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To: Cabinet

Date: 16 June 2008

Subject: Dartford Crossing Tolls

Summary The County Council's response to the Department for Transport's proposals for tolls at the Dartford Crossing is outlined

For Information

1. Introduction

1.1 The Department for Transport (DfT) has issued two consultation papers on the Dartford – Thurrock River Crossing tolls. The first, published in December 2006 and reported to Cabinet in February 2007, consulted on proposed increased toll charges at the crossing. The second was issued in February 2008 gave proposals for a local discount scheme.

2. 2006 Proposals

2.1 The 2006 consultation paper proposed that tolls for cars and lorries should be raised (eg toll for cars from £1 to £1.50) but making the Crossing free between 10pm and 6am. It also proposed that the charge for Dart Tag users (cars only) would only pay £1 per crossing (but need to buy £30 worth in advance) and floated the idea of a local discount scheme for residents living near the Crossing. It also set out that the DfT were to commission a study to address capacity issues in the longer term.

2.2 In its response, attached as Annex 1, the County Council considered that toll levels should be kept at existing levels but that more of the profits (in the form of grant) should be made available to improve local transport in the Kent Thameside area and to bring forward motorway and trunk road schemes in Kent leading to the Crossing. The County Council offered no view on the local discount scheme as there would be difficulty in defining the local area coverage. KCC also supported the commissioning of the DfT capacity study, which was actually let in February 2008 – 14 months later.

3. 2008 Proposals

3.1 DfT consulted on a local discount scheme which is proposed to be available for residents living in Dartford District and the Thurrock Unitary areas who, for a £10 annual registration fee will get 50 free crossings (ie 20p each) and pay 20p for any additional crossings beyond the initial 50. DfT

intends for the discount scheme and increased tolls to be introduced in the Autumn, depending on the response to this consultation.

3.2 Under present arrangements, KCC has received £1m per annum in 'supported' borrowing for local integrated transport schemes in Kent Thameside, but last year we did not spend this as we were a floor funded authority. With the introduction of the local discount scheme, locally targeted funding (to KCC and Thurrock Council) would be discontinued and the remaining profits from the tolls would go towards 'national transport projects'. From April this year, KCC will be receiving a twelfth of £1m per month in grant until the local discount scheme is introduced later this year.

3.3 In its response, attached as Annex 2, the County Council supported the retention of tolls at the Crossing at current levels if urgently needed local and strategic improvement schemes in the County such as M25 Chevening – Godstone (Junctions 5-7); M20 Coldharbour – Wrotham (Junctions 3-5) and M25/M26 east facing slip roads at Sevenoaks are funded but considered that if there is no benefit to the wider community in Kent, the tolls at the Crossing should be withdrawn. As a result of the proposals, the net profits from the Crossing, currently at some £50m per year, would increase, yet transport spending in Kent would reduce. The response was also critical of the proposed local discount scheme which has chosen to give reduced crossing charges to residents living in an arbitrary area where, say, people living in Stanford-le-Hope in Thurrock will benefit, yet residents in Gravesend will not, despite being some 4km closer to the Crossing

Recommendation

The report is for information only

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Background Documents:

Consultation Paper: Dartford – Thurrock River Crossing; Discount charges for local residents using the crossing – Department for Transport, February 2008.

Proposed Changes to charges at the Dartford- Thurrock River Crossing: consultation document - Department for Transport, December 2006

**Consultation on the Proposed Changes to Charges at the Dartford – Thurrock
River Crossing**

**Response from Kent County Council
March 2007**

Dartford Crossing Toll Charges

The County Council considers that toll rates at the Crossing should be retained at present levels, on condition that a significant share of the net revenue (over £52m in 2004/5) is used to improve local transport in the local area in Kent Thameside and on improvements to the motorway and trunk road network leading to the Crossing - the M25 and, in Kent, the M20 and M2/A2 corridors. This could be used to fund schemes not already in the Highways Agency's Targeted Programme of Improvements and to bring forward schemes in the programme which are subject to slippage. In the longer term, the profits should also be used to finance the construction of an additional crossing of the Thames.

Any funding of local transport schemes in the future should be in the form of grant rather than 'supported' borrowing as currently the County Council cannot afford to spend its allocation of £1m from the tolls because it is a floor-funded authority.

The County Council does not support the proposed increases in toll charges as set out in the consultation document.

There is no strong view on giving local residents a discount as there is difficulty defining what the local area should be and who should qualify and who should not. If any discount is offered, it should be through a further reduction in the Dart-Tag rate to encourage more drivers to purchase them which would reduce congestion at the toll booths.

To further reduce congestion at the toll booths, the Government should fully investigate the use of electronic toll systems at the Crossing which can operate without vehicles having to slow down excessively. Such a proposal has been put forward to the DfT by the CPRE.

Lower Thames Crossing study

The decision by Government to consider a Lower Thames Crossing (LTC) is welcomed by the County Council and the study should consider the following issues:

Stakeholder Engagement

The study must be inclusive and involve significant input from and consultation with key stakeholders such as Kent and Essex County Councils as well as Medway Council.

