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Editorial

Not a lot of news in this edition – it is of course August holiday season. But the ideal time to issue consultations when you don't want too many responses – the first article on the Dartford Crossing is a good example of this ploy.

For those who use the Dartford Crossing, as I do regularly (it's the usual route to much of the rest of the country via road for those of us who live in South-East London), it is enormously frustrating to run into repeated traffic jams for no very obvious reason – other than the presence of the tolls.

Indeed in summer months they can be particularly common when the crossing is frequented by holiday trippers on their way to the continent who do not have the experience to go through the tolls in an expeditious manner (the recent increase to £1.50 also made that worse).

So please let the politicians have your own views on this subject by responding to the consultation and writing to your M.P.

What else do you have to do in the summer holidays?

Roger Lawson, Editor

Dartford Crossing Toll Fees Rise



The Government has issued a consultation document proposing that charges on the Dartford Crossing should be increased to £2.50 per car (currently £1.50) in two stages. The ABD suggests the consultation is a pretence because the financial analysis in the consultation document is incomplete and hence false.

The Dartford Crossing is a major route used by many people who live on the eastern side of London or in surrounding counties, and by large volumes of commercial traffic. It is one of the few routes across the River Thames unless you travel further into London and use the Blackwall/Rotherhithe Tunnels or Tower Bridge (the latter two cannot be used by HGVs so most heavy traffic to and from Kent and the Channel Ports uses the Dartford Crossing). For many years the Crossing has been congested at peak times and (particularly because of HGVs being delayed by paying the tolls and then blocking other lanes). This situation has got steadily worse in recent years, and the Crossing is now well exceeding its design capacity (as the consultation document points out). Anyone who regularly uses the Crossing will know that it is obviously the toll booths that are causing the congestion because there is often free flowing traffic on either side, when there is congestion coming up to the toll booths.

The ABD suggests that the charges should be removed (as originally promised when the bridge had been paid for) because that is the only certain way to cure the congestion problem.

In the Consultation Document, it is argued that the result of increasing the charges would provide a net cost benefit for users. But the arguments for increasing the charges are defective, and it is clear that the primary reason they are being increased is to raise more money for the Government – in effect via taxation of road users. The main argument for such charges (and for increasing them) seems to be that the charges will dissuade users from using the crossing. To quote from page 13 of the Consultation document: *“The increase in charges reduces congestion by dissuading some road users from using the congested crossing. The consequent reduction in congestion is a benefit to all remaining users of the Crossing.”*. That statement is allegedly justified in the detailed financial analysis (the Impact Assessment) which is also defective.

In both cases, the impact of deterring some people from using the Crossing by imposing higher charges ignores two important results:

1. Most traffic that might be deterred by an increased charge would divert via other routes – primarily via the Blackwall Tunnel which is already heavily congested at the same times as the Dartford crossing. No cost of that congestion has been taken into account. Alternatively they would divert through central London, hardly an ideal outcome, or around the southern/western side of the M25. This will increase congestion on that section of the M25 and impose significant additional environmental costs because of the extra distance travelled (more emissions for example). These costs have been simply ignored in the financial analysis.

2. It seems to be assumed that some users of the crossing would simply decide not to travel at all, or presumably they might instead use public transport to get to their destination. In the latter case, they would presumably incur significant extra journey times because they are already choosing to use the Crossing when it is congested so it must clearly be a faster route even now for most journeys. In this case therefore, there should be some estimate applied of the extra journey time cost (using the same rates as applied to the journey time savings of those paying the higher rates in the document). No such estimate has been included in the costs analysis.

Neither has there been any attempt to estimate the financial disbenefit to those who decide not to travel at all. This is not difficult to calculate as obviously the way people value this is based on the proposed charges. With the increased charges it is estimated that a certain percentage will not travel (or choose some alternative route). So they clearly value the ability to travel as being equivalent to the charges. Such a value should be added into the calculations.

It is clear from the above comments that no proper, comprehensive evaluation of the cost/benefits of the proposed changes has been undertaken.

