

barking up the wrong tree?

The halting of the development of the light rail extension needed for 11,000 new homes at Barking Riverside throws up a number of questions about our appetite for seeing through major developments in urban brownfield locations, says **Andy Rumfitt**



Left

The Barking Riverside site

In November 2008 the Mayor of London halted the public inquiry process for the proposed Docklands Light Rail (DLR) extension to Dagenham Dock to give time for DLR to negotiate with the Mayor's office and the Government over who will fund the ongoing developmental costs as well as the final £500 million bill. This pause gives the opportunity to reflect on what the DLR scheme's progress to date tells us about our appetite for bringing forward major urban developments and transport infrastructure schemes, and what this means for the policy that espouses such an approach.

Barking Reach is part of the wider London Riverside area of over 320 hectares east of the River Roding. As London's largest brownfield site (at 140 hectares), it is the location for the proposed Barking Riverside development, being taken forward through a joint venture between the Homes and Communities Agency and Bellway Homes. As London's largest single housing development,

Barking Riverside is to be serviced by a 6 kilometre eastwards extension to the DLR, running from Gallions Reach and the Royal Docks to a terminus at Dagenham Dock.

Benefiting from having a much higher people-moving capacity than any bus system, and having much more frequent station stops heavy rail services (as well being faster to implement than heavy rail), the DLR has grown to handle 67 million passenger journeys each year across its 39-station, 31 kilometre network. With the extension to Lewisham, opened in 1999, and the new extension to Woolwich Arsenal, officially opened in January 2009, the DLR's two new river crossings help to connect East London across the Thames.

A recent survey of North Woolwich residents¹ completed two years after the opening of the DLR extension to City Airport shows the importance of the DLR in achieving social inclusion and regeneration outcomes. Just under 90 per cent of



Above

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the residents responding to the survey reported that the DLR extension had improved this deprived area (through improved access to jobs and Central London, for example), and just under 75 per cent felt it had 'improved things for them personally' (for example, it helped them to get to better jobs, and improved their access to further education). As a result, over half of all residents (53 per cent) felt that North Woolwich is improving as an area, compared with just 38 per cent of residents in 2006 when an earlier survey was completed.

Given the ambitious scale of development and its national significance, it is not difficult to argue that the delivery of Barking Riverside is the acid test of the robustness of a range of key government policies and regional and local strategies and plans. The urban location, the re-use of brownfield land and the proposed compact form neatly meet the aims of the *Our Towns and Cities* Urban White Paper.² The integration of physical and social infrastructure and the linking of existing and emerging populations with job opportunities in current and future centres of employment tick many of the boxes in the Sustainable Communities Plan.³ Delivering 11,000 new homes goes a long way in one go to achieving the Thames Gateway Delivery

Plan⁴ aims of providing an additional 110,000 homes by 2016, as well as helping to start to contribute to provision for the 570,000-710,000 additional households that the Mayor of London's Draft Housing Strategy⁵ suggests will be required over the next 20 or so years.

'Opportunity Areas' such as Barking Reach and the Royal Docks are the preferred location for development in the revised and consolidated London Plan,⁶ with potential for additional homes

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and employment opportunities. A development with the potential for a significant modal shift to public transport supports the Department for Transport's aspirations for economic growth in a low-carbon

world.⁷ At a borough level, the relevant extant Unitary Development Plans, emergent Local Development Frameworks, Community Strategies and Transport Implementation Plans all strongly support the proposed housing and transport developments.

A very good case can also be made for the strategic and regenerative response that the DLR would bring to the needs of the communities of Barking and Dagenham. While employment rose by 15 per cent in London between 1984 and 2006, it fell by 24 per cent in Barking and Dagenham – about 1 per cent each year. Currently 20 per cent of residents receive some form of benefit. These long-term job losses are, by and large, due to a reliance on a dwindling traditional manufacturing sector. With employment only forecast to grow by 11 per cent by 2026, and at a much lower rate than surrounding areas, it is clear that any economic transformation based on current trends will be a slow one.

different spatial levels, a clear need for strategic regeneration and high levels of local community support, how has the implementation of the scheme been progressing?

