

housing and growth in suburbia

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This unique publication follows on from work that the Smith Institute has undertaken on housing and place making. Suburbia has grown enormously and changed dramatically over the past 20 years. Today, more than 80% of the population of England live in suburban areas. Public policy has often overlooked these trends. While suburbs are clearly popular places to live, some have suffered neglect and many have weak labour markets, poor infrastructure, and below-average green credentials.

It is from this starting point that the essays in this collection set out ways to make suburban areas more sustainable and much better places to live and work. As Peter Hall says in his introduction, "This is a challenge to politicians of all persuasions in the run-up to the next election."

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Introduction

Professor Sir Peter Hall, Professor of Planning and Regeneration at the Bartlett School of Architecture

The single most important point about suburbia, underlined by every contribution to this symposium, is that most of us in Britain live in it. Though precise definitions present problems – as Jim Bennett’s contribution shows – and statistical results differ marginally, virtually every study shows that between 75% and 86% of us are suburbanites.

Survey after survey shows consistently that three-quarters of us would never live in a flat, and that the great majority aspire to living in a detached house. In this respect we closely resemble the countries we once colonised, and to which we bequeathed our tradition of suburban living: the US, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. The penchant for city-centre apartment life so evident across much of mainland Europe has passed us by. Periodic attempts by architects born in those countries or seduced by their lifestyles meet with stony resistance.

That being the case, “suburban” becomes almost an unhelpful category, like “human”. Suburbia tends to be defined in terms of what it is not: not densely urban. But so broad a category inevitably spans vast differences, and so we vitally need to go on to distinguish different kinds of suburbia. For there is all the difference in the world between places like Chelsea and Islington in London, which began life two centuries ago as edge-of-city suburbs and retain the key characteristic of houses with gardens, and the thousands of estates that have been built on the edges of small towns and villages all over the shire counties of England over the past 40 years.

Density is one point of distinction: up to 80 dwellings per hectare in inner London, down to as low as 20 in a typical 1980s development in Buckinghamshire, Worcestershire or Cheshire. Access to transport is another: within easy walking reach of a dense bus service (and even, in London, a train station) in any typical suburb built before 1939, almost totally car-dependent in examples built in the past 30 years. And access to shops and services is yet another: again, generally within walking distance of a traditional town centre in the first case, a long drive across country to a superstore in the other.

We can fairly say, then, that there are good suburbs and bad suburbs, and that recent land use planning policies have perversely managed to produce really bad suburbs: the worst of all possible worlds. A word of caution is necessary here: new research has concluded that urban form makes relatively little difference to travel patterns or sustainability outcomes in comparison with the broad trend that causes us all, as we become richer, to

demand more spacious homes and more travel. But there is a twist to this: if one policy conclusion is to make motoring more expensive by means of congestion charging or higher fuel duties, then it must make sense to design suburbs that give people the choice of walking to the shops or taking public transport to work. And the kind of suburbia we have too often been building, these past 30 years, denies people this choice.

So design may matter after all – including density. Nick Falk makes the claim for suburban extensions at moderately high densities, as in Continental European examples such as Freiburg or Amersfoort. These places produce a remarkably high quality of life for their residents, especially their child residents. One key element, in Freiburg, is the disposition of open space. Terraced housing is effectively grouped around the equivalent of London squares, which offer very high-quality play space for children as well as outdoor relaxation opportunities for residents.

But it would be a mistake to equate this with high density. No residential block in Freiburg's Vauban is higher than four storeys. The individual units are remarkably spacious by modern British standards, with large living rooms and generous underground storage space. Densities are moderately but not excessively high: Vauban has 2,000 apartments for 5,000 people on 42 hectares, 48 dwellings or 119 people per hectare. Rieselfeld has 4,200 apartments for 12,000 people on 70 hectares: 60 units or 171 people per hectare. And Freiburg's legendary planner, Wulf Daseking, told a BBC correspondent not to copy his city slavishly: in Britain your home is your castle, he said, and you'd better respect the fact. The implication could be that you need to give people more private garden space, plus larger parks a short distance away.

We could perhaps agree – the authors in this monograph seem to be agreeing – on two things. First, that there is more than one way to build a good suburb. In London, which is full of historic examples, densities can range from 80 to 100 units per hectare in Chelsea or Islington, through 30 in middle suburbs such as Ealing or Muswell Hill, to only 25 in the outermost suburbs. But a place like Ealing, developed between 1880 and 1914 with a strong town centre around a busy train station and bus interchange, surrounded by single-family homes at around 30 to the hectare, and generous parks around the edge, can provide one excellent model for the 21st-century suburb.

Second – as Ealing again illustrates – there are certain key features that a suburb must have: homes with gardens on quiet streets, with generous open space. Deny these mandatory obligations, by trying to raise densities or implement insensitive infillings, and the suburb ceases to be a suburb. And that way, decline could set in.

Suburban deprivation

For there is another, quite separate issue that comes out of these papers: the fact that, as suburbia provides a home for almost everyone, some of these people and some of these areas are inevitably going to be poorer than others. In fact, a look at the Department for Communities & Local Government's 2007 Index of Multiple Deprivation will show that, of the four most deprived neighbourhoods (lower-layer super output areas) in all England, three are unambiguously suburban and the fourth arguably so.

Two of these four neighbourhoods – one in Liverpool and one in Blackpool – are post-Second World War council housing estates that have become part-privatised through Thatcherite right-to-buy policies. Another, on the Essex coast, started life as an informal settlement in the 1920s, extolled by Dennis Hardy and Colin Ward in their paeon to anarchist urbanism, *Arcadia for All*. The fourth, a middle-city neighbourhood in east Manchester, was a suburban-density estate built in the 1970s. If you walk or drive through these areas, they look very much like the rest of suburban England. Only a few telltale signs – boarded-up shops, graffiti, a lack of communal life – begin to measure their degree of deprivation.

Unpicking their problem, seeking to define solutions, is by no means easy. But, as different contributors here argue, the basic issue in these neighbourhoods is lack of money. Some residents earn too little, in precarious unskilled minimum-wage jobs; others have lost such jobs they had, and subsist on benefits. Many of those living on welfare are victims of the great deindustrialisation of the 1970s and 1980s, which swept away millions of jobs in manufacturing and goods handling, and left them unable to find the kind of work for which they had trained. The tragedy of many such areas is that they seem to trap their inhabitants in continued cycles of deprivation, whereby the sons and daughters of the unemployed – particularly the sons – follow their fathers down the same path.

Has geography anything to do with this? Perhaps: these estates, stuck at the end of bus routes where the city meets green fields, have the least access to central jobs. But this is hardly an adequate explanation. Speke, the most deprived suburb in England, has Liverpool John Lennon Airport on one side and a successful industrial estate on the other, and buses that run every few minutes into the city centre.

Geography is far less significant than social psychology: the inhabitants of these places, even the young ones, have been unable to make the transition from the old culture of blue-collar work, where son followed father into the factory or down the mine, to the new knowledge economy that demands IT-savviness and the ability to relate easily to customers or fellow workers. As the chair of a Northern England chamber of commerce

put it at a conference, many of them – especially the young men – never learned how to say “Have a nice day”. And without that ability, you can’t get on to the first rung of the ladder up to the new economy.

The problem is that once large numbers of deprived people – especially deprived young people – become concentrated in an area, social problems can multiply. Unemployed young men hang around with nothing much to do, easily gravitating towards drug taking and then drug dealing or other forms of criminal activity. This helps to generate a general atmosphere of menace and fear, especially among the remaining older residents. I and my colleagues found testimony to this in the interviews we conducted in south-east London, recorded in the book *London Voices, London Lives*.¹ People who can, get out. Too often, this leads to a further weakening of the social cement and a further cycle of decline: the process Yolande Barnes graphically describes in her contribution here as degentrification: a process that has gone very far in the inner suburbs of many US cities, and has been avoided here only because – at least in Southern England – the supply of new homes has been so constrained.

The physical quality of an area has very little to do with all this. Poor design may have exacerbated antisocial behaviour in some inner-city estates in the 1970s and 1980s. But many suburban areas, built as council estates in the 1920s and 1930s, were idyllic places until the tenant mix began to change as the result of policy changes in the 1970s. Older residents can testify eloquently to this. It all has to do with the people – and this is why it is so difficult to change. Certainly, contributors to this symposium are right when they call for national policy makers to take a much closer look at the problems of the more problematic suburbs. This is a challenge to politicians of all persuasions in the run-up to the next election.

1 Hall, P *London Voices London Lives* (Policy Press, 2007)

Suburban identity

The suburbs are where the vast majority of the British population live. The English in particular are overwhelmingly a suburban nation, and the Welsh and Scots are catching up. According to government figures reported by In Suburbia Partnership, 86% of English people reside in one of the following categories of suburban development: 43% in 20th-century suburbs, 23% in 19th-century suburbs and 20% in scattered small estates in open land.

In its origins, suburbia represents a quintessentially British compromise between urban and rural lifestyles. The semi-detached house – the architectural expression of that compromise – is home to a third of the UK population. Four million semis were built between the First and the Second World War alone, in a very British response to the horrors of the Great War. "Homes fit for heroes" were suburban semis, replacing the rented rooms in inner suburbs that were so often the pre-war reality.

Born out of the flight from the depredations of the industrial city, the development of suburbia has become a matter of lifestyle preference and one of the strongest markers of national identity. According to research commissioned by the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors in 2003, 77% of British people would never consider living in a flat, and nearly a half of these say that absolutely nothing would make them change their mind.

No more than 4% would choose to live in city centres. The figure is worth bearing in mind because that small minority have a high profile and are disproportionately articulate. The percentage would probably drop even further if a second home in the country ceased to be an option for members of the most affluent urban groups. While the impact of suburban sprawl on the countryside has been a worry for at least two centuries – as early as 1782 the poet William Cowper complained of "suburban villas, highwyside retreats ... That dread encroachment of our growing streets" – there has been little real change in the way the British like to live.

In the English-speaking world as a whole, from the "hundred-mile" cities of North America to the quarter-acre plots of Sydney and Auckland, the vast majority of people choose suburban in preference to urban or rural lifestyles, and that in spite of the long-standing efforts of urban planners, architecture critics and the urban-based media to talk up the advantages of city life. Research reports such as the Commission for Architecture & the Built Environment's *What Home Buyers Want*¹ acknowledge that "we have to recognise

¹ Commission for Architecture & the Built Environment *What Home Buyers Want: Attitudes & Decision Making Among Consumers* (2005)

our suburban history and the concomitant aspirations and reconcile that with a vision of compact cities and a supply-side strategy premised on higher densities".

Suburban aspirations have also been embraced by the immigrant communities in Britain to a greater extent than city-centre or rural living. In fact, the preference for suburbia has become a global trend. Suburbanisation has been happening more slowly in Europe, where urban living remains a stronger aspirational choice; perhaps because European cities were historically less polluted than the Dickensian Coketowns, or, more probably, because the British had the railway system and the affluence necessary to move to the suburbs much earlier.

Unlike in London, Birmingham or Glasgow, bourgeois apartments in Paris still cluster in central *arrondissements* while the Corbusian *cités* of the poor occupy the suburban space. However, the pace of the European suburban shift is picking up. Improvements in the standard of living in Eastern Europe have encouraged suburban house building at an unprecedented scale. Remove conditions of poverty, and the ideal of owning a conveniently located house with a small piece of land around it – that is, of residing in suburbia – becomes all but universal.

Stereotypes obscure true variety

The fact that British suburbia may have started off as a compromise between the *rus* and the *urbs* for the recently embourgeoisied Mr and Mrs Pooter still influences perceptions. Rather than being assessed on their own terms, suburbs continue to be compared with the city and the countryside. On the one hand, they remain targets for the kind of patronising snobbery towards the lower middle classes that tells one more about the last refuge of publicly acceptable derision than about suburban identity. On the other hand, such outdated and largely irrelevant stereotypical associations flatten and obscure an increasing variety of suburban locations and patterns of growth.

Suburbia now embraces a wide range of developments: from new towns to council estates, from traditional dormitory suburbs (now around motorway junctions as often as around railway stations) to the suburbs that people commute *to* as much as *from*. "New" suburbia includes: suburban towns such as Croydon and Kingston; the "technoburbs", where people network globally even as they work from home and where residential areas stand side by side with the headquarters of global corporations; and – notably in the South East of England, where the demographic pressure is highest – largely suburban counties such as Surrey, Kent and Essex, the UK counterparts to the "suburban state" of New Jersey.

Many suburban settlements retain distinctive local identities, but they interact on an increasingly global scale and bypass the city centre as they do so. The notion of centre and periphery is anyway more complex than it used to be. For many residents and businesses the connection with the nearest airport, for example, is more important than the connection with the city centre.

While suburban lifestyle – the ownership of a house and the piece of land it is built on – continues to be depicted as a selfish choice (“If everyone was to get what they wanted, the social, environmental and economic repercussions would be untenable,” the CABA report explains), like voters in unreliable opinion polls the British people pay lip service to the excitement of the city or the open spaces of the country while embracing suburbia as “a love that dare not speak its name”. They continue to prefer their gardens secluded, their parking off-street, and their shops and post offices close by, but not to the point of living above them.

In relation to suburbia, successive governments are also guilty of hypocrisy. Election campaigns appeal to the majority of suburban voters by promising better transport links, healthcare, childcare and education provision. Politicians pander to the “invincible green suburbs” and indeed espouse suburban tastes (such as Margaret Thatcher’s never-lived-in Barratt home in a gated community in Dulwich). However, when suburban problems occur, they become “urban”.

The fact that Tottenham is described as an “inner-city” area while Ealing continues to be “suburban” has little to do with their (identical) respective distances from central London, and much more to do with the way we continue to imagine suburban identity. Cultural stereotypes of suburbia created in the 1970s, in a more homogeneous society and at the time of more homogenised media consumption, have hampered discussions of the way suburbia has evolved. It is clear that the old associations of “suburban” with white, heterosexual, conformist, middle-class and Middle England are no longer relevant, but is it still useful and productive to talk about “suburban” identity?

My answer to that would be: “Yes, definitely, unless and until we find a better word.” “Suburbia” represents a useful umbrella term for a variety of settlements with medium housing density and medium population density, and the suburban frontier does not always expand away from the city centre. Smaller households and different rates of occupancy may in fact mean that some of the inner suburbs are more “suburban” now than they were half a century ago, and – with public transport links yet to catch up with new patterns of commuting – more dependent on the car than they ever were.

The etymology of the word "suburban" emphasises its links to the city, the *urbs*, but suburbia offers its own models of local living in the globalised society. It is no longer a matter of a trade-off, but of advantage over both the city and the countryside. At their best, suburban societies are as tolerant and diverse as the inner city, yet preserve the village sense of community that may be absent from anonymous apartment blocks. They can be as leafy and peaceful as many villages, but with the advantages of sophisticated shopping, local restaurants and cosmopolitan neighbours. The problems and challenges of suburbia – and there are many – are also different from those in both the high- and low-density areas. While suburbia may still be configured in terms of residual dependency on large city centres, it is no longer simply residential and its problems cannot be solved by distant provision in the centre.

