

Strengthening the Strategic Core of London Plans in the face of New and Old Challenges

Summary report of two half day LSE London Roundtables, 20th and 27th October 2023.

Purpose and Organisation of the Roundtables

To advance discussion about how the GLA's strategic planning role could be enhanced, during the hiatus in London Plan review work occasioned by the delayed Mayoral election, LSE London organised a pair of half day roundtable sessions in October. Each involved some 25 invited participants with personal experience of the London planning process and its particular demands. The participants were drawn from London government (Assembly members and current/past officers), central and borough government, academic researchers and civic/community organisations – predominantly from within London but also several from the Wider South East.

Since many occupied sensitive positions, the ground rule for the roundtable was “Chatham House” – i.e. barring attribution of observations or arguments to particular participants. That is followed in this general summary. But individuals who are happy/keen to put any of their contributions (or follow-up thoughts) into print – including those who provided introductory remarks for the sessions – were (and still are) encouraged to contribute to our dedicated blog series:

Content and Structuring of Discussion in the Two Roundtables

The two roundtable sessions had distinct starting points:

Looking Back: starting from a [critical academic overview](#) of 5 rounds of London planning asserting that they shared 3 key features, each restricting their value as

strategic guides:

- narratives presenting 21st century London as a dynamic national economic asset, able to accommodate a growing population within its own borders, given appropriate infrastructural support;
- an absence of effective pre-adoption debate within London about their proposed/alternative strategies and their credibility ; and
- outcomes involving rates of housing supply growth in the capital consistently falling greatly below the growth in need.

Looking Forward: starting from reports of a novel, large scale GLA engagement/consultative ([Planning for London\[i\]](#)) programme. This was primarily focused on better understanding the perceptions, preferences and concerns of representative residents, as distinct from the technical analyses of trends, markets or behaviour.

In each session the discussion moved on from these starting points to explore constraints on the city's capacity to develop and sustain a strong strategic core to London Planning:

- in the first session the discussion addressed a trio of formal limitations – with respect to **time** (15-25 year planning horizons but 4 year Mayoral terms), **space** (the disconnect between the administrative GLA area and the economically functional Wider South East), and **decision structures** (greatly limiting the scope for wider political engagement on strategic choices);
- in the second session it was a strong perception that London's development/planning was more liable to be disturbed in radical ways (economically, climatically, demographically, technologically, globally) than had been expected in earlier rounds of the Plan.

Key Issues Arising Across the Pair of Roundtables

Each of the two sessions gave rise to very lively debate spanning a wide range of topics,

beyond those that we can report here. But many of the key issues raised around the table spilled over between these two sessions, with a number of (what we see as) key themes/questions emerging, and it is on these that we now focus:

A. What Matters about Housing Supply – Building Rates or Access?

How important are the headline **aggregate indicators** of performance of the Plan, as compared to the patterns of **outcomes for vulnerable groups** and the **implementation tools** deployed to improve the position of groups liable to benefit less from an overall growth in “opportunities”.

While there was a good argument for the latter emphasis, there was a sense that it was offered defensively in the housing context, where the supply gap had clearly increased rather than being resolved over 5 rounds of Mayoral Plans. In the context of housing the points were made that:

- without specific targeting and assistance, poorer households would actually gain few of the dwellings being added to the city’s housing stock;
- but also that the context now was a general level of unaffordability across the open housing market. This in turn reflected a marked overall failure of housing supply (across both London and the Wider South East) to keep pace with growing demand/need during London Plan periods;
- national planning legislation now allows for unplanned permitted development which could lead to significant restructuring of office and commercial space towards housing – which may not be adequately reflected in the coming Plan;
- achievable targets have their role in directly impacting on borough land allocation plans – but unrealistic ones simply undermine the principles leading, as was seen in the last round, to tensions between the GLA and central government;
- more generally, while aggregate numerical targets might not do the job at metro level it was also noted that it is probably the element where London and central government most obviously need to interact throughout the plan-making process.

B. Negotiating Relations with Other Powerful Independent Actors (inside/outside London)?

What kind of “**deals**” does a truly strategic and strategically effective Plan depend on. Is it

- simply (at least in principle) a fair settlement between central government and the largest metropolitan authority (Mayoral or collective) with devolved authority. In principle this would involve allocating a budget, fairly set in relation to expected economic/social returns, for services and infrastructure; *or*
- a matter of opportunistically pursued *ad hoc* deals between the authority and some set of external actors (in government, public agencies and/or the private sector), inside and outside its metro area (including state agencies). These would involve negotiated visions as to how they could deliver on strategic economic and social goals across the metro area as a whole.

