

HALTON BUSINESSES GROUP  
AGAINST TOLLS

PROOF OF EVIDENCE

BY

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## **1. Introduction**

I am John Wall JP, Managing Director of John Wall Drainage Service Ltd. I have steadily grown the business over the last 27 years. I am an active member of the Widnes Waterfront (previously Riverside Steering Group). I am also involved in the local community as a magistrate on the Halton Bench.

I am coordinating objections to tolling and delinking the existing Silver Jubilee Bridge (SJB) on behalf of Halton Businesses, as I have found that many people are not aware of the proposed tolling of both bridges and the delinking of the SJB. I do not believe that the tolling proposal has been fully consulted and have found in my own investigations that the few that have been consulted are against tolling and the delinking of the SJB, however, HBC continue with the planning application to include tolls and delink the SJB.

My biggest concern is that the tolling proposal has been decided without fully exploring other options and, knowing that there will be significant objections, the issue has been concealed.

I have lived, worked in Halton all my working life, and agree with the Proof of Evidence provided by David Parr that the area is in decline. There is significant deprivation including low income, high part-time work and unemployment above National Average levels, which I believe will worsen if tolls are introduced.

## **2. Reasons Against Tolling and Delinking of the Silver Jubilee Bridge (SJB)**

2.1 It will inevitably segregate the Borough limiting access to family, hospitals and recreation facilities, as reported in HBC/10/35 Dr Clare Twigger-Ross Para 12.16.

- 2.2 No Tolls would reduce the project cost of £431m substantially, as there will be no need for the tolling plaza, an additional 4.6 miles of road plus the cost of numerous road improvements all associated with the tolls and preventing motorists avoiding the tolls. The scope of the work would then limit the roadwork's project to just the Bridgewater Junction and the Widnes Loops Junction as per the Scheduled Works Article 4. Compulsory purchasing would be reduced, cutting the costs further. The new crossing should be linked to the existing road network as they can already accommodate the existing traffic (proven by HBC investigations in the Setting the Record Straight document). Could the project be afforded without tolling if Regional Authorities contributed? A FREE CROSSING would benefit the whole region. The original SJB was financed through Government, Cheshire and Lancashire County Councils.
- 2.3 Halton Borough Council in their Summary Proof of Evidence Para 4.4 state, "the absence of an alternative route would result in congestion over a wide area and cross-river travel difficulties would result in services being focused separately in Runcorn and Widnes". Why then, are HBC proposing to delink the SJB and remove the availability of an alternative route? In the event of an accident, maintenance or breakdown etc. on the new bridge WILL then, without an alternative, result in congestion. Services WILL be focused separately in Runcorn and Widnes, as many people will not be able to afford to cross the bridges as predicted by Dr Clare Twigger-Ross Para 12.16.
- 2.4 HBC claim the Mersey Gateway is to assist with the regeneration, however, they predict that traffic flow will decline once tolling is in force – How will that regenerate Halton?

### **3. Attempts to Object to Tolling**

- 3.1 I was aware that a new bridge was an aspiration for a number of years; however, I only became aware of the plans to toll the new crossing and the SJB in the last few months. I brought up the issue

of tolling at a Widnes Waterfront Business Steering Group meeting on 13 March 2009 but I was informed it was not the forum for such a discussion by Gareth Bennett, HBC Economic Regeneration Service. Cllr Polhill informed me at the meeting "that both businesses and the wider public have been consulted on this issue and the consensus was people would prefer to have a tolled bridge than not have a new bridge" (reported in the minutes Item 3 Para 8 Document 1). Reading this as an uninformed member, I would conclude that the consultation had been done and that was the wish of the majority. I have since read the Statement of Community Involvement and no such question was posed, therefore, that conclusion cannot be made. Yet these minutes were circulated to give the impression that consultation had taken place. I spoke to a number of business people after the meeting who had not heard of these proposals and were very concerned about the impact it would have on their businesses.

- 3.2 I attended a Real Help for Business breakfast seminar at the Stobart stadium on the 23 March 2009, again, I raised the subject of tolling and the adverse effect it would have on businesses in Halton. This resulted in a number of further questions from the audience on this subject. It was clear that a number of business people were unaware of the proposals. David Parr, CEO of HBC, informed Jill Corkish of Gemini Biomedical and me, during a private conversation, that there was no other option but to toll and if you object to it that we'll end up with no new bridge. He also went on to say, "don't bother attending [pre-public enquiry meeting on 24 March 2009] you'll be wasting your time". In my opinion, this in itself is declaring the decision has already been made.
- 3.3 I have since had discussions with Halton Chamber of Commerce (HCC) and it is my understanding that while they support the new crossing they have not been consulted or have their views been sort. Consequently, their memberships (Halton Businesses) have not been consulted on their views and the affect on their businesses. I am aware that HCC have not sent any letter of support to HBC on the issue of tolling.

