

Running the River Thames: London, Stakeholders and the Governance of the River Thames 1960-2010

STAKEHOLDERS WORKSHOP REPORT:

CAMPAIGNING GROUPS AND CONSULTATION ON THE RIVER THAMES

Greenwich Maritime Institute, University of Greenwich: 21 November 2011

AIMS OF THE DAY

The workshop aimed to explore the practical experience of environmental stakeholder groups in seeking to influence decision-making for the River Thames and Thames region. A sample group of campaigning organisations was invited, connected to the Thames, its tributaries or the river basin.

Each session of the workshop was organised around a number of questions which were distributed in advance and discussed on the day. These were:

- Who are we all? Stakeholder characteristics.
- How do we operate? Campaigning methods.
- How successful have we been? Campaign results.
- What can be done to improve stakeholder participation? Making a greater impact.

Part One of this report briefly summarises the day's discussion. **Part Two** reflects on what the researchers gained as historians from the discussion.

STAKEHOLDER PARTICIPANTS

☞ Please click on hyperlinks for more information on these organisations.

Bill Ellson	<u>Creekside Forum</u> (est. 1997)
Leanne Sargeant	<u>Essex Wildlife Trust</u> (Essex WT, est. 1959)
Frances Bennett	<u>Friends of the River Crane Environment</u> (FORCE, est. 2003)
Rob Gray	<u>Friends of the River Crane Environment</u> (FORCE)
Brigadier Nick Thompson	
CBE FICE	<u>Group against Reservoir Development</u> (GARD, est. 1993)
Katy Andrews	<u>New Lammas Lands Defence Committee</u> (NLLDC, est. 1892; 1992)
Mike Keogh	<u>Quaggy Waterways Action Group</u> (QWAG; est. 1990)
Lady Dido Berkeley	<u>Thamesbank</u> (est. c. 2001)
Emily Shirley	<u>Thamesbank</u>
Sylvia Wicks	<u>Thamesbank</u>

Also invited but unable to attend on the day were Tamsin Phipps ([British Canoe Union, River Access Campaign](#)) and Anatole Beams ([Rowers Against Thames Sewage](#)).

PART ONE: DISCUSSION REPORT

1. Stakeholder characteristics

1.1. The six organisations represented at the workshop formed a diverse cross-section of campaigning groups connected to the Thames and its tributaries. It was clear from the first session that there are numerous, sometimes overlapping, ways of distinguishing between these groups, but these appear to be some of the chief distinctions:

- Single-issue groups (GARD); groups with a broader or more diffuse remit (Thamesbank).
- Geographically based groups (Creekside Forum; NLLDC; QWAG); those concerned with the whole river (Thamesbank).
- Groups organising collective activities to enhance the local rivers and environment (Essex WT; FORCE; QWAG); groups opposing local developments (GARD; NLLDC; Thamesbank).
- Groups with formal membership (Essex WT; FORCE; QWAG; GARD; NLLDC); those without formal membership (Creekside Forum; Thamesbank).
- Groups with large and small memberships (Essex WT; NLLDC).
- Volunteer-run organisations (most of those at the workshop); those with permanent paid staff as well as volunteers (Essex WT).
- Groups with regular access to paid consultants (Essex WT; GARD; Thamesbank); those relying primarily on expertise within their own membership (Creekside Forum; FORCE; NLLDC; QWAG).
- Groups concerned with the tidal Thames and its riverside areas (Thamesbank; Creekside Forum); groups concerned with the freshwater rivers and tributaries (FORCE; QWAG).

1.2. There are shared concerns between these groups, relating for example to river ecosystems and riverside developments, but some have a more complex set of aims than others. Distinctions between organisations are not fixed, however: an organisation may emerge in opposition to a planning development and then over time evolve into a semi-permanent group working towards a wider set of aims. Several of the groups attending the workshop were of this kind (e.g. FORCE; QWAG; Thamesbank; GARD possibly). The key difference may be one of opportunity – the chance to engage in ongoing decision-making processes.

