

Our ref: stack
Your ref:

From: John Murphy
Head of Communications
Highways Agency
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15 June 2005

Dear

OPERATION STACK

Thank you for your email of 13 May 2005 requesting information under the Freedom of Information Act about Operation Stack on the M20.

Operation Stack is implemented by Kent Police when cross channel traffic is restricted by events such as adverse weather which prevent ferries from sailing, or industrial action at one of the ferry terminals.

Kent County Constabulary have sole responsibility for implementing and managing Operation Stack. Once the decision has been made to use Operation Stack, Kent police use their own emergency powers to close the M20. Channel-bound lorries are parked on the M20 coast bound carriageway between J11-12 while other traffic is diverted along the A20 via J11. When the M20 J11-12 becomes full, the coast bound carriageway between J8-9 is also closed for lorry parking. This helps to reduce road congestion in and around Dover and at the Channel crossing terminals.

As the network operator for strategic roads the Highways Agency is responsible for the M20 and for the A20 east of Junction 13 of the M20 and provides traffic management support to the police to enable them to implement Operation Stack. We work in partnership with the local authority to review the extent to which Operation Stack has been implemented and are currently considering what improvements might be possible, both in the short and longer term – to reduce the delay for cross-Channel and local travellers.

Kent County Council is the highway authority responsible for all other non-trunk roads in the county, including the A20 west of the M20 Junction 13, which is used as a diversionary route when Operation Stack is in place. In conjunction with the County Council, Ashford and Shepway Councils make the necessary arrangements in their respective areas for welfare facilities such as the provision of toilet facilities and refreshment bars for lorry drivers who have to remain with their vehicles on the M20.

On your question about the contra flow, this arrangement was implemented on the London-bound carriageway of the M20 between Junctions 8 and 9 and was introduced for the first time during the Easter Bank Holiday. The contra flow helped to remove traffic from the coast-bound carriageway, freeing up lanes, which could then be used to hold lorries heading for the Channel Tunnel and Dover. The hard shoulder and lane 1 of the London-bound carriageway were open to London-bound traffic with lane 3 for traffic heading for the coast. Lane 2 was closed to provide a buffer lane between London-bound and coast-bound traffic. On previous occasions, when Operation Stack was implemented, all the coast bound traffic was diverted to the A20 and other local roads. I enclose copies of the relevant documentation that the Highways Agency holds about the contra flow arrangements (Documents 1 – 5). However I wish to advise you that some

of the information relating to contra flow arrangements cannot be disclosed for the reasons given in annex A attached to this letter.

On question 2, the administration and implementation of Operation Stack is mainly the responsibility of the police; the Highways Agency's role is to provide the traffic management support to the police. The Highways Agency does not hold any previously undisclosed reports, letters or documentation relating the implementation of Operation Stack.

On your question about alternatives to Operation Stack, I wish to advise you that some of the information, which contains references to specific lorry-parking sites, cannot be disclosed for the reasons given in annex B to this letter. However I have paraphrased below most of the information contained in these documents.

The Highways Agency and the Department for Transport are concerned about the impact of Operation Stack on the travelling public and local residents. Together with Kent Police and other relevant authorities we are looking at the following options, which would have less impact on the road network:

Option 1 (Do Minimum)

The existing arrangements with the phase 1 and 2 closures of the M20 would be retained. This results in the total closure of the M20 coast-bound carriageway. The closure creates considerable disruption, especially to traffic and communities along the A20

Option 2 (Contra-flow with cones)

The M20 coast-bound carriageway would be closed between junctions 8 and 9. The contra-flow on the northbound carriageway provides one lane coast-bound and two lanes northbound. There would be a buffer lane between the two opposing flows with a speed limit of 40mph enforced with cameras. The traffic management involved in a 17km contra-flow is substantial and it cannot be put in place or removed quickly. This option was used as a trial over the Easter period and it took two nights to put in place and two nights to remove. The police have reported significant improvements to traffic on the A20.

Option 3 (Contra-flow with moveable concrete barrier)

The moveable barrier is an innovative solution not used before in the UK to enable the contra-flow to be put in place more quickly than option 2. There would be no need to have a buffer lane between the opposing flows and two lanes could be used in each direction. A 50mph speed limit would be used, mitigating some of the delay to north-bound traffic in comparison to a 40mph limit with option 2. However this option would need a significant capital investment and relies on technology new to the UK but potentially offers a useful trial site.

