

Caroline Pidgeon MBE AM

City Hall
The Queen's Walk
London SE1 2AA
Tel: 020 7983 4000
Web: www.london.gov.uk

Sadiq Khan
Mayor of London
City Hall
Queen's Walk
London
SE1 2AA

**Date: 26th February
2018**

Dear Mayor,

I am writing in response to the proposals that you set out in your draft document The London Plan, published in December 2017.

Overview

I broadly support a number of the new proposals that you have outlined in the draft London Plan, including proposals to focus development near transport hubs and in town centres. I agree that more homes are needed across London. It is right to clamp down on unsuitable permitted development rights and encourage a suitable mix of offices, light industry and housing where possible.

Your six "good growth policies" are sensible and provide a sound basis on which to formulate planning guidance. I also back your protections for the Green Belt and Metropolitan Open Land. However, there are areas in which your policies clash and there is no clear understanding of which policy will be prioritised. For example, your ambition to build strong and inclusive communities is welcome, but it is not easy to see how this will be achieved when you prioritise one bed homes over family accommodation.

There are other examples in which your rhetoric does not match the reality on the ground. I fully support your aim for "80 per cent of all journeys to be made by walking, cycling and public transport".¹ I am also in favour of improving connectivity across the city and reducing Londoners' reliance on cars. However, your failure to extend the London Overground, cuts to bus services and slow progress on cycling infrastructure highlight the discrepancy between your development proposals and the impact of your actions on the ground.

I have concerns about the plan's ability to encourage the level of housing development that London needs. The Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA), which determines the number and size of homes that London needs, identifies a need for 66,000 homes a year, but in 2015-16 there were just 30,390 net additional dwellings in London.² Meanwhile, only 8,935 housing starts using Mayoral funding occurred in 2016-17.³

I also have concerns about your ability to deliver the right mix of homes that Londoners need, as well as your ability to deliver your proposed policies. I have set out below the concerns I have with the draft London Plan.

¹ Sadiq Khan, Draft London Plan, 2017, Policy GG2 Making the best use of land, 1.2.4

² London Assembly Budget and Performance Committee, 22nd November 2017

³ Ibid

Affordability

The “strategic target” of 50 percent of all new London homes built during your Mayoralty being affordable does not look feasible. £2.2bn of additional funding is needed annually to achieve your manifesto’s aims⁴ and you have not set out how you mean to plug the gap in your finances. It looks increasingly likely that you will not meet your ambition on affordable housing and are unable to come up with innovative solutions to London’s housing crisis.

The draft London plan talks about creating “genuinely affordable homes”, but it is still unclear what that means. Your failure to come to an agreement with the Government about the definition of affordable housing, means that the definition of ‘affordable’ set out in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), applies to the London Plan.⁵ The affordability measure being used in the draft plan needs to be clarified so that Londoners have a firm grasp of what affordable housing refers to.

Viability Assessment Threshold

I have previously raised concerns that your plans to fast track planning applications for housing developments which include 35 percent affordable housing sets a risky precedent. This issue has still not been addressed. The figure of 35 percent appears to have been adopted on an analysis of previous development applications and approvals, some of which were a product of questionable viability assessments in the past, rather than on the basis of any assessment of housing need.

The UK’s largest house builders have shown a steep rise in profitability in the past five years, with profit margins on housing developments looking incredibly healthy. With this in mind, the 35 percent figure for the ‘threshold approach to viability’ looks like it has been set too low. More transparency is needed when assessing development plans, not less, and your viability assessment scheme should be closely monitored to gauge its success.

Space Standards

The draft London Plan specifies minimum space standards for all self-contained residential schemes, but these standards do not apply to co-living schemes or developments in which office space is converted to residential living. A lack of affordable residential property has led to a drastic increase in both types of these residential schemes in London recently and could lead to residents living in unsuitable accommodation.

There is a danger that an absence of space standards in co-living schemes, combined with a lack of suitable monitoring by cash-strapped local councils, will force more Londoners into cramped surroundings. You need to put protections in place against poor building design and spell out how you will prevent the spread of residents living in “rabbit-hutch” conditions.

