

05 December 2018

Ordinary Council

**Response to Lower Thames Crossing Consultation
(October-December 2018)**

Report of: *Phil Drane, Director of Strategic Planning*

Wards Affected: *All*

This report is: *Public*

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 Highways England are inviting views on the Lower Thames Crossing, a proposed new motorway connecting Essex and Kent through a tunnel beneath the River Thames to provide additional road capacity.
- 1.2 Consultation on the project and route took place most recently in March 2016, which the Council responded to. The route and structure that was eventually chosen were the same as the Council's preferences.
- 1.3 Since then, there have been several design changes that are published for comment as part of this 2018 consultation. Proposals include improvements to M25 junction 29. Whilst these proposals will help to improve traffic flows through the junction and benefit surrounding roads, they constrain access to Brentwood Enterprise Park; a fundamental part of the Council's strategy for economic growth published in the Pre-Submission Local Plan Regulation 19 (October 2018). In addition, the proposed highway route through Thurrock does not maximise opportunities for growth with new connections that could be delivered through the South Essex Joint Strategic Plan (JSP).
- 1.4 A response from the Council to the Lower Thames Crossing consultation is proposed at Appendix A.

2. Recommendation

- 2.1 That the Council approve the response to the Lower Thames Crossing Consultation, as set out in Appendix A.**

3. Introduction and Background

- 3.1 The Lower Thames Crossing is a proposed new motorway connecting Kent, Thurrock and Essex through a tunnel beneath the River Thames. According to Highways England it will provide much needed new road capacity across the river east of London.
- 3.2 On the south side of the Thames, the new road will link the tunnel to the A2 and M2 in Kent. On the north side, it will link to the A13 and junction 29 of the M25 in the London Borough of Havering, and adjoining the Brentwood Borough south-western administrative boundary. According to Highways England the crossing and the new connecting road network will provide quicker and more reliable journeys locally, regionally and nationally.
- 3.3 This is the most ambitious project of its kind in the country. It is the largest single road investment project in the UK since the M25 was completed more than 30 years ago. The crossing under the Thames will be the longest road tunnel in the country. At 16 metres in diameter, it will be one of the largest bored tunnels in the world.
- 3.4 The Lower Thames Crossing will have:
- a) Approximately 14.5 miles (23km) of new roads connecting the tunnel to the existing road network;
 - b) Three lanes in both directions with a maximum speed limit of 70mph;
 - c) Improvements to the M25, A2 and A13, where the Lower Thames Crossing connects to these roads;
 - d) New structures and changes to existing ones (including bridges, buildings, tunnel entrances, viaducts and utilities such as electricity pylons) along the length of the new road;
 - e) Two 2.5 mile (4km) tunnels, one for southbound traffic, one for northbound traffic crossing beneath the river; and
 - f) A free-flow charging system, where drivers do not need to stop but pay remotely, similar to that at the Dartford Crossing.
- 3.5 Several options have been explored before reaching the current proposal, including consultation in 2016 that the Council responded to. Highways England consider the current proposal to be the best option, offering the right balance between providing value for money, moving traffic effectively, and reducing the impact on local communities and the environment. One of the main ways that the environmental and community impact is being reduced is by building a tunnel, as it has fewer

visual and noise impacts. It also avoids sensitive and valuable habitats such as the Thames Estuary and Marshes Special Protection Area and Ramsar sites (a wetland of international importance).

