

Improving river services – an update report

February 2012



Six years ago we highlighted the limited use of the river to transport people. Our report *London's Forgotten Highway* (October 2006) set out the main barriers to expanding river services and recommended solutions to increase the number of Londoners using the river to make regular journeys. At present there are river bus services between Blackfriars Millennium Pier and Woolwich Arsenal Pier operated by Thames Clippers and between Putney Pier and Blackfriars Millennium Pier operated by Complete Pleasure Boats. In addition, there are various leisure or river tour services operated by different companies. All river services are overseen by Transport for London (TfL) 's London River Services (LRS) whose activities include coordinating river services with the wider public transport network and managing eight piers,¹ out of a total 33 piers.²

The Mayor has pledged to increase the use of river transport significantly. In early 2010, he committed to work towards a target of 12 million river passenger trips per year³ or more than double the current annual number of trips.⁴ This followed the publication in April 2009 of the Mayor's River Concordat, a voluntary agreement between more than 40 organisations to work together to develop river services.⁵ In his Transport Strategy, the Mayor set out specific proposals to use the Concordat to develop river services and to encourage the provision of more pier capacity particularly in central London.⁶

In light of our past work and the Mayor's pledge, we have checked on progress in improving river services. Our check has involved a site visit with Thames Clippers in December 2011 and a public meeting with representatives of the Mayor, TfL, the Port of London Authority (PLA) and Thames Clippers on 17 January 2012. Further details of our work can be found online at:

www.london.gov.uk

In summary, we have identified some improvements to river services but scope for further action. The Mayor and TfL are unlikely to realise the target of 12 million river passenger trips per year without increasing their activity in this area. The remainder of this update report outlines actions that should be taken in four specific areas as listed below. We are seeking a response from TfL by June 2012.

1. There should be a TfL owned strategic plan for the development of river services.
2. TfL should demonstrate greater commitment to river services.
3. There should be further improvements to piers.
4. There needs to be improved publicity, signage, mapping and ticketing to attract more passengers.

¹ LRS's piers are: Westminster, Festival, Embankment, Millbank, Blackfriars, Bankside, Tower and Greenwich

² Mayor's report, *By the River*, April 2009, p2

³ Agenda item 7, TfL Surface Transport Panel meeting, 3 March 2010, p4

⁴ The Mayor's Ambassador for River Transport reported 6 million trips per year at the Transport Committee meeting on 17 January 2012

⁵ Further details are online at: <http://www.london.gov.uk/who-runs-london/mayor/publications/transport-and-streets/river-transport>

⁶ Mayor's Transport Strategy, May 2010, pp.162-167

1. There should be a TfL owned strategic plan for the development of river services

The absence of a strategic plan for developing river services has resulted in patchy improvements. There remain gaps in the integration of river services with other public transport such as the cycle hire scheme and bus network. For example, Thames Clippers suggested that TfL could show the piers on its maps of the cycle hire docking stations⁷ and extend bus routes near Woolwich and Arsenal piers to make it easier for passengers to switch between modes.⁸ Similarly, there has been only partial recognition of river services in recent riverside redevelopments. Few new piers have been built in recent years apart from the floating pier at St George's Wharf, Vauxhall.⁹ Moreover, there are no detailed TfL plans for how river services will be expanded in future. The Mayor's Ambassador for River Transport told us "we are looking to expand wherever we can" and mentioned the proposal for Plantation Wharf pier at Battersea.¹⁰ Thames Clippers has developed various proposals for expansion including a 'park and glide' service at Rainham to relieve congestion on the A13 corridor.

The Mayor's River Concordat was expected to deliver a strategic plan for the development of river services. The Concordat was specifically developed in response to an identified need for "clear leadership, a clear strategic plan for the development of the [river services] market, and better co-ordination between the various stakeholders..."¹¹ The centrepiece of the River Concordat was the Rivers Action Plan but this is not a strategic plan. Instead, the published draft action plan comprised a brief list of eleven actions to be completed over three timescales: actions to 2010, to 2012 and post 2012. There was only one action listed for post 2012: "to build new piers in the east and west."¹²

The Mayor's River Concordat has produced some benefits but there are concerns about the lack of a strategy. The PLA told us that the Concordat had been useful at bringing together the key players to discuss river services regularly.¹³ The Mayor's Ambassador for River Transport made a similar point suggesting that the Concordat had not only brought together the key statutory bodies but also relevant private developers and riverside boroughs "who are now working [together] much more closely."¹⁴ Thames Clippers reported that the Concordat had generated some great ideas but not much of its work had come to fruition. Sean Collins, Managing Director of Thames Clippers, expressed concern that there was no strategic plan to guide improvements.¹⁵ TfL told us that it does "not have a strategic 10-year plan for the river."¹⁶