While being a brownfield site scores good policy points, it also means the site is expensive and complicated to develop. Like it or not, while cattle used to graze lazily in these riverine marshes in the not too distant past, the site has suffered from being the destination for much domestic and commercial waste, both legally and illegally, over many years. The area has been a centre of power generation for nearly a hundred years. While the three coal-fired power stations built in 1925, 1939 and 1954 have been decommissioned, a new 1,000 megawatt combined-cycle gas turbine power station opened in 1995 and now provides 2 per cent of national supply. Unsurprisingly, the remaining transmission infrastructure is all-pervasive and not exactly a conducive backdrop for elegant housing schemes.



Above

Home from home? 'A case can be made for much more investment to deliver a desirable residential location, including the undergrounding of the power lines'

The housing issues in Barking are well rehearsed, but suffice to say that 83 per cent of households cannot afford to buy a house and, with a waiting list for housing that grew by 250 per cent between 2001 and 2006, the Borough Council has the longest waiting list for housing in London. There are very real implications for community cohesion, local tensions and health, with 14 of 31 local health indicators being significantly worse than the national average in 2007.

Unsurprisingly, there is a strong desire for change, with some 95 per cent of the 65,000 residents consulted by DLR supporting the proposed light rail extension. So with such good policy support at

And to the north east of Barking Reach, the village of Dagenham was forever changed when Ford bought a 200 hectare site in the 1920s. By 1947 vehicle production reached 115,000, and while car production ended in 2002 there is a continuing focus on diesel engine design and manufacture. Throw into the mix a major Thames Water facility, the River Roding, some operational Thames wharves and a major transport corridor on the northern boundary and the additional challenges of developing a major urban brownfield site become all too apparent.

The vision for the Barking Riverside scheme is for the development of 10,800 new homes over 20 years

Table 1
Benefits of the DLR extension to Dagenham Dock

Economic benefits

- Long-term catalytic and agglomeration effects based on the DLR's past impacts
- Improved labour mobility to the City, Canary Wharf, Stratford City, the Lower Lea Valley and the Olympic Park
- Over 2,730 new construction jobs and 1,450 new permanent jobs
- Extended labour market catchments and improved labour supply for London's firms

Housing benefits

- Delivery of 10,800 homes on Barking Riverside by 2026
- Mixed-income, mixed community to meet local needs, with 30 per cent family housing
- Improvements in quality of life through up to five new schools, parks, 57 hectares of open space, and a polyclinic
- 6,800 houses and their effects entirely dependent on the DLR owing to planning conditions

Policy benefits

- Largest scheme in the Mayor's Draft Housing Strategy
- Core of the Thames Gateway Delivery Plan: with Barking town centre, provides 1 in 12 of all new homes in Thames Gateway – equivalent to 54 per cent of all new homes in Essex Thames Gateway or 40 per cent of all new homes in Kent Thames Gateway
- Major national scheme with more houses than the new town of Northstowe or the urban extension at Peterborough

Financial benefits

- Benefit-cost ratio of 2.2:1
- Leverage of £2 billion of public and private sector funding into Barking Riverside
- An increase in local spending of £29 million
- Reduction in the hidden costs of decline (estimated as at least £61 million per annum)

Environmental benefits

- Very environmentally friendly transport mode, with 40 per cent lower carbon dioxide emissions per passenger-kilometre from the DLR compared with cars
- Significant modal switch to public transport embedded in new development
- Housing on Barking Riverside built to high eco-standards, with each new home achieving a 57 per cent cut in carbon dioxide emissions
- Large-scale remediation of 180 hectares of land

Transport benefits

- Improved journey times and capacity (17 minutes faster to Canary Wharf and 30-40 minutes faster for the Royal Docks)
- Improved interchange, including a Crossrail interchange at Customs House (16-minute feeder service)
- Improved access and safety
- Improved frequency and reliability
- Improved commuting services

to create a new community of some 26,000 people. Just over 40 per cent of the habitable rooms will be affordable. There will be up to four new primary schools and a new secondary school, 2 kilometres of accessible river frontage, 57 hectares of open space, 40,000 square metres of retail and business space, a proposed multi-utility services company (MUSCO), and a range of health, sports and community facilities.

