

## **CPRE LONDON AGM, 8 October 2020, NOTE OF PRESENTATIONS AND PANEL DISCUSSION**

### **LONDON AFTER LOCKDOWN: PRIORITIES FOR A GREEN RECOVERY**

**Dr Clare Melhuish, Director, UCL Urban Laboratory, University College London**

The Urban Laboratory is a cross-faculty UCL platform for transdisciplinary urban research and teaching with a focus on London. We think about cities and urban development in a holistic way – from a technical and humanistic perspective with a strong investment in ecological and social sustainability.

This year's annual theme is 'Emergency', particularly in response to COVID but also other issues such as the climate and financial crisis, as a frame for a series of events and discussions. One of the key questions is: 'When does an emergency come to an end?' – for example when thinking of lockdown: 'are we still in it? are we coming out of it? when is after?'. In this context, practitioners, academics, policy makers are coming up with ideas about how we manage post-lockdown and engage with recovery taking account of the impact and opportunities arising from the pandemic.

We need to be careful heading out of lockdown. Cover has highlighted the importance of other issues, such as the climate emergency and the entrenched economical and health inequalities within cities. There is a fear that 'business as usual' is creeping back into construction, car use, and the consumer-led lifestyle which emphasises the urgency of a green recovery – we need a strong green vision and plan for London that doesn't reinstate the status quo and or romanticise a 'quarantine urbanism'.

The Urban Lab wants to realise this vision collaboratively using the expertise of its members and focusing on learning from the past, planning for the future and creating new platforms for engagement. We need to learn from the "eggs in a basket" model from the 1943 County of London Plan, and seminal works such as the Skeffington Report on public participation in planning (1969), in contrast to the world city model emerging in London with a dominating centre, crowded with iconic but unsustainable high rise offices and underoccupied residential buildings, alongside underfunded local authorities, and deteriorating public services and local infrastructure. We need to tackle the dire lack of affordable housing for key workers and other middle-income earners, dependence on unsustainable patterns of commuter transport, and a failure to embed structural green infrastructure into new development - all of which the COVID crisis has highlighted.

A new London Plan is imminent and in May the Urban Lab published a blog post by researcher Chi Nguyen asking what becomes of the London Plan in a post-COVID 19 era? The draft version provided guidance on the concept of good growth, defined as development that provides and promotes a better, more inclusive form of growth leading to a more socially integrated and sustainable city. Yet, the draft plan has been rejected by Government as not being pro-development enough and inadequate for meeting London's housing needs.

**Ben Rogers, Director, The Centre for London**

The Centre for London is London's dedicated think tank, a charity, and independent organisation advocating for a fair, sustainable and prosperous global capital through research, events, convening and influencing.

The main priorities for a green recovery are to tackle carbon emissions from heating and transport – we're doing well with reducing emissions through power supply using more sustainable green energy (solar and tidal) sources but we are not decarbonising transport, including aviation, agriculture and buildings fast enough. The main carbon emissions in London come from transport and gas heating so the priorities should focus on decarbonising transport, not just through better transport options but how do we reduce the need for transport through planning and other mechanisms, and through the way we heat and construct buildings including through switching away from gas.

We are way off target on modal shift – the Mayor has set a target that by 2041 80% of all journeys will be either by public transport or active travel but we have a long way to go to meet that target. Interesting fact: there have been estimates that COVID has led to an 8% fall in carbon emissions which is roughly what we need to be achieving every single year to contain climate change.

Development has been very uneven across London – job creation has very much been concentrated in the inner zones, as is population density. COVID gives hope for a slightly more balanced, more polycentric city where we can exist and thrive in more local economies, through working from home more and travelling less). This offers new opportunities to thinking about the future of our high streets and local town centres. We also need to take advantage of the considerable potential for job creation in the new green economy.

Overall, if we are going to meet our climate change commitments, we are going to need to change the paradigm to one where creating a greener city is not just seen as a moral commitment that we "have" to meet but rather it is seen as an opportunity, resulting not just in a more sustainable, quieter and healthier city but a more economically successful one.

**Shirley Rodrigues, Deputy Mayor for Environment and Energy, GLA**

While there are so many uncertainties ahead, the Mayor has been clear that London's economic and social recovery must ensure we create a fairer, more equal, greener and more resilient city. This requires all Londoners (businesses, NGOs, individuals, boroughs) to play their part. The Mayor co-chairs a London recovery board which has agreed a core set of principles which should govern our recovery: rooting out inequalities, creating green jobs, tackling climate change and transitioning to a zero carbon circular economy.

We can't return to business as usual but we are facing difficult economic times with higher levels of unemployment expected in future. Without ongoing investment and support for London, the economy of the UK will suffer as London will continue to be the place where millions of people will want to work and live.

COVID has brought into sharp focus a range of social and economic challenges. The key one being the inequality and access to green space that has become a lot more apparent over the lockdown. What that has highlighted is how much of a haven our parks and green spaces are with people hearing birdsong, reduced background noise (with no traffic or airplanes overhead) and enjoying more contact with nature. Increased usage seems to be by younger, more affluent Londoners, rather than by lower socio-economic groups, and disadvantaged communities. We need to redouble our efforts to ensure access to green space and nature for Londoners particularly for those who are most vulnerable or whose caring responsibilities limit their opportunities to use those green spaces. We can't ensure that every citizen has access to high quality, traditional parks but we are going to try. We are limited by the way the city is built, its urban form, and we are also trying to ensure we have good affordable housing for all in London.

