Subject: Tall buildings and London’s skyline

Report to: Planning Committee

Report of: Executive Director of Secretariat

Date: 10 June 2014

This report will be considered in public

1. Summary

1.1 This item on the agenda will provide Members with the opportunity to discuss with invited experts the implications for London of the current growing number of tall buildings now seen in the capital. The meeting will also seek to examine whether the Mayor’s strategic planning policies, and other controls, are sufficient to manage tall buildings and their impact on London’s skyline.

2. Recommendation

2.1 That the Committee notes this report as background to discussing with experts the reasons behind the growing number of proposals for tall buildings, and ways in which the planning system can manage this trend.

3. Background

3.1 A survey by the New London Architecture (NLA) think tank suggests that 236 buildings of more than 20 storeys could be on the way in London, 80 per cent of which are intended to be residential blocks. Almost a fifth are already under construction, such as ‘The Tower’ at Vauxhall or ‘One Blackfriars’, and around half have planning approval. Overall it is estimated that around 600 applications for tall buildings have been referred to the Mayor since 2008 as they are tall enough to have met the threshold as ‘applications of strategic importance’.

3.2 In March this year, a “Skyline Statement” was published and signed by a range of leading figures in culture, politics, business and civic societies. It notes that “planning and political systems are proving inadequate to protect the valued qualities of London, or to provide a coherent and positive vision for the future skyline” and finds a “shocking lack of public awareness, consultation or debate”. The signatories call for a mayoral Skyline Commission to be set up to review and enable well-designed development, and demand a more structured policy for tall buildings, with transparency for the public and clarity for developers.

---

1 Regarding height, planning applications for buildings that are more than 25 metres high and adjacent to the River Thames; more than 150 metres high and in the City of London; more than 30 metres high and outside the City of London; and proposals that would increase the height of a building by more than 15 metres have to be referred to the Mayor for comment.


3.2.1 With the drive to build more tall residential towers, the focus has also been placed on London’s opportunity areas as future development locations. These areas are set out in the London Plan and detailed in separate “Opportunity Area Planning Frameworks (OAPFs)”. These areas have capacity for 568,000 additional jobs and 300,000 additional homes across London. The latest proposed alterations to the London Plan (FALP) emphasise that: “The Mayor expects [opportunity areas] to make particularly significant contributions towards meeting London’s housing needs.”

3.2.2 GLA Officers, at a Planning Committee meeting in February, explained that the FALP propose not just new housing targets based on identified need, but also for significant policy changes to realise the potential of land in opportunity areas and other large sites. The Plan proposes that housing development in those locations should go to the top of the density range and potentially beyond. The London Forum expressed concern at the meeting as to whether an area with high densities combined with a “gratuitous sprinkling of tall buildings” would actually be a pleasant place to live.

4. Issues for Consideration

Causes and consequences

4.1 There is an ongoing debate about the reasons for the recent increase in proposals for tall buildings. While these towers may be considered to be responding to huge pressures on local authorities and the Mayor to deliver more housing at a time of very high land prices, it is unclear to what extent they will actually address London’s housing need, as many focus on high-end luxury properties and foreign investment opportunities.

4.1.1 Richard Pilkington, senior vice president and managing director of Oxford Properties (developers of the Leadenhall Building), noted at an international conference last year that the demise of the financial bravado of the pre-Lehman Brothers era meant that risks were now being taken by real estate developers and occupiers, who have different priorities than bankers.

4.1.2 Others, such as Peter Wynne Rees, planning Professor at UCL and former City Corporation Chief Planning Officer, go even further and are concerned that most of the residential units being built in London are “nothing to do with the people living in them, they are simply a pile of safety deposit boxes for overseas investors”.

4.2 Many also question the architectural quality of some of these proposals. They believe that because they are highly visible, only those of exceptional design should be permitted to appear on the capital’s skyline. The effects of tall buildings are as important at ground level as they are in the sky, therefore, any proposal should take into account whether a tall building shows consideration of scale or proportion or tries to make a meaningful relationship with its surroundings. There have been doubts if this is being achieved consistently.

