

Towards a More Compact City - The Plan for London

1. Introduction

British planning has celebrated a special event this year. This was the publication in February of the Spatial Development Strategy for Greater London, more commonly known as the London Plan. This is only the second statutory plan to be completed for Greater London and it has been produced in record time following the re-establishment of London wide government in 2000. It is also the first plan to be produced by a directly elected mayor.

In spatial planning terms, London faces the major challenge of accommodating a 10% growth in its population by the year 2016. That means 700,000 more people and, under Objective 1 of the Plan, the new homes will have to be accommodated within London's existing boundaries without encroaching upon open spaces. The area to be protected includes the Metropolitan Green Belt that for six decades has prevented London from growing ever outwards. This can only be done by making London a more compact, more intensively developed city.

The intended strategies for delivering this more compact city are described in Section 4 of this paper. However, I shall first set the scene with a brief historical perspective and then an introduction to the Plan, its vision and its range of objectives. The paper concludes with an evaluation of the London planning process and of the part that will be played by the London Plan. In particular, it asks, will the Plan work?

The views expressed in this paper are my own and they should not be taken as necessarily representing the position of my employer, the Planning Inspectorate.

2. Historical perspective

London has a long and complex history that stretches back for over 2,000 years. In terms of its population and spread, though, it has been the last two hundred years that have seen the greatest change. In 1801 when London had one million people it was still a very compact city mainly contained within a radius of some 3km. By the 1851 census the population had doubled but that radius was still less than 5km¹. However, all that changed with the coming of the commuter railways, which enabled Londoners to escape from the congested central areas to live in the fast growing and much more spacious suburbs. Thus over the next one hundred years, London spread itself out to reach broadly its present extent.

The Second World War and the physical damage to London stimulated new thinking about the planning of the capital in the post-War era. Patrick Abercrombie's Greater London Plan published in 1945 was the first attempt at a regional plan for London. War or not, it was long overdue. For the area covered had 143 local authorities and while almost all of them had either prepared a planning scheme or were in the process of drawing one up, there was virtually no co-ordination².

The Greater London Plan is notable for its apparent simplicity and its clarity. With its four concentric zones overlain by a revised transport system, it effectively put a break on any significant expansion of London's built up area. That was the role of the third zone, a 15 km deep ring of land, which was the basis for the present Green Belt. It was to curtail any further sprawl of the second zone, the outer suburbs, and there would be no further growth of any of the smaller towns within it. Another key feature of the Plan was its strategy of reducing densities in the first of the zones (the inner urban ring) through rehousing some one million people in an outer country ring beyond the Green Belt. Some 400,000 of these people were to be accommodated in eight new towns some 30-50 km from London.

In 1965, the Greater London Council (GLC) was set up, replacing the former London County Council. It produced a statutory plan, the Greater London Development Plan, but this had little apparent influence on the major problem of the day, the collapse of manufacturing industry in the capital. Linked to this, unemployment rose tenfold from 40,000 in the mid 1960s to 400,000 in 1985. And London's dockyards, increasingly obsolete in an era of container ships, were ceasing activity. Ironically, just as the first of the docks were closing, the GLC was planning for a belt of new heavy industry and commercial activity on both sides of the Thames³.

Margaret Thatcher came into power in 1979 and set in train huge changes from which planning was not immune. No more regional studies were begun and the tone of her initial stance on planning was set by a regional planning policy statement on the South East of England which was contained within three and a half sides of A4 paper. The Government's emphasis had switched in a major way from regulation to the unleashing of private enterprise. As an early sign of this, it introduced the enterprise zone (EZ) in which firms would be free of normal planning controls and able to enjoy a ten year freedom from property taxes. One of these EZs was set up at the Isle of Dogs in East London.

A second innovation was the setting up of urban development corporations. In 1981, a 2,000ha area of former docklands came under the control of an urban development corporation the London Docklands Development Corporation. This was a hugely powerful organisation run by a board appointed by the Secretary of State and directly accountable to parliament. It had full development control powers and was able to assemble land through compulsory purchase.

Highly controversial from the outset, there are differing views as to its true success. On the one hand it sparked off the regeneration of one of Europe's largest brown field sites. In physical terms what is there - the Canary Wharf development and much more - is impressive and the development gain has helped pay for the Jubilee Line, an important new link in the Underground network. On the other hand, it has been argued that the job gain for local people has been modest. Moreover, local government, and democratic control were bypassed.

