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**SHAPING THE  
POLYCENTRIC  
CITY**

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# LONDON'S TOWNS

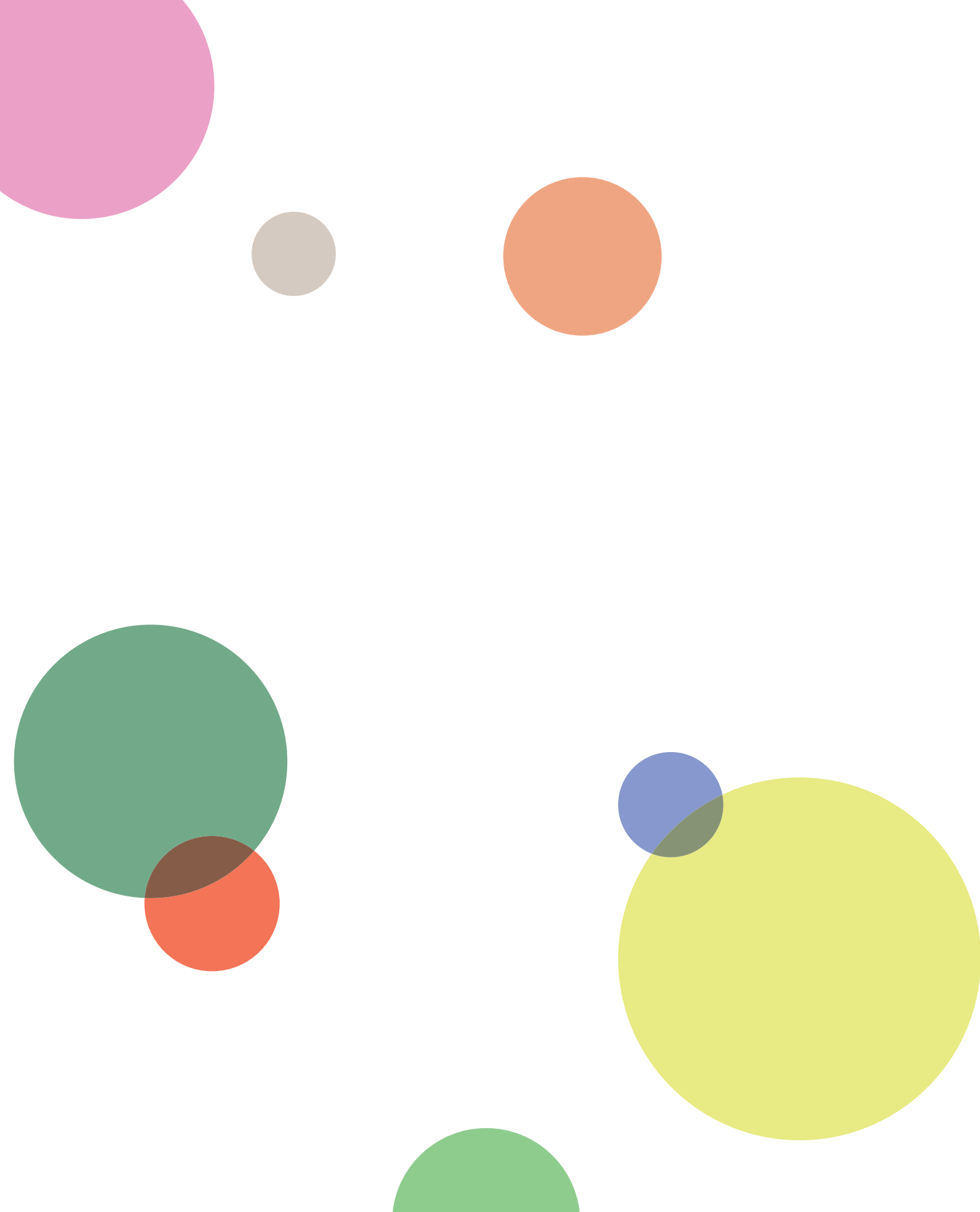
## SHAPING THE POLYCENTRIC CITY

This Insight Study was published by New London Architecture (NLA) in October 2017. It accompanies the NLA exhibition and events programme *London's Towns: Shaping the polycentric city* taking place from October 2017 to January 2018 and is part of the year-round NLA London Boroughs programme, giving local authorities a platform for discussing shared issues and best practice.

