

# London's governance is not up to the job

A lot of reading this month for those interested in the future of London. There is the modestly titled *2020 Vision – The Greatest City on Earth – Ambitions for London* by Boris Johnson (80 pages and see overleaf). A title that smacks of hubris and circuses, but it is a jolly good read as you might expect from our scrivener Mayor. It does what a good planning document should do – sets out for Londoners a pretty clear, accessible vision (let's hope the detail delivers) shorn of the planning policy speak which makes understanding utterly impossible for the average Londoner.

For no other reason than this, Boris has made a fundamental breakthrough in planning practice. Take note all you pointy-head policy wonks. Save the small print for development management, not communication.

Slightly drier but no less radical, *The West End Commission Final Report* (70 pages) and *Raising the Capital*, The report of the London Finance Commission (90 pages) also make good reading. If you want to form a view about London's ambition and its governance, you can read them all in a morning. They are fantastic flowerings of London's ambition to keep living up to its potential.

Whilst they are all coherent in their own terms, perhaps what the West End Commission's report points up, which Boris's magnum opus and the drier but no less interesting Finance Commission's report don't really tackle, is the need for a more coherent vision of what should happen in central London. A question that has for several years been made pressing by the arrival of Crossrail – and shortly one hopes, Crossrail 2 if Boris has his way.

Decades of development management rather than urban planning, and fiscal centralisation way beyond the timescale that Thatcherism envisaged to achieve its ends, and more recently harsh cuts to planning department budgets, regardless of the economic effects, have excised the ability of regional and local planners to develop a more strategic spatial approach to planning. Old school officers protest masterplans never worked and were out of date long before the ink was dry, and that it is much better to let the market do its stuff without set-in-stone plans

Yet Boris clearly espouses the need for a city leader to project such a vision. The Finance Commission understands and recommends that London requires greater financial autonomy if it is to be capable of delivering its vision of the future, while the West End Commission makes it absolutely explicit that central London, in particular the West End, lacks clear governance and an overriding, co-ordinated and shared vision that reflects the centre's expanding role that transcends parish pump boundaries.

New York runs itself with five boroughs. London has more than six times this number of administrations. Why? There are 13 central London boroughs that manage what will be soon a rapidly expanding central district. The growth of the last 30 years, and in particular the population growth of the last 12, and the next 12, make it absolutely necessary that London's governance and its financial autonomy, for the good of the UK economy, is adjusted to reflect its European dominance and its global role.

Big Bang re-established London on the global map. Crossrail, the Olympic legacy, London's creative and tech sectors, the sustained interest of foreign investors mean that a new era is opening up and London's governance is not up to the job as currently configured.

The Government should liberate London so it can best serve Britain. ■