

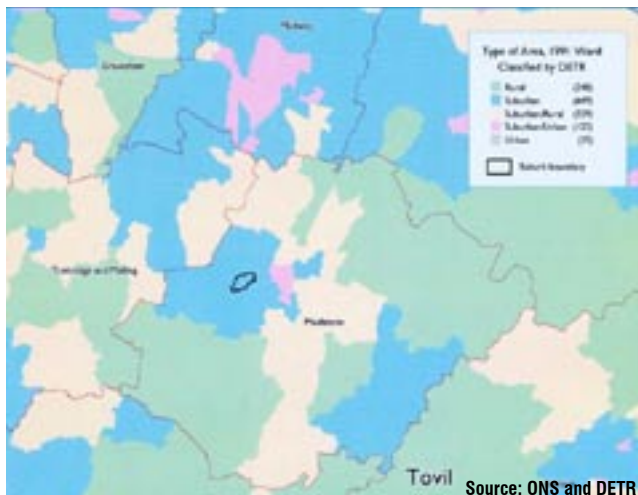
TOVIL, MAIDSTONE

This case study provides a profile of the suburb, and assesses its current state of health. It considers the need for improvement and potential for renewal, before raising some policy issues. It is based on a visit, a workshop with representatives of local interests, and data from a range of sources including the 2001 Census, Local Knowledge and CACI. FPD Savills' market report on Tovil reinforces our findings and a summary is included at the end of the case study.

Tovil in Maidstone presents the issue of how to manage the growth of the suburb which contains a pocket of deprivation (the Coombe Farm housing estate), and which is experiencing major new housing development and doubling of its population, at the same time as loss of industry.

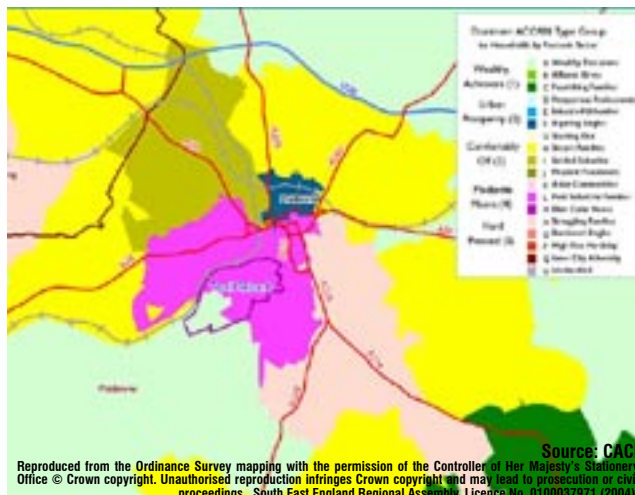


What type of suburb is Tovil?



Source: ONS and DETR

Defined by ONS as suburban

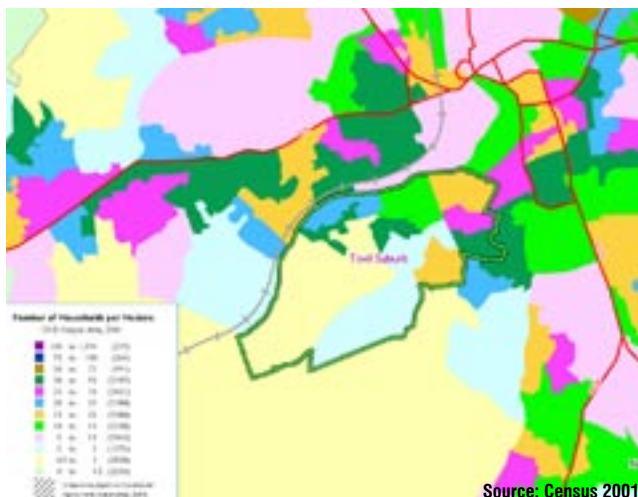


Source: CACI

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Dominant Acorn Type Group (with transport links shown)

- Post industrial families
- Wealthy Executives



Source: Census 2001

Density: number of households per hectare (ONS)
• Ranging from 0.5 – 5 in the south west to
• 15 – 50 in the north (and east)



