

Press release: Drivers in Wales and SW England set to save as VAT lifted on Severn tolls

Commuters, drivers and businesses across South Wales and the South West of England are set to make major savings from today (8 January), when the UK Government reduces the charges to cross the Severn bridges.

From 00:01 on 8 January, all vehicles will be exempt from VAT, meaning car drivers will pocket an extra £1.10 as the charge for individual crossings reduces from £6.70 to £5.60. This change will also lift an administrative burden for business users, who will no longer need to claim back VAT.

This move is expected to save regular motorists around £1,400 per year, making it far cheaper to commute Cardiff, Newport or Bristol. Businesses across the area will also benefit by not paying over £16 for lorries to cross the Severn – the abolition will boost the Welsh economy by over £100 million a year.

The reduction comes as the crossings return to public ownership, with Highways England, a UK-Government owned body, taking over responsibility for the bridges' operation and management from Severn River Crossing PLC.

Drivers are set to benefit further when the UK Government abolishes the charges completely by the end of 2018.

Secretary of State for Wales Alun Cairns will discuss the potential joint working and trade opportunities generated by the removal of charges with organisations from both sides of the border at a summit at the Celtic Manor in Newport on 22 January.

Secretary of State for Wales Alun Cairns said:

In less than a year we will see the biggest economic stimulus for south Wales and the valleys for decades. This important move taken by the Prime Minister and the UK Government in regard to the Severn Crossings represents a clear symbol of breaking down the economic and historic barriers which have hindered Wales' prosperity – whilst supporting the union of the United Kingdom.

My number one priority as Secretary of State was to remove the tolls, which will not only make journeys cheaper for commuters and tourists, but will also create exciting opportunities for businesses and investors looking to make their mark in Wales.

This will boost Welsh employment and establish lasting relationships between the economies and communities of South Wales

and South West England, creating the most natural growth corridor spanning from Cardiff through Newport to Bristol. It is time to make politics fit business, not business fit politics in Wales.

I look forward to discussing these opportunities further with hundreds of attendees from both sides of the border at the Severn Growth Summit later this month.

James Durie, Executive Director of Business West said:

There are already strong economic and other linkages between Bristol & the West of England and Cardiff & South Wales (as set out in the Great Western Cities report of 2016) and these are set to only increase further through the UK Government's decision to reduce and remove the Severn Bridge tolls. Whilst there will be some challenges in the short term to address, businesses welcome the removal of any costs and barriers to trade – and also this opportunity to work with the Secretary of State for Wales and the UK Government via the forthcoming growth summit.

Bristol & the West of England operates globally, enjoying the best performing economy outside of London, but also recognises the absolute need to look at broader regional economic collaboration and working – particularly in the context of the challenges that Brexit is posing. At a time when the Northern Powerhouse and Midlands Engine have got considerable national traction and attention, we need to explore how we can best collaborate together to unlock opportunities and profile for the West of the UK.

We cannot afford to stand still and look forward to working closer to improve this part of the country as a great place to live, work, study and visit.

Highways England have informed all TAG ticket holders of the new arrangements, and remind those who pay by top-up with a Trip TAG through online banking to update their payment details to Highways England's account from 8 January 2018. Account holders will still be able to pay through the website or phone.

Drivers paying by direct debit will not need to take any action – their accounts and balances will be transferred automatically and their payments adjusted to reflect the new charges.

After 8 January the crossings will operate as normal with just a few small changes to signs at the toll plazas.

Staff currently employed with Severn Crossing PLC have all been offered employment with Highways England.

Details of the changes and actions necessary are available on the Severn

Crossings website www.severnbridge.co.uk. TAG holders with any queries can also the TAG helpline on 01454 633 522.

