

What is the point of subregions?

The value of subregions is that they can deliver consistent, shared approaches, joining up systems to ensure more effective delivery. Stephen King explains.



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Over the last few years a lot of time and thought has been given to the subject of London's subregions. Most of this has focus on their geography – put simply which boroughs are “in” – or “out” – of which subregion. Less thought has been given to what the role of subregional working actually is. The discussion has, typically, focused on the resulting map and the carve-up of boroughs.

Boroughs have always seen the value in looking over their boundaries and working with their neighbours. This already happens on a number of groupings around waste, housing, transport etc. The GLA Group (GLA, LDA and TfL), also actively engage and invest sub regionally. This reflects that clearly London is a hugely complex, inter-linked city.

The debate on subregional boundaries has been around a long time and the last substantive piece of work was the Addison & Associates report for the GLA (June 2006), ahead of the London Plan review. The new Mayor is committed to reviewing the current configuration. Central Government's subnational review of economic development adds another interesting element and highlights that outside of London there is a clear debate about “functionality” of sub-regional working.

Housing

The approach to housing investment by the Housing Corporation was subregional and appears from the draft Mayor's Housing Strategy (November 2008), it will continue to be – although perhaps a different geography. The Homes and Communities Agency is making strong noises it wants to talk to groups of Boroughs. Boroughs already undertake subregional housing market assessments, reflecting the complex reality of London.

The knotty issue of pan-subregional (or even pan-regional) housing allocations is still with us, which would in theory allow tenants greater freedom to move around the city, to reflect their personal situations.

Transport

Clearly people travel to West End, the City and the South Bank from all points of the compass and from well beyond the London boundary. However integrated planning for transport investment is one of the clearest sub-regional issues, where there needs to be a close working relationship between boroughs, the GLA group and at times national agencies, such as Network Rail. TfL sub-regional approach focuses on the integration of economic development and land use with transport, around long term plans such as the Mayors Transport Strategy. Growth will need the transport investment to support / facilitate it.

Thinking radially Barnet's plans for tens of thousands on new homes and the impact on Camden's already congested rail and underground network. Also we need to strengthen London's weak orbital routes, linking for example outer London's town centres. The Mayor has already stated his wish to promote pilot express bus routes to address this – which will need a subregional approach.

Health

Since 2007 there is a single pan-London Strategic Health Authority, with 33 PCTs remain coterminous with local authority boundaries. However there are “informal” groups around commissioning issues. In north London this grouping reflects the old North Central SHA; Barnet, Camden, Enfield, Haringey, Islington. There are also well advanced propos-

als to establish a North Central London acute (hospital) commissioning agency from 1 April 2009. This may well have implications for planners developing their LDF's supporting investment strategies – reflecting that certain services will be provided subregionally.

Waste

The very real, hugely costly and politically sensitive issue of waste management lies subregionally. The membership of the London's Waste Authorities reflects the flow of central London's waste into outer London facilities (and beyond), in the case of the North London Waste Authority: Barnet, Camden, Enfield, Hackney, Haringey, Islington & Waltham Forest.