A strategic plan would provide the basis for a more even, coherent development of river services. The plan could detail all the current demands on the river, such as for regular passenger transport, tourist services, movement of freight and residential use such as houseboats, and how all these different demands will be managed concurrently. It could set out in detail how river

⁷ Transcript of Transport Committee meeting on 17 January 2012, p5

⁸ Transcript of Transport Committee meeting on 17 January 2012, p17

⁹ BBC web site, New floating pier at Vauxhall, 15 September 2011

¹⁰ Transcript of Transport Committee meeting on 17 January 2012, p 4 and 5

¹¹ River Concordat, April 2009, p1

¹² River Concordat, April 2009, p3

¹³ Transcript of Transport Committee meeting on 17 January 2012, p3

¹⁴ Transcript of Transport Committee meeting on 17 January 2012, p4

¹⁵ Transcript of Transport Committee meeting on 17 January 2012, p5

¹⁶ Transcript of Transport Committee meeting on 17 January 2012, p4

passenger services will be fully integrated with the wider transport network and expanded in the longer-term. Thames Clippers has suggested that TfL has a critical role to play in such expansion by providing a strategic lead.¹⁷ However, TfL has reported that expanding the services is simply a matter for commercial operators who have to judge levels of demand.¹⁸

A strategic plan for developing river services would be informed by credible passenger information and modelling of potential passenger demand. During our work, we have received different figures for annual river passenger numbers. For example, TfL reported around 2.6 million river bus passengers in 2010/11¹⁹ whereas Thames Clippers reported it had around three million passengers.²⁰ The Mayor's Ambassador for River Transport reported that there were in total about six million river passenger journeys per year²¹ but this includes more than two million passengers on the Woolwich ferry which is not a multi-stop transport service but a river crossing. Thames Clippers told us that it had recently invested in a new passenger counting system which will be rolled out to all river boat operators shortly. It argued that TfL should use the information from this new system in modelling potential future demand. Thames Clippers drew a parallel with TfL's bus strategic planning and modelling work suggesting that if TfL could do similar modelling work for river services it could help develop detailed plans for expansion.²²

The Mayor's River Concordat has brought together the many different organisations involved in river services. This has resulted in some closer working but it has not as yet delivered a strategic plan for the development of river services. The absence of such a plan has resulted in patchy progress in improving river services. The development of a strategic plan could help ensure: river services are fully integrated with other forms of public transport; the greater recognition of river services in all riverside redevelopments; and the formation of detailed proposals for service expansion. Any strategic plan would need to be developed on the basis of credible information on passenger demand and would draw on planning resource within TfL to model demand and potential for future expansion.

We recommend that TfL reports back by June 2012 on its progress in developing a strategic plan for the expansion of river services over the next ten years. This strategic plan should set out how all the different uses of the river will be managed and, within this context, how river services will be fully integrated with other public transport and expanded in future. The plan should be based on detailed information about passenger demand developed by TfL.

2. TfL should demonstrate greater commitment to river services

How TfL sees its role in relation to river transport has long been an issue of contention. In 2006 we raised questions about TfL's approach, arguing that a wholesale change of attitude was

¹⁷ Site visit with Thames Clippers on 12 December 2011

¹⁸ Transcript of Transport Committee meeting on 17 January 2012, p14

¹⁹ TfL's letter to Transport Committee, 2 February 2012

²⁰ Site visit with Thames Clippers on 12 December 2011

²¹ Transcript of the Transport Committee meeting on 17 January 2012, p1

²² Site visit with Thames Clippers on 12 December 2011

needed if the river was to be fully utilised for public transport.²³ In January 2012, TfL likened the river to a medium-sized suburban bus route which was never going to make a major contribution to the transport network. By contrast, Thames Clippers has argued that the unrealised potential could provide for more than 11 million river passenger trips per year or the equivalent of the Hammersmith & City line.²⁴

TfL's approach to river services seems poor when compared to its approach to the cycle hire scheme. In many ways the cycle hire scheme is similar to river services: it has a limited number of users (around 25,000 per day²⁵) who are often commuters; it has made little contribution to modal shift to date; and, it is operated by a private sector provider. Yet TfL has provided considerable financial, strategic and marketing support for the cycle hire scheme including spending £79 million on its set-up.²⁶