- 3.4 It is my opinion that Halton businesses in general have not been consulted, as it would be strongly opposed.
- 3.5 On 23 April 2009 I sought to obtain information on the Mersey Gateway, however, this information could not be located at the Council Offices, Widnes or Widnes Library. The attendant at the library informed me "we've not had any information here for a long time; it's probably in the archives". In the end, he did print some information off the web site.

#### **4. Statement of Community Involvement Findings (CD/8)**

Contained within the "Statement of Community Involvement" by GVA Grimley there are a number of statements that support my case. Many people are opposed to tolling; the delinking of the SJB and the issue has not been suitably consulted, such as:

Para 2.5 item 1 – Consult widely throughout the process. 120,000 people live in the borough, however; only 2,400 Halton Residents had Stated Preference Surveys issued (see Para 3.3 Stage 3 Item 4).

Para 2.17 the Mersey crossing group is formed by Local authorities, regional government, and major private businesses, for instance:

Mersey Transport who operate the tolled Mersey tunnels, it is in their financial interests to have a tolled crossing  
Construction for Merseyside, who hope to play a part in any construction and  
Liverpool Chamber of Commerce.

Yet there seems to be a lack of opportunity for LOCAL businesses to voice their opposition to tolling and it is they who will be most affected and expected to pay.

Para 3.6 Item 1 Second Consultation Stage – 2007. States a 'preferred option for the project' – Preferred option for whom?

Para 4.4 First stage crossing (2003) states that THREE QUARTERS of respondents said they would consider alternative routes to avoid tolls.

Para 4.5 Second stage (2003) Again, only a small number contacted - 6 residents focus groups and 3 business workshops, which resulted in only 18 attendees.

Para 4.6 Second stage (2003) 7,000-leaflet drop on the crossing options. Where were these delivered? Again, a small number from a total of 120,000 residents and businesses.

Para 5.6 states a wide range of stakeholders at local, regional and national levels were provided with leaflets and questionnaires – 747 in total. Why was not it the priority to consult with the people most affected? If it was 'a wide range', how many local businesses were consulted and what were the questions asked?

Para 5.36 recognises that concerns were made regarding increased social segregation.

Para 5.37 makes the point more distinctly that people interviewed are concerned on the imposition of tolls and the segregation of the borough.

Para 5.43 APPROACHES TO TOLLING I noted that respondents are not asked would they support tolls. They are asked to choose a maximum of two options from a pre-prepared list and were provided with a space to state an 'other' option:

- 1 discounts for local people
- 2 discounts for regular users
- 3 discounts for off-peak users
- 4 discounts for SJB users
- 5 other

Interestingly, 733 responded by indicating NO TOLLS in the 'other' option.

Para 5.45 Graph does not include the no tolling figure only the pre-prepared options.

Para 5.46 table illustrates the 'other' responses the majority support for no tolls

Para 5.48 REDEVELOPING THE SILVER JUBILEE BRIDGE (SJB) 60% of Respondents indicated that they would rather retain the existing bridge as it is.

Para 5.54 Residents felt it unfair to toll in addition to other costs associated with living and owning a car in Halton.

Para 5.58 Respondents concerned about the cost of the tolls.

Para 5.60 the introduction of tolls did not form part of the initial Scoping Report until November 2007. Businesses in Halton, me included, were under the impression that an additional crossing would be of advantage to Halton, as an improvement to the local and regional road infrastructure.

Para 5.72 mentions the concerns of businesses moving away from the area. This, I add, is from the very few consulted.

Para 5.77 Tolling was raised as the most frequent raised topic across all forms of communication.

Para 5.85 the public are primarily concerned with cost and the associated tolling.

## **5. Business Supporters Against Tolling**

The following businesses have expressed their opinion against the plan for tolling both the bridges and delinking the SJB. Their emails to me have been forwarded to [BrendaTaplin@personaassociates.co.uk](mailto:BrendaTaplin@personaassociates.co.uk) and copies sent to [mersey.gateway@dlapiper.com](mailto:mersey.gateway@dlapiper.com):

SMK Engineering Ltd

Integra Precision Ltd

Ace Recyclers

Whitford Ltd

Vista Optics

Feralco UK Ltd

Express Transformers and Controls Ltd

Suttons International Ltd

Getronics Ltd – x3 individual responses

Engineering Services

Fischbach UK Ltd

3D Financial Ltd

BPI Films

Polyone Corporation UK Ltd

Dutton Paintwork Services

Genlab

Plus, my own, John Wall Drainage Service Ltd

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

6.1 The Cabinet Office Code of Good Practice has not been followed (Statement of Community Involvement CD/8 Para 2.5). Two of the six criteria encouraged to follow and was not include:

Criteria 1 Consult widely - Local businesses have not been consulted on the impact tolling would have on their business. The issue of tolls and the associated costs has never been widely discussed (locally) and made clear. It appears a small proportion (2,400 out of 120,000 residents were approached with questionnaires CD/8 Para 3.3 Stage 3 Item 4) and I, personally, have attempted to raise the issue at two meetings but have been informed it is not the relevant forum; however, I have been unable to obtain a relevant time and place.

