

Simply calling it ‘Good Growth’ won’t make it so: London needs targeted home building that meets evidenced need

What is the point of a London Plan? As much as it enables good development, it ought to prevent bad development. This is perhaps what the Mayor Sadiq Khan is getting at with his concept of Good Growth. In his foreword to the London Plan he says, ‘Good Growth is not about supporting growth at any cost’.

But read on.

Skip past the well-meaning ‘Good Growth’ policies (or vision statements?). Don’t ask: isn’t it a bit convenient how vague they are? Instead: Flick ahead to Table 4.1 to find that the Mayor’s ten-year target for house building equates to 64,935 new homes per year, which has been broken down into equally unrealistic targets for the boroughs.

And if you think that target sounds achievable, note that since 2005 average annual housing delivery in London has been just 30,000 (with just 13% of that homes for social rent). Many think that it is only the GLA who actually believe they can achieve the new London Plan targets. Yet Housing Policy H1A states that ‘Boroughs must include these targets in their Development Plan documents’.

What does this policy do? It hands developers and landowners a stick with which to beat beleaguered planning departments, heaping pressure on the boroughs to approve residential developments regardless of their effect on local quality of life, and regardless of whether they meet evidenced local housing need.

Living as we do on public land, this pressure to deliver is invariably pushed on to us: tenants on social housing estates, robbing us of our sunlight, green spaces, play areas, youth clubs, community centres and – in too many cases – our homes themselves. Meanwhile public land is handed over for unneeded luxury developments and opportunities are missed to provide the social housing London needs.

London Tenants' Federation wants targeted home building to meet evidenced need, and that is overwhelmingly for social rented housing: 78% of London’s backlog of unaddressed housing need, in fact.

Yet the new London Plan will allow boroughs to get away with social rent making up just 15% of new homes built, instead bulking out their target for ‘affordable’ housing with tenures such as shared ownership, for which evidenced need is sparse.

The more of London's precious space that is taken up with market housing and so called ‘affordable’ products that do not meet need, the less is available for desperately needed social rented housing.

Our idea of making the best use of land is delivering sustainable homes in lifetime neighbourhoods in strong and inclusive communities. An emphasis on headline numbers has so far not only failed to achieve this but has exacerbated the problem. In ten years, 8,000 social rented homes were lost through ‘regeneration’ schemes promising to boost overall numbers of new homes.

We need a radical change. London Tenants' Federation suggests as a first step a target for 60 per cent of new homes built under the new London Plan to be for social rent.