

The Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE) exists to promote the beauty, tranquillity and diversity of rural England by encouraging the sustainable use of land and other natural resources in town and country. We promote positive solutions for the long-term future of the countryside to ensure change values its natural and built environment. Our Patron is Her Majesty The Queen. We have more than 60,000 supporters, a branch in every county, nine regional groups, over 200 local groups and a national office in central London. Membership is open to all. Formed in 1926, CPRE is a powerful combination of effective local action and strong national campaigning. Our President is Bill Bryson.

Much of what CPRE has achieved has only been possible due to financial support from people who care about our countryside. To find out how to support CPRE, including information on donating, becoming a member, leaving a legacy, corporate membership or volunteering, please ring supporter services on 020 7981 2870, email supporterservices@cpre.org.uk or go online at our website: www.cpre.org.uk/support-us.



The Proximity Principle

Why we are living too far apart



Campaign to Protect
Rural England

Campaign to Protect Rural England

128 Southwark Street
London SE1 0SW

Tel: 020 7981 2800

Fax: 020 7981 2899

Email: info@cpre.org.uk

Web site: www.cpre.org.uk

CPRE is a company limited by guarantee,
registered in England, number 4302973.

Registered charity number: 1089685

A report written for CPRE by Rebecca Willis

Email: hello@rebeccawillis.co.uk

May 2008



Contents

‘This report breaks new ground in thinking about density and proximity in rural and small-scale communities. It reinforces the urgency of compact development where people, services and amenities are all located close together so that people can live more sustainably in a more socially integrated way.’

Professor Anne Power,
Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion, LSE

‘This is great – accessible, convincing and actionable stuff.’
Alice Owen, Arup

‘Living in well-designed, compact settlements has enormous benefits for community and climate. This report is a timely reminder for an overcrowded island addicted to urban sprawl.’

Jon Reeds, Brownfield Briefing

Foreword	2
Summary	3
About the research	5
Introduction	6
1: A century of dispersal	8
2: What do people want?	12
3: Proximity and connectivity	18
4: Travel – how far, how fast, and how?	23
5: Ideal homes and eco-towns	26
6: Existing settlements – city slickers and rural realities	28
7: Where do we go from here?	30

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to the people we spoke to in Westoe Crown Village, Rowlands Gill, Somersham and Haddenham, and to Gillian Thomas who conducted the research; to those I interviewed and others who informed the research: Anne Power, Gideon Amos, Nuala Rooney, Lizzie Chatterjee, Alice Owen, Tim Williams, Henry Oliver, Chris Brown, Nick Johnson, Dominic Church, James Hulme, Jon Reeds, June Barnes, Marina Pacheco, Shaun Spiers, Neil Sinden, Kate Gordon, Paul Miner and Judith Rosten.

Foreword

One of the Government’s big environmental achievements has been to increase housing densities from under 25 dwellings per hectare (dph), when it came to power, to over 40 dph in 2006. This has helped save vast areas of countryside and other green space. Because denser communities can support local services and public transport, it has cut carbon. And discouraging urban sprawl and promoting the use of previously developed land rather than greenfield sites has brought new life to many urban centres.

Unfortunately the Government does not seem very proud of this success. More recent planning policy forces local authorities to release greenfield sites for housing development. The thrust of housing policy, eco-towns aside, is now overwhelmingly focussed on the number of new houses built, rather than on their quality. Little regard is paid to the people who will have to live in or near them. The numbers are all.

The Proximity Principle reminds us that building houses is only part of the challenge. We do need to build more houses, particularly affordable houses, but we need to do so in a way that is socially and environmentally sustainable. That means favouring proximity over dispersal. It also means, as a rule, building within existing settlements rather than seeking to create new communities from scratch.

This is not an abstract argument. The report draws on a wide range of research and opinion, but is grounded in the experience of people living in four different rural or suburban communities, two at low and two at medium density. Its conclusions are challenging, but also very hopeful. It suggests that we can, given the will and a willingness to learn from what works, enhance existing communities and create places where people will want to live and be able to live more sustainably.

While the emphasis of housing policy is on throwing up as many houses as possible as quickly as possible, it is not surprising that people will resist development near them. Bad housing policy creates NIMBYs. Developments that seem likely to enhance an area – to provide a critical mass for local services, for instance – are much more likely to be supported.

