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| 5 January 2017 | | ITEM: 7 |
| Planning, Transport, Regeneration Overview and Scrutiny Committee | | |
| Congestion Task Force Update (including Highways Permitting Proposal) | | |
| Wards and communities affected: All | Key Decision: Key | |
| Report of: Julie Nelder, Highways Infrastructure & Network Manager | | |
| Accountable Head of Service: Ann Osola, Head of Transportation & Highways | | |
| Accountable Director: Steve Cox, Corporate Director of Environment & Place | | |
| This report is Public | | |

Executive Summary

In April 2016, following growing concerns about the impacts of congestion in Thurrock, a Congestion Task Force was established to bring together Thurrock Council representatives, Highways England, Connect Plus Services (who hold the contract for managing traffic incidents on the M25), Essex Highways Policing, Essex Community Police, Essex County Council and business representatives. The initial focus of the group was the improvement of measures to mitigate the impact of incidents on the M25 and Dartford Crossing on local traffic in Thurrock. This work programme subsequently expanded to encompass joint initiatives to improve the free flow of traffic across local and strategic networks, and work to ensure the future-proofing of the network to accommodate future growth. This report provides the Committee with an overview of the task force work programme, and provides explicit detail on a proposal to migrate from a highways noticing regime to a highways permitting scheme, where Committee views are sought to inform a report to Cabinet in February 2017.

1. Recommendation(s)

That the Committee:

- 1.1 Considers the contents of this report and provides comments on the Congestion Task Force work programme, and specifically, on the proposal to introduce a Highways Permit Scheme in Thurrock as set out in paragraphs 3.5 to 3.13.**

2. Introduction and Background

- 2.1 One of the strengths and attractions of Thurrock to both businesses and residents is its key location just outside of Greater London, immediately adjacent to the M25, with deep water access to the Thames and road and rail access to the South East growth area. This strength has attracted a major regional retail park at Lakeside and a thriving freight and logistics industry. The consequence of this is heavy demand for road space, and a vulnerability of local roads to incidents on the M25 and A282 Dartford Crossing.
- 2.2 In February 2016, one such incident led to exceptional disruption on Thurrock's local roads and prompted the Council to invite stakeholder organisations to form a Congestion Task Force to reduce the impact of incidents on the Crossing and work collaboratively to improving the flow of traffic in Thurrock generally.
- 2.3 The first meeting took place on the 28th April 2016, and was attended by Thurrock Council officers, together with representatives from Highways England, Connect Plus Services (who manage and maintain the M25/Dartford Crossing on behalf of Highways England), Essex Roads Police, Essex Community Police and Essex County Council Traffic Control.
- 2.4 Subsequent meetings were chaired by the Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport, with attendance expanding to include representatives from Thurrock Business Board and Planning, Transportation & Regeneration Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

3. Overview of Work Programme

Mitigation of Impact of Incidents on Dartford Crossing

- 3.1 Early meetings of the Task Force focussed almost exclusively on mitigating the impact of incidents on the M25 and Dartford Crossing. Quick wins included adding Thurrock Council officers to Highways England's National Incident Liaison Officer (NILO) mailing list to receive bulletin updates of incidents which document the collaborative response of police, fire brigade and ambulance services, together with Highways England, Connect Plus Services and their contractors. Information is co-ordinated by Highways England's National Traffic Operations Centre in Birmingham, who also produce media bulletins for the travelling public. Having access to comprehensive and definitive source data allowed the Council to better anticipate the likely duration of incidents, and plan accordingly.
- 3.2 Stakeholders also pooled data to understand the exact nature of the interdependencies between the movement of traffic on the strategic and local networks. When there is a serious incident on the bridge resulting in closure for a significant period, a contraflow system is introduced through the tunnels. In order for this arrangement to be put in place, Highways England have to close southbound access from Jn 31. This in itself leads to long queues

developing in Thurrock. However, currently the traffic management plan allows traffic at Jn 31 to continue to access the M25 northbound, with the result that a significant number of vehicles attempt to exit at Jn 30 to access M25 southbound, despite having been informed that the Crossing is closed. This rapidly results in gridlock which spreads back to other junctions in Thurrock's local network.

