

# SKYLINE CAMPAIGN

## Response to draft *City for All Londoners*

16 December 2016

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the *City for All Londoners* document.

**The Skyline Campaign** is an organisation set up in 2014 and supported by a wide variety of professionals - and many ordinary Londoners - concerned by the sudden, unchecked, proliferation of tall buildings appearing across the capital, often poorly designed and in inappropriate locations. The Campaign is not against towers per se, but believes they should only be permitted if of the highest architectural standards, and in locations where they make a demonstrably positive contribution.

The Campaign's main aims so far have been to raise awareness of the recent tall building boom, and to fight for the introduction of new policy that will contribute to a raising of standards in terms of the planning, design and construction of towers.

The Skyline Campaign is consequently extremely keen to participate in this consultation and to bring to the table an analysis of the current predicament; conclusions arising from three years of intense discussions; its experience of supporting local groups, and its involvement in a multitude of high-profile planning applications.

### 1 Background

- 1.2 As you are aware, there is growing concern about the ever-increasing number of tall buildings in the pipeline for London, which are sprouting up in a haphazard and opportunistic way, with little consideration for their impact on local communities, on the character of London, and on the skyline.
- 1.3 There were 436 buildings of 20 storeys or more in the pipeline in London as of March 2016<sup>i</sup>. At the time, 89 were under construction, 233 had approval but

work was yet to start, and 114 were at the planning or pre-application stage. The number in the pipeline had nearly doubled in just two years. No doubt these figures will have again significantly increased in the last nine months.

- 1.4 Whilst largely concentrated in central London (Tower Hamlets has the most, at 93), significant numbers of tall buildings are in the pipeline across the entire geographical reach of the capital: Greenwich has 67, Barnet has 23 and Croydon has 18.
- 1.5 This represents an explosion of tall buildings that will damage permanently the city's identity, its public spaces, protected views and skyline. Too many of these towers are of mediocre architectural quality and badly sited. Many show little consideration for scale and setting, little respect for the local community, make minimal contribution to public realm or street-level experience, and are designed without concern for their cumulative effect and impact, both locally and on London, a unique world city. They do not provide housing that Londoners need or can afford. They are carbon intensive and inefficient resource users. Many are ticking time bombs, with substantial maintenance requirements that will not be met should the trend for luxury flats in the sky fall out of favour. Finally, their generic designs and universal materiality threaten London's specific, recognisable and beloved character and skyline.
- 1.6 **London deserves better.**
- 1.7 Your full review of the London Plan provides the opportunity to develop a set of policies on tall buildings that will ensure our capital city gets the highest-quality development in the right places, and meeting the right needs. We are pleased that the *City for All Londoners* document recognises that tall buildings are only appropriate where they meet strict criteria. We hope that this sentiment will be translated into new London Plan policy which establishes that any additional new towers, however well designed, should be the exception, not the rule.
- 1.8 Our response includes a number of recommendations for policies in the next London Plan, including: shifting the burden of proof onto developers, to

demonstrate how their proposal will have a positive impact on the community and on London; an improved consultation process that gives residents a realistic opportunity to block, or amend, inappropriate development; a requirement that developers consider alternative building configurations, to demonstrate that they could not achieve similar densities using mid-rise design; the use of independent design review panels; the use of a 3D model when considering tall buildings; stronger tests to ensure that the proposal is sustainable; and the strengthening and extending of the View Management Framework.

- 1.9 We also comment on existing policy, the role of viability and land values, and the potential for further, design-led master planning across the capital, including the identification of areas suitable for tall buildings.

## **2 Existing Policy**

- 2.1 Our response focuses primarily on new policies within the next London Plan. However, as this will not be adopted until 2019 at earliest, it is important that you use existing policy more effectively in the meantime.
- 2.2 The London Plan includes an existing policy on tall buildings (Policy 7.7 Local and Design of Tall Buildings), as well as a suite of other policies which are particularly relevant when considering applications for towers (Policy 7.4 Local Character, Policy 7.6 Architecture, Policies 7.11 and 7.12 on the London View Management Framework, Policies 3.5 and 3.6 on residential development, Policy 5.3 Sustainable Design and Construction, etc.).
- 2.3 We believe that if these policies were properly implemented, very few additional tall buildings would be given planning permission. However, hundreds of proposals received approval under your predecessor. This speaks to a failure to properly implement existing policies.
- 2.4 In other words, even without a change in policy, you could implement immediately a significant change in direction. We consequently ask that you

use your existing planning powers to refuse applications that are not in conformity with the London Plan, including where they do not meet the criteria established by Policy 7.7 parts C and D<sup>ii</sup>.

