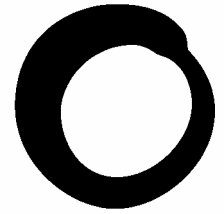


July 2004



**Friends of
the Earth**

Briefing

Another dead-end road?

The M6 Expressway proposal

On July 6th the Department for Transport announced a consultation on a proposal to build a new road in Staffordshire and Cheshire alongside the existing M6. The consultation is about the principle of building the road: it does not specify the route, how the road would be financed and constructed or how tolls would be levied. If approved, this would be a new direction in road-building in the UK and, if it works, could be copied in other parts of the country.

This briefing explains the Government's proposal, Friends of the Earth's reasons for opposing it, and why this issue is important across the UK, not just in the West Midlands and the North West. It also explains how to respond to the consultation.

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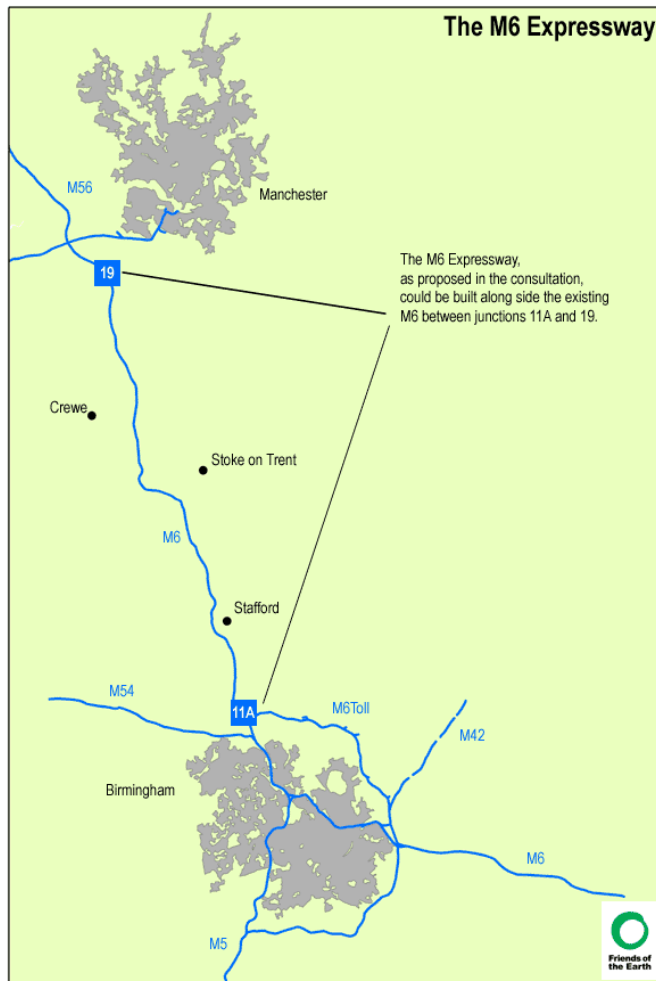
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The Government's proposal

The Government's consultation document 'M6: giving motorists a choice' *"invites views on the desirability of a new tolled expressway to run broadly parallel with the M6 between Birmingham and Manchester as an alternative to widening the existing road"*¹. This would run between junctions 11a (the northern end of the existing M6 Toll near Cannock in Staffordshire) and 19 of the existing M6 (near Knutsford in Cheshire). Some reports have suggested that the northern endpoint could be junction 20 where the M6 meets the M56.



The consultation is about the principle of building the road: there is no detail on the route, how the road would be built or how it would be paid for, although the Secretary of State for Transport said in the House of Commons that the Government hoped it would be privately financed².

The consultation suggests (but does not definitively state) that the proposed road would have two lanes in each direction and would run roughly in parallel with the existing road, with some sections within 10 metres, and other sections over 100 metres away. The Government claims that *"a new expressway would provide road users with a choice, either to use the existing M6 or to pay to use an M6 expressway for a faster, more reliable journey"*³. The advantages of this, according to the Government, would be:

- more choice, with faster more reliable journeys for all (drivers opting to pay the toll would free up space on the existing road);
- road works without delays (the new road could be built without disrupting the existing M6);
- a better route for business (there would be fewer junctions and so improved traffic flows); and
- more strategic capacity at less cost (building a new road would be cheaper than widening the existing motorway).

