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Operation Stack and road users

Transport Focus is the statutory, independent consumer watchdog for users of the English Strategic Road Network, bus coach and tram passengers in England (outside London) and passengers on Britain's National Rail Network.

I am writing to each of you about Operation Stack's impacts on road users in an attempt to understand more about the effects of the current deployment. If we all understand this in more depth then it might help when formulating decisions and policy for the future. Given the current expectation that Operation Stack will have to be implemented frequently in the next few weeks we believe there is a need to focus on these questions as soon as possible.

Through lessons learned from using Operation Stack over a number of years you, as lead agencies, have clearly developed the most broadly acceptable response to a uniquely challenging problem. However, we have received representations from trade associations, and haulage and bus companies, about the increasing frequency of implementation of Operation Stack and concerns about the new four-phase approach recently introduced. This is causing severe impacts for users of the M20 and across the surrounding area. Some of those views are summarised in the attached enclosure.

1. Information: is Operation Stack on or not?

Trying to find out if and when Operation Stack is being deployed seems harder than it should be. The Kent Police website – the obvious 'single source of the truth' - is helpful when the Operation is live; but this and other relevant websites, including Kent Council,



Highways England, and Port of Dover, seem to be giving varying messages at any one time.

It would be helpful to understand the plan for dissemination of information in more detail. Are we sure that the different players involved (Highways England, Eurotunnel, Dover etc.) are communicating a common, synchronised message to road users about the delays approaching the ports along with suggested alternative action?

2. Welfare

We understand that vehicles are inching forward in the queue for many hours, and exceptionally up to four days. The Kent Resilience Team has performed an invaluable service endeavoring to meet drivers' needs for food and water and toilet/washing facilities. However, it must be important to establish what reasonable needs should be met, and consequently the service standards the Team should work to. Do such standards exist? And if so, what are they?

3. Understanding the impact

Trying to assess the actual impact of this operation, beyond anecdotes, is difficult. We are beginning to monitor some of the social media activity to understand the impacts on some users.

But we are not aware of any analysis of the effect on drivers held in the operation and others affected. It would be enormously helpful to know if you or other parties hold data around:

- Who are the HGV drivers caught in the queues? What languages do they speak? What loads are they typically carrying?
- I understand there is some helpful data from the Port of Dover on average wait in the queue for their customers, but is a more comprehensive picture available?
- Does anyone communicate what might be needed in advance to help them survive for days?
- What is the impact on all other traffic, including diverted car / van traffic, and local businesses and residents?

If we can understand the true nature of the problems and the impacts it will be easier to target effective information and mitigation activities. It should also help assess if the right balance has been struck between the needs of motorway users and those in the surrounding area.



4. Alternative methods of traffic control

The key imperative to keep the flow of traffic moving both for HGVs and other vehicles, whether crossing the Channel or not, is obvious to all. Without an alternative space, such as a lorry park, we appreciate that the motorway itself currently provides a reasonable amount of flexible space. But, can it be used better to provide improved flow? Is the current method too restrictive and unnecessarily limiting traffic movement?

As an immediate alternative:

- Would it be possible to introduce a contra-flow system with suitably low speed limits, on the westbound carriageway during Phases 1 and 2?
- Could this even be provided without barriers to provide greater flexibility?

We know that there are no easy solutions to this problem and we await with interest the report from the European Gateway Group. We hope a strong local consensus emerges around a sustainable solution.

Providing large scale temporary flexible parking solutions for large numbers of lorries seem unlikely for a host of reasons. Perhaps the answer lies in improving the local infrastructure so that is more resilient when Operation Stack is deployed. That way everyone benefits.

I would be very interested in receiving your individual or joint response to these questions. Given we aim to be useful in helping transport users and those that make decisions about transport services, we are ready to help in any way we can. In the course of the last few years we have gained invaluable insight into the needs of rail and bus passengers during disruption, and have worked successfully with operators to improve the passenger experience. Possibly some of this knowledge could be deployed to help with this challenge.

A copy of this letter has been sent to Andrew Jones MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department for Transport.

Yours sincerely

Anthony Smith
Chief Executive
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Operation Stack – Experiences 22 July 2015

Matt Clarke, Transport Manager, Castledene (40-vehicle haulier based just west of Maidstone, majoring on Kent business)

Feels Operation Stack is “crippling” Kent, for example:

- M20 needed to get drivers to work as well as for fleet movements; chronic congestion means drivers and depot staff are needing to be paid overtime to comply with all current regulations.
- Serious impact on communities along A20 diversion route - e.g. Hollingbourne locals struggle to get out of their houses and businesses.
- Illegal HGV parking in Ashford makes it impossible to deliver and tricky to navigate through.

Norman Kemp, Director, Nu Venture Coaches Limited (local bus and coach operator, Maidstone based)

Over a decade of Operation stack – “real frustration” with lack of progress, given:

- Many single track roads in Kent – traffic congestion is a major problem as drivers try to seek alternative routes to 30+ mile queues on main routes
- The congestion impacts on passengers – they depend on the coach running to time which it just can’t do. Services may start 40-50 minutes late and be over 2 hours plus by the end of the day. This can strand passengers.
- Impact on service viability: passengers numbers fall during this period, and drivers have to be paid overtime; some routes may have to be cut
- Service quality seriously undermined by poor communication about when Operation Stack is being implemented - no coherent or central information source

Philip Norwell, Managing Director, Stagecoach East Kent (main provider of local bus services)

- Local bus reliability suffers significantly in both Ashford and Dover: the centre of Ashford quickly becomes gridlocked; and major delays on the approach to the Port of Dover where queuing freight (avoiding Stack) has blocked junctions and roundabouts, despite best efforts of Police.
- direct impact on longer Maidstone - Ashford - Folkestone route simply because the A20 becomes the route for all except freight
- Stagecoach would normally manage the situation on the ground quite effectively and customers are understanding of the dilemma; recently it has been the extended periods of implementation (however unavoidable) that has caused increase in complaints, from customers who are far removed from the cause of the problem