



Department for Transport

From the Permanent Secretary

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28 October 2020

Meg Hillier MP

Chair

Public Account's Committee

Dear Chair,

Update on Hammersmith Bridge following the Public Account's Committee hearing on 15 October 2020

In my appearance before your Committee on 15 October 2020, I stated in response to a question from Sarah Olney MP that the Government had agreed to provide funding support for Hammersmith Bridge.

I am sorry to say that this was incorrect, and was based on a misunderstanding on my part of the current agreed position on funding. Discussions on funding for the Bridge are currently continuing between the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham, London Borough of Richmond Upon Thames, Transport for London, and the Department and HMT. These discussions are however currently unresolved, and no commitment to future funding has been made by the Government at this stage.

I therefore wanted to write to correct the position, set out where we currently stand on a strategy for repairs to the Bridge, and provide some further information requested by the Committee.

As the Committee will be aware, the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham (LBHF) is responsible for the maintenance of Hammersmith Bridge. The condition of the Bridge has been deteriorating over a period of some years and this culminated in the closure of the Bridge to all users in August 2020.

The Hammersmith Bridge taskforce, led by Baroness Vere, was established by the Secretary of State for Transport in September 2020 in response to this. The taskforce brings together leaders from LBHF, Transport for London, the Department, the London Borough of Richmond upon Thames and the Port of London Authority. The decision by the Secretary of State to establish the taskforce was a response to the lack of a clear strategy or plan for re-opening the Bridge, and is intended to ensure that there is clear leadership and co-ordination of future action.

The taskforce is charged with urgently pulling together all necessary information, including technical and operational information and costs, to reach a decision on the most appropriate way to safely re-open Hammersmith Bridge and the River Thames to full use, and provide appropriate temporary measures during the works.

The Department has appointed a project director, Dana Skelley OBE, to oversee this urgent work. The taskforce is also drawing on the fracture mechanics and materials

expertise of Professor Norman Fleck, who is providing advice on the technical aspects of the assessment of the damage to the Bridge.

This is a complex project with several work strands including consideration of temporary crossing measures, immediate bridge mitigations, stabilisation work to enable unmonitored pedestrian traffic and long-term bridge strengthening to enable return of all vehicular traffic. The taskforce agreed earlier this month that a ferry service across the river would be the preferred transport solution to deliver a crossing for residents in the short-term and we are working together to put this in place as quickly as possible.

As noted above, the current position on funding of works is unresolved. The DfT is however working actively with HMT to identify potential solutions to the most urgent investment need which is funding for the temporary ferry and for stabilisation works to the Bridge. Looking at funding for the Bridge more widely, we would expect to identify a solution which includes appropriate contributions from the Boroughs and TfL.

I will write to the Committee with an update as soon as possible. I appreciate that this clarification will come as a disappointment in particular to Sarah Olney MP and other London members of the Committee. I apologise sincerely for having inadvertently provided incorrect information to the Committee. I can assure you however that the Secretary of State and Ministers are fully committed to working with local partners and TfL to find a practical solution for the re-opening of Hammersmith Bridge.

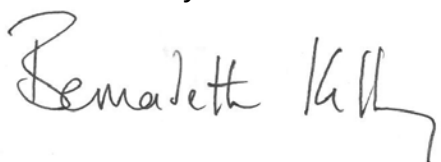
I would also like to take this opportunity to respond on two other linked points raised during the Committee session.

You asked about previous submissions and correspondence with TfL on this matter. In January 2020, the Department received a proposal from TfL requesting that £45m remaining from its £50m of National Productivity Investment Fund (allocated to TfL by the previous Chancellor to help reduce congestion in London) be reallocated to fund Bridge repairs. In February 2020 TfL also requested Large Local Majors (LLM) funding for all costs of repairing the Bridge (estimated by TfL at £115m). Baroness Vere wrote to Heidi Alexander on 16 March 2020, requesting further information to evaluate the requests for funding. The Department did not receive a reply until 27 August 2020, at which point the Bridge had been closed. The further information provided by TfL will now be considered as part of the work of the taskforce.

Finally, Gareth Bacon MP raised a broader question about responsibility for London bridges. There is no single body which has ownership, responsibility or oversight of bridges in London. Individual boroughs hold responsibility for some (such as LBHF for Hammersmith), TfL for others (including Westminster and Vauxhall bridges), Network Rail for rail bridges and the Bridge House Estates for bridges into the City of London. Hammersmith Bridge is our immediate priority. We will use our learning from this project to inform further consideration of whether longer term changes are appropriate.

I hope this is helpful.

Your sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Bernadette Kelly', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Bernadette Kelly CB
Permanent Secretary