1.3. With one exception (Essex WT), all the groups were currently managed by unpaid volunteers. Half had charitable status (Essex WT; FORCE; QWAG). Four had a formal subscription-based membership scheme (Essex WT; FORCE; GARD; QWAG). Although a large membership was seen as important for organisations running practical activities (QWAG, FORCE, Essex WT), others were happy, perhaps preferred, to remain more of a pressure group, in the confidence that they could draw on wider public support if required

(Creekside Forum; GARD; Thamesbank). It was agreed that labour time was a crucial voluntary resource and challenge, with larger membership organisations benefitting in this respect. A degree of internal autocracy was seen in some cases as necessary for effective campaigning (GARD; Thamesbank).

1.4. It was evident that all the stakeholder organisations relied on the leadership and passion of a few individuals with relevant expertise, particularly in relation to planning and environmental impacts. In some cases this expertise was the result of professional background, but in others seemingly developed through involvement in the campaigns. There were mixed views about the necessity for voluntary organisations to make use of paid experts. Some participants challenged professionals successfully, without the regular need for paid consultants (e.g. Creekside Forum). Others considered that expert consultants and legal representation had been crucial to success in public inquiries and in gaining access to influential people within relevant organisations (GARD; Thamesbank). The difference may be related in part to the degree of complexity of the issues involved. GARD, for example, had relied on water industry experts to challenge Thames Water's two-thousand page draft Water Resource Management Plan. Adequate funding was the key to this kind of expertise.

2. Campaigning Methods and Results

2.1. All the groups represented were able to identify examples of successful campaigns. For some workshop participants, though, there was a sense that campaigning organisations for the Thames were going round in circles: they met each other at consultation meetings over the years and rehearsed familiar arguments, but without real change. Other participants considered that progress was being made even if it was not always apparent. As Rob Gray (FORCE) said, it was easy to forget that 'if you weren't bashing your head against the wall, that wall would be moving forward'. Local campaigns, it was thought, could significantly influence planners' thinking even where they did not appear to, impacting on subsequent development proposals.

2.2. Groups employed a range of strategies to influence decision-makers and developers. Some relied particularly on building up productive contacts with individuals such as MPs and councillors (Essex WT); others also relied on their claim to represent the local community, or the results of research to bring about changes in policy (Creekside Forum; FORCE; GARD; Thamesbank). The importance of experience and connectedness was emphasised, though evident political affiliation was something to be avoided. It was generally agreed that making contacts with specific decision-making individuals was crucial. Yet in seeking to influence large organisations, public or private, campaigning groups found that progress could be impeded by being passed from person to person without encountering a sole responsible individual.

2.3. All workshop participants were engaged at some level with local councils, and their experience was mixed. Some had positive experiences of working with local authorities. GARD's campaign against the Upper Thames reservoir had been supported by local councils. River rehabilitation schemes had received local authority support (FORCE; QWAG), and 'partnership' was the word used in several cases to describe the relationship. Others

expressed frustration with the low priority given to community views and environmental concerns by local councils (NLLDC; Thamesbank). More generally, there were different levels of satisfaction in terms of working within 'the system'. Some put more faith than others in existing legal frameworks and partnerships, such as the current 'Parklands' projects or the 'All London Green Grid'.¹

2.4. A persistent theme was frustration with the planning system. A daunting range of problems was identified: the dominance of the housing agenda and financial considerations relating to riverside developments; the complexity of the planning system; under-resourcing of planning departments; a lack of expertise on river matters among local planners; a mismatch between planning system on paper and the system in practice; the fragmentation of the governance of the Thames, across different local authorities as well as other statutory bodies and the piecemeal nature of policy for the Thames; perceptions of riverside areas as brownfield sites, rather than sites functionally linked to the water (e.g. as 'bluefield' sites); repeat planning applications following successful objections; failures on the part of councils to implement Section 106 Agreements, addressing environmental conditions attached to planning permissions.

