

Questions to Tamar Bridge & Torpoint Ferry Joint Committee posed by TTAG Committee and Ordinary members at TB&TF JC meeting 30/09/22

Glossary

TTAG – Tamar Toll Action Group

TB&TF JC - Tamar Bridge & Torpoint Ferry Joint Committee

Question from Scott Slavin (TTAG Deputy Chair) Question read out by TB&TF JC Chair:

In view of the Joint Committee's knowledge of the Tamar Toll Action Group's existence, also of the numbers of the public we represent, will the Joint Committee agree to relaxing the limit of two questions permitted per person annually and instead allow one per meeting for each TTAG committee member?

The answer given by the TB&TFJC Chair was:

The rules on public questions which were reviewed by the Joint Committee in October 2021 apply to all members of the public. The rules permit a member of the public to ask a maximum of one question per meeting with the Chairman having discretion to permit a supplementary question, and a maximum of two questions per financial year. They will not be amended to apply differently to members of the public who are also members of the Tamar Toll Action Group (TTAG) committee to permit them a maximum of one question per meeting with no annual maximum. The rules continue, as they should, to apply equally to all members of the public.

Our comment on this response:

We are dissatisfied with the TF&TB JC's decision not to allow us greater opportunity to scrutinise their decision making processes by permitting greater dialogue at meetings. We interpret this as a desire to control the narrative and avoid public scrutiny. We have already replied to Mr Richard Orpwood (the Democratic Officer) stating the below:

"Please can you make sure that the Joint Committee understands that by refusing to allow the Tamar Toll Action Group the ability to communicate with them and ask questions at these meetings, all that will result is that we encourage members of the public to ask these questions on our behalf. As we have 2,000 members and rising, we have no shortage of people to do this and can publicise their responses sufficiently adequately to further our aims."

Question from Steve Miller (TTAG Committee Member) present in person:

Consequent on the fact that there is no government subsidy to offset a toll reduction for ZE vehicles, will the Joint Committee now abandon the divisive proposal of additional discount for them, and include a recommendation to that effect for the report?

The answer given by the TB&TFJC Chair was:

As Mr Miller has identified, the failure to find subsidy is recorded in reports before this committee. The committee will doubtless take a view on progressing this today or in December, in line with the resolution made in the June 2022 Joint Committee meeting.

Steve Miller's follow-up question was:

Regular users and business account holders are already funding the shortfall of income, having been given 2 weeks notice of the reduced discount in April. Income could be increased by about £0.5m over

the next 3 months if the recently-authorized cash rise is implemented shortly, rather than delaying until January. Why is the JC continuing to make us subsidise infrequent users?

The response was

The application for toll increases is included in the report being discussed later; the subject will be reviewed then.

The result of the later discussion regarding EV toll rates and the cash toll rate increase was:

During discussion of the GM report, a motion was put forward by Armand Toms to drop the proposal for a reduction in toll costs for EV vehicles now, rather than have a fuller report prepared by management. Cllr Long noted that this would be a complete waste of time spent on producing a meaningless report for a proposal that was likely to be refused anyway. Despite bureaucratic advice from the legal officer suggesting they wait for a future report, fortunately the proposer (Cllr Toms) persevered (with backup from Cllrs Long and Patel) and was eventually accepted and seconded by Cllr Long. It was then fully supported by vote (with one abstention from Cllr Mark Coker) and agreed that there would be no additional discount for EV's using the crossings.

On the subject of implementing the authorised cash increase, Andrew Vallance said there were procedural aspects still to be completed which were unlikely to happen before the end of October, thus bringing implementation close to the previously-publicised 1st January 2023 date anyway.

Our comment on this response:

We are very satisfied with the decision not to grant additional toll discount to Owners of EV's. There is no correlation between climate change and toll charges, nor any reduction in the maintenance necessary to the crossings that is caused by wear and tear that EV's cause as compared to conventionally powered vehicles. Arguably, with additional weight and torque compared to conventional powered vehicles, EV's actually increase this wear and tear. Further, our stated objective is for the crossings to be free at the point of use for all users. We cannot accept a position that makes it free for EV's users only, particularly as these remain expensive lifestyle choices at current cost of purchase. There is no discernible reason why those less able to afford them should subsidise free or discounted crossings for those who can.

Question from Dr Mel Priston (TTAG Chair): Question read out by TB&TF JC Chair

At your last meeting you stated that "Joint Committee Chairs were using every opportunity to lobby Government Ministers regarding funding for the crossings". Will you therefore confirm that applying for National Highways funding is a stand-alone rather than fall-back option in the Tamar Crossings Consultation being performed?

The answer given by the TB&TFJC Chair was:

So let's say I am a bit unclear about the question is no Tamar, as no Tamar Crossings consultation process, or whether you are suggesting that an application to a specific funding pot is made. On the assumption that you meant to refer to the exercise being performed by the external business consultancy, an application is intended to refer to the ongoing lobbying to central government for support and I'll reply as follows. As recognised, the committee and authorities intend to continue to lobby government for support, unless support is offered the existing self-financing approach will remain the only viable approach. This position is recognised by the appointed consultants.

