

**22 March 2016**

**Policy, Finance & Resources Committee**

**Lower Thames Crossing Route Consultation Response**

**Report of:** *Phil Ruck, Head of Paid Service*

**Wards Affected:** *All*

**This report is:** *Public*

## **1. Executive Summary**

- 1.1 Highways England is consulting on proposals for a new road crossing of the River Thames connecting Kent and Essex. Views are being sought on two potential locations, three crossing structures, and four route options.
- 1.2 A scheme has been proposed that identifies a preferred crossing location (Location C), structure (bored tunnel), and route (Route 3).
- 1.3 Responses to the consultation will inform the final recommendation to the Department for Transport. The Government are expected to make an announcement on the final scheme later this year.

## **2. Recommendation**

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

## **3. Introduction and Background**

- 3.1 Highways England is consulting on proposals for a new road crossing of the River Thames connecting Kent and Essex. A new crossing is needed to reduce congestion at the existing Dartford crossing and unlock economic growth, supporting the development of new homes and jobs in the region.
- 3.2 For over 50 years, the Dartford Crossing has provided the only road crossing of the Thames east of London. It is a critical part of the UK's

major road network carrying local, national and international traffic. Congestion and closure of the existing crossing occurs frequently and this, together with a lack of alternative transport links, creates significant disruption and pollution.

- 3.3 Traffic flow and journey times have recently been improved with the removal of payment barriers and introduction of electronic payments. However, this does not address the need for increased capacity. Already carrying 50 million vehicles a year and with traffic volumes forecast to increase, the free flow improvements will only relieve congestion in the short-term and major improvements are needed to provide a long-lasting solution.
- 3.4 In addition to reducing delays for drivers, a new crossing could transform the region by providing a vital new connection across the Thames. It would stimulate economic growth by unlocking access to housing and job opportunities, and deliver benefits for generations to come. This would not only benefit the region but the whole of the UK, providing better journeys, enabling growth and building for the future.

#### **4. Issue, Options and Analysis of Options**

- 4.1 Following a series of studies and a public consultation in 2013, the Government commissioned Highways England, the operator of the country's motorways and major roads, to consider options at two locations. Engineering solutions have been developed at both locations and assessed 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.
- 4.2 When assessing the shortlist Highways England have focussed on three main considerations:
- **Location:** Whether a new crossing should be built at Location A (Dartford, close to the existing crossing), or at Location C (east of Gravesend and Tilbury).
  - **Crossing:** Whether the crossing structure should be a bridge or a tunnel (including bored tunnel or immersed tunnel).
  - **Routes & Junctions:** How to strike a balance between environmental factors, local access and highway design standards.
- 4.3 To assess the shortlist Highways England has:

- Carried out computer modelling of forecast traffic flows, taking into account planned housing and commercial developments;
- Developed engineering designs of feasible crossing types;
- Designed preliminary alignments for highways and junctions;
- Considered the impact on people and property;
- Identified the environmental and ecological impacts both long term and during construction; and
- Estimated the costs and benefits to quantify the value for money that each route offers.

4.4 Following this assessment, Highways England propose Location C because it offers far greater benefits than Location A. It would unlock significant wider economic growth and offers higher transport performance in terms of safety, capacity and resilience. In contrast, a new crossing at Location A would not meet the transport and economic objectives. Also, in comparison with Location C, it offers poor value for money.

4.5 At Location C, three potential route options have been identified north of the river in Essex and two south of the river in Kent. A map of route options from Location C is set out at Appendix B.

### **Proposed Scheme**

4.6 Highways England has proposed a scheme after considering existing conditions, the nature of problems at Dartford and the needs and plans for the area. The proposed scheme is for a dual carriageway connecting junction 1 of the M2 to the M25 between junctions 29 and 30. This crosses under the River Thames just east of Gravesend and Tilbury. Of the potential options, this route would provide a 70mph motorway-to-motorway connection with the greatest improvement in journey times and a modern, high quality road along its entire length. A bored tunnel would provide the required capacity and would have the least impact of all crossing types on local communities, protected habitats and species. It would have two lanes in each direction with space for future capacity and would be about two miles long. Route 3 would pass to the west of East Tilbury and then between Chadwell St Mary and Linford. The route would cross the A13 where an upgraded junction would be provided. To the north of the A13 it would pass to the west of Orsett and then pass north of South Ockendon before connecting with the M25 with a one-way junction allowing travel to and from the north on the M25. The Eastern Southern Link would provide a direct connection with junction 1 of the M2 thereby creating a motorway-to-motorway link. It would pass to the east and north of Shorne, with some sections in deep cutting, before connecting to a

junction with the A226 east of Chalk. A map of the preferred Route 3 alignment in Essex is set out at Appendix C.

