



RIBA council calls for Garden Bridge procurement to be investigated

29 June, 2016 By [Laura Mark](#)

The RIBA has passed a motion calling for an official probe into the procurement of Heatherwick Studio's £175m Garden Bridge

An earlier motion put to RIBA Council in March by procurement expert Walter Menteth was deferred because of concerns raised by a number of councillors.

But, after successfully gaining backing from RIBA London, Menteth tabled a revised motion. Today RIBA Council agreed to back the motion, having made further changes to its wording and removing any reference to getting the contentious scheme stopped.

The final text of the motion stated: 'In the light of the seriousness of allegations relating to the Garden Bridge, RIBA Council calls for the procurement process to be opened up to full and detailed independent scrutiny so that this public procurement may be or may not be evidenced as fair, transparent and in accordance with the law.;

Commenting on the motion, Menteth said: 'Public procurement isn't going away and as an Institute we need to help firms by making sure it is undertaken legally'.

The procurement of the Garden Bridge has been the subject of a [long-running AJ investigation which began in December 2014](#).

The original motion to RIBA Council called for the controversial £175 million bridge to be stopped while its procurement was investigated – a stance originally backed by RIBA President [Jane Duncan](#).

However Duncan recently [changed her stance on temporarily putting the scheme on ice](#) and councillors today (29 June) said they could not back a call to halt the bridge. Instead the motion was amended before it was passed.

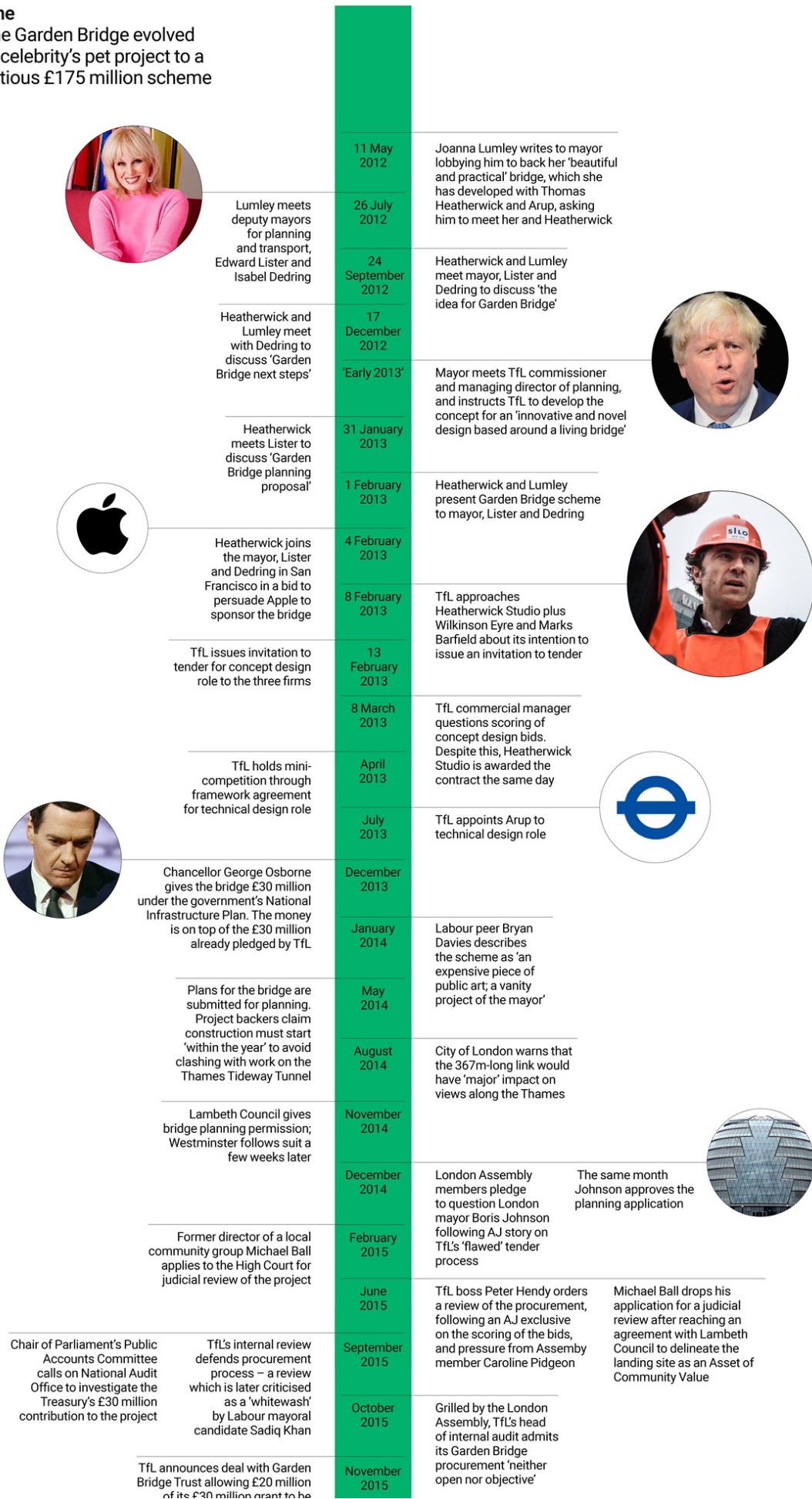
The RIBA president, who had held discussions with Transport for London before the last council meeting in March, said the institute would continue to discuss the issue with the organisation and planned to advise TfL in the future.