- 3.6 Highways England has committed to make sure local road users still have good connections to the nearby roads, and that the design will discourage 'rat running'. Highways England are complying with all relevant design and technical standards, and are getting plans reviewed by external agencies, including the Design Council.
- 3.7 When Highways England submit the Development Consent Order (DCO) application, this will include an Environmental Statement outlining how it is proposed to minimise the impacts of the project.
- 3.8 The Lower Thames Crossing is part of the biggest investment in the country's road network for a generation, including £15 billion that is being invested in motorways and major A-roads between 2015 and 2020. A further multibillion pound investment programme will be announced in autumn 2018, covering the period 2020-2025.
- 3.9 According to Highways England, the project is important because it will help to deliver:
 - a) **A boost to the economy:** Good transport connections are vital for economic growth. The areas of Kent, Thurrock and Essex, which the Lower Thames Crossing will serve are already home to key economic hubs, vital ports and thriving neighbourhoods. The crossing will provide new connections between all of these and ensure better journeys, fewer delays and give more certainty on how long journeys will take.
 - b) **Easing heavily congested roads:** Motorists trying to cross the Thames face a daily challenge. Every day, on every journey, roads and motorways on both sides of the River Thames are under huge pressure. The Dartford Crossing is already far too congested far too often, and unless something is done now to provide more road capacity across the Thames, the situation will get worse.
 - c) **Quicker journeys:** The Lower Thames Crossing will benefit the Lower Thames area around Kent, Thurrock and Essex. It will:
 - i. improve journey times along parts of the A127 and M25;
 - ii. cut congestion on approach roads to the Dartford Crossing (including parts of the M25, A13 and A2);

- iii. increase capacity across the Thames from four lanes in each direction currently (at Dartford) to seven lanes each way (Dartford plus the Lower Thames Crossing); and
 - iv. allow nearly double the amount of traffic to cross the Thames.
- d) **Creating a better future:** The crossing will be designed and built for the future, and will unlock opportunities for regional and national economic growth. As part of their development plans, local authorities in Kent and Essex have committed to building tens of thousands of new homes in the coming years. The Lower Thames Crossing is considered to support this by strengthening and connecting local communities and improving access to jobs, housing, leisure and retail facilities on both sides of the river.
- e) **Employment and education:** The Lower Thames Crossing will provide benefits for local communities and the economy for generations to come. New training and job opportunities created during construction will boost both the local and regional economies.
- f) **Supporting local growth:** Good connections across the region and throughout the country are essential for business growth. Highways England has spoken with many representatives from a range of businesses who say their main concern is transport infrastructure.

4. Issue, Options and Analysis of Options

- 4.1 An online form has been created by Highways England for comments on the Lower Thames Crossing. Issues are split into several sections that include questions. The content of the questions in each section broadly follow a format that asks for the level of support for an issue (strongly agree / agree / neutral / disagree / strongly disagree / don't know), and then to give reasons. The below sections and questions are considered to be relevant to the issues raised in the proposed response (Appendix A).
- 4.2 Section 1. The need for the Lower Thames Crossing (including questions 1a and 1b), asks whether the Crossing is needed. Highways England put forward the reasons why a Crossing is needed. The Council responded to the 2016 consultation by supporting the need for a new crossing on the basis of congestion at the Dartford Crossing and negative impacts this has on the local and national economy. Questions 1a and 1b are the only questions in the consultation that are required to be answered, all other questions are optional.

- 4.3 Section 3.2. Sections of the route North of the river in Thurrock, Essex and Havering, refers to the section of the proposed route starting immediately north of the northern tunnel entrance and ending at the connection with the M25 at junction 29, and the related improvement works at the M25. Included in the scope of question 3d and 3e are the route, structures such as bridges, embankments, viaducts and any other aspect to be commented on. This is relevant for proposals at M25 junction 29 and the potential impact on access arrangements to Brentwood Enterprise Park.
- 4.4 Section 4.1. Connections North of the Crossing, provides an opportunity to comment on connections between the Lower Thames Crossing and the surrounding road network. Questions relate to new connections rather than improvements to the existing network, such as M25 junction 29, and so is not considered to be relevant to access at Brentwood Enterprise Park. However, this is relevant to wider issues relating to the opportunities for growth in South Essex.
- 4.5 Section 7. Development Boundary, defines the area of land where the proposed Lower Thames Crossing would be situated, as well as land that may be required to enable construction and to provide mitigation for some of the impacts associated with construction. It identifies land and property that may need to be acquired permanently or used temporarily for the Lower Thames Crossing to be built and maintained. Highways England state that they will continue to work closely with the owners and occupiers of this land and property as the project develops. Questions 7a and 7b are relevant to access arrangements proposed at Brentwood Enterprise Park (adjacent to M25 junction 29).
- 4.6 Section 9. Traffic, sets out the modelled forecast changes in traffic flows and the impacts on congestion as a result of the Lower Thames Crossing. Question 9a and 9b are relevant to the potential to improve traffic flows at M25 junction 29, as well as broader improvements on the strategic highways network, and the benefits this could have to current traffic conditions and proposed new development in the Brentwood Pre-Submission Local Plan (2018).
- 4.7 Section 11. Building Lower Thames Crossing, describes plans to build the Lower Thames Crossing including proposed working hours and tunnelling methods, plans for temporary road closures and traffic management, and the proposed location of construction compounds. Questions 11a and 11b are relevant to the construction compound and access arrangements proposed at Brentwood Enterprise Park (adjacent to M25 junction 29).

