



BLOG: MATTER 24

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

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Giving evidence at the EiP: affordable housing

Kath Scanlon, 14 March 2019

It's 26 February, Day 13 of the Examination in Public of the Draft London Plan, and on the agenda is a central issue and one of the most contentious: affordable housing. Christine Whitehead and I are giving evidence based on LSE London's body of research into delivery of new affordable housing.

The EiP is held in the GLA council chamber, a soaring atrium space on the second floor that will be familiar to viewers of *The Apprentice*. The panel, chaired by Roisin Barrett, will sit at a long table with their backs to the glass façade, the buildings of the City glinting in the sunlight beyond. Those giving evidence will be ranged around a long U-shaped table, identified by folded cardboard nameplates which identify organisations rather than individuals. Three GLA officers sit, laptops at the ready, and a supporting cast behind, to the panel's right. The viewing gallery above is populated by a sprinkling of EiP enthusiasts in ones and twos—perhaps 75 in all.

Gradually we take our places (one person per organisation is permitted at the table; others may sit behind), unfolding laptops or heaving voluminous indexed ring binders onto the table. There is usually drinking water on the table but not today (it arrives later); neither are the toilets working. We evidence-givers chat amongst ourselves—quiet conversations that are eerily conveyed to the top tier of seats because the table microphones are on. Most of us know each other already—indeed, know each other well. We are the housing-and-planning insiders (borough officers; private sector organisations; chairs of amenity societies). We are the experts--those who have already submitted written evidence, and whom the Panel has asked to see.

The chair has identified specific issues from 'Matter 24' Affordable Housing that she wishes to explore. She will work down the list of questions in a rather more targeted fashion than in other sessions (or so Christine says). She sets out the day's procedure in detail and says witnesses should not read out long prepared statements or repeat what has already been said. She also notes that detailed discussion on viability will come much later in the EiP programme – a blow to many of those present. She asks the GLA representatives some short clarificatory questions. Witnesses indicate that they wish to speak by turning their nameplate on its end.

The session begins. A few interventions to give a flavour of the day: Duncan Bowie of the Highbury Group, the expert's expert in these matters, observes that the calculations of the Strategic Housing Market Assessment point to a need for 43,500 affordable homes, but the '50% affordable' strategic target of the draft Plan would, if achieved, result in only 33,000 such homes. Should those numbers not be the same? Others note that logically, a further implication is that *too much* market housing would be provided at the cost of affordable housing – not a view which is easy to maintain when the main mechanism for producing affordable homes is through development for the market. More fundamentally no-one can really argue that market housing is affordable to all those who must find private accommodation – so more market housing is needed to improve affordability.

On the issue of public land, NHS property services point out that the aim of hospitals and clinical commissioning groups is to provide health care, and that they have a duty to use their assets—including land—to contribute to that aim. Requiring 50% affordable housing on public land reduces the value of that land and thus the funds available to the NHS.

In this session (I have not been to others), the speakers successively state the positions of the organisations they represent. The chair does not invite dialogue between those holding opposing views, and her few follow-up questions give away little of the panel's thinking. Those expecting a genuine debate will have been disappointed, and the gallery is noticeably less populated after lunch.

Who is represented at the EiP, and who is not? There are numerous advocates from the 'consumer' side, arguing strongly that on the basis of need the proportion of affordable housing required by the Plan is not high enough. Some propose radical changes including a requirement for 100% affordable on public land. There are only a few 'producers', including a representative from the House Builder's Federation and two from the NHS. Not a single developer or housing association appears, even though between them they will build almost all the new affordable housing in the period covered by the Plan.

The other obvious imbalance relates to age. Around the table, the GLA officers are relatively young but most of the others are much older—at nearly 60, I pull the average age down significantly—and many are retired. Those giving evidence collectively have decades (centuries?) of experience and expertise and of course they (we) make an important contribution. But over the Plan's lifetime, those most affected will be London's young people. Their absence from the proceedings is a disappointment.