The latter presumes much more activist leadership and political engagement during the process of plan making/implementation, with irregular time patterns of activity probably over-spilling mayoral terms. Can that level of involvement be achieved?

C. Recentring the London Planning Process on Strategic Issues beyond Statutory Town Planning

Can a *single policy document* adequately serve both;

- to integrate the functionally distinct transport, housing, environmental etc. strategies, addressing the links, tensions, uncertainties, potential, imbalances and differing expectations associated with these – in ways that can be effectively and publicly debated within London – with routes of engagement going beyond “town planning”; and
- satisfy the professionally and governmentally defined expectations of what a (town) planning strategy for the area should/must contain. This would of necessity include appropriate need, target and forecast indicators and legally defensible lines of argument, both for specific elements of the Plan as well as guidance for lower tier (borough) authorities in their formal plan-making and case decisions.

If not, should not the former (with its small p planning overview) be debated and agreed – in a concise, but argued form – ahead of final drafting/presentation of the latter, and *formal* engagement with central government?

D. Taking the Monitoring Function Seriously as a Crucial Learning element in Strategic Planning

Strong concerns were expressed about the dilatory and erratic progress of the GLA in

publishing reports on annual *progress* in relation to the modest number of outcomes (was 24 now reduced to 12) to which it is formally committed. Beyond these complaints which have been publicly registered, there were views that the whole exercise was seen by the GLA in too narrow and defensive a light. This is particularly true, since it only directly applies to the opening years of longer-term plans (before another edition supercedes them).

More properly, it was argued, monitoring/review should be seen as a key learning activity, with significant benefits in its own right. As such it should be cast in a form going beyond isolated outcome indicators. Instead, it should account (in a more narrative and causal way) for what had happened during the reporting period and how this related to expectations and circumstances of that time (including factors that had been missed).

A particularly conspicuous (but far from unique) example of failure and/or avoidance has been in relation to the persistent housing supply shortfall. This is surely increasingly inexcusable in successive Plan rounds. Monitoring needs to lead to changing behaviour. It was also noted as a major failing in relation to Opportunity Areas and may well apply to other long-lasting policies.

E. Engaging constructively and effectively with central government

One external difficulty for a metro authority producing a truly strategic plan – going beyond the increasingly narrow horizons of statutory town planning – is that central government is not well positioned to respond usefully. This is **both** because of the fragmentation of relevant responsibilities across departments (and statutory agencies) **and** because (as we were reminded) central government departments cannot commit resources more than 3-4 years ahead.

Arguably that is part of what makes metro authorities special – as a level at which more inter-connections and a longer-term perspective can be seen as necessary. Frustrations with central government not seeing things in that way clearly will not be resolved by devolution of strategic authority to the metro level (even if that were always the relevant level (cf. the WSE). But if it is a matter of ensuring continuing political pressure from the metro area, it would require a very much stronger degree of political engagement within the area than is currently either available or sought in relation to the strategic /metropolitan aspects of (small p) planning.

F. Responding to recognisable uncertainty

Traditionally strategic planning is framed in relation to sets of explicit or implicit assumptions about future developments. These can be in the form of numeric trends in economic growth, migration etc., or more qualitatively in terms of changed competitive positions associated with say Brexit or committing to net -zero emission targets. Typically, these involve some kinds of modified trend extrapolation with probabilistic judgements (also from past patterns of change) about margins of errors. That was most evidently helpful in relation either to the (one-off?) Covid or Brexit developments of the last 5 years – or the financial crisis of the previous decade. In relation to the London Plan on which work will start next year and which will cover a period into the late 2040s, it seems more reasonable to expect that a range of such real (unforecastable) uncertainties factors will come into play. These most obviously include climatic stresses and attempts to manage them, plus breakdowns of global integration and the migratory waves these are likely to induce. At a more urban level the mystery of what WFH means in the long run continues. Recognising these points, the main reaction around the table was to pick up on the National Infrastructure Commission's *Managing Uncertainty* report (2022). This emphasised a need then to shift strongly from a prediction approach to thinking about response processes, including scenarios with adaptive frameworks linked to new incentives. In summing up the afternoon's discussion, the Chair suggested that what was going to be required of the Plan in these more uncertain times was tactical flexibility rather than stronger strategies.

