THAMES GATEWAY BRIDGE

A bridge too far....?

Proposals to build a new six-lane road bridge across the Thames between Greenwich and Beckton in East London are fiercely opposed by Friends of the Earth. Transport for London (TfL), the scheme’s promoters, admit that building the new bridge would generate extra traffic and bring more air pollution and noise to the area. Friends of the Earth say these impacts are completely unacceptable, and that the scheme should be abandoned.

TfL and proponents of the scheme – who include business interests and Mayor of London, Ken Livingstone - argue that building the bridge would improve accessibility (and hence create jobs) and is necessary for local regeneration and the Thames Gateway area. Friends of the Earth believes that there are better ways to improve access to jobs and regenerate the area, but alternative schemes have not been put forward.

A Public Inquiry into the Thames Gateway Bridge (TGB) has been called by the Government following fierce opposition to the scheme. The inquiry re-opens on 13 September 2005 at Charlton Athletic Football ground, after a summer recess, when opponents to the scheme will make their case.

Background

Plans to build the East London River Crossing are not new. Plans for a road bridge at the same location (but which would have additionally gone through the ancient Oxleas Wood site of Special Scientific Interest) were abandoned in the 1990s by the Conservative Government. Proposals for the Thames Gateway Bridge in its present form have been around since the mid 1990’s.

The TfL Board have been divided on the issue, and it needed the Mayor’s casting vote for the scheme to progress. A consultation on the scheme – viewed by Friends of the Earth as flawed – took place in 2003.

An Environmental Statement was finally released by TfL and submitted with a planning application to build the bridge, estimated to cost about half a billion pounds, to the London Boroughs of Newham and Greenwich in July 2004. Thousands of people registered objections to the scheme. But in December of that year the councils said they were ‘minded to approve’ the scheme. The scheme was subsequently called in for a Public Inquiry by Deputy Prime Minister, John Prescott.

Friends of the Earth – along with other transport and environmental organisations, local organisations and individuals, and people from all the main political parties including local MPs – are opposing the scheme. Many will argue at the Public Inquiry against it being built.

TfL and their witnesses, supported by a legal team, have already given their evidence, as have supporters of the scheme. The London Borough of Bexley has also given evidence, objecting to the scheme. The objectors will be aided by evidence from a group of leading academics and consultants.
WHY FRIENDS OF THE EARTH OPPOSES THE THAMES GATEWAY BRIDGE:

• More traffic

TfL admits that 20 million vehicles a year would use the bridge, and that there would be “significant increases in traffic volumes as a result of the scheme” at various places. TfL says that the scheme would generate an extra 40,000 vehicle kilometres in the morning peak hour in the area between the A2 and A12 alone, and generate demand for more than 1,600 extra highway trips in the four nearest boroughs in the morning peak period.

If the bridge is built, some roads would see a more than a three-fold increase in traffic in 2016 (compared to 2001). But TfL also admit that traffic would in fact carry on growing for a further five years after 2016, meaning even more traffic. An independent expert says that TfL traffic modelling is flawed and will give evidence in September which challenges its methodology.

• More air pollution

Extra traffic means the scheme would make the area’s already poor air quality even poorer. Transport for London admits that the bridge would worsen local air quality and add to breaches in Government and European air quality limit. TfL admits the TGB would cause pollution at one monitoring station in Newham to go above Government and EU limits. TfL say some areas would experience “moderate or large” increases in air pollution, with some homes suffering “significant” air quality deterioration. The scheme would tend to exacerbate health inequalities and disproportionately affect the poorer people of the area who are more likely to live near busy roads.

• More noise

Even with barriers and special road surfaces, Transport for London admit that “some residents may need to sleep with windows closed” at night (based on World Health Organisation guidelines). Three schools on the south side of the river would suffer a “moderate/substantial adverse effect” from extra noise, and one school on the north a “moderate adverse effect”. Transport for London say most of the 5,000 people who would be bothered by the noise would eventually get used to it.

• More climate changing emissions

Current Government strategies for tackling climate change are failing. Carbon dioxide levels have risen under Labour. Encouraging people to drive more will only increase the problem.

• No relief from existing traffic problems

Traffic on existing road-crossings is unlikely to fall if the bridge is built. Transport for London admit that the new bridge would have “little impact” on traffic flows on existing river crossings in the morning rush hour, with traffic through the Blackwall tunnel “remaining more or less unchanged”. Traffic speeds are likely to get slower in some areas, and may hardly improve in others during the morning rush hour.

• Public transport at risk

Alarming, TfL admit that the bridge would even take people off public transport (compared to what would be expected without the scheme). Furthermore, public transport services on the two lanes that are currently designated for public transport, are at risk. If Crossrail is built (the Government is progressing a bill for this) TfL admit public transport usage over the new bridge would fall “significantly”, which would lead to a review of public transport services. This could lead to all six
lanes being used for general traffic. Any transport infrastructure investment should instead be designed to complement the investment in Crossrail.

