

# NEIGHBOURHOOD REVIVAL: Towards More Sustainable Suburbs in the South East

## INTRODUCTION

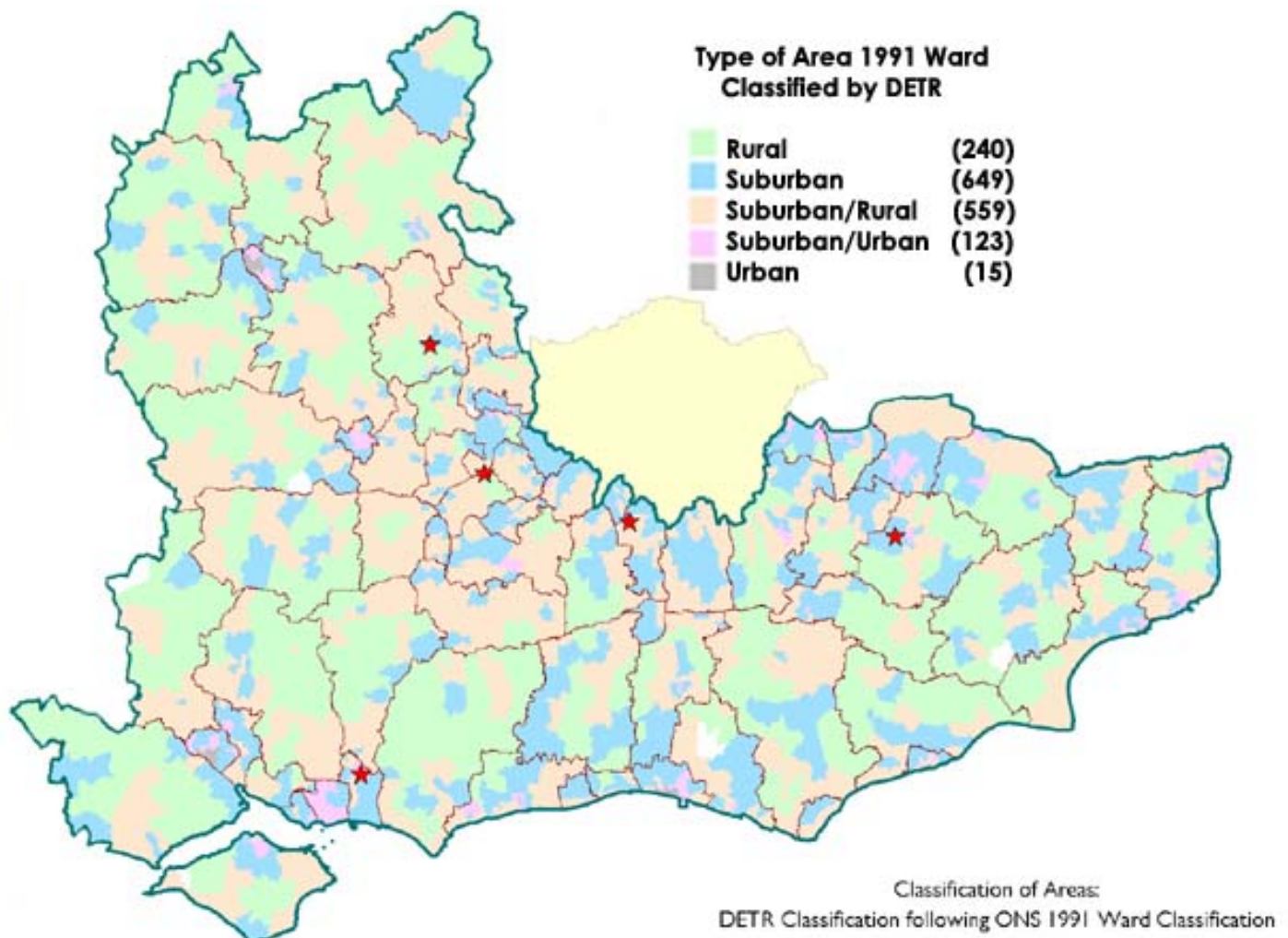
This report sets out the findings and recommendations from a five-month research project commissioned by the South East England Regional Assembly (the Assembly) on the need for a distinct focus on suburban issues in the South East Plan. It was prompted not only by concerns over the contribution that suburban areas could make to housing targets, but also by worries over whether some suburbs are ‘at risk’ of losing their attractions as places to live. Specifically the aims in the brief were to:

- *Investigate the potential for accommodating high quality mixed used development within urban areas*
- *Identify the policy implications for the South East Plan and Local Development Frameworks*
- *Advise on the appropriate focus of suburban renewal or improvement programmes.*

Unlike the Midlands and the North, which are dominated by major industrial towns and cities, the South East essentially consists of a series of suburbs superimposed on a historic pattern of market towns and villages, as a map based on the 1991 Census by OPCS illustrates (**Exhibit 1 Suburbs in the South East**).

Exhibit 1 Suburbs in the South East

★ Case Study Area



With high levels of housing demand, an over-stretched infrastructure, and relatively little brownfield land, what happens in its suburbs will not only determine the quality of life of most of its residents, but also influence progress towards improving the region's sustainability. Hence in responding to the *Sustainable Communities Plan* it is vital to understand the scope for improvement, renewal and development in the places where most people want to live.<sup>2</sup>

This research project follows on from work by a Suburbs Task Group of the Assembly's Urban Renaissance Advisory Group. It examines the potential benefits of a new draft suburban policy (see Appendix A) as opposed to the existing regional policy guidance in RPG9, and tests it against the wide variety of circumstances occurring throughout the South East. The brief stressed that

*'The existing policy framework applies generally to urban areas across the region...The Assembly is keen to ensure that the spatial strategy reflects the diversity of settlement patterns that exist in the region'.*

Initially through the Civic Trust, and subsequently through a network of local authorities under the name *In Suburbia*, suburbs have been shown to face a number of common problems.<sup>3</sup> These include *'the decay of the housing stock, local centres and facilities, and the shortage of housing and social variety'.* In *Suburbia* argues that *'prevention is cheaper than cure'.*

*'Action is required to encourage vibrant, sustainable suburbs which support the local economy and provide a better quality of life for residents, so that people choose to continue living in our suburban areas.'*

<sup>2</sup>ODPM - Sustainable Communities Plan *Making it happen*, 2003, ODPM

<sup>3</sup> LGA, SEERA, Civic Trust, Bury Metropolitan Borough Council, London Borough of Harrow, Hampshire County Council, Rushmoor Borough Council, *In Suburbia*, 2002, Hampshire County Council

Apart from pioneering work by The Civic Trust, the In Suburbia Group, and for the Greater London Plan (see, for example URBED report *City of Villages*<sup>4</sup>), suburbs in the UK have received surprisingly little attention from planners and researchers. Yet they are where 84%<sup>5</sup> of the population live in England and Wales, according to an analysis of the results of the 1991 Census by the Office of National Statistics (ONS). In the South East they are facing huge pressures for change (English Heritage has four to five times the case load of any other region outside London). Yet planning authorities feel over-stretched in most places, and so taking a more proactive approach can be daunting. Hence this study sought to break new ground both in developing tools for analysing the health of different kinds of suburban neighbourhood, and also in bringing together information from a wide range of sources. The project would not have been possible without a Steering Group of planners (**Exhibit 2**) who both reacted to the Inception Report and who helped to set up six illuminating case studies, as well as helping to validate our conclusions, and we would particularly like to pay tribute to all the time that John Pounder and Charlotte Webb have put into the project.

#### Exhibit 2 Steering Group Members

Nigel Barker	English Heritage
Jim Dunning	Wokingham District Council
Shelia Holden/ Peter Hitchen	Royal Borough of Windsor & Maidenhead
Brian Morgan	Maidstone Borough Council
Miranda Pearce	SEEDA
John Pounder	Regional Assembly
Paul Sanderson	Surrey County Council
Paul Slater	Wycombe District Council
Charlotte Webb (Chair)	Hampshire County Council

<sup>4</sup> URBED *A City of Villages: Promoting a sustainable future for London's suburbs*, GLA SDS technical report, 2002, GLA

<sup>5</sup> An analysis of the densities of different parts of England formed an appendix to one of the research reports that backed up the Urban White Paper, which then quoted the overall figure (Echenique M., Homewood R., *The Future of Suburbs and Exurbs*, 2003, Report for the Independent Transport Commission)

## Methodology

As the issues are very complex URBED used a number of different approaches:

- An inception report reviewed the available literature on suburbs and sustainability, including new research from the USA and work on the South East Regional Plan to
  - identify the key policy issues and drivers of change
  - suggest how to characterise a sustainable suburb
  - provide a framework for selecting and analysing representative examples
- An email survey was sent to over 75 local authority planning officers in both districts and counties to find out their:
  - experience with regard to suburbs
  - response to a hypothetical suburban policy
  - views on the key issues for improvement and renewal
  - interest in holding a workshop
- A ten point 'Score Card' was developed to provide a basis for assessing a neighbourhood's 'state of health' and priorities for action
- Five case studies and half day workshops were held across the region, focussing on places that were very different in their social and physical profile, plus a case study of a relatively new planned suburb
- Urban design assessments were undertaken of a range of opportunities for intensification
- FPD Savills undertook studies of the local property markets (produced as a separate report), which informed URBED's research and provided a different perspective. They also commented on the commercial viability of URBED's policy recommendations; summaries of their findings are contained in the case studies.
- The Civic Trust made available its earlier research, including unpublished reports, and contributed to our thinking on character appraisal.

## Report Structure

The main findings have been brought together in this report, and a set of case studies with ideas for improvement is available separately. The four sections answer the key questions in the brief, and deal in turn with:

1. Suburbs in the South East
2. Health checks of five case studies
3. Opportunities for positive change
4. Implications for strategic policy.

Three appendices provide supporting information on:

- A. A hypothetical policy for sustainable suburbs
- B. Results and analysis from the Planning Officers' survey.
- C. Lessons from Crawley

# 1. SUBURBS IN THE SOUTH EAST

This section considers whether new policies are needed to make suburbs more sustainable through the Regional Spatial Strategy and Local Development Frameworks. It addresses in turn:

- What defines a suburb?
- What do we mean by sustainable suburbs?
- How should they be classified?
- What are the key issues for planning?
- What is driving change?

## Defining a Suburb

The traditional British suburb is a compromise between living in the town and in the country. The brief set out to test a possible policy against a range of different types of suburb, and we were therefore asked to develop a typology. There have been a mass of attempts to produce definitions and typologies, but none are very satisfactory due to the range of factors that go to make up a suburb. The Civic Trust's pioneering report *Sustainable Renewal of Suburban Areas* for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) suggested there were six main types and gave examples. We have added examples from the South East (in brackets) – see **Exhibit 3**.<sup>6</sup>

### Exhibit 3 A suburban typology (examples from the South East in brackets)

Historic inner suburb e.g. Clapham
Planned suburb e.g. Bournville (Crawley, Sussex)
Social housing estate e.g. St Helier, Sutton (Leigh Park, Havant)
Suburban town e.g. Croydon (Basingstoke)
Public transport suburb e.g. Ruislip, Middlesex (Woking, Surrey)
Car suburb e.g. Bushey Park Hertsmere (Lower Earley, Reading)

Their report highlighted the distinction between 'public transport' and 'car suburbs', which tend to reflect the age or era in which the suburb was built. Hence these six broad types do not reflect the complexities that come from overlapping eras of development, which apply to most suburbs in the South East.

Our inception report therefore reviewed again what characterises a suburb (**Exhibit 4**). It identified a range of factors that can cause places to differ, including their age of construction, prevailing population, transport infrastructure, and housing demand, which we used in picking different types of place as case studies. Thus two areas with similar layouts, for example built in the inter-war period with semi-detached houses, can vary hugely if one is largely occupied by tenants of social housing, and the other is owner occupied.

The Civic Trust's report further points out: *'The term suburb is traditionally associated with a medium/ low density residential area, with homes and gardens of similar size and type, adjacent to the city but dependent on it for employment, services and trade.'*

However with most people in the South East living in suburbs of one kind or another, a

<sup>6</sup> Gwilliam M. et al. (Civic Trust with Ove Arup & Partners) *Sustainable Renewal of Suburban Areas*, Report for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 1998, York Publishing Services Ltd.

finer distinction is needed. Though they share a number of common characteristics, we found there are also as important differences, which are explored in the case studies in the following section.

#### Exhibit 4 Defining factors

##### Characteristics in common

- Predominantly residential areas
- Towards the edge of towns and cities
- Primarily favoured by and for families
- Serving an urban area(s)
- Relatively low density housing
- Mainly owner occupied
- Often with green, public spaces
- 'Detached' or semi-detached in terms of preferred living style

##### Important differences

- Desirability and value
- Age
- Location
- Access to public transport
- Parking provision
- Linkages with other places
- Road layout e.g. extent of cul-de-sacs
- Access to (and quality of) services (schools, health facilities, shops)
- Quality and quantity of open space

*'an identified centre focussed on public transport nodes... an area of higher density residential development close to the centre which will help to support the range of services... and their own distinctive character'.<sup>7</sup>*

Subsequent unpublished research by Arups with the Civic Trust found that it was not possible to come up with a distinct set of indicators at a neighbourhood level that could act as *'an alarm signal for neighbourhood change'*. Local people were far more concerned with parochial issues, like the state of the streets, than they were with the future state of the environment, and building a consensus proved elusive. While groups like In Suburbia have suggested concentrating on improving the quality of life, there is also a case for strategic policies at the regional or sub-regional level to secure the better use of land, to improve our stock of housing and to match development to the capacity of the infrastructure. These are not necessarily in conflict. Our inception report, based on a review of the literature, suggested that action at local level needs to address three main threats of emerging instability, changing lifestyles, and resource conservation even if these are not yet necessarily local priorities, and each of these is considered in turn.

#### Sustainable suburbs

One of the reasons for having a policy for suburbs is to make them more sustainable. Like suburb, sustainability is an ambiguous and over-used term. A distinction can be made between factors that cause a place to last and that are associated with quality of life, such as good local schools, and those that minimise the impact on the environment, such as reducing dependence on the car, or improving home insulation. The Civic Trust's report, like the hypothetical policy it inspired (see Appendix A) argued that sustainable suburbs should have:

#### Emerging Instability

In the desire to encourage the revitalisation of our city centres, and to secure an 'urban renaissance', it is easy to assume that the suburban areas where most people live are stable and not in need of any help from planners. Yet suburbs are also experiencing rapid change due to forces which planning has so far not addressed. A chapter in *City Matters*, one of the reports from the Economic and Social Research Council's

<sup>7</sup> Gwilliam M. et al. (Civic Trust with Ove Arup & Partners) *Sustainable Renewal of Suburban Areas*, Report for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 1998, York Publishing Services Ltd.

(ESRC) *Cities* research programme argues that:

*'the good suburbs are inherently unstable, inhabiting a tension field between exclusiveness, which attracts developers, over development, which threatens their popularity, and changing social fashions in housing, shopping and leisure, which undermines their prestige.'*<sup>8</sup>

As well as pressures on the more desirable places to live, there is also evidence that some of the worst pockets of deprivation are now to be found on isolated suburban Council estates, like Preston in Reigate and Banstead or Leigh Park in Havant, which formed two of our case studies. Isolated without good public transport, and with large numbers of children, plus the problems of concentrated poverty, a number of suburban housing estates are candidates for Neighbourhood Renewal. They can be identified not only through neighbourhood statistics but also through Mosaic or Acorn maps that show the socio-demographic profiles of different areas. While Leigh Park stands out because it has three contiguous wards in the top 20% of most deprived areas in the country, it reveals problems in terms of stigmatisation and attracting appropriate new development that may well apply to many other smaller pockets of social housing within areas of relative affluence.

There have also been occasional eruptions in the media about 'crises' that suburbs may be experiencing, with well-reported concerns about shortages of teachers and health workers, possibly linked to escalating house prices and a general lack of affordable housing. There are also concerns over whether suburbs built between the two World Wars may be losing part of their traditional appeal. A recent concern has been

the loss of front gardens to car parking, which has been said to encourage flooding (due to impervious nature of hard surfacing, there is more surface run-off). The setting up of research centres at Kingston University and in Cambridge should help sustain public interest in the importance of suburbs.

### Changing Lifestyles

While there are well-founded concerns about pockets of deprivation, the greatest reason for taking a new look at the state of the suburbs in the South East is the pressure to build more houses to accommodate the growing number of households without sacrificing residential quality. The *Barker Review* has reinforced government concerns about the low rate of house building, the potentially destructive effects of house price inflation on both the economy and social inclusion, and the implications of an ageing population, with many more households to be provided for. Kate Barker's most important contribution is likely to be her stress on responding to 'market signals', which suggest building many more homes in the areas where house prices have increased fastest or faster than the earnings of key workers.

