

Councillor Stephen Cowan

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



28 October 2020

Baroness Vere of Norbiton Parliamentary
Under Secretary of State
The Department for Transport
Great Minster House
33 Horseferry Road
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Dear Charlotte

Thank you for your letter which was emailed last night, and which has provided more detail to the new position you first set out in your introduction to the last Taskforce meeting on Thursday 15 October. There are a number of points you've made which are surprising and a concern given the length of time the Taskforce has been meeting.

At that meeting two weeks ago you asked why the Taskforce rather than the London Borough of Hammersmith & Fulham was working through the many issues with Hammersmith Bridge.

I explained then that I, along with Cllr Gareth Roberts, Leader of the London Borough of Richmond upon Thames, had written to the Prime Minister on 24 August urging the government to fund our detailed project plans in light of the closure of the bridge and the fact that Transport for London was unable to fund the scheme going forward.

As you know, following that letter to the PM, on Wednesday 9 September the Secretary of State for Transport announced that he was setting up a taskforce to fix Hammersmith Bridge. He told the BBC's Tom Edwards the government would "effectively take over this project."

When you called me at 11am on 9 September, I was pleased to hear that, while you couldn't agree a two-week timeframe for the work of the Taskforce, your officials had advised you that was possible and likely. I understood it to be clear from the Secretary of State's announcement of the same day that funding would be given. That conversation took place seven weeks ago, so I do not understand why you now ask which body is responsible for coming up with solutions.

Since then, we have worked tirelessly and in good faith to deliver the solution for the residents of south west London and the wider road and river network. Engineers from Hammersmith & Fulham and TfL, alongside officers and colleagues from the London Borough of Richmond upon Thames and the Port of London Authority, have had numerous meetings and conversations with DfT-appointed engineers and the Taskforce's project manager Dana Skelley.

Following the extensive review of the detailed planned programme our engineers have worked up with TfL, there has been general consensus that the diagnosis

and proposed remedy was appropriate. In fact, at our last Taskforce meeting, Dana said our plans demonstrated a “strong and sound business case” and “the works just need to be unlocked”. We are extremely grateful for Dana’s input which has confirmed our view that the project plans in place are appropriate, and her work reviewing costings to take into account the effect of COVID-19 on inflation has also been encouraging.

I am pleased to see in your letter that you confirm for the first time that bridge maintenance “has historically been funded by TfL who prioritised their funding to local boroughs for bridgeworks via Local Implementation Plan funding” and your recognition that “this is no longer available”. You also note that the impact of the bridge closure stretches across south west London.

However, I feel I must take issue with comments made by you - in your letter and on your Twitter feed - that clearly state we have not provided the Taskforce with detailed project plans. Particularly striking are comments made to resident group leaders in Barnes that somehow Hammersmith & Fulham “are refusing to hand over bridge plans to government” - comments which are understood to have been made by sources close to you.

I cannot understand how that false claim sits with the constructive and positive comments made by the Project Manager, who is widely held to be an expert in the field, and whom you appointed to the Taskforce to review our detailed plans.

Turning to your specific comments on a “viable project plan”, I would like to point out:

- **Scope:** Our detailed plans set out clearly the necessary steps to reopen the bridge within nine months to pedestrians, cyclists and river traffic. Within four years, subject to the necessary funding, the bridge would be reopened to cars and buses.
- **Phasing for repairs:** Our plans, which have been extensively reviewed by your Taskforce, explicitly set out the phases of the project and the funding needed for each period: £46m for the stabilisation works to allow pedestrians, cyclists and river traffic, rising to £141m for the longer-term plans to reopen the bridge to cars and buses.
- **Temporary measures:** Any decision on temporary measures should, as you say, be viewed in the context of the timeframe for the main bridge works - hence our repeated requests for funding for our detailed plans. It is not for a council to provide a ferry service or a temporary bridge and, while we are supportive and sympathetic to these measures being taken, we simply do not have the funds for pay for such things well outside of the council’s remit.
- **Ferries:** You told the Taskforce meeting on 8 October that you would get the £100,000 costs for the ferry procurement costs sorted “within 24 hours”. There was no suggestion at that time that a contribution would be asked from the local authorities – quite the opposite. You are well aware of our position that, with current safety and monitoring costs running at

