



Tackling congestion at the Dartford Crossing

The Dartford Crossing can carry up to 160,000 vehicles a day. Nigel Gray, Highways Agency project lead, discusses the steps being made to reduce congestion



The Dartford Crossing is designed to handle up to 135,000 vehicles a day

The introduction of the new charging system at Dartford is being progressed to the following timescale:

Autumn 2013

Contract award for detection, charging and enforcement management services

Winter 2013/14

Pre-construction work starts

Summer 2014

Technical go-live, controlled testing and integration

Autumn 2014

Remote payment introduced at the Crossing; post-construction work starts

Spring 2015

Post-construction work completed

The Dartford-Thurrock River Crossing is without doubt an impressive structure on the strategic road network.

As the two tunnels snake 1,430 metres between Kent and Essex, the Queen Elizabeth II Bridge towers 65 metres above the River Thames, a dominant feature on the horizon.

Beneath the waterline, the bridge rests on two reinforced concrete foundations, each the equivalent in volume of 400 double-decker buses and weighing a total of 85,000 tonnes.

Comprising magnificent feats of engineering, the Crossing is a vital link on the M25, one of the busiest motorways in Europe.

The Crossing itself was designed to handle up to 135,000 vehicle movements a day; however, it is not uncommon for 160,000 to occur and that means inevitable congestion, especially at peak periods. On top of that traffic flows are expected to increase by a fifth over the next 30 years, due to the anticipated development in the Thames Gateway region.

The Government understands the frustration felt by drivers at the Crossing, and is committed to delivering improvements that will help traffic flow better at this crucial gateway, both now and in the future.

Charges

Already, charges can be suspended when an emergency causes severe congestion at the Crossing, and long term there are plans for a third Lower Thames Crossing.

In the medium term is an exciting project to remove the need for drivers to stop at a barrier to pay the crossing charge. Instead, the provision to collect and pay charges would be undertaken remotely. The system, which will be similar to the London Congestion Charging Scheme, is due to be introduced in October 2014.

Nigel Gray, Highways Agency project lead, said: ***"The Dartford Crossing is a crucial piece of national infrastructure that brings economic benefits both to the region and the whole country. We understand how frustrated motorists are and that is why tackling congestion here is an absolute priority."***

"By introducing newer technology and changing the road layout, drivers will be able to continue to use the Crossing safely without having to stop to pay at a barrier."

"That may all sound very simple, but behind it is a huge amount of work, from securing the necessary legislation to underpin the change to the charging process, to procuring a charging and enforcement service provider. That's before any infrastructure work starts, and that in itself has to be carried out while maintaining the safety of the crossing, and protecting the integrity of the northbound restricted road tunnels."

"It is a lot of work but we remain on schedule to introduce this in October next year."

Making changes

The first visible signs of change at the Crossing will be this winter when work will start on the installation of the new overhead gantries, followed by testing and validation of the equipment and systems ready for the new remote payment arrangement to be introduced later in October. The actual road layout changes cannot happen until the new arrangement is in operation, so as soon as it is, that work will start. The work will be carried out overnight and at weekends when traffic flows are lowest, to minimise disruption, and is due for completion by Spring 2015.

Gray added: ***"Before the scheme comes into operation it is imperative we spread the message far and wide about the changes. We will be launching a major public information campaign to ensure road users are aware of the changes and know what they need to do."***

Road users will be encouraged to pay the charge before they use the crossing and there will be a variety of ways in which they can do this, including telephone, text message, online and at retail outlets, and customer accounts for frequent users.

For those users unable to pay in advance, it will be possible to pay until midnight on the day after they cross. However, for those who fail to pay, penalty charge and recovery processes will be in place. ●



The barriers will be removed in October 2014