



Welsh Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: [the future of the Severn River crossings](#), HC 171

Monday 13 June 2016

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Members present: David T.C. Davies (Chair); Byron Davies; Chris Davies; Gerald Jones; Craig Williams

Town Hall meeting with members of the public

Chair: What I would like, if possible, is if people would be willing to give their name and any organisation that they represent. You are perfectly free to ask a question or make a point, whatever you feel, and feel free to direct it either to myself or any other Members of Parliament who are here today. Sir, you were definitely first.

Audience Member: My name is Michael Peterken. I am a local resident. How much influence on the Government will your final report have?

Chair: Sir, that is a very good question. We ask ourselves all the time how much influence Select Committees have on Government policy. I think the answer is on this particular issue we have had a fair degree of influence, and there are members of various different political parties here. I think it is fair to say that the Select Committee has had a fair degree of influence on the promise to bring down the tolls from where they are to a 50% reduction. I think it is reasonable to say a fair amount, but we can't tell them what to do. We do not make the laws; we scrutinise the laws.

Audience Member: Sure, thank you.

Chair: The gentleman there.

Audience Member: Jim Baker. I work on the Bristol side and my wife works on the Chepstow side. I deal with the bridge every day, usually at rush hour. In my view, we are missing the point talking about tolling. These bridges are the main artery from the south of England to the south of Wales, some of the main economic regions of those two countries. Their capital cities are joined by these bridges. The only alternative route is 40 miles up through Gloucester, which is not an alternative route. If you want the economy of Wales to have a fighting chance, these tolls need to go altogether. The bridges are not at capacity. You can tell that because there is never congestion coming east. The only reason there is congestion is because there is tolling and that is just holding everything back this side of the river and it is completely pointless.

Most of the costs of running the bridges is a fallacy because we have costs that we do not need; you do not need a company, admin and staff running the bridges. All of that money could be spent on the economy, building jobs, getting companies working. You get your money back in corporation tax, income tax, and so on. We just need to get rid of this toll. If we want any tolling at all, it would be possibly to try to get the heavy traffic off the old bridge and on to the new bridge. That would be the only sense and that is to save the life of the old bridge.

Chair: I think you make a very good point about the £15 million or so costs that we are looking at: what percentage of that is on admin and what percentage is on maintenance of the bridge? It is something we may want to take up.

I do not want to answer all the questions myself, so I may look at some of my colleagues here. You, sir, were definitely next.

Audience Member: Thank you. I would like to know why there is this piecemeal approach to tolls. There are other parts of motorway systems like huge elevated sections running into London and I do not see you charging Kensington and Chelsea for the elevated section maintenance, elevated sections around Birmingham, Rotherham, and so on. They are extremely costly. Why are local people made to pay a toll after the infrastructure is complete? Maintenance on very expensive other things, shorter tunnels, you name it, all goes in the general taxation system for maintenance. Why are we continually being punished—and we are being punished—because it is paid for? Profits have been made. We should now come out of general taxation with the rest of the country.

Chair: I do not know if anyone else wants to come in at this point, but I fully agree with you. That is the question I ask a lot. Perhaps I could have a show of hands on whether most people would agree with that sentiment expressed in the room here. Is there anyone who strongly disagrees with that? No, so you make your point well, sir. There is somebody. Yes, maybe you would like to say something.

Audience Member: Yes. I am Barry Leat and I am retired. I started travelling the bridge on 1 September 1969 and I have travelled that bridge every day until 9 September 2000. I think I own the first pier. I attended the first public inquiry when they put the tolls up from two and sixpence, as it was—12.5 pence when it went decimal—to the first increase and they said they had to pay for the bridge. I am interested to hear that the Government wrote the debt off on the Humber Bridge, which was never, ever considered for the Severn Bridge.

The points made by members of the Freight Transport Association are very interesting and I am sure a lot of us have learnt an awful lot this morning. Discounts were available on the Severn Bridge in the early days. You could buy books of tickets and that gave you a 10% discount. Discounts should be given to regular users. Even people on a regular trip TAG do not get a discount. Only those on a seasonal TAG effectively get a discount, but you have to travel more than the cost of that TAG on a monthly basis. Effectively, you do not get a discount. Discounts should be given to people who commute regularly into Bristol or those coming across into south Wales.