Family Friendly Housing

The SHMA notes that the most pressing accommodation need for Londoners is one-bedroom properties, with a sharp drop in the need for four bed homes.

⁴ London Assembly Budget and Performance Committee, 22nd November 2017

⁵ The NPPF states affordable housing is housing provided at a level at which the mortgage payments on the property are more than rent on council housing, but below market levels. Affordable rented housing applies to rents of no more than 80% of the local market rent.

As one bed homes are the most inflexible type of accommodation available, there is a realistic probability that there will be a lack of housing built to accommodate families in the capital going forward. There are already a number of challenges associated with families living in London, including affordable childcare and a lack of suitable green spaces for children, and I do not want to see more families forced from living in the capital due to a lack of suitable properties.

Firm guidelines need to be implemented to prevent developers from focusing solely on attaining the highest unit numbers, to the detriment of accommodating those in highest need. You should spell out how you will protect the building of family homes in the capital in your final plan.

Small sites

The development of small sites⁶ has been identified as a strategic priority and there is a “presumption in favour” of developing smaller sites.⁷ The draft Plan expects 38 per cent of the annual housing target (24,573 homes) will be delivered on small sites, rising to 68 per cent in Outer London boroughs.

I agree that small development sites need to be utilised, but am cautious about circumstances in which small housing developments are envisaged to be within close proximity to existing homes. There are also serious issues about the presumption in favour of planning permission in small sites, especially those in conservation areas - development must always take heritage into account.

While the Plan states that small site development should avoid an unacceptable level of harm to the amenity of surrounding properties, significantly increasing the number of homes on small sites will undoubtedly have a negative impact on private open spaces and neighbours’ quality of light. Your suggestion that open spaces will be offset by green roofs does not stack up and I am concerned about how environmental factors, such as drainage, will be monitored effectively in these small-scale developments.

I am sceptical about the ability of London boroughs to develop the number of small sites identified in the draft plan. London Councils have stated that they are already identifying suitable small sites for development.⁸ Additionally, I envisage issues arising between developers’ contributions to affordable housing in small site developments. Both issues must be thoroughly monitored going forward.

The dependence on developing small sites, which have traditionally faced difficulties due to their complex nature, may seriously hinder your housing completion targets.

Public London Charter

I welcome the plans that you have drawn up to develop a set of responsibilities that privately owned public spaces will have to adhere to. This is long overdue. The public’s rights in these spaces, notably around South Bank and King’s Cross, have been mired in uncertainty for far too long. I have been pushing for clarification on this matter for years and am pleased that you have acted following the motion that Assembly Members approved in September 2017. It is important that action is finally taken and I look forward to scrutinising the details of your charter once it is finalised.

⁶ Defined as sites which are capable of those capable of delivering up to 25 homes. Sadiq Khan, Draft London Plan, 2017

⁷ Sadiq Khan, Draft London Plan, 2017, Policy H2E

⁸ London Councils, The Housing White Paper, February 28th, 2017

Affordable Workspace

London's affordable workspace supply has fallen dramatically in recent years and this is impeding the growth of micro and small business in the capital.⁹ Therefore, I welcome the inclusion of measures in the draft plan to ensure 'a sufficient supply of business space of different types and sizes...at an appropriate range of rents'.¹⁰ However, the wording in the plan is not clear enough. It is increasingly important that businesses have clarification on where they stand in the London Plan and Policy E2A should better explain how low-cost business space is defined and how it differs from the term 'affordable business space'.

Small and micro businesses need to be consulted properly on local planning matters to ensure that they remain firmly embedded in local communities across the capital. Developments at Hackney Wick and Elephant and Castle, which threaten to remove local business from the local areas with prohibitive rent hikes, demonstrate the dangers of excluding local businesses from planning decisions. Small and micro businesses state that their voices are lost in the planning decision process. More action is needed to prevent this from happening.

Night Time Economy

I am pleased that steps are being taken to protect London's night time economy in the draft London Plan. Policy HC6 aims to address the cumulative impact of high concentrations of licensed premises, which is sensible. However, the policy should include an amendment to encourage cooperation between boroughs on high streets that do not sit neatly within any one borough boundary.