- 4.8 Section 13. Other Comments, provides an opportunity for responses to be made that may not fit within the structure of questions set by Highways England. It is suggested that responding to question 13 provides an opportunity to highlight the importance of ongoing discussion with Highways England, and those promoting Brentwood Enterprise Park, to resolve objections relating to M25 junction 29 improvements.
- 4.9 The content of the response set out in Appendix A, if approved, will be separated into the relevant consultation questions and submitted online to Highways England by the deadline.

5. Reasons for Recommendation

- 5.1 Highways England has launched this consultation as the project has now progressed sufficiently that new proposals and further details can be published. Consultation documentation, including maps, computer generated images and video context, can be viewed on the Highways England website. The following issues are considered to be relevant for comment, set out in Appendix A:

Principle of Lower Thames Crossing

- 5.2 In line with the Council's response to Lower Thames Crossing options in 2016, it is proposed that the principle of delivering a new crossing should be supported.

Brentwood Enterprise Park and M25 Junction 29

- 5.3 Highways England's proposals for M25 junction 29 improvements include the widening of the M25 from three lanes to four in both directions with hard shoulders. The connections of the north-facing slip roads at this junction will be changed because of the widening through the junction. Changes will also be carried out at the existing junction 29 roundabout.
- 5.4 The employment strategy set out in the Brentwood Pre-Submission Local Plan (Item 181: Extraordinary Council, 08 November 2018), relies upon the delivery of new employment land at Brentwood Enterprise Park, adjacent to M25 junction 29. The current Lower Thames Crossing proposals compromise access arrangements to Brentwood Enterprise Park by providing a new slip road from the A127 westbound onto the M25 southbound, which severs the existing access to the site. In addition, proposals set the need for temporary access through the centre of Brentwood Enterprise Park to service National Grid infrastructure/pylons to the south of the site. This access could instead be accommodated on

the edge of the site, enabling construction of both the highways improvements and new employment land.

- 5.5 Unresolved, these issues risk the delivery of Brentwood Enterprise Park, and by extension the soundness of the Brentwood Local Plan. On that basis, it is proposed to object to the current M25 junction 29 proposals until issues can be resolved, resulting in positive compromise that can ensure the delivery of both projects.

Supporting Growth Aspirations in South Essex

- 5.6 Reflecting work to produce a South Essex Joint Strategic Plan, by the Association of South Essex Local Authorities (ASELA), of which the Council is a partner, it is proposed that a comment be made about the opportunity for the new highway to enable growth. As currently proposed the route and connections north of the crossing do not maximise opportunities for new growth. New junctions in Thurrock are not proposed. New junctions could enable the delivery of new communities supporting Government objectives to deliver new homes and jobs, supported by the work of ASELA.
- 5.7 On this basis, it is proposed that the Council object to connections proposed north of the crossing and requests further engagement between Highways England and ASELA to enable growth aspirations in South Essex.

Strategic Highway Network

- 5.8 Highways modelling work that has been published alongside Lower Thames Crossing consultation documents. Through the work undertaken on the Brentwood Transport Assessment, informing the Local Plan, frequent discussion has taken place with Highways England about the implications of new development on the strategic highway network, including changes to the network in future. Modelling data produced for Lower Thames Crossing and the changes in behaviour/traffic that could result on surrounding roads was not published in time to fully inform the Brentwood Transport Assessment, although assumptions were made. It is noted that this has the potential to change subject to further amendments to the Lower Thames Crossing project
- 5.9 It is proposed that the Council support efforts made to understand traffic conditions through highways modelling and the need to improve traffic flows at M25 junction 29. Further engagement is requested with

Highways England to enable modelling work to be consistently reflected in the Brentwood Transport Assessment, and vice-versa.

