

Opportunity Areas – extracts from transcript of Assembly Regeneration meeting Feb2020 -- not in the sequence in which the points were made

Jules Pipe CBE (Deputy Mayor for Planning, Regeneration and Skills): Opportunity Areas are identifying the most significant growth locations - at least 5,000 jobs, 2,500 new additional homes or a combination of the two. It is about aggregating the information, possibilities and opportunities and crucially the infrastructure needs to be brought forward and constructed. . . to corral different players being able to bring forward funding. The latest Opportunity Area Planning Frameworks (OAPFs) encourage good growth, drawing on London Plan principles and plans but it would be wrong to say that it is the vehicle through which these things are delivered.

Sarah Scannell (Assistant Director for Planning and Development, London Borough of Hounslow):

The London Borough of Hounslow has two identified OAs. The planning policy process is long and it is arduous. We have been working on these OA plans for nearly five years. We are dealing with applications coming in on the back of this great label of being an OA. We have had to try our best to enforce what we want from these plans and the social and economic benefits that it will bring, in a world where we do not have the policy backbone to support us.

We are encouraging every developer we have to be better than what our policy says, specifically in terms of the low-carbon economy, and there has been a very positive response. Our Members are holding us to account.

Developments like Brentford football club, with its zero affordable housing and the fact that it does not have very good energy credentials was approved in a different plan time, we do not want those to be our legacy.

Our Heathrow OA bridges Hounslow and Hillingdon and there is a bit of a challenge there about apportionment of numbers. Hounslow is a very pro borough. Hillingdon has a different perspective.

It does seem like cross-boundary issues will need more exploring.

In the west of the borough, in our Feltham OA, we have, say, 60% of our residents who need to get to Heathrow but cannot get there because of the transport links and it is a prohibitive cost-wise for them to do so.

Overall, the strategic nature of having a planned way forward for growth gives people comfort about what they are going to have and the benefits that you can reap from that, particularly around the infrastructure.

Councillor Martin Seaton (Chair, Planning Committee, London Borough of Southwark): We have three OAs at Elephant and Castle, Canada Water and Old Kent Road. We hope we will build more than 20,000 new homes. The moment you [identify an OA], you are saying "This is an investment opportunity". You create a rush to acquire land and plots of development opportunities. A consequence is that you impact upon the viability of any schemes in those areas. . . . and the consequence it has for the local community whom we ultimately serve.

We have our Social Regeneration Charter, where we map out the needs for local people within those OAs and across the borough. We identified, first of all, health inequalities; secondly, housing inequalities; and thirdly, job inequalities . . . our sole aim is using the planning and indeed the related policies in order to address those issues.

It is so important that as we begin to project forward what is our genuine achievement, it is measured by our local residents. We have land values which are so through the roof that local people cannot afford either to rent or buy a house in their immediate neighbourhood. That is not the result of the market. It is a failure of politicians like us to be clear about what our policies are and why those policies exist.

They are cautious because what they have seen across London and parts of Southwark, is that they have been forced out of the area, either on cost or insufficient provisions. In Southwark the average salary is around £30,000, whereas to rent a two-bedroom property it costs £24,000 per annum. That is crazy.

We chart numbers entering the workforce. In the past three years, 5,000 individuals who were not employed are now employed as a result of our regeneration schemes.

We have just recently appointed a Director of Climate Change and we have a cabinet member with responsibility for climate change and developing our strategies. If we had powers to implement, say, a truly effective carbon reduction strategy in Southwark, we would do it.

Skills are a challenge. Us no longer being part of the European Union, the accessibility of affordable labour is going to be a challenge for us. That may well increase our costs.

If it were possible that we were able to use our CPO powers to secure those plots of land once we have established with a developer what is to be built there and agreed the terms, that would, I suspect, improve the value of the contribution that boroughs are able to make to the overall housing development across London.

Southwark sits on prime land and therefore the viability schemes do not work. I would really encourage the GLA and central Government to think carefully about the conditions here in inner-city areas like Southwark and the impact broader policies have on our ability to deliver our commitment to build homes local people can afford.

The realm of the grant funding environment is quite bureaucratic and may not be working strategically in the public interest, if developers are choosing not to apply for grant funding. . . . because of the complexity.

