

# WHITCHURCH BRIDGE COMPANY TOLL APPLICATION DATED 5<sup>TH</sup> NOVEMBER 2014

## Further Information: Communications

### **1. Introduction**

1.1 The purpose of this document is to give more details about the Company's communications strategy, which is based on its wish to give factual information on the Company and its operations..

### **2. The Company's website**

2.1 The Company's website went live in June 2005. It is regularly updated and includes extensive and detailed information on:

- The current Toll Application and FAQ's on it
- The history of the Company and the Bridge
- A description of the current Bridge and how it was reconstructed
- Tolls, including concessionary Tolls, a description of the Bridge Card discounted pre-pay system and FAQ's on it
- Proposed Toll increases, and the process by which a Toll increase is applied for and granted.
- A photo gallery
- A guest book
- Links to other relevant websites.

2.2 The Company monitors the activity on its website. During Bridge reconstruction in 2013-2014 the website averaged 6,000 visits per month.

2.3 As well as a Guest Book, the website Home page includes contact details through which any queries, comments etc may be submitted.

### **3. Twitter**

3.1 The Company has a Twitter Account at **@whitchurchbridg**, which is used to communicate useful information through social media. The Account has gained 146 followers since it was set up in February 2014.

3.2 During the reconstruction of the Bridge regular messages and photos were posted, and since the Bridge re-opened Twitter (as well as the Company's website) has been used to publicise useful information. For example, this message was posted on 10<sup>th</sup> February 2015:

*There will be temporary traffic lights at the Bridge from 0930-1530 on Tue 17th Feb while we replace 2 lamp posts. Delays may occur, sorry.*

### **4. Items in local Parish Magazines**

4.1 The Company regularly submits items to the Editors of 8 local Parish Magazines (Pangbourne, Whitchurch-on-Thames, Goring Heath, Woodcote, Purley, Sulham and Tidmarsh, Upper Basildon, Goring) to inform readers about items of interest. Appendix 1 shows 2 recent example of items submitted for publication.

### **5. The Toll Application and Public Inquiry**

5.1 The Company submitted Public Notices about its Toll Application in 3 local papers (ie 2 more than required by the 1954 Act) - details are in Document 5 of the Statement of Reasons. In addition, the Company used its website, Twitter and local Parish Magazines to publicise its Toll Application and the approval process as follows.

5.2 Our website has had a prominent item, updated as necessary, about the Toll Application on its home page continuously since 1<sup>st</sup> October 2014. In particular, it published clarification from the DfT in the period 30<sup>th</sup> March – 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2015 about deadlines for those who wished to have their comments etc considered at the PI.

5.3 We have published 7 messages on Twitter since 1<sup>st</sup> October 2014 about our Toll Application and the Public Inquiry, including:

1<sup>st</sup> October 2014: *We have decided that we need to submit a Toll Application to increase the basic Toll from 40p to 60p. More details on our website. Sorry*

6<sup>th</sup> November 2014 *We've just published our Toll Application on our website. We regret that a Toll increase is needed, but please read it to understand why*

21<sup>st</sup> November 2014 *The 42 day public consultation period on our Toll Application starts to-day, with Public Notices in 3 local papers. Details on our website*

29<sup>th</sup> January 2015 *Dept. for Transport has just informed us that there will be a Public Inquiry into our Toll Application. Details on date and location later.*

12<sup>th</sup> March 2015 *The Public Inquiry into the Company's Toll Application will take place at 1000 hrs on Tuesday 19 May 2015 at The George Hotel, Pangbourne*

2<sup>nd</sup> April 2015: *The DfT has now clarified deadlines for those who wish to have their comments etc considered at the PI - please see our website for details*

13<sup>th</sup> April 2015 *We will be publishing a Statement of Reasons for the PI (as we did for the 2009 PI) with more detailed info to support our TA on 24th April*

5.4 The 2 items in Appendix 1 mentioning the Toll Application were sent to the editors of 8 local Parish Magazines. The Company acknowledges that each magazine has different deadlines and for this or other reasons editors may decide not to publish items from the Company. However, both items were published in the Whitchurch Bulletin, which is delivered to every household in the village.

5.5 The Village website at [www.whitchurchonthames.com](http://www.whitchurchonthames.com) has carried many items about the Company's Toll Application, including the following:

***“Bridge toll to be increased***

*The Bridge Company has announced that it needs to increase the car toll from 40 to 60 pence. A Toll Application is being prepared for submission later this month to the Secretary of State for Transport.*

*The statement does not give reasons for the increase but it is understood that the effect of delays during the reconstruction project increased the cost from £4 million to around £6 million and an increased toll income in future years is needed to pay off the resulting debt.*

*The present car toll of 40p is discounted to 29.4p for those pre-paying with a Toll Card. The Bridge Company has not said what discount will apply when the toll is 60p.*

*Bridge Company director Geoff Weir said today that the Toll Application document will explain in full detail the reasons why such an increase is necessary and, once it is published, it will be open to challenge through the consultation process administered by the Department for Transport.*

*Update, 3rd October: Reading Chronicle article [here](#).*

*Date/Time : Thursday, 2nd October 2014 20:27”*

***“Fewer drivers are using the toll bridge***

*The Bridge Company has applied this week to increase car tolls by 50%, from 40p to 60p, from 15th July next year. The discount proposed for regular users is at least 25% (giving a car toll of 45p) for five years.*

*The Toll Application, submitted to the Secretary of State for Transport on 5<sup>th</sup> November, shows the number of vehicle crossings each year. For the five year period before the recent bridge closure there was a gradual reduction in bridge use, averaging 2.2% per year. This is three times greater than the reduction assumed in the 2008 toll application.*

