A MegaPlan for a MegaCity

Submission for the NLA New Ideas for Housing London Competition

August 2015
Overview

GL Hearn proposed a land and planning solution to boost the supply of housing in London. The concept is to create an ambitious MegaPlan to match the ambition of our future MegaCity. The MegaPlan would maximise the potential contribution of Edge Land (up to the M25) to provide a long term strategy to 2050 to look beyond the immediate housing crisis and get ahead of the curve. This approach would be underpinned by a strategic Green Belt review, to positively plan for a sustainable pattern of growth and protection focused around Mega Parkland and Mega Activity Corridors.
Introduction

GL Hearn proposes a land and planning solution to boost the supply of housing to future growth in London. The concept is to create an ambitious MegaPlan to match the ambition of our future MegaCity.

The MegaPlan would act as an overarching document to provide a long-term strategy to 2050 and beyond to promote a sustainable pattern of growth. Assuming densification alone will not solve London’s long-term requirement for new homes, the MegaPlan would look beyond this and seek to maximise potential land supply across Edge Land, the inner belt running from the inner London Green Belt to the M25.

The up before out approach in London is advocated through densification and optimisation of urban land. Given the scale and severity of projected housing demand, the big idea is to positively plan for Edge Land to maximise its potential contribution. Undoubtedly a challenging and long-term proposition, however the full potential of London cannot be ignored. The plan must be prepared now to avoid revisiting today’s problems in another 100 years!
The Challenge

The housing challenge is clear. London’s population is 8.6M and will rise to over 10M in 20 years. The London Plan\(^1\) states housing need is between 49,000 to 62,000 dwellings per annum to 2036. In addition, 9,000 dpa is suggested to address the backlog\(^2\).

Notably, the London Plan distributes 42,389 dpa to London Boroughs. Therefore a shortfall of 6,611 to 19,611 dpa exists and must be made up.

By 2050, the population is forecast to rise to approx. 11.3 million\(^3\). This would result in an expected requirement for an additional 550,000 new homes (approx. 22,500 per annum)\(^4\).

This means London will become Western Europe’s first MegaCity, and mega planning is required to implement a radical step change in housing delivery.

The main obstacle is the constrained nature of the city and surroundings and in order for London to meet its own needs primary constraints including powerful planning tools, such as the Green Belt must be dealt with head on.

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1 London Plan (p.106, 2015)
2 NLA Background Competition Essay (p.5, Claire Bennie, 2015)
3 “London 2050 Bigger and Better” (p.4, Mayor of London, DATE)
4 Based on extrapolation of figures from NLA Background Competition Essay (Claire Bennie, 2015)
The Strategy

The strategy for London is centred on developing the built up area and along five growth and transport corridors\(^5\). To fully address the housing crisis and deliver step change, the MegaPlan should consider a future scenario when densification becomes saturated.

A possible solution lies in a third and relatively untapped source of land, Edge Land. This inner belt runs to the M25, which represents a clear physical and strong long-term boundary enclosing highly accessible land.

The degree to which the South East should seek to help meet the needs of a growing London under the duty to co-operate is debated. Firstly, London must seek to meet its own needs. Only as a fall-back position should it rely on the wider South East, and under this circumstance it is not reasonable to extend beyond the M25.

Green Belt land within the M25 (including London) totals 86,000 ha, and non-Green Belt (covered by existing settlements) equates to approx. 20,000 ha\(^6\). Over three quarters of Edge Land is therefore designated as Green Belt, and almost one third of this land is covered by primary environmental, landscape or heritage designations. This means a balanced and sensitive approach must inform the future strategy for this land.

In order to meet the shortfall in housing\(^7\) less than 4% of Edge Land would need to be released from the Green Belt\(^8\).

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\(^5\) Key Diagram (p.98, London Plan, 2015)
\(^6\) Land area calculations provided by Find Maps.
\(^7\) Based on London Plan housing need of approx. 49,000 dpa up to 2036 (p.106, 2015)
\(^8\) Based on an average density of development at 40 dwelling per hectare.
Implementation and Benefits

For London to grow successfully as a MegaCity whilst remaining a global economic powerhouse and retaining its world renowned character and heritage, aspirations for growth and protection must be held in equally high regard. A thorough understanding of the characteristics and function of the land should inform the balance between growth and protection.

These themes are recommended to be reflected in new land allocations to create “Mega Parkland” and “Activity Corridors” which radiate outwards as (i) wedges through the Green Belt to the M25 and beyond, and (ii) narrower spokes which intertwine through London Boroughs and around existing settlements and transport hubs up to the M25 and beyond.

In order to identify the location of these areas a strategic Green Belt review must be undertaken as a priority action. This review must assess Green Belt land against the five NPPF purposes, openness and ability to provide long-term boundaries to understand the role and function of the land and level of contribution towards national policy.

To deliver effective protection and growth, a second stage assessment should consider non-Green Belt factors such as housing needs, affordability and accessibility to test sustainability.

Mega Parkland would comprise open countryside, which makes the most significant contribution towards the NPPF purposes and is designated for its environmental / landscape or heritage qualities. This land should be protected. In the interest of positive planning, opportunities for increased access and recreational use as well as agricultural intensification should be maximised. To complement the Green Belt purposes, three purposes specific to Mega Parkland are suggested:

- To connect London green space, through the Green Belt, to the wider South East.
- To provide open strategic gaps between Mega Activity Corridors for protection.
- To create accessible green space for increased recreational and agricultural activities.

Activity Corridors would be focussed at land which makes the least contribution towards the NPPF purposes and is undesignated. These spokes would take advantage of transport links to provide new opportunities for housing, businesses, retail, community and

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9 National Planning Policy Framework (para. 80, 2012).
infrastructure development, for example in the form of settlement extensions. Development would come forward in a well-planned and inclusive manner, which does not represent “sprawl”.

The results of the strategic Green Belt review are unknown; however Activity Corridors would be envisaged to distribute development across Edge Land at the most accessible and sustainable locations. This would put in place an increased resident population to support London, and provide larger scale sites that could deliver a substantial quantum of family and affordable housing. Any relocation of centrally located activities such as distribution, employment or retail uses could potentially free up brownfield sites for densification. New development would be designed to follow a landscape led approach to respond to changing lifestyle choices and operational requirements.
Conclusion

The key to preparing a MegaPlan for London to fully maximise potential sources of land supply, such as Edge Land, need to be underpinned by a strategic Green Belt review. Such a MegaPlan would therefore conform to national policy whilst meeting growing needs of the Capital.

The housing challenge in London is likely to be ongoing. We need to look beyond the immediate crisis and get ahead of the curve. Only through a long-term and strategic MegaPlan can London become not only the first MegaCity in Western Europe, but the best MegaCity in the world.