

BLOG: MATTER 19 – DAY 2

Housing and Urban Form: Tensions in the London Plan Examination in Public

Prof Christine Whitehead | LSE London
LSE, Knowledge Exchange and Impact fund

On the second day of discussion of Matter 19 (Housing Supply and Targets) we returned to the list of sub-questions. But the discussion had greater resonance because the first sub question had real content: What is going to bring about the step change in delivery implied in the Plan?

Ian Gordon certainly spoke for me when he said that basically the Plan was pure fantasy in its expectations about substantially raising housing output through intensification inside London's already urbanised areas. The SHLAA represents a very careful analysis of how and where capacity for such a higher rate of output might in principle be available. But the closeness of the projected balance between that 'capacity' and assessed 'needs' appears quite contrived. And, more fundamentally, there is nothing in the document that makes clear that, given past experience, there is a real problem about the conversion of capacity into delivered output, nor anything really to suggest how that gap is going to be overcome during the next decade, or beyond.

One important strand of discussion that attracted general agreement was the impossibility of the annualised target being reached, at least for some years. In this context the Chair reported another suggested change from the Mayor, allowing for a stepped delivery target over a 10-year period. However, this does not solve the problem that even were the annualised target to be reached at some point the early years' shortfall cannot be made up within the ten years to which the targets apply – or even probably within the twenty to twenty-five year of the overall strategy. Add to that, much of the identified capacity depends on major infrastructure which, it is generally accepted, will not be delivered to time. Given that these are matters of agreement it would be helpful to accept that, even were we to accept that the capacity is there, realism suggests that the timescale is wrong.

In the past projected trajectories within the Plan period have been published. In the context of the current Plan what might be appropriate would be to agree that actual trajectories should be monitored at both local authority and GLA levels, together with short reports on progress towards planned delivery levels.

But if that is the position, it is simply a distraction to discuss how and where a notional shortfall of just about a thousand houses per year is 'to be made up'. The difference (of about 1.5%) is trivial, both in relation to the inherent uncertainties and the guessed proportions of small sites that might come forward – and obsessing about this is quite unhealthy when delivery gaps could well be (say) 20 times as large. It is simply adding fantasy to fantasy. (I should however admit that I added to this fantasy by noting that if permitted development were to be taken into account there would technically be an overshoot even accepting some permitted development would be on identified sites).

It was interesting (if not surprising) that witnesses from outside London should be looking for reassurance, but perhaps more surprising that a hard-headed GLA team was apparently prepared to write into the Plan that there should be no need for the wider SE to plan for an overspill– even though the existing draft entertains the possibility that experience over the medium term might require reconsideration of that view.

Another strand of debate that emerged (but which will be discussed in much greater detail later in the Enquiry) related to issues around dwelling size, mix and tenure. Here a number of participants began to question whether, even if total numbers could be delivered, there would be any chance that this could lead to the appropriate level of affordable housing – and thus whether that might imply that to achieve affordable housing targets would lead to an ‘excess supply’ of market housing. The logic of this approach depends on accepting the housing needs targets as a given, rather than being responsive to changing economic circumstances and takes no interest in the possibility that more market housing could make housing overall more affordable.

In the context of dwelling size, the core issue is rather different: whether the needs identified – many of which are currently located in the existing stock – all have to be solved in the new build sector. But if growth targets are not remotely achievable – as we infer – there are reasonable questions to be asked about the prioritising of these quantitative targets.

For me, thinking around these discussions, the most depressing aspect of the two days was that it was becoming increasingly clear that – for, all the work that the GLA team has put into the draft Plan – most of the major players (notably the boroughs) are simply going through the motions. Many of the boroughs know they cannot deliver, even with the best political will in the world, but are not really prepared to say so. This may well be - as the GLA implied- because national government would be looking for even higher targets, in which case there is real benefit to almost everyone in keeping with the devil we know.