As the South East as a whole, and the Western side in particular, has not experienced the same industrial decline as the Midlands and the North, it lacks a large stock of brownfield sites to accommodate new housing. Hence suburban intensification is starting to become an important issue for many local authorities we questioned. The very strength of the economy in the South East puts every available site under pressure, but does not always ensure that development suits the context. Hence more proactive forms of planning are needed if a balance is to be maintained. Thus superstores and retail parks have proliferated around every town, and in the process have sapped the viability

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<sup>8</sup>Bobby M., Parkinson M., *City Matters: competitiveness, cohesion and urban governance*, 2004, Bristol Policy Press.

of many local parades and small shops, which will not revive without assistance. With many more women going out to work, (as we highlighted in our inception report), there has been a sea change in shopping habits; for example the growth of 'one stop shopping' has been at the expense of many smaller centres and independent shops, and there is often an urgent need to find viable new roles for neighbourhood parades if empty shops are not to proliferate.

### Resource Conservation

Underlying the idea of intensifying neighbourhoods around shops or transport nodes is the goal of reducing the consumption of non-renewable resources, and unnecessary trips by car. Cutting unnecessary car use would also have other benefits for the environment, as it would remove the main cause of air pollution and noise. The impact of traffic on air quality and noise, and concerns about global warming, reinforce the case for adopting more sustainable life styles and patterns of development. Professor Yvonne Rydin in her draft for the *Findings* that would have accompanied the unpublished JRF research report on sustainable suburbs suggested that Britain was going down a route that led nowhere:

*'The research found that suburbs are in danger of supporting unsustainable lifestyles in terms of their environmental impact, current patterns of land use, travel behaviour, and excessive energy consumption. This is not an inevitable result of suburban development, as European examples highlighted, but arise from the particular form that British suburbs take. The dependence of many suburbs on car-use is a particular source of concern from this perspective.'*

Upgrading existing houses to meet modern standards of energy conservation would also reduce energy consumption, as would living at higher densities in better insulated homes.

Well-designed new houses could contribute to making suburbs more sustainable.

### Classifying Suburbs

Despite the appeal of a simple typology, we found that most suburbs cannot easily be classified into distinct types. This is because most suburbs contain a mix of different neighbourhoods that have built up over time. The ONS classification used in Exhibit 1 is helpful in understanding variations in physical character, and so too are maps showing differences in affordability (or incomes in relation to house prices), but they only explain some of the opportunities and constraints. So while it is possible to draw some useful distinctions at a sub regional level using GIS based maps, (which often offer better insights than statistics), we decided to focus on the neighbourhood as the basis for analysing different suburbs and the contribution they could make to the Government's plans and policies for sustainable communities. The concept of neighbourhoods has a good pedigree (and was for example used in the planning of Crawley New Town, which we used as one of our case studies). It is closely linked to the idea of local parades of shops and services, and schools, which help give suburbs their sense of identity. In analysing both the problems and opportunities we found there were significant differences in terms of age, location, density, and boundaries, but with no general rules.

### Age

There have been many books on suburbs, and some of the most helpful, such as Andrew Saint's study of *London Suburbs*, treat the subject historically. The most useful distinction relates to the era when the suburb was built, and URBED used this in *City of Villages* to understand the growth of

London's suburbs. A number of researchers have highlighted the differences between suburbs that developed on the back of the railway or tramway system in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, (which largely served as dormitories for armies of office workers), and those that grew up along the arterial roads of the inter-war period, or since the war. For example H P White in his regional history of the railways of Great Britain points out that the railways of Southern England were mainly engaged in transporting passengers, not freight, and created its 'urbanisation'.<sup>9</sup> The Southern Electrification from 1925 onwards enabled London to spread far beyond its boundaries, and made the South East quite different from the rest of England as a result. Each age or era tends to have different ideas about how to build, and the physical form, like the rings of a tree, provides a record of how towns have grown. Road layouts are shaped by the rules that transport engineers adopt, and go through periodic changes as priorities change. House styles last longer.

In the past the look of a suburban neighbourhood was determined by when it was built, with a clear contrast between Victorian villas and terraces, the inter-war semi on leafy curving roads, and the post war 'little boxes' built around cul-de-sacs. No doubt in time we will come to recognise the PPG3 neighbourhood as equally distinctive, though there is a danger that everywhere will come to look the same. However, as we found in the case studies, because very few places were developed at any one time, the patterns or layouts end up being much more complex. What seems to matter more is how the area has been managed, with visible distinctions between garden suburbs built by small private builders that are owner

occupied, and planned copies that were developed as public housing estates. As cities grow and patterns of movement change, the nature of suburbs is in a state of flux, which requires some method of being able to identify places that are at risk or that offer opportunities for sustainable intensification.

### Peripheral Locations

While a dictionary may define a suburb in terms of '*a residential area or community that is located just outside the town*' the reality is different. The growth of 'polycentric regions', accessed by car or on the Internet, is changing the basic geography of the South East. Developments around motorway junctions and bypass roundabouts are turning our towns inside out. With the growth of employment on the edge, particularly around the M25, suburbs are no longer just dormitories for London. A higher percentage of the workforce in rural areas is employed in manufacturing than in urban areas.<sup>10</sup> Along with the rise of the edge of town superstore and business park, the idea of employment centres surrounded by residential rings has broken down. Someone living on the edge of High Wycombe or Maidstone, if they have a car, may have a wider choice of employment, shopping, and leisure opportunities than if they lived in the centre, while an elderly person may end up completely isolated. There is a good argument for enabling those who do not have easy access to a car to live closer to town centres, as for example Wycombe is trying to do through its housing and planning policies.

### Low Density Layout

As it is not possible to classify suburbs by their location and relationship to centres of employment and retail, it is the side effects of low-density living that really characterise

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<sup>9</sup>White H.P., *Railways of Southern England*, 1964, David & C, See also his book *Greater London*, 1963, Phoenix House, which categorises suburbs in terms of inner and outer suburbs

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<sup>10</sup>Countryside Agency, *The State of the Countryside*, 2004



suburbs in the South East. Andrew Saint argues in his book *The London Suburb* that the inter-war semi was one of Britain's greatest contributions to architecture.<sup>11</sup> With local parades of shops and good public transport they served families very well. But with gardens front and rear, and falling household sizes, most households are now living at densities that are too low to support much in the way of local shops and services, whatever policies are adopted, now that 'one stop shopping' has largely taken over.

Furthermore, with more and more people living in post second world war cul-de-sacs, a good public transport service is often unviable. It is possible to map different housing densities, and to relate these to the transport network and local shops, but no two places are alike, as our case studies highlighted. The greatest differences of all are likely to come from the size of the plots, which determines density and affect the potential for redevelopment. There are well-established arguments for redeveloping large plots with a larger number of units, where this will help to strengthen communities (for example broadening the range of housing types), or in locations that are well served by public transport, particularly where there is spare capacity, or that are a short walk from the shops.<sup>12</sup>

### **Imprecise boundaries**

So does a precise definition matter, and how could useful boundaries be drawn? We talk about suburbs every day in Britain without being able to define precisely where the boundaries lie. The term is ambiguous, being used both to refer to a location somewhere in between an urban or a rural area, as well as to

a kind of lifestyle, essentially family oriented and nowadays largely car based.

Analysis of the 1991 Census referred to earlier, which was included in the Government's research for the Urban White Paper, classified the whole of Britain's urban areas into 47 different kinds of area ranked in terms of density. Broad distinctions were made between 'suburban urban', 'suburban' and 'suburban rural', which produced the conclusion that about 4/5ths of the population live in suburban areas.

Intriguingly little was counted as 'urban' in the South East, a term that was reserved for London. So far analyses of the 2001 Census, for example to produce a *Towns and Cities Database*, have not distinguished suburban areas, except in London; instead the ONS has classified local authorities in terms of the prosperity of their areas rather than their physical character. By contrast the London Plan makes a major distinction between suburban and urban areas according to the predominant density of housing in an area. It then uses the distinction to set different guidelines for both new housing development and parking standards. Importantly while there is some overlap between what used to be called Outer London, and what are now classified as suburban areas, there are urban centres and corridors even in what are predominantly suburban districts.

### **'The rule is that there are no rules'**

The research sought to establish whether suburbs could be classed according to a typology, which would then make the adoption of appropriate policies that much easier. In the USA, where suburbs have been on the political agenda for some years, they are sometimes classified into 'first' and 'second tier' suburbs according to when they were built. Many of the post war first tier suburbs now have similar problems to those

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<sup>11</sup> Saint A., *London Suburbs*, 1999, Merrell Holberton

<sup>12</sup> Llewellyn Davies *Sustainable Residential Quality: new approaches to urban living*, 1998, Report for London Planning Advisory Committee/DETR/Government Office for London

found in the inner cities, as the government's *State of the Cities Report* has highlighted, plus the added difficulties of reaching jobs and services in what has become an 'Exit Ramp Economy'.<sup>13</sup> But the sheer variety of patterns and forces at work, have led some experts in the USA to dispense with the idea of types, and to look instead at a range of characteristics. An influential book on American suburbs *Halfway to Everywhere* concludes that:

*'The most important generalisation that can be made about them is that no generalisations can be made about them...one typology does not fit all... the big metropolitan picture is that of a constellation of galaxies, or a patchwork quilt, polynodal, multinucleated.'*<sup>14</sup>

### Variations

In the South East, where most suburbs have evolved over many decades, most districts comprise different kinds of places in relatively close proximity, and so the idea of a simple typology becomes impractical. Instead an approach is needed that takes account of social and economic as well as physical factors, and which analyses a range of characteristics, such as age, densities and layout. The contrasts between the East and Western sides of the South East region reflect historic differences in economic structure and wealth. In turn these underlie differences in factors such as qualifications and the affordability of housing. But even within the same segment or sub region, wide variations can be found. A classic example is South Bucks, which includes Beaconsfield, and which has amongst the highest rates of car ownership and qualifications, whereas it borders on Slough, which has significantly lower rates. Hence we took an approach that is based on identifying neighbourhoods, and

put forward the idea of 'neighbourhood revival' as a more realistic alternative to suburban renaissance.

From the above review and discussions with the Steering Group it was evident that the best way forward is to recognise the difficulties of definition, but at the same time be aware of the common characteristics that suburbs share, as well as the important differences (**see Exhibit 4**). There is a long, if sometimes forgotten tradition, of planning at the neighbourhood level. By working at a neighbourhood level, rather than applying blanket policies drawn from urban areas generally, it should be easier to get community support, especially in the South East, as our workshops with Councillors on Higher Density Housing confirmed.

By considering residential neighbourhoods in relation to their local centres and adjoining industrial or commercial areas, the planning process can be made manageable, and efforts focussed where they can make most difference. For example, maps drawn from the 1991 Census<sup>15</sup> help to understand basic differences in density and location. Similarly Mosaic or Acorn maps showed differences in terms of social class or consumption habits. We have used both of these types of maps in selecting case studies that illustrate a wide range of situations (see separate report of the case studies). Though each case study is very different, there is enough in the way of overlapping issues to make them of general interest, and the findings on the kinds of action needed to make each place more sustainable are brought together in the next chapter.

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<sup>13</sup>HUD, *State of the Cities report*, 1999, US Department of Housing and Urban Development

<sup>14</sup>Hudnut H. W., *Halfway to Everywhere: A Portrait of America's First-tier Suburbs*, 2003, Independent Pub Group

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<sup>15</sup> Made available by South East England Regional Assembly

## Survey of Local Authority Planning Officers

To find out about the state of the suburbs, and the key issues we undertook an email survey of 75 heads of planning in both counties and districts. The survey secured a good response with nearly 2/3rds responding, including most of the counties.

### Extent of Suburbs

The survey of planning officers revealed significant differences between authorities, often in adjacent areas. Some districts see themselves as having over half their population living in suburbs, while others, particularly rural areas, do not think of themselves as having suburban areas at all and there are no other obvious patterns. Like many spatial terms the concept of a suburb is used very loosely, but with some notable exceptions, which may reflect historic relationships with London:

*'Approximately 10% of Berks is suburban compared with 4% urban and 0.5% in town centres- consequently significant suburban land will be expected to contribute towards Berks' housing requirement through the maximisation of previously developed land.'*<sup>16</sup>

Some planners who responded to the survey doubted the practicality of having a policy without being able to define precisely what a suburb is; others wondered whether it was possible to create an operational definition, or whether it was a suitable matter for regional guidance:

*'There is a danger that a policy dealing with suburbia raises the difficult issue of how to define a suburban area and what should happen to those areas not so defined.'*

*'A policy on suburban improvement is complicated by defining what a suburb is. However a sustainability 'toolkit' or 'good practice' type note for identifying*

*areas in need of improvement and developing a suitable strategy could be useful'*

*'Regional guidance is not appropriate for such guidance: a matter for Local Development Frameworks'*

### Need for Suburban Policies

The response from local authority planners confirmed our feeling that spatial planning is under fire for being out of touch with local or neighbourhood concerns, and for trying to make the same policy fit all kinds of situation. Despite a number of doubts a clear majority of those responding considered that the South East Plan should have specific policies for suburbs in it. However the replies suggested overall that while a policy was needed on suburbs, an hypothetical policy, drafted by the study Steering Group (see Appendix A) does not meet their need. It was considered too general to allow for all the types of place, and also too prescriptive. 13 respondents said no, and 9 were supportive in part, compared with 17 who said it provided a good starting point.

Comments included:

*'A good starting point but should be set in a wider context of looking at the role and potential for positive change in all urban areas'*

*'This should be part of general urban renewal policies' 'The policies for the region's urban areas should recognise their diversity and allow for an appropriate suite of measures to ensure improvement and renewal throughout'*

*'We would suggest its use for the larger suburban areas that are more distant from the urban centres.'*

*'The policy is unduly negative in suggesting that all suburbs are in need of improvement. In some cases there is a need to protect the quality of the suburbs also.'*

*'A more holistic approach is required to help us persuade existing residents that development can bring benefits to the area in terms of facilities, service provision and quality of the environment. Your draft policy appears to provide the framework but further*

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<sup>16</sup> Comment from the Berkshire Joint Structure Planning Unit

*work is needed on what is suburbia and what factors contribute to the quality of life'*

The main reason given for not having specific planning policies for suburban areas was that their needs are already covered by existing policies, as the following comments illustrate:

*'We have no proof or demonstration that suburban areas require a different policy framework from broader urban areas.'*

*'Policies on urban areas should apply equally to suburban and inner urban areas. Access to facilities and transport are issues that can apply to areas across the entire urban area.'*

*'The issues identified in the draft policy could apply to varying extents across all residential areas. Is it intended that there should be another policy for villages and yet another policy for large villages/ small market towns who would certainly not regard themselves as suburbs'*

*'... relevance to small market towns where residents would question whether there is any need to raise the quality of life and whether housing intensification and higher density developments would do so.'*

### Key Issues

We also tried to establish what the key issues were for suburban areas to see if there were some specific concerns that only applied to suburbs. One of the main current challenges for planners is accommodating new housing. The relative success of the economy in London and the South East, together with low rates of investment in house building, infrastructure and the public realm, have led to escalating house prices, along with public opposition to further development. Opinion surveys suggest that while most people say they would prefer to live in a village, there is particular opposition to building in them, and that there would be more support for building on the edge of town centres, or in planned town extensions. A continuing 'urban exodus' combined with strong opposition to development in the country is

likely to put the suburbs under increasing pressures.

Our inception report raised a number of possible issues for suburbs under the headings of accessibility, affordability, and town centres, and the Planners Survey identified nine possible issues, together with the opportunity to raise others (for tables see Appendix B). Roughly half the respondents highlighted three of these issues: housing intensification, improved services and quality design, with others receiving much lower responses. These resonated with issues that had been raised in a previous survey of *Councillor attitudes to higher density housing*, which suggests they probably reflect public opinion as a whole, and so are explored in more detail below.<sup>17</sup>

**Housing Intensification** Many Councils in the South East are drowning under applications for home extensions, as people extend into their lofts, build above the garage, or create a conservatory/extension in their back garden. For example Wokingham receives 2000 applications every year for extensions compared with 500 for new houses. But as well as enlarging homes, and converting front gardens into parking spaces for cars, developers are starting to identify houses with large plots for consolidation and intensification, e.g. two adjoining houses to create 12 apartments. Planners in more prosperous areas, such as to the West of London, are experiencing major conflicts between house owners who want to realise the value of their plots, and neighbours who want to retain the character of the area.

