

Scottish Association for Public Transport

Response to Consultation on Bridge Toll Review

July 2005

1 Introduction

This response outlines SAPT views on interim action to review road bridge tolls but argues that any such review should be the first stage of a wider review of transport charging in Scotland to more fully reflect the aims of road traffic stabilisation, sustainable development, social access, reduced congestion and improved reliability.

2 Towards a Strategy for Tolloed Bridges

Questions 1, 2 & 3 (on Blue Badge exemptions, emergency vehicle exemptions and breakdown vehicle exemptions) SAPT has no strong views on these questions

Question 4 Should public transport vehicles and multi occupancy vehicles be considered for exemption from bridge tolls? SAPT considers that public transport vehicles should be exempt with a lower toll for other multi-occupant vehicles than for single occupant cars at peak periods. Total exemption for multi-occupant vehicles is considered inappropriate since such vehicles make a greater contribution to road network vehicle miles and to parking problems than buses or trams. Public transport vehicles should be defined as those on services receiving Bus Operators Grant.

Question 5 Should tolloed bridges offer multiple crossing vouchers to all bridge users, or particular classes of users such as buses or multi occupancy vehicles? If so, why should this be? SAPT opposes most discounts on the basis that these encourage car use (especially at peaks) and discourage shifts to other modes or other means of travel avoiding toll bridge use. For the same reasons, public transport vehicles should be exempt with a lesser discount available to other multi occupant vehicles (see answer to Question 4) To promote equity and efficiency, the First ScotRail franchise and passenger rail track access charges should be adjusted to abolish passenger rail track access charges for local services in phase with operator commitments to enhance service capacity (with priority for the Queensferry crossing) and guarantee that peak fares will be no higher than the marginal costs of car use and related parking. As compensation for reduced income from rail track access charges in Scotland, Network Rail should receive appropriate balancing payments from the Scottish Executive and from road bridge tolls.

Question 6 What are your views on a common vehicle classification system for levying tolls at all Scotland's tolled bridges? SAPT support a common classification system though actual rates of toll may vary at different bridges. The suggested classification is:-

- public transport vehicles (exempt from charges)
- other buses, coaches, minibuses, cars and goods vehicles of 3.5 tonnes or less
(subject to a suggested base charge of £1 on existing toll bridges with possible exemption between 6.30 pm and 6.30 am)
- goods vehicles over 3.5 tonnes with sub-grades for axle loading and total weight
(base charges determined by sensors on approach to toll but with possible exemption between 6.30 pm and 6.30 am)

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? SAPT would say yes to the first part of this question and with special reference to congested peak periods and the Forth Road Bridge in particular. In answer to the second part of the question, means should include:-

- exemptions and discounts for buses and other multi-occupant vehicles (see answers to Questions 4 and suggested peak supplements outlined below)
- higher charges for peak-period single occupant cars – with the highest premiums on the Forth Bridge and lesser premiums on the Tay and Erskine Bridges. It has to be noted that, though the Erskine Bridge has less peak congestion than the Tay Road Bridge, use of the Erskine Bridge does contribute to higher traffic flows on the road network and related junctions. This 'network' impact also arises in relation to traffic using the Forth and Tay Bridges and needs to be taken into account in determining peak charges and their benefit in reducing peak flows on a network which could otherwise become more congested – particularly the Edinburgh Bypass, the southern M90 and the M8. Subject to further studies and consultation, suitable premiums over base charges for return trips by car, minibus and small vans might be £2 on the Forth

Bridge, £1 on the Tay Bridge and 50p at Erskine with these charges waived for multi-occupant vehicles i.e. these would only pay base charges. A peak premium for HGVs should also be considered (see answer to Question 9) To encourage use of net arising income to accelerate shifts to public transport and fully integrated fares. In the case of the Forth Road Bridge, SAPT considers that a significant peak shift to rail (and, possibly, to ferries) is achievable in addition to intensified bus services across the road bridge. Such shifts should be capable of stabilising or, reducing, present levels of peak use. Peak premiums should apply at Queensferry from 2006 and at Tay and Erskine from 2007 (over shorter peak periods).

