

TONBRIDGE & MALLING BOROUGH COUNCIL

CABINET

22 March 2016

Report of the Director of Planning Housing & Environmental Health

Part 1- Public

Executive Non Key Decisions

1 LOWER THAMES CROSSING

Summary

This report outlines a proposed response to the Lower Thames Crossing (LTC) route options consultation launched by Highways England (HE) on 24 January 2016. It is proposed that TMBC responds in general support of a new crossing at HE's preferred location (a bored tunnel east of Gravesend). However, there are significant concerns about the impact of the proposed LTC on the highway network and some communities in the northern part of the Borough, particularly the A229 and the A228, following the elimination of the previous 'C Variant' option which included upgrades to the A229 (Bluebell Hill) and related key junctions.

It is recommended that the Borough Council should join Kent County Council and others in reiterating the absolute necessity for HE and the Department for Transport to carefully reconsider the consequent impact of traffic movements, in particular the connection between the M20 and M2, and bring forward investment proposals in parallel with the LTC to address these matters.

Endorsement of this report and annex is sought so that it may be provided to Highways England before the consultation deadline of 11:45 pm on 24 March 2016. It is hoped that can be a platform for further discussion with HE.

1.1 Background

- 1.1.1** Following a series of studies and a public consultation in 2013, the Government commissioned Highways England to consider options for a new Thames crossing at two locations. These are Location A, at the site of the current crossing at Dartford and a new crossing location east of Gravesend known as Location C. Both of these locations have been developed and assessed by Highways England in terms of their economic, traffic, environmental and community impacts. The assessment has also taken into account the significant growth and development plans for the region. At Location C, three potential route options have been

identified north of the river in Essex and two south of the river in Kent. The two options on the Kent side of the Thames include a direct link into the M2 motorway at Junction 1 (the Eastern Southern Link) and an alternative that joins the A2 further to the West (the Western Southern Link).

- 1.1.2 Earlier consultations included a 'C Variant Option' to improve connections between the M2 and M20 via the A229 at Bluebell Hill. This option has now been dropped on the grounds that it does not assist with the delivery of the LTC project objectives.
- 1.1.3 The purpose of the consultation that commenced on 24 January is to advise stakeholders, businesses and the general public of Highways England's preferred route based on their assessment of which route best meets the objectives for the LTC and to seek views on the southern link options on the Kent side and the route options in Essex linking the road to the M25.

1.2 Highways England Preferred Route

- 1.2.1 The preferred route is shown in **Annex 1** comprises Route 3 with the Eastern Southern Link (ESL) connecting to junction 1 of the M2. The status of the road is yet to be decided (motorway, dual carriageway or express way) and work is ongoing, but it is proposed to be two lanes in each direction. Public transport features will not be designed in at this stage, the design aiming for high speed operation of the road. The ESL is said to be preferred for its ability to provide a strategically important and more direct link, aid high speed operations and create additional capacity in the network. The economic case for the ESL is shown to be stronger and is concluded to create greater general improvements along the existing corridor (A2/ M2). The Western Southern Link is more constrained and impacts on High Speed 1.
- 1.2.2 The preferred route proposed has been recommended by HE on the grounds that it:
- Provides the best economic benefits of all the shortlisted routes evaluated and reduces traffic at Dartford and therefore reduces congestion.
 - Can largely be constructed off-line, avoiding the disruption that would be caused by works at Location A
 - Provides the most network resilience through a second independent crossing of the Thames
 - Provides a high speed operation for drivers, i.e. motorway to motorway
 - Reduces air and noise pollution along the existing corridor at Dartford, whilst recognising that there are environmental and community impacts in the vicinity of the new scheme, including noise and air quality on communities alongside the preferred route

- Will provide a new strategic link to the local, regional and strategic road network, increasing resilience and addressing future increases in traffic demand.

