

DARTFORD BOROUGH COUNCIL

GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE COUNCIL

MINUTES of the proceedings of the meeting of the General Assembly of the Council held on Monday 15 February 2016.

PRESENT:

The Mayor

Councillor I D Armitt JP

The Deputy Mayor

Councillor J Burrell

Councillor Mrs A D Allen, MBE

Councillor R Lees

Councillor A Bardoe

Councillor A R Lloyd

Councillor S H Brown

Councillor M A Maddison

Councillor L A Canham

Councillor T A Maddison

Councillor P F Coleman

Councillor C S McLean

Councillor P Cutler

Councillor D J Mote

Councillor M J Davis

Councillor J M Ozog

Councillor B Garden

Councillor Mrs J A Ozog

Councillor D A Hammock

Councillor M I Peters

Councillor J A Hayes

Councillor B E Read

Councillor J S Hawkes

Councillor D J Reynolds

Councillor S R Jarnell

Councillor A S Sandhu, MBE

Councillor J Jones

Councillor Mrs R L Shanks

Councillor K M Kelly

Councillor C J Shippam

Councillor M B Kelly

Councillor Mrs R F Storey

Councillor P Kelly

Councillor D Swinerd

Councillor J A Kite, MBE

Councillor Mrs P A Thurlow

Councillor E J Lampkin

Councillor R J Wells

ABSENT:

Councillor R M Currans

Councillor D E Hunnisett

Councillor Dr B K Kaini

Councillor D Page

Councillor R S L Perfitt

Councillor L J Reynolds

80. PRAYERS: REVEREND MARCEL MCCARRON

Reverend Marcel McCarron led the Council in prayer.

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81. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillors Mrs Currans, Hunnisett, Page, Perfitt and L J Reynolds.

82. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No interests were declared.

83. URGENT ITEMS

There were no urgent items.

84. LOWER THAMES CROSSING ROUTE CONSULTATION 2016

The General Assembly of the Council considered a report which had been prepared in response to the public consultation exercise launched on 26 January 2016 by Highways England on possible options for the location of a proposed new Lower Thames Crossing connecting Kent and Essex. A new crossing was needed to reduce congestion at the existing Dartford Crossing and to unlock economic growth, support the development of new homes and promote job growth in the region. This consultation was the latest to be issued since 2009 following a series of studies and a public consultation in 2013 and invited responses by 24 March 2016.

Originally five possible locations had been identified for building a Lower Thames Crossing (referred to as options A-E) which by the 2013 consultation had been reduced to 3 options (A,B and C) with options D and E having been deemed to be too easterly to be viable. Following the 2013 consultation the Government also ruled out Option B (connecting the A2 and the Swanscombe Peninsula with the A1089) because of the impact on development proposals and the limited transport benefits.

Whilst option A (a further crossing beside the existing Dartford Crossing) had not categorically been ruled out, the current consultation related specifically to a Lower Thames Crossing being sited at location C, east of Gravesend, which Highways England was recommending on the basis that it best meets project objectives, a key one being the alleviation of congestion at the Dartford Crossing. The consultation also sought views on a number of alternative routes and junctions both south and north of the river to deliver a crossing at location C.

The Leader of the Council, Councillor J A Kite MBE, proposed the following motion:

“That this Council notes and supports Highways England’s proposal to provide a new Thames River Crossing east of Gravesend. It endorses the conclusion of Highways England that a new crossing east of Gravesend offers far greater benefits than any development of a further crossing in Dartford and will unlock significant economic growth and offer greater benefits in terms of safety, capacity and resilience. It also endorses Highways England’s conclusion that a development of a

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further crossing at Dartford offers poor value for money compared to alternative alignments.

This Council endorses the proposal for the new Gravesend crossing to consist of bored tunnels to ensure the lowest impact upon the local environment, habitats and communities east of Gravesend.

In offering support for a new crossing east of Gravesend, this Council welcomes the support of many businesses small and large, the South East Local Economic Partnership, the Ebbsfleet Development Corporation, local Chambers of Commerce and a host of other organisations, groups and individuals who have all offered support for a new crossing east of Gravesend. It encourages Dartford residents and businesses to take part in the Highways England consultation and demonstrate their support for the proposed solution to congestion in Dartford and the wider region.

That in view of the appalling economic and social effects caused to Dartford residents and businesses by congestion resulting from the existing Crossing, it demands steps be taken to improve journey times and lessen congestion resulting from its current operation. In particular, it demands Highways England takes steps to improve performance of junctions on the strategic road network close to Dartford to ensure that the impact of congestion, incidents and operational delays on local communities are mitigated.

That the response to the consultation questions, as set out in the report, be agreed as the Council's response to the consultation on the Lower Thames Crossing".

The motion was seconded by the Cabinet Member for Transport and Infrastructure, Councillor K Kelly.

In opening the debate the Leader of the Council explained that proposals for a Lower Thames river crossing were of great importance for both the Borough of Dartford and to the town centre and that it was important for the Council to make a cohesive response to the consultation. He noted Highways England's strong recommendation that the crossing should be located east of Gravesend and joined to the existing road infrastructure by the eastern southern link and route 3 north of the river. These seemed the most sensible option which would deliver the greatest social, economic and transport benefits whilst also being the least disruptive option in terms of the environment and impacts upon people. Locating a further crossing beside the existing Dartford Crossing was simply not a viable option given the lack of any meaningful increase in capacity since the Queen Elisabeth II Bridge was opened in 1991 and the fact that current usage exceeded the original planned capacity. Usage of the crossing was also increasing. There were over 300 incidents at the Dartford Crossing every year and each one resulted in heavy congestion not only at the crossing but on all the surrounding roads and the

town centre which impacted heavily on the daily lives of the people of Dartford and on local businesses.