2.5. Stakeholder groups learnt from each other and built on each others' successes. Sometimes groups were aided by a specific legal precedent or led by a clear example: Creekside Forum acknowledged the role of Thamesbank's battle against a proposed Fulham Football Ground development (2001-02) in their struggle against a News International development at Deptford. The Thamesbank ruling had confirmed the need for an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) in major planning applications. Thamesbank itself was able to point more recently to a FORCE success, when blocking the development of a recreation area.

2.6. One theme to emerge over the day was the challenge for stakeholder groups in working with existing systems. In some cases, as a result of their efforts, stakeholders are routinely consulted, used by local authorities to provide 'services' and as a resource for regulators (e.g. QWAG and identification of local sources of pollution). Such involvement was seen as an indication of successful stakeholder intervention, and an example of how behind-the-scenes activities could be as significant as major public triumphs in achieving results. Some workshop participants, however, considered that stakeholders had taken a step backwards in some ways. The creation of a directly elected Mayor and Greater London Authority (GLA) in 2000 held out promise for greater local environmental representation for London. And stakeholders were closely involved in the formation of the '[Blue Ribbon Network](#)' policies, promoting the focus on rivers and waterways within the Mayor's 'London Plan'. But several workshop participants felt that the policies on paper had not been matched by planning decisions in practice. The GLA's river stakeholder fora were thought to have become less influential in terms of formulating strategic plans. The Thames & Waterways Stakeholders Forum of the GLA's earliest years was contrasted by some workshop participants (former members of the Forum) with the current [London Waterways Commission](#).

¹ See e.g. Parklands South Essex: <http://parklands.greengrid.co.uk/>; the recent GLA consultation on the All London Green Grid: <http://www.london.gov.uk/publication/all-london-green-grid-spg>.

3. Making a greater impact

Asked to suggest ways in which stakeholders could gain more influence, among the strategies mentioned were: a clear focus on objectives, improving expertise, and finding ways of linking with and learning from other groups (Essex WT; FORCE; GARD; QWAG). Some groups also responded by identifying an external factor: the need to change the system of Thames governance. For Thamesbank, for example, the lack of a single body with responsibility for governing rivers and managing water resources was a fundamental issue, requiring a change in the law. In addition, together with several other groups, it saw reform of the planning system as a prerequisite for improvement. The introduction of 'third party' right of appeal and a bar to repeat planning applications – aimed at wearing down opponents – were central. Under-resourcing of local government was considered of relevance. In the case of planning departments, lack of time and money in some cases contributed to a demonstrable lack of expertise and inadequate attention to development proposals, and a failure to spend funds allocated under Section 106 agreements. To increase resources, one recommendation was charging landowners and developers planning application fees which were commensurate with the profits they would make if successful (Creekside Forum).

PART TWO: SOME PRELIMINARY HISTORICAL REFLECTIONS

The day aimed to examine the practical experience of campaigning groups in the Thames region. A discussion in the final session turned the tables and asked:

- What had we learned, as academics?
- Could we help to reach a measure of agreement as to the next steps for improved stakeholder participation on the Thames?

This section reflects on what we have learned from the workshop. As historians, it is our role to identify how things have changed over time – changing structures of governance, modes of participation and relationships between different interest groups – and to suggest reasons *why* they have changed. This academic aim does not further the interests of current stakeholders in any immediate ways, but a historical understanding of their changing role contributes to the debate around stakeholding in the Thames region.

Inevitably for campaigning stakeholders on the Thames, key questions are: is there evidence of progress? Are they gaining more say in decision-making processes?

Given the competing aims of different organisations on the Thames, progress is not a straightforward concept. Looking at the history of the river, it is clear that there has never been a golden age for public participation or funding on the Thames. The river and port have always been sites of conflict between different governing bodies and interest groups. Though the players have changed in recent decades, powerful financial interests continue to play a key role in influencing decisions on development of riverside areas.

