Department for Transport

Revising the Charges at the Dartford-Thurrock River Crossing: Consultation Response

The Department for Transport has actively considered the needs of blind and partially sighted people in accessing this document. The text will be made available in full on the Department's website in accordance with the W3C's Web Content Accessibility Guidelines. The text may be freely downloaded and translated by individuals or organisations for conversion into other accessible formats. If you have other needs in this regard please contact the Department.

Department for Transport
Great Minster House
33 Horseferry Road
London SW1P 4DR
Telephone 0300 330 3000
Website www.dft.gov.uk

To order further copies contact:
DfT Publications
Tel: 0300 123 1102
www.dft.gov.uk/orderingpublications

ISBN XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

Printed in Great Britain on paper containing at least 75% recycled fibre.

CONTENTS

PART 1 – INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Dartford-Thurrock River Crossing (the Crossing) is a key part of the strategic road network. It consists of two two-lane tunnels carrying traffic to the north, and a four-lane cable stayed bridge carrying traffic to the south. The crossing spans the River Thames between Dartford and Thurrock, forming a trunk road link (A282 Trunk Road) in the M25 orbital motorway.

1.2 On 30 June 2011, the Department for Transport launched a public consultation about revising the road user charging regime at the Crossing. The current charging regime has been in place since November 2008, which was the first time it was revised since the introduction of a road user charging regime in 2003.

1.3 The aim of the Department's proposals was to reduce congestion at the Crossing, with the objectives of:

- continuing to manage demand for the use of the Crossing and reducing the impacts caused by the levels of congestion; and
- providing Government with additional revenues to allow the Department to continue to prioritise development and funding proposals, particularly for the provision of additional crossing capacity in the Lower Thames.

1.4 The Department therefore proposed to:

(a) Increase the charges in two successive steps to assist users in adjusting to the overall increase;

(b) Increase the charge rates for cash payments by approximately a third at each successive step, rounded to the nearest 50 pence to keep transaction costs low;

(c) Apply existing discount levels by category of vehicle for those choosing to pay in advance using Dart-Tag; and,

(d) Retain the other elements of the current charging regime at least until such time as newer charging technologies are introduced.

1.5 The consultation document was published on the Department for Transport's (DfT) website and sent electronically to the required statutory consultees and key stakeholders. As required by legislation the consultation was also advertised in the London Gazette and the Dartford Messenger and placed on deposit at Dartford Borough Council and Thurrock Council offices. The consultation ran for 12 weeks, closing on 23 September 2011.

1.6 This document is the Department for Transport's response to the consultation process, and sets out details of the views expressed during the consultation, as well as the Department's response and the conclusions it has reached. The document also explains how the

Department intends to take forward its conclusions on changes to the road user charging regime.

PART 2 – CONTEXT

2.1 The Crossing suffers from significant levels of congestion, with over 50 million vehicles using it each year. The design capacity of the Crossing was 135,000 vehicles a day. However, a 2009 study concluded that the existing Crossing had been operating at its design capacity over a number of years, providing poor journey time reliability for its millions of users.

2.2 Even at the current rates of charge the situation is anticipated to worsen as a result of forecast traffic growth. The 2009 study concluded that the Crossing would be unable to cater for the forecast growth in traffic and predicted increases in travel demand. It also concluded that the level of performance would deteriorate further.

2.3 Recognising the importance of the Crossing, and accepting the need to raise additional revenue, the Department announced in the 2010 Spending Review its intention to increase the levels of the road user charges. The Department was able to prioritise expenditure during this spending review period for short, medium and long term measures to improve flow at the Crossing, these included:

- suspension of the charges to allow free use of the Crossing at times of severe congestion;
- introduction of free-flow charging which will require capital investment to reconfigure the infrastructure and build back-office systems for the Crossing; and
- a review of options for additional crossing capacity - undertaking a comparative economic evaluation of the three future crossing options identified previously as the first step in the process of developing a full business case for the construction of additional capacity.

2.4 The proposed changes to the charging regime at the Crossing, and the subsequent increases in net revenues from charge receipts, would allow the Department to continue to prioritise up front investment in measures at the Crossing in the short and medium term, and in developing and funding additional crossing capacity in the Lower Thames area in the long term.

PART 3 – RESPONSES TO THE CONSULTATION

3.1 The Department was keen to receive the views of as many people as possible and provided a number of different ways of being able to respond to the consultation. Respondents could reply directly via the Department's website by completing an on-line form or by completing a questionnaire and emailing a specific consultation email address. Alternatively respondents were also able to send their responses in writing directly to the Department.

3.2 In total the Department received 1,356 responses during the consultation period. 947 responses were received online via the Department's website, 316 responses were received through the consultation email address, and 93 responses were received in writing.

3.3 In addition, four petitions about the Department's proposals were submitted:

- "Protect Our Discount" was submitted by Councillor Martin Healey of Thurrock Council with 209 signatories supporting "keeping the Thurrock residents' discount for using the Dartford Crossing."
- The Gravesend, Dartford and Medway Messengers newspapers received 2,133 signatures opposing "any increase in tolls charged for the Dartford Crossing." The petition was supported by Gareth Johnson MP and presented to the House of Commons in September 2011.
- Jackie Doyle-Price MP attracted around 2,000 signatures which opposed "any increase in the tolls charged for the Dartford Crossing and any option for a new Thames crossing in the south Thames area", calling for the Department "to reduce tolls on the Dartford Crossing and to reconsider proposals for a new Thames crossing in the lower Thames area".
- "Stop the Dartford toll rise now from £1.50 to £2" was supported by around 1,500 people on Twitter at the conclusion of the consultation.

3.4 The consultation response form asked respondents to choose a category that best described who they represented and who they were responding on behalf of, these were:

- Central Government
- Large Company
- Local Government
- Member of the public
- Police
- Representative Organisation

- Small to Medium Enterprise
- Interest Group

3.5 There was no distinct category for members of parliament though in our analysis we have identified responses received from MPs separately.

3.6 Not every respondent answered every consultation question and in some cases the responses received did not express a clear opinion in favour, or against, the Department's proposals.

3.7 Only respondents answering the specific questions have been included in the analysis, but there were also some general responses that the Department has considered in formulating its response.

PART 4 – ANALYSIS OF CONSULTATION RESPONSES AND THE DEPARTMENT'S RESPONSE

4.1 The Department's consultation document included seven specific questions about the detailed proposals for changes to the road user charging regime at the Crossing. The specific questions in the consultation document were:

- Do you agree or disagree with the approach of increasing the charges for cash payments for all categories of vehicles by broadly equivalent rates?
- Do you agree or disagree that current rates of discount should continue to apply for Dart-Tag account holders?
- Do you agree or disagree with the approach of introducing changes in 2011 and 2012?
- Do you have specific comments on the draft Order?
- Do you agree or disagree that the current terms of the Local Residents' Discount Scheme should remain unchanged?
- Do you agree or disagree that other details of the charging regime (i.e. times of operation, vehicle categories and exemptions) should remain unchanged?
- Do you agree or disagree with our assessment of the impacts of the proposals particularly on small firms and protected equality groups?

4.2 This part of the Department's response to the consultation sets out each individual question asked, along with an analysis of the number responses received. For each question, it describes the common themes that were raised by respondents, and also includes the Department's response to the points made, as well as summarising the conclusions the Department has reached.

4.3 Not every response received gave a specific answer to every consultation question - and in some cases the responses did not express a clear opinion in favour, or against, the Department's proposals.

4.4 Where that was the case, the overall numerical analysis of responses received for each question has not included such responses but where such responses provided views or comments on the question, all of these have been considered by the Department in formulating its response.

4.5 CONSULTATION QUESTION 1

Do you agree or disagree with the approach of increasing the charges for cash payments for all categories of vehicles by broadly equivalent rates?

Table 1: Summary Analysis of Responses to Question 1		
	Agree	Disagree
Central Government	0	0
Member of Parliament	0	6
Large Company	17	48
Local Government	6	23
Member of the Public	136	691
Police	0	1
Representative Organisation	1	10
Small to Medium Enterprise	25	82
Interest Group	0	2
Unknown	8	38
Other	9	26
TOTAL	202	927

4.5.1 There were 1,129 specific responses to the question with 202 (18%) agreeing with the proposition and 927 (82%) disagreeing with the proposals.

4.5.2 Of the total number of responses received during the consultation process, 227 did not indicate whether they agreed or disagreed with this specific question. These responses have therefore not been included in the summary analysis above, but where such responses provided related comments, these comments have been considered.

4.5.3 46 respondents to this question did not indicate whether they represented a specific category of respondent and have therefore been recorded in the unknown category.

