

THAMES CROSSING ACTION GROUP

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Major Capital Projects Review

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.

We understand that this call for evidence excludes specific issues related to transport, but we feel our experience and comments could be relevant to other areas too. With such a large section of the budget being spent on transport, and road within that, we do hope that Labour will be carrying out a review specifically on roads, as it is very much needed and something we would most definitely wish to provide evidence for. In the meantime we hope that the following evidence will be helpful in a more generalised way.

This representation was prepared and submitted by Laura Blake, Chair of TCAG on behalf of the group in response to the Major Capital Projects Review call for evidence. TCAG can be contacted via email – admin@thamescrossingactiongroup.com.

Infrastructure Review Evidence

Headline Questions

How can we improve estimates of costs, benefits, and timescales to completion for major projects?

There needs to be better monitoring and scrutiny of what is being presented by those delivering the project. All too often the details being shared are way out of date, and nobody seems to question it. Accounting Officer Assessments based on misleading info that is years out of date is unacceptable.

If those delivering the project were held more accountable things would improve. Consultations are lasting longer and longer because those delivering the project are not adequate in their planning. They are not carrying out adequate assessments, and genuinely listening to consultation feedback.

They are also ignoring important factors, and attempting to push ahead with what suits their needs and agenda rather than doing what is right, which leads to increased costs and delays due to the need for further consultation and legal challenges.

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Similarly, there is a need to ensure policies are updated inline with changes in legislation etc. We cannot keep pushing ahead doing things the way they have always been done, just because. Things need to be monitored and updated to reflect what is truly needed.

The fact that Full Business Cases are not presented before Development Consent Order (DCO) decisions are made is another huge problem. Outline Business Cases and DCO applications are being pushed through despite being out of date, to make projects look more affordable, better value for money etc, when the reality is very different. It's akin to giving the go ahead on a major project based on a ball park figure, when what is really needed is a proper quote. Even if that quote includes a reasonable contingency fund. If those delivering the project were then held accountable for anything more than what is agreed they might start to do their jobs properly in the first place and not try to push ahead regardless assuming they will just keep getting more and more funding once a project has begun regardless of why, or how much longer things take, how much extra it costs.

It would also be helpful if there was some kind of standard/guidance on the level of inflation that is used for assessments for major projects. It is clear that in many cases out of touch unrealistic rates are being used for assessment and then people wonder why costs rise so much.

As for benefits, more importance needs to be given to what the people need and want, rather than what suits big business and economic growth. Growth for purely for the sake of growth is not sustainable, especially at a time of climate emergency. Try counting your money when there is no clean air to breathe, clean water to drink, or healthy soil to grow your food in.

Does the Civil Service have access to the skills it needs for the successful delivery of major projects? If not what is needed?

What the Civil Service does not have is facility/access to genuinely independent monitoring and scrutiny of major projects. They are far too reliant on seeking information and evidence directly from those delivering major projects. This equates to those delivering the projects marking their own homework.

Another issue as we see it is that there is not enough joined up thinking and actions, so it would be beneficial for Civil Servants to have a better oversight of all aspects. This could be done by setting up a central portal that covers all aspects of major projects, with those delivering the projects having to report certain aspects on a regular basis, and other independent sources (including the public) being able to report their own evidence of concerns and issues that get investigated and are kept on record for all to see.

How can we ensure greater transparency and regular reporting of project data to improve delivery?

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See above for the need for a central system, with stress put on the fact that those delivering the major projects must report regularly, and that there is facility for others to also report issues and concerns backed by evidence.

More information also needs to become available through Freedom of Information requests and similar. It is too easy for such requests for Major Capital Projects to be refused. This is particularly relevant when public money is being spent on projects, it is the people's money so we the people should be able to request information on projects it is being spent on.

How can government plan for changes in the external environment, including inflation, rising interest rates and other factors?

There needs to be better communication and understanding of what is happening, and how many proposals contradict other policies and ambitions. There is a distinct lack of joined up thinking and actions.

Better monitoring of those responsible for delivering major capital projects is essential, as all too often they have their own agendas to futureproof their own existence. There is no accountability for their actions and inadequacies, and that needs to change.

How can projects contribute more to UK economic goals, including supporting UK supply chains, jobs, and skills?

All too often these major projects promote growth and jobs, often stating they will be local, only for contracts to be awarded to large international companies, who then subcontract to others smaller companies and suppliers who never end up benefiting as much as they should, it is the large international companies that end up benefiting most from these projects.

