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strategic planning in the london metropolitan region

Duncan Bowie, Convenor of the TCPA's London and South East Working Group, introduces a Special Section on Strategic Planning in the London Metropolitan Region

The London and South East Working Group of TCPA Policy Council members was set up in December 2015 with the purpose of preparing for the election of a new Mayor of London in May 2016 and for the review of the London Plan which would follow. The Group was aware that in the Mayoral election debates candidates rightly focused attention on how London is to meet the challenges of growth and how a Mayor could use the Mayoral strategic planning powers. The new Mayor, Sadiq Khan, will now review the 2015 London Plan published by his predecessor, Boris Johnson; and Greater London Authority planners have already undertaken considerable research on development options, including work based on the spatial scenarios in the 2050 Infrastructure Plan¹ and supporting documents.

The TCPA's own commissioned research on household projections by Neil McDonald and Christine Whitehead has set out the numerical challenge to be faced.² The previous Mayor commissioned a series of research projects in relation to the application and possible revision of the current London Plan policy on residential density, which is based on the principle of sustainable residential quality (SRQ). These are likely to be published in the near future. Much of the debate in the run-up to the Mayoral election focused on two specific issues: whether there should be any development within the Green Belt; and whether London's housing shortage can be resolved primarily through the redevelopment and

intensification of existing council estates, now perceived by the Government to be brownfield sites suitable for redevelopment. The TCPA Working Group considers that it is important that the focus of the debate is widened.

The TCPA has long held the view that the future of London needs to be considered within the context of the wider London metropolitan region. This view was expressed forcibly on the TCPA's behalf by its late TCPA President, Sir Peter Hall, and the TCPA has continued to advocate this wider strategic perspective in its contributions to the reviews of the London Plan since the first such Plan was produced in 2004. In the 2014 Further Alterations to the London Plan Examination in Public the Inspector rightly held that the Mayor needed to establish an effective method of engaging in discussions on the planning of the metropolitan region with the planning authorities within the travel-to-work area centred on London – the functional urban region now termed the Wider South East.

Suggested approach to identifying and assessing options

The starting point for such an approach to strategic planning should be a region-wide evidence base encompassing an assessment of the requirements for development for each key land use across the region, possibly including a lower-growth scenario; and an assessment of development capacity, on a consistent basis to ensure that development



capacity is most effectively used. The evidence base should include an assessment of whether recent development activity has been appropriate in both quantitative and qualitative terms.

The identification of potential locations for residential and employment growth must include an assessment within an overall spatial framework of individual locations against a full range of economic, environmental and social sustainability criteria. This balanced approach is crucial, as justification for specific policy positions is often drawn from a single perspective – for example the justification for Green Belt protection relies on giving preference to an environmentalist perspective, whereas the justification for concentrating new development in Central London rather than adopting a more polycentric approach is often premised on an economic perspective.

The TCPA Working Group's view is that there is no single solution to responding to the challenges of London's growth and that a balanced approach will involve components of different options, and not overdependence on a single option. Options currently under consideration include the continuation of hyper-dense development in Central London and in Opportunity Areas which are primarily on the fringe of the Central Activities Zone; densification of town centres; residential densification of existing council estates; suburban residential intensification; urban extensions to London; intensification of/urban extensions to Home Counties towns; major new settlements within the Metropolitan Green Belt;

major new settlements beyond the Green Belt; expansion of towns at the edge of the metropolitan region; and residential dispersal to other parts of the UK, with or without employment capacity.

The TCPA Working Group recognises that each of these options may make a contribution to meeting both the quantitative and qualitative shortage of housing and employment-related development output, but, given the numerical and qualitative deficits, no single approach is sufficient.

The first stage of any effective approach needs to be a test of the viability of each option against different scenarios in terms of economic, political and governance contexts. There then needs to be an assessment of the impact of each option. For a spatial strategy to be sustainable, the transport connectivity of new settlements and of intensified existing settlements is crucial. Assessment of transport connectivity is not just about travel time and level of service but is also about affordability. Both the potential for intensification of lower-density residential suburbs where there is good transport connectivity and social infrastructure and the potential to improve existing services on a cost-effective basis should be considered.

Similarly, the potential for urban extensions to London along transport corridors should be subject to further detailed study. Reports by the Mayor of London/Transport for London,³ London First,⁴ AECOM,⁵ the Outer London Commission⁶ and Quod with Shelter⁷ have already identified significant potential for residential growth arising

from new stations to be provided under the Crossrail 1 and Crossrail 2 programmes.

