

Generating good growth in the Thames Estuary

Introduction

Thank you very much Teresa [O'Neill]. It is a genuine pleasure and privilege to be here this afternoon.

Again, as we look at that continuing work to ensure that we see the Thames Estuary, this area of opportunity, does truly fulfil its potential.

And as we have heard from other speakers, I certainly agree with them that I do not see this as an either/or. It is about ensuring that we have that growth across the country. Through the Northern Powerhouse, through the Midlands Engine, through the Oxford-Cambridge Arc as well as the Great South West.

But also, very firmly, seeing that this area that has so much potential, that I think has been recognised over so many years, how we haven't in the past managed to unlock this.

Now I think we do have that chance, that opportunity, indeed that duty, to see that we do.

And it has been over a year since we met across the river at Purfleet for the launch of Thames Estuary 2050, where Sir John Armit and his fellow commissioners unveiled their exciting vision for this unique part of the world.

- 1.3 million more jobs,
- £190 billion in extra growth,
- and at least one million new homes to support that growth by 2050.

These are big ambitions, yes.

But as I said last year: when it comes to harnessing the incredible, untapped potential of the UK's most important waterway, our ambitions for the Thames Estuary should know no limit.

And I'm not just saying that because this is, yes, my manor in terms of having represented constituencies both on the north and south sides of the Thames.

But because, from the Romans who established Londinium to the present day, the Estuary continues to be a vital economic gateway to the rest of the UK and beyond.

To our biggest export markets in mainland Europe and the rest of the world – something we'll want to capitalise on even more powerfully after Brexit.

That, plus, its world-beating expertise on ports and logistics, successful creative hubs, outstanding natural landscapes and the fact that it boasts 30% of the brownfield land in the south east, I think adds to a wealth of potential just waiting to be unlocked.

Just think: the Estuary is home to nearly 4 million people.

It covers an area of comparable size and opportunity to the likes of the Northern Powerhouse, the Midlands Engine or the Oxford-Cambridge Arc.

And so I'm delighted to see the new vision for the Estuary matching this enormous promise for the benefit for all its places and people.

But on that score, it's clear there is more to do.

Unemployment, skills, growth and productivity are all weaker here than in other parts of the country.

It's therefore right that the vision for the Estuary's future is rooted in the River Thames as a catalyst for growth and jobs – for unleashing opportunity and prosperity for everyone living and working in the Estuary.

And for me, that really come down to 3 things: people, purpose and place.

People

There's no question that people – the Estuary's talented, hard-working, unique people – remain its greatest asset.

People who deserve the opportunity to go for the high-skill high-wage jobs of the future – which means equipping them with the skills for the future.

The Estuary's international airports, sea ports, growing universities, and world-leading industries are great assets in this regard.

Digital skills, too, are an essential part of the mix. And I'm pleased the south east is 1 of the 6 pilot regions for our Local Digital Skills Partnership.

It's one of the many ways we're seeking to give people opportunities to succeed – from the introduction of a world-class technical education system and the T-Level, to our first 12 Institutes of Technology.

Indeed, one of these Institutes will be at Barking and Dagenham College – an endeavour I hope will set many people on the path to great jobs and great careers.

Purpose

Jobs and careers that speak to a sense of purpose, my second theme, and confidence in the future – that make the Thames Estuary a place where people want to stay – and where others want to be.

First and foremost, this involves making the most of economic growth.

A good example of this is work being undertaken by the Department for International Trade with 23 Export Champions in the area to help boost exports and encourage more businesses to come.

But purpose is about much more than just growing – it's also about how we grow.

And I've been really pleased to see the scale of ambition from partners in the Thames Estuary Production Corridor – helping the area become a world-class centre for production with a focus on the creative and cultural industries.

You'll soon be able to see that creativity in full flow down the road, where Berkeley Homes' new modular construction factory will produce the homes of the future.

And also through the work we're doing to support a year of cultural activities for the Estuary.

Because it's that powerful combination of people and purpose – better jobs, smarter growth and, yes, building the homes we need – that forms the bedrock of strong, vibrant places in the Estuary and elsewhere.

Place

Housing, in particular, is, on so many levels, the key to unlocking a better life. And that does firmly take me to place.

It is why it's one of our top domestic priorities – and why it's good to see that Ebbsfleet Development Corporation has now delivered 1,500 new homes in Ebbsfleet Garden City, a place where I have even greater ambitions.

