

**Report to Overview & Scrutiny
Committee
Date of meeting: 6 September 2011**

Portfolio: Leader

**Subject: Revising the Charges at the Dartford –
Thurrock River Crossing. Consultation Document**

Officer contact for further information: John Preston

Committee Secretary: Adrian Hendry



Recommendations/Decisions Required:

To agree that the Council makes the following responses in respect of this consultation:

- i. That all congestion charges in respect of this crossing should be done away with as soon as possible;**
- ii. That if a new further crossing needs to be designed with new technology, and has new tolls to pay for its construction, then so be it;**
- iii. That, in the meantime, charges should only rise after new technology allowing free flowing use of the crossing is introduced, and that any further increases in such charges should be introduced infrequently thereafter, and not in two frequent successive stages;**
- iv. That variable message signs, rather than fixed signs, indicating what the charges are should be introduced;**
- v. That, if for any reason the queue associated with the crossing reaches Junction 29 southbound, or Junction 3 northbound, that the charges should be suspended until the queue has disappeared; and**
- vi. That the three local Members of Parliament, the Local Enterprise Partnership and the Federation of Small Businesses are copied this Council's response.**

Report:

1. The Dartford – Thurrock river crossing comprises two two-lane Tunnels under the River Thames, and the Queen Elizabeth II Bridge with four lanes over the Thames. That gives eight lanes for both directions.

2. The first tunnel opened in 1963, the second in 1980 and the bridge opened in 1980; apparently early estimates of no more than two million vehicles using the first tunnel quickly proved a significant underestimate. Nowadays some 50 million vehicles use these crossings each year.

3. It is considered that the crossings serve three main purposes;
- They allow 'local' traffic between Essex and Kent to cross the river.
 - The crossings are an A road, but are effectively part of the M25 orbital motorway

around London, which allows traffic to circumnavigate parts or all of the Capital rather than that traffic criss-crossing the Capital.

- As the 'lowest' crossing point on the River Thames, it allows long distance traffic from the continent (whether using Ports or the Channel tunnel) to reach other parts of the national motorway network; in particular Heavy Goods Vehicles (HGV), and in particular to access the Midlands and beyond.

4. Originally the expense of such major feats of engineering were constructed at public expense, and tolls levied to pay back those costs. The Bridge used private finance, but also had a toll on the same basis.

5. By 2003, when the costs of the tunnels and the bridge had been met, the previous Government determined that there should continue to be a charge at this crossing point; the rationale appearing to be that without such a charge that the volumes of traffic wanting to use the crossing would cause congestion, so congestion could be restricted or avoided by levying a charge.

6. The 2003 charges differentiated by type of vehicle, and gave some local concessions to residents of Thurrock and Dartford. It is also possible to buy a Dart Tag in advance and at a discount for regular users. Payments are made by hand at a toll booth (where change can be given), or by putting the correct payment into a receptacle, or by the Dartford tag being recognized at the toll booth. Vehicles have to slow markedly and come to a complete halt. Advanced signs indicate to users of the M25 that charges exist and what the principal charges are; these are fixed signs rather than ones which can contain variable messages; there may be fewer such signs at present because of nearby road works within Essex.

7. If 'local' traffic needs to get between Essex and Kent, it has few options other than to use the crossing; a charge may not "put off" that many who need to make such a journey. The alternative of going into London and using the charge free Blackwall tunnel exists; but to do so adds to journey time and length and cost compared to paying the Dartford charge (in particular given the local concession, or if the Dartford tag is purchased in advance)

8. Users of the M25 could theoretically avoid the Dartford-Thurrock crossing by using the other sections of the M25 which are charge free; however, if that approach became widespread it could cause congestion on other sections. The M25 also crosses the Thames between Berkshire and Surrey on its western side between junctions 12 and 13. There is no charge to cross the Thames at that point, and the estimated flows are 64 Million vehicles per year. Those flows are accommodated on five lanes in both directions.

9. As the "lowest" crossing point there are very limited opportunities for long distance traffic to sensibly avoid the Dartford-Thurrock crossing and as the economy has grown, this purpose is becoming more important and the HGV flow has grown in proportion to other vehicle types. A charge is not much of a practical restriction, because other options (such as using a "higher" crossing point up river) do not really exist.

10. In 2008 the charges were revised upwards, although a free night time period was introduced. One of the given reasons for not increasing the charges on an annual basis, by amounts compatible with the increase in the retail prices index, is to avoid charging odd amounts rather than what are seen to be rounded amounts (such as £1.50p.)

11. Over this period, the M25 has been, and is being, widened over much of its length; that is more so on its western side.

Present recent conditions

12. The Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) has been reporting the experiences of its members, and which echo some of the Government's own comments that the Dartford –

Thurrock crossing experiences some of the worst performance of the national road network, and that reliability of journey time is very variable; the users experience tends to forget the trouble free journeys, but the occasions where the traffic is backed up on the Essex side to the Brentwood junction (28) are recalled. It might be annoying for holiday makers to have to leave plenty of extra time for a journey, or for those going to one of the Regional Shopping centres near the Essex and Kent sides of the crossing; but for business travellers the congestion has exceedingly high costs associated with delays.

