

Just Space conference Community visions towards a new London Plan

Importance of environmental, social and economic justice for the past, present and future of London

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We've seen London change dramatically under the current Mayor and London Plan, not only in terms of the environment: the new developments, new road and transport infrastructure, deteriorating quality of air. But also the social make-up of London has been affected by the current policy approach: entire communities have been displaced and scattered across the city, sometimes even out of London, valuable skills and trades being lost with the disappearance of adequate workspaces, green and open public spaces where communities used to come together turned into soulless grey plazas, shopping malls or semi-private spaces where you're not quite sure you're allowed to be in.

For too many Londoners the day-to-day reality is a struggle, to work two or three low paid jobs to pay the rent, to keep kids in school, a struggle to cope with disability, old age, mental illness and discrimination without the services and social support they lost due to cuts or displacement. The experience of too many Londoners in the present is feeling insecure about their future, isolated, not heard, their needs overlooked and marginalised.

And this comes from a London Plan which opens by stating that it will offer equal life chances to all Londoners, opportunities to have suitable accommodation, build skills and get the jobs they want, live a healthy life and enjoy the diversity of cultures in this city. The London plan talks about minimising social inequalities, deprivation, discrimination. There is actually a policy in the London Plan which states The Mayor is committed to ensuring equal life chances for all Londoners. Meeting the needs and expanding opportunities for all Londoners – and where appropriate, addressing the barriers to meeting the needs of particular groups and communities– is key to tackling the huge issue of inequality across London. But is this the reality we know? Is London currently a just and inclusive city where all its citizens have equal access to the homes, jobs, green spaces and social infrastructure which meet their different needs?

I think we all know someone who's been affected by the London Plan, whose livelihood and wellbeing have suffered due to changes in their immediate environment, who have been priced out, lost their home, had to close shop, lost the services essential to them. From our experiences it looks like no one is ever bothered to read that policy let alone implement it. To decision makers, social inclusion and justice are a vague concept which they treat as a tick-box, measure in units and percentages. There is very little serious evidence being gathered about the needs of people from different communities, with different needs and experiences. There is no adequate assessment of the impacts the plan has on Londoners, to judge whether this policy approach has ever worked or whether it has contributed to the exact opposite.

And this creates frustration and a feeling of powerlessness, but also mobilises many groups to resist, to fight, to learn, to do it themselves, to think of creative ways to avoid the wall we keep hitting, the bureaucracy, the political unwillingness, the viability argument. Among the groups here and the other many campaigns, community led organisations, researchers in London there is a vast resource of evidence, methods of participation and engagement, alternative models to meeting the needs of different communities.

So let's use this knowledge and expertise today to discuss how to turn the London Plan on its head and put social justice at the heart of it. Social justice should be about gathering evidence about all Londoners and asking everyone what they want to see, how they imagine the future of this city, how they want to contribute to its making.

And we have to do this with solidarity and understanding for those who aren't involved, those often forgotten, who don't have the time or confidence to campaign. Because they don't feel part of this big society, because no one in power speaks their language or ever asked them how they are affected and how their needs can be met.

So whether we are looking at housing, employment, transport, the environment, we need to keep in mind how policies in the new London Plan will achieve social sustainability. And how to ensure communities have a genuine influence on what goes in the plan, what sort of relationships are needed with the GLA for us to have a meaningful input, what sort of governance will enable Londoners to be involved in implementing and monitoring the plan.

If this is our chance for a more equal, fair and inclusive strategy for this city we need to work very hard over the coming year to make sure we enable as many voices as possible to be heard and feel they have a stake in the future of London.