

Freedom for Drivers Foundation

PO Box 62, Chislehurst, BR7 5YB; Tel: 020-8295-0378

Web: www.freedomfordrivers.org

TO: London Assembly Inquiry into Smart Road User Charging

Via Email to scrutiny@london.gov.uk

21 February 2023

I am responding to the aforementioned inquiry on behalf of the Freedom for Drivers Foundation.

We are a not-for-profit organisation which promotes the interests of road users and aims to educate our supporters and the general public on transport issues. We have several thousand supporters who receive our newsletters and follow our blog. See our web site at www.freedomfordrivers.org for more information.

We have commented extensively in the past on transport issues in London and on the Mayor's Transport Strategy which we have consistently opposed as it imposes major costs on vehicle owners and has little rational justification.

We have attempted to answer your questions below:

1. Do the current road user charging systems in London require reform?

Answer: Yes because the Congestion Charge and ULEZ/LEZ systems are of course remarkably stupid where the charge is only payable once per day however many times a vehicle drives into the zone or how far they travel. This has encouraged the use of Private Hire Vehicles and taxis which have increased enormously in numbers as a result, thus adding to congestion.

Neither does it encourage low emission vehicles or discourage high emission ones.

Nor does it discourage travel at the busiest times of day as the charge is the same whenever you travel. So there is little benefit in reducing congestion.

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Nor is there any concession to people who need to travel within the zone for medical reasons (several major London hospitals lie within the zone and although there is a refund claim system for NHS patients it is complicated to make claims). Nor for any other people who provide essential services such as social carers or plumbers/electricians.

The original justification for the Congestion Charge was that it would solve London's perennial road traffic congestion (environmental benefits were not an argument used because it was known they would be minimal). But it did not solve the congestion problem with that soon returning to the same level as before and subsequently becoming a lot worse. The environmental claims made by some have also been shown to be false with air pollution within the zone basically unchanged as a result. Neither does it raise any significant funds for public transport improvements because almost all the revenue from the scheme goes in operating costs. Indeed if it was not for the accidental fines people collect from forgetting to pay the charge, it would probably lose money. Enormous costs are imposed on the road users with no benefits, so it has just ended up being simply a tax but a very expensive one to collect.

2. How might smarter road user charging differ from the current daily charges for driving applied in London?

Clearly we need a system that is cheaper to operate but which reduces traffic congestion.

3. How might charges for driving in London be varied for different types of journeys, such as travelling for work, caring responsibilities or essential services?

We are not opposed to road user pricing per se, but it certainly needs to be a more intelligent system if it is to gain public support. Charges need to relate to which roads are travelled or which are most congested at the time chosen to travel. The total costs imposed on users should not rise.

As regards discrimination between different types of journeys or the users this is a much more difficult proposition. There might be specific categories – for example registered disabled, those undertaking medical treatment or providing medical services but this would require a great deal of thought. In general wider discrimination would not be easy because a key principal should be to keep the system simple so that it is minimal cost.

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4. What strategies and targets could smarter road user charging support?

The target should simply be a system that reduces congestion.

Note that it is important that any system is justifiable on the basis of a cost/benefit analysis. Past proposals in this area have not been shown to be economic and the current charging schemes are clearly not cost effective solutions.

5. What technology could be used to support smarter road user charging?

A system of smart tags that enabled vehicles to be tracked across London would be one solution, although the problem of recording those visitors from outside London would remain. Solely relying on cameras is not a good solution as it is very expensive to install and operate, plus is prone to errors and vulnerable to licence plate cloning.

6. How could smarter road user charging assist with tackling current challenges such as traffic, air pollution and climate change?

It will have no possible impact on climate change. Even if one accepts that air pollution in terms of carbon emissions has an impact on climate change, which many people do not, the influence on world carbon emissions from those in London is already less than 1%.

Intelligent road user charging might have some impact on air pollution but vehicles are already becoming very clean and are likely to be even cleaner by the time any smart charging scheme could be introduced.

The primary benefit, indeed probably the sole benefit, would be in reducing congestion which is a major cost imposed on the economy.

7. Are road user charging schemes best set up at a city or regional level, or as a national system, and what benefits or difficulties would you expect with either approach?

A national system would be preferable to ensure it was comprehensive.

8. If smarter road user charging is introduced, which charges or taxes should it replace and how should the current taxes and charges be changed?

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It should certainly replace the existing Congestion Charge and LEZ/ULEZ systems in London. A national system could also replace VED taxation and fuel taxes.

9. What discounts and exemptions would you like to see for any new smarter road charging scheme, for example to help disabled people, those on low incomes, those who need to drive for work, or people who live in areas with low levels of public transport?

I suggest there should be very few exceptions. The only categories with any exemption or discounts should be the disabled or those attending medical appointments. The system needs to be kept very simple.

10. If the Government were interested in a national distance-based road user charging scheme, would London be a sensible place for a trial?

No because London is not separate to the rest of the UK and road networks in London are linked to the national network. There is no suitable boundary because there are many roads that bypass the M25 and vehicles could divert to minor roads easily.

11. If distance-based road user charging was introduced, do you think Londoners who drive should pay less in total for vehicle or driving-based charges, the same, or more than they do currently?

They should pay no more than they do at present (including VED and other taxes). Ideally a national scheme would replace VED and fuel taxes (as fuel taxation is being undermined by the growth in electric vehicles).

12. Mayors and local authorities currently have powers to introduce new road charging schemes. Do you think anything further is required beyond an electoral mandate for these bodies to use those powers (for example a local referendum)?

A referendum is certainly required if there is going to be public support for a scheme. This would need to be based on specific and detailed proposals for how the scheme would work.

13. How are other cities and countries working on similar smarter road user charging ideas faring, and what alternatives are they looking at for achieving similar policy goals?

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We are unqualified to answer this question in detail but Singapore appears to have an effective system already in place but in a very different environment to a major city such as London.

Sincerely,

Roger W. Lawson, Director