

BOF 66 Agenda Item 8

UK Bridge Governance: Status Quo or Rethink?

Richard Fish



Introduction

This note has been prepared as a discussion piece, if only on the basis that just because that's the way things have always been, it doesn't mean that's the way they should always be. It is intended to stimulate a debate with no personal preferences or ulterior motives.

History

I could write war and peace here but, at the expense of some detail (and possibly strict accuracy) the following is intended as a summary of the last 30 years.

Before the millennium, the only body taking an holistic view of bridge management in the UK was the County Surveyors Society¹, through its Bridges Group (CSS BG). It should be remembered that, when I joined the Group in 1992, there was no UKRLG, no UKBB, no devolved governments, and no Highways Agency (let alone Highways England). It was hosted by the then Department of Transport at St Christopher House in Southwark and attended by senior DoT bridge engineers and the TRL (indeed, we used to occasionally have meetings hosted by TRL at Crowthorne). There would also be occasional guests, such as British Rail bridge engineers.

In terms of public sector bridge owners, the only significant exception was the London Boroughs: LoBEG was in its infancy and was largely independent of CSS until the late 1990s.

Liaison between CSS BG and other parties was generally task specific (for example, the Railtrack Bridgeguard 3 agreement) or on an annual basis, such as with DoT when a delegation from the CSS BG was granted an audience with civil servants to ask questions about bridge issues (and even occasionally get answers).

Just before 2000, Ian Holmes, a DoT (or maybe even DETR by then) civil servant came up with the concept of the UKRLG and its Boards in order to try to improve collaboration and streamline communication. At almost exactly the same time, Cam Middleton was promoting the need for some sort of forum which would facilitate dialogue between all bridge owners; and BOF was born.

