

## OPINION

### Outer London as Goldilocks – both too far in and too far out

Population Densification in Outer London: The Worst of Both Worlds

Application of a one-size-fits-all “London mindset” and large-scale development in the outermost boroughs of London – whether on the green belt itself or densification of suburbia – creates an incoherent and undesirable hybrid “London” that is neither one thing nor the other.

Allow me to explain. As someone who has spent most of my life in both inner and outer London – from years in Camden and West Hampstead as a student and 20-something, to years in Ruislip, Watford<sup>1</sup>, Barnet and Enfield as a child and adult – it has always been self-evident to me that Inner London and Outer London were **completely different** beasts, as they have been for the past 100 years. Yet now, due to a complex mixture of demographic (chiefly massive population growth), political and cultural reasons, all of London is evidently being approached as one homogenous blob. That would be forgivable if that single approach was a holistic all-London approach, but it is not – instead, the way of life, identity, aspirations and expected behaviour of Inner London are being copied and pasted onto the furthest reaches of Outer London, by inner-city decision-makers with an inner-city mindset. Invariably those Londoners with political and cultural power live in Inner London and **apply their understanding of what “London lifestyle” is when reshaping the outer areas**. In many ways, this is robbing Outer London of the things what make it what it is.

**MY THESIS:** From its creation and for 100 years, Outer London represented a compromise, a grey area, a best of both worlds: having the City a manageable train journey away, but more space to drive and explore and live an almost provincial, quieter, greener, suburban life, with a cultural catchment area overlapping the border with neighbouring rural counties in both directions. But the present population densification brings high-density, hectic, car-free, inner-city life to the outer suburbs, filling up the green space and quiet that people came here for all along, gradually taking away people’s ability to easily drive out to the countryside, filling up the commuter trains so the journey into London is unbearably crowded for up to an hour and too far to cycle and: saying “*You will live an inner-city London life, or go and live in the country, pick one*”, without even being close to Central London. **Worst of both worlds.**



<sup>1</sup> Watford is, indeed, in Hertfordshire, but is very much part of the contiguous built-up area of London and the border is of little significance locally.

What is the point of living in Outer London if it is too urbanised, crowded, congested and hectic to easily drive out to villages to see elderly family and have a quieter, greener, semi-rural life (**too far in**), but every time you go to work or meet friend or colleague for coffee it takes up to an hour of standing on perpetually overcrowded trains, too far to cycle in or take the bus instead (**too far out**)?

**You used to get the benefits of the city and the country - now you get the benefits of neither.**

Swathes of the Middlesex, Surrey and Kent countryside were rapidly transformed from villages, towns, forest and farms into the Outer London we know today in the 1920s and 1930s. Beyond the ultra-densely populated inner-city slums and tenements, many of which were cleared out in a massive population outflux following the Blitz, then the smart Victorian and Edwardian areas such as St John's Wood, Kennington and Islington, now there were the suburbs that merged gradually, seamlessly, into the countryside – most notably the huge tract of suburbia known as Metro-Land.

You almost certainly know all this already, but it is worth a reminder of the reason for living in Outer London, both then and now:

**WHAT YOU GET:** you get to still live “in” London area but with more space, the vastness of open countryside to explore, a garden, a car and a driveway, free-range living, a quieter, semi-rural life, escaping the crowded city to sparse, tranquil suburbs, able to drive in and out to anywhere in Hertfordshire, Essex, Kent or the other Home Counties with ease, often overlapping geographical spheres of influence

**THE PRICE YOU PAY:** no longer having London and the office and your friends on your doorstep, making a substantially longer commute, up to an hour, by train (which, in the early decades of the Metropolitan Line, even included a Pullman car serving cooked breakfast and tea to your seat as you enjoy the view from the window). Of course, especially after 100 years, nostalgic, sepia-tinged fantasies fade and even disappear- but the **sheer distance** does not.

The pandemic brought this sheer distance into stark relief. During and after the big lockdown, we in Outer London found ourselves caught between a rock and a hard place. Too far out to walk in, too far out to cycle in, banned from public transport and very severely inhibited from driving in by the Mayor's various temporary (apparently not-so-temporary?) measures, **we found ourselves cut off from “London” for the best part of a year, despite supposedly living “in” it.**

Meanwhile we saw our own friends living in Highbury or Camberwell cycling into town for idyllic walks along the South Bank or around deserted Soho streets, for over a year most of us were strung out on a limb in zone 4 or 5, might as well be on the Moon. **Yet if you were unfortunate enough to not have access to a car of your own, you were equally unable to break free of the border and explore the many secluded walking locations of the surrounding Home Counties.** Trapped.