But as I've said, many times before, this isn't about building more homes.

It's about building communities – which is why we're also investing in the transport links, infrastructure and vibrant high streets that are essential to helping communities thrive.

We've announced £4.85 million to local partners to support development of low-cost transport options between Abbey Wood and Ebbsfleet.

We're progressing with the Lower Thames Crossing – the largest single road investment project in the UK since the completion of the M25.

We're investing over £290 million in 41 projects across north Kent and south Essex, through the South East Local Enterprise Partnership, to generate the jobs and growth this area needs.

And we're revitalising town centres across the country through our £675 million Future High Streets Fund – and in that context I note that Chatham and Dartford have been shortlisted for funding.

But as we build more homes and grow new communities, we need to think not just about today's priorities, but about the legacy we're leaving for our children and their children by respecting the Estuary's outstanding natural beauty – by leaving it cleaner and greener than we found it.

That entails securing biodiversity net gain from new development – enhancing the environment for wildlife and people alike.

And also bolstering the defences of communities against weather-related emergencies through initiatives such as the Thames Estuary 2100 Plan – which aims to protect 1.3 million people – including £275 billion worth of property and infrastructure – from the increasing risk of tidal flooding.

My thanks do go to the Environment Agency for their work in this area.

Next steps

Because that's what this project is all about: making the Estuary a great place to live and work for generations to come.

And it's important we recognise, that while substantial government efforts will of course be required to meet our ambitions for the Estuary, local people and local businesses here in Kent and Essex must remain in the driver's seat.

That's why we are taking steps to strengthen governance in the region. At Autumn Budget we announced a £10 million fund to support local areas delivering development through innovative models such as Development Corporations.

In March I announced our commitment to explore locally-led development corporations where areas are looking to grow.

Today I want to make clear again that where there are innovative ideas for major housing and regeneration projects – especially in places of high housing need – we will back them.

Our door is always open to offer support to local areas with ambitious growth and housing plans.

And to give local authorities more clarity on the scope of their powers and encourage a more proactive approach to development, I can today announce that we've published guidance on the compulsory purchase powers of New Town Development Corporations.

Realising the full potential of the Thames Estuary Vision will require careful coordination and collaboration between the government and local partners across the region.

It's for this reason that the government is also setting up the Thames Estuary Board responsible for shaping one shared strategic vision for the region and driving progress towards it.

I'm pleased to see the strides we've made towards this – with more than £1 million going towards getting the Thames Estuary Board off the ground to support the Thames Gateway Strategic Group's plans.

Recruitment for an independent Chair of the board – a strong champion to lead the next phase of this work – is now also live.

And when it comes to next steps, the role of this champion, working with a new Cabinet-level ministerial champion – who can co-ordinate this agenda across government and drive growth at pace – will be key to providing stronger governance and keeping up the momentum.

All of us – central and local government, businesses, those engaged in voluntary partnerships – have a stake in the Estuary's future – particularly those on the ground.

And I want to see local stakeholders really come together to advocate for the Estuary with one voice at a regional level and support the new independent champion once they're appointed in the autumn.

You all have different roles to play as levers of growth and different areas in the Estuary will have different needs.

The government has set out plans to...

- ...realise the potential of the Lower Thames Crossing and unlocking housing,
- ...carry out regional labour market analysis,
- ...understand how we can protect and enhance the Estuary's natural environment,
- ...and celebrate all it has to offer in a communications campaign...
- ...will have a greater impact as they get underway over the next two financial years.

But the success of these plans, and our broader work to make our vision for the Thames Estuary a reality, will depend on a coordinated effort across the region.

By acting as one, we can together ensure that our work will have a greater impact as it gets underway over the next 2 years.

Conclusion

Having lived both north and south of the river, I know just how much the Thames Estuary and the remarkable people who live here, and the remarkable places we all know well, have got going for them.

And I'm determined to see them playing to their strengths and reaping the rewards of better jobs, skills, housing, connectivity and growth as we chart a positive new course for our country.

That means not being afraid to think big – to be bold in our ambitions, to lead and collaborate with a clear and strong sense of purpose and pride on behalf of the communities we all serve.

From Greenwich to Gravesend, Southend to Rochester, I know the Thames Estuary – and our great country – has a positive future ahead of it.

And I look forward to working with all of you to make sure that we fully grasp that potential and turn that vision of our Thames Estuary into a reality.

Thank you very much.