What respondents said

Road user charge

4.5.4 Many of the respondents to this question said that they did not consider it necessary to have a road user charge at the Crossing. The point was made that a previous Government had put in place the tolling regime at the Crossing as a means of paying for the construction and on-going costs of maintenance and operation of the QEII Bridge, and that once the debt associated with these costs had been repaid, the need to levy a toll for the use of the Crossing should have ended.

4.5.5 Where responses were in agreement with the continuation of charging, this was on the basis that the net revenues generated were used to introduce an improved charge collection process, as well as the development of additional river crossing capacity. There was some recognition that funding was needed to develop a free-flowing charging solution in the medium term. For example, John Lewis Partnership had no objection to the strategy of increasing charges given that this will support improvements to the route.

Causes of congestion

4.5.6 Many responses said that the main cause of congestion at the Crossing was the process of charge collection, with motorists needing to slow down, stop and pay the crossing charge. Respondents, including the Automobile Association, called for the removal of the barriers and charges completely, as this would offer significant benefits through improving the traffic flow.

4.5.7 Some respondents called for the suspension of the charges for a trial period to assess the impacts on congestion of no charges being levied at the Crossing.

Proposed increases

4.5.8 Respondents said that the total overall increase in the level of the crossing charge, by £1, and the provision to increase by Retail Price Index (RPI) in future years was excessive. Many of the respondents said that given the current economic climate, increases above the level of charges by the use of the retail price index were not justified, and such increases would have detrimental effects on business, as well as the Government's objectives for economic growth.

4.5.9 Some responses indicated that any proposed increase in the charge level should take account of the number of coins needed to make the payment, to ensure that the payment transaction was efficient and as quick as possible. Responses suggested that the charge level should be set at a rate that enables a simple combination of coins to be used.

4.5.10 Some respondents, including the Road Haulage Association said that if charges are to remain then the proposed increase for all categories of vehicles should be by equivalent rates. In contrast, some respondents believed that the majority of delays at the Crossing were caused by those that pay by cash, suggesting that the cash rates should be increased further to encourage a greater take up of electronic pre-payment through the Dart-Tag scheme, which would improve efficiency at the Crossing.

4.5.11 Many responses said that the Department's evidence of the impacts from increased charges, on reducing congestion and improving journey times was questionable and unsubstantiated, particularly in light of the experience and impacts from the previous rise in charge levels implemented at the Crossing in 2008.

4.5.12 Some respondents said that were any increases to the charges to be made, they should only be increased in line with increases determined by the increases in the Retail Price Index, as proposals to increase the level of the charge by 66% were too high.

4.5.13 Other respondents suggested that instead of using the Retail Price Index to determine increases in the level of charges, the Department should use the Consumer Price Index (CPI) to determine increases in level of charges. It was suggested that as the CPI is now used more widely as a measure of inflation, its use would be more appropriate to adjust the levels of charges at the Crossing.

Vehicle classes

4.5.14 Many of the responses to the question called for greater increases to the level of charge levied on heavy goods vehicles (HGVs), as it was considered that they created the greatest impact at the Crossing in terms of the use of the available road space, but HGV's were a greater cause of congestion than other vehicles.

4.5.15 Some respondents called for greater increases in charges for non-UK registered vehicles, particularly HGVs, again saying they were a greater cause of congestion than other vehicle types. The Freight Transport Association (FTA) said that in the case of the Crossing no efficient alternative route exists for HGVs given their limited flexibility to alter journey times and/or routes. The FTA expressed concern that congestion would not be reduced to an acceptable level that justified the charge increase.

4.5.16 Responses to the question also called for the levying of the road user charge for motorcycles, as it was considered that all users of the Crossing should be subject to a charge and it was unfair on other road users that motorcyclists could use the Crossing for free.

4.5.17 ITS UK (a not-for-profit public/private sector association for the promotion of intelligent transport systems) suggested that the proposed increase in the charge levels for HGVs should be reduced to encourage HGVs to continue to use the Crossing as a quicker and shorter route than using other roads. ITS (UK) said that if HGVs did

not use the Crossing due to the increases in the charge levels, it would be contrary to Government's energy saving, climate change and carbon reduction policies.

Scottish River Crossings

4.5.18 A few respondents, such as Dartford Borough Council, the Automobile Association, both the Essex and Kent regions of Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) and the National Alliance Against Tolls, cited the example of the impacts in Scotland where all charges on crossings have been removed.

4.5.19 The FSB said that the reasons the tolls were abolished on the Tay, Forth and Skye crossings was because they were seen as barriers to business, and the same logic should apply to the Dartford Crossing. Dartford Borough Council said that the future predicted levels of traffic increases on the Erskine Bridge had not materialised since the barriers were removed, and that traffic levels on the Forth Road Bridge increased by only 1.95% since 2006, following the removal of tolls.

Other comments

4.5.20 A number of responses made additional points not specifically related to this question.

4.5.21 Transport for London (TfL) requested that additional revenue from the Crossing should be used to provide further variable message signs on the approaches to the Blackwall Tunnel, as well as contributing to the costs of additional river crossing capacity within London.

4.5.22 A number of responses called for greater transparency on the uses to which the net revenues raised from the charging at the Crossing were being put.

4.5.23 Some suggestions were also made to providing payment facilities at the Crossing for left-hand drive vehicles as this would address the problem of foreign drivers having to leave their vehicle to pay the charge.

4.5.24 A number of respondents raised concerns regarding the effects an increase in the charges would have on them by restricting their ability to afford the use of the Crossing.

4.5.25 Some respondents suggested that the additional revenue required to help fund future improvements at the Crossing should be achieved in a different way, by using revenues from road tax or the fuel duty on petrol for example.

4.5.26 A few respondents suggested the charges should be one-directional as is the case at the Severn Crossing with removal of charges travelling southbound and doubling the charge travelling northbound through the tunnels.

Department's response

Road user charge

4.5.27 The Government, at the time of the 2010 Spending Review, recognised that given the financial climate, it had to make difficult choices about transport funding. It concluded that there was a need to raise additional revenues from the charges at the Dartford Crossing.

4.5.28 The charging regime at the Crossing is in place to manage traffic demand as there is currently a mis-match between the levels of demand and the levels of available supply (in terms of Crossing capacity). The Department's strategy for the longer term is to improve the performance of the Crossing by increasing the levels of supply through implementation of newer free-flow charging technology, and ultimately, longer term, to provide additional crossing capacity.

4.5.29 The increases in the level of road user charges allow the Department to manage traffic demand in the short term, and the increased net revenue levels lets the Department maintain the prioritisation of funding for future improvements.

Causes of congestion

4.5.30 The Department clearly understands that in the current charging process, there is a need for traffic to slow and pay a charge, and that in itself slows the flow of traffic. However, the main cause of congestion is not the payment process, but the overall levels of traffic wanting to use the Crossing at particular times of the day, compared to the available physical road capacity.

4.5.31 The Crossing has operated over its design capacity for a number of years and it provides little resilience for incidents that do occur, and the impacts of any incidents are made worse because of the large volumes of traffic at the Crossing.

4.5.32 The Department recognises that a payment mechanism which enables free-flowing traffic movement is needed, and it is committed to the introduction of newer charging technology at the Crossing to provide improved traffic flows as part of the charging process.

Proposed increases

4.5.33 The Department believes that the proposed levels of increases in the road user charges at the Dartford Crossing are both necessary and justifiable, as part of its overall short, medium and long term strategy for tackling congestion and improving performance.

4.5.34 The Department has accepted that in the long term additional capacity is needed at the Crossing, and that in order to develop such

proposals there is a need to prioritise its development. The Department also recognises that in the short term, the management of the demand for use of the Crossing is needed.

4.5.35 Not taking action would be irresponsible and would not address the current impacts caused by congestion at the Crossing, nor the wider impacts on the national and local economies. Although smaller increases in the level of charges would provide some level of improvement, the Department has concluded that its proposed levels of increase provides the right balance in managing the congestion at the Crossing and allows prioritisation of further improvements to take place.

4.5.36 In theory charges at the crossing could track the CPI, however, the Departments preferred choice is to track the RPI, this is also used when determining price increases on rail fares. RPI has shown a very slightly higher inflation rate for most recent years, but in some years CPI has shown a slightly higher inflation rate. Given that the difference in the inflation rate reported by the RPI and CPI is usually very small, it is considered that, even if any benefits could be obtained from switching from RPI to CPI, these would be outweighed by the administrative costs of making and implementing the change to the Charging Order and therefore does not merit change.