Two-way tolling, an absolute disaster. If anybody can cast their mind back to the 1970s, you had to be down at the bridge at 7.15 in the morning to get across, otherwise you would

be queuing. The queue would stretch all the way down into Chepstow and all the way down the A48 into Pwllmeyric. That was effective double tolling, absolute disaster. The single method of tolling now is the way forward.

The TAG system: only two dedicated lanes on the M48 bridge on the extreme right and the extreme left. All the freight transport lorries know that. They use the one on the left-hand side. Unfortunately, if you get behind a car that does not understand the TAG system you have to sit there until somebody comes and sorts the problem out. TAGs do fail; they are not reliable. If you are sat in a TAG lane, as I have done on the second Severn Crossing—the only time I use that is when I am forced to use it because of the closure of the M48 or the westbound lane—you have to get out of your car and wander round to the keeper. People behind you who have TAGs can't move. You are holding up the whole of the system.

The ANPR system has to be introduced. It absolutely works essentially for the criminal fraternity. They know that they get caught on ANPR cameras. The police use it every day of the week, so the ANPR system has to be introduced very quickly.

There are three courses there. That is the only way of doing it.

Chair: That is great. Thank you very much indeed for that, sir. I appreciate that comment. The lady at the back.

Audience Member: My name is Suzie White. I live in Caldicot. I worked in Bristol for 13 years from 1987 and when I started it was 50 pence each way. Now you are telling me that the increase in the bridge has been with inflation. It has not. We have been hit really hard both sides of the bridge. I am in the situation now where I do not work in Bristol but my husband does. We have family and friends over in Bristol and we do limit going over and them coming over to see us because you have to take into account that my husband pays nearly £1,500 on the bridge a year to get to work. That is a big chunk of your wages. My brother and numerous friends are in the same situation, so I do not want to see this carry on being, like we say, a form of taxation.

The Government seem to think they are doing us a favour by halving it. No, I do not think they are. I am sure the debt should be paid off earlier and there has been some misquoting on the figures, personally. First, it needs to be at least halved, if not more. I understand if to keep it open, the old one especially, we need to pay maintenance, because it is not only just about cars. I am a member of Chepstow Harriers. We use that bridge for running. I walk and cycle on it. The main route from Land's End to John O'Groats is across that old bridge. It needs to be kept open for tourism and that brings in many people getting to work. People cycle to work, so that is also important.

I know somebody who works on the tolls and those tolls are used to cause traffic at the tolls so they are not causing traffic on the M4 further along. That is a fact, so we desperately need to look at this relief road. If the Government are not going to the black route they have to come up with something else. Living around this area and having to travel—I work in Crosskeys on a Friday afternoon. From 12.00 pm the M4 is near enough back to Magor, and then what traffic is being kept back at the tolls?

Chair: Obviously, it is the Government in Westminster that are responsible for the Severn Bridge and the Government in Cardiff that will do the relief road. As a Committee, we want them all to work together. I must say we are not the Government; we are there to ask these questions.

Audience Member: But it does not help when you have Leanne Wood saying that she will not invest the money, and she is now a major player in the Welsh Assembly. She wants to come and live round here and have to put up with the traffic and trying to get to work and the amount of time it takes. It is great that all these major tourism things happen, these events in Cardiff, but it does cause backlog all across the area, back to Chepstow and further.

Chair: Can I ask a quick question to the audience again? How many people think that the Welsh Government need to get on and sort out the relief road as quickly as possible? Is there anyone who is against a relief road? No. So whether it is the black route or the other one, people want a route. Do you have a question or point on that, sir?

Audience Member: My name is Mark Youngman and I work for Great Western Railway, who probably has a vested interest in the movement of people between Cardiff and Bristol. Fortunately, there has not been any mention of rail up here, which is quite good for me to come to a public meeting and not get harangued by everyone.

Chair: You may have spoken too soon there.