In 1986, the Government abolished the Greater London Council. Responsibility for planning passed to 33 unitary planning authorities (the 32 London Boroughs and the Corporation of the City of London). These bodies were charged with producing Unitary Development Plans (UDPs) but there was no provision for any overall plan for London⁴.

This highly radical step was widely criticised by planning bodies at the time. Would it not have been better to have reformed the organisation so that it could concentrate on key strategic functions, was one of the arguments made⁵. But what actual difference did the abolition make? Strategic issues were dealt with through various co-operative arrangements aided by a small new planning body, the London Planning Advisory Committee (LPAC). And from above, the Government Office for London (GOL) produced strategic guidance following consultation with all the unitary authorities⁶.

But many issues were not being tackled. Infrastructure, in particular the Underground system, was being allowed to decline and key functions such as waste disposal had been given little strategic direction. There were huge deficiencies in training to enable the jobless to acquire the new tertiary services skills increasingly in demand. But above all, an adverse image was spreading of an increasingly congested and uncared for London. With no overall voice to put its case, and no overall vision, there was a fear that London would decline relative to continental cities.

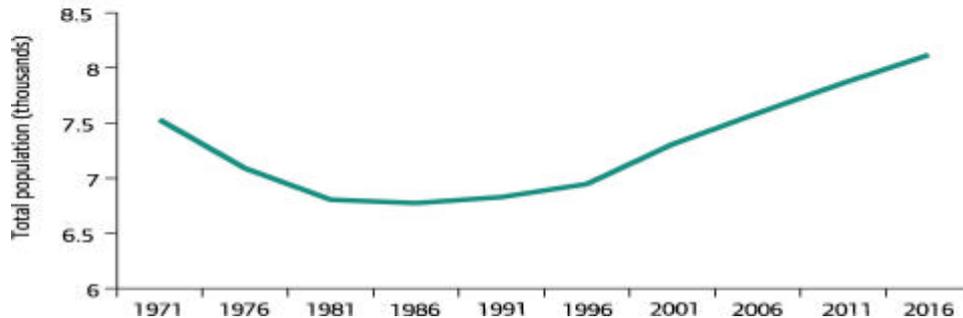
The Greater London Authority Act 1999 provided for the re-establishment of citywide governance. However, the Greater London Authority that it created is a very different organisation from the former GLC. For one thing, it is a much smaller organisation with fewer functions. For another, it has an elected mayor who is supported by a separately elected Assembly. The Mayor has direct responsibility for strategic planning in London and, in particular, for producing a Spatial Development Strategy.

3. The London Plan - an Introduction

The first part of the London Plan charts the changes that have taken place in London over the last 20 years. On the economic front, finance and business have come to dominate, fuelled by the forces of globalisation. London is one of the three world financial centres and the 'the world's most economically internationalised city'. Developments in telecommunications and transport links have shrunk distances between the decision makers and their markets and people have moved in from all over the world bringing new ideas and dynamism.

That migration - both external and from within Britain - means that the population is growing once again. It had reached 8.6 million in 1939 but from that peak there had been a steady decline, encouraged in part by regional planning policies for the South East of England, starting with the Abercrombie Plan, of which the new town programme was a part. It had fallen below 7 million by 1978 and five years later it had declined to its lowest point of 6.75 million. In the following year (1984), a small increase was recorded and the climb back began. London's current population is estimated at 7.3 million. The mid 80s was also the point when the increase in service jobs, particularly in the financial sector, began to outstrip the losses in other sectors. These changes and the projection to 2016 are shown in the figure below.

figure 1.1 Projected population growth in London (1971–2016)



But, overall, these twenty years of growth in both the population and the economy hasn't been matched by the necessary investment. Neither has the new wealth filtered down to all Londoners; London has the second highest unemployment rate amongst the English regions and it is particularly high among the ethnic minorities. Investment in housing and transport, in skills training, and in the public realm has been below what is needed. Housing shortages have led to rapid price rises disadvantaging those on lower incomes, traffic congestion has increased, imposing economic as well as social and environmental costs and there are skill shortages alongside persistent social deprivation. Also, not enough has been spent on schools and health facilities.