Source: Census 2001

Dominant House Type (ONS)
• Terraced housing

Physical features

a. Location Tovil lies one mile to the south-west of Maidstone (Kent's county town) town centre, in a relatively hilly area and on the edge of attractive countryside. Partly adjacent to the river, the town centre can be reached via a riverside walk in ten minutes, or by using the Park and Ride facility, which provides a ten-minute bus service.

b. Age Tovil was originally developed as an industrial area, linked to paper making along the River Medway in the late Victorian period. It has been progressively expanded, to include a large interwar Council estate built as 'homes fit for heroes', and some 30's semis and ter-

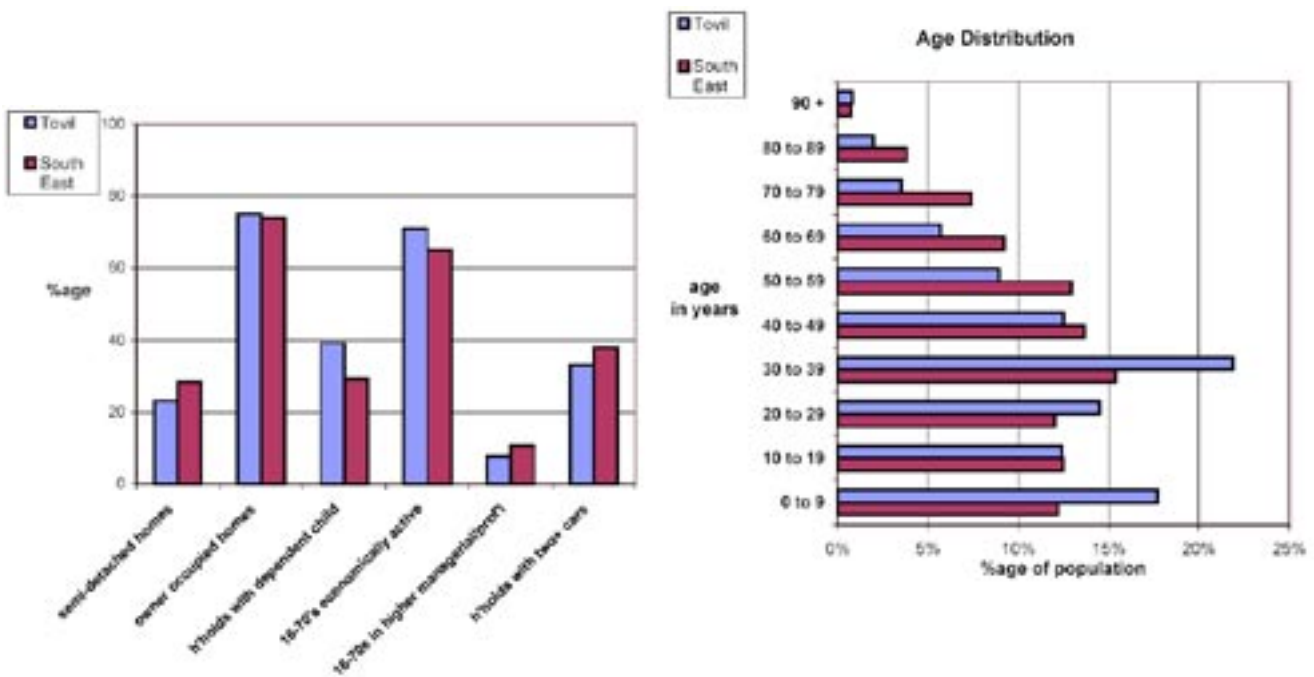
aces. There is a large amount of post war housing, with much expansion over the last 20 years, and Westbury is currently building 200 new homes on a former printing works.

c. Layout Tovil is mainly built in a large, irregular grid on either side of the Old Tovil Road, with many cul de sacs.