All Charges Should be Removed

The ABD opposes any increase in charges simply because it believes that all charges should be removed as was originally promised by the Government when the bridge had been paid for. This would remove most of the congestion that takes place at the Crossing.

In addition, there is no financial analysis included in the report of the cost/benefit of removing all charges. Why not? As the estimated revenue from the proposed higher charges is of the order of £100m over the “appraisal period”, a rough estimate of the benefit of removing the existing charges must be at least £200m. The fact that no such option was included in the consultation document and evaluated therein makes it very clear that these proposals are not concerned with evaluating all possible options in a neutral manner, but that it is simply a front to justify raising more revenue for the benefit of the Government.

Click on this link to see the full ABD response to the consultation:

www.freedomfordrivers.org/ABD_Dartford_Crossing_Response.pdf

or go to

www.dft.gov.uk/consultations/dft-2011-08

for more background and how to respond to the consultation yourself. It is important that as many people as possible do respond to this consultation and you need to do so before the 23rd September. You can do so very easily on-line on this web page:

https://consultation.dft.gov.uk/dft/2011-08/consult_view

You could also write to your local Member of Parliament and complain at this blatant attempt to rig the consultation via the defective consultation document (in addition of course it was issued just before the holiday season began which is another sure way to minimise responses).

(Editor's Comments: This is one of the most appalling examples of a biased consultation document that I have seen in recent years – and I have seen a few. The magnitude of the incompetence of the person who wrote the Consultation Document and attempted to justify the Government's proposals is absolutely astonishing. But read it for yourself and see what I mean. Politicians change their flavour when Governments change, but dishonesty persists. No honest person would try and pretend that the reason why the Government wishes to raise these charges is other than to generate more revenue in the form of taxation. Although the consultation document might have been written by a civil servant, it will no doubt have been reviewed and approved by a member of the Government, i.e. a politician, but no reasonably intelligent person reading this document would accept it as being unbiased. In my view all road tolls should be removed – as they have been in Scotland. They distort the economics of travel and are simply another way of extracting money from people who cannot easily avoid paying the charges).

Suspending The Tolls

Incidentally you might have seen it reported that if the queues get too long, then the tolls will be suspended in future. But this is obviously only a sop to public opinion because when one looks into the detail it is clear that the queues have to be very long indeed before this will be even considered. They need to stretch past junction 28 on the north side of the crossing (the A12), or past junction 4 on the south side – in practice for many miles and with delay times so long that it might be easier to divert to another route anyway!

Transport Expenditure



The Institute of Advanced Motorists (IAM) recently reported that the Government spends only about one third (£12.7bn) of its total tax revenue from road users (£43.8bn) on roads and local public transport. Since 2002 the Government has spent more on rail infrastructure than road infrastructure although rail is used for only seven per cent of all passenger travel.

IAM Director of Policy of Research, Neil Greig said “Using so little of the taxes motorists pay on road upkeep is plainly unfair.”

(Editor's Comments: I agree with Mr Greig. The latest manifestation of this topsy-turvy policy is the amount proposed to be spent on HS2 - the High Speed link from London to Birmingham. Some interesting comments were made by respected financial journalist John Kay in the Financial Times recently. He concluded by saying “Despite the fantastic detail underpinning the so-called economic case, there are no answers to the questions any investor would pose to the most modest of start-ups – even though taxpayers are asked to commit up to £30bn for this project.” He suggested the Government should come back when they have formulated a proper business plan. Yes it's not just the nimbys who think this scheme is lunatic, it's anyone who has any knowledge of capital intensive projects).

Improving Happiness



The Government is keen to ensure that its policies make people happy (that may be to offset the gloom from the economy which the Government cannot do much about, but let's assume it's not simply a diversionary tactic). Indeed it has tasked Cabinet Secretary Sir Gus O'Donnell to look into the matter, and is also developing measures to track the population's “happiness”.

It is worth reminding readers of an article that was published in the BBRAG newsletter (the predecessor of this one) a few years ago. It is reproduced here for your enlightenment:

According to a research report published by the Medical Research Council, driving is good for you. Researcher Anne Ellaway reported that car owners have better general health and increased psychological well-being, than people who use public transport.

