

Hammersmith Bridge – the current situation and looking ahead

The bridge is now open again to river traffic, with no need to book in advance [See PLA notice to mariners U4 of 2021 16th July 2021]. There are sensors checking movement of the bridge and if any changes to the bridge's structure should require it to close again, a red cross will appear: navigators are advised to have contingency plans for a sudden bridge closure, but no longer need to share these in advance. A rather indistinct green arrow indicates navigators can proceed. There is also pedestrian and cyclist traffic back over the bridge and the footpath is again back in use. Relief all round.

But this is not the end of this sorry saga. Repairs to the bridge's structure still have to be undertaken and this may require further closures. Some have proposed it should be possible for the bridge to stay open to pedestrians throughout, but contingency plans are still being made to operate a ferry. Uber boats with their Thames Clippers won the contract to operate a service just below the bridge. Their proposals involve one pontoon held nearly midstream, joined by an extensive walkway from the Hammersmith bank, which rests on the bottom at low water. The Barnes bank was to be served by another pontoon, connected by a shorter walkway, this one elevated so some oarsmen and kayakers could pass under at favourable states of the tide. One or two ferries were expected to shuttle between the pontoons.

These structures are now subject to planning applications before the local Councils, Richmond (21/1770/FUL) and Hammersmith & Fulham (2021/01666/FUL) and there is similar information also before the Marine Management Organisation (MLA/2021/00224). The details on the planning portals include a preliminary Navigational Risk Assessment (NRA). This was undertaken assuming restrictions beneath the bridge remained and with only limited commercial river traffic. The NRA raises some very serious issues, including for bigger boats going downriver on the tide soon after high water, where the usual track could pass through the proposed position of the 'Hammersmith' pontoon. There had been no consultation with users of private powered vessels, but the RTS along with the Barge Association (DBA) have now been invited to the group being consulted on the full Navigational Risk Assessment. It is unclear when the PLA will be deciding on the River Works Licence for these important static works, which are expected to have a lifespan of up to 3 years: they would remain in the river, even when the ferries were not operating.

Groups representing local users of the river have been commenting negatively on the planning applications, but many local residents are in favour, apart from the most local who have concerns about noise and traffic. The RTS in its response to the planning applications has indicated that a well-informed Navigational Risk Assessment is what matters most, with appropriate mitigation for the identified risks.

Feedback from a recent meeting of the River Users Liaison Group (RULG) for the Navigational Risk Assessment (NRA) is that work on preparing the river bed and inserting piling is to take place in the coming weeks, and be completed by the end of October. This is said to be needed because Natural England restricts piling during the winter months, so this preparatory work is expected even if the temporary ferry, if needed at all, would not be operative for many months. It is important for skippers wanting to pass under the bridge to check the Notices to Mariners (NTMs) from the PLA for details of any additional navigational risks caused by this work and/or listen to the regular London VTS radio broadcasts .