- Where it adjoins the river it is relatively isolated, and bordered by industry, much of which has closed in recent years, creating development opportunities, such as the Eccleston Road site – 6.62 hectares in six ownerships.
- Tovil has no real 'heart', but there are three supermarkets, Tesco, Netto and Lidl

on the southern edge, as well as a very small group of shops, including a Post Office.

- There are few noteworthy buildings in the suburb, although some of the Victorian terraces are pleasing, and the two Church of England schools which are listed, add to the area's character.
- The housing is varied and built to different densities, with an average density of 26.4 people to the hectare. The study area has about 1,500 houses (to include both halves of the Coombe Farm Estate) but this will soon increase. There is a low proportion of detached houses.



Neighbourhood features

a. Role Tovil is a mixed suburb, with an increasing residential role at the expense of a declining industrial base. It does however provide an important source of relatively affordable housing where wages are generally low. A higher proportion of Tovil people are working than the South East average, albeit many in lower paid jobs.

b. Image and identity Tovil suffers from a poor image tarnished by its industrial past and the Coombe Farm estate which has high levels of deprivation e.g. the pupils at one of the primary schools live in an area showing the 8th highest level of deprivation in Kent. Despite its poor external perception, Tovil residents are generally proud of their homes and neighbourhood and it has been described as ‘the Chelsea of Maidstone’.

c. Demographics There is a relatively young population (43% are aged 20-44 compared with 35% in the South East), with a high number of dependent children, (39% versus 29% for the South East).

d. Housing demand The housing is mainly owner occupied, in line with the average for the South East, but with a higher proportion of Council and other social housing, and a lower proportion of privately rented. Prices are average compared with other parts of the South East, although semi-detached house prices have risen faster than average. Nearby new two bed apartments overlooking the river are selling at prices of over £200,000 – well above the South East average.

There is concern with what may be considered an over-supply of apartments, where the need is also for family housing, with car parking (a slightly lower proportion of the population own two or more cars compared with the South East average). Constraints on housing development include fragmented ownership of the main Eccleston Road brownfield site, as well as problems of flooding and contamination.

e. Social infrastructure There is under-

capacity in terms of school and health provision. It is proposed that the two infants/junior schools are combined into one larger school on the Eccleston Road site. The current doctors’ surgery is regarded as inadequate and unwelcoming (needing ‘nerves of steel’ to attend!), and there has been consideration of a new health centre on the same site as the new school, thus providing a community hub. In terms of leisure and recreation facilities there are several pubs, as well as a complex housing the Masonic Lodge, a Workingmen’s Club and bowling green. The northern end of Tovil is close to Maidstone town centre, with access to its facilities, and there is the newly developed Lockmeadow site with its clubs. The small gardens do not provide adequate playing space and there is a lack of safe open space for children.

Health of the suburb: priorities and opportunities for improvement

The first part of the workshop comprised a scoring/ranking exercise using a ten category scorecard (5 physical and 5 social characteristics).

Participants were asked to score questions within each of the ten categories, and the results used to stimulate discussion and reach consensus on priorities. A further ranking exercise enabled the priority categories below to be identified, together with some ideas for improvement.

Connectivity The area suffers from an unreliable bus service at the end of the day (last bus being at about 6 pm), and it would often be quicker to walk into town. While it is possible to walk to Tescos it is not a pleasant or easy journey: pavements are discontinuous, and at some places, such as opposite Tescos, crossing the road is difficult. There is also road congestion into Maidstone, and in parts it is not easy to access the riverside.

Possible improvements:

a. Walking strategy Small improvements to the pavements, road crossings, and signing, along with tidying up the general environment would make it feel much safer to walk, and would help reduce car use.

b. Better buses More reliable services, and measures to give buses priority may be required, and there may be scope for better integration with rail services, or even reopening the old railway halt. The existing park and ride scheme is popular, and the idea could be extended.

c. Congestion easing Small changes

NEIGHBOURHOOD SCORE CARD - TOVIL

- * 1. Poor
- 2. Adequate
- 3. Good
- ** 1 to 5 where
1 = least important and
5 = very important

