



Keith Prince AM
Chairman of the Transport Committee

Sadiq Khan
Mayor of London
(Sent by email)

21 December 2023

Dear Sadiq,

I am writing to share the conclusions and recommendations of the Committee's investigation into river services in London. The Committee held a meeting on this topic on Thursday 15 June 2023, which included guests from Transport for London (TfL), the Port of London Authority (PLA), Thames Clippers, Livett's and the Cross River Partnership (CRP).¹ The Committee also undertook a visit with Thames Clippers to Dartford on Thursday 16 November 2023 to learn more about the light freight trials and passenger services on the river.

The investigation covered a range of issues, including those that relate to both passenger services and light freight on the river. The Committee's recommendations cover the following areas:

- The need to appoint a new 'River Commissioner' to provide leadership and work with stakeholders to remove barriers to the growth in river transport.
- The need to ensure increased accountability around the Thames and London Waterways Forum which has an important role in bringing together stakeholders to deliver the Mayor's strategies.

¹ London Assembly, [London Assembly Transport Committee Meeting \(Plenary\)](#), 15 June 2023

- The importance of updating TfL’s pier strategy to: reflect new patterns of demand for services post-COVID; incorporate light freight into plans; and inform decisions around investing in charging infrastructure for electric vessels and proposed investments in new walking and cycling focused ferry crossings.
- Increasing awareness of river services and real-time information to promote passenger river services.
- Increasing awareness of river-based jobs and training to increase the diversity of the river workforce.

The need for GLA leadership

The Committee heard that the patchwork of different authorities, pier owners and boat operators, with responsibilities for different aspects of the river means that it can be challenging to ensure that all stakeholders work together. In the absence of formal structures, relationships are critical in getting things done. In the words of James Trimmer, Director of Planning and Development at the PLA, “in terms of the management of the river, you need to know people, if I am being honest, to make things happen.”²

Our evidence suggested that there is a need for clearer goals and formal accountability, so that it is clear who should be delivering progress on river transport and how they are performing. Sean Collins, CEO of Thames Clippers, argued:

“We need a commissioner that will achieve similar to that of walking and cycling. If you combined all the boroughs together and look at that mass and the representation that they individually have into City Hall the river does not have that.”³

In 2018, the Transport Committee recommended that there be a ‘River Ambassador’ to provide the leadership required to promote river passenger transport.⁴ Our guests suggested that there is an ongoing lack of focus and attention in this area and suggested that a dedicated paid role is needed to work with stakeholders and galvanise action. Such a dedicated Commissioner could provide a more powerful focus to co-ordinate strategy and work with stakeholders, such as local Councils bordering the river.

- **Recommendation 1:** The Mayor should appoint a River Commissioner in 2024-25 to accelerate progress on better using the Thames for passenger and freight transport, including through working closely with the PLA, industry and local authorities.

The role of the GLA in supporting greater co-ordination and accountability

The Thames and London Waterways Forum was created in 2017 “to advise the Mayor on river transport and waterways issues”, replacing both the River Concordat and London Waterways Commission.⁵ It aimed to “support the relevant goals set out in the ... Mayor’s Transport

² London Assembly, [London Assembly Transport Committee Meeting \(Plenary\)](#), 15 June 2023

³ London Assembly, [London Assembly Transport Committee Meeting \(Plenary\)](#), 15 June 2023

⁴ London Assembly Transport Committee, [A river tube line – the untapped potential of the Thames](#), 7 August 2018

⁵ MD2116 [The Thames and London Waterways Forum](#)

Strategy, London Plan and London Environment Strategy, as well as the Port of London Authority's Thames Vision", and was established to be "a partnership coordinating strategy and activities on the Thames and London's waterways".⁶

Guests at our meeting indicated that the Forum could be more effective in bringing together stakeholders and providing updates about its work. At the time of the Committee's meeting in June, the terms of reference of the steering group were not available online on the GLA website, and there had been no public updates on the GLA website about meetings of the Forum since 2018.⁷ As I write, these have still not been updated. A Mayor's Question on the topic in January 2023 confirmed that the steering group had met in May 2022,⁸ and a further Mayor's Question indicated that there was no meeting of the whole Forum in 2022.⁹

James Trimmer of the PLA told the Committee in its meeting in June that there had been a steering group meeting in April 2023, and that a Forum meeting was planned – which subsequently took place on 27 November 2023.¹⁰ However Sean Collins of Thames Clippers observed that "the meetings are very infrequent and I do not see much delivery".¹¹

- **Recommendation 2:** The Mayor should take steps to ensure that the Thames and London Waterways Forum provides strong co-ordination to drive forward the Mayor's priorities for the river, including increasing transparency and accountability around its activities. This should include publishing minutes of the steering group meetings on the GLA website, and annual reports to Assembly Members on progress.

