

Where can we build more homes?

Five new ways to find land that can close the house building gap in London

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Introduction

We can't just build our way out of London's affordability crisis, but with a booming population there can be no doubt that London needs more homes.

The Mayor has struggled to find enough land to meet his own targets, and needs space for at least another 70,000 over the next decade¹.

This shortage is in spite of a number of problems with the land he has identified. London has experienced a large-scale loss of wildlife-rich brownfield sites in places like the Thames Estuary, developed for housing. We're also seeing a worrying loss of industrial land running at twice the mayor's target, and of in-demand office space. This industrial and office capacity is all too often occupied by viable businesses. The loss is driven by the profits landowners and developers can make from residential development.

Worse, the Mayor and the Government are increasingly eyeing up council estates for redevelopment, treating thousands of homes with deep-rooted communities as brownfield. A housing committee report I chaired showed that estate regeneration schemes over the past decade are responsible for the net loss of over 8,000 social rented homes.

We need to make the best possible use of suitable brownfield sites, which will deliver the bulk of the homes London needs. There is clearly also a need for new sources of land that can avoid the loss of habitats, jobs and social housing.

In this report, I suggest five approaches that could help provide another 70,000 homes:

1. Building up (on top of existing homes)
2. Providing less car parking and more homes
3. Making better use of small sites
4. Community-led estate regeneration
5. Setting up a People's Land Commission

London's housing crisis needs a comprehensive solution that reduces demand from investors, gives rent controls and better protections to private tenants, and that provides far more genuinely affordable housing. These ideas for securing more land should go into the mix to ensure every Londoner can enjoy a comfortable, affordable and secure home.



(This response sets out my individual views as an Assembly member and not the agreed views of the full Assembly)

1 - Building up

Why not add more stories to existing buildings? This has been happening for most of London's history, and can be seen if you look carefully at the buildings around you.

Here you can see additional stories added to residential and office buildings in Swiss Cottage and Euston Road:



This has many advantages compared to demolishing and rebuilding at a higher density. For the residents it means a short period of time out of their home and a fairly short period of disruption and noise, compared to the misery of a demolition and rebuild process which – in extreme cases – has left empty sites blighting their neighbourhoods for a decade.

It can also be much more environmentally friendly. One estimate provided to me by an expert in sustainable construction suggests that demolishing and then building to that height would have an embodied energy 250% higher than just adding further stories to the existing buildings.

Adding further stories also provides an opportunity to refurbish the existing homes. The Ducane Housing Association in Hammersmith and Fulham took this approach with two 1970s buildings. In these images you can see the blocks before, and after, the project:



The housing association was able to refurbish the existing 112 homes to Decent Homes standard, with increased levels of insulation to achieve the EcoHomes "Very Good" Standard.

2 - Space wasted by car parking

Councils across London are building new homes on underused car parking spaces, especially on council estates. But at the same time they're providing new spaces elsewhere.

A startling fact about car parking was tucked away in the transport background paper to the Mayor's draft Infrastructure Plan. If car ownership levels remain the same as today, and the population continues to grow as projected, we will need car parking spaces equivalent to Richmond Park.

That isn't just a recipe for congestion and pollution. It's also a huge waste of space.

If all of those parking spaces were at ground level, they would take up space that could otherwise be used to build another 100,000 homes.

Current car parking standards are very unevenly applied across London. One study suggested that in outer London, the number of spaces per new home varied from 0.37 in Sutton to 1.26 in Bromley³. Over the past three years, that would suggest around 24,000 new car parking spaces being provided, taking up land that could have provided another 4,300 homes.

If all those outer London boroughs attain the same standards as Sutton, they could build another 7,200 homes over the next decade.

Here are my estimates for the best and worst three boroughs in London:

Borough	New homes built	New parking spaces	Spaces per home
Kingston	752	278	0.37
Sutton	1,173	434	0.37
Waltham Forest	1,465	615	0.42

Bromley	1,867	2,352	1.26
Hillingdon	3,370	3,167	0.94
Barnet	3,743	3,968	1.06

The Mayor now wants to further relax these parking standards, allowing more generous car parking provision in areas with the lowest public transport accessibility⁴.

