



## MANAGING SUBURBAN CHANGE IN THE SOUTH EAST

### Overview

Suburbs are moving towards centre stage in the planning policy debate. Pressure for development and intensification in many suburban areas is leading to inappropriate development and loss of local character. Since most people in England live in suburban areas they have a special place in the national psyche. If suburbs are to have a sustainable future, it is vital that we find new and better ways of managing change in these places.

The South East England Regional Assembly, the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) and English Heritage have differing (but overlapping) interests in how change in suburban areas is planned, executed and managed. The Managing Suburban Change project was established to examine the issues in more depth, gain the views of those stakeholders closest to the ground and to look at possible solutions or strategies.

Workshops were held at three locations across the South East – North Camp in Rushmoor, Cressex in Wycombe, and Tovil in Maidstone. The three areas uncovered examples of various key suburban issues, all of which are relevant to the wider debate. The format of the workshops was as follows:

- introduction to the suburban policy debate;
- introduction to the local area by the Local Authority, and an overview of the rapid area assessment of the suburb carried out by English Heritage;
- a walking tour of the suburb;
- discussion groups and feedback ;
- presentation by keynote speaker about the future of our suburbs.

The workshops were attended by Local Authority officers and members, developers and local interest groups.

### Summary of Workshop Discussions

The discussion groups considered two key questions:

1. What barriers currently exist to a more proactive approach to the management of suburban change?
2. What would help make a more proactive approach possible?

A large number of issues were raised that the workshop participants felt were either creating problems or could help produce solutions. A number of recurring themes were apparent, as well as issues that were either inter-related or had broader applicability. A brief summary follows.

## **Barriers**

### **1. Lack of a vision or strategy for suburbs**

Local authorities tend not to take a long-term or comprehensive approach to the management and development of their suburbs. They are also often failing to identify or differentiate the specific issues that are emerging in their suburban areas.

Suggested reasons for this were:

- An absence of political leadership - local politicians are not prioritising suburban issues;
- Lack of training – for both officers and members on suburban issues and priorities;
- Limited resources and competing priorities – suburbs are currently often not perceived to be a priority by local authorities having to make difficult decisions about the use of time and resources.

### **2. Land ownership issues**

- Fragmentation of land ownership. Local authorities are unwilling/unable to consider and facilitate land assembly, which leads to piecemeal development. This has obvious implications for overall character and infrastructure provision.

### **3. Perceptions of the suburban way of life**

- Developments in recent years have usually conformed to the expectation that suburbs are low-density car-dominated places;
- Resistance to change on the part of suburban residents and negative perceptions towards any development has often resulted in inertia. This is also evidenced by the lack of a defined policy framework which leads to a reactive approach by development control officers based on short term 'quick fixes';
- There is a need to challenge the view that developing at higher densities will only have negative effects, including environmental degradation and increased traffic.

## **Possible solutions**

### **1. Much greater commitment and vision from local authorities**

To develop an overall strategy and vision for their suburbs, local authorities need:

- Political leadership and commitment to proactively managing change;
- To be clearer and more effective in the way they communicate their objectives for suburban development to their communities. This includes how they will be achieved and what the benefits will be to enable community 'buy-in';
- To promote stronger leadership at a community/neighbourhood level, ensuring that change reflects and protects what is valued in these communities;
- Greater resources to devote to the suburbs (see below).

## **2. National and local guidelines and policy framework**

At the policy level there is a need for:

- National guidance emphasising the importance of suburbs and the need to identify and tackle the issues and problems in these areas. This will help promote the suburban agenda and help local authorities prioritise the suburbs for resource allocation;
- Clear local policy frameworks that proactively promote proposals for suburban change. Such documents, be they Supplementary Planning Documents or Area Action Plans, will help secure high quality, appropriate and successful developments.

## **3. Increased understanding of suburban character and pressures for change**

An understanding of the local suburban character and related threats and opportunities will help increase local awareness of the problems and inform policy guidance:

- This can be done by the use (or more complete use) of characterisation projects;
- Such an understanding will also help resolve some of the tensions between guidance which seeks to increase densities and the potential for loss of suburban character.

## **4. A more interactive planning and development process**

- Better dialogue and negotiation is needed between all parties, at the pre-application, application and post-application stages, with an emphasis on proactive engagement between developers, local planning authorities, and the local communities.

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