

Thames Vision 2050 – feedback from The River Thames Society

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Given: Sustainable development objectives:

- *Social – equitable access to employment and wider opportunities*
- *Environmental – emissions reduction, biodiversity, water quality and climate resilience*
- *Economic – wealth and job creation, including recovery from the impact of the Covid pandemic*

1. What do you think the priorities for the development of the Thames should be between now and 2050?

General comments

The overall markers of success must not be just in freight tonnage, passenger numbers, direct employment or financial turnover, but also include measures of positive contributions to the wider health and wellbeing of people and the environment.

The PLA has responsibility for only part of a river which is much longer. With the opportunities of a growing international port and the pressures to reduce inequalities for people who live near the tidal Thames, rightly the PLA's greatest emphasis will be given to commercial growth in the estuary with less emphasis on those upper reaches which are within its remit. Some matters in the upper Tideway are hard to change, like the clearance under bridges, the river's width and its depth, and limited wharves and piers. This means opportunities for growth in fast passenger traffic or commercial carrying are very limited higher up the river. So the differences we already see between the section above Putney and the rest of the Tideway could be expected to become enhanced over time. Even now, the use of the tidal river above Putney more resembles that in the lower non-tidal river than that in the rest of the Tideway: commercial vessels are limited to slow passenger boats, with some carriage of waste and materials in smaller barges, and the towing of houseboats to/from dry docks. The predominant river traffic is of leisure vessels. The challenge for the PLA is to retain the tidal river as an entity, with the users of the upper Tideway not feeling disgruntled as the inequalities on and by the lower river are 'levelled up'. Getting the balance right between the various sections of PLA's territory will be difficult, especially when the big money on the river is downstream, and much of the most valuable real estate by the river is in the centre and upstream. The PLA needs to be ready for challenge to its retention of responsibility for all the tidal river.

Infrastructure

We know river views greatly increase the value of residential property, but to help reduce inequalities, it is essential that all the public can have direct access to the river banks and this must be encouraged and facilitated by the PLA, in spite of the pressing commercial pressures for exclusivity.

Skills development

The Thames Skills Academy is doing good work encouraging young entrants, with the PLA and some of the larger companies having apprenticeship schemes. A river-wide look at recruitment would be useful, perhaps an audit of current training opportunities - involving companies of all sizes and support services, especially boatyards. The PLA could then take the initiative looking at how gaps could be filled. Hopefully, the Albert Island Boatyard, for which expressions of interest are being sought, will act as a spur to recruitment.

Much of London is likely to remain a diverse city with a young population, but even so relevant emphasis will be needed to leisure and good living, with 'wealth and job creation' not assumed to be the only important driver of change. There are many on/by the river who have ceased to be economically active, but will still want to appreciate what it has to offer for leisure, for culture and the environment. For example, for the river to remain active and attractive, there must be retention and expansion of the facilities to maintain leisure vessels. Historic vessels have a particular attraction for tourists and locals, and emphasis on and support for the special skills needed to maintain them would be appreciated.

Safety

The assumption is that careful processes will be used for identified harms. But there could well be unknown unknowns, especially contaminating our river or through importation of goods from areas of the world with inadequate biological or related controls. Or the slipping of standards in a free-for-all port, as seen in the recent explosion in Beirut. Or unprecedented impacts from a tsunami, whether natural or Montgomery-related. So tough and independent governance please, with exercises and lessons learned. And transparency.

2.What are you most concerned could adversely impact the development of the Thames between now and 2050?

General comments

Other than the general situation of the economy, the main concern is greed, and the 'wrong' sort of development, ie that where the emphasis is short term profit, especially if this is then offshored rather than reinvested locally. Too much of the Thames and its banks are already under the control of those who do not have any local personal commitment.

Infrastructure

Maintaining the half-tide barrier at Richmond is important for the users of the river upstream and also for its intrinsic historic importance. Not a direct responsibility of the PLA's, but the future of the Thames barrier and the degree of water extraction from above Teddington will also be of major importance to the river and communities alongside.

The 'sale' of the river bed on long leases might seem right in the short term, but prove limiting in the longer term, with control of the river for potential future public benefit then lost. The right of navigation must not be sacrificed for the sake of non-river-related uses for the privileged few. Follow the London Plan: the river is not to be regarded as developable land, at any price. So no cycleways or roads cantilevered over the banks, please, and houseboat moorings and floating swimming pools restricted to limited sites away from the main stream. No vanity-project 'private' bridges bringing only potential disadvantage to the river users. Ensure more than ample clearance under any new

crossings, even if high-aircraft vessels are infrequent. Work with the GLA, Boroughs and other riparian councils to help protect the riverscape from unsightly built development.

Skills development

Much seems to be out of the hands of the PLA, affected by national immigration and educational policy, and societal norms about what sort of work is suitable for whom. Also the very high cost of housing in commuting distance of much of the river

Safety

There is an inevitable tension between the freedom to enjoy the river on small craft and safety, which may get more challenging as there is increasing pressure on water space, with more drones and autonomous vessels expected too.

3.What innovation do you think could be key to unlocking the long-term value of the Thames?

General comments

‘Long-term value’ needs to be judged in more than strictly financial terms, but also include environmental and societal benefits. The challenges include preventing the Thames working as a barrier between communities, between the haves and have-nots, as well as between the 2 banks of the river.

Infrastructure

It would be interesting to understand from the environmentalists whether static but floating barges holding reed beds (and all the associated wild life) might have a place in helping ‘green’ parts of the river not used for navigation, including sites waiting for more active development.

Skills development

The PLA could further develop its education role, aiming to encourage children and young people to develop an interest in the river. The Thames Explorer Trust project is currently supported by the PLA, but there are other potential projects too. Creative ways may need to be found to expand the scope and reach of projects that enable youngsters to interact with the river, building on the existing projects at various locations, like the RTBP (River Thames Boat Project). In addition, not so much an innovation, but maybe the PLA could run again boat trips for school children, like back in the days of the enclosed docks. The trip boat companies could be sub-contacted for this, and be expected to welcome more mid-week and all-season trade.

4.What do you think need to be done to improve access to the Thames and opportunities related to it?

General comments

Not all opportunities should be judged on their direct financial return. Maintain free 24hr public access to both banks of the river and ensure the river remains as public open space, with use shared by non-commercial as well as commercial operators. The PLA should champion the right of navigation, which must be preserved, with interference by fixed structures only for exceptional river-related reasons. Opportunities for some must not be at the expense of others: the PLA should ensure the river remains a shared resource. Any ‘selling off’ of river bed for private operators on long leases must be subject to appropriate public scrutiny, both in general and for each specific instance.

Infrastructure

Boatyards and other facilities for maintaining vessels must not be priced out, indeed may need special sponsorship/protection to enable them to survive. A historic harbour on the Tideway would be much appreciated

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