Similarly, TfL has shown considerable commitment to the development of the cable car between Greenwich Peninsula and the Royal Docks. TfL has provided up-front funding of around £3 million for the cable car, which is expected to carry one million passengers in its first year, yet it remains uncertain that this money will be recouped.²⁷ By contrast, TfL's direct financial support for river services largely comprises a subsidy of around £400,000 per year to Thames Clippers for certain services operated in peak hours²⁸, most of which is swallowed up by TfL fees for pier usage.²⁹ TfL is also now providing a subsidy of £6,000 per four week period to Complete Pleasure Boats as part of the temporary, six month, arrangement to operate the Putney to Blackfriars service.³⁰

The popularity of the cycle hire scheme shows that TfL's support can make a huge difference. If TfL commits to a particular transport service, it can help ensure this service becomes an integral feature of the transport network. This point was emphasised by the Mayor's Ambassador for River Transport. He told us that TfL's "active enthusiasm and support" for river services was needed because it is "a very big player in all matters transport". If TfL "holds back and drags its feet", other organisations may also hold back in taking action to improve and expand river services.³¹

The TfL Board could do more to ensure there is greater TfL commitment to river services. The Mayor's Ambassador for River Transport suggested there are TfL Board Members who are very enthusiastic but not all are keen.³² The Deputy Mayor for Transport, as Chair of the River Concordat, leads on river transport but her remit is wide and includes many large and complex services such as the Tube. There may, therefore, be merit in ensuring another TfL Board member is dedicated to river services in the same way that some existing Board Members represent services such as taxi drivers and the private hire car trade. Thames Clippers has argued a specific river services representative on the TfL Board could help to champion these services.³³

²³ Transport Committee's report, *London's Forgotten Highway*, October 2006

²⁴ Site visit with Thames Clippers on 12 December 2011

²⁵ TfL letter to Transport Committee following 11 October 2011 meeting, 4 November 2011

²⁶ Further details in Transport Committee's report, *Pedal Power*, November 2010 (<http://www.london.gov.uk/publication/pedal-power>)

²⁷ Budget & Performance Committee's report, *Whose brand is it anyway?*, February 2012

²⁸ Mayor's answer to MQT 3909/2010, Caroline Pidgeon AM, 15 December 2010

²⁹ Site visit with Thames Clippers on 12 December 2011

³⁰ TfL's letter to Transport Committee, 2 February 2012

³¹ Transcript of Transport Committee meeting on 17 January 2012, p7

³² Transcript of Transport Committee meeting on 17 January 2012, p7

³³ Site visit with Thames Clippers on 12 December 2011

TfL’s approach to river services may be holding back their development. Moreover, it contrasts poorly to TfL’s active support for the cycle hire scheme – in many ways a similar service which is now a popular feature of the transport network. At present, river services, like the cycle hire scheme, only comprise a small part of the transport network but they too have potential for expansion. In addition, river services, like the cycle hire scheme and the cable car, are a form of transport that the Mayor has trumpeted as a priority. TfL should, therefore, be committing wholeheartedly to their expansion. The extent to which river services develop depends greatly on TfL. The TfL Board can help to ensure TfL delivers on this mayoral priority.

We recommend that the Mayor appoints a specific representative of river services to the TfL Board to champion improvements to river services and oversee the delivery of a strategic plan for their expansion.

3. There should be further improvements to piers

Improving the piers remains central to the development of river services. In 2006, we found the range of ownership of piers limited the scope for expansion which, in turn, limited the provision of more services. There remain many different organisations managing the piers. For example, the 15 piers currently used by Thames Clippers have ten different owners.³⁴ In 2009, the London Development Agency (LDA) published a detailed Pier Plan with proposals for improvements to piers over the next twenty five years. The Mayor has said opportunities for developing piers will be explored with private developers and pier owners in line with this Pier Plan and the availability of funding.³⁵

There have been some improvements to piers in recent years but many remain poor. Alongside the new pier built at Vauxhall, improvements have been or are being made to: Tower Pier, London Eye Pier, Embankment Pier and Greenwich Pier. Thames Clippers has welcomed these improvements but highlighted that they are largely confined to a “very few select piers in the central zone.” It argues that the piers in their entirety are a mess and represent the biggest problem for river services; there needs to be improvements to many more piers.³⁶ The Port of London Authority agreed. It told us of the need for greater maintenance at many of the smaller piers which can be a real challenge for their operators because revenues are small.³⁷ When we explored this issue before, we recommended the creation of a central fund to pool pier owners’ contributions for pier improvements and a board of pier owners to co-ordinate the works. Thames Clippers has made similar suggestions, arguing for some form of centralised pier management.³⁸

