

applying polycentricity to the new london plan

Corinne Swain looks at the relevance of the concept of polycentric development for planning for London – at national, regional and within-London scales

The idea of polycentric development has been likened to a Russian doll, in that it can be unpacked and replicated at different scales.¹ This article explores the relevance of the concept at three such scales, in the hope of providing some insights to inform the forthcoming full review of the London Plan.

Polycentric development is a spatial concept with an underlying economic objective. As a policy stance it implies promoting growth in a number of centres in order to encourage more equal growth across an area, as opposed to its concentration in one central area or city. As a descriptive term it refers to a number of places within a network which work together to create a critical mass utilising good transport links, digital connections, and joint working. Polycentric development was an underpinning theme of the European Spatial Development Perspective (produced in 1999), but has only intermittently influenced planning frameworks in the UK.

London's relationship with other UK cities

Peeling back the outer layer of the Russian doll reveals the primacy of London, where none of the other major cities apart from Bristol achieves above-national-average levels of productivity (GVA per worker). Current devolution deals, welcome though these are, focus attention on the functioning of individual city-regions, rather than seeing these major cities as nodes within a national network. The one exception to this is the promotion of the

'Northern Powerhouse', in part through improving physical transport links between its major cities. It is notable, however, that there is no forum in which a comparative evaluation could be made between a step-change in investment to increase the North's economic competitiveness against varying levels of continued investment in London – certainly the initial remit of the National Infrastructure Commission presupposed that both would be required.

Interest in the UK system of cities, and whether there is a legitimate role for national government in managing this system of cities, was one of the ideas explored through the recently completed 'Future of Cities' Foresight project led by the Government Office for Science.² By using hypothetical scenarios and a range of futures-based interactive workshops, a safe space was created to imagine what life might be like in both London and other cities if demographic and economic trends were shifted in a different direction to the current trajectory. The type of policies and funding decisions that would be necessary to create a more regionally balanced system of cities has also been explored in a recent TCPA study report.³

There would be real benefit in considering a wider range of scenarios for London's growth in preparing the next London Plan. City Hall has previously been loath to do this, arguing that any growth lost to London would benefit comparable 'world cities' rather than core cities within the UK. Instead, the

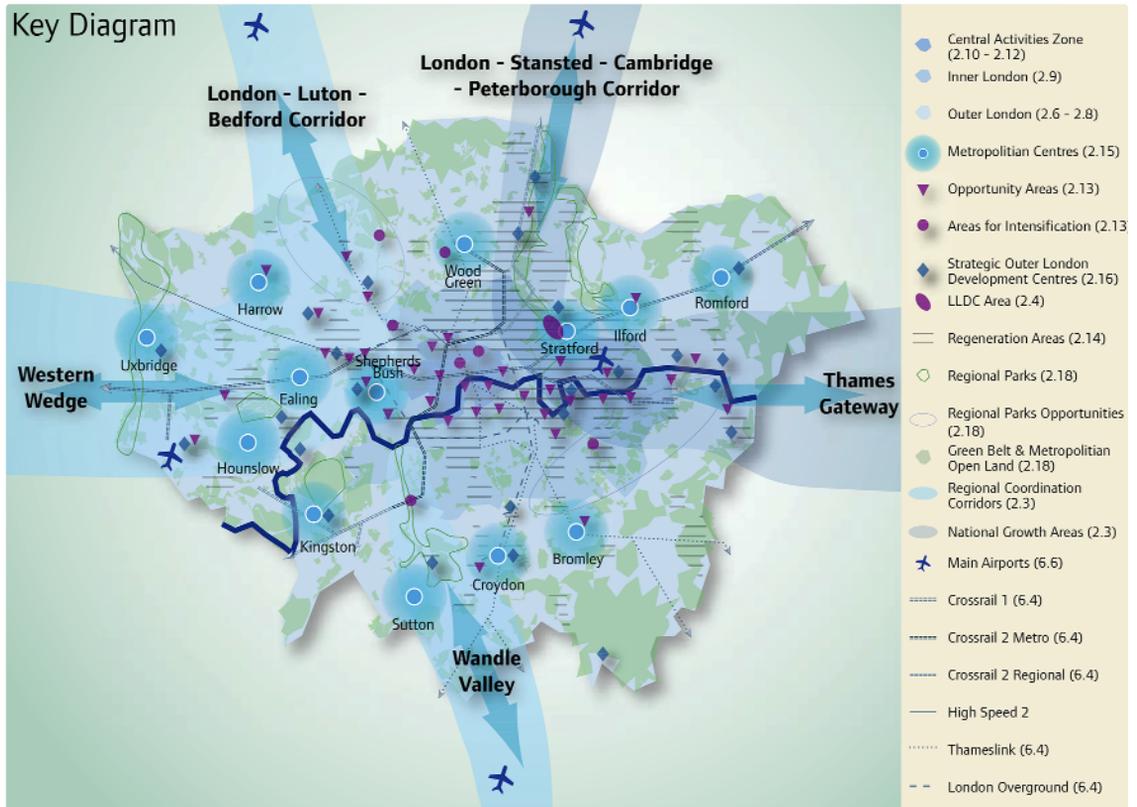


Fig. 1 The Key Diagram depicting the spatial strategy of the London Plan 2015 (incorporating minor alterations in 2015 and 2016)