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

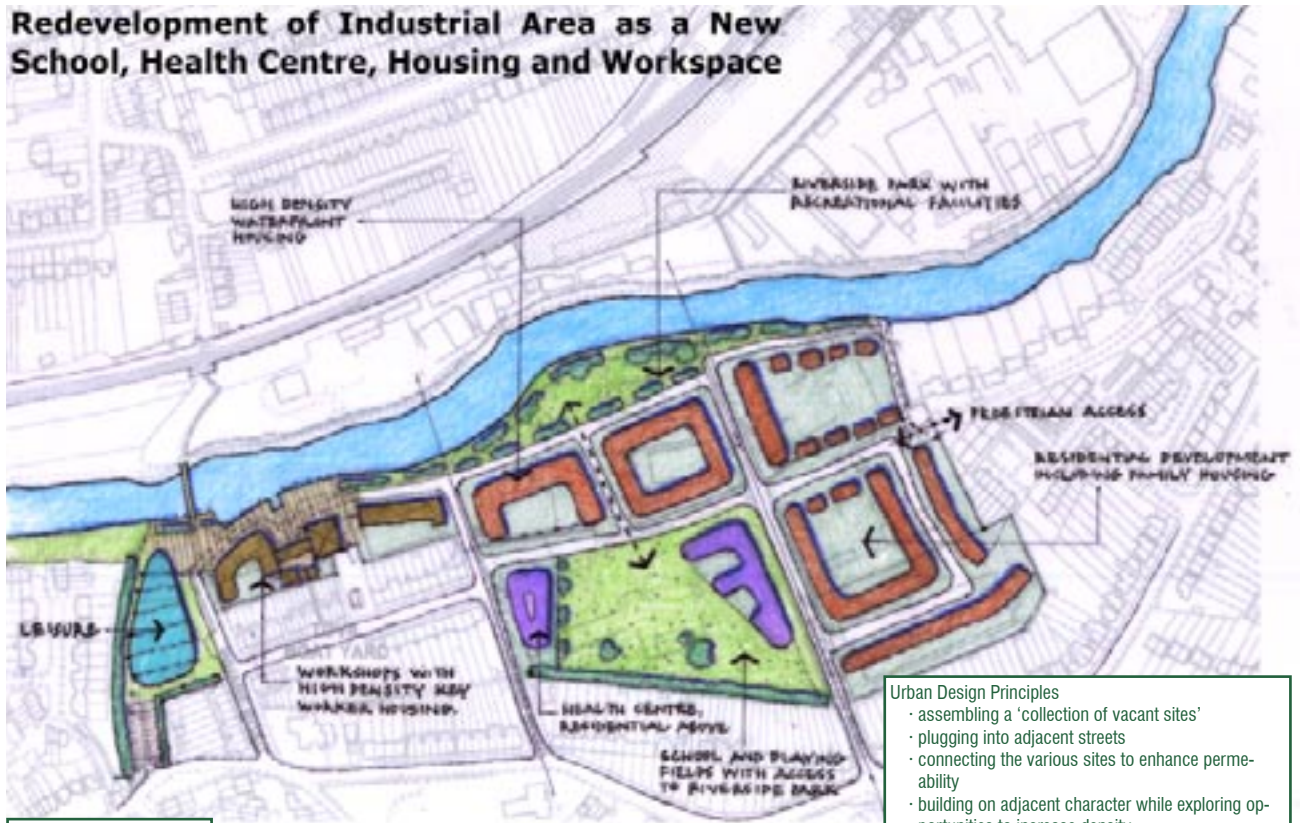
to light timing or road allocation were identified as ideal measures to decrease congestion as traffic goes to or through Maidstone. The development of another bridge was mentioned, although the county's focus on the Thames Gateway and Ashford hinders any substantial changes to traffic flows or road construction.

d. River access Small environmental improvement could be made to the existing River Walk, but access on the south side needs to be considered in any further redevelopment.

Choice There is a good choice of hous-

ing at the bottom end, but if your position improved and your family expanded you might need to move, and so improving the area's sustainability depends primarily on widening the choice at the upper end rather than increasing the amount of social housing.

