

# Evidence for the National Networks National Policy Statement Inquiry

## Introduction

Thames Crossing Action Group (TCAG) represent thousands of people who are opposed to the hugely destructive and harmful, not fit for purpose £10bn+++ proposed Lower Thames Crossing (LTC). More info on us and our concerns and issues with the proposed LTC can be found on our website [www.thamescrossingactiongroup.com](http://www.thamescrossingactiongroup.com).

This paper was prepared and submitted by Laura Blake, Chair of TCAG on behalf of the group in response to the National Networks National Policy Statement Inquiry<sup>1</sup> in May 2023. TCAG can be contacted via email – [admin@thamescrossingactiongroup.com](mailto:admin@thamescrossingactiongroup.com).

## Reason for submitting evidence

Prior to our campaigning most of us would not have been aware of the National Networks National Policy Statement (NN NPS). However, it didn't take long for us to learn the relevance and importance of the NN NPS. Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects (NSIPs) are generally considered to be significant in a positive way by Government, and at one time that may well have been true. However, with so many NSIPs and development in general in our country more and more of us can see the destruction and harm these projects cause, often with very little or no benefit to most.

We were amongst those calling for the outdated NN NPS to be reviewed and updated, because it was no longer compliant with UK legislation and other policies, advice and evidence. We also called for the policy to be suspended whilst the review and update take place. We were disgusted that the Government instead feel it acceptable to push ahead regardless, knowing the policy by which such a huge, destructive and harmful project is judged, is outdated and not in keeping with UK law.

For these reasons we wanted to take part in this inquiry, because if it is policy for the national network of road and rail that is considered nationally significant then the nation (the people) need and deserve the right to have their say in the policy.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://committees.parliament.uk/work/7087/national-networks-national-policy-statement/>

## Requested Evidence

We do not believe that the draft NNNPS is as strong and ambitious as it should and could be. We strongly believe that there are opportunities to further improve the policy.

Evidence shows that building more roads just leads to more traffic. We cannot continue to do the same thing and expect different results. We need a policy that supports and encourages the change that we need, this draft NNNPS does not do this.

Now more than ever, at a time of climate emergency, there is an urgent need for modal shift and actions towards a healthier and more sustainable future for all.

The Department for Transport (DfT) carried out a study into a new Thames crossing back in 2009 because of the increasing demand at the Dartford Crossing.<sup>2</sup> This has of course now resulted in the proposed £10bn+++ Lower Thames Crossing (LTC) being progressed.

In a written statement to Parliament<sup>3</sup>, the then Secretary of State for Transport, Justine Greening stated that *“However, this expansion in rail freight will be very difficult to deliver unless the industry is able to develop modern distribution centres linked into both the rail and trunk road system - ‘Strategic Rail Freight Interchanges’ (SRFI) - in appropriate locations to serve our major conurbations. To date, this has proved extremely problematical, especially in the south east where growing demand and increasing congestion on the road network are creating serious logistical challenges”*.

Adding a new road such as the LTC would lead to around a 50% increase in cross river traffic, which is counterproductive in reducing congestion in the South East that was referred to as an issue in regard to SRFIs.

Evidence shows that the proposed LTC fails to meet scheme objectives<sup>4</sup> and is not fit for purpose<sup>5</sup>, and it is infuriating that adequate consideration has not been given to non-road alternatives.

It is ludicrous that 70% of the goods in and out of the Port of Dover alone use the Dartford Crossing, as part of the route from the South East to the Midlands and beyond, but the port is not connected by rail.

42% of vehicles using the Dartford Crossing is goods vehicles.

Rail improvements between Ashford and Reading would negate the need for the proposed LTC by taking more freight off the roads and onto more sustainable rail.<sup>6</sup>

This option would cost far less than the proposed LTC, and reduce congestion on the roads in the South East, as well as improving more sustainable transport options.

At a time of climate emergency, the updated policy should reflect the advice from the Climate Change Commission (CCC) that new roads should only be built if they can be shown not to increase emissions.<sup>7</sup>

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<https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20100513123749/http://www.dft.gov.uk/about/strategy/capacityrequirements/dartfordrivercrossing/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/strategic-rail-freight-interchanges>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.thamescrossingactiongroup.com/ltc-project-objectives/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.thamescrossingactiongroup.com/ltc-not-fit-for-purpose/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.thamescrossingactiongroup.com/rail-and-tram-alternatives/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.theccc.org.uk/publication/2021-progress-report-to-parliament/>

We need a policy that is not so focused on roads. We need more joined up thinking and a policy that recognises, supports and encourages more sustainable options, including public transport and active travel.