The need to work closely with local authorities and developers

The Mayor sets planning policies and has a role in working with local authorities and the Port of London Authority to help ensure access to the river is maintained and improved. This includes facilitating the provision of new piers, wharfs and other interchange facilities.¹²

James Trimmer of the PLA highlighted the example of a wharf, for which a planning application had been submitted in 2019 but had yet to receive a decision. He said that increasing the speed of such processes would help support investment.¹³ This reinforces the need for co-ordination and leadership to work with local authorities to ensure that they prioritise the river and safeguard key locations and ensure development is integrated with the river and ensures access for passengers, freight and leisure.

Recommendation 3: A key task of a new River Commissioner should be to work with primary stakeholders, including Councils and developers, to speed up the development and approval of new infrastructure to enable river services, such as wharves, slipways and piers.

⁶ [Thames and London Waterways Forum | London City Hall](#)

⁷ <https://www.london.gov.uk/programmes-strategies/transport/thames-and-london-waterways-forum>

⁸ MQ [2023/0324](#)

⁹ MQ [2023/2508](#)

¹⁰ PLA [Thames and London Waterways Forum 2023](#)

¹¹ London Assembly, [London Assembly Transport Committee Meeting \(Plenary\)](#), 15 June 2023

¹² For example, Policy SI 15 Water transport of the [London Plan 2021](#)

¹³ London Assembly, [London Assembly Transport Committee Meeting \(Plenary\)](#), 15 June 2023

Updating the Pier Strategy

TfL's Passenger Pier Strategy (2019) set out how TfL plans to work with stakeholders to support passenger services and to encourage private sector investment in pier infrastructure. The Strategy committed to supporting the PLA's target figure of 20 million annual river users by 2035 (approximately a doubling of pre-pandemic figures).¹⁴ Danny Price, General Manager of Sponsored Services at TfL, told the Committee that "TfL is committing over the next ten years around £40 million to ensure that the piers are fit for purpose and modernised".¹⁵ It is unclear at this stage whether there will be investment in providing charging infrastructure for zero emission vessels on its piers, due to uncertainty about when and how this will be needed. Danny Panayiotou, Head of London River Services at TfL said "the biggest issue is we do not know how best to invest at this particular time".¹⁶

Sean Collins from Thames Clippers told the Committee that central London is "is where the focus needs to come from TfL, from the Mayor's Office".¹⁷ This is because it is where demand is greatest, capacity constraints highest, and also where TfL controls most piers. He also highlighted the importance of ensuring that piers are financially sustainable, which he said would include the multi-use of piers for new commercial opportunities, such as using them for light freight.

Although TfL confirmed in the meeting that they had no funding for new ferry crossing services there have been further developments in recent months.¹⁸ Thames Clippers have now announced a consultation for an enhanced all electric, zero emission, roll-on/roll-off (RORO) ferry replacement for their existing crossing from the DoubleTree by Hilton Hotel to Canary Wharf.¹⁹ This would be delivered by Thames Clippers and is a partially sponsored project by the Department for Transport's Green Maritime Fund via Innovate UK. Thames Clippers are proposing changes that would improve pier access, increase capacity and make the pier compliant with disability legislation, which could also improve access for light freight and cycles more generally.²⁰ The PLA has also published a report on possible new walking and cycling ferry crossings on the Thames.²¹

While recent trials have shown that there is significant potential for transporting light freight into central London by river, the logistics of using piers for freight can be complicated, and most piers were not designed for this purpose. Sean Collins of Thames Clippers identified the need for improved brow access (the way that boats connect to piers) at Tower Pier, which "can be achieved but it all needs investment and it needs a proper plan to deliver it."²² Chris Livett, Chair

¹⁴ TfL (2019) London's Passenger Pier Strategy <https://content.tfl.gov.uk/pier-passenger-pier-strategy-action-plan.pdf>

¹⁵ London Assembly, [London Assembly Transport Committee Meeting \(Plenary\)](#), 15 June 2023

¹⁶ London Assembly, [London Assembly Transport Committee Meeting \(Plenary\)](#), 15 June 2023

¹⁷ London Assembly, [London Assembly Transport Committee Meeting \(Plenary\)](#), 15 June 2023

¹⁸ London Assembly, [London Assembly Transport Committee Meeting \(Plenary\)](#), 15 June 2023

¹⁹ Thames Clippers, [New cross river ferry - Consultation for the proposed new Ferry at DoubleTree by Hilton in Rotherhithe to Canary Wharf](#), 22 November 2023

²⁰ Thames Clippers, [New cross river ferry - Consultation for the proposed new Ferry at DoubleTree by Hilton in Rotherhithe to Canary Wharf](#), 22 November 2023

²¹ Port of London Authority [Report recommends three electric ferry crossing options for east London](#) 13 December 2023

²² London Assembly, [London Assembly Transport Committee Meeting \(Plenary\)](#), 15 June 2023

of Livett's, told the Committee that he would "encourage more research into the use of slipways and other bits of infrastructure where we can just simply have roll-on and roll-off".²³

The Committee also heard from Fiona Coull, Programme Manager of the Cross River Partnership, about the light-freight trials taking goods into central London by river, particularly focusing on next day deliveries and e-commerce. She told the Committee that the light freight trial had resulted in significant reductions in harmful emissions.²⁴

Fiona told the Committee that while the trials were successful, they also identified challenges that would need to be overcome to scale up the service. One of these is capacity of the current piers, although as Danny Price from TfL observed "not all the eight piers that we [TfL] have are super busy",²⁵ so there are potential opportunities to use less busy piers. James Trimmer also commented that the PLA is "also looking at increasing freight vessels and whether we can put those on the night tide, where of course it is emptier",²⁶ but acknowledged that there are amenity issues, such as the potential for some noise disturbance, that may arise from this.

