

Our ref: CRS 716,964

Your ref:

[REDACTED]
Charging and Policy Team Leader
WMRCC Quinton
1 Ridgeway, Quinton
Birmingham B32 1AF

3 March 2015

Dear [REDACTED]

THE DARTFORD CROSSING AND FOI REQUEST

Thank you for your letter dated 7th January sent To Rt Hon John Hayes MP about the Dartford Crossing and your request under the Freedom of information Act 2000.

The Government made a commitment to improving the Crossing experience for the millions of people who use it every year. The Crossing handles around 50 million vehicle crossings each year, often exceeding its design capacity and experiencing congestion problems. Daily two-way traffic levels average about 141,000 vehicles per day compared to an original design capacity of 135,000 per day and it is not unusual to see levels in excess of 160,000 vehicles per day occur. The removal of the need for users to stop and pay the charge at a barrier, through the introduction of Dart Charge, has already resulted in reduced delays and improved traffic flow and the road user experience. Highways Agency data shows that there has already been a dramatic reduction in congestion and queues saving millions of hours a year of time spent queuing, and reducing by over 80% the number of occasions when serious queues occur. The full benefits are being experienced on southbound journeys already with journey times reducing by an average of over 9 minutes and there has been significant northbound improvement of over 4 minutes.

I appreciate the concerns you have raised about the charge increase. Toll charges were levied at Dartford until 2003 when the debts associated with the construction of the QEII Bridge and the tunnels had been fully discharged. A Road User Charge was introduced in 2003 to manage the high demand for use of the Crossing after a study carried out for the Department for Transport indicated that without charges the level of traffic using the crossing would increase by over 17%. Parliament agreed the powers for the charging regime in the Transport Act 2000 and the charges imposed and collected are used to fund transport improvements in accordance with the Transport Act 2000.

It is worth noting that, in spite of the increase to £2.50, nearly 70% of crossings are now being paid for on pre-pay accounts. Account customers receive a discount, which means that for car drivers they pay £1.67 per crossing – a discount of nearly one third.

The Highways Agency is serious about tackling cases of evasion where UK or Non-UK vehicles fail to pay the charge. The equipment used at the Crossing, primarily ANPR cameras, is

capable of capturing all vehicle registration marks (VRM). Where there is any doubt about the country of origin of the VRM captured by the ANPR system, the image is reviewed manually to identify the registration. If we confirm that the road user charge has not been paid, we use enforcement measures to recover the outstanding charges. These include effective penalty and recovery processes and the use of a European debt recovery agency to support the recovery of outstanding charges from non-UK vehicles. This approach has proven successful elsewhere with schemes such as the London congestion charging and Dublin M50 toll schemes. The new scheme is still in its infancy, but all of the evidence suggests that the vast majority of drivers are paying the charge with more than 90 per cent of chargeable journeys made during December now paid for, and each day this figure continues to rise; this is a very good sign that are getting to know and understand the new arrangements.

In order to achieve these results, the Agency recognised that Dart Charge is a significant change for drivers and have been running a wide-ranging public information campaign to inform drivers about the changes. This has included radio and poster advertising, print and broadcast media and extensive work with partners both in the UK and overseas. By 26 February 2015, over 570,000 Dart Charge accounts had been set up for users from all over the UK and abroad and over 1.5 million vehicles registered. This suggests a strong sense of awareness of the introduction of Dart Charge. However, the Agency is not complacent, and is continuing to work hard to raise further awareness of the scheme. Moving forward, the next phase of the public information campaign is to consider how best to reach those who may still be unaware of the changes, particularly infrequent users.

With regards to the exact information displayed on the signage, the Agency gave careful consideration to the display of information such as the website address and the telephone number, whilst ensuring that signage is clear and effective without becoming a distraction and potential road safety issue. We concluded that to display a telephone number on road signs would not be appropriate for people who could potentially be driving at speed once the work to remove the barriers altogether was complete. Information on road user charges is no longer displayed at the Crossing, as payment is no longer taken there. The information about the various methods of payment is too detailed and complex to be displayed on signage.

With reference to your request under the Freedom of Information Act 2000, the specific details highlighted in bold below, our responses are:

1) Number of vehicles using the QE Bridge and the number using the tunnels.

I can confirm that there were 2,019,852 vehicles using the bridge and 2,003,932 using the tunnels during the period since 30 November until 6 January 2015. These figures relate to the hours where Dart Charge was payable i.e. between the hours of 6am and 10pm as opposed to the full day.

2) The number of those that were registered outside the United Kingdom.

The number of chargeable crossing made by vehicles registered outside of the UK is 78,265 via the tunnel and 83,145 via the bridge. These figures relate to the hours where Dart Charge was payable.



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3) The number of those which failed to pay before the £105 (for cars) became due.

Currently the Agency does not have the data to enable us to answer this question because the £105 (for cars) does not become due until 28 days after the issue of the Penalty Charge and the issue of Penalty Charges was delayed to give crossing users the chance to comply with the scheme.

4) The number of those not paying, which were registered outside the United Kingdom

In addition to the answer above, we are still accepting payments for these crossings so we do not have exact numbers yet of non-compliant foreign registered vehicles. It also means that the number of non-compliant vehicles is likely to reduce as more drivers pay the charges due. However, we have calculated that between 30 November 2014 and 6 January 2015 inclusive, the number of potential non-compliant crossings made by non-UK registered vehicles was 83,112. This equates to 2% of the total number of crossing for this period during the charging hours of 6am and 10pm. Up to the 16 February 2015, 18,716 cases have been passed to a European debt recovery agency.

5) The number which subsequently found to be operated on "Trade Plates" where the camera had failed to read the correct plate.

I can confirm that the Agency does not have the data to enable us to answer this question.

6) The revenue that will be lost because the fee payable exceeds the administrative cost involved in tracing a foreign registered vehicle and its driver.

In the context of the question asked, we have assumed that the fee payable is the associated penalty charge following non-compliance of Dart Charge and the administrative cost being what we, the Highways Agency pay to Sanef our service provider. We can confirm that no such revenue will be lost.

Regarding your query about vehicles towing a caravan or trailer, standard cars with or without trailers or caravans are classed as Class B by DVLA. Goods vans, including car-based vans without side windows behind the driver, vans or buses with more than 8 seats in addition to the driver's seat and goods vehicles with two axles with or without a trailer are classed as Class C by DVLA. Please note that a two-axle goods vehicle with a drawbar trailer is charged as a two-axle goods vehicle. For further information, please refer to:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/dartford-crossing-vehicle-classes>.

In keeping with the spirit and effect of the legislation, all information is assumed to be releasable to the public unless exempt. We may therefore be publishing the information you requested, together with any related information that will provide a key to its wider context, via the [Gov.uk website](http://www.gov.uk).

If you are unhappy with the way we have handled your request you may ask for an internal review. Our internal review process is available at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/highways-agency/about/complaints-procedure>

If you require a print copy, please phone the Highways Agency Information Line on 0300 123 5000; or e-mail ha_info@highways.gsi.gov.uk. You should contact me if you wish to complain.



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If you are not content with the outcome of the internal review, you have the right to apply directly to the Information Commissioner for a decision. The Information Commissioner can be contacted at:

Information Commissioner's Office
Wycliffe House
Water Lane
Wilmslow
Cheshire
SK9 5AF

If you have any queries about this letter, please contact me. Please remember to quote reference number CRS 716,964 in any future communications.

Yours sincerely

[Redacted signature]

[Redacted name]

Charging and Enforcement Policy Team Leader

Email: [Redacted email address]



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