

A Social-Ecological Spatial Framework for a Viable Greater Manchester.

“Rewriting the spatial framework is our opportunity to plan for sustainable development and shape a Greater Manchester that best meets the needs of local people and our environment, and is not just driven by the needs of developers and a market-led free for all but is an opportunity to secure mutually supportive economic, social and environmental outcomes that benefit people now and long into the future.”

Paul Dennett, Greater Manchester’s lead for housing, planning and homelessness, and City Mayor for Salford¹

The rewritten Greater Manchester Spatial Framework will soon be out (unless the rumours about its delay until the autumn prove to be true). But will the new version address the real problems that the previous version would have merely compounded?

We said this about the GM Spatial Framework, 2016 draft:

*The model of urban development that emerges from the GMSF draft is problematic. It envisages a “regional centre” consisting of flats, offices and shops, dormitory suburbs and warehousing and industrial sites on the periphery, in addition to “Gateway” areas with high concentrations of goods in transit. People will often have to travel long distances to work (for example in the city centre). The plans for renewing local towns (or rather their centres) seem like an afterthought, and there is little on the ecological, social and economic renewal of Greater Manchester's vast swathes of suburbia. Had the Framework started by asking the question, **“What makes for a Viable Community² - socially, environmentally and economically?”**, then a very different Framework might have been the result.*

We weren't the only ones offering a critique of the underlying model: a group of scholars from the University of Manchester said:

When Greater Manchester has been formatted for exclusive growth by the mono-culture of flat building in the centre, the city region needs a policy reset. Instead it has a draft GM Spatial

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https://www.greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk/news/article/288/greater_manchester_publishes_land_available_for_jobs_and_homes

2

The Viable Economy. Manchester: Steady State Manchester, (2014)
<https://steadystatemanchester.files.wordpress.com/2014/11/the-viable-economy-master-document-v4-final.pdf>

Framework for the next twenty years to 2035 which envisages a near doubling in the number of flats in the new town in the centre, plus more than 175,000 homes on new edge city estates for houses and warehouses often on green field sites off the orbital M60 and other major roads(p. 30).

This reflects the close relation in Greater Manchester between political and (property) business elites who ignore the risks of overbuilding and property price crash in flats which would probably panic buy to let investors dependent on increasing property values. The need for more than 150,000 extra edge city homes is based on the implausible assumption that the regional growth rate will accelerate to a sustained 2.8% and on a supposed “land supply gap” which reflects the developers’ preference for green field sites (pp 33-4).³

Both ourselves and the University of Manchester group make the connections between the assault on the green belt, the failed “jobs and growth” model, the devastating city-centre building frenzy, and the housing crisis. The driving forces and outcomes of the city centre boom were explored in another piece of [research by Jonathan Silver](#) of the University of Sheffield in a piece commissioned by Greater Manchester Housing Action⁴. In [an invited commentary](#) we drew attention to the neglect of human scale liveability and the ecological impacts of the building boom, not least through its material and energy use⁵. We will return to these issues below.

The 2016 draft Spatial Framework hit two unanticipated blocks.

Firstly, there was an unprecedented response to the consultation, 27,000 separate submissions. A variety of community groups organised demonstrations, culminating in a large one brought together by the newly formed umbrella organisation *Save Greater Manchester's Green Belt* in Albert Square, outside Manchester Town Hall, seat of the council most associated with the agglomeration, boosterist, developer-friendly approach to planning⁶ (or more truly

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A point also made by colleagues at University of Manchester Business School: Folkman, P., Froud, J., Johal, S., Tomaney, J., & Williams, K. (2016). *Manchester Transformed: Why we need a reset of city region policy* (CRESC Public Interest Report) (p. 61). Manchester: Centre for Research on Socio-Cultural Change (CRESC), University of Manchester. Retrieved from

<https://foundationaleconomycom.files.wordpress.com/2017/01/manchestertransformed.pdf>

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Silver, J. (2018). *From Homes to Assets Housing financialisation in Greater Manchester*. Manchester: Greater Manchester Housing Action. Retrieved from

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/45uj6plrn14hwrB/FROM-HOMES-TO-ASSETS.pdf?dl=0>

5 Vandeventer, J. S. (2018, May 6). Does housing financialisation deliver a viable economy for Greater Manchester? - [Greater Manchester Housing Action]. Retrieved May 22, 2018, from <http://www.gmhousingaction.com/housing-financialisation-deliver-viable-economy-greater-manchester/>

6 Haughton, G., Deas, I., & Hincks, S. (2014). Making an impact: when agglomeration boosterism meets antiplanning rhetoric. *Environment and Planning A*, 46(2), 265–270.

the lack of it⁷). The latter group also ran a well attended day conference [Breathing Space: Building our Greater Manchester](#) this March which went well beyond the defence of the Green Belt to consider key issues in urban planning, including transport, housing, and the future of the High Street, giving the lie to the suspicion that the Green Belt campaigners are merely a bunch of NIMBY's.

