

Is the UK's lorry vignette scheme the first green shoot of recovery for RUC schemes?

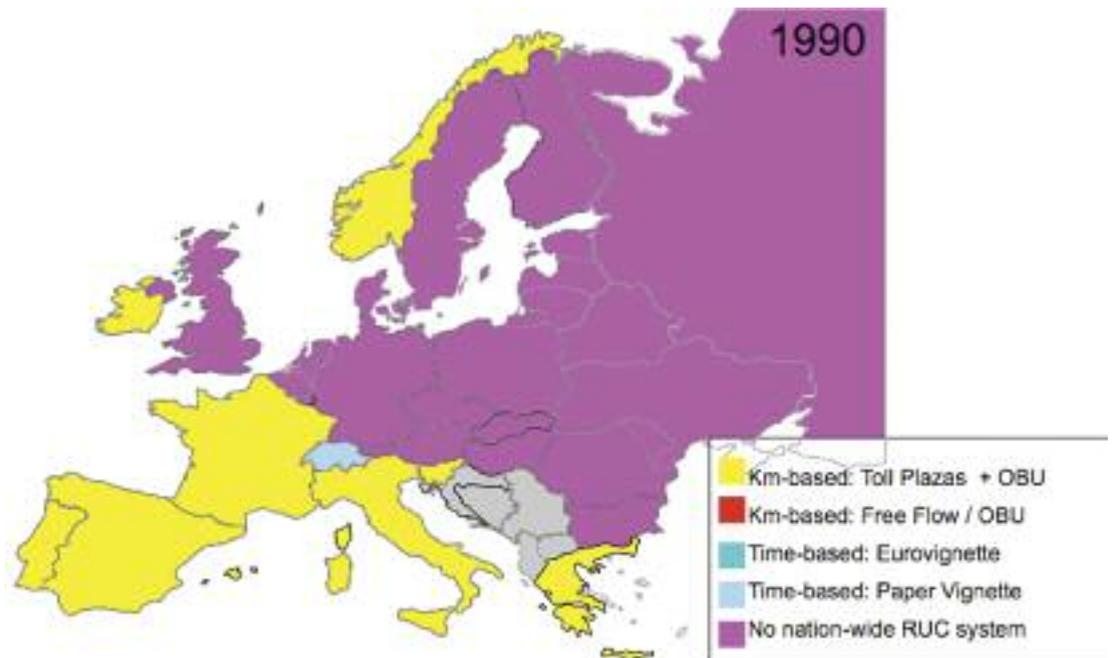
The ITS-UK road user charging interest group conference last week saw speaker after speaker search desperately for good news for those who advocate road pricing in the UK and, while many of these searches may prove to be fruitless, there were one or two signs that charging could come to the UK... eventually. **Rik Thomas** reports

Those in favour of road user charging (RUC) schemes in the UK have suffered several serious setbacks in recent years, with referendums in Edinburgh and Manchester both rejecting congestion charging schemes by significant margins; London mayor Boris Johnson withdrawing the Western Extension of the capital's scheme introduced by his predecessor; and the previous Labour administration cancelling its planned RUC scheme for lorries. And yet, according to Stephen Joseph, CEO of the Campaign for Better Transport and the keynote speaker at the ITS-UK RUC conference, there are some reasons for a mild measure of optimism.

The current Conservative-Liberal Democrat Government's decision to re-introduce a road user charging scheme for heavy goods vehicles, albeit in a much less ambitious way than had been proposed by Labour, "does offer opportunities", Joseph said. "A pro-motorist RUC scheme is still possible," he claimed, listing the salient facts that all local authorities are currently short of cash, that smartcard technology is currently advancing in leaps and bounds, and that a 'free-flow' system for the Dartford crossing of the River Thames is being planned as three reasons for optimism.

Joseph also listed the slow but steady progress of Nottingham's workplace parking levy, the Government's Localism Bill to give more power to local authorities and the administration's advocacy of electric vehicles, which will inevitably lead to loss of revenue from fuel duty if it succeeds in getting a significant proportion of UK motorists to switch to electric vehicles, as other reasons why RUC has not suffered a terminal setback in the UK. "Pay-as-you-go charging for motorists is

... but that, by 2011, only the UK, Finland and several former USSR countries had no kind of lorry RUC scheme in place at all



Ludger Linnemann of AGES International showed that back in 1990 lorry RUC schemes in Europe were very much in their infancy, with only Switzerland having any kind of vignette system...

unfashionable at present," he did concede. "But congestion, carbon and money shortages will bring it back."

Lagging behind the pack

Ludger Linnemann of AGES International, the company that administers the Eurovignette scheme currently in operation in five European countries (the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, Denmark and Sweden), expanded on Joseph's point that the introduction of a 'vignette' charging scheme for lorries in the UK could well be a bridgehead for more widespread and complex schemes in the future. Linnemann explained how lorry RUC has slowly but steadily spread across Europe in the last 20 years. After pointing out that the UK, apart from Finland and several countries of the former Soviet Union, is the last European country not to have some form of lorry RUC scheme, Linnemann made the interesting point that every nation that has introduced lorry RUC started with a simple time-based vignette system (where truck

drivers pay by the day, or buy a longer-term pass such as an annual vignette) before moving on to a more complex and, in many cases, distance-based charging system. Those hoping that the UK will make a rapid transition from a simple vignette system to a more complex distance-based RUC system, however, should take heed of Linnemann's warning that the most rapid transition from A to B was made by Austria – and that took seven years and, he added wryly, the Austrians only did it that quickly because they wanted to get their new system in place ahead of the Germans! And talking of whom... the Germans made their switch over in about ten years, with the Czechs, Slovaks and Swiss taking about 12, 15 and 16 years respectively, with Poland planning to do so in nine years, and Denmark and Belgium 18 years.

A brave new world?

Probably the most optimistic speaker at the ITS-UK RUC was Southampton University academic John Walker, who has undertaken soon-to-be-published research for the RAC Foundation on the public acceptability of road pricing and has come to the perhaps surprising conclusion that there is far less public hostility to the RUC concept than recent events may perhaps suggest. "National road pricing can be public acceptable," Walker told the conference. "And it may cost much less to implement than previous estimates suggest – but there is ignorance and misunderstanding of it."

Walker's recommendation was that the 'Stockholm experience' of trialling a congestion charging scheme before holding a referendum on it should be re-enacted in the UK. "Perhaps a former Transport Innovation Fund (TIF) bidder [should be used] since they will be best prepared – using ANPR technology," Walker said. "A referendum, if necessary, should be held after the scheme has been implemented, so that people vote based on real knowledge and experience." He also advocated that a lorry RUC scheme should be introduced nationwide "at the earliest opportunity". "The benefits are clear, the microwave and GNSS technologies are proven and ANPR may be able to do the same job at lower cost," Walker added.

