

Response from AA

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The Scottish Executive
Roads Policy and Finance Division
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Dear Madam

TOLLED BRIDGES REVIEW – PHASE TWO CONSULTATION

Please find listed below the response of the AA Motoring Trust to each of the twenty consultation questions outlined in the above document.

Yours sincerely

NEIL GREIG
HEAD OF POLICY

Exemptions for Disabled Drivers/Blue Badge Holders/Emergency Vehicles

QUESTION 1 - Do you think that the system for verifying Blue Badge exemptions should be changed? If so, can you suggest what these changes should be?

The current system is bureaucratic, time consuming and does not encourage its use by disabled drivers. In the short term the system could be changed so that the production of a valid blue badge is enough to secure the discount without the need to fill in paperwork at the tolls. In the longer term technology will deliver the opportunity to pass the tollbooths automatically without the need to prove entitlement on the spot. This could take the form of a database of valid registration numbers or some form of machine-readable pass.

QUESTION 2 - Do you consider that the exemptions for emergency service vehicles should remain limited to the Ambulance, Fire and Police Services, or should we consider extending this to cover other key services?

The AA Trust would have no objection to services such as doctors on call, bomb squad or coastguard having an exemption.

QUESTION 3 - Vehicles used by bridge authorities to respond to breakdowns on each bridge are exempt. Do you see a case for extending exemptions to the AA, RAC or other commercial breakdown services responding to breakdowns on the road network other than where this is the responsibility of the bridge authorities?

The AA will be replying separately on this matter but the Trust would point out that breakdowns close to the bridge can have a significant impact on delays. Any measure that allows accredited breakdown vehicles to access such breakdowns quickly should be welcomed.

QUESTION 4 - Should public transport vehicles and multiple occupancy vehicles be considered for exemption from bridge tolls?

The AA Trust would support positive incentives for such vehicles linked to developments in 'park and ride' and 'park and share' services. We would not support increases in tolls for single occupancy vehicles on what are essentially key sections of the long distance trunk road network.

Discount Schemes

QUESTION 5 - Should tolled bridges offer multiple crossing discount vouchers to all bridge users, or particular classes of users such as buses or multiple occupancy vehicles? If so, why should this be?

The current system of paying tolls on Scotland's tolled bridges is archaic, expensive and works against efforts to provide a more flexible approach. Modern systems such as direct debit, electronic tags, unmanned 'throw in the money' tollbooths or credit card payment options should have been introduced years ago. People expect to be able to pay in such ways and would also expect a discount since automatic collection saves the bridge authority money.

The idea that multiple crossing discounts should be removed on the Forth Road Bridge in an effort to price people off the bridge would be unpopular and unlikely to work. Only incentives to use car sharing or public transport linked to a genuine step change in quality of provision are likely to tempt drivers out of their cars.

Classification of Vehicles

QUESTION 6 - What are your views on a common vehicle classification system for levying tolls at all Scotland's tolled bridges?

The AA Trust represents the interests of car drivers and would expect any classification system to treat them as one group. Lorries do most damage to our infrastructure and the AA Trust would support a system that penalised those LGVs which cause most damage. This could be linked to incentives for modern vehicles with less damaging suspension systems.

Given the importance of short break tourism to the economy of Scotland tolls for caravan users should not be onerous.

Reducing Traffic and Congestion on Tolled Bridges

QUESTION 7 - Should we encourage modal shift from single occupancy cars to public transport and multiple occupancy vehicles on all tolled bridges? If so, how might this be achieved?

Public transport and car share options must be easy to access, cheap and above all safe and reliable. The AA Trust support the provision of new bus and car share lanes on the approach to the tolled bridges but regrets that the bridges themselves do not have the capacity to support such lanes.

The Trust supports the concept of maximising the use of the new capacity created by the formation of new bus lanes by allowing single

occupancy drivers to pay a premium to use them as well. High Occupancy Toll lanes (HOT) have been a great success in the USA.

Levels of congestion on the Erskine Bridge do not yet merit any form of control or incentive schemes. The AA Trust support the removal of tolls from the Erskine Bridge to help redistribute traffic away from other congested Clyde crossings.

QUESTION 8 - Do you think that raising tolls at peak times would result in less congestion at those times?

The AA Motoring Trust believes that many drivers on tolled bridges are using them as part of the long distance trunk road network and therefore cannot access public transport alternatives. Recent history – the drive to change to unleaded petrol for example shows that incentives work far better than punitive taxation. Affordable public transport options such as ‘park and ride’ and discounts for multiple occupancy, for those who can use them, are more likely to change behaviour.

The Trust also believes that much can still be done to reduce congestion through better accident management, incident recovery and driver information.