Secondly, the incoming Metropolitan Mayor, the former government minister Andy Burnham, called for a radical rewrite of the Framework. More recently he has said:

There's a feeling that cities get all the policy attention and towns are left to struggle and this is an issue for Greater Manchester if we don't wake up to it..... peopleare proud and passionate about Bolton, about Rochdale, Leigh, you know, Stalybridge, wherever it might be. They care about those places and they want to see them on the up. We've got to start there. Start with what they care about and think about the housing that we truly need rather than the housing that developers want to build. And that's where you start to tell a more coherent story for how we're going to develop a planning and spatial framework that is actually about rejuvenating the whole of Greater Manchester in the right way.⁸

There is some overlap here with the emerging critique of the previous Greater Manchester development model [maybe headline this concept earlier]. But the public statement on the GMSF rewrite frames it in terms that hardly suggest the kind of “radical rewrite” of which Andy Burnham spoke during his election campaign.

The framework is a joint plan for Greater Manchester that will provide the land for jobs and new homes across the city region, setting out ambitious plans as we seek to make Greater Manchester one of the best places in the world.

The framework is a huge part of securing the future success of Greater Manchester as we build a powerhouse of the North which reaches its full potential.

⁷ <https://doi.org/10.1068/a130335c>

The observation that the last 20 years of development in Manchester manifests a lack of strategic planning comes from colleagues leading the University of Manchester's “Doing Devolution Better” research project.

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Making policy Q and A, Andy Burnham. Metropolis, Manchester, Manchester Metropolitan University, 2017 (2) 22-27 (p. 25).

<https://app.box.com/s/1p01sodnnq92pgyml1dla5c1thlx9h>

....The Greater Manchester Spatial Framework, which is being produced by all 10 councils working together in partnership, will ensure that we have the right land available in the right places to deliver the homes and jobs we need up to 2035, and will identify the new infrastructure such as transport, schools, health centres and utility networks required to achieve this. By working in a coordinated way, we can ensure the right decisions can be taken on both locally and at a Greater Manchester level.⁹

We can make the following observations about this statement:

1. It still adheres to the agglomeration-boosterism that has characterised what has passed for policy up to now.
2. There is no mention of heritage, amenity (other than formal services), biodiversity, or natural resource conservation and management. And there is no mention of liveable spaces that help the population to construct, reconstruct and maintain communities of conviviality and well-being.
3. It is clear that the massive interest from the citizens of Greater Manchester is not being utilised in any kind of a collaborative way to jointly construct a new plan. Instead we have the familiar model of put out a document, invite responses, and then publish a revised version: the antithesis of living, participatory democracy.

A crystal ball: the Next Draft of the Spatial Framework.

Here's what we think might happen now:

- 1) To recap, the 2016 draft GMSF wasn't bad just because of building on the green belt but because of the whole developer-led speculative model. That means an unliveable region with swathes of neglect, and concrete hell in centre, vast material flows via "logistics hubs", cars and lorries /

2) Given brexit, growth projections will be downscaled¹⁰. That will reduce pressure on Greenbelt, placating some opposition, weakening the loose social coalition for change.

3) So the speculative, oligarchic, developer- captured, neoliberal, boosterist, growthist model will continue, despite tweaks to give some thought to the smaller town centres.

4) Which means those of us who see the need for a totally different future for our city and region need to

- **stick together** (don't let the developer lobby divide and rule),

- **clarify our understanding of the driving forces**, and

- **agree design principles for a liveable, inclusive, post-growth region**, a *Social-Ecological Spatial Framework*.

In the next section we set out the key dimensions of this alternative approach to spatial planning.

The Alternative: A Social-Ecological Spatial Framework.

