

Response from Dunbartonshire Chamber of Commerce  
Strathleven House, Vale of Leven Industrial Estate, Dumbarton, G82 3PD

## **Tolled Bridge Review Phase Two Consultation**

Over the past few weeks we have undertaken a survey of a representative cross section of members from the broader Dunbartonshire area. This survey covered retail, manufacturing, services and other areas of commerce.

It is our policy that the tolls on the Erskine Bridge should be withdrawn as it is the only tolled bridge in Scotland to have Trunk Road status. As such it should be treated the same as the Kingston Bridge and Clyde tunnel. Tolls create an artificial barrier to trade and discourage the free and true movement of goods and labour from one side of the Clyde to the other.

The results of the survey show a varied response and attitudes to the Erskine Bridge depending on the nature, frequency and time of travel. Most criticism was levelled at the amount of road works and their impact on peak time congestion. The amount of road works over the past 18 months has increased significantly. All respondents realise that the works are essential and would be carried out whether there were tolls or not.

It was discovered that when users in Milngavie/Bearsden/Clydebank areas consider their journey for leisure they will almost always use the Clyde Tunnel rather than pay the additional £1.20 on the Erskine Bridge. Alternatively a venue on the north of the river was occasionally sought instead.

Small businesses see very little impact on their choice of route if they are infrequent users of the Erskine Bridge. Where regular cross river journeys are required, other factors start to come into play, such as time of day, day of week, school holidays, and location of appointment near to Bridge or tunnel.

We discovered that a number of medium sized businesses have had to offer cash awards to employees who live on the south side of the river to travel to the north for work. The tolls act as a barrier to employment by artificially raising the cost of employment by £288 per annum (excluding the 10% discount – if taken up). Individuals on very low pay can ill afford this increased cost of travel. Larger employers suffer more directly from the level of the tolls levied at The Erskine Bridge. Allied Distillers for example (West Dunbartonshire's largest private sector employer) export significant quantities of their produce via Greenock Ocean Terminal and rail terminals at Coatbridge and Mossend, all of which necessitate crossing the river by way of the Erskine Bridge. The costs of transporting containers and other equipment every working day is significant and the Erskine Bridge is an artificial cost that companies such as Allied Distillers have to carry. When you consider that Allied

Distillers faces industry competition, the prospect of continuing existing tolls or higher weight based tariffs is one that the Dumbarton operation would not welcome. It

is important to avoid putting artificial obstacles in place that favour one geographical location over another.

Prestige retailers and leisure operators such as Loch Lomond Shores may also be impacted with any increase in tolls. To be successful it requires to attract tens of thousands of visitors per annum from its surrounding areas both north and south of the

river. As we have discovered from our research when considering leisure travel the fact that tolls exist at present becomes a factor in determining one's destination and or route.

In the responses to the individual questions we have stated our policy that the Erskine

Bridge tolls should be scrapped but also given a qualified response in the event that tolls are to be retained.

#### Question 1

This problem would be alleviated if the tolls were to be withdrawn from the Erskine Bridge. If the tolls are not to be withdrawn then we would make the following observations:

The difficulty with the present system is the requirement to identify the Blue Badge holder and completion of a form. The problem is compounded at peak times when a few Blue Badge holders in quick succession can cause significant queues. This will be

difficult to change as it would be unlikely to be cost effective to have a toll booth specially dedicated to Blue Badge Holders only (Peak time use only).

It may be possible as technology develops to have Blue Badge permits bar coded and

the toll booth operator can then utilise a simple hand held scanner to scan the card and

capture the data currently completed manually. This would obviously have to be a national system as all permits would have to be bar coded.

#### Question 2

If the tolls were to continue each Bridge Authority should be allowed to determine its own exemptions but within a national framework such as those within the Transport (Scotland) Act 2001. We feel that as such the Erskine Bridge would still be able to allow exemptions for the Erskine Hospital vehicles.

#### Question 3

If tolls were to be lifted this would no longer be relevant.