Improving piers owned by others might be difficult but TfL could act now to improve Westminster Pier. At present, TfL operates this pier for use only by river tour services even

³⁴ Transcript of Transport Committee meeting on 17 January 2012, p6

³⁵ Mayor’s report, *By the River*, April 2009

³⁶ Transcript of Transport Committee meeting on 17 January 2012, p6

³⁷ Transcript of Transport Committee meeting on 17 January 2012, p8

³⁸ Site visit with Thames Clippers on 12 December 2011

though it is located in the heart of a busy employment area close to a major Tube station. If TfL extended the use of Westminster pier to river bus services, it could allow many more Londoners to use the Thames for regular journeys. TfL has acknowledged that Westminster Pier is “a physical constraint on the river service network” which it could address. Leon Daniels, Managing Director of Surface Transport at TfL, told us that he “fully accepted that there are such pinch points which, if unlocked, might make a difference to expanding river services.”³⁹

There have been some improvements to piers in recent years. However, these improvements have largely been confined to a few TfL operated piers in the central zone. It is important that many more piers are now developed to provide the necessary infrastructure for expansion of river services. In 2009 the LDA published a detailed pier plan which the Mayor and TfL should be progressing. They should be putting in place mechanisms by which all the different pier owners can come together to fund and deliver improvements. At the same time, TfL should be actively seeking to improve more piers under its control including opening up Westminster Pier for use by river bus services.

We recommend that TfL reports back by June 2012 on the next steps for improving piers including the scope for: creating a fund to pool pier owners’ contributions for improvements and a board of pier owners to coordinate the works; and opening up Westminster pier for use by river bus services.

4. There needs to be improved publicity, signage, mapping and ticketing to attract more passengers

Since 2006 there have been some developments to encourage more use of river services. Over 2009-10, TfL: funded a significant marketing campaign for river services; installed new signage at some piers; published new maps for river services; revamped the river service information on its website; and extended Oyster Pay As You Go to river bus services.⁴⁰ Leon Daniels described this work as exceptional. He told us “clearly there is more work that can be done...but frankly I think it is harsh to suggest that the river continues to be a huge secret.”⁴¹

We agree with TfL’s assessment that more could be done to increase river passengers. There is, for example, scope to develop pier signage. Cynthia Grant, a transport consultant, has highlighted the poor signposting for piers at major interchanges like Embankment and Blackfriars. She has also suggested the new banners at TfL’s piers might be too small for people to notice.⁴² There is also scope to develop ticketing. Thames Clippers has reported on the potential for the river bus fares to be structured on a zone basis thereby making the services more attractive to commuters.⁴³

³⁹ Transcript of Transport Committee meeting on 17 January 2012, p15

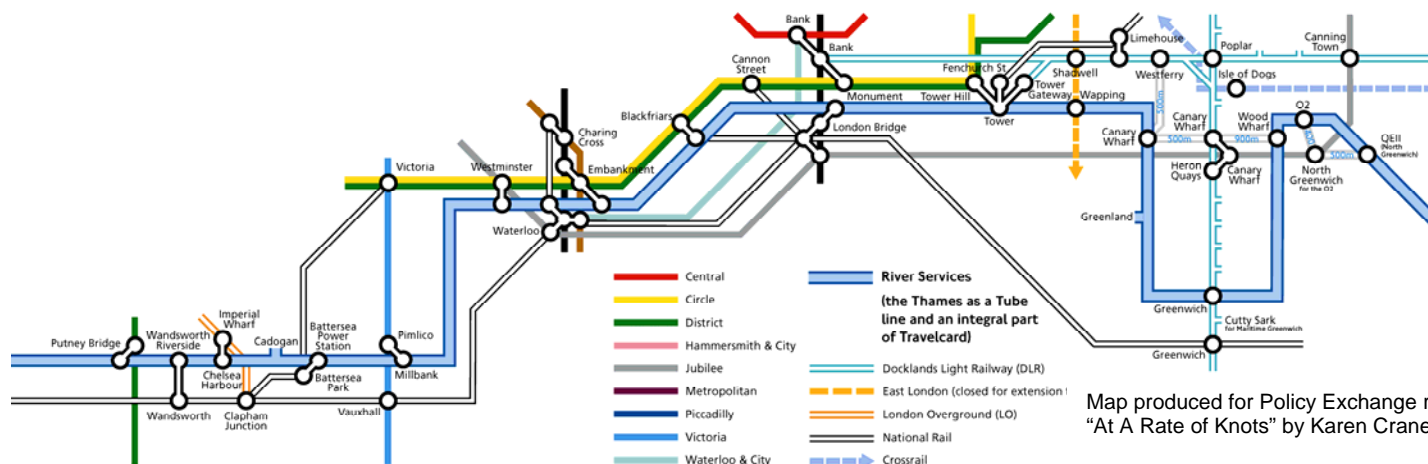
⁴⁰ Mayor’s response to Val Shawcross AM’s MQT 0291/2011, 26 January 2011

