

Councillor Stephen Cowan

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



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Dear correspondent

Thank you for writing. I am very sympathetic to the points you make about the disruption caused by the necessity to close Hammersmith Bridge for safety reasons and would like to assure you that my team and I have been working at pace to find solutions to fix the bridge - the biggest problem being how to pay for these extremely expensive works.

As you'll be aware, the closure of Hammersmith Bridge encouraged a significant amount of party-political game playing - especially around the 2019 general election. Unfortunately, I think this has got in the way of progress and still continues to do so. Quite a lot of the stories that have been put around are simply nonsense. Chief amongst them is the claim that there has been a delay in agreement from the London Borough of Hammersmith & Fulham (LBHF) to fund a share of the bridge repairs.

I would like to take this opportunity to set out what has actually happened and what we are doing:

1. By the end of this year, Hammersmith & Fulham's residents will have paid (via their council) £8.6m towards the repair of Hammersmith Bridge. That is more than any other London Council has ever contributed to bridge repairs and significantly more than previous H&F administrations.
2. Hammersmith Bridge is extremely expensive to fix in comparison to other London bridges. In part, that is because it is London's earliest remaining example of a suspension structure over the River Thames. Its suspension mechanisms are unique. It is one of the earliest mechanical suspension bridges in the world.
3. The £141m cost is unaffordable for Hammersmith & Fulham. Since 2010 the government has cut LBHF's total annual net budget from £184.345m to £124.458m this year. Even taking a loan would cause significant cuts to local services or huge rises in council tax – things we won't allow.
4. LBHF and Transport for London (TfL) applied to Government for funding for the works on Hammersmith Bridge on three separate occasions; December 2019, February 2020, and June 2020. All three bids were rejected.
5. The Leader of Richmond Council and I wrote to the Prime Minister on 24 August asking for government help. Some days later, Department of Transport (DfT) officials responded by advising LBHF and TfL officials that, the Prime Minister had called the Secretary of State for Transport and asked him, as a consequence of our letter, to act. They also advised that the PM wanted Hammersmith Bridge back open to "at least cyclists and pedestrians" as quickly as possible and that there would be money for the stabilisation works (works scheduled to begin

- in September 2020, would have been completed in June 2021) but the DfT officials hadn't decided what account to take the money from.
6. On the evening of 8 September, I was advised that the Secretary of State wanted to urgently speak with me the next day. My officials advised me DfT officials had told them the meeting was likely to confirm funds for the stabilisation works. Two meeting times were booked in but then cancelled and, instead, a new meeting was arranged at 11am on 9 September with Baroness Vere, a Parliamentary Undersecretary of State at the DfT.
 7. On 9 September, rather than deliver the news of the funding, Baroness Vere advised me she would be leading a Government Taskforce and that no money would be forthcoming until she and her DfT team had checked the work undertaken by the specialist engineers commissioned by LBHF and TfL. Baroness Vere told me her officials had suggested this work could be done within two weeks. I asked Baroness Vere if she knew what the Secretary of State and the Conservative Mayoral candidate would be announcing at 11:30am as they were visiting Hammersmith Bridge. Baroness Vere said she had no knowledge such an event had been booked in.
 8. Shortly afterwards also on 9 September the Secretary of State for Transport announced he was going to "... *effectively take over this project to make sure we bash heads together and get this thing sorted.*"
 9. On 15 September I followed up my phone conversation with Baroness Vere with a letter welcoming the formation of the Government Taskforce and suggesting an agenda which included "*financing options*" for its first meeting. Baroness Vere did not allow that and subsequently refused all detailed discussions of finance at the Taskforce.
 10. On 15 October, at the fifth meeting of the Government Task Force, Baroness Vere announced a completely new position. She explained how she had been thinking over the previous weekend about Norfolk and Suffolk county councils whom she had recently arranged government funding of 80 and 85 per cent for bridges in Lowestoft and Great Yarmouth. She said that LBHF needed to put in a bid and would write to me to set out what that should contain. A number of the members of the Government Taskforce responded by explaining there had already been three bids and all had been rejected and this appeared to be a time-wasting measure. It was difficult to understand why this new position had emerged as LBHF is not a county council (London County Council was abolished in 1964 and that role is occupied by the London Mayor) and unlike the bridges in Lowestoft and Great Yarmouth, Hammersmith Bridge is largely used and therefore mostly benefits people outside of Hammersmith & Fulham.
 11. The reason for this new position became clear when it emerged sources close to Baroness Vere had briefed residents' groups with the claim that the reason the Government Taskforce had made no progress was because LBHF had not provided a financial bid or shown willing to pay anything towards the bridge's repair. This is evidently wholly untrue but given the anxiety so many residents feel about the failure

