Bridging East London

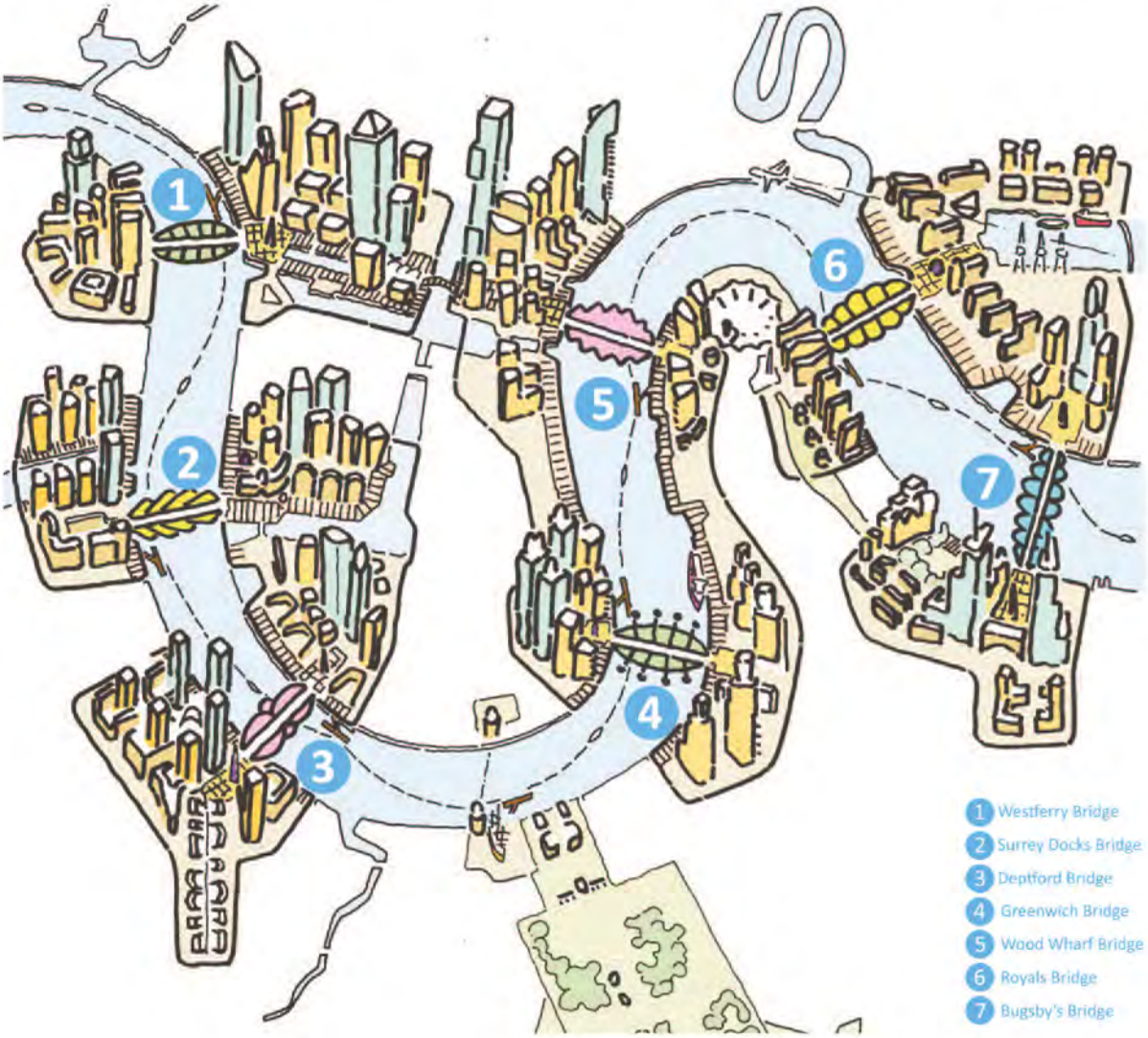
Unlock housing capacity with low-level river crossings says Terry Farrell