The rationale sounds reasonable, but with land for housing at such a premium – not to mention the congestion and pollution it could cause – a much better course of action would be to improve public transport, walking and cycling and to toughen up the parking standards.

One example of reducing car parking in outer London is BedZED, the zero carbon housing development in Hackbridge, part of the London Borough of Sutton.



Here, the parking guidelines at the time it was built proposed 1.5 spaces per home, but the design team and developers opted to provide less than one space per home. The site was then laid out to prioritise walking and cycling, with a bus stop and train station nearby, and London's first car club was established.

These all gave residents alternatives to private cars, and as a result residents drive 64 per cent less than the local average.

The lower provision of car parking also freed up space for more homes, which in turn improved the financial viability of the development⁵.

3 - Small sites

The GLA currently estimates the scope for development on small sites based on trends, and estimates there is scope to provide 106,476 homes over the next decade⁶. In boroughs as different as Bromley and Islington they provide over half the new homes.

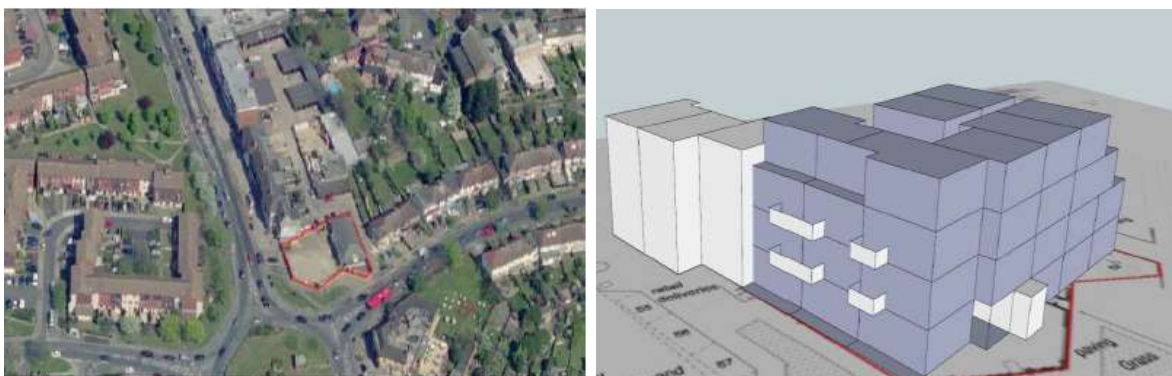
The Mayor could get far more out of small sites by helping small developers and community groups try out innovative approaches.

For example, Lewisham Council sold some very hard-to-develop small sites to tenants on the council waiting list to build their own homes, with training and support. Starting in 1979, residents built twenty seven homes with gardens at very low costs.



Unfortunately, the land was gifted to the self-builders and the homes are now sold on the open market at very high profits. Public land needs to be held in Community Land Trusts to keep the benefits for the local community today and in the future, rather than private profit.

Small developers are looking to make better use of small sites, delivering more homes while meeting London's rigorous space standards through clever design. In this proposal by Mix Developments, 35 flats were proposed for a site where planners had allowed for just 15:



Larger sites can also be subdivided into smaller plots to unleash this creative potential.

The Mayor could work more closely with innovative developers and the Federation of Master Builders to make more of small sites in London.

4 - Community-led estate regeneration

The Government and the Mayor, along with a growing number of independent think tanks and commentators, are suggesting that London's housing estates should be redeveloped to provide more homes. Some even imply that these sites are effectively brownfield – an offensive suggestion that is bound to put the existing residents on the defensive.

We must start treating council estates as what they are – places full of people, families, neighbours, playgrounds, trees, memories. Too many politicians and officers focus instead on assets and investors, net present value and optimal densities.

This isn't just a moral case. Having spoken to and helped a lot of tenants groups, I think there is also scope to get many more homes built in London if we work together with communities and let them take the lead on estate regeneration.

The Andover Estate is a good example. It currently provides 1,064 council homes in Finsbury Park, and is the largest council estate in the poorest ward in Islington. It suffers all the problems used to justify regeneration – high unemployment and crime, overcrowding and disrepair.