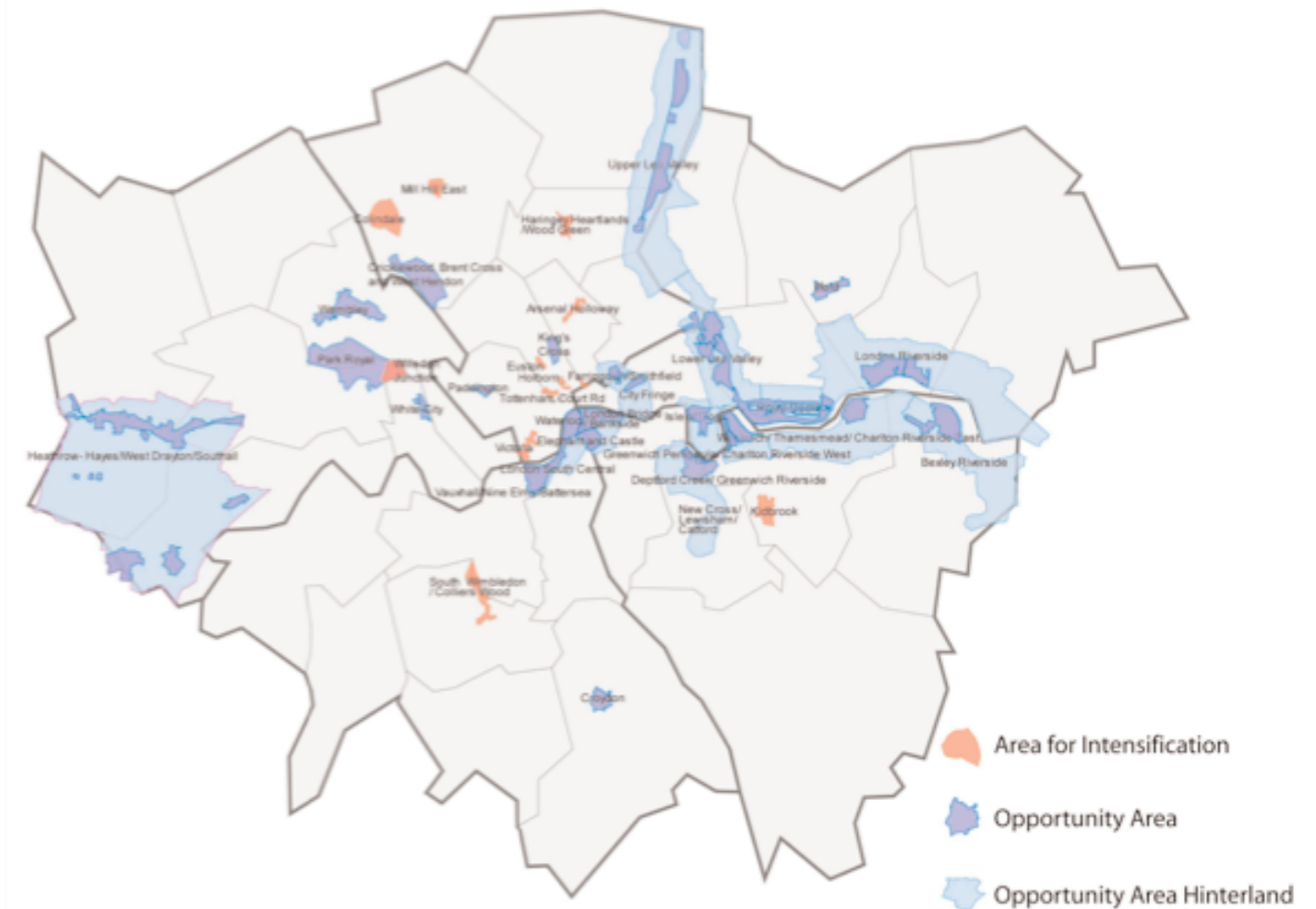
Worklessness

London continues to have unacceptably high levels of worklessness, reflecting concentrations of low skills. Tackling worklessness and raising skills needs focused neighborhood action, but there is also a recognised benefit from boroughs working together – to share good practice and support joint commissioning. The West and East London City Strategy Pilots are good examples of subregional – multi-agency approaches, while in north London the North London Pledge is a voluntary commitment of three London Boroughs to work together to raise skills and tackle worklessness.

The transfer of large sections of the Learning and Skills Council's funding to Boroughs in the coming year is another opportunity (and challenge), which the current draft LDA investment strategy recognises will need a subregional approach. Young people should be able to move freely around London to seek the skills they need and much of this movement is subregionally.

London's Geography: Opportunity & Intensification Areas, with subregional boundaries

The London Plan, Consolidated with Alterations since 2004, February 2008.



Economic development

The Government published its response to the consultation on the Review of Sub National Economic Development and Regeneration (November 2008). In line with the view of boroughs it seeks to introduce a duty on them to carry out economic assessments and points out London Councils stressed the need for assessments to be carried out at a sub-regional level to reflect

functional economic areas. Certain issues, such as effective inward investment, already benefit from close working at the regional, subregional and borough level.

Cross-borough working

A number of Opportunity sites run across a number of boroughs and again some type of partnership is need to ensure a coordinated approach, this may be a more

geographically tight area – such at the Upper Lee Valley (by far London's largest Opportunity Area) and Park Royal. At the same time projects as diverse as Crystal Palace renewal and Woodberry Down (the largest estate renewal project in Europe) will have an impact far wider than the borough they are located in.

Fuzzy – flexible Boundaries

“Sub-regional boundaries need to

be regarded as “permeable”, and must not prevent action across them (planning for “corridors” of growth across borough boundaries for example)”, – Planning for a Better London, July 2008

It would be a retrograde step to set overly rigid sub-regional boundaries in the London Plan – boroughs and regional government should be proactively encouraged to think flexibly, focusing on the functional

objective of sub-regional/cross-boundary work. Boundaries are too easily perceived as being 'hard' or rigid, with work programs set to reflect these artificial geographies, not outcome focused.

