

Press release

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Lord Foster reveals further developments for the proposed Thames Hub

Today, Lord Foster, Visiting Professor in the School of Geography and the Environment, delivers his annual lecture as part of the Humanitas programme at the University of Oxford. The lecture – entitled Infrastructure, Heritage and Lessons – considers the proposed Thames Hub, an integrated infrastructure plan for Britain, inspired by the lessons of nineteenth-century pioneers.

Since the launch earlier this month, further studies have been undertaken into the proposed Thames Hub, which includes: a £20bn high-speed Orbital Rail line around London; a new £6bn Thames Barrier and crossing; and a £20bn international Estuary Airport, with annual capacity for 150 million passengers. All of this takes place in the context of a comprehensive environmental management strategy that minimises the impact of development and provides opportunities to create significant new wildlife habitats to more than offset losses elsewhere. The total estimated cost of the project is £50bn.

The proposal includes a detailed study of wildlife habitats in the Thames Estuary, investigating the potential for a new nature reserve; analysis of the wreck of the SS Richard Montgomery, a World War II munitions ship, which lies close to the proposed airport site; a survey of the settlements and listed buildings on the Isle of Grain; further detail on rail alignment and integration of utilities and gas insulated cables; and possible locations of intermodal stations on the Orbital Rail link. Studies have also been carried out into the possible increased risk of bird strikes in the Thames Estuary – findings indicate that this problem is not unique to the site and many precedents exist for dealing with this.

Over the last few weeks, the team has also met a large number of public and private-sector stakeholders, across a range of infrastructure sectors, and has received strong support for the Thames Hub proposals. Initial discussions with investors have shown that there is interest in supporting the project through its planning, design, construction, and operation and maintenance phases. With an appropriate political and planning framework, this is a project that can be delivered.

Notes for editors:

The main components of the Thames Hub are as follows:

A new barrier crossing that extends the flood protection to London and the Thames Gateway into the 22nd century. The barrier harnesses tidal power to generate carbon-free energy.

A four-track, high-speed passenger and freight Orbital Rail route around London, which links London's radial lines, a future high-speed rail line to the Midlands and the North, the Thames Estuary ports, High Speed 1 (Channel Tunnel to London), and European networks.

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An international Estuary Airport, capable of handling 150 million passengers per annum, thus enabling the UK to retain its global aviation hub status. The airport is integrated within a logistics matrix that connects by rail the Thames Estuary Ports and the ports of Liverpool, Southampton and Felixstowe. Associated with the Hub is a major renewable energy source in the Estuary.

A new utilities and data spine in the Thames Barrier, Orbital Rail line and high-speed networks, with applicability across the UK.

A comprehensive environmental management strategy that minimises the impact of development and provides opportunities to create significant new wildlife habitats to more than offset losses elsewhere. The project can also be the catalyst to reduce pressure on foreshore habitats from rising sea levels and storm activity.

Further research:

The impact on foreshore habitats within the Thames Estuary has been of major concern and the wider impact of changing sea levels has been considered. Work is now underway to find a site for a new nature reserve island for displaced migratory birds and wetlands wildlife to create secure new habitats. Such a facility would build on the experience being developed at Wallasea Island in Essex, where a 600 hectare site has been returned to its original state as a salt marsh. Our aim is to create a world-leading new habitat that will allow not only new breeding and feeding areas but the opportunity for Britain to lead in addressing the impacts of rising sea levels.

Concerns have been raised about the safety of the wrecked World War II munitions ship, the SS Richard Montgomery, lying in shallow waters approximately four miles from the proposed terminal buildings. The design team has met the Ministry of Defence, who advise that as long as the wreck is not disturbed during the construction of the airport there would be no danger. A strategy for modelling the sea bed in this area is being developed to ensure that this will be the case.

The proposed Orbital Rail, the first all new four-track high speed line in Europe, is aligned with the existing M25 corridor. Its design allows Euro Gauge freight rolling stock to travel around London and access new rail freight depot facilities to the east and west of the city. The substantial increase in rail freight capacity will allow a significant modal shift from road to rail, removing thousands of lorries from the M25. For passengers, the Orbital Rail will cut journey times between the north and south-east. Whereas today a train journey from Manchester to Heathrow takes more than three hours, the new Rail Orbital will allow passengers from Manchester to reach the proposed Thames Estuary Airport directly in just 1 hour 50 minutes.

The location of Orbital interchange stations has been developed to maximise their potential to act as nodal points within the national growth corridors and to create new routes. Two million people will live within 10km of one of the Orbital interchange stations, all of which are easily accessed by road to facilitate modal interchange.

The tunnels integrated within a new Thames barrier have been developed to allow national rail connectivity for freight and passengers, as well as local road connectivity to serve Essex and Kent. The opportunity to use this connectivity to include long distance electricity transmission has been further

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developed to enable the inclusion of the latest gas-insulated high-voltage transmission cables, which can be easily maintained and will reduce transmission losses.

While the Isle of Grain is one of the most sparsely populated areas in the South East, extreme sensitivity is needed to compensate and re-house those people and businesses that would be directly affected. Studies have identified a number of listed buildings that could be affected by a new airport development on the island and a strategy has been developed which could either allow for their inclusion in any new development or their careful removal and relocation as necessary. The team has also studied several precedents for building relocation.

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