CPRE has long argued that it is more important to build well than to build quickly. In the longer term, an emphasis on quality may even make it possible – because more publicly acceptable – to build more houses. In any case, the current downturn in the housing market makes it highly unlikely that a policy based on numbers can succeed, even in its own terms. The Government may not want to rethink its housing policy, but the market is forcing it to. Let us hope that any rethink gives serious consideration to past success, and to the ‘proximity principle’.



Shaun Spiers
Chief Executive, CPRE

Summary

Housing and planning policy should be governed by the proximity principle: the idea that compact cities, towns and villages produce the best social, economic and environmental outcomes. Proximity brings people, shops, schools and healthcare closer together. It drives creativity and innovation. It means less distance to travel: people are more likely to walk or cycle, which in turn makes streets safer and more welcoming. There are environmental advantages, too, with less land and energy required. Before the development of modern transport, proximity was achieved automatically. But today, it requires careful planning and intervention by government.

1: A century of dispersal

The twentieth century was a century of dispersal. There are three reasons for this: demography, with increases in the elderly population and smaller family sizes; increased mobility, particularly through car ownership and use; and a housing policy which encouraged growth into suburbs and new towns, as a response to slum conditions and overcrowding.

Well-intentioned policies led to negative social and environmental consequences. Social problems have tended to concentrate in inner cities. Environmental costs have included loss of countryside, pressures on water resources and increasing carbon emissions. By the 1990s, the negative effects of dispersal were becoming clear, and in 2000, housing policy adjusted accordingly, with new planning guidance encouraging higher density development, the use of brownfield sites and better public transport.¹ This new consensus was, however, fragile, and the Government has backed away from more radical measures. Now, Government proposals for 240,000 new homes a year have brought these questions to the fore once more. The need for additional housing provides an opportunity to reshape our towns and villages, and think again about what sort of communities we want to create.

2: What do people want?

Based on household interviews conducted across four different locations, this chapter asks what people want from their home and their community. When people buy or rent a house, they are investing in much more than a building: community, surroundings, services and even status are also important

For some people – those we call stimulation seekers – communal living and convenience are attractive; while others, cocooners, want privacy and peace. Most people are happy with the amount of space they have in their home, though many express frustration at the lack of space for cars. There is a trade-off between community interaction and private space, which is understood implicitly, with people settling for smaller homes in order to be closer to certain facilities. Families feel this trade-off most acutely, as they require both private space and community interaction to flourish.

In short, it is clear that each household works through a complex equation about the relative benefits of private space, nearby facilities and community life, and balances this against what they can afford. Community needs and aspirations need to be considered alongside housing demand. The two are so linked that it makes no sense to separate them.

3: Proximity and connectivity

Innovation theorists have long stressed the need for proximity, density and variety, as vital ingredients of an innovative economy. Similar forces are at play in villages and towns. Compact village centres create the conditions for community interaction. Shared facilities like pubs, shops, churches and libraries form shared spaces for informal encounters, which are hugely important to people. The physical layout of a settlement is a key factor in encouraging connectivity and interaction.

The role of connected communities is also proving crucial to tackling environmental challenges. Exhortations to do the right thing will have limited effect if taking action

¹ Planning Policy Guidance 3: *Housing*, issued in 2000, superseded in 2006 by Planning Policy Statement 3: *Housing*.

is difficult, expensive or out of the ordinary. People need to see that they are part of something bigger. Personal action needs to be supported by action at community level, and by government. Self-styled eco-communities like Ashton Heyes, the Cheshire village aiming for carbon neutrality, demonstrate that environmental action and community engagement can be mutually reinforcing. Compact development is a crucial tool in climate change mitigation, too, with greater opportunities for public transport and decentralised energy generation.

4: Travel – how far, how fast, and how?

Transport has always played a central role in shaping places. As transport has become quicker and cheaper, development has spread further. However, people have a very ambivalent attitude toward car use. Most people like getting around by car, but are troubled by congestion, traffic noise and safety worries. Cars enable dispersed development, but they do not make it inevitable or desirable. There are alternatives, based around increased proximity, public transport and active travel (walking and cycling), but these need long-term planning and policy support. Simply discouraging car use, through increased fuel taxes or decreased space for parking, is not enough.

5: Ideal homes and eco-towns

More than a century after Ebenezer Howard founded the garden city movement, the idea of a blank slate still holds a strong allure for planners. Howard argued that old cities had failed in so many ways that the best course of action was to start again, with new towns adapted to the needs of modern life. The Government’s proposal for ten new eco-towns, designed to be exemplars of sustainable living, can be traced directly back to the garden city movement. But there are dangers in emphasising novelty and invention.

