Introduction

1. This paper provides a briefing on issues concerning the proposed redevelopment of the Thames Gateway area of East London, South Essex and North Kent. It sets out the historical background to the Thames Gateway ‘project’ and gives details of the major political and administrative institutions and public policy development processes through which the area’s redevelopment will be managed. The major barriers to the successful progress of the Thames Gateway project are identified, together with a number of suggestions as to how public policy may be developed in order to overcome those barriers.

Background

2. The Thames Gateway is a large area of largely brownfield, former industrial land extending some 43 miles eastwards from central London (Tower Bridge) to the outer reaches of the north and south shores of the Thames Estuary. At its widest (easternmost) point, it is some 20 miles wide (including the Thames Estuary). It contains the largest continuous area of brownfield land in Western Europe, offering some 3000 hectares of developable sites. That figure may well be a significant underestimate, and some 30 hectares of industrial land in the Thames Gateway is becoming newly vacant each year (some 60% of the total across London). Much of the land is contaminated as a result of its industrial history. The area is defined by the boundaries of the constituent local authorities rather than by the nature of the land and therefore also includes significant areas of greenfield land and undeveloped Green Belt. The population is some 3.3 million.

3. In addition to the legacy of vacant brownfield land, the decline of industries such as power generation, docks and gas works has led to high levels of unemployment. Much of the Thames Gateway is characterised by run-down, poorly designed neighbourhoods with poor quality housing (especially in London). This is largely a result of the drive to provide housing for employees of the industries that provided the impetus for the area’s growth in the post-War period. Poor public transport provision has led to high car use and low density development. Skills and income levels among the resident population tend to be low and individuals who prosper tend to move out, undermining the area’s potential for indigenous regeneration.

4. The Thames Gateway (as the ‘East Thames Corridor’) was first established as a major planning concept through the South East Regional Planning Guidance (RPG) process in 1990. RPG 9a - The Thames Gateway Planning Framework - was published in 1995 and identified the area as one of substantial growth potential. The concept has maintained its profile through the RPG (and London Spatial Development Strategy) process ever since and, most recently, as a major growth area identified through the Government’s February 2003 Sustainable Communities Plan initiative (SCP), which has an associated action plan specifically for the Thames Gateway. The SCP has made
available a significant amount of new money for a wide range of projects that would promote the redevelopment of the Thames Gateway.

5. Redevelopment initiatives within the Thames Gateway are focused on 14 ‘Zones of Change’ (six of which are in London) which, collectively, amount to around one third of the total Thames Gateway area.

**Issues for the countryside - why the Thames Gateway is important**

6. The Thames Gateway offers an unprecedented opportunity to accommodate on brownfield land much of future demand for housing and economic development in south-eastern England. In respect of housing alone, the Government intends that over one million new dwellings should be provided to meet housing demand in south-eastern England by 2016. The redevelopment of the Thames Gateway could greatly reduce the pressure for greenfield housing and economic development - and associated infrastructure - in the London region and beyond. It could also help to mitigate the scale of urban out-migration by providing housing that is attractive to potential out-migrants in new, high quality, brownfield developments.

**Vision and key campaign objectives**

7. CPRE London’s objectives for the Thames Gateway can be summarised by the ‘vision statement’ that the area’s redevelopment will, to the greatest possible extent and into the long term, meet the demand for housing and other built development that would otherwise be met through urban sprawl and urban out-migration throughout south-eastern England.

8. The most recent major statement of Government policy *Creating Sustainable Communities - Making it happen* (July 2003) committed the Government to the delivery of at least 120,000 new homes within five ‘strategic development locations’ within the Thames Gateway by 2016. That figure appears to have been determined largely by the limits of currently planned transport infrastructure projects (not including Crossrail, for which there is as yet no Government commitment). It is considered by the Mayor and London’s regeneration professionals to be a very significant underestimate of the available brownfield capacity and may even be too low a figure to provide the scale of private sector contribution that will be necessary to fund the required civil and civic infrastructure. CPRE has called for the Government to adopt a target figure approaching 300,000 additional homes in the entire Thames Gateway area, and that remains a key campaign objective. We support the Mayor’s aspirations to deliver at least 90,000 new homes in the London part.

