London Boroughs Report 2018

This NLA Report is published by New London Architecture (NLA) in November 2018. This inaugural annual London Borough Report is a resource for Londoners, professionals and international visitors to understand local development across London, alongside a permanent exhibition at NLA’s Central London galleries. The Report forms part of the year-round NLA London Boroughs Programme, giving local authorities a platform for discussing shared issues and best practice.

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London’s boroughs are on the front line in ensuring that the capital’s citizens can enjoy full and rewarding lives. They reflect the variety and diversity of our great city – some, like Westminster and Kensington and Chelsea, include areas of great wealth as well as areas of deprivation. Others, like Barking and Dagenham, are still recovering from London’s industrial decline but whose lower land values now provide new opportunities for those pushed out of more central areas because of the high cost of housing and workspace.

The delivery of new housing is a key role for the boroughs and one that will be helped by the lifting of the borrowing cap in the Autumn Statement, while the growth of housing delivery vehicles within local authorities is an encouraging sign that public housing is once again being delivered by an energised public sector. Local infrastructure and the delivery of the Mayor’s excellent strategy for healthy streets also falls within the boroughs’ remit and is an area where greater application and more funding is needed. The completion of cycling quietways is slow and tortuous while key schemes for better conditions for pedestrians have been delayed.

This new publication and the related permanent exhibition at New London Architecture, The Building Centre, brings together the strategies of London’s local authorities into a single document so that Local Plans can be seen in a broader context and in relation to the new London Plan. London is a complex metropolis. The 33 very different local authorities not only provide the governance in their local neighbourhood, they also contribute to the variety that characterises the city. It is a misnomer to call London a city of villages – it is a city of towns and local centres that generate its polycentric plan and the communities that live in them.
The wider picture

As central government finance for local services continues to be reduced, London’s boroughs have to find new ways to manage and deliver services while also dealing with intense pressures on land, housing targets and often severely curtailed resources. Undoubtedly one of the greatest challenges that local authorities across London have been tackling – and almost certainly will continue to face in the coming years, despite recent government announcements – is the prolonged period of public funding austerity, combined with higher costs of – and increasing demand for – the statutory services that they must provide for their residents.

In September 2017, London Councils – the organisation that represents London’s 32 boroughs and the City of London Corporation – reported that as London’s population is expected to boom to 9.1 million by 2020, having grown at ten times the rate of the rest of England, London boroughs will have experienced a nearly two-thirds reduction in funding from central government since 2010. This, it argues, will lead to a ‘cumulative £1.5 billion funding black hole in borough finances by the end of the decade’,1 even though this year saw three-quarters of local authorities across England, including in London, made the decision to raise general council tax for local households by the maximum rate allowed without the need for a local referendum.2

Against this background of some of the toughest financial conditions, tragic events have also brought into sharp focus the role and responsibility of national and local authorities in ensuring the safety and security of London’s citizens, both at home and in public spaces. The Grenfell Tower fire of June 2017 led to the loss of 72 lives in one of the worst civil disasters in modern Britain. One of the major causes of the fire has been attributed to new exterior cladding added during renovation in 2016, and this led to a major independent review of fire safety measures and building regulations. In the aftermath there was also widespread criticism of the council’s response to the fire, and also the management of the tower and lack of attention paid to safety concerns consistently raised over a long period by residents. While the public inquiry is ongoing at the time of writing, the tragedy has compelled local authorities in particular to rethink and reassess not only the ways in which public housing estates are managed and maintained but also the way in which they engage and involve residents in processes of change.

Grenfell occurred during the same period as three terrorist attacks on Westminster and London Bridges and in Finsbury Park in March and June 2017. The use of vehicles as weapons by the assailants led to the implementation of safety barriers and other ‘hostile vehicle mitigation measures’ not only on bridges but in and around other public spaces and venues.3 At the same time, concerns about safety in public spaces were heightened by a reported increase in incidents of violence, especially knife crime among young people (up by 21 per cent in 2017-18 according to the Metropolitan Police),4 and crimes committed using mopeds.

Wellbeing and health is another key major concern for London, especially as the city’s air quality has continued to be one of the world’s worst. The capital reached its legal limit (set by the European Union) for the whole of 2018 less than one month into the year, despite the Mayor having introduced a ‘Toxicity Charge’ (T-Charge) for older, more polluting cars in central London, and low emission bus zones. Central government’s announcement in June 2018 of a third runway for Heathrow airport offers positive news for business growth but has also raised serious concerns about the anticipated negative impact on air quality, noise and congestion; in July 2018 the Mayor, along with environmental campaign group Greenpeace and four London boroughs – Wandsworth, Hammersmith & Fulham, Richmond and Hillingdon (plus Windsor and Maidenhead) – sought a judicial review of the Government’s decision; the case, along with other legal challenges, will proceed to a full hearing in March 2019.5 Expectations of growth in London’s town centres, especially among the business community and local authorities – and not least hopes for easier and quicker travel across London – were severely deflated by the announcement in August 2018 of a nine-month delay in the completion and opening of the central section of the Elizabeth line until autumn 2019. Although plans to continue pedestrianise Oxford Street were scrapped, in October Westminster City Council announced £150 million of investment over the next three years in improvements to the area, including more spaces for pedestrians and introduction of 20 mph speed limits, but with two-way traffic retained along the length of the street.

