



Anthony Browne MP

Member of Parliament for South Cambridgeshire
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By email only to:

Cllr Bridget Smith, Leader, South Cambridgeshire District Council and GCP Board Member
Cllr Lucy Nethsingha, Leader, Cambridgeshire County Council
Cllr Anna Smith, Leader, Cambridge City Council

26th September 2022

Dear Councillors,

Your proposals on Congestion Charging

The Greater Cambridge Partnership (GCP) is controlled by the three councils you lead. I am writing to ask you, and your Liberal Democrat and Labour colleagues on these councils, to respond to the concerns of thousands of residents on proposals to introduce congestion charging in Cambridge.

The GCP wants to introduce the UK's most draconian congestion charging scheme in Cambridge. The proposed £5 daily driving charge will apply to cars, vans, motorbikes, mopeds, and even fully electric vehicles. The proposed charging zone covers the whole of the city, including Addenbrooke's, Royal Papworth, and The Rosie hospitals. With few exemptions, everyone will have to pay the full charge for journeys into and within Cambridge, including residents, NHS staff and patients. This means city dwellers will face a £5 fee just to leave their driveway, or to move their car along the street to a different parking space.

The public backlash against this proposed tax on drivers has been nothing short of extraordinary. At the time of writing, nearly 20,000 signatures have been collected on petitions calling for the plans to be scrapped.

Together with local Conservatives from across Cambridgeshire, I have opposed this proposal from the outset. It will disproportionately disadvantage those who are least able to pay, creating a two-tier system where only the well-off can afford to drive into the city. It will damage hospitality and retail businesses in the city and create rat runs in rural South Cambridgeshire.

No other city in the UK has introduced or proposed such an inflexible and wide-ranging charging regime, meaning Cambridge will be a national outlier if these plans go ahead. Only central London comes close, but even there, electric vehicles are exempt from all charges, residents get a 90% discount on the congestion charge. Motorbikes and mopeds do not pay the congestion charge, and many of them do not pay the ULEZ charge either. London also has an extensive underground system, frequent overland trains and buses every few minutes, offering a genuinely desirable alternative to driving for the vast majority. Cambridge does not, and will not, have a comparable public transport offering.

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A few UK cities have adopted or proposed Clean Air Zones. Almost all of these exempt private cars and all of them exempt electric vehicles, thus incentivising the transition to zero emissions vehicles. Several cities, including Manchester, Liverpool, Leeds, Nottingham and Exeter have scrapped plans for Clean Air Zones altogether, in favour of more targeted solutions.

Initially, the GCP proposes to spend £50m of taxpayer money upfront to subsidise more frequent and cheaper buses before introducing the charge (there is currently no clear plan for how this will be delivered) but acknowledges that further funds may be required. Thereafter, the extra buses will be subsidised from the estimated £70m per year generated by the congestion charge. Residents rightly want to know why Cambridge expects such a large public subsidy drawn from all drivers, when other comparable cities do not.

Whilst I welcome the aspiration to improve bus services, there are many people for whom buses, no matter how cheap, simply will not provide a realistic alternative to driving.

Convenience, frequency, reliability, journey length, and cost are all factors in how people choose to travel. Buses simply will not work for a vast number of people and journeys. Shift workers, those for whom an hourly village bus service is inadequate or does not go to the destination they require, the elderly and vulnerable, parents with prams and buggies, or who need to drop young children off at school or nursery before heading to work, those who need to travel to multiple locations each day, or to carry heavy equipment, trips to the hospital or taking a pet to the vet. These are just a few of the everyday situations in which buses will not be suitable. The public understands this, but it seems that the councils you lead do not, or if they do, they do not care.

I urge you and your colleagues to scrutinise the evidence base for the GCP's congestion charging plans. The GCP's own traffic monitoring data confirms that motor vehicle volumes are down 10%, air pollution down 36% and bus passengers down 23% compared with pre-pandemic levels. This appears to confirm the increasing evidence base that home-working and hybrid-working are revolutionising the way we work and travel. The existing Park and Ride car parks are not full, and congestion is much reduced post-pandemic. Why is an indiscriminate driving tax considered appropriate in these circumstances? Much more comprehensive real-world data is needed to understand how our travel habits have changed in the Cambridge area and how your transport planning needs to adapt for this.

It is also very concerning to see that the GCP's modelling data forecasts a reduction in rail travel following the introduction of the congestion charge (including a 45% reduction within the charging area and 20% within South Cambridgeshire). If correct, this could threaten the viability of local rail services and would seem to be contrary to the GCP's objectives, not least because rail not only produces zero emissions during operation but also causes no road congestion in the city. Surely, you should be aiming to *increase* rail travel in and around Cambridge?

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Residents of South Cambridgeshire will be alarmed to hear that, according to GCP forecasts, they will see a 15% increase in car journeys within their district following the introduction of the charge. This revelation is tucked away in table in a modelling report and was not highlighted in any of the papers prepared by the GCP for the recent Joint Assembly meeting.

As council leaders, you, and your councillor colleagues, have a duty to listen to your residents and the businesses who are demanding a rethink of these proposals at to scrutinise the GCP's evidence base. There is up to £0.5billion of taxpayers' money at stake for their projects. It must be spent wisely and with the backing of the people you are elected to represent. The current congestion charging plans manifestly fail to do either.

If the GCP Executive Board votes this week to progress plans for the congestion charge, will you commit to holding a full council debate and vote at your respective councils, to put on public record your council's position on the GCP's proposals?

Your sincerely,

Anthony Browne MP

cc

Cllr Elisa Meschini, GCP Board Chair (Cambridgeshire County Council)

Cllr Dave Baigent, GCP Board Member (Cambridge City Council)

Cllr Neil Gough, Substitute GCP Board Representative (Cambridgeshire County Council)

Cllr Brian Milnes, Substitute GCP Board Representative (South Cambs District Council)

Cllr Rosy Moore, Substitute GCP Board Representative (Cambridge City Council)

Dr Nik Johnson, Mayor, Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority

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