Vehicle classes

4.5.37 The Department has considered the many options suggested for varying the levels of proposed increases, either by levels of use or by the type of vehicle using the Crossing. It has decided that the most appropriate and fairest way forward is for the rate of increase to rise by broadly the same amount for all vehicle classes, as proposed in the consultation. The Department does not believe the need to levy a charge for the use of the Crossing on motorcyclists because their use is minimal. The latest figures indicate less than 350,000 motorcycles used the crossing last year, this equates to 0.68% of the total traffic, and claims that they are an equal cause of delay and congestion are not valid. In addition obtaining money to pay for the charge whilst travelling by motorcycle is not easily accessible compared to those travelling by other means which in turn would impact on journey times.

Scottish River Crossings

4.5.38 Responsibility for the policy of charging at Scottish river crossings is for the Scottish Parliament. The Department is aware of the decisions taken to remove charges at those river crossings but does not consider that this in itself is a reason to adopt a similar approach at the Dartford Crossing.

4.5.39 There are clear differences between the Dartford Crossing and the respective Scottish river crossings, in terms of their physical capacity, as well as in the volume and the make up of traffic using them. The Dartford Crossing is a key part of the strategic road network, and

forms part of the M25, which is the busiest section of the motorway network in this country, and indeed in Europe. The volumes of traffic at Dartford are far in excess of that making use of the river crossings in Scotland and as such the situations are not analogous.

4.5.40 Given the very different circumstances, the Department does not accept the case for the removal of the charges at the Dartford Crossing, nor does it consider it to be an appropriate way forward for trying to manage demand for use of the Crossing, and providing revenues to allow for future prioritisation of improvements.

Other comments

4.5.41 The Department has made clear that current legal requirement for net revenues from the crossing charge at Dartford will remain unchanged, in that all such receipts must be spent on transport.

4.5.42 The Department has noted the calls made by respondents for net revenues to be better targeted at local transport measures in the vicinity of the Crossing. Such arrangements have been in place before, but as part of the consultation on changes to the charging regime implemented in 2008, and subsequent introduction of the Local Residents' Discount Scheme, the Department considered the question of whether the allocation of local transport funding was the most appropriate way to recognise and recompense local communities for the impacts of the crossing in their vicinity.

4.5.43 The Department decided at that time that the provision of enhanced discounts to local users of the Crossing was the right way forward, and it does not consider a reversion to the previous arrangement is appropriate.

4.5.44 As for requests for the funding of transport measures in the near vicinity of the Crossing such as at the Blackwall Tunnel, the arrangements for funding transport infrastructure improvements in the Greater London area are governed by a different process, and it is right that this process remains. It is for Transport for London to make the case for the funding of such measures as part of the existing funding and governance arrangements. The Department for Transport continues to work collaboratively with TfL on development of improvements on the strategic and local transport networks to ensure they are complimentary and make best use of public funding.

4.5.45 As part of the development of the proposed implementation of newer, free-flowing charging technology, the issue of how best to manage the payment of the charge by left-hand drive vehicles is being considered. Clearly, achieving greater levels of pre-paid transactions at the Crossing will reduce any need for drivers to leave their vehicle to make the charge payment.

4.5.46 The Department will look to the current Crossing operator to address any specific operational aspects of payment arrangements for left-hand drive vehicles, but it is not an issue that needs to be addressed in the definition of the charging regime.

Conclusions

4.5.47 The Department is clear that road user charging at the Dartford Crossing will be maintained, to allow the Department to manage the levels of traffic at the Crossing, and tackle the impacts from congestion.

4.5.48 It will continue to pursue its strategy for delivering improvements at the Crossing in the short, medium and loner term, and that the charges at the Crossing will pay a key part in both tackling congestion but also contribute to the planned future improvements.

4.5.49 The Department has decided that the most appropriate, fair and justifiable way forward is to increases the levels of cash payment rates at the Crossing at broadly the same level for each class of crossing user, taking account of the need to ensure the payment levels facilitates the optimised payment process and transaction times as is possible in the circumstances.

Summary of the Department's decisions

In light of the consideration of the responses made the Department intends to the take following actions:

- The cash payment rates for the road user charges at the Dartford-Thurrock River Crossing will be increased by broadly equivalent rates for all user classes at the Crossing.

4.6 CONSULTATION QUESTION 2

Do you agree or disagree that the current rates of discount should continue to apply for Dart-Tag account holders?

Table 2: Summary Analysis of Responses to Question 2		
	Agree	Disagree
Central Government	0	0
Member of Parliament	4	2
Large Company	47	18
Local Government	23	6
Member of the Public	606	198
Police	1	0
Representative Organisation	5	5
Small to Medium Enterprise	75	29
Interest Group	1	1
Unknown	35	9
Other	27	7
Total	824	275

4.6.1 There were 1,099 specific responses to the question with 824 (75%) agreeing with the proposal that the current discount rates for Dart-Tag holders continue. 275 (25%) disagreed with the proposition.

4.6.2 Of all the responses received during the consultation process, 257 did not indicate whether they agreed or disagreed with this specific question. These responses have therefore not been included in the summary analysis above, but where such responses provided related comments, such comments have been considered.

4.6.3 44 respondents to this question did not indicate whether they represent a specific category of respondents and have been recorded in the unknown category.

What respondents said

Discount rates

4.6.4 Respondents said that frequent users of the Crossing should receive greater discounts from the levels of cash charges than currently proposed. For example, Mazda Motors UK already encourage their staff to make use of Dart-Tags, but for those employees that use the Crossing five days per week, the proposed increases in the discounted charge level will be significant. One Call Hire Ltd suggested that greater discounts should apply to business users, regardless of the specific type of vehicle.

4.6.5 Generally, the responses indicated that frequent users of the Crossing should receive a greater discount than that proposed, with some suggestions that the levels of discount should be similar to those received from the Local Residents' Discount Scheme.

4.6.6 Suggestions were made that the level of increases to the charges paid by Dart-Tag users was too high, and that the rate of increase should be determined through use of the RPI. This would result in a greater differential to cash payments and would make the charge cheaper than the cash alternative, and would encourage further take up of Dart-Tag, which would improve traffic flow at the Crossing.

4.6.7 Due to the relatively low take up of Dart-Tags for car users, a number of respondents said there should be greater discounts available. This would then encourage more people to use Dart-Tags, speed up transactions times, and reduce congestion at the Crossing.

Encourage take up

4.6.8 The general consensus from responses received was that the levels of discounts available should be increased further to encourage a greater take up of the Dart-Tag scheme. The Freight Transport Association and the Road Haulage Association in particular, suggested that the level of discount rates for vans and HGVs should be more equitable to that for car users. The Freight Transport Association quoted that only 23% of car crossing trips are paid for by Dart-Tag, compared to 40% of vans and 70% of HGVs. Offering greater discounts to cars users was therefore unfair.

4.6.9 A number of responses asked that the current charge rate for Dart-Tag holders should be frozen and not increased, which would encourage take up. Some respondents felt that the current discounts for Dart-Tag holders should continue but increases in the levels of charge should not happen until free-flow charging is introduced.

4.6.10 Suggestions were made that the introduction of a dedicated Dart-Tag only lane at the Crossing would not only encourage Dart-Tag take up, but would also reduce congestion and improve journey times.

Removal of discounts

4.6.11 Some respondents suggested that the Dart-Tag discount rates should be removed in their entirety, as all users of the Crossing should pay the same amount and payment should be simply based on the category of vehicle. Others suggested that removing the discounts available to Dart-Tag users would mean there was no need to increase the level of charges at the Crossing.

Other comments

4.6.12 For those agreeing with the Department's proposals, there was a recognition that Dart-Tag users already benefit from quicker transactions and are helping to reduce congestion.

4.6.13 Sanef Tolling Ltd and ITS UK suggested that tag technology should be interoperable with other tolling or charging schemes, both in the UK and abroad. Both organisations added that doing so would encourage a further increase in tag uptake, and welcomed the introduction of free-flow charging technology to improve the efficiency of revenue collection at Dartford.

4.6.14 Some respondents said that the administration charge should be removed.

Department's response

Discount rates

4.6.15 The Department has considered carefully the views provided on the levels of discounts proposed for regular user of the Crossing. It has considered that the provision of discounts from the cash charge already recognises that for many regular users, alternative journey choices may not always be available. The Department is also keen that the discounted charges offered do encourage the take up of advance crossing charge payment mechanisms.

4.6.16 The Department believes that in determining the levels of discounted charges for each vehicle class, its proposals have struck the right balance between vehicles classes, in terms of the respective volume of use, the size of vehicle and the available physical road space at the Crossing. The Department does not consider it appropriate to move away from the current scale of discounts offered to the different users at the Crossing.

