

## London's Railway Land – Strategic Visions for the King's Cross Opportunity Area

### Introduction

This is a paper about two interlocked visions for the King's Cross area, one of Central London's Opportunity Areas as defined in the London Plan. The first of these is a vision for transport and it concerns the enhanced role that the two adjacent stations of King's Cross and St Pancras will have once the Channel Tunnel Rail Link (CTRL) is fully open, and once other infrastructure developments are complete. The second vision is for a new high density urban quarter for London, replacing a massive area of redundant railway land. What interlocks them is that the scope of the second project has been dependent upon the decision in respect of the CTRL while, for practical reasons, the construction of the urban quarter 'King's Cross Central' has had to await the completion of the transport scheme. In planning terms, this linkage (among other factors) has meant that the land has stood under-used and semi-derelict for many decades.

Figure 1 shows the location of the Opportunity Area with St Pancras and King's Cross Stations at its southern end. Also shown is Regent's Canal; the planned urban quarter will be developed both to the north and the south of it.

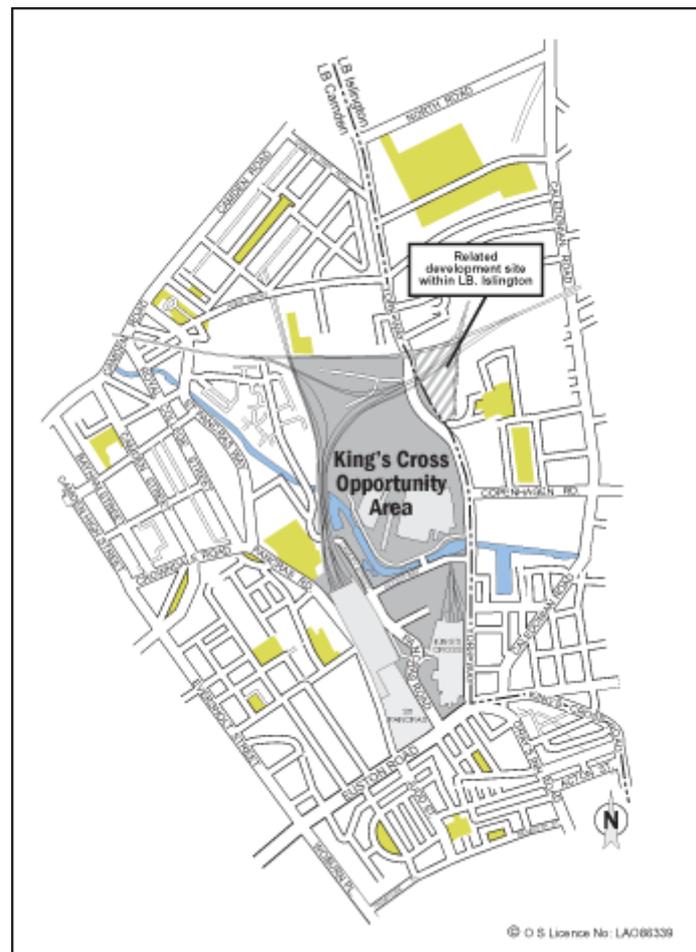


Fig.1 London's King's Cross Opportunity Area – Source – LB Camden

At long last there is a clear, comprehensive future for this important railway area, just over 2km due north of Trafalgar Square. This paper explores the way that this 'dual vision' has emerged and relates this to planning policy - that of the London Plan, the Camden Unitary Development Plan (UDP), and other relevant documents. First, however, it charts key periods within the complex history of this area that begins almost at the start of Britain's railway age.

## **The history**

The mid 19<sup>th</sup> Century saw a 'gold rush' of railway building in Britain as the network expanded to cover the whole of the country, creating a 'spider's web' of competing private companies radiating out from London and other centres. In a process that displaced an estimated 100,000 people, London was massively transformed through the construction of a series of railway termini, starting with Euston in 1837.<sup>i</sup> King's Cross Station stems from 1857, and St Pancras followed in 1868.