Relevant comments included:

*'Anecdotal evidence from people living in such areas would suggest that existing densities are what attracted to live in the area, and that raising densities*

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<sup>17</sup> URBED with MORI, *Attitudes to Higher Density Developments in the South East*, 2004, Report for the South East England Regional Assembly

*will erode quality of life rather than be seen as a critical part of renewal'*

*'(The Surrey Structure Plan Examination In Public) Panel accepted that infilling and replacement with more closely spaced or taller buildings has to be carefully designed and laid out. They concluded that failure to do so could result in town cramming, a poorer quality of life, and loss of identity.'*

**Improved Services** One of the major reasons for opposing more housing in the South East is that the infrastructure, i.e. schools and health services, is already overloaded. There are also common concerns about congestion, such as getting on to main roads at peak times. In the absence of any obvious tools for increasing capacity or financing it, it is not surprising that most residents want development to happen somewhere else. However priorities vary from place to place. Our previous survey, with MORI, of the attitudes of Councillors to higher density housing development found a marked difference between attitudes in Kent, and possibly East Sussex, where the priority is to raise incomes and employment levels and the rest of the South East. There is also an issue of how broad the scope of planning should be. Comments included:

*'The focus should not just be on renewal. Regeneration is important as is enlivening suburban areas'*

*'Greater emphasis should be put on the need to provide community facilities'*

**Quality Design** A common concern is that some of the qualities people value in our suburbs are being lost, and that new development is making them look worse rather than better. The many guides to good development tend to show examples from the centres of major provincial cities, and the best publicised housing schemes tend to be those on larger brownfield sites rather than those found in suburban areas. New developments in the suburbs are widely seen

as mediocre at best, and out of character at worst, and very few are entered for awards, let alone win them. An evaluation of a hundred recent housing schemes in the South East concluded that the:

*'dominance of highways infrastructure and limited evidence of bespoke design are damningly evident.'*<sup>18</sup>

So while there is a general recognition of the need to build more houses, as Kate Barker and other have argued, there are fears about opening up the 'floodgates' to housing that could be 'anywhere'. Comments included:

*'Safety is an important issue that needs to be promoted and addressed through high quality urban design'*

*'Need to recognise that there are extensive areas within suburbs the character of which residents want to retain'*

*'...policies that allow redevelopment that looks similar to surrounding area e.g. third floor may be in the roof space, but the new building might contain a number of flats. Key issue here is to ensure that parking is not a problem either logistically or visually'*

## Drivers of Change

URBED was asked to review the different forces at work that might affect the quality of life in the suburbs, and to look into the future to see how the situation could change, and this was covered in our inception report. The literature on sustainability is dominated by environmental concerns, whereas we believe the suburbs require a more holistic approach that takes account of their social and economic as well as their physical capital. Hence we have sought to distil trends from the latest Census along with predictions of what life could be like in 2020, drawing on a range of published research. Understanding the major drivers of change, and where they are leading, is important if planning is to

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<sup>18</sup> CABE, *Housing Audit: Assessment of Design Quality of New Homes*, 2004, CABE

address the causes and not just the symptoms of 'suburban instability'. But how feasible is it to 'buck the trends'? While planning often reinforces trends, there are examples where major shifts of behaviour have taken place in response to an overwhelming challenge or crisis. Examples include war time food rationing which improved health standards; the Clean Air Act which banished domestic fires and hence smog; and more recently the banning of smoking in public places, and the introduction of Congestion Charging in London. So trends are by no means irreversible, given the will.

### Economic Trends

The most powerful trends tend to be those that shape job and earnings prospects. On the face of it the South East has been prospering with nearly full employment, and has benefited most from the shift to a service economy. However over the last decade a revolution has taken place that may not be sustainable. A new analysis of the Census *People and Places: a 2001 Census Atlas of the UK* by Dorling and Thomas, argues that the North-South divide is no longer a regional division. They suggest that the London metropolis stretches as far as Bristol (making it important to consider the inter-relationships, which may well be changing).<sup>19</sup> The authors assert:

*'The South is London, and London is the South and regional divisions are meaningless. This is a single functioning place: the London metropolis. The archipelago of the provinces is made up of a city cluster of islands and their hinterlands.'*

A particularly important set of trends concerns the viability and vitality of smaller local centres, which in the past gave many suburbs their identity. As trade and investment has shifted towards the centres of historic towns, like Guildford for example,

and towards the top 200 town centres that now account for 75% of spending on non food shopping compared with 50% twenty years ago, as well as to out of town centres and superstores, so local centres are losing many of their traditional shops, and are having to find new roles. While the decline of the small food shop may seem inexorable, there are also areas of growth, like eating out or other forms of service, which in many centres are taking their place. Indeed local centres could even make a come-back as people at home during the day, including those working at home, look for an excuse to go out for a cup of coffee or a book.

Some of the trends in the changing nature of employment over the last ten years are startling, as *People and Places: a 2001 Census atlas of the UK* graphically reveals. For example the numbers employed in banking and finance in the UK grew from 2.9 to 4.1 million from 1991 to 2001, largely in the South East, and overtaking manufacturing for the UK as a whole. Many of the new offices are involved in some aspect of financial services, which now employs more than 10% of the population in almost all London boroughs, and 34 of the districts of the South East. In contrast manufacturing has continued to lose jobs, and with it skilled jobs, while nationally the numbers in 'elementary occupations' rose from 2.1 to 3.2 million. Technological change has also reduced the prospects for those without higher skills, particularly as the number of jobs in personal services and secretarial and administrative positions has also declined.

Other well-recognised trends include:

- The ascendance of Information Technology
- The dispersal of employment to areas off motorways with plenty of parking (fuelling the growth of car usage)
- The growth of women in employment, often in poorly paid part-time jobs

<sup>19</sup>Dorling D., Bethan T., *People and Places: A 2001 Census atlas of the UK*, 2004, The Policy Press

- Skill shortages, and the transfer of jobs abroad.

In future while economic forces may continue to turn cities inside out, there maybe an increasing stress on working from home, which requires homes that are large enough to accommodate an office either in the home or in the garden. Research in Horsham found that over ten percent of houses had a business run from them, often linked to property in some way. Suburbs have traditionally attracted the very people most likely to start successful small businesses, whereas new development rarely provides much in the way of smaller units.

Also, with an ageing population and limited pensions, working lives are likely to get longer. People who once might have retired to the seaside may want to stay where there is access to part-time jobs, or where they can look after an ageing parent. Also with increasing instability and lack of prospects for internal promotion, house-buying couples will want to live where they can access a range of jobs without having to move far. This puts a premium on locations close to motorway junctions, and houses that are large enough to hold a mass of equipment and possessions. It will also put increasing pressure on the area classified by the ONS as 'Prospering Southern England' in the West of London.

### **Social Trends**

Though many suburbs look unchanged on the surface, many residents have significantly different lifestyles from a generation ago. There is evidence that there has been a shift from communal to more individual means of satisfaction, and in many places a decline in voluntary activity. As the numbers of households increase, and as young people continue to return to the 'nest' because of difficulties in finding a place they can afford,

so the demands for improving the quality of life in suburban neighbourhoods will intensify. This could particularly affect the role of local centres, with some of them going 'up market' to cater for increased affluence with places to 'eat and meet', while others contract or go 'down market', as for example charity shops take the place of shops that once sold new goods.

Well-established trends include:

- Home based leisure is leading to fewer public communal activities.
- Deserted streets and local centres along with crowded pub 'circuits' in towns as redundant shops are given over to the 'evening economy' make older people feel less secure; the media has fuelled concerns about personal safety even when the trends have been the other way.
- Houses have been extended to accommodate an increasing number of possessions (over the last decade the number of rooms in each household rose by 10%), and conservatories and sunrooms have boomed.
- Demands have increased for separate bathrooms, and to house children who cannot afford to leave the 'nest', now that children are unlikely to be independent before their mid-twenties.
- In some of the more prosperous suburbs what were built as 'granny annexes' have ended up as 'nanny annexes' as women go out to work, and use their earnings to pay for child care.

In future it is possible that with an increasingly ageing population, living on fixed incomes, we will see more sharing, with 'expanded families' making full use of all the space that suburbs can offer. It is possible that town centres will recover their social role, and become primarily places to meet others, rather than simply buy goods and services. One likely response to an inflexible

housing market, and concerns about savings, is the growth in people renting out part or all of their homes, as they used to do in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Pressures on space and to create new sources of income will encourage people to sell off spare space, including back gardens, if they are allowed to do so, and possibly build small homes at the back. Larger homes may be used to care for elderly relatives who cannot afford to live on their own or in a retirement home. At the same time, other 'empty nesters' will be downsizing into more manageable homes, possibly within walking distance of the town centre, creating a market for different kinds of property.

### Physical Trends

The combination of economic and social trends is likely to call for new kinds of housing. No longer is it the norm for everyone to 'go up to town on the 8.20 train'. The front garden is often given over to parking, the garage holds unused possessions, the spare room may be used by a grandparent, children may return to using their rooms after university, and the garden shed is a home office for operating in the knowledge economy! A fundamental constraint on development in the South East however is the capacity to accommodate more cars. With almost universal access to cars, and a decline in bus usage outside cities like Oxford, the real constraint may be the number of cars that people can park in front of their house, so long as car travel continues to be relatively cheaper than public transport and has a higher status.

Significant trends include:

- More people going out to work, and working longer hours, has encouraged the growth of 'one stop shopping', resulting in a loss of traditional local food shops; with filling stations developing their role as convenience shops

- Parents driving children to school is leading to fewer people on the streets and may encourage car usage (and increases congestion at peak times)
- Rising energy prices are likely to increase the pressures for insulating 'leaky' houses, and making them more airtight, and will reinforce the trend towards building flats rather than detached houses.

The report of the Government's Sustainable Development Commission, *Shows promise, but must try harder*, contrasted Labour's commitment to cut congestion on trunk roads and in urban areas, with the continuing annual rise in traffic levels of between one and two percent since 1999.<sup>20</sup> In part this is because people are travelling much further. As people move to locations that are accessible to a range of jobs, and now travel on average 30 miles a day (compared with 5 miles a day in 1950), so peak hour congestion continues to grow however much the roads are improved. In the suburbs most trips to work are by car (four fifths in Outer London), and many people live too far from reliable public transport for it to be seen as a practical alternative. Almost 40% of people in Bracknell Forest commute daily by car, and South Bucks has the distinction of the most households with three or more cars (16%). Even for those who could use public transport, the costs of car use have fallen relative to public transport, and suburban buses and trains are seen as unreliable and inferior, rather than as a good choice. The cost of providing new high quality public transit systems of around £50 million a mile (compared with £2 million for a new station) is proving too high to enable schemes like the proposed South Hampshire tram to go ahead. Simply increasing road capacity will do little to reduce congestion, as traffic grows to fill the space available.

<sup>20</sup> Sustainable Development Commission, *Shows promise. But must try harder*, 2004, SDC



Well-publicised predictions by Marcel Echenique for the Commission for Independent Transport regarding the growth of traffic suggest that congestion will rise by 40% over the next 20 years.<sup>21</sup> Using the National Travel Survey, he calculates that the car is currently used for 64% of journeys in the suburbs, and that the average journey to work is likely to rise from 25 minutes to 35 minutes. This is partly a result of more people moving to the suburbs, and also using their cars more to get to work. The numbers without a car are forecast to drop from 40% to 20% by 2021, and though the number of trips will stay constant, people will be travelling further, particularly from the rural areas.

In future we may learn to tame the car, and to make full use of the alternatives, particularly if car use is made relatively more expensive, and public transport is better integrated. Whatever the increases in road building, the South East can never accommodate an American way of life without great losses to the heritage and quality of life that many in the South East prize. Hence the most basic argument for trying to make the suburbs more sustainable is to save the waste of resources lost in longer journeys or controversial and expensive road building programmes. There is a host of tools available to reduce dependence on the car (see for example URBED's *Tomorrow's Suburbs: Making London's Suburbs More Sustainable*)<sup>22</sup>. It is possible that ideas pioneered in historic towns like Oxford or in London will be taken up in other areas.

A further constraint on the physical infrastructure is the utilities and particularly the supply of water, and the sewer system. The greatest waste of all is when capital that

has been accumulated over generations is neglected or run-down through lack of reinvestment or maintenance. Much more effort is going into developing new communities than making the most of what we have inherited, and infrastructure tends to be taken for granted. However pioneering spatial plans, such as the *Sustainable Suburbs Study* in Calgary Canada, do offer a possible model, by showing the range of tools that could be used to cut resource use.<sup>23</sup> The Calgary report argues that:

*Providing transportation is the single most expensive element in developing new communities. City-supplied transportation services, including streets, traffic operations, street lighting and transit, are expected to represent 60% of the costs of growth over the next ten years'*

The sites that have not yet been developed for housing often involve higher costs as they suffer from contamination, flooding, or a lack of services, as in much of the Thames Gateway. Consequently intensification, that is getting more people to live in existing areas, should produce real savings.

Constraints on the social infrastructure include over-subscription to the best state schools, with many moving into an area to take advantage of these. However as house prices rise, teachers and other key workers are having difficulty in finding somewhere to live. There are also capacity problems in terms of insufficient primary health care facilities. However an expansion of Primary Care through group medical practices, possibly using redundant space in local shopping centres, and an encouragement of 'healthier living' could reduce pressures on the health services.

<sup>21</sup>Echenique M., Homewood R., *The Future of Suburbs and Exurbs*, 2003, Report for the Independent Transport Commission

<sup>22</sup> URBED, *Tomorrow's Suburbs: Tools for Making London's Suburbs More Sustainable*, 2004, GLA (Unpublished)

In Germany, where there are 51 cars for every hundred people compared with 40 in Britain, and

<sup>23</sup> City of Calgary, *Sustainable Suburbs Study*, 1995, City of Calgary

with a ten percent higher GDP per capita, people only travel 70% of the distance travelled each year in Britain. The difference is explained partly by more people living at higher densities close to town and city centres, but also by people using an integrated public transport system, with good suburban bus services, including tramways in cities, good interchanges, and much greater use of cycling. In Freiburg, which is probably the most sustainable city, car use fell from 1976 to 1999, public transport rose from 22% to 28% of all trips, while cycle use rose from 18% to 29%. The number of people driving to work in London turns out to have been falling even before the introduction of the Congestion Charge, and in Central London and Cambridge households with three cars or more have fallen.

### Property Markets

The rate at which we develop our housing stock and adapt our town centres is substantially affected by property developers and investors. In the past they have played safe, and have been reluctant to invest in mixed-use schemes or rented property. There has been a huge growth of supermarkets at the expense of traditional independent shops because private investment has been concentrated in the larger centres and in out-of-town centres where parking is easy to provide. Additionally, with major doubts over the returns from pensions and life insurance, and a fall in the Stock Market, private funds have been invested in houses, and there has been a spectacular growth in the 'buy to let' market.

Developers are already spotting the opportunities for developing apartment blocks on the edge of town, supported in part by households acquiring properties to let, but this source of funding may disappear if there is a collapse in house prices. A pattern of living more like that found on the Continent may develop where people defer buying a house until they are in their 30's and

earning sufficient to support a mortgage. More and more want to combine a small flat in a major city or historic town with another place in the country or on the coast or even abroad. However many others are excluded altogether from the owner occupied property market, due to high property prices, and relatively low rates of inflation. New ways must be found to enable young people to get into the property market when they want to settle down. The South East Plan calls for 'creative solutions' to the form and design of new development, but we also need innovations in housing finance, for example through equity sharing and equity release schemes. Real Estate Investment Trusts (REITs) could therefore have a very important role to play in providing a wider range of affordable housing, and suburbs could provide the kinds of sites that will be required.

### Planning Frameworks

Planning has to cope with rising expectations and responsibilities, such as providing for community engagement with ever less resources. Although the government is now encouraging proactive planning, e.g. the use of development frameworks and masterplans, there are many suburbs and their problems are too complex to receive the attention that they need. Hence a new kind of planning is needed, that seeks to harness the energy and concerns that people in suburban neighbourhood have been putting into their home improvements.

The Civic Trust's original report by Michael Gwilliam et al *Sustainable Renewal of Suburban Areas* in 1998, drew attention to suburbs as the 'neglected field', and argued for responding to the problems they presented, rather than trying to impose national policies: *'To simply 'impose' housing development quotas on a suburb, without engaging with its local community and its problems, is, however, likely simply to create a*

*resistance and increase the weariness and hostility with which some suburban communities already tend to react to proposals for change and development'*

Subsequent action research funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (but unpublished) found that it was impossible to resolve conflicting priorities through reliance on neighbourhood statistics alone. This was partly due to their limitations, and the difficulties of engaging with communities who only emerge to oppose development proposals. But it was also due to fundamental differences between environmental sustainability (which primarily concerns government), and quality of life issues (which is where residents and councillors have most worries). There was no simple way of taking account of specific neighbourhood problems, and ensuring that some improvements were made to local services.

But the promotion of environmental sustainability does not have to be in conflict with improving the quality of life. Some local authorities already recognise the potential for playing more of an enabling role, and for responding to concerns for a 'cleaner, greener, safer environment'. Several of the authorities in our case studies have been at the forefront of efforts to promote an urban renaissance in the South East. At the same time, we may see a reversal of the trends towards the centralisation of power, with local authorities playing a more proactive role, as the implications of the *Egan Review of Skills* and the *Balance of Funding Review*, now under Sir Michael Lyons, are gradually acted upon. This includes finding ways in which the communities in local neighbourhoods can become involved in improving the public realm, and funding improvements to the environment out of the value created by development.

Furthermore the requirement to produce Statements of Community Involvement, along with maturing Local Strategic Partnerships, and the requirement for Regional Transport Strategies to be an integral part of Regional Spatial Strategies, should provide a solid basis for harnessing market forces. So too could appealing to the interest of homeowners in maintaining property values, and providing a better future for their children. Hence we should not assume that recent trends will continue forever.

