

Public Inquiry - Toll Increases on Aldwark Bridge, North Yorkshire

I'm grateful to you for scheduling the hearing today and for allowing me to attend and voice the concerns of my constituents in the Wetherby & Easingwold constituency. I want to be clear that this objection is to the *scale* of proposed toll increases on Aldwark Bridge, rather than an increase per se. The main point I wish to relay today is the direct financial burden on local families, businesses, and communities who rely on this essential crossing every single day, often multiple times a day, to drop children at local schools, clubs and activities.

Financial Impact on Families

The bridge, privately owned as it may be, serves a critical public function. It is not a luxury – it is a necessity. In an ideal world, this piece of critical infrastructure would become part of the adopted highway. This is not a novel idea; indeed, my predecessor Sir Leonard Ropner spent much of his time in parliament, from the 1930s to the '60s, lobbying for the demise of privately owned toll bridges. I hope I have a little more success, but, for now at least, it is in private ownership, and it falls to this inquiry – under the provisions of the Transport Charges Act - to determine whether the current owner can increase the toll by the suggested amount.

Under the current proposal, the average family using the bridge for their daily commute will see their toll expenses rise by £624 per year in the immediate term. Over the next decade, this burden will escalate to an eye-watering £1,040 per year. This is not a small increase—it is a massive additional cost imposed on households that are already grappling with the rising cost of living.

Impact on Businesses and the Local Economy

This impact is not limited to individuals and households. Businesses in the areas – most of which are small, independent enterprises – will also bear the brunt of these toll increases. Tradespeople, farmers and suppliers rely on Aldwark Bridge to transport their goods and provide essential services. Increasing the cost of doing business will inevitably lead to further higher prices for consumers as a secondary inflationary impact.

At a time when public policy is directed at encouraging economic growth and supporting our high streets and market towns, such toll hikes risk driving businesses away from the area, making it harder for them to operate, and ultimately weakening our local economy.

Unfair Disproportionate Impact on Rural Communities

I'm especially keen to stress the disproportionate impact this increase will have *because* we are a rural community. Alternative routes are few and far between. Unlike in more urban areas, where toll roads often come with viable public transport alternatives, residents in this part of North Yorkshire do not have that luxury. There is no reasonable way to avoid the bridge without taking a significantly longer and more expensive journey—costing even more in fuel, time, and vehicle wear and tear. By way of an example, as we endured during the recent extended closure of the bridge, a resident travelling from Great Ouseburn to Aldwark village or Linton-on-Ouse, both abutting the banks of the river, could expect to triple their travel time and increase the distance of their journey by a factor of five should they wish to avoid using the bridge.

Effectively, this toll increase acts as a rural tax, unfairly penalising residents who have no active travel alternatives and therefore no choice but to use their own vehicles to get to work, school, and medical appointments.

A Call for Fairness and Alternative Solutions

As you'll be aware, during the public inquiry in 2005, a significant uplift in charges was approved to pay for a programme of repairs that was never undertaken. When the bridge was sold, these funds were not transferred, and residents are now effectively being asked to pay twice for repair works. It cannot be right that residents are being asked to pay higher rates to compensate the new owner of the bridge due to the neglect of previous owners.

While I note the proposals include a new 'sinking fund' to provide for future refurbishments of the bridge, I'm sure the Inspector will note the comments of his predecessor who, at the 2021 inquiry, highlighted that there is no legal mechanism to ensure that the funds collected for refurbishments or maintenance are ring fenced for these purposes.

Sir, in a moment my colleagues representing parishes in the area will address in more detail our collective concern as to transparency of the business case presented by the applicant, the accuracy of the data provided and this application's conformity with Section 6 of the Act. To avoid repetition this morning, I'll avoid commenting further on this now other than to share a view that where maintenance and improvements are required, it would seem more sensible to first discuss a business case that links fee increases to inflation *and* providing a residents' discount, either with the introduction of purchasable annual passes or an agreement by which the neighbouring parish councils make a precept-generated contribution at a discounted rate permitting all parishioners to traverse the bridge at their will. Both options would avoid placing a disproportionate burden on the local population.

Conclusion

For now, to conclude, this toll increase is unfair, unjustified, and unsustainable. It places an unacceptable financial strain on families, weakens local businesses, and disproportionately impacts rural communities who have no alternative routes.

I would therefore urge the Inspector to reject the application for an increase in fees as proposed and encourage the applicant to heed the contributions made by residents here today, with a view to finding a solution that protects the wellbeing of our communities and accessibility across the bridge.

Thank you.