---

4 FALP paragraph 2.61
5 John Lett, GLA Strategic Planning Manager, Planning Committee meeting, February 2014
6 Michael Bach, Chair, Planning & Transport Committee, London Forum of Amenity and Civic Societies, Planning Committee meeting, February 2014
8 http://www.propertyweek.com/q%20a-city-of-london-planning-officer-peter-rees-on-office-to-resi-conversion/5056739.article
Managing tall buildings through the planning system

4.3 Rowan Moore, architecture critic, notes that tall buildings in London need not be a problem, if they are well designed and in the right place. He refers to the current London Plan policy 7.7 (Location and design of tall and large buildings), that requires tall buildings to form “cohesive building groups”, “contribute positively to the image and built environment of London” and be “resisted in areas that will be particularly sensitive to their impacts.”

4.4 Policy 7.7 also requires that tall buildings “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” and “individually or as a group, … enhance the skyline and image of London”. Other relevant London Plan policies include Policy 7.6 (Architecture), Policy 7.8 (Heritage assets and archaeology), Policy 3.4 (Optimising housing potential) or Policy 3.5 (Quality and design of housing developments).

4.5 However, significant decisions over tall buildings appear to have been made contrary to such policies and previous Secretaries of State have overturned the advice of planning inspectors on key projects. The City of London, which had a plan to confine tall buildings in a cluster around the Bank of England, permitted 20 Fenchurch Street, known as the Walkie Talkie, which stands outside it.

4.6 There is also Mayoral Supplementary Planning Guidance (SPG) that addresses London’s skyline (the London View Management Framework SPG, March 2012) that explains the policy framework for managing the impact of development on key panoramas, river prospects and townscape views. Some consider it too weak as it was designed (primarily) to protect strategic views of St Paul’s and the Palace of Westminster, to limit tall buildings to strategic clusters and only applies to certain zones. Other relevant Mayoral guidance include, for example, the ‘London’s world heritage sites – Guidance on settings’ SPG.

4.7 Furthermore, many of the planned towers are in the regeneration zones of east and south London, and future proposals are likely to also be located in areas which have so far largely been devoid of tall buildings, like many of the 38 opportunity areas designated in the London Plan. There is a debate to be had about whether Opportunity Area Planning Frameworks need to pay particular attention to clusters of tall buildings and seek to influence their design location and purpose.

Issues for discussion

4.8 It is recommended that Members use the opportunity of this meeting to:

- Explore further the reasons for the increasing number of proposals for tall buildings in London;
- Consider the purpose these new developments serve and the implications for London and Londoners;
- Assess to what extent current planning policies, SPGs and OAPFs provided by the Mayor and the boroughs are sufficient to manage the planning process and how they could be improved if necessary; and
- Identify steps that the GLA and others can take to more effectively respond to tall development proposals both now and in the future.

---

10 The Guardian, 2 December 2012: London high rise craze ruins skyline
11 The Guardian, 29 March 2014: London is being transformed with 230 towers. Why the lack of consultation?
Invited experts

4.9 The following experts have confirmed their attendance at this meeting:

**Julia Barfield:** Managing Director, Marks Barfield Architects (MBA). MBA created the London Eye in 1989. MBA has won more than 60 awards for Design, Innovation and Sustainability.

**Sir Edward Lister:** Deputy Mayor for Policy and Planning, GLA. Sir Edward advises the Mayor on strategic planning applications and has oversight of the London Plan.

**Rowan Moore:** architecture critic. Rowan trained as an architect but later turned to journalism. He has been editor of the architecture journal Blueprint and has written for the Evening Standard and The Guardian.

**Tony Pidgley CBE:** Chairman, Berkeley Group plc. The Berkeley Group has numerous projects for tall residential towers proposed or under construction across London.

**Peter Rees:** Professor of Places and City Planning, The Bartlett, UCL. Peter was recently appointed a professorship by UCL, having previously held the role of City Planning Officer at the City Corporation since 1985.

5. Legal Implications

5.1 The Committee has the power to do what is recommended in this report.

6. Financial Implications

6.1 There are no direct financial implications to the GLA arising from this report.

List of appendices to this report:

None

### Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985

List of Background Papers:


Contact Officer: Alexandra Beer, Assistant Scrutiny Manager
Telephone: 020 7983 4947
Email: [scrutiny@london.gov.uk](mailto:scrutiny@london.gov.uk)