Audience Member: I wanted to make one point that you have raised, Chair, in terms of being devil's advocate about the unintended consequences if you remove the tolls and increase traffic. A 30% increase in traffic—there are already people in Chepstow at the moment who have been moaning how much traffic comes down the A48 from the Forest to go to Bristol to commute. At the moment, one could argue that the tolls are a barrier, a disincentive for people to make that drive. If you take the tolls away, that disincentive goes and people will just be minded, if we in the rail industry cannot put a solution on for them, to just simply jump in their car. People talk about the M4. Outside of the major events—and there are a couple of big major events coming up in Wales in the next 18 months or so—Friday evenings I am not too sure whether or not the M4, but more importantly the local road network in Chepstow, Caldicot, Magor and Newport, would be able to cope with an extra 30% of traffic that has started in England or is going out to the local area.

Probably my plea is that whenever the consultation starts or whenever dialogue happens about what the future of tolls is that it looks at the wider transport picture. Is there a role for improving sustainable transport? Is there a role somehow to discourage people from still travelling at peak times in Chepstow, because that will be one potential consequence? If you remove the tolls, people will find it much easier because one big barrier to jumping in their car has gone out the window. In 20 years' time I am sure the people of Chepstow, Caldicot and Rogiet would not want to be sitting down and bemoaning the fact that 30% more traffic was trying to squeeze through the A48.

Chair: Okay, thank you very much for that. That is a good point.

Audience Member: I have a rather different take here. We have talked about getting rid of tolls. I actually want to introduce a toll for motorbikes. The south-east Monmouthshire area is plagued at weekends with motorbikes, as you well know, David, from conversations that we have had and work you have done to help us. They bring little to the economy of this area. Many of them are day-trippers coming over from Bristol and, in fact, due to their behaviour, a lot of them bring costs to the area through accidents and deaths. In the last three weeks, we have had one death of a Bristol motor-biker near Abergavenny. It is tragic for his family, but there is a cost in all that for the local area. On the B4235, which is the road I live on, we have had a biker seriously injured, still lying in hospital after three weeks.

The concept of no charging on the bridge for bikes—if we get rid of all charges then we get rid of all charges and, frankly, I would be in support of that as such, but if we are having any charges, bikes should be charged. The reason that the bikes are not charged is probably back to the days when bikes were seen as a poor man's form of transport. If you can now afford to spend £10,000 to £15,000 on a 1,000cc bike or more that is bigger than some cars these days, you can afford to pay a toll.

The reason for wanting a toll is to try to discourage some of these bikers from coming and using our roads as a racetrack playground with very little benefit to the economy. We are told that they are tourists looking at the wonderful scenery. The speeds they travel along our roads, in excess of 90 miles an hour on country roads, does not mean that you are looking at the scenery. If you are, perhaps that is why so many of them crash and die. Let us prevent the deaths by discouraging the bikes in some way and tolls would be one way of doing that.

Chair: Thank you for that. I would just reiterate all of this is being recorded and all of it is being treated as evidence to the Select Committee. Sir, you were next at the back there.

Audience Member: [Member of the public], resident of Caldicot. The general opinion here today is that basically users of the bridge have been ripped off over the years. I would like to know how strong is the representation of this area to the Government in sorting this problem out. It seems to be going on and on and on and there is no result at the end of it.

Chair: Shall I bring in other members who are, after all, in the vicinity? I will start on my left and come round.

Chris Davies: Thank you, Chairman, and you were doing so well. I think, if I may say, the tolls on the bridge have an effect on all of us in Wales. You feel very heavily burdened, Chair, and I can understand that because you live closest to the bridge and many of you will cross it daily, as we have already heard. I live 60 miles away and travelling back and forward to London I get the burden of the bridge weekly. Many of my constituents, certainly haulage drivers, have a massive problem. I sympathise enormously.

I think the Government are going in the right direction to halve the tolls. I think this is a massive way forward. I know that will not satisfy everybody until the tolls are done away with altogether and that is our aim, I am sure, Chairman, which is what we would like to see, certainly as David represents your seat here. We hear from David regularly. He is constantly championing yourselves and his constituents up there in Westminster about how it would benefit this area to have the tolls removed. I am afraid we cannot work miracles today. We

can take the evidence. We can put the extra pressure on, which is what we are here to do, and we will try to go forward for you. Believe me, it does affect everybody in the whole of Wales.