Character Though there are disagreements over the precise boundaries, and whether all or part of the Coombe Farm Estate should be incorporated, the area has a distinct identity, with a character that comes from its innate diversity and topography. Making it more sustainable



Illustrative only

- Urban Design Principles
- assembling a 'collection of vacant sites'
 - plugging into adjacent streets
 - connecting the various sites to enhance permeability
 - building on adjacent character while exploring opportunities to increase density
 - maximising the value of land adjacent to open space by building high
 - improving the spatial containment of the space.

depends on retaining a mix of uses, which could be driven out by rising land values.

Community As described under social infrastructure the main priority is for more school capacity and better medical facilities, especially to meet the needs of an expanding population. Although there is a general shortage of GPs these could be found given the provision of new premises. Skills levels need to be up-graded (qualification levels 4/5 are lower than the South East average). There was also concern that Tesco's will relocate if a larger site for a superstore can be found.

Possible improvements:

a. Community facilities The development of a new two storey primary school is being promoted by the Diocesan Board and the only feasible site is Eccleston Road. It is hoped this could also include a new health centre.

b. Upskilling Training and other support is needed to help those who left school without qualifications to acquire the skills and confidence needed to get good jobs.

Room for renewal and redevelopment

In addition to the above improvements there is the following potential for the area to become more sustainable through renewal and development.

Maidstone Council drew up a draft Development Brief for Lockmeadow and Eccleston Road in 2001. The Eccleston Road/Wharf Road area comprises six sites totalling 6.6 hectares, with a number of different businesses including a boatyard. Much of the area is subject to flooding and contamination, and there is also the problem of relocating existing users. Though the other side of the river,

Lockmeadow, has since been developed, this site involves many risks, and requires too much in the way of obligations for any private developer to take it on. Opportunities on this site include:

- **Providing a community hub** Using part of the site for a new school may require 1.9ha, and the Department of Education has been approached to provide a grant.
- **Building riverside apartments** There is scope to build more high quality waterfront housing overlooking a small marina. The development would need to be built above the flood plain, possibly with car parking, open space or boat yard activities below.

Other possible opportunities include:

- **Developing a business park in a town extension** If Maidstone were to extend out to the East, and a new river crossing



were to be built to relieve the pressures of through traffic, then space could be provided to enable existing businesses to relocate and grow without the constraints of operating in a residential area with very cramped access.

• **Renewing the Coombe Farm Estate** Maidstone Housing Trust has recently taken over Coombe Farm estate, and is proposing to redevelop some 120 out of the 400 or so houses to make better use of the space and provide a wider range of units. The main reasons for renewal are structural problems, and also the opportunity to change the poor image, to some extent caused by a small number of ‘problem families’. It is not possible to make substantial changes, as there is a need to work within the constraints of existing services, but it is planned to replace the 120 units with 160 and to replace some of the two storey units with three. Given the desirability of new housing it is hoped that a wider range of people will be encouraged to move in.

• **Reusing the school sites** Funding towards the new school might be raised from selling off the existing schools for reuse as housing, perhaps as Live Work units

• **Changing use** The Burkes site in the south east of the suburb is currently designated for employment use, but a change of use might provide the opportunity for further residential development

• **Disposing of Council owned depots** There is scope for including these within intensification developments.

Recommendations for policy

Tovil is progressively improving as a place to live, but without any overall plan. Sites have become available as businesses have closed, and there is a danger that others will simply be squeezed out as owners 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, and so the obvious opportunities to part fund improvements from new development are

likely to be lost. A number of possible solutions came out of the workshop:

• **Development Frameworks and Action Area Plans** Areas in transition or growth need not only to identify strategic development opportunities but also to work out the actions needed to improve facilities in line with a changing population. In particular this includes changes to primary schools and primary health facilities, but should also cover the provision of shops and the role of local centres.

• **Feasibility Studies** What can be imposed in terms of obligations must reflect the economic viability of development, after taking account of both likely values and development costs. Feasibility studies could help reduce the risks, and thus increase the chance of appropriate development coming forward.

