

Silvertown tunnel proposal: The health and wellbeing concerns of Greenwich residents



Contents

About Healthwatch Greenwich	P2
Introduction	P3
Gathering feedback	P4
Local residents	P5
Our findings	P6
Conclusions	P9
Recommendations	P9
Appendices	P10
Acknowledgements	P11
Contact us	P11

About Healthwatch Greenwich

Healthwatch Greenwich is one of 152 local Healthwatch organisations established throughout England on 1 April 2013 under the provisions of the Health and Social Care Act 2012. We have a dual role as champions of the rights of users of publicly funded health and social care services for adults and children, and to hold the system to account for how well it delivers services and engages with the public.

We collect feedback from people of all ages and from all communities. We do this through local voluntary sector organisations and community groups, through our feedback centre on our website, via social media and telephone calls, during listening sessions at patient and public service user meetings, events and drop-in

sessions at a range of venues across the borough. As part of our remit to gather views, we also have the power to ‘enter and view’ services and conduct announced and unannounced visits.



Introduction

Plans for the Silvertown tunnel

In May 2018, the Department for Transport granted Transport for London (TfL) permission to construct a new 1.4km road tunnel under the River Thames.

The new tunnel will link West Silvertown and Essex-bound A13 north of the Thames, with North Greenwich and the Kent-bound A2 south of the river. It will be located approximately one kilometer downstream of the existing Blackwall Tunnel. Under the current timeline, construction of the tunnel is due to begin in 2020, with an expected opening date in 2025.

TfL have stated that the purpose of this tunnel is to:

- Reduce congestion and delays
- Reduce the environmental impact of the current congestion on the Blackwall tunnel route, and
- Improve cross-river public transport links by utilising zero-emissions buses.

However, the argument that the tunnel will improve congestion and air pollution has been strongly contested by others, including leading physicians, environmental scientists and traffic experts. Instead, they have argued that it could strengthen the problem.



Why are Healthwatch Greenwich interested

Until now, Greenwich council has been named as one of only four Beacon Authorities for air quality in the country. They have been forward-thinking in their strategy and implementation of protocols to reduce air pollution. However, how the tunnel will affect the health of local residents has become a controversial issue.

We wanted to understand how local residents themselves feel about the plans. Did they have any health concerns, and if so, what were they?



Gathering feedback

Our methodology

A team of volunteers and Healthwatch staff set out to speak to local Greenwich residents about their views on the planned Silvertown tunnel. Conducting short, street interviews, we asked Greenwich residents:

With regards to the Silvertown tunnel, do you have any health or wellbeing concerns regarding traffic, noise or air pollution?

Our Healthwatch team approached people mainly in the wards of:

- Peninsula (where the tunnel will emerge)
- Greenwich West, and
- Blackheath Westcombe.

Using a random sampling approach, we spoke to people at:

- Their homes, via door-to-door knocking
- Greenwich Leisure centre and the surrounding areas,
- Greenwich station and Maze Hill station
- Local shopping areas



Across three days, we spoke to **112 Greenwich residents.**

Strengths and limitations

Using a random sampling approach we were able to speak to a large number of people. We also visited homes in the day and the evening, to ensure we spoke to a cross-section of people, such as professionals, carers and older people.

However, as we used a Vox Pop approach (short street interviews) and therefore did not collect demographic information, we cannot be certain that our sample was representative of the borough.

Another limitation of the study arguably lay in the phrasing of our question. Whilst we asked residents for their concerns or worries, we did not directly ask whether they felt it would have any health benefits. Thus, while this report may be indicative of the types of concerns Greenwich residents may have, it cannot reflect fairly on how and why people may feel positively about the tunnel. Nonetheless, we have included positive opinions where they were offered without direct prompting.

Our report is not intended to be a generalisable study. We offer a snapshot of some of the types of concerns Greenwich residents have reported to us. Our recommendations from this follow the findings.

