Strategic Planning, Sustainability & Transportation Committee	**08/03/2016**
Is the final decision on the recommendations in this report to be made at this meeting?	**Yes**

Response to consultation by Highways England on the proposed Lower Thames Crossing

Final Decision-Maker	Strategic Planning, Sustainability & Transportation Committee
Lead Head of Service	Rob Jarman: Head of Planning & Development
Lead Officer and Report Author	Steve Clarke: Principal Planning Officer, Spatial Policy
Classification	Public
Wards affected	All

This report makes the following recommendations to this Committee:

1. That Councillors agree the proposed response set out in section 4 of the report and that it is forwarded to Highways England as the Council's formal response to the Lower Thames Crossing Consultation by the deadline of 24th March 2016

This report relates to the following corporate priorities:

- Securing a successful economy for Maidstone Borough – Whilst the proposed route does not directly affect the Borough, the improved capacity and resilience as a result of the scheme, if constructed, would assist the connectivity of the Borough with the National Strategic Road Network and potentially boost economic activity within the Borough.

Timetable	
Meeting	**Date**
Strategic Planning Sustainability & Transportation Committee	08/03/2016

Response to consultation by Highways England on the proposed Lower Thames Crossing

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1 On 26th January 2016, Highways England launched a public consultation on a number of potential routes for a proposed Lower Thames Crossing. The consultation closes on 24th March 2016. This report considers the consultation and recommends that the proposed response set out in Section 4 of the report is forwarded to Highways England as the Council's formal response.

1.2 A new crossing of the River Thames is needed to reduce congestion at the existing Dartford Crossing and to provide free—flowing north-south capacity. A government priority is also to unlock economic growth and to support the development of new homes and jobs in the region.

1.3 Following a series of earlier studies and a public consultation in 2013, the Government commissioned Highways England to carry out a more detailed assessment of two location options for the construction of a new Thames crossing.

1.4 Location A was the area in the vicinity of the existing Dartford Crossings and Location C east of Gravesend.

1.5 The Consultation focusses on Option C (east of Gravesend) as the preferred location and considers three route options north of the Thames (in Essex) for connections to the M25 and two to the south, both east of Gravesend, connecting the new crossing to the A2/M2 corridor (a western and eastern southern link).

1.6 The Consultation booklet is attached at Appendix One to this report. Attached at Appendix Two is the questionnaire prepared by Highways England for the Consultation. Full details of the technical assessment (including indicative route plans) undertaken by Highways England of the options which has led to Option C as the preferred location for the crossing, can be found on the Highways England Lower Thames Consultation website by following this link.
https://highwaysengland.citizenspace.com/cip/lower-thames-crossing-consultation

The full suite of technical assessment documents is also available for viewing in The Gateway.

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2. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

2.1 On 26th January 2016, Highways England (HE) launched a public consultation on a number of potential routes for a proposed Lower Thames Crossing. The consultation closes on 24th March 2016. This report considers

the consultation and recommends that the proposed response set out in Section 4 of the report is forwarded to HE as the Council's formal response.

2.2 The Dartford Crossing is the only crossing of the River Thames east of London. The first 2-lane Dartford Tunnel was opened in in 1963 and a second 2-lane tunnel added in 1980 and subsequently, the 4-lane QEII Bridge was opened in 1991. Free-flow tolling via the Dart Charge was introduced in 2014.

2.3 There are 50million crossings a year over the crossings which are designed for 135,000 daily crossings, a capacity which is regularly met. Some 25% of customer journeys through the crossings are made by Heavy and Light Goods Vehicles and this is expected to increase to 34% by 2041. Over the course of a year, the crossings are on average partially or fully closed 300 times and it typically takes 3-5 hours following a closure for the roads to clear. Alternative routes during closures are much longer and themselves become very congested during incidents.

2.4 The crossings themselves are not classed as a motorway but are linked either side to the M25 London Orbital Motorway and are a key part of the National Strategic Highway Network.

