

CENTRE FOR LONDON

Public planning – a manifesto for London

London needs to better involve the public in
planning – this is what the next Mayor can do.



The need for change

As London approaches a mayoral election, all the candidates agree on one thing: London needs to continue building. We need more affordable homes, and we need to remodel and regenerate our high streets, town centres, homes and workspaces as our working, shopping and eating habits change, if we are going to become a fair, green, thriving city.

But planning the changes that our city needs cannot be done without overhauling public participation. Too many Londoners feel shut out from the process of urban change, and too many new developments fail to properly involve local people. The result is an erosion of trust, and new buildings and places that could be so much better.

The London Plan has the potential to galvanise and support effective community involvement and so create a better city, but the next Mayor must do more to put these ideas into action. This manifesto proposes five ways for them to do that.

1. Demonstrate leadership and champion democracy

How: Publish a draft Mayoral Statement of Community Involvement that builds on the strong ideas in the current London Plan and is itself subject to the exemplary public involvement that it embodies, and establish Mayoral Community Advocates who can support public involvement at every stage of the process.

Why: Having a say in how our areas look, feel and operate is a democratic right, and must be upheld even more so for people who currently feel cut off from decision making. There are excellent intentions in the London Plan, but they must be given proper weight, and more work is needed to put them into action.

2. Fund and build skills

How: Provide funds for a multidisciplinary training programme for local authority officers, councillors and community champions to ensure they work effectively with local people to develop and enhance plans. Establish support funds for community organisations alongside the resourcing of local authorities.

Why: Effective, collaborative engagement that is consistent across all of London requires time and resources. It's hard for local authorities to do this with their current funding and staffing.

3. Establish a knowledge base

How: Commit to regularly reviewed and updated place-based audits and engagement processes that value and understand what already exists. These should be carried out with local people so there is local knowledge and experience at their core.

Why: Local people, organisations and businesses understand the richness and potential of their areas. Their knowledge provides a valuable baseline for positive change: engagement should build on this existing knowledge rather than trying to recreate it.

4. Create incentives

How: Develop and launch an accreditation scheme for London local planning authorities and developers that sets standards and recognises and rewards good public and community engagement, similar to the Good Work Standard.

Why: Establishing benchmarks with what good public and community engagement in planning looks like promotes best practice, provides an incentive for developers to deliver – and fund – good community engagement and supports long-term stewardship.

5. Provide scrutiny

How: Setup a scorecard to help London's councillors assess the quality of community engagement in applications presented to them at planning committees.

Why: Rebuilding trust between communities, local authorities and developers requires greater openness. Supporting good and transparent decision making is an important part of this.

→ Chelsea Barracks – Hub (2015)



© Soundings

↘ Grand Union Housing - on-line community workshop (2019)



© Soundings

The case for better public involvement in planning

Londoners need to play more of a role in shaping decisions on local planning, development and regeneration. London is already doing well with engagement in some respects: it has a vital and engaged civil society, boroughs often have good connections with their citizens, and the city has become a centre for innovation in new, often digital, methods of engagement. Mayoral initiatives like estate ballots and the Talk London engagement platform have worked well, as has neighbourhood planning in some parts of the city. But we need to go much further. Public trust in developers and local authorities proposing new developments is very low, and too many people feel that public engagement is tokenistic or mechanistic and one way: done to them but not done with them. If people think that new engagement is more of the same, it may reduce trust even more. We also need to do more to learn from what has gone well in London and other places.

Better engagement is important because:

- It **improves the quality of what gets built**. Local people hold the knowledge about their community, how new development and regeneration will affect their local area and how it can support their needs and aspirations. In the best examples, local peoples' skills and knowledge informs, complements and builds on the professional skills and knowledge of developers, architects and planners.
- Positive, early and ongoing engagement can **increase the quantity of housing** that gets built, because it builds trust and transparency and so helps move the discussion between residents, developers and public bodies from being negative and oppositional to being problem-solving and collaborative.
- Having a say in how our areas look, feel and operate is a **democratic right**. Voting in elections is part of democracy, but the evolution of our neighbourhoods doesn't work on a four or five-year election cycle: it needs the ongoing, long-term involvement of broadly based, diverse and representative dedicated civil society groups and active citizens, coupled with inclusive reaching out to people whose voices are seldom valued.

- Being involved in decision making **boosts wellbeing, motivation and a sense of agency**, through people feeling more in control and more connected to their local areas, most importantly for people who currently feel cut off from decision making.

