

SCOTTISH COUNCIL FOR DEVELOPMENT AND INDUSTRY

TOLLED BRIDGES REVIEW: PHASE 2 CONSULTATION

Introduction

1. The Scottish Council for Development and Industry (SCDI) is an independent membership network, which strengthens Scotland's competitiveness by influencing Government policies to encourage sustainable economic prosperity. Its membership includes businesses, trades unions, local authorities, educational institutions and the voluntary sector.
2. SCDI is a long-time campaigner on Scottish transport issues and welcomes the opportunity to take part in this Review of Tolled Bridges, which are important parts of the Scottish transport infrastructure. SCDI supports measures which help encourage a modal shift and which act to help meet the Scottish Executive's ambitious target of stabilising road traffic volumes at 2001 levels by 2021. However, any decisions on tolled bridges must also be viewed in light of the economic and social inclusion effects they would have on the surrounding areas and Scotland as a whole.
3. As a supporting mechanism for economic development and social inclusion, SCDI feels that the abolition of tolls on all bridges in Scotland would be the most equitable course of action, and would bring the three bridges which are currently tolled in to line with all other bridges in Scotland. SCDI would not wish to see money needed for maintenance being diverted from other transport projects, and the £18.8m lost revenue per annum generated from the tolls (£9.8m from the Forth Road Bridge, £3.5m from the Tay Road Bridge and £5.5m from the Erskine Bridge) could be absorbed as a small part of a total Scottish Executive budget of £25.9bn.
4. That said, given abolition is not addressed in the current document, the responses below give SCDI's views on the best way to implement the tolls. The purpose of the tolls is primarily to pay for maintenance of the bridges. However, where appropriate they can also be used to attempt to reduce congestion. Those questions to which an opinion has been given precede each response.

Exemptions

4. **Should public transport vehicles and multiple occupancy vehicles be considered for exemption from bridge tolls?**
5. Yes. In accordance with the aim of encouraging a modal shift to public transport, SCDI supports the extension of exemptions to include public transport vehicles. In our view a more appropriate way to encourage the use of multiple occupancy vehicles, which could contain just a driver and one passenger, thus not significantly reducing bridge traffic, would be through a discount scheme or priority measures (see questions 5 and 7 below).

Discount Schemes

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?

6. SCDI is in favour of measures to encourage a modal shift in favour of public transport. For this reason we would like to see the end of anomalies such as multi-trip discounts available to single-occupancy vehicles but unavailable to buses. This would be solved should buses be made exempt, as suggested in the response to question 4 above. In the future, should the bridges move to automated barriers it would be difficult to police discounts being reserved for multiple occupancy vehicles. However, SCDI would support this option in the longer-term as detection systems are developed. The possibility also exists to encourage the use of multiple occupancy vehicles in other ways (see response to question 7).

Classification of Vehicles

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

7. The Tolled Bridges Review consultation document reports that the varying vehicle classification systems across the UK can be confusing for travellers. For example, the situation on the three tolled bridges in Scotland varies from a single fixed toll for all vehicles on the Erskine Bridge to seven categories on the Tay Bridge. To combat this confusion SCDI would have no objection to a common vehicle classification system, where vehicles are classified into the same broad groupings on every tolled bridge in Scotland and the rest of the UK, but also feels that this can be addressed through better signage prior to arrival at the toll plazas. This would help ease congestion as drivers would be able to have the toll ready prior to arriving at the booth.

Reducing Traffic and Congestion on Tolled Bridges

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?

8. Yes. SCDI has been a long-time supporter of encouraging modal shift from single occupancy cars. This is clearly in line with the objective of stabilising traffic volume. There are several methods to encourage this, including discounts and the allocation of dedicated roadspace on, or approaching, the bridge, or the allocation of certain booths. The implementation of appropriate combinations of these measures is a matter for those directly involved in the operation of the various bridges, who will be in a better position to decide which will be most efficient, effective and safe. Any scheme put into operation must be done sensitively to take into account the needs of the wider community and the local economy. There are also the more general options, not just relevant to tolled bridges, such as ensuring that public transport is a viable option for commuters and ensuring that the service is as efficient and frequent as possible. Public transport services put in place must reflect the

final destination of bridge traffic. Many users of the Forth Road Bridge are not travelling to central Edinburgh, but to surrounding areas such as West Lothian and Midlothian. For these users to be able to switch to public transport, a quality service must run to these areas. This would also have to be combined with a strong marketing and publicity campaign to encourage the public to make use of the facilities and to persuade them public transport is an option.