The past decade has seen a consistent focus on the role of stakeholder engagement in the management of the River Thames and its port. This appears to offer community and

campaigning groups more say in consultation processes than in the past, but a dominant theme of the workshop was a sense of the ongoing struggle of stakeholders in getting their views taken seriously in decision-making processes, and frustration with the way these processes operated. The 'stakeholder', moreover, is an ambiguous term which does not capture the different roles and backgrounds of organisations, or differences in terms of access to resources and ability to influence policy-makers. This research project is exploring the implications of the rise of 'stakeholder engagement' and the extent to which it has delivered what it seems to promise in relation to the Thames.

Historically, opportunities for stakeholder engagement are not going in a linear direction. This was clear to stakeholders at the workshop. There are pressures in different directions. While potential opportunities for public and community interventions open up, others may shut down. A potential narrowing of the democratic space cited at the workshop was the role of the Planning Infrastructure Commission (IPC). Created in 2009, this was intended in part to replace the public inquiry process in the case of major infrastructure projects. Concerns were expressed in this context over opportunities for public debate over the proposed Thames Tideway Tunnels.² On the other hand, the [Localism Act 2011](#) has been introduced by the current Government with the stated aim of increasing the role of residential communities in local planning processes. Interestingly, none of the workshop participants expressed a sense of optimism about the potential of 'localism' to increase local community involvement in decision-making. Some felt it would only add to the complexity of planning processes.

At the same time, the increased currency of environmental concerns is clearly having an impact. In this context, localised environmental crisis events can shift the relationship between organisations and add power to campaigns. This was potentially the case with FORCE, following the recent severe pollution incident on the River Crane (October 2011). Thames Water now were dealing more closely with the group as one of the leading community voices along the river. There is a precedent for this in the aftermath of pollution in the River Wandle in 2007, which saw an increased role (and funding) for the River Wandle Trust. Rob Gray (FORCE) considered that environmental incidents of this kind were taken more seriously now than they were even ten years ago.

Environmental crises, and official and community responses to these crises, take place in a wider historical context. They are informed by the current regulatory structure for water resource management and pollution control, and also by prevailing norms around the responsibilities of statutory bodies and the role of local communities in river management. This is partly, then, about what kinds of response it is legally necessary for a polluter to make to such an incident at any given time. But it is also about what kind of response is socially acceptable. Campaigning groups learn from each other and, cumulatively, help set the tone for public debate around such crises. The proliferation of river action groups in recent years is part of this ripple effect (e.g. [Action for the River Kennet](#); FORCE; QWAG; [Thames 21](#); [Thames Rivers Restoration Trust](#)).

² The IPC is to be wound down under the Localism Act 2011 and replaced by Planning Inspectorate in April 2012. See the Planning Portal: <http://www.planningportal.gov.uk/planning/appeals/planninginspectorate>.

The stakeholder workshop has helped us formulate some new questions.

How far has recent community action for rehabilitation of the Thames and its tributaries created a more meaningful participatory role for local communities? While there was a sense in the workshop that ‘the community’ has lost out in environmental decision-making, it was also striking that there were new forms of community action here. The years since the 1960s (and before) have seen frequent examples of local action groups springing up to express grievances and issues of concern for their community. The involvement of local people in the planning and execution of river rehabilitation schemes seems to be a development of the past fifteen years or so. These ‘activity’ groups (QWAG, FORCE, Essex WT) are, to some extent, directly involved in governance.

There was discussion in the final session of the potential links between this kind of community engagement and changes in education, with a high than ever proportion of the UK population now educated to degree level. Has this created more articulate and ‘entitled’ communities? As Sylvia Wicks (Thamesbank) put it: ‘The minute you teach people to think, you ... have to listen to what they have to say’. One implication of this would be we need to ask why people have started to think *in this way*? When and why did community involvement in river rehabilitation schemes become a legitimate community demand?