Securing a 'step change' towards more sustainable suburbs has to start with a recognition that current trends and practices are simply unsustainable. However with so many competing priorities, and limited resources at their disposal how should planners decide where to focus, and can indicators help? The key is planning for the longer term, in fiscal as well as social and environmental terms. The Calgary report argues that a more sustainable community will reduce infrastructure and maintenance costs, and make more efficient use of land and environmental protection. It will also create a greater sense of belonging, with wider housing choice. A move towards sustainable suburbs thus involves making better use of existing physical and social capital, which is why URBED has developed a simple Neighbourhood Score Card system, which we applied to the five case studies.

## Conclusions

Our review of the literature, and the views of planning officers, provides a number of reasons for focussing on managing neighbourhood change within the suburbs:

1. While suburbs may be hard to define, and can be grouped into many overlapping types, depending, for

- example, on their age, location, and density, they are where most people in the South East live (and vote), and are one of the factors that makes much of the region distinctive, and different from either pure urban or rural areas.
2. Planning officers are concerned about how to define suburbs, and how far they are different from other areas. Rather than dividing them into distinct types, we recommend identifying them on the basis of a range of characteristics, and then taking a neighbourhood approach, which considers both their physical and social capital, and how well they are doing.
  3. Though few suburbs in the South East are likely to have the problems experienced in the 'first tier' suburbs in the USA, some could face threats to their stability and lifestyles if action is not taken first. They are also likely to be the places where cuts in energy consumption can most readily be made, for example through improved home insulation, or a reduction in the use of cars for short trips. Hence efforts to make communities more sustainable need to take account of their distinct issues and opportunities.
  4. Suburban areas in many parts of the South East are facing pressures for intensification, as a result of rising house prices and changing demands, such as the growing number of households. However local people and councillors are concerned about the capacity of services to cope with an increased population, and the poor quality of many new developments. Planning officers want help in dealing with the issues of housing intensification, improved services, and quality design.
  5. The underlying drivers of change include not only economic, social and physical trends, but also the relationship between planning and the property market. In particular rising congestion as a result not only of growing car use but also changing travel patterns as jobs become more dispersed poses a huge challenge to most people's quality of life. Any progress towards developing a more sustainable (and fairer) society depends on changing lifestyles and behaviour in the suburbs, not just in the centres of towns and cities. Hence it is crucial to find practical ways of engaging communities in the planning process, and not just leaving them to erupt in opposition every time an application for building new houses is made.
  6. Sustainability involves more than just making buildings last and reducing the consumption of natural resources, and a policy for sustainable communities must involve more than building energy efficient housing estates. Hence a means is needed of agreeing on wider priorities that do not rely on indicators alone, and that can be readily applied without taking too much officer time. The concept of 'health checks' and of using the planning process to help increase the stock of both social and physical capital may provide useful tools.
  7. While the idea of 'sustainable suburbs' may seem a contradiction in terms, the approach we have taken in this report is that by identifying neighbourhoods where development is both needed and feasible, and by starting with people's concerns and priorities, the capacity and resources might be found to manage neighbourhood change in a much less wasteful and confrontational way. Hence rather than setting impossible targets, and

hoping that high minded policies will eventually change people's minds, or responding to whatever planning applications come forward, it may be more productive to take a proactive approach to managing suburban change, which means dealing with neighbourhoods as a whole.

8. The case studies have therefore been used not only to assess the potential for housing intensification, that is building more homes, but also to identify the scope for improving their quality of life,

and hence avoiding the danger of them becoming like some inner city areas where people live out of necessity rather than choice. The idea of a Neighbourhood Score Card as a means of reaching a consensus rapidly on priorities enables suburbs to be seen as far more than just housing estates. Broad conclusions are set out in the next section, and the full case studies are provided in a separate report, which also includes summaries of findings from FPD Savills research into the property market in each of the areas.

## 2. HEALTH CHECKS OF FIVE SUBURBS

Having examined the literature and sought the views of planning officers, we set up five representative case studies to explore the issues and opportunities they faced, and the implications for the South East Plan. A sixth shorter study provided inspiration from a New Town. The case studies were selected to represent a range of situations. We established the Neighbourhood Score Card, to assess how well they were doing, and to identify opportunities for improvement and positive change in a systematic way. We also undertook an urban design assessment of a different kind of opportunity for intensification in each case study area. Finally we drew on a report by FPD Savills on the local property market to help validate our conclusions, which are set out in the next section. This section deals in turn with:

- How can you assess the health of a suburb?
- What is the Neighbourhood Score Card?
- What is the state of the physical capital?
- What is the state of the social capital?

### Methodology

#### Case Study Selection

Within the constraints set by the brief we picked suburbs that would illustrate the potential for improvement or renewal in contrasting parts of the region, and with different characteristics in terms of age, location and boundaries. Our inception report suggested securing a mix in terms of four main factors, which we broadly followed:

- Income levels (and access to employment)

- Proximity to a town centre or railway station
- Economic role e.g. London dormitory, coastal town
- Property values e.g. hot spot, average or at risk

We also suggested that as districts are made up of neighbourhoods and centres that have coalesced over time, there is a need to think in terms of ‘transects’ or ‘strings’, for example running along the railway lines or main roads, picking up where possible on well established names, which can often be taken from local maps, rather than the names of wards, which are often artificial. Suburbs need to be seen as integral parts of urban agglomerations, rather than as self-contained areas, which is why maps are often better than statistics. The initial three case studies were selected through suggestions from the Steering Group and the responses to the questionnaire. The final three were chosen to achieve a balance between the different suburban characteristics. The case studies cover not only different types of location and ages of development, but also reflect differences in market conditions as well.

Significantly the populations of the suburbs we studied seem to average around 6 or 7,000, plus or minus 2,000 (which is in line with the original plans for Crawley). The more prosperous areas such as Sunningdale have lower populations, reflecting their lower densities. Leigh Park is an anomaly, as it has a population of 27,000 but should really be seen as four different neighbourhoods.

#### Exhibit 5 The Case Studies

- **Sunningdale** in Windsor & Maidenhead is a rural suburb and one of the most prosperous and desirable places in Britain. It was first developed in the late Victorian and Edwardian era, and is now undergoing major

renewal. It raises the issue not only of how to control intensification without losing an area's basic character, but also how to accommodate an increasing population without overstressing schools and health services.

- **Cressex** in High Wycombe, also on the urban fringe, was developed first in the 1930's, and Cressex Road is a long street of semis, with large gardens. The road now lies close to a junction on the M40, next to one of the largest business parks in Buckinghamshire and an out of town retail and leisure park, in a part of the town that is still expanding, with plenty of new housing. The case study raises the issues of how to deal with the pressures for redevelopment of inter-war houses with large gardens along a road that still has considerable character and which provides family housing.
- **Tovil** in Maidstone, a suburb just a mile from the town centre, is a Victorian industrial areas, which has gone through progressive phases of development, including a 1920's Council estate, part of which is to be redeveloped at higher densities. It raises the issues of not only how to manage growth, but also how to break down divisions within the community, and how to develop complex sites in ways that strengthen the social infrastructure.
- **Tadworth** on the edge of Reigate and Banstead and Epsom Downs also includes a major housing estate in the Preston ward, where poverty levels contrast hugely with the prosperous roads on the edge, which were built before the First World War, and the thriving local centre. It raises the issues of how to bring different parts of a community together, and how to use development sites to make the area as a whole more sustainable.
- **Leigh Park** in Havant is classified altogether as a suburban area, and was built to create a new community on the edge of Portsmouth after the last war, largely in local authority housing. The local authority and SEEDA

have been engaging the community in plans for redeveloping areas, including housing built on Radburn principles, and a major former industrial site. It raises the issues of how to regenerate former Council estates built at relatively low densities, how to tackle pockets of deprivation, and how to promote a sense of identity and pride.

- **Tilgate** in Crawley was developed as one of nine neighbourhoods in one of the first New Towns to be built after the last war, and consists largely of terraced housing built in the 1950s, with denser housing around the local centre. Crawley is booming thanks to its easy access to London and Gatwick Airport. The partial case study provided a valuable source of inspiration in showing how many of the problems facing other suburbs could be tackled. Crawley's success can be judged by a growing population (up 10,000 over the last ten years), rising house prices, with a high proportion of former public housing now owner occupied, and high satisfaction ratings in surveys.

### Structure

Each case study involved an initial briefing and tour to understand the context and to identify possible problems and opportunities. We prepared a profile bringing together the neighbourhood statistics and indicators that proved most useful, and drew from maps provided by the Assembly. The local authority then convened a half day workshop with a cross section of people, wherever possible involving representatives of the local community as well as agencies, planners and other local authority officers.

Each workshop followed a similar format except for the one in Crawley, where we concentrated on the lessons that could be drawn from a successful suburb in an area experiencing growth pressures. The workshops were designed to take half a day to allow for maximum participation. Each

started with a review of the type of place, using a PowerPoint presentation to stimulate discussion. The participants were then broken into two groups to assess separately the physical and social capital, before getting together again to agree the main priorities, and opportunities for improvement and renewal. We also tested out ideas for possible policies. A report on each case study was fed back with ideas on what policies were needed, and comments were incorporated

The case studies were also used to help FPD Savills undertake a market assessment of each area, and participants were therefore asked about what there was too much of or too little of in terms of housing and other property in each area. The case studies are set out in a separate report, and this section brings together some general conclusions, along with examples from our findings.

### **Neighbourhood Score Card**

For this project URBED developed a method of a Neighbourhood Score Card, which is based on a number of factors known to lead to sustainability. The Score Card is designed to give equal weight to social as well as to physical considerations, and to enable groups of stakeholders to agree on priorities. The idea is that just as investors judge a company by its balance sheet, and not just by the profit or turnover achieved in any one year, so we should look at a neighbourhood in terms of whether development is adding to or reducing its physical and social capital. To make this operational, a simple set of ten factors was devised, each starting for memorability with the letter C. There are 20 questions (two for each of the ten themes), which can be used to evaluate the current state, and to agree a set of priorities. The derivation of the Score Card is outlined below.

Following our inception report, we suggested that policy efforts need to focus on two main priority issues, conserving character, and improving connectivity, but that others would emerge from the case studies. We also wanted to pay particular attention to the issues of assessing and increasing the capacity of local health and education services.

However it is important not to come with pre-conceived ideas about what is good or bad in an area. We therefore developed the idea of assessing Environmental or Physical Capital, (which CAG Consultants and Land Use Consultants devised for the Countryside Agency and English Heritage), and have turned this into a simple assessment of the main physical factors we believe influence how well a suburb functions.<sup>24</sup> We have also applied the concept of Social Capital, which sociologists like Robert Putnam (*Bowling Alone*) have promoted.<sup>25</sup> A simple checklist picks up both the main policy issues and drivers of change. The framework was essentially an experiment, and no doubt could be refined through further research (such as taking account of local opinion surveys).

While in practice it may not be feasible to cover all of the factors equally, the Neighbourhood Score Card provided a useful starting point or checklist for discussing the priorities for improvement and renewal. The Score Card was validated and improved in the first workshop at Sunningdale, and proved capable of being used with a variety of different groups. We found it works best when there are representatives from the community, such as councillors, as well as officers. The Score Card was firstly filled in individually and then

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<sup>24</sup> CAG Consultants, Land Use Consultants, 1998, *Environmental Capital*, Countryside Agency, English Heritage, English Nature, Environment Agency

<sup>25</sup> Putnam R., *Bowling Alone*, 1995, Simon and Schuster



responses were compared, with the URBED facilitator enabling agreement on a group score. The ten elements of the Score Card are outlined in **Exhibit 6**, along with the

twenty questions we used to assess them. The results for each of the case studies are set out in the separate report.

#### Exhibit 6 Neighbourhood Score Card

- \* 1. Poor
- 2. Adequate
- 3. Good

- \*\* 1 to 5 where
- 1 = least important and
- 5 = very important

A. Physical capital	Score*	Rank**
<b>1. Choice</b>		
• can the area accommodate the stages in a family's life cycle?		
• does it offer a mix of house types and affordability?		
<b>2. Connectivity</b>		
• can you reach services and jobs without too much stress?		
• are there basic shops and quality open space within easy walking or cycling distance?		
<b>3. Conservation</b>		
• are natural resources being saved e.g. energy, water, materials (waste)?		
• is bio-diversity being encouraged e.g. trees, wildlife?		
<b>4. Character</b>		
• does the area look attractive and cared for?		
• has new development enhanced the area?		
<b>5. Commerce</b>		
• are there other uses in the area, such as employment or leisure?		
• are there places to set-up a business?		
<b>B. Social capital</b>		
<b>1. Community</b>		
• do people feel a sense of pride?		
• does the area readily accept newcomers?		
<b>2. Civic life</b>		
• are there enough places to meet others e.g. pubs, clubs, open spaces?		
• are the shops and services welcoming?		
<b>3. Crime</b>		
• do residents feel safe when they go out?		
• do residents feel their property is safe?		
<b>4. Climate for enterprise</b>		
• is it a good place to start a business?		
• is there sufficient purchasing power to support local businesses?		
<b>5. Capacity (and quality) of services</b>		
• can you get to see a doctor without a long wait?		
• can you get into an acceptable secondary school without a long journey?		

## Findings on Physical Capital

Physical or environmental capital comprises buildings, ranging from houses to shops, and the infrastructure, for example roads and schools, and public spaces. Top of the list in terms of the priorities set by most of the workshops were the elements of choice and connectivity. These also happen to be the two key factors which Bruce Katz, an American expert on the state of the suburbs, has highlighted as being critical to regeneration in his important review of lessons from US experience for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.<sup>26</sup>

### Choice

To be sustainable suburbs need to accommodate different stages in a family's life cycle, and to offer a mix of houses in terms of types and tenure. Building more housing has become a national political priority, as a result of household growth and house price inflation, and this is of course reflected in regional guidance, which encourages higher density development around transport hubs. Access to affordable housing is crucial to economic growth as well as social well-being. However there is a danger of losing choice as a result of demolishing houses unnecessarily where land values are highest, and not providing the kind of housing that will make the district as a whole more sustainable.

Progress towards sustainable communities calls for a review of all the sources of sites for new homes, rather than just relying on selected Growth Areas and former industrial sites. Given the predominance of suburbs in the South East planners need to be asking what role suburbs should be playing in the general supply of housing. URBED's report

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<sup>26</sup> Bruce Katz, *Neighbourhoods of choice and connection*, 2004, Joseph Rowntree Foundation

for Friends of the Earth *Tomorrow: a peaceful path to urban reform*, highlighted a range of sources such as sub-division of larger under-occupied property, previously developed vacant land, and living over the shop, as well as land likely to fall vacant and reclaimed derelict land.<sup>27</sup> Subsequent guidance we produced for the ODPM on *Tapping Housing Potential*, found that local authorities tended to ignore small sites that yielded less than ten units even though in practice they often account for the bulk of new housing supply. The report by Barker Associates<sup>28</sup> for the Assembly on assessing housing capacity questions the idea of using trends in 'windfalls', and argues for systematically identifying the areas of greatest potential. The *Barker Review* suggests building more homes where market signals suggest that the housing market is becoming over-stretched.

Our case studies found significant opportunities for widening choice in all the case study areas. Intensification was already happening in the more prosperous suburbs like Sunningdale and Cressex. This was not just in terms of home extensions, which can be seen almost everywhere, but also in proposals to demolish houses in large plots and replace them with more units. There was also a slight trend towards intensification around transport nodes and near shops, suggesting that PPG3 is starting to take effect. However new developments were doing little to widen choice except in Tovil, where the priority was seen as widening choice at the upper end rather than increasing the amount of social housing. There was a problem in areas with lower land values, such as Leigh Park or Tovil, in finding

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<sup>27</sup> URBED *Tomorrow: a peaceful path to urban reform*, 1998, Friends of the Earth

<sup>28</sup> Baker Associates, *Tapping the Housing Potential*, 2004, for SEERA

developers prepared to take on mixed use development:

- In Sunningdale (Windsor & Maidenhead) many large old houses along the London Road are being redeveloped, often for apartments. The demand for housing is so strong that a high-density block of houses has been shoehorned into a narrow site next to the station platform. Developers are required to provide a proportion of affordable housing if they build more than 15 units, but most developments are below the number where affordable housing is required. Despite the huge property values being generated there is little or no provision for affordable housing. And judging from one example of housing development where social housing has been included, it has not been well integrated.
- The workshop attendees considered that there was nowhere in Sunningdale that young families could afford to buy, which meant that as people got older they are living a long way from their children. The sale of larger houses for redevelopment in Sunningdale is allowing some elderly people to 'trade down' and move into more manageable apartments, though many were also apparently using the opportunity to move abroad. Significantly the larger houses priced at over £1 million were no longer selling.
- In Cressex Road (High Wycombe) 12 units have gone up where previously there were two houses, and this is seen as the start of a flood of schemes. Though the scheme fitted in quite well, it did not use the site to the full, and almost all the public space was given over to parking. Developers are seeking to redevelop three plots at a time to make intensification viable, and there has been a number of applications, with developers apparently approaching many

householders about selling. As a result there are divisions between those that want to sell and those who want to retain the area's character. Councillors are concerned that the area could lose its attraction as a relatively affordable place for families. House prices may escalate further if more people move out of London to take advantage of Buckinghamshire's excellent schools.