If building on the Green Belt takes away the bit of countryside immediately on your doorstep, taking away your car takes away access to the broader rural county beyond. Unless you are going to another city or principal town (in which case public transport can work), unless you are a time-rich Tour de France cycling enthusiast (who relishes spending a whole day cycling 20+ miles), unless you hire a shared vehicle for £100 per day, and unless you pre-plan a three-hour journey, possibly via Central London, by 3 trains, a bus and taxi... Then without a car, realistically, **you are not going to go to these beautiful rural assets that are supposed to be the silver lining of living on the outer edge of the metropolis.**

Housing overdevelopment and population densification are permanently changing the character and atmosphere of Outer London areas themselves. Many people talk trivially and casually about assuming the necessary “infrastructure” to accompany development will materialise, somehow, but in practice it rarely does so to a meaningful extent. The odd smattering of new Tesco Express and Nisa stores pop up, hurrah, but beyond that we just see the town centres become more overcrowded, the fight to get a bench to sit on in the park, the difficulty getting a GP appointment, the queue for your favourite café getting longer, your local attractions gradually becoming fully booked all the time, the desks being pushed closer together. It is obviously, and logically, making them feel busier and more crowded. Places like Uxbridge, Romford and Enfield were simply towns in their own right, with a rural hinterland of their own and their own **distinct identity** – my born-and-bred neighbours in Enfield talk about “going up London tomorrow” – after all it takes at least an hour door-to-door to get to most destinations in Central London, the same as it would from the satellite and commuter towns much further away from the M25 – which would certainly not be considered London itself. But semantics aside, the erection of high-density and in-fill developments brings with it the brash, frenetic, fast-talking inner-city culture of Inner London... Without being any nearer to Central London. **In Outer London we do not benefit from the fast, express, intercity trains to London that satellite towns and cities do – we have to make do with the slow, stopping trains or the Tube lines, both of which are now overwhelmed with passengers for much of the day all the way from the outer termini, and often take even longer than commuting in from a town or city in another county.**

The increase in population density gradually has increased road congestion and pollution, which in turn contributed to the major clampdown against car ownership, even in Outer London. Whilst pollution and emissions are clearly a big problem, as is congestion which is becoming chronic (and only made worse by road closures and carriageway narrowing) and the case against car ownership in Islington or Vauxhall has its merits, it is clearly a more restrictive proposition in Outer London. **Politicians and planners (living in Inner London, I suspect) seem to think that having a car in Hornchurch is equally as unnecessary or out of place as having a car in Wapping – this is absurd, London is not one homogenous place, the same argument does not apply. Much of Outer London is simply an integral part of the patchwork of local places that happen to straddle a border.** If you live in Enfield and want to go to your friend’s house for lunch just across the Essex border in Abridge, it is 60 minutes cycling, 90 minutes by train (via Liverpool Street or Moorgate!) or 25 minutes by car. **Without a car, you simply wouldn’t go there anymore. You should not be impeded from going to this nearby place just because you are the “wrong” side of an arbitrary border.**

So if you cannot face spending 2-3 hours of your day negotiating increasingly packed public transport in and out of London every time you want or need to go anywhere or do anything, **at least** you have the benefit that you can drive out across the border to the various rural areas, small towns and villages in your adjacent? No – planners and councils have decided **all** of London, including developments right up to the edge of the M25, should be car-free, and erecting every possible obstacle, disincentive, discouragement, impediment and restriction to stop you driving out to the countryside, effectively trapping you in London. Yes, if you happen to be going to a large town or other city, you can go by public transport (usually via Central London) but that usually takes 1-2 hours, meaning it’s often not worth the trouble and discomfort. Or you could book a taxi – at which point it is no better than driving yourself. Again you will be met with smiling propaganda of cycling as some kind of solution. Of course, if you live in cycling distance of zone 1, or in a rural town-sized settlement where you can cycle from your house to the town centre, it is brilliant, it is the future, and more of that is definitely needed. I passionately support more cycle lanes, generally, we need them – not to “replace” all cars, but certainly as core infrastructure for a

much greater proportion of journeys globally. **But try and apply that cycling solution to Outer London – most people cannot possibly be expected to regularly cycle the 10-15 miles into London, and they certainly cannot be expected to regularly cycle cross-country down the country lanes to the towns, villages, workplaces, country parks and farms of the surrounding Home Counties. Where exactly are we supposed to be cycling to?**