Workshop events we have run on the spatial question in our region always lead to the conclusion that social life or liveability, together with the natural world are two aspects people find most important and which are most typically eclipsed in economy-framed discussions on spatial planning. With this in mind we set out a two level approach to planning within the region.

Places to live, work and be

The core of a regional spatial strategy must be two-fold: a focus on local places and local assets; and on region-wide places and regional assets. Two key questions to ask of every plan and every development are,

1. Exactly how does this plan or development make this place a better place for everyone, across the lifespan, to live, work and be - in the short term and for ever?
2. Exactly how does this plan or development increase, preserve and enhance green and blue space to grab greenhouse gas emissions, manage heat and flooding under conditions of

¹⁰ This is already happening: the new homes projection has been quietly reduced by 27,200 units. See new housing estimates and land identification from GMCA: https://www.greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk/news/article/288/greater_manchester_publishes_land_available_for_jobs_and_homes

The number of new homes needed has been revised downwards to 200,000 – close to the CPRE estimate. The estimated number of homes that can be built on brownfield sites is now up to 175,000, an increase of 12,000. There is still some way to go but the closing of the gap is to be welcomed. However, it remains unclear where the revised housing estimates come from and there is no discussion of the [other factors that we, and those commenting on our earlier post](#), have raised.

climate change, protect biodiversity and nature, while offering amenity to the population.

In what follows, we argue for a return to an earlier stated purpose of a regional spatial framework

“Planning shapes the places where people live and work and the country we live in. It plays a key role in supporting the [Region’s] wider social, environmental and economic objectives and for sustainable communities. ...spatial planning goes beyond traditional land use planning to bring together and integrate policies for the development and use of land with other policies and programmes which influence the nature of places and how they function”¹¹

This is the orientation supported by Paul Dennett’s acknowledgement in the quote at the top of this article; there can be no spatial planning that does not consider at its heart the lived experience of our communities and the things that are needed to sustain them in the broadest sense.

Local places and local assets

Greater Manchester is made up of different places, each with different strengths, cultures, histories, traditions and aspirations to be great places to live, work and be. The ambition should be to plan to make all of these places great, not just in terms of the built environment but in terms of what buildings are there for. The starting point is to make good use of what is there already in terms of the existing population in all its complexity, knowledge and talents; homes and a diversity of kinds of living spaces; local workspaces and places of employment; shops; cultural facilities (including community centres, pubs, cafés, faith centres, schools and colleges, health centres, libraries and places for meeting and for entertainment); transport facilities, green and blue spaces.

- Community engagement and participation – all developments done participatively with a focus on built-in safety and increasing space for growing
- Homes fit to live in.
- Retrofitting housing to reduce energy demand and hence costs and emissions while improving comfort and health.
- Mixed communities with citizens of different ages, socio-economic circumstances, ethnicity and faith, abilities, life-stages living side by side.

¹¹ ODPM (2004). Planning Policy Statement 11: Regional Spatial Strategies. <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20100408031041/http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/planningandbuilding/pdf/147423.pdf>

- Local places of employment including workspaces for entrepreneurship and development of community good employment as well as for support for growing, maintenance and repair (as both employment and as non-employed activity).
- Shops for everyday, fresh vegetables and fruit; affordable staples, convenience, accessibility (within walking distance of homes) and all age friendly - for example with places to sit (without spending) if necessary.
- Walking routes, whether by pedestrianised areas or via pavements accessible for all and in good repair. Crossings that give pedestrians the priority over cars.
- Cultural facilities for all within walking distance of homes. Diverse kinds of affordable venues and support for home-grown entertainment (film clubs, drama groups, choirs etc).
- Public spaces with art installations and importantly places to sit and rest or to talk.
- Health centres, service centres offering a range of health and well-being services with public rooms open in the evenings and at weekends for community groups
- Schools and colleges with facilities made available out of hours on a community-good basis.
- Transport, affordable and taking people where they want to go. To other towns, to hospitals, to the countryside (so not just radial routes).
- Green spaces available to everyone for growing and for recreation but also just to be, within easy reach of homes. New developments to have gardens and if flats to have both private and public green and blue spaces. This might mean an increase in ponds and wetlands around housing developments (with seating!)

- liveability
- walkability
- breathability
- just being
- conviviality
- (true) prosperity
- resilience
- safety

Regional spaces and assets

There are some aspects of space and place that can and should be addressed at a regional level. Connectivity between community

places; transport within and between community places and beyond; access to the countryside; large areas of green and blue spaces; larger developments for employment, education, health care, etc.