1.13 of the draft NPS states, "It will be subject to review by the Secretary of State approximately every 5 to 10 years or earlier if necessary, in order to ensure that it remains appropriate." This offers no real commitment or improvement from the current NPS.

We and others called for the current NPS to be reviewed and suspended whilst the review and update took place. We believe it was likely the threat of legal challenges that finally resulted in the review and current update.

How can the wording of the draft NPS be considered sufficient when the Secretary of State for Transport can avoid and delay reviewing the NPS, when clearly it was outdated and not taking UK legislation like Net Zero into account?

The UK government declared a climate emergency in May 2019. Yet it took until July 2021 for government to announce they would review the NPS in order to account for Net Zero commitments.

This does not suggest a government who are willing to review policies when necessary.

The Government are knowingly pushing ahead with projects being judged against what they know to be an outdated policy that is not in keeping with legislation and other policies, guidance, and evidence.

How are we expected to trust a government that won't back up the talk with actions?

How are we supposed to have faith in a policy that appears to simply offer more support of presumption of gaining DCO as quickly as possible, rather than providing a policy that would ensure proper scrutiny of proposed projects, and support and encourage more sustainable options?

Many of the delays with NSIPs is due to inadequacies of consultation and projects. In this day and age the bar needs to be set a lot higher for applicants, and better monitoring of consultation standards is needed.

Safety on roads needs to be improved. National Highways failed to deliver what was signed off in regard to 'smart' motorways, yet they are not being held accountable. There should be a level of duty of care to road users within policy.

Air quality is also a serious public health issue that needs to be given greater weight within policy. Proposed projects should have to show that they will improve, not worsen air quality.

Cumulative impacts of projects also need to be taken more seriously. Carbon emissions are not being adequately judged, and should not be judged using anything like the current ridiculous test against national levels. NSIPs are also having a huge impact on agricultural land and therefore food security. Not only that but the loss of agricultural land then also has follow on impacts to the environment as our food has to travel more miles and has greater impact.

Just like the current NPS the draft is still not strong enough to ensure a healthy sustainable future at a time of climate emergency, and will likely still be legally challenged, as it is not anywhere near ambitious enough

Also, the NNNPS should not be designed to just ensure that DCO can be granted asap, it should be about ensuring the best outcome possible for a healthy and sustainable future for us all.

The policy should not read as though it supports a predetermined outcome. Fair, transparent scrutiny should take place, and alternatives thoroughly considered.

Delays of NSIPs are often largely to do with inadequacies of projects and consultations.

There are also more and more people who are concerned about the growing amount of development that is causing destruction and harm to the environment, our country, and our lives, health and wellbeing.

We need a policy that protects these aspects, and this revised draft policy has not been strengthened or improved enough which will likely mean there are continued legal challenges and strong levels of opposition.

Since Government are supposed to represent the people this needs to be addressed and we need to see a policy that backs up all the talk with actions.

The aspect of levelling-up depends on your definition of levelling-up and growth. To many levelling up is about ensuring a healthy and sustainable future, and wanting to improve and enjoy the natural environment. Whereas government seem to focus purely on financial gain and growth, which is of no value if we don't have a planet and environment that can sustain us.

Also, any levelling-up and growth should in no way be at the cost of the impacted communities, using the excuse that it is a 'nationally' significant project. All that kind of practice results in is levelling-down, which is completely unacceptable.

More transparency is needed in regard to estimated costs of projects, and Outline Business Cases and Accounting Officer Assessments (AOA) should be published in a timely manner, and up to date, particularly when there are delays.

With the proposed LTC the figures being used in the AOA are two years out of date<sup>8</sup>. We now have a project being progressed through DCO process for which the start of construction has been delayed by two years, being judged on estimated costs that are already out of date, and will be even more so should the DCO be granted as costs will of course rise further in the years to come.

Contingency funds are being used by National Highways in an irresponsible way, that has resulted in them already being spent with nothing left to back up any issues and gaps.

Again, it seems there is a lot of talk from government, particular on environmental improvements, but with little action and strong policy to actually back it up. For instance government talks about planting more trees, yet presumption is in favour of destructive projects that decimate trees and woodland including ancient and long established woodland.

