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Nancy Holman et Andrew Thornley

## The reversal of strategic planning in London: the Boris effect with a focus on sustainability.

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# The reversal of strategic planning in London: the Boris effect with a focus on sustainability.

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## Introduction

1 Boris Johnson won the election for Mayor of London in 2008 with a manifesto based on pragmatic populism. He responded to the public dislike of the new kind of articulated buses, called bendy-buses, by promising to bring back the traditional Routemaster double-decker even though this would be extremely expensive<sup>1</sup>. He promised more for cyclists, pledging to turn London into a 'city of cyclists'. He promised more for motorists by re-assessing the Western Extension to the congestion charging zone, and more for everyone with a big tree planting scheme, which would see 10.000 new street trees across the Capital. However, amidst this air of populist appeal, the reality was that he had no background in local government having spent most of his career in journalism where he had built a rather controversial reputation as a bit of a joker. Since his election his approach has continued to be one of seeking publicity with a range of *ad-hoc* statements and schemes. This style contrasts significantly with that of the previous Mayor, Ken Livingstone, who had a lifelong attachment and knowledge of local government. The switch in style raises for us the question of whether the new pragmatism has meant a loss in strategic planning and leadership for London.

2 In order to tackle this question we must first define what we mean by strategic planning. For us, and broadly following Albrechts' (2004) strategic planning engages with complex problems in an integrated way, allowing for the creation of strategic visions of shared futures at a larger than project level scale. Here we are examining planning at the London-wide regional scale<sup>2</sup> and specifically the London Plan, which co-ordinates various components into an integrated policy. Such an approach allows policy to counter differences that might exist across London. The city exhibits extreme social polarisation: some neighbourhood areas are amongst the richest in the world attracting global residents while others are the most deprived in the country. In the British system, some of this inequality is countered by the national taxation system that redistributes resources to local authorities according to a formula based on need. However this only goes so far, and there are many policies for London that need a strategic approach, not only for reasons of achieving social equality but also for simple efficiency. For example, certain provision and utilities need to be co-ordinated across local authority boundaries; some require a large scale for meaningful operation while others have undesired neighbourhood impacts which no single authority wants. Transport, environmental protection, waste disposal and incineration are some of these kinds of activities.

## London Governance - a brief modern history

3 London over the last thirty years has experienced major institutional changes. The Greater London Council (GLC) was abolished in 1986 and this was followed by a period without any metropolitan government. In 2000, this was re-established with the Greater London Authority (GLA) with a streamlined bureaucracy and an elected mayor. Since then there have been two mayors, allowing for comparison. These institutional changes have brought very definite conditions for the development of strategic planning.

4 The removal of the GLC fitted into the political ideology of the period that stressed minimal intervention and market freedom<sup>3</sup>. Some saw this as a welcome move that led to the strengthening of the lower-tier boroughs (Hebbert, 1992)<sup>4</sup>, or an opportunity for spontaneous innovation through the creation of more action-oriented, and financially efficient, ad hoc bodies. However the new arrangement lacked a co-ordinated strategic perspective and this

was to prove a problem over the years that followed. The powers of the old GLC were reallocated amongst an array of actors from central government; to the lower tier of the London Boroughs; to various non-statutory joint bodies. The London Planning Advisory Committee (LPAC), made up of representatives from the boroughs, and responsible for preparing strategic planning reports was just such an advisory body. This committee presented its ideas to central government that now prepared the statutory Strategic Planning Guidance for the city. In tune with the non-interventionist ideology of the period, the first guidance in 1989 was only a few pages long and simply set out the main parameters within which the local authorities should operate. So, as a result of the ideology of non-intervention and institutional fragmentation, very little strategic planning took place in the years following the abolition of the GLC.

5 It was not long before problems started to arise with this minimalist approach to London's government. Increasing concern was expressed at the lack of overall vision, the inability to co-ordinate transport and development, as in Canary Wharf, and poor city leadership<sup>5</sup>. From the late 1980s onwards pressure was developing for yet another reform to London's government. The establishment of the GLC had been largely a technocratic reform searching for greater administrative efficiency while its abolition had been a politically motivated action based upon ideology. The institutional changes during the 1990s can be said to have been the first to respond to the pressures of economic globalisation and inter-city competition. The private sector played a significant role in pushing these institutional changes forward. These pressures of globalisation have dominated the policy agenda ever since. During this period when London had no overall government, the City Corporation was active in commissioning reports and funding promotional bodies that were concerned with the competitiveness of London. Studies were undertaken on London as a World City and these concluded that London was at a disadvantage in not having a single voice to promote the city (e.g. Llewelyn Davies, 1996)<sup>6</sup>. Traditionally business in London had been organised under two main umbrella bodies, the London branch of the Confederation of British Industry which represented manufacturing industry but was becoming more broadly based, and the London Chamber of Commerce and Industry with a tradition of representing retail and small traders. In 1992, a new body was set up called London First with the aim to 'engage the business community in promoting and improving London, using the vision, energy and skills of business leaders to shape and secure the capital's future'<sup>7</sup>. It is interesting to note that the principal sponsors of this new body were companies that could be described as linked to the new global economy – for example, British Airways, the Airport Authority, British Telecommunications, the internationally oriented business service and financial firms, and international developers involved in the biggest development projects in the capital (for details see Thornley et al, 2005)<sup>8</sup>.

6 So the message was clear. The lack of a metropolitan authority and a strategic planning approach was causing problems for London in the new era of globalisation and inter-city competition. There was a call, led by the private sector, for political leadership and a vision of the capital's future. Central government began to respond by beefing up its Strategic Guidance for London and setting up collaboration with bodies such as London First to think about a vision. However, the resultant strategic planning was weak and disjointed. At this point a new national government came into power, led by New Labour and Tony Blair. The new government solution to the London strategic deficit was to set up a new authority led by a directly elected mayor. This was the first time Britain had had a Mayor who was directly elected by the people and the idea was that this would give the incumbent greater political stature and the ability to impose leadership. The new form of government was set out in the Greater London Act of 1999 which listed the mayor's legal duties. These duties reflected the 'joined-up thinking' of the new government prioritising policy co-ordination, sustainability and social inclusion.

7 Of particular importance to our investigation, strategic planning is the requirement set out in the act for the mayor to formulate a number of London- wide strategies. The Act specifies eight of these covering, economic development, transport, bio-diversity, noise, waste management, air quality, culture and spatial development. This last strategy, the Spatial Development Strategy (SDS), subsequently called the London Plan, is a strategic land use plan that is

required to draw together and co-ordinate all other strategies. It is also the only one to have statutory, or quasi-legal, status. There are strict procedures that have to be adopted in its formulation, including public involvement through an Examination in Public, and once adopted it has to be followed by the second tier boroughs in the production of their own plans and granting of planning permissions. We will be focussing on this London Plan as this plan sets out the Spatial Development Strategy for London and deals with matters that are of strategic importance to Greater London.

8 In the rest of the article we will be contrasting the interpretation that has been taken by the two Mayors of this requirement to prepare a London Plan, with a focus on their approach to sustainability. We have selected this as our case for two primary reasons. The first is that under the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) and the enabling legislation that set up the GLA, sustainable development is seen to be a strategic priority. Secondly, sustainable development is, by its very nature, a policy area that takes strategic vision with its triumvirate balancing of economy, social equity and environment. As described above, the GLA arose as a response to lack of leadership, vision and co-ordination in the approach to the governance and planning of London. Our contention is that under Livingstone a positive step was taken to remedying these former problems but that there is a danger that under Johnson this step has been transformed into a shuffle.

### **The first mayor -the Livingstone years 2000-2008.**

9 When Livingstone came to power he enthusiastically adopted a strategic approach giving high priority in the early days to the Transport and Economic strategies. The London Plan took a while longer to produce, as it is required to go through a statutory procedure. It was eventually completed in 2004. The Plan said that London had two strategic choices. It could rein back its economic and population growth through policies of dispersal, like those that took place in the decades after the second world-war. This would take the pressure off the overloaded infrastructure but would also compromise London's development as a world city and, it was said, damage the whole UK economy. Alternatively it could accept the processes of economic and population growth, re-centralise, and create the adequate infrastructure to cope with the pressure. The growth would then help to create the improvements in services and transport the city needed. This second option was the one adopted. The role of the Plan was therefore to ensure that the Mayor could provide the facilities needed for the world city growth strategy, and to formulate policies to deal with the pressures that this increase in economic activity and population created.

10 However the growth had to take place in a way that also created social and environmental benefits and the overall slogan was 'to develop London as an exemplary sustainable world city'<sup>9</sup>. It was said that this involved three interwoven themes: to ensure strong, diverse long term economic growth; to ensure social inclusivity to give all Londoners the opportunity to share in London's economic future; to make fundamental improvements in London's environment and the use of resources (The Mayor London, 2002)<sup>10</sup>. Thus policies followed that covered economic, social and environmental issues; growth, equity and sustainability.

11 Livingstone articulated his policy for creating an exemplary sustainable world city in Chapter 2 of the London Plan by clearly setting out a vision that linked it to a strategy based on promoting growth in London that did not exceed the city's current boundaries or encroach upon its open spaces. By doing this Livingstone created an explicitly spatial development strategy for sustainability that promised to intensify development in key areas that had good public infrastructure and to extend development eastward into the Thames Gateway. This meant that the Plan represented a polycentric development strategy, which called for the interconnection of various parts of London in order to utilise land and other resources effectively (Holman, 2010:28)<sup>11</sup>.

12 The Plan went further than simply propagating a vision for the sustainable development of the Capital. Livingstone also strengthened the role sustainability played in the Plan through the creation of thirteen sustainability criteria (Policy 2A.1) that were to be used in the creation of Sub-Regional Development Frameworks and Unitary Development Plans (UDPs now Local

Development Frameworks - LDFs). Reflecting on these criteria<sup>12</sup> we see a strong emphasis on the use of previously developed land; the favouring of polycentric development in areas with good access to public transport, employment, shops, housing and infrastructure; the avoidance and mitigation of risk (primarily flooding); the assessment of developmental impacts on natural, cultural and human resources; and finally the contribution mixed-use developments might make in community building. What is essential about these criteria is not simply their content but the manner in which they were to be used in London's spatial planning. These criteria were created to guide and shape the statutory development frameworks produced by the lower tiers of London government (i.e. the boroughs.) and were given statutory weight. Holman notes that this is a key element of Livingstone's plan as it "...moves the loose and somewhat Protean concept of sustainability into a more defined and concrete set of concepts based on specific definitional elements"<sup>13</sup>.

13 This leads us to one final area where Livingstone can be seen to be acting as a strategic policy leader through the policy instrument of the London Plan. By instructing the lower tiers of government to formulate their development documents based upon, not only the London Plan but also and more specifically the sustainability criteria, we can see the Plan as a centralising document. Here it is being used to create a 'shared' sense of vision and to co-ordinate London's development. It can be seen as another process through which the Mayor can gain control and influence policy on both a London wide scale but also more locally. This type of oversight can be seen not only in the sustainability criteria mentioned here but also in the numerous targets, criteria and policies also adopted in the plan dealing with housing, density, parking and tall buildings. By way of illustration of the language used in the London Plan with respect of the boroughs, the 2008 Plan uses phrases like *the boroughs should* or *the boroughs will* at least 300 times. This level of control did not always sit well with the lower tiers and by the end of Livingstone's reign as Mayor of London many pundits were categorising his relationships with the boroughs as tense and combative with a number of council leaders welcoming a more conciliatory approach (Cooper and Dowler 2008)<sup>14</sup>. The time was looking right for regime change.

### **A Mayoral change of pace - the Johnson Years 2008-**

14 Ken Livingstone easily won the second mayoral election in 2004 but lost in 2008. Although he lost he was still very popular with certain sections of the electorate – especially residents of inner London and the city's significant minority populations. There were a number of factors that led to his demise. The Labour Party nationally was very unpopular, some people just felt that it would be interesting to have a change after eight years with Ken, and there was a backlash from suburban residents. There was also a history of antagonism between Livingstone and the city's daily newspaper, the London Evening Standard. The newspaper conducted a very vociferous and personal campaign against him. As a result the Conservative Party candidate Boris Johnson won, even though he was widely regarded as a rather superficial figure. This image was based on numerous gaffes in the past including slights on the black community and regular appearances on TV comedy shows. However he expressed a feeling of enthusiasm and an excellent sense of how to use new media. Whilst Johnson was busy producing his very popular blog<sup>15</sup> and appearing energetic and novel, Livingstone came over as rather tired and defensive having to fend off a number of media attacks that accused him of anti-semitism, being backed by terrorists, and general corruption<sup>16</sup>. The election showed the importance of image, the media and winning soundbites with Johnson often making headlines from the Mayoral promises made by Livingstone. For example, in a televised debate when Livingstone described his policy to create a Parisian style cycle scheme in London, Johnson, a keen cyclist, was able to quip that he would personally offer Livingstone, a non-cyclist, lessons on how to ride a bike, winning the biggest laugh from the audience.