Moving on from that, can I just cover the two previous points, if I may, Chairman? First on the bikes, I am afraid Brecon and Radnorshire has one of the highest, if not the highest, fatality areas for bikes in the country. They all tell me that they are wonderful roads to be driving bikes on, but I am afraid the Severn Bridge has not stopped people coming across so it is not unique to your area. We have massive problems with bikes but imposing tolls will not necessarily make a difference. I think, as we are all hearing now, the feeling in the room is that we would like to get rid of the tolls altogether.

As far as Great Western Railway is concerned, we heard a very good speech there, but I do get the feeling that Great Western Railway would not like to see the tolls removed for various reasons. I am wondering if one of those main reasons is a commercial decision. I am going to ask you directly, if I may, if I can go back to the witness in the audience: would you feel that by removing the tolls Great Western Railway would suffer commercially, a yes or no answer?

Audience Member: I do not think I can answer that.

Chair: Very wise.

Chris Davies: You can't answer or you do not want to answer it?

Audience Member: I can't answer it because it is a bigger transport planning issue. It is not just about us. There are two other transport operators who provide cross-border services, Arriva CrossCountry and Arriva Trains Wales, plus National Express, plus Stagecoach. You name it, there are a lot of other transport operators. But I go back to my central point that there is evidence out there that says 30% increase in traffic on the M4 if you took the tolls off, that will have an impact on the local road network and needs to be factored in, leaving aside what impact it has on transport operators.

Chair: May I just bring you back again, sir, very quickly and then there are about four or five other people who want to get in?

Audience Member: The gentleman was saying that it is only the local residents. No, I am concerned about the Welsh economy as a whole, not just local residents.

Chris Davies: It affects all of us, yes.

Audience Member: As I said, I am concerned that this subject is going on and on and on. I am curious and suspicious of how strong the representation of this area is in Westminster. Seriously, up to now, it does not seem to be—

Chair: Can I come in, because I do represent the area in Westminster? What I would strongly suggest, if you have the time, is to have a look at the last Welsh Affairs Select Committee report into this, because there is absolutely nothing that could have been done about the tolls up until the handover. The Government made a deal with a company. Effectively, they said, "You build this bridge. You take over the old one and you will get £1 billion in tolls." That

was set in stone. It is a legal document. Without tearing up all kinds of laws—I mean literally tearing up property law—there is nothing any Government could have done about it. What we can do, though, is to have a big impact on what happens next when the concession comes to an end. We do not know the exact date but it is pretty imminent. It will be between November 2017 and April 2018.

Audience Member: I take your point, but you are saying now it is imminent, autumn 2017, 2018.

Chair: Yes.

Audience Member: That is fine. In parliamentary concern and time, that is very short.

Chair: You are right, sir, and that is at the point—

Audience Member: Absolutely very short because things move very slowly.

Chair: Very true.

Audience Member: On what we have seen, on what has been said today—

Chair: You are quite right, I totally accept the point made by the FTA as well and a point made by us.

Can I bring in Gerald Jones because he is a local MP as well, or fairly local?

Gerald Jones: Fairly local, yes. It is a good point for the area and for the wider economy of south Wales. I represent Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney, top of the Valleys area. There are constituents of mine who have raised this issue, not huge numbers but it has been raised with me over the last 12 months. I have only been in Parliament just over a year, but there has been a constant campaign regarding the Severn Bridge tolls. I think it is fair to say that it has cross-party support as well. My colleague Jessica Morden has done a lot of work on this issue and raised debates within Westminster over a long period of time, so there is cross-party support for dealing with this issue. As Chris has said, it is moving in the right direction, but it is about going further than that and putting as much pressure on as possible when the time comes that it comes into public ownership in 2017 or thereabouts to deal with this issue because it is having a long-term effect on not just this area but the wider south Wales economy.

Chair: Thank you. I think there was a gentleman right at the end there. I am going to try to bring a few people in quickly who have not come in yet.