We need environmental protections to be given priority and importance throughout the country in all areas, and NSIPs should not trump protecting our environment, health and wellbeing.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.thamescrossingactiongroup.com/freedom-of-information-request-appeal/>

We do not believe environmental surveys and mitigations are always carried out adequately, nor that there is any follow up to ensure mitigations etc are carried out adequately. We need more and better monitoring from independent sources who don't stand to benefit from keeping developers happy.

In regard to alternatives, more needs to be done to ensure alternatives have been given adequate and recent consideration, particularly when it is a huge project and there have been delays. Things can change over the years and projects should not just be pushed through because of how long it has taken so far, assessments of alternatives should be scrutinized ongoing to ensure what is being proposed is still the best option and again question whether it is fit for purpose or not.

Biodiversity requirements should be brought forward and not left until Nov 2025, that is too late, we need to be acting now when it comes to biodiversity net gain.

In regard to good design National Highways provide very little information and realistic imagery of what their projects will look like, nor adequate details of designs, for if they go ahead. All too often we and LAs are being told we will have to wait until DCO to get info, and even then it is buried amongst tens of thousands of pages of documentation, and subject to the contractor making decisions if the project goes ahead, rather than any reassurance of what the end result would be.

More weight needs to be given to communities and the Local Authorities that represent them when it comes to NSIPs.

Things like Local Transport Plans and Local Plans are often struggling to be produced due to the impacts and threats from NSIPs.

The draft also seems to suggest new guidance on LTPs, but as far as we know that information is not yet in the public domain. This does not offer transparency and present info in a clear and informative manner.

With the proposed LTC we and our Local Authorities have been struggling to get information out of National Highways on so many aspects for years.

We need a policy that ensures all parties are provided with all the info they need, and that there is not a presumption of DCOs being granted and policy favouring the applicant, as is the case now.

We also need better and more monitoring of environmental impacts to ensure that what is promised with projects is delivered and maintained. It is too easy to plant trees and then leave them to die. Increasingly areas that have been allocated as environmental mitigation or compensation becoming under threat and lost to other developments. It seems that nobody is monitoring the long-term overall impacts, and the revised policy should address this. It should be mandatory that all negative impacts of NSIPs are monitored and necessary actions taken.

Protections need to be applied to all areas, with thorough adequate research and surveys carried out. There should be no exceptions just because the development is an NSIP.

We should not have instances, like with the proposed LTC, where ancient/long established woodlands are being destroyed to avoid going through historic toxic landfill sites<sup>9</sup>. If projects cannot be routed/positioned due to various impacts then the project should really not be going ahead unless the area can be completely avoided without impact to other areas that need to be protected

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.thamescrossingactiongroup.com/the-wilderness/>

There seems to be a distinct lack of acknowledgement that the policy and associated process and projects are also relevant to the general public, not just the applicant, and those considering and making the decisions. If projects are to be considered Nationally Significant then the nation (we the people) should be having a greater say in them, rather than them just being used as a way for government to do as they wish, and inflicting hugely destructive projects that are not fit for purpose on us using our taxpaying money to do so.

## **Conclusion**

The draft NNNPS as it stands is too little too late, and needs strengthening to ensure proper scrutiny of NSIPs, not a presumption that NSIPs need to be granted DCO as quickly and easily as possible. The bar is currently way too low and in favour of the applicant, and the draft offers very little if anything to improve and strengthen a policy that should ensure the best outcome for us all for a healthy sustainable future.

We also need an urgent pause on the projects that are being pushed through and judged against a policy that is known to be outdated and not in keeping with legislation and policy.

To simply push ahead with, knowing the position is unfair and unethical, and any revised policy if worth the paper it is written on will be like closing the door after the horse has bolted.

We are talking about huge projects here, like the proposed £10bn+++ Lower Thames Crossing, amongst others. It is not just the financial cost, but also the cost to our health and well-being and the environment.

Government talk the talk, and have recently announced delays in many road projects, so why not back up the talk with actions and hit pause on pushing the project through whilst a revised policy is put in place? The alternative of carrying on as though it is business as usual is ludicrous, and definitely not in the public interest.

**Thank you for allowing us the opportunity to present our paper to you in relation to this inquiry. We hope you will find it of interest and helpful to all aspects on which you were seeking evidence. Please don't hesitate to contact us should you wish to discuss further.**