TTAG comment on this response:

We think our question was sufficiently clear, it was centred on whether the TB&TF JC were applying for National Highways agency funding to operate the crossings as the default position rather than in support of, or addition to, the current arrangement of toll fees. We do not feel this question has been adequately answered and would like a clear answer from the TB&TF JC on their strategy for securing central funding to operate the crossings. The TTAG Committee would like more transparency on the extent of the lobbying being performed.

The remit of the consultation (section 7) states that “Options to move to a centrally funded Bridge, DfT / NH or variations of subsidy **if there is no appetite for ownership.**”

We would like additional reassurances from the TB&TF JC that the option to move to a centrally funded bridge is considered in full, whether or not there is an appetite for ownership.

Question from Stephanie Carter (TTAG Secretary). Present in person but question read out by TB&TF JC Chair:

Will the TBTFJC commit to send emails to ALL tag holders to inform them of any future proposed increases and to inform them they have the right to comment and make their views known in advance to the Secretary of State for Transport and TBTFJC?

The answer given by the TB&TFJC Chair was:

We have previously responded to similar questions asking for preferential communication channels when toll increases are proposed. In response to those questions we have stated that legislation prescribes the way in which our applications to increase tolls had to be publicised and had been the case with previous applications. The publication channels for notices this year were agreed with the Department of Transport as adequate and appropriate. In the Government’s recent decision letter, the Secretary of State stated that she is content that we met our statutory requirements in relationship to the notice and highlighting the right to object. The Statutory obligation was supplemented with detailed feedback received through the substantial consultation exercise undertaken earlier this year which addressed a representative sample of all users. The joint committee considered that the process followed this year gave adequate opportunity for the general public, for the public in general and the local community in particular to make their representations. A follow on point I would say is in reality the committee is considering future increases to determine the extent of additional consultation communication beyond the statutory requirement taking into account context and format of the changes proposed at that time, so certainly we would look to exceed but at this point it will come after we wait and see as to what those consultations need to be.

Our comment on this response:

The TF&TB JC has responded that publication channels for notices this year were agreed with the Department of Transport **as adequate and appropriate.** Our open letter to the TF&TB JC dated 7th July 2022 clearly demonstrates that the 30’000 (approx) circulation of the two publications used for the notices was in no way adequate to reach a meaningful sample of the target population. The email exchange of 12th April 2022 between Mr David List (General Manager Tamar Crossings) and Sandra Zamenzadeh of the National Transport Casework Team that the TB&TF JC disclosed to us as part of their reply on 2nd August 2022 offers no evidence as to the adequacy of the publications used. Nor to how appropriate they were. They were stated by Mr List as intended for use without any explanation at all. Similarly Ms Zamenzadeh failed to ask any questions to establish how appropriate they were for reaching members of the public spread across two very large counties. The answer on their suitability became apparent later when there was zero response received to the public notices. We have yet to identify a single member of the Tamar Toll Action Group who saw either of them and submit that the impact of toll increases on residents is so great that a 1957 written act describing publication of notices in printed matter is no longer appropriate for the digital age. Particularly when the Tamar

Crossings organisation possesses the personal contact email address of over 50,000 Tag account holders, and in fact used them to send out an email to all account holders the very same day the notice was published.....but omitted to mention that notice in their email.

The above said there does appear to be some recognition from the JC that there needs to be a better way of publicising matters like this as it was raised again by Councillor Long (we think) later in the meeting. The TB&TF JC Chair agreed it for discussion at a future meeting. We will maintain pressure on them regarding this.

Question from Nick Bennet (TTAG Ordinary Member) Question read out by TB&TF JC Chair:

Bearing in mind the recent 30% toll price increase, current soaring inflation rates and the cost of living crisis, will the Committee agree not to pursue the idea of annual RPI toll increases due to the significant adverse impact this would have on local businesses and commuters?

The answer given was:

The simple response is no. We have to consider all options for funding in this current economic climate to safely sustain the Tamar Crossings and reflect the effects of inflation on the cost of operating and maintaining the crossings. However the ability to index tolls using RPI would not mean that tolls must increase by that index, rather it would set a ceiling on the ability to increase tolls to levels that ensures that funding for operation and maintenance remains sufficient, but not excessive.

TTAG comment on this response:

For users of the crossings, this response is very discouraging. The TB&TF JC has missed the point that at current high inflation rates the potential inflationary increase to tolls could be at levels far in excess of those applied to salaries, and far in excess of toll increases seen thus far. The JC also misses the point that it is the people and businesses of SE Cornwall that are being penalised by the continually rising operating and maintenance costs of not only a 500m piece of the A38, a vital part of the strategic road network that receives no funding support from the Highways Agency, but also the Torpoint Ferry. This is an unfair tax being imposed on users as there is no viable alternative to crossing apart from a 500yr old single track bridge unsuitable for large volumes of traffic and large vehicles. From 1st January 2023, the Tamar bridge toll will be the most expensive bridge in the UK, exceeding the far larger Dartford Crossings. If this annual RPI increase is applied, it will potentially increase by a further 10% per year; this is not sustainable for users and businesses who need to cross the Tamar frequently, eg for school runs, medical care, caring responsibilities, retail and business use; We will be lobbying hard for, at minimum, a Dartford-type arrangement for local users should this RPI increase be granted. Our ultimate goal however remains central adoption and National Highways funding for both crossings.