The Thames, London's engine room

With the help of the Thames, could we begin to plan a truly sustainable place? – asks Neil Bennett

The recent, and very welcome, appointment of Kate Willard, as the first Estuary Envoy and Chair of the new Thames Estuary Growth Board hopefully heralds a renewed interest and understanding of the Thames and its vital role in delivering an all-round, truly sustainable, London.

Here at Farrells, we have long regarded the Thames as London's engine room, in its best symbiotic, big-picture sustainability, sense. The news of a new impetus for the Estuary provoked a deeper consideration for me, a polemic even, at this time of stress from Covid-19, for what sustainability and resilience should really mean.

As the downstream part of our metropolis - let's say starting at Tower Bridge (and the City of London Corporation agree as they have clamoured to be part of the Growth Board) - this is a coherent place, shaped by millennia of human activity, and by investment in the assets we need to order to live. The Thames is a part of our ecological system, it's almost our local place, our own Eco-Region.

With much land incrementally reclaimed over time from water and marsh, it is where true globalisation started – with expeditions setting out from Greenwich, Woolwich, and Charlton. The estuary also saw great waves of emigration and immigration. It is still where the great docks were, and are, located, initially in east London, and now at Tilbury and the aptly named new 'London Gateway' port – which is capable of receiving ships with 22,000 containers.

If we look at the "blue infrastructure", it's the source of our drinking water, its where that raindrop on your street will eventually drain into, it's that benign quiet river that has the increasing ability to flood huge areas of our city. It's an underused transport artery, both for people, who want to criss-cross the river , and for heavy freight. And, as you would expect Farrells to say, it is truly the thing that has shaped all of the places in our city.

London is beginning to wake up to the Thames' capacity as a sustainable resource, for both food and energy. Up to very recently the source of 10 per cent of the UK's energy, now renewable power sources, like the London Array of marine windmills, are taking over the brunt of power generation from the old coal-fired power station - though it has to be said some of the transmission wires striding up and down and across the Thames carry electricity generated from nuclear sources in Europe.

And then, we are also dependent on the river as somewhere substantial for London's growth. If you look at the GLA's Opportunity Area plans, most, by area, line either the River Lea or the River Thames. And that is before the 'Gold Coast' plans of L.B. Bexley and others, to exploit better accessibility, including extending the Elizabeth Line to Ebbsfleet.

From the first political moves made to effectively double the >>>

BELOW:
Centuries of coherent economic activity line the Thames

BELOW:
Farrells spatial framework for the Thames Estuary
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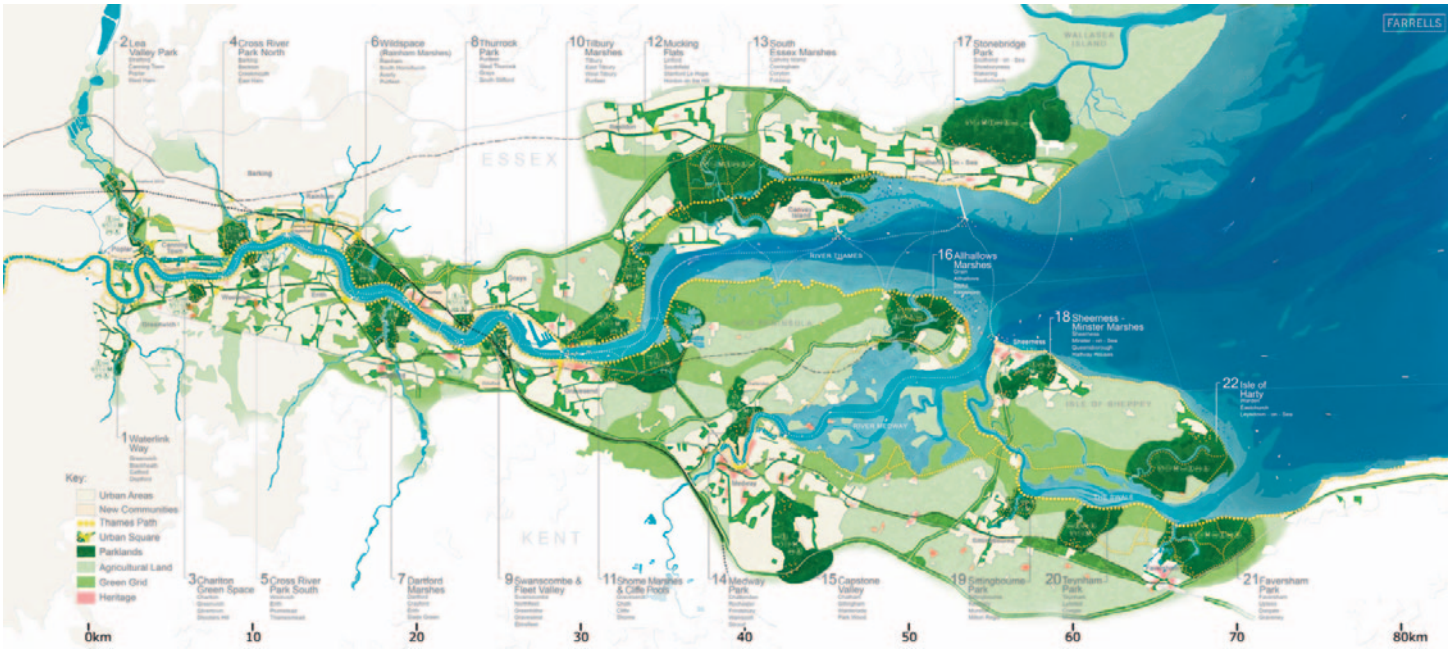