London is a great world city. Its economy continues to thrive, it is a global centre for innovation, creativity and culture, and its population will reach 10 million by 2030 – Europe's only 'super-metropolis'. As a result of its success, London needs more housing on a bigger scale than ever before, equal to Victorian rates of delivery. An ambitious strategy to increase supply far beyond current levels is required, with new homes to meet the needs of a changing, dynamic and growing population. Solving the housing crisis is not only about technical innovation, new housing policy, new forms of ownership, or innovative funding mechanisms. The answer, in my view, lies in transformative spatial planning at a metropolitan scale.

The GLA has responded to this challenge by investing in a number of bold infrastructure projects, notably London Overground and Crossrail, and there are ambitious plans to make further investments to support growth including Crossrail 2. The London Plan favours intensification in areas with the greatest levels of accessibility. New infrastructure will support house building at increased densities, but we are still not building enough homes and, crucially, have only managed to build around 2,000 homes for social and affordable rent per year since 2008.

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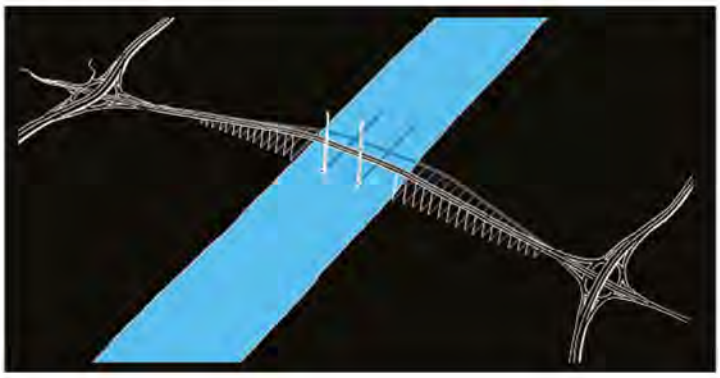
In recent times, the focus of London's growth has shifted to the East. Shoreditch and Hackney have become desirable places to live and work whilst Canary Wharf has become a major finance centre with a mix of shops, homes and a cultural offer with superb connectivity. The London Olympics Legacy has helped support growth in Tower Hamlets and Newham and the Royal