- 2.5 Current policy could produce different results purely by interpreting the “tests” in the manner that you express in the *City for All Londoners*, rather than wait until an amended London Plan is adopted. Existing policy provides the opportunity to give more weight to the impact on the community, streetscape and the skyline. The policy will still need updating with a wider set of tests, but you can start making decisions differently to your predecessor without much change in policy.
- 2.6 Such decisions would provide much-needed, clear political direction both to the Planning Decisions Unit in City Hall and to local planning authorities across London.
- 2.7 We also note that many of these policies were developed at a time when the majority of tall buildings coming forward were for commercial use. We believe that there must be a distinction made between commercial and residential proposals. Many of the existing housing and related policies, including on issues such as play-space, make proposals for tall buildings unacceptable in planning terms.

### **3 Policy recommendations for next London Plan**

#### ***3.1 Burden of proof***

- 3.1.1 The current London Plan requires that proposed tall buildings “*should not have an unacceptably harmful impact on their surroundings*” (Policy 7.7). This places the burden of proof on the planning authority to identify harmful impacts, meaning the default position is that tall buildings pass the policy requirement unless a specific reason can be identified. We believe that this situation should be reversed: in future developers should have to prove that their proposal will have a *positive* impact on its surroundings.

3.1.2 We recommend that the next London Plan place the burden of proof on developers to demonstrate how their tall building will enhance London's skyline, the local area, and - given their visibility - the city as a whole. Such a policy requirement would be in keeping with the approach laid out in *City for all Londoners* under which tall buildings will "only be permitted if they can *add* value to the existing community" and that they make a positive contribution to the streetscape and the skyline, as well as their local impact at street level. For example, the document has an ambition to preserve the intrinsic character of historic London, including the diverse local characters of the many villages that have grown up to create modern London; the impact of a tall building, either within or visible from these areas, must be a factor. These considerations could all be applied to both new applications and to renewals. By giving more weight to these factors, applications for tall buildings will face a more thorough and meaningful assessment.

### **3.2 Genuine public consultation**

3.2.1 Applications for tall buildings have often been approved despite intense opposition from local communities and concerned Londoners. Londoners indeed often feel that their views are ignored by developers and decision-makers when tall buildings are proposed in their city, and that they have no recourse against outcomes they oppose. Earlier this year, Ipsos Mori polling found that nearly three-quarters of Londoners believe the public should be consulted more over the number of new tall buildings that are built<sup>iii</sup>.

3.2.2 There is clearly a need for greater public consultation when considering tall buildings. The public must feel that their views have been heard and appropriately taken into account.

3.2.3 We therefore suggest you consider Londoners' and local residents' views when determining whether a proposed tall building "add[s] value to the *existing* community". Where objections raise legitimate planning grounds, there must be strong planning reasons to ignore these and grant approval.

3.2.4 We also recommend that you lobby Government for a change in planning guidance to create a “community veto” on tall buildings. You will be aware that this “community veto” already exists in relation to wind farms by virtue of the Written Ministerial Statement of 18 June 2015 given by the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government. This gives local people ‘the final say on wind farm applications’.

### **3.3 Alternative designs**

3.3.1 We agree with you that “higher density *does not necessarily mean high rise.*” Study after study has demonstrated that often mid-rise designs can provide similar and even higher levels of densities than those achieved in tall buildings<sup>iv</sup>. This is because mid-rise designs can more intensively use the plot at the ground level and do not require the large unit sizes that tall buildings need, to be viable. Tall buildings often fail to optimise the development potential of sites, in that they often produce fewer, larger units; these, but also the smaller units, are invariably unaffordable to Londoners. Indeed, the drive to go tall is not fuelled by an ambition to achieve more housing, but by the developer’s incentive to maximise profit.

3.3.2 We recommend the new London Plan require that any proposal for tall buildings also consider other buildings configurations. Before a final scheme is put forward, the developer must demonstrate that it has considered alternative designs, and that it cannot develop a scheme to provide new homes at similar densities in any other configuration than a tall building.