Now you may jump to the conclusion that this result is not surprising because car owners are presumably more wealthy than public transport users, and the wealthier are known to be healthier and to live longer. But Ms Ellaway found her results were true even after she had adjusted for the effects of age, social class and income.

It seems that the effects result from women having more security and sense of control of their lives, and in men from having more self-esteem. To quote from the comments of Ms Ellaway who intends to continue the research: "It showed that there is something about cars that is fundamentally good for people's health and we should know more about that".

Will that have any influence on Government policy? Your editor doubts it.

Note that all past ABD and BBRAG newsletters are available on the ABD web site and there is a lot of interesting material in them. They are also all indexed in the web site search facility so looking for particular topics is very easy.

Blackfriars Bridge

Also mentioned in our last newsletter was the revised scheme for Blackfriars Bridge and our inability to get information out of TfL on the subject. However, cyclists have continued to demonstrate against the proposed changes. They have campaigned vociferously to promote their own interests (probably to the disadvantage of other road users). See this BBC report on the latest demonstration: www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-14350045

On the 4th August your editor finally got a response from TfL on this subject after many weeks (to his questions on the latest revised scheme), but as I believe work commenced that same week to make the changes planned, it was obviously too late to complain further. This is what I said to TfL at that point:

"Obviously your response has been made so late, that there is now no opportunity to correct what is clearly a very defective design.

There is no way in future for traffic travelling south on New Bridge Street to reach Upper Thames Street so as to travel east via Queen Victoria Street (as it can at present). This is yet another major route closure where you have simply ignored the representation I submitted on this matter. Instead unsuspecting drivers will be forced across the bridge, or to the west (instead of east) along the Embankment

It's hardly surprising that you get demonstrations from other folks (like cyclists), who take the same view as me - namely that TfL never listens to anyone and remains a totally undemocratic organisation!"

Perverting Justice?



A story covered in our April edition was the apparent conspiracy to divert fees from speed awareness courses to finance the operations of the police and the "Thames Valley Safer

Roads Partnership" (a Safety Camera Partnership as they are called from which funding was withdrawn by Oxfordshire County Council).

It has now become evident that in fact the operations of that organisation were taken over by an organisation called Safer Roads (see www.saferroads.org) – this is fact a private limited company called Road Safety Analysis Ltd. Full information is available from Companies House on this company for a nominal fee (as with any limited company). You can see who the directors are (not surprisingly some of them worked for the Thames Valley Safer Roads Partnership), and their accounts should be available there also in due course.

This company is a “company limited by guarantee” (like the ABD) and with members acting as guarantors. The founding directors are some of the members but who else might be members (if anyone) is not clear. It is nominally a “not for profit” organisation but the directors could pay themselves handsomely under the adopted Articles.

Oddly enough the Articles make it clear that this organisation was originally set up to run the “MAST” project – a road safety information system, but clearly it has been adapted to another purpose.

Even more surprising if one thinks about it is that what is in essence a private body is now acting as a law enforcement organisation. At least a “Safety Camera Partnership” has some pretence of being a public body, being a partnership between the police, the courts and local authorities even if it was in essence a “Quango”.

Being a private body, Road Safety Analysis Ltd is not subject to the Freedom of Information Act, but reports suggest that the number of speeding tickets has doubled since it began operations – the impact on road casualties is not known of course.

All rather peculiar to say the least. I expect to report more on this subject in due course.

The Future of Road Congestion in London



The above was the title of a recent report from the London Assembly Transport Committee – a body on which

Conservatives are in minority even though the Mayor, Boris Johnson, effectively dictates London wide transport policies. Needless to say, one could perhaps have anticipated that it might be more concerned with political posturing than examining the facts in a neutral manner.

The full report can be found here:

www.london.gov.uk/publication/future-road-congestion-london

In the report, congestion is forecast to increase because of rising population and business growth in London. The report reviews what the Mayor’s Transport Strategy is to tackle this problem, and there was agreement on some issues among the Committee members, but on two issues there was no agreement.

