

# Is Developing Airspace a Solution to London's Housing Crisis

## Briefing Note

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By the year 2050, it is estimated that 70 per cent of the world's population will be living in cities. For cities such as London, with reducing levels of space but increasing demand for housing, there is a need to make more effective use of land, as recognised by the NPPF and the London Plan, and to introduce more innovative solutions.

For London, with a current population of 8.1 million and a predicted population of 13 million by 2050, the challenge is huge. Recent housing delivery rates between 2014/15 and 2016/17 have been between 32,000 and 45,000, but the total housing target for London for the ten-year period up to 2028/29 is 649,350 (or 65,000 per year).

In order to meet this target a number of alternatives have been suggested, ranging from 15 new towns of 30,000 population each around London to increasing the number of high-rise buildings across London (a record 510 towers of 20 plus storeys are currently planned or under construction over the next decade). An alternative solution is the increased use of the airspace above London's roofs- which it has been anticipated could provide around 180,000 additional residential units.



Credit: Apex Airspace Development

Airspace is defined as the unused space above residential, commercial and public buildings, which can be developed to accommodate additional residential units. Airspace development can include building another floor of

accommodation within an existing roof space, extending a building up by one or two storeys, adding a penthouse, building residential accommodation on top of existing non-residential buildings or introducing a modular unit or structurally separate unit on the existing roof. In the case of modular units, these can be constructed off site and craned in (with less impact on neighbours) and do not require moving people out whilst the work is being undertaken.

Developers in New York have been trading air rights since 1960's, allowing lower buildings to sell airspace to neighbouring properties and trading air rights as Transferable Development. In the UK, some of the first air right buildings date from the early 1990's, such as One Embankment Place above Charing Cross Station, Alban Gate at Broadgate and Cannon Place above Canon Street Station.

The Government has recognised the scope for developing upwards in recent planning policy guidance. The National Planning Policy Framework (2018, as amended February 2019) encourages the effective use of land in order to support the Government's objective of significantly boosting the supply of homes and meeting the need for homes (300,000 per year) and other uses, whilst ensuring the safeguarding and improvement of the environment.

**Part e) of paragraph 118 of the NPPF (2019)** states that planning policies and decisions should:

*“support opportunities to use the airspace above existing residential and commercial premises for new homes. In particular, they should allow upward extensions where the development would be consistent with the prevailing height and form of neighbouring properties and the overall street scene, is well designed (including complying with any local design policies and standards) and can maintain safe access and egress for occupiers.”*

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Within the draft London Plan (2017), there is a greater emphasis on the role of small housing developments (1 to 25 units) which it is considered could account for 245,730 additional residential units over the plan period. As part of this approach the draft Plan promotes the use of airspace through Policy H2: Small Sites, which at part D3 acknowledges that "...boroughs should apply a presumption in favour of the following types of small housing development which provide between one and 25 homes [including]: 3) the redevelopment or upward extension of flats and non-residential buildings to provide additional housing." The Plan also refers to the opportunity to make use of over-station airspace, such as above Euston Station.

The draft London Plan recognises the need for development to be designed at optimum density (Policy D6); and the role that tall buildings can play in helping London to accommodate its expected growth (Policy D8).

The use of airspace does provide an opportunity for new housing, but account must be taken of the requirement for good design, with reference to the form and character of the surrounding context, good connectivity and adequate infrastructure capacity, as recognised in Policy D1 of the draft London Plan. Any new development will also need to comply with the recent changes to the Building Regulations for buildings above 18 metres, with particular consideration given to the requirements for means of escape, fire separation, fire sprinklers, lift and stair access and choice of materials.

Whilst the upward extension of homes will be most viable in those areas of London with the highest land values, the use of airspace will add to vibrancy and diversity of the housing stock. It also provides an opportunity to develop more affordable homes. Apex Airspace have already purchased airspace from private and institutional freeholders, retailers, local councils and housing associations in order to develop homes. Tesco is developing flats above a number of its superstores with Apex Airspace and it is understood that development above 20 of their sites in London could deliver 9,000 additional residential units.



*Credit: Apex Airspace Development*

On 30 January 2019 the Government announced £500 million funding for affordable homes, including a pioneering project to build rooftop properties on top of existing buildings. Homes England has agreed a £9 million funding deal with Apex Airspace Developments to develop 78 rooftop homes on five sites in Tooting, Wanstead, Walthamstow, Putney and Wallington over a three-year period, making use of offsite construction methods.

The use of airspace above London's existing residential and commercial properties is therefore one area which merits further consideration in order to meet the London Plan's housing delivery targets for the next ten years.

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