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[Promotions & Attractions](#)
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Merseytravel > About Us > Media Centre > News > Mersey Tunnel Tolls Setting

Mersey Tunnel Tolls Setting

[News](#)
[Merseytravel Facts and Figures](#)
[News Archive](#)

Mersey Tunnel Tolls Setting

Published on 05/02/2014

Mersey Tunnels tolls

Merseyside's Integrated Transport Authority sets Tunnel toll levels for 2014/15

Merseyside's Integrated Transport Authority has today (Thursday 6 February) approved a rise in the Mersey Tunnels toll, increasing the cost of a car journey paid in cash by 10p to £1.70 from April –10 pence less than what the rise is authorised to be.

Under the Tunnels Act 2004, the toll should rise in line with inflation, taking a car crossing to £1.80. The 10p discount was at the discretion of elected Members who can take into account economic and social factors should there be overriding need.

Members have also approved a rise on the Fast Tag toll, taking it up by 10p to £1.40 for cars. As currently, this would mean that for every six journeys the equivalent of the seventh would be free.

Increases have also been approved for other classes of vehicles (see table).

Said Cllr Liam Robinson, Chair of Merseytravel's Integrated Transport Authority:

"Taking a decision on tunnel tolls is never an easy one. We appreciate that any increase in the cost of a service is less money in people's pockets and that's why we don't take it lightly. The tunnel tolls should rise in line with inflation each year, but we've once again kept them below this as well as offering further discounts via our Fast Tag scheme.

"The safe and effective operation of the tunnels is vital to the economy of the Liverpool City Region and beyond, but maintaining the tunnels is a significant undertaking, not least because of their age.

"The work involves a lot more than just keeping eight kilometres of roadway usable. Millions of pounds of investment is needed to keep the tunnels on an even keel and millions more to make any improvements. This is in addition to the money needed for their day-to-day operation and to pay off the residual debt from their construction and the money borrowed for past improvements before we had the ability to raise funds in year.

"The tunnels do make a surplus. This acts as a buffer should any urgent work be required to keep the tunnels running that's not accounted for in any predetermined capital programmes. It also gets ringfenced for a funding pot that pays into projects such as Park and Ride schemes, new bus stations and access improvements. This is what an integrated transport network is about. We want one that is fit for the 21st Century and for a world class city region."

"It's worth remembering that anybody who uses the tunnel can benefit from cheaper charges through our Fast Tag scheme. This reduces the cost of a car journey by 30 pence a time, meaning that the equivalent of every sixth journey is free. More than a third of payments are already made through this."

Keeping the Kingsway and the Queensway tunnels safe and efficient is a significant undertaking costing millions of pounds each year. In 2012/13, £12,630,000 was spent on maintenance and improvements, in addition to other costs, including their day-to-day operation.

As well as eight kilometres of roadway being maintained, ventilation stations, fans, water pumps, electricity generators and close to five and a half thousand lights need to be kept up and running.

Recent improvement schemes have included the resurfacing of Queensway and soon-to-be completed resurfacing of Kingsway, totaling £5 million pounds, and the fire main renewal in the Kingsway costing £3.5 million.

Current charges and proposed toll charges as of 1 April 2014

Authorised: What we are allowed to charge- the maximum legal toll levels under the Tunnels Act, based on the November Retail Price Index (RPI).

Actual: What we do charge

Class	Toll	April 2013	April 2014
1	Authorised	£1.80	£1.80
	Actual Cash	£1.60	£1.70
	Fast Tag	£1.30	£1.40
2	Authorised	£3.50	£3.60
	Actual Cash	£3.20	£3.40
	Fast Tag	£2.60	£2.80
3	Authorised	£5.30	£5.40
	Actual Cash	£4.80	£5.10
	Fast Tag	£3.90	£4.20
4	Authorised	£7.10	£7.30
	Actual Cash	£6.40	£6.80
	Fast Tag	£5.20	£5.60

Common claims & responses:

Below are some common claims and comments that are made around toll setting time and Merseytravel's responses to them.

Claim: The tunnels debt was paid off long ago

Fact: The loans are still being paid and will not be paid off until 2048. These payments are fixed and the penalties incurred by paying them off early would make the debt more expensive and therefore be a false economy. The debt does not just relate to the construction costs of both the Queensway and Kingsway, but also the money that was borrowed for tunnel maintenance and improvements before the Tunnels Act 2004. This now ensures sufficient funds are generated through tunnel use to allow for their upkeep and improvement without borrowing.

