

Statement to Public Inquiry Oct 15th

My name is Scott Slavin and I'm the Vice Chair of the Tamar Toll Action Group.

I am 54 years old and first came to South East Cornwall as a 16 year old to join the Royal Navy at HMS Raleigh. Other than time at sea, South East Cornwall has been my home ever since. I bought my first house there in 1992 and have worked both in Plymouth and in Torpoint over the course of those 32 years. Like many people who've lived in South East Cornwall for such a long period of time, I consider the Tamar Crossings, both bridge and ferries, to be a critical lifeline for access to services such as retail, leisure, health care, education, worship and pretty much anything else you can think of.

In 1992 when I first crossed the Tamar, the cost was just £0.40. Affordable by any standards even then. Today we are facing an increase to £3.00. A 650% uplift over 32 years. The Tamar Crossings application and rebuttal evidence has cited inflation as being a major factor in why they need a further toll increase so soon after the last one in January 2023. The Bank of England Inflation calculator however shows that 40 pence then has a value of just 86 pence today. A 115% rise. Therefore, the increases we've had over the intervening period, combined with the one they are requesting today, are 5 ½ times higher than the rate of inflation. Yet still, like Oliver Twist, they ask for more.

The Tamar Toll Action Group was founded 2 ½ years ago when, with almost no notice, the Tag Discount percentage was reduced in order to get the management team at the crossings out of a financial hole. Combined with other rises in recent times, this proposed uplift constitutes a 100% increase in the Toll in less than four years. Over the same period, the revenue raised by the Tamar Crossings has risen by 58% whilst traffic volume has dropped by only 9%. In parallel, there has been no impact assessment carried out to consider the effect that another toll rise will have on the people and businesses affected. And the case presented by the Tamar Crossings repeatedly and grossly understates the heavy reliance and frequency of use, that most users on the immediate west side of the crossings need of the Bridge and Ferries.

The Tamar Toll Action Group's aims have always been fourfold. Objectives that we've been fairly successful in.

1. To encourage engagement from the public on this important local issue and highlight to them how it affects this area. This in comparison to how residents of other areas with significant tolled crossings receive central financial support.
2. To shine a light on how the public can scrutinise and influence decisions being made that affect them. In so doing, increasing the transparency in the decision-making process.
3. To lobby local MPs to engage and fight for change on the issue in parliament
4. And to encourage members of the public to also lobby those same MPs.

In Mr List's rebuttal evidence, he mentions having managed the crossings for 27 years. Our former MP for Southeast Cornwall is here with us today. Before being elected as an MP, Sheryll Murray was a Cornwall Councillor. She sat on the Joint Committee from 2001 to 2005. Sheryll assures me that at that time, the debt was zero. So, over the last 20 or so years of the current management, the debt has ballooned from zero to around £45 million. We understand further borrowing is planned. This is a figure that is now so large, that it is taking approximately 1/3 of our toll revenue to service. Is it therefore inflation and traffic volume reduction that is to blame for the shortfall in their income? Or is it in fact the excessive borrowing to fund vanity projects that has left us, the people, in this predicament? For make no mistake, the cause of the claimed shortfall is not from anything that the users reliant on the crossings have or have not done.

Who is holding the Tamar Crossings to account? The Joint Committee? They're not experts in matters of bridges or chain ferries. I am a Marine engineer and began a career at sea 34 years ago. I have spent the last 11 years working as a Fleet Technical Manager managing a fleet of 32 vessels for my company. I am very familiar with the common engineer's tactics of using their expertise to bamboozle additional funding out of those less versed in the topics than themselves. I have had others try it on me in the course of my work. I have seen it done to accountants on many projects. I have also watched it being done to the Joint Committee in their meetings. How else did we end up with a £5 million expenditure on the Rolls Royce of office buildings that I understand was originally given budget approval at £3.5 million?

Today, Mr Dean, I ask you to take a holistic look not just at the application, but also at the accuracy of the statements made in support of it. The misrepresentation around the pandemic causing a drop in traffic volume when their own figures show that traffic fell in the years prior to the pandemic. The performance of the management team and the historic decisions that have led to their short fall in funding. Finally, at the damaging impact that a further significant rise in the toll will have on the communities and local economies of the small rural towns and villages reliant on the crossings. An impact that we formally requested was assessed by the Joint Committee and / or responsible authorities. A request that was refused.

Scott Slavin

For Tamar Toll Action Group.