These social, environmental and economic matters are all aspects of the sustainability agenda that has become an integral part of British planning since the early 1990s⁷. What happens in London - how it deploys its resources on many fronts - transport infrastructure, energy and waste etc will be of key importance not just to Londoners and their quality of life, but also to the achievement of national targets set by the Government.

So there are huge strengths to build upon but also, as the London Mayor puts it, 'opportunities and concerns' to tackle. The London Plan seeks to provide a new citywide vision for the capital in which these various issues are addressed in a holistic way. That vision is: *to develop London as an exemplary, sustainable world city, based on three balanced and interwoven themes:*

- *strong, diverse long-term economic growth;*
- *social inclusivity;*
- *fundamental improvements in the environment and use of resources.*

This is to be implemented through six objectives, and through each of them a range of policies.

The six objectives are:

- o **Objective 1** - To accommodate London's growth within its boundaries without encroaching on open spaces;
- o **Objective 2** - To make London a better place to live in;
- o **Objective 3** - To make London a more prosperous city with strong and diverse economic growth;
- o **Objective 4** - To promote social inclusion and tackle deprivation and discrimination;
- o **Objective 5** - To improve London's accessibility;
- o **Objective 6** - To make London a more attractive, well-designed and green city.

These objectives, or themes, are all closely interrelated and there has to be action on all of these fronts if the Plan is to work. However, Objective 1 is about the future spatial structure of London and it is on this that the next section of this paper will concentrate.

4. Towards a more Compact City

The spatial strategy to achieve the Mayor's vision is multi-faceted. At a wider regional level, it is closely linked to the Government's Sustainable Communities Plan which is intended to deliver 200,000 additional homes in four growth areas within southeastern England, and for which additional resources are to be provided. Indeed, two of those directly involve the capital: those of London-Stansted-Cambridge and Thames Gateway.

The London Plan proposes 28 Opportunity Areas which are to accommodate substantial growth. A high proportion of these are in East London as well as within Thames Gateway. This is the Mayor's priority area for development and some 40% of the new homes in the Plan will be built here. The Plan also envisages a quarter of a million new jobs in the period to 2016. Much of this job growth should be accommodated in the Opportunity Areas close to the City of London, in areas such as the Isle of Dogs and Stratford. Transport developments such as the Channel Tunnel Rail Link and Crossrail (which both have stations at Stratford) and planned new bridges across the Thames will provide excellent accessibility, and help ensure that the stimulus for development continues well beyond the Plan period.

Another major growth area will be Central London. The strategy builds upon its strengths in terms of international business and finance, culture and tourism and provides for more intensive development throughout the 'Central Activities Zone' and within several Opportunity Areas. The latter include some major railway terminals. Thus the Paddington area is set to accommodate some 23,000 new jobs and 3,000 dwellings in tall buildings developed around a canal basin. At Kings Cross, some 20ha of underused land will become available for development once the

Channel Tunnel Rail Link is complete, while at London Bridge, Renzo Piano's 300m 'Shard of Glass' will form a striking addition to London's skyline. This proposal is one of a number of tall buildings to be built at public transport interchanges. This is a new policy direction for London that has had to be reconciled with the protection of historic views, such as that of St Paul's Cathedral.

The draft London Plan was scrutinised closely by a Panel which heard evidence from a wide variety of bodies. One of the criticisms made was that the Plan was over-centralised. It was argued that there should be a more polycentric growth strategy embracing major centres outside Central London and improvements to orbital transport links. This would help diversify London's economy, provide more local jobs, make good use of London's transport capacity through reverse commuting and encourage shorter journeys. The Panel agreed and the final Plan does provide for an improved balance between Central London and the outer areas.

Thus, there is to be an increased emphasis on the promotion of London's many town centres, those former villages that have been swallowed up in the city's expansion over the centuries. This network of centres now forms a key spatial priority in the Plan. An intensification of use in and around these areas may also be the main way for many of the outer London Boroughs to contribute towards meeting London's overall housing need. While much of the new housing will be built within the Central London area and, in particular, East London, the ambitious housing target will not be met without a significant contribution too from the suburbs.