Source: *The London Plan*⁴ - Chapter 2: 'London's places'

Greater London Authority (GLA) has relied on numerical projections within a relatively narrow band, despite a nod to London playing 'a distinctive and supportive role in the UK's network of cities' in London Plan Policy 2.1: 'London in its global, European and United Kingdom context'.⁴

But there is something of a self-fulfilling prophecy about the way that trend projections so strongly influence the local planning system, particularly in terms of setting new housing targets. The latest Office for National Statistics (ONS) sub-national population projections continue to anticipate that towards 60% of England's population growth over the next ten years will occur in London and its immediate hinterland.⁵ Perhaps the shock of Brexit will prompt the consideration of a wider range of scenarios in preparing the next London Plan?

London and its hinterland

The second layer of the Russian doll involves unpacking London's relationship with the wider metropolitan area. In terms of its settlement structure, the Wider South East looks quite the opposite of polycentric development, with its dense, largely radial rail network binding an array of small cities and towns into London. Yet there are

many interconnections between businesses within this large area, termed 'functional polycentricity' in the EU-funded 'Polynet' study⁶ led by the late Professor Sir Peter Hall and Dr Kathy Pain in the mid-2000s.

Current policy interest is focusing on growth co-ordination corridors radiating outwards from London. This concept has its origin in the first London Plan (of 2004), with four such corridors identified. They have featured on successive London Plan 'Key Diagrams' since, and indeed a fifth corridor was added to the 2011 replacement London Plan (see Fig. 1). For much of this time, their meaning has been left for local interpretation, with the idea being embraced more actively by some than by others. In particular the Croydon-Gatwick Diamond-Brighton corridor (termed the Wandle Valley in the London Plan) has been enthusiastically supported by the South London Partnership and the relevant Local Enterprise Partnerships outside London.

The new Mayor can be expected to take a keen interest in these growth co-ordination corridors. But to be attractive to Home Counties districts such proposals must have a realistic chance of bringing additional employment opportunities, rather than being seen as a stalking horse for further residential

growth to support the London labour market. Current best practice is perhaps represented in the London-Stansted-Cambridge corridor, where there is the prospect of major infrastructure investment through Crossrail 2, offering not only more rail capacity into the Central London office markets, but also opportunities to widen the available labour pool for growth sectors in the corridor, particularly in Cambridge. A voluntary collaboration of local authorities and other stakeholders (the London-Stansted-Cambridge Consortium) has been working together to maximise the economic potential of this and associated infrastructure investment. This may provide a role model for future collaborative initiatives in other corridors.

'A full review of the London Plan offers the opportunity to provide stronger policy backing for growth co-ordination corridors... there has not been a clear rationale for the corridors, or a statement on what it is hoped each will achieve'

A full review of the London Plan offers the opportunity to provide stronger policy backing for growth co-ordination corridors. Apart from brief references in previous London Plans, either in the relevant sub-regional policy or as part of the general spatial strategy, there has not been a clear rationale for the corridors, or a statement on what it is hoped each will achieve. Indeed, setting this out, perhaps in the form of a sub-regional narrative sitting alongside the London Plan, would sense-check whether each of the corridors is still justified. Certainly there was confusion in the Examination in Public of the South East Plan (the Regional Spatial Strategy for the South East) in 2006/07 as to what economic linkages could be strengthened along the London-Luton-Bedford corridor.

However, it would be wrong to think that employment-led corridor growth is only applicable if it stops or starts in London. The Polynet study found that business interconnections, independent of London, were particularly strong between businesses in a north-west arc running between Reading and Cambridge. Interest in the Oxford-Milton Keynes-Cambridge arc was initially promoted in the Regional Development Agency era, and has been kept alive by the South East Midlands Local Enterprise

Partnership and others in bringing forward East West Rail. Other city linkages were set out in the South East Plan as part of its 'hub and spoke' strategy.

While London can justifiably promote an interest in growth and co-ordination corridors stopping and starting in its area, there are no local governance mechanisms at present for considering other strategic corridors in the Wider South East. It is therefore encouraging that the National Infrastructure Commission was asked by the then Chancellor George Osborne to examine the potential of the Cambridge-Milton Keynes-Oxford corridor to act as a knowledge-intense cluster and to identify long-term infrastructure priorities to unlock growth, jobs and housing.⁷ Interestingly, the remit includes advising on institutions to strengthen governance across the corridor.

