



DON'T LET THEM DRIVE YOU OFF THE ROAD!

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Dartford Consultation

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Dear Sir,

Dartford Crossing Consultation

The Association of British Drivers (ABD) strongly opposes any increase in toll charges at the Dartford crossing; in fact, the ABD supports removal of the charges altogether. Three important points should be made:

- 1) The government has reneged on promises to scrap the charges, contained in the original Act that authorised construction of the Queen Elizabeth II Bridge.
- 2) Continued imposition of charges obstructs traffic flow, causing avoidable delays.
- 3) Approximately £50 billion per annum is extracted from British drivers in motoring taxes. At the same time, only £8 billion is spent annually on improving the road network. Given the disparity of these figures there can be no justification for continuing the crossing tolls, let alone raising them, long after the construction costs have been repaid and the maintenance fund established.

Retaining charges at the existing crossing will continue to cause lengthy tailbacks of traffic, poor air quality in the immediate area (which has been declared an air quality management area), wasted fuel, missed appointments, unnecessary wear and tear on vehicles, and driver frustration at having to endure largely avoidable delays.

The proposal to allow free access at night is of little benefit to those who have no choice but to use the crossing during the day and face an increase of 50 per cent or more in charges. People do not travel at the most congested times unless it is unavoidable, so most drivers would have to pay the increase, for which they would gain no improvement in journey times. Indeed, by increasing the charge to £1.50 for car drivers, who are the majority users, there would be extra delays as drivers search for two coins to make payment. The proposal to discontinue charges for trailers is one of the very few measures the ABD can support.

Removal of the charges and the toll booths, and reducing the width of the toll plazas to match the width of the carriageways, would lead to a faster throughput of traffic. (It would not be

acceptable to leave the toll booths in place with barriers raised, as traffic would fan out and then be channelled back, uncontrolled, into four lanes, which could reduce capacity and cause safety problems.) As well as reducing the problems associated with queuing traffic on the crossing approaches, removal of the tolls and toll plazas would allow for some of the projected increase in future traffic flow. The eventual widening of the M25 to dual four-lanes, north of junction 30, would match rather than exceed the capacity of the crossing.

There would need to be carefully designed advance direction signing on the crossing approaches, telling drivers which lane to use for the direction they want to take on exiting the crossing. This would minimise congestion due to late weaving of traffic.

Junction 1A on the southbound side may (repeat may) require some re-engineering to ensure a smooth flow of traffic leaving/joining the crossing at that point. The four lanes from the southbound booths carry traffic reasonably well; if (and given time and adequate signage they would be) the majority of drivers are in the right lane at the end of the bridge, then traffic joining/leaving the M25 at junction 1A should not experience major problems.

Traffic usually flows fairly well past junctions 1A and 1B before dividing either onto the A2 approaches or continuing on the M25. In fact M25/A2 widening work being undertaken here will considerably improve traffic flow leaving more road space available from the current booths onwards.

Scrapping tolls would negate any need for exempted vehicle classifications, Dartford tag users, discounts for local users, price increases, lower admin and operational costs, besides reducing costs for business users; these include the thousands of commuters who use the crossing daily.

The Brown & Root study quoted in the consultation document "suggests" traffic volume could be 17.6 per cent higher if there were no charges. While it is accepted that removal of tolls may attract some drivers, this happens to be the only strategic Thames crossing to the south and east of London and the nearest river crossing for truckers travelling from/to Dover. Other routes involve long detours through or around London and provide no real alternative. Very few drivers are likely to use the crossing just because of the absence of tolls.

The lack of choice in Thames crossings has not prevented the Government from proposing another 48,000 houses in the Thames Gateway over the next 20 years. It is fanciful to assume that the people who live in those houses will travel entirely on foot, bicycle or public transport; they will want to own and use cars. Instead of maintaining and exacerbating the current levels of congestion at Dartford in order to extract more money from motorists, the Government should be planning additional cross-river capacity, including a lower Thames crossing.

Yours faithfully,

(This submission has been discussed and contributed to by ABD members and is available on the national ABD website: www.abd.org.uk.)