New realities

Changing patterns of work, marked by increasing intra-suburban commuting and home working, can lead to a reliance on local provision. Shopping, services, education, culture and leisure providers all in turn become local employers and bring their own transport, parking and other demands. The example of Kingston (where the Centre for Suburban Studies is based) is telling. Kingston is arguably a suburb of London, but it is also a large, historic town, which offers sizeable outside employment. The number of people commuting into it, at more than 30,000, is roughly the same as the number of people commuting out of it every day. Yet, as much as the historic character, the distinctive "suburbanness" of places like Kingston is endangered by the cascading urbanisation and pressure to build new dwellings. In that process, the suburbs lose unique qualities that attract home buyers, employers and investors to them, and that loss hurts the city as well.

While the US suburbs are characterised by sprawl, the growth of British suburbs is restricted by space and planning regulations. Polycentric suburban developments are modelled as much on villages, market and county towns (and many of these have morphed into suburbs when enveloped by growing development). While in the US the suburban expansion can still drain the city of its energies, the population pressures in the UK, and particularly in the South of England, make that model increasingly unlikely over here. Instead the suburbs are being swallowed by their cities and losing the qualities that made them popular in the first place. The suburbs already have many of the same problems with transport, infrastructure, crime and grime as the city. More than urban living, suburban living is no longer associated with particular life stages – people go to school, study, work, retire and die in them. The suburban population is older than before, but the number of suburban children below the age of five has grown too.

In dealing with these new realities, suburban communities need as much help as the

"inner city". Indeed, because of outdated models of provision delivery – such as emphasis on radial rather than concentric public transport – sometimes those problems are comparatively greater. Of course, the suburbs can also become victims of their own success. The pressure to build new homes in successful suburbs threatens that which made them attractive in the first place. If they "work" they become ever more sought after, in a way that brings pressures on public provision, while help is not as readily available as in suburbs or inner-city areas that don't work.

However, with some external assistance, the suburbs are better placed to help themselves than many urban and rural areas. They offer more flexible, more adaptable patterns of living. Home ownership is a source of positive identity, self-esteem and well-being. It offers a sense of identification with, and belonging to, a community, and gives a promise of integration for the incomer that is perhaps easier in suburbia than in the close-knit village communities or the anonymous residences of the city centre.

In the "New World" of suburbia we are all incomers and we can all belong. It is unsurprising that those immigrants who can afford the choice – from the Koreans of New Malden to the South Asians of Southall – have traditionally preferred suburban settlement. The BBC's *Kumars at No. 42* in Wembley can be said to represent an updated take on *The Good Life*, and Southall is in many ways the continuing echo of the Victorian suburb, with the house of God at the centre of community life, the homes occupied by large families, and a vibrant high road responding to local needs.

The history of suburbia offers a succession of attempts to create new communities. Some, like Bedford Park and Hampstead Garden Suburb, influenced new patterns of planning and architecture around the world. Contemporary architects are often, and perhaps understandably, more interested in *grands projets* (whose patrons they would not dare castigate for unsustainable "selfish" choices) than smaller-scale individual dwellings. They also sometimes impose unrealistic ideals of their own upon other people's homes. Meanwhile, the average suburban family home has not radically improved either in terms of aesthetic appeal or sustainability since the days when Voysey, Shaw and Lutyens turned their attentions to it. It is perhaps easier to rebuke suburban "selfishness" from one of the airier inner-city locations than to create new and greener suburban homes, parks and shopping areas; easier to urge the government to impose "hard choices" on four-fifths of its people than to attempt to square the circle of suburban preference and its long-term sustainability.

The suburb is not the "enemy". It is who we are.

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Outer London – realising its potential

In the past few years, interest has been growing in realising the full potential of London's suburbs. The 2007 reports *London's Suburbs: Unlocking Their Potential*¹ and *Semi-detached: Reconnecting London's Suburbs*,² together with the on-going project "Towards Successful Suburban Town Centres" at University College London, indicate just how widespread this interest has become. At the same time, the outer London boroughs have increasingly expressed concerns that the London Plan and the capital's economic and transport strategies are overly concentrated on inner and central London to the detriment of outer London.

Recognising this, in late 2008 the mayor of London set up the Outer London Commission to make recommendations to inform and support changes to the London Plan and other mayoral strategies and policies, with the objective of enabling outer London to realise its economic, social and environmental potential and play a full part in sustaining London's continuing success. Among the key tasks given to the commission were:

- to identify the scope to grow the outer London economy on a sustainable basis – removing barriers to growth for competitive, established sectors and attracting new ones;
- to explore the potential contribution of a few large growth-hubs, for example, possibly Stratford, Croydon, Brent Cross and the Heathrow area;
- to secure wider rejuvenation of outer London's town centres and other business locations;
- to enhance the quality of life in business and residential environments;
- to examine the relationships between demographic, housing and economic growth;
- to improve infrastructure, especially the balance between different types of orbital and radial movement, strategically and locally; and
- to extend and deepen the skills base, addressing barriers to employment now and in future.

The heartbeat driving these tasks was concern that, while employment in London as a whole rose by 6% between the cyclical peaks of 1989 and 2001, and by 3% between 2001 and 2007, employment in outer London rose by only 1% between 1989 and 2001 and by 2% between 2001 and 2007. In the counties surrounding outer London, employment grew by 11% in 1989-2001 and by 4% in 2001-07.

1 British Urban Regeneration Association and URBED (Urban & Economic Development) *London's Suburbs: Unlocking Their Potential* (2007)

2 London Assembly *Semi-detached: Reconnecting London's Suburbs* (2007)

Outer London, though, is far from homogeneous, and this general trend conceals significant local variations. Some outer boroughs recorded strongly positive employment growth, especially between 1989 and 2001: Hillingdon's employment increased by 39% or 54,000, Richmond grew by 26% (17,000) and Barnet by 17% (20,000). Against these must be set significant declines in the 1989-2001 period for Barking (-21% or -15,000), Waltham Forest (-13%, -11,000), Croydon (-10%, -17,000), Hounslow (-9%, -15,000) and Brent (-9%, -12,000). More substantively, below these headline boroughs lie a raft of others with lower levels of decline or, at best, only modest growth.

Addressing structural challenges

The core task for the Outer London Commission is therefore to identify and address the longer-term structural challenges that have led to what appears to be a fundamental imbalance in London's economic geography.

To try to answer this, the commission has posed and considered some basic questions, including:

- What kinds of office jobs (financial services, public-sector, and so forth) are forecast to grow?
- What is the overall public-sector/private-sector split?
- Has any attempt been made to assess new employment opportunities such as green and creative industries?
- Is the growth of employment opportunity constrained by any factors (such as skill sets, lack of cluster development, infrastructure deficits)?

Some of this material is to hand within the Greater London Authority and some is in the process of preparation – such as retail needs assessment, town centre health checks, the London office policy review, and the housing capacity study.

As a first step, the commission considered whether this imbalance matters. There is a view that it may not, predicated on the wider geographical context of outer London. It is part of the wider South East, a city region of 21 million people accounting for two-fifths of overall national output and much of the UK's net growth. Closer to home, it has improving links and access to the main growth areas of the 4.5 million-job London economy, which over the long term is generally expected to grow at least at national trend (2.5% rise in GDP).

Outer London also has a substantial employment base of its own (almost 2 million jobs or 40% of the London total). Given this economically positive context, perhaps the main

thrust of policy for outer London should be to play to its core, modern strength as an attractive place to live, uniquely located to access the main motor of the UK economy.

There are some telling points in the above arguments, but they do not represent a full, much less a particularly positive, vision of the economic roles outer London could or should play in London and the wider South East to achieve the mayor's and government's objectives. These are that outer London is not just a dormitory and that it should:

- optimise its contribution to the regional/national economy;
- ensure that this economic contribution complements broader objectives such as minimising the need to travel;
- better meet local aspirations in terms of choice of local employment opportunities;
- recognise that commuting (a third of outer London's employed work outside the area) does not suit everyone; and
- perhaps most significant of all, if overall growth rates in outer London can be raised to the London average or the outer metropolitan area average then the whole economy must grow. This particular aspiration similarly underpins the government's Thames Gateway initiative.

Town centres in their own right

Outer London boroughs stress the economic importance of the suburban subregions and individual town centres in their own right. For example, the six boroughs that make up the West London Alliance point out that they contribute some 20% of the capital's economy, have a highly skilled workforce with over 50% educated to degree level, and count international blue-chip companies among the businesses located there. In the same vein, the outer boroughs draw attention to the fact that they, like central London, have specialist clusters of businesses, including: Heathrow (transport/logistics); White City (culture/media); Croydon (government/corporates); Stratford (leisure/Olympics); and Newham and Bexley Thamesides (manufacturing/logistics), all of which are key parts of London's economy and have developmental needs.

Chief among these is a call for increased investment in accessibility, especially orbital movement to provide better connectivity between key centres and hubs. Better public transport systems lie at the heart of this perceived need for improvement, but there is also a wish for some new roads and the power to relax parking standards to enable competition from town centres and business parks outside London to be addressed.

To respond to this, the commission looked at a number of key considerations. For example: What are the relative advantages of better orbital or radial movement, or is a combination

of the two necessary? Does it look likely that a high-speed orbital link around London will be essential to foster higher levels of growth or could, say, a hub-and-spoke concept be more cost-effective? Is there scope to make more efficient use of the existing rail network, either locally or strategically? What part could buses or cycling play in supporting a sustainable economy? Are there any parking, traffic management or other road-related issues?

Allied to this, the commission is looking at whether there is any potential for new employment opportunities including knowledge-based, creative and green industries, and whether the latter would require particular interventions. For example, it is exploring whether any sector that needs a high degree of skill requires a fusion between higher education and other sectors through research and the labour market, possibly with seed-corn public-sector infrastructure investment to support science parks. Another area being examined is whether outer London is competitively disadvantaged in terms of IT infrastructure such as fibre-optic cable or local hubs.

Alongside these considerations, the boroughs have stressed, as has the commission, that economic regeneration cannot be separated from local quality of life and quality of the environment. One of the historic virtues of many London suburbs is their unique sense of community and place. Economic rejuvenation must be part of wider place making and community regeneration around facilities and services required to meet the changing needs of outer London – schools, hospitals, cinemas – and high quality of the public realm, not least open spaces. *Rus in urbe* (bringing the countryside into the city) has been suggested as one of the defining characteristics of outer London. The commission is being pressed to call for more and better local social infrastructure, with town centres forming part of a wider and stronger “civic hub”.

In short, the boroughs argue for an alternative geographical context for outer London, in which the area is characterised by a series of unique and separate communities, each with its own particular economy. The analogy quoted is that rather than seeing London as a single sun (inner and central London) with a subordinate satellite ring (outer London), the city consists of a constellation of stars, some bigger than others, but all unique and deserving of investment to help them develop their potential to the full.

Super-hubs

It is against this background that the commission has addressed one of its key tasks – assessing whether concentrating investment on enhancing the competitive strengths of a limited number of “super-hubs”, that is centres of greater than subregional significance, would make the most effective use of scarce regeneration resources and thereby maximise the benefit to outer London as a whole.

To do this, it has identified the characteristics that would delineate super-hubs. These include the scale of offer available regarding: overall accessibility; offices; retail; culture, leisure and tourism; health; higher and further education; and specialisms. Of these, the most important (and perhaps the only real delineating characteristic) was considered to be the ability to attract large-scale office employment comprising several million square feet of floor space. All the other factors, even if on a large scale, are already present in existing metropolitan centres, albeit not necessarily all together.

Four potential hubs were initially suggested for examination:

- Croydon (south London);
- Stratford (east London);
- Brent Cross/Cricklewood (north London); and
- the west London opportunity area and environs.

Initial work undertaken by the commission has indicated that significant difficulties surround this concept. It is considered unlikely that any suburban centre would be able to attract enough large-scale corporate office occupiers to reach the office scale threshold needed to be regarded as of greater than subregional significance, as market forces favour central London or the outer metropolitan area, thereby leapfrogging suburban locations (other than possibly Croydon, which already has a greater than subregional office sector).

Also, revised lower employment growth forecasts for London suggest there will not be enough demand to satisfy new development on the scale required; without the scale to generate enough ridership, needed public transport improvements would be difficult to justify in the light of restricted budgets and other priorities.

This, coupled with the outer boroughs' fear that super-hubs would suck investment away from existing town centres, has led the mayor to indicate that they will not be forced on to unwilling boroughs. Densification of residential development within and around town centres would help to create enough demand, and this option remains for those boroughs such as Croydon that wish to pursue a growth/retention policy.

Conclusion

In conclusion, what is likely to emerge from the commission's work is a renewed emphasis on the importance of the outer boroughs, based on a "constellation" of hubs and centres rather than a focus on a limited number of growth hubs. Outside the central area, town centres remain the main geographical focus for Londoners' lives in the broadest sense – they are the places with which people most identify and that they visit most regularly for

a wide range of goods and services as well as social interaction; the replacement London Plan should recognise this.

That is not to say that there is no room for flexibility or change, and the commission will take into account the need to ensure that outer Londoners have access to the widest choice of local employment as well as any commuting offer. In this latter respect, access to the Thames Gateway, London-Stansted-Cambridge, Croydon-Crawley, Western Wedge and London-Luton-Bedford corridors are of importance also. If a radical new spatial geography for London based on a polycentric system is unlikely, measures to promote the importance of the suburbs as areas in their own right, with individual and unique needs and requirements, seeking a fairer share of new public-sector investment resources, is likely.

Sustainable suburbs – learning from Europe

With more than 80% of the British population living in suburbs, it is surprising that they have received so little political attention. It was the neglect of outer London that lost Ken Livingstone his position as mayor of London, and it could be that the next general election will be fought over what is happening in our suburbs, rather than on the world stage. This short paper brings findings from work that URBED has undertaken over the past few decades, both in reports for clients – such as *City of Villages* for the Greater London Authority – and in research, such as *Regeneration in European Cities*.¹

It seeks to answer four main questions:

- Why do our suburbs matter?
- What can be learned from recent European experience?
- How can we apply the lessons to regenerating existing areas?
- What should the policy be on urban extensions and new settlements?

The state of our suburbs

When Britain's cities expanded in the 19th century, through miles of dreary lookalike terraces around every mill and factory, the filth and degradation gave rise to the Garden City movement and its legacy, the semi-detached house. In the 1930s, during the Great Depression, more than 3 million houses were built, enabling the middle classes to ride suburban railways out to Shangri-la or Dunroamin and create their private utopias. This story, and its consequences, are told in *Building the 21st-Century Home*, and the new edition chronicles the ups and downs of the past 10 years, when we achieved something of a renaissance in city living.² The saga highlights the need to make the most of what we have inherited, and not take it for granted.

Because for generations those who could have moved as far away from cities as transport systems make possible, suburbs have received little political attention compared with inner cities and city centres. Indeed, when the government commissioned a *State of the Cities* report, inspired by the US model, the winning team chose to focus on the renaissance of the larger post-industrial cities. The report said little about how to transfer the benefits to the surrounding areas.

1 URBED *City of Villages: Promoting a Sustainable Future for London's Suburbs* (Greater London Authority, 2002); Falk, N et al *Regeneration in European Cities: Making Connections* (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2008) (www.urbed.co.uk)

2 Rudlin, D and Falk, N *Building the 21st-Century Home* (Architectural Press, 1999/2009)

The centres of Leeds and Manchester are rightly celebrated as urban regeneration success stories, but the fates of Bradford or Oldham tend to get ignored. While grand new shopping centres or arts facilities may grab the headlines, they do little to engage the hearts and minds of (or to employ) those living on the edge. It is the growing polarisation and loss of a sense of purpose that should be concerning us most as we start to reassess priorities.