4.6.17 The Department considers there is insufficient justification to increase the charge the level of the discounted charge for Dart-Tag users by the Retail Price Index. To provide a differential charge increase to those users already receiving discounts from the current cash charge rates would be inappropriate.

4.6.18 The Department does not consider there to be sufficient justification for greater discounts to be provided to private car users than currently available. Use of the crossing by car users is by far the largest in volume terms, just over 32 million per year, equating to nearly 63% of

total traffic. The current discount regime provides the largest level of discounted journey cost to car users, while the take up rate of discounted crossing charges is the lowest of the three vehicle classes at under 26%. The Department does not believe further discounted journey costs for car users is appropriate and instead will seek to encourage take up of Dart-Tag.

4.6.19 The Department does not consider it necessary to provide equitable discounts rates for all three vehicle types. The level of discounts offered to van and HGV vehicles are broadly equivalent, and while the take up rates of such discounts do differ, these rates are still greater than those for car users.

Encourage take up

4.6.20 The Department is keen to ensure that the availability of discounts for regular users is well known and that any barriers to users to taking advantage of those benefits are addressed.

4.6.21 However, the Department is not clear on the degree to which proposals to waive the administrative costs for users of the Dart-Tag scheme discounts would lead to a greater take up of the scheme. Currently the £10 registration charge is transferred as credit to Dart-Tag users' accounts, so the administrative fee should not be an additional cost to the user.

4.6.22 Dedicated lanes at the Crossing were previously provided for those users paying the crossing charge by way of the Dart-Tag electronic process. However, given the overall volume of traffic using the Crossing, and limitations in optimising the physical capacity by segregating cash and non-cash payers, the view was taken that is was better to use all available lane space to process the highest amount of traffic at the Crossing. The Dart-Tag only lanes were therefore discontinued.

4.6.23 The Highways Agency and the Crossing operator are however considering the feasibility of improvement to the physical layout of the Crossing plaza, to improve its operational performance and the throughput of traffic, including the Dart-Tag vehicles. The Department will carefully consider propositions from the Highways Agency and the Crossing operator on their proposed approach.

Other comments

4.6.24 The Department is concerned if there is confusion in the detail and indeed the operation of the discounted charge regimes at the Crossing. It is keen to ensure that the availability of such benefits are known to both regular or other users of the Crossing, and to ensure that the discount regimes do provide an effective and easy to use service for its customers.

4.6.25 The Department is therefore keen to understand the challenges to greater take up of the discount regime, and to consider whether there

is room for improvement in the management and effectiveness of the current arrangements.

Conclusions

4.6.26 The Department is clear of the need to maintain the levels of discount available for regular users of the Crossing compared to those that pay using cash. It believes that current level of discounts offered to the different users of the Crossing strikes the right balance between the levels of use, their impacts in terms of road space and the need to encourage greater use of electronic pre-payment of the Crossing charge. It therefore intends to leave unchanged the rates of discount being offered from the cash charges.

4.6.27 The Department does however want to ensure the availability of such benefits is better known and the administrative arrangements for the discount scheme remain effective. It therefore intends to review the effectiveness of the discount scheme, and will consider the implementation of any necessary changes following its considerations.

Summary of the Department's decisions

In light of the consideration of the consultation responses the Department will take the following actions:

- The level of discounts from the cash charge for each of the current vehicle classes at the Crossing is to remain unchanged.
- The discounted crossing charges for members of the Dart-Tag scheme for vehicle classes will increase at the same rate as the level of charge increases for cash users.
- The Department will however, undertake a review of the effectiveness of the Dart-Tag scheme in providing discounts for regular users to ensure it remains effective and provides the user of the scheme with an easy to use service.

4.7 CONSULTATION QUESTION 3

Do you agree or disagree with the approach of introducing the changes in 2011 and 2012?

Table 3: Summary Analysis of Responses to Question 3		
	Agree	Disagree
Central Government	0	0
Member of Parliament	0	6
Large Company	16	50
Local Government	1	28
Member of the Public	133	679
Police	0	1
Representative Organisation	0	9
Small to Medium Enterprise	16	89
Interest Group	0	2
Unknown	7	39
Other	9	25
Total	182	928

4.7.1 There were 1,110 specific responses to the question with 182 (16%) agreeing and 928 (84%) disagreeing with the proposals.

4.7.2 Of all the responses received during the consultation process, 246 did not indicate whether they agreed or disagreed with this specific question. These responses have therefore not been included in the summary analysis above, but where such responses provided related comments, such comments have been considered.

4.7.3 46 respondents to this question did not indicate whether they represent a specific category of respondents and have been recorded in the unknown category.

What respondents said

Two stage approach

4.7.4 Those that agreed with the Department's proposals said that a two-stage approach for increasing the charge levels was a good idea because it would allow users of the Crossing to adjust financially, and that having two increases rather then one larger increase would be preferable. Some of the views provided also stated that the increase in charge would make more people use Dart-Tag and provide benefits in terms of reduced congestion.

4.7.5 In contrast, a number of respondents said that introducing two increases in a short space of time was likely to cause confusion to the travelling public and that revising the charges within five months of each other would offer very little time to adjust to the initial change before the further increase was implemented.

Timing of introducing changes

4.7.6 Some respondents suggested that increases should only occur once and not before the 2011 Christmas period, as this could deter potential shoppers visiting the near by Bluewater and Lakeside shopping centres. In particular, the John Lewis Partnership and the British retail consortium expressed concern that increasing the charges in November 2011 would impact on the levels of trading for retailers. The John Lewis Partnership reiterated that the additional cost would not only fall to consumers, it would also impact on costs for the business in general and their suppliers. They suggested that businesses should be given a longer notice period to factor in the implications of a charge increase.

4.7.7 Some responses agreed with proposals to increase charges in November but said that the second increase in April 2012 should be implemented at a later date. Some respondents, including the South East Local Enterprise Partnership and the Essex Chambers of Commerce said that the timing of the increase should only be introduced once implementation of newer charging technology at the Crossing had been completed. This view was supported by Essex County Council and the Thames Gateway South Essex Partnership. The London Borough of Bexley said that the timing of the proposed increases was too far in advance of the proposed delivery of free-flow charging technology.

4.7.8 Transport for London and the London Assembly Liberal Democrat Group said that any increases in the levels of charge should be delayed until after the 2012 Olympic and Paralympics Games. They suggested that due to the high volume of visitors to the city of London during the Games period, the level of proposed increases might discourage use of the M25, causing diversion onto alternative routes which would then increase the levels of traffic on what would be an already heavily congested Olympic route network. TfL also suggested that the charges should be suspended whilst the Games were in

operation which would then improve the traffic flows at the Crossing and relieve the pressure on the Olympic route network.

4.7.9 Some respondents suggested that there should only be one increase in charge levels and that it should be delayed until 2013.

4.7.10 Some views received suggested that any increase should only occur once a year, and that the charge level should be raised by the rate determined by the use of the Retail Price Index. The New Anglia Local Enterprise Partnership said that the current charges were too high and that if charges were to be increased it should be limited to once a year and in line with inflation. Some views provided said that increasing the charges once a year and by RPI would also allow businesses to budget more effectively and consequently opposed the timing of the proposed two increases.

4.7.11 A number of respondents expressed concern regarding increasing the charges whilst the economy was recovering from a recession. For example, Moss Electrical Company estimated that the proposed increase would double their costs. Thurrock Borough Council indicated that any increase should wait until 2012-2013 to enable residents and businesses to recover further from the current financial downturn. Other views expressed were that there should be no increase until the level of unemployment falls and that average income among the lowest earners increases.

Other comments

4.7.12 A large number of respondents reiterated the point that the charges at the Crossing should be removed altogether. Kent County Council requested clear accountability from the Department for Transport regarding the use of the revenue generated from the Crossing.

Department's response

Timing of introducing changes

4.7.13 The Department understands the financial climate in which it proposed changes to the charging regime at the Crossing. It, like the rest of Government is committed to stimulating the performance of the economy.

4.7.14 In terms of the timing of the proposed changes to the charging regime, the Department announced on 24 November 2011 that it wanted to consider the responses made to the consultation in further detail, and that in doing so, it would not be implementing the first increase in charges in late 2011 and the second planned increase in Spring 2012 as it had proposed.

4.7.15 The Department accepts the need to balance the performance of the economy and the timing of the proposed increases to the crossing charges at the Crossing. It recognises that currently there are difficult economic times for business and for households. However it does

believe that in the absence of charge increases at the Crossing, the Department would have to delay the implementation of its planned improvements to the Crossing, which in themselves are designed to bring benefits to the economy by addressing the impacts caused by current levels of congestion.

4.7.16 The Department has therefore concluded that the timing of the second increase will aligned with the timing of the introduction of free-flow charging at the Crossing, currently scheduled for October 2014.

