THE LONDON BOROUGHHS


2020
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*WHERE WE HAVE THE LONDON PLAN WE REFER TO THE INTEND TO PUBLISH VERSION, DECEMBER 2019.*
“Desperate times call for desperate measures”. With council spending on local services having fallen by more than a fifth since 2010, the funding situation has been growing increasingly desperate over the decade. But these times have also thrown up positive responses, perhaps because “necessity is the mother of invention”, where councils are taking greater control of the delivery of new development.

For instance: in frustration at the speed of delivery and the affordability of homes, councils around the country have responded by starting to do their own development. Research by Inside Housing shows that the top four councils with the biggest development plans in the country over the next five years are all from London — Havering, Barking and Dagenham, Croydon and Newham. Havering has twelve major estate regeneration projects; Barking and Dagenham is delivering new housing and regeneration through its wholly owned delivery vehicle Be First; Croydon through Brick by Brick. In Edmonton, the Council is leading the regeneration of Meridian Water to build 10,000 homes over the next 20 years. Camden’s Community Investment Programme is delivering schools, homes and community facilities in the borough and last year won the top NLA accolade for the Agar Estate for delivering homes in the UK’s largest Passiv Haus project. 21 London boroughs have declared for Climate Emergency.

Newham recently announced its community wealth building programme where the borough will use its purchasing power and influence to keep wealth in the local economy. These new approaches, according to Newham Mayor Rokhsana Fiaz, have “rekindled optimism and confidence in local government’s transformative potential, and for the first time in many years we’re not on the back foot”. That confidence is reflected in the growth of Public Practice. There is a real enthusiasm among younger professionals to help deliver change and better places in boroughs in the face of swinging cuts to planning departments.

Local authorities are starting to take on the risk and the entrepreneurialism that has for so long been the prerogative of the private sector; but they still require funding to deliver their programmes. In 2013, when he was Mayor, Boris Johnson endorsed the findings of the London Finance Commission which had called for greater financial freedom for the capital. According to Johnson, tax devolution would give London government “the autonomy to invest in its own vital infrastructure as its population and economy grow, and bring London in line with competitor global cities”. In the light of the Prime Minister’s current focus on delivering economic growth in the north, and the anti-London sentiment of many MPs, it is even more important for the capital that such devolution policies are now implemented.

The independence of boroughs is reflected in the new London Plan where local character is a key plank of the town centre first approach and Opportunity Area Planning Frameworks. Local boroughs can also set out their local strategies for tall buildings — although one hopes this will be done in collaboration with neighbours which will be made much easier once there is a London wide 3D computer model, as also promised in the Plan and something the NLA has been calling for ever since our first Tall Buildings Study in 2014.

This research illustrates what individual boroughs are doing to implement their local plans. Although each one reflects the needs of its own specific community, when you amalgamate all the maps to create one big plan (see page of local plan map), you can start to understand the complexity and scale of change that is happening in this great city and the role the boroughs play in its delivery.

**Peter Murray**
Curator-in-Chief, NLA

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**LOCAL HEROES**
May 2020 will be half-way through the boroughs’ four-year term, with a mayoral election taking place early that month. As a result, much political attention will be focused on the race for City Hall, following a period when national politics has been the main concern. So how are the boroughs faring, and how is the fall-out from the general election likely to affect their capacity to deliver for London?

Given that many London councils have seen their budgets cut by a quarter or more since 2010, it is amazing how well they still function. The city’s population is still increasing rapidly (up 83,000 in 2018) which means declining borough budgets have had to be spread over ever-more people. There are self-evident problems, notably potholes, rough sleeping and scruffier streets. Now austerity is supposed to be ‘over’, the boroughs will be hoping for resources to start to improve the urban environment.

But the next hazard facing London councils is a so-called ‘fair funding’ review. The government is committed to altering the pattern of local authority resource distribution so as to be able to fund its own services and investment.

As London’s first Chief Digital Officer, my task is to ensure that our approach to technology starts and ends with the citizen. This can be summed up with a simple question: how can digital, technology and data empower Londoners from all walks of life to live healthy lives and live well alongside each other?

The new Smarter London Together Roadmap, launched by Mayor Sadiq Khan in June 2018, champions a bold people-first approach to the way data and technology serve those who live, work and visit our great city.

Our focus is on establishing better London-wide fundamentals — we call this ‘fixing the plumbing.’ This champions user-centred design standards when we create new services, responsible data-sharing, radically improving full fibre connectivity across the city, better basic digital skills and new ways of fostering collaboration between boroughs and public agencies.

London is already a recognised leader in mobilising open data for public benefit. Today nearly half of all Londoners regularly use apps made possible from live data publicly available for Transport for London. The 6000 datasets of the London Datastore empower London’s agencies and research institutions to solve some of the most complex urban challenges faced by Londoners: like poor air quality, housing and inequality.