As Britain has tended to follow the US model in most things, it is worth noting that the problems once associated with the inner cities there have shifted. Poorer people have moved out to “the first-tier suburbs”, where it is no longer possible to reach jobs or services except by car. The rise of what Joel Garreau calls “edge cities” – car-based retail and business parks – has sucked the life out of large and small city centres.³ In the process these edge cities have created a new underclass.

The US leads the industrialised world in inequality and related aspects of social malaise, such as teenage pregnancies and drug abuse. Unfortunately Britain seems to be following close behind, as Richard Wilkinson shows in the charts in his latest book, *The Spirit Level*.⁴ Our case studies have revealed places that have lost their independent shops, their front gardens, and much of their peace and quiet, and that often look neglected and unloved.

Why look to Europe?

When the UK is compared with the countries of Northern Europe – Scandinavia, the Netherlands and much of Germany – the message is clear: many of the problems that cause us most concern, such as security and gang behaviour, could be due to the way we have managed industrial and urban change. The distribution of income is closely related to indicators of well-being and quality of life.⁵ The UK, along with the US, unfortunately tends to come close to the bottom, whereas the social-democratic countries of Northern Europe come close to the top on almost every measure. Similar relationships can be found at the state level in the US, suggesting that spatial disparities really matter. So instead of always turning to the US for ideas and inspiration, it is worth looking and learning from cities that have tackled similar challenges to the ones we now face, but in very different ways.

Though European cities often looked to Britain for inspiration in the 20th century, copying our garden cities and new towns for example, they generally followed a very different urban model. With most people living in apartments built to much higher densities, towns

3 Garreau, J *Edge City: Life on the New Frontier* (Anchor, 1992)

4 Wilkinson, R *The Spirit Level* (Penguin, 2009)

5 Ibid

and cities were able to afford a better standard of physical infrastructure. There was less of a contrast between town and country. While our cities took out their trams to make driving easier, their cities invested in new integrated transport networks. With much greater autonomy, including the devolution of power to French cities in the 1970s, they were able to join up transport and development in ways that have eluded the UK. They saw development as an expression of city pride, not something to be fought by nimbys. The results of civic patronage can be seen in the richness of European culture.

The ethos of city living has persisted, even though most cities had to be heavily rebuilt following war-time destruction. The wealthiest and most talented tend to live in the town centres. The poor (particularly immigrants) were often relegated to the edges, sometimes in system-built blocks of flats similar to the ones we later built. A concentration of people living and working in the same place helps support a good range of independent shops and services, as well as good public transport, and can make walking and cycling a pleasure. The city - instead of being a drain on the rest of the economy, or an "engine of growth" - becomes an embodiment of what people value most: a sense of collective achievement or public good.

Of course, the results are not always successful. The appalling housing estates on the edge of Italian cities (sometimes the product of gentrifying the centres) are worse than anything we can show. At its worst polarisation produces riots, as in some French cities, when poor people feel cut off from opportunities. Religious and racial differences can spark off disturbances, and encourage antisocial gang behaviour. That said, walking round Swedish, Dutch or German suburbs still feels a lot safer than doing the same in the UK (in part because there are more people on the streets), with the added benefit of being able to take a frequent tram back to the city centre.

Sadly, many local politicians in the UK find it difficult to justify visiting European cities, and are surprisingly ignorant compared with their Continental equivalents. Europe has been treated as a bogeyman, which we have sought to lecture, rather than tapping the full potential of co-operation. The behaviour of our football fans and wedding parties has not helped to build relationships. Furthermore, the statistics that are available do not explain why things work so differently in places that on the surface have much in common. For example, Leeds and Bradford have lagged behind Lille and Roubaix, and indeed French provincial cities have outperformed Paris in economic growth, whereas in the UK, London's success has not been sufficient compensation for other cities losing their *raison d'être*.

My own conversion started with recognising that the US cities I visited when I was at

Stanford Business School no longer provided the models for sustainable development we were seeking (with notable exceptions, such as Portland, Oregon). By contrast, regular visits to European cities – first on study tours, later to participate in conferences, and finally through comparative research projects – revealed that Europe was setting the pace, and that very different processes were at work.⁶ While the UK was busily centralising every decision, European countries were generally decentralising. While we indulged in imperial fantasies, they were getting on with beautifying their cities, and with great ideas made up of many small projects. While we were talking, they were building. We may have become the very command economy we were supposed to be fighting.

Regenerating existing neighbourhoods

The differences in approach can be seen by considering a couple of case studies of post-industrial cities: Gothenburg and Rotterdam.⁷ Both Sweden and the Netherlands have built many more (and better and bigger) homes than we have in recent decades. Like us, they set broad targets (in Sweden it was to build a million new homes, in the Netherlands to increase the stock of housing by nearly 8% over 10 years). However, they then left local authorities to determine how the target was to be reached. Fundamental to the process was to make the most of existing cities through the realisation that this was the only truly sustainable and fair policy to pursue.

A visit out to a suburb in Gothenburg (Sweden's second city) or Stockholm is very easy compared with, say, visiting a suburb in Birmingham or Bradford. Frequent trams reach the outskirts quickly, and it is easy to change to a bus at the well-maintained bus station. The public realm is well looked after and feels safe. Care has been taken to avoid concentrating too many of any one nationality into a particular block or housing estate. What started life as fairly inhumane-looking concrete blocks are being redeemed through neighbourhood greening projects. There is a focus on communal activity to ensure everyone understands and respects the Swedish way of life.

Such a process, which in Germany is called "careful urban renewal" (with a pioneering project in Kreuzberg as part of an international building exhibition) or "critical reconstruction" (with exemplary schemes in cities like Kassel and Karlsruhe), aims to rebuild ugly buildings but to save and reuse the rest. As a result renewal is much less costly and more effective because it can work with existing communities, rather than displacing them. The resulting mix is much more complex, but, like a good garden, is all the better for it.

⁶ See reports on URBED's website, www.urbed.co.uk: *Learning from Dutch Cities*, *Learning from New Dutch Settlements & Suburbs*, *Learning from Lille & Roubaix*; *Learning from Berlin*

⁷ Falk et al, op cit

Such neighbourhoods also have a wider mix of classes and income groups as well as races, thanks to differences in the way social housing works. Instead of treating it as a kind of last refuge for those who cannot cope, rented housing forms a much larger sector. In the Netherlands rents are related to income levels, so there is not the same stigma of living in social housing. In Rotterdam, where a majority of the 600,000 population were born abroad, there is a programme called Opzoomeren to teach "social etiquette" and develop mutual respect. Rented housing is also well managed for the most part. It is significant that Switzerland has one of the smallest owner-occupied sectors while we have one of the largest – the Swiss preferring instead to invest in small businesses, and leave housing management to professional landlords.

The collapse in the private housing market in the UK, with prices generally far above what most people can afford, provides an opportunity to rethink our relationship with both housing and neighbourhoods. As energy, water and waste removal become ever more expensive, there is a golden opportunity to make savings by upgrading existing neighbourhoods, rather than tearing them down. As renovation is highly labour-intensive, it also provides one of the best ways of creating training and employment opportunities. A start would be to equip a new generation of energy-conscious plumbers with the idea that they can save the planet (as well as enjoy a good life). Somehow European cities do not dismiss plumbers or engineers as second-class citizens or venerate accountants, bankers and lawyers as we have done!

Building sustainable urban extensions

At the same time as cities have cared for their existing neighbourhoods, they have also extended their boundaries. It is simply far more economic and sustainable to extend what exists than to build anew. The illusion of paying for advanced infrastructure out of the uplift in land values needs to be quashed. We need to tackle the root causes of why new housing in the UK is so much more expensive to build than on the Continent.

In case studies for a research project, *Beyond Ecotowns*, which examined 10 successful new settlements in four different countries, we found that the rate of building (and occupation) was some three to five times the British equivalent.⁸ In turn developers needed much lower margins, because the risk was lower. Building materials and construction costs benefited from economies of scale, and the learning curve of doing things again and again, rather than every project being a voyage of discovery. Local authorities take the lead in making serviced sites available in appropriate locations.

⁸ PRP Architects, URBED and Design for Homes *Beyond Ecotowns* (2008) (www.urbed.co.uk)

We have taken successive groups of local politicians, officers, developers and landowners from Cambridgeshire (and other local authorities) to look and learn from success stories in Freiburg in south-west Germany, and Amersfoort near Utrecht. We have also visited many other new housing schemes. It is also worth highlighting Kirchsteigfeld (a new suburb of Berlin and Potsdam) and Adamstown near Dublin, as in both cases there was heavy private involvement. But what stands out in all cases is that local authorities were playing a much more proactive role. They rely on multidisciplinary teams who stick with the job, not armies of consultants who come and go. And there is much more in the way of physical and social infrastructure provided from the start.

Messages for politicians

Housing can easily become a political football, with attacks focusing on numbers, when they should be concerned with more subtle issues, such as quality. Already in the Conservative Party's policy statement *Control Shift*, which attacks over-centralisation, there are commitments to abolish regional-level organisations and spatial strategies. Sadly, far from freeing up economic development, this will simply strengthen the forces of inertia, and reinforce spatial and other inequalities. Nor will it direct resources at where they could make most difference – namely the hundreds of failing suburban town centres, and their often poorly used local public transport systems.

We therefore need to find a way to enable people of all sides to unite behind a common cause. The Cambridgeshire Quality Charter for Growth provides a possible mechanism.⁹ By asking what we really like about Continental towns and cities, and how we might transfer some of the lessons, we could escape the Punch and Judy show of politics. Instead we could concentrate on the longer-term issues of how we can build our way out of the current economic and ecological mess, as experts such as physics professor David MacKay advocate.¹⁰

There are now enough good models to learn from. The Dutch housing programmes, such as VINEX, show how national, regional and local governments can work together to build more housing. The French *contrat de ville* system shows how development and transport can be linked, and the multi-area agreement concept could be turned into something of lasting value. The Homes & Community Agency's approach to what it calls the "single conversation" could lead to what Americans term "quality deals" in which everyone benefits. We simply need to believe that it is both necessary and possible to build something better than we currently enjoy.

9 URBED *Cambridgeshire Quality Charter for Growth* (Cambridgeshire Horizons, 2008)

10 MacKay, D *Sustainable Energy – Without the Hot Air* (UIT, 2008)

There is no simple answer to regenerating suburban neighbourhoods. Continental towns have improved themselves through taking action, not just talking about it. Here are five recommendations in summary for government, which are spelt out in more depth in research reports alluded to above:

1. Concentrate development in growth areas and corridors designated for their transport capacity and economic potential (reinforcing, not replacing, subregional strategies).
2. Make land available for housing development at prices that make quality growth possible (rather than trying to pay for everything out of section 106 agreements or tariffs, which can deter developers).
3. Support neighbourhood management in areas that are at risk or in transition so that different services support each other (using variants of tax increment financing to provide incentives for good husbandry).
4. Use education and related community services as a means of changing attitudes and behaviour to foster respect and communal action (rather than encouraging people to fend for themselves).
5. Celebrate our suburban inheritance by using the Heritage Lottery to back projects put forward by communities – for example, to reuse empty shops and develop open land such as car parks, rather than allowing further sprawl. In this way growth and renewal could go hand in hand.

Keep alive our lost Elysium – the importance of the suburban public realm

*Gaily into Ruislip Gardens
Runs the red electric train,
With a thousand Ta's and Pardon's
Daintily alights Elaine;
Hurries down the concrete station
With a frown of concentration,
Out into the outskirts edges
Where a few surviving hedges
Keep alive our lost Elysium – rural Middlesex again.*
Excerpt from John Betjeman's *Middlesex* (1954)

Betjeman's Elaine takes the train to access what's left of Elysium in 1954; today she would probably take a car. There would be no one to beg pardon, and her frown of concentration would probably be satnav-related. What would she make of a contemporary suburb?

An interesting example has recently been unearthed from the BBC's archive showing how an Edwardian such as John Betjeman (himself raised in the garden suburb of Hampstead) viewed the post-war suburbs. A documentary from the 1960s shows the poet laureate inspecting the freshly minted civic centre of Seacroft, a suburb of Leeds. Seacroft appears as the epitome of brutalist design, all tower blocks and sweeping concrete corridors mimicking piazzas. Not liking what he sees, Betjeman comments: "I am sure that most of the people here will wish themselves back in the old streets before long."

Betjeman wasn't wrong. The inflexible quality of Seacroft's built fabric combined with other factors to produce a familiar cycle of decline often experienced. I would argue that Seacroft was missing two essential ingredients for a successful suburb: a sense of place, and greenery.

One of the defining characteristics of suburbs is the amount of green space, in particular the mixture of public and private green space. Indeed, one of the greatest assets of the suburbs is that they have more space generally. But the challenge is to make the best use of this space. With careful planning one can enrich and green the urban form, but too much space and the too-low population density results in sprawl.

Town-country trends

The values of suburbia pioneered by the late Victorian urbanists – distinctive places with

a spatially and architecturally balanced built environment that provide privacy, accessibility and sociability – remain popular today. Places like Hampstead Garden Suburb in London, or Wolverton in Milton Keynes, have held their value today and are still highly sought-after locations.

Pioneers such as Ebenezer Howard and Raymond Unwin had clear views about the role of design and architecture in producing a public realm that assuaged the strain of the industrial metropolis. Design then, for better or worse, has had the role of encapsulating how we “live apart” from the town: be this in Edwardian villas of the garden suburbs, or modernist social housing and civic centres of post-war new towns.

Yet Thomas Sharp in *English Panorama*¹ reflected a familiar ambivalence about suburbs in 1950 when he wrote:

Town-Country (the suburb) has proved to be an aesthetic void, a social wilderness. The need for the future, in a land as crowded as England, is to re-establish something of the traditional physical antithesis between town and country, so that each may be pure of its own kind.

Suburbs have the potential to offer the best of both worlds; a flavour of both city and country and close proximity to, but not the extremes of, both. At their worst they are a netherworld of faceless houses, empty lawns and potential sinks of deprivation.

Arguably, poverty of aspiration in the design of the suburban public realm can amplify and consolidate social deprivation. The poor-quality park landscaping and social infrastructure of the George's Park estate in Lozells, a suburb of Birmingham, was a major contributing factor in the area's decline.² Laid out in the 1970s, by 2000 the park had become a basin of attraction for drug dealers, fly tippers and joy riders. There were regular muggings and a number of rapes. This blind spot, produced by a shortsighted urban intervention, ended up costing £1.2 million to put right.

What has replaced it is a park designed with the involvement of local community bodies. This has led to a well-used and popular place that the community takes pride in, and is catalysing wider improvements in the neighbouring streets. Better design would have increased the resilience of its place to deal with the social and economic problems of their communities.

1 Sharp, T *English Panorama* (Architectural Press, 1936, revised 1950)

2 Commission for Architecture & the Built Environment *The Cost of Bad Design* (2006)

Private green spaces also abound in suburbs. The trees and lawns and hedges that are ubiquitous in many of our best suburbs and garden cities were vital in order to attract urban dwellers, particularly families, precisely because the cities and urban centres they longed to leave were anything but green. As is often the case in town planning, there was a trade-off: all that attractive foliage actually resulted in very little usable public space.