### **3.4 Independent professional advice**

3.4.1 We recommend that all proposals for tall buildings be subject to independent design reviews, at several key stages of planning and design, including at pre-application stage. Design reviews can evaluate the quality of proposals. Panels can review the design and provide an assessment of its strengths and

weaknesses as well as identify next steps that should be taken to maximise the benefits that can be achieved. Design review panels could also be used to determine whether there are suitable low- or mid-rise alternative configurations.

- 3.4.2 Statutory consultees, such as Historic England and Royal Parks and many others also provide important advice that must be heeded. Your predecessor failed to take note of this advice, ignoring warnings from Historic England about the irreparable damage to London's historic character caused by a number of the proposals he waved through. We suggest that responses from statutory consultees be given much stronger consideration when determining applications for tall buildings.

### **3.5 3D modelling**

- 3.5.1 We recommend the compulsory use for all large scale developments of a fully interactive 3D computer model of London's emerging skyline; it is a very useful tool to realistically evaluate benefits and harm caused by tall buildings and large developments at a local and city-wide scale. 3D models of the whole of London already exist, such as that from GIA, and the GLA should take advantage of this technology.
- 3.5.2 This model would allow developers, planners, and the public to see what is proposed across the capital and get a sense not only of the individual, but also of the cumulative effect of tower clusters and large developments on the city. It would also allow them to be considered at different angles, and from different distances, scientifically exposing conflicts of views, impact on amenities, and potential for environmental harm such as shadowing.
- 3.5.3 As a relevant example, had a 3D model been used in assessing the Stratford tower by Manhattan Lofts, it would have been immediately obvious that the Richmond Park view of St Paul's would be seriously compromised by its presence.

### **3.6 Sustainability**

- 3.6.1 There is a growing evidence base demonstrating that tall buildings are less sustainable than those which provide similar quantum of development in other configurations.
- 3.6.2 Energy use is higher in tall buildings. A survey into residential towers found that electricity use is twice as high, likely due to the buildings' greater exposure and therefore increased solar gain, as well as other conditions prevalent at higher altitudes, including more wind and colder temperatures.
- 3.6.3 Tall buildings are often less sustainable also in other ways. The taller the building, the higher the amount of embodied energy require per useable square metre because low-carbon materials such as timber are often not viable. Tall buildings suffer more highly from heat losses for the same amount of insulation as lower buildings because of the higher wind speeds. They can create poor micro-climates at ground level.
- 3.6.4 Tall buildings must not be given an easy pass on sustainability. They must be subject to the highest standards of scrutiny, particularly in relation to their longevity and need for maintenance. Environmental Impact Assessments must realistically demonstrate the impacts of tall buildings. Applications must model environmental impacts using dynamic models to understand overheating, vertical sky views, daylight and sunlight/shadow impacts, energy demands etc. A post-occupancy evaluation should also be required as part of the off-site carbon payment; where targets are not met, the developer should have to pay compensation. Buildings should have to prominently display energy certificates in the same way as household appliances.
- 3.6.5 The social sustainability of tall buildings must also be carefully considered during the planning process. Towers built in disadvantaged areas are prone to be divisive, and known for not contributing meaningfully to their local economy. Buildings of such a scale and complexity invariably take a long time to be built and occupy, often blighting their neighbourhoods for many years in the interim.



### **3.7 Strengthen, enhance and extend the View Management Framework**

3.7.1 The London Plan and the attendant London View Management Framework protect a number of important historic views across the capital, from parks and other public spaces that take in important buildings, to urban landscapes that help define London. The intrusion of tall buildings into these views can have a significant adverse impact on the character and quality of those views, and we therefore call on you to strengthen and enhance the View Management Framework, and extend it to include other well-loved views that are relevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. A major omission is views along and across the Thames especially upstream of Lambeth Bridge.

3.7.2 The updated Framework should be evidentiary; views should be protected for their architectural, cultural, or historic significance, and not determined by politics. It should consider new views, and also reconsider earlier versions of the Frameworks to see how existing views have been eroded. It should reflect the topography of London, which is at risk of being lost. Finally, consideration should be given to a Framework that focuses not on particular points but rather on unfolding views, which are revealed as one moves through the cityscape. This work will be greatly facilitated by using the virtual 3D model mentioned previously.

## **4 The impact of viability**

4.1 Rising land values are putting pressure on developers and architects to produce tall buildings. A pattern has emerged in which developers overpay on a site then attempt to recoup their costs with over-intense developments, often in the form of towers with luxury flats. Viability considerations have become a get-out clause that developers have used to force through proposals that do not conform to London Plan policy.

