

Follow up notes to the 15 January Discussion Document

Notes regarding Tower Bridge (*Notes re exhibition at bottom of page 2*)

Since the discussion paper it has become apparent that the entire bridge needs a full access-audit – not just from a DDA perspective but also to reflect how the routes and numbers of pedestrians using the bridge in recent years have dramatically changed.

If the bridge was treated like a stadium structure, the existing stairways would be condemned as inadequate. The main ‘pinch-point’ is the SW steps. At the very least, a second set of steps should be introduced nearby (ideally along with at least one lift) to afford a peak-time one-way crowd management system.

There is already frequent day-to-day jostling. Each year the crowding gets worse. Imagine hundreds scrambling to get down to an event on the field, or the opposite, as hundreds try to make the next DLR or District Line train, or both at the same time! Even before 2012 there is a risk of accident and injury on and around the SW steps as waves of people attempt to enter them (some carrying pushchairs, bikes and luggage) from up top and down below, during various events, such as Thames Festivals.

The real threat comes from the increasing occurrences of sustained ‘saturation usage’, where crowds build up at the top and bottom of the existing steps, trying to get onto them. As these crowds build they can act as barriers to egress for those already on the steps. In this way the density of peoples moving up and down the steps against the flow of each other can quickly get dangerous.

QUOTE “Architectural features that typically are implicated in dangerous crowding incidents are those that rigidly confine people within an inadequate space, or are not properly designed for crowd pressures and efficient mass movement. This includes corridors and stairs of inadequate width, insufficient numbers of doors or gates, escalators, and protective guardrails that are either too low or not provided at all. Minor design deficiencies that present no apparent problems under normal traffic conditions can be accentuated in crowds, potentially triggering more dangerous, "domino effect" accidents.” (<http://www.iaamweb.org/cvms/IAAMCrowdDyn.doc>)

It will be a PR disaster for the City and London if, in the run up to 2012, health and safety concerns force the closure of this critical route between the bridge and Thames Path. It will be a genuine disaster if any serious injuries are sustained.

That Berkeley Homes may be planning for an elevator to be installed behind the Dock Master’s House, is irrelevant. Such an elevator will have no impact on the current access bottleneck problem. Further, although it may tick the step free access box, its out of the way setting will mean it will not be an ‘inclusive’ access solution.

This issue is also about positioning London as a brand. Around Potters field is a growing cluster of London's 'jewels' (the Shard is to come) and it is unsurprising that increasing numbers of tourists want to visit the area. It is also by the seat of London's government. Business people and policy makers come here to discuss issues such as inward investment. London is doing itself a huge disservice by requiring that these people move between the bridge and the field via an old, often overcrowded, steep staircase. It damages the brand: if London can't manage this, what can it manage?

Given that Berkeley Homes will be developing the nearby site soon, there is now a 'once in several generations' opportunity to find a 'universal win'. A new portal on the site of the existing coffee shop, which is probably already slated for demolition, could deliver significant value to all concerned.

A well designed portal here will, in addition to resolving existing access problems, generate significant additional footfall for both the new mixed use development and the Tower Bridge Experience. It would draw foot traffic that would otherwise simply pass by along the Thames Path to Shad Thames, by its architecture and a slight redesign of the paths around this end of Potters Field. It will also add to the 'critical mass' of interest around Potters Field, and draw yet more visitors. There would even be an opportunity for The Tower Bridge Experience to re-site its ticket office at this portal, to free-up 'in-tower' exhibition/sales space, to generate possible additional souvenir revenues and, most importantly, massively ramp-up visitor numbers.

In the last couple of months I have had the benefit of David Morris' insights as a wheelchair user. Understandably, David would like there to be lifts on the north side too. What really surprised me was that fact that the eastern footpath on the north side is totally inaccessible to wheelchairs. Previously I had ignorantly assumed that, if need be, it was not too much of a diversion for wheelchair users at St Katherine's dock to make their way up the ramp of St Katherine's Way, to get to the bridge. When I examined the area recently I was first surprised at how much of a deviation this was. I was also surprised to discover that there are no dropped kerbs where the eastern Tower Bridge approach pavement meets East Smithfield and St Katherine's way.

Tower Bridge is the nation's première bridge. Given that the nation champions inclusivity; will soon host the Olympic Games and is home to an ageing, crowded and increasingly 'on foot' population, it must be upgraded.

Update on the proposed "1 Bridge, Many People" exhibition.

Since the discussion paper space has been secured at City Hall. The aim now is to mount an exhibition celebrating access improvements in existing buildings. This will comprise a selection of case studies and personal user accounts and will be supported by material from other organisations and printing from Four Graphics Limited. The physical exhibition will be supported by a website at www.betteraccess.org.