

OFFICER'S RESPONSE TO OBJECTIONS

I am writing in response to your recent objection to the proposal to exempt Southampton residents from the toll for motorcyclists at the Itchen Bridge.

I enclose for your information a copy of a report on this proposal that was presented to the Council's Cabinet on 7th September 2009. This sets out the reasons behind the scheme and the background of health and safety concerns over the concession that was previously proposed for all motorcyclists. It was those concerns, and the need to find a way to resolve them at a reasonable cost, that delayed the previous proposal. However, a practical and affordable solution has now been found in the form of the key fob permit scheme but, because this would only apply to city residents, it has been necessary to carry out further public consultations upon it.

A public notice about it was published in the Southern Daily Echo on 25th September 2009 and copies were posted on both approaches to the bridge. Written consultations were also undertaken with the Motorcycle Action Group and other organisations. The closing date for responses has now passed and there are currently two objections, including your own.

The purpose of the permit is to identify motorcyclists who live in the city, who would be required to stop at the toll booths to have their permits checked. Other riders would also have to stop to pay the standard 20p toll. Health and safety experts have advised that, with the current traffic control arrangements at the toll booths, it is essential for all motorcyclists to stop. The permits would be easy to display and inspect and would bear clearly marked serial numbers for that purpose. They could be used as key fobs or displayed in other appropriate ways.

In the longer term, there may be a need for more fundamental changes to the arrangements at the booths, including the addition of exit barriers, which are now standard at toll bridges elsewhere. These would control the flow of traffic physically and many of the present safety concerns would no longer apply. Further consideration could be then given to extending the toll concession to all motorcyclists.

I hope that this clarifies the background for you. Turning now to the specific concerns raised in the two objections received, it seems to me that these can be summarised as follows:-

1. The toll concession should apply to all motorcyclists, not just to those living within the city boundary. As it stands, it discriminates against people who work, shop and spend their leisure time in Southampton and help to support local businesses and enterprises.
2. The proposed key fob permit is unacceptable because motorcyclists will still have to queue at the toll booths and cause unnecessary congestion.
3. The proposal is different from what the Cabinet agreed previously.
4. The government has taken away the legal powers to charge tolls for motorcycles.

With regard to the first point, the legislation governing the bridge actually requires the Council to consider giving concessions to local traffic when setting the tolls. Existing discounts for car users only apply to city residents and discounts for lorries are restricted even more tightly to an area around Woolston. The bridge was built as a local facility and was not intended to provide a short-cut through Woolston for longer-distance traffic. However, a wider concession is not ruled out in the future.

On the second point, while motorcyclists would still have to use the toll booths, those with permits would simply need to display them to the toll collector and be allowed to proceed. Even at present, observations at the bridge indicate that most motorcyclists do not take much longer to pay than car drivers and do not contribute noticeably to overall delays.

The proposal is different from what was agreed previously, but the change was approved (subject to public consultations) by the Cabinet on 7th September 2009. There has been no removal of the legal powers to charge tolls for motorcycles and such charges continue to apply at a number of toll bridges across the country.

After carefully considering your concerns, I believe that the current proposal remains the best option available at the present time. Consequently, I regret that I am unable to uphold your objection. I hope you will find this decision acceptable but if, for any reason, you do not you may ask for your concerns to be considered further. They would then be referred to the Cabinet for a decision at a meeting due to take place on 21st December. If you would like to pursue your objection further in this way, please write to let me know and make sure that your comments reach me by 18th November.

Please note that the contents of your objection would be made available to the public if it were considered by the Cabinet. You are welcome to contact me on Southampton 8091 7589 if you would like any further information.

Yours sincerely

Roger Mortimer
Principal Officer Traffic Management