

Response from Argyll and Bute Council

**DRAFT CONSULTATION PHASE 2.
TOLLED BRIDGES REVIEW – RESPONSE by ARGYLL and BUTE COUNCIL.**

This consultation is primarily related to the administration of tolled bridges, from an operational perspective, the underlying presumption being that this form of revenue collection from road users will continue.

Before providing a response to the administrative matters which form the bulk of the set questions, this Council reiterates its fundamental objection to tolls continuing on the Erskine bridge, as previously intimated in a joint letter to the First Minister from the leaders of six of the West of Scotland's Councils.

This joint letter, dated 13th October 2004, is appended to our current response, for ease of reference.

Argyll and Bute Council accepts that there may be valid reasons on other estuarial crossings to apply tolls – these would relate to demand management issues, such as excessive traffic at peak times, leading to congestion on associated routes.

This is clearly not the situation on Erskine Bridge, a crossing where the majority of the congestion and delays are caused by the very act of collecting tolls, by a method which is totally unsuited to purpose in this electronic age,

The bridge also provides the most direct route from the national network to Loch Lomond, Argyll and The Western Highlands, and ought to be signed accordingly as a toll-free route.

With this proviso, the Council's response to the consultation follows.

Q1. Do you think that the system for verifying Blue Badge exemptions should be changed? If so, can you suggest what these changes should be?

- A. A. The Blue Badge verification arrangements in their present form are time consuming, and frustrating for drivers. Better designed dedicated booths would, coupled with electronic collection, ease both congestion and frustration levels

Q2. 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?

- A. A. Exemptions should be for all blue light traffic. There may be other groups who should be exempt eg Coastguard/Doctor on call.

Q3. 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?

- A. A. Exemptions should not be given to commercial breakdown organisations, given the potentially large numbers of agents.

Q4. Should public transport vehicles and multiple occupancy vehicles be considered for exemption from bridge tolls.

- A. In principle, there should be exemptions for multiple occupancy vehicles, as part of the modal shift agenda.

Q5. Should toll 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?

- A. A. Discounting would encourage a more flexible use, would reduce administration, and would assist in electronic charging.

Q6. What are your views on a common vehicle classification system for levying tolls at all Scotland's tolled bridges?

- A. A. It seems sensible to have a National Classification, adopted at all Scotland's toll bridges, in order to simplify arrangements for multi-vehicle users, and create a 'national' charging framework.

Q7. 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?

- A. A. The principle of collecting dues from single occupancy vehicles is appropriate in signalling modal shift aspirations. Electronic 'collection' methods are available.

Q8. Do you think that raising tolls at peak times would result in less congestion at those times?

- A. A. If there is no suitable alternative route, it is difficult to establish a justification for charging penalties at peak times.

Q9. 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?

- A. A. Revenues are already collected in other ways for the maintenance of the road network. The bridges should not be separated from the rest of the network for charging.

Q10. 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?

- A. A. The system should be a reflection of the level of objections, but modest inflationary increases should be permitted without the need for a PLI.

Q11. 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?

- A. A. Again modest inflationary, year on year increases should be decided by the management authority.

Q12. Do you consider all tolls should be subject to increases linked to an inflation index?

- A. A. Yes.

Q13. 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?

- A. A. There is the advantage of simplicity in having the National Network managed by a National Agency. This would simplify the introduction of a classification system, ensure that charging was consistent and rationalise operating methods.

Q14. Should we consider transferring some or all of the powers and functions of current bridge authorities to Regional Transport Partnerships in the future?

- A. The National Agency would be a more appropriate body to manage these bridges. There already exist two separate networks – trunk and local. It would not be beneficial to create a third.

Q15. 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 the 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?

- A. As above. There is no advantage in de-trunking the Erskine Bridge. It is logical that the A82 be signed from the M8 and M74, as the most direct route to Argyll and the Highlands.

Q16. Do you have any views on the advantages or disadvantages of the FETA mode, for any or all of the bridges?

- A. As previously stated, all bridges should be managed nationally, in the interests of a cohesive national network.

Q17. Do you have any views on the advantages or disadvantages of the TRBJB model, for any or all of the bridges?

- A. As above

Q18. Do you think there would be any merit in having a single body responsible for operating and managing all tolled bridges in Scotland?

- A. A. Yes – the arguments of consistency and simplification on a National network.

Q19. If you think all bridges should be run by one body what form, powers and functions should this body have?

- A. A. The powers to operate and manage the bridges as part of the national network.

Q20. Are there any other management options that you would like to suggest?

- A. A. No - the favoured option is for national control.

Blair Fletcher
Transportation Manager 1st July 2005