To achieve greater shifts to rail, action should include:-

- longer trains and platforms up to 8 or 9 coaches and A8000 corridor upgrade
- more frequent services to south Fife with bus feeders and expanded park and ride; also including two signal sections on the Rail Bridge
- a high quality rail interchange in the Gyle/Maybury area, linking with local buses, trams and airport access
- fully integrated and restructured fares
- priority for Forth Road Bridge buses through new traffic lights giving bus priority to bridge access from the north and a toll avoiding lane at South Queensferry.

Question 8 Do you think that raising tolls at peak times would result in less congestion at these times? SAPT considers that there would be an appreciable impact provided that higher peak charges were linked with the other actions in the answer to Question 7.

SAPT would also support the proposal to move the Tay Road Bridge toll to the south of the river in association with park and ride and enhanced (half-hourly) rail services into Dundee from Cupar and Leuchars (with a future extension to St Andrews). Quality bus

Links using the Erskine Bridge should be developed between Dumbarton and Paisley/Glasgow Airport.

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? SAPT appreciates that HGVs have become a special problem in relation to the need for repair and structural work on the Forth Road Bridge.

This is leading to critical total loads on the bridge when high volumes of HGVs coincide with heavy car use. Independently of current plans for a national system for lorry charging, there is therefore a strong case for either a substantial

peak premium for HGV use of the bridge (encouraging use at other times and greater use of the Kincardine Bridge for Fife to west and England lorries) or a prohibition of HGV use a peak times unless specially registered. With respect to HGV-related wear and tear issues, SAPT suggests – pending national lorry charging (which could become a source of funds to the present Toll Bridge Authorities) – a base HGV charge related to axle loads and total weights with appropriate sensors before the toll – see answer to Question 6.

Question 10 Do you think that the current process involving Public Local Inquiries is appropriate for making changes to tolls or charges to meet the costs of managing, maintaining and operating a bridge? SAPT considers that the current system is not appropriate and that changes should be introduced under a simplified procedure requiring

- six months notice of draft proposals to make changes (with any comments of objections made within 3 months)
- publication not later than 4 months from the draft notice of an independent summary of comments and objections with recommendations to the relevant bridge authority
- a final decision by the bridge authority subject to an appeal to the Minister if the authority departed from the independent recommendations

This procedure should also apply where a proposal includes a congestion charging elements but with the period of notice extended to 9 months with 3 months allowed for the preparation of an independent summary and recommendations. Any proposal for congestion charging should include proposals for the use of net income arising.

Question 11 (on role of Minister) – see answer to Question 10

Question 12 Do you consider that all tolls should be subject to increases linked to an inflation index? SAPT considers that tolls should not be related to an inflation index since this could involve undesirable complication of payments. The suggestions in the answer to Question 10 would allow account to be taken of inflation subject to changes in tolls being in units of £1 or 50p (unless more sophisticated electronic charging is available). Normally, changes should not be at intervals of less than two years.

Other Comments

a) Integration with Wider Changes in Transport Pricing

There is an urgent need, on both equity and efficiency grounds, to integrate consideration of changes in road bridge tolls with wider reforms in transport charging (including motorways and trunk roads, rail infrastructure charges, lorry charging, ferry charges and fares restructure) as part of Scottish priorities to cut

congestion, improve reliability and give stronger support to modal shift from cars, social inclusion, road traffic reduction and sustainable development.

SAPT would urge priority for the Scottish Central Belt as a pilot for testing wider UK reforms and assessing the impact of simpler charging systems not requiring the complexity and legal problems of GSP technology. It is unlikely that aims for early cuts in congestion and improvements in reliability can be delivered unless peak period charging across the Scottish Central Belt is introduced before 2010. The technique which SAPT suggests for assessment is the purchase of Yearly, Monthly, Weekly or Day Permits allowing peak-periods use of designated roads. Permits could either be related to a central computer record of vehicle registrations (allowing non-holders to be quickly identified and fined) or issued with a chip scanned at varied locations to reveal non-holders and activate penalty payments and fines.

