IHT Briefing Note on Road Pricing and Transport Infrastructure following publication by the Department for Transport of their report to Parliament "Towards a Sustainable Transport System" November 2007

The IHT view

IHT acknowledge the potential benefits of road pricing in that it provides a means of managing a scarce resource; we refer to the road space on many urban and inter-urban roads that are currently congested. The UK Government predicts that the cost of this congestion will rise to £22 billion per annum by 2025. Our profession also recognises that it is difficult to achieve public support for road pricing, particularly for a national scheme.

The Department for Transport understandably, as set out in "Towards a Sustainable Transport System", is focussing on local road pricing pilots. These will help local authorities who want to ensure that their economies can grow and want to tackle road congestion which constrains economic growth as well as reducing the quality of the local environment. But these urban pilot schemes will not directly address the massive burden on regional and national economies caused by congestion on trunk and motorway inter-urban roads. It is these roads that carry over 60% of the goods transported by road vehicles in the UK. As the Department's own feasibility study into road pricing put it… "A considerable impact can be made on congestion with a relatively small reduction in traffic. In principle the scope for this reduction in traffic exists without serious inconvenience". We agree. There is a major programme for widening existing motorways over the next 10 years. The motorways planned to be widened are:

In England the M1 J6A-13 and J21-42, M6 J11A-19, M11 J6-8, M25 J5-7and J16-30, M27 J3-4, M62 J25-28

In Scotland the M8

In Wales the M4

This programme provides the opportunity to reduce congestion on some of the most critical and congested links in the motorway network in the short term. But the benefit of this additional capacity will be lost if we do not then manage the demand for use of these roads. This is because traffic levels will simply grow to fill the extra capacity available; we tried building our way out of capacity constraints in the past and we know it does not work in the UK. Research as part of the National Travel Survey has shown that improved highways encourage longer journeys, particularly by commuters who trade car mileage against the perceived benefits of living in a location distant from their place of employment. We need to "lock-in" the benefits achieved by this highway investment programme. This is achievable by ensuring the benefits of reduced congestion and more reliable journey times on motorways are gained mainly by "high value" road users rather than by leisure users, who can choose to travel at times when there is spare capacity, or by commuters travelling longer distances.

It is possible that the Active Traffic Management (ATM) hard-shoulder operation successfully introduced on the M42 may be replicated elsewhere on sections of the motorway system either instead of or in addition to the widening programme. The capacity benefits of ATM will similarly be lost if we do not then lock them in by managing the demand for use of these sections of the motorway system.

Road pricing is potentially the most viable and effective way of achieving this "locking-in". There are other ways of managing demand. One that is being piloted by the Highways Agency in England is the introduction of a high-occupancy vehicle (HOV) lane as part of the current widening of the M1 between junctions 7 and 10 from 3 to 4 lanes. This HOV lane will be available to passenger vehicles with more than one occupant who will be able to avoid congestion on the other 3 lanes. Whilst this HOV lane will encourage some car sharing, it will not provide priority use for those vehicle movements that are most important to regional and national economies. For this reason road pricing, including the option favoured in North America of High Occupancy Toll (HOT) lanes, is a potentially better mechanism for providing priority for business and freight travel and for managing travel demand.

There are two other key issues here. First, we need to make sure we retain public support for this major motorway-widening programme. If the public were to believe that gains in journey time reliability and reduced congestion will be lost in a few years by traffic growth, then there will be pressure to resist the programme on environmental grounds.

Second, it is essential that we obtain public support for road pricing. We can draw on the parallel with rail and air travel; the public accepts that, at peak periods of demand, rail and air capacity is stretched and higher prices are charged. Similarly road capacity is a scarce resource and differential charges between peak and off-peak periods will provide the means to make the best use of that resource. The way in which the charges will be regulated and levied and the financial proceeds used must be spelled out clearly so that lobbyists have no space to scare the public into opposing road pricing.

Road pricing must not be viewed by the public as a national road tax but rather must be seen as fair, seen as giving priority to road vehicles based on their value to the economy and society and must be provided alongside improvements in the capacity and quality of viable alternative travel by public transport.

Members of the Institution of Highways and Transportation will be asked to implement the road widening programme and want to be able to convince the public that the programme is good value and will provide long term benefits. We can provide this message with confidence if we know that measures will be put in place to lock-in the benefits of the widening programme.

We support Sir Rod Eddington's remarks in his written advice to Government that "pilots should be framed to test different pricing structures and technologies on both the urban and inter-urban networks". Nationally we are running out of time if we are to discourage the predictable reaction to the inter-urban road widening programme of a leap in traffic growth spurred by life patterns that are seen as unsustainable. Announcing a pilot road pricing scheme on the motorway network now would send the right message to the public and would buy some time for implementing comprehensive travel demand management benefiting priority road users.

This implementation would be entirely consistent with Sir Rod's call for a greater level of investment by Government in transport infrastructure, both highways and public transport, to maintain our national economy and its international competitiveness. Without this investment in transport infrastructure we will not be able to implement road pricing and we will not achieve the economic benefits that both road pricing and improved infrastructure have the potential to deliver.

In addition our economy relies on well maintained road infrastructure and so it is vitally important that we give a high priority to highway maintenance and fund this appropriately. Funding for both new infrastructure and for maintenance of our transport infrastructure asset needs to be at a consistent level to allow more cost-efficient planning and delivery. It also ties in with more efficient use of expensive infrastructure – making the best of what we have by running it in the most efficient and effective way.

The **IHT** will continue to press for a strong government leadership in implementing road pricing, initially in pilot demonstration projects on both urban and inter-urban roads, together with a high priority given to funding new transport infrastructure and maintenance. These are vital ingredients in reducing the costs of congestion and in maintaining the international competitiveness of our economy.

Notes to editors

IHT, founded in 1930, has over 11,000 members concerned with the design, construction, maintenance and operation of transport systems and infrastructure across all transport modes in both the public and private sectors. The IHT promotes excellence in transport systems and infrastructure.

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