Concentrating our attention on new towns could divert us from the question of how to improve our existing settlements. Eco-towns could actually cause further problems, by encouraging greater dispersal and social polarisation. A thorough look at the history of garden cities and new towns shows that reality has not always matched up to the high ideals that inspired them.

Criticising this lust for novelty in housing does not rule out new development. But it does call into question the overwhelming focus on the new. Eco-towns will account for less than 3 per cent of the Government’s projected three million new homes, which are in turn a fraction of the existing building stock. Refocusing on what we have already would be more effective.

6: Existing settlements – city slickers and rural realities

The benefits of proximity tend to be seen primarily in an urban context. But proximity is just as important in villages. Arguing for proximity is not about concentrating people into cities. It is an argument for creating clusters of people.

The decline in rural services such as banks, doctors’ surgeries and post offices is well documented. But there is a strong demand for housing in rural areas, and a lack of affordable housing. Just as there is a need to support existing urban communities, through regenerating inner cities and reusing derelict land, a similar argument can be made for supporting existing village communities, through providing more housing, and more people to support local services. Yet development within villages is restricted, while proposals for new settlements, such as eco-towns, are encouraged. There needs to be a greater focus on existing communities, and increasing proximity in rural as well as urban settings.

7: Where do we go from here?

Government policy is contradictory. Aspects of it favour proximity, such as planning guidance recommending higher density and brownfield development; some policies curb car use and support public transport; and there is support for town centre regeneration. However, aspects of it still support dispersal through the encouragement of large new settlement areas, such as urban extensions and eco-towns; a focus on road transport and limited investment in alternatives. The focus on new housebuilding could push us either way –

toward supporting proximity, by concentrating on existing settlements and organic growth; or toward dispersal.

A focus on proximity would allow us to fulfil environmental and social objectives, as well as meeting housing needs. This could be achieved through planning policy and financing mechanisms that support existing settlements; through a more sophisticated approach to measuring density; through linking transport and planning policy; and through encouraging greater community involvement. The final chapter sets out these recommendations in detail.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

This report is based on desk research and interviews with housing and sustainability practitioners, including architects, government officials, planners, housebuilders, housing organisations and environmental groups, to gather views and evidence on the issue. It also involved qualitative research in four different communities:

> Somersham, Cambridgeshire: a compact village of around 4,000 people, with an estimated 40 dwellings per hectare at its core, surrounded by lower density;

> Haddenham, Cambridgeshire: a more spread-out village, of around 3,000 people, with an estimated 10-30 dwellings per hectare throughout;

> Westoe Crown Village, South Shields: a medium–high density new development in South Shields, which will house 1,500-2,000 people when complete, at an estimated density of 50 dwellings per hectare;

> Rowlands Gill, Newcastle upon Tyne: a low-density village suburb of Newcastle, with a population of around 5,500 and an estimated density of around 10-20 dwellings per hectare.

In each location, five detailed household interviews were carried out. Interviewees reflected a mixture of life stages, income, social background and housing type. Interviews followed an informal topic guide and included a house tour and a guided walk or drive around the location

More details of the research methodology and findings are available as a separate publication *Housing Density: qualitative research findings*, available from www.cpre.org.uk. All names have been changed.

Introduction

We are living further away from each other than at any point since the birth of modern cities nearly two hundred years ago.² The housing policy of the past century has been, above all, a strategy of dispersal – from cities into suburbs and beyond into new towns. This strategy has sometimes been explicit, driven by the need to tackle city slums; and sometimes implicit or even accidental, prompted by an increase in mobility, and car use in particular.

Overcrowded cities and slum housing were an immense problem 150 years ago. It is little wonder that politicians and social reformers concentrated on improving living conditions by looking for solutions outside existing urban areas. But this noble impulse, coupled with a rapid growth in mobility, was actually the start of a catastrophic wrong turn for housing policy.

There are advantages to living in close proximity to each other. Proximity brings people, shops, schools and healthcare closer together. It drives creativity and innovation. It means less distance to travel: people are more likely to walk or cycle, which in turn makes streets safer and more welcoming. There are environmental advantages, too, with less land and energy required.

So why have we been so focussed on dispersal? First, because there are obvious advantages to individuals in having more private space, both inside and out. But the second reason is not actually a reason at all. We have done it because we can. With the rise in private car use, we can move quickly. Mobility, or the lack of it, has always shaped settlement patterns. Cars and trains gave us the ability to disperse; people wanted more space; and so we moved from proximity to dispersal without thinking it through.