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## CONTENTS

<b>Foreword</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Chapter One. Introduction</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Chapter Two. The evolution of London and its towns</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>Chapter Three. How are London's towns changing?</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>Chapter Four. How should we shape London's towns for the future?</b>	<b>38</b>
<b>Chapter Five. Revitalising station sites in London's towns</b>	<b>52</b>
<b>Chapter Six. Conclusions</b>	<b>60</b>
<b>Showcase</b>	<b>62</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>174</b>
<b>Profiles</b>	<b>176</b>
<b>Sources and further reading</b>	<b>183</b>

FOREWORD

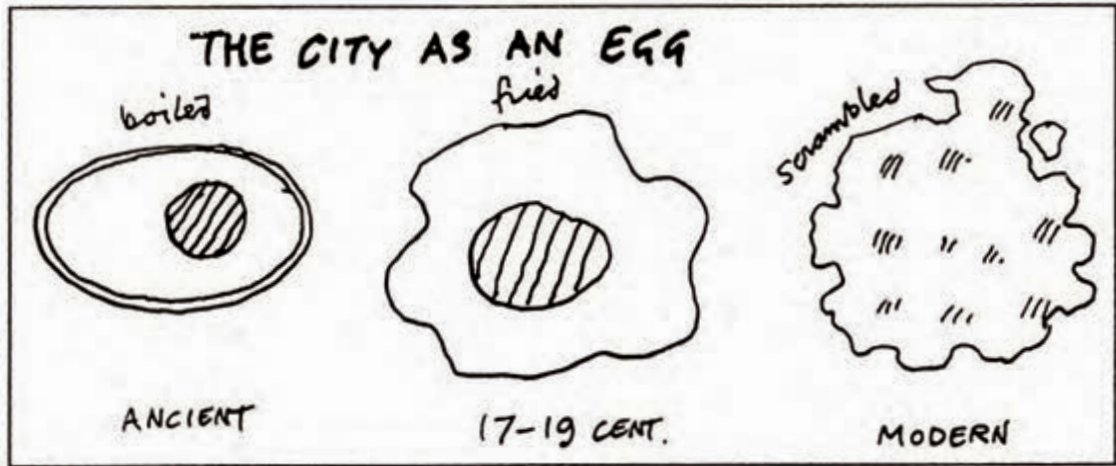
Over its history London has developed naturally as a polycentric city - it's towns and villages growing to form one large metropolis. With the City of London and Westminster at the core, Chelsea and Kilburn, Brixton and Croydon, Wandsworth and Hampstead retained their distinct identities but were absorbed into the administrative conglomeration of first the County of London, then the London County Council, the Greater London Council and now the Greater London Authority.

Over the 20th century, London's centre increasingly dominated the capital's economy, following the radial pattern of the 19th century railways. Orbital movement was rarely seen as a priority – the motorway boxes and the M25 a means of diverting traffic away from the core rather than creating connections between town centres. Ken Livingstone was nicknamed the Zone One Mayor because of his focus on the central boroughs – although he was responsible for one of the most dramatic transformations in London's movement patterns, the Overground rail links which have transformed places like Dalston, Peckham and Willesdon.

