East Kent Access – Phase 1

A report by the Head of Major Projects to the Highways Advisory Board on 6 March 2007.

Introduction

1. The original concept and scheme justification for East Kent Access – Phase 1 in 1999 included High Occupancy Vehicle lanes (HOV). When Phases 1A & 1B were opened it was decided to defer a decision on implementation until Phase 1C was nearing completion. This Report recommends that HOV lanes are not implemented. See Fig.1 for general location plan.

2. The intention to have HOV lanes was, in part, to complement the initiative by Pfizer to introduce a Green Travel Plan for its staff that would encourage car sharing. Government policy was also increasingly focused on integrated transport solutions and less inclined to support conventional highway improvement schemes. There was also a desire to encourage modal shift and car sharing so that extra capacity was not just lost to normal traffic growth.

3. These objectives are important but the practical aspects of introducing HOV lanes also need to be considered.

4. These issues were brought before this Board in September 2004 when Phase 1B between the Stour Viaduct and the Ramsgate Road roundabout was approaching completion and there was a very strong objection to the Traffic Regulation Orders that had been published. In January 2005, this Board accepted the recommendation not to proceed with HOV lanes on Phase 1B on what was a relatively short length and to reconsider when Phase 1C was more advanced. This was also in the hope that experience elsewhere and further Department of Transport (DfT) advice would give a stronger steer.

5. The DfT has recently published Traffic Advisory Leaflet 3/06 – High Occupancy Vehicle Lanes, commenting on the experience of two of the three sites in the UK. While there are benefits claimed and the Department would like to encourage more schemes, the fundamental problems of introducing HOV lanes on East Kent Access remain.

Location

6. The three HOV sites in the UK are essentially congested urban routes. East Kent Access Phase 1 is a rural route that by the nature of the improvements will not have capacity constraints on opening – car sharers and buses will therefore gain little advantage over normal traffic through use of a HOV lane.

7. Officers visited a site in Leeds, Yorkshire in 2005. This is a radial route with traffic predominantly heading straight for the city centre with little side traffic and traffic signals that allow HOV and normal traffic to proceed alternately at the end of the HOV section.

8. Phase 1B and 1C has three roundabouts, two serving Pfizer and Sandwich and one serving the old Richborough power station site and Richborough port site. A HOV lane occupying the conventional near side lane would need to stop short of roundabouts to accept merging conventional traffic wanting to turn left. Along the length of Phase 1C there are ten entrances serving a house, active commercial sites or potential development sites. A HOV lane occupying the conventional near side lane would be

penetrated by the need for normal traffic and lorries to access these sites and all the difficulties associated with slowing and conflicting movements. A HOV lane occupying the outside lane is less conventional, and would need DfT consultation because of the added signing and enforcement issues, and would have similar problems as traffic exits the HOV lane to get to the nearside to access their site destinations. There would also be issues of users needing to move out of the HOV to bus stops and car sharers exiting accesses needing to move across to the HOV lane.

Safety

9. Following on from the layout aspects above, a HOV would require far more crossing and merging movements and this must have safety implications. With a conventional dual carriageway operating in peak periods there is a tendency for traffic to align itself in convoy fashion depending on whether it will be going left or straight on.

10. HOV lanes operate at peak periods only and it can be envisaged that there may be confusion for drivers as to the legitimacy of being or not being in a HOV lane. They do not have to be peak only but the UK sites operate this way and would be totally unnecessary if operated in the non-peak periods – some 20 out of every 24 hours.

Signing and Road Markings

11. HOV arrangements will require extra signing and road markings at a time when efforts are being made to reduce overall road clutter.

Enforcement

12. With the HOV on the conventional nearside lane it may be difficult for drivers to avoid encroachment as they slow to turn into or exit accesses unless the HOV is terminated well in advance of the access or restarted well beyond.

13. Leeds have trialled infra-red enforcement cameras and Officers saw a demonstration in Leeds in 2005 but there were problems in accurately identifying the number of occupants and the DfT Advisory Leaflet suggests this is still the case. It will be many years before a reliable approved system is available.

14. Unlike bus lanes there are currently no enforcement powers for HOV lanes. In Leeds, they have a special arrangement with the Police and enforcement is limited to a few hours a month funded by the City Council. This is augmented by City Council staff who periodically note the details of violating vehicles who then receive warning letters in the names of both the Police and the City Council. Leeds has a violation rate of approximately 10%

15. Even such occasional enforcement is not practical in Kent where there are more pressing service delivery, financial, and resource priorities within both the Police and Kent Highway Services.

Local Community Views

16. When experimental Traffic Regulation Orders were published in 2004 for implementing the HOV lanes on Phase 1B there was a very strong reaction from individuals and the local community. The views were that public money had been used to create road space that would then be denied to a significant proportion of drivers who were unable

to car share. It was felt that they would cause congestion and that traffic switching lanes on the approach to the roundabouts would raise safety concerns and that use could not be enforced. There is no reason to suggest that these views will be any different now.

Conclusion

17. The intention to include HOV lanes within the East Kent Access Phase 1 was and remains a laudable objective as a way of supporting Green Travel Plans, encouraging car sharing and modal shift, and tempering unrestrained future traffic growth. However, for all the reasons given above, East Kent Access Phase 1 does not lend itself to the introduction of HOV lanes. Congested urban radial routes into town centres with traffic signal control are the obvious candidates and there would probably be several other more appropriate locations in Kent to pilot this concept. In the two years since reporting to this Board, there have been no new schemes implemented in the UK and the recent Traffic Advisory Leaflet does not really advance our knowledge and the fundamental difficulties of enforcement remain.

Finance

18. East Kent Access Phase1 is funded by Government through the Local Transport Plan. The Department of Transport has been advised of the issues above and that it is being recommended that HOV lanes are not implemented at the present time.

Recommendation

19. Subject to the views of this Board, it is proposed to recommend to the Cabinet Member for Environment, Highways and Waste that:
    (i) Phase 1C together with Phase 1B should be operated as a conventional dual carriageway without High Occupancy Vehicle lanes;
    ii) any consideration of introducing HOV lanes should be deferred until UK experience and further DfT guidance can offer a solution to the particular difficulties associated with introducing HOV lanes along East Kent Access Phase 1B & 1C and until robust remote monitoring and enforcement regimes are available.

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Background Documents: None