

THAMES GATEWAY – LANDSCAPE: THE FIRST INFRASTRUCTURE

The following paper is based on the work of the urban design group of Terry Farrell & Partners and conversations with Sir Terry Farrell, stakeholders in the Thames Gateway and senior British politicians. The author is the project leader for the Thames Gateway National Park concept.

The east has long been the poor, neglected side of London and was even recently described in the press as the “cockney Siberia”¹ or the “land that God forgot”². The Thames Gateway initiative provides a unique opportunity to transform the region, but as yet it lacks an identifiable, coherent vision.

This paper proposes a radical and exciting alternative and vision for the Thames Gateway. We can achieve all the development proposed – 200,000 new homes and more – through high density, low-rise development. In fact, most of the area in question will remain countryside. There is an essential opportunity therefore to focus on the area’s landscape – the primary task is therefore to use landscape as the big coherent vision.

- New homes on brownfield land cannot form the sole vision for the Thames Gateway
- New housing development will only add 5% of built up area – the essential opportunity is to focus on the landscape
- Therefore 90% of the proposed housing development could be built in the London Thames Gateway area
- The primary task is not urban regeneration but to balance this with rural regeneration

What we therefore ask is twofold:

- What is the landscape “capability” of the Thames Gateway?
- Could development begin with a vision celebrating the existing landscape and creating a new world-class landscape?

Preface

Sir Terry Farrell has said of the Thames Gateway, *“We are looking at a desperate landscape which has suffered hugely from industrialisation and neglect; not a positive place to start as an attractor to new inhabitants and visitors. Yet the landscape of the UK is almost entirely man-made and we have the choice to re-make it. We should transform the Thames Gateway from a dispirited, neglected landscape into a very positive, fine new landscape. In effect, we are proposing a ‘greenprint’ for the Thames Gateway. Creating a new green infrastructure would be an investment in ‘placemaking’. New parks and commons, with the quality and stewardship of London’s Royal Parks, would actually have a positive effect in the region creating new opportunities for ecological balance, tourism and employment. Why not a new type of National Park for the Thames Gateway?”*

Political Background

By 2020, if the government’s plans succeed, the Thames Gateway will be a destination of choice for living and working. It will form a new city within a city, with a well-designed mixture of houses, a range of job opportunities, excellent social and cultural infrastructure and good transport connections to the rest of London, South East England and Europe. Tapping into the

development potential of the Thames Gateway will help to accommodate London's growth without encroaching on green field sites or the Green Belt, will deliver significant quantities of affordable housing, and will improve quality of life through integrated social, environmental and economic revitalisation for existing communities.

Public sector agencies, and local and regional authorities, will work with the private sector to build new housing that is integrated with - and reflects the character of - East London's existing communities, that centres on hubs served by new and existing public transport, and that is designed to include buildings and public space of the highest quality. New and emerging opportunities such as London's bid for the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games will be managed to optimise local benefit and act as catalysts for these changes.³

At least that is the aspiration, but as yet there has been nothing to convince future residents that the Thames Gateway should be the next residential destination of choice.

The Context & Analysis

Through its sheer scale, the Thames Gateway is an initiative of national and indeed international significance.

The statistics in relation to Thames Gateway are mind-boggling. In encompassing the reappraisal and regeneration of some 1200 square miles of the Thames estuary to the east of London, this initiative is equivalent in scale to the West Midlands or Bedfordshire. The Thames Gateway area includes within its boundaries large parts of the counties of Kent and Essex, which the government have declared that new settlements should be created to assist in the development of London and the south-east of England. As a consequence, some 200,000 new homes are proposed throughout the region, the equivalent in scale to a town/city the size of Edinburgh. No initiative has been proposed on this scale since the re-building of our towns and cities after the devastation caused during the second world war.

The Thames Gateway initiative has been stimulated by a variety of factors, not least of which is the growing availability of land arising from the closure of factories in the post-industrial era, the construction of the CTRL through the region (and the consequent planned improvements in the transport infrastructure) and the governments response to predictions of an emerging national housing shortage.

Yet despite the immense scale of this undertaking, there is little evidence of a co-ordinated approach to this endeavour. What is the grand vision for the Thames Gateway? Who is responsible for giving clarity to such a vision? What are the dreams and aspirations of those who will inhabit this new region? Who will champion and protect the vision when it is formulated? These questions remain unanswered.