However, those suburban areas - taking up two thirds of London's total land area, pose a particular challenge to the planners. Viewed in sustainability terms, these two-storey, semi-detached housing areas are at far too low a density. That means that many residents live some way from public transport routes and other necessary services. They tend to be highly car dependent. On the other hand, these can be very 'green' areas, often with fine street trees and long rear gardens that have become havens for wildlife. In part because of those qualities, residents' groups will fight tirelessly to prevent their redevelopment for more profitable, higher density houses, or particularly flats. Such proposals are the subject of numerous planning appeals in which articulate residents are key players.

But it is Government policy, and it is the Policy of the Plan, that the densities of new development should be higher than they are now. Thus, even in a suburban area, that density should be in the range 30 to 50 dwelling units per ha. Typical densities now are 25 dwellings per ha or less. How, then is this conundrum to be resolved?

The precise details of where development should go is generally a matter to be determined by the Boroughs through their UDPs and, soon, the Local Development Frameworks that are to replace them. However, at strategic level, the London Plan sets out a general approach for guiding change.

As far as the 'residential heartlands' are concerned, the approach should be one of local improvements to the public realm and better maintenance and management. This should be coupled with 'some sensitive redevelopment, while having regard to biodiversity issues'. But the likelihood is that most of the development will go to those areas that are more accessible by public transport. And both to exploit that accessibility and to maximise the number of dwellings, densities should be significantly greater than would be sought for new development in the residential heartlands.

This maximisation of dwelling numbers in any area or on any individual site is of key importance. The Plan takes forward the concept of Sustainable Residential Quality (SRQ) developed initially by LPAC and publishes a density matrix, intended as a strategic framework for appropriate densities at different locations. This is a sophisticated approach that considers the location of a site in relation to the nearest town centre, its setting in terms of the existing building form and massing, and its public transport accessibility level or PTAL. The last of these measures the extent and ease of access by public transport on a scale of one to six (the best

accessibility). The matrix (reproduced at the end of this section) shows recommended densities for more and less accessible sites in different settings and for different housing types including flats. The Mayor expects that planning applications referred to him will comply with this guidance and that policies in UDPs will also be compatible.

Allied to this SRQ approach, the scope for new housing is already informed by a housing capacity study published in 2000. This work will be updated this year. The new study is based on the fullest possible implementation of the London Plan's policies; those concerning density, mixed use development (typically with dwellings above other uses), policies for town centres and the suburbs, the re-use of some employment land and buildings such as offices, and residential development within the Opportunity Areas. The intention is to identify the additional capacity that will enable London to hit its target of 30,000 additional homes per annum.

That increase in quantity, at least 25% beyond that which is being achieved at the moment, will both enable London to meet the anticipated overall demand and provide for many people who are in acute housing need. This large group includes many who will continue to require social housing, but also teachers and other public service workers for whom the purchase of a house is increasingly out of reach. The Mayor's strategic target is that 50% of the new housing stock should be affordable with a proportion of this being accessible to 'key workers'.

But the quality of the new housing will be every bit as important as the quantity. Too often in the past we have created hostile environments, particularly some of the big public housing schemes of the 1960s and 1970s and these have declined socially to become the problem estates of the present. Not before time, there are signs that the lessons have been learned. The Urban Task Force led by Lord Rogers concluded that successful regeneration must be design led and there have been some excellent design guides published by Central Government⁸⁹¹⁰.

Good design is fundamental to the objectives of the London Plan. Given the need to intensify development, very high standards of design will be vital if London is to be a better city to live in (Objective 2) and if it is to be more attractive and green (Objective 6). Good design can attract economic investment (Objective 3) and far better, more inclusive design can help prevent the social ghettos of the future (Objective 4). Excellence in design which is essential to higher density development can create highly sustainable neighbourhoods, which are resource efficient, where work and local services are directly at hand and where there is less need to travel (Objective 5). The challenge is to make such all round quality the norm and not the exception, as now.

Density location and parking matrix (habitable rooms and dwellings per hectare)