Audience Member: Thank you. I am marginally taller and standing at the back.

Chair: I recognise the chairman in Wales of First Great Western, if I am not mistaken.

Audience Member: Thank you, Mr Chairman. I am John Pockett and I put my hand up to support my colleague. I work for Great Western Railway and for the bus and coach industry as well. In support of Mark, the cavalry coming to the rescue, it is not an issue whether the tolls will increase passengers on the railway. Mark made the point, and I just want to emphasise it, that this whole thing, the removal of the tolls or the increase of the

tolls, certainly the removal of the tolls, is not the panacea to help everything. This is part of a much bigger transport policy solution and I would urge the Committee here, the DfT in London and the Welsh Government in Cardiff to look at this. This inquiry should maybe, I would suggest, go into the mix as part of an overall transport policy solution.

Chair: Thank you very much, John. May I have somebody who has not asked a question yet? Councillor Dovey then, if I could turn to you.

Audience Member: Thank you, Chairman. The fact of the matter is that there are two bridges here that play a great role in our lives. There is the Severn Bridge and, of course, there is the bridge just across the way from us, the Wye Bridge, which brings the majority of the traffic down from the A48 to join the motorway further down, as we all know. The big issue is the growth in housing in this area, the fact that we live very close to one of the most dynamic cities in the country, which is Bristol. People forget we have Gloucestershire on two borders. Everybody thinks Gloucestershire and Bristol is just across the water. Well, it is across the water as well as across the Wye. We have 200 or 300 extra houses going to be built at Sedbury and the issues that that will bring for traffic coming through here in Chepstow and trying to get out to the motorway.

The point I would like to make is that there is no doubt that commercial vehicles are avoiding the bridge. You have only to sit out on the wall and watch them come in through here. They come from all over the country and all over Europe. They all know their way down through and they are trying to duck through and avoid the bridge. The effect of that, of course, is we have an air quality issue in Chepstow because of the amount of traffic, which actually is of east European standards. It looks like the Assembly could be fined by Europe over this because they have done nothing to deal with it.

If the bridge opened, there would be no doubt that a lot of commercial vehicles would use the bridge if the tolls came off that, but that would not solve our problem completely because of the growth of housing in this area—we are just across the road from a site here where they want to build 300 houses. I would point out to people who do not realise it that we do not have any option but to build houses at the rate and quantity that the Assembly Government want us to be able to house the people who want to live in Monmouthshire. We have houses being built there. We have houses being built in Gloucestershire, as I have said, 1,000 up there, so there is more traffic coming through here. That is causing great problems for this area in general.

The one point I would make is—and our colleague across there from First Great Western has made it very adequately—the fact is this is not just a truck/car problem. It is a transport problem in the wider sense and we really do need Governments of both nations—sounds funny, doesn't it—to talk to one another. We will not get a complete solution to the problem here unless there is information shared and a determination to put the problem right for this area and the commercial future for Monmouthshire and the rest of south-east Wales.

Chair: Thank you very much, Councillor Dovey. The lady there, I think.

Audience Member: Naomi Leeming, local resident. Two questions, if I may; one is a curiosity one. How well received are you with this subject in Parliament? Are you having to beat down doors to be heard or are you being encouraged to be proactive to find this

information and take it back? My second question is you talked earlier about a legal binding document that will not allow us to do anything until ownership is handed over. Does that mean then you can't make any decisions or implement any processes ahead of the handover, in which case we are going to be chasing our tail when we do hand over and the whole thing will be a mess, or do we literally have to wait for the handover to happen before you can commit staff, charging systems, whatever the decision may be?

Chair: Very simple questions; I will see if I can answer for the whole Committee here. Select Committees, I would say, are never encouraged. It is not really in Ministers' interests to encourage us, but I think it is also fair to say in general we are well received and we are listened to, even if action is not necessarily taken. There is virtually nothing that could be done about the tolls. I summarise a little bit but please do have the report online if you are not sure about that. The point is, and this gentleman made it rather well, the Committee may well conclude that the Government are not acting quickly enough to deal with the handover. I am not sure whether we will come to that conclusion. Personally, speaking as a local MP, I am of that opinion and I will put that on the record, but I can't speak for the Committee, of course, until the report is written. I hope that answers questions.