If such a system was introduced, present peak-period bridge holders could either purchase a Central Belt Permit or continue payments for the use of particular bridges. More radically, bridge tolls could be incorporated in a Central Belt Permit system with a lower payment for those NOT using the Forth Road Bridge and a higher payment for those wishing to use the Forth Road Bridge at peaks. This, however, would have the downside of the loss of concessions for multi-occupant cars – possibly compensated by greater use of priority lanes and access rights. **Road Toll Bridge maintenance and renewal costs would become incorporated in a transparent roads budget, exclusive of separate accounting for use of the net proceeds of congestion charging.**

b) Integration with Land Use Policies

More emphasis should be placed on avoiding land use policies which would encourage further increases in road vehicle miles. This is already a feature of National Planning Policy Guidance but has not been fully applied in practice. Significant developments near toll bridges with substantial congestion should only be approved if these are part of deliverable strategies for road demand management and the acceleration of modal shift to quality public transport corridors and increased multi-occupancy at peaks. There should be a presumption in favour of Forth Road Bridge strengthening (possibly including one extra lane in each direction) and against a second road bridge with a large increase in capacity likely to generate further road vehicle miles and pressure for widening of the Edinburgh Bypass, M8 and southern M90 – contrary to Scottish Executive aims for road traffic stabilisation and cumulative, absolute cuts in greenhouse gas emissions.

Management Options for Scottish Tolled Bridges

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?

There are advantages of simplicity, better use of scarce resources for policy and programme preparation and delivery of national strategy but disadvantages include a lessened role for the planned Regional Transport and Planning Partnerships or Authorities for those areas in which most travel to work and shopping trips take place. Being directly involved, the Minister would be in a less favourable position to take decisions on appeal. Aids for the delivery of national transport and planning strategy would remain within funding allocations and in the legislative and regulatory framework. On balance, SAPT considers that present toll bridges (and some existing trunk roads) are best within the remit of Regional Transport and Planning Partnerships or Authorities with specific obligations to consult on draft proposals, to prepare Business Plans and publish transparent accounts – including proposed and actual uses of any net proceeds from the congestion-related element in charging.

Question 14 Should we consider transferring some or all of the powers and functions of current bridge authorities to Regional Transport Partnerships? This is the option favoured by SAPT. The Tay Road Bridge straddles the boundary of proposed partnerships but, in this case, Fife Council could be a member of the Central/Tayside Partnership though without voting rights on any requisition to local councils but with a right to vote on Tay Road Bridge charges and have a share in the net proceeds of any congestion element.

Question 15 As the Erskine Bridge functions 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 Clyde, do you see any argument for detrunking it so that it would become the responsibility of the RTP for the West of Scotland? SAPT favours detrunking of the Erskine Bridge (and of some other trunk roads in the west) since the greatest proportion of usage, and potential usage, is for trips within the West of Scotland. Detrunking would assist better integration of regional transport and planning in the west.

Question 16 Do you have any views on the advantages and disadvantages of the FETA model for any or all of the bridges? The FETA model is not appropriate as it has led to an excessive focus on enhanced road bridge capacity rather than on strong efforts to enhance usage of the Rail Bridge, to develop demand management and modal shift and to develop policies avoiding general rises in road usage in south Fife and the Lothians contrary to Scottish Executive aspirations for traffic stabilisation and sustainable development. A Regional Transport and Planning Partnership or Authority would be better placed to take forward an integrated and sustainable agenda.

Question 17 Do you have any views on the advantages of the Joint Bridge Board model for any or all of the bridges? SAPT does not favour this model for the reasons stated in the answers to Questions 15 and 16.

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?

SAPT sees no merit in this approach. Most trips and transport management and planning requirements are within regions. Separate toll bridge management is not desirable and is becoming even less so with the shift to integrated approaches to transport, planning and related pricing. However, there could be an option for major bridge improvements – in an approved Scottish Transport Strategy – to be delivered by the National Transport Agency

Question 19 – no comment required in view of answer to Question 18

Question 20 Are there any other management options you would like to suggest? –

SAPT would only emphasise the importance of regional approach to transport, planning and management within clear Scottish Executive guidelines as an effective approach to the delivery of sustainable transport, reduced congestion and improved reliability. In the medium term, bridge tolls are likely to be fully incorporated in reformed approaches to road charging and transparency in the use of the net proceeds of congestion charging.

Within ten years, road charging is expected to be fully separated from pure tax elements which the Treasury may wish to continue as part of UK taxation policies. In addition to consulting on a Bridge Toll Review, the Scottish Executive should be more active and innovative in pursuing wider reforms in transport charging, including a lowering of some charges for rail infrastructure use and a review of ferry fares and charges. It is not evident that islands reached by bridges or tunnels should become free of charges while remoter islands should experience relatively high ferry and air fares.

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