

The Gravesend – Tilbury Ferry

A report by the Divisional Director, Transport Operations to the Highways Advisory Board on 7 September 2004.

Introduction

1. The County Council has, for a number of years, provided revenue support to maintain a ferry service across the Thames between Gravesend and Tilbury. The contract with the current operators, the Lower Thames and Medway Passenger Boat Company, who took up the service following the demise of the White Horse Fast Ferries in 2001, is due to expire in June 2005. Because of the important strategic nature of the link, Members views are sought as to its' continuance in the future.

Background

2. The ferry provides a valuable public transport crossing of the Thames and in total there are some 85,000 passenger trips per year. There are 26 sailings per day, Monday to Saturday from the West Street Pier in Gravesend. There are no sailings on Sunday.
3. The majority of passengers originate in Thurrock and the main journey purpose is broadly 'leisure', although there are a good proportion of work related journeys with peak period trips running at some 30,000 per year. It is considered that the service accords with the approved revenue support criteria for work, education, food shopping and health related trips. Furthermore, with the ongoing redevelopment of the Thames Gateway, there is potential for many more people to use the service to access work opportunities to the north as well as the south of the river.
4. At present Kent County Council and Thurrock Council jointly fund the ferry. At the onset of the contract the two councils paid a £50,000 capital contribution split 50:50 to enable the purchase of the vessel, MV Duchess M. The current annual operating cost is £89,000 per annum. Kent County Council's share of this is £44,500, paid from the Council's revenue support budget.
5. Based on the County Council's current level of funding, the service performs reasonably well, with a £0.52 subsidy per single passenger trip.
6. The existing operators, who also own the West Street Pier, have maintained a reasonable service through the contract period. The operating agreement has been breached on some notable occasions, but issues have broadly been addressed to ensure compliance.

Continuing the existing Service

7. Kent and Thurrock Councils are proposing to jointly seek expressions of interest for the continuing operation of the service, however, there are two key issues which make it likely that a higher level of revenue support will be necessary even based upon the existing service frequency.
8. The MV Duchess was built in 1956 and, whilst it meets safety standards, the continued reliability of the vessel is a concern. A new vessel, which is up to modern accessible public transport standards, is desirable, but this is likely to require a significant capital contribution from the funding authorities.

The Gravesend – Tilbury Ferry

9. The operators of the service also own the West Pier in Gravesend and are unlikely to allow a new company to run the service from their pier. This has the potential to inhibit competition. Ideally, a new better quality docking facility is needed on the Gravesend river front. In principle, it would be possible to adapt the Gravesend Town Pier for ferry operation, however, this is also likely to require a major capital contribution on the part of the County Council. Furthermore, this can probably only be achieved as part of the proposed longer-term redevelopment of the Pier.

A Better Quality Service

10. In its current form the Gravesend - Tilbury Ferry is unlikely to expand its' customer base. A step change improvement is desirable to bring the service up to the standard of other public transport proposals in the Kent Thameside area, such as Fastrack. As outlined above, measures should include a new vessel, a back up and improved boarding infrastructure. An expanded timetable should be offered together with enhanced marketing to advertise the service and identify links with other public transport opportunities. This is, however, likely to increase the cost to around £250,000 per annum.
11. The major Kent Thameside development sites are a significant distance from the Gravesend Town Centre waterfront. Income from any development is therefore unlikely to be available to provide either capital or 'pump priming' revenue for the service.
12. In principle the County Council's ability, with Thurrock Council, to bid for its' share of the Dartford River Crossing toll money offers a good alternative source of funding, however, with the Government's current spending conditions, funds can only be used for capital measures and not revenue support. Furthermore the ferry would need to compete for a share of the funding alongside other, potentially better value, public transport improvements in Kent Thameside.

Conclusion

13. Members are asked to note the issues surrounding the continued operation of the Gravesend - Tilbury Ferry. Subject to the views expressed by this Board, operator and cost details will be firmed up and will be included in future reports. It is therefore proposed to recommend to the Cabinet Member for Transport and Environment that:
- i) expressions of interest be sought for the continuing operation of the ferry from June 2005, broadly in line with its' current service level.
 - ii) investigations to continue into the inclusion of the ferry as an integral part of the evolving transport strategy for the Thames Gateway and the upgrading of the service as a part of a joint Kent/ Thurrock bid for funding through the Local Transport Plan from the Dartford River Crossing monies.

Accountable officer – David Joyner (01622) 696852

Background documents: None