9. Consistent with the ideas set out in *Compact Sustainable Communities*, realising the Thames Gateway’s potential will require, broadly:

- raising the average density of new developments;
- increasing the rate of brownfield land recovery;
- avoiding urban sprawl into greenfield areas; and
• creating a high quality and attractive residential environment, protecting urban environmental assets and providing good access to all necessary amenities.

10. In addition, the scale of redevelopment likely if the Thames Gateway has significant implications for environmental impact caused by the consumption of natural resources, particularly construction materials and water resources. That impact should be minimised through the adoption of best practice (see below).

**Political context**

11. The political significance of the Thames Gateway being identified by the Government as a major growth area should not be overlooked. The fact that the Prime Minister chose to Chair the Cabinet sub-committee whose work led to the July 2003 statement is very strong evidence that the issue is being taken seriously by the Government. The political momentum appears to be coming from the Deputy Prime Minister, John Prescott.

12. However, the received wisdom among those of London’s regeneration professionals who are closely involved with the Thames Gateway project is that the Government is very nervous about the potential cost implications of the area’s comprehensive regeneration. These costs are in respect of, for example, transport and other civil infrastructure and site decontamination. The unambitious nature of the July 2003 statement, for example, reflects the fact that the Government has not committed public money to major transport infrastructure projects such as Crossrail. Worryingly, it appears that the Government’s concern is that consideration of environmental quality concerns (including avoiding greenfield development) will give rise to additional costs that may be the final nail in the coffin of the entire Thames Gateway project. There is also a concern that the Government is focussing unduly on the stark numbers of new housing units and is concerned that insistence on high standards of design and environmental protection may undermine the delivery of the required numbers.

13. Notwithstanding the Deputy Prime Minister’s conviction, the success of the Thames Gateway’s redevelopment will depend on the enthusiastic buy-in of other Government departments - Transport, Health, Education and Culture, Media and Sport. Engagement of these departments at Cabinet level currently appears to be lacking, with the result that there must be doubts over the likelihood that the budgetary commitment necessary to bring forward the necessary community infrastructure.

**Policy development processes**

14. National regional and local government planning policy for the Thames Gateway is being developed through the following major processes:

- **Sustainable Communities Plan** (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister - ODPM);
- **Regional Planning Guidance** (South East Regional Assembly and the East of England Regional Assembly);
- **London Spatial Development Strategy** - the ‘London Plan’ (Mayor of London)
- **London Sub-regional spatial strategies** (Mayor of London)
• East London Urban Development Corporation (ODPM/Mayor of London); and
• Economic Development Strategy (each of the three Regional Development Agency’s - RDA’s).

15. There are also a number of other (ostensibly subsidiary) processes underway:

• London Thames Gateway Development and Delivery Strategy (LTGDDS - a strategic investment strategy for the Thames Gateway) (ODPM/Mayor of London);
• Thames Gateway London Partnership Economic Strategy (‘Going East’ - An investment strategy developed by the TGLP partners) (TGLP - see below);
• Thames Strategy East (a spatial planning framework specifically for areas close to the river) (TGLP);
• Green Grid (establishing a network of protected open space) (TGLP); and
• Area Development Frameworks (detailed land use and planning policies for specific defined areas) (Mayor of London).

16. With the exception of the first (which appears to be very significant) it is not clear as yet which of these ‘subsidiary’ processes above are likely to have the greatest weight and their relationships to each other are far from clear.