In May 2023, the Cross River Partnership published a 'Deep Dive' report, which shared the learning from the light freight trials, and future areas to be addressed.²⁷

- **Recommendation 4:** The Mayor should continue to support future light freight trials and work together with other stakeholders to find ways to scale the volumes of freight being transported and overcome current barriers.
- **Recommendation 5:** The Mayor should publish an update to his pier strategy in 2024-25, which should be expanded to cover both passengers and light freight. It should include:
 - updating projections for further growth in passenger travel;
 - proposals for TfL to increase pier capacity in central London;
 - options for providing electric charging infrastructure for vessels on TfL piers; and
 - research into new ways to increase the capacity for roll-on/roll-off (RORO) ferry support and other methods that can more efficiently load and unload light freight and bicycles in key locations.

Improved information on river services

The ambition to double river users to 20 million by 2035 will require greater awareness of services among people travelling in London and integration of river services into everyday journeys.

The Committee heard that the TfL Go app has included symbols for river services,²⁸ and this is noted as a positive move. However, while there is information about scheduled services, there is

²³ London Assembly, [London Assembly Transport Committee Meeting \(Plenary\)](#), 15 June 2023

²⁴ London Assembly, [London Assembly Transport Committee Meeting \(Plenary\)](#), 15 June 2023

²⁵ London Assembly, [London Assembly Transport Committee Meeting \(Plenary\)](#), 15 June 2023

²⁶ London Assembly, [London Assembly Transport Committee Meeting \(Plenary\)](#), 15 June 2023

²⁷ Cross River Partnership [A Deep Dive: The London Light Freight River Trial Process, Performance and Prospects](#), May 2023

²⁸ London Assembly, [London Assembly Transport Committee Meeting \(Plenary\)](#), 15 June 2023

no information in TfL Go on real-time or live river service departures, and it can sometimes be difficult to see options for river services if these are not the fastest route – meaning some people who might be willing to consider this option for the additional amenity of river travel are not aware that this is as a possibility.

- **Recommendation 6:** TfL should explore ways to feature river services more prominently on the TfL Go app, including ways to ensure that they appear as an option for those who may be less time sensitive, and ways to provide real-time information on river boat departures.

Training and the need to increase diversity in the river workforce

The river workforce includes a range of roles linked to building, maintaining, and navigating boats as well as support services. The Committee heard that attracting new people to these industries was a challenge. Chris Livett told the Committee “If you look at our support services that we need for the river, shipbuilding in particular, it is poor. Also, our training is not to a standard for the country’s biggest port, albeit we are members of the Thames Skills Academy (TSA) and we have been working hard to further that.”²⁹ Sean Collins from Thames Clippers highlighted the progress that the TSA had made, but emphasised that it can take five or six years to train people and that “getting people is extremely hard” and added “we have to entice more people into our industry”.³⁰ Danny Price from TfL stated that a further challenge is that the river is a “very, very non-diverse environment, given the boroughs that it serves, and it is a challenge and it goes to the heart of safety”.³¹ He pointed out the work that is being undertaken, such as the Women on the Water Group, but said that more needed to be done.³²

- **Recommendation 7:** The Mayor should increase support for training, including further support for the Thames Skills Academy, for river-related skills such as shipbuilding or other roles linked to working on boats. The Mayor should also seek ways to work with local authorities and other stakeholders to increase the diversity of people who work on the river, including through greater promotion of opportunities to work on the river. The proposed River Commissioner should also seek to review the working conditions of those on the river to ensure they are set at such a level to help entice more people into the river services industry.

Conclusions

The Committee sees a significant opportunity for using the river more, for both passengers and freight. Now is the time to re-invigorate previous strategies. Transforming this potential into reality is challenging but could be accelerated with a dedicated Commissioner charged with working with stakeholders to provide a clear focus on the river, and who can dedicate time to driving forward your strategies in these areas. It is also vital that there is increased accountability for the work of the Thames and London Waterways Forum and transparency around its activities, and all Londoners have improved information about river services, and opportunities to work on the river.

²⁹ London Assembly, [London Assembly Transport Committee Meeting \(Plenary\)](#), 15 June 2023

³⁰ London Assembly, [London Assembly Transport Committee Meeting \(Plenary\)](#), 15 June 2023

³¹ London Assembly, [London Assembly Transport Committee Meeting \(Plenary\)](#), 15 June 2023

³² London Assembly, [London Assembly Transport Committee Meeting \(Plenary\)](#), 15 June 2023

I hope you will consider these recommendations to really make the most of London's most iconic natural asset,

Yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Keith', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Keith Prince AM

Chairman of the Transport Committee