
Thames Gateway Bridge – A Victory for the Luddites?



It seems the proposed Thames Gateway Bridge (artist's impression above) may be history. Indeed all major bridges may be based on the result of the public inquiry into this proposal which recently produced its final report after two years of work. The inspector, Michael Ellison,

recommended to the Secretary of State for Transport that permission be refused. His major reason for doing so was simply that it might encourage people to travel!

Under Planning Policy Guidance 13 (“PPG13”) which has been in effect for some years, planners need to take account of “the impact of the proposal on traffic generation and overall travel patterns having regard to the desirability of achieving development that minimises the need to travel, particularly by private car”. Although Transport for London (TfL) argued that the bridge was needed for “regeneration” of the area, the inspector suggested that they had not proved their case that such regeneration required a bridge to be built. In any case he considered PPG13 should take overriding precedence.

So if other inspectors follow the same approach, it is going to be almost impossible to justify any new bridges. Bridges enable people to undertake journeys that they otherwise could not practically make, or could not otherwise afford, so they are bound to be in conflict with PPG13.

There were a lot of objectors to the bridge on environmental grounds, but in fact the environmental impact would have been negligible – indeed in some respects it would have been improved. In addition the access roads had been deliberately kept poor to deter long-distance traffic, and the tolls set at a high level to reduce traffic volumes (with a discount for local residents). The Mayor of London even contributed £65,000 to help the objectors make their case.

The general attitude of the inspector can be gauged from this paragraph in the report which refers to the results of the public consultation: “*It was clear, for example, that a disproportionate number of individual motorists had responded to the consultation. The results were then presented without adequate warning of their shortcomings.*”. On what does he base that allegation? He doesn't say, and as so often nowadays it tends to suggest that motorists are in some way being classed as second class citizens and should be ignored whatever they say.

But the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, Hazel Blears, has subsequently announced that the public inquiry will be reopened. It will be asked to look again at the regeneration and environmental issues.

Note that Ken Livingstone and TfL have been strong advocates of this bridge – one of the few positive decisions that Mr Livingstone has made to improve the road network. He said “Any delay to the Thames Gateway bridge is a blow to east London, and south-east London in particular. The reopening of the public inquiry will delay bringing the benefits of the Thames Gateway Bridge to an area that sorely needs them. This new crossing is crucial to supporting plans for an extra 160,000 houses in the Thames Gateway region and up to 42,000 additional jobs in the area as whole.” Presumably he was hoping the Government would ignore the inspector’s recommendation and proceed with it anyway.

(Editor: what a farce! This bridge was being talked about when I lived on Thamesmead 30 years ago. It was needed then, and it is needed now, but has still not been built. The public inquiry took much too long,, ignored the financial benefits of the bridge and the other benefits it would bring to the users, and was ultimately hobbled by the ridiculous and luddite PPG13 regulation).

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