The consultation states that *“before taking any decisions we shall need to assess the full range of potential social, economic and environmental impacts of an expressway, and the scope for minimising any adverse impacts, as well as maximising the benefits”*⁴.

The consultation runs until 21st October.

The existing M6 Toll

The Government’s proposal is based on the perceived success of the existing M6 Toll, which opened in December 2003 and which provides an alternative to the M6 to the north of Birmingham⁵. The Government claims that *“the M6 Toll now regularly carries 40,000 vehicles on a weekday, and 30,000 a day at weekends. This is around one fifth of traffic flowing through the West Midlands conurbation each day”* and that *“the M6 Toll is improving the experience for people making this journey. Drivers using the M6 Toll benefit from journey times that remain constant throughout the day. They also benefit from significant journey-time savings. For example, drivers save half an hour on a journey that used to take over an hour during weekday peak periods”*⁶.

However these are only early results. The M6 Toll has not attracted the levels of traffic predicted. About 10% of traffic on the M6 through Birmingham and the Black Country has transferred to the M6 Toll which at least partly reflects the fact that the overwhelming amount of traffic on the conurbation’s motorways is not simply ‘passing through’. This reduction has been reflected in the overall level of traffic on the M6 but congestion remains endemic. The Department for Transport does not mention the longer term prediction from the Public Inquiry into the M6 Toll that traffic volumes would return to their original level, with roughly 169,000 vehicles per day on the M6, once the whole system had settled down.

The current M6 Toll is operated by Midland Expressway Limited (MEL⁷) who have a 53 year concession to build and operate the road. Profits from the M6 Toll are not reinvested in improving transport in the UK, but go to MEL shareholders. The terms of MEL’s concession agreement are secret and not even the Inspector at the public inquiry into the road was allowed to see it. Under this concession agreement, MEL can set the tolls at whatever level it likes and only have to give the government 6 months notice of any changes. Until very recently, toll levels for HGVs were set to deter these vehicles from using the M6 Toll because of the scale of the damage they cause to the road. Tolls for HGVs have been cut, but there is no guarantee that they will remain at this level if traffic volumes rise.

Friends of the Earth's objections to the proposal

It isn't needed

Congestion on the M6 in Staffordshire and Cheshire is within the capacity of those motorways. Even looking thirty years ahead neither are anticipated to reach the levels of chronic congestion on the section of the M6 through Birmingham even assuming traffic growth remains strong.

The West Midlands to Manchester Multi Modal Study (MIDMAN), which reported to Government in 2002, recommended widening to four lanes, but said it was 'a matter of judgement' whether this was better than no widening at all. It dismissed further widening as having detrimental transport and planning consequences and being too road-based. It also rejected the concept of a new public motorway separate to the M6. Friends of the Earth did not endorse the conclusion of the MIDMAN study concerning widening, but we believe it is wrong for the Government to ignore this finding and propose an alternative which is more environmentally damaging.

It doesn't address the real congestion problems

The real congestion problems in the area are not on the motorway but in the Greater Manchester and West Midlands conurbations and the towns and cities along the M6 corridor such as Stoke-on-Trent, Stafford and Newcastle-under-Lyme. The proposed road could increase congestion in these areas rather than improve the situation by funnelling more traffic onto already busy roads. Real choice can be provided for people in these areas by investing in high quality public transport and safer streets to encourage people to walk and cycle.

It won't benefit the economy of Staffordshire and Cheshire

The M6 Expressway is about enabling cars to get from the South East to the North West more quickly. It would have very few junctions and would essentially bypass the towns and cities such as Cannock, Stoke, Stafford and Newcastle-under-Lyme, bringing no benefit to the economy of Staffordshire and Cheshire. However, as noted above, when traffic left the M6 Expressway, it would add to congestion on the rest of the roads network, particularly in these towns and cities.

