

A R I V E R

RUNS THROUGH IT

London is going eastward, along the A13, along the A2, along the river, into the 'Thames Gateway'.

Tim Williams, Director of the Thames Gateway London Partnership, explains why the forthcoming regeneration programme in this region will be among the most significant destination developments in the UK over the coming decade.

A new direction for London

What is the 'Thames Gateway'? It is the area extending from Tower Bridge eastward to Thurrock and Dartford, on both sides of the Thames. Thames Gateway London is Europe's largest and most ambitious regeneration initiative, identified by the Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott as a national priority. The initiative is about building a linear city, to use the phrase of that great visionary and

eccentric Michael Heseltine. It's also about the relationship between London and its hinterland. From my point of view, it's about the quality of that development as London goes east, and it's about the access to the opportunities for communities that are here now, but also that might be brought here. I'm one of those who believes that we should grapple enthusiastically with the idea that we're actually building a new city on the east side of London, and that we've already got its financial district – it's called Canary Wharf. Developing

The new city being built on east side of London has already got its financial district - Canary Wharf
 Photograph courtesy of Chorley Handford





The proposed lifting bridge option for a crossing between the Greenwich peninsula and Silvertown/Royal Docks
Photograph courtesy of Wilkinson Eyre Architects

The future of London lies eastward, with the Thames Gateway becoming not just the Gateway to London but potentially the Gateway to Europe

the Thames Gateway as a destination in its own right is also about building up the rest of the city. That, I think, is the long-term, and not too visionary, prospect.

I think we're actually looking at the historical reorientation of London. For 300 years it went westward, and we are now seeing a genuine eastward shift. The reality of that has not caught up with many planners, developers and business people in the City of London. When Canary Wharf was developed by the only people with the courage to take the initiative, go bankrupt and come back and do it again – foreign developers – the City itself exuded prejudice against development on the east side of London. We are now starting to see a transformation in attitudes, with some City firms actually making a feature of their proximity to Canary Wharf in their corporate literature and advertisements.

Crossing boundaries

Launched in December 1995, the Thames Gateway London Partnership is a subregional alliance of 12 local authorities, two Training and Enterprise Councils, English Partnerships and the University of East London. We've just had the City Corporation join us as our fourteenth local authority member, we operate north and south of the Thames, which makes us very unusual, and we are part of a dynamic new structure for the Thames Gateway, the Strategic Thames Gateway Executive, which was launched in

October 2000, and includes, uniquely, ministers from departments such as the DTI, DETR, the DfEE and the health ministry, and the RDAs for the Eastern region, the South Eastern region and London, because the Thames Gateway crosses boundaries.

The Thames Gateway goes down not just to the London boundary but over into Thurrock, and actually the Government has extended it to Southend, because it feels that all these areas interact with the London economy, and that they can provide industrial and housing development for the expanding population of the South East, so they should be tied together in the Thames Gateway project. I see great dynamism in Thurrock over the next 10 to 20 years. In my view, Thurrock will become a borough of London during that time.

We are experiencing a convergence of reality, public and private investment, and policy aspiration. People have talked about it before, people have hoped that it would happen, and a number of forces are in alignment that will help bring this thing forward. But there are a number of barriers, not the least of which is how we will make the funding of the development happen. How do we raise the values of some of the land that we've got out there in the Thames Gateway? And how will the region's housing and transport infrastructure need to be developed to support sustainable regeneration?

Crossing rivers

It's not just ministerial boundaries that are being crossed in the pursuit of regeneration development in the Thames Gateway. So too, in the longer term, is the River Thames itself. The Thames Gateway River Crossings lobbying group, comprising London First, East London Business Alliance, South London Economic Development Alliance and Thames Gateway London Partnership, has been campaigning over recent years for three new river crossings to be put in place in order to address the current chronic shortage of crossings between Blackwall and Dartford and to accelerate the regeneration process in the Thames Gateway region as a whole by creating new jobs, increasing business efficiency, reducing distances travelled to work, encouraging non car-based travel and reducing congestion. The three crossings proposed would be: (a) a two-lane road crossing between Greenwich Peninsula and Silvertown/Royal Docks, with pedestrian and cycle lanes; (b) a rail tunnel crossing at Woolwich which could either be heavy rail linking the North Kent Line to North London Line, or the extension of the Docklands Light Railway (DLR) from City Airport's currently planned extension to Woolwich Arsenal Station; and (c) a new road and public transport crossing between Beckton and Thamesmead, which would carry four lanes

of traffic and have two dedicated public transport schemes on the north and south side of the river, as well as a provision for pedestrians and cyclists.