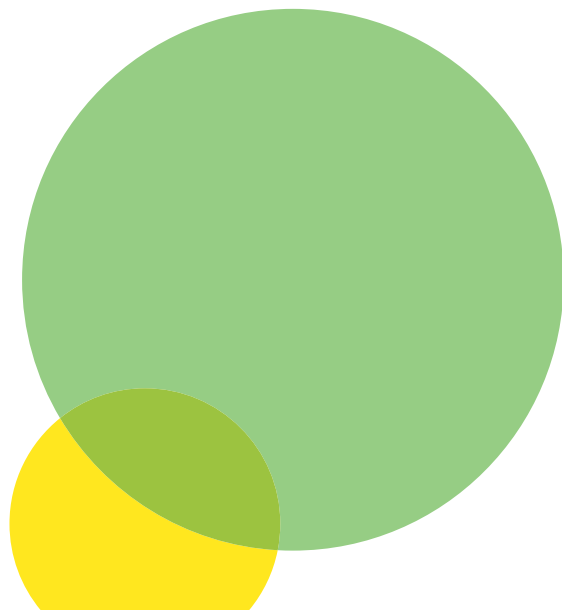
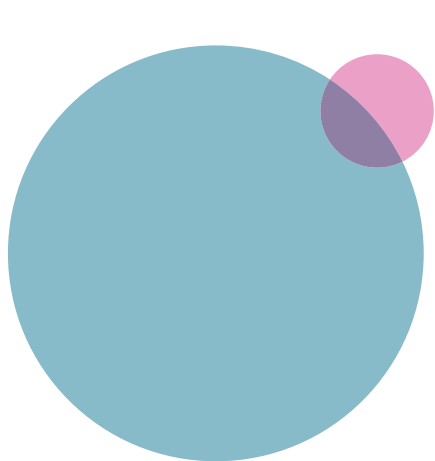
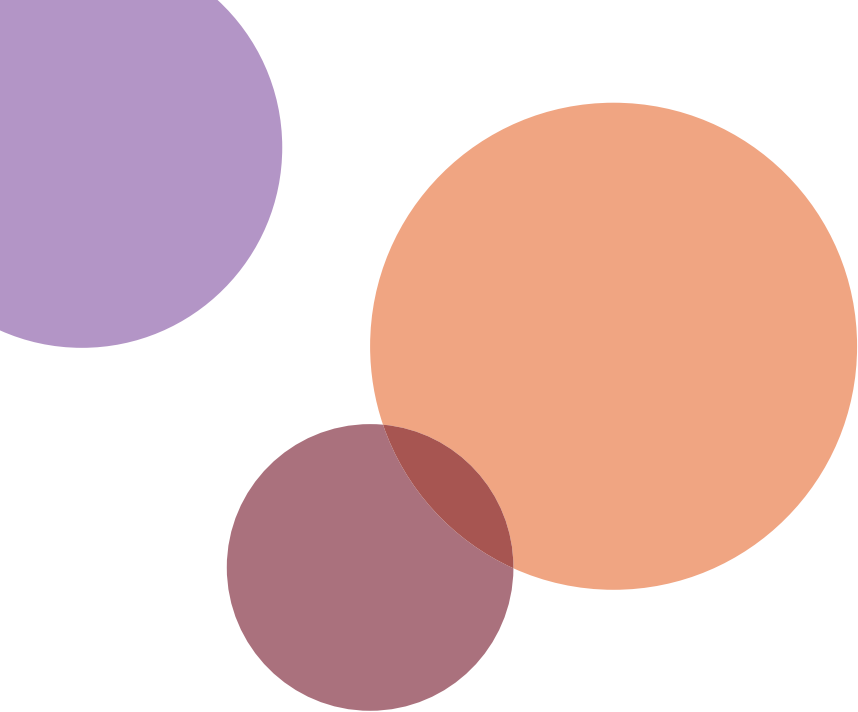
Over the past decade, significant changes have taken place in outer London town centres as the centre has spread, and the high cost of accommodation has made outer areas more attractive as places to live, with new infrastructure transforming the viability of new developments. Thus we see major growth taking place in Stratford, Thamesmead, Barking, Croydon, Nine Elms, White City, Hounslow, Ealing, Brent Cross/Cricklewood, Haringey and Walthamstow.

Although the centre is still the key economic driver of the capital, the changing nature of London matches Cedric Price's famous analogy of the city as an egg. The ancient city of London was hard boiled with protective shell of the medieval walls; the later London was a fried egg with the lower density suburban white sprawling across the plate, while the contemporary city is gradually becoming more scrambled. This is reflected in a growing interest in mixed-use developments with a focus on neighbourhoods, placemaking and a reduction in commuting. This report sets out the drivers and the solutions for the creation of a many-centred city that provides places where people can work, live and play and that retain their distinctiveness and character.