Against this backdrop, London’s local elections of May 2018 offered ‘no major political earthquake to speak of’.6 There was relatively little change, and even stasis, in the political make up of London, with the major parties retaining and consolidating their support in traditional strongholds. The Conservative Party now holds seven councils and fought off an expected Labour challenge in Barnet, City of Westminster, Kensington & Chelsea and Wandsworth but has continued to lose council seats across much of the capital. Labour controls 21 councils – virtually the same as before the elections – but increased its total number of councillors with its second-best London local election result since 1971. The Liberal Democrats retained Sutton and won back Richmond and Kingston but made only a limited increase (33) in their total number of seats across the capital since 2014.7

Local Authorities who increased their main Council Tax 2018-2019

1. In September 2017, London Councils – the organisation that represents London’s 32 boroughs and the City of London Corporation – reported that as London’s population is expected to boom to 9.1 million by 2020, having grown at ten times the rate of the rest of England, London boroughs will have experienced a nearly two-thirds reduction in funding from central government since 2010. This, it argues, will lead to a ‘cumulative £1.5 billion funding black hole in borough finances by the end of the decade’, even though this year saw three-quarters of local authorities across England, including in London, made the decision to raise general council tax for local households by the maximum rate allowed without the need for a local referendum.

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The wider picture

Political control of London’s boroughs, July 2018
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Air Quality and Air Quality Focus Areas
© GLA

NO2 (µg/m3) LAEI 2013 Update

- < 16
- 16 – 19
- 19 – 22
- 22 – 25
- 25 – 28
- 28 – 31
- 31 – 34
- 34 – 37

- 37 – 40
- 40 – 43
- 43 – 55
- 55 – 58
- 58 – 73
- 73 – 76
- 76 – 97

- Air Quality Focus Areas

- Labour
- Conservative
- Liberal Democrats
- City of London Corporation
- No overall control
National and regional policies and strategies

The past year was an especially important one for the future shape of London with the publication of two key strategic documents for planning and the built environment: the revised National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), published by the UK Government in July 2018, and the new Draft London Plan, published by the Mayor of London in December 2017. The former sets out the national planning policies for England and how these are expected to be applied, while the latter is the strategic plan for the capital, outlining the economic, environmental, transport and social framework for development. Both provide the strategic overview and direction within which local authorities and communities develop their own local and neighbourhood plans, which reflect priorities of specific places.

A key driver underpinning the policies outlined in the NPPF is the need to exponentially increase housebuilding to meet the stated nationwide target of 300,000 new homes a year by the mid-2020s, and to ensure that this focuses on affordable, high-quality homes. Among the important changes announced are a new standardised methodology for councils to calculate local housing need, informed by factors including the affordability of existing homes for people on lower and medium incomes; an emphasis on more intensive and effective use of existing land and buildings and greater use of small sites; and a stronger focus on high-quality design. At the Conservative Party conference in October 2018, the Prime Minister announced the lifting of the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) borrowing cap for local authorities, removing the limit to how much they can borrow against their housing revenue account, with the aim of encouraging councils to bring forward and deliver more rapidly on building new homes.

The overarching principle of the new Draft London Plan is one of ‘Good Growth’. Future planning, infrastructure and development must be underpinned by the Plan’s stated aim ‘to improve the health and quality of life of all Londoners, to reduce inequalities and to make the city a better place to live, work and visit’. Key elements of the Plan include a new target of 65,000 homes a year, of which an overall 50 per cent should be affordable; an enhanced focus on walking, cycling and public transport as a means of creating healthier and more socially and economically sustainable places; intensification and densification, especially around transport hubs; greater use of small sites; a commitment to preserving the Green Belt; and retention and consolidation of industrial uses. To create an accessible, inclusive and sustainable city within the capital’s existing boundaries, the vision for London’s growth is as a compact, mixed-use and multi-centred city.

With a population expected to increase by 70,000 a year to reach 10.8 million in 2041, this means making more efficient use of land and building to greater densities in places with good public transport access, as a means of unlocking growth especially in outer London. Expanding on key areas and the vision laid out in the Plan, the Mayor also published specific strategies for transport, the environment, housing and culture. Another key feature of mayoral policy is that the commitment to high-quality design for buildings and neighbourhoods, with, among other measures, the appointment of the Mayor’s Design Advocates. This group of 50 leading built environment professionals from a range of disciplines provide independent support, critique and advice on all aspects of London’s built environment.

The vision, direction and ambitions of the Draft London Plan have broadly received a welcoming, though measured, response from professionals and public alike. Representing views of London’s boroughs, London Councils offered support for the commitment to ensuring housing growth and supporting physical and social infrastructure, but it expressed concerns about ‘adequate mechanisms’ to deliver this – especially the pressures on planning departments and lack of skills and resources in the light of the Mayor’s call for design reviews and design codes, for example. It also called for boroughs to have greater flexibility in setting local policy on employment. Concerns about resourcing were shared by the London Assembly Planning Committee, which also welcomed the Mayor’s decision to continue to accommodate London’s growth within its boundaries and recognised that density of development must be higher – but this must be the best quality of design, with the support of local communities. While more homes are needed, said the Committee, they must be the right size and type for the capital’s housing need.

At the Big Debate, organised by New London Architecture (NLA) in February 2018, over 1,000 people polled on their responses to the Plan: the vast majority (86 per cent) agreed that densifying the suburbs was necessary to deliver more homes and jobs, and that the Mayor working with wider partners across the South-East on strategic infrastructure and housing targets would prove effective in providing affordable homes for Londoners (72 per cent). But an overwhelming majority (96 per cent) felt London would fall short in delivering 65,000 new homes a year.