The first was the question of a “road user hierarchy” favouring some road users (typically pedestrians and cyclists come top) as against others (and car drivers come bottom). Other than the Conservative members, the Committee wanted the road user hierarchy (scrapped in the Mayor’s Transport Strategy) to be reinstated.

The second was the question of whether there should be specific conditions (such as congestion levels) for when road user charging should be considered.

The Conservatives disagreed on these two issues and produced a minority report on them. They want no hierarchy at all, and no London-wide road charging scheme under any circumstances.

(Editor’s Comments: I agree with the Conservatives on these matters. I certainly don’t agree with a road user hierarchy because I believe all men and women are created equal and therefore there should be no prejudice against any particular group of road users.

In fact I think the whole report is rather misconceived because I do not think congestion will worsen significantly – it is self regulating as it has been in London for hundreds of years. If it gets too bad in any one location, people switch to alternative routes, alternative modes of transport or simply stop travelling. That’s not to say it is not important to try to reduce congestion, because improving ease of travel and travel choice is a major benefit. But Armageddon is nowhere near being reached and such scare mongering does not justify some of the solutions that restrict personal liberty which are being suggested. Indeed traffic volumes as measured in some London boroughs have been falling in recent years).

News Snapshots

Sundry news in the last few weeks that is worth a mention is as follows:

+ The legal action mentioned in our last newsletter about proposed changes to parking charges in Barnet is still be pursued. See <http://barnetcpz.blogspot.com> . They still need financial support though so please assist them if possible.

+ Westminster Council have decided to proceed with parking charges in the evening on weekdays (including Saturday), and on Sunday from 1pm to 6pm. The rate will be £4.40 per hour on Sunday and at some of the other times, which must be one of the highest on-street parking charges in the country. Churchgoers and operators of businesses such as theatres and restaurants in the West End all protested very strongly but to no avail. Many people believe that this change was simply about raising revenue when council budgets are under pressure. Westminster already makes an enormous profit from on-street parking – for the details, see: www.freedomfordrivers.org/Profiting_from_Parking.pdf .

+ TfL seem to be panicking about the risks of congestion on the roads and on public transport during the Olympic games – or perhaps they are trying to panic the populace of London so they avoid travelling next summer at all. A good example of what might happen was already provided recently when Kings Cross tube had to be closed due to overcrowding, and that was on a weekend when there was a trial of one of the Olympic events. How bad will it be when the real thing occurs? *(Editor: readers who live in London might wish to plan a long holiday next summer).*

+ Enfield is to introduce “emission-based” permit parking charges. Brian Mooney who represents the ABD for Enfield said this: *“Parked cars do not emit any CO2 so this is ludicrous. People are already taxed heavily on their fuel, and drivers with big cars pay more because they need more fuel”*. *(Editor: a similar scheme proved to be enormously unpopular in Richmond when it was introduced, resulting in a change of control of the council).*

+ Camden are refunding £50,000 in PCN fines for a bus lane infringement in Bloomsbury Street after it discovered that in fact the bus lane had been temporarily suspended by a traffic order due to road works. *(Editor: and quite right too although it astonishes me that so many people seem to have paid the fines without question).* But in Richmond, a similar case where parking tickets were issued by uncertified camera cars, the council is only going to refund the charges if drivers ask for them.

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About The Association of British Drivers (ABD)

The ABD is the leading independent organisation which represents the interests of private motorists in the United Kingdom. We campaign to protect the rights of individual road users and believe that road transport is a beneficial and essential element in the UK transport infrastructure. We oppose excessive taxation of motorists and are against tolls and road usage charging. We also campaign for more enlightened road safety policies. The Association is a “not for profit” voluntary organisation which is financially supported primarily by its individual members. More information on the ABD is available from our web site at www.abd.org.uk

Note that the ABD maintains a list of members who are familiar with individual London boroughs and may be able to help with information on local issues in those boroughs. The current list is below. If any other members would like to keep an eye on local news and advise on local transport issues then please let me know. Roger Lawson

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