A modern high tech tolling regime can price according to demand and incentivise off peak travel in the clearest and most easily understood way. Without investment in new systems and a continued reliance on manual collection it is hard to see how the bridges can be used more efficiently.

Tolls Reflecting Cost of Wear and Tear

QUESTION 9 - Should tolls reflect the impacts of different vehicle types on the need for maintenance, repair and strengthening programmes? If so, do you have suggestions for how this might be done?

Heavy goods vehicles fitted with the most damaging forms of suspension should pay the highest tolls.

Procedure for Changing Tolls or Charges

QUESTION 10 - Do you think the current process involving Public Local Inquiries (PLIs) is appropriate for making changes to tolls or charges to meet the costs of managing, maintaining and operating a bridge?

The current system is overly complex but has proved a disincentive for more frequent increases in tolls. Bridge users should have the opportunity to comment and object to the tolls they pay and authorities must set out a transparent case for any increases. See question 11

QUESTION 11 - Do you consider that final approval by Scottish Ministers is an essential safeguard for toll/charge payers or do you think the final decision is a matter for the management authority for the bridge?

It is essential that a bridge operating authority do not sit as judge and jury on toll increases. The involvement of Ministers or some other independent party is important in providing necessary checks and balances. The AA Trust would not object to the removal of PLIs if ultimate decision-making remained separate from the toll collecting authority.

QUESTION 12 - Do you consider all tolls should be subject to increases linked to an inflation index?

The AA Trust has no objection to this concept providing common sense is exercised in minimising the number of changes and setting customer friendly toll levels that reduce the need to carry or dispense change.

Executive/Transport Agency

QUESTION 13 - What advantages and disadvantages do you see if any or all of the tolled bridges were to be managed by the Scottish Executive or the national transport agency?

The tolled bridges are currently well run, well maintained and retain a high level of expert knowledge. The Trust's main fear is that the subsuming of the bridges into bigger organisations might lead to the diversion of funds if other programmes are being cut or run over budget.

If a structure were proposed that transparently protected the income of the bridges and maintained the policy of tolls being first and foremost to maintain the bridge then we may be willing to consider such a move.

The main advantage of passing control of the bridges to a central body would be their better integration into the strategic road network with improved information flows and a better overview of their national role.

Regional Transport Partnerships

QUESTION 14 - Should we consider transferring some or all of the powers and functions of current bridge authorities to Regional Transport Partnerships in future?

The AA Trust considers all tolled bridges in Scotland to be of national importance and key parts of the strategic network. We would be concerned that regional partnerships might dilute this approach and see the bridges as an income source for local projects.

QUESTION 15 - As the Erskine Bridge functions both as a key national and strategic link for the West of Scotland as well as an important local link for communities north and south of the River Clyde, do you see any argument for de-trunking it so that it could become the responsibility of the RTP for the West of Scotland?

See question 14 – The Trust consider that the Erskine Bridge can still exercise a regional and local function whilst remaining under central control. These are matters of better communication and management links that can be fostered without the need to de-trunk.

Joint Board (FETA Model)

QUESTION 16 - Do you have any views on the advantages or disadvantages of the FETA model, for any or all of the bridges?

The FETA model appears to be working well although it has added yet another layer of transport planning on top of that already being undertaken by Fife and Edinburgh Councils and bodies such as SESTRANS. Given willingness by all parties concerned there is no reason why other models such as Transport Agency control should not be able to deliver similar levels of well integrated planning.

FETA has improved its communication with its customers but more could be done to develop a relationship with them – modern payment methods offer the best opportunity to do this.

Joint Board (TRBJB)

QUESTION 17 - Do you have any views on the advantages or disadvantages of the TRBJB model, for any or all of the bridges?

The Joint Board works well in its own quiet way but in this day and age is not seen as a customer facing body. Improving the voice of bridge users in such bodies would be a major step forward.

Single Tolled Bridges Authority

QUESTION 18 - Do you think there would be any merit in having a single body responsible for operating and managing all tolled bridges in Scotland?

As outlined above there may be merit in bringing such important parts of the strategic road network under Executive or Transport Agency control. This would only be acceptable however if the funding of the bridges was transparent and there were clear opportunities for the voice of the customer to be heard. The long term funding of bridge maintenance must be ring fenced and protected from short-term budget decisions.

QUESTION 19 - If you think all bridges should be run by one body what form, powers and functions should this body have?

See Question 18

QUESTION 20 - Are there any other management options that you would like to suggest?

Experience in France and the USA shows that private companies can run tolled infrastructure successfully with innovative ideas and a more customer-facing persona. Any new structure in Scotland should investigate projects such as the Versailles Tunnel in France to learn about best practice.