- In Tovil (Maidstone), the population is expected to double, and Westbury are currently building 200 new homes on the site of an old printing works at a density of around 50 to the hectare. A housing association that has taken over the Council's stock is planning to replace 120 out of a total of 550 houses, with around 160 units, an increase of about a third. Here the community welcomes the new homes as they are seen as lifting the area and improving its poor image.
- In Tadworth (Reigate and Banstead) quite attractive new housing has been built on the site of an old secondary school in the Preston ward, and a masterplan is being developed for the wider area, including the playing fields, with a view to promoting a sustainable new development. However the prices are far beyond the range of what local residents in social housing can afford.
- In Leigh Park (Havant) former council houses that have been sold under the 'Right To Buy' are attracting 'aspirant young couples' from along the South Coast. There is said to be too little choice, particularly as far as the intermediate market is concerned. Young people have to move to Portsmouth to find bed-sits, and other gaps include modern housing for the elderly and accommodation for key workers. Though there is space for intensification, and an Enquiry by Design process has developed masterplans, the

Inspector's report on the Local Plan recommended scaling back the provision of new housing.

- In Tilgate (Crawley) generally there is a wide range of housing around the neighbourhood centre in terms of both house types and tenures. With densities of around 30 to the hectare, there is little scope for general intensification, but development is taking place around the centres. The attraction of the local centre at Tilgate is now reinforced by the new Community Health Centre alongside, and the Council seeks to maintain a diversity of shops when leases come up for renewal. The range of housing choice is being extended through new developments, such as the redevelopment of a hotel as a block of well-designed apartments. The sports centre near the railway at Three Bridges is being redeveloped for 800 new homes at a relatively high density, and new facilities are being built next to a secondary school, which will also be redeveloped, and which will be on the Fastway route. Fastway is an excellent model for making a suburban area more sustainable as it combines frequent services with modern buses that have priority at intersections, and with good waiting facilities, linking up with Gatwick Airport.

### Connectivity

To be sustainable people not only need to reach services and jobs without too much stress, but should also have access to basic shops and quality open space within walking or cycling distance. Rising levels of traffic and an overloaded transport infrastructure are often cited by the public as reasons for opposing new housing. Research on Councillor Attitudes to Higher Density Housing found they feared cars ending up being parked in the street for lack of private

space. Hence progress depends on locating more new housing in areas where alternatives to the car are feasible, and on imaginative approaches to the provision of parking e.g. shared spaces. The economic strength, and hence capital value, of an area is often the product of the quality of its linkages. Connectivity is also affected by the quality/attractiveness of the route, the perception of safety (which can be improved by ensuring that routes are overlooked by windows), and the continuity of the route (which should enable pedestrians or cyclists to reach their destination without too many intimidating barriers, such as roundabouts and underpasses).

Far from connectivity improving, it was actually getting worse locally in a number of the case studies. However there were some obvious opportunities for improvement given the will and the resources:

- In Sunningdale, with a good station and shops at its heart, it was no longer thought safe to walk or cycle to the shops and station due to the amount of traffic on the main London Road. Children going to the secondary school use the school bus, and the local bus service is seen as unreliable and does not link up with the trains. The new houses were thought to be generating much more traffic, with 25 houses being replaced by 370 new homes with at least 800 cars.<sup>29</sup> This pressure placed on local roads helps explain resistance to intensification in some suburban areas.
- Cressex Road is currently dominated by through traffic. Much of the time walking is unpleasant, in part because of the traffic, but also because of the dreary fronts presented by houses whose front gardens has been turned over to parking. A new shuttle bus service linking the

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<sup>29</sup> [www.sunninghell.com](http://www.sunninghell.com)

station with the business and retail parks is starting to provide a good alternative way of getting into town. A new road, which will link the industrial estate to the motorway, should free up Cressex Road, and would allow the carriageway to be narrowed. In turn this would allow the provision of parking bays and also cycle lanes.

- In Tovil, the last bus from the town centre, which is when the shops close, is often cancelled. Walking back from town at night is considered unsafe for women. Access to local shops is threatened by the closure of a major supermarket if it gets permission to expand farther out of town. Pavements and crossings are non-existent in parts.
- In Tadworth, the social housing is isolated from the surrounding area, and the bus services have been terminated due to anti-social behaviour. A number of the local shops have closed, and access to a supermarket involves walking through a wood. In contrast the Edwardian streets on the perimeter are pleasant to walk along, and connect up with the station and bus routes.
- In Leigh Park, there is a good but circuitous bus service to both Havant and Portsmouth, and the bus station at Havant is going to be improved. The location of an out of town Asda/Walmart superstore encourages those who can to drive, or other to take taxis. Housing densities around the local centre are low. There are proposals to improve the pedestrian links, and there is scope to narrow the carriageways, and reallocate the space.
- In Tilgate by contrast, housing was largely built around a series of neighbourhood centres; pedestrians have been given priority over cars; there is plenty of parking by the shops; and parking is being provided in bays along

the residential streets, after narrowing the carriageways as part of traffic calming.

Crawley is moving towards a modal split of 60% cars and 40% other, as opposed to the general average of split of 80/20.

The key has been to develop the town around a series of walkable neighbourhoods of around 6-7,000 population, each with its own shops, pub, and community facilities. The Fastway bus service referred to earlier was opened a year ago, to link Gatwick Airport from Crawley through to Horley. It offers a dedicated route, a ten-minute peak time service, using modern buses, with some 'guided' sections, good waiting facilities, and a service running through the night.

### Character

Suburbs are more likely to be sustainable if they look attractive and cared for, with new development fitting in, or enhancing the area's identity. The Urban Task Force under Lord Richard Rogers *Towards an Urban Renaissance* has led to a new focus on raising the standards of urban design. The Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) acts as the principal champion supported by regional Architecture Centres. However, there is surprisingly little guidance on good practice for the smaller towns and suburban areas. *Living Places*, URBED's report for the Government Office South East on urban renaissance in the South East found only a few examples of good practice in suburban towns, such as Eastleigh and Basingstoke, for example. On the whole standards generally lagged far behind the Continental equivalents. Since then efforts to involve councillors and to recruit design champions in all the authorities, backed up by practical steps such as study tours, may be starting to change attitudes, but there is a real lack of good examples in the South East.

The general impression from the case studies was that once leafy suburbs are losing their character and identity, with no signs of improvement to the public realm to match the improvements that were taking place to people's homes. Front gardens and grass verges are being used for parking, and in few cases were there any signs of a public attempt to tackle the problem creatively. Places with distinctive buildings may be designated as Conservation Areas, but character goes unrecognised. Concern about the poor state of the streets is stopping people being more positive about other environmental initiatives. Streets and open spaces are also an important part of our environmental capital, along with access to adjoining countryside or parks. New development is generally not helping. Indeed in Wycombe, the design quality of most planning applications was berated at the workshop. New housing schemes were generally prosaic at best, which only served to intensify opposition to development. However, as we found in the Tovil workshop, which included a volume housebuilder, the risks associated with securing planning permission and dealing with complex sites are deterring developers from taking them on, let alone investing much in good design.

- The greatest amount of new housing was in Sunningdale, where most of the new houses were described as 'Neo Geos' or 'Post Colonial'. Superb Arts and Crafts houses are fast disappearing, along with the hedges and trees that once softened their appearance. None of the houses that had been built recently came up to the standard on CABA's *Building for Life* website, for example. Nor did they measure up to the best examples in Windsor & Maidenhead's own *Pattern Book*, with a very few exceptions. The new houses all tend to look similar, though they are supposed to be 'exclusive'. The most widespread loss is not the architecture but the loss of landscape, particularly where boundary hedges are being replaced by fences or railings. In a former Crown Estate tree nursery in the Sunnings, which is being developed for housing, hardly a tree had been left standing.
- The loss of public realm is particular evident along Cressex Road. Extensions into the loft or over garages pay little regard to the look of the street. In a number of cases the problem is aggravated when hedges are removed. Piecemeal redevelopment will further destroy the character and identity of the road, leaving it 'gap toothed.'
- In Tovil the concern was how to retain the mix of uses that gives the area its character, while also making the area more desirable, an issue that did not arise in the other case studies.
- In Tadworth (and also Tovil) areas of social housing tend to stand out when rubbish or broken down equipment accumulates for lack of collection facilities, or where front gardens become unkempt for lack of interest or resources. The problem can be further aggravated when there are no fences or hedges.
- In Leigh Park there is a bigger problem than elsewhere of overcoming the overall sense of uniformity, which helps stigmatise the area. This is bound up with securing new housing that will look different. It also involves improving the public realm, including redesigning the open space to facilitate new uses, and encouraging efforts to make houses and neighbourhoods look more distinctive
- Tilgate provided a welcome contrast. There are fourteen distinct neighbourhoods, all of which have their own identity, reinforced by the coloured signs. Three incorporate existing settlements, and the others get their identity from their centres. Though most

of the houses are simple two storey terraces, they have been made to look individual through action such as painting facades, adding porches, and creating colourful gardens. Existing trees were maintained, and many others have been planted. The centre has been brightened up through extensive greenery, and Crawley won Britain in Bloom in the South East in 2003.

### Commerce

Places that provide a mix of uses, and places to set up a business, are more likely to be sustainable over the long term. Though suburbs are primarily residential areas, they are also where the people who have the capacity to set up a business are likely to live. RPG 9 advocates '*ensuring the vitality and viability of town and local centres*' and maintaining or extending mixed uses. However with pressures to use every available site for housing, and to secure 60% of new housing on brownfield sites, maintaining a balance could be difficult.

The promotion of mixed uses was generally not seen as a priority (and indeed in some areas such as Tovil, one aspects of the suburb's improvement was seen as reducing the intrusion of industry, and the heavy vehicles it generated). However the situation was very different in Leigh Park, where incomes are low, and raises important issues of how to secure a balance. The role of the local centre varied hugely. The case studies ranged from Sunningdale, with its local shopping centre at the heart of a solidly residential area, but split into two parts, to Tovil, with its mix of housing and industry, and with the main shops now on the edge in a retail park.

- In a prosperous area like Sunningdale, houses are more than large enough to accommodate a home office, and many people are likely to work at home some

of the time because of the kinds of jobs they do.

- Suburbs that are close to town centres or edge of town retail parks like Cressex are unlikely to retain much in the way of a choice of shops, given most people's preference for 'one stop shopping'. However provided the shops can be easily accessed both on foot and by car, and are reinforced by other attractions, such as pubs or medical practices, or restaurants, they may be sustained.
- In Tovil an out of town retail park now serves as the local centre. There is an ongoing loss of cheap premises in which to start a business; for example the 200 new houses being built in Tovil are on the site of a printing company that closed after many generations. Local centres therefore have an important role to play in maintaining a degree of diversity and allowing new businesses to start up.
- In Tadworth, while many local shops were no longer viable, there could be scope for using empty space for community enterprises or training purposes.
- In Leigh Park, this factor was given much greater priority, reflecting concerns about pockets of deprivation. Ideas for promoting community enterprise were discussed, including making full use of development sites for incubators, such as the Procter and Gamble site.
- Crawley has a buoyant economy, with most people getting jobs locally (the airport accounts for 25% of jobs, and the same proportion of its employees live in Crawley).

### Conservation

Given other priorities, it is unsurprising that efforts to promote bio-diversity and to save the natural environment are not considered particularly important in this context, even though efforts to promote conservation were

generally ranked as poor. This in part stems from a 'throw away' culture, and real change depends on changing people's attitudes from early on in life. A shortage of landfill sites and EU Directives, plus the prospect of higher fuel duties, may eventually encourage moves towards recycling and reusing what we already have. So too may the fear of adding to flooding risks as a result of covering over front gardens and building on flood plains. Environmentally friendly houses, such as the Integer scheme in Maidenhead, may encourage more innovative design, but will unfortunately not make much difference to resource conservation by themselves. However if house builders and property owners came to see the value of conserving natural resources, for example because they raise property values (by about 2% according to *Building for Life*), then we might see a step change.

Though all of the authorities are concerned about environmental sustainability, there are difficulties in putting the principles into practice. Trees and other greenery are being lost as people's front gardens are used to park the car, and in some streets as a result of cabling or fears of subsidence, with no obvious examples of replacements being planted. In none of the case studies was there much evidence of initiatives to save natural resources.

- In Sunningdale, while the new houses will be better insulated than the ones they replace, demolition of old houses consumes resources, which are not generally being recycled. The energy involved in remaking bricks or concrete may more than outweigh any energy saved in heating the house.
- While Red Kites now fly above Cressex, thanks to their reintroduction to the Chilterns, there is a danger of losing the 'green chains' on which wildlife relies.

- In Tovil there are great opportunities for making better use of the river, which is currently cut off by industry.
- In Preston there has been a loss of playing fields, without any new facilities to channel young people's energy in ways that are not destructive.
- In Leigh Park the extensive grass verges are mowed periodically rather than any attempt being made to encourage other uses. Indeed active uses on open space appear to be discouraged. However there has been an innovative scheme to turn a culverted stream into a natural area.
- In Crawley, a major effort has been put into tree planting and linking up green spaces, and attractive leaflets have been produced to celebrate their green inheritance, and encourage people to use them.

### Findings on Social Capital

The full concept of sustainability is not just about making sure that environmental resources last, but also making the most of human capital. In the past suburbs have been valued because they are seen as good places to bring up a family. While all the workshops agreed that it was important to consider the 'human' aspects, social capital proved harder to assess, particularly if there were no community representatives in the workshop. It was felt the questions could be used productively in a survey or focus groups, and some work may be needed to refine them further. The general priorities seemed to be with community engagement and the capacity of local services such as health and education to cope with an increased population.



## Community

The level of involvement in the local community is often seen as a sign of a good place. So too, though harder to assess, is whether newcomers are welcomed and accepted into the community. In the past one of the appeals of living in a suburb was the sense of knowing your neighbours, and being able to take part in a range of activities that opened up friendships. Generally people today have less time to put into the community, except when there is a major threat to local amenity, such as the closure of some facility or a new development. Those with sufficient time to serve as local councillors tend to be retired.

In the workshops there was a general concern that people had less time for community activities, and were becoming more 'individualistic', leaving a few people to shoulder the responsibilities. On the positive side there was also evidence from both Leigh Park and Tadworth that efforts to build stronger communities from the bottom up can pay off, though it takes several years of effort. There was also a shortage of spaces to meet in some areas, which made it difficult to get people together. Schools, which might have acted as community hubs, are often shut in the evenings due to the cost of caretakers.

- In Sunningdale there was felt to be a decline in community spirit, with a low voting turnout. However the Parish Council clearly was playing a role and, for example, provided information on the impact that intensification was having.
- In Cressex, as in most places, concerns were raised about young people hanging about with nothing to do. The community was also split between those who want to sell their houses for redevelopment, and others who say they want to maintain the area's character. A consultant has been engaged by the Local Authority to probe into options and preferences.
- In Tovil, where the Parish Council had produced a community plan, there was a clear priority for developing a new primary school, with a health centre attached, not only to improve educational prospects but also to give the place a real heart. It was significant that the main 'livewire' in Tovil was a relatively new local vicar who saw the potential of using Agenda 21 to develop a community based plan for the area. He was helped by teachers living in the area, and by the fact that the primary schools were both church owned, giving them direct access to the Department of Education.
- In Tadworth the state of the bus shelters suggested that some young people felt alienated, and the bus services through the suburbs have had to be withdrawn because of bad behaviour. A local secondary school, which had previously brought people from different backgrounds together, had closed.
- In Leigh Park, the Enquiry by Design process, using techniques promoted by the Princes Foundation, has helped to create a local forum with over 150 residents who want to be involved, and 45 have volunteered to serve on Area Panels. In every suburb there are concerns about security; but in Leigh Park paradoxically this has led to the widespread removal of seats, though there has also been some investment in new playgrounds. Pressure from local people has secured the demolition of a pub that was notorious for anti-social behaviour.
- In Tilgate, the local centre had been built with space for meetings, a library and a pub, and this had recently been augmented by a community health centre, which helped generate activity.

### Capacity

Local services are important to the health of a neighbourhood and, for example, residents expect to see a doctor without a long wait. Those with children want to be sure they can get into an acceptable school without too long a journey. Some suburbs are resisting intensification on the grounds that services are over-stretched, and others are complaining about the cuts that are being made in local schools, shops, and transport. Hence the quality and capacity of local services are both important aspects of social capital. Assessing capacity is not easy, given the tendency for people to shop where it is most convenient, and to send their children to the best schools they can (or to move where the state schools perform best).

A number of relevant points were made at the workshops:

- In Sunningdale, while the Parish Council recognises that some redevelopment of large plots is inevitable, and that the population is likely to grow as a consequence, they feel that development should be much more 'joined-up' so that facilities keep pace with housing.
- In Cressex, there is still a local centre adjacent to a roundabout, but generally people no longer have shops within walking distance, and when they get in their cars they go to where it is easiest to park.
- In Tovil the clear priority is seen as expanding the capacity of the two church schools by building a new school. The community also want to provide space alongside for a much better health centre to replace the existing one, where, it was said, you need 'nerves of steel' to attend! While a new health centre by itself would not overcome the shortage of GPs generally, it was expected that they would be able to recruit more easily to a more efficient and attractive place to work, and

to benefit from being next to the school, for example in encouraging healthier living habits. The project is potentially an example of good practice, though it could suffer if a site were not to be made available fairly quickly now that funding has been lined up from the Department of Education.