To date, the publicity surrounding the Thames gateway has been characterised by 'negative' aspirations. In the same way that the term 'Congestion Charging' uses two words with significant negative association to describe a positive initiative to free our city centres from the tyranny of the motor vehicle, so is the Thames Gateway contaminated by adjectives destined to promote the negative: 'housing shortage', 'contamination', 'remediation', 'industrial dereliction', 'brownfield land' and so on. Yet these are the words chosen by politicians to describe the initiative and to encourage the re-population of the region. Given that publicity, who would go and live there out of choice?

It was in this context that Terry Farrell and Partners decided to provoke a debate on what is the right approach to the Thames Gateway from the viewpoint of urbanists and designers. We began to ask ourselves if there is a better starting point, and what would it take to change people's perceptions from negative to positive in relation to Thames Gateway?

Clearly, the region does suffer from the legacy of the industrial era. The region is littered with pylons and overhead cables carrying London's power from northern and French power stations. To this day it still plays host too much of London's sewerage treatment plants. Yet interspersed with these large scale infrastructure issues is a truly remarkable natural and built heritage. Areas which have been left undisturbed for decades have recolonised with the most amazing examples of biodiversity in Great Britain. The history of defending London from land and water-borne attack has resulted in some of the most outstanding surviving examples of military architecture anywhere. The natural beauty of the estuarine environment is increasingly well represented in areas such as Rainham Marshes - Britain's first nature reserve to be situated within a large urban conurbation. Taken as a whole, there exists the potential for a designated landscape on the scale of the Norfolk Broads, the New Forest or a National Park.

Given the potential of the positive nature of much of this initial fact-finding exercise, the group led by Sir Terry Farrell have started to explore the potential for promoting a different vision for the Thames Gateway, asking should the starting point be an investment in a newly created public realm of open parkland or 'green infrastructure'?

Inspired by the way that the Royal Parks of London evolved from hunting grounds to become much-loved areas of 'trapped countryside', we are interested in exploring further how the success of the Royal Parks 'brand' may be applied to the Thames Gateway. They are characterised by a high standard of quality stewardship, add significantly to the lives of most Londoners and have been described by Sir Terry as "the only world-class public realm in the country". They are attractions within themselves, they are centres of horticultural excellence, they provide a home for rallies and concerts and even events of national celebration. Most significantly they enhance property values.

Given the estuarine nature of the natural environment, the character of parkland spaces in the Thames Gateway would need to respond accordingly. They might be somewhat more 'wild' in nature and take on more of the sprawling heath land quality of Richmond, Ham Common or Hampstead Heath. In the way that Bushey Park, Hampton Court and Richmond Park enrich the composition of west London, so too could Greenwich Park be complemented perhaps by larger (less formal) green open space further downstream.

Clearly these ideas are in their infancy and there is much work to be done, but it is a vision which might start to unite the Thames Gateway and feed into the 'Green Grid' and 'Green Arc' concepts already being explored.

However the problem is this...

- Firstly, those planning the Thames Gateway perceive it on too small a scale and in fragmented bits, this is also true of the initiatives being proposed.
- Secondly, the Thames Gateway is perceived as an urban expansion project, but as this paper will explain, the quantum of urban expansion is not considerable at all.

Take the five central London boroughs. Central London Partnership tell us that their population is the same as the whole of the Thames Gateway (see figure 1).