Institutions

17. The following public institutions are responsible for policy development (and, in some cases, implementation) on a strategic scale in the Thames Gateway. Some produce their own detailed policy statements (as listed above), while some (also listed above) exist more to contribute to other policy development processes. The apparent proliferation of such bodies may appear to have created something of a quagmire and this may be a major barrier to effective policy development and, indeed, meaningful public participation:

Thames Gateway Strategic Partnership (TGSP) - a grouping of Ministers, the Mayor of London, Regional Development Agency chairmen, sub-regional Partnership chairmen and representatives from the regional assemblies in the Thames Gateway. It is Chaired by the Minister for Planning (currently Keith Hill MP) and it aims to develop and implement a pan-Gateway regeneration agenda. The TGSP has a number of ‘sub-groups’ - including the Planning Sub-Group and the Environment Sub-Group - on which NGOs, statutory agencies and local authority partnerships are represented.

Thames Gateway Strategic Executive (TGSE) - the officer-level (Civil Service and executive agency) body that supports the TGSP.

Sustainable Communities Delivery Unit (SCDU) - This is perhaps the key unit within the Government departments (ODPM). It includes responsibility for Thames Gateway, English Partnership sponsorship, design issues, Millennium Communities and Urban Regeneration Companies. The Urban Policy Unit would report to this new unit.
London Thames Gateway Partnership Board (LTGPB) is a non-executive working group jointly chaired by the Mayor of London and the Minister for London. Its role is to oversee and co-ordinate the planning and accelerated delivery of regeneration projects and programmes in the London Thames Gateway, principally through the London Thames Gateway Development and Delivery Strategy (above). The Board comprises various regeneration and housing quangos and the private sector. It is not the Board of the London Thames Gateway Partnership (see below).

Thames Gateway Steering Group (TGSG) is a GLA-led initiative and acts as the executive group supporting the LTGPB, setting and taking forward the LTGPB’s agenda. It brings together the GLA, LDA, ODPM, English Partnerships Transport for London and the Thames Gateway London Partnership (representing the boroughs) together with a range of other agencies.

Thames Gateway London Partnership; South Essex Partnership; and Kent Partnership variously comprise representatives of constituent local authorities, Regional Development Agencies, educational agencies and public, private and voluntary sector organisations. The Partnerships are created to lead the strategic regeneration of their respective sub-regions. The London Partnership excludes NGOs from its membership, but allows NGOs to participate in various Task Groups (e.g. the Planning Task Group and the Environment & Quality of Life Task Group).

East London Urban Development Corporation (ELUDC), also referred to as the ‘Thames Gateway UDC’, will be a public-private ‘special delivery vehicle’ whose board will include representatives of local authorities and the LDA.

English Partnerships (EP) - EP is the national urban regeneration agency. It is an executive agency of the ODPM and is responsible for taking forward major land assembly and regeneration projects. These are usually carried out in partnership with local authorities and the private sector. EP currently has a particular focus on re-assigning surplus Government-owned land.

Making progress in the Thames Gateway

18. The four ‘headline’ objectives set out in paragraph 11, above, cannot be achieved without progress being made on each of a number of major issues identified below. These are all significant obstacles to the regeneration of the Thames Gateway and for which it cannot be said with reasonable certainty that they are likely to be resolved ‘on their own’. Some of these issues were identified by PC in 2002 as being priorities for increasing the rate of brownfield land regeneration in London generally. There are, of course, any number of other potential obstacles and difficulties to be overcome within each of these themes, and there are other obstacles that will become apparent even when progress is achieved on all of them.

19. Some of these themes are expressed below in terms of the absence of specific targets. This is because Government targets indicate the extent to which there is a commitment to specific policy objectives and, in the absence of targets, Government commitment can be assumed to be absent and the likelihood of progress being achieved
is therefore seriously undermined. Indeed, the 2001 report on the Government’s Thames Gateway Review noted that:

‘There are no targets set for the Thames Gateway and hence nothing against which to monitor progress. Targets and milestones for the area would assist in future reviews of RPG9A [and development plans] and in evaluating the effectiveness of different streams of (public) investment.’