The green streets could look very nice, but the "grass village greens" were often glorified car parks. The box hedges and shrubs defined domains; the privets created privacy and contributed to a sense of suburban isolation. Few public spaces were created for community activities or given over to community ownership and care. Creating housing, even with generous gardens and green streets, is not the same as creating communities – communities need somewhere to commune.

Historically, suburbs have been the place to bring up children; indeed, demographic analysis of the suburbs has shown that this is still very much the case. In large part this is a result of the urban renaissance: the regeneration and densification of our urban centres has generally failed to provide adequately for children, families and older people.

Suburbs, with proportionally lower land values, continue to provide space for much-needed social infrastructure, such as schools and parks. But this lower-density built environment has resulted in everything being further away than is considered conveniently walkable in the 21st century (given that we walk far less than our parents or grandparents). So it's not a surprise that we now get into our cars for short journeys.

What we have been left with, therefore, is a legacy of a suburban public realm that appears green and leafy, but actually serves to create a sense of isolation and detachment that is further exacerbated by a reliance on the car. But public space can also be a locus for creating social capital. Research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has shown that public spaces provide "democratic" spaces that allow for "all individuals and groups to see and be seen by others". Public spaces such as parks and town centres allow people to interact with one another and "to observe and perhaps accept difference".³

Social capital is not the only potential benefit of a well-managed public realm. Suburbs, typified by leafy streets and gardens, are particularly resilient under climate change. The abundance of green infrastructure mitigates the urban heat island effect and makes suburban temperatures more comfortable in comparison with the inner city. This infrastructure can also be used to create active transport corridors, changing the dominant

3 Worpole, K and Knox, K *The Social Value of Public Spaces* (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2007)

transport type from car- to person-powered. Indeed, green infrastructure such as greenways for walking and cycling can provide solutions to many of our most pressing challenges.

Green infrastructure

Edward Glaeser of Harvard University has argued that cities are inherently more environmentally sustainable than suburbs.⁴ This is because the carbon footprint of city dwellers is significantly smaller than that of suburbanites. This is further borne out in the London example, where an average Londoner in 2006 produced 6.2 tonnes of carbon-dioxide emissions, whereas the UK average is 11.19 tonnes.⁵ Glaeser cites the car as the main culprit, and fails to recognise the benefits of suburban living that draw people there in the first place. As we have seen, the best of the suburbs have natural networks of green infrastructure that provide opportunities for both mitigating and adapting to climate change. In this way cities should seek to emulate the suburbs by bringing nature into the cityscape.

Many architects and planners dismiss suburbia as neither town nor country, preferring to work on iconic city-centre developments. But there is much that we can learn from suburbs – not to create more sprawl, but in terms of family homes and greenness. The impetus now is not just that green is attractive, but that green is a necessity; to combat the urban heat island effect, to help us adapt to our changing climate, and to improve public health in an increasingly stressed and obese society.

By injecting green infrastructure into our urban realm we further blur the lines between town and country, city and suburb. But what we gain is immeasurable in terms of quality of life. We can, however, measure the “value” of these public spaces by proxy. So, for example, properties that overlook a park are on average around 5% to 7% more valuable than neighbouring properties.⁶

By finding a balance between density and open-space provision we can develop, and redevelop, quality places where people choose to make their homes.

Finding Elysium: an agenda for a suburban renaissance

The government has recently launched *World Class Places*,⁷ its strategy for improving

4 Glaeser, E “Green Cities, Brown Suburbs” in *City Journal* vol 19, no 1 (Winter 2009)

5 Dodman, D “Blaming Cities for Climate Change? An Analysis of Greenhouse Gas Emissions Inventories” in *Environment & Urbanization* no 21 (2009)

6 Commission for Architecture & the Built Environment *Does Money Grow on Trees?* (2005)

7 For access to this strategy, visit: <http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/planningandbuilding/worldclassplaces>

quality of place. The basic tenets of what makes a good place are as applicable to the suburban as to the urban context. As defined in the strategy, a good quality of place is "the physical characteristics of a community – the way it is planned, designed, developed and maintained – that affect the quality of life of people living and working in it, those visiting it, both now and into the future".

What is needed is a new approach to regenerating suburbs and new towns that builds on the principles of good place making. A good-quality place needs to be flexible enough to respond to changing economic and environmental circumstances. As Betjeman saw in Seaford, the new development was inflexible, and therefore ultimately unsustainable. Suburbs can be particularly vulnerable to the kinds of economic and environmental shifts that we are currently experiencing.

Decentralised industries mean that connections to a central city or manufacturing base are no longer as critical. Environmental factors and energy scarcity mean that the car dominance of suburbs may come to an end. Lack of communal areas and community infrastructure can lead to fewer occasions for social interaction and increased isolation. This is particularly problematic in the context of an ageing society, where those who are less mobile will suffer disproportionately in the suburbs.

These societal shifts mean that we are seeing a shift in the way in which people use spaces and places. Flexibility is the key to success, particularly in suburbs. Where there are spaces that are underused – empty shops, parks, community halls, post offices – it should be possible for local people to take ownership (literal or figurative) of and transform these spaces to fit their needs.

Therefore what we need to develop is a set of principles for a suburban renaissance. A renaissance that recognises the primacy of well-managed and well-maintained public green spaces in creating an attractive and active suburban public realm, and which provides opportunities for community development and economic vitality.

Though the low-density allure of suburbia is irresistible for many, those involved in creating suburban developments should recognise that "high-density" is not a negative term. Population density provides an opportunity for something very desirable indeed – intensity. With local shops close by, cultural activities on our doorsteps, good parks and public spaces, high-quality housing and real civic spaces full of activities, events and markets, a more urbane suburb could provide a solution for families that is more in tune with 21st-century lifestyles.

Suburban property markets

Suburbs play a very important but hidden part in the urban story, accommodating many of the people who use towns, but are generally not the subject of much research. This piece draws on a variety of research projects undertaken by the author and on some of the material provided by academic institutions and others on the sustainability of suburbs. In doing so, it attempts to present some of the main issues facing suburbs and suburban markets and their impact on the development of new suburbs and the regeneration of old ones.

Such suburban studies as there are point to a huge diversity of suburban experience. At one end of the scale are the places that many people don't think of as suburban. Examples are the thriving commuting "ubertowns" of the South East of England (such as Guildford, Brighton and Tunbridge Wells) and the grand, established suburban neighbourhoods (such as Clifton in Bristol, the West End of Glasgow). At the other end of the scale are decaying, under-serviced and aging belts of homogeneous 20th-century housing estates cut off from the urban centres they are supposed to serve. In all of them, the housing market, and the health of property markets generally, can have a huge impact on how they perform and adapt. In turn, the suburbs have a huge impact on the property market.

Suburbs: the challenge

The suburbs are particularly important to the housing market because, in the UK, the housing market *is* suburban. Not only do 80% of UK households live in suburbs but also suburban housing is more likely to be owner-occupied, while city-centre locations have higher levels of other types of tenure, including private renting.

Despite an often high preponderance of owner-occupation in struggling suburbs, such areas still risk "degentrification" in a market downturn: a process of physical decay and relative devaluation. This is a rare phenomenon in the UK but is experienced in many US suburbs as they age. The highly supply-constrained nature of the UK housing market usually ensures that dated and obsolete housing stock is quickly brought into new use, especially if it is in private ownership.

There are long-term structural changes, including demographic ones, that may affect the nature and prosperity of some, currently stable, suburbs over the next 10 or 20 years. One of these changes is the increasing need to retro-fit existing stock to meet more eco-friendly energy use standards. More generally, aging populations coupled with ageing housing stock mean that repairs and maintenance will become an increased burden for owners and may present problems in some suburbs, especially where the occupants may

be equity-rich and income-poor. In affluent areas, this need not be an issue, although it could become one in times of recession and slow housing markets. High market turnover is often helpful in renewing stock, as incomers tend to renovate as they move in. In areas of lower affluence, deteriorating stock could substantially change the nature and character of an area, for the worse.

The on-going health of the suburbs therefore depends greatly on their ability to adapt under changing market conditions. In some cases, this means appropriate redevelopment. It almost certainly means more policy attention than the suburbs have been used to receiving.

In the 1980s and 1990s, there was anxiety over the decaying inner cities, which captured the attention of both the policy makers and the opportunistic home-buying public. It was perhaps symptomatic of the booming property markets from the mid 1990s to the mid 2000s that so much policy effort was focused on "urban renaissance". While much-needed inner-city regeneration has been the result over the past decade or so, the markets are now reminding us that attention needs to be paid to the suburbs instead. If there is to be an appropriate policy response on the suburbs, then a great deal more about them needs to be understood and catered to. The health and pricing of local property markets can tell us much about what makes some suburbs successful while others continue to fade.

Suburbia post credit-crunch

With the market for urban apartments particularly hard hit by the credit crunch and the housing market slump, in the search for deliverable locations and housing types attention is increasingly turning to suburban houses. These appear to be in higher demand than city flats and quite probably set to weather the storm better.

The latest figures from Savills' index of prime residential property prices shows that popular south-west London suburbs such as Wandsworth actually registered price rises in the second quarter of 2009, while flats in London's Docklands continued to fall. In the search for value seen in a buyer's market, there would appear to be a preference for substantial family houses over flats. The British house-buying public perceive a freehold house to be inherently more valuable than a leasehold flat. When the chips are down and the speculative froth is no longer encouraging "exotic" purchases, the default choice is the three-bedroom semi-detached. By extension, good suburbs become the location of choice.

Good suburbs

Features of desirable suburbs seem to be: a readily identifiable character, a well-defined but well-connected neighbourhood area with walkable distances to local amenities, and

high levels of good-quality open space and greenery. In a market environment where land is scarce, such open spaces are under threat of development. Alternative sites need to be provided for development to preserve green space; and, in some locations, green space needs to be created from existing developed land.

Stable, well-established suburbs present few immediate social problems but also relatively few opportunities for development. There are possibilities for modest intensification and mixed use in the form of business or retail uses on the ground-floor level of apartment schemes near stations and existing retail areas. In stable suburbs, the biggest risk seems to be to the character of the area if inappropriate development is undertaken. The commercial pressures are for large houses to be redeveloped as flats. This needs to be undertaken extremely sensitively if they are to fit in with otherwise very large, low-density, upmarket houses in the same area. Apartments will be inappropriate in an area far from facilities, amenities and transport.

Changing the suburbs in a changed market

When it comes to new development, there is a difference between redeveloping existing suburbs and building new suburbia. The markets teach us that the quality of neighbourhood is one of the most important factors in the success of any residential development scheme, and this will apply to both greenfield and brownfield suburban development.

Where there is a concentration of transport facilities or other amenities, there may be a case for selective intensification within suburbs. In these circumstances, the infrastructure and facilities should support higher densities. In these locations, a more urban grain and character may be entirely appropriate. This is the way that towns develop into cities and cities expand. Many parts of what is now considered city centre were once outlying suburb. Often, the best quarters of cities are subsumed villages that have been captured by the extending urban fabric.

But if we are speaking of continued suburban development rather than the urbanisation of suburbs, then land is scarce, and small, subdivided, owner-occupied plots do not lend themselves easily to wholesale mass redevelopment. Post credit-crunch, the lack of (or high expense of) development debt funding will be an added feature of the markets. This also militates against large-scale schemes and towards small plots, fully serviced and in established locations. Suburban infill fits the bill when very little else is deliverable.

The characteristics of suburbs

Suburban housing has historically been delivered at much lower densities than housing in town and city centres. There is less communal and public space but more private gardens,

which are an important characteristic and can lend suburbs a greener, more spacious character and greater biodiversity than more central, urban areas. Developers and planners need to recognise these lower densities (and often then ecological value) as well as the market pressure for them to remain lower. The attraction of suburbia to purchasers is that it is different from urban housing. The pay-off of a longer commute is the bigger garden and quieter street. While undoubtedly there is scope to provide suburban housing at densities higher than is the case in some of the leafiest (and most car-reliant) locations, there is still a high underlying expectation of open space, gardens and amenities in the family home market.

A high proportion of open space often distinguishes suburbs from more urban areas and lends an important character. Research shows that the presence of well-maintained, high-quality open space creates value in residential areas and is therefore more likely to reinforce the economic stability of a location.

Lower densities than those hitherto specified in planning policies informed by a more urban "model" are needed if the character of the best suburbs is to be maintained. Suburban development also needs to allow for much higher levels of car ownership, and probably usage, than more urban areas. This does not preclude policy efforts to reduce car usage, as opposed to car ownership (through provision of cycle ways and intensification of local facilities and amenities around transport nodes, for example). But car storage is likely to remain a significant feature in aspiring, suburban neighbourhoods.

The public transport available to a suburb governs much of what is possible in terms of redevelopment and intensification. A continued lack of public transport will prevent anything but relatively low-density car-accommodating residential use in most locations unless they are within easy reach of a town centre.

Commercial property in suburbs

An important characteristic of suburbs, common to the case studies we have made or seen, is the relatively low value of and poor investor demand for commercial buildings in the suburb. In some cases this is a huge strength. Small-scale "affordable commercial" units owned by local, non-institutional landlords can be a very important element of economic generation as it encourages small business start-ups and helps them to thrive. Successful suburbs seem to have a large quantity of flexible business spaces of this type at low rents.

Commercial demand in the suburbs is most likely to come from small local businesses. In the case of business space, this may take the form of accommodation needed by

businesses that have started life in the garages and front rooms of local dwellings. In the case of retail, it is more likely to be small specialist, one-off shops. Chain shops, restaurants and bars are more likely to be found in the affluent suburbs or where the suburb is close to a town centre or otherwise able to serve a wider catchment population.

Opportunities exist for certain suburbs to act as seed-corn areas for local businesses that have hitherto been accommodated in domestic premises. Small workshops, live-work units or other types of flexible space may be needed to enable these enterprises to grow. The cost-sensitive nature of users may mean that special business rates, or exemption from them, would be needed to make such units work, and the diverse nature of enterprises may also mean that conventional B1 use alone is not appropriate. 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 is very unlikely that institutional investors will own property in anything but the most affluent or nationally prominent suburban locations and also unlikely that they will own the small-scale units more common in the suburbs. If there is no market for commercial buildings, or not a ready or lucrative one, it will make developers much less likely to develop commercial or mixed-use property. This presents both challenges and opportunities for neighbourhood building.

The fact that good but low-value commercial property enhances residential value in suburbia presents a conundrum for developers: the opportunity to maximise residential values but at the expense of land for low-cost commercial. It is difficult to resolve this conundrum without sufficient scale of development. It is even more difficult to design the type of "affordable commercial" property that will enhance value in a large scheme. The issue of the on-going management of the non-residential elements of a scheme is a further consideration, which militates for new mechanisms to participate in the positive residential value impact that it will incur.

Market-led development

Most suburbs in the South of England are probably capable of market-led regeneration and development. The characteristics of this development are that: it has hitherto been concentrated in the residential sector; it is sometimes piecemeal and unco-ordinated; and high residential values may push out other uses because commercial developers cannot or do not compete for land. The market does not currently militate in favour of mixed-use, integrated neighbourhoods of the sort that often enable places to thrive. It may be that the biggest hurdle that owner-occupiers face in a decaying suburban area is finding a

single visionary leader to create the conditions under which renewal can occur for the whole area. Where local communities or private enterprise can provide this, there are potentially beneficial development opportunities.