Nobody wants to come in. Sir, you were next.

Audience Member: I am a resident of Chepstow. I have been a resident since the first Severn Crossing was built. I would like to reiterate what the first gentleman from Great Western and Councillor Dovey said. We suffer and benefit from being the lowest bridging point ostensibly for two rivers. It also means that we are a major route through, especially for traffic from Forest of Dean in Gloucestershire trying to get to the Severn Bridge. We are also a major artery for commuter traffic trying to get to the Severn Bridge. I know a lot of the discussion has been on the wider infrastructure and lorry transport and that sort of thing, but the minute you drop the Severn Bridge tolls or abolish them, the Chepstow area will be a target for commuters to Bristol. We can see the influence on house prices already, I think, with the rumours of the reduction in bridge tolls. We can see it quite frequently in the congestion we get in Chepstow and we do not have alternative routes. There is no alternative if you want to get from Forest of Dean to somewhere over here. You have to come over that bridge or you go a considerable distance up the River Wye to the crossing. That is detrimentally affected by the traffic trying to get to the Severn Bridge. If you increase that traffic flow over the Severn Bridge, the situation here in Chepstow will get worse.

When the initial Severn Bridge was built, there was a provision for putting a new bridge across the River Wye and that it would deposit the traffic directly at the new Wales junction. That was put on the plans; we are talking in the 1960s. It has never been built and I think it needs to be considered. If you do anything now with the Severn Bridge, you need to consider what should have been done about 40 or 50 years ago. It is still not too late to put that bridge over there, but it needs to be done, otherwise we are in logjam.

Chair: Thank you very much. Ned?

Audience Member: I was going to say exactly the same. As a councillor for this area, I regularly get complaints from people waiting 20 minutes, half an hour, trying to get to the Chepstow junction. You need to look at the transport infrastructure as a whole. Taking the

tolls off the Severn Bridge or reducing them will completely reconfigure traffic flows and that needs to be considered.

Chair: Thank you very much. The lady on the end there.

Audience Member: I think I am the person that these people are speaking about because I have just moved to Chepstow from Bristol and my husband and I still both work in Bristol, so we commute. It is definitely a bigger transport issue. There are no direct trains from Chepstow to Bristol. There is a 20-minute wait at Severn Tunnel junction and if every morning you have a baby to deal with and you have to get ready, that 20 minutes is a really long time that you could have at home. There is a direct commuter bus, which is brilliant, but I work until 6.00 pm and the bus back is at 5.15 pm. The very last bus back is at 6.00 pm, so I am stuck in Bristol and cannot get here. That would be my first point.

My question is, which was touched on briefly, has there been any consideration given to introducing a system where if you have a hybrid or electric car then you can use the bridge for free to try to encourage people to buy them and reduce emissions?

Chair: Well, not as far as I am aware. I look around at the Committee. I think it is one of those things that can be looked at. I should have said, maybe I did say, if I cannot get around anyone here, if anyone wants to put in any written evidence, it does not have to be done in the formal way that organisations do it; a simple couple of sentences will count as written evidence. Please do feel free to submit any ideas or any thoughts that you have if I cannot get around everyone. To be honest with you, I will let you in on a secret of Government. A couple of clear sentences in simple English are more likely to get read by everyone than the pages and pages of jargon that some organisations, though not First Great Western, like to send us.

I had better turn to people who have not asked any questions yet, if that is all right, and then I will come back.

Audience Member: I am Anne Roberts, a local resident. I think what I will take away from this morning's discussion is a major concern about the timeframes, picking up on your point. You seem to be facing a major change programme in less than a year and, as far as I can see or have heard, very little planning about what is going to happen. I agree that it is a transport issue, I agree that it is wider than just the bridge. If you are really going to be entering into a phase where the ownership is changing and you have less than a year to understand how that is going to happen, what can we as local residents do to express—well, I would like to express my concern about the timeframe.