The GLA's response to the consultation on their "Planning for a Better London" document (December 2008) again recognises that what ever the boundaries, they will need to apply flexibly, with different partnerships to address particular issues. It also recognises that subregions play a role in inter-regional discussions with partners in the wider South East.

North London prides itself on being a bit of a market leader on cross boundary working. North London already works closely with West and Central London on the London to Luton Coordination Corridor, which brings together three of the UK's largest regeneration sites (Brent Cross / Cricklewood, Wembley and Kings Cross). To the East linking the Upper and Lower Lee Valley, driving the Olympic's legacy northwards is a strategic objective of north London boroughs such as Haringey, Enfield and Waltham Forest.

On issues of shared interest subregional partnerships are already working together – for example on outer London economy and the future of our town centres. Something we hope the Outer London Commission will found of use. This highlights that outer London is not homogenous – but is hugely varied.

North London works over the London boundary developed good inter-regional links, for example setting up and facilitating the West Anglia Routes Group, which brings together the local authorities between Cambridge-Stansted-Harlow-Stratford and Liverpool Street to seek investment in this

main artery for this Housing Growth Corridor. The Thames Gateway interregional planning statement (2004), runs across three of England's regions is a very useful document setting out a joined-up approach. Greater joining up between the London, East of England and South East Regional Spatial Strategies remains a firm (if strangely elusive) objective of regional and sub regional partnerships.

Inner v Outer London?

"Central, inner and outer London are inextricably interlinked – none can succeed in isolation from the others – and this will be a major theme in our approach to planning for London" Planning for a better London, July 2008

This is the issue which has focused most attention on if boroughs are "in" or "out". The last Mayor originally adopted a central London subregion, but was in the process of breaking this into five wedges, bring together inner and outer boroughs. This was adopted in the London Plan (February 2008) following the public inquiry. Mayor Johnson is proposing a strong central London core subregion – bring together seven boroughs (Westminster, the City, Kensington and Chelsea, Camden, Islington, Lambeth, Southwark).

This proposal clearly acknowledges the importance of the Central Activity Zone, the powerhouse of much of London and the UK's economy. It reflects that in many ways the "old" wedges did not work, specifically for Westminster and the City.

However a central London subregion which attempts to align for example Dulwich with Archway, also has its issues – especially if the specific problem you are trying to fix is joining up planning around the

Central Activity Zone.

Arguments between the pizza wedges or the doughnut (all the jam in the middle) approach to craving up the subregions will never go away and there is no simple solution. It is worth noting that the Panel report on Mayor Livingstone's first London Plan EiP (which took the doughnut approach), stated "there is a strong dissatisfaction with these boundaries as planning units" (July 2003). There will always remain pros and cons to any perceived one-size fits all approach to geography. Westminster and the City will never sit comfortably in anything but a central London subregion.

Do we define subregions by an area's shared character, e.g. a dense, inner London? Or define them by elements of functional relationships? – very crudely speaking outer London exporting workers, inner London exporting wages and waste.

As the Mayor's statement makes clear inner and outer London are "inextricably interlinked", which is reflected in some of the functional groupings set out above. In North London boroughs such as Camden, Islington and Hackney actively see that they have to "look in more than one direction". I return to the point that any form of working needs to encourage fuzzy-flexible boundaries. We need a central London subregion - but perhaps with a clearly defined tighter CAZ focus?

We need to firmly bury a simple "lines on a map" – you are "in" or you are "out" approach to subregional working. London is a highly complex, interlinked city – people and services move around and make links in a multiplicity of ways. The Mayor's planning statement in the summer strongly endorses this approach, looking for greater working across subregional and interregional boundaries. Boroughs (and others) should be free to join

which and as many subregional clubs as they see benefits from.

What we need to reflect on is the reason for different people being in different clubs. But more than that we need to encourage and promote the permeable boundaries we are all in favour of.

The starting point needs to be what is the added value of subregional working – a firm integration of what benefits are there from groups of boroughs working together. Similar to setting up Multi Area Agreements there should be a test of need for this. Also like MAAs boroughs can be in more than one.

90 per cent of successful policy is in its execution. To execute policy you need to organise effective delivery and where that has to be cross boundary – planning, transport and so on. It has to be smaller groups working in manageable partnerships with some agreed decision making and governance structure. The value of subregions is that they can deliver consistent, shared approaches, joining up systems to ensure more effective delivery.

Delivery will need small, lean teams, with a clear focus on promoting outcome driven subregional partnerships, operating at a large enough number of boroughs (i.e. more than three) to be cost effective.

The starting point is – as ever – why are we doing it?