Peter Murray,  
Chairman,  
New London Architecture



The city as an egg – the polycentric city as defined by Cedric Price



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This Insight Study examines the future of the capital's outer urban centres, exploring the next wave of development taking shape and looking ahead to how the capital could be strengthened as a truly polycentric city. The Study was conducted over a series of months, with in-depth research, interviews with key experts and industry-focused roundtables, alongside a major design workshop that explored future visions for the development of five public transport hubs in the TfL estate.

London's towns are the essential fabric of its everyday life: the multitude of 'stars' in the capital's constellation. They are focal points for local communities, but also part of an interwoven whole.

The capital is facing unprecedented change as its population is expected to grow to over 11 million by 2050, meaning we need a minimum of 50,000 new homes and an additional 46,000 jobs in London each year. We are already seeing a greater shift of people and businesses settling beyond the centre, especially because of affordability and land use.

Outer London's towns have a wealth of existing amenities and, most importantly, good transport connections. Both long-established town centres, such as Croydon, Kingston and Romford, and newer planned and emerging ones, such as Canada Water, Old Oak Common and Silvertown, can provide the key to unlocking capacity for the capital as a whole.

However, we can only make a sustainable city for the future if we accommodate and manage 'growth' in the right way, with mixed-use development and innovative regeneration around public transport hubs to the fore, as the proposals produced in a design charrette that formed part of this research have outlined.

New development should draw on the lessons of placemaking that have been so successful in regenerating London but also be adaptable and open to new uses and ways of living, working and moving around, especially with the transformation that massive advances in technology is bringing. London's towns have to be little pieces of city in their own right rather than dormitory suburbs, but also highly integrated with surrounding areas.

## TO ENSURE 'GOOD GROWTH' IN LONDON'S TOWNS WE NEED:

**Better physical and digital connectivity:** London's towns have to be highly accessible and connected in multiple ways to all other parts of the city. We need more orbital links in public transport, so that people do not have to travel in and out of the centre, as well as a robust digital and energy infrastructure. Nevertheless, good public transport access to the centre will still be vital as so much business happens there.

**Robust shared visions and plans:** A shared and clearly articulated vision, clear decision-making process and coordinated leadership for the town are vital to ensure long-lasting change is successful. This means that policymakers, the industry and the community should work together through considered engagement, communication and collaborative working from the earliest stages.

**Better use of local character as the foundation for new development:** As each place is different, change in London's towns needs to be based on a profound understanding of local character and identity, what the priorities for the community are, and how the town functions socially, economically and culturally at everyday street level.

**Innovative, high-quality mixed development:** Towns also need to anticipate wider changes to ensure that they remain resilient. A mixture of types of employment, housing, retail and leisure spaces will help to support this. While local uses are important, it is also essential to consider how the town fits into the wider urban context.

**Incremental, phased growth:** Mixed-use development in urban areas is most successful where it is delivered in multiple phases, so that change is incremental and can be embedded gradually, and where opportunities for temporary and small-scale projects allow the testing out of ideas and concepts.

**Denser development that respects local character:** Building at higher densities can help make better and more efficient use of constrained and complex sites in town centres. However, this should also be sensitively integrated with the existing context.

London's towns are the essential fabric of its everyday life: the multitude of 'stars' in the capital's 'constellation' that act as focal points for local communities, giving places distinctive identities, but at the same time forming part of an interwoven whole. They form the essential underpinning of London. However, the capital is facing unprecedented change as its population is expected to grow massively to over 11 million by 2050, meaning the city needs to provide a minimum of 50,000 new homes and an additional 46,000 jobs per year. In his 'A City for All Londoners' manifesto, Mayor Sadiq Khan has argued that development to accommodate this huge shift should be 'good growth', but what does that mean as we try to safeguard quality of life while also providing thousands of new homes and jobs for all Londoners, as well as school places, good transport connections, and essential access to high-quality green space, leisure, amenities, and community facilities and services? As central London has become increasingly denser and unaffordable, the city's outer areas could see huge pressure on homes and schools, services and especially transport, as well as on strategic industrial and employment land as demand for new homes far outstrips supply. Yet, as the Mayor has committed to protecting the Green Belt in its current form, growth must be contained within London's boundaries.

