

## INTRODUCING THE WESTERN WEDGE

### Sub-Regional Planning across the Greater London Boundary

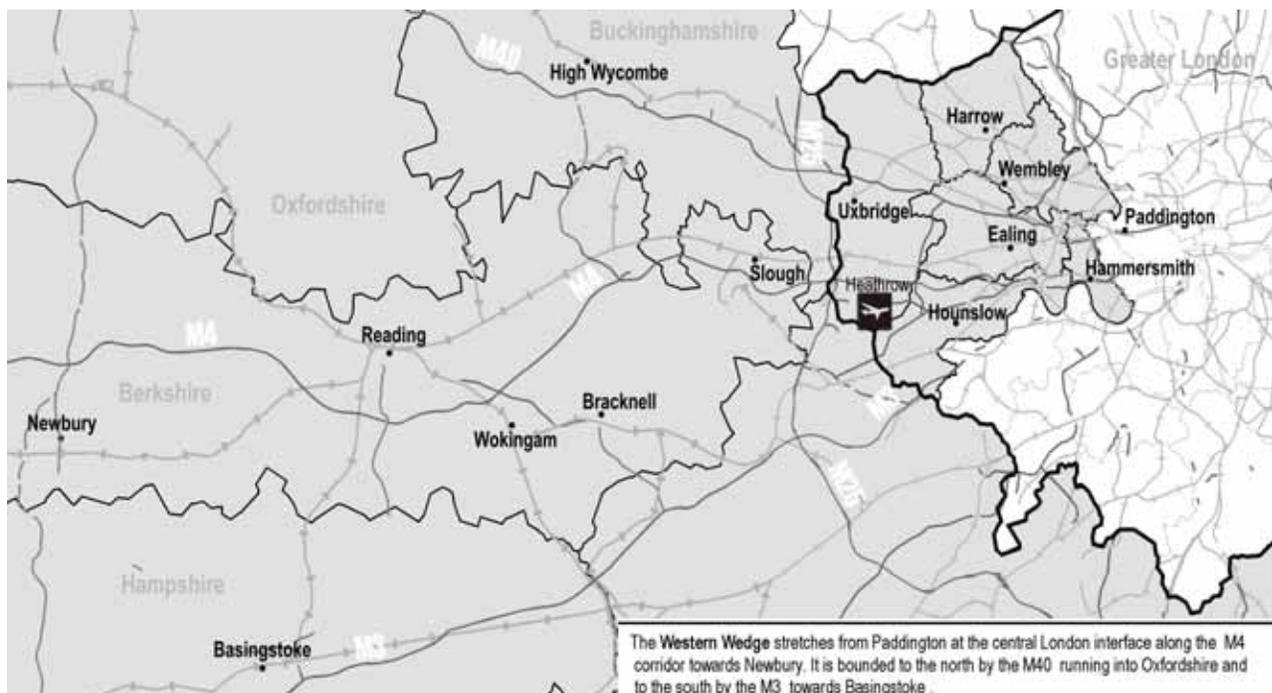
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Among the changes the Mayor has made to his February 2004 London Plan<sup>1</sup> compared to the 2002 draft<sup>2</sup> are strengthening and clarifying ongoing work at the sub-regional scale and the significance of the capital's linkages with adjoining regions. A new chapter is devoted to the purpose of producing Sub-Regional Development Frameworks (SRDFs) for each of the five defined sub-regions, with drafts to be completed by the end of 2004. The sub-regional boundaries are rightly to be regarded as 'permeable', recognising that issues can transcend them, both within London and across Greater London's administrative edge. The Plan makes clear that SRDFs should achieve 'the most effective and sustainable relationships across external boundaries'.

The London Plan's Key Diagram shows major functional development corridors extending from central London into adjoining regions. The Thames Gateway to the east is now well understood, and the Government's other Sustainable Communities Plan<sup>3</sup> growth area involving the capital directly, London-Stansted-Cambridge, is becoming established with studies in hand. The inter-regional sector to the west, referred to as the Western Wedge, has still to register on many planners' radar. The purpose of this article is to raise its profile, outline the key issues and potentials and suggest an agenda for collaborative working.

Collaboration is a key theme of the Plan's sub-regional approach: arrangements are needed for regional bodies in the wider South East to be involved in their preparation, which it is hoped will be reciprocated. Understanding the significance of the Western Wedge is therefore important at this time: work has commenced on the West London SRDF while, concurrently, sub-regional activity is under way as part of the preparation of a new Regional Spatial Strategy by the South East England Regional Assembly. SEERA has defined a number of sub-regional study areas, of which two are of particular relevance: 'London Fringe', extending around the 'M25 ring' from Kent Thameside to South Buckinghamshire, and 'Western Corridor' from the M25 to Swindon. While SEERA is not committed to producing sub-regional frameworks for these areas, they provide the opportunity for simultaneous London and South East cross-boundary liaison.