The Leader explained that the meeting had been called when news of the consultation had been released by Highways England and it had initially been expected that their recommendation might be more balanced and less clear cut. The strong recommendation for a crossing east of Gravesend was welcome but it was vital that the people of Dartford, businesses and organisations should make their views known by responding to the consultation and to avoid any complacency. The proposed crossing east of Gravesend offered far greater benefits than development of a further crossing in Dartford and would unlock significant economic growth and had greater merit in terms of safety, capacity and resilience. The Council also welcomed the support it had received from key partners including local businesses, the South East Local Economic Partnership, the Ebbsfleet Development Corporation, local Chambers of Commerce and other organisations and groups. Moving forward it was also important to emphasise the need for other improvements to the transport infrastructure in Dartford and particularly the strategic junctions from the motorways to the Dartford Crossing and to recognise the impact that developments such as Ebbsfleet Garden City and Paramount Park would have in coming years and to plan accordingly. A strong message was also required to get Highways England to take steps now to improve performance at junctions on the strategic road network close to Dartford to mitigate the impact of congestion, incidents and operational delays on the local community in view of the appalling economic and social effects these were having on Dartford residents and businesses. In so doing he recognised the impact that a new river crossing would have on the residents of Gravesham and the need to ensure that they received fair and equitable treatment and that those most directly affected were properly compensated. He noted that the preferred route delivered the most benefits for the whole of the Thames Gateway, including Dartford and Gravesham, and the best mitigation in terms of environmental impact. He explained that the Council would be making information available on its website with links to the Highways England consultation page and strongly encouraged local residents, businesses and organisations to have their say on this vitally important matter.

The Leader of the Opposition expressed his strong support for the comments made by the Leader of the Council and welcomed the proposed motion. He said that option C was the only option which would reduce congestion in Dartford and was vital to the regeneration of the town. He cited the information contained in the Highways England Business case whereby 73% of respondents to a business survey had said that traffic congestion in Dartford adversely affected their business, that usage of the Dartford crossing exceeded its capacity and that on average there were over 300 full or partial unplanned closures of the crossing each year often causing severe congestion, taking many hours to clear and often bringing the town centre to a standstill. A further crossing at Dartford would simply add to this problem and would reduce air quality in the area. Option C was the only viable option to deliver the transport benefits that the region needed and it was vital to recognise the impacts that the development of Ebbsfleet Garden City and Paramount Park would have. The route recommended by Highways England would deliver the most direct route for the crossing with the least impact on

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the environment. He also stressed the need for the people of Gravesend to be treated fairly and properly but that swift action was now needed by the Government on this matter and to rapidly improve the transport infrastructure given the delay already experienced in tackling these issues.

The Leader of the Swanscombe and Greenhithe Resident's Association also registered his Group's strong support for the motion and said that the Town Council had already taken the matter up. It was important for transport issues in the area to be addressed as this impacted heavily on local businesses as well as on the lives of ordinary people who experienced unacceptable levels of disruption.

Members cited other examples of the disruption caused by the frequent closures of the Dartford crossing and the misery caused by gridlocked traffic. This impacted on the work of the parishes and disrupted emergency services and those trying to access Darent Valley Hospital. It was recognised that development and road usage was increasing and that action was needed to tap into the opportunities for economic development. Proposals for further crossings closer to London were unlikely to have a significant impact on relieving pressure on the Dartford crossing and Members felt that a crossing east of Gravesend, whilst not a panacea, would deliver significant improvements and provide resilience. A Member asked about the likely sequencing of the A2 Bean and Ebbsfleet junction improvements and whether these would be implemented before the new crossing was built and was advised that improvements to the strategic road junctions were scheduled to take place in advance of the crossing being built.

In reply the Leader of the Council thanked Members for their support and highlighted the extreme traffic congestion being experienced because the capacity of the Dartford Crossing had not increased in 25 years whilst usage had increased enormously during that time. He stressed the huge impact this had upon the locality in terms of the disruption to people and businesses, lost opportunities for economic development and the impact that major developments such as Ebbsfleet Garden City and Paramount Park would have unless infrastructure issues were addressed urgently. A crossing east of Gravesend was the only sensible and viable option for a much needed river crossing to provide this additional capacity and resilience. He urged all residents, businesses and organisations to respond to the consultation and to make their views known to the Government. He also stated that he would be writing to the management of Darent Valley Hospital to encourage them to get involved. The Leader of the Council commended the motion to the Council.

The motion was put to the vote and carried unanimously.

RESOLVED:

That this Council notes and supports Highways England's proposal to provide a new Thames River Crossing east of Gravesend. It endorses the conclusion of Highways England that a new crossing east of Gravesend offers far greater benefits than any development of a further

crossing in Dartford and will unlock significant economic growth and offer greater benefits in terms of safety, capacity and resilience. It also endorses Highways England's conclusion that a development of a further crossing at Dartford offers poor value for money compared to alternative alignments.

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The meeting closed at 7.45 pm

MAYOR

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