If anything is done to improve this matter then it is essential that it be done in a way that supports and insists on sustainability too, because if any investment is to be made into such things it must be sustainable to benefit our future.

How can the machinery of government be improved to support the delivery of major capital projects?

Again, better monitoring and scrutiny is needed. We need joined up thinking and actions, there are too many contradictory behaviours, and too much talk with little or no action to back it up.

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Just one example, on one hand we have a government who are spending money on planting trees to support and enhance the natural environment, but on the other hand are investing billions on hugely destructive and harmful major projects that are destroying trees, woodland and the natural environment in general.

Current and future major projects

What projects or initiatives do you think should be prioritised for the future development of UK infrastructure, and why?

It is critical that any projects or initiatives support a sustainable future, there is simply no other viable option. Growth and development for the sake of it is not sustainable.

Government need to take more notice of what the Climate Change Committee are saying, because unless we take climate emergency more seriously all these hugely destructive and harmful projects just keep getting pushed through. We need to be investing in sustainable solutions and infrastructure.

Politicians seems to have been talking about the importance of our environment for so long, with little or no actions, and now seem to be backing away from facing and dealing with the issues. This is not something we can afford to get wrong.

Are there specific technological advancements or innovations that you believe can significantly benefit infrastructure delivery?

If any are used it is essential that they are proven and delivered as signed off on, and it is critical that they are proven to be safe.

What can we learn from the experience and approach taken by other nations in terms of accelerating infrastructure projects?

No comment

Procurement and supply chains:

How can we enable more efficient local supply chains?

As already mentioned above, it seems that generally contracts for major projects end up being awarded to large international companies, who then subcontract to more local companies/supply chains. These large companies are the ones bidding for the work before contracts and decisions are made, but the weight of what they decide is often then

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passed down to the smaller companies who also have to bear the brunt of the associated costs and responsibilities, whether that be supply chain or subcontractors.

Future reforms, funding and investment

What do you see as the main obstacle to the private sector investing more significantly to help improve UKs infrastructure?

Maybe the question should be not what the main obstacles are, but on what grounds is it acceptable for private sector investment into the UK infrastructure. That is part of the problem with our infrastructure that is essential to our future having been sold off. Profits have become more important than genuine benefits for the country.

Are there regulatory changes or policy recommendations that you believe would be beneficial to accelerate investment and delivery?

We do not believe that anything should be accelerated just for the sake of it, and certainly not at any cost to our lives, health and wellbeing, and the environment. Those things need to be prioritised over economic growth for the sake of economic growth, for the reason mentioned previously above.

What do you see as the main alternative funding models* available to the sector to fund stations and their surrounding city developments?

No comment

Are you aware of best practice approaches and case studies that have used alternative models with successful outcomes?

No comment

**Potential funding models may include, but not be limited to, examples that include the use of development corporations, private sector investment, and co-location of other infrastructure.*

Additional

Are there any other issues you would like to raise that are relevant to the Review's Terms of Reference?

Only to reiterate again the need and importance of a roads review, since it has been excluded from this call for evidence/review.

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In her speech on 9th October 2023¹ Rachel Reeves stated:

"And that is why our Shadow Transport Secretary Louise Haigh will commission an independent expert inquiry into HS2 to learn lessons for the future. Because many more major government capital projects running over time, over budget and in danger of going undelivered. It is incumbent on government to make sure major projects are delivered on time and on budget. I will not tolerate taxpayers' money being treated with the disrespect we have seen over recent years. I will not turn a blind eye to dither, delay and incompetence. I will hold those responsible to account. And I will demand action when they are not delivering value for money. So I have tasked Darren Jones, the Shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury; To work closely with industry experts; And to examine, line by line, every ongoing major capital project; ..."

We note it says **every** ongoing major capital project, no exclusion of transport/roads.

We hope that transport including roads will be reviewed separately, as it is very much needed, and we wish to submit our own evidence to such a review.

Also, to highlight that the email address provided in the call for evidence for this review does not appear to be correct, which could hinder people's ability to respond.

Plus, we feel it would have been helpful for better promotion of this review call for evidence, as we only came about it through word of mouth on 14th Feb and have quickly prepared this response. This is despite we have been looking out for such a review thinking it would include all projects, including roads.

We thank you for the opportunity to submit our representation, please don't hesitate to contact us if you wish to discuss further.

¹ <https://labour.org.uk/updates/press-releases/rachel-reeves-speech-at-labour-conference/>