15 In terms of significance for urban policy it is interesting that Boris Johnson's election success demonstrated a divide between inner and outer London, and between wealthier and poorer sections of the community. This geographical split created what has commonly been called the *blue doughnut* where the outer, more wealthy London boroughs voted in greater number

for the Conservative<sup>17</sup> candidate Johnson and the inner London voters opted for the Labour candidate Livingstone. This formed a striking visual image of a blue outer ring encircling a red core. We have already noted that the suburban areas of London disliked the affordable housing policy promoted by Livingstone and they also felt that too much attention was oriented to the inner and central parts of the city. In his election campaign Boris picked up on this sentiment saying that he would work more closely with the boroughs, particularly the outer suburban boroughs, and give them more autonomy. In office he set up a City Charter and an Outer London Commission to improve relations between the GLA and boroughs, promising to reduce the policy constraints on the boroughs. This closer relationship between the Mayor and the boroughs and the promise to give them more autonomy means, in our view, that it will be more difficult for Johnson to adopt and enforce a strategic leadership role.

- 16 Johnson has prepared his own London Plan and this will be adopted in 2011. As required by the legislation it includes the aim to balance the economic growth, environmental sustainability and social equality of London. The general approach of his Plan, which looks forward to 2031, is similar to the previous ones. The city is expected to continue to grow in population and employment and a major aim is to retain its world city status. Alleviating climate change also remains a central focus. The major development projects of Cross Rail and the Olympics are fully supported although there are no firm proposals for the remaining fifteen or so years of the plan period. He has also withdrawn some transport schemes that would have increased accessibility to poorer parts of the capital such as Peckham and Barking. However the main difference is that the plan will be less detailed and used less forcibly. At the end of the day the London Plan gains its strength from being a statutory document that can be used to control the boroughs, a lobbying document to influence central government, and a means of trying to influence the behaviour of private interests and the public.

## Boris Johnson's London Plan - a continuation of vision and strategic direction? The case of sustainability

- 17 Johnson sets out his vision on strategic planning for London in the opening pages of the London Plan. He notes that the new Plan will be "...shorter, more clearly strategic and user-friendly" than its predecessor<sup>18</sup> and that with respect to his advice to the boroughs he will first provide "...areas of *flexibility*, where authorities may want to consider how their particular circumstances might differ from those of London overall" and secondly advice on areas where greater analysis is required to determine local policies (IBID emphasis added)<sup>19</sup>. Here we see a true departure from the approach taken by Mayor Livingstone who took a far more structured and dominant role with respect of the lower tiers of government. We will now turn to Boris Johnson's treatment of sustainability in the London Plan to see if the consolidating policy direction it provided in Livingstone's Plan continues.

- 18 The initial and obvious area of divergence between the Livingstone and Johnson Plans where sustainability is concerned is one of language. There is a significant shift in language between the two plans with the 2004 and 2008 versions of the London Plan favouring the terms sustainability and sustainable development and the 2010 Draft Replacement Plan opting instead for the terminology 'quality of life'. If we look at the frequency table below the shift is obvious.

