

The Lower Thames Crossing fiasco

It is just not good enough to simply accept that the half baked proposal known as Option C for such a critical infrastructure project as the Lower Thames Crossing should proceed in the belief that it is “better than doing nothing.” Yet many are beginning to think that way,

The starting point for the Lower Thames Crossing should have been the identification of specific and quantifiable outcomes required and (as its top priority) what that might mean for those living in Kent and Essex whose lives had already been or would be seriously affected by the development.

They must be protected from traffic congestion, gridlocked infrastructure, potentially lethal particulate poisoning, years of being forced to breathe polluted air, more illnesses and unnecessary deaths than anywhere else in Kent and Essex.

They must be given all the support and assistance they are legally entitled to and have the right to expect.

The only acceptable solution should be the delivery of the most effective, efficient and resilient outcome for the Lower Thames Crossing possible, capable of being built using methods, techniques, materials and existing construction methods available at the time.

There should not have been any contractual commitments made until there was certainty in respect of construction and design. A decision made not to use equipment still in development, avoidance of significant uncertainties prior to legally committing to the project, no half measures, no sticking plaster bodge ups, no delays or disruptions, protests from conservationists, environmentalists, pressure groups even being considered at that moment in time.

The initial decision to move forward should only have been made if the option under consideration represented the very best outcome that could be achieved together with an unfaltering acceptance by all parties that the project **had to be afforded** bearing in mind its huge significance for the future of the UK and its trading with Europe and the rest of the world.

A successful outcome will be measured in terms its benefit to the entire population of this country albeit to varying degrees.

Anything less should be rejected as being totally unacceptable even though for some it will bring disbenefit.

There is likely to be significant land grab, loss of housing and other buildings, environmental damage, pollution and other major causes for concern.

In these circumstances mitigation has to be considered as mandatory and always undertaken where practical and achievable to do so.

It has to be generously funded with costs allowed for from within the budget for the works together with bespoke, equally generous compensation arrangements in place given the huge national importance of the project.

The project must not be undermined by minorities when so many are now demanding that the needs of the country, its economy and its people must come first.

Failure will cause serious, possibly disastrous and irrecoverable outcomes for the economy of the UK, its entire population, its arterial road network and its essential road transport industry in event of failing to deliver the outcomes required.

Q. When did Britain ever have a decent strategic road network that worked well, met all of the demands placed upon it, proved to be so resilient that parts of it still remain exist and has never been equalled to this day?

A. AD 43 – 410

Traces of some of the roads built by the Romans still exist today. They may not be capable of supporting one of the latest double decker articulated units anymore but in their time were built to enable the Roman Army to do its job during the occupation of Britain. They were well designed, fit for purpose and well maintained. And they became the first national road network to be built in Britain. They even had manned waypoints every 6 miles or so where travellers, merchants and soldiers could stop and rest.

Sound familiar?

The Lower Thames Crossing is a Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project (NSIP) as defined by the Planning Act 2008. No other road project has had the greatest impact on the future economic development of the country for over 35 years.

So, in very simple terms what is it that the Government, the Secretary of State for Transport, numerous contractors and suppliers etc. etc. (hoping to make lots of money) are going to build for the future benefit of the UK, its economy and its population.

One thing is certain.
Option C will not achieve this.

Within a matter of a few weeks the Chancellor of the Exchequer (CE) has a crucial decision to make about the future of the Lower Thames Crossing.

CE actually has 4 “options” to choose from

- Cancel
- Postpone
- Review – Is the preferred Option C really the best there is?
- Press the “GO” button.

Let's remain positive for the time being and assume that HMG decides that it can afford to spend the £10n- £12bn (new revised estimate) it believes it will cost to deliver Option C.

The CE will need to bear in mind it's a design and build contract that has already been promised to various named partners.
It is supposed to achieve commercial and integration targets, delivery of roads, north and south of the Thames together with tunnels and systems.

To date approximately £1.2bn spent to date (recently revised up from £0.8bn).

What next?

The Secretary of Transport (ST) has requested comment about the latest position from “All interested Parties” on 25 February 2025 with a closing date of 13 March 2025, warning that postal replies may be subject to delay.

