

Summary of Responses to Consultation

In December 2006 the Government published a consultation document: *Proposed Changes to Charges at the Dartford-Thurrock River Crossing*.

The consultation sought views on a range of measures designed to improve the use of the Crossing including changes to the charges, discounts for local residents, and investment of income in local travel schemes.

Consultation closed on 9 March 2007. This document summarises the responses received. The Government will be announcing formally its conclusions following the consultation in due course. A more detailed analysis of the responses will be undertaken as part of the Dartford Crossing strategy review. This summary focuses on the responses relating to the proposed changes to the charging regime.

Numbers of responses

The consultation attracted 178 responses that were sent directly to the Department. Some of these responses included the names of a number of people who had registered views in response to coverage on websites or in the media.

Local MPs submitted some 5,500 cards, petition forms and coupons from local papers, in support of their representations for a 90% discount for local residents. In addition there were two lists of names (numbering 3592 and 1234) who had registered their support via the MPs' websites.

3389 representations (2,816 petition signatures and 573 forms), in response to the campaign by the Kent Messenger newspaper relating to the proposals, were passed to the Department.

There were 937 "signatures" to an e-petition on the 10 Downing Street web site opposing the proposed increase in charges.

The above numbers have not been summed as it is possible that some people may have registered their opinions in more than one place.

Unless otherwise stated this summary refers to the 178 responses submitted directly to the Department.

Origin of responses

Many responses did not provide information on their origin but from the information available:

- 13 responses came from motoring and trade associations;
- 26 came from central and local government organisations;

- 3 were from local MPs.

Most of the remainder came from private individuals.

The organisations that responded are listed in the annex.

Summary of responses

General observations

Many respondents appeared not to be reacting directly to the consultation document. Very few responses acknowledged the proposal to apply a substantial discount for those using the "Dart tag" scheme. It appeared that this proposal was not widely known and some respondents did not appear to know of the existence of the Dart tag scheme.

Where comments can be attributed to the specific questions asked we have included them below.

Proposed changes to the charging regime

Given the pressures on the Crossing and the need to take action now what are your views on the proposed changes to the pricing regime and the suggested level of discounts for Dart tag users?

68% of the responses specifically opposed the increase with 9% supporting the increase. 61% suggested that charges should be removed altogether with 6% supporting their retention.

There was a widespread belief that the toll booths were the primary source of congestion at peak periods. Many replies noted that the legislation setting up the original construction of the Queen Elizabeth II Bridge had made provision for the removal of tolls once the construction costs had been met. Many responses noted that the Bridge and tunnels provided 4 lanes each way and concluded that the tolls must be the primary cause of congestion. Solutions suggested included the removal of all charges or improved arrangements using more modern technology such as number plate recognition cameras.

Many existing Dart tag users suggested that there should be better facilities for tag users including more dedicated and better positioned lanes at the Crossing.

What are your views on the proposed process of increasing prices in line with inflation within the order to maintain the pricing signals at the Crossing to manage demand?

There were few comments on this point but some of those who accepted that pricing did influence demand accepted that this was a reasonable way of adjusting charges at the Crossing. Most replies from the general republic did not accept that an increase

would suppress demand, arguing that they were forced to use the crossing, frequently at peak periods.

Given the impact of the Crossing on local congestion and the local environment and given the need to manage local demand at the Crossing what are your views on additional discounts for local residents? What are your views on revenues being spent on local transport improvements?

12% of replies favoured a local discount that acknowledges the inconvenience and pollution that the crossing generated in many cases for local residents. Some of these replies referred to large numbers of supporting representations as described above. 4% of replies opposed local discounts. No clear definition of local residents could be derived from the responses as many did not offer addresses but 13% either identified themselves as local or gave local postcodes. Suggestions for areas to be offered discounts included Dartford, Thurrock, Gravesham and Basildon or simply regular users. Local authorities offered varying views on the level of tolls but many wished to see a greater percentage of the Crossing income dedicated to local transport projects.

Some comments favoured the use of revenue to construct new crossing capacity.

Exempted Vehicles

The Government wants to achieve a balance between offering exemptions for users of vehicles that genuinely have no alternative to driving for transport and managing demand at the Crossing. How does the proposed list of exempted vehicles achieve that aim? What other vehicles should be considered?

Proposals included exemptions for vehicles engaged in car recovery, a widening of the exemptions for public service vehicles to include all coaches and improvements to exemptions for disabled users

Vehicle Classifications

How clear are the current vehicle classifications? What other classifications would help distinguish the broad categories of: motorcycle, car, light goods vehicles, minibuses, and heavy goods vehicles and regular buses?

Most respondents who commented felt that vehicle classifications were clear as they stood although there were a number of suggestions for clearer signing at the crossing.

The Government would like to better understand how the proposed changes to the charging regime would affect business – particularly small businesses. How would your business be affected by the proposed change in prices? How would your business be affected by worsening congestion at the Crossing?

Only a small number of responses specifically identified themselves as commercial users of the Crossing although trade associations clearly represent many members.

Both public transport and commercial operators registered concerns about the wide impact and costs of congestion on their national and international schedules.

Review of crossing capacity

There was little comment from private individuals on the proposals announced at the same time to carry out a review of capacity requirement. Some replies suggested that tolls should be dedicated to the creation of new capacity. Some expressed the view that a new crossing should be well downstream of Dartford, removing traffic from the eastern section of the M25 altogether. In contrast a number of responses considered that capacity increases could be delayed by either faster tolling arrangements or removal of the tolls. A number of local authorities and the Thames Gateway development partnerships offered contributions on the effects of capacity at Dartford on the redevelopment in the area plus observations on the requirement and location for further crossing capacity which will be taken forward within the capacity review. We will be analysing these responses further.

Other issues

Some responses covered issues not specifically raised in the consultation. These included

Safety concerns – frequent lane changing either side of toll booths, excessive speed particularly in the tunnel, the need for more proactive speed control, a requirement for clearer signs.

The toll plazas - improved payment methods that did not require vehicles to stop, plaza layout, operation of the toll booths at night and during periods of heavy congestion, one way tolling, mostly suggesting the removal of the southbound (bridge) toll plaza, better arrangement for left hand drive vehicles.

The effect of congestion at the crossing on the wider traffic network

Next Steps

The Government will issue its formal response to the consultation later in the year.

Annex

Major organisations responding to the Consultation:

Automobile Association
Ash-cum-Ridley Parish Council
Association of British Drivers
Bexley Council
Bromley Borough Roads Action Group
Confederation of Passenger Transport
Council for the Protection of Rural England (Kent)
Dartford Borough Council
Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee
East of England Regional Assembly
Essex County Council
Freight Transport Association
Friends of the Earth
GEM Motoring Assist
Gravesham BC
Greenwich Council
Institute of Advanced Motorists
Kent County Council
Kent Police
London Rivers Association
London Travel Watch
Medway Council
Motorcycle Industry Association
National Alliance against Tolls
Open Road
RAC
RAC Foundation
Road Haulage Association
South East Coast Ambulance Service
South East England Development Agency
South East Regional Assembly
Southend on Sea Borough Council
Swale Borough Council
Thames Gateway Kent Partnership
Thames Gateway London Partnership
Thames Gateway South Essex Partnership
Thurrock Thames Gateway Development Corporation
Thurrock Council
Tonbridge and Malling Council
Transport for London
W A Shearing and Co