



NOT FIT FOR PURPOSE? – Inquiry to look at controversial new powers sought by the Port of London Authority. Start date: February 25 2025

- **Who runs the River Thames?** Since 1909, London’s largest open public space has been controlled by the Port of London Authority (“PLA”), **an opaque organisation with vast powers but remarkably little accountability.**
- **What’s at stake?** The PLA is now pushing to increase its powers by means of a little-known legislative device called a Harbour Revision Order (“HRO”). This allows the PLA to change its own Act without parliamentary approval.
- **At whose cost?** The PLA, as a Trust Port, is required to act for the benefit of all its stakeholders, which include vessels, marine operators and waterside communities. Objectors say this new HRO stands to cause **financial and other harms to many stakeholders**, the vast majority of whom know nothing about the proposed changes.
- **Conflicts of interest and abuses of monopoly?** Objectors point to conflicts between the PLA’s roles as commercial landowner, lender, licensor, regulator and statutory consultee. Environmental groups lament too much green talk and not enough green action. But the PLA argues that any scrutiny of its current operations is beyond the scope of the HRO.
- **New environmental provisions ruled out.** The PLA claims it needs this HRO to “modernise” its Act but insists new provisions to tackle climate change and pollution are also irrelevant to the HRO, even when it comes to sewage, emissions and wash from the very vessels – including cruise ships – that the PLA charges to navigate the Thames.
- Objectors are alarmed at the prospect of new powers for a regime so **lacking in transparency.** The PLA does not answer to FOI and has no Ombudsman or independent regulator. It isn’t accountable to the Mayor of London or the GLA. Unlike Planning and Licensing authorities, the PLA makes its **decisions behind closed doors. There’s no public register** of existing PLA River Works Licences for the structures that shape the built environment of the Thames. And there’s no published list of most related fees, such as those for balconies.
- Objectors say this HRO fails to recognise **how much the Thames has changed.** It’s decades since London’s larger port functions were privatised and moved downstream to Tilbury and Thames Gateway. Today’s metropolitan river is lined with residential blocks, heritage and cultural institutions, hospitals, offices and hospitality businesses. Objectors support a thriving port, but shouldn’t any “modernisation” of the PLA’s Act reflect today’s Thames and its needs?
- The PLA first submitted its proposed HRO in April 2020. But river users, as well as community and environmental groups, have refused to withdraw their objections. The PLA is not backing down. So the HRO is now going to an [Inquiry](#) starting on Tuesday 25 February 2025, at 46 New Broad Street EC2M 1JH, chaired by [Christopher Jacobs](#).

Further information about the Inquiry, including documents submitted in evidence, can be found at [Helen Wilson Consultancy Limited](#)

EVIDENCE PRESENTED TO THE INQUIRY HIGHLIGHTS MAJOR ISSUES INCLUDING:

- An absence of any new provisions to tackle the climate emergency and pollution on the Thames, with river emissions now threatening to undermine the hard-won gains of ULEZ.
- The PLA's role in the sewage crisis in the Thames.
- Excessive unenforced speeding creating wash from Thames Clippers and other operators, damaging the homes of boat-dwellers, eroding the shoreline and threatening wildlife.
- Increasing numbers of cruise ships allowed into central London at a time when cities like Venice, Barcelona and Amsterdam are restricting entry and adding environmental controls.
- Potentially misleading green claims while the PLA, the self-styled "custodian" of the Thames, too often seeks to delegate climate action to other bodies – though retaining the near exclusive right to harvest income from the river.
- The PLA's aggressive commercial tactics and lack of transparency when extracting charges including those on balconies over the river, a situation referred last year to the Competition and Markets Authority.
- Can the PLA ever be truly fit for purpose or should the government be looking towards a new, modern statutory body with full accountability and transparency, FOI and an Ombudsman?