Much has been said about Judicial Review including the possible costs, complexity and perhaps crucially in this case, the length of time they can go on for and the range of possible outcomes, including the possibility of even further delaying the progress of the project.

Although many requests fail early on in the process, if an application is accepted as valid by the Judge as meeting the necessary qualification requirements, the way would be open for a Judicial Review request to be made and possibly submitted to the Supreme Court for consideration.

There are a wide range of awards if the challenge is successful ranging from quashing order, prohibition, or mandatory order to name but a few.

On 12 December 2013 the Transport Secretary (Patrick McLoughlin) announced that there were sufficient grounds to discard Option B.

Serious concerns were expressed that it would “jeopardise major development of the Swanscombe Peninsula, a key part of the growth strategy for the Thames Gateway area.” The major development referred to was the Paramount Theme Park, a £2bn Theme Park originally planned to open in 2019.

The Paramount Theme Park development was eventually killed off in January 2025.

Given that the project was speculative at best and without substance, there being no formal contractually binding agreements to support or guarantee the development, the Government decided that it would remove one of the 3 options for the most important and single biggest road investment project since the M25 which was completed more than 30 years ago.

The Lower Thames Crossing is unprecedented in size and scale, it will be the longest road tunnel in the UK and one of the largest diameter bored tunnels in the world, signed off by none other than George Osborne and Lord Sassoon being named by the Government at the time as one of its top priority projects in its National Infrastructure Plan 2011. At the time, a claim was made that “Britains infrastructure will be made fit for the 21st century”.

The existing crossing causes huge amounts of pollution, congestion and higher than average levels of sickness to the local population often due to the presence of poisonous or cryogenic particulate matter within the air that is breathed.

None of these issues have ever been properly addressed by any Government at any time during the lifetime of the Crossing and any efforts to mitigate the worse effects arising have completely failed to achieve any significant degree of protection, due mainly to financial constraints and limitations and general apathy towards dealing with the issue

Some traffic will immediately start to use the Lower Thames tunnels in preference to the existing crossing at Dartford at all times, irrespective of operating conditions at the existing Crossing.

In the event of traffic flow at the existing crossing being affected by an unplanned event or inclement weather there is no reliable data available to identify the likely effect that might have on the Option C route. This will be determined by the seriousness and duration of the

event and the actual traffic volumes being experienced on the Option C route leading up to and during and immediately after the event has passed when traffic flows normalise.

it is inevitable that the existing Dartford Crossing will be continue to be affected by events, both planned and unplanned, ever it was first opened as a twin tunnel with a single lane running in each direction in 1963.

Since the QE2 bridge was opened in 1991 it continues be affected as before but with the added impact of adverse weather conditions causing speed restrictions, lane closures and at times, complete closure of the QE2 bridge.

It will continue to be affected for the foreseeable future, with the resilience of the crossing being further degenerated due to its poor design and ongoing demand with vehicle crossing numbers already running at unacceptable levels.

Option C will provide some relief for a very limited period of time.

However no lasting improvement to the performance of the crossing at Dartford will be achieved unless there is an ongoing, cast iron commitment towards ensuring there is adequate funding available to improve the resilience of the existing crossing, its infrastructure and that of the primary routes serving it iand the Lower Thames Crossing.

Spending upwards of £12bn on a tunnel and approximately 14 miles of 3 lane dual carriage way at a rough cost of £800,000,000 a mile without achieving even a modest improvement to the performance of the crossing, leaving residents of Kent and Essex continuing to choke under an expanding toxic cloud of polluted air not to mention having their lives ruined by traffic congestion and gridlock for generations to come, in the forlorn hope that a new tunnel and a 6 lane bypass14km long will make the problem go away is like **living in cuckoo land**.

It will not bring any significant, enduring benefits to the economy, our transport system, the people having to live next to it, nor to the population in general.

The current fiasco will end up becoming a major disaster from which UK might never be able to come back from all due to successive Governments short sightedness and lack of understanding of what a properly designed transport system could be capable of delivering for the benefit of the country as a whole.

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