20. Ultimately, it appears to be fairly widely accepted that the ‘key’ to unlocking the regeneration of the Thames Gateway is in creating confidence among the major institutional investors that a reasonable profit is likely to be forthcoming from the project. Creating that confidence will require major up-front public sector investment in infrastructure, site decontamination and possibly flood defences in order to create a number of nuclei around which substantial further development can take place.

21. The major issues holding back development are:

**Major transport infrastructure** - Despite the need to develop the Thames Gateway in such a way that reduces the need to travel, transport access is likely to be a major limitation on the possible scale of development. Committed schemes include: the Channel Tunnel rail link and the waterfront transit schemes (guided bus); East London Line extension; Docklands Light Railway extensions; and various road improvements. However, a significant package of schemes beyond those appears to be necessary even to deliver 120,000 new homes. Crossrail 1 will greatly enhance the capacity of the Thames Gateway to intensify its existing business districts, but the Government has not yet made any commitment to ensure that the necessary funding is provided. The Government should publish a definitive list of major infrastructure projects that it considers necessary to deliver housing in the Thames Gateway on the scale that it envisages and on a scale that it is willing to aspire to.

**Community infrastructure** - In order to avoid the wastage of land caused by car dependency and to maximise the attractiveness of new development, the Government and planning authorities need to adopt clear standards for the provision of community facilities including, for example, schools, hospitals, sports facilities and open space. Such an approach would be consistent with the Government’s objective of improving ‘liveability’ in urban areas. Proximity standards for residents should be established in planning policies. It is estimated that the regeneration of the London part of the Thames Gateway, for example, will require 53 new primary schools, ten new secondary schools and six new playing fields. Key to achieving this will be the enthusiastic engagement of all relevant Government departments - Transport, Health, Education and Culture, Media and Sport. High level ministerial statements of support are required from each of those departments.

**Funding community infrastructure** - Very substantial sums of public money will be required to pay for the infrastructure of ‘sustainable communities’: health care, education, local transport infrastructure, recreation and leisure facilities. In addition, there is the cost of providing ‘civil’ infrastructure such as sewerage, electricity supply, water supply and other utilities. The £446 million announced by the Government for
various regeneration projects was a welcome start, but very much more public money will be needed, not least because that sum is required to be spent within three years. The scale of funding required is likely to greatly exceed what can be secured through private sector developer contributions (Section 106 agreements) and it seems clear that a new funding stream must be identified, such as schemes for capturing the increase in land value created by public investment or a new development land tax. ‘Value capture’ through taking land into public ownership and then re-selling to developers is likely to be the simplest approach but requires substantial up-front public investment. The Government should urgently address this ‘funding gap’ issue head-on and fully and publicly explore the available options in time for the next Comprehensive Spending Review.

Professional regeneration skills - The shortage of appropriately skilled professionals in the regeneration sector (including construction workers and local authority planners) is widely recognised as a major impediment to progress nationally. The Government’s Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) has been vocal in its self-criticism over this issue. A programme is underway to address the skills shortage (including the LDA’s Centre for Regeneration Excellence for London) but it is likely to bring about significant change except in the long term. As CABE proposes, a key action required by the Government is to establish a strategic partnership of the relevant institutions to establish what skills gaps can and need to be filled, and how.

Compulsory purchase - Major developers are apparently stockpiling large areas of land in the Thames Gateway and do not appear willing to begin development while the value of these assets rises substantially. Falling values may also create reluctance among landowners to release sites for development. This kind of speculation can only be stopped by bringing the sites into public ownership through compulsory purchase and then releasing it piecemeal to developers. Useful changes to the compulsory purchase procedures are currently held up in the progress of the Planning Bill and there is some doubt as to whether the relevant authorities will be willing to take advantage of the new provisions.