Chair: You have expressed it very well and it may well be echoed. It is slightly over a year, but it is a very—

Audience Member: Well, the date is not known, which makes some of us concerned. The length of time to make that change seems to be incredibly short if you are going to plan and effect it efficiently and get the best outcome for people here and people in the rest of Wales. I would like to know what I can do as a local resident to express my concern about that timeframe.

Chair: Well, you have just done it and you have done it very well, if I may say so. I know there are two people over there with a question. I do not think you have asked one yet, so please feel free if you have not.

Audience Member: Thank you, Mr Chairman. My name is Kit Spackman and I am a foreigner because I live in England, up there, 10 miles away in Lydney.

Male Speaker: Another nation.

Audience Member: Yes, absolutely. I have brought my passport with me. The point I would like to make is I would fight if at all possible that any administration of the bridges should be held by the Welsh Government in Cardiff if only for the reason that if it is I would be in the position of paying tolls, if there are tolls, under their control. I would have absolutely no input into that whatsoever. My MP, Mr Mark Harper, cannot influence what happens in Cardiff. I hope that he influences people in Westminster, but quite a lot of the things I have been hearing here today have been—the phrase “Welsh” has come up numerous times, quite obviously because we are in Wales, but there are a significant number of people who are living in west Gloucestershire, over there, who are affected exactly the same way by the issues on the Severn Bridge. I take on board what the councillor here said about the issues on the Wye Bridge itself. The whole thing about taking the whole as a transport issue is very well taken, I think.

Chair: It is a very good point. Since nobody else’s hand has gone up, madam at the back, please feel free to have another go.

Audience Member: I would like to pick up on a couple of things that have been said. A gentleman said about what our politicians, our MPs, are doing about things not seeming to happen. The Humber Bridge was successful in getting their tolls halved and getting £150 million wiped off because they had a very good campaign. Not only local MPs, councillors, residents, transport users, they all got together and campaigned, and I think it is all our responsibility. You are saying what you want to do. I think we need to get an organised campaign together to get our say across what we want, local businesses, local residents, MPs, councillors.

Chair: Maybe we should talk again on that. Madam, you obviously have not asked a question yet.

Audience Member: Yes, thank you. I just want to make two points. My name is Elizabeth David. I am a local resident. First, to support the view about the strategic road infrastructure and tolling policy because I would be pro getting rid of the tolls, obviously, I spend a lot of money on them, but if necessary I think they ought to be there only to cover maintenance. I think the key thing for us is it does not feel fair. It does not feel fair how tolls are introduced. You have them on bits of the M6. You have them on bits of other things, but there are lots of areas where we do not have them. I think we need to see the fairness in how that policy is being applied across the UK.

The second point is to reiterate the bit about transport. We have not heard much about the environment in this debate, which is a concern of mine. I am concerned about the fact that when we build new roads we tend to get more traffic and I do not think that is helpful in the longer term. Living here, I reluctantly have come to the conclusion we do not have an

alternative. We do need to do that. I have spent hours looking for how to go into Bristol on public transport, how to do things, how to go to Cardiff on public transport; 90% of the time I end up in my car. We have to have a much better integrated transport system as part of this whole debate. I really want to emphasise that, along with so many other people.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. We have about five minutes left. May I ask that people who have asked a question perhaps do not put their hand up and those who have not asked a question I will try to get everyone in quickly. I will go from that direction, sir.

Audience Member: Yes, Richard Green, local resident. Am I right in saying the Forth Bridge is a similar bridge to the Severn Bridge?

Chair: In terms of structure?

Audience Member: Yes.

Chair: You have me there. Does anyone know?

Audience Member: They have got rid of the tolls on that bridge and the Scottish Government have taken over the expenses, so if it was able to be done on that bridge, then why not on this bridge?

Chair: I do not feel I can give you a full answer to that, but it is a fair question. We will look at that.

Moving on, the lady just behind you, sir.

Audience Member: I would just like to make a point. I spend part of my time in Wiltshire and part of my time at Tidenham Chase and have a vested interest in that that is a tourist spot that has a lot of people coming over from Bristol and every time the bridge is shut it makes a big difference. What I am hearing is you have to be careful what you wish for because if you abolish the tolls then you are going to have more local traffic congestion both here and further down in Wales. Using the bridge on a very regular basis over a lot of years, I have noticed that big events cause congestion and commuting back as well you get more traffic if you have fewer tolls. I think that people have to be careful to get that balance.