4.7.17 The Department understands the points made about the need to provide a level of certainty about the future levels of charge at the Crossing. It also considers that a two-step approach to increasing the charge level is the right approach. To adopt a regular annual increase of charges, aligned with the rate of the retail price index, the outcomes would mean there would be far more multi-coin cash transactions at the Crossing, and the potential for increased transaction times. It would also remove the Department's flexibility to leave charge levels unchanged, if the circumstances at the time warranted no increases.

4.7.18 The Department has listened carefully to the views on increasing the levels of the road user charges at the Crossing prior to the Olympic and Paralympic games this summer. We have been clear that the objectives for planning transport provision during the Games period focus on spectators, athletes and other visitors to the Games making their way to activities and events by way public transport. In considering a range of options in terms of both the levels and timing of changes to the road user charge rates, the Department has considered carefully the impacts different approaches would create.

4.7.19 To fully understand the impacts in terms of the overall levels of traffic at the Dartford Crossing but also on the surrounding network, and other London river crossings, the Department has produced specific analysis looking at the scale of traffic impacts changes at the Crossing would bring.

4.7.20 The Department's evidence points to the fact that changing the charge rates at the Crossing does impact on the overall level of traffic using the Crossing, but also that some traffic does divert onto other parts of the surrounding network. However, the Department's analysis shows the scale of these impacts to be minimal in relation to the overall scale of change. Such scale of change is also expected across the other London River crossings.

4.7.21 However, despite evidence that the impacts from the proposed changes are minimal at best, the Department has considered whether increasing charges prior to the Olympic period is appropriate in terms of contributing to ensuring the delivery of an effective Olympic Games travel plan.

4.7.22 The Department has concluded that, taking into account the overall scale of the challenge in managing traffic for the Olympic Games period, changes in the level of charges at the Dartford Crossing would

not be appropriate, and has therefore decided implementation of increased charge levels will not take place until after the Olympic and Paralympic Games period.

Other comments

4.7.23 At present, the use of the net revenues are specified by legislation and make clear that such revenues are spent on transport. In addition, there are legislative requirements to produce annual accounts for the road user charging regime at the Dartford Crossing, and these are produced and published by the Highways Agency. The Department also produces and publishes annual accounts related to its investments.

Conclusions

4.7.24 The Department recognises that increases in the level of the road user charges at the Dartford Crossing are a necessary action to ensure it tackles the issues and impacts caused by the current levels of congestion at the Crossing. It also recognises that the timing of the proposed increases are important both in terms of ensuring addressing the congestion now, but also in terms of the overall economic climate.

4.7.25 The Department has already decided that given the need to consider the responses made to its proposals, but also in terms of the views provided about the short-term impacts, that charge increases would not take place as planned in late 2011 and spring 2012. In addition, given the views expressed, the Department has decided not to increase the level of charges before or during the Olympic and Paralympic Games period.

4.7.26 However, to ensure that we do begin to address the issues at the Crossing, and to ensure we can implement our plans for future improvements, the Department has decided to implement the first increase of 50 pence in the cash rates for car users in October 2012.

4.7.27 Given the need to be able to demonstrate to users of the Crossing that improvements are being delivered at the Crossing, the Department has decided to implement the second proposed increase at the same time as the proposed introduction of newer, free-flowing charging technology at the Crossing, currently scheduled for October 2014. Equivalent increases in the cash rate for other vehicles will take place on the same timescales.

Summary of the Department's decisions

After carefully considering the consultation responses on the proposed timing of increases in the level of road user charges at the Dartford-Thurrock River Crossing, the Government intends to the take following actions:

- Changes to the levels of the road user charge at the Crossing will not be implemented in the period before or during the Olympic and Paralympic Games in summer 2012.
- The first increase in the road user charges rates will take place in October 2012.
- The second increase in the road user charging rates will be implemented at the same time as the introduction of free-flow charging technology at the Crossing, currently estimated as October 2014.

4.8 CONSULTATION QUESTION 4

Do you have any comments on the draft Order?

Table 4: Summary Analysis of Responses to Question 4		
	Yes	No
Central Government	0	0
Member of Parliament	3	3
Large Company	30	33
Local Government	11	13
Member of the Public	244	490
Police	1	0
Representative Organisation	6	4
Small to Medium Enterprise	42	58
Interest Group	1	1
Unknown	15	26
Other	14	17
Total	367	645

4.8.1 There were 1,012 responses to the question, with the majority of responses, 645 (64%), stating they did not have any comments on the Draft Order. 367 (36%) did indicate that they had comments on the Draft Charging Order.

4.8.2 Of all the responses received during the consultation process, 344 did not indicate whether they had any comments on the Draft Order These responses have therefore not been included in the summary analysis above.

4.8.3 The majority of those with comments on the Draft Order tended to focus on the removal of the charge, making similar comments to those for question 1, or the timing of the increase similar to those comments raised in question number 3, rather than the legalities of the Draft Order itself.

4.8.4 41 respondents to this question did not indicate whether they represent a specific category of respondents and have been recorded in the unknown category.

What respondents said

4.8.5 Some respondents, including the London Borough of Bexley raised concerns that provision has been made to increase the charges further on an annual basis up until 2018 in line with the Retail Price Index. They indicated that the annual increases would be disconnected from any funding needs for future improvements at the Crossing, and that the additional revenue generated may be seen as an additional tax and not used for its intended purposes.

4.8.6 Some respondents felt that in the current trial of charge suspension, the basis for suspending charges was open to interpretation and that the revised Order should clearly define the meaning of severe congestion used as the trigger point for this course of action.

Department's response

4.8.7 The Department, in considering the views made in the consultation on the specific areas of the road user charging regime at the Crossing, and reaching decisions on its proposals, will make the necessary amendments to the proposed charging Order to reflect those decisions. For example, in terms of the commencement dates of the Order, and the specification of the timing of any proposed charges increases.

4.8.8 The definition of a local resident set out in section 2 (1) of the draft Order is the correct legal definition in terms of eligibility of the current Local Residents' Discount Scheme. The Department does not therefore consider it necessary to amend the Order to clarify this current definition.

4.8.9 The draft Charging Order did not contain a specific definition of severe congestion, in relation to the circumstance in which such levels of congestion would constitute an emergency, from which the Secretary of State has the power to suspend the levying of the road user charge.

4.8.10 Defining the criteria for severe congestion is not legally necessary in the Charging Order. The Secretary of State's powers to suspend the charge are contained within Section 17A of the Transport Act 2000.

4.8.11 The Transport Act 2000 provides the Secretary of State with the power to vary the charging regime in line with the Retail Price Index (RPI).

4.8.12 The Department intends to continue to exercise the discretion to vary the charging regime in line with RPI in future years, and it will do this by varying the existing charging order. The intention is that

consideration of potential increases by RPI would only be considered after 2014.

Conclusions

4.8.13 The Department has carefully considered the views made in terms of the draft Charging Order provided at the time of the consultation on its proposals. It has decided that in completing the drafting of the Charging Order, the drafting will reflect the decisions it has taken in terms of the details of the charging regime, and the draft Order will be subject to the necessary Parliamentary procedures to complete the legal implementation of the revised charging regime.

Summary of Department's decisions

Given the responses made in terms of the draft Order the Department intends to the take following actions:

- The Statutory Instrument required to implement the changes to the charging regimes at the Dartford Crossing (The Charging Order) will be amended to reflect the decisions taken by the Department on the details of the charging regime.

4.9 CONSULTATION QUESTION 5

Do you agree or disagree that the current terms of the Local Residents' Discount Scheme should remain unchanged?

Table 5: Summary Analysis of Responses to Question 5		
	Agree	Disagree
Central Government	0	0
Member of Parliament	4	2
Large Company	36	26
Local Government	21	7
Member of the Public	465	329
Police	1	0
Representative Organisation	2	9
Small to Medium Enterprise	66	34
Interest Group	0	2
Unknown	29	14
Other	19	15
Total	643	438

4.9.1 There were 1,081 responses to the question. The majority of respondents 643 (59%) agreed that the terms of the Local Residents' Discount Scheme should remain unchanged, with 438 (41%) suggesting there should be a change to the scheme.

4.9.2 Of all the responses received during the consultation process, 275 did not indicate whether they agreed or disagreed with this specific question. These responses have therefore not been included in the summary analysis above, but where such responses provided related comments, such comments have been considered.

4.9.3 43 respondents to this question did not indicate whether they represent a specific category of respondents and have been recorded in the unknown category.