Demand

Current future flow levels should be established at the Dartford Crossing both in terms of total vehicles and HGVs and current and future delays forecast due to the

congestion through the Crossing and toll booths. A range of time horizons should be identified – say 2015 (before possible start of road pricing), 2025 and 2035.

Capacity of the Dartford Crossing

All means of increasing the capacity of the existing crossing should be investigated, including use of enhanced electronic devices.

Scenario Testing

Scenarios including Do Nothing, Do Minimum (enhance capacity at existing crossing), Increased Infrastructure at Dartford and options for a Lower Thames Crossing should be considered.

Role of a Lower Thames Crossing

The County Council considers that the LTC should be a strategic link to relieve the Dartford Crossing, to provide an alternative route to the ports and Channel Tunnel via the A2/M2 as well as serving future development within the Thames Gateway and beyond. North of the river, the LTC should link from a new link to the M11.

Crossing for Road and Rail?

The study will have to look into whether a crossing for rail freight is viable. The amount of rail freight passing through the Channel Tunnel is pitifully small (some four trains per day in each direction and some 1.5 million tonnes per annum) and new capacity crossing the Thames would help to make railfreight more competitive by avoiding congested lines through London. However, having a combined road/rail structure would be very expensive and the approaches would have to be designed differently (gradients on the railway have to be much less severe).

Location

The location of any crossing will have to take account of physical constraints and would therefore have to be located to the east of Gravesend

Benefits/Impacts

The overall transport, economic and regeneration benefits of a Crossing will have to be evaluated along with the beneficial and adverse impacts on communities and the wellbeing of settlements. Additionally the effects on nationally and internationally important natural environment to the east of Gravesend will need to be assessed.

Integration with the Wider Network

The ability to integrate a strategic crossing with the existing road and rail network in Kent and the impacts associated with any consequential links with these networks will also have to be taken into account. Additionally, the effects of the crossing on traffic flows on the wider road network have to be assessed between the Crossing and Dover and improvement schemes worked up to accommodate significant increases.

It is likely that the A2/M2 corridor would come under the greatest pressure and schemes to address problems such as the capacity of M2 Junction 5, dualling the section between Lydden and Dover and Brenley Corner interchange need to be considered.

The opportunities of adopting dual-routing of cross- Channel Traffic – Dover Eastern Docks via A2/M2 corridor and Channel Tunnel/Dover Western Docks via M20/A20 should be fully investigated. This would enable ferry-related traffic flows to and from Dover to be separated out to reduce the severe impact of lorry traffic (air quality, severance and congestion) on the length of A20 Town Wall Street and the centre of the town. This will be increasingly important if the Dover Harbour Board develop the Western Docks for ferry traffic.

Funding

Funding these improvements should come from the Dartford Crossing tolls and from the imposition of a charge on lorries crossing the Channel and passing through Kent. Last year over 3.6m lorries passed through the port of Dover and the Channel Tunnel and the forecast growth of this traffic will be around 5% per year.

The County Council has long advocated the use of a Brit Disc which would be levied on these vehicles and it is heartening that the problem has been recognised by Government who carrying out feasibility study into a time-based charge or vignette. This study is due to be completed in October and a charging regime should be introduced as soon as practicable to generate funding to support these road improvements, lorry parking and inspections of the roadworthiness of lorries.

If and when a Lower Thames Crossing is built, a significant proportion of subsequent net revenue should also be devoted to local transport schemes in the local area of Kent Thameside and on improvements to the motorway and trunk road network leading to the Crossing.

**Consultation on the Proposed Changes to Charges at the Dartford –
Thurrock River Crossing**

**Response from Kent County Council
May 2008**

Kent County Council has supported the retention of tolls at the Crossing at current levels so that urgently needed local and strategic schemes in the County can be funded in the future. In particular, it was hoped that funding to support public transport schemes in Kent Thameside would continue and be enhanced and, in the form of grant, more schemes could actually have been built. It therefore is extremely disappointing that the proposal is to withdraw funding for local schemes in Kent Thameside after having, at last, to be giving the County Council grant instead of borrowing approval.

There is an urgent need to bring forward strategic trunk road schemes in Kent leading to the Crossing such as the M25 (Junctions 5 to 7 – Chevening to Godstone) and M20 (Junctions 3 to 5 – Wrotham to Maidstone (Coldharbour)). In the longer term, it will be necessary for an additional crossing of the Thames to be built downstream from Dartford. The net profits from the Dartford Crossing tolls currently generate some £50m per year and with the increased charges, this will rise significantly in the future. The County Council considers that the increased profits should be targeted at local and strategic schemes in the area of the Crossing and not go towards unspecified national transport projects.

As to the proposed local discount scheme, the choice of the local area for discounted charges is totally arbitrary, with only residents of Dartford Borough and Thurrock Unitary Council areas being eligible. This means that residents in Stanford-le-Hope (in Thurrock) qualify for the discount, but residents in Gravesend do not, despite the fact that the centre of Gravesend is some five kilometres nearer the Crossing.

If it is decided not to allow any benefit to the wider community in Kent from a crossing which was originally constructed as a joint Kent/Essex County Council project it is our view that the crossing should not be tolled given sufficient monies to pay for the future maintenance of the crossing have already been raised.