If people working at local level are creating and pursuing new opportunities for community involvement in environmental planning, what does this tell us about changes in the wider political context? This would have to be read in the light of wider literature on environmental participation. Specifically, we will ask, to what extent have transnational initiatives such as Agenda 21 and Local Agenda 21, its UK offshoot, opened up new opportunities for stakeholder participation on the Thames and elsewhere? How far have their ideals of sustainable development, social and economic justice helped to create successful community-led action and politics for rivers? And how does this relate to developments such as the EU’s Water Framework Directive (2000), with its obligations on water resource and river managers to engage with stakeholders through ‘the active involvement of all interested parties’.³ This focus on environmental governance must also be considered in the context of local and metropolitan governance more generally, which has undergone fundamental change over the past four decades.

Are successful campaigns the result of the right campaigning methods, the right people or the right issue? Discussions at the workshop suggest that success in achieving campaigning aims is about all three, but possibly the last is the key factor. It is important for organisations to focus consistently on the main issues and to be heard by the top decision-makers. But it is also clear that the success or failure of campaigns reflects, in part, the extent to which they are up against embedded financial interests or infrastructural constraints. On a level playing field of funding and expertise, it may be easier to block a specific reservoir development than to convert government to a policy of rainwater harvesting or achieve a fundamental change in

³ For Agenda 21, see: [United Nations Conference on Environment and Development \(UNCED\) at Rio de Janeiro \(Earth Summit: 1992\)](http://www.un.org/Depts/da/development/development.htm). For the EU’s Water Framework Directive, see: http://www.euwfd.com/html/what_is_the_wfd-.html.

the governance structure for the Thames. The history of policy-making for river governance provides many examples of the painfully slow and uncertain nature of change. At a meeting of experts in 1907, a London County Council chemist, J. Brooke Pike, complained that Royal Commissions had been calling for 'river boards' for fifty years. There was no shortage of influential advocates, but it was another half century again before river-basin management was introduced, in the 1960s and '70s.⁴ The Running the River Thames project is centrally concerned with how and why specific policies have gained uptake at certain moments and not at others (or failed altogether).⁵

Finally, the workshop – like the 'stakeholder' focus of the wider project – raised the question: what is the status of campaigning groups as 'community groups'? Earning and sustaining the right to speak for a 'community' is integral to the aims of any campaigning organisation. This mirrors, to some extent, the task of elected local representatives and their officials in maintaining legitimacy, though voluntary groups and local government representatives often have quite different understandings of political legitimacy. Tensions between voluntary groups and local government are a long-standing feature of policy debates relating to the Thames, and some of these tensions were apparent at the workshop. One of the many valuable contributions of the workshop, however, was in highlighting the rich diversity of voluntary sector approaches to community representation for the Thames and riverside areas: from the New Lammas Land Defence Committee, trying to keep alive almost-forgotten 'Lammas' rights on the Hackney and Walthamstow Marshes, to Group Against Reservoir Development – with a solid local membership but substantially funded by an interested donor with strong Campaign for the Preservation of Rural England backing – to the wider membership-based approach of the Essex Wildlife Trust.⁶ The project team will continue to explore different understandings of community representation and political legitimacy among voluntary and statutory bodies involved in Thames policy-making in recent decades.

⁴ 'Rivers pollution from the naturalists' point of view', *Essex Naturalist*, Vol. 15 (1907), 253-57.

⁵ For an examination of policy change in relation to flooding, see e.g. C.L. Johnson, S.M. Tunstall and E.C. Penning-Rowsell, 'Floods as catalysts for policy change: historical lessons from England and Wales', *International Journal of Water Resources Development*, 21 (2005), 561-75.

⁶ For 'Lammas', see NLLDC website and e.g. G.A. Blakeley, *Walthamstow Marshes and Lammas Rights* (London: Walthamstow Antiquarian Society, 1951). Essex WT is also funded from local and central government sources.