While central London will undoubtedly continue in its role as one of the world's leading centres for business, it is outer London's established and emerging towns and their centres – with a wealth of existing amenities and, most importantly, good transport connections – that are starting to provide the key to great places to live and to work in the coming decades. There is already an ever-larger shift of people and businesses setting beyond the centre, owing in particular to residential and commercial space becoming unaffordable in central London and the limitations on land use. Major shifts in urban planning policy, both nationally and in London, since the turn of the millennium have also been highly influential in advocating the idea that regeneration and development should be focused around public transport nodes in order to support social and environmental sustainability, reversing the previous adherence to sprawling car-based development that encroached on green space and pushed thriving town centres into decline by its emphasis on building out-of-town retail and business parks. Particularly significant in this transformation in urban theory and practice was Towards an Urban Renaissance, a report published in 1999 by the Urban Task Force led by Richard Rogers, which set out a vision of sustainable

urban regeneration by making cities compact, multi-centred, socially mixed, well designed and connected, and environmentally sustainable.<sup>1</sup> Today outer London town centres such as Croydon, Romford and Kingston – historic villages and market towns that were later absorbed into London's huge suburban growth from the 19th and 20th centuries with the coming of the railways, the Tube and the car – are being reshaped with new mixed-use denser development to support the creation of sustainable neighbourhoods for the long term. Yet the multi-centred city – also described as the 'polycentric' city – does not just encompass those places that we might identify as traditional 'town centres', but also areas that have good connectivity and therefore could potentially accommodate further densification. Many parts of outer London are becoming even more accessible with the opening of the Elizabeth Line (Crossrail 1) and other planned transformational upgrades to rail infrastructure, such as Crossrail 2. London's well-connected web of local towns have a vital role in making smarter, more intensive, creative, affordable and attractive ways of integrating spaces and places for living, working, relaxing, learning and making – and especially places that meet the specific needs of local communities as well as supporting London as a whole.



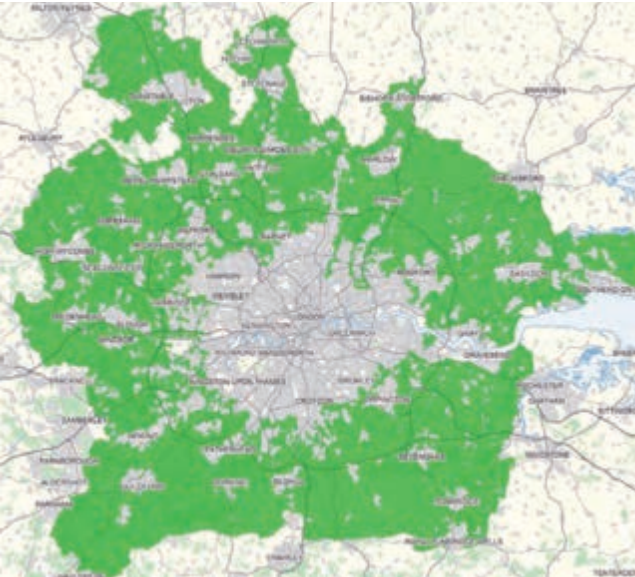
WHAT IS A ‘POLYCENTRIC’ CITY?

London is already a city of many centres with unique identities that have evolved through centuries of development (see Section 2). The capital’s suburbs cover almost two thirds of London’s geographical area and provide homes for more than half its population: ‘they are vital to its economic, social and environmental sustainability and contribute much to London’s unique character as a city made up of a series of villages’.<sup>2</sup> However, in policy terms, a truly polycentric city is the result of imperatives to distribute economic growth more evenly. Corinne Swain, Arup Fellow, defines polycentric development as being ‘a number of places within a network which work together to create a critical mass utilising good transport links, digital connections and joint working’.<sup>3</sup> It is not just a set of hubs and nodes with clusters of housing, she says, but ‘a spatial concept with an underlying economic objective ... [in policy] to encourage more equal growth across an area, as opposed to its concentration in one central area or city’.<sup>4</sup> The concept implies maintaining a constant balance between the individual parts (towns) and the whole (city): as Ojay McDonald of the Association of Town Centre Management explains, ‘we have to keep coherence but reclaim distinctiveness’.