A map from 1894 shows the present Opportunity Area completely filled with buildings and other structures, goods sidings, and locomotive turntables – the paraphernalia of the age of steam - plus a gasworks. Much of that infrastructure has now gone or fallen into disuse. In the latter category, there are numerous listed buildings, regarded as being of architectural and/or historic importance. The legal presumption that these should be preserved, together with the desire on the part of Camden Council<sup>ii</sup> and other bodies that these should indeed be retained, has had a major influence on the nature and design of the King's Cross development.

Turning then to the more recent history, there have been moves to pursue the regeneration of the King's Cross 'railway lands' since the mid 1980s. However, nothing materialised for many years, in part for economic reasons but also because of the uncertainties surrounding the alignment and delivery of railway projects. In 1986, the former British Rail and the other landowners got together to select a developer for the site, and four developers were invited to submit plans. The requirements set by British Rail included the provision of a low-level London terminus for a Channel Tunnel Rail Link (CTRL) at King's Cross. For its part, Camden Council prepared a community planning brief providing for 1850 housing units at affordable prices, plus opportunities for jobs and open space. In 1988, the list of potential developers was reduced from the original four to two and final, revised submissions were invited. In June of that year, the London Regeneration Consortium (LRC) was selected as the approved developer.

In July 1988, British Rail launched a Parliamentary Bill to authorise the construction of a CTRL Terminus at King's Cross, and hearings continued until 1991, notwithstanding the uncertainties concerning the funding and viability of British Rail's plans. In the meantime, the Channel Tunnel itself was getting close to completion but no Government commitment had been made to help fund any high speed rail connection to London. By contrast to the attitude in France, where the TGV rail network was extended to the Tunnel portal, to be ready for the opening of cross-channel services, in the UK, the new Eurostar trains were to follow existing tracks to terminate at a newly extended Waterloo Station.

Returning to the King's Cross story, in April 1989, LRC submitted an outline application for a redevelopment of the railway lands consisting largely of offices. However, it faced much opposition and was withdrawn. Another application followed six months later for a slightly smaller development with significantly less space allocated to offices. In part, that reflected a downturn in the property market,

especially in that sector. At about the same time, an alternative housing-led scheme emerged from the local community groups.<sup>iii</sup>

Protracted negotiations over the content of the railway lands scheme continued. In 1992, Camden Council resolved that it was "minded to grant" planning permission for a further revision to the LRC proposals, subject to conditions. However, the recession began to bite and one of the LRC partners ceased trading. In 1994, the latest outline application was withdrawn, because of the poor economic conditions and a belated Government decision to promote an alternative scheme for the CTRL with a high-level terminus at St Pancras. Legislation for a new route for the CTRL based on the use of that terminal was passed in 1996.

The concession to build and operate the CTRL was given to London and Continental Railways Ltd (LCR). They were also to be responsible for the remodelling of St Pancras Station. Those works are now almost complete and they are described further below. CTRL was also granted part of the regeneration site which they now own in conjunction with Exel plc. The developer is Argent (Kings Cross), a company responsible for a number of major office and mixed-use schemes during the 1990s.

### **The Transport Vision**

This is an area that is already very well connected. Thus, King's Cross/St Pancras is a major hub on the London Underground system, the only one served by six lines. King's Cross Station is at the southern end of the East Coast Mainline serving York, Leeds, Newcastle and Edinburgh (GNER). Through a separate company (WAGN), it also provides links to Cambridge and East Anglia. For its part, St Pancras is the terminus for the Midland Mainline, serving Leicester, Derby, Nottingham and Sheffield. There is a further, through route which is Thameslink, which provides a connection from places to the north to Gatwick Airport and the south coast, but its present King's Cross stop is some distance away from the main station, and across a busy road.

Very soon, an international dimension is to be added that will further enhance the connectivity of King's Cross/St Pancras. From November, Eurostar trains will enter an extended St Pancras International Station via High Speed 1, the new name for the CTRL. London will then be just 2 ¼ hours away from Paris and less than 2 hours from Brussels and there will be links too to other continental cities such as Amsterdam. This will be a major new asset for Britain and Europe, and the businesses that will set up at King's Cross Central will be extremely well connected internationally.

