

FRIDAY 17 MARCH, 2023

A REFERENDUM (LOCAL POLL) ON THE “CONGESTION CHARGE” IS NOT THE ANSWER: briefing paper

Councillor Steve Count has submitted a motion to the Full Council Meeting on 21st March calling for a local poll (ie referendum) on whether Cambridgeshire residents want to pay a congestion charge to receive improvements in public transport, as outlined by the Greater Cambridge Partnership (GCP) in the Making Connections 2022 consultation. In addition, the Cambridgeshire Residents Group (CRG) will present a petition at the Meeting demanding Cambridgeshire County Council hold a referendum on the congestion charge.

The Cambridgeshire Sustainable Travel Alliance (CSTA) believes that a referendum on the congestion charge is not the answer. This paper sets out the reasons why.

Note: the “congestion charge” referred to in the petition is called a road user charge in the Making Connections 2022 consultation. We use the term road charge below.

Summary

- Referendums are votes on a single issue, however, the Making Connections 2022 proposals are multi-faceted and about much more than just road charging.
- A referendum on 4th May would take place before the feedback from the Making Connections consultation had been analysed. Rather than holding a direct vote by the electorate, we should let our elected representatives work together to find solutions.
- Referendum campaigns are divisive (dependent as they are upon the answer to an oversimplified yes/no question) and can stifle constructive debate.
- Referendums are costly (an allocation of £1.5 million is suggested).
- Support for congestion reduction schemes can grow after implementation; a referendum might remove the opportunity to put a scheme into practice and see the benefits.
- A referendum would exclude young people, and also those who live outside Cambridgeshire, but travel to Cambridge regularly. It could also potentially disadvantage minority groups who suffer disproportionately from transport-related social exclusion.
- A referendum is not necessary to implement a road charging scheme.

The Making Connections 2022 proposals are multi-faceted and about much more than just road charging. The feedback from the consultation is still under analysis.

- Referendums are votes on a single issue, however the Making Connections 2022 consultation is multi-faceted. A yes-no referendum question, however worded, is unlikely to be able to communicate all the nuance behind the proposals and will not allow for feedback that could shape a successful alternative that would tackle the area's transport issues. A question requiring a yes or no response balancing the benefits of improved public transport against the disbenefits of imposing a new tax on motorists does not allow a response encompassing the wider advantages of reducing congestion (faster journeys for motorists, improved air quality, reductions in carbon emissions and opportunities to reallocate road space for walking and cycling etc).
- A referendum could be viewed as an abdication of responsibility by decision makers to engage with the complexities associated with the decision in hand. Local government is a system of representative democracy. This enables elected members to consult and question professional advisers (local government officers and/or external consultants) on the complexities of potential policies. We elect them to examine issues in depth and to work together to find solutions to our transport challenges.
- A referendum on 4th May would take place before the feedback from the consultation process had been analysed.

Referendum campaigns are divisive, stifle constructive debate and can give groups a platform to further their own ideas

- Referendum campaigns are divisive, dependent as they are upon the answer to an oversimplified yes/no question. They intensify existing divisions and do not resolve public angst. As a County, we should be working together to find solutions to our transport challenges that work for everyone, rather than intensifying existing points of disagreement by holding a referendum.
- Councillors are currently waiting for the results of the Making Connections 2022 consultation and a recommendation from the GCP Board on how to proceed based on the public's feedback. Conducting a referendum at the current time would distract from decision-making based on the detailed analysis of information gathered through the GCP's 'Making Connections' public consultation. Indeed, It is worth noting that at its 2nd March meeting, the Cambridge City Council unanimously resolved not to make any decisions about whether or how to proceed until the responses to the consultation had been fully analysed. The minutes from the meeting state that the Council “...reiterates its commitment to the consultative process by listening to the

responses of the 24,000+ people who have responded, and considers it is only right that council does not pre-empt the results of that consultation by making a decision on the future of any scheme until the responses have been analysed.”