• **Flexible Planning Standards** 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 and the costs, particularly abnormally high costs such as decontamination. 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 therefore need to be seen as averages for the town as a whole, rather than being rigidly applied in each development.

In addition flexibility is needed in low value areas in order to avoid an over-provision of social housing, at the expense of developing a diverse, more sustainable, higher quality suburb.

- **Delivery Vehicles** Where sites involve a number of owners and complications, an external agency is needed to act as champion, prepare a masterplan, assemble the site, 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 (BLAT).

- **Stock Transfer** Where an RSL takes over Local Authority housing stock there is an opportunity to both upgrade and broaden the range of housing, making the whole area more sustainable and diversifying the population e.g. by providing sheltered accommodation for the elderly or key worker housing. The RSL is a better vehicle for this type of development as their interest is in the longer term management of property (unlike private developers).

- **Area Management** Much can be done to improve the look of estates comprising mainly social housing by ensuring that 'detritus' of all kinds, commonly found in front gardens, is removed quickly, and residents are encouraged to have a pride in their properties. This would require a neighbourhood partnership approach involving Local Authority cleansing departments, neighbourhood wardens, tenant and resident groups and local voluntary agencies.

- **Community Engagement** Especially in the Eccleston Road site, where the risks and development demands are high, there is great potential for the involvement of local residents in prioritising development needs. Instead of a 'wish list' of possible items demanded from the developer, the community should prioritise, and perhaps relax some wishes in favour of others. For example, dropping the social housing requirement could enable the developer to contribute the land for a community hub of school and doctor's surgery.

Summary findings from FPD Savills' Market* report on Tovil

Residential

- Described by agents as an up and coming area with relatively strong demand, values have risen faster than in the Borough of Maidstone (but from a low base). The potential for riverside development will also raise the profile.
- Tovil's poor image has significantly affected property prices which are lower than in other areas of Maidstone e.g. detached house average £189k cf £298.
- The area's image will not be improved by new development alone: the local authority housing will also need to be improved, either within the public or private sector. This could be through selective redevelopment and a resulting widening of the tenure base. Alternatively, if the rest of the area improves sufficiently, this may tip the proportion of "right to buy" properties towards a more sustainable tenure mix.
- Young, first timer buyers predominate, attracted by the lower prices in the north of the suburb (Old Tovil). They tend to be 'blue collar' at lower end of the income spectrum; Acorn classification 'moderate means – post industrial families'. However there is a more affluent group of 'wealthy achievers – wealthy executives' in the south west of the suburb (New Tovil).
- Current high density (in line with PPG3) mid-price range development is being undertaken mainly by local builders but also by some national developers. There is a risk that this could be piecemeal, unconnected and uncoordinated unless public, or partnership, plans are put in place to ensure that it is integrated and makes maximum use of an attractive public realm and links with the riverside and town centre.
- The good prospects for Maidstone will have a knock on effect for Tovil which has the potential to become a "quarter" of the town centre rather than a separate suburb.

Retail and Leisure, Office and Industrial

- There has been a loss of commercial and manufacturing space to residential use, and this is likely to continue given the higher land values that can be realised.
- Most of the retail spend is captured by Maidstone's town centre, which has low levels of vacancy due to high demand.
- Tovil is only suitable for neighbourhood convenience stores, perhaps alongside other amenities, and there is no planned development. These stores should aim to serve a future growing/more affluent residential population.
- However, the potential for leisure space is strong, based on the small number of leisure units to meet current and future demand from residents e.g. health club.
- Both office and industrial stock is of poor quality, ageing and low value. Office users are attracted to out of town locations where larger, better quality space is available, and manufacturing interest is sustained only because of the cheapness of the space; there are better (but more expensive) locations close to motorway access.
- There is minimal office development, and an oversupply of retail warehousing space.

Future action

- There is a need to improve the links to the town centre in order to enhance the suburb's value.
- It may be appropriate to prepare a public masterplan of the area in order to gain some coherence to the somewhat piecemeal current private development.

* The full market report can be found at www.southeast-ra.gov.uk