Chair: Okay, thank you. Sir?

Audience Member: It was just a quick question. Ryan from Chepstow Racecourse. In terms of moving forward and people being kept up to date with the developments of the bridge, is there any way of registering our interest to be kept up to date and somewhere to follow the developments?

Chair: The report from the Committee may well come out before the summer recess. I think the best thing for anyone local to do is probably to e-mail me. Presumably when the Government make an announcement—we hope they do—they will put out copious press releases but I cannot guarantee that you will see them.

Audience Member: Thank you.

Chair: Can I work my way along to those who have not asked questions yet? The gentleman there, sir.

Audience Member: Thank you. I was going to ask about the unintended consequences and a few people have already raised that. My name is Clive Osborne. I live also in Gloucestershire, but my question relates to the hinterland. We have already heard that people are moving in from Bristol, commuters. Is there any work on scoping the impacts, for example, on local villages becoming dormitory villages, house prices rising so that local people can't afford them? We have heard from the industry and from commerce. Is that aspect considered at all?

Chair: You mean if the tolls are got rid of or halved?

Audience Member: Yes.

Chair: I am not aware of any so we will have to find out about that as well, I think, and come back to you.

Audience Member: Thank you.

Chair: The gentleman there.

Audience Member: Christian Schmidt. I am council planning officer at the Monmouth County Council. Just to come back to a point that was made earlier, the idea of traffic relief for Chepstow, a bypass, is still part of the local transport plan. Having said that, the A48, is a trunk road so it is the transport agencies on both sides, because it takes quite a number of parties in there. We certainly have not had any funding or any chance to do anything about it. We could try again, but it has not worked in the past.

On the proposal of direct trains from Chepstow, that is something that we have talked to the rail industry about in recent consultations. Given that the rail industry probably moves at the same speed as Parliament, I think the next franchise in 2019 might be a good chance. Before that it would be very unlikely.

Chair: Thank you very much.

Audience Member: Just a quick one. I am also from the Forest of Dean. Was Mark Harper invited to this?

Chair: Well, he is not a member of the Welsh Affairs Select Committee.

Audience Member: No, but this is a typical border problem.

Chair: It is, but there are certain protocols we have to go through. Mark or any MP would be welcome to come to one of these meetings, but he is—

Audience Member: Yes, that is what I wondered, because everybody is concerned about this. Coming from the Forest of Dean and as a person living there, I can quite see why we should not have Mark here, as they come down from Caldicot down to Tutshill.

Chair: I cannot really speak for Mark. In fact, he is the Chief Whip, which means that he decides who becomes a Minister or not, so I had better be careful what I say about him. He is like my personnel manager here. He is definitely not a member of the Welsh Affairs Select Committee and could not be on the Committee. He could, like any other MP, come to one of these meetings, but dare I suggest that an effective way of lobbying him would be to ask to see him at a surgery or perhaps with a group of—

Audience Member: I thought I would ascertain whether he had been invited, that was all. Thank you.

Chair: Thank you, sir. Did I see a hand in front?

Audience Member: Yes. I have heard a lot of good discussion on operational issues, the impact of changing tolls, removing tolls, but I would like to separate the strategic issue that tolls affect the economy massively in the area from the operational issues that there might be knock-on impacts of removing those tolls. One of the reasons I would like to do that is because I think the way the bridge is managed has a big impact on those operational issues. Routinely, the bridge is operating on one lane. As soon as you do that and bring cars up from the M48 on to the roundabout, then Chepstow just grinds to a halt. If they did not do that and they just managed the bridge a bit better, you would not have some of those issues. You have to get those two issues sorted.

Chair: Okay. We have run out of time now but may I just say again if anyone has any points they want to put across, please do feel free to e-mail the Welsh Affairs Select Committee with literally a couple of sentences in plain, good old English without any jargon and they will get read when they get fed in? I would like to thank everyone very much for attending this. The meeting is now closed. Thank you.