The Mayor of London and planning: an overview

Overview

The structure of planning authorities and responsibilities in the United Kingdom is complex. At the national scale, central government has its own priorities and agenda – for example, the Government has recently finished consulting on its draft National Planning Policy Framework. At the local scale, borough councils are responsible for granting or rejecting planning permission. It is perhaps no surprise, therefore, that the Mayor of London plays a strategic role when it comes to planning.

The London Plan

The Mayor is required by the Greater London Act (1999 and as amended) to produce a spatial development strategy for London, detailing the kind of development and land use which is deemed suitable and necessary for the city. Since the establishment of the GLA and the Mayor of London, this document has been called The London Plan, and there have been three published – in 2004, 2008 (both amended) and 2011. The London Plan sets out an integrated economic, environmental, transport and social framework for the development of the capital to 2031. The long period reflects both the time taken for developments to be planned and delivered, and the strategic nature of the document. The London Plan brings together the general geographical and locational aspects of the Mayor’s other areas of power and responsibility, though is not site-specific at a micro scale.

Besides the obvious overlaps between planning and areas such as transport, housing and culture, there are three cross-cutting themes to which the London Plan attends:

- Economic development and wealth creation;
- Social development;
- Improvement of the environment.

The London Plan has been written with a particular view to coping with an increasing population, and the economic necessity of providing employment for an expanded city. At the same time, the Plan must have regard to the equality of opportunity for all Londoners, the reduction of health inequalities and the consequences of and mitigation of climate change. November 2011 saw the publication of Early Minor Alterations to the London Plan, dealing in part with the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), on which the Government is currently consulting. The Early Minor Alterations attends to the possibility for the need to change the London Plan in accordance with the new guidelines set out in the NPPF, but states: (a) that the London Plan reflects the intent of the proposed framework; and (b) that supplementary guidance may be published in light of the developing relationship between the Plan and the NPPF.

The Mayor, the London Plan and other planning authorities

The 33 boroughs (including the City of London) are responsible for local planning decisions, and the Thames Gateway Development Corporation and the Olympic Delivery Authority are the planning authorities for parts of East London. The boroughs’ own Local Development Frameworks have to be in general conformity with the London Plan, given that it proposes the overall direction for planning in London. Further, the Mayor must be consulted on planning applications that are of potential strategic importance to London, as defined by the Government and set out in The Town and Country Planning (Mayor of London) Order 2008. In practice, such applications include those developments which are particularly large (in terms of height, floor space and number of homes contained within), those close to sites of acknowledged importance (historical sights, the River Thames) or those involving major infrastructure works.

When applications of potential strategic importance are referred to the Mayor, the Mayor has up to six weeks of receipt of the consultation to decide whether or not the plans conform to the London Plan. Once the Local
Planning Authority (LPA, i.e. the borough, City of London etc.) has resolved to grant or refuse permission, the application must be sent back to the Mayor. Within fourteen days of receiving this further application, the Mayor may direct the LPA to refuse the application, decide to act as the LPA for that application or simply allow the LPA’s decision to stand.

**Opportunity areas**

There are only limited opportunities for large scale developments in London. Opportunity Areas, and their lesser cousins Intensification Areas, are sites for such potential large developments, as identified in the London Plan. Opportunity Areas are the major sources of brownfield land with the capacity for residential, commercial and other kinds of development, linked to existing or potential improvements in transport infrastructure. Intensification Areas are already built up and with good transport links, but can support intensified development.

**Mayoral development areas and corporations**

The Localism Act 2011 included a provision for the establishment of Mayoral development areas and Mayoral development corporations (MDC). The Mayor may designate any area of land within Greater London as a development area, in pursuit of the expedient furthering of any of the principle purposes of the Greater London Authority. The Mayor must first consult various different organisations and individuals, including the London Assembly, constituency members of the London Assembly whose Assembly constituency contains any part of the development area, and London borough councils whose borough contains any part of the area. Following the consultation and any appropriate responses, the Mayor must inform the Secretary of State, who then establishes a corporation for the area. The act describes the powers that would be granted to MDCs, including powers relating to infrastructure, regeneration, the acquisition of land (including by compulsory purchase) and streets, among others. The Mayor may also choose to grant further powers to an MDC, including the power to perform some or all of the functions of a local planning authority. MDCs are modeled on existing urban development corporations, but exist as functional bodies of the Greater London Authority. The incumbent Mayor has proposed that the Olympic Park Legacy Company should become an MDC, incorporating the area of the Olympic Park, and some land beyond its border. A consultation was launched in February, and in October 2011 the Mayor published a statement following the consultation; there have been no further development thus far. Development areas and corporations will comply with the London Plan in the manner of other local development plans and authorities.

This has yet to be decided, and the Mayor published a statement following the consultation

**The role of the London Assembly**

The London Assembly’s Planning and Housing Committee holds the Mayor to account over his or her policies and strategies as related to planning and housing. The Mayor must consult the committee on the London Plan and respond to the comments made. The committee also monitor’s the Mayor’s exercising of the statutory powers over strategic planning applications.

**Further resources**

Mayor of London and GLA planning - http://london.gov.uk/priorities/planning