

Town & Country Planning



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Crawley New Town: a photographic journey
Whatever happened to regional planning?
Making places that work for everyone

Off the rails

Robin Hickman examines the planning of a new highway project, the rising costs, poorly estimated impacts, and relationships of knowledge to power



Robin Hickman

Absurdity and a new highway

Imagine a hypothetical proposed new highway project, some of it in a tunnel under a large river. The project has been consistently supported, over decades, by both Conservative and Labour governments, and £1.2 billion has been spent in planning and promoting the project since 2009. A further £840 million has recently been committed to continue the planning process.

The evidence provided by the project promoter, National Highways, is wrapped in a narrative of technocratic objectivism, but hides many normative positions – including in the process of project analysis and justification. The stated objectives for the project are mostly about reducing congestion on another highway crossing further up the river, that was itself widened only in 1991. The estimated costs of the project have risen from an initial £4.3 billion to £5.9 billion, to between £9.2 billion and £10.2 billion, and perhaps even to £16 billion or more. This is for a 23 km-long highway and river crossing – so it might eventually cost nearly a £1 billion per kilometre. There will be congestion relief on the existing crossing, but induced traffic (volumes of traffic will grow to use the new highway capacity and fill the space provided) means the relief might only last for five years. Induced traffic is not recognised as an issue by the project promoter.

Hidden calculations

The headline benefit-cost ratio (BCR) is important to secure governmental funding for transport projects. The BCR for this project has fallen from 3.4 to 2.9 to 0.48:1, as project costs have risen. A BCR of less than 1:1 means that the project costs more than the estimated benefits; 2:1 is viewed by the Department for Transport (DfT) as 'high' value for money and 4:1 as 'very high'. There is much that can be said on the use of cost-benefit analysis (CBA) in transport project appraisal, including that all BCR ratios are arbitrary, to a greater or lesser extent (usually to a greater extent), depending on the partiality of the factors included in the cost-benefit analysis. This CBA is very partial and mostly represents time savings for commuters and business users relative to cost, using reference case projections of traffic growth. It doesn't effectively measure many critical environmental and social costs, such as the resulting increased traffic volumes and impacts on CO₂ emissions targets; or the social inequity of providing a transport system for cars, largely for the use of higher to middle-income groups; or for freight vehicles which could be encouraged on to rail. The use of aggregation in the CBA is controversial, as it allows time savings to outweigh negative impacts, particularly as time savings are given great weight in the calculations. All the calculations are 'black-boxed', so non-experts cannot work out what is going on and debate is discouraged.

The project is very interesting for relationships of knowledge to power. The project promoter, National Highways, is funded by the UK government through the Department for Transport (DfT), with a remit to deliver highways. There is little consideration of whether the highway is the optimal infrastructure for the region, or whether public transport might serve requirements better – that decision was taken (erroneously) decades ago. National Highways provides its own evidence on the project, developing little evidence on some of the major impacts, including those on local transport networks, climate change and social equity. It promotes the project as if it is good value for money and will have positive impacts for the environment. The claims of a direct relationship between highway investment and economic growth are unsubstantiated, as economic growth depends on many factors beyond the new highway capacity, such as the planning of employment, commercial and residential uses in the surrounding area, and the state of the local economy.

Inevitable approval

A six-month public examination is held in 2023 to consider the project's development consent order (the case for the project). The evidence extends to 554 documents and is 63,330 pages long – meaning that no ordinary person can read the full evidence or understand the range of arguments made. This makes the project very difficult to challenge. The Planning Inspectorate weighs the evidence given, uncritically, and recommends approval. The Secretary of State for Transport considers the recommendation and gives approval in 2025.

The result is that a collection of governmental organisations judge in their own cause. The hypothetical project is approved, which doesn't resolve the local transport problems. Few would suggest using this process of project analysis and justification. The problem is that the project is not hypothetical. It is the Lower Thames Crossing,¹ the largest project in the UK government's Road Investment Strategy. It has approval and is probably coming to Kent and Essex in the early 2030s, certainly if the tolls are high enough to attract the private operators.

In the words of writer Kurt Vonnegut, who famously expressed his full faith in the continued absurdity of our existence: 'so it goes'.

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Notes

1 *Lower Thames Crossing Examination Library*. Planning Inspectorate, 22 Dec. 2023. This development consent order (DCO) document library includes evidence provided by National Highways. <https://infrastructure.planninginspectorate.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/projects/TR010032/TR010032-001818-C%20-%20LTC%20Examination%20Library.pdf>

2 For a fuller discussion of this subject, see R Hickman, A Mosser, D Abendano and Y Dong: *Discourses on the Lower Thames Crossing* (in review)