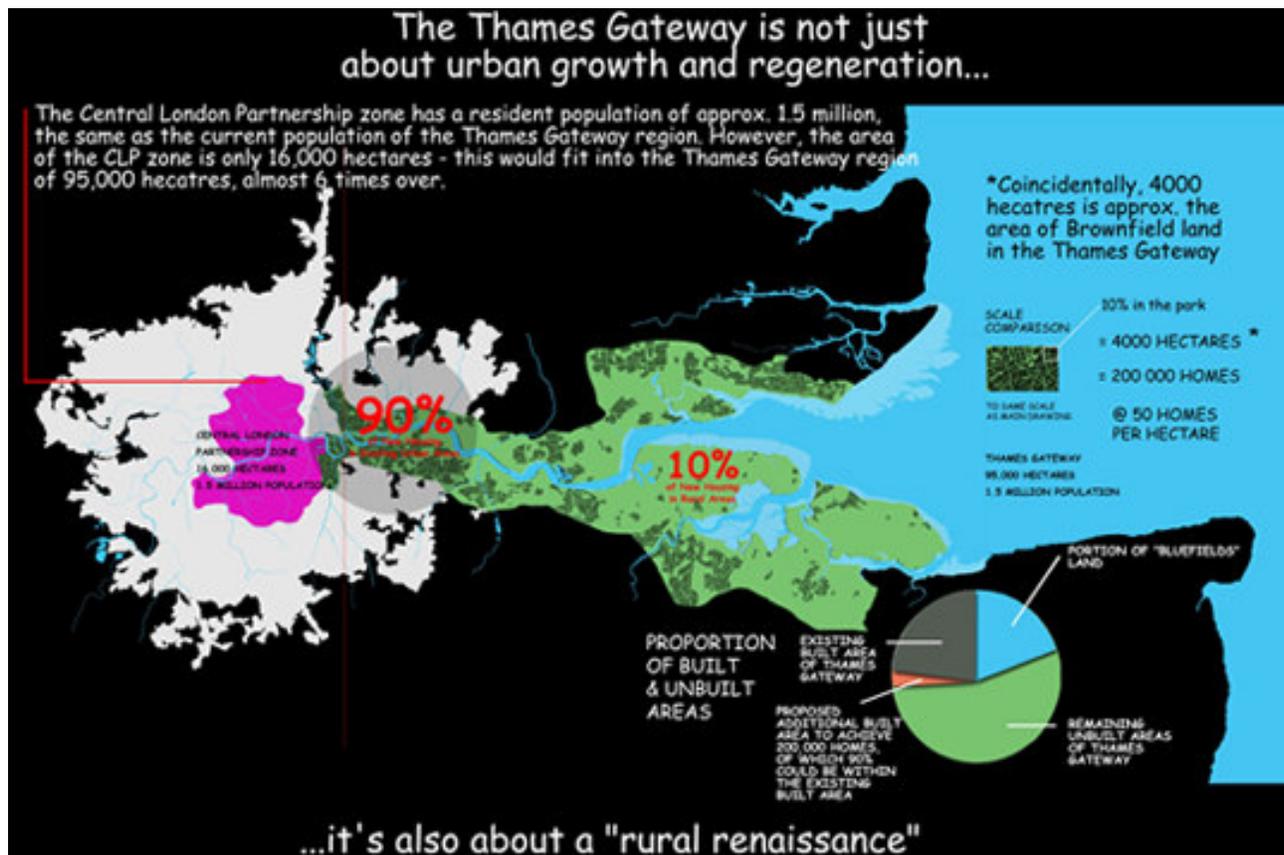


Figure 1 – The population of the five central London boroughs is the same as the whole of the Thames Gateway, however, it's area of 16,000 hectares would fit into the Thames Gateway nearly 6 times over. The red segment of the pie chart shows the area 200,000 new homes would take.

The Main Thrust

People will soon realize this is not about urbanization but that it is actually about **rural regeneration** – a policy area, which has been neglected by the current government.

This is a story, a project. We are looking at a desperate landscape, which has had a huge amount of industry and neglect; it is scrubby and not very fine. It is also under enormous threat from the effects of flooding and global warming. More than any other parts of urbanised Britain and issues of landscape and rural regeneration and these issues are central to this thesis up and down the country.

There are parts of Britain, for instance Lincolnshire and areas of South Wales, where the primary task is not urban regeneration but to balance rural regeneration with urban regeneration. These two go together, they cannot be split.

The idea is that regeneration landscape is entirely man made. Take Stonehenge - the pillars

were built in the middle of a forest clearing and English Heritage are now trying to protect the moorland setting. The moorland is entirely man made as we cut the forest down. If you look at the Yorkshire Dales, not only did man make them, by cutting down the forest to make fields for the sheep but man is now artificially conserving it, through English Heritage and others giving grants to the sheep farmers, in order that their uneconomic activity can be made economic. The listed buildings, all the stone farmhouses, field divisions, little byres and all the little ancillary landscape that makes up the Yorkshire Dales is conserved so Britain is in the business of artificially creating landscape. It is part of what we do.

Creating nature through parks and forests

The ecology is also essential. Creating nature through parks and forests actually has a very positive effect. Create a new landscape by creating parks, in the gaps of urbanisation, with the quality of stewardship and husbandry of the Royal Parks. This has to be a positive policy, not just plonked down bits of green. If this is done, like the tourism in the Yorkshire Dales it becomes part of the economy. Maintained landscaped parks, commons and forests are genuine employers. They create employment for people and you could argue that the new settlements would have a relationship to these parks and commons. The South Downs currently creates some 9,000 jobs and adds over £300 million to the local economy.