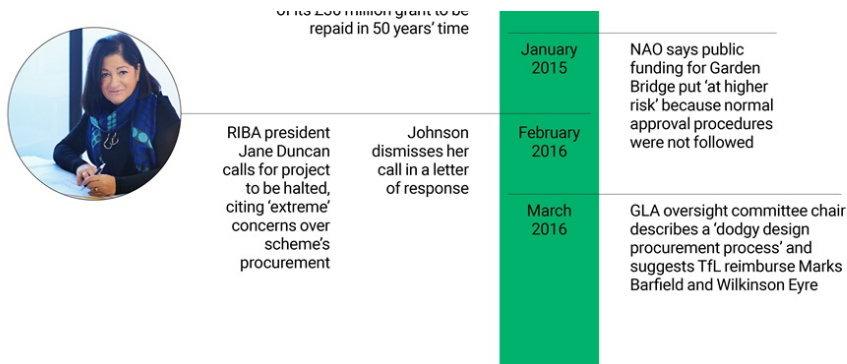
She also said that she would be speaking with London's new mayor Sadiq Khan about the bridge's procurement.

Speaking at the council meeting, past president Stephen Hodder, said: 'Everyone is aware there are anomalies here but we should use this as an opportunity to improve procurement and engage with TfL.'

Timeline

How the Garden Bridge evolved from a celebrity's pet project to a contentious £175 million scheme





2016.03.24 Garden Bridge Timeline v4

Comment

Kerr Robertson, Glasgow-based architect

Like many architects I very much welcomed the recent call by Jane Duncan for the Garden Bridge project to be put on hold while the whole procurement process is properly scrutinised. My view has nothing to do with the idea of the bridge in principal or taking sides. I would like to make clear that I love the work of Thomas Heatherwick. I have huge respect for Arup as engineers as well as Transport for London who have delivered many important and successful public projects. I am also a big fan of Joanna Lumley and her campaigning for good causes. While I personally like the idea of a Garden Bridge I understand why others might not. I would therefore consider myself neutral in terms of the debate that has been raging for and against - but with one exception.

The issue I have is simply about procurement and my concern over the significant questions raised in this respect. I am also concerned that because of the hue and cry the implications have been obscured.

There should be no doubt that anyone tendering for work which is funded with public money must be given equal opportunity. Tendering is expensive and all bidders should have no doubt that all legal requirements will be met and each submission will be given fair and equal consideration. No-one wants to be left thinking they had been invited simply to make up the numbers. Accordingly the process needs to be transparent.

This is not just a 'London issue'

Given the nature of local politics and the level of public outcry from campaigners on both sides, procurement will probably not seem that important to many people.

But this is not just a 'London issue' and its not just architects who are affected. This is also about public confidence in those spending tax-payers money - and that those responsible will not favour one party over an other. The rules and regulations governing public spending are there for good reason - and the risk of allowing these to be ignored are enormous.

No-one should be awarded a contract where they may have had an unfair advantage over others. Where there is reason to believe an award has not been compliant (even in honest error) it is difficult to see how a project can then be allowed to progress without being first properly investigated. Apart from the implications for the unsuccessful bidders, the other concern is that without sanction there would be little or no incentive to prevent other agencies following suit.

Procurement procedures might seem complicated to the uninitiated, but if this was the X-Factor and it was discovered that members of the public had spent money submitting votes which had no bearing on the outcome, there would quite rightly be significant outcry. This would not be allowed to continue and quite likely someone would be held to account.

You cannot expect the same level of public outcry about a relatively specialist area of bureaucracy. This is why ordinary architects and engineers expect their professional institutes to stand up for them. It's a matter of principal.

I note from the current campaigning for a new RIBA President one of the candidates has written in the press about the importance 'high-level principles' and having "an ethical code which enabled the public and our clients to trust us and our judgements and entitling us to be heard above others who do not claim to profess such standards". If we as a profession are not willing to take a stand when matters of principle arise this amounts to no more than empty rhetoric.

Readers' comments (2)

- [Robert Wakeham](#) 29 June, 2016 6:01 pm

While they're at it, the RIBA Council might find it instructive to compare the TfL Garden Bridge procurement saga with that of the TfL procurement of the 'Boris bus' design - where the two competition winners (Foster and Partners' proposal in collaboration with Aston Martin being one) were passed over in favour of Heatherwick.

And when it comes to 'flawed evaluation and scoring during the bidding process', is it entirely coincidental that during Boris Johnson's spell as Mayor of London this was exactly the same criticism of the hugely expensive collapse of a TfL underground signalling contract, estimated to amount to a £1.422 billion 'hit' at the end of the day?

Did a culture of cronyism and rottenness seep into TfL and the Mayor of London's organisation on Boris's watch?

If so, should the RIBA be checking whether the pressures of winning commissions, and striving to keep the right side of very powerful and influential client bodies, might have caused some architects to drift into that zone where 'don't rock the boat, remember where your fees come from' might easily become intertwined with pervasive corruption?

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- [Chris Medland](#) 29 June, 2016 6:43 pm

Who are they asking to investigate this? Have they approached the metropolitan police? If not then who?

