

## Garden Bridge legal bid targets Boris Johnson

28 August, 2019 By [Will Hurst](#)



Prime minister Boris Johnson and others who oversaw the 'gross waste' of £43 million of public money on London's Garden Bridge could face legal action after an audacious attempt to hold those responsible to account cleared its first hurdle

Jason Coppel QC, an expert in public and procurement law, will examine the possibility of claims against the trustees of the Garden Bridge Trust – the charity which developed the project – plus the former London mayor and the public sector organisations which oversaw the cancelled £200 million project.

The QC's opinion is being obtained by [Unity Legal Solutions](#), a firm providing services to consumers of legal advice, and will be paid for mainly via a crowdfunding appeal set up by writer and campaigner Will Jennings.

The appeal [was launched last month](#) and has now reached its initial £5,000 target. One of the wealthy private donors to the bridge, Michael Gross, has also contributed to the legal effort.

Last year, [Coppel said it was 'likely'](#) that the trustees – who include Garden Bridge champion Joanna Lumley and former chief government construction adviser Paul Morrell – breached their legal duties to act with reasonable skill and care, 'in particular in relation to the conclusion of the construction contract with Bouygues'.

Although the trust had failed to secure either the land or the money required to build the bridge, it still went ahead with signing the contract in early 2016, a decision now estimated to have cost around half of the total bill to the taxpayer, £21.4 million.

Co-founder of Unity Legal Solutions Roger Billins said the QC would be asked to 'provide comprehensive advice as to whether taxpayers have any recourse against those responsible for the gross waste of public money involved in the abortive Garden Bridge project'.

He added: 'We will be asking him to consider the possibility of claims against the trustees who were ultimately responsible for spending the monies as well as claims against TfL [Transport for London], the Charity Commission and of course the then mayor, Mr Johnson, for their poor guardianship of public funds.'

That nearly 150 people have pledged an average of £34 each shows there is still this public appetite for this

Last year, Gross accused the Garden Bridge trustees of '[pissing money down the drain](#)' though he was subsequently refunded his £50,000 donation. He said the Garden Bridge scandal was part of a wider malaise in the UK.

'I don't think we know the true story of the Garden Bridge because we don't know where the money went,' he said. 'The trustees haven't provided the accounting and the Charity Commission has been toothless.'

'It's a story that needs to be told. Forty-three million pounds is a lot of money. It's like everything now in public life: everyone seems untouchable. There is something wrong in this country.'

Jennings said the commission and TfL had failed to protect the taxpayer or hold the individuals responsible to account and added that he hoped the legal action could ultimately recover taxpayers' money.

'That nearly 150 people have pledged an average of £34 each shows there is still this public appetite for this,' he said. 'Stopping the Garden Bridge and the entitled people behind it was a huge moment for public opposition which I think will be looked back on as fondly as the victory of the 1970s Covent Garden activists is today.'

Another QC previously commissioned by Billins, David Matthias, [concluded that the Charity Commission could face a judicial review challenge](#) from a concerned member of the public due to its 'failure' to call the trustees to account in respect of losses resulting from prematurely signing the construction contract.