

TAMAR BRIDGE & TORPOINT FERRY JOINT COMMITTEE

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PRESS RELEASE

Members of Joint Committee make decision on Tamar Bridge parapets

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Members of the Tamar Bridge and Torpoint Ferry Joint Committee have decided to retain the existing parapets across the full length of the Bridge and to continue to deliver and develop the current positive intervention programme in line with Public Health guidance on suicide prevention.

At the same time the Committee recognise the concerns expressed by some local residents over the traumatic impact of the loss of life and incidents of anti social behaviour on the people living close to and under the Bridge. They have, therefore, asked officers to progress a detailed report to review the welfare of the residents living underneath the Bridge and what actions can be taken, which may or may not include raising the parapets at either end of the crossing.

Members of the Joint Committee had been asked to consider whether to increase the height of the parapets on the Tamar Bridge. At the last meeting it was agreed to set up a working party to acquire evidence from relevant bodies, professional organisations, emergency services and affected members of the public, with a report on its findings being brought back to the meeting on 18 October. Drop in sessions were held for the public in Saltash and Plymouth, with a private meeting held with representatives of the emergency services, public health professionals, the Samaritans and Tamar Crossings managers.

During the public sessions Members heard evidence from local residents about the rare but deeply traumatic impact of loss of life, taken over residential and public land. They also heard reports of incidents of anti-social behaviour with objects being thrown over the parapets and people shouting down to residents.

At the meeting with professionals they discussed evidence relating to incidence, contributory factors, best and current concern for welfare practice,

displacement, experiences on other bridges and high places with public access, and public and media perceptions.

Specific points raised included the potential impact on self rescue. Of those who climb over the current barrier, almost all self-rescue. Members were told that the proposed raised parapet design would make this considerably more difficult, adding a small delay to any assisted rescue. However, the raised height would likely be a deterrent to some who would climb over the current parapets.

There were also concerns over potential displacement – persons considering taking their own life may find raised physical barriers too difficult to climb and instead choose other locations that are less well-lit and where there is a reduced chance of being noticed and approached by a trained person. Raised parapets therefore may lead to displacement rather than a reduction in number of suicides, and could possibly lead to an increase in completed suicides.

Over the last two decades Tamar Crossings staff have developed a range of measures to improve the detection and handling of vulnerable people presenting themselves at the Tamar Bridge and Torpoint Ferry. Three years ago it was decided to introduce some more specific training to help support people who come to the two crossings and give concern for their welfare. Today more than 100 staff and contractors have received specialist mental health training to enable them to reach out to these individuals and the organisation is being invited to share information about its wider public safety programme with other organisations across the country.

Tamar Crossings have worked closely with mental health professionals, the emergency services and specialist groups, including the Samaritans, to develop its positive intervention programme. As well as providing staff with specialist training to support them to positively engage with vulnerable people while keeping themselves safe, there is also dedicated CCTV coverage monitored in a 24/7 control room as well as physical barriers on both sides of the Bridge. This follows guidance issued by Public Health England to help prevent vulnerable people from harming themselves which is in line with their national suicide prevention strategy.

The Public Health England guidance sets out four key areas of action. These are:

- **Restricting access to a site by closing the site, installing physical barriers or introducing boundary markings or lighting** . The parapets on the Tamar Bridge are 1.5 metres high, and are amongst the highest on any major bridge in the UK. There is also high quality lighting both on the Bridge, and in the car park and surrounding areas.
- **Increasing the opportunity and capacity for human intervention by improving surveillance, increasing staffing or foot patrols and providing suicide awareness/intervention training for staff working at or near the**

site. There are eight fixed 'smart' cameras on the south cantilever, with a further 16 cameras on and underneath the Bridge and around the buildings and the car park area. These are monitored 24 hours a day seven days a week by our control room staff who have a direct link to the emergency services. More than 100 members of staff and contractors have completed a bespoke "mental health first aid" course which was designed jointly by staff at the Bridge and STORM, an organisation which specialises in mental health. The two and a half hour workshop includes sections on understanding distress and suicide, being able to start a conversation with a vulnerable person, helping them to stay safe until the emergency services arrives, understanding the importance of personal safety and knowing how to support those involved in the incident. Sessions are delivered by three senior Tamar Crossings managers who have been specially trained by STORM.

Increasing opportunities for help seeking by the vulnerable person by providing Samaritans signs and/or free emergency telephones : Staff have worked with the Samaritans to provide signs at the entrance at both sides of the Bridge. On the advice of the Samaritans it was decided not to put repeater signs across the Bridge or to provide emergency telephones as most people have mobile phones.

Changing the public image of the site by ensuring media reporting of suicidal acts is in line with Samaritans guidelines, discouraging personal memorials and floral tributes at the site ; introducing new amenities or activities; or re-naming and re-marketing the location : Staff have been working with Public Health colleagues to encourage the media to follow Samaritan guidance when reporting suicidal acts. They are also working with partners to highlight the architectural and engineering contributions of the Bridge and have recently opened a new Visitor and Learning Centre to increase public awareness and understanding of its history and culture. This is part of a package of measures to help promote the heritage of the Bridge, with the programme being developed further in the coming months.

"The Joint Committee is committed to ensuring the safety of all people using the Tamar Bridge" said Cornwall Councillor and Joint Chair Sam Tamlin. **"Despite the perception by some members of the public and media that a large number of suicides occur on the Tamar Bridge, the reality is that only a very small proportion of the suicides in Plymouth and Cornwall each year (under 1%) actually occur there. In Plymouth there were 64 suicides between 2016-18, of which only five were at high places. Only one of those was at the Tamar Bridge.**

"Research carried out by Public Health England shows that 70% of suicides take place in the home and most suicides occur when the person is alone. We recognise, however, that there can be significant emotional stress for those associated with, involved in, or witness to potential suicides or completed suicides. "

Adding that measures already in place were helping to ensure that the vast majority of people presenting at the Bridge with welfare concerns, including

erratic behaviour and drunkenness, received support from the emergency services, health professionals and trained Bridge staff, and were removed to a safe place, Plymouth City Councillor and Joint Chair George Wheeler told the meeting **"Having considered the advice from the professionals and the findings of the working group, and discussed all the available options, we have decided to retain the existing parapets across the full length of the Bridge.**

"We recognise, however, the traumatic impact of loss of life on local residents living close to and underneath the Bridge. We have also heard about the impact of anti social behaviour. As a result we have asked officers to provide a detailed report reviewing the welfare of the residents living underneath the Bridge and what actions can be taken".

**David List
General Manager**