The implications of this are that, if it is considered desirable to provide new mixed-use and suburban areas or the renewal of existing suburban areas, then new sources of capital, alternative investors, and new models of their delivery will need to be found.

Viable management companies will be key to facilitating the continuing success of sustainable suburban neighbourhoods by managing the integration of commercial and other uses. If done well, this can add to rather than detract from the overall value of land, so it should be a viable commercial proposition – if a largely untested and unproven one.

Struggling suburbs

The potential for a suburb to thrive seems to depend on how accessible it is to surrounding residents. Impermeable suburbs can suffer from a lack of identity and this affects the future development of businesses and enterprises. Radical solutions may be needed to open up such areas, and policy-led initiatives to combine new development with the creation of new means of access may be required. Recent research confirms that residential property values, as well as commercial ones, are enhanced on prominent, highly reachable streets. Permeable places are clearly more desirable and attract higher values, while values are impaired in cut-off streets. Neighbourhoods also seem more set to fail if their local centres of amenity are not integrated into the global road network and reachable from other areas.

Selective intensification and mixed development can improve the quality of places, but the private sector has to find ways of bearing the associated infrastructure costs and changes. Similarly, local authorities need to be willing to create the transport links that might be needed to facilitate these improvements.

Recent research evidence shows that market value is significantly limited by a lack of permeability in local road networks. The 20th-century approach to family housing developments of feeder roads and cul-de-sacs appears to inherently devalue properties. Some suburbs may need radical alterations to road layouts and to existing, poor-quality open spaces in order that further residential or mixed-use development with appropriate facilities and amenities can take place.

Affordable housing in suburbs

Some case-study research suggests that suburban areas are inherently less well suited to

accommodating high levels of affordable housing. Where the proportion of social housing in a neighbourhood was found to be substantially above national average levels, it was often associated with the segregation and stigmatisation of the area and was widely perceived as contributing to lower values for the privately owned stock in the suburb.

Stable suburban neighbourhoods were often found to be those with about national-average levels of owner-occupation and a lower level of social housing as a proportion of the whole. It may be that levels of social housing provision that are appropriate and sustainable in urban areas, well served by transport and other amenities, are not sustainable in suburban locations where support structures may not be so well developed. This is an area on which more research and policy attention needs to be focused.

Conclusions

Over the next few years, while residential development activity is likely to be highly constrained, it would seem that the focus of any activity is going to be suburban: either the creation of new suburbs or the concentration of piecemeal, infill and redevelopment activity in existing suburbs. The challenge for the property industry is to provide new, sustainable neighbourhoods in a suburban context. This means utilising different skills from those required for urban development and improving on the existing suburban housing estate-style developments, to provide more vibrant and mixed places. Not only will this mean redesigning suburbia but, in a credit-constrained financial environment, it will also mean redesigning the way in which it is delivered.

The cost of failure will be to risk devaluing and degrading family neighbourhoods. A failure to deliver high-quality family housing supply in suburbs will perpetuate the property shortage and put further inflationary pressure on the successful suburbs that remain. Be prepared for a new suburban renaissance agenda.

Towards a suburban renaissance

Many commentators on housing and urban policy have highlighted the extent to which suburbs are something of a policy blind spot. The challenges of managing congestion and post-industrial decline in our city centres on the one hand, and addressing housing affordability and the decline of the rural economy on the other, have at times dominated the spatial attention of national policy makers and politicians.

In the meantime the suburbs have been largely left to look after themselves. Arguably, they have in general done this very well. As John Hills' 2007 housing review set out, the majority of the population are better housed now than they have ever been, and the vast majority of people live in suburbs.¹ The market and local planning policies have delivered suburban homes and neighbourhoods largely in line with people's aspirations, albeit at volumes that have not kept pace with demand.

This broad picture does not present an overriding case for a distinctive suburban policy agenda, over and above national policies for housing growth and quality. Also, the fact that debates about housing growth and urban policy are frequently polarised, in terms of both land use and urban design, has not encouraged decision makers to articulate a specific policy approach for the suburbs. On the one hand, urbanists argue for densification of our existing cities and towns as the most sustainable approach to development. On the other hand, suburbanistas point to the evidence about the types of homes and neighbourhoods that people want and favour lower-density growth through urban extensions.

Some of the discourse on suburbs has no doubt been coloured by the views of urban visionaries such as Jane Jacobs, who were very critical of suburbs in the US. For example, Jacobs said in 1962: "Suburbs are perfectly valid places to live, but they are inherently parasitic, economically and socially."² In the US, unconstrained suburban sprawl has drained the life out of cities, with profound impacts on their social and economic sustainability.

However, it is important to understand that suburbs in this country have been shaped by a different policy context. The impact of Ebenezer Howard's garden cities vision on local planning and suburban design, combined with the green belts and more recent policies of minimum residential densities, have played a role in preventing sprawl. While the long-run demographic trend of counter-urbanisation has still led to significant challenges for our cities,³ in many respects our policy framework has withstood these pressures better

1 Department of the Environment, Transport & the Regions *Living in Urban England* (2000)

2 Cited in: Sparberg, A *Jane Jacobs: Urban Visionary* (Rutgers University Press, 2006)

3 Parkinson, M *State of the English Cities* (ODPM, 2006)

than those of some other countries.

Where the combined effect of counter-urbanisation and economic restructuring has resulted in the decline of some of our cities, the impact in many of those cities' suburbs has been profound. The UK Housing Market Renewal programme, which has been in place for six years and is now being delivered by the Homes & Communities Agency, was set up to address the social and economic problems that arose from housing market failures in residential areas of the North of England and the Midlands. The programme grew out of a recognition that the problems of deprivation and poor-quality housing and physical environments were not restricted to inner-city social housing estates.

While it has not been described as a suburban programme, many of the neighbourhoods that have benefited from housing market renewal are suburban and predominantly private housing markets. The interventions it has delivered are focused on physical renewal and restructuring to address historic structural barriers to these areas' economic prosperity and social cohesion. With £2.2 billion allocated to this programme to date, it dwarfs equivalent national programmes for addressing suburban decline in other countries.⁴

So while there may not be a discrete policy agenda for the suburbs, where suburban communities in specific areas have faced significant problems of social and economic decline the policy response has been comprehensive. In thinking about the growth agenda, the role that existing suburbs could play in providing the foundations for new housing supply are less well developed, but significant none the less. Looking forward, the Homes & Communities Agency's new approaches to delivery of growth, affordability, renewal and sustainability can deliver solutions for suburban neighbourhoods without there being a specific policy agenda for the suburbs.

The Homes & Communities Agency is the national housing and regeneration agency for England and was formed on 1 December 2008. Our role is to create opportunities for people to live in high-quality, sustainable places, providing funding for affordable housing, bringing land back into productive use and improving quality of life by raising standards for the physical and social environment.

The agency has an annual investment budget of more than £5 billion to deliver housing growth, affordability, renewal and sustainability. Its creation provides the opportunity to adopt a place-based approach to delivering housing and regeneration. Going forward,

⁴ For example, in the US in May 2005 senator Hillary Clinton introduced legislation for economic and tax incentives for suburban revitalisation. At the heart of the programme is a \$250 million reinvestment fund to provide grants for infrastructure and real estate renewal.

local authorities and their delivery partners will be able to have a "Single Conversation" with the agency that will address the full range of housing and regeneration investment needs in their place. Through the Single Conversation we will be able to deliver programmes of investment to meet the needs of local places and support the ambitions that local authorities and their communities have for their place. This means that the Homes & Communities Agency will be well placed to respond more flexibly to the specific challenges of delivering growth and renewal in suburban areas.

Is there an on-going need for suburban renewal?

As the evidence that led to the establishment of the housing market renewal pathfinders showed, in spite of the majority of suburbs prospering these areas can experience problems of decline and deprivation. A number of previous studies have highlighted the extent to which some suburban neighbourhoods are suffering from decline,⁵ as the value of their assets has been eroded over time through neglect, changing residential needs and preferences, and economic restructuring (when suburbs have been built to accommodate workforces from particular economic sectors that have disappeared or declined).

It has been argued that the problems of deprivation in suburbs are masked by the fact that deprived neighbourhoods are sometimes adjacent to affluent areas, or that their lower density means that they are not identified as a priority by traditional measures of deprivation. This has led to calls for methodologies targeting regeneration to use sub-local spatial scales.⁶ The broader case for adopting a neighbourhood-level approach to better target regeneration has been accepted⁷ following the government's Subnational Review of economic development and regeneration and is reflected in the new Regeneration Framework.⁸

Our understanding of the extent to which some suburban areas are deprived is limited by the fact that we do not currently have an established basis for small area classification of suburban neighbourhoods. When the government published its Urban White Paper in 2000, the supporting analysis drew on small area classifications from the 1991 census to identify suburban neighbourhoods. On the basis of this analysis, 86% of the population lived in suburban wards.⁹ Subsequent work to geographically classify urban and rural areas has not identified suburban areas within the urban classification.

5 For a review, see: Kochan, B *Achieving a Suburban Renaissance – The Policy Challenges* (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2007)

6 Ibid

7 HM Treasury, Department for Communities & Local Government and Department for Business, Enterprise & Regulatory Reform *Review of Sub-national Economic Development & Regeneration* (2007)

8 Department for Communities & Local Government *Transforming Places; Changing Lives: Taking Forward the Regeneration Framework* (2009)

9 Department of the Environment, Transport & the Regions, op cit

For this report the Homes & Communities Agency looked at possible options for a more up-to-date classification of our suburbs. One option was to use the geo-demographic classification of super output areas (SOAs)¹⁰ that the Office for National Statistics produced from the 2001 census in a similar way as was done for the urban white paper using 1991 census data. However, we have found that the geo-demographic clusters that have been produced using the 2001-based output area classifications do not readily identify suburban areas. While some of the classifications are called suburban, many suburban areas actually fall into other categories under the new output area classifications, as they span city-centre and suburban areas of our conurbations. Using this approach would very significantly underestimate the size of suburbia.

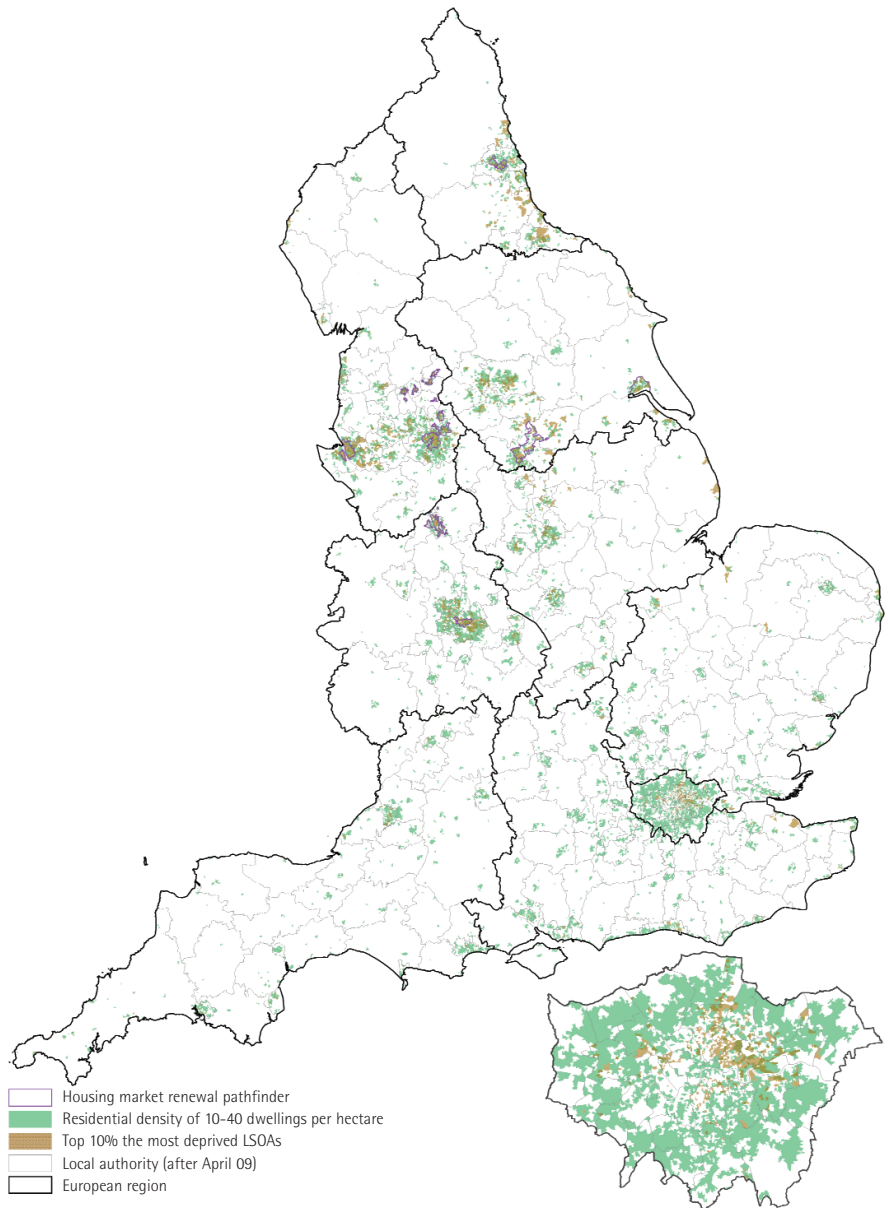
An alternative approach to geo-demographic cluster analysis is to look at readily measurable physical characteristic of suburbs to provide a spatial proxy for suburbia. In the analysis that follows we have used residential densities of 10-40 dwellings per hectare as a proxy measure to identify suburban lower-layer super output areas (LSOAs). The measure of residential density used in this map is for whole LSAOs rather than particular sites. This range of densities would include suburban neighbourhoods of different types, from 1930s detached and semi-detached houses to older terraces. Using this density measure provides the following map for suburban England (see over page).

Spatially, this is not significantly different from the picture provided by the 1991 census data, but it does provide us with the opportunity to identify neighbourhoods (in the form of super output areas) that have suburban densities and are also deprived, using up-to-date measures of deprivation. Suburban neighbourhoods that fall within the top 10% most deprived lower-layer SOAs are highlighted in the map. We have also overlaid the boundaries of the housing market renewal pathfinders, which shows that many of these deprived suburban areas fall outside the pathfinders. This demonstrates that there are suburban neighbourhoods that may need some renewal which are not currently covered by housing market renewal. The Homes & Communities Agency will be able to look at the needs of these types of neighbourhoods, alongside other local priorities, through the Single Conversation.

This is the kind of strategic analysis that the Homes & Communities Agency will use to inform our discussions with local authorities, their communities and delivery partners in identifying investment priorities through the Single Conversation. Moving to an approach based on a local assessment of need, as opposed to delivering investment through a series

¹⁰ Super output areas are a unit of geography used for statistical analysis, derived from the 2001 census. SOAs were created with the intention that they would not be subject to frequent boundary change. There are three layers of SOAs; lower-layer SOAs have a minimum population of 1,000 and a mean population of 1,500.

Figure 1: Residential density across suburban England's lower-layer super output areas



of targeted national programmes, opens up the opportunity to ensure that deprived suburban neighbourhoods do not get overlooked simply because they do not fit national programme criteria.