⁴¹ Transcript of Transport Committee meeting on 17 January 2012, p11

⁴² Presentation at Centre for London’s seminar, *The Thames as a Transport Corridor*, 17 November 2011

⁴³ Transcript of Transport Committee meeting on 17 January 2012, p11

Thames Clippers has suggested that TfL could improve the depiction of river services on the Tube map. At present the standard Tube map shows a boat symbol next to a station to denote a nearby pier but these boat symbols are not shown over the river making it difficult to see how the Tube network and river services link together. Thames Clippers argues that the river services should instead be shown as a transport line, another “London Underground” line, as per the image below. Revised Tube maps showing the river as an integrated transport line could be displayed at major interchanges and piers to encourage more Londoners to see river services as an integral part of the transport network that can be easily used to make journeys.



Map produced for Policy Exchange report “At A Rate of Knots” by Karen Crane

This year represents a significant opportunity to attract more people to river services. For the 2012 Games there will be improvements to Tower and Greenwich Piers and extra services to encourage spectators to use this form of transport. Thames Clippers has suggested that the 2012 Games should provide an opportunity to showcase river services and entice more people to think about and use the river in future.⁴⁴ Prior to the 2012 Games, the Thames Diamond Jubilee Pageant – a flotilla of over 1000 ships – on 3 June will provide another opportunity to showcase the river to a wider audience.

TfL has described its recent work to encourage more use of river services as exceptional. Whilst there have been developments in publicity, signage, mapping and ticketing for river services, TfL should not be complacent. There is plenty of scope for more work in all these areas to encourage greater awareness and thus demand for river services. In 2012 the Olympic and Paralympics Games and the Thames Diamond Jubilee Pageant offer great opportunities to promote river services to many more people.

⁴⁴ Transcript of Transport Committee meeting on 17 January 2012, p15

We recommend that TfL reports back by June 2012 on the steps that will be taken to capitalise on the focus on the river during the 2012 Games and beyond including its plans for: more marketing of river services; improving signage at piers; developing its Tube maps to show the river as another “London Underground” line; and working with boat operators such as Thames Clippers to develop more integrated ticketing for river services.

Conclusion

Since our report in 2006 river services have developed but only partly. There has been growth in passenger numbers alongside some improvements to piers, signage, marketing, mapping and ticketing. However, river services are poorly integrated with other forms of public transport, such as the cycle hire scheme, and there is limited recognition of river services in riverside redevelopments. The Mayor’s River Concordat has brought together relevant organisations but it has not delivered a strategic plan covering all the uses of the river and how passenger services will be more fully integrated with other transport services and expanded in future. TfL’s commitment to river transport remains, at best, half-hearted. There is a vital need to improve many more piers. There is considerable scope for further actions to attract many more people to river services.

Without TfL support for planned expansion as part of a long-term strategic plan, we consider that the Mayor’s ambitions for river services in London will be difficult to achieve. The current TfL position of leaving service expansion to commercial operators has not resulted in the full potential of river services being met. The partial progress to date means the river services in London continue to lag behind river services found in other cities. These include cities such as Paris, Amsterdam, Hamburg, Chicago, and Brisbane.⁴⁵ However, the Mayor has aspirations to match or even exceed other cities’ river services; he has committed to more than doubling the current number of river passenger trips per year to 12 million. He and TfL now need to take further action if this target is to be met.

⁴⁵As cited by Cythnia Grant at her presentation at the Centre for London’s seminar, *The Thames as a Transport Corridor*, 17 November 2011

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Steve O'Connell, Conservative
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Committee contacts

Laura Warren, Scrutiny Manager
laura.warren@london.gov.uk; 020 7983 6545

Dana Rothenberg, Communications Officer
dana.rothenberg@london.gov.uk; 020 7983 4603

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