

# A FRAMEWORK FOR HOUSING IN THE LONDON THAMES GATEWAY

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# Executive summary

The London Thames Gateway, directly to the east of the City of London along the Thames Estuary, has a growing supply of brown field sites and potential capacity for hundreds of thousands of additional homes and work spaces. These homes could relieve the wider housing pressures of London and the south east, as long as there is major investment in essential infrastructure and reinstatement of the damaged environment of old industrial areas.

Many existing communities of the Gateway need reinvestment, regeneration and densification if they are to recover from decades of decline. Adding private housing, intermediate and low cost affordable housing would help existing communities recover as well as offering essential homes to new residents.

Our report sets out a framework for delivering new and renovated housing in an integrated and sustainable way. Volume one presents our framework; volume two explores the six elements of the framework in more detail; and volume three brings together supporting documentation gathered during the study.

This report outlines an overall approach for providing housing in the Thames Gateway. While the study is not a definitive housing strategy, it creates a structure which can support locally driven strategies within which different actors can operate. We draw on existing studies and documentation, as well as site visits to all of the ten London local authorities involved; meetings and workshops with all the main actors, including developers, government and community bodies; and active engagement with the issues and problems at the level of practical delivery as well as policy making over many years.<sup>1</sup> The six essential elements of our proposed framework are:

- Strategic policy issues;
- Local delivery and leadership;
- Housing supply and demand;
- Stock condition and investment;
- Mixed communities and social infrastructure;
- Physical, environmental and design challenges.

We summarise each in turn.

- The key **strategic issues** are: the need for upfront investment in infrastructure, particularly public transport; environmental remediation; energy, water and waste; social provision and regeneration. Other strategic issues include job growth, regional equity and balance.
- These strategic issues are a key to **successful delivery**. Delivery can only work in small, manageable parcels, with clear local leadership and local delivery vehicles, community support and reinvestment in existing communities. Local authorities, housing associations, developers, funders, and builders must all be active partners in delivery.
- There is no doubt that the **supply of housing** in greater London and the wider region is extremely tight and very expensive, relative to the rest of the country, or to the incomes of many essential workers. But **demand** for housing in the London Thames Gateway is very variable and generally it is the lower demand, poorer part of

London. Yet many local needs are inadequately met and there is often too little choice. Creating more varied tenures and styles, offering choice across borough boundaries and integrating diverse needs are all important. Because households today are remarkably different from a generation or two ago, more ethnically mixed but also smaller with less children, housing demand has changed and so must housing supply to cope with the twin problems of supply for smaller households, and pockets of severe overcrowding concentrated in east London.

- The **existing stock** of the East End – both public and private – is often in need of regeneration. There are many unfit homes, and council estates often require major reinvestment to reach the decent homes standard. The options for attracting funding are limited and Councils are likely to revisit small-scale, partial transfers, working with communities and housing association partners, as investment options through the public purse will be limited. If new developments are fitted within existing housing areas on infill sites, then resources can be generated to upgrade existing housing and environments. Only this way will we prevent the deep polarisation and major segregation of social housing.

- It is now commonplace that new developments should include a **mix of incomes, tenures and uses**. Creating more mixed communities within existing built-up areas is equally important. Crucially, we must avoid the development of large peripheral estates, albeit privately funded, far from transport hubs, shopping centres, schools and other facilities. Such estates are unlikely to attract the mixture of incomes and activities that would generate dynamic, attractive neighbourhoods or create the higher values essential for real regeneration. There are already some examples of this failure in the Thames Gateway. At the same time, integrating ethnic minorities with more traditional communities is key to social cohesion.

- **Designing** attractive new mixed income, mixed use urban areas and regenerating existing communities requires **technical expertise** as well as **design skills**. It requires upfront investment in sound **infrastructure, environmental protection and flood prevention**; financial resources for public transport, the public realm, open spaces, quality schools and health centres; a mix of services and retail at street level; tree planting, play areas, parks and so on. To justify this care and to generate a critical mass of people, planning must allow for sufficient density – an average of 50 homes per hectare in the outer half of the Thames Gateway and more in the London area. A broad mix of housing types will allow enough family homes with gardens and small affordable units for single and childless people to create balanced communities.

Our proposed framework requires the integration of all six elements if it is to support sustainable communities. We look at three alternative scenarios: the first with low housing targets built at low density; the second with moderate housing targets at moderate density; and the third with high housing targets at higher density. These scenarios have different costs, benefits and risks, but overall we conclude that only the more ambitious housing targets, built at higher density under scenario three, will ensure high enough quality, a critical mass of people and services, environmental protection, intensive long-term management of conditions, and sufficient value to generate investment in existing communities and infrastructure.



The high density approach allows homes to be built in phases that respond to market conditions, prioritising infill sites in and around existing areas, only adding more sites as they are needed. If we treat the available land in the Thames Gateway as an irreplaceable asset, and use it with care at urban densities, protecting the precious but undervalued environmental resources, then there is a chance that the East End will share in London's prosperity, and its environment will become its greatest asset.

Over the short term – to 2006 – many developments will not meet our aspirations.

Over the medium term – to 2012 – regeneration, integration, environmental protection, higher density, public transport and more mixed uses will become the norm. Smaller, better designed flats with better managed communal facilities will be more popular and public spaces will be more important.

Over the longer term – to 2030 – the imperatives to save energy, reduce waste, cut water and land use will be so strong that living within our environmental resources – or our 'ecological footprint'<sup>ii</sup> as it is often called – will be regarded as essential.

