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A spatial strategy for London

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Synopsis

In January this year, I addressed a lively and well-attended GIS conference at Romney House. It was at the time when we were finalising *Towards the London Plan* (the proposals draft of the Spatial Development Strategy) and the Mayor's Transport and Economic Development Strategies were both out for consultation.

I briefly outlined how GIS can contribute to London's new strategic and accountable government by making the horizontal linkages between different strategies, the vertical linkages between different levels of planning (from neighbourhood to borough to GLA and to government) and the management and monitoring of strategy implementation.

GIS also has a role in extending democracy and promoting social inclusion by providing a range of consistent and accessible, area-based data, so communities can take an active part in planning the future of their neighbourhoods, while having access to the bigger picture.

Time has moved on. We have now published *Towards the London Plan*. It begins by analysing London's strengths. London is one of three genuine "world cities", with a population and GDP similar to Switzerland's, the dominant city in North West Europe and a major player in globalised business and financial services. It is a city of great ethnic and cultural diversity, of artistic and academic excellence, a hub of telecommunications and of air transport but also a city of distinct neighbourhoods.

It then goes on to look at the global and more local forces that are driving change. London's world city economy has been booming for nearly a decade. As a consequence, overall wealth is increasing and, at the same time, London's population is growing rapidly. From a low of 6.8m in 1983 to 7.4m now, it is projected to rise to 8.1m by 2016. Therefore, London is subject to powerful demand pressures. This has coincided with no government or voice for London and for fifteen years there has been no co-ordinated supply-side response. The net result is a ramshackle public transport system, traffic congestion, acute shortages of office space and housing, leading to rapid price increases, a decline in environmental quality and a waste of natural resources.

Above all, London is a divided city. Despite a buoyant economy, it has increasing disparities of wealth and opportunity. Huge areas of inner and east London suffer multiple deprivation - high unemployment, poor housing and health care, low educational achievement and a neglected townscape.

Towards the London Plan sets out the policy framework which leads to an overarching vision "to make London an exemplary, sustainable world city" and examines a number of options to realise this. However, only one is consistent with the vision – to meet London's economic, population and household growth, as far as possible, within Greater London in sustainable patterns of development. This means facilitating the continued expansion of the globalised activities, providing many more homes, 50% of them affordable, regenerating local economies and, especially, focusing investment and development towards east London, while improving environmental productivity in respect of energy, waste and water.

One of the key initiatives to achieve these objectives is to integrate development opportunities with the 20-year long-term programme of investment in public transport, heralded by the Mayor's Transport Strategy.

Better tube and bus services, rail improvements including Orbirail and the three major new rail projects (Thameslink 2000, Crossrail and the South West to Hackney lines) and river crossings together with DLR extension and new tram networks will increase the accessibility of a wide range of locations, focused around good transport interchanges.

This greatly improved public transport system opens up for development or redevelopment sites varying in size, accessibility and availability - from huge sites like the Stratford railway lands to small opportunities in or close to town centres all over London. In these locations, development will be at higher densities, dependent on the capacity of public transport. Appropriate to size and location, they will combine a mix of housing types and tenures and a mix of uses, including offices and work-spaces, shops, leisure facilities and, on larger sites, services such as schools and health care as well as open space.

All I said about GIS in January is brought into high relief by the evolving London Plan and how it will be implemented, which I will say more about in my speech. The Strategy for London's future will only succeed if the key players co-operate and work on the basis of common and comprehensive area data. In the first instance, this is vital for the GLA and its family. The GLA is the strategic planning authority. TfL will control or influence most of the transport investment in London. The LDA deals with regeneration, training and has powers to acquire and dispose of land.

The 33 London boroughs are key partners, as local planning, housing and regeneration authorities. But the private sector has both the resources and the development expertise, while London's community and voluntary sectors must be engaged. All need to work together with a shared understanding of the issues and problems facing different parts of London and how those parts interact, if the Plan is to work on the ground.

GIS is crucial, not just for the London Plan but for other strategies, Borough Community Strategies and for the investment plans of other public and private organisations. The case for a geographic information system, which is common or compatible for the GLA and its family, for the boroughs and for other stakeholders is overwhelming. The GLA, as London's elected strategic authority, has a responsibility to take the lead in developing a GI strategy.

A GI strategy for London must be policy-led, driven by a policy group which brings together the key partners at a senior level. Its should be responsible for setting priorities and objectives, encouraging partnerships and data sharing, monitoring and reviewing progress and raising awareness. This group should steer a small, highly competent technical team, providing the management expertise. It should draw up the action plan, ratify data interchange standards and procedures, set up data working groups (eg. on social exclusion, crime, neighbourhoods, health, housing, the environment, democracy) and report on progress to the policy group.

Work needs to start in earnest on the London GI strategy. I will be putting proposals to the Mayor in the next month or so to initiate the process.