G. The Potential for Making Substantial Use of Market Research Style Engagement Material

In preparation for the next round of formal Plan making the London Plan team have undertaken an extensive programme of qualitative work, focused initially on engaging with the values, preferences and concerns of a representative sample of the London population. This was seen as a complement to more technical, professional analyses which will follow. While welcoming such engagement, there was some concern among roundtable participants about the apparent sharpness of this distinction between the technical and evaluative inputs. In particular it was argued by some that a lot of judgements in play when problems and interventions were being considered in the plan-preparation process would be valuable. These would involve clarifying how relevant social and economic processes worked, with what knock-on effects etc. And that this was

not simply a matter of technical versus evaluative kinds of knowledge, nor something on which *either* professionals *or* citizens were the reliable judge. By approaching public engagement in this particular and intensive way at the outset of Plan-making, it was suggested that a perverse effect could actually be to reduce political engagement debate about substantively important issues as strategic choices emerged – because these would be seen as already determined.

H. The Role of the Assembly and Assembly Members in Plan Development

Participation by some Assembly members in the roundtables, and their very constructive contributions about strategic planning for London were generally appreciated by other participants, especially those who infrequently engage with them. Their formal powers in relation to the Mayoral Plan are extremely limited– with just the nuclear option of rejecting it if (quite improbably) a two thirds majority could be mustered. Because of this, the potential for the Assembly as the one available focus for debate and pre-examination of the Plans and the strategy they embody seems to have been greatly underplayed. This was partly because of the lamentably thin coverage of strategic and London-wide policy-making in the city’s media. But also, it was suggested that this was partly because the content of the Plan, and the vision embodied in it were not accessible enough to engage the public – including especially the young and other under-represented groups. On the way to a formalised “Plan” the city needs a strategy document embodying an aspirational perspective and scenarios/opportunity spaces for the future with which various groups and interests can actively engage.

I. Other Issues

A wide range of other issues were raised during the course of discussion. A number of persistently neglected major issues which, with limited time, could not be pursued as much as some would have wanted:

- whether growth, particularly population growth, should continue to be a central driver of the Plan;
- how productive engagement with issues, actors and complementarities/synergies in the rest of the capital city region could (at last) be pushed forward. – with concerted action as well as systemic analysis;
- the view that the Plan is fundamentally a rich person’s tool which often only pays

lip service to achieving distributional goals and how this element might be strengthened;

- the extent to which the coming revisions to the National Planning Policy Framework will transfer powers to central government in ways which will impact on the Plan and particularly its implementation with respect to land use and housing.

In addition there were a host of other issues that surfaced briefly, ranging from the material basics of electrification, drainage, and water supply – and the need for much more effective longer-term infrastructure planning; to suggestions that the next London Plan was likely to give much more attention to issues about high streets; to more thought about what the ageing of the city's population implies.

And running through all the discussion was the concern about whether, however good the Plan, does London really have the power to implement it.

Follow-Up

The sessions were, as already noted, very lively, and not formally recorded. So this summary is incomplete, and doubtless inadequate in what was picked up from the discussions. Equally they are incomplete since not everyone got to do more than mention their personal key issue in the final round-up.

For this reason, as well as to advance discussion of the issues actually summarised here, and prepare for follow-ups, we would urge participants with more that they would like to put into play or get corrected (whether said on the day or not) — to put this into blog form to continue debate on-line and planning for what should come next.

And similarly for all those with interests in these issues who did not get to these (inherently small) events, we would appreciate any postings from you.

All to be sent to Martina Rotolo via london@lse.ac.uk

With thanks to all who participated or would be interested in doing so.

[Ian Gordon](#) and [Christine Whitehead](#), LSE London

Visit our main page for more:

[Strengthening the Strategic Core of London Plans – Roundtables 2023 main page](#)

[i] Planning for London Programme 2022-24 is the GLA London Plan Team that has been undertaking work in the last year or so, in preparation for a new round of London Plan-making/revision after next May's Mayoral election.

Background information on what they have been doing via intensive engagement with a random sample of ordinary Londoners and now in roundtable exercises with stakeholders – together with links to the publicly available reports – can be found here:

- [Planning for London Programme](#)
- [Talk London](#)
- [Planning for London website](#)

The last of these has links to the main substantive outputs so far, notably substantial (and glossy) reports from the (market research) consultants on four core themes:

[Towards a Green and Fair Economy](#); [Sustainable Transport and Public Spaces](#); [Housing in London](#); and [Places and Communities](#)

More background information about organisation of the programme and its links to Plan Preparation can be found here:

[Planning a Programme of Engagement Ahead of a Future London Plan](#)

and in the GLA's response to an FOI application of ours here:

[FOI – Planning for London Programme \[Jun 2023\]](#)