Planning within London

The final layer of the Russian doll is to consider whether the polycentricity concept could usefully be applied *within* London. The London Plan, certainly under the first Mayorality, had a very strong focus on the Central Activities Zone. This philosophy still remains strong, not least because of the prevailing emphasis on agglomeration economies.

There are several forces of inertia that explain why this Central London focus has persisted. These include the lobbying muscle of Central London business interests; the implicit support of both Westminster and Whitehall functions which have continually resisted decentralisation; the emphasis on Opportunity Areas in which the family of Mayoral bodies invest most time and resources, being concentrated in Central and Inner London; and the reliance on trend-based employment projections.

One counter-voice has been through the Outer London Commission, championing a greater role for the suburbs. Indeed, in its first-round report⁸ the Commission considered the idea of creating four 'super-hubs' which would have wider sub-regional reach, capable of accommodating functions at sufficiently high densities to justify new public transport. For various reasons this particular concept was not taken forward, but a suite of new policies was included in the replacement London Plan of 2011, including measures to stimulate the economy, regenerate town centres, and promote Outer London strategic development areas.

Despite attempts to densify selected centres and active planning on others, it is questionable what progress has really been achieved towards shaping a more polycentric city. Indeed, the plot of employment densities in Fig. 2 reveals just how concentrated employment is in the Central Activities Zone, with only a few metropolitan town centres featuring outside.

There are clearly big challenges to creating stronger employment centres in Outer London

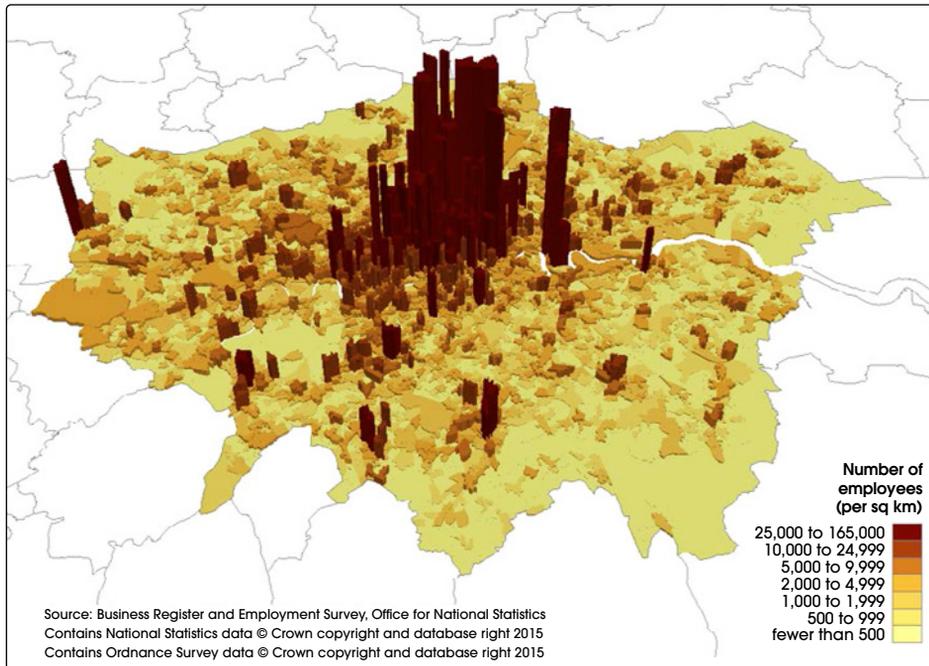


Fig. 2 Employment densities across London, 2013

Source: GLA draft employment evidence database 2016, drawn from the Business Register and Employment Survey, Office for National Statistics, in *Outer London Commission. Seventh Report: Accommodating London's Growth*. Outer London Commission, Mar. 2016.

www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/olc_accommodating_growth_main_report_fixed.pdf

given the weak demand for suburban offices, competition from multi-channel retail, and piecemeal office-to-residential conversions under permitted development freedoms. Yet some of the better-connected centres are currently undergoing major reconfiguration, such as at Croydon, or redevelopment at higher density, such as at Hammersmith, and others may benefit from new

But fostering polycentric development is not just about recognising the potential of Outer London; it is also about recognising where the GLA family is trying to create new employment centres, most noticeably at Old Oak Common and Park Royal to maximise the new accessibility created at the intersection between Crossrail 1 and HS2.