1.3 Impacts of the Preferred Route on Tonbridge & Malling Borough

- 1.3.1 There are some significant potential advantages to the preferred route for the Borough outlined below in terms of general improved accessibility and economic growth.
- 1.3.2 Equally, there are some factors that present a degree of risk in terms of impact if they are not properly addressed and it is important that the Council draws attention to these and seeks some commitment from HE to addressing them.
- 1.3.3 The previous 'C Variant' option has been dismissed on the grounds that this upgrade would have limited economic benefits, high environmental impact, a high cost and would have little additional benefit in transferring traffic from Dartford onto Location C routes.
- 1.3.4 However, there is significant concern that without investment to improve key points in the highway network severe and unacceptable impacts on the A229 Bluebell Hill and the Lord Lees roundabout, junction 6 of the M20 and to some extent, the A228 will result.
- 1.3.5 As Local Highway Authority, Kent County Council's Transport Strategy Team are preparing their own draft response and have recently obtained the traffic modelling data used by Highways England for this project. This will be scrutinised to ensure full comprehension of the impacts on the A229 and on the roads around the ESL and WSL.
- 1.3.6 The A229 is the main route between Maidstone and the Medway Towns and is the shortest link between the M2 and the M20. It is therefore the most likely route that will be taken by drivers using the Eurotunnel at Folkestone or the port at Dover with starting points or destinations north via the LTC. The A229 is expected to take the brunt of the additional traffic flows. It is also possible that some drivers may choose to use the A228. There is no real prospect that the A228 could be enhanced practically, but it may pose as an attractive alternative if the A229 cannot adequately cope with the additional traffic. This places even greater need to make improvements to the A 229 itself and related junctions.
- 1.3.7 In some quarters the A249 link from junction 7 of the M20 to junction 5 of the M2 is being promoted as the preferred route between the new crossing and Dover/Eurotunnel, in order to attract the prospect of improvement invests to that route. However, that presents a considerably longer travelling time than the A229 and seems highly unlikely to be the choice for drivers.
- 1.3.8 The information available shows that the A229 will have an increase in traffic. It can be inferred that a high proportion of the decrease in traffic volumes on the

M20 through the Borough would have diverted to the M2, via the A229. This is in the order of 5,000 vehicles a day.

- 1.3.9 Not addressing the junctions at either end of the A229 but nevertheless encouraging increase traffic will have possible safety implications, with the slip roads blocking back on the A229. Information on how the junctions have been modelled is not available in the consultation documents and until KCC have been able to fully assess the recently received modelling data, it is unknown if this has been fully taken account of. Some good working relationships have been developed with KCC colleagues to enable us to understand this situation in more detail.
- 1.3.10 In conclusion, whilst the consultation is focused on route options, the impact on the existing local road network and junctions are not adequately considered. As a result of the changing traffic flows created by the LTC, improvements to the A229, the Lord Lees roundabout, M20 junction 6 and M2 junction 3 should be given serious consideration, designed and funded in parallel with the LTC scheme to avoid future problems and to provide the most comprehensive and agreeable solution to strategic traffic movement through the area.
- 1.3.11 In terms of the route choices south of the river, the ESL would seem to produce slightly greater benefits in terms of traffic mitigation on the M20 through the Borough. This is based on the traffic data produced by HE and arises principally due to the more direct nature of the route and the ability to maintain a high speed traffic regime. However, concerns have been raised about the likely high impact levels arising from the design of the junction (with M2 junction 1), the local traffic movements that might arise from the constraints on that junction, and the higher local impact on communities, albeit outside of Tonbridge and Malling. In addition the WSL might also give rise to further potential 'rat running' bringing the A227 readily into play.
- 1.3.12 KCC seem likely to support the WSL based on some of the reasons outlined in the preceding paragraph and other matters that are related to local issues in and around Gravesend. For Tonbridge and Malling the choice is rather more balanced and it is difficult to come to a final view at this stage without knowing what the realistic prospects might be of securing the 'C Variant type' improvements mentioned in this report.

1.4 Economic Benefits

- 1.4.1 The economic case supporting the preferred option sets out that whilst construction will cost in the region of £4.3-5.9 billion it could add £7 billion into the economy, creating over 5,000 jobs, and has the potential to unlock investment, housing and regeneration and will stimulate apprenticeships and training both during the construction and in the longer term. The strategic transport case is based upon improving transport connections at a critical part of the road network

supporting both local businesses, national companies and international trade through the Channel and Thames Estuary ports.

