

Gravesham BC - Response to draft London Plan 2017 (02/03/2018)

Below are Gravesham Borough Council's comments on the draft London Plan, which was published for public comment on 1st December 2017. The Council welcomes the opportunity to comment on the draft Plan. As with the current London Plan, this is a Spatial Development Strategy which has been produced in accordance with the Greater London Authority Act 1999 (as amended). When adopted, it will replace the current London Plan which was originally published in 2011 and amended through a number of formal alterations up until March 2016. It will be the overall strategic plan for London, setting out an integrated economic, environmental, transport and social framework for the development of the Capital for the next 20 to 25 years (that is 2019 to 2041).

It is a surprisingly prescriptive plan for a document that is fundamentally strategic in nature and this will limit the flexibility for London boroughs to develop their own policies to address locally specific circumstances. This may be because the challenges facing London are so significant, and the Mayor believes that the only way that these challenges can be met are if the Boroughs have minimal flexibility

Residential

The plan sets an ambitious annual housing target of 65,000 homes a year – roughly double the current rate of homebuilding. Policy H1 deals with Increasing Housing Supply, and presents new ten-year targets for net housing completions (2019/20 –2028/29) in Table 4.1, pg 145.

The plan states that existing Opportunity Areas and Central Activities Zone are expected to take most of the growth with a general view towards much greater densification in these areas. However, the plan also recognises the need for more small sites of up to 25 homes to be brought forward and table 4.2 of the Draft London Plan sets out 10-year targets (2019/20 – 2028/29) for net housing completions on small sites (below 0.25ha in size). The small site target is 24,573 net additional homes per year or 37.8% of the overall target. The explanation included is that these can be assembled and delivered more quickly than larger sites.

There is a greater emphasis on outer-London boroughs taking more of the housing growth than they have in the past - 58% of the requirement in the new plan, compared with 41% in the current plan. Of the 20 outer-London boroughs, 13 have seen their housing targets increase by over 100%.

The plan sets out ten-year housing targets for all local authorities with boroughs required to prepare delivery focused development plans that consider all potential sites within their area. Boroughs will also need to publish annual progress reviews and regular reassessments based on infrastructure capacity. Page 146 of the plan sets out individual targets for each borough which differ significantly from the OAN assessments.

Gravesham BC welcomes that the draft is aiming to meet virtually all of London's quantitative need (65,000 of 66,000).

The recent draft London Plan proposes to meet more than a third of new housing on "small sites". To meet that target, we understand that the plan advises boroughs to apply a presumption in favour of certain small housing development on such sites where they meet design codes. This includes infill, conversion, extension and garden development in high transport locations or near town centre and upward extensions of residential and non-residential buildings for housing. There are exceptions,

notably for listed buildings and co-living proposals. As part of this, boroughs are encouraged not to seek on-site affordable provision for the very smallest of small sites and to delay commuted payments until occupation to aid cash flow.

In theory, the small sites presumption is a positive move to speed delivery and generate certainty. Part of its test will be how the "presumption" interacts with existing policies which contain more specific controls. Unlike the presumption in favour of development in the NPPF, there is no suspension of other development plan policies, so while the London Plan will have extra weight because it is newer, there will remain scope for individual boroughs to continue to include their own priorities in the decision-making mix.

Equally the approach set out in Policy SD8 – Town Centres: development principles - and Development Plan Documents is slightly concerning. Whilst the sequential approach to town centre uses is supported, it states that the full potential of out-of-centre retail and leisure parks should be realised to deliver housing intensification without a net increase in retail or leisure floorspace. We are concerned about introducing residential development into out-of-centre retail and leisure parks due to the less accessible nature of these areas and their parking pressures and the precedent that this sets.

We are aware that some of the suburban London Boroughs believe that there is limited capacity for intensification of suburban areas without detrimental effects upon local communities, heritage, character and green infrastructure. They believe that the suburban pattern of development is a fundamental and long-standing component of London's urban character, and one of the factors that defines London and makes it a unique city.

From the events that we have attended on the draft London Plan and comments that we have seen, the small sites target is not currently considered to be achievable. As the small site windfall component forms such a high percentage of the outer borough's overall housing target, it is difficult to see how this volume can be managed through the allocation of specific deliverable sites.

We understand that part of the concern may be because this aspect of the housing target was not consulted on as part of the proposed methodology for the Mayoral SHLAA. Rather it was introduced following an analysis of the results that were consulted on and, potentially, a realisation that London's housing needs were unlikely to be met. It appears that the starting point for the small sites target is an assumption that 1% of residential units within 800 metres of a railway station, town centre boundary or high PTAL level will deliver additional residential units in the form of residential conversions or intensification. It is not clear what evidence underpins the distance or 1% per year assumption.

