

Will a future London be levelling down?

Future mayors will need to coin a new credo to embrace dealing with a falling population and negative growth, says Nigel Moor

The leader in PiL117, the last issue, *Planning for a falling population* warned that London will have to learn to cope with a long period of declining population and negative growth. Adding to these anxieties, does Boris Johnson's levelling up election pledge to the Red Wall constituencies, mean that London faces in addition a drastic cut in government grants.

The levelling-up agenda

The government's levelling up agenda promised to the Red Wall – the dozens of Labour held Leave-voting constituencies – signals a new era of infrastructure spending in the regions. Boris Johnson in June 2020, six months after his election victory, pledged £5 billion to accelerate infrastructure projects. But there are losers as well as winners. The expansion of Heathrow Airport could be shelved indefinitely. A similar fate could face the £33 billion Crossrail 2. Overspends on the Crossrail 1 scheme have inevitably raised concerns about the successor project. The pandemic provided the opportunity to pronounce its indefinite suspension. Pushed by the DfT, Transport for London first suspended consultancy work on the project in the early days of the pandemic and in the spring of 2021 announced its cessation. This is a crucial step in the government's levelling up agenda after dealing with the pandemic. After more than thirty years of enormous investment in London's transport network, this is the first significant cutback.

England's history

No country can escape its history. The beginning of the second decade of the twenty first century sees a conjunction of two forces: Brexit and the coronavirus pandemic. These forces have had an impact on England greater than anything else since the Second World War. Looking ahead, and trying to gauge the changes that will take place to influence England's political and social structure is probably as difficult as at any time in the country's history. It is even more difficult to picture what a future London might look like.

London's population peaks at nine million

Following the deregulation of financial services in 1986 – Big Bang – London's population grew for the next 30 or so years, and it became the world's most global city. People came from all areas of the world to be part of this thriving, creative economy. At the onset of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020 London's population was estimated at around 9,304,000. Collier and King in their book *Greed is Dead* (2020) quote that by 2018 output per person in London was measured at £54,700 compared with £23,600 per person in the North East and the capital accounted for 23 percent of national output, up

from 18 percent in 1998. Agglomeration such as this is a trend some economists encourage as being allocatively efficient. They go further and suggest that if we must worry about spatial fairness, the best approach is to transfer consumption to provincial towns and cities through taxes and benefits. Collier and King conversely argue that although London is efficient at transforming effort into income, it is inefficient at transforming income into wellbeing.

Population data might support this view. Between 2008 and 2018 around 550,000 people left London each year. Until 2020 this had been offset by those moving in – principally from abroad – but immigration is falling. If the numbers of people leaving London continue at this level, London's population may have peaked at around nine million. The new London Plan has barely been adopted and already arguments rage over future housing needs. Simon Ricketts (*PiL* Issue 117) contrasted the plan figure of 53,000 per annum against a delivery of less than 37,000 and new Government expectations of 93,000 per annum. But all this must now be in the melting pot as there is the plausible expectation that the future population of London could fall well below its present level.

This population reversal is not unprecedented. Like other cities that deindustrialised after the Second World War, London's population initially peaked in 1939, at 8.6 million, before consistently falling until in 1981 it had shrunk to 6.6 million.

The reasons were in many ways similar to that induced by the need to challenge the coronavirus: a desire to reduce the density of people living and working, especially in Inner London. After the Second World War the movement of people out of London was the genesis for a wave of new towns. Similarly following the pandemic, a new exodus could help create a new wave of garden towns, built at lower density with more open space and dedicated cycle and footways. In doing so England will become a less centralised country, in which opportunity is more evenly distributed, and a better place to live in many other ways. This could align with the view expressed by Collier and King that what needs to be spread around the country is the capacity to be productive, not just the capacity to consume.

England will differ from many other parts of the world, where people will continue to live at high densities in metropolitan areas, particularly in China, India and the USA. The city qualities of proximity and connectivity are still prized in these cultures. But these qualities that made cities attractive and vibrant places to live and work turned them into hotspots for the coronavirus. As Roger Boyes noted in an article in *The Times* in 2020 during the pandemic, it turned out that a virus can be transmitted in much the same way as ideas. England, the first country to industrialise, had already during the early part of the twentieth century, embraced the gar-

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den city movement as an answer to industrial pollution and the spread of disease. A century later that movement will gather fresh momentum as England's individual answer to Covid-19 and other viruses. There are currently around twenty garden towns and villages being promoted in the country.

Tall buildings in London

Associated with London's population growth in the first two decades of the twenty first century, was the extraordinary growth of tall buildings. In 2019 the New London think tank estimated that there were 541 buildings of 20 storeys or more planned in the city, with 60 completed in London in 2019 – more than double the total for 2018.

Two of the city's tallest buildings were approved in 2020, during the pandemic: the 36-storey tower at 50 Fenchurch Street (designed by architect Eric Parry), and the twin skyscrapers in Vauxhall (designed by ZHD, the practice founded by Zaha Hadid), which stands at 53 and 42 storeys. Following the pandemic will the business model that sustained this extraordinary growth, and the increasing concerns about fire strategy and safety in the post-Grenfell world of increased regulatory scrutiny, slow this growth?

Following a mini-boom in the 1960s, which saw the construction of the Millbank Tower and Centrepoint, the next two decades saw little construction of tall buildings. What changed the picture was the speed at which the docklands area to the east of the City became a successful high-rise business district. The City of London Corporation realised that it had to respond to this threat to its pre-eminence, and advised by Peter Wynne Rees, the city's chief planning officer for nearly 30 years, it embraced skyscrapers.

In his history of London Simon Jenkins brilliantly dissects the misguided and poorly conceived strategies that have blighted the planning of the capital. Commenting on the Shard, Jenkins wryly observes that no other borough but poverty-stricken Southwark

would have tolerated such a structure with not the slightest nod of respect to its location in low-rise Bermondsey. The new towers that rose over the metropolis in the first two decades of the new century appealed to their purchasers because they offered privacy, secrecy, and gated security, but some now lie empty.

Time to rethink

Looking forward to 2036, the revised City Plan (published in March 2021) acknowledges that the pandemic might have financial implications both in the short and medium term for the City Corporation and Transport for London. I think a slow-down of development, particularly new tall office buildings, could provide an opportunity to look again at areas singled out for renewal in the plan. The City of London has little public space along the River Thames particularly when compared with the South Bank. This is not new. After the Great Fire of London in 1666 the Royal surveyor Sir Christopher Wren submitted a plan for a new city modelled on European cities – he had lived in Paris for a year – with broad streets and an open quay along the river with access to London Bridge. The plan was rejected, and the city was rebuilt quickly maintaining the old medieval street pattern. This area between the London and Tower bridges could now provide an exciting public space worthy of a world city.

Londonism is a term coined by *The Economist* to describe a creed which is pro-finance, pro-immigration and investment hungry and was championed by Ken Livingstone and Boris Johnson and now Sadiq Khan. It would not have been possible without the massive rail investment that has dramatically improved both connectivity and productivity in the capital city. But future mayors, who will not enjoy this level of government support, will need to coin a new credo, to embrace dealing with a falling population and negative growth. ■

ABOVE:

The City of London has little public space along the River Thames particularly when compared with the South Bank.

This proposal for a City 'Boardwalk' is by Brian Waters and Bryan Avery©

Dr Nigel Moor is a chartered town planner who began his career in London with the Covent Garden Planning Team, and since been active in local politics having been a town, district and county councillor. This is an extract from his new book to be published next year *England Restored* which is a second edition of *The Look and Shape of England* published in 2010.



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