The pandemic has shown us how much Londoners want to help each other, to work together to solve problems, and to come up with new ideas. We must build on this demonstration of community spirit as the city recovers and we plan for a better future.

This manifesto was developed by Centre for London in partnership with ftwork and collaborating and building on the work of [Collective Community Action \(CCA\)](#). It is based on input from an advisory group, expert interviews, and a literature and case studies review. Our advisory group included people from community groups, local government, architectural practices, developers and academia.

For more detail on why we chose these recommendations and for a detailed list of sources and case studies, please visit [Centre for London's website](#).



© Soundings

✘ Brixton Town Centre Planning – Community Liaison Group (co-design session) (2011)

✘ Brixton Town Centre Planning – Workshop (2011)



© Soundings

The Mayoral Statement of Community Involvement

In their first six months in office we are calling on the Mayor to publish a Statement of Community Involvement, which is co-produced with Londoners and builds on the strong ideas in the London Plan. It should include:

- Committing to the principles that public and community participation in planning in London should be informed, early, sustained, diverse, transparent and supported;
- Demonstrating how these will be put into action for the assets and buildings that the Mayor controls, as well as in the planning policies that they set in the next London Plan;
- Saying what they believe good community development looks like, as a step to developing an accreditation scheme;
- Recommending innovative and achievable ways for local authorities and developers to put these principles into action in their own work.

For more proposals on the content of a Mayoral Statement of Community Involvement, see the [statement by Collective Community Action](#).

Principles for involving Londoners in planning

Research and case studies tell us that the most effective engagement is *informed, early, sustained, diverse, transparent and supported*. These principles should be at the core of the Mayor's work to promote a fairer and more participatory system.

- **Informed:** all public engagement should start with a thorough understanding of what has already happened in that area, and who is already involved. This avoids the risk of circular and repetitive discussions, which are frustrating for residents and slow down decision making. People working on public engagement should also be well informed about what has worked in other areas, so this can guide their work. Fulfilling the London Plan's policy to build strong and inclusive communities requires a commitment to ongoing **'place-based audits'** so that all involved in building and regeneration can access open-sourced data regularly to catalyse ideas, and not just respond to already proposed projects. **Scorecards** will help councillors on planning committees to make better decisions about the proposals put to them.

- **Early:** the sooner engagement in planning begins the better. This should start with extensive public participation in the development of the London Plan, Borough Local Plans, neighbourhood plans and planning of major developments. This should include engaging with people face to face, through established forums and online, depending on the needs and preferences of different groups.
- **Sustained:** engagement doesn't work if it's regarded as a one-off event rather than a continuing process, and not keeping people informed erodes trust. This is particularly important where plans need to be revised, or where individual cases arise that can't easily be determined by agreed planning frameworks and principles, or that deviate from them for one reason or another. It's also important that local authorities and local residents get the chance to assess developments when they have been built, to see what could be done better next time.

- **Diverse:** there is no such thing as a “typical” Londoner and there can be no one-size-fits-all approach to engagement. Politicians, planners and developers need to understand the communities who will be affected by a new development (not just those who live there) and actively engage with all the key groups. Engagement should involve a range of ways to be involved, both face to face and online. Face to face meetings should be held at different times to suit people of all ages, with childcare provided or paid for. Engaging young people should be a particular priority. When citizens dedicate significant time to a particular process they should be paid and offered training if they want it.
- **Transparent:** people will only trust a process and be happy with its outcome where it is fair and transparent. Yet our planning system is highly complex and often technical and opaque. Local authorities and developers must be open about funding and business models underpinning development (as well as the costs and benefits of development). They should also ensure that technical planning documents use accessible language or are summarised in accessible language, so that they can be understood by citizens as well as qualified professionals. Viability reports, which set out the basis on which developers and local authorities agree affordable housing and other contributions to local amenities, must be made publicly available early in the process. An **accreditation scheme** could reward developers who do engagement well.
- **Supported:** effective engagement requires time and money, to cover local authority staff time, citizens’ involvement time, the costs of online and face to face engagement as well as supporting and facilitating community groups, and training and capacity building. This has been a particular challenge for neighbourhood planning processes in less wealthy areas, which often struggle to receive the support they need. Delivering a London-specific **multidisciplinary training and support programme** – alongside improved skills training for developers, architects and other built environment professionals – will help make engagement as effective and consistent as it should be.