*Whether the decline is just the result of drivers avoiding the bridge because of increased tolls or whether it is also due to other factors (such as more people working from home) is not explained.*

*The pattern of declining bridge use is one of the reasons for the increased toll. However, the main reason is the £6.4m cost of reconstruction, which is £2.3m more than the 2008 estimate. Six issues causing the cost increase and the five month delay are listed in the application, the principal one being the 11 week stoppage caused by exceptional river conditions.*

*Bridge Company director Geoff Weir said today that after the bridge reopened in September he expected an initial reduction in the number of crossings, as some drivers would keep to their changed routes. Crossing numbers have already recovered to about 90% of the previous level, he said.*

*There is a link to the full 37-page Toll Application on the [Bridge Company's website](#). When the period of consultation starts, anyone will be able to make representations to the Secretary of State on the application.*

*Date/Time : Saturday, 8th November 2014 17:03*

#### ***“Six weeks consultation on bridge tolls begins***

*Objections to the Bridge Company’s proposed 50% toll increase should be submitted not later than 2nd January 2015.*

*The Bridge Company issued a [Public Notice](#) in local newspapers yesterday giving details of the proposed new toll charges and the name and address of the person in the Department of Transport to whom any objections should be sent.*

*Date/Time : Saturday, 22nd November 2014 09:42*

- 5.6 The local newspapers and radio stations have carried items about the Toll Application since it was announced in October 2014.
- 5.7 The Company decided not to post Notices about the Toll Application at the Toll Booth as it was concerned that such Notices would provoke spontaneous comments from Bridge users which may have been detrimental to the safety and welfare of its Toll Collectors.

## **6 Summary**

- 6.1 The Company believes that it has an effective communications strategy through its website, Twitter and local Parish magazines. In particular, it believes its communications about its Toll Application have been open and comprehensive, and far beyond what it was legally required to do under the 1954 Act or as requested by the DfT.

GW

## Appendix 1 – Items submitted for publication to the Editors of 8 local Parish Magazines

### **1 Item submitted to editors on 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2014**

(Published in the Whitchurch Bulletin in November 2014)

#### **“Whitchurch Bridge**

The Bridge reopened on 19<sup>th</sup> September – much later than we would have liked, but the inevitable consequence of the high river levels last winter and to a lesser extent the structural problems encountered during demolition. The Company again apologises to all those whose journeys were disrupted during the Bridge closure.

We were very pleased and not a little surprised by the crowds who turned up for the opening ceremony, David Card's 1902 De Dion Bouton was a great way to open the Bridge and was much photographed.

Our next project will be to widen the road and pavement on the Pangbourne approach. This will need careful planning if we are to avoid damaging the character of this area: the existing railings are not compliant with current highway standards and there are trees close to the highway on both sides which may need to be felled. We will consult widely on the details of this scheme, which in any case will not get under way until we have built up the necessary funds.

We are submitting a Toll Application to the Secretary of State for Transport to increase the Toll from 40p to 60p, under the process laid down in the 1954 Transport and Miscellaneous Charges Act (there's a copy on our website). We will publish the Toll Application on our website, and anyone is entitled to comment on any fact or assertion in it through a public consultation process administered by the Department for Transport. The Secretary of State will only approve the increase if he/she believes it to be justified on the facts.

Finally, may I thank you for the courtesy shown to our Toll Collectors, who do their best to collect the Tolls efficiently and good-humouredly.

Geoff Weir

Company Secretary, the Whitchurch Bridge Company

[www.whitchurchbridge.com](http://www.whitchurchbridge.com) “

## **2 Item submitted to Editors on 3<sup>rd</sup> January 2015**

(Published in the Whitchurch Bulletin in January 2015)

### **“Whitchurch Bridge**

For reasons that we have explained previously the cost of reconstructing Whitchurch Bridge was significantly higher than expected, and because of this the Whitchurch Bridge Company needs to increase the Class 1 Toll from 40p to 60p.

There is a legal process to be gone through before the Tolls can be increased – the Tolls are regulated and any increase has to be justified by the Company and approved by the Secretary of State for Transport.

We submitted a Toll Application in November. The Public Consultation period ended on 2<sup>nd</sup> January 2015. The Department for Transport (DfT) received some objections, so we are expecting that it will ask the Planning Inspectorate – part of the Department for Communities and Local Government – to arrange a Public Inquiry at which the Company and the objectors can put forward their respective cases to an independent Inspector. The Company will ensure that, in its evidence, it addresses all the points put forward by the objectors.

We expect the Public Inquiry will take place locally, hopefully in Pangbourne, in late Spring 2015. We will publicise the date and location on our website as soon as we can. Being a Public Inquiry anyone may attend. The Planning Inspectorate will contact objectors directly with details of how they can participate.

The DfT normally receives the Inspector's Report within 2 months of the Public Inquiry. This Report, with an accompanying submission from civil servants, is then put to DfT Ministers for a decision (note that this will be after the General Election). If the Toll Application is approved a Toll Order is prepared by DfT civil servants, approved by lawyers, registered with the National Archives at Kew and then sent to the Company.

The Company must receive this Toll Order before it can increase the Tolls. Based on our experience when we last applied for a Toll increase in 2008 we are not expecting any increase in Tolls to be approved before September 2015.

We regret that a Toll increase is necessary. Bridge users can be assured that the Secretary of State will only approve the increase if he/she believes it to be justified on the facts.

Finally, may I thank you for the courtesy shown to our Toll Collectors, who do their best to collect the Tolls efficiently and good-humouredly.

Geoff Weir  
Company Secretary, the Whitchurch Bridge Company  
[www.whitchurchbridge.com](http://www.whitchurchbridge.com) “