

Running the River Thames: London, Stakeholders and the Governance of the River Thames 1960-2010

REPORT ON 'CONSULTATION AND THE ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE OF THE THAMES: A CONVERSATION ABOUT STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT'

Greenwich Maritime Institute, University of Greenwich: 23 November 2012

AIMS OF THE AFTERNOON

The main focus of this round-table conversation was the practical experience of major Thames region governance organisations in engaging with campaign groups. Representatives of a small number of key institutions connected to the river and river basin were invited to participate. To encourage frank and open discussion, the event operated under the Chatham House Rule.

PARTICIPANTS

Dominic Martyn	Environment Agency
Cllr Barrie Hargrove	London Borough of Southwark
Kevin Reid	Greater London Authority
James Trimmer	Port of London Authority
Jill Thomas	Consumer Council for Water
Vanessa Taylor & Sarah Palmer	Project Researchers

Also invited, but unable to attend on the day, were Nick Tennant, Thames Water and Myles Thomas, Environment Agency.

THE PREAMBLE

Vanessa Taylor opened the session by explaining that the 'Running the River Thames' research project focused on the ways in which the environmental governance of the Thames has evolved from 1960 to the near-present. This period had been chosen for two reasons. First, it spans very important changes in the way in which the environmental functions of the river are governed. For example, the governance of pollution control, sewerage and water supply shifted from semi-representative organisations to larger managerial units. Second, over this period London's relationship with its river altered. The port moved downstream, out of London. London bodies lost control of functions such as sewerage, pollution and water supply, so there has also arguably been a change in the balance of power between London and other areas. The 1973 Water Act, privatisation in 1989, and more recently EU environmental 'Directives' have created new spatial, ownership and regulatory arrangements for water supply and management of the Thames.

Vanessa said that these developments raised a number of questions. What happened to ideas of localised democracy during these changes? What are the implications for 'environmental citizenship'? What are the most effective forms of consultation from the point of view of stakeholders and of those organisations responsible for environmental governance?.

In November 2011 the team had discussed such issues with representatives of some local campaign

groups, so the 'Conversation About Stakeholder Engagement' was concerned with perceptions from the 'other side'. Against a background of changing obligations and expectations of participation, how do statutory bodies interact with stakeholders?

THE DISCUSSION

The discussion was deliberately open-ended, but focused on how seven key questions applied to the organisations represented in their relationship within campaigners, within the context of the environmental governance of the Thames.

Question 1

'Stakeholders' has seemingly largely replaced older terms like 'interests' and 'lobbies'. What do you see as the significance of this?

Although some disliked the term 'stakeholder' on the grounds that it was sometimes too loosely applied, it was agreed that the use of the word did reflect a real extension of the meaning of 'interests' and 'lobbies' beyond primarily commercial concerns to the broader community. It was suggested that 'interest' and, even more so, 'lobby' had a pejorative connotation, but this was not the case with 'stakeholder'. The requirement, sometimes statutory, to involve the wider public in a major decision and its implementation created pressures for an organisation; conflict could not always be avoided. Nevertheless, building an external coalition of support was seen as essential and one participant described this as energising.

Questions 2 and 3

What are the main campaign groups with which you have recently been involved?

Has your approach to campaign groups altered in any way in recent years? If so, in what ways?

What have been the key drivers for change here?

A number of campaign groups were identified. A distinction was made between groups routinely consulted, often through contact with individuals well-known to the governance organisation; those actively sought out for consultation because identified as likely to be affected; groups which emerged in opposition to a particular proposal. The last of these could be particularly difficult, if not impossible, to convince. In the other two cases, where the relationship would typically be more cordial and constructive, there could be suspicions that the governance organisation was attempting to manage, and so dilute, opposition. Establishing a relationship of trust with campaign groups was now regarded as more important than had perhaps been the case in the past. It was considered that secrecy was counter-productive and that there was value in encouraging discussion. Failure to do so at an early stage could create problems in the longer term.

While statutory duty was a reason for engaging with campaign groups and wider public, it was thought that consultation would happen even if this were not the case. There is now a general recognition that the environment is important and two of those present said that they felt personally very committed to sustainability. The Internet and email had empowered campaigners, but also made it easier, as also necessary, for governance organisations to make use of this means of communication.

Questions 4 and 5

What are the chief obstacles for your organisation in trying to influence campaign groups?

From your perspective what is the more effective strategy for campaigning groups to adopt: lobbying behind-the-scenes or public campaigns?

The point was made that governance organisations needed to believe in the possibility of changing minds, though some individual campaigners appeared temperamentally suspicious of those in positions of authority and fixed in their views. It was, however, agreed that in most cases campaign group leaders were fairly level-headed and willing to engage constructively. Campaigners often themselves had professional expertise or could draw on this externally, so providing accurate information was essential. It was suggested that governance organisations had become more skillful at managing consultation.

Behind-the-scenes lobbying was not regarded as necessarily more effective than public campaigns; consultation was now the norm and transparency was valued more than secrecy.

Questions 6 and 7

In what circumstances have campaign groups influenced your decisions?

Where your organisation also has a role as a stakeholder, how has your experience of dealing with statutory bodies changed over time?

Those present provided several examples of cases where campaign groups had succeeded in influencing decisions. Most were modifications of proposals, but one was a total reversal.

In response to Question 6 it was pointed out that the position of a governance organisation as a stakeholder was different to that of stakeholder campaign groups. It had privileged access to other bodies, often having routine professional contacts and being regularly involved in meetings. Viewpoints therefore had a certain predictability. It was noted, for example, that most of those present at this event were already known to each other.

The Greenwich Maritime Institute wishes to record its thanks to all the participants for their willingness to contribute to the research on this project.