What respondents said

Eligibility criteria

4.9.4 A number of respondents suggested that the scheme should be extended to include local businesses. Although Thurrock Borough Council agreed with the terms they want the scheme to be extended to cover Thurrock-based businesses given concerns over the impact of the increase on Thurrock's regeneration agenda. The South East Local Enterprise Partnership, the Federation of Small Businesses, the Essex Chambers of Commerce and the Road Haulage Association would also like to see the scheme extended to include local businesses.

4.9.5 Some respondents indicated that the current scheme was too restrictive in applying only to local residents. Although it was recognised that local residents are likely to use the Crossing on a frequent basis, it was suggested that the principle is the same for those that travel to work as they have little alternative but to use the Crossing.

4.9.6 Suggestions were made that employees who work for businesses within a certain radius of the Crossing should also be entitled to receive the same level of discounts that are offered to local residents. Conversely, some respondents stated that were the scheme extended to businesses the level of discount given should not necessarily be as high as those for local residents.

4.9.7 Of those that disagreed with retaining the current terms and conditions of the scheme, a large proportion suggested that the scheme should be extended further to allow more residents to benefit. The suggested boundary of the extension varied, for example, the London Borough of Bexley would like to see the scheme extended to Bexley area. Other locations that were suggested included Gravesham, Havering and Basildon. A number of responses suggested extending the scheme to include residents within a certain radius of the Crossing and these ranged between 10 and 20 miles.

4.9.8 Some respondents felt that the balance between the number of residents eligible for the Local Residents' Discount Scheme between Thurrock and Dartford was unfair. This is primarily down to the larger catchment area of those paying their council tax to Thurrock Council compared to those that pay Dartford Council. Members of Sevenoaks District Council suggested that the inclusion of Bexley would address this imbalance.

Scheme benefits

4.9.9 Some respondents suggested that the number of free crossings should be extended for local residents as this would attract more people into the scheme.

4.9.10 Respondents asserted that the main reason residents were failing to take up the scheme was due to the administration charge which means it is only cost effective for people who use the Crossing regularly. It was recognised that the benefit would increase if the charges increased, however, the pre-registration process and committing to a number of crossings was a disincentive to take up the scheme and it was suggested that the administration charge should be reduced or preferably removed.

Other comments

4.9.11 Some views suggested that further promotion of the scheme should be undertaken to increase awareness and encourage take up. Councillors from Dartford Borough Council were keen to bolster awareness through, for example, online applications and inclusion of information in mailings for council tax bills and electoral registration forms.

4.9.12 A petition was received from was submitted by Councillor Martin Healey of Thurrock Council with 209 signatories supporting "keeping the Thurrock residents' discount for using the Dartford Crossing."

4.9.13 Other views expressed ranged from removal of the scheme in its entirety or the benefits reduced. ITS (UK) suggested that if the free crossings and discounts were to remain, it should be restricted to off peak times only which would aid the flow of traffic during peak hours.

Department's Response

Eligibility criteria

4.9.14 The Local Residents' Discount Scheme was established in recognition of the impacts the Crossing has on the local communities in its vicinity. The Department accepts that those impacts could equally apply to business and employees within those local communities. The level of additional discounts provided to local residents is currently determined on the number of crossing journeys made, but the discounts were not specifically established to reflect the levels of use of the Crossing by eligible local residents. The current charging regime already provides discounts from the crossing charge through the Dart-Tag scheme for regular users, whether they are users from local businesses or not.

4.9.15 The extension of the scheme to local businesses employees could on the face of it provide similar recompense for the impacts of the Crossing. The position however is not straightforward, and would depend in part on the definitions adopted for a "local business" or "an employee of a local business".

4.9.16 At present, the data on the use by the different vehicle classes of the Crossing in itself is insufficient for the Department to determine the relevant use by local businesses or employees of local business.

4.9.17 Further work would be necessary to try and obtain more information to get a better understanding of the details and volumes of journeys being undertaken by such users, and therefore determine whether there was a need to provide enhanced levels of discounts.

4.9.18 There are also a number of issues that would need to be explored in terms of the administration of such a scheme, and the determination of appropriate criteria for eligibility.

4.9.19 As with the proposals for the extension of the residents' scheme, inclusion of local businesses would require consideration of the potential scale of discounts and for further information to be collected.

4.9.20 The Department would need to consider in more detail the rationale for the provision of the additional discounts to local business or employees of local business, over and above those discounts already available to regular users of the Crossing.

4.9.21 The Department understands the views of regular users of the Crossing and that in defining specific geographical areas as eligible for the Local Residents' Discount Scheme, there will be a feeling of unfairness from those users falling outside the criteria.

4.9.22 In establishing the discount scheme in 2008, the Department concluded that the appropriate eligibility criteria to best reflect the impacts of the crossing on local communities was evidence of residency within the administrative boundaries of Dartford Borough Council and Thurrock Council.

4.9.23 In considering extending the geographical boundary for the residents scheme, the Department would need to understand better the specific travel patterns of those using the Crossing and the regularity of their journeys and the impact of the crossing in that vicinity.

4.9.24 The Department is also mindful that in relation to this consultation process, the views expressed about extension of the scheme were not universal, with a large number of respondents expressing a view that the scheme should not be extended.

Scheme benefits

4.9.25 The Department is very aware of the views made in relation to the effectiveness of the scheme for currently eligible residents. It also recognises that only a small percentage of the total eligible population use the scheme. The Department is keen to ensure that the maximum available benefits to residents are being taken up, and recognises that the level of the discounts offered may be seen as a barrier to take up. It is not clear whether the number of free crossings currently provided as part of the scheme discounts are one of the key issues that is causing low take up, but the Department is keen to understand further, and improve the effectiveness of the residents' scheme.

4.9.26 The Department is also aware of the views made in relation to the registration process and the annual renewal process for the residents' scheme. It is keen to ensure that the process remains effective and is

not a barrier to involvement which diminishes access to available benefits.

Other comments

4.9.27 The Department has considered the other comments made about the Local Residents' Discount Scheme. It is keen to ensure that the opportunities for discounted crossing charges are better known by those who are eligible for such discounts. The Department is also keen to understand the patterns and timings of journeys undertaken by members of the scheme, so it can consider whether any further changes to the current scheme are necessary.

Conclusions

4.9.28 The Department has made a clear commitment to the current members of the Local Residents' Discount Scheme that, in recognition of the impacts the Crossing has on the communities in its vicinity, it would not change the levels of discounts offered, or indeed increase the charges from their current levels.

4.9.29 The Department does however want to better understand the potential barriers to membership of the scheme, and to improve the current levels of take up. The Department also wish to reassure itself that the scheme remains effective and easy to use for its members, and it has therefore decided to conduct a full review of the current scheme. The recommendations from that review will be considered and any necessary changes that will improve matters for local communities made at an appropriate time.

Summary of Department's decisions

In light of the comments and evidence received the Department intends to the take following actions:

- The Department will fulfil its commitment of no increases in charge rates for members of the Local Residents' Discount Scheme. The Department intends, as a minimum, to maintain the current eligibility criteria for the scheme.
- The Department is committed to improving the discount scheme so that it is effective and easy to use. I have asked my Department to undertake a full review of the scheme to ensure it provides suitable discounted benefits to local communities who are impacted by the Crossing.

4.10 CONSULTATION QUESTION 6

Do you agree or disagree that other details of the charging regime (i.e. time of operation, vehicle categories and exemptions) should remain the same?

Table 6: Summary Analysis of Responses to Question 6		
	Agree	Disagree
Central Government	0	0
Member of Parliament	1	5
Large Company	27	37
Local Government	17	11
Member of the Public	381	401
Police	0	1
Representative Organisation	8	1
Small to Medium Enterprise	51	53
Interest Group	0	1
Unknown	19	24
Other	13	20
Total	517	554

4.10.1 There were 1,071 responses to the question. The majority of respondents, 554 (52%), disagreed with the proposition that the current charging regime should remain the same. In contrast, 517 (48%) agreed. The overall level of responses received show an even split of opinion with the overall difference being only 42.

4.10.2 Of all the responses received during the consultation process, 285 did not indicate whether they agreed or disagreed with this specific question. The responses have therefore not been included in the summary analysis above, but where such responses provided related comments, such comments have been considered.

4.10.3 43 respondents to this question did not indicate whether they represent a specific category of respondents and have been recorded in the unknown category.

What respondents said

Charging times

4.10.4 Respondents' views on the timings of the charge varied. Thurrock Borough Council proposed amending the non-charging hours to between 9:00 pm and 07:00 am to encourage travel outside of peak times and relieve congestion at the Crossing. The London Borough of Bexley suggested that the charging period extends too far into the evening, and should be brought forward from 10:00 pm as this was well beyond the period of peak travel. Some respondents suggested that there should be adjustments made to the charge levels at weekends when flows are lighter compared to weekday peak flows. Some respondents suggested that removing the charges during peak hours would improve the flow of traffic at the Crossing.