The phasing is closely linked to the delivery of the necessary transport services. The section 106 legal agreement which forms parts of the planning permission (approved in August 2007) states that no more than 1,500 of the 10,800 dwellings may be occupied before there is a Transport and Works Act Order authorising the construction of the DLR extension to Dagenham Dock. The legal agreement

also states that no more than 4,000 of the 10,800 dwellings may be occupied before the proposed extension is operational, which is likely to be 2017 at the earliest.

The proposed DLR extension through Barking Reach has been around for some time. The concept of the scheme was first proposed in 1997, with detailed options appraisal, design, engineering and environmental impact work taking place over the last three years in the run-up to a public inquiry that was planned to start on 4 November 2008 before the Mayor's intervention. To flexibly accommodate current uses and the historical legacy of the site, the proposed route runs through sections of cut and cover, viaduct and track at-grade, in addition to running through a 1.3 kilometre twin tunnel under the River Roding and over a new bridge across the

A13, London-Tilbury line and high-speed rail link, before terminating at a new light rail/rail/bus interchange at Dagenham Dock. With a planned opening date of 2017, delivery of the scheme will have taken 20 years.

Despite the traditionally narrow scope given to the evaluation of transport schemes, the proposed DLR extension is much more than just a transport project. It is at the heart of a strategic transformation programme for 26,000 new residents and 166,000 current residents. It is a prerequisite for housing-led growth at a new sustainable community on the largest brownfield site in London. It is the physical manifestation of at least ten years of urban regeneration, housing and transport policy. The specific benefits are given in Table 1.

While the official line is that the proposed DLR extension is halted rather than cancelled, it does provide another example in a rather long list of major schemes that struggle to come forward owing to their long-term time horizons. Any focus on urban brownfield sites to deliver a host of policy aspirations will require courage, a consistency of direction and funding through thick and thin, as the

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current political, financial and economic climate starkly reminds us. Bringing large-scale schemes forward is expensive and complicated, and so by necessity is a long-term endeavour. Even relatively well advanced schemes do not necessarily fit well with a Keynesian call for accelerated public sector investment to mitigate the consequences of a recession.

However, the DLR extension and the multi-modal terminus at Dagenham Dock would do more than just support the 26,000 residents on Barking Riverside. Projecting forward changes in uses and densities, this area of East London could be home to another 50,000 residents over the next 30-plus years. This is not something that can be allowed to happen haphazardly: it requires a strategic and integrated planning approach.

Arguably the investment in a light rail extension is the minimum required to deliver a sustainable and durable community at Barking Riverside. A case can

be made for much more investment to deliver a desirable residential location, including the undergrounding of the power lines. Worryingly, it took a once in a 50 year event – the Olympics – to achieve this in the Lower Lea Valley. Can we afford to bring these sorts of sites forward, and are we willing to invest enough in the required enabling infrastructure to make them successful places?

If we can't afford to develop Barking Riverside, then what are the alternatives to accommodating this scale of housing development; and what would failure say about the value of current policy? While it is difficult to see how the housing numbers game will survive the current turmoil, what are the alternatives for Barking and Dagenham (and London) to absorb this scale of residential development over the next 20-30 years into well crafted and successful places where people want to live?

● **Andy Rumfitt** is Director of Innovacion. The views expressed here are personal to the author.

Notes

- 1 *North Woolwich Research: Changes 2006-2008: The influence of Docklands Light Railway*. Social Research Associates, for Docklands Light Rail, Jul. 2008. www.tfl.gov.uk/assets/downloads/north-woolwich-research-report.pdf
- 2 *Our Towns and Cities: The Future – Towards an Urban Renaissance*. Urban White Paper. Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, 2000
- 3 *Sustainable Communities: Building for the Future*. Sustainable Communities Plan. Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, 2003
- 4 *Thames Gateway – The Delivery Plan*. Department for Communities and Local Government. HM Government, 2007
- 5 *The London Housing Strategy. Draft for Consultation with the London Assembly and Functional Bodies*. Mayor of London, Nov. 2008. www.london.gov.uk/mayor/housing/strategy/docs/strategy.pdf
- 6 *The London Plan: Spatial Development Strategy for Greater London. Consolidated with Alterations since 2004*. Greater London Authority, Feb. 2008. www.london.gov.uk/thelondonplan/docs/londonplan08.pdf
- 7 *Towards a Sustainable Transport System: Supporting Economic Growth in a Low Carbon World*. Cm 7226. Department for Transport, 2007