

A design-led approach in the new London Plan

The Plan will help learn lessons from Covid-19, featuring policies aimed at improving space and quality standards for new-build properties, says Lizzie Le Mare

The London Plan's formal adoption at the start of last month gives developers the certainty they need to fully understand the core aims of London's new development strategy and move forward on a number of projects across the capital.

By working within an adopted framework to deliver local agendas there is a clear way forward out of the three-pronged crisis we currently face – recovery from the coronavirus pandemic, solving the city's affordable housing shortage, and responding to the climate emergency.

The heart of the Plan focuses on addressing the housing crisis and delivering new homes – in particular, affordable homes in the context of 'good growth'. Much of the debate between the Secretary of State (SoS) and the Mayor in finalising the published version focused on housing numbers and ensuring that the Plan will meet London's full housing need. This is a point on which the SoS and the Mayor clearly still disagree, with the SoS concluding that 'you still have a very long way to go to meet London's full housing need'. However, in considering the delivery of housing it is important not to think in sheer quantity, but also to think of the importance of quality and the role that good design has in delivering successful places.

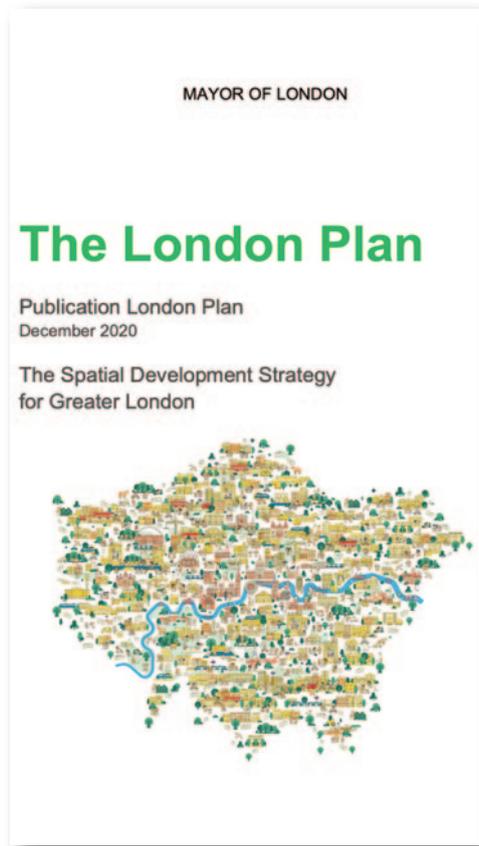
Large swathes of housing stock are now subject to regeneration and refurbishment because they were built quickly due to pressure to house people in great need. We need to ensure that in this current housing crisis we are building good quality, well designed places where people want to live and work that will last.

The new Plan sets out some good groundwork in terms of delivering 'good places', with policies that promote a design led approach to optimising site capacity as a good starting point. Moving away from the application of blanket density ranges based on public transport accessibility will help to promote more distinctive and innovative design centred around local needs. Acknowledging that all places have unique characteristics that need to be considered in development proposals is crucial and a welcoming feature of the new Plan. The difficulty will come in the ability of planning authorities to assess what 'good design' is and ensure that a more objective view on site capacity does not lead to prolonged

and lengthy discussions when dealing with applications.

Meanwhile, an area of conflict that could potentially flare up is the tug between policies on estate regeneration and those covering zero carbon and the circular economy – with new sustainability policies making it much harder to demolish existing buildings. Energy and sustainability are just one of many considerations alongside the existing character and quality of an estate, the views of local residents and any wider regeneration objectives.

One aspect that may help to achieve an understanding of what an appropriate site capacity would be is the publication of guidance on this matter. Consultation has recently closed on a supplementary guidance document, 'Good Quality Homes for All Londoners' which will help interpret and implement the Plan's policies on housing design, optimising site capacity and enabling housing supply through small site developments, with the wider purpose of sup-



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porting good growth. The document sets out guidance to cover design and quality issues at a number of scales - from establishing if a site is suitable for development, to a design-led approach to capacity, down to housing design standards that will ensure the internal environment of new homes is well thought out and supports the way in which people want to live.

At the same time, a point of contention in drawing up these plans was the definition of tall buildings. The Secretary of State had insisted the plan be modified so that where there was no borough level definition for 'tall', it was automatically set at anything over six storeys or 18m. This had previously been set at 25m in the Thames Policy Area and 30m elsewhere in London. By lowering the height of what is deemed 'tall' it means a more cautious approach could be taken restricting opportunities for innovation.

This point illustrates some of the tension that has occurred in agreeing the final Plan, on one hand, great emphasis has been placed on achieving housing targets but on the other some modifications can be seen to be reducing the ambition of the Plan itself.

The pressures for new good quality homes, schools, hospitals and places of work will inevitably mean fewer opportunities to create more traditional parks and nature reserves too. The urban greening and healthy streets policies in the Plan will be vital therefore in ensuring a healthier, happier and more sustainable future for London.

Finally, the Plan will help learn lessons from Covid-19, featuring policies aimed at improving space and quality standards for new-build properties, tackling poor air quality, and ensuring all residents and workers have access to open green spaces. It also steers us on a path towards tackling the climate crisis, with the goal of making London a zero-carbon city by 2030. ■