

The Kent & Medway Economic Partnership's (KMEP) Written Representation for the Lower Thames Crossing – 18 July 2023

The Kent & Medway Economic Partnership (KMEP) is made up of Kent & Medway's 14 Local Authority leaders (Kent, Medway and the 12 Districts), 17 business representatives from different industry sectors including three business membership organisations (Federation of Small Businesses, Institute of Directors and Kent Invicta Chamber of Commerce) and representatives from higher and further education. KMEP has been one of the federated boards of the South East Local Enterprise Partnership (SELEP) and its main role is to oversee strategic economic plans and activities for Kent and Medway, channelling investment to boost economic growth and ensuring that the concerns of the county's public and private sector are raised nationally.

KMEP agrees that the Lower Thames Crossing (LTC) is needed and supports it for the reasons below. Please note however that two of the twelve District Councils in Kent (Swale and Gravesham) do have a different viewpoint which has been outlined in their own relevant representations.

1. Capacity of the Dartford Crossing:

- The Dartford crossing has been functioning significantly in excess of its design capacity for many years and experiences frequent and severe congestion which will only worsen without an additional crossing. Traffic flows are predicted to increase, not least given additional housing and population growth in and around the Thames Estuary. Regular congestion at the crossing has a significant knock-on effect on other parts of the strategic road network south of the crossing (M25, M2/A2 in particular) as well as the local road network.
- Unpredictable journey times for vehicles using the Dartford crossing result in lower productivity for logistics companies (freight), businesses in general and commuters with no current options for road users to take a viable alternative route. The LTC will provide some resilience for local infrastructure particularly when incidents close the existing crossing which is not an infrequent occurrence.
- The Dartford crossing is also an accident hotspot which results from and contributes to congestion, exacerbating congestion issues on the local highways network.

2. Benefits for Business:

- There are significant opportunities for local businesses to get involved in supply chain activity prior to and during the LTC construction phase as well as in future to support the operation and maintenance of the infrastructure. While KMEP recognises that some contracts have already been awarded, a local sourcing policy should be applied to ensure that tier 2-4 contractors include local firms so that the economic and employment benefits of the scheme are experienced within Kent & Medway.
- Assuming that wider network improvements are also implemented, businesses in Kent & Medway and freight passing through the county stand to benefit from reduced travel times and congestion, thus boosting productivity.
- If local firms are able to actively secure contracts and work during the construction phase as well as future maintenance of the LTC, this will provide additional local employment opportunities, reducing travel for the construction and maintenance workforce and aligning with the LTC's goals to be a flagship major project from a sustainability perspective. In future, skilled employees will also be able to easily cross the river, reducing a current recruitment barrier affecting many firms in the Thames Estuary.

3. Economic Growth:

- Local Economic Growth Opportunities are currently being stymied by congestion resulting from incidents at the Dartford crossing. The Thames Estuary area suffers from a negative image linked to congestion which deters inward investment and a new crossing will alleviate this issue.

- By actively engaging with the education sector and working with local businesses and industry, the LTC could provide significant new and enhanced employment opportunities for the local population.
- The current crossing is a nationally important section of road infrastructure with a significant proportion of the 3.5m HGVs travelling from the Port of Dover (the UK's busiest ro-ro port) and the Channel Tunnel each year via Dartford to the Midlands and North. Reduced travel times will benefit the national economy.

Wider Network Improvement Requirements:

KMEP strongly believes that without building further resilience into the wider Kent (and South Essex) strategic and local road networks, the LTC will not be able to function as designed due to inadequacies in the nearby and inter-connected strategic and local road networks. Although the LTC will generally ease congestion issues at Dartford, without urgent improvements to Kent's road network, there is a significant risk of congestion and problems continuing to be pushed to the next weakest point on the network. Any such problems effectively cut off access to Kent's coastal communities in particular and damage the visitor economies and harm businesses in general.

KMEP wishes to emphasise how essential it is that investment, planning, and construction of road infrastructure improvements in Kent & Medway should be made concurrently with the LTC scheme, rather than at a later period. The LTC is just one of a number of vital improvements needed to ensure traffic fluidity to and from the UK's busiest RO-RO port and the Channel Tunnel. More than £144bn value in freight is transported through the Port of Dover alone each year. Combined with the Eurotunnel, the Short Straits route manages almost 60% of all trade in goods with the EU and supports trade and growth far beyond the South East. Time and time again and even taking into account recent disruption, it has been shown that freight operators would rather face significant queues to travel via the short straits than re-route. That's because the Port of Dover alone is capable of clearing a queue of lorries around 18 times faster than competitor ports. Across the Port of Dover and Eurotunnel, the Short Straits facilitates around 12 crossings per hour and no other crossing can match this capacity and frequency, or the level of resilience that the system offers for critical just-in-time freight flows.