In 2020 we will be working on Datastore 3.0, to truly establish a data service for London to drive innovation to solve civic challenges. An important milestone will be the creation of a planning open data hub for London in the first half of this year, which should significantly improve the availability and reliability of data in the planning system.

Our investment in full fibre for the city will replace the copper ‘last mile’ by laying hundreds of kilometres of fibre cabling in tube tunnels linked to over 600 public buildings and providing a fibre backbone for the city. These public assets then act as local hubs to lower the cost of private investment in areas of London underserved by the market, improving connectivity and preparing the city for 5G.

We are collaborating with European cities and entrepreneurs to sharing new energy saving and mobility smart tech designed around citizens’ needs for more low-carbon, connected neighbourhoods and cities. With the growth of Internet of Things devices, transparency is fundamental, which is why London is piloting a new Data Trust with the Open Data Institute so we can share live data from city spaces while safeguarding their privacy and security of Londoners.

We are also committed to support the next generation of pioneers by enhancing the digital skills of young women and Londoners from diverse backgrounds through the Digital Talent Programme and providing a basic digital skills entitlement for adults with low or no skills from September.

Last year we worked with London Councils to launch the new London Office of Technology & Innovation (LOTI) to enhance collaboration with 16 London boroughs and provide the first ever audit of what technology powers local services in our city to improve buying and sharing.

As a result of this, the Mayor of London’s Civic Innovation Challenges set open calls to the tech community to work with public agencies to develop and scale solutions to Londoner’s biggest issues, and we are currently working on three projects: enhancing the visualisation of planning (with City Hall), reducing road freight (with Transport for London) and combating online extremism (with the Met Police).

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Trust—or lack of it—in those who lead and deliver urban redevelopment, was a major ‘community’ theme last year. No surprise to anyone ‘on the ground’, but now with an extra wedge of troubling evidence thanks to developer Grosvenor’s UK-wide research. This was accompanied by industry calls for ‘more’ and ‘better’ engagement. ‘Co-design’ and ‘co-production’ are on everyone’s lips, and the pages of many ITTs. Which should make me, and communities I work with, happy… But it won’t—and, more importantly, it won’t work—unless done for the right reasons: desire to fundamentally re-organise the ways in which places are produced and, in particular, the ways in which decisions are taken. (Rather than to de-risk planning.) And this will involve a real shift from business-as-usual.

Local communities—our fellow London citizens—ask consistently excellent questions. It’s why I love my job. Right now, things people want to understand, and challenge, include: the economic underpinnings, and value assumptions, of development, ways in which infrastructure is planned and allocated, and merits of different methods for—and role of different players in—addressing the ‘housing crisis’.

At the heart often lies a demand to remember that a city and staff are massively reduced, while traditional power structures are embedded in culture and in legislation. So I share these examples as real bold sparks of possibility. My wish for 2020? To see more of this, with inter-borough knowledge and skill sharing. Plus, ideally, GLA expertise has been exacerbated by austerity. As local planning authorities have had to rethrive to managing applications and producing local plans, non-statutory services have been the hardest hit. Nationally, the number of architects working in the public sector fell by 10 per cent between 2015 and 2019. But London Boroughs are bucking the trend. According to the AJ the number of architects employed by boroughs increased from 29 in 2015 to 44 in 2019. 16 had joined local government through Public Practice, alongside many other built environment practitioners. This reversal reflects a structural shift in the resourcing of London authorities. Faced by a sea change in local government finance and mounting pressures from housing and environmental crises, farsighted councils understand they cannot afford to be reactive. These Boroughs are using a mix of fee income, capital borrowing and Mayoral funding to rebuild their capacity to plan proactively, and directly deliver a new generation of council homes. New enterprises demand new in-house expertise. The GLA’s 2018 survey shows that the planning and placemaking skills most strongly required by London Boroughs are in design, followed by commercial skills including development and viability. ‘Traditional’ planning skills such as policy and development management appear to be the least needed. Through Public Practice, experienced architects, urbanists and landscape architects are working within councils to develop design guidance, characterisation and masterplanning. Others are demanding higher design quality through the pre-app process, and defending it from consent through to completion. Increasingly, authorities are bringing in design skills to explore more creative ways of using (and keeping) their own assets, from feasibility studies, to small sites programmes, and major council-led housing delivery projects.