Proximity has become a social good, much like public spending. Everyone wants to pay as little tax as possible, while benefiting from public services. Similarly, people want as much space as possible for themselves, but want to benefit from the collective goods which come from proximity. Put simply, most would prefer to live in a big house, with a

garden, within walking distance of shops and schools, and with clear roads to drive on. But individual and collective needs are, to an extent, in conflict. While this is well understood with tax and public services, it is not widely acknowledged in housing.

Like public services, then, proximity has become a social good that can only be achieved through government intervention. It used to be automatic, but now it needs to be planned for. The market will not deliver it. We need to make collective decisions, to prevent an accumulation of individual decisions leading us in the wrong direction. There are ways in which this can be done – through the planning system, transport policy, housing and regeneration policy. But it is far from simple.

And where is the Government in all this? Most governments recognise and act on the need to protect the public good of proximity. But some do it better than others. The United States has, until recently, been the least active. This has resulted in a situation where cities have sprawled over a large distance, such as metropolitan Atlanta, which reaches 120 miles across. However, now many American towns and cities are advocating a return to compact development, or so-called smart growth.³

The current UK Government has a contradictory approach. Elements of its policy support proximity: planning guidance setting minimum density levels and encouraging brownfield development; the protection of Green Belts and support for public transport. However, other aspects of policy contradict this, and support dispersal instead including development of new free-standing eco-towns; a transport policy favouring the motorist and a tax system that incentivises new build over renovation. Contradictory policy has resulted in contradictory outcomes, and a failure to provide the collective good of proximity.

The Government has pledged to build three million new homes by 2020, to increase the affordability of housing – and Prime Minister Gordon Brown has staked his reputation on the issue.⁴ While there are important debates to be had about the numbers of homes needed, and indeed the link between housebuilding and affordability,⁵

2 For a detailed discussion of the statistics on population density, see Office for National Statistics, *Population Density, Change and Concentration in Great Britain 1971, 1981 and 1991*, 1995, which confirms these trends toward dispersal: what it terms evening out of populations, with decreased densities in urban areas and increased densities in suburban and rural areas.

3 See www.smartgrowthamerica.org

4 Department for Communities and Local Government, *Homes for the Future: More affordable, more sustainable – Housing Green Paper*, July 2007

5 See, for example, Levett-Therivel Consultants for CPRE, *Deconstructing Barker – A one dimensional misunderstanding of a multidimensional issue*, March 2007

it seems clear that substantial amounts of new housing will be built over the years ahead. We face a choice: three million new homes could continue to accelerate the process of dispersal. Or with careful policy and planning, they could help us in the right direction. New homes in the right places, together with

refurbishment and regeneration of existing built areas, could breathe life into threatened communities. They provide an opportunity to reshape our towns and villages, and strengthen the communities that we depend upon.

THE BENEFITS OF PROXIMITY

- > **greater social contact and connectivity;**
- > **services (shops, schools, healthcare) are close at hand;**
- > **drives innovation (including social and environmental innovation);**
- > **reduces land-take;**
- > **supports existing settlements;**
- > **makes public transport viable;**

- > **creates a safer and more secure environment;**
- > **preserves distinctiveness of rural and urban areas;**
- > **community energy schemes are feasible; and**
- > **reduces carbon emissions from buildings and transport.**

1: A century of dispersal

‘I must beg you not to talk of the sea. It makes me envious and miserable; I who have never seen it!’

Emma Woodhouse, in Emma, by Jane Austen, 1816

‘Do you know the road I live in – Ellesmere Road, West Bletchley? Even if you don’t, you know fifty others exactly like it. You know how these streets fester all over the inner-outer suburbs. Always the same. Long, long rows of little semi-detached houses... the stucco front, the creosoted gate, the privet hedge, the green front door.’

George Bowling, in Coming Up for Air, by George Orwell, 1939

The dispersal that has characterised the last century has three main causes. First, although there are more houses than ever before, there are fewer people per house. Family groups are smaller, older people are living longer, and more families are separated. In 1971, the average household size was 2.9; in 1998 it was 2.3.⁶ In one of our study areas, Rowlands Gill, the number of households had increased by 1 per cent despite an overall fall in the population of 3 per cent.⁷

Second, we are more mobile than at any point in history. Jane Austen’s heroine Emma, a feisty, wealthy young lady, had never seen the sea – unthinkable for someone of her status today, but less remarkable when most journeys were by foot, and longer trips were both rare and arduous. In the last fifty years, car ownership has grown exponentially. This has allowed people to live further from each other, from shops and from workplaces, creating radically different ways of life. People now travel on average thirty miles a day, compared to around five miles in the 1950s.⁸ Cars allow greater movement, but they also need space, in the form of roads, parking spaces and garages, which in turn affects the design of settlements.