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

9. No. This issue varies between the tolled bridges but, in general, demand is fairly inelastic as most travellers at that time are commuters who must travel at that time of day, and tolls would have to be raised substantially for there to be a significant reduction in traffic. This is especially true where there are limited alternatives, such as the Forth and Tay Bridges. Any price rise at peak times would have to be combined with other measures, such as an increase in park and ride services. On the Erskine Bridge any shift in traffic away from the Erskine Bridge would lead to increased congestion on the alternative Clyde crossings, such as the Clyde Tunnel. Tolls on bridges cannot be used as a congestion charge if it will simply shift congestion to another area. An increase in tolls combined with a viable alternative such as an efficient public transport system or a park and ride scheme may encourage a modal shift. In the longer term it will be necessary to consider the tolls in the context of any national Road User Charging Scheme which may be introduced.

Tolls Reflecting Cost of Wear and Tear

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?

10. Whilst it would seem logical for heavier vehicles which lead to higher maintenance costs to accordingly pay higher tolls, it is necessary to consider the wider economic and environmental issues surrounding this. Whilst buses may be heavier than a car and cause more wear and tear they do represent a more efficient use of bridge space and as such should not be penalised. As stated in question 5 above, SCDI supports the abolition of tolls for buses. Penalising buses would be contrary to environmental aims and to the aim of stabilising traffic flows. In terms of freight, its contribution to the economy must be emphasised and should be taken into account when assessing its impact on maintenance costs. Whilst it must not be forgotten that the main objective of a bridge toll is to finance maintenance, we would also not wish to see a situation where any penalty on heavier vehicles would lead to it being beneficial to use three smaller vehicles rather than one larger one, thus increasing traffic and congestion. It must also be considered that heavier vehicle weight does not always mean increased wear and tear. This is dependent on the number of axles and the weight borne by each.

Procedure for Changing Tolls or Charges

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?

11. SCDI considers that final approval should rest with Scottish Ministers.

Executive/Transport Agency

13. What advantages and disadvantage do you see if any or all of the tolled bridges were to be managed by the Scottish Executive or the National Transport Agency?

12. Whilst SCDI acknowledges that the tolled bridges are nationally important, forming strategic links to the road network, it does not believe that this is a sufficiently strong argument for them to be managed by the Scottish Executive or the National Transport Agency. As well as being of national importance they are essential to local communities and must respond to local needs and the local situation. A large percentage of traffic on the tolled bridges is local commuter traffic and SCDI would support the local authorities' right to be involved in major decisions affecting the bridges, whether through the current bridge authorities or through the RTPs.

Regional Transport Partnerships

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

12. In its response to 'Scotland's Transport Future: Proposals for Statutory Regional Transport Partnerships', SCDI proposed that the RTPs should evolve and gain additional functions as they develop and mature. Whilst it may not be appropriate for the RTPs to take over some of the functions of the current bridge authorities in the short term, SCDI supports this in principle as a longer term objective. However, this is an issue which may have to be considered on a case by case basis. Whilst the Forth Road Bridge sits within one RTP, the Tay Road Bridge is situated on the boundary of the South East and Central and Tay partnerships. This would obviously lead to distinct issues about which SCDI would not wish to be overly prescriptive. As is the case with all roads between the different partnerships, there must be a level of cooperation between the transport partnerships. It may be that this is the most appropriate method of management for the Tay Bridge, or it may be decided that the TRBJB continues sole management of the Tay Road Bridge. The case of the Erskine Bridge is dealt with in question 15 below.

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?

13. As detailed in the response to question 13 above, SCDI supports local involvement in the management of the tolled bridges. However, this is a matter which would obviously need the agreement of the RTP for the West of Scotland.

Joint Board (FETA Model)

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

14. SCDI has no evidence to suggest that the FETA model has any disadvantages. The ability to develop, support and fund schemes and measures including roadworks, traffic management and public transport services to reduce road traffic congestion or encourage the use of public transport appears to have been a successful one. It has resulted in projects such as the Ferrytoll Park and Ride expansion. FETA is a member of the current voluntary SESTRAN partnership and SCDI would hope that in the future, FETA would continue to work closely with SESTRAN should it no longer be a member. As detailed in question 14 above, whilst SCDI has no criticism of the FETA model, it may be more appropriate in the future for FETA powers and functions to be transferred to SESTRAN. SCDI can see the advantage of increasing the powers of the TRBJB to the level of FETA, but this would obviously be a matter for the TRBJB and local stakeholders.

Joint Board (TRBJB)

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

15. Although the Tay Road Bridge experiences lower levels of congestion in comparison to the Forth Road Bridge, there are still congestion issues at peak times which have differing results due to the Tay Road Bridge toll plaza being so close to Dundee city centre. There would appear to be a strong argument for the FETA model to be extended to the Tay Road Bridge to allow it to have a wider remit and introduce local measures to improve local transport and reduce congestion. However, as stated above this is a decision for local stakeholders.

Single Tolled Bridges Authority

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

16. As detailed in our response to question 13 above, SCDI believes that any advantages in having a centralised body to operate and manage all tolled bridges are outweighed by the advantages of allowing local needs and situations to be taken into account in decisions for the different bridges. SCDI believes that the high level of local input for decisions on the Tay and Forth Road Bridges should continue.

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