

Foreign drivers cost taxpayers £53m in unpaid road tolls

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Almost a quarter of foreign drivers are ignoring tolls on Britain's busiest motorway, leaving the country as much as £53 million out of pocket.

Figures released under the Freedom of Information Act show that more than 500,000 overseas drivers have failed to pay to use the Dartford Crossing on the M25 since a new charging system was introduced in October 2014.

Highways England said that the vast majority of non-payers were from mainland Europe, but some cars were registered as far away as Burkina Faso, Cambodia, Gabon, the Faroe Islands, the Philippines and Timor.

The disclosure led to claims that the new charging system, introduced to cut congestion, is not fit for purpose.

Traditional toll booths have been replaced by number plate recognition cameras that log passing vehicles and bill their owners.

Drivers are charged between £2.50 and £6 for a single journey and must set up an account in advance or pay the toll by midnight the following day. Penalties for non-payment can reach up to £105 after more than a month.

Motoring groups have claimed that

the lack of clear warnings on routes leading to the crossing, which goes over and under the Thames to the east of London, were to blame for widespread non-compliance.

Steve Gooding, director of the RAC Foundation, said: "Nobody wants to see the return of the toll booth, but all drivers have an obligation to keep paying their way. The best method of ensuring foreign compliance is to effectively penalise non-compliance.

"The message would soon get through if those avoiding the charge at Dartford knew for certain they would get a knock on the door back home in Dortmund, Donetsk or Dubrovnik."

Highways England said that 2,040,270 foreign-registered vehicles had used the crossing during charging hours between November 30, 2014, and December 17, 2015.

Of those, 75.1 per cent paid the road charge, leaving 508,027 non-payers. According to Highways England 433,556 penalty notices, worth up to £105 each, have been passed to a debt recovery agency.

In a letter accompanying the statistics, the organisation said: "Where the road user charge is not paid, enforcement action will be taken regardless of the road user's country of origin."