Density targets for residential and commercial development - In order to ensure that land is developed at an appropriately high density and therefore wastage minimised, appropriate targets need to be developed and adopted by the Government and, ideally, the Mayor of London and the Boroughs. Recent data shows that average residential densities in four of the seven London Thames Gateway boroughs has actually decreased since 1997. The Government has not adopted any targets for the Thames Gateway beyond the general standards already established in PPG3-Housing. PPG3 merely makes a vague reference to the need for urban densities to usually be over 50 dwellings per hectare (dph). CPRE London recommends an average density of 90 dph for urban areas and throughout the Thames Gateway. The targets should be cascaded down through sub-regional strategies, Area Development Frameworks, masterplans and development briefs.

Design and construction quality standards - In order to ensure that the Thames Gateway becomes and remains an attractive place to live and work in the long term, there needs to be some mechanism by which to ensure that plans are appraised against
appropriate design standards. An appropriate standard should encompass consideration of: standards of construction; attractiveness of design and layout; access to amenities; incorporation of green open space; and managing the visual impact of electricity pylons. The Building Research Establishment’s *Sustainability checklist for developments* and the CABE-sponsored *Building for Life* award criteria may provide the basis of such a test. The challenge is to integrate those standards into the planning process at all relevant stages.

**Greenfield protection target** - Greenfield land is present within much of the Thames Gateway: around the edge (i.e. rural land); along the riverside; and within the urbanised area. Much of it is Green Belt land. Developers will succeed in targeting greenfield sites and leaving urban brownfield sites unredeveloped unless it is made clear that there can be no question of those sites being developed at least until all suitable vacant brownfield land has been redeveloped. The Government, the regional planning bodies, RDAs and all local planning authorities should adopt a target for 100% of new development in the Thames Gateway to take place on brownfield land. The absence such a target will lead to greenfield sites being developed unnecessarily while brownfield sites are overlooked.

**Flood defences** - Much - if not all - of the Thames Gateway is likely to be subjected to a major flooding hazard over the coming decades. A realistic programme of developing flood defences - or flood management - is essential to allow investor confidence. A programme of ‘managed retreat’ will seriously compromise the quantity of developable land available. The Environment Agency estimate that £4 billion is required to be spent on enhancing flood defences over the next 30 years, but a clear programme of the required work is not expected to be identified and published before 2006. The Government should make it clear where the necessary funds are expected to come from.

**Water resources** - Water resources across much of eastern Kent and Essex are already stretched. Even with a major programme of water conservation measures being undertaken in the Thames Gateway, water resource limitations may be too great to allow all the available land to be redeveloped. New reservoirs will have significant landscape impact implications. At the very least, demanding standards for water conservation and recycling measures need to be built into all new planning approvals. Nevertheless, before major development takes place, the Government should carry out an assessment of the water resource implications and undertake a comprehensive review of the necessary additional infrastructure, including its likely environmental impact of that infrastructure.

**Reallocation of employment land** - A very substantial quantity of land in the Thames Gateway remains allocated in UDPs as ‘employment land’, i.e. exclusively for industrial or other business premises use and some 30 hectares is still becoming newly vacant each year. A very great deal (perhaps the majority) of such land stands practically no chance of ever being required for such uses (unless, perhaps, it is developed wastefully for very low intensity purposes). Local Planning Authorities have been reluctant to release this land for other purposes (e.g. housing) because of the unrealistic fear that that would stifle economic growth in their areas. Government proposals to require the re-use of industrial and commercial land for housing unless a convincing case for retention is made a useful step in the right direction. However, much of the land in question is
likely to be greenfield, and so it must be made clear that it is the brownfield sites should prioritised for re-allocation. Many excess sites, especially greenfield but also potentially brownfield sites, may also warrant complete withdrawal from development plans.

**Sustainable construction**

22. In addition to addressing the barriers to achieving the full regeneration potential of the Thames Gateway, CPRE London advocates that the remote environmental impact of the area’s regeneration is minimised through universal adoption of the principles of sustainable construction. All planning authorities and the RDAs should require all new building in the Thames Gateway to conform with the BRE standard for sustainable construction and, in particular, to achieve best practice, especially in respect of the use of recycled and secondary aggregates and water conservation.

CPRE London,
September 2003