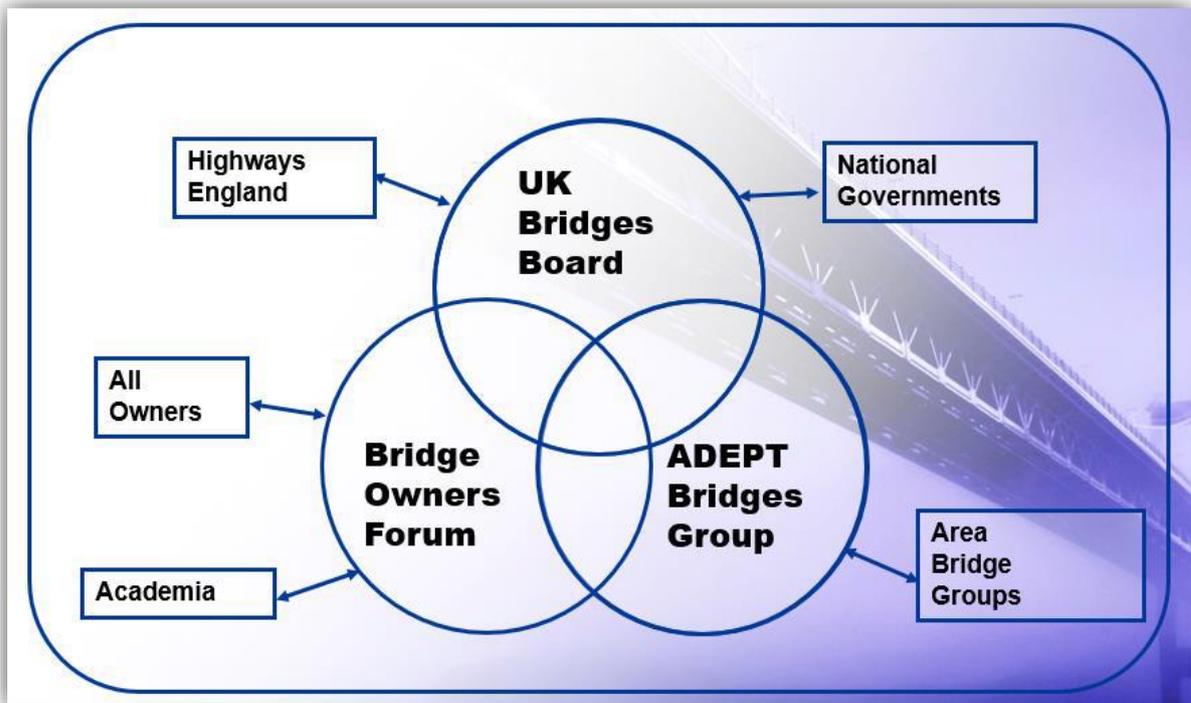
Relationships

As chair of UKBB and CSS Bridges Group from 2005 to 2009, and frequently accused of sitting on 3 bodies all of which were talking about the same things, I was often asked to explain the

¹ Now ADEPT

respective roles and relationships. I usually used the Venn diagram below, or similar versions of it. This is the latest version, recycled from a powerpoint presentation.

In the time since I first used the diagram, the relationship between BOF and UKBB has been formalised with BOF being a recognised sub-group of UKBB since 2016 (in fact the only one).



Roles

My personal high-level (albeit simplistic) definitions are:

- UKBB**
 - Maintaining a strategic outlook;
 - Primary links to Governments; and
 - Responding to and instigating policy decisions.

- ADEPT BG**
 - Providing a conduit via ADEPT Engineering Committee for national discussion;
 - Supporting smaller local authorities and escalating issues, via ABGs; and
 - Promulgation of advice.

- BOF**
 - Identifying needs and promoting/managing research projects;
 - Supporting UKBB Business Plan; and
 - Horizon scanning.

Discussion

“The task of preserving the old [bridges] and keeping a watchful eye on the new is a national duty, to which I am glad to think our people are now alive. We have no Pontifex Maximus, but his office is in commission among public authorities and a great magnitude of able engineers.”

So wrote John Buchan MP (he of 39 steps fame) in 1933 in his introduction to the book “British Bridges”². Whilst he is right in that there is no Governmental *Pontifex Maximus*, Buchan makes the point that we are all *Pontifices Maximi* and, as such, we are those who need to be “alive to the task”.

But, both collectively and individually, can we be alive to the task when funding is depleted and our professional capacity reduced? Is there now Buchan’s “great magnitude of able engineers”?

I am sure we all agree that there needs to be greater recognition by Governments of the risks associated with the deterioration of our transport infrastructure and to push for greater investment. I suggest that this cause is best championed by strong collective voices, presenting robust, professional and evidence-based arguments. The question is how best should we do that?

Is there a need for a body with more independence? In the present pandemic, at least in England, there has been a noticeable difference in messaging between SAGE³, working with the Westminster government, and the group known as Independent SAGE. Rightly or wrongly, the former can be seen as being (perhaps too) close to the establishment whereas the latter is able to put out a more radical but realistic commentary.

I recognise that all members of all three bridge bodies have a primary duty to their employer over and above any loyalty to ADEPT, UKBB or BOF and it could be problematic to align with ideas that are too controversial or challenging. But is there a way this could be achieved?

At the moment, it seems to me that the only bridge equivalent of independent SAGE is some grumpy old bridge engineers on Twitter.

Conclusion

The questions that might be considered at BOF 66 are as follows:

- Is the present arrangement of bridge groups the most effective?
- If not, what changes could be considered?
- Is there a need for an independent body to challenge and lobby?
- If yes, what might that look like?

And, whilst this paper can only really focus on any changes from a BOF perspective, is it appropriate for UKBB and ADEPT to continue the debate?

Richard Fish
14th January 2021

² British Bridges (An Illustrated Technical and Historical Record). Published by The Organising Committee of the PUBLIC WORKS, ROADS AND TRANSPORT CONGRESS, London, 1933.

³ Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies