

London and WSE: the case for a city-regional perspective

Discussion paper for London & SE research network meeting, 9 July 2018

This note focuses on the evidence needed to assist strategic planning in London and the Wider South East. Given the political resistance to any type of formal regional governance, advocating the need for a clearer contextual understanding of how the city region currently functions, might be more realistic than any hint of a regional plan. Any new insights and/or examples of missed opportunities might act as a catalyst to approach things more strategically.

Regional collaboration in the past

Strategic planning goes in and out of fashion. But it is the case that in its absence, local planning decisions tend to live "off the fat" of previous strategic development frameworks. Hence during the Thatcher years of the 1980s, the local authority mindset was still geared towards focusing growth in the areas identified in the Strategic Plan for the South East (SPSE) 1971 (Reading, Crawley, Southampton). The regional planning era in the 2000s gave these ideas a refresh, e.g. with recommendations for strategic Green Belt releases north of Harlow, west of Stevenage and north Guildford which continue to be taken forward in the localist era. The Thames Gateway has remained a long-established growth valve through various political cycles.

The organisational means by which evidence was assembled and logical decisions taken has varied over the years:

- For the SPSE 1971 it was spearheaded by the SE Economic Planning Council (expert appointees), but also including government experts and the Standing Conference of local authorities.
- The advice given to the government for the Regional Planning Guidance for the SE (RPG9) was led by SERPLAN (a voluntary collaboration of local authorities, largely funded by the GLC and later LPAC?)
- The South East Plan and the East of England Plan were produced by the statutory Regional Assemblies. Funding to set up the technical and logistical support for the Assemblies was provided by CLG. Government Offices for the Regions were active participants at the EiP and occasionally commissioned research.

Current collaboration (instituted in 2015) between London and the WSE authorities follows the model recommended by the Outer London Commission, with a Political Steering Group comprising a small number of representatives from the GLA, London Councils, South East of England Councils (SEEC) leaders group and the East of England LGA (EELGA) leaders group. A Councillor from each of the 156 local authorities can attend the Annual Regional Summits. Links with the LEPs and transport organisations are now being developed.

Progress since 2015

Some progress has been made in producing a wider city-regional perspective on demographic trends (GLA Intelligence, 2016-based central projections¹). Although the results are not significantly different in aggregate to the 2014-based ONS projections, there are said to be significant differences

¹ GLA-based population projections: Explanatory note and results for the WSE, July 2017
<https://files.datapress.com/london/dataset/projections-documentation/2017-12-01T12:33:49.25/2016-based%20projections%20WSE%20results.pdf>

at authority level². The raw data is available from the London Data Store, but needs significant spreadsheet work to produce authority level comparisons. In any event, ONS 2016-based sub-national population projections are now out, indicating a generally lower growth average over a 10 year period³.

Although this exercise aids understanding, together with research on past migration trends for EELGA⁴, it is difficult to see how findings will be applied, apart from adding to debate at the forthcoming draft London Plan EiP and perhaps encouraging some WSE authorities to argue for the use of variant projections in their objectively assessed needs estimate. It remains a significant challenge that housing targets set in the London Plan are on a different basis to the WSE, not only in scale but also distribution (SHMA and SHLAA).

Some progress has also been made through the collaborative process on identifying key transport corridors for investment in the WSE. Much of the background evidence for their identification came from the regional planning era but also supplemented in some counties (including Kent and Suffolk) by more recent Infrastructure and Growth Frameworks, inspired by London's work on its Infrastructure Plan for 2050.

Some of these investment corridors link with transport growth corridors in the draft London Plan, others are orbital (Figure 2.15). But authorities in the SE and E are at pains to emphasise that such corridors are not intended to receive London overspill housing.

Research needs

Causes and characteristics of domestic migration (net out-migration from London to WSE): in addition to traditional driver of family formation and a desire for more space (now reemerging in the aftermath of the financial crisis), how extensive is out-migration of those no longer able to afford private rented accommodation in London and rehousing of those on LB waiting-list beyond the London boundary (from Thanet to Peterborough)? Implications for the types of housing and facilities needed as well as spatial patterns.

Prognoses: implications of ongoing welfare reforms, implications of Brexit, will Millennials and Generation Rent want a more suburban lifestyle in their middle ages or not?

Commuting patterns: changing relationships between housing costs, transport costs and travel to work time? Interactions between activity centres within the WSE, reducing dependence on London? Implications of digital working?

Economic functional linkages across the city region; update of Polynet study - growing independence of business linkages in a NW arc of London? CEBR report also useful on dependencies on London⁵.

² Ben Corr at London Assembly Planning Committee evidence session, 14 March 2018. Major recipients of net out-migration over the 10 year period used in the GLA's projections (2007-16) were Dartford, and Reigate and Banstead, plus other districts around the London fringes: Basildon, Thurrock, Tandridge, Elmbridge, Spelthorne, Slough, Three Rivers, Watford, Hertsmere, Broxbourne, Epping Forest and Basildon

³ SE 6.4% v 8.1%; E 7.3% v 8.9%; London 8.8% v 13.7% (mid 2016-2026 v mid 2014-24)

⁴ Review of research on migration influences and implications for population dynamics in the WSE, LSE with Tony Champion & Neil McDonald for EELGA, Dec 2017

⁵ Symbiosis or Sibling Rivalry: The future links between London and the South East, Centre for Economics and Business Research Ltd for SEEDA, May 2005

Gaps, duplication and mismatches within Strategic Economic Plans of LEPs⁶? Any evidence of emerging skill shortages? Implications of losing middle management and clerical jobs?

Need for more technical capacity

Inching towards a clearer understanding of trends and spatial patterns across London and the WSE has been hindered not just by political resistance (hence the need to focus on the "art of the possible") but also the lack of a dedicated technical capacity. The Strategic Spatial Planning Officers' Working Group (SSPLOG) provides technical support in a low-key fashion within limited resources. Much of the staff input comes from the GLA which may itself raise suspicions over any research findings is done to "London rules".

This organisational set up contrasts with the scale and pace of research integration that has been achieved by the Greater Sydney Commission. This has allowed the production of a commendably joined up set of development frameworks, namely a regional plan, five local plans and an infrastructure plan at State level. All were published on the same day in March 2018, ensuring alignment between infrastructure funding priorities and planned development locations.

The GSC is independent of State and local government. It has a dedicated technical research and intelligence capacity with professionals focusing full-time on the city region, rather than as an extra to their day jobs. Local authority secondments have supplemented this technical capacity for the production of local plans. The Commissioners act as a full-time steering group and take ultimate responsibility, but are themselves a mix of academics, consultants and retired civil servants. Three Commissioners are responsible respectively for economic, environmental and social aspects, each appointed by the State. For the six Commissioners who each represent an area of Greater Sydney, the relevant local authorities shortlisted and made the recommendation to the State about their appointment and in all cases this was accepted.

Could elements of this approach be replicated in the WSE?

In the short-term, a full-time joint technical team could be established to support the work of the London and WSE PSG. Possible sources of funding might be GLA/TfL, LEPs, HCA, local authorities perhaps claiming some new burdens funding from Government. Universities might be persuaded to provide some funding in kind by seconding academic support to increase their local research impact. Business or developer secondments might also be possible (in partial emulation of the Regional Planning Association model in the US).

In the longer term an equivalent of the GSC might be considered with the Mayor and Leaders of SEEC and EELGA appointing a small number of independent Commissioners, using public appointment procedures. They in turn could oversee the administrative appointment of a local Commissioner say for each quadrant of the wider city-region and for London, as recommended by groups of local authorities. Subject to gaining the necessary trust of politicians as well as financial underpinning, this might even be a vehicle to prepare a city-regional vision and development framework. Experience from the GSC is that it has been able to act as an independent arbiter between local authority interests in terms of identifying the most appropriate locations for strategic growth.

⁶ Strategic Economic Plans in the Greater SE; Overview of key housing and transport objectives, initiated by SSPLOG, Enzygo Environmental Consultants for GLA, April 2015

Possible drivers for a more strategic approach

These could include:

- the desire to increase productivity (already a concern of the GLA). The production of a Regional Industrial Strategy might be of interest to the Leaders of SEEC and EELGA, rather than fragmented Local Industrial Strategies as envisaged in the national strategy.
- Opportunities for a city region transport led framework led by TfL's ambitions to take over rail franchises on London commuter routes. A collaboration with the emerging TfSE and TFE could lead to a shared transport vision as a lobbying tool with government. In the longer term this could be extended to structure new development as well as improved connectivity.
- Linking up of the London Plan's "willing partner" approach with the NIC led coordination of growth in the CaMKOx corridor (increasingly involving the HCA) to increase housing delivery. Note that the GLA recently supported Housing Investment Fund applications from six authorities in the WSE(largely NE and SE of London).
- Perceived risk of falling behind other regions and nations in making a stronger case for government infrastructure funding – lessons from the visioning and preparatory stages of producing a Great North Plan, including evidence and ideas sessions facilitated by IPPR North?

Building a regional evidence base - **what role for the London & SE research network? How to fund?**

Identify a regional research agenda (see initial ideas above). Discuss with SSPLOG? Discuss with the Research Councils?

Set up an online regional research repository. Examples include a range of comparative international studies looking at growth corridor economic initiatives commissioned by the London Standed Cambridge Corridor Growth Commission⁷

An annual research conference, encouraging academics, think tanks and consultants to showcase their research into how the city region functions.

Producing a synthesis of evidence, including maps, from current Independent Economic Review work (including Essex, Cambridge and Peterborough) and Infrastructure and Growth Frameworks (including Suffolk, Kent and possibly Surrey). NB. TfSE about to start an economic connectivity study.

In the longer term, could add policy overlays, including:

- base mapping of regional assets and constraints capitalising on GIS techniques;
- establishing a consistent approach to identifying potential development land capacity based on local density assumptions, including redevelopment of underutilised land close to stations;
- establishing a common methodology for undertaking a strategic Green Belt review;
- producing combined Excel spreadsheets of Local Plan housing targets, and other numerical evidence as/when reports are produced in machine readable PDF format, which could then be mapped;
- coordinating with utility companies to get an up-to-date picture of new investment and remaining constraints, previously water supply concerns in Oxford and River water quality

⁷ LSCC Growth Commission resources and research reports:
http://www.lscggrowthcommission.org.uk/?page_id=444

concerns (i.e. sewage outfall) around Basingstoke and Southampton – work needs updating now that the Water Directive 2015 is in force. Strategic flood risk assessment?

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