

London's new plan better than a curate's egg

More people, more jobs, more growth, more transport, more investment, more money-making. London's success will be to somewhere else's disadvantage. Presumably the Mayor has no qualms about this

Planning in London has been published and edited by Brian Waters, Lee Mallett and Paul Finch since 1992

Statutory plans are notorious for being a compendium of reasonable policies, half-baked ideas, platitudinous statements of the obvious, and half-truths dressed up as principle. The new London Plan, launched by Mayor Khan last month, largely avoids the pitfalls inherent in this sort of document. It sets out a coherent approach as to how London could and probably should develop over the next few decades – not-too-modestly envisaging that the document will hold good from 2019 to 2041.

There is, however, an acknowledgement that the housing target policy of 66,000 net additional homes per year is likely to need a review before 2029; one suspects that the policy-makers already know that these targets, unless there is a radical change in delivery mechanisms, will not be met. Nothing wrong with the targets, of course. Elsewhere, the plan looks more sure-footed. The transport strategy reads like a history of the immediate future, and is entirely credible. The clear identification of growth areas and the policies that should inform them is plainly set out, and even if there are quibbles about detail the general thrust looks sound.

Particularly impressive is the section on design. This has been pretty much adopted from the work carried out by the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment, now part of the Design Council, particularly in respect of design review. There is welcome acknowledgement of the problems of protecting design quality once permissions have been given, and indications of how this could be addressed. The general policies in respect of what should be expected of design in a world city in the 21st century seem sensible, though there is a tendency to assume that minimum space standards should immediately become maxima in the interests of 'efficient' use of sites, when simply providing more on a site might be a better alternative.

London needs a plan and this looks like a robust one, even if some of the claims made about it are exaggerations, for example the claim that 'Good Growth' is a new idea. It is a rehash of multiple past national and local policies. For 'good' read 'sustainable'. Moreover, the robustness conceals the broad context in which planning, with its multiple policies and guidance, relates to the unplanned world. For example, to what extent should planning try to second-guess what is happening in the market?

Not that long ago, the Mayor's predecessors had a near-obsession that offices were a terrible thing, were transforming vibrant parts of London into commercial dead zones, and should be generally resisted. You would never think that now: offices are positively encouraged, and protections are put in place to stop too much housing, yes housing, interfering with office locations. These include, rather mysteriously, Soho and Covent Garden. One senses that the Mayor has been lobbied rather successfully by vested interests.

At a more general level, there is a statement in the plan that development should be about 'fairness', that is to say whether a particular proposal will make the capital more equitable, more accessible, healthier. But the point of the plan is to make London more prosperous in comparison to both the rest of the South-east, and to the regions generally. More people, more jobs, more growth, more transport, more investment, more money-making. In short, London's success will be to somewhere else's disadvantage. Presumably the Mayor has no qualms about this, but he should reflect on whether the planning tests he is setting for proposals within London can nor should be seen in the same way. This is particularly true of housing proposals. The plan seems to be based on a belief that everything can be provided in quantity once you have identified land and applied design policies. But planning is not the same as delivering, especially if you are looking forward to 2041.

A final question: given the concerns about climate change and catastrophic flood expressed in the plan, would it be too much to expect an explicit proposal for a second Thames barrier, as part of an infrastructure plan incorporating an estuary airport? ■

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Doing it the Swedish way

Imagine letting developers and architects choose what they thought best? Take a look at Linköping's university housing project

We are still a way off delivering the 66,000 homes a year that Mayor Khan's new London Plan targets. And for those few who will read it, or the myriad wordy housing policy documents from London's brow-beaten planning departments, it doesn't seem unreasonable to look for a dynamic tactic for how boroughs might achieve 'delivery' – especially of the right quality.

Socially-minded Swedes have revived a successful national model in the small university hi-tech town of Linköping in southern Sweden that is worth looking at and adapting for London. Sweden has a housing shortage, driven by similar forces that produced ours. It has a much smaller national population of 10 million. And perhaps it is easier to deliver homes in a town with 150,000 people – not that dissimilar to a smaller London borough.

Linköping's university has a low-rise 70s campus on the edge of town, divided from the modest town centre by greenfield land owned by the municipality. Sweden has a strong tradition of 'Expos' – built exhibitions of new settlements expressing the social concerns of the day that use design to address these. The last was in Malmo 15 years ago.

So the time seemed ripe to revisit the Expo concept on an eight-hectare greenfield site, now called Vallastaden, between the university and the town. An impressive 1,000 new homes have been built in five years on this site – by no less than 40 different developers. One or two developers or housebuilders would probably have sufficed over here, with the results we know and love so much.

Vallastaden's developers, however, who included individuals, architects as well as major contractors like Skanska, did not bid on land price which was fixed, but against 19 criteria assessed on a points basis. Bidders won points for using wood and innovative construction methods; ecological kit like solar panels or returning energy to the grid; including art; research projects to deliver better social outcomes, like flexible new apartment layouts; or being an innovative architect-led builder or developer rather than a major contractor.

The idea was to avoid developer-induced design sterility, to liberate developers and designers to collaborate, innovate and experiment, and to insert urban scale densities that would extend the town, bridging the physical disconnect between 'town and gown' while adding value to the municipality's surrounding land-holdings, providing new homes for all, including students and tenants as well as homeowners, in a delightful neighbourhood.

The biggest innovation seems to offer the opposite of the British planning system. Liberty! Encouragement for smaller developers to choose materials and colours without hindrance, to pick storey heights, working within fixed numbers of storeys – two, three, four, five or six – according to a pre-set urban layout – but with complete freedom for the developer/designer to set a storey height.

Imagine letting developers and architects choose what they thought best? Unheard of. No let's have a procurement bidding war based on price instead. Imagine tens of thousands of people coming to see the resulting Expo? Unlikely.

Linköping. Listen-up voters, it is worth sending your planning officers and housing & regen' cabinet members on a freebie to Sweden in 2018 – before it's too late. And if they've any sense, London's housebuilders should do the same for their development directors. ■