2.5 Transport for London (TfL) is working on three other Thames Crossings in East London.

- **Silvertown Tunnel:** This was subject to public consultation in 2015 and has received approval from TfL's Board for a Development Consent Order (DCO) application to be made. This would run from the A102 Blackwall Tunnel southern approach to Silvertown on the north bank of the Thames (roughly along the line of the current cable car crossing the Thames).
- **Gallions Reach and Belvedere:** Consultation closed on 12th February 2016. Two crossings are proposed and could be either bridges or tunnels and would connect Thamesmead to the Royal Docks and Belvedere to the A13 at Rainham. A package of potential public transport provision associated with the two crossings was also consulted on.

However, these would serve East London and local traffic rather than provide additional capacity at Dartford.

2.6 HE was initially tasked with looking at three broad locations for a Lower Thames Crossing at A: Dartford, B: The Swanscombe Peninsular and C; East of Gravesend. Following a Ministerial Statement on 12th December 2013; HE was asked to only consider two location options with Option B having been abandoned as it passed through the site of the proposed Paramount Park at the Swanscombe Peninsular. The options studied were therefore:

- Option A: near the existing Dartford-Thurrock crossing
- Option C a new link connecting the A2/M2 with the A13 and the M25 between junctions 29 and 30.

- Option C also had a proposed additional variation 'C Variant' which would see the existing A229 widened and improved between the Junction 6 of the M20 and Junction 3 of the M2 (i.e. Bluebell Hill).

2.7 Since then HE has actively been assessing the two potential route corridors in terms of actual routes, and also the type of crossing. For each crossing location, a bridge, immersed tunnel (similar to the Medway Tunnel) and a bored tunnel were considered.

2.8 HE inaugurated a Stakeholder Advisory Panel at an early stage. This comprised officers from affected local authorities and organisations such as Ebbsfleet Development Corporation. A number of meeting/engagement events were held to enable HE to elicit details of potential and committed development in the study area and other matters such as environmental and historical safeguarding and air quality data to assist in potential route assessment and traffic modelling. Briefings also took place with Senior Members and officers from each authority.

2.9 Detailed technical studies including environmental appraisal, traffic modelling, geological appraisal, cost benefit analysis and economic assessments have been undertaken on both option corridors.

2.10 A crossing at Location A would not increase the resilience of the network by providing an alternative and would have a limited wider economic value as no new communities would be connect to the highway network. The studies have concluded that for Location A, the adjusted Benefit Cost Ratio would be approximately 2.3 based on the most likely costs. A crossing at Location A could increase crossing capacity by 60% in its opening year and would deliver journey benefit times of 5mins.[1] Given, however, that no new route would be involved, additional traffic would be funnelled into the existing corridor from M25 J2 northwards to J29 and incidents would still cause delays on local roads. The existing 50mph limit on the approaches would remain.

2.11 From an ecological aspect, Location A would be likely to have a lower impact on protected habitats and species than Location C as it is further away from sensitive areas. However, the fact that additional traffic would be attracted to the existing corridor would make existing noise and air quality problems worse.

2.12 During implementation of a scheme at Location A, there would be at least six years of traffic disruption which would impact the M25 and connecting roads in the wider area. This would be very likely to negate any benefits that have arisen from the introduction of the Dart Charge and HE has estimated that the cost to the economy would be approximately £390million.

2.13 A crossing at Location C would provide a new road and link new communities to the road network north and south of the River Thames. This could unlock significant growth and regeneration, improving access to jobs and services and increasing business opportunity. Estimates of wider

[1]Highways England: Lower Thames Crossing Summary Business Case p.10 para 2.7.2

economic benefits indicate that a crossing at Location C could increase GDP by over £7billion and create 5000 new jobs.[2] The adjusted Benefit Cost Ratios vary from 2.9 to 3.4 depending on the most likely costs and the route selected.

