

NEIGHBOURHOOD REVIVAL: Towards More Sustainable Suburbs in the South East

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CONTENTS

Executive Summary	i
Introduction	1
Methodology	3
Report structure	3
1. Suburbs in the South East	4
Defining a suburb	4
Sustainable suburbs	5
Classifying suburbs	7
Survey of Local Authority Planning Officers	11
Drivers of change	13
Conclusions	19
2. Health Checks of Five Suburbs	22
Methodology	22
Findings on physical capital	26
Findings on social capital	32
Conclusions	37
3. Opportunities for Positive Change	40
Creative housing solutions	40
Intensifying transit nodes and interchanges	42
Strengthening local centres	43
Improving areas through intensification	44
Using public land	45
Building planned extensions	45
Addressing market issues	46
Conclusions	47
4. Implications for Policy	49
What kind of policy is required?	49
Proactive planning	50
Neighbourhood management	53
Local funding mechanisms	54
Benefits of neighbourhood revival	56
Appendices	
Appendix A	
A hypothetical policy for the suburbs	57
Appendix B	
Results and Analysis from the Planning Officers survey	58
Appendix C	
Crawley: An example of a more sustainable Suburb	70

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Executive Summary

The South East England Regional Assembly commissioned URBED to advise on the need for a distinct focus on suburban issues in the South East Plan. Specifically the research considers the potential for accommodating high quality housing and mixed use development within suburban areas, the policy implications for both the South East Plan and Local Development Frameworks, and the appropriate focus for suburban renewal or improvement programmes.

The research comprised:

- a review of the literature,
- a survey of planning officers,
- five case studies of very different kinds of suburbs (and a review of lessons from Crawley New Town),
- urban design assessments of a variety of development opportunities, and
- an analysis of property market reports from FPD Savills¹ (who were separately commissioned by the Assembly).

The study has benefited from the advice of a steering group of planning officers from County, Unitary and District authorities, English Heritage, SEEDA and the Regional Assembly under the guidance of the Assembly's Urban Renaissance Advisory Group. As well as the main report and FPD Savills' report, there is also a separate report of the five main case studies.

Suburbs in the South East

A large part of the population of the South East lives in suburbs. These have been built up over many decades, making it difficult to classify these areas into distinct types. However, the suburbs have many characteristics in common including, in particular, their relatively low density and therefore appeal to families, but they also have many important differences. Common issues include emerging instability (as in urban areas, suburbs are also experiencing rapid change such as escalating house prices and inability to attract key workers), changing lifestyles, and the need for resource conservation.

Key factors in classifying suburbs include age, peripheral locations, low-density layouts, imprecise boundaries, 'the rule is that there are no rules', and distinctions even between neighbouring areas. In the light of this analysis it was agreed that it would be more helpful to focus on neighbourhoods, when considering appropriate policy responses. These are easier to identify as they tend to cluster geographically around local centres, and are often defined by boundaries such as main roads and railways, waterways, and open space.

Planning Officers Survey

The survey of planning officers secured a very good response, and showed the huge variations within the South East, with some areas having half their population living in suburbs, while others did not think of themselves as having suburban areas at all. A majority welcomed the idea of

¹ FPD Savills, Property Markets – Towards Sustainable Suburbs, 2004.
Available at www.southeast-ra.gov.uk

specific policies for suburban areas in the Regional Spatial Strategy for the South East (the South East Plan). Three main issues were raised on which further advice was needed: housing intensification, improved services, and quality design.

Drivers of Change

Our review of the main drivers of change suggested that while the trends are strong, they are by no means irreversible.

- **Economic trends** affecting suburbs include the spread of London and South East, the tendency for cities to turn themselves inside out, the growth of larger centres at the expense of smaller ones, the continuing decline of manufacturing, and the changing job market.
- **Social trends** include a revolution in lifestyles, with knock-on effects on local centres, and the need to cater for an increasingly old and dependent population.
- The main **physical trends** include the impact of increasing car usage on congestion and travel times, and the capacity of the utilities, particularly water, to cope with a population increase. There are also trends in property investment that could enable creative solutions to be found to the problems of providing affordable housing.

A key factor in responding successfully to these trends in ways which promote more sustainable suburbs will be whether the planning system can become more a proactive force for managing change, as envisaged by the recent Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act and the Egan Review of Skills.

Health checks of five case studies

To assess the state of the suburbs, we picked five case studies that were broadly representative of the range of situations to be found in the South East:

- Sunningdale near Windsor & Maidenhead,
- Cressex Road in High Wycombe,
- Tovil near the centre of Maidstone,
- Tadworth on the edge of Reigate and Banstead,
- Leigh Park in Havant

In addition Tilgate in Crawley, was used to assess the feasibility of a number of the recommendations.

Stakeholder workshops in each of the five main case studies used URBED's Neighbourhood Score Card to help identify priorities for action. Both physical and social capital were assessed in terms of ten elements, and the discussion was also informed by a set of socio-demographic data and maps. The Score Card proved an effective way of rapidly agreeing on the state of the suburb, and hence the opportunities or priorities for improvement. It highlighted significant differences between the case studies. Four factors were generally considered to be very important in all cases:

- choice (is there a mix of house types and values to accommodate all stages in a family's life cycle?)
- connectivity (are there shops, services, open spaces and jobs within easy access?)
- community (do people feel a sense of pride and belonging to their area?)
- capacity (is there sufficient social infrastructure in terms of basic services such as health and education?)

We concluded that suburban neighbourhoods could be assessed systematically, and classified in terms of four categories, as follows:

- areas of stability (with no need for immediate action),
- areas at risk (or with special needs),
- areas of opportunity (or with scope for intensification), and
- areas of special character (or with features that needed protecting and enhancing).

The last three called for more proactive planning and/or neighbourhood management.

Opportunities for positive change

The case studies identified considerable potential for development that could enhance the surrounding neighbourhood., including:

- Identifying creative housing solutions
- Intensifying development around transport nodes and interchanges
- Strengthening local centres
- Improving areas through intensification
- Using public land
- Building planned extensions

Suburban Property Markets

FPD Savills report states that despite the general strength of suburban housing markets in the South East additional incentives will be needed to attract mixed use and commercial property investment into suburban areas. The report does however identify potential for selective intensification within many suburbs, especially those well served by public transport and other essential infrastructure and services. It suggests that a focus for suburban policy may be the identification and promotion of opportunities to intensify and transform existing retail warehousing and under-occupied industrial estates/business parks, for example, into higher density mixed use centres – where they are, or could be, well served by public transport.

Implications for policy

The overwhelming conclusion is that planning in the South East needs to address suburban issues through more proactive planning, neighbourhood management, and new financial mechanisms. While this will take resources, and require the kinds of changes recommended by both the Egan and the Barker reports, it will bring considerable benefits including:

- better design
- wider choice of housing
- resources for neighbourhood improvements
- and ultimately support for more sustainable life styles.

Specific recommendations cover:

- Proactive planning
 - Area action plans
 - Neighbourhood profiles
 - Character area appraisals
 - Design guides

- Development briefs and masterplans
- Flexible standards
- Neighbourhood management
 - Multi agency working
 - Area management
 - Brownfield trusts
- Local funding mechanisms
 - Community charge
 - Community infrastructure programme
 - Feasibility studies
 - Partnerships or development trusts