

Councillor Stephen Cowan

Leader of the London Borough of Hammersmith & Fulham
Hammersmith Town Hall, London W6 9JU



10 September 2020

Dear neighbour

Hammersmith Bridge

On 13 August Hammersmith Bridge was closed to pedestrians and river traffic because in the preceding hours new sensors positioned throughout the bridge alerted engineers to a rapid and sudden increase in the size of dangerous micro-fractures in the cast iron pedestals that hold the 19th century suspension structure in place.

The micro-fractures were first discovered last year using the latest technology. Cast iron is brittle and can shatter. The micro-fractures therefore posed a serious risk that the bridge could suddenly, and with little warning, collapse into the Thames.

Up until 10 April 2019, Hammersmith Bridge carried 22,000 motor vehicles a day. Up until 13 August 2020, hundreds of boats travelled underneath it and 16,000 pedestrians and cyclists travelled across it each day.

I am very sorry about the disruption this is causing. Working with Transport for London, Richmond Council, and the Port of London Authority, we are considering several options for a ferry service. There are practical challenges to overcome with this including the low tides and lack of suitable piers infrastructure but if we can do this we will. We have also asked TfL to put on extra bus routes.

Specialist engineers have put together 'shovel ready' plans to fix the 133-year-old bridge. It will cost £46million to stabilise it, which will make it safe for pedestrians, cyclists and river traffic. That work can be completed within nine months. It will cost up to £163million to fully restore the bridge so it can be reopened to buses and motor vehicles – a similar amount to building a new bridge. A temporary bridge suitable for pedestrians and cyclists would cost £27.3million, take nine months to build but wouldn't solve the problems for river traffic. It costs £2.7million a year simply to stop additional and dangerous deterioration.

While we're looking at all possible sources of finance – such as a toll – there are challenges with each option. I've written to the Prime Minister seeking the government's urgent constructive engagement and financial support. In response, on 9 September the government announced a Taskforce to review the engineers' plans - which I'll take part in. I welcome any indication that the government will now work with us on this but have stressed to ministers the need for immediate government action.

How did this happen?

The engineers discovered that the microfractures are a consequence of decades of unchecked corrosion that is riddled throughout the suspension structure. These very serious problems only began to be discovered from 2015 onwards because in 2014, we commissioned a Comprehensive Structural Integrity Review – the first such review in decades. Prior to that, only £250,000 had been spent touching up the decking and other minor works.

We've employed some of the best engineers in the world (who've worked on the Golden Gate Bridge in California and oil rigs in the North Sea) and tasked them with fully diagnosing all the problems with Hammersmith Bridge and developing a plan to fully restore it. But as they peeled back different parts of this unique structure, they discovered new, complex and often dangerous failures which brought new challenges and pushed up restoration costs.

Funding the 'shovel ready' plans to fix Hammersmith Bridge

The government has asked local authorities for big 'shovel ready' schemes that will kick-start our economy during the recession. My letters to the Prime Minister detail how the restoration of Hammersmith Bridge is such a scheme.

It cannot be right that the residents and businesses of Hammersmith & Fulham should be asked to bear all the multi-million pounds costs to repair such an important part of London and South East England's road and public transport infrastructure – especially so while we're deploying huge resources protecting our residents during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite all its failings, Hammersmith Bridge is a beautiful Victorian structure and a unique part of Britain's pioneer engineering heritage. What a terrible metaphor it would be for our country if we allowed this achievement from a golden era of British industrial history to simply crumble away in the middle of the Thames, at the heart of our capital city.

I hope this letter explains what has happened and what is being done to rise to these challenges. There has been quite a lot of misleading nonsense circulating (such as it's possible to build a temporary road bridge for motor vehicles right next to Hammersmith Bridge for just £7million) which has proven unhelpful.

Hammersmith Bridge has been a priority and a worry ever since I became the Council Leader in 2014. I'm determined that, despite the huge problems, we properly fix it and do so as quickly as possible. So, I've instructed the engineers to carry on the restoration works on the basis that we will get the necessary funding.

I will write again to update you on our progress.

With best wishes

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads 'Steve'. The signature is stylized with a large, sweeping 'S' and a cursive 'teve'.

Cllr Stephen Cowan

Leader of the London Borough of Hammersmith & Fulham