes forecast to increase, the free flow improvements will only relieve congestion in the short-term and major improvements are considered to be needed to provide a long-lasting solution.

8. In addition to reducing delays for drivers, a new crossing could transform the region by providing a vital new connection across the Thames. It would stimulate economic growth by unlocking access to housing and job opportunities benefitting not only the region but the whole of the UK, providing better journeys, enabling growth and building for the future.

9. The additional Thames crossing plans have been welcomed by Essex and Kent County Councils as well as the Road Haulage Association and Freight Transport Association. Lobbying of Government has been ongoing for over a decade to promote a new Thames crossing which is viewed by many as much needed infrastructure.

10. The two short listed locations for a bridge or tunnel announced by DfT in 2013 were:

- *Option A*: adjacent to the existing Dartford Crossing (the two tunnels and the QEII bridge that carry M25 traffic across the Thames)
- *Option C*: further east (to the east of Gravesend and Tilbury) linking the M2 in Kent with the M25 in Essex via the A13.

A variation of option C, known as 'Option C variant' was also shortlisted this included widening the A229 to create an improved link between the M2 and M20 in Kent.

11. HE has now identified its preferred option as Location C which is also known to be the preference of both Essex and Kent County Councils. Their assessments have shown that Location C provides double the economic benefits of Location A; as well as a clear alternative route to the Dartford Crossing, reducing congestion and improving resilience of the road network. Location C would support regeneration objectives on both sides of the Thames estuary and the lengthy construction phase could be undertaken without causing traffic disruption in the vicinity of the Dartford Crossing.

12. On the choice between a tunnel or bridge HE favour a bored tunnel solution as it would generate the least noise and visual impact during construction and operation and would be likely to have least impact on protected habitats and species by virtue of minimizing disturbance over much of its length. The tunnel would have separate tunnels for north and southbound traffic each with two lanes but with space to add further capacity at a later date. A 70mph speed limit would apply.

13. HE has calculated the cost of its preferred option in the range of £4.3 - £5.9bn. Subject to the necessary funding and planning approvals, HE anticipates that the new crossing could open in 2025 if publicly funded. If private funding is also used the crossing would open later, in 2027.

14. It should be noted however that the Location C proposal is not universally supported with there being some opposition from Thurrock Council where the tunnel would emerge.

### *Connector Roads*

15. A package of new roads or existing roads upgraded to dual carriageway would connect the tunnel with the existing network. South of the Thames these would connect from

the end of the M2 near Rochester in Medway, linking up to the A13 north of the Thames, and then joining the M25 between junctions 29 and 30.

16. As illustrated on the map above, the consultation presents three options north of the river:

- 1) Route 2: upgrade the A1089; this would mix local and long-distance traffic.
- 2) Route 3: the shortest route, a new road with some impact on local ecological and heritage sites but less than routes 2 or 4.
- 3) Route 4: a new section of road together with upgrading the existing A127. This route would be longer and more expensive than the other two options and impact on ancient woodland, a conservation area and a registered park and garden.

17. Route 3, providing the shortest route and greatest improvement on journey time, would be an entirely new road constructed to modern standards for a 70mph road. It would also have the benefit of the lowest environmental impact and constructed with least disruption to existing traffic routes.

**Options considered and rejected:** Not to respond to the consultation.

**Resource implications:** Consideration of this consultation has been undertaken within the Planning Policy Team liaising closely with the Cabinet Members responsible for Transportation and planning Policy matters.

**Legal and Governance Implications:** The proposed Thames Crossing is being consulted on by Highways England on behalf of Government and would, if approved, then need to be progressed through the various statutorily prescribed highways and planning processes.

**Safer, Cleaner Greener Implications:** As the consultation comprises a series of options it is difficult at this stage to assess likely implications for the District. However, in overall terms it is likely that the addition of a Thames crossing further east than the current Dartford crossings is likely to have the effect of diverting particularly long distance haulage traffic further away from this District.

**Consultation Undertaken:** None required – the recommendations of this report and the Council's response to the consultation will be considered by the Neighbourhoods and Communities Services Select Committee on 15<sup>th</sup> March 2016.

**Background Papers:** Further details of the current consultation being undertaken by Highways England, including the summary business case can be accessed via this link. <https://highwaysengland.citizenspace.com/cip/lower-thames-crossing-consultation>

**Impact Assessments and Risk Management:** There are no direct impact assessment or risk management implications arising from the recommendations of this report.

**Equality:** The proposed changes to national planning policy are being advanced by Highways England on behalf of Government. There are therefore no immediate direct equality implications for Epping Forest District Council.