### **Alternative Routes**

- 4.7 The consultation material sets out alternative routes from Location C: Route 2 and Route 4. Route 1 is the only route option from the discounted Location A option (Dartford).
- 4.8 Route 2 follows a similar alignment to the proposed Route 3 scheme but would be the closer to urban areas and have greater noise impacts on places such as Tilbury and Grays. It would involve upgrading the existing A1089, which is constrained by closely spaced junctions and would mix local with long distance traffic.
- 4.9 Route 4 would involve a new road, an upgrade of the existing A127 (in Brentwood Borough) and an upgraded junction where the A127 joins the M25 (junction 29). It would affect ancient woodland, a conservation area and a registered park and garden. The overall route is longer and more expensive than either Routes 2 or 3. A map of the Route 4 alignment within Brentwood Borough is set out at Appendix D.

## **5. Reasons for Recommendation**

- 5.1 Brentwood Borough Council's response to the consultation is set out at Appendix A. The response broadly supports the need for a new crossing and is in favour of the crossing location, structure, and route proposed by Highways England.
- 5.2 The Council's response objects to Route 4 on the basis that it would have detrimental impacts on proposed strategic development allocations for new homes and jobs in the Borough, set out in the Brentwood Draft Local Plan. The route would have negative impacts on nearby residents in West Horndon. There are also concerns about the level of re-engineering required to existing infrastructure (such as the A127 and M25 junction 29) and the higher cost implications with no additional economic benefit.
- 5.3 The Council responded to the Lower Thames Crossing consultation held in 2013, at that time supporting Location A (Dartford) rather than Location C (further east, where a crossing is proposed now). This response noted that Location C was preferred from a county-wide perspective because of economic benefits, connectivity improvements, access to labour markets and potential to facilitate regeneration across Thames Gateway. However, Location A was preferred at that time because of the

environmental and Green Belt impacts that alternative options would pose and concerns about the cost of required improvements to the existing road network and junctions. The Council's view has changed in 2016 because it is now clear that engineering solutions required to provide a crossing at Location A are complex and not cost effective. There are also concerns about the vulnerability of the national road network in that location. Evidence is now provided to suggest Location C will provide opportunities to improve local connections, relieve congestion at Dartford and provide wider economic growth. Although the Council remains concerned about environmental and Green Belt impacts it accepts that it is not always possible to completely satisfy competing needs.

## **6. Consultation**

- 6.1 Highways England is undertaking public consultation between 26 January and 24 March 2016. Responses will be analysed and incorporated into the final recommendation to the Department for Transport. The Government are expected to make an announcement later this year to confirm the route, location and type of crossing.
- 6.2 Copies of consultation materials, maps and questionnaires have been available to view at a number of deposit locations during the consultation period, including Brentwood Library. In addition, a series of Public Information Events were held across the region, including an event at West Horndon Village Hall on 17 February 2016.

## **7. References to Corporate Plan**

- 7.1 The Lower Thames Crossing project proposes major new infrastructure with wide ranging impacts. Although there is no direct reference made in the Council's 'Vision for Brentwood' Corporate Plan 2016-2019, the project has implications for the Local Development Plan and other Council priorities.

## **8. Implications**

### **Financial Implications**

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- 8.1 The potential economic benefits of a new crossing and preferred route will benefit Brentwood businesses and contribute to unlocking growth opportunities in the A127 Corridor, as proposed in the Brentwood Draft Local Plan. However, should Route 4 be chosen this will have financial

implications for the Council's Local Development Plan process, requiring reconsideration of issues and potentially proposed development locations.

### **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 and further consider issues through its Local Development Plan process. Engagement in this way is consistent with the Duty to Cooperate and the Council's adopted Statement of Community Involvement.

### **Other Implications**

- 8.3 Depending on the Government's decision on the final route, there could be potential implications for other Council services related to the strategic aims of the emerging Brentwood Local Development Plan.
- 8.4 There could be localised implications for the southern part of the Borough and the emerging West Horndon Neighbourhood Plan should Route 4 be chosen.

## **9. Background Papers**

- 9.1 None

## **10. Appendices to this report**

- Appendix A: Brentwood Borough Council response to the Lower Thames Crossing route consultation 2016
- Appendix B: Map of Route Options from Location C
- Appendix C: Map of Preferred Route 3 Alignment in Essex
- Appendix D: Map of Route 4 Alignment in Brentwood Borough

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