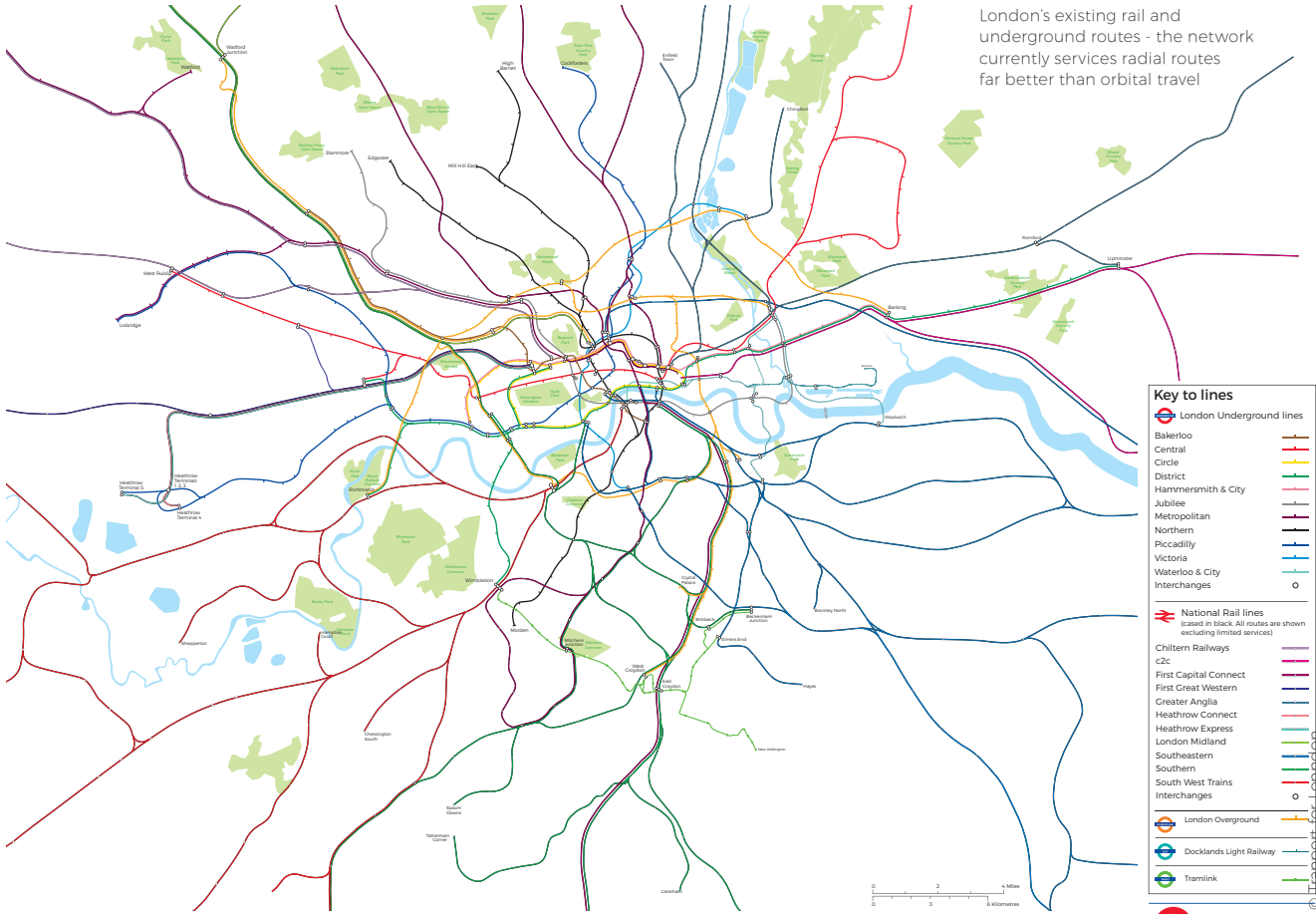
Part of the challenge of accommodating massive anticipated growth as inclusively and sustainably as possible across London lies in its complexity as a geographical and political entity (see Section 3) and its relationship with the wider South East region, and the fact that growth and change do not radiate equally from a central core. One of the functions of the Outer London Commission, established in Boris Johnson’s mayoralty (2008–16) to examine how outer London areas could realise their economic potential and how town centres