Future Engagement and Resolution of Objections

- 5.10 It is proposed that the Council requests further engagement with Highways England to help resolve objections.
- 5.11 In addition, reiterating comments made in 2016, it is proposed that the Lower Thames Crossing is considered in combination with other transport infrastructure investment (i.e. further Thames crossings, A127 improvements, M25 junction 28 improvements, and A12 widening).

6. Consultation

- 6.1 The Lower Thames Crossing consultation began on 10 October 2018 and ends on 20 December 2018. Consultation documentation, including maps, computer generated images and video context, can be viewed on the Highways England website at <https://highwaysengland.citizenspace.com/ltc/consultation/>.
- 6.2 Previous consultation has taken place on the proposal, the most recent closing in March 2016. The Council responded to this consultation (Item 416: Policy, Finance and Resources Committee, 22 March 2016). The response provided a view regarding crossing location and structure; route; and wider strategy and future engagement. The crossing location, structure and route being proposed in this 2018 consultation are all in accordance with the Council's preference on options. The works to M25 junction 29 is a new proposal, not mentioned in 2016.

7. References to Corporate Plan

- 7.1 The Lower Thames Crossing proposals are relevant to the Council's Local Development Plan, which is a key priority in the Council's 'Vision for Brentwood' Corporate Plan 2016-2019. The Plan is an important delivery vehicle for several cross-cutting priorities, informed by individual Council strategies.

8. Implications

Financial Implications

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- 8.1 The potential economic benefits of a new crossing will likely benefit Brentwood businesses and contribute to unlocking growth opportunities in the A127 Corridor, as proposed in the Brentwood Pre-Submission Local Plan. However, should the improvements proposed at M25 junction 29 constrain the access and development of Brentwood Enterprise Park it could reduce the amount of employment land to be delivered in the Borough and increase the risk of the Brentwood Local Plan being found unsound, resulting in financial implications that have yet to be quantified.

Legal Implications

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- 8.2 As a major national infrastructure project with implications for the Borough, it is important that the Council respond regarding proposals set out in the Brentwood Pre-Submission Local Plan. Engagement in this way is consistent with the Duty to Cooperate and the Council's adopted Statement of Community Involvement.

Other Implications (where significant) – i.e. Health and Safety, Asset Management, Equality and Diversity, Risk Management, Section 17 – Crime & Disorder, Sustainability, ICT.

- 8.3 The proposed Lower Thames Crossing route and connections have implications for the South Essex Joint Strategic Plan (JSP). This will need to be considered through the plan-making process for both the Council and the Association of South Essex Local Authorities (ASELA), of which the Council is a partner.
- 8.4 As the Lower Thames Crossing project progresses, in future a Development Consent Order (DCO) will be submitted by Highways England to the Council as local planning authority. A DCO is the means of obtaining permission for development categorised as Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects (NSIP). This includes energy, transport, water and waste projects. This is a statutory process and has implications for the resources of the Council's Planning Development Management Team.

8.5 When Highways England submit the DCO application, this will include an Environmental Statement outlining how it is proposed to minimise the impacts of the project. This may identify implications on the local environment and wellbeing of local residents and businesses.

9. Background Papers (include their location and identify whether any are exempt or protected by copyright)

- Highways England Lower Thames Crossing Statutory Consultation, October-December 2018:
<https://highwaysengland.citizenspace.com/ltc/consultation/>
- Brentwood Borough Council response to Lower Thames Crossing Route Consultation, March 2016 (Item 416: Policy, Finance and Resources Committee, 22 March 2016):
<https://brentwood.moderngov.co.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=359&MId=1749>

10. Appendices to this report

- Appendix A: Brentwood Borough Council Response to the Lower Thames Crossing Statutory Consultation, December 2018

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