ENDS

Further information:

Severn Bridges daily charges after January 8 2018:

- Category 1 (Cars and other vehicles up to 9 seats): £5.60
- Category 2 (Goods vehicles up to 3.5 tonnes, small buses): £11.20
- Category 3 (Goods vehicles over 3.5 tonnes, large buses): £16.70

Severn Bridges (M4 and M48) monthly charges after January 8 2018:

- Category 1: £5.60, with the Season/Shared TAG at £98.56 (20% discount based on 22 trips per month).
- Category: 2 £11.20, with the Season/Shared TAG at £197.12 (20% discount based on 22 trips per month).
- Category 3: £16.70, with the Season/Shared TAG at £330.66 (10% discount based on 22 trips per month).
- The abolition is set to benefit the Welsh economy by around £100m a year, according to Welsh Government: The Impact of the Severn Tolls on the Welsh Economy, 30 May 2012.
- Regular motorists are set to save over £1,400 per year based on a monthly tag charge of £117.92 over 12 months.
- The Secretary of State for Wales Alun Cairns has announced that he will host the first cross-border, Severn Growth business summit on 22 January 2018 at the Celtic Manor Resort. Businesses can sign up to attend the summit [via Eventbrite](#).
- On 13 January, the Government launched a consultation, setting out a series of proposals designed to deliver improvements at the Crossings. This consultation ran for eight weeks until 10 March. The consultation response can be found [here](#).
- The Severn Bridge was built in 1966 and a second crossing was completed 30 years later. When the bridges come under public ownership, they will be run by Highways England. Previously it has been run by Severn River Crossing plc.
- The first Severn Bridge was opened in September 1966, providing a direct link from the M4 motorway into Wales, with a toll in place for use of the bridge to pay for the cost of construction. It continually operated above capacity and in 1986 the then Government stated that a second bridge would be constructed.
- In 1988 it was announced that tenders would be invited from private consortia to fund, build and operate the second bridge and take over the operation of the first bridge. In 1990 the concession was awarded to Severn River Crossing PLC ("SRC"). Construction work also started in April 1992 and the second bridge was opened in June 1996.

News story: Independent Office for Police Conduct launches today

The Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC) is the reformed police watchdog, previously known as the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC).

New leadership under a director general will mean speedier decision-making with a new board to ensure greater accountability to the public.

This is the latest step in the Home Office's reforms to strengthen the organisation and will lead to new powers.

The new single executive head will ensure clear lines of accountability and a streamlined decision-making process.

As well as these changes, the Policing and Crime Act 2017 includes further provisions which will increase the IOPC's powers, clarify its investigative processes and further safeguard its independence. The major reforms were announced by Prime Minister Theresa May during her time as Home Secretary and these powers will allow the IOPC to:

- initiate its own investigations without relying on a force to record and refer a particular case for investigation
- reopen cases it has closed where there are compelling reasons, such as new evidence
- increase the IOPC's independence from the police by abolishing 'managed' and 'supervised' investigations
- investigate all disciplinary investigations against chief officers
- present cases against officers in the police disciplinary process when the force disagrees with the IOPC's findings

Minister for Policing and the Fire Service Nick Hurd said:

We are absolutely determined to make the police complaints and discipline systems simpler and more transparent for the benefit of the public. We want confidence in policing to continue to grow and be underpinned by the vital role the reformed IOPC will play.

Under the leadership of Michael Lockwood and the newly appointed board, it will provide powerful scrutiny for policing, with new powers to begin investigations when they are deemed appropriate and be decisive in concluding cases.

Director General of the Independent Office of Police Conduct Michael Lockwood said:

Public confidence in policing is best served by robust and independent oversight. People need to know that when things go wrong, or serious allegations are made about police officers, they will be thoroughly investigated by a truly independent body. That's the role of the IOPC; it's crucial work, and I'm proud to be a part of it.

The IOPC, like the IPCC before it, will continue to investigate the most serious and sensitive matters involving the police, including deaths and serious injuries as well as matters such as allegations of corruption. It will also oversee the complaints system in England and Wales and set the standards by which complaints should be handled by the police.

The Home Office is also pleased to announce the appointment of new board members Geoffrey Podger as senior independent director, and Manjit Gill, Catherine Jervis, Mary Lines, Andrew Harvey and Bill Matthews as non-executive directors. The non-executive directors will form the majority of the new board, and provide independent support and challenge to the director general as well as oversight of the overall running of the organisation.

[News story: New Northern Forest gets Government backing](#)

Ambitious plans to create a new 'Northern Forest' along the M62 corridor have been kick-started today following an announcement by the Prime Minister Theresa May.

Following backing from the Environment Secretary Michael Gove, over the next 25 years the Woodland Trust and Community Forest Trust are aiming to plant more than 50 million trees from Liverpool to Hull, with the government today providing almost £6 million to launch the first project of its kind for more than a quarter of a century.

