

Response from the Rt Hon Andy Burnham MP to the Greater Manchester Spatial Framework

Introduction

Over the last 20 years, parts of Greater Manchester have been transformed. Our challenge over the next 20 is to apply the same ambition to the whole of Greater Manchester and its outlying towns.

We will only achieve that with a clear and convincing plan for growth across the entire city-region. So I support the principle of developing a strong Spatial Framework for Greater Manchester.

In uncertain economic times, such a plan is needed to give confidence and clarity to potential inward investors. But, if we get the balance right, it also has the potential to empower local communities over developers by preventing a planning free-for-all. For these reasons, calls to scrap the entire GMSF process are wrong and should be resisted.

I also support the level of ambition set by the draft framework on the numbers of new jobs and homes for Greater Manchester between now and 2035. But our ambitions must extend behind sheer numbers.

The people of Greater Manchester deserve a plan that also delivers the right mix and quality of jobs and homes to meet the range of needs; that integrates new developments with our public transport system to keep Greater Manchester moving; and that improves the attractiveness of our area as a place to live by minimising the loss of our green spaces and improving the quality of our air.

I am not convinced that plan as currently drafted achieves these goals. In my view, it falls some way short of the coherent, ambitious and sustainable framework that Greater Manchester needs.

1. Diversity of housing

On housing, the principal aim of any 20-year plan should be to solve Greater Manchester's housing crisis. That means developing a plan that will deliver a mix of housing and provide all people with the ability to find an affordable home to rent and to own.

I do not believe the framework as currently drafted will deliver the right mix of housing, in terms of type, size, tenure, location and affordability. Due to the nature of many of the housing sites that it seeks to release, the draft framework is overly-focused on delivering larger properties for owner-occupation. While some of these properties are needed to support our ambitions, the current plan delivers too many and leads to a disproportionate focus on large green sites close to main roads. These sites are favoured by developers due to the lower costs of development and the value of the homes they produce. But, often, they are not well connected to existing public transport infrastructure and could put a large number of extra cars on our roads.

While I support the overall goal of 227,000 new homes between now and 2035, I believe we should be aiming to ensure that a much higher percentage of those homes are affordable homes to rent and to own. Consequently, I believe the plan should be refocused to provide for higher-density residential developments in brownfield areas, and in particular our town centres.

I welcome the focus in the draft GMSF on promoting the main town centres as the primary focus for office, retail, leisure and cultural activity in their surrounding areas. However, more attention should be paid to some of the secondary town centres in our boroughs and in particular their potential for greater residential development.

Many of these towns have experienced out-of-town retail development in recent years and have been left with an over-supply of redundant retail space in the town centre. I would like to see a new drive to transform some of the larger towns of Greater Manchester as attractive places to live, where new housing is much more closely linked to the existing public network.

2. Quality jobs for all of Greater Manchester

Despite a sustained growth in jobs in recent years, Greater Manchester still lags behind the national average in terms of productivity. Economic development across the city-region has been unbalanced. In too many areas, we have an over-supply of lower-skill and lower-wage jobs.

Through this plan, Greater Manchester has an opportunity to set out a vision for a new economy drawing on the findings of the Independent Economic Review for the Northern Powerhouse. It needs to be a plan to support the development of a new industrial base, skilled jobs and sustainable growth to benefit every part of Greater Manchester.

I am concerned that the proposed framework is not sufficiently ambitious and overly-focused on warehousing and distribution developments. While these industries are important, I believe there needs to be a better balance in terms of the jobs and industry we are seeking to bring to Greater Manchester. In particular, a higher priority should be given to the four key sectors identified in the Independent Economic Review: Advanced Manufacturing, Energy, Health Innovation and Digital.

3. Congestion and air pollution

Greater Manchester's roads are already close to saturation point and traffic is often at a standstill. Even at current levels of development, our transport system is struggling to support the demands of a modern economy and meet the needs of our current population. For this reason, great care needs to be taken to ensure that any traffic arising from any proposed new development can be reasonably absorbed within our transport system.

Without major improvements to our public transport infrastructure, it will not be possible to deliver developments proposed in the Spatial Framework without significantly worsening traffic congestion on our roads. That, in turn, threatens to worsen air pollution at a time when there is the prospect of new fines being levied.

For this plan to succeed, it needs to be much more integrated with Transport for Greater Manchester's Transport Strategy 2040. As a basic principle, we should ensure that proposed sites for development do not create unsustainable levels of traffic congestion and are conditional upon the necessary improvements to our public transport system.

4. The loss of green belt

Due to the focus in plan on larger homes for owner-occupation, and on distribution and warehousing, the current plan proposes to open up a large number of green space close to main roads. This has given rise to widespread public concern about the loss of green belt and green space. I am also aware of concerns that significant areas of existing public open space, protected urban greenspace and other previously undeveloped land have been allocated for development.

Whilst it is not possible to develop an ambitious 20-year plan for Greater Manchester without losing green space, it is clear that many communities feel strongly that the plan as currently drafted is unfair and disproportionate. As a result, it could diminish quality of life in some communities and restrict people's access to good air and green space. The plan needs to be rebalanced to respond to these concerns and demonstrate a commitment to sustainable development.

Conclusion

For the reasons I have given, I believe that the current plan needs to be subject to a radical re-write that results in a substantial reduction in loss of green belt.

Whilst I support the commitment set out in the draft GMSF to release the minimum amount of green belt to meet our need sustainably, I would go further and propose that we consider the aim of no net loss of green belt. While this might be difficult to achieve, we should aim to get as close to it as we possibly can. To that end, further work needs to be done on the designation of new areas as green belt to replace any that may need to be lost.

In conclusion, I believe we need to see a plan that is more balanced in terms of the jobs and homes it seeks to deliver and more ambitious for the future of Greater Manchester.

Specifically, I would like to see a plan that:

- Provides a solution to the housing crisis, with a better mix of new housing
- Creates a greener Greater Manchester by minimising the loss of existing green space, enhancing what remains and developing a new cycling network

- Promotes an ambitious vision for our economy, bringing quality jobs to every part of the city region
- Revitalises our smaller town centres as vibrant places to live
- Manages traffic congestion by better linking employment and housing more closely to public transport

Over the coming years, our city-region has the opportunity to deliver on our full economic potential. With the right plan, we will be able to ensure that the investment and growth in houses and jobs happens in a way which makes Greater Manchester an even better place to live, work and visit. But I am clear it will only succeed if it can command a broad consensus of support amongst the public and communities of Greater Manchester. That is why significant changes are needed to the draft framework to show that we are listening to their concerns.