- 3.3 The proposed solution to this problem is to close northbound access to the M25 whilst the East Tunnel Bore is in contraflow, and diversionary routing protocols are being updated to reflect this.
- 3.4 Thurrock is also seeking to introduce yellow box junction markings at Junction 31 to deter motorists contributing to gridlock. These will be implemented in the New Year to avoid works being undertaken during Lakeside's Christmas trading period.
- 3.5 Ultimately, partners are working towards a system whereby Highways England, Thurrock and Essex all have access to a cloud-based traffic management system which covers their respective networks from Jn 28 to Jn 31 of the M25, together with the adjacent local junctions, and these junctions can be operated through Collaborative Traffic Management (CTM). The work to progress this work is being undertaken by Highways England's consultants, and the target date for delivery is summer 2018.

Improving Free Flow of Traffic Across Local and Strategic Networks

- 3.6 Thurrock Council as the Highway Authority is responsible for 576 km of road network. The Council has an obligation under the 2004 Traffic Management Act to take all reasonable steps within its power to keep roads clear and traffic moving.
- 3.7 In June 2016, in recognition of the growing challenges in relation to this obligation, Thurrock Council established a dedicated Highways Network Management Team within the Transportation & Highways Service Area (previously, staff had covered a broad range of traffic management and road maintenance duties). A Highways Network Manager was appointed, and tasked with developing measures to give Thurrock more proactive control of traffic movements across its networks. A key recommendation arising from this work was that Thurrock change the mechanism by which it controls the activities of parties undertaking works on the highway from a 'Noticing' to a 'Permitting' system.
- 3.8 There are two methods of control available to the Highways Authority to control street works: i) 'Noticing' which is supported by the New Road and Street Works Act 1991; ii) or 'Permitting' which is supported by the Traffic Management Act 2004. Currently, Thurrock Council utilises the 'Noticing' process to meet its statutory obligations to co-ordinate works within the borough.

- 3.9 The key difference between the two methods is that with 'Noticing', the Statutory Undertakers inform a Local / Highway Authority where they are working under New Road and Street Works Act 1991(NRSWA) legislation, whereas with 'Permitting', the Traffic Management Act 2004 allows the Authority to implement a Permit Scheme where the statutory undertakers have to apply for permission to work on the network.
- 3.10 Within a Permit Scheme, the Highway Authority can stipulate conditions that enable the works to be contained in a certain period, or restricted hours of work to suit the best operating method for a particular road or area, providing the Council with more control of its network. If works overrun, penalties can be charged. With 'Noticing', the Authority relies on the statutory undertakers to carry out their repairs in an expedient considerate manner.
- 3.11 Thurrock Council has, to date, coordinated works under the NRSWA legislation through Notices submitted by the Statutory Undertakers. However, due to growing demand on Thurrock network and necessity to relieve the congestion, steps have been taken to assess costs and benefits of operating a Permit Scheme.
- 3.12 Under a Permitting Scheme, statutory undertakers buy a Permit to occupy road space, based on the duration of occupation, the scale of proposed works, and the sensitivity of the street within the road network. The feasibility study of the Permit Scheme reviewed the volume of potential permits issued on the traffic sensitive and non-traffic sensitive routes on Thurrock network. Table 1 below shows the forecast volumes with the associated charges. The total income from Permit Scheme is currently estimated at £242,340 per annum (legislation requires the Council to set charges such that it recovers the costs of operating the permit Scheme, but does not generate a surplus).

Table 1 – Permit Scheme Income

| Activity | Road Category | | | Permit fee | | Income | | Total |
|--------------------------------|---------------|---------------|-------------|------------|---------------|---------------|----------------|----------------|
| | Cat 0-2 TS | Cat 3&4 No TS | Total | Cat 0-2 TS | Cat 3&4 No TS | Cat 0-2 TS | Cat 3&4 No TS | |
| Major (PAA) | n/a | n/a | n/a | 95 | 70 | 2,090 | 26,600 | 28,690 |
| Major | 22 | 380 | 402 | 215 | 140 | 4,730 | 53,200 | 57,930 |
| Standard | 88 | 432 | 520 | 120 | 70 | 10,560 | 30,240 | 40,800 |
| Minor | 240 | 1232 | 1472 | 60 | 40 | 14,400 | 49,280 | 63,680 |
| Immediate (Urgent) | 43 | 272 | 315 | 55 | 35 | 2,365 | 9,520 | 11,885 |
| Immediate (Emergency) | 76 | 408 | 484 | 55 | 35 | 4,180 | 14,280 | 18,460 |
| Total Permit Fee Income | 469 | 2724 | 3193 | | | 38,325 | 183,120 | 221,445 |
| Total Variation Income | | | | | | 4,095 | 16,800 | 20,895 |
| Total Income | | | | | | 42,420 | 199,920 | 242,340 |