Spanning more than 120 miles between the cities of Bradford, Leeds, Manchester and Liverpool, the proposed Northern Forest will help boost

habitats for woodland birds and bats and protect iconic species such as the red squirrel – alongside providing a tranquil space to be enjoyed by millions of people living in the area.

The announcement forms part of the government's upcoming 25 Year Environment Plan, which will set out how we can be the first generation to leave the environment in a better state than we inherited it.

Further details on the Government's strategy to build an environment fit for the future will be set out this week.

Prime Minister Theresa May said:

It is vital that we leave our planet in a better state than we found it, with cleaner air, stronger protections for animal welfare and greener spaces for everyone to enjoy.

Progress is being made. We're investing over £3billion in improving air quality, tackling marine pollution by banning harmful microbeads and increasing sentences for animal cruelty to five years.

But to create an environment fit for the future we can't stop there, and that is why we are supporting the creation of this new Northern Forest and will shortly be setting out our ambitious vision to further support the environment and protect its good health for generations to come.

Environment Secretary Michael Gove said:

Trees are some of our most cherished natural assets and living evidence of our investment for future generations. Not only are they a source of beauty and wonder, but a way to manage flood risk, protect precious species, and create healthier places for us to work and live.

This new Northern Forest is an ambitious and exciting project that will create a vast ribbon of woodland cover in northern England stretching from coast to coast, providing a rich habitat for wildlife to thrive, and a natural environment for millions of people to enjoy. This new forest will help us deliver a Green Brexit and help to deliver on our pledge to leave the environment in a better state than we found it.

Austin Brady, Director of Conservation at the Woodland Trust, said:

The Northern Forest will accelerate the creation of new woodland and support sustainable management of existing woods right across

the area. Planting many more trees, woods and forests will deliver a better environment for all – locking up carbon on a large scale, boosting wildlife habitat and greening our towns and cities.

The Woodland Trust and Community Forests will use new and innovative mechanisms to engage communities and a wide range of partners in delivering the forest.

With the Government backing growth, investment and jobs across the Northern Powerhouse as part of efforts to create an economy that works for everyone, the Woodland Trust and Community Forest Trust estimate this new forest will generate more than £2 billion for the country's economy. The area's breathtaking scenery and landscape is famous across the world, and this scheme will help bolster it for future generations.

The first planting will begin in March this year, supported by funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund, at the Woodland Trust's 680-hectare Northern Forest flagship site at Smithills, Bolton. The Woodland Trust is already committed to investing over £10 million in this project and several others over the wider forest area.

The Northern Forest will connect the five Community Forests in the north of England – the Mersey Forest, Manchester City of Trees, South Yorkshire Community Forest, the Leeds White Rose Forest and the HEYwoods Project – with green infrastructure and woodland created in and around major urban centres such as Chester, Liverpool, Leeds, and Manchester.

It will follow on from the successful National Forest, which transformed 200 square miles of industrial site in the heart of England. The forest now attracts over eight million visitors a year and has seen wildlife like otters, water voles and dragonflies flourish.

[News story: Statement from the Justice Secretary on John Worboys](#)

John Worboys was convicted of horrific crimes. My thoughts and unreserved sympathy are with his victims for whom news of the Parole Board's decision to order Worboys' release must have reawakened the most appalling memories.

It is a priority for this government that victims of rape and sexual assault have full confidence in the criminal justice system. While sentence lengths for these horrific crimes have increased by over 30% since 2010 and more victims are coming forward, there is still more to do.

While it is right that the Parole Board should remain an independent body, I

believe that there is a strong case to review how to allow greater openness about the decision-making process.

We also need to make sure arrangements across the criminal justice system ensure victims are both heard and, if they wish, kept informed about their case.

I have talked to the Victims' Commissioner, Baroness Newlove, and the Chair of the Parole Board, Nick Hardwick, about what changes we could make to help victims of crime and provide greater transparency about the Board's work. I want to make sure we consult victims groups and others, and to start this work now so that decisions can be taken before Easter.

Press release: Professor Nick Hardwick welcomes government support for transparency

Professor Nick Hardwick, Chair of the Parole Board said:

"I welcome the support from the Lord Chancellor for my call for greater transparency of the parole system.

"It is sad that it has taken the Warboys case to get us to this point. I hope it will mean that in future we will be able to be more open with victims and the public about our decision making and that provides reassurance that the safety of the public is always uppermost in our minds."