The Mayor has not demonstrated that the proposed target for small sites can actually be delivered. This is important to the closer SE authorities like Gravesham BC because there doesn't appear to be a Plan B. Equally it would have been helpful to understand the role and input of the many local housing companies and their strong focus on delivery.

The limited availability of suitable and deliverable sites in the districts outside of London to meet additional population flows must be considered. Many areas are highly constrained such as Gravesham with AoNB, Ramsar/SPA and Green Belt. Equally, it is questionable whether the housing markets outside of London will have the capacity to deliver not just a boost in supply arising from their current needs assessments prepared by the districts but additional housing to help meet London's projected needs. It

has been noted that the current needs assessments prepared by the districts already factor in internal out-migration from London.

Affordable Housing

The Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA) indicates a need for 65,878 new homes a year in London, of which 43,500 should be affordable but the London Plan target is for only half of these new homes needed per year to be affordable.

The plan suggests a 'strategic target of 50% of all new homes being genuinely affordable' with individual schemes at 35% or above being fast tracked (pg161). A 50% target is also set aside for development on public sector land, but this is to be applied 'across the portfolio' rather than on a site-specific basis (pg167).

It states that affordable housing will be measured on the basis of habitable rooms¹ rather than units with a requirement for figures to be presented as a percentage of total provision in terms of habitable rooms, units and floorspace to enable comparison (p166). In a change to previous plans, it states that family housing can now be considered as two bedroom and above rather than three bedroom and above (p179). This is welcomed as the plan needs to be based on how people live now rather than historic assumptions.

The following tenure of affordable homes is proposed: 30% low cost (Social or London Affordable Rent), 30% intermediate (including London Living Rent and Shared Ownership) and 40% to be determined by the borough depending on local need (p169).

The Council is aware that the 2004 version of the London Plan included a 50% target for affordable housing provision and that this was not delivered. This is concerning because the draft plan contains no additional incentives to ensure the target is delivered and does not explain its economic viability. The accompanying viability study² suggests that in lower value areas, it is only the lower density schemes that may be able to achieve 35% affordable housing and for these 50% affordable housing is not generally viable.

Density

The plan proposes to remove the density matrix approach in favour of 'optimising housing density'. We understand that the primary reason for the removal of the matrix is because it has been applied too rigidly by boroughs. A site by site design-led approach is suggested with accessibility, including proposed infrastructure improvements, walking and cycling, all being relevant considerations (pg117).

It states that residential developments that do not optimise density will be refused and, in order to measure density, all schemes are to provide number of units, habitable rooms, bedrooms and bed spaces per hectare (p117-118). However, the plan also notes the higher the density of a development, the greater the level of scrutiny there will be on the design (p118).

¹

https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/london_plan_topic_paper_on_density_policy_and_details_of_research_-_2017_final.pdf

² https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/london_plan_viability_study_dec_2017.pdf

Of the overall total the SHMA suggests that 55 per cent of these, or 36,335, should be one-bedroom units despite concerns about overcrowding. In response, the draft new Plan does not include a target for the number of bedrooms in new housing developments, instead referring boroughs to the SHMA and to assess based on local need.

There does seem to be widespread support for a design-led approach to development sites. At the same time there is concern that this approach will always require higher densities. Paragraph 3.6.1 says “For London to accommodate growth in an inclusive and responsible way every new development needs to make the most efficient use of land. This will mean developing at densities above those of the surrounding area on most sites. The design of the development must optimise housing density...”

It has been suggested that, in reality, taking the local context and character into account, as required by other draft policies, may not lead to higher density development being the optimal solution for every site.

Also design-led scenarios will take resource, and this could cause problems with the speed of delivery needed.

Build to Rent

The growth of the Build to Rent (BTR) sector is acknowledged and welcomed within the document with specific policy H13. We support the recognition that BTR can help accelerate the delivery of housing in the capital and that it is particularly encouraged in town centre locations.

We are unsure about the decision that has been made that BTR can qualify as part of affordable housing if it meets certain criteria (pg184). We understand that the affordable component can be solely Discount Market Rent but London Living Rent is the preference. BTR is also able to qualify for the 35% ‘fast track’ route where 30% is London Living Rent and the remainder at discounted rents (pg181). All other affordable routes are to follow the Viability Tested Route.

Student Accommodation

The plan’s acceptance that the local and strategic need (3,500 units per annum across London) for purpose-built student accommodation should be met (pg194) is welcomed, with boroughs being encouraged to develop student accommodation in locations that are well connected to local services by walking, cycling and public transport but away from existing concentrations of student housing (pg193).

The plan emphasises the need for a link with a higher education institution. A formal agreement will be required before initial occupation for the ‘majority’ of rooms.