- A referendum campaign might well be hijacked by groups to further their own agenda. This is of particular concern as, in Oxford, groups infiltrated a recent anti-Low Traffic Neighbourhood protest to further a ‘climate lockdown’ conspiracy narrative. Local news media reported that similar elements attached themselves to a recent Cambridge protest march.

Referendums are costly and potentially lock-in decisions

- Councillor Count has suggested that £1.5 million be set aside to cover the costs of the referendum – the same sum which Huntingdonshire District Council has secured for eight new projects to be delivered under the government’s UK Shared Prosperity Fund.
- The CSTA considers that a national road charging is an inevitability to replace the £25 billion per year currently generated by fuel duty, which will diminish rapidly in the transition to electric vehicles and eventually reduce to nothing. With a national road charging scheme on the horizon, there may well come a point where the County Council wishes to move quickly to implement a local road charging scheme, enabling the funds generated to be ring-fenced for improving Cambridgeshire’s transport infrastructure, rather than being taken into the national treasury.
- If a referendum rejected a local road charging scheme, albeit in the context of no national scheme, it might appear to lock-in a ban in an entirely different context.

Evidence shows that support for congestion reduction schemes can grow after implementation

- If a referendum were held before any scheme was implemented, the public might miss the opportunity to discover the many benefits of a transformed bus service, better facilities for walking and cycling, and reduced congestion.
- Experience from existing road charging schemes shows that support can grow after implementation, once people have had a chance to adjust habits and the benefits become clearer.
 - In 2008, Milan implemented a ‘pollution charge’. Three years later, [79% of voters voted in favour of extending the measure to all vehicle types, increasing the charge and progressively extending the charging area.](#)
 - In Stockholm, [public support for road pricing](#) was below 40% before implementation of the city’s road charging scheme. After a six-month trial period in 2006, more than 52% of Stockholm’s residents voted to make it permanent and by 2011, public support for road pricing stood at nearly 70% (and support was more than 50% among the people who paid the fees most often).

- The London Congestion Charge was introduced by Ken Livingstone in his first term as Mayor of London in 2003. Before introduction, [public support for the London Congestion Charge was around 40%](#). After introduction, [acceptability rose to over 50%](#), with Ken Livingstone stating that [support was nearly 75%](#). Ken Livingstone was then reelected mayor in 2004, demonstrating public support for the scheme.

A referendum would be exclusionary

- If Cambridgeshire County Council were to hold a referendum on the road charge, only the residents of Cambridgeshire would be able to vote, yet people travel to Cambridge from a wide area for work, education, healthcare and leisure. Recognising this, the Greater Cambridge Partnership (GCP) invited responses to the Making Connections 2022 consultation from those in towns such as Saffron Walden (Essex), Haverhill and Bury St Edmunds (Suffolk), Royston (Herts) and Biggleswade (Bedfordshire). [Those outside Cambridgeshire affected by the proposals would not have their voices heard](#) if Cambridgeshire County Council were to hold a referendum on the road charge.
- You must be 18 or over to vote in a referendum in the UK. Many young people under 18 stand to benefit from the Making Connections 2022 proposals (for example secondary school children who struggle to get to school currently because of poor bus services) and participated in the GCP consultation. If Cambridgeshire County Council were to hold a referendum on the road charge, [young people would be excluded from the decision-making process](#).
- The bus service transformation proposed in Making Connections 2022 aims to tackle transport-related social exclusion, which is disproportionately felt by those who already suffer from inequality, such as women, children, older people, disabled people, ethnic minorities and LGBTQ+ communities. A referendum could disadvantage these minority groups.

A referendum is not necessary

- A referendum is not necessary to implement a road charging scheme. The scheme in London, for example, went ahead without a referendum.
- [This country works on the principle of representative democracy and local authorities use various consultation processes to engage with the local community](#). The Greater Cambridge Partnership (GCP), which has advanced the Making Connections 2022 proposals, is a body made up of elected representatives from three local councils (Cambridgeshire County Council, Cambridge City Council and South Cambridgeshire District Council), plus some university and business representatives in an advisory capacity. [The final decision whether to proceed with the Making Connections 2022 proposals will be made by elected representatives on the County Council](#).