

Mr Oliver Bennett comments

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While the objective of the distribution of tourists across the whole city is a laudable one, there appear to be no practical measures contained in the Plan to achieve it. Market trends rather point in the opposite direction, of increased emphasis on iconic attractions (Palace of Westminster, Buckingham Palace, Tower of London etc.) among the likely geographical markets for London. This can lead to the perils of 'overtourism' as already experienced in a number of major European cities. There need to be practical measures to address these risks if London is to maintain its leading position as a tourism destination.

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In the "Projections of demand and supply for visitor accommodation in London to 2050" (Working Paper 88) it is noted that, in 2015, of the total of 138.5 million visitor nights spent in London, 78% were from international visitors. 85% of these international visitor nights arose from non-business travel, i.e. leisure visits and visiting friends and relatives (VFR). Growth in both international and domestic visits is projected on a straight-line basis to 2050.

What is highly likely is that the proportionate make-up of international visitors will change during this period, notably with higher rates of growth from Asia, notably from China. The number of visits from China to the UK rose by 27% in the first quarter of 2017 as against 2016, an indication of trends to come.

For these visitors the iconic attractions contained in central London are of especial importance. Diverting Chinese visitors from Buckingham Palace and the Palace of Westminster, for example, to attractions in outer London will be especially challenging.

The London Tourism Impact Study, prepared in 1989-90 for the London Planning Advisory Committee and the then London Tourist Board, considered the impact of tourism on heritage sites and on the transport system. Such a consideration seems to be lacking from the London Plan and from the support documents underlying it.

Measures to control tourism flows are likely to become increasingly essential in order to avoid conflict with London's residents. Such conflicts will detract from London as a destination and render straight line projections of demand implausible. Any loss of reputation reduces the attractiveness of London as a place to live, work and invest.

In the London Tourism Impact Study consideration was given the limitation of visitor flows to key attractions by rationing and/or by price. To date there has not been any coherent response in London, although for St Paul's Cathedral and for Westminster Abbey there is a degree of rationing by price.

Without consideration and implementation of measures to address visitor management, it may be necessary to reduce the rate of increase for serviced visitor accommodation as put forward in the London Plan. It could even lead to a need to engage in 'demarketing' activities – i.e. an attempt to make London (or parts of the city) less attractive generally (or to certain groups in particular) to make the situation more sustainable.