

Dear Julian Smith

I write as Chairman of the Leigh Woods Society in response to the calling of a Public Enquiry to consider the Clifton Suspension Bridge Trust's proposal to raise toll charges. We have reviewed the papers submitted to the Department of Transport and although the numbers and financials are out of date, it is clear that the CSBT needs to raise its income each year to meet its cost base. Given the lack of alternative sources of income (direct or from subsidies and donations) the proposal to increase the toll is inevitable. The agreement to hold Bridge card fees to a maximum of an inflationary increase is sensible as there are a large number of existing residents who regularly use the Bridge and should be encouraged to continue to do so as an essential source of revenue for the CSBT. We would like to review the latest submission and figures and submit any further comments as a result.

Who are the Leigh Woods Society?

The Leigh Woods Society has existed for nearly 19 years and aims to 'further the interests of the residents of Leigh Woods and to preserve and protect the amenities of the area for the benefit of such residents'. Our current membership stands at 106 households (185 members) out of 270 households which represents 40% of potential membership.

What is Leigh Woods?

Leigh Woods is an unusual neighbourhood being physically defined by the Avon Gorge and the National Trust Burwalls Wood to the east, Leigh Woods National Trust woodland to the north, Ashton Court Park to the west and south and Rownham Hill and Mead to the south. It is therefore a well defined area all covered by the postcode BS8 3P*.

It stands at 80 -90 metres above sea level, and has no facilities within its boundaries other than an Anglican Church. Leigh Woods would not exist without the Clifton Suspension Bridge. In fact, the first houses were built as speculative development to help pay for its construction. This interdependence continues: all services for Leigh Woods residents are to be found across the Bridge; schools, post office, shops, bank, doctors, and dentists.

The nearest Post Office is 0.8 miles away in Clifton, the next nearest not crossing the Bridge is 2.2 miles away (and 80 meters vertical height) in North Street, Bedminster, or in Failand, 3.3miles away. The nearest doctor is 0.7 miles away, in Clifton or 3.5 miles in Pill. The nearest dentist is 0.9 miles away, in Clifton or 2.4 miles in Coronation Road, Bedminster (and 80 meters vertical height). This just illustrates how residents of Leigh Woods depend on crossing the Bridge for everyday needs and in so doing are frequent and, we hope, valued toll payers.

Leigh Woods' relationship with the Bridge

Leigh Woods residents are very proud of the Bridge and daily marvel at its majesty soaring across the Avon Gorge. In choosing to live here we accept the toll and the fact that such an historic structure needs care and maintenance. However, many residents came here before 2000 when the much cherished annual season ticket was an accepted annual household expense. When the CSBT chose to move to a 'pay as you cross' (PAYC) system the predictable household expense started escalating wildly. In 1999 the cost had been a steady £25 per year, in 2000 it was £100 for the year, a 400% increase, or £120 for 4000 crossings. By the middle of 2000 the CSBT had removed both these high use options and the remaining 1000 crossings card cost £80.

In 2003 the cash toll increased 50% from 20p to 30p. In 2005 1000 crossings cost £120, a 50% increase over 5 years. In October 2006 a Public Enquiry considered the CSBT's request to increase the toll from 30p to 50p, a 67% increase. This was implemented in January 2007. In 2010, 1000 crossings cost £325, a 170% increase over 5 years and over 400% increase in 10 years. Now the CSBT are requesting a 100% increase in maximum toll to £1. They suggest the 1000 crossings card will go up to £350 an 8% increase, and thereafter only increase by inflation, for which we would like a commitment. Many of these long term residents are, by the passage of time, now pensioners and we all know what has happened to the income from pensions over the last decade or so, making the financial burden of needing to frequently cross the bridge not inconsiderable. For those residents who are of working age the need to frequently cross the bridge is often even higher with work and children needing to access schools. For families with children who need ferrying to outside interests, say sports clubs, each journey is a two-way affair for the driver meaning on a school day there can easily be a total of 8 journeys across the Bridge. Lift sharing with other parents becomes impossible, unless they also live this side of the Bridge, because for parents living in Bristol it would represent a fee of £2 on top of petrol to drop a child home. Equally, friends who live in Bristol no longer offer lifts home to Leigh Woods residents and inviting friends round would put a £2 tariff on friendship.

The effect on Leigh Woods of raising the toll

When the toll rose to 50p per crossing in 2007 Leigh Woods started to become an unofficial Park and (bicycle) Ride or Park and Stride, as 'shunpikers' leave their cars parked along our roads. Why not save yourself £1 per day and walk over the beautiful Bridge for your daily exercise? At weekends the situation is hardly any better with shoppers going into Clifton and visitors coming to the Bridge. The raising of the toll would make this situation very much worse with the likelihood that commuters will start parking on both sides of our roads leaving them one way at a time roads. The new Visitor Centre will inevitably mean more parking and has indeed already caused problems with coaches attempting to access the existing small Visitor Centre. Hence the CSBT's actions impact on local residents and our quality of life as above and also during the many necessary maintenance projects. The prospect of the constant noise, disruption and dust from the upcoming year long Visitor Centre and Offices building work is already filling us with dread. We suggest that to show good will to local residents the CSBT put an ongoing uplift of 20% on the number of crossings on one card per Leigh Woods household, easily found by the unique Leigh Woods post code of BS8 3P*.

