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ROUNDTABLE INSIGHT:
The River Thames: An Untapped Asset



In Partnership with:



The River Thames is an integral part of London's society and economy. It is an iconic waterway, a tourist attraction, a hub of industry and a feature of daily life for many of London's eight million inhabitants. But how much use do we really make of the Thames?



In many ways, the Thames is an untapped resource that can and should help solve many challenges our bustling city faces. And one critical challenge is the transportation of freight. A modal shift from road to river will help reduce road congestion, improve air quality, and mitigate climate change impacts, while also supporting regeneration and boosting economic growth. While a number of initiatives are already underway to open up freight capacity on the Thames, we need to do more, together, to stimulate real change.

This paper identifies the steps needed to accelerate modal shift to river-based freight transport and to develop a culture that sees the Thames as the valuable asset it really is.

Why use the river?

Toxic air is of critical concern in the capital, with highly dangerous levels already reached, and around 40,000 early deaths a year. While there are moves underway to tackle this, further steps must be taken, especially as London's population is set to grow to 11 million by 2050. A significant shift must therefore be made to reduce the pollution we're producing; the River Thames is key to alleviate this pressure.



London population to grow to 11 million by 2050



40,000 early deaths a year caused by toxic air

Indeed, energy consumption (per tonne/km) from transport of goods via waterways has been calculated to be about 17% of that of road transport and 50% of rail transport. While shifting lorry freight loads onto the river will not alone remedy London's air pollution problem, it will make a considerable difference – both in terms of air pollution, and general traffic movements. Supporting the movement of freight onto the river could not only assist in reducing pollution from vehicle movements, but would also contribute to wider safety concerns for pedestrians, cyclists and other road users. London's Thames Tideway construction project is demonstrating the extent to which river transport can help alleviate pressure on the road network:



439,000t material moved by river barge up to June 2018



55,568 estimated no. of lorry movements avoided up to June 2018

In addition to improving air quality and reducing vehicle movements, a shift towards river use would also deliver economic and social incentives. Air pollution has been estimated to cost the UK £15 billion a year – similar to the cost of obesity or alcohol abuse. For London's businesses, utilising barges can also provide a more cost-efficient way of transporting goods, and alleviate unnecessary costs for councils through road damage. But for this to happen, both political and industry leadership is required.

Congestion is on the rise; research by the London Assembly Transport Committee found that delays for car journeys have been steadily increasing since 2012 with inner London the most affected. It's clear that shifting freight transport to the river will cut transportation times, benefiting both businesses and consumers.



Background

The Thames is one of the most utilised inland waterways in the United Kingdom, moving 10 million passengers and 12 million tonnes of freight in 2017. However there remains significant under-utilised capacity that can be leveraged for the benefit of London and Londoners. River usage remains dwarfed by the road, which still moves nearly 90% of all freight transported in London.



While there are currently many challenges and restrictions surrounding river use for industry, the Thames could become a much more significant part of London's transport and freight network. The use of the Thames as a critical transport asset is recognised by the Mayor but more can be done to support the potential for growth in both passenger and freight capacity, especially once construction of the Thames Tideway Tunnel is completed in 2023.



Action is happening, with support from the likes of Transport for London (TfL) and the Port of London Authority (PLA), but we need to do more as a joined-up river economy to truly realise the river's potential. It is crucial that we collaborate and create momentum to tackle issues, drive action and change our transport culture. Collaboration between logistic providers, river operators and retailers to create new logistic solutions and supply chain processes will play a critical role in driving this modal shift.



What's stopping us from using the river?

There are a number of benefits to utilising the river. However, 'blue infrastructure' is still not considered a key part of London's transport system both culturally or by authorities. This is preventing any serious shift to river usage.

Operational riverside infrastructure, such as wharves, is severely lacking in London. Access points along the river are often overlooked by key decision-makers because space is at a premium. Continued demand from commercial and residential developers for prime riverside space often means that only road and rail access points are considered when developing new residential and commercial properties, and the potential for river access is not prioritised.

However, it is possible to balance the needs of residential and commercial stakeholders, by ensuring new housing developments sit side-by-side with a processing facility and cargo wharf. Cory's Cringle Dock development, where new housing sits side-by-side with a processing facility and cargo wharf, shows how mutual benefit can be realised through effective collaboration and integration.

