

RESPONSE TO LOWER THAMES CROSSING CONSULTATION

1 PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 Highways England are consulting on the latest proposals for a new motorway crossing over the River Thames connecting Kent and Essex, referred to as the 'Lower Thames Crossing'. This report sets out the background to the current consultation by Highways England, potential implications for the district, and seeks approval for a proposed response to be submitted by close of the consultation on 20 December 2018.

2 BACKGROUND

Previous Consultations

- 2.1 In 2010, the Government recognised a need for an additional crossing in the Lower Thames area to alleviate congestion at the existing Dartford-Thurrock crossing. This recognition highlighted the strategic importance of this route, and the implications its efficiency has for businesses and the national economy. Subsequently, the 2011 National Infrastructure Plan included the Lower Thames crossing as one of the top 40 priority infrastructure projects.
- 2.2 The expected benefits of a further crossing are broadly to improve journey times, cut congestion on key approaches to the Dartford Crossing and transform journeys both locally and regionally, through increasing capacity and allowing nearly double the amount of traffic to cross the Thames.
- 2.3 A consultation by the Government in 2013 identified four potential locations for a new crossing (Appendix A):
- Option A - in the vicinity of the existing Dartford Crossing
- Option B - in the vicinity of the Port of Tilbury
- Option C - to the east of Tilbury
- Option D - to the west of Canvey
- 2.4 Following this consultation, Highways England were tasked by the Government to consider Options A and C in more detail. A further consultation was held in 2016 focussing on three potential route options north of the river in Essex, and two south of the river in Kent in the vicinity of Option C (Appendix B).
- 2.5 In April 2017 Highways England announced its preferred route for the Lower Thames Crossing (Option C, Route 3); consisting of a bored tunnel crossing under the River Thames east of Gravesend and Tilbury, a new road north of the river, which would join the M25 between junctions 29 and 30, and a new

road south of the river which will join the A2 east of Gravesend (the Western Southern Link).

Current Consultation

- 2.6 Since announcement of the preferred route, Highways England has worked with residents, communities, businesses and local authorities to progress their design. Highways England launched the current consultation on 10 October 2018, with comments accepted until 20 December. It is anticipated the new crossing would provide over 90% additional road capacity across the River Thames east of London.
- 2.7 The Lower Thames Crossing is classified as a Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project (NSIP), as defined by the Planning Act 2008. This means that Highways England will need to submit an application for a Development Consent Order (DCO). A DCO is similar to planning permission but is specifically design for NSIPs to enable all relevant consents and permissions to be considered at the same time. The documents published as part of the current consultation will be used to support the submission of a DCO. Once submitted, further comments will be invited on the application. The Lower Thames Crossing is expected to be completed in 2027.
- 2.8 The proposed route of the crossing has been revised as a result of the previous consultation; changes include a redesigned junction with the A13 to reduce congestion, and removal of the A128 junction (Appendix C). In summary, the Lower Thames Crossing in its proposed location would deliver:
- approximately 14.5 miles (23km) of new roads connecting the tunnel to the existing road network;
 - three lanes in both directions with a maximum speed limit of 70mph;
 - improvements to the M25, A2 and A13, where the Lower Thames Crossing connects to these roads;
 - 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;
 - two 2.5 mile (4km) tunnels, one for southbound traffic, one for northbound traffic crossing beneath the river; and
 - a free-flow charging system, where drivers do not need to stop but pay remotely, similar to that at the Dartford Crossing.

- 2.9 Highways England's consultation website¹ provides more detail and helpful visuals on the design and routing of the proposed crossing.

