1. Context

The open public consultation (OPC) ran from 8 July to 5 October, although late contributions were still accepted.

The OPC contained two set of questions: one testing the feelings of users for the general public, and a more technical one for experts. Respondents were also given the opportunity to provide any further comments. Some respondents also submitted additional documents providing further relevant information. In order to obtain better insight and more detailed information, a set of targeted interviews have been carried out subsequently.

The evaluation of the implementation of road charging policies took place in 2013, when also a proposal was prepared but finally not adopted. The questionnaires therefore were based on the issues identified during that evaluation as well as the impact assessment that accompanied the 2013 proposal. The issues covered included the quality of road infrastructure, the fairness of road pricing (taxes and charges), the problems of congestion and CO₂-emissions, as well as the scope of EU legislation in the field.

2. Objectives of the OPC

The main objectives of the OPC were: 1) to confirm/verify the problems identified during the ex post evaluation; 2) to seek the opinion of stakeholders on possible policy measures; and 3) to assess the expected impacts of the possible policy measures.

3. Statistical information

There were 135 responses to the questionnaires as well as 48 additional documents of which 27 were of relevance. These responses covered a variety of stakeholder groups, including transport undertakings and their representatives (42%), consumers/citizens and their representatives (14%), public authorities (13%), the construction industry (7%), public transport associations (4%), and tolling service/solution providers (4%).

There was a relatively high number of coordinated responses (36, i.e. 27%), following 12 different templates for answers, indicating that standard replies circulated by associations to their members and sent in high numbers.
Responses were received from respondents residing in, or organisations based in, 20 EU Member States, with the majority of responses (80%) are from EU-15 Member States. The highest number of responses was received from Belgium (24), Germany (20), Spain (19), Austria (11), and Hungary (8).

4. Main findings and position on the main potential policy measures

   a. Opinions on the fairness of pricing

The majority of stakeholders (72%) felt that different taxes and charge systems are thought to cause market distortion, therefore supporting EU harmonisation. Transport undertakings were strongest in agreement with this, with 82% of respondents indicating that they felt that this was the case. 70% agreed that the exemption of lorries between 3.5t and 12t in some countries can distort competition.

Regarding light goods vehicles, there is mixed opinion over whether the fact that the Eurovignette Directive does not cover LGVs can cause market distortion within the freight transport industry. The majority of respondents agreed (54%) that this was the case, whereas 31% disagreed.

Regarding passenger cars, 60% of the respondents (85% of consumers/citizens) felt that revisions to the rules could introduce fairness for non-resident road users to some extent or fairly significantly.

There was disagreement as to whether road users are paying enough based on these principles, with 65% of transport undertakings feeling that charges were too high, while 52% of consumers/citizens felt that charges were too low. In the case of light vehicles, respondents from EU-13 Member States felt strongly (67%) that prices are too low. This is probably linked to the prevalence of vignette schemes in those countries.

   b. Scope of the rules and overall approach

The survey suggested that any legislation introduced should not be focused solely on HGVs, but on all road vehicles including both freight and passenger transport (54%) based on the polluter pays (75%) and user pays (80%) principles.

At the same time, only 51% agreed that the overall price of transport should cover all related externalities, with 42% were against. Consumers/citizens agreed in highest proportion (63%).

Regarding the geographic scope, 34% were in favour of applying legislation to all main or national roads, whilst 36% felt that the legislation would be best applied to road infrastructure of European importance, such as motorways and national roads carrying significant international traffic.

Regarding congestion, with the exception of toll service providers (strongly feeling that EU legislation should be applied, in order to address congestion on all of the TEN-T network, motorways, and interurban roads), most respondents felt that the problem should be dealt with by Member States and local authorities.

Most stakeholders (82%) agreed that the revenues generated from taxes and charges should be reinvested back into the maintenance, repair and upgrade of the road network, ensuring
transparency of the process to the public. At the same time several felt that tax revenues should not be used solely for the support of infrastructure, but should be used to fund other transport-related services, e.g. public transport.

There was also broad agreement (74%) on the question whether the EU should make sure that all vignette prices are set proportionately.

On the way to address CO\textsubscript{2}-emissions, many suggested the introduction of regulations covering fuel consumption and CO\textsubscript{2}-emissions for heavy duty vehicles; that CO\textsubscript{2}-emissions should be accounted for in fuel taxes; and that the focus should rest on taxing fuels appropriately.

In addition, there was some concern that by changing this Directive there would be a danger of 'double taxation', i.e. by another source for the same reason (e.g. annual road tax). The stakeholders believe that EU-wide harmonisation of the rules would be an ideal solution, as it would create fair competition rather than favouring companies in countries where taxes are lower.

c. On the proposed solutions

Overall the proposed changes were positively received, with the stakeholders considering all identified issues to be covered by the Eurovignette Directive as important.

1) Challenge of road maintenance

All three proposed measures received around 2/3 of approval, with monitoring and reporting of revenues and expenditures getting slightly higher mark (69%) than the introduction of rules on the liability of the keeper of the toll road, and the requirement of national plans on the maintenance and upgrade of roads (both 65%).

2) Fair pricing for HGVs

The stakeholders were proponents of phasing out vignette schemes in favour of distance-based charging for HGVs or all goods vehicles.

3) Fair pricing for other vehicles

Respondents felt the most favourable with the inclusion of light goods vehicles and buses/coaches was also suggested from the responses. Other options – including either light vehicles or buses/coaches received a lower level of approval.

4) Possible extension of mark-ups beyond mountainous regions

Responses were mixed: 32% felt that this provision should be extended, to use the revenues more flexibly, to support projects within the same corridor, or used to compensate for the higher costs linked to the use of an alternative infrastructure on the same corridor, while 29% were against. EU-15 Member States were more in favour with EU-13 respondents less so.

For some, further mark-ups may result in double charging, and no further mark-ups can be justified. If a mark-up is used in these areas, then there needs to be transparency in its calculation, with its contribution clearly separated from the base charge.
5) Measures addressing CO$_2$-emissions

The proposed measures for addressing CO$_2$ emissions from HGVs were supported by the stakeholders. The options that were most agreed with were the measures to promote fuel efficient vehicles and technologies by reduced road charges for them (68% and 66% respectively). By contrast, the only option which suffered a more mixed response was the phasing out of the EURO exhaust emissions standards. Even so, in this, 44% expressed agreement with the measure, whilst 33% disagreed.

The need for an adequate measuring methodology was widely accepted.

6) Addressing congestion

Proposals for congestion charging were met with scepticism. The greatest approval rate (40%) was given to 'allowing congestion charging for all vehicles', with the possibility to extend the application of mark-ups receiving the lowest disapproval (40%).

It was agreed that if congestion charging is applied, it should cover all vehicles, not just HGVs. Some said that congestion charging may not actually have the intended effects, as often users do not have alternatives.