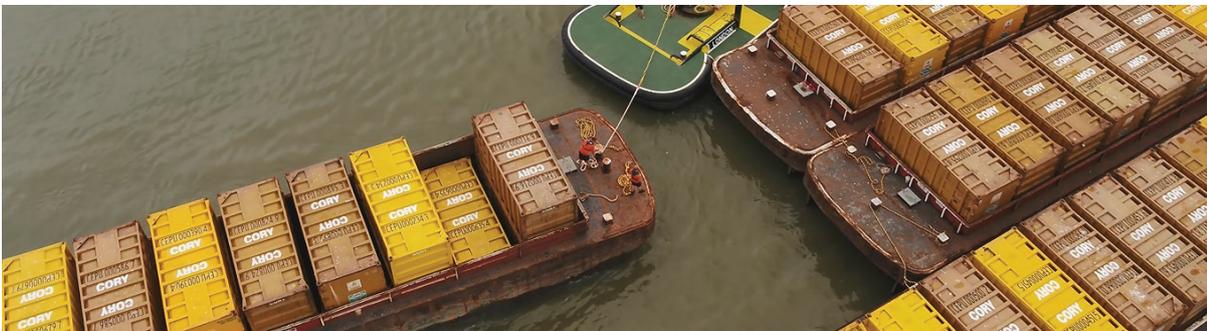


Creating an industry movement

It is encouraging to see an already supportive policy environment towards prioritising the River Thames. The Mayor of London's London Plan recognises water transport as one of the most sustainable modes of transport for freight, while the Port of London Authority's Thames Vision has set out an ambition to double cargo on the river by 2035, as well as the number of commuters and tourists. While there is support, ambitions have not yet translated into reality.

Further collaboration is required, particularly between policy-makers and London's businesses. A joined-up transport strategy which recognises and supports the needs of all common river users could significantly accelerate progress. Existing river uses play a key role in ensuring this. Often authorities see water-based opportunities as elusive, but by educating planners, politicians and users with case studies and statistics that demonstrate the importance and benefits of river use, a clear business case for using the Thames can be made. Companies need to realise that investment in river infrastructure will pay dividends for them in the future.

The Mayor should seek to make it in companies' interests to use the river by providing financial benefits. This should be done in conjunction with improving road connections to and from wharves so that they can provide a competitive service in comparison with road use. Steps have been made, particularly through a joint Cory and ICE roundtable held in 2018, which brought together stakeholders from across London to identify how to elevate the Thames as a crucial infrastructure asset.



Changing culture

It is evident from examples around the world that once this shift is encouraged and promoted, the Thames can be used to great advantage.

Paris is a good example of what can be achieved. Private companies and policy-makers in the French capital have recognised the benefits of using the Seine to cut emissions and lorry journeys. The French supermarket Franprix launched its ambitious "Franprix en Seine" project in 2012 with the help of the European Union, the French state, the Parisian region, and the Port of Paris. The project involves switching the supply of 135 of its 350 stores in the capital from road to river transport, taking as many as 2,600 lorries off the city's roads each year. And the company has said it can go even further: with sustained political help, and further private investment, it could supply all 350 stores via the Seine.

This demonstrates the potential if we shift the dial and move away from the current UK mindset that the road has to come first.



As ICE's 'Engineering Cleaner Air' report highlights, one way to kick off this culture change is through financial incentives, such as grants. This, in conjunction with improving road connections to and from wharves, will make the river a competitive service in comparison with road use - and a genuine alternative to road freight.

A London-specific grant scheme with TfL would therefore be an incredibly useful starting point from shifting London's businesses from road to river.

Summary

It is clear that the River Thames has the potential to be a central part of the transport system in London. But steps have to be taken from politicians, businesses and river users.

While policy-makers have accepted the value of the Thames in principle and recognise that it could help them to achieve their aims regarding congestion and air pollution, greater collaboration between all stakeholders is needed to put these plans into action.

By working together across industries and sectors, we can ensure that we move even faster.

Get involved

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Cory

- Get in touch with Cory at: riverlogistics@coryenergy.com
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