



Inquiry into the circumstances surrounding the closure of the Forth Road Bridge¹

Transform Scotland response to Scottish Parliament ICI Committee inquiry

Friday 29 January 2016

1. Introduction

- 1.1. Transform Scotland is the national alliance for sustainable transport, bringing together organisations from the private, public and voluntary sectors. We campaign for a society where everyone can have their travel needs met within the limits of a transport system that is environmentally sustainable, socially inclusive and economically responsible.

2. Evidence

- 2.1. The intention of the Scottish Parliament, in abolishing the Forth Road Bridge Joint Board and establishing the Forth Estuary Transport Authority (FETA) was clear: to enable and empower the constituent local authorities to draw up and then implement a local transport strategy which would help address the very obvious challenges posed by traffic growth in the bridgehead area.
- 2.2. Such a local transport strategy would be funded in large measure by replacing the inherited tolling regime – which was seen as not fit-for-purpose in that, for instance, it effectively charged buses more to cross the bridge than it did HGVs. This was seen as absurd: the former helped to encourage the use of public transport rather than the car whilst the latter were the source of much of the damage being done to the bridge and the resulting disruption being imposed on general traffic by the increasing need to effect remedial works – for instance, road resurfacing.
- 2.3. A new "smart" tolling regime was thus to be put in place – one that would encourage car sharing at peak periods and the use of public transport. The new smart tolls would also, of course, enable the bridge authority to continue in its historic role of operating and maintaining the bridge. Indeed, it was hoped that the new tolling regime would assist in making this task easier than would have been the case had the old tolling regime remained in place. Moreover, sufficient equipment was purchased to enable smart tolls to also be implemented on any additional road crossing at Queensferry.
- 2.4. Toll monies had already been used to help fund schemes away from the bridge itself but in the bridgehead area which FETA had thought would benefit bridge users – such as the multi-storey car park at the Ferrytoll Park+Ride site. They were, however, insufficient to fund schemes such as the M9 Spur Extension/A8000 Upgrade – which The City of Edinburgh Council could not afford. Monies were therefore advanced to FETA by the Scottish Executive (as was) to enable these road improvements to go ahead – on the explicit condition that the order for the smart tolling regime be submitted by FETA.
- 2.5. Politics, of course, intervened and not only was the smart tolling regime never implemented but tolls were abolished altogether. Whilst this was perhaps understandable for the Skye Bridge, the Erskine Bridge and Tay Road Bridge, it was always obvious that the maintenance requirements of the Forth Road Bridge were of a different order and that future funding would need to be sufficient to meet those increasing challenges. It was also obvious that, now being dependent on central government for its finances, FETA would be

¹ <http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentarybusiness/CurrentCommittees/94916.aspx>

competing with the many other demands on the public purse to enable it to be funded to a level commensurate with its responsibilities.

- 2.6. The removal of tolls also saw the effective abandonment of the local transport strategy drawn up by FETA – which now reverted to the role of operator and maintainer of the bridge (some elements of the strategy have, however, since been implemented using other funding streams – such as the Halbeath Park+Ride site).
- 2.7. Were funding levels maintained? No. In 2006/2007 (the last full year of tolls), FETA funding amounted to £11.871 million. By 2014/2015 available funds had reduced to just £6.816 million.
- 2.8. As was reported to FETA at its meeting of 16 December 2011, the Scottish Government's Spending Review of September that year had resulted in Transport Scotland confirming that the Capital Grant available for the following three years (from 2012/2013 to 2014/2015) had been set at £13.8 million – a reduction of £19.354 million (58%) from the Indicative Capital Plan approved by FETA in February 2011.
- 2.9. As a result of this reduction in funding, all non-committed schemes within the Capital Plan were reviewed – despite the fact that all of these were considered "essential to maintain the long term integrity of the bridge and approaches, and include schemes that will help to reduce future maintenance costs" (FETA Review of Capital Projects, 16 December 2011).
- 2.10. This review was guided by risk analysis techniques and resulted in a rank ordering whereby the necessary remedial works to the truss end links were given a priority ranking of 5 (out of 13). Even these proposed works were themselves a downgrading from the full replacement of the truss end links that was originally planned. This was justified on the grounds that the opening of the so-called Forth Replacement Crossing in 2017 would see a significantly reduced loading on the bridge.
- 2.11. The review also assumed that £2.4 million could be drawn down from FETA's reserves to "support the transition to lower levels of grant funding".
- 2.12. In fact, due to the urgent need, reported to FETA in June 2012, to replace all 944 cable band bolt assemblies to "reinstate the structural integrity of the hanger system" at a contracted cost of £4.059 million, a further rescheduling of "less urgent" capital works was carried out (FETA Capital Plan Update, 03 September 2012) – and, even then, yet a further utilisation of FETA's reserves was required.
- 2.13. In addition, the cost of the ongoing investigation to determine the condition of the main cable anchorages had risen by around £2.1 million (FETA Capital Plan and Reserves Update, 26 October 2012).
- 2.14. This Update also reported that FETA's approach to Transport Scotland to seek additional funding and removal of the Authority's liability for the legacy costs of the M9 Spur Extension/A800 Upgrade had been unsuccessful and that, "given the Authority has no other significant income stream, the only option is to defer further non-committed capital schemes".
- 2.15. So, not even the strengthening, never mind full replacement, of the truss end links took place – and we now know what happened. As shown above, this cannot be unrelated to the reduction in funding made available to FETA by the Scottish Government.
- 2.16. In general, the enforced closure of the bridge in December 2015 illustrates the following points:
 - (i) The removal of a locally-managed, ring-fenced funding stream for the operation and maintenance of the bridge;
 - (ii) The removal of local accountability. Scrutiny of the now centralised and privatised operation and maintenance regime is now the responsibility of the Scottish Parliament – which has already many other tasks to which to attend;
 - (iii) The prioritisation by the Scottish Government of new infrastructure (especially road) over the maintenance of that already in place;

(iv) the relative under-investment in the parallel rail service which struggled to cope with the increased demands placed upon it during the closure, and;

(v) The abolition of one important tool – tolls – in traffic demand management on the cross-Forth road network and abandonment of proposed "smart" tolling whilst, rightly in our view, continuing to implement a differentiated peak and off-peak pricing regime on the adjacent rail line.

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Transform Scotland is the national alliance for sustainable transport, bringing together organisations from the private, public and voluntary sectors. We campaign for a society where everyone can have their travel needs met within the limits of a transport system that is environmentally sustainable, socially inclusive and economically responsible. Transform Scotland Limited is a registered Scottish charity (SC041516).

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