If we must turn our backs on driving the country lanes of the surrounding counties, either for work, family or leisure, and must look towards the city centre, then we face the largest problem: transport in the other direction. We are (all) relentlessly bombarded with imagery of this “new mobility”, this new, modern, youthful, sustainable, refreshing, car-free London way of living. Pictures of hipsters on bikes, teenagers on electric scooters, people “walking to work”, people “hopping on” the Tube. This is almost exclusively an Inner London phenomenon, for the obvious reason that the cyclable range of most people is not infinite. **A vision of people who live in Highbury and cycle to work in Shoreditch, people who live in Maida Vale and cycle to work in Westminster, people who live in Peckham and cycle to Soho for dinner. Santander bikes, Lime/Dott/Tier scooters, Swapfiets bikes, the Zipcar Zipzone, they all only stretch to most or all of Inner London, not Outer London, they are not for us, it is simply too far.** Obviously, London can never be Amsterdam, a “cycling city” (I used to live in Amsterdam myself and commuted to work by bike, and can confirm you can cycle from one end of the capital to the other in 45 minutes), partly because of its topography but mainly because of its sheer size. Have you tried cycling to Central London from Uxbridge, Enfield or Croydon, 10-20 miles each way? **Nobody but the most fanatical enthusiast would consider that a viable distance to cycle regularly to go to work, to go to the cinema, to meet a friend for dinner, to buy a new handbag. The same applies to scooters, e-bikes, bus, Zipcars, Ubers: either too far, too expensive or too time-consuming to be a regular option in and out of town – you just have to take the Tube/train.**

When it comes to that train, again, population densification has transformed it to a desperate extent. Originally, it was considered a tolerable distance because you would sit and have space and it would be “civilised”. For most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, if you lived in Harrow or Ilford, that was the case. But the erection of many thousands of flats in the outer reaches of Greater London has resulted in **not only a greater sheer number of people in these areas, but also a larger proportion of them who are commuters and have a Central London-focussed professional and social life**, so masses more people going in and out of town on these Tubes and trains: making them incredibly busy and crowded almost all day. “Capacity increases” are once again concocted in **an Inner London-centric way, namely by providing new trains with more empty space and fewer seats**, in order to fit more people in... **Standing**. In many cases, all the way from the top of the line. I previously spent a stint of my life (which I would not wish to repeat) living in Colindale, Barnet. This area has been densely developed (i.e. filled with blocks of flats) on a genuinely breath-taking scale. Yet its little Zone 4 Tube station on the Northern has stood there since 1924, unchanged except for superficial changes to surface buildings. **These trains, running every 2 minutes at peak, after consistently full, standing room only, all the way from Zone 4.** The idea of standing on the train being normal is, again, an Inner London conception, where people are rarely on a train for more than 15-20 minutes. But if your journey home, within Greater London, to Zone 6, regularly entails jostling on a 5-deep platform to then stand up for 30-60 minutes all the way home, that is another fresh level of hell.

Of course, “The Tube” was always “busy”, but that overwhelmingly meant just Zone 1. **But when you move millions of London-focussed, urban, commuting people out to hyper-dense developments in Walthamstow, Stanmore or Woolwich, then it has the effect that the entire network is busy and crowded, all the time, often making people stand for long journeys.** If HS2 and Crossrail are anything to go by, **any new Tube or rail line**

**would take 20 years to build.** Let alone the multiple lines that would be needed to compensate for such high and increasing density in the outer zones. The Victoria line, for example, is already running trains every 1-2 minutes at peak times, and is still rammed full. Yet more and more flats are built at Blackhorse Road and Tottenham Hale, funnelling countless thousands more people onto the line – in a location where they are practically prevented from having a car and where they are too far out for most to cycle or take the bus into town. **The result is a claustrophobic nightmare where you can choose between an almost unbearably and increasingly overcrowded Victoria line into London, or staying home.** That's no way to live.

Intensification of Outer London dismantles the essence of Outer London and creates the worst of both worlds – the crowding, lack of space for cars, hectic atmosphere of inner-city life, without being close enough to Inner London to enjoy city life. It risks creating a banlieu that is simultaneously cut out from the countryside and the city centre. Pretending that the same way of life and atmosphere can or should be copied from the inner city to the outermost suburbs is unwise and is likely to create pointless slums – originally meant to enjoy both city and country, but ending up with neither.