

The business PERSPECTIVE

Development of the Thames Gateway Area

Although some inroads have been made in the development of the ambitious Thames Gateway programme, the overall pace of development up to now has not been as fast as had been anticipated. However, with new leadership now in place we look forward to things taking off. So, how does business view the Thames Gateway?

Certain inherent strengths give us reason for optimism: room to expand; relative affordability; important strategic rail and air links and the Port of London. After all we have seen Canary Wharf change from a derelict wharf into London's second business centre. But regenerating one of the largest brownfield sites in Europe is no easy task. The target of

180,000 new jobs sounds impressive, but there needs to be a sustained strategy to realise this with clear milestones set out.

Engagement with business from the outset is essential to develop an appropriate needs based plan. We must be realistic in our objectives. Will this become the new headquarter hub? Or the new centre of back office operations? Or an R&D centre? Having a clear plan is relevant as firms often form clusters where similar firms locate in close proximity due to advantages such as sharing of information, infrastructure, skills, services etc.

At present there is clearly more than just a river crossing's distance between the economies within London and transformation of the Thames Gateway will require strong

political will and resolute implementation on the ground.

The planning process, which the CBI has been lobbying hard to improve, continues to frustrate business; the most recent example being the deferment of the decision on the Thames Gateway Bridge go ahead. Transport links are a fundamental and pivotal part of regeneration and failings in the planning process must not be allowed to impede real progress.

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Crossrail, which the CBI has lobbied for, will increase accessibility within London, and further unlock the regeneration potential on both sides of the river.

Ultimately – for employment targets to be realised a practical approach to attract businesses is essential. Key transport links, sustainable communities and housing, suitable office space, a skilled local workforce and the overall attractiveness of the area are all important. Building housing without successfully attracting new businesses will result in the pitfall of creating dormitories and long commutes for employment.

Finally, the potential is there, and a strong partnership approach is critical to make this vision a reality. The wider legacy of the 2012 Games will also be a positive contribution.

The CBI is committed as a key stakeholder to playing its part and using its voice for business in the UK to delivering the vision. NIGEL BOURNE