Local residents



Sally lives in Blackheath. She is concerned about the impact the tunnel will have on her health and wellbeing, as well as that of her children. Sally feels that building the tunnel will have a negative impact on air quality and river pollution, and that more cycle lanes should be built instead. She is also worried about all the extra waste that will be produced because of the construction work, and the environmental impact of this. She suggests we need more outdoor spaces to exercise, instead of more roads.

John understands why people are worried about the impact of the tunnel on their health and wellbeing. However, he feels that the tunnel will actually improve congestion and thereby reduce air pollution. He also feels that there needs to be an understanding of drivers' needs, as when the tunnel is closed it can be very stressful for people needing to cross the river. He does agree that public transport links should be improved, so that less people feel they have to drive in the first place.



Michael is worried about the impact the new tunnel will have on the health of his grandchildren. He lives on the other side of Greenwich, and thinks the impact will be much worse for people who live closer to the planned route. He told us that the air quality in the Borough is already awful. However, he believes 'we can't influence decisions. If money is involved these projects go ahead irrespective of what residents think'.

Our findings

One of our most surprising findings was that only one in five people we spoke to had heard about the proposed Silvertown tunnel. This surprised us, given the areas we canvassed will be directly affected by the proposal, and the significance of the proposal to the local area and its residents. One resident Asked, 'why have the council kept this quiet?' whilst another Felt that she should make more effort to keep herself informed.

80% of
people were
unaware

Health and wellbeing concerns regarding traffic

With regards to the impending Silvertown tunnel, we asked local residents if they had a health and wellbeing concern regarding traffic in the local area. Of our respondents:

61.6%

69 people were
concerned about
traffic

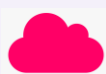
10.7%

12 people were
unsure

27.7%

31 people had no
concerns

We then asked those who did have health and wellbeing concerns what these were. Predominantly, people were worried that rather than decrease the traffic on the road, the tunnel would actually attract more drivers. Local residents told us that they were therefore worried about:



Additional air pollution



Additional noise



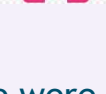
The building phase leading to more heavy goods vehicles (HGVs) on the road



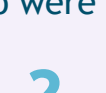
Busier roads making driving more difficult and therefore more stressful



The existing shortage of road crossings, which would become more problematic with increased traffic



The safety of children on roads with big lorries



That there may be more HGVs in the area going forwards

Those who were unsure, told us:



They had not considered the impact yet, but that they would be concerned if it did lead to extra traffic

7=9%\$

One person told us they would like to see more data evidence about the possible impact of the tunnel before forming an opinion.

Those who did not have any traffic concerns largely thought that the traffic on the road would improve as a result of the tunnel. They told us:



The Silvertown tunnel will help to spread the traffic
It would help with standing traffic and therefore reduce pollution
Although there would be additional hazards, the area needs the tunnel

Health and wellbeing concerns regarding noise levels

We then asked local residents if they had a health and wellbeing concern regarding noise levels, in relation to the propose Silvertown tunnel. Of our respondents:

38.4%

43 people were concerned about noise levels

11.6%

13 people were unsure

50%

56 people had no concerns

Those who were concerned listed the following reasons:



Concerns for older and more vulnerable people, including children, who may be disturbed by additional noise



Numerous people had been exposed to increased noise levels during the construction work in Greenwich centre previously, and were worried it would be similar



Noise affecting the quality of life in the Borough
Noise levels affecting residents' ability to sleep



Noise from the construction phase
Damage to ears and hearing for local people

Of those who were unsure, one person commented:



'I should make a better effort to be informed'

One person who was not concerned told us:



That there is already a noise issue when the current Blackwall tunnel is closed, so they hoped noise levels would actually improve

Health and wellbeing concerns regarding air quality

Our final question for residents was whether they had any health and wellbeing concerns regarding air quality, given the proposed Silvertown tunnel. Of our respondents:

67%

69 people were concerned about air quality

6.3%

12 people were unsure

25.9%

31 people had no concerns

Those who did have concerns, listen the following reasons:



Fears that increased pollution would affect people with respiratory conditions such as asthma and bronchitis



Numerous people told us they were especially worried about the affect increased pollution and worse air quality would have on their children and grandchildren



Numerous people told us that there is already poor air quality in the area, and the Silvertown tunnel will just add to the problem

Of those who were not concerned:



One told us he was not convinced of the link between poor air quality and health conditions



Others felt the Silvertown tunnel will help to improve air quality in the area

Other comments

Many of the residents we spoke to felt that more people should be encouraged to use public transport. We also heard numerous concerns about the impact of air pollution of children and young people. One person told us that three members of her family had developed asthma since moving to the Borough, and another was made nervous by the fact that her friend's child had recently developed bronchitis. She felt this was likely made worse by the fact she walks to school everyday along busy roads. Others felt that the proposal seemed to be 'contradictory to other policies such as cycle lanes and encouraging use of public transport', as well as the low emission zone. There were also worries that the tunnel would damage existing fauna and wildlife, and reduce the areas for local residents to be outdoors or to exercise.

Others were supportive of the Silvertown tunnel. One person felt that there needed to be balance between improving the roads for drivers and the affects of pollution and congestion. Another commented that the proposed toll on the tunnel would help to reduce congestion.

Conclusions

With regards to the upcoming Silvertown tunnel, air quality was the biggest health and wellbeing concern of the people we spoke to (67% had a concern), with the amount of traffic coming a close second (61.6% were concerned). The amount of noise the tunnel might lead to was a lesser concern (38.4% of people were concerned, but 50% were not).

After speaking to over 100 people, it became clear to us that the majority of people were worried about air quality and the impact of pollution as a general issue. Of those who said they were not concerned specifically by the Silvertown tunnel, the majority reported that this was because they felt the tunnel would actually have a positive impact on congestion, air quality and noise. Only one person we spoke to indicated that she was not concerned about the connection between air quality and health.

Given the strong interest in the impact of congestion and pollution amongst our participants, we were disappointed to hear that so many people we approached had no awareness of the planned Silvertown tunnel at all.

Recommendations

1. TfL and Greenwich council should make a greater effort to inform and engage local residents of constructions which are likely to affect air quality and congestion levels

Although the Silvertown tunnel has already received approval, it is vital that local residents are kept informed of the next stages of development. It would also be useful to involve local people in forming and implementing mitigation strategies against increased congestion and pollution, such as strong publicity links for new public transport links via low emission buses.

2. Local residents to be more actively involved in forming the council's air quality strategy

It was obvious from the people we spoke to that there is a keen public interest in the areas of air quality and the impact of congestion on health within the borough. We would suggest Greenwich council take full advantage of this through active participation in the air quality control strategies.

3. Further engagement work be done with Greenwich Borough's Children and Young People population to hear and incorporate their views on the Silvertown tunnel

Many of the residents we spoke to highlighted their concerns about the impact of the tunnel on their children and grandchildren. Given the significant impact of air quality and congestion on young people, we would advocate that their views be sought and reflected in future proposals and air quality strategies, both by TfL and Greenwich council.

Appendices

Checklist item

Traffic

1. Do you have any health concerns about the level of local traffic, if the proposed Silvertown Tunnel goes ahead? IF NO GO TO Q2

1a. If yes – please tell us your health concerns?

Write in here:

2. Do you have any health concerns about noise (from construction or traffic), if the proposed Silvertown Tunnel goes ahead? IF NO GO TO Q3

2a. If yes – please tell us your health concerns?

Write in here:

3. Do you have any health concerns about air quality, if the proposed Silvertown Tunnel goes ahead? IF NO GO TO Q4

3a. If yes – please tell us your health concerns?

Write in here:

4. Do you have any other health or wellbeing concerns, if the proposed Silvertown Tunnel goes ahead? IF NO GO TO CLOSE

4a. If yes – please tell us your health and wellbeing concerns?

Write in here:

ADDRESS:

Acknowledgements

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- Alan Roberts
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- Daphne Barnett
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