- In Tadworth, one of the ideas that was generated in the workshop was to develop a new village centre as part of a masterplan, bringing together in one place the different services that are currently scattered around the suburb.
- In Tilgate the local shopping centre and various services such as the library and a community health centre are all close together, helping to keep the centre alive most of the time.

### Crime

A good place to live is one where people feel safe when they go out, and know that their property will be secure when they return. While general attitude surveys and the media tend to stress concerns about security, the reality is much better than most people think. However many suburbs are intrinsically vulnerable due to low numbers of people on the street and the possibility of breaking in round the back of semi-detached and detached houses when their occupants are away. Indeed most of the streets we explored seemed very empty even when people might have been expected to be coming home from work. Furthermore the problems have increased now that women are much less likely to be at home during the day, and people walk less. As a result expenditure on home security has escalated, along with the costs of insurance claims. While there has been a growth in home entertainment and communication systems, a lack of places to socialise and meet other young people informally may help to explain binge drinking and hooliganism.

In the workshops crime did not come out as a significant priority. However it was clear from our visits that there were a number of opportunities for improving security. These range from improving street lighting to providing activities for young people, possibly making better use of existing spaces. It was significant that despite our efforts, we were only able to have one of our workshops actually in the suburb under consideration, and whether this was due to an actual lack of facilities, or management issues, there is clearly a need to take stock of the public facilities in a neighbourhood, and how well they meet the needs of different groups.

- In Sunningdale, many houses, especially in new developments, are being protected through railings and electronic gates. (Gated communities are being developed, as in the USA.) Apparently car theft is much less of an issue now due to built in security systems in the cars.
- In Cressex, concerns were expressed about gangs of young people hanging around and occasional anti-social behaviour. The area has been identified as having a shortage of public open space, and there is nowhere obvious to 'kick a ball' around.
- In Tovil the former Council estate is known for housing some 'problem families'. Part of the reason for redeveloping a large part of it is to change the estate's image. Significantly there is a debate locally about whether it really is in Tovil.
- In Tadworth young people started to demolish a building where a meeting was being held, and bad behaviour has led to the withdrawal of bus services through the estate.
- In Leigh Park there have been particular problems with car theft, and the use of cars for joy riding. With little in the way of leisure facilities that the young can

afford, and poor linkages to town centres, there will inevitably be areas where young people congregate and 'hang about', and a number of imaginative ideas were generated.

### **Civic life**

A good suburb is not only likely to provide places to meet, and to have local shops and services that care for their customers but also to have a large number of voluntary activities that bring people together, from amateur dramatics to school sports. Increases in GNP per capita and income levels, and related home improvements, are of little lasting value if they are associated with a falling quality of life, for example as a result of increased time spent travelling to work, personal isolation and fears for security. As suburbs tend to be largely seen as places for families to grow up in, much of the social life nowadays revolves around schools. However civic life is also an issue for people with time on their hands and not much money, like some of the elderly, particularly with the decline in the role of the church. The concentration of shopping and leisure in larger centres and also out of town has weakened the local centres that once gave suburbs their identity, and there are particular problems in poorer neighbourhoods where people have much less choice. As independent shops close, those who are most vulnerable, such as the elderly, may become increasingly isolated.

- The local centre in Sunningdale is relatively thriving, and this is partly because there are a number of restaurants, as well as shops providing services like hairdressing. There are also excellent town centres nearby, and world renowned golf clubs. Many of the new people moving in work for international companies, and so it is probable that they have their own social networks and do

not expect much from the neighbourhood.

- The centre in Cressex Road appeared to be viable in part because it still has a range of shops and services close together, and also because it can draw on day time trade from the nearby business park.
- In Tadworth many of the shops in the centre of the estate have closed, possibly when Asda/Walmart opened on the edge. Isolated corner shops find it almost impossible to survive, except by 'adding value', for example as takeaways.
- Lack of investment in the public realm and poor pedestrian linkages can make local centres in suburbs like Leigh Park feel unwelcoming, as they no longer meet contemporary expectations. Even where a number of people do not have cars, as in Leigh Park, people share taxis to get to supermarkets, a new form of 'community activity'. Pubs nowadays often need to serve food and be large enough to attract people from a distance if they are to flourish, and so smaller ones outside town centres are closing.  
A valuable innovation in Leigh Park has been the provision of a crèche as part of a Sure Start programme on the edge of the local centre.
- In Tilgate, perhaps because it was part of a New Town, a great deal of effort has gone into community development. A fund for local improvements and local committees enable the local authority to be responsive to community concerns. The abundance of flowers, which won Crawley the Britain in Bloom top award, symbolises a high quality of civic life. One interesting innovation elsewhere in Crawley was the conversion of a new industrial unit into a crèche.

### **Climate for enterprise**

A sustainable or good suburb is much more than a dormitory, and so should be a place where starting and running an enterprise is part of the way of life. Research in both the USA and the UK suggests that the most fruitful areas for business development today tend to be on the edges of major cities, not in their inner areas, as was the case a century ago. While many new businesses may be hatched on the kitchen table or in a garage, they need space to grow, which is where both town centres and industrial estates are important. SEEDA's *Regional Economic Strategy for South East England*, published in 2002, put its priority on Smart Growth, taking up the concept promoted by the Congress for New Urbanism in the USA. The strategy highlighted the contrasts not just between the cities and the more rural areas, but also between the Western side of the region and the Eastern side, with much lower rates of business formation in the more deprived areas. However, while the report singled out 'leading urban areas' and 'small rural towns', it said little directly aimed at the suburbs where the majority of residents in the South East actually live. Yet redundant shops and the space above them in local centres could well provide suitable accommodation for small businesses, (provided there are places for staff and customers to park nearby).

The climate for enterprise did not generally feature as a priority in the workshops. However there was evidence that both local shops and industrial estates are in danger of being squeezed out by development pressures. It was only in Leigh Park where creating a climate of enterprise was given a high priority, presumably because all the other case studies enjoy virtually full employment at present. Providing new space to work is expensive, and so it is important to

make the most of old buildings and retain some kind of balance.

- In places like Sunningdale, many people have large enough houses to work at home. They are also likely to be in touch with people who may act as customers or suppliers and to come from a background that favours entrepreneurship. There is more than enough spending power to support many small enterprises, including specialists in fitting electric gates and gardeners. The local businesses that are viable respond to local needs, like hairdressers and restaurants, and involve adding value, not just selling goods. Business centres providing small units can be found relatively locally.
- In Cressex there could be pressures to redevelop parts of the business park as housing, though the offices and showrooms closest to Cressex Road have been built fairly recently. Evidence from Savills suggests that there is not likely to be much interest in financing mixed use schemes, whereas there would be interest in housing. So if the amount of business space was maintained, and there are no conflicts between uses (for example residents complaining about the noise of lorries at night), there may be scope for some housing on the edges.
- In Tovil a number of businesses have closed down, including long established printers, as new owners seek to capitalise on the value of their properties. There are also some very successful local firms, who may have difficulty finding premises elsewhere if and when the riverside industrial estate is redeveloped. People now commute much further to work, creating pressures on parking in residential streets.
- In Leigh Park few of the residents come from families that have worked in small firms, though a significant number are

now involved in construction. Some households are said to be trapped in the 'benefits culture'. Consequently public efforts to provide encouragement and space, including support for community enterprises, are vital, and could help to make the estate as a whole much more sustainable and liveable. Savills were doubtful about the possibility of attracting private investment in a mixed use scheme because of low values and isolation from the main road system.

- Tilgate, as part of a planned New Town, provided an example of people living relatively close to where they worked, and it is likely to have attracted more enterprising people. However what stood out was the fact that the local authority owned the shops, and managed them to ensure a good mix of shops and services, many of which were provided by local independent businesses.

## Conclusions

1. The case studies substantiated the value of a focus on the suburban neighbourhoods in regional policy for the South East. They brought out important differences between neighbourhoods that are at risk of losing their character or attractions, or that have significant opportunities for development including appropriate sites for intensification. They revealed there were important differences not only in physical features, such as location, age and layout, but also in neighbourhood features, such as role, image and identity, demographics, housing demand and social infrastructure.
2. The Neighbourhood Score Card worked well as a means of structuring discussion and reaching some consensus on

- priorities in a relatively short time. It showed it was possible to carry out a quick 'health check' that would provide an agenda for further work, and the basis of a local Area Action Plan. In particular the idea of separately considering physical and social capital was justified. The Ten 'C's, while a little forced, provided a simple structure, though some of the concepts questioning would benefit from refinement. It could also be useful in establishing community preferences, and might be linked with the use of neighbourhood statistics to establish indicators (provided there is a practical means of benchmarking them).
3. The presentation of a Profile combining factual inputs with impressions, was refined through discussion, and proved more powerful than simply starting with a blank sheet or trying to do a SWOT analysis.
  4. The case studies were purposely very different, but there were a number of common characteristics, which would not necessarily have been so important in town centres or in rural areas, and where the solutions would be significantly different. In particular there was general agreement on the importance of four of our ten factors:
 

**Choice:** particularly in housing type, tenure and cost, making it easier for people to live near their families

**Connectivity:** particularly improving local linkages and making it safer to walk and cycle to centres and transport facilities

**Community:** particularly engaging with, and providing facilities for young people

**Capacity:** particularly upgrading schools and primary health services to cope with population increase
  5. In all cases the group was able to identify a long list of possible improvements, many of which could be readily taken forward if there was the right mechanism. Hence the process proved the value not only of analysing the health of neighbourhoods, but also of bringing different departments, agencies, and sectors together in a structured way. By responding to these local concerns it may be possible to overcome distrust, and build consensus for more fundamental changes, like intensification. Unsolicited comments included:
 

*"We had never met before"*

*"We should do this more often; it is what I came into planning for"*

*"The workshop helped to keep the momentum (of the regeneration project) going"*
  6. FPD Savills' market reports confirmed the potential for suburban intensification, and the interest of both developers and investors. However they also brought out the lack of interest in investing in developing workspace, retail or leisure. Consequently they suggest that different kinds of mechanism are needed if the goals of mixed use development are to be secured in suburban locations. The workshops brought out the difficulties of developing some of the more complex sites. The barriers were most significant where land values are low, and where plots needed to be combined. Paradoxically public opposition to new housing could well result in less investment in design not more, as developers go for 'off the peg' solutions rather than investing in a 'bespoke' design.
  7. The case studies also validated the use of map based statistical data on densities, demography, and transport facilities. These could be used in preparing Sub

Regional Spatial Strategies, for example to identify neighbourhoods in need of special attention, which should be valuable when it comes to producing Local Development Frameworks, and the strategies could also contain policies for managing neighbourhood change. The case studies showed it is feasible to undertake a quick appraisal or health check of a suburban neighbourhood, and to classify it in terms of its potential for improvement without a massive study. On the basis of the case studies we examined, suburban neighbourhoods could be classified in terms of four categories, which call for different responses in the Local Development Framework and which could overlap:

- area of stability, where no immediate action is needed (e.g. Crawley)
  - area at risk (or with special needs e.g. Leigh Park, Preston)
  - area of opportunity (or with scope for intensification e.g. Tovil, Cressex)
  - area of special character (or with features which need protecting and enhancing, but which do not justify designating a Conservation Area e.g. Sunningdale).
8. There is a need for a proactive approach for the last three of these areas, for example by providing Supplementary Planning Guidance through the Local Development Framework to provide clear direction, and to avoid wasting the time and resources of both developers and the community in schemes that will never get off the ground. This should also significantly increase the supply of affordable housing, and may lead to better design by reducing the risks and uncertainties of development.

### 3. OPPORTUNITIES FOR POSITIVE CHANGE

The previous section has shown that suburbs present distinct issues and opportunities for improvement, which require a more proactive approach at the neighbourhood level. We were also asked to *‘investigate the potential for accommodating high quality, mixed use development’*. In this section we consider whether the potential for housing and other intensification could generate the energy and resources needed to make much needed improvements, drawing on our visits, urban design assessments, and FPD Savills’ market reports on each of the case studies and their general conclusions. We deal in turn with:

- What is the scope for creative solutions and Sustainable Urban Neighbourhoods?
- Could the intensification of transit corridors provide an answer?
- What can be done to strengthen local centres?
- How can areas be improved through intensification?
- How could publicly owned land be used to promote sustainability?
- What about redundant industrial land, and planned urban extensions?
- Why has the private property market failed to respond?

#### Creative Housing Solutions

Development in the suburbs must be assessed against a range of objectives. It is not just about making our communities more sustainable or saving the planet, but also responding to changing housing demands. A disturbing side effect of rising house prices, and the difficulty new households face in getting a foot on the housing ladder is

growing social exclusion. At extremes, concentrations of poverty in areas cut off from shops and services can create many of the problems associated with inner city areas, as evidence from American First Tier suburbs has shown. Whatever the levels of deprivation, at present the suburbs in the South East are unlikely to decay in the way that suburbs in the USA or Paris have done. But much more widely, in many suburbs it is harder for communities to function if teachers, and other key workers cannot afford accommodation locally, and if children find it almost impossible to afford to live near where they grew up. Also if elderly people cannot find more manageable homes nearby, they may end up living on their own in under-occupied houses, or having to move in with their children (which in both cases can create stress and depression).

Appropriate suburban intensification could therefore help to tackle social exclusion and build social capital, as well as making our suburbs more sustainable, and in the process look better and feel safer.

Simply building many more homes for sale will not solve the problem alone, as they will always be a drop in the ocean, and most people in the South East will be living in houses that are built now for several generations. Nor will new communities in the Growth Areas of the East do much to remedy shortages in the Western areas where demand is strongest. Hence other means are needed to enable people to get on the housing ladder in areas where demand is strongest, and suburban renewal has an important role to play. Policy Q1, in Regional Planning Guidance for the South East (RPG9), rightly recommends *‘increasingly creative solutions’* to the location and design of new housing in urban areas. We undertook some initial urban design studies to consider more creative options, and what these might



entail for the suburbs. In particular we tried to apply the principles of the Sustainable Urban Neighbourhood, for example in intensifying development around transport nodes, including schemes that incorporated a mix of uses, and that helped to strengthen the centres.<sup>30</sup>

There has already been a major switch to building more densely in the South East. The proportion of flats and maisonettes within the construction of new dwellings has risen from 17% in 1998 to 46% in 2003, while the proportion of detached houses has gone the other way. Unfortunately none of our case studies provided examples of innovative design. They contrasted poorly with parts of Essex or London where higher density schemes have been successfully built, a conclusion which has since been reinforced by CABE's review of a hundred recent housing schemes.<sup>31</sup>

What kinds of opportunities are being missed?

- First the smaller sites in most of the case studies could be suitable for schemes such as 'shared equity' or 'staircasing' that offer opportunities for people to get on the 'housing ladder'. Some could also make use of new approaches to construction. For example various forms of self-build, including the use of 'kit houses', would enable self-builders to focus on fitting the house out, not erecting the structure, as they do in Scandinavia, for example. Self-build could also be used to enable households

to acquire a basic shell, and extend and improve it as their resources allow.

- Second the larger sites, such as in Tadworth, with its redundant school playing field, or Tovil, with its riverside industrial estate, could be used for schemes that incorporate a mix of uses. Some of these sites might serve as demonstration projects, for example applying ecological principles, like Bedzed in Sutton.
- Third, where the public sector owns or can acquire land, there may be scope in the suburbs to provide innovative forms of rented housing. For example housing co-operatives could appeal to key workers like teachers), as they do in Denmark and Germany. Similarly retirement homes and apartments with lifts could make it easier for older people to 'downsize', thus releasing family homes to be upgraded and reoccupied. The growth of private rented accommodation as a socially accepted alternative to home ownership should enable investment by financial institutions as well as private investors in 'buy to let' schemes. New investors, such as Real Estate Investment Trusts, may well prefer to build in safer locations in suburban towns and neighbourhoods than in large brownfield sites. However they will require local authorities to take the lead, as otherwise the rewards will not compensate for the risks.
- A further opportunity for creativity is to make use of the spare space in larger houses to enable several households to share the same house, (which the government seems to be thinking about as a means of enabling young people to find places to live). Under-occupation of homes by elderly people living on their own, who may not be able to afford to keep the place up, could be supplemented by 'paying guests' or

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<sup>30</sup> Rudlin D., Falk N., *Building the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Home*, 1999, Architectural Press

See also Llewellyn Davies *Sustainable Residential Quality: new approaches to urban living*, 1998, Report for London Planning Advisory Committee/DETR/Government Office for London

<sup>31</sup> CABE, *Assessing the Design of Quality New Homes*, 2004

lodgers, including key workers, but this require careful management. Also as people age, they should be able to 'downsize' without leaving friends and relatives behind. There is a growing interest in 'equity release', but improving the utilisation of the housing stock may yield better overall results.