An area of merit and attraction

We should not be saying “how do we fit in more houses, and how do we expand on them and what roads do we need to do this?”. We should be saying, “How do you take a piece of neglected dispirited landscape and make a very positive new landscape?” You are expanding into an area of merit and attraction. It becomes an attractor. People want to live in the west of London, and beyond, Gloucestershire, Berkshire and Surrey because of the landscape. They don't want to go east because the landscapes have been ruined by neglect and by past industrialization. But industries have changed and the time has come to adapt.

The Four Main Areas

The structure of the Thames Gateway Park will need exactly how it will be different from the other growth regions that the government has identified. There are therefore four main areas that will need to be analysed:

Governance

- A single body responsible for the National Park to streamline the work done by over 60 different agencies in the area (see figure 3)

Physical Environment

- Grounding overhead power lines
- A comprehensive flooding policy that includes strategies on flood barriers, SUDS, sacrificial lands and so on, with a proposed flood barrier at Tilbury Docks (see figure 2)
- Investment in Landscape Projects : Flagship for EU Landscape Strategy and Rio Summit protocols especially on carbon emissions

Planning

- Density policy that provides sufficient housing whilst maintaining the landscape

- Encourage life on the river by creating 20 000 new moorings
- A regional framework plan for the whole area in addition to RPG9a
- Streamlined planning process for the delivery of housing densification in the Thames Gateway Urban (TGU)

Economics

- Tax relief and grants on start-up rural businesses and industries
- Attraction of EU funding
- Tax relief for the construction of sustainable housing
- Creation of a “Green PFI” process
- Creation of tax efficient Thames Gateway bonds