3 POTENTIAL IMPLICATIONS FOR ROCHFORD DISTRICT

- 3.1 It is recognised that there is a need for additional capacity to enable fast and efficient crossing of the River Thames to the east of London. The district would not be directly affected by the proposal *per se* due to its siting in Thurrock Borough in the far western extent of South Essex. Whilst a new crossing, in theory, would have potential benefits for local residents and businesses operating in the district, its location would continue to draw traffic on the strategic road network in South Essex in order to reach it.
- 3.2 The crossing has been designed with few junctions with the aim of avoiding congestion on local routes in the area, but this could also impede access from South Essex. Designing in additional junctions to those proposed has the potential to improve accessibility from the district and surrounding area, if this was aligned with capacity improvements to the strategic road network beyond the immediate vicinity of the crossing (including A13, A127 and A130).
- 3.3 Proposals for the crossing have been under consideration for a number of years. Following this consultation Highways England will need to submit a DCO for consideration. Simultaneously, the six authorities which includes Thurrock Borough Council, through the Association of South Essex Local Authorities (ASELA), have agreed to prepare a Joint Strategic Plan (JSP) for the sub-region. Any delays to the application process could have implications for the timely delivery of the JSP to support local plan-making across South Essex. This is in part due to the route potentially sterilising development opportunities in Thurrock Borough. These issues should be taken into consideration through the consultation.

4 PROPOSED CONSULTATION RESPONSE

- 4.1 The Lower Thames Crossing consultation includes a number of specific questions, focusing on key areas. Officers have reviewed the consultation material, and it is proposed that the Council formally responds by 20 December as follows:

1. The need for the Lower Thames Crossing

Rochford District Council strongly agrees with Highways England that a new Lower Thames Crossing is needed.

2. Our preferred route for the Lower Thames Crossing

Rochford District Council does not oppose the preferred route which has been proposed, and the changes that have been made to the route *per se*.

¹ <https://highwaysengland.citizenspace.com/ltc/75d4717b/>

However, the Council would like to raise concerns regarding the potential sterilisation of development opportunities in Thurrock Borough and the impact this may have on the preparation of the South Essex Joint Strategic Plan (JSP). Also, opportunities to improve accessibility from South Essex through appropriately located, additional junctions and increasing capacity on the strategic road network have been overlooked.

3.2 Sections of the route: North of the river in Thurrock, Essex and Havering

Rochford District Council does not oppose the proposed route north of the crossing *per se*, but would like to raise concerns regarding the potential sterilisation of development opportunities in Thurrock Borough and the impact this may have on the preparation of the South Essex Joint Strategic Plan (JSP). The JSP is a key delivery for growth ambitions across the sub-region in line with Government aspirations to deliver new homes, jobs and infrastructure in a sustainable manner. The location of the preferred route could have detrimental implications for this ambition.

The proposed route, as currently designed, could also stifle access to the new crossing from South Essex and undermine opportunities to significantly improve the strategic road network across South Essex, including A13, A127 and A130. This could have implications for the economic growth potential of the sub-region if residents and businesses cannot effectively and efficiently access the proposed crossing. The design could therefore benefit from additional junctions and improvements to the strategic road network beyond the immediate vicinity of the crossing.

5 RISK IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 If Rochford District Council does not respond to the consultation it will lose an opportunity to help shape and influence the planned crossing to the maximum benefit of local residents and businesses.

6 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 There are no direct resource implications of responding to the consultation.

7 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 This is a statutory consultation on the proposed Lower Thames Crossing, which is classified as a Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project (NSIP), as defined by the Planning Act 2008.
- 7.2 Section 110 of the Localism Act 2011, (inserting section 33A into the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004) places a duty on Local Planning Authorities to engage with other listed bodies, including other Councils and Highways England, constructively, actively and on an ongoing basis in relation to strategic matters (the 'Duty to Co-operate').

8 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1 An Equality Impact Assessment has been completed and found there to be no impacts (either positive or negative) on protected groups as defined under the Equality Act 2010.

9 RECOMMENDATION

- 9.1 It is proposed that Council **RESOLVES**

- (1) That the current consultation from Highways England regarding proposals for a Lower Thames Crossing be noted.
- (2) That a response be submitted, as set out in this report, by close of the consultation.



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Background Papers:-

None.

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If you would like this report in large print, Braille or another language please contact 01702 318111.

Figure 5.1 Location options for a new Lower Thames crossing





