

The great Garden Bridge debate

With the Garden Bridge now back on the agenda, [Finn Judge](#) and [Nathalie Taylor](#) examine the debate

Tuesday 10 November 2015



Image. Thomas Heatherwick

The Political Implications

The Garden Bridge, an idea conceived by actress Joanna Lumley in 1998, won the support of London Mayor Boris Johnson and Chancellor George Osborne two years ago. To great political fanfare, both pledged separate £30 million cash injections to the project. Transport for London (TfL) offered support and Johnson signed Londoners up for an annual £3.5m for its maintenance.

However, the rapidly escalating public cost meant that political opposition against the 366m-long proposition began to rally. Sadiq Khan, Labour's candidate for Mayor of London, previously declared he'd scrap the project if elected, claiming it "no longer represents value for money". This came in spite of a ComRes poll indicating that 78 per cent of Londoners would support the construction.

The bridge's trust describes the Garden Bridge as "a breathtaking new public garden". Many supporters would argue that the Garden Bridge would provide a solution for London's apparent lack of green space. Indeed, this issue was touched upon in former Labour mayoral candidate Dame Tessa Jowell's campaign. Talks between Khan, Lambeth Council and the Garden Bridge Trust resumed after a deal was struck on for contributions from Transport for London. TfL's contributions have been converted into a loan amid the council's concerns of insufficient private investment.

This brings public funding for the project down to £60m, with the £30 million loan from TfL, which has

gone some way towards winning over its more fiscally prudent critics.

The Business Case

The proposed 'Garden Bridge' that is set to span the Thames has courted controversy since the plans were introduced last year. Those in favour of the Bridge have promised economic benefits from tourism. Others say that a tree-lined garden over the Thames will be great for ordinary Londoners to enjoy.

However, the proposed dream, has turned into a bitter dispute over funding. The total cost of this architectural marvel is £125 million. Donations are providing £85 million, but £60 million will come from Transport for London (TfL) in form of a 50 year loan and Treasury grant. The private sector is set to contribute a mere £40 million.

While initially assumed to be a privately funded initiative, the taxpayer will now have to support a significant proportion of the scheme. This has raised issues of value for money, especially as nine bridges already span the area of the Thames between Westminster and London Bridge.

Although TfL will recover its £30 million investment eventually, groups such as the Taxpayers Alliance argue that as £30 million comes from a Treasury grant, the scheme relies too heavily on state funding. Indeed, as the Bridge will not be free to access, some question whether public money should be used at all.

Ultimately, what do we really want – beauty or value for money. With the government committed to austerity, the lack of necessity for this project makes it a dubious financial endeavour.



4 comments

chris medland

10 Nov '15 at 12:17 pm

to clarify costs the above are a bit inaccurate – total cost is £175,000,000. Also £3,500,000/annum running costs. Taxpayer contribution is £60,000,000 with £20,000,000 of this being a 50 year loan. Taxpayers are also underwriting the £3,500,000/year running cost. However the bridge will be privately owned with no public right of way. The development will also be closed at night and on occasions for private events.

The bigger questions are – is a bridge needed here at all? If a bridge is needed what is the best bridge solution for the site? A pedestrian and cycle bridge could be built here by TfL for £60m and no private input would be required and there would be minimal running costs and there would be a public right of way and a bridge that is open 24/7 and would not block views down the river as it would be more streamline in its design and construction. So another question is: Is 2000sqm of foliage and small trees worth the additional £120,000,000 and if so why? The other cost to the public is less easy to evaluate – i.e. it is the privatisation of public space and essentially the privatisation of prime views of London.

Is this a 'green' project? Well, starting from first principles, it was clearly not conceived as a project to get best ecological or sustainable value – as for £175,000,000 you can literally secure over a million acres of virgin rainforest, that's 100's of millions of trees. Equally for the same amount you could make London a national park, create dozens of new land based parks and add significantly more ecological value.

Does the bridge do harm? Well, thousands of tonnes of concrete being poured into what is a protected riverbed habitat in order to support 200 trees or so, whilst the development requires the removal of 30 mature existing trees. the balance in gain compared to harm seems clear. The development is not environmentally friendly, and in pure carbon payback terms I suspect we are talking 1000's of years

 Report

Fran Edwards

10 Nov '15 at 4:07 pm

The figures quoted in this piece are completely wrong. The total projected cost of the project is £175m. £145m has been raised so far including £85m so far in private funding. The percentage of public funding the project will receive is 23% and 77% will be privately funded. Please check your facts.

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Michael Ball

13 Nov '15 at 11:01 pm

Fran please check your facts:

- (1) £20m so far spent, 100% public funding
- (2) maintenance and running costs £3.5m NPV p.a., appx £150m capitalised, underwritten by Mayor of London, and therefore undoubtedly paid out by TfL (what private venture will foot a bill which the state promises to pay anyway?) 100% from public funding
- (3) TfL/ Treasury providing £60m, although £20m to be "treated as a loan" – but since the Trust have no collateral and the running costs including financing costs are underwritten, TfL will effectively pay off its own loan – therefore capital public funding remains £60m
- (4) Private pledges claimed of £80m but no evidence produced, and the names provided simply don't give out this kind of money
- (5) Total lifetime cost of project = £175m capital + £150m revenue = £325m, of which £210m from public funding = 65%, private funding 35% (and that is assuming they secure a further £35m)
- (6) Business case argues that the regeneration benefits of 3.5m additional tourists will be... an uplift of land values north and south of the bridge by an additional 5%!! Well, hoorah, they are only rising 10% p.a. already, which is a PROBLEM in London, not a benefit.
- (7) Why don't London First members pay for the whole thing and be done with it? Cos they all know there is such a thing as a free lunch!

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Will Jennings

10 Nov '15 at 4:58 pm

As pointed out there are a number of inaccuracies here.

But also worth mentioning that London is already one of the greenest cities in Europe. This project actually damages that by removing an existing loved, public greenspace to build a corporate entertainment & queue structure while having no grass on the bridge itself. That it's made out of 1000s of tonnes of concrete is why the Green Party and many environmental organisations are deeply against it.

You touch on some politicians connections, but don't go deep enough. For instance, you mention Tessa Jowell but fail to mention she never engaged with the public in discussions regarding the bridge, then it was discovered that the chair of the GBT donated £10k to her campaign fund to be mayor. Suspicious?

There is no need for a crossing at this point, while TfL know that the miles and miles east of Tower Bridge are calling out for crossings. This bridge will shave an incredible 30 seconds of somebody's walk from Waterloo to Fleet Street. And that is not counting for any queue or security they have to get through to use the crossing. Nonsense, for £60m+ of public money.

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