<i>Terminology Used</i>	<i>London Plan (2008)</i>	<i>Draft Replacement Plan</i>
Quality of Life	36	<b>50</b>
Sustainable Development	<b>45</b>	16
Sustainability	<b>44</b>	15

Figure 1 Frequency chart of terminology (Holman, 2010:33)

- 19 Clearly, there is a significant movement towards using a new nomenclature to describe what might be termed sustainable development under the Johnson Plan. Indeed this shift is highlighted on p. 23 of the Plan in the section *A new focus on quality of life*, which gives us ten points<sup>20</sup> that help define what Johnson means when this term is used. These bullet points arose from the consultation phase of the Plan's creation and range from housing affordability

and health inequality to transport and air quality. What is absent from these ideas is any notion of how these ten points fit into a broader definition of sustainability that would incorporate a balance of the needs of the economy, the environment and society. By turning away from the language of sustainability, which embodies in it the concepts and discourse, however vague, of the balancing of these three pillars within both space and time, the new Plan is left with the weaker, softer notion of quality of life. Sadly, this more rosy view in no way recognises the political struggles and compromises that are necessary to bring about sustainable development and presents a picture of ‘sustainability’ that is far more based on individual notions of quality of life.

20 In our opinion this retreat from the language of sustainability has left the new Plan, which sets out the strategic direction for London, in a weaker position when it comes to balancing the needs of economy, society and environment. With this in mind, we will now focus on how the specific criteria offered by the Mayor’s impact on sustainable development, which, as was noted above, is a strategic priority under both the ESDP and the enabling legislation for the GLA.

21 As was mentioned earlier Mayor Livingstone set out a series of thirteen sustainability criteria against which the boroughs were to judge their development plan documents. The Johnson plan also provides six detailed objectives that embody the concept of sustainable development. However, the latter are not set out to be specifically used to judge plans or projects in the Capital. Rather these are again tied to looser policies that defer judgement to local boroughs as to how best to support quality of life in their areas.

22 Taking the two lists together for comparison we see that the objectives provided by the Johnson Plan are nicely balanced between the three spheres of sustainable development. The objectives note that London should strive to have an internationally competitive economy; that it should improve social, health and other inequalities faced by Londoners; and that it should be at the front of the movement to improve the environment. The thirteen criteria provided by Livingstone are also well mixed across the three pillars of sustainability noting that future plans and development should take account of the impacts of development on health, the impact it may have on local businesses, and the environment. However, this cursory analysis, if left at the surface level, could prove confounding as the two lists differ in two very significant ways.

23 Firstly, the sets of criteria diverge in terms of their specificity, with Livingstone’s criteria being far more explicit than Johnson’s objectives. An excellent case in point would be to examine Johnson’s fourth objective which is that London should strive to be:

...a city that delights the senses and takes care over its buildings and streets, having the best of modern architecture while also making the most of London’s built heritage and which makes the most of and extends its wealth of open and green spaces and waterways, realising its potential for improving Londoners’ health, welfare and development;

24 and compare this to Livingstone’s eleventh criteria, which is that development and plans should:

...take account of the suitability of sites for mixed use development and the contribution that development might make to strengthening local communities and economies including opportunities for local businesses and for the training of local people.

25 Embodied in these two points we see a Johnson objective that is arguably no more than an aspiration for London to become a “city that delights the senses” to a very pointed aim in the Livingstone Plan that directs local councils to consider the “...suitability of sites for mixed use development”.

26 Another example of this point is Johnson’s first objective:

...A city that meets the challenges and population growth in ways that ensure a sustainable, good and improving quality of life for all Londoners and helps tackle the huge issue of inequality among Londoners, including inequality in health outcomes.

27 Clearly this is a laudable objective but when compared to another of Livingstone’s criteria: “Optimising the use of previously developed land and vacant or underused buildings” we again see a Johnson objective that is loose in its specificity and a Livingstone criteria that is directed.

28 The second way in which the two lists differ is in their spatiality. The majority of the thirteen criteria listed in Livingstone's plan have a spatial consequence. For example, Livingstone's criteria tell us that development should be guided towards being polycentric, on previously developed land, and near transport links. This has the effect of giving the criteria a concrete rationality born of a specifically spatial vision. In doing this Mayor Livingstone provides strategic guidance to the boroughs in a way that Mayor Johnson cannot.

## Conclusion - shuffling away from a radical strategic vision?

29 So, has Johnson's Plan and more pragmatic style moved us away from strong strategic leadership for London? The answer to this question in part remains to be answered, in that it will have to wait for Johnson's full tenure as Mayor to be served and his Draft Replacement Plan's adoption. However, we feel there is certainly enough contained within the Johnson's Plan to offer an interim report when it is compared to the current London Plan.