Andrew Dismore AM: That probably coincides with my experience in Barnet with Colindale and Mill Hill, which is a great intensification area. The real problem there is that communities just do not see any benefit. In fact, it is all negative, in that in Colindale all they are seeing is great tower blocks going up and all the car parking being taken up by people in the neighbouring streets, the people from the developments, because those are not allowed car parking. The net result is they just fill up the local streets and annoy everybody and change the context of the area. Similarly, with public transport in Mill Hill. What has happened there is that the single-track line from Mill Hill East is always full before it even leaves the station at the end of the line. If we take the Mill Hill one, for example, granted there were 2,500, nearly 3,000 properties but they are only being built at about 250 a year to keep the price up, which is just ridiculous.

Jules Pipe CBE (Deputy Mayor for Planning, Regeneration and Skills): What I would prefer to think is going on when a developer displays interest in an OA is the fact that they have greater clarity about what is wanted in the location, and of course developers like certainty. Their shareholders like certainty. That is a useful thing that the OAPFs bring in terms of a journey towards outcomes, that certainty for developers.

If we could say, "It is in the plan. This is the tariff for these things. This is the contribution you have to make, not just to transport but to the social infrastructure. You have to pay for your share, otherwise the development does not go ahead", then life would be easier for all of us.

Comment by Peter Eversden – That "certainty" is not given by OAPFs and would be made clear only when Councils have defined locally what they want and what they will not allow in each OA. Masterplans are essential.

Another outcome is the process itself of engagement and community involvement in shaping it. I am not sure that that was always the case but certainly the ones that we have been doing in the last three or so years, that has definitely been a strong focus. *Comment by Peter Eversden – That needs assessing by London Forum.*

We want to revolutionise the LDD to make it a more real-time set of data, plus being able to monitor delivery.

Site by site, we do see too much development going through at whatever stage, whether it is local authority with the GLA, or it gets called in by the Secretary of State and passed, without sufficient infrastructure associated with the development that actually delivers on the strategic plan.

Darren Richards (Growth Strategies and Urban Design Manager, Greater London Authority): The OAPF in Thamesmead straddles the boundary between Bexley and Greenwich. Both boroughs preparing their local plans did not have the capacity to do the work that we all agreed was needed, so we stepped in using our resources.

We do look at social infrastructure requirements for the growth. . . . what that would mean in terms of the number of schools. What would be the impact on health services? It is a very important part of delivering a framework, whether it is the GLA doing it or whether it is a borough doing it through a local plan. They will prepare their own infrastructure delivery plans. Part of that is assessing what the requirements will be from the level of growth that could occur in those OAs. Those will be built into some of the policies or recommendations in the OAPF that will then influence planning decisions as those developments come forward.

Comment by Peter Eversden – Can the content of OAPFs really be planning "policies" that can be used for borough development control and for appeal inquiries?

Some OAPFs have not been updated for several years, nor translated into Local Plan policies by boroughs.

Part of OA frameworks is to justify why this additional housing could only be delivered with a level of investment . . . like the Old Kent Road OA, very closely linked to the need for the Bakerloo line extension (BLE). Setting out requirements at the start gives councils more ability to set out what they will be requiring in their delivery plan. These documents help make the case for funding. A good example is the Housing Infrastructure Fund (HIF), where a large number of OAs will or could be unlocked by the successful bids around DLR and the Overground. There is also money from Housing and Land, things like the land assembly pilots [and] work around industrial intensification.

Navin Shah AM (Deputy Chair): I have a figure of 303,000 homes which must be the total delivery figure for OAs. Here it says 40% will be low-cost. When does the Mayor expect the OAs to deliver the 303,000 homes?

Darren Richards (Growth Strategies and Urban Design Manager, Greater London Authority): We have in the Plan for each OA a homes capacity figure and a jobs capacity figure, but that is to 2041. How many of those figures are in the first 10 years, I can send you those details.

The Plan is very clear that a lot of that capacity will not come forward if we do not have transport investment.

We do not have a target for low-cost housing and we would not normally set it in an OAPF. Boroughs do set their own affordable housing targets and it is open to them to differentiate those targets in particular areas.

We are producing an annual monitoring report which we will put up onto the website, that starts to track progress against the OAs using the information we are getting now from the improved LDD.