It wouldn't provide a real choice

The Government claims that building the M6 Expressway would provide travellers with a choice, with drivers having the choice of using the existing M6 or paying for a faster trip. But all this does is to create a two-tier road network. A small number of people would be given the appearance of choice while the majority would be saddled with no choice. But everyone would suffer from increased congestion on other roads from the additional traffic generated by the new motorway. Real choice involves giving motorists a choice of whether or not to use their car. When the upgrade of the West Coast mainline is completed, there will be a twice-hourly train service between Manchester and Birmingham, improving choice in the corridor.

It would encourage people to travel further

The M6 has allowed people to live outside the Greater Manchester and West Midlands conurbations and commute back in. Increasing the amount of motorway space will make this more attractive for more people, exacerbating the problem and increasing travel distances.

It would damage the local environment

The Government accepts that building a parallel road would require more land than widening the current motorway. There would be specific impacts on countryside, villages and nature sites. These cannot be judged in detail without more information but, as an example, there are seven ancient woodlands along the edge of the existing motorway. There would also be the potential for infill development between the new road and the existing motorway, as is now starting to emerge on the M6 Toll.

It would lead to more climate change emissions

The Prime Minister has said that climate change is the single biggest long-term problem facing the world⁸. Road transport produces 18% of UK emissions of carbon dioxide (CO₂), the main gas causing climate change⁹. Increasing road capacity and car dependency and making it easier to travel further will encourage people to drive, increasing emissions. The MIDMAN study concluded that the only option for the M6 compatible with meeting our commitments on reducing CO₂ emissions was no widening at all.

It is the wrong sort of road-user charging

The Government has recently published and welcomed the report of a feasibility study looking at the possibility of introducing a nationwide system of road-user charging. This study concluded that such a system could reduce congestion by up to 48% and could be technologically feasible by about 2014¹⁰. Friends of the Earth believes that nationwide road-user charging is needed as part of an overall policy of traffic reduction, but that the charging should be based on existing roads, not new toll roads which increase the overall capacity of the road network. The revenue should also be ring-fenced for investment in improving alternatives to the car rather than going to a private company.

It could lead to pressure for further road-building

The Government has rejected plans for a new motorway linking the M6 and the M56 in the Knutsford / Mere area of Cheshire, because of its environmental impacts. It is almost certain that the roads lobby would press for this to be re-instated. The roads lobby is also pressing for a motorway on the western side of West Midlands. This could also be seen as a model for other motorways across the country.

It is part of a wider agenda

Friends of the Earth believes that the M6 Expressway is the Government dipping its toe in the water, testing public views on building new roads in this way, and that if the M6

Expressway is approved, then similar toll motorways could be built parallel to stretches of the M1, M4, M5, M25, M42 and M62.

What can you do?

Please respond to the Government's consultation, objecting to the proposal to build the M6 Expressway, and encourage as many of your friends and neighbours to do so as possible. The consultation closes on 21st October 2004.

The address for responses is

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You can also send an email response via the Friends of the Earth website www.foe.co.uk/campaigns/transport/press_for_change/m6_expressway/index.html

NOTES

- 1 Department for Transport 'M6: giving motorists a choice' – see www.dft.gov.uk/stellent/groups/dft_transstrat/documents/page/dft_transstrat_029573.hcsp
- 2 Hansard 6th July column 694
- 3 ibid
- 4 ibid
- 5 The M6 Toll is a dual three lane motorway running from junction 4 of the M6 in Warwickshire to junction 11a in Staffordshire. For more information, see <http://www.m6toll.co.uk/>
- 6 Department for Transport 'M6: giving motorists a choice' op cit
- 7 MEL is owned by Macquarie Bank of Australia and Autostrada, an Italian toll motorway operator.
- 8 Evidence to the House of Commons Liaison Committee 6th July 2004
- 9 Office of National Statistics 'Greenhouse gas emissions from transport industries' 22nd July 2004
- 10 Department for Transport 'Feasibility study of road pricing in the UK'