For some authorities, like Havering and Epping Forest, this is the first dedicated in-house design expertise they have had in living memory. Others, like Tower Hamlets and Bexley, are building internal teams to carry out work that might have been outsourced, lowering costs and building institutional knowledge. In Enfield and Barnet they are working with local traders to revive the local economies of high streets and town centres. In other authorities, such as Newham and Redbridge, Associates are co-designing new approaches to estate renewal together with residents. Councils that understand the scale of the structural challenges they face also understand that the answers don’t lie within any one discipline or department. This isn’t only about design. Public Practice is also supporting authorities to bring in environmental experts to develop cross-council sustainability action plans—for example at Ashford. We are working with the Connected Places Catapult to create roles that integrate data and digital services with planning—such as the Harlow & Gilston Garden Town Digital Officer. And we are working with the GLA to establish a network of ‘infrastructure coordinators’ across London to align new development with the planning and delivery of utilities, highways and transport. The public sector’s capacity may have been dismantled, but it is being reconstructed in exciting new forms. Future public planning roles may not be Borough Architects—but they will be interdisciplinary, cross-departmental, digitally fluent, and closely engaged with communities. That, I think, will make them jobs anyone would want to do.
As we enter the 2020’s, it’s a good time to think about what the next decade might hold for our sector. I am certain we will see progress in three key areas: environmental sustainability, housing delivery and the quality of our new homes and services.

Climate change will impact on every sector and the Government’s commitment to zero carbon by 2050 will bring far reaching changes over the next 30 years. Housing contributes a seventh of the UK’s carbon output, the built environment some 39 per cent of the world’s carbon emissions. We should expect Government to act quickly to gather the “low hanging fruit” — securing improvements from the biggest carbon contributors including housing.

Reducing emissions from existing homes was on every party’s manifesto and the introduction of the Future Homes Standard by 2025 will have a dramatic impact on how we build and heat new homes. In future, smarter design and construction will be necessary and off-site manufacture can bring real benefits here; precision engineering increasing build quality, reducing waste and allow more sustainable material. Swan’s Cross Laminated Timber modular homes at Beechwood in Basildon are actually embodied carbon negative.

Whilst a pity more attention wasn’t given to housing during the general election campaigning, this Government remains committed to increasing new homes and, in London especially, homes and homelessness were among the most talked about issues on the doorsteps.

Many borough (such as Barking & Dagenham) are now gearing up to build more homes through their own local initiatives to reduce emissions in existing residential areas. Part of the approach is improving streetscape; planting more trees therefore helps to indirectly reduce transport emissions as well as sequestering carbon and tackling the biodiversity crisis. Hackney is recognising this by committing funding for an expected 5,000 trees.

Housing
Geoff Pearce, Executive Director of Regeneration and Development, Swan

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The Mayor’s RE:FIT programme is helping Councils with local initiatives to reduce emissions in existing residential buildings. One of these is Enfield’s ground source heat pump array for eight existing tower blocks; an example of the surge towards heat pumps (fuelled by the new London Plan). Retrofit programmes are slow though. We need a more standardised approach supported by the right technical expertise and thorough commissioning if fuel poverty and CO2 emissions are to be addressed.

Declarations of a climate emergency have been racking up over the last year with only seven London boroughs yet to do so. In line with the Government’s own pledge councils are committing to Net Zero Carbon by 2050, 2040 or even 2030. It’s the right rhetoric but subsequent action is too slow; it doesn’t feel so far like there has been the shift in gear that an emergency should inspire.

The next ten years are crucial. Delaying emissions reductions will have catastrophic impacts.

CO2 Emissions across London can be attributed to:
37 per cent residential, 36 per cent commercial and industrial, and 26 per cent transport. Most councils have started on their own estates and operations and are making modest progress.

By 2041 around 80 per cent of all trips within London will need to be via low carbon modes. Transport for London’s funding to make streets and public areas more cyclable and walkable in Enfield, Kingston and Waltham Forest, is a great precedent using speed restrictions, new Bikehangars and awareness programmes. Just one year on residents in “Mini-Holland” areas walk and cycle an extra 37 minutes a week compared to elsewhere in London. Part of the approach is improving streetscape; planting more trees therefore helps to indirectly reduce transport emissions as well as sequestering carbon and tackling the biodiversity crisis. Hackney is recognising this by committing funding for an expected 5,000 trees.

New build operational energy is more easily dealt with. Some pioneering councils are looking at high standards for new social housing. Camden’s Agar Grove is being built to Passivhaus standards and is carrying out post occupancy evaluation to further optimise energy consumption, crucial for delivering low energy in practice. Low carbon planning requirements in high value areas has to date been a powerful tool. However, just as councils have called on Government to provide powers and resources to make their targets possible, the closing Part L consultation would take these away. The new London Plan Policy SI2 also seeks to address upfront carbon emissions. As awareness grows of the importance of embodied emissions, architects and clients are seeking to reduce these crucial emissions, and even exploring commitment to Net Zero Construction under the UKGBC framework.