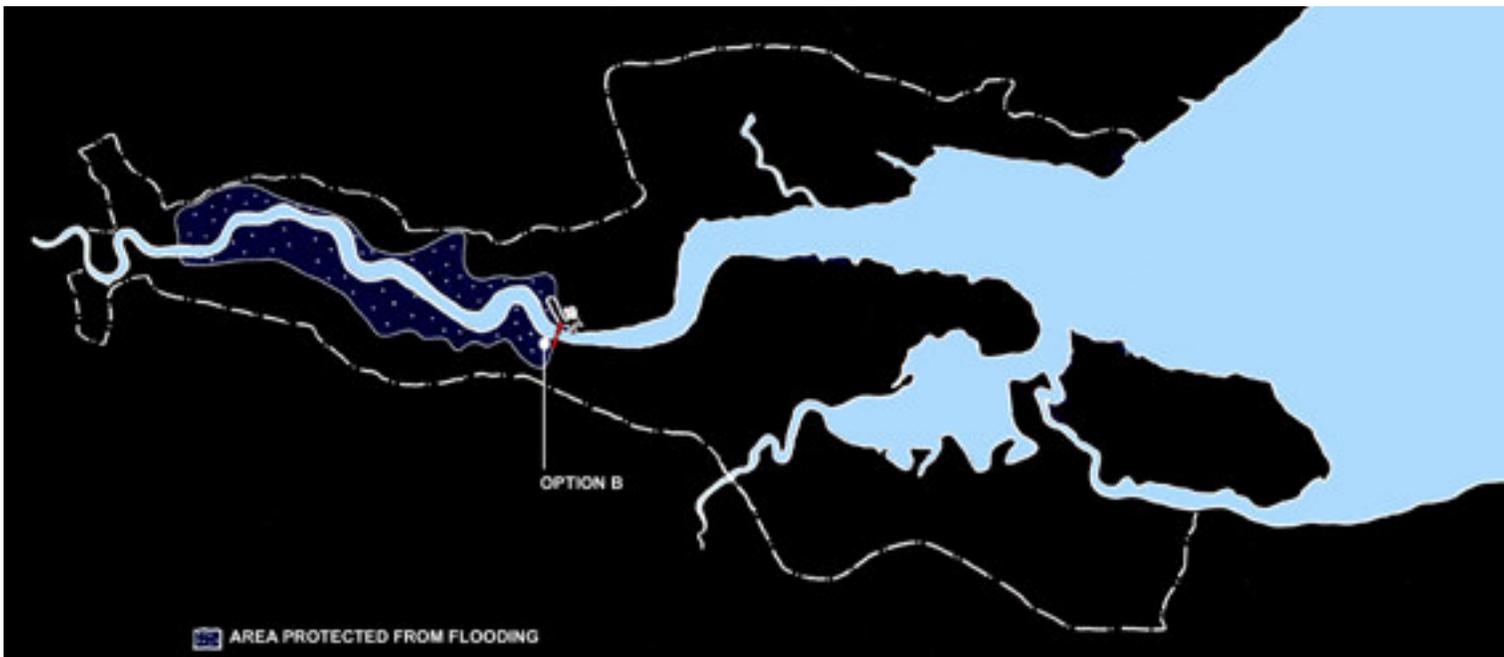


Figure 2 – Tidal Barrier option for the Thames Gateway

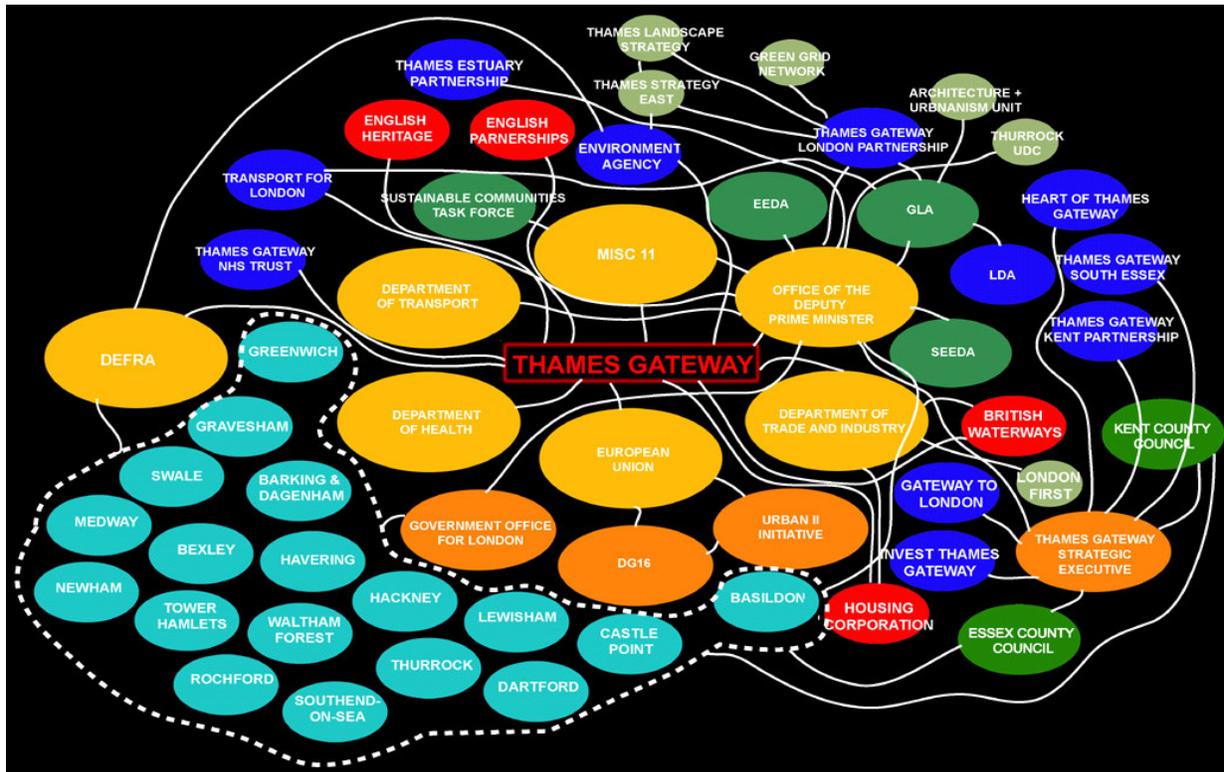


Figure 3 – Confusion of Governance

The 12 Point Manifesto

The area, of course, would not be a traditional “National Park” as set out in legislation. It would therefore need a mission statement about what the aspirations of this “new type” of National Park should be:

1. **Create a new type of National Park** as an investment in landscape on the doorstep of London and to raise the public awareness of the natural landscape heritage
2. **Invest in an infrastructure of** accessibility designed to make the region more accessible to all
3. **Grow the existing communities** by the intensive development of new homes in gaps in the existing urban fabric where economic shifts have created them
4. **Enhance the diversity of landscape typologies** in the region through reuse of ‘rural’ brownfield land for the creation of new countryside
5. **Reverse the destruction of traditional wetland landscapes and habitats** and reverse the utilisation of the region as a dumping ground for London. Reintroduce flora and fauna which once flourished in these areas
6. **Reconnect the north and south banks** of the Thames Gateway with central London through a network of new fast-link ferries
7. Expand the **network of long distance pedestrian and cycle paths** to connect the whole region together and to link with the national networks being established
8. **Develop the economic profile of the new park** from industrial/commercial to tourism attractor and encourage land and water based leisure activities

9. **Discover ways to accommodate climate change** in the new landscape and leisure industry. Look to other northern European countries for innovative methods of flood protection and power generation
10. **Explore ways of sustainable living** such that the Thames Gateway could become a model for living and working through encouraging industries with and environmental agenda, sustainable waste management regimes etc.
11. **Set up special planning and tax measures** for the region.
12. **Ensure political “buy in”** by placing the policy into the manifestoes of all the main political parties.

There has been a good degree of political buy in already, however what remains now is to actually convince decision-makers that the landscape should be regarded as important green infrastructure, with a central role in securing successful and sustainable economic and social regeneration in area which has been traditionally neglected, because after all, what is the point of building 200,000 new homes if nobody wants to live there?

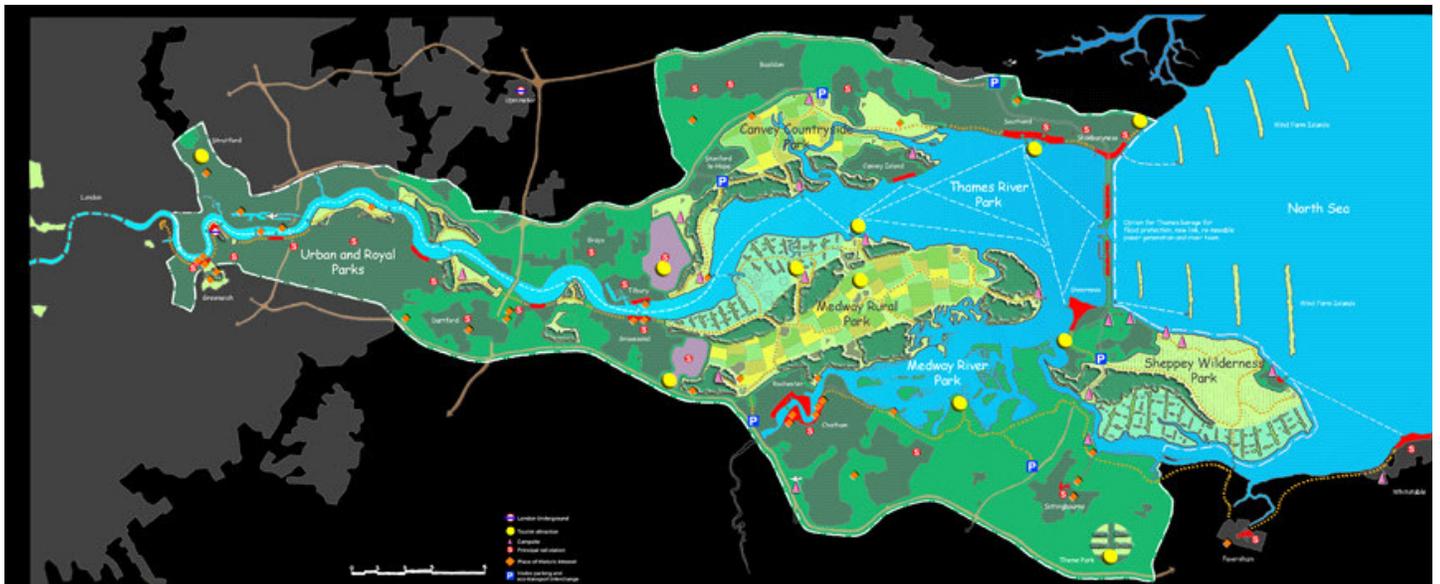


Figure 4 – A Vision for Thames Gateway Park

¹ Glancey, Jonathan (2003), *The Guardian*

² Steven Norris (London Mayoral candidate) in conversation with the author, October 2003.

³ London Development Agency, (April 2004), *London Thames Gateway – Development and Investment Framework*