The London Plan Key Diagram gives a very diluted view of where major change is envisaged, by indicating all Opportunity Areas throughout London and metropolitan town centres in Outer London. But it is clear that the 38 Opportunity Areas, which largely signify land availability, are not equally attractive to employment growth sectors, particularly private business services. It is also clear that the current policy thrust in Outer London is to increase residential densities in town centres, without distinguishing those that may have above-average prospects for employment growth.

There would therefore be advantages in adopting an explicit policy principle to promote polycentric development in the new London Plan, and the Key Diagram should reflect this. This could then more readily inform infrastructure investment decisions under both Local Enterprise Partnership and Transport for London growth funds. A greater recognition of the need for improved orbital movement⁹ may well be necessary to achieve this.

‘There would be advantages in adopting an explicit policy principle to promote polycentric development in the new London Plan, and the Key Diagram should reflect this’

public transport infrastructure, for example Ealing from Crossrail 1. With proactive London borough planning, skills support from the GLA where necessary (for example on Compulsory Purchase Order procedures), and consolidation of modern office space into fewer locations, there may well be scope to strengthen the economy of some of these town centres.

Conclusions

In the current climate of demographic and housing pressures, there is a tendency for planning discussions to be dominated by where new residential development should be located. Exploring the polycentricity concept refocuses our attention onto economic drivers.

This is not just about abstract spatial constructs. Adopting such a strategy within London would provide a greater choice of employment locations and premises for growth sectors, including in the cultural and high-tech industries, and for business services where Central London rents may become prohibitive if growth pressures persist. It could reduce overall commuting journeys. Outside London it could contribute to networks of cities working together to achieve greater critical mass.

The GLA family have several tools at their disposal to further such concepts even beyond the GLA's own boundaries. These include using Transport for London's financial and strategic planning muscle to assist employment-led growth corridors between London and the Wider South East; sharing knowledge with those core cities preparing to work under a mayoralty; and more broadly helping to devise evaluation systems to capture a wider range of transformative benefits from major infrastructure investment.¹⁰

For all these reasons the preparation of the London Plan must be seen in a broader context than simply updating existing policies for the management of development within London itself. Adopting an explicit objective to pursue polycentric development would be a good starting point.

● **Corinne Swain** is an Arup Fellow, and a member of the former Outer London Commission. The views expressed are personal.

Notes

- 1 C. Haig and K. Kirk: *Polycentricity Scoping Study*. Heriot-Watt University, for the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, Mar. 2003. <http://archive.northsearegion.eu/files/user/File/Events/Thematic%20Events/Polycentric%20Seminar/ScopingPoly.pdf>
- 2 *Future of Cities: Foresight for Cities. A Resource for Policy-Makers*. Foresight Project. Government Office for Science, Apr. 2016. www.gov.uk/government/publications/future-of-cities-foresight-for-cities
- 3 *Cities Are Crucial. Four Scenarios for a 21st Century Urban Policy*. Report of the TCPA Urban Policy Study Group. Town & Country Planning Tomorrow Series Paper 18, Jul. 2016 (published in *Town & Country Planning*, 2016, Vol. 85, Jul.). www.tcpa.org.uk
- 4 *The London Plan: The Spatial Development Strategy for London Consolidated with Alterations since 2011*. Greater London Authority, Mar. 2016. www.london.gov.uk/what-we-do/planning/london-plan/current-london-plan/
- 5 By calculation from *Subnational Population Projections for England: 2014-Based Projections*. ONS Statistical

- Bulletin, May 2016, Table 1. [www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationprojections/bulletins/subnationalpopulationprojectionsforengland/2014basedprojections-the-figure\(59.5%\)refers-to-london-and-the-former-south-east-and-east-regions](http://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationprojections/bulletins/subnationalpopulationprojectionsforengland/2014basedprojections-the-figure(59.5%)refers-to-london-and-the-former-south-east-and-east-regions)
- 6 P. Hall and K. Pain (Eds): *The Polycentric Metropolis: Learning from Mega-City Regions in Europe*. Earthscan, 2006. www.strategvest.ro/media/dms/file/Resurse/The%20Polycentric%20Metropolis%202006.pdf
- 7 Letter from the Chancellor of the Exchequer to the Chair of the National Infrastructure Commission, 16 Mar. 2016. www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/508109/DOC150316-15032016124609.pdf
- 8 *The Mayor's Outer London Commission: Report*. Greater London Authority, Jun. 2010. www.westlondon.com/assets/olc-final-report-june-2010.pdf
- 9 See Nick Falk's article in this issue: N. Falk: 'Achieving smarter growth in London and the South East'. *Town & Country Planning*, 2016, Vol. 85, Aug., 312-6
- 10 See, for example, *Crossrail 2: Regional and National Benefits*. Mayor of London, Network Rail, and Transport for London, Sept. 2015. https://consultations.tfl.gov.uk/crossrail2/october2015/user_uploads/g8.pdf