COMMENTS:

Ralph Hardwick, Chair of the River Residents Group, said, *"For many years I have been challenging the PLA with regard to vessel emissions, especially from cruise ships. The PLA says that this HRO is designed to modernise its operation but wishes to avoid environmental concerns affecting the River Thames. The PLA style themselves as 'custodians' of the river, but this HRO proposal fails to build any current legislative environmental protections into any of its regimes as landlord, lender, licensor, regulator and statutory consultee to all landside river development."*

Michelle Lovric, Vice-Chair of the River Residents Group, added, *"The PLA has refused to engage with our evidence on emissions, cruise ships and water pollution, failing even to offer an environmental witness to this Inquiry. But the environment does not consent to be ignored in the matter of this HRO, the business of which is maintenance and improvement of London's greatest natural resource. The PLA promises to leave the river better than they found it. This HRO would leave the PLA itself better off and its directors more protected from liability. But will future generations inherit a healthier Thames, or just a more powerful, less accountable authority?"*

Diana McCann, from environmental group Thames Blue Green Economy, said, *"The tidal River Thames should be a public commons, held on trust for the people, as stakeholders of the PLA. But Londoners have been effectively hoodwinked by the PLA into seeing the river as something to be driven over and walked along, priced out of sailing or rowing on, frightened to swim in or just mess about in. We know that being in green Nature is good for us – being on or in blue Nature should feel as natural as walking in our local park too and our Thames should be clean, accessible and free to love and enjoy."*

David Beaumont, of the Organisation of PLA Customers, said, *"The PLA, as it is now, was created by their own Private Act of Parliament in 1968. Their 2025 Harbour revision Order (HRO) is a power grab, significantly increasing the legal privileges they arranged for themselves in 1968 but this time without the inconvenience of having to go through Parliament. Sadly it is the sort of behaviour we have come to expect from a self-funded, self-serving QUANGO financed by their*

compulsory fees on river users. Fortunately enough people have objected to force this Public Inquiry about the HRO."

Nick Lacey, from the Tower Bridge Yacht and Boat Company, said, "So are the PLA still the best people to completely control one of London's greatest but most underappreciated public assets, Old Father Thames? Or should a new body be set up, directly accountable to the GLA and to the people of London? Despite strenuous efforts to limit its scope, in the wider picture this Inquiry represents a rare, perhaps unique, opportunity to scrutinise the PLA's powers and operations, and to think about possible alternatives."

Simon Anthony, who represents many flat owners living along the Thames, said: "The PLA has been abusing its considerable powers unchecked for decades, even bringing a private criminal prosecution in an attempt to extract more money from river residents. It's been charging residents ever more extortionate amounts for their balconies, rainwater outfalls and disused 'campsheds', all of which it dubiously classifies as commercial 'works'. These charges are so inflated, for example, that residents with balconies are now paying more per square metre than their flats are worth and 10 times more per square metre of river than is paid by the hugely profitable London Eye. The PLA claims these charges are 'fair' but refuses to provide any credible justification. It's a completely unaccountable body with no government control and no ombudsman or regulator and the last thing residents want is for it to grant itself even more powers. The PLA no longer has a port to run (since that was privatised and moved downstream decades ago), is a 'self-serving' monopoly and needs radical reform."

DIRECTORY: among objectors giving evidence are:

Thames Blue Green Economy, Diana McCann tbgebluegreening@gmail.com

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National Bargee Travellers Association [National Bargee Travellers Association – Representing the interests of all itinerant live-aboard boat dwellers](#) press@bargee-traveller.org.uk

Organisation of PLA Customers [OPLAC](#) David Beaumont david@johmar.com

River Residents Group, [River Residents Group](#) Paul Crosbie (see below)

Simon Anthony, member of the public, simondavidanthony@gmail.com

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Lawyers for Nature [Lawyers for Nature](#) Paul Powlesland

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For other objectors, see the Inquiry website above.

BACKGROUND READING:

<https://www.thehistoryoflondon.co.uk/the-port-of-london-authority/>

The PLA's annual report and accounts for 2023 [annual-report-and-accounts-2023.pdf](#)

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