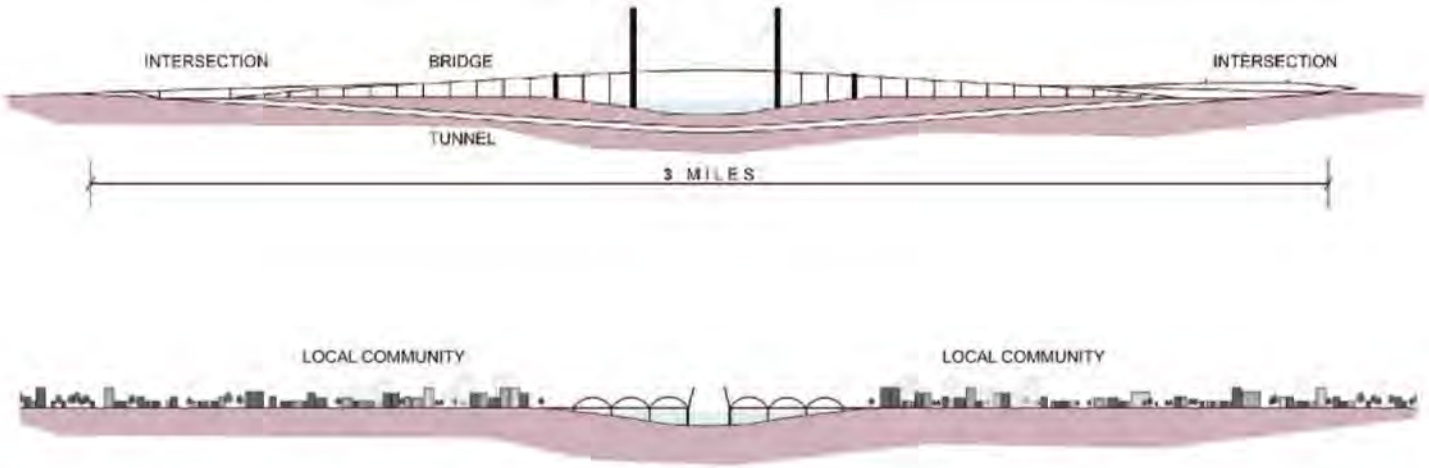
Sir Terry Farrell CBE

High-level bridge



Low-level bridge





Docks is at last attracting sustained investment. However, large areas of East London have seen little or no growth. A lack of transport accessibility has held back housing delivery in East London and too much has consisted of low-density sprawl in featureless dormitory suburbs. Sustained growth and exceptional quality of life has occurred in parts of London that offer high connectivity. It is time to invest in balanced metropolitan growth to help solve our housing crisis. This means bringing the ingredients that have underpinned success in other parts of London to the East, allowing it to blossom.

In London there are 34 bridges across the Thames but only one to the East of Tower Bridge (the Queen Elizabeth II Bridge) which is a high-level bridge. Proposals for further Lower Thames Crossings will support the UK's strategic economic objectives, with improved national and regional connections, but high-level bridges such as these will not support the kind of high quality urban growth that is needed. Because of their long approach ramps, often stretching a mile back from the river bank and connecting directly with a motorway, high-level bridges and tunnels sterilise the river banks. By contrast, low-level bridges enable walking and cycling and conveniently connect people to transport nodes on either side of the river.

East London has the city's greatest growth potential, with more than 40 per cent of its Opportunity Areas. I strongly believe that building low-level bridges in the right locations in East London will provide the connectivity that drives growth in the rest of London. It will increase capacity within Opportunity Areas and will enable intensification within existing places. More importantly, it will re-integrate settlements on the North and South banks with the Thames itself. New opportunities for house building, recreation, landscape restoration and the animation of waterfront will transform quality of life. All of this can be done for a fraction of the cost of most infrastructure projects. Low-level bridges are considerably less expensive than the higher level alternatives.

There could be a series of 'mini-cities' along the Thames interacting with each other as well as with the rest of London, enabling the delivery of at least 50,000 new homes and 40,000 new jobs. These connections will allow people >>>

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from either side of the Thames to benefit from cultural, educational and social amenities that have been inaccessible to date. Bridges between Barking and Thamesmead, North Woolwich (and Royal Docks) to Woolwich and Greenwich Peninsula to the Isle of Dogs and Surrey Quays would make even more of Crossrail by increasing the catchment area. They would also reduce pressure on over-burdened parts of the network by providing sustainable alternatives.

Maritime constraints have to be fully considered of course, and awareness of the cultural and economic importance of river traffic on the Thames is paramount. Recent discussions with the Port of London Authority about the concept of low-level bridges which lift or swing, allowing ships and boats of various shapes and sizes to pass through whilst maintaining the ability to navigate the river, have been very positive. Working in partnership with Buro Happold on engineering and economics, more detailed proposals will be subject to a technical assessment process..

I believe that this initiative is as important to our great city as the Bakerloo Line extension, Crossrail 2 and HS2. It can be delivered quickly and with manageable construction risk and costs. It will speed up delivery of new homes and allow other housing initiatives to bear fruit. Building low-level bridges in East London - with opening sections to allow river traffic - is the single most important thing we can do to transform housing delivery in London. Connectivity increases value and increased value attracts higher densities. Creating new low-level bridges is essential if we are to accelerate delivery of all types of homes in a balanced metropolitan way and maintain London's status as a world city. ■

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Unlocking housing capacity with low-level river crossings