National Highways modelling shows that 7 million vehicles will use the Lower Thames Crossing. This makes investment in the existing pinch points of Brenley Corner and the sections of the A2 that remain single track (notably between Lydden and Dover) more critical than ever. With around half of the international freight traffic using Eurotunnel and Dover heading beyond London to support economic activity in the Midlands and North, these upgrades need to happen concurrently with the building of the new crossing to unleash the full potential of the Lower Thames Crossing. Otherwise, the Lower Thames Crossing will push a huge additional volume of freight onto a single track road, cutting off East Kent in the process and undermining the resilience of a strategic international freight route.

While current schemes such as the M2 Junction 5 improvements and the Levelling Up Funding for improvements around Dover port will build additional resilience into Kent's road network, further improvements and bifurcation of Channel traffic are essential to achieve the full the benefits of the LTC. A number of strategically important improvements are needed, particularly to ensure that links between the LTC, Dartford Crossing and the Short Straits international gateways are enhanced and future-proofed including:

1. Improvements to the to the M2 / A2 corridor:
 - Upgrading the M2 Junction 7 at Brenley Corner (a Road Investment Strategy (RIS) 3 2025-30 'pipeline' project) where Dover port traffic in particular suffers delays due to congestion.
 - Dualling the A2 single carriageway from Lydden to Dover (A2 Dover Access, a RIS3 2025-30 'pipeline' project) needed to ensure the free flow of freight and passengers to and from the Port of Dover

- Widening the 2 lane stretches of the M2 (junctions 4 to 7 in particular) to enable traffic to flow more smoothly and faster.
 - Improvements to the M2 Jct 1 where current capacity is already preventing local housing and economic growth without taking into account increased volumes linked to the LTC.
2. Improved linkages between the M20 and M2:
 - Upgrading the A229 with accompanied improvements to M2 junction 3 and M20 junction 6 to allow free flow between the two motorways without impeding local traffic (this is a Kent County Council-led project bidding to DfT for Large Local Major scheme funding that would require a contribution from the LTC to offset its impact).
 - Upgrading the A260 from Lydden to Hawkinge – the most easterly rung in the ladder between the M20/A20 and M2/A2
 - Improvements to the stretch of the A228 between the M2 Junction 2 and M20 Junction 4
 3. Permanent off-road lorry park provision and improved technology solutions at the Channel ports to eliminate the need for Operation Brock, ensuring the free flow of UK-EU traffic from Kent's ports and the Channel Tunnel via the LTC (and Dartford) and tackling inappropriate lorry parking across Kent. Operation Brock and the lack of suitable lorry parking facilities will continue to disrupt traffic flows in the county and reduce the effectiveness of the LTC and surrounding roads in future if these issues are not dealt with swiftly.

KMEP recognises that not all improvements to Kent & Medway's strategic and local road network are within the direct remit of the scheme's influence but would expect that dialogue continues between the Applicant, DfT, National Highways and other relevant local and national stakeholders to identify solutions to funding gaps or barriers to the implementation of the other essential schemes highlighted above, some of which are being considered under RIS2 and the RIS3 pipeline. Some, however, are not currently part of future RIS programmes or are being considered within any National Highways mitigation plans for junctions on the strategic road network which will be impacted by the LTC.

KMEP would also request that the LTC commissions work to understand likely impact of HGV route changes to and from the Channel ports and where SNR and local road network improvements are essential to ensure that free flow of Kent & Medway's road network as well as the LTC itself.

Minimising Negative Local Impacts:

KMEP would also like to request that National Highways protect existing businesses and communities from any negative impacts that may be brought by the LTC's construction and operation by ensuring that:

1. Adequate measures, including suitable Traffic Management Plans, are agreed with local stakeholders and put in place to prevent inappropriate use of local roads (A227, A228 in Gravesham and Medway and A2 stretch from Medway to Faversham in particular) which are designed to serve local communities. Planning and enforcement must be in place to ensure that long-distance traffic remains on the Strategic Road Network.
2. National Highways works closely and constructively with local authorities and stakeholders to ensure the most appropriate environmental, air and noise mitigation measures are put into effect both during the construction phase and into the future as the LTC becomes fully operation. The declared ambition to ensure that the scheme is delivered as sustainably as possible is welcomed but assurances that measures are properly planned and implemented, especially in the immediate vicinity of the LTC south of the River Thames, are needed given the proximity to existing residential communities and sensitive habitats.

Additional Opportunities:

Whilst KMEP understands that a number of sustainable or active travel options have to date been ruled out, KMEP would strongly encourage the Applicant to continue to engage with local planners and public transport operators in investigating business cases for sustainable bus routes and interchange opportunities between key locations in Kent and Essex to enable the use of the LTC as an alternative to existing lengthy rail connections in and out of London. KMEP would like to see this issue given specific consideration during the Examination to test whether there is more the Applicant and the scheme could do to enable viable public transport solutions using the LTC to be delivered.