in these areas could be revitalised, was to assess the potential for four ‘superhubs’, or major new growth hubs, with wider regional reach. Although this policy was not adopted, the ‘Town Centres Network’ in the London Plan has created the strategic framework for town centre policy development and implementation across London. It lists over 200 places identified as ‘town centres’ across London and classifies them into five different types according to their catchment, scale, mix of uses, accessibility, potential for future growth and regeneration, night-time economy and office development. Anticipated growth and an urgent need for housing across the whole of the South East region has also led to the case being put forward for an ‘urban polycentric region’ – or London City Region<sup>5</sup> – and proposals for a new strategic integrated framework which would bring together decisions on growth, economic potential and infrastructure investment over an area stretching from Brighton in the south to Cambridge and Oxford to the north and west, including a number of strategic ‘growth corridors’ (also proposed by the Outer London Commission).

As an alternative to densification, in recent years there has also been much highly charged debate about the role of the Metropolitan Green Belt and proposals put forward by the London Society and others to integrate urban and suburban development with it through measures such as the selective release of sections of land on the city fringe. However, the Mayor has stated even in his draft Environmental Strategy published in August 2017 that he is committed to protecting the Green Belt in its current form, and so for the foreseeable future the policy direction seems unequivocal.



Metropolitan Green Belt containing urban sprawl



HOW DOES CONNECTIVITY SUPPORT A POLYCENTRIC CITY?

Without the vital connections to allow people to travel efficiently to and from different places in different ways, the idea of a many-centred city falls at the first hurdle. As Mike Savage, Director, WSP, observes, at the heart of good growth is ‘access: putting people in close proximity to jobs, shops, education and everything else they need on a day-to-day basis’. Without further action on public transport, rising demand means that by 2041, 71 per cent of travel on London Underground in the morning peak time would be in crowded conditions<sup>6</sup> (anecdotal evidence might suggest that is already the case). Greater connectivity will be critical in managing higher travel demands within the city and supporting continued economic and social vitality in towns across outer as well as inner London. This is already planned with the opening of the Elizabeth Line in 2018, linking Reading and Heathrow in the west with Shenfield and Abbey Wood in the east, including linking a number of existing town centres such as Ealing, Hayes, Romford, Ilford and Woolwich. Critically, the core ‘placemaking’ approach to new stations and station upgrades has involved the integration of new above-station buildings and improved public spaces to support last-mile journeys on foot and by bike, and to support economic growth, which is already

unlocking further major development in and around centres (see Section 3). The proposed route for Crossrail 2 from north-east to south-west also highlights the potential for growth in town centres such as Tottenham Hale, Wimbledon and Kingston, and overall would support 200,000 new jobs. Alongside these once-in-a-lifetime infrastructure improvements, the Mayor’s draft Transport Strategy (MTS) of 2017 proposes a fundamental reexamination of the way people move around the city, outlining an ambitious target of 80 per cent of trips in London by 2041 being made by walking, cycling or public transport, and a corresponding reduction in car use, especially in outer London, by provision of better bus and rail services and walking and cycling routes for local trips.

The essential driver of the true polycentric city is multiple connections and interchanges, especially on orbital routes, which allow people to move around quickly and reliably without having to travel into the centre and out again. Demand for such services can be seen, for example, in the fact that the number of ‘passenger kilometres’ travelled on the London Overground increased by 258 per cent between its first year of operation in 2008/9 and 2015/16.<sup>7</sup>