- **Dubious reliance on accessibility**

TfL relies heavily on improved accessibility for its regeneration case and for the potential for new jobs to be created. Its figures are based on a dubious comparison with west London. It assumes that if east London is as accessible, it could expect similar levels of jobs. This does not take into account the land available for businesses to develop, or how problems like local sewage works (and a new noisy polluting new road) could put firms off.

The London Borough of Bexley has already told the Public Inquiry that TfL estimates that the scheme could result in zero extra jobs in its borough. Accessibility is a two-way street – jobs in an area can also become more accessible to those from further afield. TfL showed at the Public Inquiry that Newham already has above average accessibility. Canary Wharf is nearby, but it is still the third most deprived borough in England. There are better ways to improve accessibility and aid unemployment than through the building of this bridge.

- **Not good for business or the Thames Gateway**

A scheme designed around the needs of car users would have serious implications. A report for John Prescott’s Department found that even with this scheme and a further proposed road crossing at Blackwall the result “could even be counter-productive” to business development, because of the extra congestion. Also, a car-dependent Thames Gateway is also more likely to develop in a spread out way, rather than in the high-density way that the Government seeks.

- **Local crossing?**

The bridge would connect directly into the North Circular Road and the M11 in the north, and to dual carriageways from the M25 in the south. Some local roads are likely to experience an increase in usage as traffic cuts through to the A2.

TfL estimates that 1,100 goods vehicles will use the bridge in the rush hour, and that only 36 per cent of the estimated 4,450 cars that would use the bridge in the morning rush hour are expected to be relatively “local” (travelling within the four nearest boroughs of Newham, Barking & Dagenham, Greenwich and Bexley). Bizzarely, TfL consider that all journeys that start or end in one of the four nearest boroughs (which is 64% of cars in the morning peak hour) are “local”, regardless of how long the journey, and imply that this traffic is not long-distance. Tolls, which TfL say would discourage longer-distance travel, would make up only a small part of those journey costs.

- **Who is this bridge for?**

49% of households in Newham and 41% in Greenwich do not own a car or van, but a TfL witness said at the Public Inquiry that of the people using the bridge in the morning peak hour, only 18% would be using public transport. TfL also admit that some journeys by public transport in the rush hour might be no quicker if the bridge is built. A TfL Board member has said the scale of the scheme was driven by “the needs of the car commuter in peak time”. TfL figures show the supposed benefit of the scheme is mainly to car and goods vehicle users, by a proportion of 94% benefit to cars and goods vehicle users to 6% public transport users. TfL admits that walking and cycling would become more dangerous if the bridge is built.

**Why are there no choices?**
TfL does not seem to have followed guidance which aims to check if there are better ways to achieve the objective before pursuing a scheme. A 2003 consultation that TfL relies on to claim support for the scheme is considered flawed and invalid by Friends of the Earth. Proper information was not available at the time as an Environmental Impact Assessment had not been done. Even interim figures, which showed a 36% increase in some traffic estimates on previous figures, were only made available half way through the consultation. Furthermore local people were not given any choices for different regeneration or transport schemes that could help the area and provide the improved access to jobs and services that people want, but without adding to the air quality and traffic problems in the area.

What does Friends of the Earth want?

Friends of the Earth is campaigning against the bridge being built, and is calling for it to be rejected by the Inspector and by Ministers.

Allowing the scheme to proceed would be a failure in planning terms as Government policy requires an approach that reduces the need to travel, particularly by private car, and maximises the use of non car modes, particularly public transport, cycling and walking. The scheme has not been designed around the needs of walking, cycling or public transport.

Surface transport (mostly cars and freight) currently accounts for 22% of total UK Carbon Dioxide (CO2) emissions, with cars alone responsible for 17%. This scheme would make Government targets harder to achieve.

East London does not need to accept the traffic growth that TfL forecast. Research shows that car travel demand could be cut by up to 33% in large urban areas, and TfL’s policies in other areas, such as the congestion charge, show considerable progress can be made.

When limits on air quality would knowingly be newly breached, the scheme should be rejected. Not to do so would also be a failure in environmental justice terms - the scheme would exacerbate rather than redress a disproportionate burden of environmental problems falling onto those who already suffer them.

Friends of the Earth believes the scheme is not necessary for regeneration, and is more likely to fail some of those most in need of sustainable regeneration, while not reducing inequalities. We want to see a proper evaluation of what would most benefit those people most in need. This scheme would also hinder the wider Thames Gateway area from developing into the Sustainable Communities vision that the Government aspires to. Policies to improve accessibility sustainably and meet local needs locally should be pursued.

Further Information:

For more information on the Thames Gateway bridge, go to [www.foe.co.uk/london](http://www.foe.co.uk/london) or contact Jenny Bates, London Regional Campaigns Co-ordinator, at jennyb@foe.co.uk, or call 020-7566 1633, 07884 003107.

Friends of the Earth Press Office: 020 7566 1649