SME's are the largest employers in Halton; however, they do not necessarily make headlines creating and retaining jobs.

Nevertheless, Halton's future is dependent on their prosperity.

There is no excuse for not being open and truthful if consultation is to be genuine and it appears only stakeholders have had an opportunity to express opinions and they are usually from outside Halton. By not following these guidelines, they have marginalised the local business community.

Criteria 2 Be clear about what your proposals are, who may be affected, what questions are being asked and the timescale for responses.

I have been unable, to date, to locate any questionnaires to view so can only draw conclusions from the answers given and shown in the CD/8 Core Document Statement of Community Involvement.

The local business community, who will be largely affected, have not been consulted.

In addition, the question asked (Para 5.43 Statement of Community Involvement) did not include the option of 'No Tolls' it took 733 respondents to have the good sense to enter that in the 'other' option.

HBC say on their web page that the toll will be £1.40 for cars at present but cannot say what the toll will be! It is also noted that larger vehicles are not included in estimated costs to use the crossings. Again, HBC are not being clear about the cost of the proposals.

6.2 The consultation exercise was defective as it was run based on a public relations exercise promoting the crossing not on the associated cost of using a tolled crossing. For instance, HBC web site refers to Local Chamber of Commerce in Halton supports the project; however, there is no mention of supporting tolls. There are many other letters of support on the HBC website, again, however, I noted that very few mentioned support for the tolling.

6.3 The findings of the, very limited, Statement of Community Involvement details objections to the tolling on virtually every page - What is the point of consulting if the findings are to be ignored? These issues raised have never been investigated or addressed.

Again, HBC has not complied with the Cabinet Office Code of Practice by not giving feedback on how public opinion on NO TOLLING would influence the policy. HBC have already made their decision. As stated by David Parr, CEO of HBC, to me regarding the pre-enquiry meeting on 24 March 2009 "don't bother attending you'll be wasting your time".

6.4 I do not believe other options outside of tolling have been fully explored. This is a massive project with the potential to create huge regeneration to the area with the vastly improved transport links to Halton and the surrounding area. The new bridge, as a FREE CROSSING, would be a catalyst for regeneration bringing in new business, improving the current congestion problem and subsequent increased employment levels, fulfilling one of HBC key objectives. The new crossing should be financed with all other local authorities contributing. This is wholly possible once the project is

reduced to the scope of works from Bridgewater Junction to Widnes Loops Junction and without the additional roadworks and subsequent costs to accommodate the tolling.

The new crossing should be in addition to the existing SJB, not instead of, as HBC are proposing. Otherwise, we will have severe congestion with the first incident on the new bridge. The proposal to make it single carriageway to cater for cyclists and walkers was not the most popular option during the limited consultation, but still this is HBC's proposal! The most popular option (60%) was to retain the SJB in its current state (Para 5.48 Statement of Community Involvement)

6.5 HBC hold every name and address and could send out a questionnaire in direct respect to tolling and the delinking of the SJB to ensure they have fully consulted and have not concealed the issue. In particular, ask the question "Would you prefer two tolled bridges or no new bridge?" In addition, subsequently, act on the responses.

6.6 Councils have been known, as in this case, to make decisions without always looking at the unintended consequences of their actions.

Failure to act on public opinion has a corrosive effect and will undermine local democracy. The local authority is there to look after the best interests of all within the borough.

6.7 You have to question HBC's agenda concerning the tolling – is it to reduce congestion (as per their main aim) or an opportunity to open up a new income stream?

HBC have stated any surplus funds from the tolling will be returned to HBC (Setting the Record Straight Page 7 Para 9). There has been a no information when I have tried to find out how much

money tolling will drain from the local economy (I asked Cllr Polhill on 13 March 2009 at Widnes Waterfront Steering Group meeting). This money is effectively coming from businesses and local people already under immense financial pressure living in an already deprived area. It is accepted that Halton has a high level of unemployment above the national average and is in decline.

Tolling will hang like a black cloud over Halton and the area will be synonymous with it, sending out a very negative message. If I were a new business just starting out would I choose to set up in Halton? There is likely to be a mass exodus of business from this area further pushing Halton into decline. There will be no incentive to stay.

The cost to my business, alone, is estimated at £ 31,000 per year based on 5 large vehicles making 4 crossings each per day. This will result in businesses having to reduce employees and investment to cover the costs or alternatively relocating outside the area. Not to mention the costs to each individual employee (£ 768 per year) that will inevitably reduce the recruitment pool or increase wage costs to compensate employees' travel.

Finally, as spokesperson for the group, I hope the public enquiry will hear our views and ensure HBC carry out a full consultation with local businesses and residents and, furthermore, investigate, with an open mind, other options without the need for tolling.