35% of student bedrooms in the development should be affordable and if the 35% figure is not met, a scheme will then be considered under the Viability Assessment Route (pg195).

Gypsy and Traveller accommodation

The draft London Plan includes a policy specifically dedicated to Gypsy and Traveller accommodation using the Mayor’s definition which differs from the current Government planning definition. The Mayor has adopted a new definition for Gypsies and Travellers because of his concerns that the existing Government planning definition does not recognise all Gypsies and Travellers because of the need to

have immediate plans to travel for work in the future. It requires boroughs to carry out accommodation needs assessments and to plan to meet identified need based on the new definition.

We are concerned that the Mayor is proposing to use his own definition and not the definition which is intended to apply nationally. An inconsistent approach to definitions could cause problems when looking at need across Boroughs and surrounding districts, especially if the area isn't intending to fully meet its need.

Commercial

Industrial

Protection and intensification of existing industrial land is presented as the key policy in this area. The plan establishes a general principle of no net loss of industrial floorspace in Strategic Industrial Locations (SIL) and Locally Significant Industrial Sites (LSIS) (pg239). Boroughs are now allocated a 'retain', 'provide' or 'limited release' classification in terms of their industrial land position. Only Havering, Newham and Barking and Dagenham fall under 'limited release' (pg237). The plan states that any release of industrial land should be facilitated through the processes of industrial intensification, co-location and substitution; and be centred on locations well connected by public transport and contribute to housing, schools and other infrastructure (pg246).

At the same time, Borough development plans and development proposals should be proactive and encourage the intensification of industrial land through: (i) development of mezzanines; (ii) introduction of small units; (iii) development of multi-story schemes; (iv) addition of basements; and (v) more efficient use of land through higher plot ratios (pg246).

There have been concerns that the focus on residential development has overlooked the need to also plan positively for employment and so this clarity is appreciated.

Office Market

The plan's proposal that any office (or industrial) development larger than 2,500 sqm should consider scope to provide flexible space for SMEs is welcomed.

Town Centres

The plan recognises the changing role of town centres and the pressure online shopping has placed on their ability to function. There is a recognition of the importance of diverse town centres which have a vibrant daytime and night-time economy and provide a hub for a varied range of uses.

The plan acknowledges that the changing trends for how consumers shop, creates both opportunities and challenges for town centres including adapting to innovative ways of retailing, accommodating new space where there is a demand and need and managing the transition of surplus retail space to other uses such as intensive mixed-use.

The plan includes more explicit support for residential development in town centre locations and gives more flexibility for local authorities to look at how town centres are planned so they can make best use of space and facilities to create sustainable locations with active day and night time economies (pg79).

This is welcomed.

Land

The plan reiterates the longstanding commitment to preserving London's Green Belt. It states that all of London's growth will be accommodated without intruding on any Green Belt or protected green spaces (pg303).

An inevitable consequence of this approach is an increased focus on intensification and densification in urban areas especially areas with good transport links and town centres.

As highlighted above, some of the suburban Boroughs have raised concerns about this and should be allowed to determine themselves where the best locations of development should be. A Green Belt Boundary review can assist with this consideration of growth opportunities and should not be ruled out by the Mayor.

Transport and Infrastructure

There is a significant shift away from car usage with the Mayor committed to achieving 'healthy streets' by prioritising 'active transport'. The plan requires new retail and office development to provide significantly more cycle parking whilst student accommodation will require long stay cycle parking at one space per bedroom. Larger residential units will no longer require more car parking than smaller units.

There is a greater emphasis on the link between infrastructure improvement and development with areas which will then have access to the tube network will subsequently be expected to increase density significantly (pg35).

Similarly, those areas benefiting from Crossrail 2 are deemed capable of accommodating significant levels of housing, employment, infrastructure and associated development in the plan (pg38).

The Borough Council welcomes the support in the draft plan for the extension of Crossrail 1 (Elizabeth line) out to Ebbsfleet to enhance rail services in North Kent which will support development already permitted and the opportunities in LB Bexley.

Considering the prescriptive nature of most of the plan, the air quality policy requires boroughs to find ways to interpret the policy and then implement. Most development is likely to result in additional traffic movements, which inherently will add to existing pollution levels. Whilst the aim of the policy is welcomed, implementation of the policy would be more effective if it had contained practical and workable planning criteria. As written this policy will result in a range of different approaches being taken across London and may not achieve the aims of improving air quality.

Design

The document dedicates an entire chapter to design with 13 design policies, and shows a significant commitment by the Mayor for good design and architecture. One of these policies, Delivering Good Design, is particularly sensible as it includes steps for maintaining design quality through to a project's completion with a proposed measure allowing local councils to use 'architect-retention clauses in legal agreements where appropriate'. This is particularly viewed as an issue under Design and Build where architects are often not novated.