Two years ago the Mayor published his environment and transport strategies and we hope to be issuing soon the new London Plan. The aim is to transform London to a zero carbon, zero waste city, and one that is more equal and dealing with the climate and ecological emergencies. We believe those policies and programmes remain broadly right but need to be strengthened. We are committed to continuing Green Belt protection and we have an innovative new green policy requiring all new development to include pocket parks, trees, etc so we can bring that natural world closer to us. We are promoting the healthy streets approach to encourage the huge modal shift needed: getting people out of private cars and walking and cycling more for health benefits but also because we need to reduce our carbon emissions and toxic air. Part of that is ensuring our streets are much more green and more liveable and no longer dominated by traffic. We have been promoting low traffic neighbourhoods and schools streets through the Mayor's Streetspace plan for London. Whilst they are temporary schemes we are clear that we would like these to be made more permanent subject to consultation by the local authorities who institute them.

We have a long way to go but there is polling which shows people don't want to go back to 'business as usual' and don't want to lose some of the gains in terms of carbon reduction and air quality we have seen. But there are also certain sections of the community who are very keen to return to their previous way of life. It's always difficult to foster systemic change: you need to bring people along with you in implementing those policies and the pandemic has mobilised more support for these new approaches.

Accelerating the greening of our cities, isn't just a COVID recovery response but a way of tackling fundamental social justice issues and ensuring we are well-prepared and resilient in the face of the profound impacts of climate change that are already happening.

## Key points from the discussion:

(Andrew Jones, from the GLA's Environment Team stepped in for Shirley during the discussion)

- concerns were raised about lack of emphasis on protecting existing trees in London as opposed to planting new trees. Strong protections were contained in the London Plan, and an Urban Forest Plan is being developed by the Forestry Commission and GLA, but Borough Councils have primary responsibility for ensuring protection of trees.
- there was support for local community and neighbourhood-led regeneration initiatives to reduce inequalities in access to green space and affordable housing. The 'Brixton Green' community-led regeneration project around Summerleyton Road was highlighted as a useful case study - details on the UCL Urban Lab website.
- there is a need to scale-up, coordinate and share experience in local initiatives for environmental improvement, including recent GLA greener city grant schemes and local climate action and mutual aid initiatives. Neighbourhood governance was considered important for London but not given adequate support. GLA is interested in looking at how more support can be provided to local community action as part of deliberations by the its new Recovery Board. Participants were encouraged to contribute ideas for a green recovery to the Talk London website.
- questions were raised about the potential of 'e-scooters' as a green mode of transport and the need for more coordinated and effective policies on parking across London. Priority should be given to parking for car-sharing schemes and reducing private car parking in new development and to free up space for new green infrastructure. There was a pressing need to rebuild confidence in the use of mass transit post-covid.
- the inequality of access to green spaces and the need to address areas of green space deficiency, particularly in disadvantaged communities, was considered a vital issue. Learning from the recent Streetspace projects would be useful but more intervention was needed to support creation of new green space.
- more resources are needed to ensure the effective maintenance and improvement of green spaces. Following through recommendations of the recent London Green Space Commission is essential especially establishing a centre of excellence, sharing borough best practice, supporting the work of parks friends groups, and pressing the case for more funding for green space management.
- while London is fortunate to have a rich historic legacy of green space provision, including private gardens and urban squares, all new development should be required to provide adequate and genuinely public new green space.
- there is a need to recast many of our streets as green spaces rather than only for motor vehicles, as is being done in other European cities, and transform them into part of London's green infrastructure.
- the speakers favourite green spaces included: Abney Park Cemetery; green spaces around Temple; the Chelsea Physic Garden - all quiet and not so well known; Regents Park for the

way it combines different kinds of space for different activities with canal infrastructure, and the framing by surrounding development; and a number of wetland habitats such as Walthamstow and Woodberry downs, alongside the repurposing of rivers within new parks, such as Sutcliffe Park in Greenwich.

- there was strong support for designating new parks as a means of protecting green spaces not formally recognised as such: such as an unnamed area of green space at the heart of the Wandle Valley which combines a nature reserve, wilder area, common, and traditional Victorian park.
- the long term impact of C19 on land use change was not clear but there are likely to be significant changes in the commercial property market in central London and opportunities to promote a more polycentric city with a continuation of home working in outer London neighbourhoods.
- transport patterns are also likely to change fundamentally although there would not necessarily be less commuting overall. A reduction in commuting for work purposes could help improve wellbeing but this could be replaced by more travel to central London for retail and leisure purposes.
- concerns were raised over the sense of disenfranchisement and disconnection local people feel from being able to influence new development. Public participation in planning is important but people often lack knowledge, time and a commitment to a locality to get involved.
- it was felt that just as C19 has demonstrated the importance of green space, pressure on public finances will mean it's difficult to improve provision and quality. Proposals for planning reform could also make it more difficult to secure a green recovery although more emphasis on design quality and digital engagement could help.
- the pandemic has demonstrated that circumstances can change at a speed and scale that was not thought possible before. To take advantage of this new opportunity, along with other environmental groups, CPRE London will be putting a comprehensive agenda for positive change in the run up to the Mayoral elections next year.

PD/NS

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