

1.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Suburbs have an important role in accommodating many of the people who use towns. They are an important but relatively un-studied part of the urban scene. Suburbs play a very important but hidden part in the urban story but are generally not included or allocated roles in much of current planning policy. This policy is largely orientated towards the central urban areas and to the standards and changes which are needed there rather than considering the needs and differences of these more peripheral places.
- Suburban housing is delivered at much lower densities than in town and city centres. There is less communal and public space but more private gardens which are an important characteristic and lend suburbs a greener and more spacious character and greater biodiversity than more central urban areas. Planning policy will probably have to recognise these lower densities and the need for them to remain lower than those hitherto specified in planning policies informed by a more urban “model” if the character of suburbs is to be maintained.
- There may be a case for selective intensification within suburbs, especially where there is a concentration of transport facilities or other amenities. In these circumstances, the infrastructure and facilities should support higher densities.
- Suburban planning policy 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 (through provision of cycle ways and intensification of local facilities and amenities around transport nodes, for example).
- Social housing provision in the suburbs tends to be more segregated and isolated than might be the case in more urban areas. This can often be perceived as a problem and the cause of a poor reputation and low value in the area. Ironically, these low values may also be seen as a very important reason for the success of a market – namely that it makes property affordable for people who wouldn’t otherwise be able to own a home.
- A common theme in suburbs is the high proportion of owner occupiers, usually constituting the vast majority of residents. This makes suburbs inherently different to city centres.

- An important characteristic of suburbs, common to all the case studies, is the relatively low value and poor investor demand for commercial buildings in the suburb. This is largely due to the poorer communication links and the fact that they do not contain a large catchment population.
- Commercial demand in 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 studies 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.
- 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 suburbs 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 more unlikely to develop commercial or mixed use property in suburbs.
- Obtaining funding for any commercially-led projects is likely to be difficult and more likely to be found for out-of town development. Given the resistance to any further out of town development for clear reasons of sustainability, it may be appropriate for suburban policy to focus on intensifying existing, low density, commercial out-of-town retail malls, declining industrial estates, business parks and the like. These could form the core of new, sustainable suburban areas.
- All suburbs studied appeared to be under-provisioned in leisure facilities and, where they did exist, their potential had not been maximised. In some cases, it may be that leisure could lead regeneration and create the value necessary to provide other improvements to the area.

- In the South East, we believe that most suburbs are capable of market-led regeneration. The characteristics of this development is that it is usually concentrated in the residential sector, it is sometimes piecemeal and uncoordinated, high residential values may push out other uses because commercial developers cannot/do not compete for land. The market does not currently militate in favour of mixed use, integrated development. It may be that the biggest contribution that the public sector can make in these situations is to provide a visionary leader for the whole area or to create the conditions in which one can occur.
- The policy implications of this are that, if it is considered desirable to provide mixed use or commercial uses in suburban areas, alternative investors will need to be found. Where these are not forthcoming, it may be necessary to either set up alternative “exit routes” for the developer or in some way acknowledge the financial loss that may be incurred.
- It may be appropriate to set up publicly or privately run management companies to facilitate the ongoing management of commercial uses, and their integration with the suburb. If done well, and in partnership with the private sector, this should add to the overall value of land rather than detract from it.
- Features of desirable suburbs seems to be a readily identifiable character, a well defined but well connected neighbourhood area with walkable distances to local amenities and high levels of quality, open space and greenery. Any policies which encourage these characteristics on new developments and regeneration are more likely to ensure the economic success of the suburb.
- Aging housing stock where repairs and maintenance become an increased burden for owners 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 as 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.

- 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.
- 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.
- Whilst a variety of uses other than residential in an area may increase its attractiveness and add to a neighbourhood identity, it is not always commercially viable. Market issues need to be addressed before such development is specified or required by policy makers.
- There is very often tension between the character of a suburb and the need for its occupants to store their cars. Car dependence is likely to be greater in suburbs so methods of accommodating cars as inconspicuously as possible, whilst reducing the need for car usage, is more likely to be successful than any attempts to ban cars outright. Commercial buildings also need to be provided with adequate parking if local businesses are to survive and prosper. Design solutions can be employed to ensure that cars do not dominate the street scene and frontages.
- 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 access of a town centre.

- The potential for a suburb to thrive can depend on how accessible it is to surrounding residents. Impermeable suburbs can suffer from a lack of identity and which affects the future development of businesses and enterprises. Radical solutions may be needed to open them up and policy-led initiatives to combine new development with the creation of new means of access may be required.
- Selective intensification and mixed development is capable of improving the quality of places but the private sector may not be able to bear all the costs of infrastructure changes and links that might be needed to facilitate these improvements.
- If an area is improved there is a conundrum to be solved. In the face of the heavily constrained supply of the South East, improved place quality pushes up values. This means that an area risks becoming less affordable and key workers may be kept out by the relatively high values.
- Stable suburbs 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.
- Higher density and mixed development can be accommodated in locations around transport nodes and existing commercial uses and should add to the vitality of areas.
- 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. These longer term trends need to be researched further.
- Certain suburbs, next to town centres, are ideally placed to become more integrated and part of a growing central urban area.
- For some suburbs, the development of adjacent or adjoining existing, low density out-of-town commercial developments may constitute an opportunity for improvement. The conversion of retail warehousing or under-occupied industrial estates or business parks, for example, into higher density, mixed use transport hubs could transform locations.

- Stable, well established suburbs present few 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 at ground floor level of apartment schemes near stations and existing retail areas.
- Some suburbs may need radical alterations to road layouts and existing, poor quality open spaces in order that further residential or mixed use development with appropriate facilities and amenities can take place
- Opportunities exist for certain suburbs to act as “seed corn” areas for local businesses where these 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 units work and the diverse nature of enterprises may also mean that conventional B1 use is not appropriate.
- Where the proportion of social housing in a suburb was substantially above national average levels, it was sometimes 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.
- 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.
- 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, up-market houses in the same area. Apartments may be inappropriate in an area far from facilities, amenities and transport.

- There is a danger that development will be uncoordinated and piecemeal in suburbs suitable for regeneration. There is potential for wider public benefits to arise from redevelopment if policy can make provision for more integrated development schemes.
- Risks following regeneration or redevelopment can include the demise of an area or scheme due to poor management. One solution to this may be to set up a local “estate management company”. This could be private sector, public sector or a mixture of both.