

Draft London Plan – the challenges of planning and design quality

The new London Plan is arguably the most far reaching and visionary document to have been drafted for the city for some time says Kim Vernau

The Mayor's new London Plan addresses major challenges affecting the provision of housing and sustainable transport networks for the city, setting out the key policies to guide London's spatial development for the next 20 to 25 years, including a framework for local plans across London. Consultations on the draft closed last month.

The scope and level of support for affordable housing outlined in the plan importantly acknowledges that this is a key deliverable for meeting London's urgent housing need. Modern Methods of Construction are also recognised within the plan. Embracing the role of techniques such as offsite construction has a vital role to play in supplying quality homes Londoners want to live in, while also addressing problems arising from shortages of skilled labour in the construction workforce.

The strategic objective of the new plan is to shape how London will evolve and develop as a growing city, delivering increased housing numbers while maintaining a high quality of design. However, one of the key challenges that still needs to be addressed is the ongoing crisis in quality of design in design and build procurement, resulting in problems in the life-cycle of buildings.

Issues concerning design quality stem from design information not being completed at the tender stage, or significant variations being required after the appointment of the contractor, resulting in significant costs to the end-client. As a result of this separation of design and construction, the contract can be seen as adversarial. Robust expert monitoring during the course of the build is therefore a critical requirement in order to prevent subsequent construction defects.

The proposed implementation of area-wide design codes in the Government white paper – Fixing our Broken Housing Market – will be key to ensuring that a high quality of design can be achieved going forward. Those areas where developed and adopted design codes are already in operation are among the most successful at build-

ing new homes, enabling architects, planners and other experts to draw up proposals which reflect and deliver on local priorities.

The plan also sets out a vision for a more socially integrated city, focusing on health, jobs for existing communities, excellent data communications and sustainable mixed use developments. Future developments in London should be economically sustainable, with the new plan supporting a commitment to build 50% of new homes that are affordable, and contributing to a zero carbon rating by 2050.

Feedback on the consultation so far has highlighted that not all outer London boroughs share the same objectives as those set out in the plan, with criticism that there needs to be a greater recognition of the differences between the development needs of inner and outer London. Increases in housing targets and a prescriptive approach to planning have already given rise to objections.



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In those areas where the outer suburbs have a conglomeration of towns and villages the intensification of the suburban pattern of development, as envisaged by the plan, could bring damaging and irreversible change to the character of those towns and villages. Furthermore, London is often the shopping destination of choice for residents in outer London, and public transport connections and car parking standards need to be addressed, not ignored.

There is also no clear detail outlined in the plan for the protection of conservation areas, local heritage designation or the settings of listed buildings. The catch-all GLA Design Guide fails to provide the subtlety necessary to preserve the character of towns and villages that comprise outer London. To expect each Borough to write individual design codes for all these areas would be unrealistic. These issues need to be clearly stated and considered in respect of new developments.

At the heart of the overall success of the plan is the requirement for the provision of quality new build homes on both infill and smaller sites, where the necessary transport infrastructure is already in place. Unlocking the role of small and medium sized builders and developers will also be critical to delivering new homes in London.

The new London Plan is arguably the most far reaching and visionary document to have been drafted for the city for some time. However, there are still a number of key challenges to be overcome, and its future progress merits widespread attention from the planning, construction and real-estate sectors. ■