Third, housing policy has encouraged growth outward, into suburbs and new towns, as a response to slum conditions and overcrowding in cities. These three drivers –

smaller household sizes, greater mobility and an outward-driven housing policy – have had a profound impact on our settlements. There are fewer people in each house, and houses are more dispersed – so people live further apart. This dispersal of our population is extremely significant, though rarely understood or acknowledged. Popular perceptions, and political responses, lag behind the reality.

From overcrowding to undercrowding

The slums of Victorian Britain, immortalised by Charles Dickens, have had a profound influence on the way we think about housing – one that lasts to this day. Industrialisation caused people to flock to cities, to live in appalling, overcrowded conditions. For decades, housing campaigners and politicians fought for improvements in city housing. The by-law housing of the late nineteenth-century, the new villages and towns like Port Sunlight, Saltaire and Bourneville, the Garden City movement pioneered by Ebenezer Howard, and the postwar New Towns like Basildon, Harlow and Milton Keynes, were all inspired by the need to relieve the overcrowding and squalor of life in the cities. *The Housing and Town Planning Act* of 1909 confirmed this move out of the city into a less crowded suburban model of growth.⁹ In short, throughout most of the nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries, there was a wholly understandable ambition to reduce population density.

Righting the wrongs of nineteenth-century slums was essential and laudable. But the obsession with reducing overcrowding lingered long after it was really necessary. Anne Power explains the peculiar hold that this period has over housing policy:

‘Perhaps, as the first country to experience rapid industrialisation and urbanisation simultaneously, we have never quite escaped the mindset that associates city life with chaos and human brutalisation. Nor have we shaken off the impulse to escape urban troubles by building outwards...’¹⁰

6 Office for National Statistics, *General Household Survey 2006 Overview Report*, 2006

7 Gateshead Council, *Census 2001 Ward Factsheets: Chopwell and Rowlands Gill*, November 2003

8 John Adams, Royal Society of Arts, *Hypermobility: Too much of a good thing?* November 2001

9 Anne Power and John Houghton, *Jigsaw Cities: Big places, small spaces*, 2007, pp. 20-40

10 Anne Power and John Houghton, *Jigsaw Cities: Big places, small spaces*, 2007, p. 41

It was not just the social reformers who were intent on building outwards. By the inter-war years, speculative development by private builders reached fever pitch. In 1936 alone, England’s housing stock increased by a record 3.3 per cent, and the bulk of it was ribbon development, far from existing shops or services. As the historian, Ross McKibbin, writes, ‘the speed with which this happened, and its omnipresence, took most people by surprise, which is why it occurred largely without restriction.’¹¹ This was dispersal at its most extreme: in the 1920s and 1930s, while the population of Birmingham increased by 25%, its built-up area increased by 68%, and Coventry’s by a staggering 83%.¹²

Falls in construction costs and increased availability of mortgages brought home ownership within the reach of the middle classes¹³ (though not, generally, the working class), and made owner-occupation a widespread aspiration of the English middle classes. Though the homes themselves were popular, their impact on the landscape, and their disconnectedness from town or village centres, was the source of objection and protest, not least by the novelist George Orwell.

In these inter-war years, a tipping-point was reached. Today, English cities are markedly low-density compared to others in Europe. On average, there are only 55 people per hectare in London, and 41 in Sheffield.¹⁴ The drive to reduce housing density shifted from being a social and environmental benefit, to becoming a problem in itself. Overcrowding and slum conditions are not a good way to house a population. But neither is low-density suburban living, which tends to be energy-intensive, car-dependent and socially divisive – or, in the words of US commentator James Howard Kunstler, ‘the most drastic misallocation of resources’.¹⁵

Social realities and the environmental imperative

The exodus from cities throughout the twentieth-century was above all an exodus of the wealthy. As those who could afford it moved out, the poor were left behind, which

in effect worsened conditions in urban areas. Slum clearances continued until as late as 1980, resulting in considerable upheaval and uncertainty for already marginalised city dwellers.¹⁶ Meanwhile, those in the new suburbs sometimes succumbed to new town blues, uprooted from established communities, a long way from shops, schools and workplaces and extended family.¹⁷

In recent years, the environmental costs of this pattern of housing have become clear, too. For each acre of land used for housing, a much larger area of land is disturbed, through quarrying, transport needs, and light and noise pollution.¹⁸ The most obvious environmental impact, because it is obvious in a visual sense, is the loss of countryside. The loss of habitat and biodiversity is also a factor. As housing increases, water use increases, leading to water shortages, particularly in the South East. Increasing the amount of developed land reduces flood resilience, as there is greater surface water run-off, leading to more flash floods.