High Speed 1 will also bring significant benefits for travel within the UK. There will be new stations along the line at Stratford City and Ebbsfleet within the Thames Gateway development area. Those places will be boosted economically because of their new international links and because of their accessibility to Central London. Also, commuters from further afield, from places such as Ashford, will have their journey times cut in half, and people who previously would not have thought of commuting, will have new opportunities to work in Central London.

High Speed 1 will have a further, albeit short-term role, and that will be in connection with the 2012 Olympics, the main centre for which will be the Olympic Park in a regenerated Lea Valley. It is clear that the excellent connectivity of this site, which will have Stratford City as its local hub, was one of the main factors that persuaded the Olympic organising committee to choose London over other possible candidates.

With the new fleet of Javelin trains to be in service from 2009, public transport will have the capacity to deliver up to a quarter of a million passengers per hour to and from the Games. St Pancras Station, the gateway to Central London, will be just seven minutes away.

Coupled with High Speed 1, the capacity of Thameslink is being expanded, among other steps, through the construction of a new low-level station at St Pancras. This will provide convenient connections to the new international services. Also, the role of Thameslink as a strategic north-south route will be greatly enhanced, and with the future east-west Cross Rail and improved orbital services, there will be a 'sea change' in Greater London's railway system. This will not be before time. Until quite recently, London's transport system has compared most unfavourably with systems in capital cities in other countries, and the schemes that are now coming on stream are what is needed if the Mayor's wider vision for London as an 'exemplary, sustainable world city' is to be realised.

Users of the enhanced services at King's Cross and St Pancras will also benefit from better station facilities and, generally, a much better environment. At present, the practically complete extension to W H Barlow's single span train shed at St Pancras is the most obvious sign of that. But there is much more that is happening and will happen. Thus there has also been great activity underground with new pedestrian connections and ticket facilities. And at the front of King's Cross, the 'temporary', and unsightly southern concourse is to be removed, opening up the entire original façade to public view and providing a new public space for Londoners. Around the side of the station there is to be a new western concourse covered by a vast, glazed canopy. And Sir George Gilbert Scott's magnificently extravagant hotel at the southern end of St Pancras Station is currently being restored by the Manhattan Loft Company as a hotel, together with apartments in its turreted upper stories. Thus, buildings which epitomised the confidence of the beginning of the first railway era are being restored and adapted to serve new roles for an era of international high speed rail travel.

### **King's Cross Central**

The complementary mixed use redevelopment of the remainder of the King's Cross site has involved a lengthy process of consultation, research, planning and design work. Throughout, the developers, Argent, have worked extremely closely with three local authorities, Camden Council, the adjoining Islington Council, and the Greater London Authority (GLA) which came into being in 2000.<sup>iv</sup> There has also been close consultation with statutory bodies (such as English Heritage, in connection with listed buildings) and with local community groups through the King's Cross Development Forum. Regular meetings with that body – some 40 in total - achieved considerable common ground. It acted as a 'sounding board' for the emerging proposals, although even with the approved revisions, not all of the groups were satisfied with the final result. There was also a great deal of consultation with the general public, via a dedicated web site and public exhibitions.

The proposals from Argent built upon four public consultation documents:

- (i) Principles for a Human City (July 2001) set out 10 key principles for area regeneration;
- (ii) Parameters for Regeneration (December 2001) described the constraints, challenges and opportunities that the area presents;

- (iii) A Framework for Regeneration (October 2002) set out initial proposals and ideas of the site; and
- (iv) Framework Findings (2003) summarised the results of the consultation around (iii).

There were other influences, in particular the evolving planning framework, notably the policies of the London Plan, a specific chapter on King's Cross that was to become part of Camden's updated UDP, and a planning brief, also prepared by Camden Council.

In May 2004, Argent submitted three outline planning applications, one for the development of the main site (to Camden Council) and identical ones to Camden and Islington Councils in connection with the adjoining and much smaller 'triangle site'. There were also eight 'heritage applications' seeking consent to demolish certain buildings and carry out alterations to others on the main site.<sup>v</sup>

The two Councils consulted widely on these applications and held extensive discussions with Argent. For its part, Argent spoke directly to a range of 'stakeholders', including the Mayor of London, English Heritage and local people. As a result, Argent revised its planning proposals for the two sites, and submitted new applications to the two authorities in September 2005. There were many changes of detail, the main ones comprising; larger proportions of 3 and 4 bedroom family homes; explicit provision for a number of health, education and other community facilities; new plans for surface transport, including the option of a Cross River Tram; reduced building heights in 6 zones; 'green energy' provision; and a new park and more open and green space.