		Car parking provision	High 2 – 1.5 spaces per unit	Moderate 1.5 – 1 space per unit	Low Less than 1 space per unit
		Predominant housing type	Detached and linked houses	Terraced houses & flats	Mostly flats
Location	Accessibility Index	Setting			
Sites within 10 mins walking distance of a town centre	6 to 4	Central	650 – 1100 hr/ha 240 – 435 u/ha Ave. 2.7hr/u		
		Urban	200 – 450 hr/ha 55 – 175 u/ha Ave. 3.1hr/u	450 – 700 hr/h 165 – 275 u/ha Ave. 3.0hr/u	
		Suburban	200 – 300 hr/ha 50 – 110 u/ha Ave. 3.7hr/u	250 – 350 hr/ha 80 – 120 u/ha Ave. 3.0hr/u	
Sites along transport corridors & sites close to a town centre	3 to 2	Urban	200 – 300 hr/ha 50 – 110 u/ha Ave. 3.7hr/u	300 – 450 hr/ha 100 – 150 u/ha Ave. 3.0hr/u	
		Suburban	150 – 200 hr/ha 30 – 65 u/ha Ave. 4.4hr/u	200 – 250hr/ha 50 – 80 u/ha Ave. 3.8hr/u	
Currently remote sites	2 to 1	Suburban	150 – 200 hr/ha 30 – 50 u/ha Ave. 4.6hr/u		

source: GLA

5. An Evaluation

With the birth of the Greater London Authority, London has a two-tier planning system once more and an ability to develop a wider, strategic vision for its future. However, its planning powers are quite tightly constrained. Planning applications for individual developments are the concern of the Boroughs, although the Mayor will be consulted on a limited number of cases 'that may raise issues of strategic importance'. He or she has the power to direct refusal of such applications, but this power is expected to 'be used selectively, and as a matter of last resort'. It would apply, for example, in the case of a major shopping development whose catchment extended beyond a Borough's boundaries.

The Mayor also has a role in representing London's planning interests in discussions about broader regional planning matters. Such interests include Thames Gateway and planning in the broader South East Region. However, his most important role lies, overwhelmingly, in his responsibility for the SDS. It is on the effectiveness of the London Plan and its successors that the new planning arrangements will largely be judged. So, how effective is the Plan and will it work?

There are reasonable grounds for optimism. First, it provides a firm, clear vision for London that is coupled with incisive policies and reasoning. It is a highly readable document, a far cry from many other plans which, too often, are characterised by formulaic, lowest common denominator policies. Secondly, it is a 'spatial strategy', the first example of a new type of regional plan for England that goes beyond the traditional confines of land use plans; it includes, for example, spatial policies on education and health¹¹.

Thirdly, the London Plan 'goes with the grain'. It seeks to work with and accommodate what the Mayor calls, 'the phenomenal pressures for growth'. There are deep-rooted factors that are driving this change, in particular the continuing expansion of the finance and business services sector. For planners, it is a question of ensuring that desired development can occur in the right place, at the right scale and at the right time and that it is properly co-ordinated with transport links and other necessary facilities. The Plan gives out the right messages but it cannot itself guarantee smooth implementation.

Fourthly, there would appear to be a widespread acceptance of the Plan. Indeed, at the Examination in Public there was relatively little dissent even in respect of its more radical proposals. The expert Panel largely supported its policies, although they did agree with some objectors that there was too much of a focus on central London and not enough on some of the outer areas. As stated earlier, changes were made and the result is a more polycentric strategy.

As always, some doubts must remain. One question is whether the London Plan is sufficiently sustainable environmentally. Does not this accommodation of considerable growth imply more resource use, more pollution and more waste? Has the environment lost out at the expense of the economy? The answer will, to some extent, be dependent upon the effectiveness of other strategies for which the Mayor has legal responsibility, notably those on transport, biodiversity, waste management and air quality. From the policies that are set out in the London Plan which is the co-ordinating document, there are encouraging signs.

On implementation, the fine detail will come in the UDPs and the successor Local Development Frameworks prepared by the Boroughs. How can one be certain that the vision of the London Plan can be carried through to these? Here, the main mechanism will be the need for these lower tier plans to be in 'General Conformity' with the SDS before they can be adopted. This should ensure a reasonable degree of consistency while allowing the Boroughs some limited flexibility in their drafting of detailed policies. But this remains an area of potential conflict between the two tiers of London governance.

The Plan does address an inherent problem in the present local government structure, that is the big gap between the London level and the level of the Boroughs. There are many potential cross-boundary issues that were too detailed to be addressed in the London Plan but require further work. The solution has been to initiate five sub-regional development frameworks and these are to be progressed through partnerships with groups of Boroughs drawn from Central, East, West, North and South London.

There is much to do before the Mayor's vision of an 'exemplary, sustainable world city' can be turned into a reality. Things look promising but, of course, the 'devil will be in the detail'.

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