4.10.5 Those that did agree noted that the charging times do spread the morning rush hour more evenly and provides a good opportunity to avoid the charges at the Crossing and avoid morning peak congestion.

Vehicle classes

4.10.6 Many respondents, mainly members of the public, felt that users of motorcycles should no longer be exempt and should be charged to use the Crossing. The general view being that motorbikes should not be subsidised by other road users and that they should pay the same rate of charge as those travelling by car.

4.10.7 Sevenoaks District Council suggested that buses and coaches should be charged at a lower rate. This would encourage greater use of public transport and reduce the number of vehicles that use the Crossing.

4.10.8 Some views expressed, including those from Basildon Borough Council and Basildon Business Group asked that consideration should be given to increasing the charges for road hauliers from the Continent.

4.10.9 A number of respondents suggested that the charges were too complicated and could be simplified by just having two categories of charges, with one for HGVs and one for all other vehicles. Owners of small vans indicated it was unfair to be charged a higher rate compared to owners of large 4x4 private vehicles.

Charge Exemptions for Disabled Motorists

4.10.10 The Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee (DPTAC) suggested that the exemption for tax exempt vehicles (disabled class) should be extended to all Blue Badge holders, and this view was also shared by Disabled Motoring UK.

4.10.11 Both were concerned that the current use of the vehicle taxation class as the criteria for eligibility, which itself considers eligibility for the higher rate of Disability Living Allowance, does not consider situations

where a person may become disabled after the age of 65, but may not be able to be eligible for vehicle tax exemption, and therefore may not be eligible for exemption from for the charge at the Crossing.

Other comments

4.10.12 Similar to the responses received from question 1, a few respondents did accept the need for the charges at the Crossing, but proposed the removal of the charges travelling southbound (QEII Bridge) and doubling the charge travelling northbound through the tunnels.

4.10.13 A number of comments received reiterated the point that there should be no charges at all at the Crossing and therefore felt that this question was irrelevant. Some views expressed that the current criteria set for the charges to be suspended was unsatisfactory and that the definition of severe congestion should be re-evaluated.

Department's Response

Charging times

4.10.14 In establishing the current charging period in 2008, the Department was keen to ensure that it did reflect the busiest periods of use. It was also clear that in moving from a 24hr a day charge, it would allow some users to retime their journeys, where the price of the crossing was a key determinant in choosing to make such journeys.

4.10.15 The Department acknowledges that it is timely to review the current charging period to ensure that the charging period is still supporting policy objectives. There may be a case for changing the period of charge, to focus more on times of peak use, and encourage more use of the Crossing at less busier times.

4.10.16 However, the Department has insufficient evidence at this stage to reach a conclusion on whether the charging period should be amended. It would need to consider more detailed evidence than it currently possesses to reach any decision. The Department has therefore concluded that in the short term, there will be no change to the current charging period at the Crossing, but that it will investigate further the case for amending the timing of crossing charges.

Vehicle classes

4.10.17 The Department does not accept the need to levy a charge for the use of the Crossing on motorcyclists. Currently, their use of the Crossing is minimal, latest figures provided indicate under 350,000 motorcycles used the crossing last year, this equates to 0.68% of the total traffic, and claims that they are an equal cause of delay and congestion are not valid. As with other charging regimes, such as the London Congestion Charge, the Department intends to maintain the exemption from the crossing charge by motorcyclists.

4.10.18 As defined by legislation Schedule 5 (exempt vehicles) of the Charging Scheme Order, allows local bus services to pass for free.

There are currently no plans to allow the same for coaches, which tend to be used more for private use.

4.10.19 The road user charging regime at the Dartford Crossing must comply with relevant European legislation in place to safeguard fair competition within the European Union. This ensures Member States do not discriminate against foreign hauliers, and this also safeguards that UK hauliers are not discriminated in charging scheme in the EU.

4.10.20 The Department recognises the need to ensure there is a level playing field when it comes to foreign-registered HGVs not paying for the use of the general road network in the United Kingdom. The Department set out for consultation in January this year, a package of proposed user charging and other measures to ensure that to respond calls made by UK freight operators for the introduction of charging, providing that the overall level of taxes and charges on UK hauliers does not increase significantly.

4.10.21 The Department considers that, subject to the outcome of the consultation, proposals to charge foreign-registered hauliers for the use of the UK road network is the right way forward, rather than specifically levying different road user charging rates at the Dartford Crossing.

4.10.22 The Department can see some attraction from the reduction in the number of vehicle classes charged at the Crossing, in terms of providing a simplified charging structure. However, it recognises that there are very different patterns of use between the three current charging classes, as well as differences in the size of vehicles and the impacts they have in terms of both the level of road space they require, and their different usage times.

4.10.23 The Department does not see a justification on grounds of simplification alone to reduce the number of charging classes at the Crossing from those currently in place. The Department therefore intends to maintain the three categories of vehicle charging classes.

Charge Exemptions for Disabled Motorists

4.10.24 The Department has been clear that intends to keep in place exemptions from the crossing charge for disabled motorists. It recognises the points raised in relation to the possible consequences of basing the exemption criteria on the taxation class of the vehicle, however it considers that further investigation is necessary to assess whether basing the exemption criteria on Blue Badge eligibility is an appropriate way forward.

4.10.25 The Department will work closely with the relevant disabled motoring organisations to investigate further the scale of the potential issue highlighted, and the possible options that would ensure that eligibility for such exemptions are effective and continue to provide an exemption from the crossing charge for disabled motorists who make use of the Crossing.

Other comments made

4.10.26 The Department recognises that in other locations, such as the Severn River Crossings, one-directional is tolling in place and the Department has considered whether such an approach would be appropriate at the Dartford Crossing. However, the introduction of a one-way charge has a number of potential difficulties. The Department would need to fully understand the impacts a possible introduction of a doubled, one-way (northbound) charge could make, particularly any diversionary effects on traffic movements, on to what are already congested parts of M25 and adjoining road network. Ministers have been clear that the priority for the medium term is the introduction of newer free-flow charging technology at the Crossing. The Department has therefore decided that it will not amend the charging regime to introduce a one-way charging regime.

4.10.27 The Highways Agency introduced in July 2011, an operational protocol, on a six month trial basis, which set out the circumstances in which suspension of the crossing charge would be considered.

4.10.28 The six month trial concluded at the end of December 2011, and the Highways Agency are currently conducting a review of the effectiveness of the trial, and will provide advice to the Department on the future arrangements for the process of charge suspension at the Crossing, including its recommendations on the criteria to be used for the definition of severe congestion.

Conclusions

4.10.29 The Department has carefully considered the details points made about the current operation of the charging regime at the Crossing, and it recognises there are areas that could be improved upon. However, at this point in time, insufficient evidence is available to justify specific changes in the immediate future.

4.10.30 The Department recognises that the current operational elements of the charging regime have been in place since November 2008, and has concluded that it will not make any major changes to those arrangements immediately.

4.10.31 However, the Department is keen to see whether there is further evidence that could justify more substantial changes and it will look in more detail at some of the views provided.

4.10.32 The Department will work closely with the relevant disabled motoring organisations to investigate further the details of the eligibility criteria for an exemption from the crossing charge, to ensure such exemptions are effective.

Summary of Department's decisions

In light of the consultation responses the Department intends to take the following actions:

- The current charging period will remain in the short term, but the Department will review the future period of charging.
- The Department intends to maintain the three vehicle charging classes.
- The Department will maintain the exemption for motorcyclists.
- The Department will maintain the exemption from the charges for disabled motorists and will investigate further the effectiveness of the current eligibility criteria.
- The Department will maintain two-way charging at the Crossing.
- The Department will make a minor amendments to the exemptions for the Crossing to allow vehicles of visiting Armed Forces travel free
- The Department will consider further and explore in more detail the points made about the specific elements of the charging regime.

4.11 CONSULTATION QUESTION 7

Do you agree or disagree with our assessment of the impacts of the proposals particularly on small firms and protected equality groups?

Table 7: Summary Analysis of Responses to Question 7		
	Agree	Disagree
Central Government	0	0
Member of Parliament	0	5
Large Company	18	41
Local Government	5	21
Member of the Public	236	460
Police	0	1
Representative Organisation	0	10
Small to Medium Enterprise	32	66
Interest Group	0	2
Unknown	13	24
Other	8	24
Total	312	654

4.11.1 There were 966 responses to the question. The majority of respondents, 654 (68%) disagreed with the assessments made within the impact assessment, while 312 (32%) agreed with the assessment of impacts.