As assets, the tunnels are worth around £1bn. The capital expenditure levels and maintenance being paid is modest considering their value.

Claim: There are no benefits for local users

Fact: The tunnels offer free journeys to those using our Fast Tag scheme. The more journeys people make through the tunnel the more users will save, so it's particularly beneficial for the most regular users such as commuters- most likely to be local users.

The Fast Tag toll is almost one fifth cheaper than the cash toll, meaning for every 6 journeys the equivalent of the seventh journey is free. More than a third of payments (35%) are already made by Fast Tag, meaning many tunnel users already benefit from a reduced toll rate each journey.

Claim: The tunnels could be toll free as part of the national road network

Fact: Only those road projects, including tunnels, built on approval from Government as part of the national road network are paid for indirectly via road tax. The tunnels were built as a joint venture by local authorities and as such their upkeep and maintenance remains outside of the national highway network. Calls have been made locally to Government to

review this, but there are no plans currently.

Claim: Toll rises are out of line with inflation

Fact: Under the Tunnels Act 2004 tolls should rise by the level of inflation, but aren't permitted to go above this. The toll level increases since the Act was introduced in 2004 have been below the level of inflation as elected members have exercised their discretion on economic and social grounds to maintain a discount. For example, Merseytravel's integrated authority should have increased the toll up to £1.80 in 2013, but instead only approved an increase of 10p to £1.60. Being in line with inflation keeps the toll broadly in line with other cross river travel costs such as bus and rail fares.

Claim: The tunnels haven't improved since they were opened

Fact: There are more than 25 million vehicles a year through the tunnels and significant investment in the operation, maintenance and development is needed to keep them safe and efficient. They are regarded as the safest tunnels in the UK and amongst the safest in Europe for their age following the last independent assessment. Major investment over the last seven years has involved the creation of new escape chambers for use in the event of an accident, resurfacing of the Queensway Tunnel, re-cladding of the Queensway Tunnel, renewal of fire mains and the renewal of high mast lighting. There are also a significant number of other smaller projects on-going on an annual basis. £12,630,000 was invested in 2012/13.

Claim: Other similar tunnels are toll free

Fact: Only those funded through Government as part of the national road network. There are still comparable charges for tunnels such as the Dartford and Tyne.

Claim: The tunnels were meant to be toll free within 10 years of construction

Fact: The local legislation which authorised the construction of the Queensway Tunnel may well have originally provided for them to become toll free within a defined period. However this legislation has long since been amended through various Mersey Tunnels Acts over many decades so that tolls remain for both tunnels to cover operating, maintenance and renewal costs and to save this burden falling on the local tax payer. Once the debt is repaid people in Merseyside will be consulted to determine the level of toll.

Claim: The surplus can be used by Merseytravel on anything

Fact: The two Tunnels are part of a wider network and cannot be considered in isolation The surplus provides valuable revenue which is ring-fenced for reinvestment into public transport across Merseyside as identified in the Local Transport Plan. This is what an integrated transport system is about. This is particularly important given recent funding cuts. The surplus also provides a 'buffer' should there be unexpected urgent work required on the tunnels that has not been accounted for in pre-determined capital programmes.

Tunnel facts and figures:

Tunnel maintenance involves much more than keeping nearly 8km (64,000 sq metres) of surface roadway in the Queensway and Kingsway up to standard. Many other aspects of the operation need to be kept in good working order too including:-

- 14km of road, when including the tunnel and approach roads
- 5,428 light fittings, including those on the approach roads
- 44 in-tunnel ventilation fans
- 8 ventilation stations each with six four-story high fans
- 30 water pumps to remove ground water
- 32 jet fans which clear smoke in the event of an emergency
- 11 standby electricity generators which have enough capacity to supply 2700 homes
- 400 CCTV cameras linked up to the central control room to assist in assessing traffic flow and in the event of accidents and emergencies.

Recently completed schemes include:

- Queensway tunnel cladding renewal £8M

- Kingsway fire main renewal £3.5M
- Queensway road resurfacing £2m
- Renewal of tunnel approach road lighting £1.9M
- New Tunnel CCTV System £1.2M

This financial year (2013/14) we are delivering a programme of over 70 projects including the following major schemes:-

- Kingsway resurfacing (starting January 2014) £3M
- Replacement of high mast lighting (the tunnel approach lighting) £1.7M
- Refurbishment of Georges Dock Building mechanical and electrical including a new tunnels control room £1M
- Tunnel Emergency Phone System Renewal £900k
- Tunnel Fire alarm system renewal £500k

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