£2.7m for this year, we are not able to contribute further. Nor, given the £19m shortfall in promised COVID-19 funding from government this year and the revenue cuts to annual budgets over the last ten years from £184m to £121m, would it be appropriate for us to ask the people of Hammersmith & Fulham to pay towards new transport infrastructure.

- **Alternatives for reengineering and replacement:** I am unclear what alternatives you are referring to here. But you are aware that plans for a temporary road bridge were dismissed by TfL and discussions about taking down and replacing the current 133-year-old Grade 2* listed bridge offer no solution to the current problem.
- **Project management:** I am unclear why you'd ask us to consider working with TfL on the project management of works because it is evident, including from the three prior bids for phase funding over the last 10 months (December 2019 and February and June 2020), that we have been working extremely closely with TfL throughout and continue to do so benefiting from their in-house transport expertise, procurement frameworks, and capabilities.
- **Short term reopening:** There is currently no case that has been made to review the Continued Case for Safe Operation. The bridge remains, according to the CCSO, in "immediate danger" of collapse. The Taskforce must heed that expert advice and cannot risk public safety. The best way to secure a short-term reopening of the bridge is to proceed with the Phase One stabilisation works. If this had been agreed - through one of the three funding bids, following my letters to the Prime Minister, or following the setting up of the Taskforce - the bridge could have been reopened by June next year. As things are currently transpiring, even with agreed funding tomorrow, this date has now slipped to September 2021.

At no point have you or any of your officials expressed dissatisfaction with our contributions on the above. We will continue to fully engage on these topics and will continue to share all the engineers' work and proposals.

For any avoidance of doubt, I have asked the TfL/LBHF team to re-submit the detailed plans for the bridge project to your office which I hope will allow us to procure the next stage of the project works.

Returning to the funding issue, and as I pointed out at our last meeting, London councils have mostly not funded the stabilisation and strengthening works on their bridges as that can only be provided by a transport authority, whether TfL (if fully funded) or your own DfT.

Hammersmith Bridge is a national strategic transport asset situated in the heart of our capital city which is also the economic powerhouse of the UK economy. It links one local authority to another which is not comparable to the bridges you mentioned in Lowestoft, Suffolk or Great Yarmouth, Norfolk at our last meeting, or to the A595 works in Grizebeck, Cumbria which you tweeted about last night. All three of those are within the boundaries of their county councils and are new works that will support the economies in those counties.

Furthermore, last Wednesday the Prime Minister told Parliament that Hammersmith Bridge would be re-opening. This has followed a similar pattern of public messaging, that has included the Secretary of State for Transport, which has sought to give the public the impression the government has "provided the money... to repair the bridge". As you know, the Taskforce hasn't been allowed to discuss funding in any detail and only touched upon the funding issue three weeks ago when we began to discuss a press statement that claimed, "significant progress".

It is unfortunate that you chose to send such a letter to me 24 hours before the public meeting, when you could have done so at any time since 9 September.

I know you agree with me on the need to fully restore Hammersmith Bridge and for the Taskforce to quickly find short term solutions to mitigate the problems faced by people needing to cross it. I can only assume that your recent position and the lack of progress is a consequence of the party political shenanigans that I touched upon in my letter to you of 15 September and which we both agreed had the potential to damage this project when we spoke on the phone on 9 September.

Finally, given the degree of comment yesterday on social media, the meeting with residents tonight and in the interests of transparency and understanding of the challenges, I trust you'll agree it appropriate to release both your letter and my response to the public.

I look forward to discussing these issues again with you at the next Taskforce.

With kind regards



Cllr Stephen Cowan

Leader of the London Borough of Hammersmith & Fulham