



## **Quartered, drawn and hung out to dry: What ‘tackling spatial inequalities’ really means for London’s low-income communities**

By Fran Heron, Camden Tenant and Chair, Camden Town District Management Committee

Foodbanks, homelessness, overcrowding, children turning up at school hungry and without winter coats. It is widely acknowledged that poverty is on the rise. So how might the London Plan go about addressing this?

The most obvious contribution would be to set an ambitious target for delivery of new social rented homes. A secure, suitable place to live with money left after paying rent for bills, food, clothing, travel costs, one-off expenses and, hey, maybe the odd trip to the cinema or swimming baths: currently that’s a mere pipe dream for the hundreds of thousands of Londoners on the waiting list for social housing.

Unfortunately, the new London Plan looks set to let the boroughs get away with just 15% of new homes being for social rent or the higher ‘London Affordable Rent’.

But the word ‘poverty’ does crop up in the draft new London Plan: twice. Once in relation to skills training and once under Policy SD10: Strategic and Local Regeneration’. Now that one caught my eye.

The policy states that, “Development Plans and Opportunity Area Planning Frameworks have a key role to play in tackling spatial inequalities and the causes of deprivation.”

‘Tackling spatial inequalities’ is mentioned several times as a key goal of new development. But what does the term mean?

In reality, it replaces the discredited ‘mixed communities’ mantra that helped justify the demolition of 8,000 social rented homes in London from 2005 to 2015, and the loss of green space on many estates to make way for new properties for private sale.

The rationale goes that ‘mono tenure’ neighbourhoods (meaning social housing) are undesirable. Of course, in practice social housing estates have, for many years, comprised social tenants, leaseholders, private renters, sometimes affordable renters and freeholders. This economic mix is also matched with a much more vibrant culturally diverse population than could ever be achieved in the growing number of luxury apartments.

At public expense, affluent newcomers are encouraged to set up home where once council tenants lived, or where children’s playgrounds stood.

These schemes have also come at the expense of London’s stock of social housing – which has remained roughly the same since 2002 thanks largely to estate demolitions, exacerbated by the Right to Buy.

Meanwhile there is a conspicuous absence of any contraflow route for the impoverished to mingle cheek by jowl in wealthy neighbourhoods in Outer Shangri-La should they wish to reach that destination!

The official rationale behind this is that social housing tenants will benefit from living in close proximity to those who are presumed to be their social 'betters'. An insulting notion, and one which has been roundly rejected by the research.

A review of the evidence on Mixed Communities by Dr Rebecca Tunstall and Dr Ruth Lupton as far back as 2010 found 'to date the evidence is limited that neighbourhood has a large effect on individual outcomes, over and above individual and household factors. Nor is there robust evidence that neighbourhood mix per se or changes to mix (over and above other neighbourhood characteristics) is influential.'

Meanwhile Paul Cheshire's research for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in 2007 found that moving wealthier residents into poorer areas in fact results in higher prices for property, goods and services, all of which make life harder for less well-off residents.

So why continue to promote this discredited idea of 'mixed communities', under the guise of 'tackling spatial inequalities'? Cheshire's 2009 report 'Policies for Mixed Communities', holds the most probable clue.

His paper concludes that 'Mixed neighbourhood policies may divert attention from the need for effective income redistribution'. Actually, moving wealthy people into poorer neighbourhoods (and, often, moving poorer people out of London altogether) masks poverty. It makes poverty less visible in the statistics and encourages a 'job done' culture while nothing could be further from the truth.

At London Tenants Federation we want the Mayor to take poverty seriously, and tackle it head-on. Tackle inequalities, yes, but the new London Plan should scrap all references to 'tackling spatial inequalities.' We're calling for 60% of all new homes built under the new London Plan to be for social rent, and for the Mayor to take proper account of the outcomes for those who are displaced by regeneration.