- to move to the next stage of works, some people were taken in by it and were all too ready to believe this line of attack.
12. On 27 October, Baroness Vere sent me the letter she had promised on the 15 October. It sought to distance her and the Government Taskforce from any responsibility for any action and made a series of inaccurate points which I responded to on the 28 October. She did, however, confirm that bridge maintenance “has historically been funded by TfL who prioritised their funding to local boroughs for bridgeworks via Local Implementation Plan funding”. She also recognised that “this is no longer available”.
 13. It is worth pointing out here that data from the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government shows that, since 2010, only £100m in total has been spent by London boroughs on maintenance and repair of all London road and river bridges – equivalent to less than £400,000 per year for each borough. Even then, most of that money was eventually paid by TfL or Government. The Bridge House Estate (a charitable trust established by royal charter in 1282) owns and maintains five of London’s most important and historic bridges. Their spend on Blackfriars Bridge, Southwark Bridge, London Bridge, Tower Bridge and the Millennium Bridge between 2011/12 and 2018/19 was an average of £1.3m per bridge per annum.
 14. Additionally, few bridges cost as much as Hammersmith Bridge to repair. For example, in 2013/14 the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea paid £2.6m towards the repair of Albert Bridge but TfL contributed the bulk paying £7.1m. Chiswick Bridge recently cost £9m to refurbish but those works were fully paid for by TfL. Wandsworth Council is paying for the refurbishment of Wandsworth Bridge itself, out of monies raised through their Community Infrastructure Levy, only because TfL is effectively out of funds and can no longer contribute. But those works are only costing around £6m - significantly less than LBHF has already contributed.
 15. On 28 October, I was unable to attend a public meeting arranged by Cllr Gareth Roberts, Leader of LBRuT because I was dealing with an imminent close family bereavement. However, I was surprised to learn that the agreement of an independent chair had been dropped and Baroness Vere had not only insisted in chairing the meeting but used it to repeat the completely false line that LBHF had failed to make any bids or offer any funding whatsoever – a line that she had only detailed in writing to me the day before. Indeed, as I mentioned we have never been allowed to discuss financing the bridge repairs at the Government Taskforce.
 16. Two weeks later on 15 November, I attended a Zoom meeting with Rt Hon Grant Shapps MP, the Secretary of State for Transport, Baroness Vere and a large number of DfT officials. It was a cordial meeting during which I advised them of the Ritblat/Foster’s/COWI alternative proposals that Sir John Ritblat and I had been working on since the summer. The Secretary of State told me that the government required an unprecedented £64 million (or at least 50 per cent contribution) from LBHF - equivalent to an £800 increase in LBHF

residents' council tax payments. I explained I was very proud to have delivered the third lowest council tax in Britain and would not in any circumstances be asking our residents to pay such an amount. I promised to send a letter, correcting some of the inaccurate facts he had clearly been given, and setting out confirmation of our funding commitment.

17. There have been a series of constructive exchanges between the Secretary of State and me since that meeting.
18. LBHF has commissioned a feasibility study into the Ritblat/ Foster's/ COWI proposal for a temporary truss bridge which holds out the prospect of the bridge being fully re-opened in a far quicker timeframe than the existing plan.
19. LBHF officers, working with a series of sector-leading consultants, have also developed a business case called the Outline Financial Plan (OFP). That will not only see Hammersmith Bridge repaired but offers value for money to national and local taxpayers.
20. The OFP was submitted to the Secretary of State by LBHF on 19 February. It also seeks to secure the long-term governance and funding measures necessary to see one of the world's oldest suspension bridges repaired and reopened ASAP while guaranteeing its ongoing maintenance so it remains a fully functional utility, well into the 22nd century.

I assure you again, that my team and I will continue to work around the clock doing everything we can to get Hammersmith Bridge repaired and reopened in the shortest possible amount of time.

Funding is the major issue holding back progress. I hope that together, the Government, TfL and LBHF will shortly be able to release news of a genuine step forward.

Meanwhile, I hope the Fosters/COWI team's work which LBHF has commissioned and paid for will produce a lower cost, quicker solution.

With kind regards

Cllr Stephen Cowan

Leader of the London Borough of Hammersmith & Fulham