2.14 A Crossing at Location C would have a 70mph design speed along its length. North-south crossing capacity across the river would increase by 70% in its opening year and would not affect the existing Dartford crossing corridor during its construction. It is estimated that, on opening, the new crossing would draw some 13-14% of existing traffic away from Dartford, improving journey times at Dartford by 5 minutes and improving journeys from Kent to the M25 by up to 12 minutes using the new crossing.[3]

2.15 On the negative side, a crossing at Location C would be much closer to sensitive ecological areas and would require appropriate mitigation measures.

2.16 The result of the study is such that the Option C location has been chosen as the preferred corridor for the new crossing as it provides better value for money and would unlock greater regional economic growth and transport benefits in terms of capacity, improved flows and network resilience, than Location A.

2.17 The preferred form of crossing is a twin-bored tunnel due to the fact that this would result in the least potential environmental impact during construction and on-going operation, albeit it would be more expensive to build and subsequently maintain than a bridge or immersed tunnel. There would be a charge for users of the crossing.

2.18 Three potential routes north of the river in Essex have been identified and two south of the river. Attached at Appendix 3 is a plan showing the routes subject to the current consultation process.

2.19 HE has indicated that the Eastern Southern Link (ESL) that connects directly to M2 Junction 1/A2/A289, west of Strood, passing to the east and north of Shorne, south of the Thames; and Route 3 north of the Thames, which runs between Tilbury and East Tilbury and crosses the A13 south west of Orsett before joining the M25 between Junctions 29 and 30 are their preferred route choices. The proposed scheme is shown on the plan attached at Appendix 4. It is emphasised, however, that HE is seeking respondents' views on all Crossing C route options as well as the proposed scheme. The estimated cost for the proposed route is between £4.3bn and £5.9bn with and adjusted Benefit Cost Ratio of between 2.5 and 3.4. The Western Southern Link cost estimate is £4.1bn - £5.7bn but this has a lower Benefit Cost Ratio of between 2.2 and 3.1.

2.20 A formal public consultation exercise that seeks representations on the scheme and studies that have led to the recommended and preferred option corridor (C) and the route options serving that corridor commenced on 26th January 2016 and runs until 24th March 2016.

[2]Highways England: Lower Thames Crossing Summary Business Case p.10 para 2.7.5
[3]Highways England: Lower Thames Crossing Summary Business Case p.11 paras 2.7.6 and 2.7.7

2.21 As indicated in paragraph 2.6, back in 2013, HE was also requested to consider an Option C variant. Essentially, this would have involved the widening of the A229 Bluebell Hill between M20 Junction 6 and M2 Junction 3 as the shortest and most direct link between the two Motorways and a seemingly logical route from the Channel Tunnel and Ashford to the proposed road.

2.22 Four potential routes were initially considered as part of the longlist of route options. Two involving respectively, a bored tunnel and viaducts at M2 J3 (CV3) and twin bored tunnels at M2 J3 (CV4), were discounted at the first assessment stage on the grounds of the impact on Bluebell Hill village and construction impact at M2 junction 3 from CV3 and the significant environmental impact and high cost of tunnels in CV4.

2.23 Two further options were considered to merit further investigation as part of a shortened longlist of route options covering the whole scheme.
CV1: Would have involved a new London-bound viaduct from the M20 direct to the A229 northbound carriageway at M20 J6 and the widening of the existing carriageway up Bluebell Hill on the current line of the A229 as well as a new route onto the M2 London-bound direct from the A229. Coast-bound there would have been a tunnel from the M2 onto the A229 southbound.
CV2: A revised and re-worked M20 junction 6 and M2 junction 3 but no tunnels.

2.24 At the further longlist assessment stage, the remaining C variant options were discounted on the grounds that:

- There would be a relatively small impact on transferring M20 traffic from the existing Dartford Crossing onto new route at C (thus providing limited congestion relief)
- Significant impact on AONB (biodiversity and landscape)
- High Cost (capital cost) estimated to be in the region of £500million. Does not bring wider benefits that materially add value to the Lower Thames Crossing scheme (travel time savings and congestion relief).