### **Intensifying Transit Nodes and Interchanges**

However innovation by itself will not be sustainable unless it is in locations that are not totally dependent on the car. As people are unwilling to walk more than 400 metres it is essential that public transport is located within this distance. Higher density new housing therefore needs to be concentrated around transport nodes and on the fringes of town centres. Further as changes nearly always have to be made to get from home to work e.g. from home to station, it is important to have quality interchanges that make the journey as enjoyable as possible. As railways were usually the basis for the growth of 19<sup>th</sup> century suburbs, they form an important potential area for suburban intensification. While there are doubts about accommodating a high proportion of the population in 'Compact Cities', experts agree on the importance of developing along transport corridors and around nodes. In the US what is called by the New Urbanists 'Transit Oriented Development' has its roots in Ebenezer Howard's concept of the 'Social City' but which was never properly implemented. The South East would benefit from some new model schemes and places like Tadworth and Leigh Park offer ideal opportunities.

A key task in Sub Regional Spatial Frameworks and Local Development Plans should be identifying areas for housing

development where there is the capacity to cope with an increased population. In fact URBED believes there are plenty of opportunities to build more homes near railway stations, and along bus routes if land given over to parking was used more intensively. Not only would higher densities of development help to pay for transport improvements, but they could also make the streets look much better, for example by overlooking what are currently dead areas.

Potential opportunities identified from our case studies include:

- In areas close to major towns and cities, like Maidstone, as well as providing park and ride sites into town, there is scope to reopen halts that have closed, linking in with new housing development alongside. The potential for improving suburban railway lines has been largely neglected up till now. As the government is dismissing Light Rail schemes like the South Hampshire Tram as too expensive, consideration needs to be given to creating better suburban services connecting up with buses, and with plenty of space for cycle parking as they do in Crawley, for example.
- Main roads are often where the largest houses were built in Victorian times and, with rising traffic levels, are no longer so attractive for families. In Sunningdale, a large number of houses have already been demolished, and a total of 25 houses have been redeveloped as 370 flats. But there is also scope for further development along the London Road leading up to the station. Further opportunities exist for redeveloping houses with very large gardens backing on to the main road. Noise should not be a problem with the use of double glazing.
- Both Leigh Park and Tadworth have considerable amounts of open green space, along the main roads used by the

bus, that could be incorporated in a development scheme. Higher densities would help make more frequent bus services viable, as the Crawley example illustrated. Experiments are needed in using smart buses at peak times on more direct routes, possibly taking a loop, to offer a quality alternative to cars. The concept of Quality Bus Corridors may show the way but so too may other concepts like shared cars and taxis, and using bicycles to get to good railway stations.

The example we took for our urban design study in Sunningdale can be found in many parts of the South East. Our idea is to redevelop part of the station car park, formerly the goods yard, as a means of upgrading the interchange and station facilities. In the case of Sunningdale the ground floor could be developed as a health centre or shops, as well as improved waiting facilities for passengers (see case study for the illustrative scheme). A second storey could be readily added on to the car park, as at Beaconsfield on the line to High Wycombe, to avoid losing any spaces. Urban design principles include:

- **Identity** Use local centres and transport nodes to create a proper gateway, in this case possibly commissioning a landmark building as values should be high, and the site is very prominent
- **Mixed uses** Group together compatible uses to reinforce the vitality and viability of the local centre
- **Permeability** Minimise the space given over to tarmac, and locate the car parking in a multi-storey structure, fronted by single aspect residential accommodation, and with some public space where vehicles are subservient to pedestrians.

## Strengthening Local Centres

The concept of intensifying development around town centres, which is fundamental to both PPS6 and the London Plan, also has an application to the South East, and its variety of local centres. Our case studies ranged from suburbs that had centres at their heart, like Sunningdale or Leigh Park, to those that had shopping centres on their edges, like Tovil and Tadworth, and their centres varied enormously in health. There were obvious opportunities to increase the number of people living close to Leigh Park, and possible to create a new centre in Tadworth as part of plans to regenerate the social housing area of Preston. However in general, as suburbs tend to be largely built up, and space is needed for parking, the main way of strengthening local centres is likely to lie in diversifying their attractions, and providing ‘magnet’ uses e.g. community buildings, to attract visitors, with the further possibility of securing mixed uses in larger schemes or in locations where property values are high.

Potential opportunities identified from our case studies include:

- There is a major opportunity to develop a redundant industrial complex in Leigh Park owned by Procter and Gamble for mixed uses. The site should yield at least 200 new homes, and could therefore serve as a demonstration project for sustainable design. As it is next to the local shopping centre, it needs to be carefully planned, so that it strengthens the heart of Leigh Park rather than creating an isolated estate
- Redundant pubs, again in Leigh Park, offer further opportunities for development and have the added advantage of being able to develop the car park as well. Rather than simply replacing them with housing, it may be

better for the suburb as a whole to use them as a base for community enterprises, for example catering for young people, and with special housing above, such as a Foyer (which in the case of Cressex misses the opportunity to act as a community hub).

As an illustrative example, we took a site in a turning off Cressex Road where there are proposals to redevelop a doctor's surgery close to the local shops, which is the subject of a planning application for new housing. We considered the possibility of developing it as a new primary health centre, which could be shared by a group of doctors, plus nurses. This would be ideal for housing above, and the site could open up a much larger site made up of houses with long back gardens. By allowing higher densities within walking distance of the shops, say 500 metres, the benefits of Sustainable Residential Quality would be applied without it leading to speculation on a much wider scale. The basic urban design principles we used were:

- **Critical mass** Retain and broaden the mass of attractions in local centres
- **Urban block** Ensure that the spaces on the street are contained
- **Permeability** Improve walkability by grouping attractions, and also opening up a new pedestrian circuit
- **Identity** Maximise the density on a corner site, while reflecting the character of the road

### Improving Areas Through Intensification

Both the richer and poorer suburbs offered opportunities for intensification, and where it is happening it tends to be on an unplanned, ad hoc basis and is driven by smaller house builders. The obstacles and risks may make involvement in these sites unattractive for

some of the volume house builders. The easiest opportunities to redevelop plots are in the wealthiest areas, where houses have long back gardens that can be grouped together, and all the main house builders are active in Sunningdale. While those who will benefit financially support the schemes, intensification is usually resisted by neighbours on a large number of grounds. Is there scope for a positive and planned approach that would secure wider benefits for all?

Potential opportunities identified from our case studies include:

- In Sunningdale, the options exist of restoring some of the finer houses, and extending them into the back gardens as character blocks of apartments, while retaining the front garden, along with a parking court in the drive, or behind the houses.
- In Cressex, where there is considerable concern about a flood of developments leading to 'gap toothed' streets, a policy could be devised to enable higher densities at street corners and close to the shops, and to draw up a brief with a new access lane opening up sites in the large gardens, and possibly breaking through to adjoining roads to make the whole suburb more permeable.
- In Tovil, some 120 former council houses are to be redeveloped at densities that will be a third higher, in part through using part of the front gardens, and also by going from two to three stories. This is likely to be supported as it should help improve the area's image.
- In Leigh Park and Preston the redevelopment of some prominent groups of unpopular social housing could help to transform the image of the area. Introducing three and four storey housing would also make the long roads less monotonous.

The example we took of the benefits of site assembly was in Tovil. There is a major opportunity to redevelop a number of riverside industrial sites, which total nearly seven hectares in six different ownerships. As well as providing a much needed new school and health centre, the development could embrace a range of housing. It is dependent on the site being assembled, and some of the existing uses being relocated.

Urban design principles include:

- **Critical mass** Maximise the density and hence value of the buildings overlooking open space, in this case water, and use them to help cross-subsidise other more social uses, and to give the suburb a new heart
- **Mixed uses** Bring a new health centre and a combined primary school together to minimise car trips
- **Permeability** Improve public access to the waterside, and make walking generally more attractive.

## Using Public Land

Because suburbs frequently incorporated the land attached to grand houses, they often include institutions used by the health, education and social services. While care must be taken not to impose social or environmental costs, opportunities exist for using public land to open up a much larger and better-planned scheme.

Potential opportunities identified from our case studies include:

- In Sunningdale schools are starting to build housing for teachers on land they own
- The Cressex case study identified a site that the County Education Department was using as a Special School that could well be relocated, and thus become

available for development on a scale that would allow a significant element of affordable housing

- Tovil includes several Council depots which could possibly be relocated as part of a comprehensive development scheme for the riverside site; while it is important not to relocate public uses like hospitals to distant locations, the public sector could use its land assets to help secure better quality schemes than private developers would undertake on their own.

We took as an example of intensification the Tadworth case study, where a former secondary school had already been redeveloped for housing. The County and District Councils have commissioned a masterplan to show how an exemplary scheme could be developed using the playing fields that are still owned by the County. Relevant urban design principles include:

- **Mix of uses** Create an identifiable heart using shops or community facilities with residential above
- **Identity** Use 3-4 storey buildings to give the centre an appropriate density (the centres of historic villages are often at least three stories high), and improve the gateways
- **Permeability** Open up some of the cul-de-sacs to make it easier to walk into and out of the estate.

## Building Planned Extensions

A number of our suburbs lie on the edge of the Green Belt, but the open space is of varying quality. At present, as we have seen, suburbs are growing in a piecemeal way, and certainly not in line with any considered plan. In view of the potential advantages of making use of existing social infrastructure, and the economies from extending the

physical infrastructure, much more serious consideration needs to be given to the potential for planned urban extensions, through the commissioning of feasibility studies and masterplans. Lessons could be drawn from experience in Europe; for example from the West German city of Freiburg where a major high density development around natural courtyards on the edge of town is connected to the centre by a new tramway, and cars are kept in a multi storey garage at the edge, creating a very safe environment for children to grow up in. We saw a number of opportunities for what could be Sustainable Urban Neighbourhoods or even Urban Villages.

Potential opportunities identified from our case studies include:

- In Cressex there is an area of scrub land known as Cressex Island still to be developed, where further development may be feasible once the connection with the motorway has been upgraded
- In Maidstone the Council is starting to consider an extension into an area of low landscape value in order to help safeguard areas like Tovil from further extension
- In Tadworth, the development of the school playing field would form a small extension, but another option might include relocating some of the existing public spaces onto the Heath, (as is done in Hampstead Heath for example), and in the process improving linkages from the social housing to the nearby superstore. Savills support the idea of trying to relocate retail uses nearer to the leisure facilities, and at the workshop the idea of using this as the heart of the village was suggested.

The best example of a site that could be the basis of a new urban village is in Leigh Park, where there is a general need to change the

area's image to the outside world. The redevelopment of a redundant industrial complex quite close to the main centre offers an opportunity to apply a number of principles:

- **Critical mass** create a distinct quarter by developing several hundred units which will appeal to people who might not have previously considered living in Leigh Park, as well as filling missing rungs on the property ladder
- **Permeability** develop higher density housing close to the shops and services in order to increase the number of people on the streets, and make the area feel safer
- **Identity** build at three or four storeys to make the long roads in Leigh Park look more interesting and varied.

### Addressing Market Issues

Identifying room for development is quite easy, but making it happen is much more difficult. Even though property values are generally high in the South East Savills did not consider there would be interest from developers in promoting mixed uses or developing anything other than housing. So how are hard-pressed local authorities to secure the very facilities that give suburbs much of their appeal and value? It is well accepted by the Treasury that the public sector has the right (and some would say responsibility) to intervene where there is what economists call 'market failure'. In other words where there is a clear demand, but the risks and rewards are insufficient to encourage a private developer to come up with a scheme, the public sector is justified in filling the gap. We found good examples of this happening in Crawley, and excellent opportunities in all five of the case studies. In the summary section of their Property

Market Report Savills make a number of important points:

- *Planning policy will probably have to recognise these lower (suburban) densities and the need for them to remain lower than those hitherto specified in planning policies informed by a more urban 'model' if the character of the suburbs is to be maintained.*
- *There may be a case for selective intensification within suburbs, especially where is a concentration of transport facilities or other amenities.*
- *Suburban planning policies need to allow for much higher levels of car ownership, and probably usage, than more urban areas.*
- *If it is deemed advantageous to have a variety of property uses in a suburb, special business rate concessions may need to be granted and, in some cases, more flexible planning use classes may be appropriate.*
- *It may be appropriate for suburban policy to focus on intensifying existing, low density commercial out-of-town retail malls, declining industrial estates, business parks and the like. These could form the core of new, sustainable urban areas.*
- *In the South East, we believe most suburbs are capable of market led regeneration.*
- *It may be appropriate to set up publicly or privately run management companies to facilitate the ongoing management of commercial uses, and their integration with the suburb. If done well, and in partnership with the private sector, this should add to the overall value of the land rather than detract from it.*
- *In areas of lower affluence, deteriorating stock could substantially change the nature and character of an area for the worse.*
- *Reducing the need for car usage is more likely to be successful than any attempts to ban cars outright. Commercial buildings also need to be provided with adequate parking if local businesses are to survive and prosper. Design solutions can be employed to ensure that cars do not dominate the street scheme and frontages.*

- *Opportunities exist for certain suburbs to act as 'seed corn' areas for local businesses where these have hitherto been accommodated in domestic premises.*
- *Apartments may be inappropriate in an area far from facilities, amenities or transport.*

## Conclusions

We therefore conclude from our case studies and urban design examples that:

1. Many suburban neighbourhoods do offer significant opportunities for intensification, which would help to widen housing choice.
2. Intensification could be used to make suburbs more sustainable, but only if they are in the right place, for example near shops or station, and if there are mechanisms for linking new development with local improvements.
3. Generally there is demand for development in the suburbs in the South East, if it is housing led. But if we want to encourage sustainable communities with the right balance of land and building uses, then a more proactive involvement by the Local Planning Authorities and other stakeholders, is required.
4. A more proactive approach to planning (perhaps covering a fifth of a District's neighbourhoods), would include identifying opportunities, working up complex schemes, and in some case assembling sites and managing. This would follow naturally on from the new planning system, its requirement to produce Area Action Plans, and its stress on community engagement.

5. Unless such an approach is taken to engaging the support of both the community and other stakeholders, the public reaction to uncoordinated and piecemeal development will lead to the decline of areas that are less affluent, and further disenchantment with planning and local authorities elsewhere.
6. Realising the opportunities does call for different approaches to planning (approaches that have often been applied in regeneration areas in the past), and the kinds of skills spelt out in the Egan report.<sup>32</sup> In particular it will require a more inter-disciplinary approach that brings different departments together, and that will engage housing developers as well as community representatives, as happened, for example, in the Tovil workshop.
7. Though there are financial implications, the suggestion from Savills' report is that in many places a positive plan backed up by an area management approach would enable the development of housing schemes of sufficient value to make some contribution to improving the local environment or providing more affordable housing. It may also provide new sites for housing closer to where people actually want to live, for example by redeveloping surplus shops, or the edges of industrial estates at higher densities.

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<sup>32</sup> Egan Review, *Skills for Sustainable Communities*, 2004, ODPM



## 4. IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

This section pulls together proposals for making suburbs more sustainable, drawing on the literature review, planning officers survey, and case studies. It deals with five main questions:

- What kind of policy is required?
- How can proactive planning be made to work?
- What role should neighbourhood management play?
- How can improvements be funded?
- What are the benefits of Neighbourhood Renewal?

### What Kind of Policy is Required?

Policy makers have largely ignored suburbs in the past, and there is a policy gap, which needs to be filled. The simplistic distinctions between urban and rural no longer apply in the South East at least, given the drivers for change. This exploratory study used a variety of techniques to assess whether a stronger focus on suburbs in Regional Planning Policy was needed, and to identify what actually could be done to resolve the problems that many suburbs in the South East are facing. We found that while urban renaissance has received considerable attention, there is little guidance available on how to deal with issues such as maintaining and improving the character of suburban neighbourhoods, or coping with increasing car use and ownership.

Without a positive plan, backed up by area management, and financial mechanisms, several of the suburbs we studied are likely to deteriorate, and the opportunities for positive change in the others will go unrealised.

Furthermore despite the concerns over quality expressed in our surveys of both councillors and planning officers, the results of pressures to produce larger numbers of new homes will continue to be disappointing unless some better ground rules can be agreed between both planning authorities and developers. Suburbs in the South East present a strategic issue of national importance because they are where so much housing investment is taking place (for example in home extensions and improvements), as well as a growing amount of small scale intensification. They also provide greater opportunities for putting the principles of sustainable development into operation because of the higher levels of car use, and also consumption of non-renewable resources.

However it would be wrong to come up with standard solutions or rules, as situations vary so greatly across the South East region, even within the same district or suburb, as the case study of Tadworth illustrates so well. A policy for sustainable suburbs, or what we have called neighbourhood revival, needs to embrace not only areas which are at risk, or which have areas of special character, but also where there are opportunities for development, which require public intervention. We found that development in areas of relatively high land values like Wycombe can produce 12 homes in place of 2, but developers need 3-6 plots to make backland development work financially. They are reluctant to include affordable housing. In contrast the larger plots and values in Sunningdale are generating ten homes for every one, and many more benefits could be extracted without loss to either quality or the production of new homes.