I agree with the statement made by London First that London is only just "catching up with international competitors in its support for the night economy".¹¹ I would also like to see more late-night transport options available to Londoners so that they could take full advantage of our city's spectacular night time economy offerings. Your draft plan stresses the need to "ensure night-time economy venues are well-served with safe and convenient night-time transport"¹², but this is completely at odds with your swinging cuts to London's night bus services. Outer London boroughs remain underserved by public transport, especially at night. If you are serious about boosting London's night time economy, you need to rethink your severe cuts to bus services.

Transport

As London continues to grow, it is imperative that our transport infrastructure improves at the same rate. Your support for major rail schemes is positive, but more priority should be given to cycling, walking and bus services. You have not made enough progress on these matters during your tenure¹³ and a target modal share for cycling should be included to increase the uptake of this method of transport.

Bus services need to improve, especially in Outer London. This area has the most potential for shifting people's journeys from cars to public transport, but your cuts to bus services are leaving more people unable to rely on public transport. You need to rethink your decision to green light road

⁹ Page 3, Helping SMEs to thrive, London Assembly Economy Committee, November 2017

¹⁰ Sadiq Khan, Draft London Plan, Policy E2, P.225

¹¹ London First written submission to the Economy Committee's response to the Mayor's draft London Plan 2017

¹² Sadiq Khan, Draft London Plan, Policy HC6, P.292

¹³ Walking and cycling have not improved in recent years, based on journey stages. Travel in London - Report 10, TfL, 2017

projects like the Silvertown Tunnel, as well as your cuts to bus services, and invest in the capital's bus services, particularly in Outer London, if you want to hit your public transport targets.

Tall buildings

I agree with your proposals to ensure that tall buildings have a 'positive contribution to the existing and emerging skyline'.¹⁴ I would like to see this taken further. You should ensure that local communities have greater involvement from the start in developing plans for tall buildings. Additionally, your final plan should establish a "Skyline Commission" to advise on the design impact of tall buildings and review existing protected views with the intention of adding new viewing corridors.

Monitoring

There has been a historic lack of follow through by both City Hall and Local Councils when enforcing measures set out in the London Plan. This is evident when looking at electric vehicle charging points. Your current plan stresses the need for including provision for electric charging points where car parking is provided in new developments, much as previous plans have done.¹⁵ However, whenever I have queried the number of electric charging points installed in new developments, councils have stated that they do not monitor this information. If there is no capacity to ensure the implementation of planning requirements, your ambitions remain hollow statements.

The issue of monitoring planning requirements does not only apply to electric charging infrastructure. Your plans include energy and water efficiency targets but I am concerned that you do not have sufficient resources in place to follow through on your proposals.

Missed Opportunities

There are a number of missed opportunities in the draft London Plan to challenge the way in which planning applications are granted. You have continued with a "business as usual" approach to planning applications and, although providing stability, your plan does little to affect the transformative housing developments that are needed in the city.

My manifesto outlined steps to require local councils to publish the financial viability assessments - submitted on behalf of developers - which are often used as an excuse to reduce the level of affordable housing below locally agreed targets. The presumption that developers are expected to make a 20 percent profit on their investment is wholly unfeasible and this sense of entitlement needs to change. Making this information more accessible to the public is long overdue and will help give the public reassurance that local councils are properly reviewing developers' plans.

Your London Plan was an opportunity to open up the decision-making process at City Hall. Holding planning meetings in public and allowing community groups the same access as developers in influencing decisions would help to push more community led planning. By continuing to keep the public at a distance on planning issues you have missed a chance to get the public on side to create the "good growth" you tout in your plan.

¹⁴ Sadiq Khan, The Draft London Plan 2017, P. 126

¹⁵ Sadiq Khan, The Draft London Plan 2017, P. 431

I would like to see your final plan include more commitments to help deliver affordable, accessible and suitable premises for the Voluntary and Community Sectors, including women's centres, as well as child friendly spaces in London. Both of these issues would merit further details in the final plan.

I hope that you consider the points that I have made above and provide further details about how you will improve planning requirements in your final London Plan.

Best wishes,

Yours sincerely,



Caroline Pidgeon MBE AM
Liberal Democrat Member of the London Assembly

