

London, 4 June 2021

Stop the Silvertown Tunnel Coalition
c/o Simon Pirani
simonpirani@gmail.com

To: members of the London Sustainable Development Commission

Dear friends,

We write to ask you to call on the London Mayor to review the Silvertown Tunnel project, in the light of the climate emergency declared by the Mayor, the Covid-19 pandemic and the economic effect of Brexit. It was clear even before the declaration of climate emergency, the pandemic and Brexit that the tunnel project would be damaging to sustainable development; now, it is probably the greatest threat to sustainable development in London.

We would ask you to consider three points as follows.

1. The tunnel project runs directly counter to the Sustainable Development Goals, and to the main recommendations of your report, London's Progress Towards Meeting the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (March 2021) (hereafter, the Progress Towards report).

Your first recommendation (Progress Towards report, p. 7) is that London boroughs should embed the principles of the SDGs to support integrated decision-making. And yet in the boroughs that would be affected by the tunnel, Newham, Hackney, Lewisham and Southwark councils have all opposed it, along with local members of parliament. Greenwich councillors have not taken a formal decision to oppose the tunnel, but collectively make no attempt to justify it in public debate. It would be hard to find anyone in these boroughs, which have been so hard pressed by the pandemic, who believes there is no better way of spending £2 billion in the coming years than on a road infrastructure project that will not benefit local communities. Why not review and reconsider?

Your third recommendation is for integrated sustainability plans. The tunnel project, London's largest infrastructure project, flies in the face of this approach. It claims to solve one problem – traffic congestion at the Blackwall tunnel – while creating the danger of a series of much greater problems: exacerbating traffic congestion overall, exacerbating air pollution, diverting resources from sustainable transport modes, widening the gap between London's climate performance and climate targets, and so on. Were it built, the tunnel would positively discourage non-motor transport: cyclists can use it only by taking their bike on a bus; buses have to share lanes with HGVs; there is no provision for innovative types of transport (cargo bikes, electric scooters, etc). A failure to review the project now would be a cynical rejection of your appeal for integrated sustainability plans.

Your fourth recommendation is that government and public bodies should “drive more meaningful community participation”. And yet the tunnel project clearly has no social licence: in addition to the political opposition mentioned above, it is opposed by local doctors, by climate scientists and other researchers, by a string of community organisations ... and supported by no-one in local communities. (We have recorded the extent of opposition to the tunnel on our web site, <https://stopsilvertowntn.com/>.) The project has been characterised by the GLA's shameful refusal to consider community views.

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2. The tunnel project is sure to reverse progress towards “more carbon friendly transport options” that you espouse (Progress Towards report, p. 59). This is because of the well-researched phenomenon of “induced traffic”: more roads produce more traffic. Worse still, the tunnel project is completely incompatible with the climate targets set by the GLA. First, because the projections by TfL of transport sector emissions are far higher than the emissions projected by the GLA itself in line with its decarbonisation targets, and would be higher still if the tunnel were built; and, second, because the GLA’s emissions projections, in their turn, are far higher than projections for made London by the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change, aligned with the city making a fair contribution to the 1.5 degree target. This means that the GLA, while claiming to be leading the way on climate change, has, with its largest spending decision of recent years, launched a project that will inevitably increase London’s greenhouse gas emissions. The problem is analysed in detail in the Stop Digging report, published by the Transport Action Network last year, available here: <https://transportactionnetwork.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Stop-Digging-Report.pdf>

With the support of numerous transport researchers, we have been warning the GLA, TfL and London Assembly members that, while TfL acknowledges that the tunnel will have adverse effects, it claims that these will be met by limiting traffic flow with a user charge. However there is no guarantee that future mayors would impose such a charge at a sufficient level. And no research has been done on whether the congestion problem at the Blackwall tunnel could be solved not by building a second tunnel, but by imposing such a charge on the Blackwall tunnel.

3. The tunnel project can only exacerbate the problem of air quality and health inequalities on which your report focuses. You note the “increased exposure to air pollution in areas that have a high percentage of non-white ethnic groups” (Progress Towards report, p. 63), and point out that “disadvantaged communities and non-white ethnic groups have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic”. The corollary of this is that a project that will inevitably exacerbate air pollution problems in Newham, the most polluted and most ethnically diverse borough, should be re-examined. Since the pandemic and the Brexit decision in any case are significantly altering the long-term traffic projections on which the tunnel was based, not to reconsider it now would be negligent in the extreme.

There is no time to lose in urging the Mayor and the GLA to reconsider this damaging project. We ask you to meet with members of the Stop the Silvertown Tunnel Coalition to discuss these vital issues. Please let us know if you are available to do so.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Simon Pirani', with a horizontal line underneath it.

Simon Pirani,
on behalf of the Stop the Silvertown Tunnel Coalition.