3.13 Overall, the implementation and operation of the Permit Scheme would be cost – income neutral, and implementation costs would be absorbed within overall service budgets. Benefits of a Permit Scheme include:

- Better control of timings of works that affect road and footway space
- Enhanced planning and visibility of works on the network
- Increased collaboration between parties affected by traffic management
- Improved information and awareness about works on the highway

3.14 It is proposed that, subject to Cabinet approval in February 2017, Permitting is introduced in Thurrock with effect from June 2017.

Future-Proofing Thurrock's Highways Network

3.15 The third and final strand of the Congestion Task Force Work Programme involves work to understand the capacity and pressures on Thurrock's current road network, the future requirements of road users, and the nature of infrastructure enhancements needed to meet these needs. To date, work has been undertaken to build a strategic model of trip making across the borough, and this is being validated against existing traffic count data. The intention is that, once built, this model will allow the Council to test out the traffic implications of future possible land uses as they emerge through the Local Plan development process, along with the cumulative implications of proposed land use changes in Thurrock and the wider South East.

3.16 Thurrock is also in the early stages of exploring possible opportunities offered by cutting-edge technology to improve road capacity and the travelling experiences of road users. We are currently in dialogue with the Transport Systems Catapult, one of ten elite technology and innovation centres established and overseen by the UK's innovation agency, Innovate UK. Transport Systems catapult was created to drive and promote Intelligent Mobility – the use of new and emerging technologies to transport people and goods more smartly and efficiently. We hope to be in a position to report on specific outcomes of this dialogue later in the year.

Recommendations to Committee

3.17 Planning, Transportation, regeneration overview and Scrutiny are asked to note the work of the Congestion Task Force, and provide comments, particularly on the proposal to introduce Highways Permitting, as set out in sections 3.5 to 3.13 above.

4. Reasons for Recommendation

4.1 The reason for this recommendation is to support the future work of the Congestion Task Force, and inform a report to Cabinet seeking approval to progress implementation of Highways Permitting scheduled on the Forward Plan for February 2017.

5. Consultation (including Overview and Scrutiny, if applicable)

5.1 The purpose of this report is to consult Overview and Scrutiny on the Congestion Task Force Work Programme, and, in particular, the proposal to introduce Highways permitting with effect from June 2017.

6. Impact on corporate policies, priorities, performance and community impact

6.1 Implementation of the Permit Scheme would enhance the Council's priorities in allowing more control over submitted works, this will allow for less delay and congestion, hence reduced costs for Thurrock PLC and related retail and freight movements

6.2 The positive health benefits associated to reduced congestion, would be beneficial for air quality, and promote a 'greener environment' for our residents to live in.

7. Implications

7.1 Financial

Implications verified by: **Laura Last**
Management Accountant

The costs of implementation and operation of Permit Scheme are shown to be cost neutral. The implementation cost will be managed through existing budgets. The performance of the estimated costs and income would be reviewed after the scheme is implemented to ensure that the Scheme's operations remain cost – income neutral as required by the legislation.

7.2 Legal

Implications verified by: **Vivien Williams**
Planning & Regeneration Solicitor

The Traffic Management Act 2004, and its supporting Codes of Practices, allows for Local Authorities to implement a Permit Scheme in order to meet its statutory responsibilities for the Local Authorities to coordinate works on its network under Section 59 of the New Road and Street Works Act 1991.

7.3 Diversity and Equality

Implications verified by: **Rebecca Price**
Community Development Officer

There are no adverse risks identified for groups with protected characteristics.

7.4 **Other implications** (where significant) – i.e. Staff, Health, Sustainability, Crime and Disorder)

None

8. **Background papers used in preparing the report** (including their location on the Council's website or identification whether any are exempt or protected by copyright):

Statutory legislation and supporting Codes of Practices.

9. **Appendices to the report**

None.

Report Author

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