

29 November 2017



Sir John Armitt
Chairman
Thames Estuary 2050 Growth Commission
c/o Catherine Pert - EA to Sir John Armitt
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Dear Sir John

Thames Estuary 2050 Growth Commission

Congratulations on your appointment as Commission chair. I wanted to take this opportunity to mention to you the work of the Thames Gateway Kent Partnership (TGKP), which I chair.

The partnership was formed in 2001 to promote the interests of North Kent, and encourage, facilitate and enable sustainable economic growth and regeneration. TGKP brings together the local authorities of Dartford, Gravesham, Swale, Medway and Kent, with the Ebbsfleet Development Corporation, leaders from key private sector organisations and wider public sector bodies.

TGKP works closely with partners in South Essex and East London to keep a focus on this nationally-important initiative and to lead productive dialogue with Government to maximise its success. We welcome the opportunity to engage with the Commission and to re-energise the efforts of partners across the Gateway to accelerate progress to deliver regeneration, growth and prosperity.

Much has been achieved in the Thames Gateway over the past 20-30 years. There is significant scope to build on this and to continue to regenerate areas with enormous potential. North Kent has considerable strengths: proximity to London, opportunities for development, a high-quality natural environment, heritage and culture, and the impetus of the achievements to date. We want to take this even further to tackle some of the long-term challenges.

We have had to spend much of the recent past reminding government that “London and the South East” is not a single entity. North Kent does not enjoy the economic prosperity and benefit of other parts of the South East. Productivity, unemployment and skills all trail the national average. GVA per head of population in North Kent is 20% lower than the national average, 25% lower than the south-east average and lower than that of the North-West.

This presents a unique opportunity: raising the economic performance of Thames Gateway Kent to the South East average would add in the region of £4 billion a year to the Kent economy. We are helping to make this happen: the North Kent Enterprise Zone is one example, the long-term transformation of the former naval dockyard in Chatham another. We are also working on a number of exciting, large-scale, schemes that realise the Gateway’s potential, such as extending Crossrail to Ebbsfleet and building a world-class cluster of creative industries through the Thames Estuary Production Corridor.

Authorities in North Kent are working hard to deliver demanding housing growth. Recent Government announcements propose a revised methodology that could see the area facing one of the largest percentage increases in the country. North Kent has the potential to make a significant contribution to the national housing challenge, but this needs to be balanced with an equal focus on employment and commercial activity to support economic growth.

Without this, there is a risk that North Kent becomes over-dependent on London for employment, rather than benefiting from proximity to the capital in a sustainable way. This is compounded by a lack of good-quality “employment” space across Kent, in part a consequence of permitted development rights for conversion to residential and in part due to the disinclination of investors to support speculative commercial developments. Additional housing should be completely integrated with jobs and improvements to infrastructure in “enterprise communities”.

Infrastructure improvements are also critically important for North Kent, and not just to support the local economy: North Kent is the gateway from the Channel ports to the rest of the United Kingdom. We welcome the Government’s commitment to the Lower Thames Crossing but the wider road network in Kent that feeds into the crossing needs to be improved. We want to challenge assumptions about how long it will take to deliver: the problems are manifest now and ten years is far too long to wait for a solution. We also need to ensure that North Kent can maximise the economic benefits of the crossing – and that it is not just a project to help national traffic flows.

We want to regain the momentum that was lost following the departure of Lord Heseltine. Since then we have been developing strategies and priorities for the future, jointly with colleagues in Essex and East London which we are keen to share with you. It also bears saying that nearly six months after the General Election, a “Minister for the Gateway” – which we have had in previous governments – is still to be announced. Public awareness of work to regenerate the Thames Estuary has declined – when other parts of the UK are promoting their regeneration efforts more assertively. We would be keen to work with you to address this to excite the public’s imagination about the Thames Gateway

TGKP looks forward to working with you to help the Commission to make a real, lasting and positive contribution to the regeneration of the Thames Gateway in Kent. We are due to meet on the 5th December, collectively with London and Essex colleagues, but I would also like the opportunity to talk you through the challenges, opportunities and priorities for the Gateway specifically in Kent. I would be delighted to show you some of these first-hand and to discuss with you how the Commission can help us to deliver progress and change to a part of the country with unparalleled potential.

Yours faithfully

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

Rob Bennett, Chairman, Thames Gateway Kent Partnership