Future suburban renewal

Looking at the future approach to delivering housing market renewal, the location of the new growth points means that many of the original pathfinder areas will deliver housing growth as well as renewal in the years ahead. The pathfinders are well placed to deliver the site remediation, land assembly and infrastructure provision that can make brownfield sites as attractive as greenfield development opportunities in the same areas. They can also work with their local authorities to align housing growth and renewal activity with other investment in transport, health and education.

To inform our discussions with local authorities, their communities and delivery partners, the Homes & Communities Agency is using the current round of housing market renewal funding to encourage the pathfinders to integrate their housing market renewal interventions with other local economic imperatives on areas such as skills, employment and transport.¹¹ This way the programme's interventions stand a better chance of achieving sustainable outcomes that are more resilient against future fluctuations in the market. Another lesson from the *State of the Cities* reports has been that there is little point in trying to improve social outcomes in deprived areas of our cities unless we are also taking effective action to raise the underlying economic performance of those cities.

Better alignment of public investment in deprived communities is a key principle underpinning the new Regeneration Framework.¹² The housing market renewal pathfinders and the new pilot city regions of Leeds and Greater Manchester provide good opportunities to put those principles into practice. In anticipating the potential future priorities for the next spending review, when the public finances will be very tight, place-based approaches like housing market renewal will need to be able to demonstrate benefits in terms of renewal and growth and the ability to achieve improvements in social, economic and environmental outcomes.

Through the Single Conversation, the Homes & Communities Agency can respond to the full range of needs exhibited by suburban neighbourhoods. We can align our programmes to address suburban needs in a more coherent way, whether the need is for market renewal, brownfield land assembly and infrastructure to support growth, or national affordable housing programme investment to provide more affordable housing options.

¹¹ Kerslake, B "Why Housing Pathfinders Must Change" in *Regeneration & Renewal* 15 June 2009

¹² Department for Communities & Local Government, op cit

The place of suburbs in urban economies

Addressing issues of suburban renewal through the Single Conversation will require an understanding of the role that suburban neighbourhoods play in the wider economy of their cities and towns. The functional economic footprints of places rarely match the administrative geography of local government, and so individual local authorities are not always the best spatial scale at which to take a strategic approach to improving the economic performance of our towns and cities. This is why initiatives such as multi-area agreements and the pilot city regions are so important. If we are to address issues of suburban renewal effectively, we need to understand the function that suburban neighbourhoods play in the wider urban economy in which they are located. The subnational review encourages us always to bring questions of neighbourhood renewal back to economic performance. And this is no different for suburbs.

In an increasingly knowledge-based economy, a place's economic competitiveness is dependent on its human capital – the skills of its residents. While the natural assumption that we make is that people tend to follow jobs, there is some evidence that the long-run trend is for jobs to follow people.¹³ A knowledge economy means that the investment location decisions of business will be driven even more by access to skills than by access to raw materials, supply chains or logistics.

The ability of places to attract and retain skilled people through good quality of life, and critically the quality of the residential offer, will become more and more important. Ensuring that an area's suburbs provide the quality of life to attract people with the skills needed in the local economy must be taken into account in thinking about economic development and improving a place's economic performance. This approach is already at the forefront of thinking on linking housing and economic development strategies in the pilot city regions, but will also apply to other areas.

Suburban growth

Suburbia also has an important role to play in relation to new housing supply. The recent oversupply of city-centre flats means that the mix of future housing growth will include more homes and neighbourhoods of a suburban form. In the current market context the funding for infrastructure being made available to the designated growth points, the majority of which will be suburban extensions of existing urban centres, becomes even more critical to housing delivery.

13 Meen, G "On the Long Run Relationship between Industrial Construction and Housing" in *Journal of Property Research* vol 19, no 3 (1 September 2002)

In delivering new homes in suburban locations, we need to ensure that the new suburbs do not suffer from some of the problems that have blighted some of our less popular existing suburbs, which largely relate to the quality of housing and urban design and to density. The lower density of some suburbs has meant that community facilities, local transport and local retail centres have not been sustainable. Set alongside concerns about achieving more sustainable development as well as more socially and economically sustainable places, we simply cannot afford to build more of the same. We need to look at how we can deliver suburbs that retain the features that make them valued neighbourhoods, while ensuring that the density and urban design achieve truly sustainable places.

In this country we can now point to a number of examples of new, more sustainable suburbs. Just one such example is Oxley Park in Milton Keynes. The Oxley Park development by house builder Taylor Wimpey and housing association Paradigm is one of the successful Homes & Communities Agency Design for Manufacture competition sites.¹⁴ It includes 145 homes of a range of types, with 43 homes for affordable rent, and the homes for sale include some available through the first-time buyers initiative. The residential density across the site is 45 dwellings per hectare, and the homes include innovative measures to deliver very high environmental performance, which means that they achieve the Ecohomes rating level "very good". The combination of the high-quality urban design, mix of housing types and high standards of environmental performance means that it provides a truly sustainable suburban neighbourhood.

The Homes & Communities Agency will build on the lessons of our exemplar schemes in the developments that we support going forward, which will continue to include a high proportion of suburban developments, and in our work with local authorities and delivery partners. The agency is looking at potential new exemplar programmes as part of the housing package announced in Building Britain's Future that will take standards of urban design and environmental sustainability even further, and at the same time test new delivery models.

Conclusions

Whatever the profile of suburbia in national policy, the scale and importance of our existing suburban areas to the housing markets and economies of our towns and cities means that suburbs will be a priority in our thinking about renewal and sustainability of existing homes and neighbourhoods. Through the Single Conversation, the Homes & Communities Agency will be better able to respond to the need for sustainable suburban renewal and growth where this is a priority for local authorities and their communities. We will also be

¹⁴ For further information, visit: <http://www.designformanufacture.info>

driving forward the development of more sustainable high-quality suburban housing growth as a major component of new housing supply.

The diagram in this chapter was produced by Monika Laskus in the Homes & Communities Agency's Spatial Intelligence team.

Fixing broken suburbs – regenerating deprived suburban neighbourhoods

Thomas Pynchon's fictional Californian suburbia, San Narciso, is "less an identifiable city than a group of concepts – special purpose bond issue districts, shopping nuclei, all overlaid with access roads to its own freeway".¹ It is almost as difficult to get a conceptual grip on British suburbs, let alone work through policies for suburban communities. This chapter attempts to do both, analysing the specific challenges facing deprived suburban neighbourhoods and laying out some lessons for policy makers.

Now is the right time to do this, for a number of reasons. First, around three-quarters of Britons live in suburban areas. But suburbia itself is a highly varied patchwork of neighbourhoods, some of which face severe challenges. There is no suburban dimension to current urban policy frameworks: this is a gap that needs filling.

Second, it looks as if the bulk of funding for deprived areas ends up in suburban communities, especially the neighbourhoods I term "inner suburbs". But the evidence that some of these initiatives deliver on their objectives is mixed at best – either in suburbs or elsewhere. We need to refocus the wider regeneration policy mix.

Third, and most importantly, the bigger picture is shifting. The downturn has led to the collapse of the current funding model for physical regeneration, and is already putting severe strain on public finances. Policy makers need to understand and prioritise what works for deprived neighbourhoods, and to push forward new ideas. They will also need to make difficult decisions about what kinds of places should come first in the queue.

The coming months may also bring political change. Conservative politicians have shown some interest in suburban issues (Boris Johnson's Outer London Commission) and in local government (Michael Heseltine's Cities Taskforce). But there are also some surprisingly large gaps in Conservative thinking around regeneration and economic development. A new administration will need to quickly develop policies for deprived areas, in suburbia and beyond.

The chapter is structured as follows. The first sections lay out basic definitions, and provide some idea of the scale of the problem. Then follows a review of policy frameworks and forward objectives. Next is a review of the evidence, then recommendations on strategy, key issues and delivery challenges, before conclusions are finally stated.

¹ Pynchon, T *The Crying of Lot 49* (Vintage, 1967)

Defining terms: how suburban are we?

"Regeneration", "neighbourhoods" and "suburbs" are all fairly fuzzy concepts. For the purposes of this chapter, I follow the government's regeneration framework and think of "regeneration" as the mix of activities that reverse economic, social and physical decline in areas where market forces alone will not achieve this.²

Pinning down "suburban neighbourhoods" is a bit harder to do.³ The best way to approach this is to think of the UK in functional terms: a system of urban and rural areas; within that, cities, towns and villages; and within that, a wide range of *neighbourhoods* – from city centres out to rural hamlets. This means we need to think about suburban neighbourhoods as building blocks of towns and cities, as well as communities in their own right.

In population terms, Britain is an urban nation. The most detailed numbers are available for England, where the latest figures from the Department for the Environment, Food & Rural Affairs and the Office for National Statistics – based on very fine-grained census data⁴ – puts around 73% households in urban areas.⁵ Looking at towns and cities more closely, cities have the lion's share of this. The DEFRA data puts just over 46% of households into "major urban" or "large urban" areas. Similarly, recent government research suggests that the 56 largest English cities account for over 50% of the population.⁶

At neighbourhood level, however, Britain is suburban. The best available government data (see figure 1) suggests that around 84% of the population live in "suburban" wards of some kind.⁷ These numbers are not ideal,⁸ but more recent geo-demographic data gives a similar picture. Experian's Mosaic household classifications suggest around 78% of households live somewhere in suburbia.⁹ Of these, around 37% live in "inner" and 41% in "outer" suburbs (more on these below).

2 Department for Communities & Local Government *Transforming Places, Changing Lives: Taking Forward the Regeneration Framework* (2009)

3 Lupton, R and Power, A *What We Know about Neighbourhood Change: A Literature Review*, case report 27 (London School of Economics, 2004)

4 The Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs/Office for National Statistics figures are based on a joint DEFRA/ONS/ODPM exercise classifying different types of urban and rural areas from output area upwards. Data is from the 2001 census.

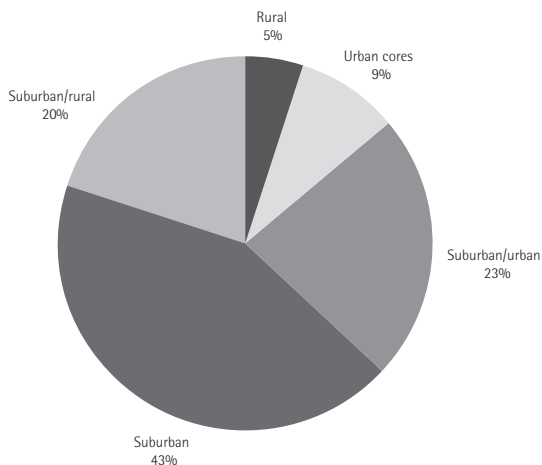
5 Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs "Local Authority Classification Dataset" (April 2009) (<http://www.defra.gov.uk/rural/ruralstats/rural-defn/LAClassification-dataset-post0409.xls>)

6 ODPM *State of the English Cities Report* (2006)

7 Department of the Environment, Transport & the Regions *Living in Urban England: Attitudes & Aspirations* (2000)

8 These figures derive from ONS ward classifications, which use data from the 1991 census and 1996 English Housing Conditions Survey. Wards also vary widely in size, and can include up to 30,000 people in some urban areas.

9 Experian *Mosaic United Kingdom: The Consumer Classification for the UK* (2004)

Figure 1: Urban, suburban and rural population shares, 2000

Source: Based on analysis from *Living in Urban England: Attitudes & Aspirations* (Department of the Environment, Transport & the Regions, 2000)

This is the critical point: if the UK is an urban country – a nation of towns and cities – it is also largely a nation of suburban neighbourhoods. In economic terms, cities are where the action is: the largest English cities have over two-thirds of the country's jobs.¹⁰ But in terms of community, we are suburbanites: the most popular house types in the UK are the semi and the bungalow.¹¹ The Urban Task Force vision of high-density communities – a kind of "Barcelona in Britain" – does not fit very well with the reality of most people's lives.¹²

What's the problem? Deprivation and suburbia

Suburban neighbourhoods play a number of roles. Unlike city centres, they do not have a central-business-district function. Land use is mainly residential; local economies are largely non-traded goods and services, with the "consumer economy" of retail and leisure a major feature. Suburban neighbourhoods are usually commuting bases into major economic cores. As such, their populations tend to fluctuate: falling in the daytime and rising in the evening.

10 ODP, op cit (2006)

11 Commission for Architecture & the Built Environment *The Value of Public Space: How High Quality Parks & Public Spaces Create Economic Social & Environmental Value* (CABE Space, 2004)

12 Urban Task Force *Towards A Strong Urban Renaissance* (2005)

The overall "state of suburbia" is good. "Suburban local authorities" – those with largely or entirely suburban characteristics – are typically well-off, with above-average incomes and skill levels, good-quality housing, strong public services and low crime.¹³ Within this, and as suggested above, we can distinguish between "inner", "outer" and "outermost" suburban neighbourhoods.

"Inner" suburbs form the ring of communities around a town or city centre. Many are Victorian, with later, "outer" suburbs spreading beyond this towards the edge of the built-up area. "Outermost" suburbs will be new-build estates and urban extensions, probably dating from the 1960s onwards, either self-contained or abutting existing settlements.

What about deprived suburbs? They are the minority. The Local Futures Group study identifies "deprived suburban local authorities" as those close to large urban cores, and predominantly in the North and Midlands.¹⁴ Using the ONS and DEFRA data at LSOA¹⁵ level, I estimate that around 27% of "suburban" neighbourhoods are in the top 10% most deprived in the 2007 Index of Multiple Deprivation, and around 2.91% in the top 1%.¹⁶ This broadly corresponds with the Mosaic classification, which suggests that around 27% of households live in neighbourhoods that could be described as deprived suburbia.¹⁷

But deprived areas themselves are likely to be suburban. I estimate that, of the worst-off 1% of neighbourhoods in the 2007 Index of Multiple Deprivation, around 84% are suburban. Of these, 51% are probably inner suburbs and 33% outer suburbs. For the 10% most deprived neighbourhoods, around 81% are suburban (49% inner, 32% outer).

Deprived suburban neighbourhoods face multiple challenges. Residents will tend to have low incomes, poor skills, and high rates of worklessness; the area itself may have poor-quality housing and an impoverished physical environment, as well as poor connections to other parts of the larger urban area. In some cases, the wider economy itself may be weak.¹⁸

13 Local Futures Group *State of the Suburbs* (2006)

14 Ibid

15 LSOAs = lower-layer super output areas, which average around 1,500 people.

16 I use the DEFRA urban/rural classification and the ONS urban/rural classification of local authorities, alongside 2007 IMD data. I define "urban" LSOAs as those with urban morphology; "inner" LSOAs are within a "major urban" local authority, "outer" LSOAs are within "large urban" or "other urban" districts. I calculate the suburban share by adding inner and outer LSOA totals, removing 10% of inner LSOAs to account for city-centre residents (following DETR, op cit).

17 Experian, op cit

18 Local Futures Group, op cit; Unsworth, R and Nathan, M "Beyond City Living: Remaking the Inner Suburbs" in *Built Environment* vol 32, no 3 (2006), pp235-249

Policy and delivery frameworks

Supporters of suburbia, and suburban local authorities, repeatedly claim that suburbs are "forgotten" in urban policy.¹⁹

From the data above, we can see that this is a bit simplistic. The majority of suburban neighbourhoods are fairly well-off, and may not require much help from policy makers. On the other hand, deprived areas are predominantly suburban, and therefore a lot of regeneration funding probably goes into suburban areas – not just urban cores.