30 When reading the plans and considering them from the point of view of balancing economy, environment and social equity, we see a strongly precise and prescriptive plan put forward by Livingstone that chooses to use the language of sustainability. It is both spatially and terminologically specific in the way it describes sustainability and links this to guidance directed at the boroughs. Here we see, embodied in the thirteen sustainability criteria, concrete guidelines that must be used by the boroughs when they formulate their plans and development projects.

31 Johnson's Plan is clearly different. He favours the looser more individual notion of quality of life and never fully defines sustainability as it relates to strategic planning. In addition to this, the more conciliatory and pragmatic approach he takes with relation to the boroughs means that it is exceptionally hard to see an overall strategic vision emerging from the Plan. This is a serious flaw. Here the dismissal of a more strategic approach is something that should be considered by the planning community especially in light of the new UK national government's moves towards the decentralisation of planning. By assuaging a more directed approach we run the risk of moving from a London Plan that strode ahead with a strategic vision to one that shuffles along in pragmatism.

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## Notes

- 1 Johnson initially estimated the cost of replacement at £8 million only later having to admit the cost would be far closer to £100 million, which was the initial costings quoted by independent transport consultants, Johnson, J., “The perfect political storm” *The Political Quarterly* 79(3), p.437, 2008.
- 2 In the United Kingdom London is considered to be a region with the power to create a *Regional Spatial Strategy* called the London Plan.
- 3 Thornley, A., *Planning after Thatcherism*, London, Routledge, 1993.
- 4 Hebbert, M., & Ward, S., “21<sup>st</sup> Century soapboxes? MPs and their blogs”, *Information Polity* 13 (1): p.21-39.
- 5 Newman, P., & Thornley, A., “Fragmentation and centralisation in the governance of London: influencing the urban policy and planning agenda”, *Urban Studies*, 34 (7), 1997, p.967-988.
- 6 See for example Llewelyn-Davies, *Four world cities: a comparative study of London, Paris, New York and Tokyo*, London, Llewelyn-Davies, 1996.
- 7 <http://www.london-first.co.uk>
- 8 Thornley *et al.*, “Business privilege and the strategic planning agenda of the Greater London Authority”, *Urban Studies* 42 (11), 1947-1968.
- 9 The Mayor of London, *The London Plan*, London, Greater London Authority, 2008.
- 10 The Mayor of London, *The London Plan*, London, Greater London Authority, 2002.
- 11 Holman, N., “The changing nature of the London Plan”, in, Scalon, K., & Kochan, B., (eds.), *London in Austerity: a review of planning, housing and public policy issues in 2010*, LSE London, 2010, p 28.
- 12 For a list of these criteria please refer to the London Plan (2004) or the Revised London Plan (2008). They can be easily accessed from <http://www.london.gov.uk/thelondonplan/policies/2a-01.jsp>
- 13 Holman, N., *op. cit.*, p.29.
- 14 Cooper, K., & Dowler, C., “Boris Johnson’s new plan for London” *Inside Housing*.
- 15 Francoli & Ward *op. cit.*
- 16 Johnson, J., *op. cit.*
- 17 The Conservative party uses the colour blue for their candidates whilst the Labour party uses red.
- 18 Mayor of London, *The Draft London Plan: draft spatial development strategy for London*, London, Greater London Authority, p.10.
- 19 Mayor of London, *The Draft London Plan: draft spatial development strategy for London*, London, Greater London Authority, p.10, emphasis added.
- 20 These points can be found in the Draft Replacement Plan <http://www.london.gov.uk/shaping-london/london-plan/>

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### ***Résumé***

Boris Johnson won the election for Mayor of London in 2008 with a manifesto based on pragmatic populism. This style contrasts significantly with that of the previous Mayor, Ken Livingstone. The switch in style raises for us the question of whether the new pragmatism has meant a loss in strategic planning and leadership for London. We will examine this question by comparing the London Plans produced by Mayors Livingstone and Johnson, focusing specifically on sustainability. Our contention is that under Livingstone a positive step was taken to remedying these former problems and but that there is a danger that under Johnson this step has been transformed into a shuffle.

### ***Entrées d'index***

**Keywords :** London Plan, quality of life, strategic planning, sustainability