The Western Wedge was conceived by the former London Planning Advisory Committee at the 1999 Public Examination into the draft Regional Planning Guidance for the South East (RPG 9)<sup>4</sup>. RPG 9 defined a 'Western Policy Area' outside London, but failed to establish a mechanism for relating its policy development to West London. This shortcoming was recognised by both the Mayor and the South East regional bodies. They jointly commissioned an analytical study of the Western Wedge from Arup Economics & Planning in late 2001, across both its West London and west of M25 parts, which reported in mid-2002<sup>5</sup>. This led to the recognition of the Wedge in the London Plan, which states that the two regions should promote coordinated forms of sustainable development.

There is a compelling case for the Western Wedge concept as a policy framework bringing together inner West London, outer West London and the Thames Valley parts of the South East region. The sub-region straddles the Greater London boundary in terms of its strong recent and projected development performance underpinned by a dynamic, high-order economic structure. Heathrow Airport affords a comparative advantage to the whole growth corridor, a factor standing to grow in significance with the prospect of Terminal Five. Particular sectoral drivers of growth are transport and logistics, the Wedge being the leading regional distribution hub linked to the international transport access via Heathrow; manufacturing, constituting one of the remaining South East concentrations and one which is increasingly specialising in applied technologies; finance and business services, supporting the many corporate headquarters which have located in the subregion; ICT, with software innovation and IT servicing showing greatest buoyancy; and the creative, media and culture sector, which is particularly strong in inner West London and, being linked to regeneration activity, is likely to be stimulated further by the National Stadium development at Wembley.

### **West London**

Development performance in West London has been slightly weaker than the average for the whole Wedge, having experienced employment growth of 21% from 1995 to 1999 compared to 24% for the Thames Valley and 23% for the overall sub-region (Arup, *op. cit.*). Recent significant growth in West London has converged on the A4/M4 corridor and primarily in the boroughs of Hammersmith & Fulham, Hillingdon and Hounslow. Outer West London has the most buoyant economy of outer London generally and, benefiting from Heathrow, is one of the only parts of suburban London which has attracted recent office development. There is, however, patchy occurrence of nationally significant deprivation in parts of West London.

The London Plan envisages capacity for 86,000 new jobs and 45,000 additional homes through high density development of brownfield land, concentrated around transport nodes. Five 'Opportunity Areas' with 1,200 ha of developable land are designated. These are Park Royal, Wembley, White City and two corridors north and south of Heathrow. Willesden Junction is earmarked as an 'Area for Intensification'. Employment forecasts are below both the Greater London average and that for three of the four Thames Valley counties (Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Surrey). The labour supply is tight towards the outer part of West London and long term skills and training interventions are needed to unlock the labour potential in the inner extent of the subregion.

### **Thames Valley**

Thames Valley in the South East has been the strongest performing component of the Wedge and the weight of international inward investment has occurred on this side of the M25. This has reflected superior comparative advantage in terms of skilled labour, access and land, including campus-style B1 business parks which have proved particularly attractive to major software firms.

However, recruitment problems evident in Outer West London are even more apparent in the Thames Valley element of the Wedge. The shortfall in appropriately skilled workers relative to demand is likely to generate increased commuting, including reverse commuting from West London as well as in-migration. In view of the latter scenario, housing supply is likely to become more critical in the Thames Valley.

Land resources are likely to come under increasing pressure as national and regional policy shifts favouring brownfield development and intensification cuts off the supply of greenfield sites which has fed demand to date and contributed to the area's competitiveness. Some residual business park development is, though, still taking place, notable Green Park at Reading. Also, the buoyant property market has meant rapid recycling and upgrading of brownfield land, particularly at Slough and Reading.

## ***Benefits of an Inter-regional Approach***

Whilst the Western Wedge is an internally coherent economic continuum, it is clear that circumstances vary in different parts of the sub-region, particularly regarding supply-side constraints. Broadly, these variations appear on an east-west dimension. A joint inter-regional approach to the sub-region could reconcile these demand/supply differentials to enhance the economic performance of West London relative to that in the Thames Valley. For the Thames Valley, it would help resolve those supply side shortages which are critical to the ongoing success of the Wedge.