For example, a glance at the 66 local authorities qualifying for the working neighbourhoods fund in 2008/09 suggests around two-thirds have at least some suburban characteristics. And 43% of the most deprived neighbourhoods in the Index of Multiple Deprivation are in housing market renewal pathfinders, which typically cover inner suburban areas.

As city centres have improved, the bulk of regeneration funding seems to be shifting outwards. This is not widely recognised, and has happened despite much clear policy thinking about roles and objectives for suburban areas.²⁰

The current government's policy and delivery landscape is extremely complex. Table 1 sets out the main features. Neighbourhood renewal initiatives received a major boost through the work of the Social Exclusion Unit.²¹ After 2001, there has been an increasing focus on joining up delivery of mainstream services to deprived communities, with local strategic partnerships and local area agreements used to link providers together.²²

The 2003 sustainable communities plan introduced a number of larger-scale programmes that have attempted to improve the residential "offers" of both specific neighbourhoods and wider subregions.²³ Most ambitiously, the housing market renewal programme is trying to find new roles for inner-urban neighbourhoods. More recently, worklessness and enterprise became key elements of policy and "neighbourhood renewal" has increasingly taken a back foot.²⁴

19 For example: Campbell, D *Successful City-suburbs for Successful City-regions: Interim Report* (London Borough of Barnet, 2007); Hubble, N *Suburban Futures Interim Report* (Centre for Suburban Studies at Kingston University, 2006); Civic Trust *In Suburbia: Delivering Sustainable Suburbs* (2005)

20 Audit Commission *Housing Market Renewal: Programme Review* (2009)

21 Social Exclusion Unit *A National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal* (1998)

22 ODPM, *op cit* (2006)

23 ODPM *Sustainable Communities: Building for the Future* (2003)

24 Department for Communities & Local Government and Department for Work & Pensions *Working Neighbourhood Fund* (2007)

Table 1: A typology of programmes for deprived areas in 2009

Agenda	Scale	Example initiatives, funding streams
Neighbourhood renewal	Neighbourhood/estate level	Neighbourhood renewal fund, New Deal for Communities, employment zones
Improving local delivery	Neighbourhood and local authority level	Local strategic partnerships, local area agreements
Sustainable communities	Subregional, pan-regional	Decent Homes, Thames Gateway, Northern Way, housing market renewal, mixed communities pilots
Jobs, skills and enterprise	City-regional and local authority level	City strategy pathfinders, working neighbourhoods fund, local enterprise growth initiative

The Department for Communities & Local Government has been the main player here, spending at least £3.5 billion per year on regeneration programmes.²⁵ These have mainly been area-based policies, with a large physical element. The housing market renewal programme, for example, received £1.2 billion of core funding between 2002 and 2008, probably leveraging at least this much again in private-sector contributions.²⁶

Taking stock: what do we want to achieve for deprived suburban areas?

Current thinking about urban areas and regeneration lacks a clear understanding of the roles of suburbs. Given that most Britons live in suburban areas, we need to develop a suburban dimension to our policy frameworks.

We know that deprived suburban neighbourhoods face a number of challenges. Given the multiple roles that suburbs typically play, what are the main economic, social and environmental objectives for these communities and their residents? We can pick out three high-level priorities:

- **individuals:** improving opportunities and life chances;
- **communities:** providing quality housing and a good place to live; and
- **local economies:** strengthening transport links to urban cores, and encouraging appropriate development of local economies.

We will also want to achieve:

- **sustainability:** delivering these goals in a sustainable way, meeting the challenges of climate change.

²⁵ Department for Communities & Local Government, op cit (2009)

²⁶ ODPM *Sustainable Communities: Homes for All: A Five Year Plan from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister* (2005)

Setting the direction

Given these objectives, what is the right forward approach for deprived suburban neighbourhoods? Should we be developing policies for places or people? And what can be achieved at neighbourhood level?

Places or people?

We can pick out three basic rationales for area-based intervention in poor neighbourhoods (see table 2). Deprived neighbourhoods often suffer **area-based problems**, such as poor housing or lack of amenities, which need a place-based response. In other cases, we will want to use *area-based delivery* as a way of reaching key groups of people, or linking up service provision to improve effectiveness. We may also need to deal with local capacity problems or previous policy failure.

Table 2: Rationales for area-based intervention in deprived neighbourhoods

Rationale	Key issues
Dealing with <i>area-based challenges</i> and market failures	Improving poor-quality housing/physical environment; investing in transport connections; providing new public services, such as schools and healthcare
Using <i>area-based delivery</i> to key groups, or across providers	Using local areas as "containers" to reach key groups of people; joining up delivery across local service providers
Dealing with <i>policy failure</i>	Restructuring failing partnerships; improving the level and quality of services in deprived areas

No area-based intervention is a perfect way of targeting poor people.²⁷ However, the evidence suggests that area-based approaches can go some way towards delivering our individual and community-level objectives for deprived suburban neighbourhoods. For example, we know that area-based policies are important tools for delivering housing, services and improvements to the physical environment in deprived neighbourhoods.²⁸ Complex services, such as neighbourhood management, which have an important role to play in stopping the spiral of decline in deprived communities, also need to be run on an area basis.²⁹

27 Tunstall, R and Lupton, R *Is Targeting Deprived Areas an Effective Means to Reach People? An Assessment of One Rationale for Area-based Funding Programmes*, case paper 70 (London School of Economics, 2003)

28 Tunstall, R and Coulter, A *Progress on Twenty "Unpopular" Estates, 1980-2005* (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2006)

29 Lupton, R *"Neighbourhood Effects": Can We Measure Them & Does It Matter?*, case paper 73 (London School of Economics, 2003); Power, A *Estates on the Edge* (Palgrave Macmillan, 1998)

Other services – such as education and training – are better delivered direct to individuals. But area-based delivery is helpful in reaching people in poorer neighbourhoods. Research in neighbourhood renewal fund areas and New Deal for Communities areas found that local strategic partnerships play a useful role in helping bend mainstream local services to the needs of deprived communities.³⁰

What's the right scale?

There are clear limits to what neighbourhood-level programmes can achieve for local economies, and for individuals' economic prospects. For example, the mixed communities approach attempts to introduce a wider range of incomes and tenures into poor neighbourhoods. These programmes aim to deconcentrate poverty, and to improve individuals' employment rates and access to work opportunities. This assumes that area effects or neighbourhood effects – such as physical isolation, reputation effects and peer dynamics – help shape individuals' life chances.³¹ For instance, people in poor inner suburbs might be subject to postcode discrimination.

However, the evidence suggests that economic area effects seem to be small. Communities with greater income or tenure mix tend to be more popular, with higher resident satisfaction, but it is not clear this has much impact on skills, wages or employment rates.³² On many deprived estates, incomes and employment rates have risen in recent years. But city-level, regional or national factors seem largely to drive this – in particular, changing macroeconomic conditions.³³

Moving forward

Overall, the evidence tells us that improving individual life chances in poor suburban neighbourhoods – and improving suburban economic performance – is best done through policies aimed at individuals, and through co-ordinating activity across the wider urban area. It is important to incorporate the roles of different suburban neighbourhoods into strategy and policy making. But explicit "strategies for suburbs" are probably a bad idea.

This also suggests that objectives and targets for most housing-based programmes should be reviewed, and stripped back if necessary to focus on the basics of "delivering a good place to live." Neighbourhood-level initiatives – such as successors to the New Deal for

30 Department for Communities & Local Government, op cit (2009)

31 Berube, A *Mixed Communities in England: A US Perspective on Evidence & Prospects* (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2005) (<http://www.jrf.org.uk/publications/transatlantic-perspectives-mixed-communities>)

32 Cheshire, P, Gibbons, S et al *Policies for "Mixed Communities": A Critical Evaluation*, SERC policy paper 2 (London School of Economics, 2008); Lupton, op cit (2003); Joseph Rowntree Foundation *Mixed Communities: Success & Sustainability* (2006)

33 Tunstall and Coulter, op cit; Cheshire et al, op cit

Communities – should concentrate on achieving social goals, and enabling delivery of higher-level economic objectives. At the subregional level, now that basic remodelling has largely been achieved,³⁴ many housing market renewal programmes and funding streams could be merged into mainstream economic development initiatives.

What are the key policy challenges?

New funding models

The most immediate challenge for suburban neighbourhoods is a severe funding crisis. This is not just a suburban problem, and solutions will need to be rolled out across urban areas. The credit crunch has broken the existing funding model for housing and commercial investment, which was based on leveraging large private-sector contributions and rising property prices. As a result, physical regeneration is grinding to a halt in many areas.³⁵

This model was also premised on rationing land through local planning systems, with often severe constraints in some places: so it is possible that this model will work again come the upturn. We also know that – at least against a background of macro growth – property-based regeneration projects actually outperform the market average.³⁶ Despite this, at least some of the underlying institutional and speculative investment is also likely to fall off in the years ahead. So there is a clear need to look for complementary or alternative funding tools.

The public sector therefore has a critical role to play, especially in the short term. Homes & Communities Agency budgets need to be combined with additional funding streams. Additional local taxes, such as business rate supplements, are helpful and should be maintained for larger cities. Local authorities and social landlords should also look to develop further local asset-backed vehicles (LABVs) with private-sector partners. And current explorations of tax increment financing – or accelerated development zones – should be speeded up.³⁷

Housing and quality of place

As funding begins to flow again, we need to take another look at the housing mix for suburban neighbourhoods. So far, much of this has involved “pushing the city centre out”

34 Audit Commission, op cit

35 Parkinson, M *The Credit Crunch & Regeneration: Impact & Implications* (Department for Communities & Local Government, 2009)

36 IPD IPD *Regeneration Index* (2007)

37 Marshall, A *Keeping the Wheels from Falling Off* (Centre for Cities, 2009); Northern Way Private Investment Commission *Rebuilding Momentum in Regeneration* (2009)

– developers building fairly high-density apartments around the urban core. This was a questionable strategy even before the crunch. Flat living is premised on walkability; new flats too far out risk not being occupied.³⁸ Worse still, most developers were building well ahead of demand.³⁹

Instead, when we build we should plan for a range of housing types in suburban neighbourhoods. Most people say they want houses with gardens: terraced houses and townhouses allow this, at relatively high densities. More broadly, there is a clear list of key ingredients for successful inner-urban projects: existing residents and incomers say they want high-quality housing stock, security, good schools, public services and public spaces.⁴⁰

How far should we adopt a wider quality-of-place approach, using built form to drive forward growth? The jury is out on this. While quality-of-place measures can help deliver our social objectives, it is less clear what the economic impacts will be. It is intuitive that well-designed buildings and public spaces can improve residents' well-being and improve an area's functionality.⁴¹ However, unless underlying economic conditions are strong, it is not clear that quality of place has much impact on the residential offer. Jobs, not design values, ultimately drive skilled workers' location decisions.⁴²

Within specific towns and cities, deprived suburban neighbourhoods are typically competing with popular ones, and may have few distinctive advantages.⁴³ There is relatively little evidence that "pricing in" works on a large scale. Conversely, expanding suitable housing supply in the neighbourhoods where people want to live may do more to improve the wider urban offer.⁴⁴

Investing in good design and public spaces can help raise local housing prices and land values.⁴⁵ This is good news for land and property owners – but not for existing residents if rising housing costs lead to displacement. This last point is also an obvious risk of the housing market renewal programme type of approaches, which explicitly aim to raise

38 Allen, C and Blandy, S *The Future of City Centre Living: Implications for Urban Policy* (Centre for Regional Economic & Social Research, 2004)

39 Nathan, M and Urwin, C *City People: City Centre Living in the UK* (Centre for Cities, 2006)

40 Nathan and Urwin, op cit; Silverman, E, Lupton, R et al *A Good Place for Children? Attracting & Retaining Families in Inner Urban Mixed Communities* (Chartered Institute of Housing/Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2006)

41 Department for Communities & Local Government, op cit (2009); Northern Way *Residential Futures* vol 1 (2009)

42 Nathan and Urwin, op cit; Nathan, M *The Wrong Stuff*, discussion paper 1 (Centre for Cities, 2005)

43 Unsworth and Nathan, op cit

44 Manchester Independent Economic Review *The Review* (Manchester Enterprises, 2009)

45 Commission for Architecture & the Built Environment, op cit

house prices in deprived neighbourhoods. Area remodelling needs to be accompanied by financial help for existing residents – such as cheap loans or mortgages provided by social landlords – as well as careful neighbourhood management through change.

Delivering “a good place to live”

We know the basic elements of a successful neighbourhood: housing, utilities, physical and transport infrastructure, space, public and private services.⁴⁶ But, in practice, a neighbourhood of this kind is still harder to deliver than it should be. There are at least four barriers:

- funding formulae – these tend to be reactive, rather than anticipating future needs;
- data on area change – often of poor quality and lagging actual population change, with sources not shared among Whitehall departments;
- cultural and capacity barriers – in some cases, local players (such as primary care trusts or local education authorities) lack the experience and/or skill sets to co-ordinate and plan community-wide investments; and
- levels of funding – funding shortfalls are being made worse by the recession and pressure on public finances.

The cumulative effects of all this are to make new developments riskier, for public- and private-sector players; and to limit the individual and community benefits from regeneration.

As recommended by this author and others,⁴⁷ central government now has a cross-cutting commitment to co-ordinate housing, transport, schools, health and environmental investments.⁴⁸ It is essential that this commitment is carefully monitored and carried through.

At the local level, performance frameworks should incentivise cross-agency and cross-border working, especially through co-ordinating mechanisms such as local area agreements and multiple area agreements. At the same time, local authorities and agencies need to be given much more freedom and space to innovate. Longer, outcomes-based monitoring, along the lines of three-year multiple area agreements, are the way forward here.

Employment and skills

Low employment rates and poor skills are a challenge for many residents of deprived

46 ODPM, op cit (2003)

47 Bennett, J, Nathan, M et al *Would You Live Here? Making the Growth Areas Communities of Choice* (Institute for Public Policy Research, 2006)

48 HM Treasury *Public Service Agreement 20: Increase Long Term Housing Supply & Affordability* (2007)

suburban neighbourhoods, particularly in London's inner suburbs and around cities in the North and Midlands. People with low or no qualifications are much more likely to work locally if they work at all.⁴⁹ At the same time, residents will need help to connect them to opportunities in the wider labour market. Barriers to work and training – employability, employer behaviour, childcare, physical access to jobs – differ across cities and within particular communities.⁵⁰

So national-level programmes such as the Flexible New Deal – and its successors – will need to devolve some strategic decisions to city regions, and allow for tailored neighbourhood-level delivery. Social landlords and community groups should be working alongside Jobcentre Plus to ensure that services reach all residents. The objective should be long-term attachment to the labour market – ensuring people hold down the jobs they move into, and have a chance to develop their skills.

Improving suburban transport

Compared with other countries, the UK's inter-city transport system is relatively well-networked (although expensive). The holes in the network are within city regions, specifically in connecting suburban and peripheral neighbourhoods to urban cores.⁵¹ Improving commuter rail, light rail and bus networks can deliver a range of benefits to suburban residents and to wider local economies, not only in individual time-saving but also in connecting people from deprived neighbourhoods to jobs elsewhere in the city-region economy (the Manchester Metrolink extension is a good example of such an investment).