A longer-term vision makes the high density, high numbers, integrated approach we advocate seem by far the most sustainable and most attractive way forward. If we start off in the right direction now, adopting a sustainable and integrated framework from the outset, then housing and regeneration in the Thames Gateway will build on the strengths of existing communities and compensate environmental damage along the way.

**Our main recommendations are therefore clear:**

- We should not depend on large new schemes, no matter how well planned; rather we should start from existing communities and build out from existing centres using readily available smaller sites, thereby involving and investing in existing communities, as well as expanding supply.
- We **advocate up-front investment in physical and social infrastructure** to support the expanding and more diverse population of the London Thames Gateway, to attract investors and regenerate run-down areas.
- We should **plan for higher density, more mixed use, more integrated communities**, to ensure higher quality, to support social investment and to preserve land. This will help to integrate the London Thames Gateway with the rest of the city and provide much needed affordable housing.
- We should **build and renovate homes to the highest possible eco-standards**, to minimise energy and water use, waste production and environmental impact.
- We should **invest in high quality urban design** to create new value in existing communities, to support high levels of up-front investment in infrastructure and to enhance the environment of neighbourhoods, both new and existing.
- We should **protect and reinstate the natural environment of the Thames estuary**, avoiding as far as possible building on unprotected land and land at risk of tidal or river flooding, making the waterfront and open spaces as accessible, natural and secure as possible.

**In practice this means:**

1. **Existing centres and communities** need significant reinvestment but also offer much needed infrastructure and capacity if upgraded. Intensifying the use of existing areas is vital to their regeneration. By working out from existing town centres, delivery can happen more quickly, more cheaply and more sensitively. It mixes old with new, helps integrate diverse communities, and supports mixed activities and uses. Relaxing industrial zoning restrictions in the post-industrial era will encourage new and remodelled, residential and commercial activities that are crucial to realising the potential of the area.
2. **Upfront investment in major infrastructure** is essential to support a large increase in the number of homes. Public transport improvements, land remediation, social infrastructure all need a major public commitment if investors and prospective residents are to be attracted. Schools, health centres, libraries, leisure facilities, parks and other services are all essential and costly.
3. **Building at moderately high density** – an average of 50 to 100 homes per hectare and more in the inner Gateway – allows potentially much more ambitious building targets, but supports family houses with gardens as well as higher density flats for childless households. It encourages more mixed communities with mixed uses and allows more affordable homes for key workers, funded through market developments.
4. **Aiming for the maximum energy, waste and water use targets** – a 60 per cent reduction across the board – would raise the profile of the London Thames Gateway, creating more sustainable communities and offering innovative models of more carbon-neutral development to London and other main cities in Europe and around the world.
5. Higher density requires **higher quality design, more careful management and attractive public spaces** – supporting an urban renaissance and a more compact city. Therefore density, design and quality go together.
6. **Paying back the environmental damage of the past two centuries** and protecting the natural assets of the river estuary will pay dividends in higher land values where building is allowed, and in flood prevention through soft landscaping, creating a green grid and maximising waterfront access.

A long-term vision and clear framework must be coupled with smaller, more short-term, project-by-project goals that respond to local needs and reflect local character and conditions. Housing needs and housing pressures, community involvement and inter-ethnic understanding must all drive a bottom-up focus on delivery in bite-size chunks.

# Conclusion

Our conclusion is that we must not, but could too easily, squander this opportunity.

The Thames Gateway is a unique area at a unique turning point in its history. As a real gateway to one of the world's great capitals, it has immense potential. There is the opportunity in the London part of the Thames Gateway to achieve many important political, social, economic and environmental goals by treating the areas involved as an invaluable, once-only, asset to be used with utmost care.

We know that housing on its own creates dull dormitory areas, that social housing in isolation from other more popular tenures tends to decay rapidly, and that housing works well where it is linked by fast, efficient transport to job opportunities, leisure and services. In cities this means public transport, because congestion is too great and land too scarce to allow ever more cars. It means mixed uses so that the pre-dominance of modern, service jobs is integrated closely with the need for homes. It means creating more mixed communities so that schools, doctors and public transport serve different income groups and therefore offer more adequate standards, equalising provision across different types of area.

Producing as much new and fully renovated housing as possible through regenerating and densifying existing communities could

meet up to half of the housing need forecast for the London Thames Gateway for the foreseeable future. Such is the regenerative potential of the old industrial communities of the river estuary that there is a real prospect of meeting housing, social, economic and environmental goals together, while conserving land.

Housing is a basic need, close to food and water in being as essential for survival. <sup>ii</sup>How much space we need for increasingly small household units, and what we can afford above basic shelter is a wholly other question. But housing, if it is to work and last, must be fully part of the complex tapestry of urban life. It is this complexity that our framework study sets out to examine. The London Thames Gateway is a great challenge and a great opportunity for London that must be treated as part of the city with all its rich diversity. If properly used, the Thames Gateway could enhance community well-being and social integration.

The framework we propose is based on the knowledge that housing is fundamental to social inclusion, that housing and jobs go hand in hand, and that the natural environment provides the vital support systems within which housing must be made to work.<sup>iv</sup>

**Together they can create a sense of place, prosperity and community.**

<sup>i</sup> See for example *Cities for a Small Country*, 2000, Rogers and Power

<sup>ii</sup> See the *Living Planet Report* by the World Wildlife Fund (2002) and the study of London's ecological footprint by Best Foot Forward (2002)

<sup>iii</sup> UN Habitat (2001) *State of the world's cities*

<sup>iv</sup> DEFRA (currently being revised) *Government Sustainable Development Strategy*

## Disclaimer

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