In November 2006, Camden approved an extremely detailed Section 106 Agreement covering a very wide range of economic, social and environmental matters and the following month it granted approval to the application for the main site. At the time of writing full approval of the triangle site applications, amounting to about 1ha of the overall 27ha site, was still awaited.

The approved scheme comprises the following main elements:

- High density, mixed use development;
- Refurbishment, investment and new uses for 20 historic buildings and structures;
- Around 50 new buildings;
- 20 new public streets and 10 new public spaces;
- Enhancements to Regent's Canal, including three new bridges;
- 'World-class' public realm – 40% of site area;
- Urban home zones;
- 25,000 jobs, together with skills and recruitment initiatives;
- 1,900 homes and up to 650 units of student accommodation;
- Retail and leisure provision;
- University of the Arts London;
- Children's centre and primary school;
- Primary health care centre, plus walk-in centre;
- Public health and fitness facilities;
- Indoor sports hall;
- 'Flux Park' play facilities and open space;
- Public bicycle interchange facility;

- Energy infrastructure comprising 14 wind turbines, ground source heat pumps, photovoltaics and solar water heating, district heating/CHP and provision for biomass energy;
- Native species planting and green/brown roofs and new habitat areas;

The approved floorspace is as follows:

Use	Floorspace (sq.m)
Mixed use development – total permissible	739,690
Offices	up to 455,510
Retail	up to 45,925
Hotels/serviced apartments	up to 47,225
D1 ('non-residential institutions')	up to 74,830
D2 ('assembly and leisure')	up to 31,730
1900 homes	up to 194,575

Table 1 King's Cross Central floorspace

What has been approved is the broad principle of the scheme, and floorspace maxima. Table 1 cites floorspace figures for the various sectors. These total more than the 'total permissible' figure; this is deliberate, for it builds flexibility into a major scheme that is likely to take 10-15 years to complete. Thus, to a limited extent, the floorspace of one sector could be 'traded' against another, depending on market conditions.

The outline scheme displays a broad indication of the layout of King's Cross Central (Fig.2) and the developer has also provided a series of illustrative views of how its various zones might appear. One such view appears as Figure 3. In practice there will be numerous detailed applications covering the individual buildings. The design policies of both the London Plan and the UDP are clear that very high standards will be expected.



Fig.2 King's Cross Central – the layout Source – Argent (King's Cross)

## **The Soundness of the Vision**

The above illustrations, and many others, give a general indication of how King's Cross Central might look. But to what extent are the development and the final, detailed plans likely to 'succeed' in practice? Have the developers and their partners 'got it right' and has all that consultation paid off? As some measure of this, I next attempt to assess this development against some of the key considerations in the London Plan and the more detailed ones in the UDP. Whether a development meets the aims of the development plan is legally the starting point for any UK planning authority in assessing its acceptability, although 'other material considerations' may play a part in the eventual decision. Those development plans have emerged following extensive consultation and they represent the authorities' vision for their area. To what extent, therefore, does the vision provided by this particular development at King's Cross mesh with the wider vision – London or Borough-wide - set by these plans?

**Opportunity Areas** In spatial planning terms, London faces the major challenge of accommodating significant population and employment growth. In population terms, that means growth of around 10% by 2016, while the City's booming economy should generate many hundreds of thousands of new jobs. Under Objective 1 of the London Plan, the new development that this will entail will have to be accommodated within London's existing boundaries without encroaching upon open spaces, including the Metropolitan Green Belt. This can only be done by making London a more compact, more intensively developed city.