The CSBT expanding financial responsibility

The CSBT undoubtedly have a difficult task in ensuring the continued structural integrity of the bridge and are under pressure to take on the promotion of the bridge as icon. We argue that the latter burden is not for the toll payer to shoulder. The CSBT needs to find partners to fund extras like tourist facilities. The Heritage Lottery Fund grant of £595,000 is a step in the right direction but it must be noted that this covers barely a third of the cost of the new Visitor Centre while the ongoing drain on resources of running costs again falls on the toll payer. The 'ring fenced' £1.5 million came from reserves built up by toll payers. We have found no examples of any other toll which supports benefits for tourists rather than Bridge users. Even the Golden

Gate Bridge Visitor Centre is supported by the National Parks rather than the Bridge toll.

Are there any examples of schemes that have been put before the CSBT that have been rejected as too costly even though desirable? The CSBT system as it stands will tend to produce the result we see before us today of lots of projects which are all good ideas but proliferating year on year with the cost covered by the expedient of raising the tolls.

Income versus expenditure

The CSBT is in danger of killing the goose that lays the golden egg. The higher the toll, the less people use the bridge and their income starts to fall. The art is to hit the peak in that convex curve. The other approaches to this perennial problem are to prioritise spending with the essential engineering requirements coming first, and possibly only, and also to seek alternative funding. The Bridge represents an essential part of the area's and indeed the Nation's road infrastructure, and the tourist/iconic nature of the bridge add considerably to the local area's attractions. Indeed, Bristol's Mayor has called for it to be put forward as a World Heritage Site recognised by UNESCO, surely this should involve some financial commitment from the city.

A number of residents have looked at the detailed submission and there are some points and observations we would like to make for consideration at the Public Enquiry:

- From the 10 year income and expenditure schedules, the £1 toll is the most effective but will reduce the 'net income' from current users who do not have change and place a £1 in the machine.
- However, the schedule shows a gradual shift from cash to Annual Tickets/PAYC from 2012 which impacts the overall income. It is likely that the shift will be more rapid and will affect the cumulative cash position. As such, we would suggest this is considered in the CSBT's plans to avoid any further funding crises.
- The plans assume an inflationary increase only for Bridge card users. We request the CSBT commits to maintaining the availability of existing cards and with maximum annual increase of inflation for a minimum period, for example 5 years (ie that the CSBT stands behind their projected figures if they are so confident of them). We request the CSBT attempts to keep any annual expenditure below the inflation level or at the same price as the previous year, through more efficient and effective management of their operations and maintenance and the timing and costs of projects.
- We request that the inspector carefully and critically examine the usage projections and underlying assumptions put forward by the CSBT – these are key as if those are wrong, the charges for cards will likely change.
- We request the CSBT considers a discounted card for a larger number of crossings than at present for example 2,000 or 3,000
- The forecasts assume that there is no increase in staff and running costs from the new Visitors Centre – this should be confirmed. Additional products and services income from the Centre should be encouraged provided the costs are held.
- There is reference in the business justification to running costs increasing – particularly wages, National Insurance, pensions and external fees. Given the rest of the country is subject to no salary increase or at best inflationary increases, we would expect the CSBT to keep running cost increases to this level. Where resources are

from external parties we would hope fees and costs are negotiated to a similar pattern or lower given the financial state of the CSBT.

- If any resulting changes in income/expenditure still generate a future deficit there needs to be a change in the financial support from North Somerset and Bristol City Councils as we believe the Bridge is a major artery for Bristol City (as well as a key Tourist attraction) and should not be left to decline and become a relic.

- We are not privy to the fundraising activities of the CSBT but would encourage the Trust Members to find Bristol and North Somerset benefactors who might leave an annual legacy to keep this icon in the condition it is today. In addition, if they have not been approached then the Tourist Board may wish to contribute to the running costs of the Visitor Centre in return for some more general information being held there and made available to tourists/visitors to Bristol.

In summary

Should this increase be approved, the toll will have increased from 20p to £1 in 10 years, a 500% increase when inflation in the same period, 2003 to 2013 has gone up by a mere 26%. While the frequent user has faced an increase from £25 (for unlimited use) to £350 (for only 1000 crossings) in the period 1999 to 2013, a 1,400% increase while inflation increased by 31%.

Admittedly there have been, and will continue to be, developments in technology and techniques that require further and more extensive remedial action to be taken in maintaining the Bridge. The CSBT could examine expenditure more closely and seek savings while not expanding responsibilities with new ongoing revenue commitments. The CSBT could also look harder at sharing some of the burden of resourcing the Bridge.

Given the unique relationship of Leigh Woods with the Bridge, we suggest an acknowledgement on the part of the CSBT by affording an ongoing modest 20% uplift on one card charged to each household in Leigh Woods.

Yours sincerely

Kate Buss

Chairman

Submitted 29th April 2013 for and on behalf of Leigh Woods Society