13. The South East Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) has considered the consultation and objects to the proposals for a number of reasons as follows;

- the charges create congestion in their own right and should be dispensed with as soon as possible.
- in any event adjustment to increases cause substantial delays at the booths and a two stage increase is therefore twice the problem (very few such journeys are by locals)
- 10 miles of queues before freeing up the booths is too high a threshold representing in the order of 2 hours to get over the river.
- fast track technology is essential before any increase.

14. The LEP invited individual Local Authorities to comment themselves.

The proposals in the consultation

15. Effectively the consultation concerns proposals for the short, medium and long term, as follows:

Short term

The charges would be increased in November 2011 and then, again, in April 2012; for example the cash charge for cars being taken from the present £1.50p to £2.00p and then to £2.50p

Increased use of the Dart tag would be encouraged.

The local concession to residents of Dartford and Thurrock would be retained. The ability to suspend the charges, in defined emergency situations, and when severe congestion occurs is apparently being trialled from 1 July 2011.

Medium Term

To implement a free-flow charging regime; in other words a charge would still be levied, but payment would be made electronically, and would not require vehicles to slow and/or to stop at a toll booth and make a manual payment.

Longer term

In the longer term the Government is considering additional crossing capacity, with three options; at the site of the existing crossing, between the Swanscombe peninsula and the A1089, and between the east of Gravesend and the east of Tilbury. It is suggested that the main cause of the existing congestion is the physical capacity of the existing tunnels and bridge. Development of these options would partly be funded from the increased charges for the existing crossing. Any new option would have its own charging regime. An additional such crossing has estimated costs of between £1 and £7 billion.

Concerns

16. For the reasons explained above, the rationale for the charges appears to be based on false premises; the charges may put some journeys off, but add to journey time and cost for many, particularly when incidents or congestion occur; the comparison with crossing the Thames to the west of London suggests that extra capacity is needed rather than congestion charging. An initial toll to pay for infrastructure is one thing, but to continue with the congestion caused by the manual toll process is quite another. The first objection of the Local Enterprise Partnership can be endorsed.

17. At a time of considerable challenge to public expenditure to suggest replacing fixed signage twice within a short period serves to emphasise that a very short term approach is being taken; this might be lessened by providing signage which could explain new charging regimes by changing the message when necessary rather than changing the signs themselves. This does not overcome getting users to understand what the charge level is close to the point at which payment is necessary, and not changing the charge too frequently. The second objection of the LEP can also be endorsed.

18. To date the FSB have been less than complimentary about the trial of suspending charges in an emergency, and when there is severe congestion (i.e. extending for 10 miles) If charges are only suspended in rare instances, this again emphasises that the charges are an impediment to business, but are not a solution to capacity not being kept within proportion to need or demand. The third objection of the LEP can also be endorsed.

19. If one accepts that charging for the crossings generates funds for other transport schemes, and that the key issue is not that one can avoid a charge altogether, but that it is about collecting the charge in a less disruptive way, then experience with the Central London congestion charge would suggest that charge collection technology can be used rather than a predominantly manual arrangement.

20. A conventional toll might allow 200 vehicles per lane per hour, whereas electronic systems would allow this to increase to 500 (if the vehicle stops) or up to 1800 per hour if "free flow" is used. Such systems already exist in a variety of countries worldwide.

21. Whilst the Dart tag introduced some electronic systems to this toll, it is clear that free flow numbers across up to 13 lanes at these crossings would significantly reduce the adverse impacts. Plainly free flow could not operate on all the existing width and depth of the toll plaza with as many as 13 lanes.

22. It is considered that the LEP view that charges should not be increased unless that was in concert with the introduction of free flow electronic tolling/charging can also be endorsed.

Reason for decision:

23. Whilst the Dartford–Thurrock crossing is some way outside the District, there will be residents and businesses based locally who use it from time to time, and who could reasonably expect that paying a charge would be consistent with receiving a reasonable likelihood of a timely journey. When there is a reasonably regular risk that a ten mile journey on a motorway standard route can take two hours, that is showing that the present arrangements are not achieving their objectives. Although there could never be the capacity on a road network to avoid there ever being delays, the present position is unacceptable. There is a history of greatly under estimating use levels, perhaps because the functions these crossings serve have not been well recognized; there is an unfair contrast with the western side of the M25 where it crosses the Thames, and the medium term solution should be brought forward in favour of the suggested short term solutions.

24. It is suggested that the views of Council should be brought to the attention of the three local members of Parliament, the FSB and the LEP.

Options considered and rejected:

Not to respond to the consultation.

To respond positively to the consultation.

Consultation undertaken: None; EFDC is a consultee in this case.

Resource implications:

Budget provision: N/A

Personnel: From existing resources

Land: Nil

Community Plan/BVPP reference:

Relevant statutory powers:

Background papers: Thales.com website concerning electronic toll collection.

Environmental/Human Rights Act/Crime and Disorder Act Implications: There are some environmental concerns addressed in this report.

Key Decision reference: (if required)