4.2 We need to break out of the situation in which the price of land determines everything. Expectations have been set by precedent in which over-development has been allowed because of viability considerations – this

precedent should be reversed by refusing applications which do not conform with policy. We welcome the recent guidance on viability provided in the draft Affordable Housing and Viability Supplementary Planning Guidance, and hope that this is enforced through the use of planning powers to refuse inappropriate applications. This will change expectations and drive down land values. Downward pressure on land values would free up architects to design better buildings.

## **5 Design-led Master planning**

- 5.1 Many of the negative consequences of tall buildings on London's communities and its skylines are due to the unplanned and uncoordinated way in which these structures have appeared. Where tall buildings are in the right location they can make a positive contribution to the city. One way to guarantee that tall buildings are well-located and work well with their surroundings is to produce sensitive to context, design-led master-plans.
- 5.2 Design-led Master-planning exercises look at a site in the context of the wider area to determine what type of development is suitable in terms of use, place-making, and other important features. They provide an opportunity for planners and developers to take an aspirational rather than constraint-led look at potential schemes, identifying urban design opportunities that will generate unique and distinctive places and neighbourhoods. Master planning offers the opportunity for an approach that can be centred on specific human needs and human experiences, starting with the specific existing context.
- 5.3 The assessment undertaken for the GLDP, LPAC and later recommended by former English Heritage/CABE was for each borough to identify areas where tall buildings would be inappropriate, were sensitive to tall buildings or where they might be appropriate. London Plan Policy 7.7e proposes this. We recommend that the GLA undertake a review with the boroughs to identify where high-rise buildings are appropriate.

## **6 Conclusion**

- 6.1 The Skyline Commission is not against tall buildings. We acknowledge that, as you write in the document, "*tall buildings [will continue] to play a role in the future of London*". We want to make sure that they play the right role. Tall buildings are mostly appropriate for commercial uses, not residential. Where

they are proposed as residential development, approval should be the exception, rather than the rule.

- 6.2 The policy proposals suggested above will help to ensure that only well-designed tall buildings that make a positive contribution to the local community and to London as a whole, without negative impacts on the environment, will be secured.
- 6.3 But policy can only guide decisions. We therefore stress the importance of setting the tone by using your planning powers to refuse inappropriate tall buildings which do not meet the policy tests set out in the current London Plan.
- 6.4 Thank you once again for the opportunity to comment on this draft document. We look forward to continuing to take a positive and proactive approach to working with you and your planning teams to ensure that London gets the type of development it deserves.

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<sup>i</sup> New London Architecture. London Tall Buildings Survey (Annual Update). March 2016. Available from [http://www.newlondonarchitecture.org/docs/1\\_nla\\_ir\\_tall\\_buildings\\_single-1.pdf](http://www.newlondonarchitecture.org/docs/1_nla_ir_tall_buildings_single-1.pdf).

<sup>ii</sup> London Plan Policy 7.7 states that tall buildings should:

- a generally be limited to sites in the Central Activity Zone, opportunity areas, areas of intensification or town centres that have good access to public transport
  - b only be considered in areas whose character would not be affected adversely by the scale, mass or bulk of a tall or large building
  - c relate well to the form, proportion, composition, scale and character of surrounding buildings, urban grain and public realm (including landscape features), particularly at street level;
  - d individually or as a group, improve the legibility of an area, by emphasising a point of civic or visual significance where appropriate, and enhance the skyline and image of London
  - e incorporate the highest standards of architecture and materials, including sustainable design and construction practices
  - f have ground floor activities that provide a positive relationship to the surrounding streets
  - g contribute to improving the permeability of the site and wider area, where possible
  - h incorporate publicly accessible areas on the upper floors, where appropriate
  - i make a significant contribution to local regeneration.
- and that tall buildings should not:
- a affect their surroundings adversely in terms of microclimate, wind turbulence, overshadowing, noise, reflected glare, aviation, navigation and telecommunication interference
  - b impact on local or strategic views adversely.

<sup>iii</sup> Ipsos Mori. "Tall buildings in London. March 2016 survey. Topline Results". Question TW010, p. 4. Available from <https://www.ipsos-mori.com/Assets/Docs/Polls/skyline-campaign-tall-buildings-2016-topline.pdf>.

<sup>iv</sup> Cite Barbara's work here