Responsibility for public commitment to this programme of transport development lies with the Mayor of London, Ken Livingstone. In November 2000, Mr Livingstone made an initial commitment to putting in place the three new river crossings in his announcement of a draft transport strategy: 'I am determined to improve the transport system and access to East London in order to boost jobs and living standards in the area. Priorities include extending the East London line from Whitechapel to Dalston by 2005, new Thames river crossings and, in the longer term a new Hackney-Merton tube line.' We are, naturally, absolutely delighted that the lobbying has paid off, and that river crossings have gone to the top of the Mayor's transport and regeneration agenda. The announcement demonstrates the Mayor's conviction that the future of London lies eastward, with the Thames Gateway becoming not just the Gateway to London but potentially the Gateway to Europe, because of the Channel Tunnel rail link coming in from the East.

I believe, perhaps controversially, that the first new river crossing will open by 2007, and that it will be a DLR crossing from City Airport to Woolwich. From the Thames Gateway perspective, we would prefer that there was a heavy rail crossing. The private sector says it can fund this new City Airport-Woolwich crossing through PFIs, with very little state involvement – perhaps as little as £50 million over a period, funded through tolls and so on. We would then have a river crossing to Woolwich by 2007. Firstly, I suggest you think seriously about buying your second home in Woolwich, and buy it now. Secondly, somebody tell the Prudential, because the Prudential is sitting on most of the land in Woolwich and appears to think it has negative value.

Crossing sectors

If quality development is to happen, patently we need to see more cooperation between the public and private sectors, so we can work together on this vision, and this programme. At Thames Gateway London Partnership, a largely public sector body, we have taken the conscious decision not to take private sector people on board. To do so would run the risk of them going native with the public sector, and consequently failing to do their job, which is to raise our game. The way we've chosen to do it is to have a very close relationship with the East London Business Alliance, and try to come up with three big things as a common agenda, so that we don't actually crowd each other's act, but we agree on the fundamentals. This is quite amazing for a

public sector body like ourselves. These three fundamentals are river crossings, inward investment vehicles, which we believe we will be building together, and the huge public infrastructure and environmental upgrade that will be required to connect people in need on the east side of London with the opportunities that are emerging. Thames Gateway London Partnership is also working on a huge project with Ford at Dagenham. There is to be major reinvestment at Dagenham, to make it a World Centre for Diesel Engines and a centre for manufacturing excellence of national importance, built up over the next ten years.

The quality challenge

The problem area for policy and for those working practically on these matters is how to ensure a consistent level of quality in new developments. Looking across the the river to Dartford, for example, I don't think people have quite understood what Ebsfleet and Bluewater are doing. Through these ebullient developments we're actually looking at world city functions moving from Central London over to this area as, in a sense, the 'headquarters for Europe'. There was a lot of optimism that Stratford in East London would be the location at which London going east would stop first, but I'm not so sure. I've got a feeling that the North Kent side of the equation has been underestimated. There you have a really innovative local authority that wants stability, 50,000 extra houses and, essentially, to move the town centre. Forget about the problem of out-of-town development and say the whole of new Dartford is going to be out of town, clustered around the rail development, the shopping centre, and the mass of new activity there.

Conversely, in areas such as Barking and Bexley, we see the challenges for development presented by an abundance of land, much of it heavily polluted. Bellway homes have developed in Barking Reach, and I am absolutely convinced that it can be developed as a major sustainable community for the east side of London, connected to the Royal Docks development. This, of course, would need some transport connections to be put in place, which I think will come within the next five to ten years, but the quality of development also needs to be there. It's fair to say that the development there right now doesn't fit in with urban task force aspirations, and I think that's the real challenge for us all. The Government can get development and housing on the east side of London. But can it get the right kind of development, which will actually attract new communities to spend their money locally, and work with us?



The proposed Thames Gateway Bridge between Beckton and Thamesmead

Photograph courtesy of Wilkinson Eyre Architects

The funding challenge

The main challenge to our blue-sky scenario is that the gap funding challenge presented to us by the EU came at exactly the moment that there was a lot of optimism about how we might fund the development of brown-field sites. Clearly, it stopped in its tracks the simple idea that we could have joint ventures with private sector partners. We know the consequences of this: public authorities purchasing land at much greater cost than would have been the case if we'd had joint ventures. Optimistically, there is clearly a lot of urgent thinking going on in English Partnerships and the LDA (80% of its land is in the Thames Gateway) about how to fill the funding gap. I think that we have to be more open to the possibility of finding capital through things like bonds, of the kind that are more familiar in the American context, but which we don't seem to talk about so much over here.

The challenges to high-quality, sustainable development are manifold. But we are finally seeing the reality of policy aspirations, the coming together of institutions, and a genuine political and commercial will to proceed with certain key developments on the east side of London. This will make the Thames Gateway happen.

The Government can get development and housing on the east side of London. But can it get the right kind of development, which will actually attract new communities to spend their money locally, and work with us?