According to the London Plan, a large proportion of the growth will take place within 28 Opportunity Areas, of which King's Cross is one. These areas have been identified on the basis that they are capable of accommodating substantial numbers of new jobs or homes and their potential is to be maximised. Each of them is to accommodate at least 5000 jobs, or 2500 homes, or a mix of the two together with appropriate supporting uses such as local shops, leisure facilities and schools. In purely quantitative terms, this development with its 25,000 potential jobs and 1900 homes (plus student accommodation) well exceeds that threshold. That is not to say that all interests are happy about the proposed mix. Indeed some local campaigners have strongly questioned the adequacy of housing provision and, in particular, the amount of affordable housing to be built. I deal with this argument later.

**Transport** Another important planning aim is to secure the integration of transport and development: by encouraging forms of development that reduce the need to travel, especially by car, by seeking to improve public transport capacity and accessibility within areas of greatest demand, including those designated for development and regeneration, and by supporting high trip-generating development only at locations with high levels of public transport accessibility and capacity. This development entirely meets that aim in that it is to be a high density development at a place with very good accessibility, by means other than the car. Coupled with that, parking provision is to be severely limited.

There is a current issue over transport capacity but that is to be addressed by the already committed large-scale investment in the rail and underground system. For example, in the case of Thameslink, the enhanced system will be able to accommodate 12-coach trains running at up to 24 per hour. Looking ahead, there are plans for a Cross River Tram to supplement underground and bus services. A corridor for this is provided within the King's Cross scheme.



Fig.3 Illustrative view of proposed Cubitt Park Source – Camden Council

**Integration with surrounding communities** There is also the issue of how well this new development would fit into this part of London. Thus, Camden Council, while supporting development that would enhance London's role as a world business, commercial and cultural centre, also sees a need for the King's Cross scheme 'to achieve economic, social, and physical integration with surrounding communities'. The UDP points to the fact that the Opportunity Area is surrounded by a number of residential communities, notably Somers Town to the west, Maiden Lane to the north, King's Cross to the south and Thornhill (within Islington) to the east. Those communities are among the most deprived in the United Kingdom with particularly high levels of deprivation in terms of income, employment and housing. Community regeneration in these areas is a priority for the Council.<sup>vi</sup> The question to be asked is to what extent can the benefits of the new development 'ripple out' into these surrounding communities?

The King's Cross development will create a large number of **jobs** that will theoretically be available to local people. Further potential jobs will be created through the transport enhancements. For example, the new Eurostar services will create a significant demand for jobs at St Pancras Station. But, if local people are to benefit significantly, it will be important that training is provided to equip them with the knowledge and skills to take advantage of those opportunities.

There is a related question that concerns the mix of **business users**. The UDP indicates that the Opportunity Area should provide accommodation for a range of businesses that contribute to both the London-wide and local economies. Thus, office space for large corporate organisations as well as small business units should be included. Also, developments should make provision for those sectors of London's economy that are particularly strong locally, for example art, media and higher education. In terms of jobs, this would help ensure that a range of employment opportunities are created, at various skill levels.

This development would appear to take a reasonable account of these local needs. In terms of jobs for local people, the Section 106 Agreement provides for employment and training initiatives. Much would depend, of course, upon the effectiveness of these in practice. Regarding the mix of business users, this is a development that lends itself to variety. In particular, it reuses older buildings that will make up a significant proportion of the floorspace, and such accommodation is often very suitable for small firms. Higher up the scale, and in terms of Camden's priority sectors, former railway buildings to the north of the present King's Cross Station are to become the base for the University of the Arts, London. This will be at the heart of King's Cross Central and should add a distinctive character and liveliness to this area.

Turning to **housing**, that proposed will take up some 20 to 25% of the land. Also, while 1900 homes might seem a relatively small number, given the size of the site and the scale of need in London, it exceeds the minimum of 1000 units specified in the UDP. Also, some 40% of those homes would be 'affordable'. Breaking this down, 70% of these would be social rented, meeting the growing need for people who cannot otherwise afford to buy or rent accommodation in the housing market. The remaining 30% would be 'intermediate housing', for those on moderate incomes, including 'key workers' (for example, teachers and health-care workers). The aim is to make available a range of accommodation for less than the normal market price or rent, thereby allowing essential workers to live close to where they work.