Suburban schemes that significantly extend the effective reach of urban labour markets can also help raise labour productivity.⁵² Central government needs to properly take account of this, fully incorporating wider impacts in future cost-benefit analysis.

Where should we target resources?

The coming years create difficult choices for policy makers. Which projects and places should come first? Clearly, we should be seeking to support and improve existing areas, rather than create completely new ones. For housing policy, that means remodelling and expanding the suburbs we have, rather than creating new towns.

49 Department for Communities & Local Government *What Works in Economic Development for Deprived Neighbourhoods?* (2007)

50 Ibid

51 Eddington, R *The Eddington Transport Study* (Department for Transport, 2006)

52 Graham, D *Wider Economic Benefits of Transport Improvements: Link between City Size & Productivity* (Department for Transport, 2005)

For regeneration, the picture is more complex. Suburban neighbourhoods are the building blocks of towns and cities, as well as being communities in their own right. It is not sensible simply to look at neighbourhoods in isolation. Two key principles for deciding where the money goes should be:

- residents' characteristics – is targeting an effective way to reach key groups?
- wider economic conditions – what is the strength of the subregional economy, and is it growing or declining?

This means that deprived suburban neighbourhoods in struggling locations present a real policy challenge, as a recent Policy Exchange report pointed out.⁵³ As the reaction to that report showed, it will probably always be politically unacceptable to actively manage an area into decline. More to the point, proponents of “encouraging people out” rarely spell out how this would work in practice – for example, what support systems would be needed to place people into new homes, schools and jobs – or how the social welfare losses (to social capital and local identity, for example) would actually compare with any economic gains.

A more pragmatic strategy for the worst-off areas is to connect their existing residents to economic opportunities elsewhere. This means that employment, skills and transport interventions are the priorities. Rather than building new homes in weak areas, housing funds should be concentrated on improving the well-being of existing residents – through neighbourhood management, maintaining housing stock and environmental improvements. As suggested above, this means that housing market renewal programmes – and their successors – will need to change direction.

Conclusions

What are the lessons here for future policy? Three big points stand out.

First, we need a suburban dimension to policy making. Most Britons live in suburbs of one kind or another, and we are currently channelling large amounts of regeneration money into poorer suburban neighbourhoods. But explicit “strategies for suburbs” are probably a bad idea. Suburbs are building blocks of towns and cities – not actual towns and cities.

Second, we need to make some changes to the regeneration policy mix. For deprived suburban neighbourhoods, area-based approaches can deliver important social and environmental goals, and to ensure local services reach residents. But economic goals are

53 Leunig, T and Swaffield, J *Cities Unlimited* (Policy Exchange, 2008)

best met at wider urban level, through employment, skills and transport interventions. This means we need to review the objectives of area-based programmes to ensure they are realistic, and put a greater emphasis on attaching people to the labour market – especially in the weakest areas.

Third, we need to make it easier to deliver good places to live. We must urgently develop new funding tools and make it easier to deliver the residential offer. That means smarter incentives, and much more room for local policy innovation.

These are major challenges for policy makers in the years ahead. But it is critical to meet them – both to improve poor neighbourhoods, and to unlock the potential of the people who live there.

Thanks to Becky Tunstall, Ruth Lupton, Henry Overman and others for helpful comments.

Suburbs and the city region

The emergence of the city-region concept in the past 10 years has initiated a new era of planning, with groups of authorities drawing up economic development strategies that sit between the region and the district or the city. Unlike previous subregional plans, however, the focus on the core city as the economic driver of the subregion provides a different underlying ethos.

With the focus on the core, the question raised is the function of those areas surrounding it – in effect the suburbs of the major city. Should they be residential, retail and leisure areas supporting the workers travelling into the core city – or can they support a more diverse economy? They need to be sustainable places with good transport links into the core and peripheries. They also need a sound economic base, related both to the needs of their residents and to the core, but with a distinctive offer.

In discussing this challenge, I will relate it to some of the dilemmas facing the Manchester city region as it takes on statutory functions as one of the government's pilots, as well as to the debates in the London city region around the economic role of the suburbs that have intensified in the past five years.

Centres more likely to grow after recession

In both Manchester and London, the boom years saw considerable growth in financial and business services jobs in the core. Some have suggested that the recession and the subsequent upturn will offer an opportunity to rebalance economies. Projections for Manchester, however, suggest that growth in financial and business services will continue its upward spiral, after a sharp fall during this recession, while employment in many surrounding areas will barely make up the losses incurred during this recession.

Many outlying areas, once relatively self-sufficient, are becoming more dependent on the economies of their nearby major cities, particularly in the Northern regions. Analysis for the Northern Way, a joint local/national government initiative to promote the competitiveness of the North, shows the large-scale one-way flows into the major cities – which increased even between the last two censuses.¹ There has been continuing decline in the industries in many Northern towns, while the business, professional and financial service industries around Manchester grew – particularly in south Manchester. Net job gains achieved across the Manchester city region are due entirely to growth in the

¹ Institute for Political & Economic Governance *The Northern Connection: Assessing the Comparative Economic Performance & Prospects of Northern England, Final Summary Report to the Northern Way* (University of Manchester, January 2008)

south of the city region,² and this is likely to continue.

Commuting distances have become greater as employment grows in those cores and people move further away from the city centre. Analysis of the 2001 census shows the pull of Manchester and Salford, which attract commuters "in numbers greater than 500 from as far as Preston in the north, Wirral in the west, Crewe and Nantwich to the south and Leeds to the east ... In contrast, the Manchester/Salford area makes a much smaller contribution in terms of numbers of commuters outwards."³ A paper by the population geographer Tony Champion points out that other than in London, the residential population is growing in a ring of places outside the major cities. In effect, the role of the areas surrounding the core, the suburbs, as dormitories, is being reinforced, particularly for families, whose breadwinners are supporting the core.⁴

A pure market-led policy would probably allow the concentration of employment in the growing sectors of financial and business services in the core centres until other factors acted as a brake. This approach has implications for environmental sustainability, in terms of transport, and social sustainability, in terms of the division between jobs and homes increasing with longer travelling times. There is a strong body of evidence demonstrating the unsustainability of the traditional suburbs in terms of lifestyle and car dependency, but the less dense housing and greener environment retain their attractions to residents. Inner urban areas could helpfully emulate some of the features of suburban living to reduce their loss of population while tackling car dependency with their better public transport provision.

Threat of lost identity

Public opinion is not necessarily in support of a city-region approach, because of a loss of identity. The Borders Party, debating the proposals for an Edinburgh city region, commented: "It's all about how many houses and who gets them – and it's about houses for Edinburgh. Just when new thinking on sustainable planning and new technology should be helping us to get jobs out into more provincial areas, here we are considering how to truck even more people into Edinburgh from an ever wider area. That's a bankrupt approach."⁵ Any approach focused on core cities will have to work hard to demonstrate benefits to the peripheries.

2 Manchester Independent Economic Review *The Case for Agglomeration Economies* (2009)

3 *Travel to Work Patterns 2001*, Census Panel briefing paper (North West Regional Assembly, July 2006)

4 Champion, T "The Quest for 'Sustainable Communities' in the Context of Britain's Changing Population", paper presented at the Housing Studies Association Autumn Conference on Planning and Housing Policy and Practice (September 2004)

5 "Standing up for the Scottish Borders: The Edinburgh City Region & a New Level of Bureaucracy" (Borders Party, undated press release)

There is a political commitment for a more dispersed economic form, but its implementation has yet to become clear. Many policy documents recognise the importance of spreading the benefits of the core city to surrounding areas and the need for policies to make it happen. The 2006 local government white paper⁶ suggests that "successful major cities can increase the opportunities for prosperity across a region, but the benefits cannot be taken for granted". The government's State of the English Cities report, published in 2006, points out that:

... the city-region concept requires a willingness by smaller local authorities to recognise the key economic and political leadership from the larger local authorities. In turn it requires mature political leadership from the larger local authorities so that smaller places do not feel threatened by larger ones or fear that their long-term economic interests will be neglected.

The major development agencies around Manchester have funded a large body of work, the Manchester Independent Economic Review, which has identified the major economic growth sectors in the city region. Now that the city region has formal government backing, its first job will be to draw up an economic development strategy. One key question will be the extent to which it supports the continuing concentration of jobs in Manchester, which has come about as a process of agglomeration, creating an economic mass giving access to skills and to transport that has boosted productivity.⁷

The Manchester Independent Economic Review work acknowledges that the process of agglomeration will produce winners and losers:

How much do we know about how all of these different effects play out in practice? The answer is, once again, very little. On balance, the evidence suggests that regional strategies based around city-regions are most likely to deliver on regional growth objectives (because, if nothing else, within the region they are working with market forces rather than against). New evidence will be needed to help quantify the magnitudes of gains and losses to different people in different places. On the basis of what we currently know, however, it is clear that there will be winners and losers, even if the size of any effects remains unknown.

The Manchester Independent Economic Review is concerned that the benefits of agglomeration could be reduced if added commuting causes congestion and other external costs.

6 *Strong & Prosperous Communities* (Department for Communities & Local Government, 2006)

7 Manchester Independent Economic Review, op cit

Work by Oxford Economics for the Association of Greater Manchester Authorities, a key player in promoting the city region, projects some of the winners and losers in the agglomeration process. Using an economic model based on past trends, it projects a sharp rise in employment in Manchester – a gain of 37,800 jobs between 2008 and 2018 – significant growth in existing centres at Trafford, Salford and Warrington, and the other districts in the city region seeing virtually no growth, or even decline.⁸ Interestingly, all the districts are expected to see population growth that will outstrip the additional jobs. In an accompanying report to the Association of Greater Manchester Authorities, the officers do suggest that these figures are based on a “policy-off” scenario, and it would be possible to make projections based on interventions.

Need to develop complementary roles

The issue is therefore the extent to which strategies can help the outlying areas grow on the back of Manchester – or develop independent economies. Many suburban areas will find it difficult to compete with the core in terms of attracting major financial and business service providers looking for a city-centre location, but there are a number of strategies that could help them develop complementary or at least distinct economic roles.

Bury Council is looking for the district to play a complementary economic role to Manchester city centre. The local authorities are waiting with bated breath for the city region’s economic development strategy, according to Colin Fishwick, head of Bury Metropolitan Borough Council’s urban strategy and neighbourhoods unit. The town has a highly skilled population, which is increasingly commuting into Manchester – about 48% of its working population commutes daily. Oxford Economics is projecting a small decline of 400 jobs between 2008 and 2018 in the town.⁹ The loss of 1,800 jobs between 2008 and 2010 will not have been made up by 2018.

The council is preparing a submission to the city region proposing ways in which the town can develop a complementary role to the city. It came close to attracting the new CWS headquarters building in 2007, which finally opted for Manchester’s Northern Quarter. It will provide space for businesses that cannot afford the costs of space in the city centre and only need to be close by. It also aims to promote the growth of existing companies. One of the key constraints in many suburban areas is the lack of high-quality business space, which Bury is seeking to overcome. The council is bringing forward a business park site that will be tailored to the needs of incoming business as well as providing potential for expansion of existing firms. It is also seeking to improve the quality of its town centre,

⁸ Oxford Economics *Economic Forecasts for Greater Manchester: A Summary of the Greater Manchester Forecasting Model (2008 update)* (Association of Greater Manchester Authorities, January 2009)

⁹ Op cit

which was a particular attraction to the CWS. It has a major new retail development, which it sees as a magnet in terms of attracting both additional residents and businesses.

There is potential to create growth hubs that are well connected to each other as well as to the core. These ideas are being developed within the context of a debate, particularly within the London and South East context, that has focused on the potential of several major business centres existing within outer London.

Agglomeration in London has created the dominance of central London. This process was supported by previous London mayor Ken Livingstone in the London Plan, which projected major growth in the financial services sector in the centre. In outer London the limited amount of growth projected was focused mainly on leisure and retail, except around Heathrow Airport.¹⁰

Livingstone's successor Boris Johnson is seeking to redress this trend in his revisions to the London Plan. His focus is on creating "super-hubs" at key locations around outer London. There are examples of city regions with multiple centres, each with a complementary role. Randstand in Holland comprises a ring of four large cities: Amsterdam has a focus on tourism and finance, which is a result of its proximity to Schiphol airport; Utrecht has the service sector; The Hague is the seat of government and Rotterdam has its port.¹¹

To create a more dispersed city-region economy, transport connections are key. The Centre for Cities has acknowledged the challenge that growth of the city-region core poses for surrounding towns.¹² It has highlighted the importance of transport links between the core centre and the surrounding towns to encourage complementary activity. Comparing the relationship between Reading and London with that between Burnley and central Manchester, it points out how Reading has developed a complementary relationship, attracting firms in related sectors (some are branches of headquarters in London), which have chosen the town because it combines relatively low-cost office space and shared access to a skilled labour market, national and international markets.

Burnley, on the other hand, is on the edge of the travel-to-work area of Manchester, but their economies are not closely linked. The solutions suggested by last year's Centre for Cities report¹³ focus particularly on transport connections and strategies that identify economic links between the core and peripheral areas.

10 Kochan, B (ed) *London: Bigger and Better?* (London School of Economics, 2006)

11 Davoudi, S "Polycentric Development & Metropolitan Governance", keynote speech to the International Conference on Social Policy and Regional Development, Zagreb, Croatia, 2006 (June 2008)

12 Lucci, P and Hildreth, P *City Links: Integration & Isolation* (Centre for Cities, March 2008)

13 Ibid

Ideas to promote suburbs

A paper on the future of London suburbs put forward a number of ideas to boost their economies.¹⁴ The ideas put forward included the provision of large business parks for green industries. Zones of cheap industrial space for students completing arts and design courses could be provided. Home-work units in suburban district centres could be set up for people to have a cheap, flexible base and not have to commute for one or two days a week. Large employers might find it attractive to have a base in the core centre, but also offices in the suburbs near where their workers live and where they could work several days a week. The paper commented that further work was required to see how the towns around the core centre could identify new economic niches.

Anonymity is a word almost synonymous with the suburbs, and the challenge is to make them stand out from surrounding places – and their core city – other than on price, by offering a distinctive environment. They also need to be places where people want to live and work. The quality of public space and proximity to the countryside can be exploited to attract both employers and residents. The success of York and Chester as medium-sized independent towns highlights the role of historic centres in helping to attract business.¹⁵ The large towns have attracted iconic buildings that have put them on the map – the "Guggenheim effect". These smaller towns need to identify a key attraction to make them stand out from nearby larger centres.

Concentrating economic growth in one major centre does not inevitably bring benefits to the surrounding towns, is expensive in terms of infrastructure costs and could stymie long-term growth. Creating locations where people can and want to live and work is obviously the most sustainable option, but is unrealistic for many. A complex mesh of commuting patterns within and across city-region boundaries, into the core and to neighbouring towns, would demonstrate a sustainable economy. Whether the city-region administrative model is flexible enough to promote such a dispersed economic pattern based around several centres, each with varying roles, will only become clear as the approach matures.

14 Potts, G, Falk, N and Kochan, B *London's Suburbs: Unlocking their Potential* (Greater London Authority, June 2007)

15 Institute for Political & Economic Governance, op cit

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