Across the Wedge, developable land is most constrained towards inner London at one side and in the Thames Valley at the other. Brownfield development opportunities in outer West London may be fewer than in East London but represent a significant supply-side resource in the Western Wedge context. Potential competition for sites and resulting effects on employment may be averted through the inter-regional approach to land supply and demand promoted here. In terms of labour supply, the shortfall of workers relative to demand in the Thames Valley is likely to grow as employment growth projections (+20% by 2016) are well in excess of demographic projections of the workforce. Increased reverse commuting from West London and from other areas adjacent to the Thames Valley may well be how the labour market adjusts. The latter scenario may translate into additional pressure on West London to deliver on its housing targets in line with and above levels stipulated in the London Plan, given the comparatively greater housing constraints in the Thames Valley. The supply of highly paid, growth sector employees and 'traditional/manual' workers, according to the Arup Report, are both constrained in the Thames Valley. Training interventions in West London and particularly inner West may provide a medium to long term solution for Thames Valley labour-constrained hotspots.

Public transport investment constitutes another supply-side constraint critical to the ongoing success of the Wedge. CrossRail, to date afforded less attention in terms of benefits for West London compared to East, is particularly significant for the core spine of the Wedge, although the current scheme does not extend the line west of Heathrow into the Thames Valley. Notwithstanding, it would widen labour markets, allow intensified housing and employment provision at hubs and improve the attraction of brownfield employment sites. Orbital transport improvements, running north and south of the core spine of the Wedge, are similarly critical, particularly for allowing the network of town centres north and south of the core spine to benefit from and contribute to prosperity.

Key centres in the Thames Valley element of the Wedge include Slough, Reading<sup>1</sup>, Bracknell, Windsor and Maidenhead then, at the western-most extreme, Basingstoke (M3), High Wycombe (M40) and Oxford. In West London, the London Plan identifies three metropolitan centres (Ealing, Harrow and Hounslow), six major centres (Uxbridge, Wembley, Hammersmith, Fulham, Chiswick, Southall and Kilburn) and a host of district centres. These centres and growth nodes need to be treated as part of a polycentric network for accommodating growth and maximising the mutual benefit and complementarity of policy treatments by London and the South East.

The London Plan is alive to this imperative, having taken on board the strong dissatisfaction voiced at the 2003 Examination in Public with the role of town centres in the draft Plan. The adopted Plan conceives of a polycentric network comprising the City, London's town centres and centres in adjacent regions in a mega-city context, with Policy 1.1 seeking stronger and wider roles for London's centres. The SRDFs are charged with developing robust town centre strategies. The national policy context is increasingly conducive to this stance, with the shift to what may be termed a 'centres' paradigm with urban intensification and brownfield recycling the preferred spatial forms of development. This displaces car-based, out-of-centre, greenfield development as the style of the 1980s/1990s and from which the Thames Valley economy benefited from to great effect.

## **Conclusion**

The case for two-way inter-regional collaboration is clear; the question is how to make it effective. Whereas the Government has recognised the need to provide an overarching mechanism for the Thames Gateway and London-Stansted-Cambridge growth areas through the ODPM's Sustainable Communities framework, collaboration for the Western Wedge will not enjoy such Government prioritisation. It will need to rely on political cooperation through the regional bodies for both policy development and implementation activity. The opportunity now exists to pursue this at the sub-regional scale.

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The London Plan provides a good starting point: Chapter 5 indicates that preparation arrangements for SRDFs will include authorities in adjacent regions and statutory bodies (e.g. Environment Agency and transport providers) which cross administrative boundaries. The section on West London refers to a 'coherent' framework which would both improve its economic performance and address its needs, and relieve problems in the Thames Valley. To this end, the section refers to joint work on a 'collaborative strategy', with authorities on 'the other side of the West London boundary' being involved in the SRDF. We now need a clear mechanism for how such collaboration can be made effective. It must be a two-way process, providing a West London input into the sub-regional work in hand through SEERA's London Fringe and Western Corridor studies – remembering the common interest in the ongoing impact of Heathrow Airport.

### **References**

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<sup>1</sup> Greater London Authority (Feb 2004) *The London Plan*. London: GLA.

<sup>2</sup> Greater London Authority (Jun 2002) *The Draft London Plan*. London: GLA.

<sup>3</sup> Office for the Deputy Prime Minister (Feb 2003) *Sustainable Communities: Building for the Future*. London: HMSO.

<sup>4</sup> Government Office for the South East, Government Office for the East of England, Government Office for London (Mar 2001) *Regional Planning Guidance for the South East (RPG 9)*. London: HMSO.

<sup>5</sup> Arup Economics and Planning (Aug 2002) *The Western Wedge: Spatial Development Strategy Technical Report Fourteen*. London: GLA.