This is the main outstanding area of dispute between Argent (and Camden Council), on the one hand, and the King's Cross Railway Lands Group on the other. The latter fears that, rather than helping the surrounding population, King's Cross Central will gentrify the area, pricing local residents out and forcing the departure of local businesses. The Group's main charge is that the proposed provision of affordable housing does not go nearly far enough.<sup>vii</sup>

The amount of affordable housing in any development is a matter for negotiation between the developer and the local authority, taking into account development plan policies. Here, the provision undershoots the 50% aspiration set out in the London Plan and in the present version of the Camden UDP. It is generally recognised, however, that what is achievable for any particular site will vary considerably depending, among other things, upon the price of the land, the costs of tackling contamination etc. Also, in this case, the affordable housing is just one part of a substantial package of community provision that is legally committed through the Section 106 Agreement. From that perspective, a 40% provision of affordable housing might be said to be a relatively substantial one.

As is the case with the balance between the total amount of housing and commercial uses, there is a viability issue here and, of course, there will be limits to the level of risk that any developer will be prepared to take on. Unless the development can be seen to be clearly profitable, certainly in the long term, it will not proceed. From the consultations that have taken place in this area, there is an overwhelming desire to see development happen.<sup>viii</sup> No doubt that reflects the experience of the early 1990s when earlier proposals failed to materialise.

**Place-making** Policy KC8 of the Camden UDP states, among other things, that the 'Council will grant planning permission for development proposals ...with a very high standard of design that capitalises on the remaining high quality architectural and engineering works'. Related requirements include the need to achieve 'an attractive, safe, legible and stimulating environment for resident, worker, and visitor alike', together with 'a high degree of physical integration with the surrounding area'

and 'to promote sustainable design principles and also maximise opportunities for improved energy efficiency to limit greenhouse gas emissions'.

These are matters of design that are key to King's Cross Central becoming recognised as a successful place. Not only do the new buildings have to achieve a very high standard of design, but the spaces between them and between the new and the old need to be well conceived and executed. The challenge is to create an interesting and high-quality urban realm. The buildings and structures from the 19<sup>th</sup> century are an extremely valuable resource. Not only are they fascinating in themselves, but their retention and incorporation within the layout should give this development a character that new buildings alone can rarely supply. In particular, the listed gas holders which are to be re-erected close to the Regent's Canal and used as surrounds for three housing blocks and a play/amenity space will be highly distinctive features.

## Conclusions

This development has been a very long time in the making but, so far, the signs are that it will have been worth the wait. The transport proposals and the proposals for King's Cross Central are entirely complementary. The already substantial transport links will be further enhanced as will the environment, and passenger experience, of the stations themselves. The addition of a third station for Thameslink, under the street adjacent to St Pancras, is itself a hugely important development. All of these works are nearing completion, so it is easy to imagine their potential.

By contrast, the works at King's Cross Central have only just begun and it will be several years before this classic brown field site sports even the first phase of this large-scale development. Clearly there is enormous potential to create a fine urban quarter, but the eventual success of this development will be dependent on the details, and the long-term commitment of the developer and the consenting authorities to pursue the required very high standards throughout. That way, the vision will be finally realised.

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<sup>i</sup> Ackroyd, Peter *London- The Biography*, London,2000

<sup>ii</sup> Camden Council is the local authority responsible for much of the site. However, a small part of the redevelopment area to the east of York Way, the 'triangle site' falls partly within the Borough of Islington. This has been the subject of separate planning applications.

<sup>iii</sup> Pike, David 1990 *The King's Cross Development Case Study* The Planner Vol.76, No.49, 14 December 1990.

<sup>iv</sup> Gossop, Chris 2004 *Towards a More Compact City- The Plan for London* proceedings of the 40<sup>th</sup> ISoCaRP Congress 2004.

<sup>v</sup> Four of these were for Listed Building Consent and four for Conservation Area Consent

<sup>vi</sup> Camden Council – Camden Replacement Unitary Development Plan 2006

<sup>vii</sup> Arnold, Damian *Fear of the Future* Local Government Chronicle 15 February 2007, pp20-21

<sup>viii</sup> Davey, Alex, Gibbs, Andre *King's Cross – The Story So Far* Regenerate, November 2006, pp 22-26