The decision was therefore made not to progress C variant beyond the shortlisting stage. The assessment documentation does, however, indicate that further consideration of the potential to upgrade the A229 will be given as part of HE's ongoing route planning.

2.25 Option C Variant is not therefore part of this consultation.

2.26 Recent mention has been made in the local press about an alternative improvement of the A249 between M20 J7 and M2 J5 at Sittingbourne and an improvement of the M2 between Junction 5 and Junction 4. I understand that this idea is being jointly promoted by the KCC Cabinet Member for Economic Development and the Leadership of Swale Borough Council.

2.27 For the avoidance of doubt, such a proposal does not form part of the current HE consultation.

2.28 Any improvement to the A249 between the M20 and M2 motorways would involve construction wholly within the Kent Downs AONB with similar

environmental concerns to Option C Variant. In addition, the route has not been modelled by HE and given that a M20/A249/M2 route would be longer and less direct than the A229 Bluebell Hill (which was shown not to bring any material wider benefits or congestion relief), it is considered that such a route would be even more unlikely to bring benefit.

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3. AVAILABLE OPTIONS

3.1 There are two options open to Councillors. Firstly, a formal response from the Council can be sent to Highways England; secondly, Councillors could choose not to make a formal response to the consultation.

3.2 Choosing to make representations will enable the Council's views to be taken into account as further consideration of the project by Highways England takes place prior to the formal preferred route announcement being made and any subsequent application for a DCO is submitted.

3.3 Councillors could choose not to make formal representations. This would result in a missed opportunity to set out the Council's position at a relatively early stage in the process. As indicated previously, however, the Council is still likely to have an opportunity at the formal DCO application stage to make representations, but this would be after any announcement of a 'preferred route' which by then would also have been safeguarded.

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4. PREFERRED OPTION AND REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 The preferred option is for the Council to make representations on the current consultation within the timescale set-out by Highways England as this will make the Council's views known at an early stage and prior to any preferred route announcement expected later in 2016.

4.2 The consultation questionnaire seeks views on the following main questions:

1. To what extent do respondents agree or not with the choice of location C as the crossing point and the reason(s) why.
2. Which of the three route options or an alternative route or no route north of the River Thames should be chosen and why that is?
3. In relation to each of the three routes north of the river, to what extent do you agree with HE's proposals?
4. Should the route south of the river, be the western southern link, the eastern southern link, another route or none and why?
5. In relation to the two routes south of the river, to what extent do you agree or not with HE's proposals?
6. The HE proposed scheme following the evaluation process is a new bored tunnel road crossing at location C following Route 3 north of the river and the Eastern Southern Link south of the river. To what extent do you agree or not with HE's proposals and why?
7. Do you have any comments in relation whether any additional junctions to those proposed (M2/A2, A226, A13 and M25) would be beneficial?

4.3 The suggested responses are as follows:

4.4 Question 1: To what extent do respondents agree or not with the choice of Location C as the crossing point and the reason(s) why.

A: The Council strongly agrees with the choice of Location C. A crossing at this location would provide greater longer-term capacity and resilience on the Strategic Highway Network and also the potential to alleviate capacity problems in the Dartford area that a crossing in Location A would not do. In addition, such a route has the potential to unlock greater regional economic benefits.

4.5 Question 2: Which of the three route options or an alternative route or no route north of the River Thames should be chosen and why that is?

A: The Council considers that Route 3 provides the best option as it is a 'free-standing' and more direct route that provides the best means of generating additional capacity on the highway network which is the purpose behind the crossing. Option 2 would involve considerable disruption to existing urban areas and routes and Option 4 is long and would involve considerable disruption to the A127 Corridor. However, Highways England should also consider the implications of the routes' potential connectivity to the London Gateway container terminal.

4.6 Question 3: In relation to each of the three routes north of the river, to what extent do you agree with HE's proposals?

A: The Council considers that it tends to disagree with Routes 2 and 4 for the reasons set out in response to Question 2 and that it tends strongly agrees with Route 3.

4.7 Question 4: Should the route south of the river, be the western southern link, the eastern southern link, another route or none and why?