Alternative development options have also been considered in a number of articles published in the *Planning in London* journal.⁸

Mobilising resources

Decisions in relation to transport and other infrastructure investment must be related to a coherent spatial plan for the location of new and expanded residential settlements. Orbital light rail and enhancement of commuter networks could also make a significant contribution.

While the TCPA Working Group is not advocating specific development options, a number of sub-regional studies, including studies of sectors of London and of the wider growth corridors, are necessary. This approach was advocated in the 2000 LPAC (London Planning Advisory Committee) strategic frameworks and in the 2003 Sustainable Communities Plan, as well as in the earlier work of Sir Peter Hall, and focuses on the green fingers/green wedges approach to the urban/rural boundary rather than the concept of a rigid Green Belt.

However, spatial planning is only one component of the development of a sustainable response to the challenges faced by London's growth, and issues of public and private sources of funding, land assembly, land value capture and governance are crucial. Regulatory and taxation measures also have a role in ensuring the optimal use of both investment and development output, whether it be residential, commercial, transport and utility services, or social infrastructure. But the social sustainability of planning decisions and development outputs is crucial, and this is central to any consideration of development options in a globalised city in which development activity is to benefit all of the population of the metropolitan region and reduce rather than increase both social and spatial polarisation.

We also need to recognise that the current governance structures for the planning of the metropolitan region are inadequate. London cannot be planned independently, and the previous Mayor had begun to initiate discussions at both a political and a professional level with the other planning authorities within the metropolitan region. These discussions need be put on a more formal basis and move beyond information-sharing to a process for joint planning. There needs to be consideration of a range of governance options. This discussion has been initiated in the recent reports of the Outer London Commission,⁶ and central government, the new Mayor and the representatives of the Home Counties districts need to reach an agreement on an appropriate way forward. London is not an island, nor is it a city state detached from the rest of the metropolitan region, the UK and Europe.

The articles in this Special Section of *Town & Country Planning* are written by members of the TCPA Policy Council's London and South East Working Group – Corinne Swain, Nicholas Falk and myself, on aspects of the challenges faced by the metropolitan region – together with contributions from two academics, Ian Gordon (of the London School of Economics) and Michael Edwards (of University College London), who have been active contributors to debates on planning in the London metropolitan region for a number of years. These articles are intended to open up discussion on appropriate responses to the challenges facing London and the South East.

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Notes

- 1 *Draft 2050 Infrastructure Plan*. Mayor of London, Jul. 2014. www.london.gov.uk/what-we-do/business-and-economy/better-Infrastructure/london-infrastructure-plan-2050
- 2 N. McDonald and C. Whitehead: *New Estimates of Housing Requirements in England, 2012 to 2037*. Town & Country Planning Tomorrow Series Paper 17. TCPA, Nov. 2015. www.tcpa.org.uk/data/files/Housing_Req-Final.pdf
- 3 *Draft 2050 Infrastructure Plan: Transport Supporting Paper*. Mayor of London, Jul. 2014. www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/Transport%20Supporting%20Paper_3.pdf
- 4 *The Green Belt: A Place for Londoners?* London First, Feb. 2015. <http://londonfirst.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Green-Belt-Report-February-2015.pdf>
- 5 *Big Bold Global Connected – London 2065. A Manifesto for Long Term Growth of the London City Region*. AECOM, Mar. 2015. www.aecom.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/AECOM_Cities_London_2065_Manifesto.pdf
- 6 *Co-ordinating Strategic Policy and Infrastructure across the Wider South East of England*. Fifth Report. Outer London Commission, Mar. 2016. www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/olc_coordinating_strategic_policy_and_infrastructure_across_wider_south_east.pdf; and *Accommodating London's Growth*. Seventh Report. Outer London Commission, Mar. 2016. www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/olc_accommodating_growth_main_report_fixed.pdf
- 7 *When Brownfield Isn't Enough: Strategic Options for London's Growth*. Quod, with Shelter, Feb. 2016. www.quod.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/When-brownfield-isnt-enough-high-res.pdf
- 8 *Planning in London*. 2016, Issue 97 (Apr.-Jun.). www.planninginlondon.com/HTML/Archive/Archive.htm