All targets need managing and Haringey has been a pioneer when it comes to their borough’s emissions. Conducting annual emissions reporting since 2011, they now have the three lowest emissions of any London borough. Some councils are setting up new committees or holding Citizens Assemblies, though with competing demands many councils arestruggling to get strong strategies in place. It is essential that they do and that these eventually penetrate to all relevant departments, maybe then we will see more projects being procured, commissioned and managed to be low carbon.

There are some good precedents in place but councils now need to commit much greater funding than they have in the past to back up admirable rhetoric with the coordination and weight a climate emergency deserves.

Net Zero
Hero Bennett, Principal Sustainability Consultant and Partner, Max Fordham

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Confidence appears to have returned to the London property market with the continuity of a confident Conservative Government and the likely re-election of Sadiq Khan as Mayor of London. This stability means that 2020 should be a busy year for those of us involved with Planning.

UK Government statistics from 2019 indicate that 88 per cent of planning applications are being approved and the same percentage of major applications are being determined within 13 weeks “or the agreed time” (MHCLG, March 2019). However, frustration remains amongst applicants about expensive pre-application discussions that provide limited certainty and the fact that timescales linked to Planning Performance Agreements are not binding. Viability assessments remain a key sticking point often delaying determination of planning applications.

Other changes are afoot which may impact planning performance’ during 2020.

Sadig vs Jenrick — The sometimes fractious relationship between the Mayor and Central Government will be interesting to watch. The Secretary of State could yet decide to intervene with the London Plan on matters raised by the Planning Inspectors but disregarded by the Mayor. We might also see more call-ins of major planning applications by the Secretary of State particularly on matters such as tall buildings. Design is a key focus of the NPPF and Boroughs will be required to develop evidence based local policy and guidance on matters such as tall buildings. All of this will draw upon local planning authority resource and we are likely to see more use of independent design experts.

New and evolving development sectors — Build to Rent is a maturing sector but is not being dealt with uniformly by planning authorities, particularly on matters such as affordable housing. Similarly evolving products in student, co-Living, retirement, hotels, co-location etc invite debate on use classes and the application of planning policies which can delay planning determination.

2020 marks the 20th anniversary of the Greater London Authority. This is an important milestone also for London’s boroughs. The creation and maturation of the GLA and its agencies has been accompanied by a new era for London government as a whole.

There is no doubt that the scale of ambition and investment in transport over the last two decades has been a massive boon for London—not just for transport, but for wider outcomes such as better air quality, a new generation of placemaking schemes, regeneration.

Yet we all know big challenges remain as we look ahead—emissions, congestion, and active travel levels are still not where we would all like them to be. We still have major inequalities across the city, where life prospects can differ dramatically from one end of a tube line to the other. And we are only scratching the surface of how transport can drive outcomes such as housing delivery at scale.

So what role can London’s boroughs play in taking the transport agenda to the next level in the capital?

Following the Mayor’s announcement of the central London Ultra-Low Emission Zone in 2014, it was the boroughs who made the case, and the political effort, for expansion across the inner boroughs. It was a brilliant example of how the dynamic between the GLA and the boroughs could work to deliver a cutting-edge new policy for London. The joint effort on the cycling programme—whether we look at the Waltham Forest Mini-Holland scheme or the wider network of cycleways sprouting up all over the city—is another great example.

How can we extend this sharing of political ‘work’ to deliver change, and mutually spurring each other on to deliver a progressive transport agenda?

Road pricing is an area where progress must now be made, where London could take the lead. Using links between transport infrastructure and housing development areas to catalyse new housing delivery and placemaking is another—from Thamesmead to Euston. And identifying the next projects where development can help pay for transport solutions, building on the Northern Line Extension experience, such as the Bakerloo Line Extension corridor.

We are seeing major structural changes in how people live their lives in London. The growth of flexible working, and structural shifts in shopping and leisure, have caused major changes in travel patterns. What people want from the neighbourhoods where they live and work has also changed. At times it feels like the transport system has not kept pace with how society is changing. It is the boroughs closely connected with London’s communities and people, who can bring the deeper understanding and local curation needed to enable the transport system to evolve—to better match what it delivers to what people want.

There is a lot of talk—rightly—about getting the right balance of devolution and funding across all regions in the UK. This is often seen as a threat to London. However, if London’s boroughs can continue acting as an engine for innovation, this need not be a threat at all.

As London’s boroughs continue to drive new approaches to urban policy and infrastructure—whether low emission zones, cycling, funding solutions, or placemaking—London will benefit. But so will those cities and regions across the country who can learn from the capital, and who now are starting to have the powers to put those measures in place.