But starting from this latter level, imposing developments that serve a discredited theory of agglomeration economics and speculator-developer financial interests, will lead to a devastating impact on life in the city region and a missed “*opportunity to secure mutually supportive economic, social and environmental outcomes that benefit people now and long into the future*”.

Instead the GMCA and its constituent authorities have to consider “how are we going to work with local communities, to support and strengthen them”. It then needs to look at the in-between spaces and understand how these contribute to and impede community life, and agree ways to enhance them while protecting nature.

Planned region-scale developments need to be designed organically on the basis of the mapping of need that can be derived from these two strands of work, while taking account of the bigger picture of macro-social-economic trends and eco-system threats.

Building on this way of thinking and working we can draw attention to the following frameworks:

1) The ***elements of sustainable communities***, for example in the 2004 Egan Review¹².

¹² http://ihbc.org.uk/recent_papers/docs/Egan%20Review%20Skills%20for%20sustainable%20Communities.pdf

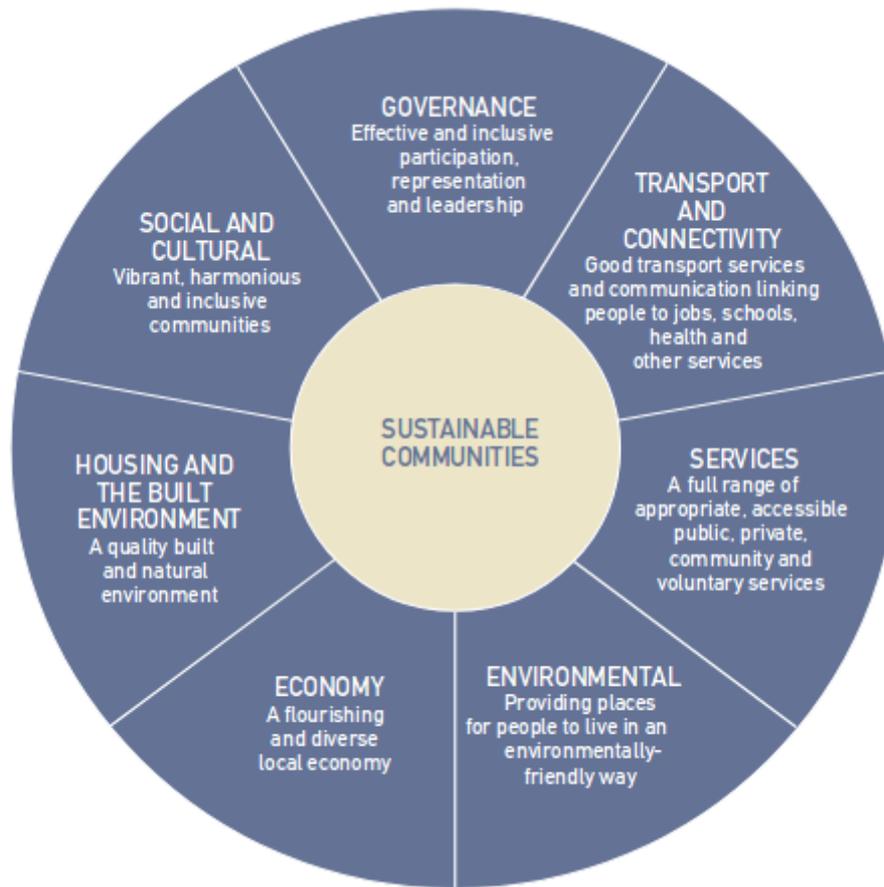


Illustration 1: Elements of sustainable communities. From the Egan Review, 2004.

2) The **Garden City principles**¹³ – not as a recipe for new housing estates, but in a way closer to Howard's vision of integrated home, work and amenity with the benefits of both urban and rural environments close by. We suggest these ideas could be used (retrofitted) to turn the Greater Manchester City Region into something like an Extended Garden City¹⁴.

¹³ TCPA **Garden City Principles**: <https://www.tcpa.org.uk/garden-city-principles>

¹⁴ We explore these ideas further, here: <https://steadystatemanchester.net/2017/03/07/greater-manchester-towards-a-retrofitted-garden-city/>

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