But in 2011, the tenants and residents association and their active community centre, the Finsbury Park Community Hub, set out to develop their own community-led plan to regenerate the estate.

They set-up the Andover Future Forum, held six consultation events involving hundreds of residents and other local stakeholders, and worked with council officers and professionals including C2O futureplanners, Annie Lennox Landscape Architecture and Studio RS Architecture.



After two years of work, they published an award-winning masterplan called the Andover Estate Development Plan. Their plan would create 15 more usable communal gardens, three new linear parks, twice the capacity in the nursery and community centre, new youth and health centres, a training café and an urban farm. Among all of these, they found space for over 140 new homes⁷.

That's a five-fold increase on the original plans laid out by Islington Council.

Community involvement and leadership was instrumental in helping to identify the space for this remarkable list of new homes and facilities. As Stephen Hill of C2O futureplanners said, "residents know there are bits that simply don't work. You would have to be quite a remarkable surveyor or architect to pick that up."⁸ Plans such as those below were grounded in the lived experience of residents, and were better for it.



The process also meant that the solution to the crime and anti-social behaviour was grounded in the experience of those who know the estate best. Instead of demolishing the estate in the hope that new buildings would solve deep-seated problems, the residents were able to tweak the layout – for example, by improving the natural surveillance by adding windows and balconies to the blind gables overlooking squares.⁹

Sadly, in this case, Islington Council later took over the plans for the estate and side-lined the community, reverting to the standard approach of a council-led regeneration project with residents involved through consultation¹⁰.

This isn't an isolated case. In Southwark, a resident-led process run by the Leathermarket Community Benefits Society has developed plans for 27 new homes on land currently taken up by underused garages¹¹.



Most Londoners want new homes and don't necessarily object to building new homes in their neighbourhood if you give them control over their local area.

5 - Bringing it all together – a People's Land Commission

The Mayor and the Government have launched the London Land Commission, tasked with identifying public sector brownfield land that could be used to build homes¹². This is welcome, but it is unlikely to explore the opportunities I have outlined – to build up on existing buildings, avoid wasteful car parking, make the most of small sites and let communities take the lead on estate regeneration. By working with big developers, who build expensive homes that are mostly sold to investors, he is also undermining public support for new housing.

I think the Mayor should launch a People's Land Commission, working together with communities to find opportunities and gain consent for new homes.

In a deprived neighbourhood of Philadelphia, the local community did just this. They were fed up with the scattered vacant plots left behind by de-industrialisation, and launched a campaign called Take Back Vacant Land. With outside support and a lot of community organising they mapped vacant plots in their neighbourhood, finding 35 hectares of land which – developed to the sort of densities supported by the London Plan – could provide space for at least 3,500 new homes. They also mapped out power – the landowners, their connections with local politicians, and the record of those politicians in promoting new housing¹³.

They used this to run a successful campaign for the city authorities to establish a new Land Bank, charged with buying up plots of land and transferring a significant number to neighbourhood Community Land Trusts for affordable housing.

The Mayor could bring this model to London, establishing a People's Land Commission with membership drawn from City Hall, the London boroughs, community and civil society organisations, professional bodies and private sector developers.

The Commission would support local communities in organising Citizens' Land Watch Panels, or perhaps supporting existing Neighbourhood Forums and Tenants and Residents Associations. They would undertake audits of potential development sites, charged with exploring innovative ideas such as those in this report. Like the custom and community build programmes, this would take up-front investment to build capacity. But in the long run, it would bear fruit.

Local people, with help to organise their community and with professional input, are best placed to spot the opportunities. They will yield far more potential for new housing, and far more support from local residents, than the Mayor can hope to achieve with his top-down London Land Commission.

Stephen Hill has set this proposal out with a more detailed institutional framework to ensure that this leads to development for the common good, rather than the private good of developers and investors¹⁴.

I put the idea to the Mayor in March, and he promised to explore the role that community organisations could play in his London Land Commission¹⁵. I hope this report shows the significant potential to build more homes if he fully adopts the proposal.

What do you think?

This report sets out five ideas for the Mayor to increase housing supply in an environmentally and socially sustainable way.

If you have any thoughts on this report or on solving London's housing problems, get in touch.

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