4.11.2 Of all the responses received during the consultation process, 390 did not indicate whether they agreed or disagreed with this specific question. These responses have therefore not been included in the summary analysis above, but where such responses provided related comments, such comments have been considered.

4.11.3 37 respondents to this question did not indicate whether they represent a specific category of respondents and have been recorded in the unknown category.

What respondents said

Economic

4.11.4 A number of respondents stated they were concerned with the effect an increase in charge would have on business. The general consensus from business, large and small, was that their costs are likely to rise as a result of the charges increasing. A number of those representing business or employees of a business indicated that there was no viable alternative to the Crossing and as a consequence they will be financially worse off with no benefit realised.

4.11.5 TfL raised concerns about the effect on businesses in the vicinity of Blackwall Tunnel and feeder routes. The view expressed was that should traffic divert and cause additional congestion at the Blackwall Tunnel it would have a negative impact on small firms in east and south east London.

4.11.6 Members of Sevenoaks District Council suggested that the impact assessment should have taken into account the changes in traffic patterns that might be expected as a result of the increases, in particular the impact on the Blackwall Tunnel, Woolwich Ferry and the M25 and their approach roads. The Federation of Small Businesses raised the point that business use of the Crossing is greater than average road use by business and said that the increases will therefore have a disproportional impact on business.

4.11.7 Among others, Dartford Borough Council suggested that there would be no compensatory reduction in congestion as a result of the charges increasing. The view was that the increase in charge was unlikely to deter the majority of users to sufficiently improve the movement at and around the Crossing. A further point raised was that no assessment had been made of the effects that congestion at the Crossing has on local roads. The Essex Chambers of Commerce did not believe that full consideration had been given to the cost of delay and congestion to businesses moving goods and services over the Crossing.

4.11.8 Responses from small to medium enterprises expressed concern that increasing the charges in the current economic climate could lead to an increase in small firm failures as they in turn will have to increase their prices or customers will expect small companies to absorb the costs. John Lewis Partnership was concerned that no assessment had been made on the cost implications for businesses or the impact on the proposed timing.

Social

4.11.9 Some views expressed concern that no assessment was made on the health impacts that the traffic congestion at the Crossing causes. The Dartford Constituency Labour Party suggested that insufficient consideration had been given to the health implications arising from excessive traffic-generated air pollution, as well as noise levels on local residents.

4.11.10 A few respondents suggested that the increase in charge would restrict their ability to make personal visits to either family or friends, in particular those with lower earnings.

Environmental

4.11.11 Some of the respondents did not agree with the environmental assessment made as a result of the increase in charges. Councillors of Temple Hill called for an acknowledgement of the historical impact on air quality and not just the change from increasing the charges. It was suggested by doing so the benefits would be greater if the barriers were removed in terms of improved air quality.

Department's response

4.11.12 The Department has published a final regulatory impact assessment as part of its response to the consultation process. In doing so, the Department has revised the analysis developed for the purposes of consultation.

4.11.13 The Department in considering different policy approaches to tackling the issues at the Crossing, has developed specific analysis to compare impacts of the approaches against the current "baseline" case of making no changes at the Crossing. The Department's analysis has used the latest forecasts of economic growth issued by the Office of Budget Responsibility and the latest forecast of traffic growth.

Economic

4.11.14 In terms of economic impacts, the Department's analysis demonstrates that its proposed way forward provides positive economic benefits for all users of the Crossing whether commuters, business and other transport users. Benefits are provided in terms of improved journey times, as well as decreases in vehicle operating costs. The analysis recognises that although there are dis-benefits to users through the increases in crossing charges being paid, these are out-weighed by the positive transport benefits, and there is an overall net benefit from the proposals.

4.11.15 In terms of the impacts on business, the Government's analysis has captured the main economic and financial impacts in line with the Department for Transport's approach to the assessment of policy interventions, and it demonstrates that there is an overall benefit to businesses from the proposals, through improvements in journey times for all business users who make use of the Crossing.

Social

4.11.16 In terms of potential impacts on statutorily protected groups, the Department's assessment is that there are no specific impacts from its proposals, and it has made clear that it intends to maintain the current exemptions from the crossing charge for disabled motorists.

Environmental

4.11.17 In relation to environmental impacts, the Department's updated impact assessment has been undertaken in line with its published methodologies for completing transport appraisals, including the assessment of potential environmental impacts.

4.11.18 The Department consider that with the predicted reductions of traffic expected from implementation of its proposed approach, will provide improvements to air quality and noise levels, although quantification of the scale of such impacts are difficult to substantiate due to the complexities of making such an assessment, and could only be determined through further specific assessments at disproportionate cost.

4.11.19 Air Quality Management areas exist in the vicinity of the Crossing and the responsibilities for the monitoring and management of air quality rests with the relevant local authorities.

4.11.20 The Department's proposals would lead to a change in the emission of greenhouse gases and the scale of these impacts are set out in the updated impact assessment, and show that the proposed approach would decrease in emissions of 28,643 tonnes within the period assessed.

Other impacts

4.11.21 The Department's updated impact assessment also provides an assessment of the diversionary impacts on traffic of its proposals, and as well as the expected impacts on a number of other London river crossings, which were concerns raised as part of the consultation process.

4.11.22 The Department recognises that the changes in the charging regimes at the Dartford Crossing would mean changes to traffic patterns both at the Crossing and at other locations on the surrounding road network. However, the Department consider the scale of these impacts to be minimal and do not require further specific mitigation to address.

Conclusions

4.11.23 The Department, in reaching its conclusions about changes to the charging regime at the Crossing has looked and assessed carefully both the specific impacts its decisions would have at the Crossing in terms of impacts on traffic and congestion, but also the expected impacts, both positive and negative on other areas, such as social and environmental impacts, and in other locations of the road network.

4.11.24 The Department considers that taking account of both the expected positive and expected negative impacts, its decisions on the specific changes to the charging regime are the right approach in best meetings its aims and supporting objectives for improving the future situation at the Dartford Crossing.

PART 5 – OVERALL SUMMARY AND NEXT STEPS

5.1 The Department for Transport has considered all the responses and representations made on its proposal for changes to the road user charging regime at the Dartford-Thurrock River Crossing.

5.2 It has concluded that road user charging will be maintained at the Crossing as a key part of implementing its strategy of delivering improvements to the performance of the Crossing, in the short, medium and long term.

5.3 The Department has decided that in terms of the charging regime at the Crossing that:

- The rates for the cash change for use of the Crossing will be increased by broadly equivalent rates for all vehicle user classes.
- The first increase in charges will take place in October 2012.
- A second increase in charges will take place at the same time as the introduction of free-flow charging technology at the Crossing, currently scheduled for October 2014.
- The discount rates for those paying the charge in advance through the Dart-Tag process will remain unchanged.
- The charges offered under the local residents' scheme will not be increased and remain as currently established.
- It will undertake a full review of the local residents' discount scheme to ensure it provides suitable discounted benefits to local communities who are impacted by the Crossing.
- It will review the Dart-Tag scheme to ensure it continues to provide benefits to regular users of the Crossing.
- The other elements of the charging regime will remain largely unchanged with only minor amendments to the current exemptions for visiting Armed Forces.

5.4 The details of the future levels of the road user charging regime are set out in the table below:

Dartford Crossing Day Charges (6am-10pm) Note: no charges apply 10pm-6am			
	Current	**Amendments**	
		October 2012	**October 2014**
Motorbikes	Free	Free	Free
Cash charge			
Cars	£1.50	£2.00	£2.50
2 Axle Goods	£2.00	£2.50	£3.00
Multi Axle Goods	£3.70	£5.00	£6.00
Dart-Tag charge			
Cars	£1.00	£1.33	£1.67
2 Axle Goods	£1.75	£2.19	£2.63
Multi Axle Goods	£3.20	£4.33	£5.19

5.5 Changes to the details of the charging regime at the Crossing are made through a legislative process, using secondary legislation (a statutory instrument) as required by the Transport Act 2000[1]. Subject to the outcomes of the Government's processes for the development and implementation of secondary legislation, the Department for Transport will finalise the revised Charging Order and complete the necessary Parliamentary processes for the Order to come into effect.

5.6 In addition, a detailed implementation plan has been developed with the Highways Agency and the current operator of the Dartford-Thurrock River Crossing, to make the necessary operational changes to the charge collection process, including the installation of new signage, information provision for users (for example, publicity and leaflets) about the revised charging regime, and making the necessary software changes for the management of users pre-payments accounts, for the Dart-Tag system.

[1] Sections 167, 168, 171 and 172(2) of the Transport Act 2000(a)