In contrast, in an area with relatively low land values like Tovil, the opportunity to improve

services in line with population growth is likely to be lost without an overall plan. This is in spite of the area progressively improving as a place to live. Sites have become available there as businesses have closed, and there is a danger that others will be squeezed out as owners and developers capitalise on rising land values. As a result the area's balance could be lost, and further pressures placed on an inadequate social infrastructure. Yet the Council has very limited capacity to turn down applications on the grounds they are not good enough, and there is no system of area management to secure a co-ordinated approach. Increasing levels of obligation and risk deter substantial developers from getting involved. Hence the obvious opportunities to part fund improvements from new development are likely to be lost, and with it the chance of creating a more sustainable community. We also found real differences with what could be done in areas of similar style housing in Tadworth and Leigh Park, due to differences in scale and location.

These contrasting examples reinforce the point made in the first section that there is no simple or standard solution. Merely introducing an additional set of policies specifically for suburbs would not provide the answer by itself. Nor would calling a halt to development. The barriers to sustainable development have already been picked up in earlier work, for example in *Delivering Urban Renaissance in the South East*<sup>33</sup>, and include:

- The cost and complexity of site assembly and the risks associated with mixed use schemes on urban brownfield sites e.g. Tovil
- The risk adverse nature of property investors e.g. Sunningdale
- And an uncertain planning framework e.g. Tadworth, Leigh Park, Cressex.

In addition we came across further barriers, which apply at the regional level. They include the tendency for large property owners, such as Network Rail, to sit on property assets, like station car parks, the lack of capacity on the part of local authorities to invest in or manage properties, and no proven mechanisms for capturing the values generated by development. In the suburbs these barriers are further aggravated by the problems of securing enough support to overcome local opposition to intensification, and of increasing the capacity of health and education services.

It is not necessary to apply the ideas of Neighbourhood Revival to every suburb. Our suggested response is to support local authorities in making full use of the new planning system to develop Area Action Plans for suburbs that could be at risk of declining or that offer significant opportunities for new housing or for improving the local environment. They also need to implement area or neighbourhood management in areas that are undergoing a transition. To achieve both these changes, the government needs to ensure that local authorities can mobilise the necessary resources, which we consider in the third part of this section.

### Proactive Planning

Now is an ideal time to introduce a new approach to planning for the suburbs, making use of all the tools that are available, and focussing on the areas that are potentially at risk, or that offer significant opportunities for development:

- **Area Action Plans** The new Local Development Frameworks will require

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<sup>33</sup> *Report of Seminars –Creating Living Places in the South East, Delivering Urban Renaissance in the South East*, 2002, GOSE, SEERA

Councils to produce plans for areas that offer significant development opportunities or that merit conservation. The ODPM is also encouraging local authorities to produce strategies for smaller centres that are at 'risk' in advice to support PPS6, which URBED is producing. Sub Regional Planning Frameworks can be used by groups of authorities to identify opportunities in suburbs that justify further study, for example identifying residential areas close to good transport links where the densities seem too low, or that are next to retail centres that are performing badly or that are at risk of losing their vitality and viability. Counties could identify areas where there is capacity on the part of the schools or health services for an increased population. District Councils could review all their neighbourhoods, starting with maps identifying where all the shops and services are located, and maps showing the socio-demographic profiles, if possible backed up with information on travel trends.

- The **Neighbourhood Profile** should then be a useful tool in assessing priorities, and reaching conclusions over whether efforts should be made to engage the local community (something that would be covered by the *Statement of Community Involvement*). For example it could be backed up by surveys as part of the process of community engagement that local authorities will be required to adopt, or focus groups, or even the setting up a Neighbourhood Forum to agree principles governing new housing in existing neighbourhoods. The lead needs to come from the Chief Executive, rather than relying on planning alone, as Area Action Plans will inevitably involve a number of local authority departments, and relationships with other agencies, such as Health, not to mention the

problems of different tiers of government (and most of the population of the South East do not live in Unitary Authorities). The process is also closely linked to the development of Community Strategies, the role of the Local Strategic Partnership, and taking a corporate approach to governance. It may well be that a different mix of partners is needed in different neighbourhoods. For example, in areas that are 'at risk', the lead needs to come from the local authority's Regeneration Unit or equivalent, whereas in suburbs with character, a stronger role will be provided by a Conservation or Urban Design officer.

- **Character Area Appraisals** In some cases more positive guidance is needed on what aspects of the local environment really matter. Local authorities are already used to the idea of producing studies for Conservation Areas, and also Village Appraisals, and English Heritage is bringing out new advice on Character Assessment, using simple techniques like photographing what is good and bad. While many suburbs and their buildings do not justify the status of Listed Buildings or Conservation Areas, many still deserve to be treated as somewhere distinctive, where a pride of place should be encouraged. Character Appraisals could provide an excellent way of engaging local people, including schools. Appraisals could identify the areas where intensification was appropriate, as well as marking features that should be conserved and enhanced. They are a natural follow-on from preparing a Neighbourhood Profile. By identifying acceptable heights, materials and boundary treatments they could provide the clear framework that both house owners and developers need to reduce

uncertainty, and hence produce better designed schemes.

- **Design guides** Councillors and planning officers are continually looking for good examples that can be used to encourage developers to produce better designs. In some cases, like Leigh Park, good modern design is needed to escape a legacy of 'boring streets'. In others, like Cressex Road, responding to the existing character may be more important. While there is an abundance of published design advice, nearly all the examples feature large developments in the centre of major cities. Though Design Guides, like *Surrey Design*, provide excellent principles, they are short on examples drawn from a suburban context. Windsor & Maidenhead have produced, but not published, a 'Pattern Book' that offers another interesting model because it illustrates different densities and contexts. However the lack of good examples means that inspiration needs to be drawn from further afield than a single county or even country. A practical design guide is needed to influence the design of infill housing and particularly the way parking is handled, the design of new community schools, and primary health centres, and the revitalisation of smaller centres. Such a guide also might gain inspiration from experience abroad e.g. the Netherlands. There is a range of other ways, linked to the production of a design guide for the suburbs, by which quality could be improved:
  - appraising the character of some classic suburbs that have stood the test of time, possibly in conjunction with CABI or English Heritage, and publishing a guide to what creates lasting value
  - involving a Design Panel, drawing on local architects and conservation groups, for example, in vetting

applications for areas that are designated as having a special character (supported by the local Design Champion and the Regional Architecture Centres)

- giving awards for sensitive and imaginative infill schemes
- putting more examples on the CABI Building for Life web site, and drawing on it for inspiration
- sharing good practice through the Councillors Toolbox.
- **Development briefs and masterplans** Some of the examples in the case studies show that suburban renewal can be as complex and demanding as developing a large brownfield site. CABI has published guidance on Creating Successful masterplans which quotes Les Sparks, a CABI Commissioner, as saying *'We need to avoid making everywhere like everywhere else rather than more like itself.'* In a number of the case studies, such as Leigh Park and Tovil, it was clear that the local authority needed to take the lead, without necessarily doing everything itself. For example, briefs could be prepared in association with professionals working for developers or groups of private owners. Small schemes might be discouraged in favour of proposals that not only provide more than 15 units, and hence require some affordable housing to be provided, but also offered community benefits as well. Securing a balanced mix of uses in lower value areas where there are major sites like Procter and Gamble to be developed not only requires a masterplan, but also needs a feasibility study to assess the need for public pump-priming. In high risk/low value situations like Leigh Park, development briefs and illustrative masterplans should help in finding appropriate developers, packaging finance, and securing community

support. Hence the pay-off should be in creating a more sustainable community, and leveraging in private investment.

- **Flexible standards** The huge differences between the suburbs we studied underlie the need for greater flexibility. Not only are suburbs not the same as urban or rural areas, but also they differ on a number of fundamental characteristics. This makes it unrealistic to apply the same standards to everywhere. In particular a range of standards are needed for:
  - Housing densities
  - Parking standards
  - Proportions of affordable homes
  - Mix of uses.

## Neighbourhood Management

Proactive planning can only take us so far. All the workshops proved the value of also developing a positive area management approach, but at present there is no regular process for doing this. As well as a top down approach to strategic planning in which people 'see the big picture', there is a need to respond to local concerns from the bottom up. A number of conclusions emerged from our research which in essence involve applying some of the approaches that have been successfully used in urban regeneration:

- **Multi agency working:** In areas where there is deprivation it is crucial to get 'joined up working' both in the delivery of services, and also the planning of new facilities. The Tovil workshop proved the value of bringing different agencies and sectors together as it identified both the need for and the prospect of funding for a new school, provided the land was made available. Similarly the Tadworth case study shows the value of linking work to improve services with proposals for developing under-used land. As

council estates inevitably have people with high levels of dependency, and who may not sustain car-based independent life styles it is important to take positive action to avoid the whole area developing a poor image. Such arrangements could be coordinated through the Local Strategic Partnership.

- **Area management** Places like Leigh Park should not have to rely on high levels of deprivation in order to receive special attention, as they have done through the Single Regeneration Budget. They require continuous and locally based Area Management, and multi agency working e.g. links between health visitors and housing improvements. These can be hard to justify when local authorities continually have to bid for fresh, short-term programmes. Making Leigh Park sustainable will take a generation. It is just over two years since SEEDA put in funding, and the tangible results are starting to show. As the case studies highlighted, it is essential to consider social and physical capital together, not in isolation. Once there is a 'delivery mechanism' in place it is possible to consider a whole range of possible tools for making the suburb more sustainable. In *Tomorrow's Suburbs; a toolkit for making London's suburbs more sustainable*, some 75 different tools are set out under seven broad themes. The themes, which may also be relevant to the South East, are 1) Reinforcing the role of local centres, 2) Making new development more sustainable, 3) Improving the existing housing stock, 4) Promoting alternatives to travel by car, 5) Improving environmental sustainability, 6) Protecting and promoting suburban employment, and 7) Improving the quality of design and the public realm.
- **Brownfield trusts** With short-term pressures, limited capital funds, and a

shortage of staff that know how to manage regeneration projects, there is a strong case for setting up Special Purpose Delivery Vehicles for the larger opportunities. In the Leigh Park workshop we discussed the need for more than one form of partnership, (as Leigh Park is larger than most small towns). There is possibly the potential to set up a community based Development Trust or a Groundwork Trust, to promote better uses for the public open space, with a rental income to help cover running costs. There may also be scope for setting up the equivalent of an Urban Regeneration Company or mini Development Corporations to take over land owned by Portsmouth Council, along with other sites needed to create viable development packages, and to enter into partnerships that use private finance to achieve public goals. Where sites involve a number of owners and complications, an external agency is needed to act as champion, prepare the masterplan, assemble sites that are in separate ownership, where necessary tapping public Compulsory Purchase Powers, and issue briefs for specific elements. It is possible this could be achieved through SEEDA's Brownfield Land Assembly Trust, but as this focuses on very small infill sites, something extra is needed to tackle the kind of development opportunities we found in Tovil and Sunningdale.

### Local Funding Mechanisms

There is a major issue of how to finance the promotion of more sustainable suburbs, which is too complex to be dealt with properly here, and which, following up the Barker Review, requires ways of tapping the increase in land values that results from

development and public investment.<sup>34</sup> However the case studies, and previous research for the Assembly<sup>35</sup> have thrown up a number of possibilities that need to be explored further:

- **Community charge** Some of the opposition to development would be reduced if developers made a proper contribution to improving the general environment or capacity of local services as part of a neighbourhood management approach. This could be facilitated by using a predictable system of 'charges' rather than the current ad hoc Section 106 agreements. Some authorities such as Wycombe and Hampshire are currently securing contributions where there is a transport strategy, as in Marlow and High Wycombe (and therefore Cressex), and where new development is proposed that generates new demands for travel. Contributions are proportionate to the level of demand associated with the development and its parking provision. The contributions fund is ring fenced so it can only be spent on the local transport strategy, though there are a number of other variants. A better system still would be to set a charge related to the value of the development, to be paid before the houses are occupied, as this should come out of the land value, and should not therefore discourage development from going ahead. This could be a modification of the current Stamp Duty system, or else could be introduced as part of the process of reviewing the arrangements for local authority finance,

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<sup>34</sup> Falk N., *Funding Sustainable Communities*, 2004, TCPA

<sup>35</sup> URBED with MORI, *Attitudes to Higher Density Developments in the South East*, 2004, Report for the South East England Regional Assembly

in response to the *Barker Report*<sup>36</sup> and Sir Michael Lyons *Balance of Funding* inquiry. Such a proposal relates as much to the suburbs as it does to the designated Growth Areas. It could be promoted by the Assembly, and does not necessarily require legislation if it makes use of the existing Section 106 system and planning briefs.

- **Community Infrastructure Programme** There would also be less resistance to new housing if there were proper compensation for its cumulative impact. Again the Barker Report favours this in the Growth Areas, but the arguments apply just as much in the suburbs. Models can be drawn from the Planning Gain agreements negotiated on major commercial developments such as More London on London's South Bank. Community support could be secured in a number of cases if local authorities:
  - ring fenced the funds in a separate account
  - were 'transparent' about how it is used, and ensured it was spent
  - involved the Parish Councils or community representatives in how the funds are deployed
  - applied the funds to the wider neighbourhood, not just the site where development is taking place.
  - Topped up the fund with contributions so it became a rolling fund (as in Crawley, for example).
- **Feasibility studies** A further measure that can help move complex projects forward is to undertake feasibility studies. What can be imposed on developers in terms of obligations must reflect the economic viability of development, after taking account of both likely values and development costs. FPD Savills' report

makes it clear that on the whole investors have not been interested in mixed uses in suburban locations. Feasibility studies could help reduce the risks, and thus increase the chance of appropriate development coming forward. This will enable planning standards to be responsive to market conditions, and should therefore lead to more rather than less development coming forward. For example, what is feasible in terms of the amount of parking or affordable housing to be provided, or the degree of remediation works on a site again depends on the value that can be secured from development less the costs. In a place like Tovil abnormally high costs such as decontamination, and the risks of site assembly will put off most developers, and so if the public sector is not prepared to fund the gap, it needs to be more flexible in what is allowed. In places that are far removed from public transport and where walking or cycling into town is not feasible, families are likely to use their car/s more. Standards for parking therefore need to be seen as averages for the town as a whole, rather than being rigidly applied in each development.

- **Partnerships or development trusts** As developers are sometimes reluctant to pay money over to local authorities (as they may be concerned that the local authority will use the money for infrastructure improvements or will sit on it) the idea of a local trust that could collect contributions, and then use them to support improvements favoured by the local community, could help improve the process. Groundwork Trusts, as in North Kent, are one possible model. Development trusts provide another, of which the best known example is Coin Street Community Builders on London's South Bank. Development trusts could

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<sup>36</sup> Barker K., *Delivering Stability: Securing our Future Housing Needs*, 2004, Barker Review of Housing Supply

also be used to take over under-utilised assets in places where Parish Councils do not exist, for example in Tadworth. Where there is a substantial landowner like Railtrack, or a health authority, the Sub Regional Spatial Plan could kick the process off, in which case a conventional development partnership may provide the solution.

### Benefits of Neighbourhood Revival

Finally, there is the question of whether it is worth investing more time and public resources in our suburbs, given all the competing pressures on resources. There are five justifications:

- First, the benefits of a more proactive approach will be better designed neighbourhoods. As the process needs to break new ground, it is important to draw lessons, as is already starting to take place through the *Councillors Toolbox*, from other suburban areas both in this country and abroad, and there is an appetite in many areas for taking a planned approach rather than simply responding to what developers come up with. Here regional policy can play a valuable role in sharing good practice, and in helping to change the attitudes and behaviour of other key stakeholders apart from local authorities, such as housebuilders. The examples from Crawley show that such an approach is perfectly feasible.
- Second, the benefits should come from bringing the housing stock more into line with demand, and, for example, making housing more affordable. Here regional policy can help to mobilise the development of sites that can make our suburbs more sustainable without harming their character. It will therefore contribute to widening choice, and
- implementing the recommendations in the *Barker* report.
- Third, proactive planning, backed up by a predictable charge on new development, offers the prospect of contributing some of the resources needed to expand capacity. Here regional policy can help to reduce the opposition that slows development down and often worsens its quality, by using Neighbourhood Action Plans to set appropriate ground rules. The South East should be in the lead in showing how to harness increased land values to the cause of creating more sustainable communities.
- Fourth, over the longer term, these improvements should help to support more sustainable life styles, which in turn will help to maintain property values and investment over our children's lifetimes, as well as our own. In this way regional policy for the suburbs can help halt the current trends towards intolerable levels of congestion and pollution, and social conflict from people who feel their needs are not being met.
- Finally, while we have not been charged with assessing the capacity of local authorities to take a more proactive and neighbourhood based approach, the evidence from the case study workshops was that such an approach will be welcomed, as it can make the job more satisfying, and help to raise the profile and image of planning in the eyes of the wider community, thus overcoming one of the principal barriers to creating more sustainable suburbs. While this is a fundamental change in the way many local authorities operate, the approach is very much in line with the recommendations of both the Barker and Egan reports, as well as the government's policy for changing the culture of planning.