A: The Council considers that the Eastern Southern Link to be the preferred route. This route provides a better connection to the A2/M2 corridor and has the potential to remove traffic and thus increase capacity/resilience earlier on the A2 than the Western Southern Link.

4.8 Question 5: In relation to the two routes south of the river, to what extent do you agree or not with HE's proposals?

A: In relation to the Western Southern Link the Council neither agrees nor disagrees with the proposal. In relation to the Eastern Southern Link the Council strongly agrees with HE's proposals

4.9 Question 6: The HE proposed scheme following the evaluation process is a new bored tunnel road crossing at location C following Route 3 north of the river and the Eastern Southern Link south of the river. To what extend do you agree or not with HE's proposals and why?

A: The Council strongly agrees with the proposed scheme as providing the best balance between improved capacity and resilience on the strategic road network, potential economic benefits and potential environmental impacts.

4.10 Question 7: Do you have any comments in relation whether any additional junctions to those proposed (M2/A2, A226, A13 and M25) would be beneficial?

A: The Council has no comment to make, other than that by adding additional junctions it considers this is quite likely to reduce the effectiveness of the new road as a piece of Strategic Road Infrastructure by adding greater levels of local traffic that 'junction-hop'.

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5. NEXT STEPS: COMMUNICATION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE DECISION

5.1 The consultation closes on 24 March 2016. If agreed, the proposed response set out in this report will be forwarded to Highways England to meet that deadline.

5.2 Highways England will then consider all the consultation responses it has received and has indicated that a 'Preferred Route Announcement' would be made in mid-2016. At this stage the 'preferred route' is likely to be formally safeguarded. An Outline Business Case would be prepared by HE at this juncture.

5.3 As a project that comprises nationally significant infrastructure, the means of obtaining consent would be through a Development Consent Order (DCO). There would be further opportunity to make representations as part of this formal application process.

5.4 Assuming public funding is made available, indications are that the application for the DCO would be made in 2019 with a decision on the DCO anticipated in 2020 with construction commencing in early 2021 after the Full Business Case has been prepared, with the scheme opening in 2025.

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6. CROSS-CUTTING ISSUES AND IMPLICATIONS

Issue	Implications	Sign-off
Impact on Corporate Priorities	The scheme if constructed is likely to assist the connectivity of the Borough with the National Strategic Road Network and potentially boost economic activity within the Borough.	Rob Jarman: Head of Planning & Development
Risk Management	N/A	Rob Jarman: Head of Planning &

		Development
Financial	No implications directly arising from this report	Head of Finance and Resources and Finance Team
Staffing	No implications directly arising from this report	Rob Jarman: Head of Planning & Development
Legal	No implications directly arising from this report	Kate Jardine Team Leader (Planning) Mid Kent Legal Services
Equality Impact Needs Assessment	No implications directly arising from this report	Policy & Information Manager
Environmental/Sustainable Development	The construction and use of the proposed new road will have an environmental impact including potentially on International, European and National designated Environmental and Heritage assets. These would be offset to some extent by the improved capacity and potential air quality benefits at the existing Dartford Crossing. The environmental impacts will need to be balanced against the wider economic benefits that would accrue from the scheme.	Rob Jarman: Head of Planning & Development
Community Safety	N/A	Rob Jarman: Head of Planning & Development
Human Rights Act	N/A	Rob Jarman: Head of Planning & Development
Procurement	N/A	Rob Jarman: Head of Planning & Development and Head of Finance and Resources

Asset Management	N/A	Rob Jarman: Head of Planning & Development

7. REPORT APPENDICES

The following documents are to be published with this report and form part of the report:

- Appendix 1: Lower Thames Crossing Route Consultation 2016 booklet
- Appendix 2: Lower Thames Crossing Consultation questionnaire
- Appendix 3: Lower Thames crossing Consultation Routes
- Appendix 4: Lower Thames Crossing Highways England Proposed Scheme

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8. BACKGROUND PAPERS

None