1.4.2 Although the local economic benefits of this scheme are not explicitly quantified, there seems to be potential for the Tonbridge & Malling economy to benefit in the following ways:

- Employment and training opportunities during the construction phase – both Mid-Kent College and West Kent College have courses in Construction.
- Potential for travel savings (reduced congestion and accident levels) along the M20 corridor for both commuters and HGVs.
- Providing strategic accessibility improvements and alleviating the M20 corridor could help to improve the viability of some of the emerging proposals in the Borough, such as the Aylesford Newsprint site.
- Key existing employment sites, such as Kings Hill and Quarry Wood could benefit from improved marketability through actual and perceived increase in accessibility.

1.5 Environmental Issues

1.5.1 It is probable, based upon the evidence available to date, that the LTC will divert some traffic, particularly freight heading north, away from the M20 to the M2 with the potential to reduce air pollutants and mitigate congestion levels along the M20 through the borough and particularly between junctions 4 and 5 where there is an existing Air Quality Management Area.

1.5.2 However, this benefit could be negated by the potential harm to air quality and noise on the A229 if adequate proposals are not taken forward to address congestion and impact as part of an overall package of road improvements linked to the LTC preferred route.

1.6 Public Consultation and the Consultation Questionnaire

1.6.1 The public consultation was launched unexpectedly on 24 January without prior stakeholder notification. By the time the consultation period ends, Highways England will have held 24 Public Information Events and a number of targeted presentations for elected Members and the business community.

1.6.2 Highways England has created a specific consultation website including an online consultation questionnaire. The consultation was advertised in the local and national press, on local radio stations and reported on locally and nationally by the media. The opportunity was taken at the last Parish Partnership Panel to draw attention to the outline proposals and encourage Parish Councils to submit their own submissions.

1.6.3 The Council's proposed response is set out in the completed questionnaire in **annex 2**.

1.7 Next Steps

1.7.1 The consultation closes at 11:45 pm on Thursday 24 March 2016. The results will be analysed and presented to Government along with the report of Highways England setting out the preferred route and the justifications for this.

1.7.2 Formal consultation on a final route will need to be carried out in the future under a formal Development Commencement Order, likely to take place during 2018. As a project of national importance, the planning application would be determined under NSIP. Funding is yet to be agreed but will be either publicly financed or funded through a PFI. The estimated programme for completion of the LTC is between 2025/ 2027.

1.7.3 It will be our intention to work with KCC and others to analyse the detailed impact of the proposals and liaise with Highways England in order to continue to seek improvements as described in this report.

1.8 Legal Implications

1.8.1 None arising from this consultation matter.

1.9 Financial and Value for Money Considerations

1.9.1 None related to this report.

1.10 Conclusion and Risk Assessment

1.10.1 The principal e risks related to the proposed LTC lie within the balance between the level of traffic and environmental impact on the one hand and the accessibility and potential economic benefits that this major infrastructure investment could bring on the other. That is why the focus for this consultation response and our ongoing interest is on securing adequate investment on key parts of the existing highway network and junctions to run hand in hand with the LTC project.

1.10.2 Overall, it is considered that location C for the proposed crossing is supported as the most advantageous location in strategic transport and economic terms. In terms of the route choices south of the river, in the absence of any commitment to local improvements and more detail on traffic movements on the existing highway network, it is recommended that no final indication be given at this stage.

1.11 Recommendations

1.11.1 The issues and conclusions raised in this report be endorsed and be forwarded to Highways England along with the comments included in annex 2 as the Council's response to the public consultation

1.11.2 The Director of Planning, Housing and Environmental Health be requested to work with KCC in making a case to the Department of Transport and Highways England for a commitment to investment in the existing highway network referred to in this report.

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Background papers:
Highways England Lower Thames Crossing Route
Consultation Documents 2016.