#### Question 4

Again if tolls were to be scrapped this would not need to be answered.

This should be taken within the context of environmental objectives. The exemptions for public transport vehicles should be automatic to encourage more use of the public

network and dissuade people from using SOV car trips. This should also be viewed within the context of under resourcing at the Vale of Leven Hospital which has involved many West Dunbartonshire residents having to travel to Paisley or Greenock

hospitals for treatment or visiting ill relatives. Public transport routes to these hospitals should be exempt from toll charging.

Multi occupancy vehicles are much harder to control and manage. Their travel is unpredictable and as such would involve a form to be completed at the toll causing delay as is currently the case with Blue Badge holders. Whilst multi occupancy travel is to be encouraged we cannot see how it would be operated efficiently and accurately. It would be difficult to determine what is genuinely multi occupancy travel (does it include driver plus 1, 2 or 3 passengers, are children to be included in the passenger count?).

#### Question 5

If the tolls are to be continued multiple crossing discounts should be offered to all drivers living within certain post codes and are able to demonstrate regular use of the

Erskine Bridge (e.g. living in Clydebank and working in Erskine etc). This would help reduce the artificial barrier to employment caused by the Erskine Bridge tolls.

#### Question 6

In many cases introducing a vehicle classification system would shift traffic from one crossing which is toll based to a free alternative such as the Clyde Tunnel. This would

have an adverse effect on traffic congestion and wear and tear on these alternatives. In

some cases (e.g. transport of hazardous goods) there are no alternatives but to use the

Erskine Bridge. In these circumstances the tolls are again to be seen as an artificial barrier to trade and should be discouraged.

The removal of the tolls would create a more natural flow of traffic.

#### Question 7

The Erskine Bridge has little congestion except during periods of extensive road works and peak time travel. However this is very light compared to the Clyde Tunnel or Kingston Bridge.

By making the Bridge free to all it would be more likely to lift some of the congestion currently experienced at the Clyde Tunnel and Kingston Bridge.

#### Question 8

Removing tolls from Erskine will result in less congestion at the other Clyde crossings.

Raising the tolls at peak times is merely a tax raising tool. For some travellers the alternatives of the tunnel or Kingston Bridge are not feasible and as such they will pay

the Erskine Tolls. However there is a price sensitivity beyond which the pain of using alternatives is less than the pain of paying the tolls.

#### Question 9

This question should be reviewed along with the alternatives for road pricing as being reviewed by Westminster Parliament as there are obvious parallels that can be drawn.

If road pricing is to be considered then the tolls on the Erskine Bridge should be withdrawn and the national trunk road rate applied in its place.

Road pricing would negate the need for bridge tolls.

A charging system based on the class of vehicle is prone to the same points as raised

in our response to Question 6.

Questions 10 – 12

We would advocate that the tolls should be scrapped.

If tolls are to be retained then there must be room for inflationary increases otherwise the real costs of maintenance are not being covered by the revenues raised and a bigger proportion of the funds raised will be eroded by growing overheads.

The Scottish Executive should still be involved in a wider community discussion should a higher than inflation increase be required.

Question 13

By retaining Trunk Road status the Erskine Bridge would be treated on the same basis

as other strategic crossings such as the Clyde Tunnel and Kingston Bridge. If this status changes the bridge management would transfer to some other agency and this

would have inherent risks such as funding priorities. The Erskine Bridge is quite unique in that it joins two other main trunk roads – M8 and A82. These are strategic routes and the Erskine Bridge is a vital link between these roads.

Question 14

The Erskine Bridge should retain its trunk road status and should be treated the same

way as Clyde Tunnel and Kingston Bridge.

Question 15

This would seem an illogical step given its strategic importance to not just the local area but the entire North West of Scotland. This makes it imperative to maintain the Scottish Executive management and ownership.

Question 16 – 17

See response to Question 15.

Question 18

The Erskine Bridge should be treated differently from the other tolled bridges as it alone has trunk road status.

Question 19

No response.

Question 20

No response.