>>> number of people living in the Estuary, we have realised this is a true test of whether the nation is able to sustainably plan for growth, from an economic vision onwards.

A first tenet of sustainability is not how efficient that gizmo on your roof is, but is rather putting new growth next to our existing infrastructure – whether transport hubs, social infrastructure or indeed, existing places where people live, work and socialise.

When a politician, who shall remain nameless, announced there shall be 200,000 new homes in the Estuary, to serve London, the public outcry was enormous, with many visioning new cities and a "cockney Siberia". Farrells were able to show, by sustainably placing new housing next to existing settlements in accessible locations, that all of these homes could be comfortably accommodated, without loss of the green and blue infrastructure – the good things - that shape the Estuary.

This kind of thinking is why eco-extensions, such as our Bicester project, have succeeded, with real zero carbon homes built and occupied, whereas completely new eco-settlements, and new places in London have struggled to emerge – it's just too difficult in the real world to start somewhere from scratch.

A second potential benefit arising from concentrating growth around transport is our continuing reliance on private vehicles. I believe it was Tony Blair who correctly observed that as a nation we made a mistake by allowing everyone access to a car, and today my view is that we are wilfully ignoring the impact of possibly more and more private vehicles.

(One reason I care is because every day a car user very roughly consumes about 40 kwh (i.e. very comparable, if not much greater than the energy consumption of your home), before the energy cost of producing the fuel, and the embedded energy costs of producing (and disposing of) individual vehicles. Source: the late David Mackay – "Sustainable Energy – without the hot air")

I acknowledge that cars are changing from internal combustion to electric (but as I write this 40 per cent of the electric power is being produced by non-sustainable sources), that AV control is on the way, but they are still individual capsules, where I cannot see private ownership changing that much. Those capsules still need roads – with another £27bn pledge in the budget for road improvements, in the never-resolvable quest to remove congestion – and yet still will inflict damage on greater London – its people, its places, it's streets and front gardens.

By building next to transport hubs (properly planned and operated, as multi modal, convenient centres, as the Dutch and others do so much better than we do) , with much more attention to the last mile issues that dog Outer London, could we dramatically diminish private vehicle ownership?

A final point is that London and its Thames eco-region gives us the medium, and the tool kit, for low carbon work and industry, and for low carbon communities. Arguably it is already energy (and water) self-sufficient and has all the potential to be the UK's leading location for low carbon energy, including wind solar, tidal and biomass sources.

With the help of the Thames could we truly begin to plan a sustainable place? ■

Neil Bennett is urban design partner at Farrells