A draft feasibility study into the use of moveable barriers, cannot be disclosed for the reasons given in annex C to this letter. We plan to publish the final report later this year.

Option 4 (Alternative parking sites)

This option would require finding a permanent alternative site for Operation Stack. A contract has been awarded to investigate and recommend solutions to overnight lorry parking for Kent County Council and partners. The Highways Agency is one of those partners.

The study brief will focus on the following principle areas:

Identification of one or more alternative locations to use as holding areas for lorries currently held on the M20 at times of disruption of cross channel services, this will include the need to consider the minimum ground standard required and outline cost

estimates related to likely land pricing. It is also necessary to consider who will operate such alternative sites, the Highways Agency or private sector;

Examination of the sorts of methods that information may be communicated to HGV operators and drivers to alter travel patterns at the time of disruption to cross channel services;

Investigation into the supply chain patterns and reasons for midweek evening peaks in traffic on the A20 with drivers and operators, on site at the Port of Dover and via telephone survey. Also a series of observations, along the A20, approaching the port during times of likely queuing.

We expect the results of the study to be published later this year.

On your fourth question about the cost implications of Operation Stack, the Highways Agency holds very little information about this as the main costs are covered by Kent Police. The Highways Agency's traffic management costs for Operation Stack are part of the lump sum element of the contract with our Managing Agent Contractors, InterRoute. The additional costs for implementing the contra flow arrangements during Easter 2005 amounted to £308,000. These costs included additional items such as provision of CCTV cameras, additional lining, and signing.

A number of questions have recently been asked in the House of Commons about Operation Stack and I enclose copies and the relevant replies (Documents 6 & 7). The Highways Agency also holds copies of correspondence between the Chief Executive, the Department of Transport, Members of Parliament and their local constituents about matters relating to Operation Stack. Before we can release this information to you we must write to the Members of Parliament in question and to their constituents asking for their permission to release this correspondence. Once I have their replies I will contact you again.

I hope you find this information helpful.

If you are unhappy with the decision about disclosure of certain information made in relation to your request you may ask for an internal review. You should contact me at the above address if you wish to complain.

If you are not content with the outcome of the internal review, you have the right to apply directly to the Information Commissioner for a decision. The Information Commissioner can be contacted at:

Information Commissioner's Office
Wycliffe House
Water Lane
Wilmslow
Cheshire
SK9 5AF

Yours sincerely

John Murphy
Head of Communications

Annex A

| <i>Exemption in full</i> | |
|---|--|
| Section 35: Formulation of Government Policy | |
| <i>Factors for disclosure</i> | Factors for withholding |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To increase knowledge of how the Government works, how decisions are arrived at to improve public contribution to policy making process. • Allow more informed debate. Improve trust and quality of decision making. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experts and stakeholders are deterred from providing advice because it might be disclosed/published. • Impartiality of civil servants/public officials will be undermined if this information is made public. There will be pressure not to challenge ideas and provide advice in the formulation of policy leading to poorer decision-making. • Publication of the options might prevent freethinking about policy proposals – leading to public criticism. |
| <p><i>Reasons why public interest favours withholding information</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ministers, officials and experts need to be able to conduct a rigorous and open risk assessment of all the possible options without premature disclosure – this would prevent the development of possible better options. | |

ANNEX B

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| <p><i>Exemption in full</i></p> <p>Section 22: Information intended for future publication</p> | |
| <p><i>Factors for disclosure</i></p> | <p><i>Factors for withholding</i></p> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • public need to be informed so they can participate in the decision-making process • disclosure will inform the community about a matter of general concern | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information which is released prior to publication could give commercial advantage or cause blight, damaging local interests or the local economy. |
| <p><i>Reasons why public interest favours withholding information</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decision-making process involves several parties. The technical feasibility of the options needs to be assessed and agreed by all parties, and involve safety, commercial and operational issues. | |

ANNEX C

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| <p><i>Exemption in full</i></p> <p>Section 22: Information intended for future publication</p> | |
| <p><i>Factors for disclosure</i></p> | <p><i>Factors for withholding</i></p> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disclosure will inform the public | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We intend to publish the final feasibility study into moveable barriers later in 2005. |
| <p><i>Reasons why public interest favours withholding information</i></p> <p>Early first draft of a feasibility study that has not been finalised may be misleading to the public</p> | |