The climate change impacts of development are significant. Our homes are responsible for around a quarter of the United Kingdom’s carbon emissions. Government has pledged to introduce standards requiring all new homes from 2016 to be zero-carbon in use, which can be achieved through a combination of high energy efficiency and renewable generation. This will be a huge step forward, but still represents only a fraction of the total carbon emissions associated with the built environment. The impacts of the construction process itself are significant, and construction of new homes is more carbon-intensive than refurbishing existing buildings. With the right incentives, the existing housing stock can be brought up to much higher standards of energy efficiency.¹⁹

Settlement patterns also dictate carbon use. More dispersed development requires more transport, which is carbon-intensive. Lower densities make public transport less efficient, walking and cycling less attractive, and car use more likely, all contributing to carbon costs. In any debate about house building, the overall carbon impacts of settlement patterns, not just the carbon costs of individual buildings, need to be considered.

11 Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918 – 1951*, 1998

12 Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918 – 1951*, 1998, p. 81

13 Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918 – 1951*, 1998, p. 73

14 Transport and Urban Development Department, The World Bank, *The Dynamics of Global Urban Expansion*, 2005

15 *The End of Suburbia: Oil depletion and the collapse of the American Dream*, documentary film, 2004

16 Anne Power and John Houghton, *Jigsaw Cities: Big places, small spaces*, 2007, p. 46

17 Department for Communities and Local Government, *Transferable lessons from the new towns*, July 2006, p. 78

18 Henry Oliver, interview, November 2007

19 Sustainable Development Commission, *Stock Take: Delivering improvements in existing housing*, July 2006

High-density debates

By the 1990s, these negative social, economic and environmental effects of dispersal were becoming increasingly clear, particularly in our cities. In 1999, the architect Richard Rogers presented the Deputy Prime Minister with a three hundred page assessment of the UK’s cities, drawn up by his Urban Task Force. The challenge was stark: ‘To stem a long period of decline and decay, pessimism and under-investment, we must bring about a change in urban attitudes so that towns and cities once again become attractive places to live, work and socialise.’²⁰

The Task Force recommended a new approach, based on supporting existing communities in cities. They wanted regeneration of cities to come before development of new settlements, with a focus on careful design and masterplanning, rather than a piecemeal approach to development. At the heart of Rogers’ vision was an increase in the density of housing, as a route to achieving walkable communities, safer streets, and good public transport facilities.

Rogers’ report was the turning point in debates about density. Planners had spent decades encouraging lower density development, to reduce perceived overcrowding; now they were being asked to use the planning system to promote higher densities. Government took the recommendations to heart, introducing guidance in 2000 which asked for density levels of 30-50 homes per hectare, and limited the allowance for car parking to 1.5 spaces per home.²¹ Local authorities were no longer able to use over-development as a reason for refusing planning permission and in certain parts of the country had to seek permission from ministers to develop below 30 homes per hectare. They were encouraged to carry out capacity studies to explore potential for development within existing areas, and to encourage brownfield development. A new organisation, the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE), was created to advise on urban design and public space.

As planners and developers were adjusting to this new reality, more changes were afoot in

the housing market. Land values and property prices soared, especially in the South East, driven by a buoyant economy and a resurgence of the private rented market and buy-to-let mortgages. These price rises at a time of low interest rates made property an attractive investment, with the housing market offering an alternative to savings or pensions. But house price rises presented the Government with a political headache, as more and more people were priced out of the market. As a result, in 2003 the *Sustainable Communities Plan* was launched, identifying growth areas for housing in the south and east, and rebalancing the housing market in the Midlands and north through a combination of refurbishment, demolition and housebuilding. The influential *Barker Review*, commissioned by the Treasury and published in 2004, also advocated higher levels of housebuilding as a solution to house price inflation.

With the launch of the *Sustainable Communities Plan* and the *Barker Review*, government policy became increasingly contradictory. Planning guidance, following the Urban Task Force’s recommendations, encouraged higher density, brownfield development and regeneration of existing communities; the *Sustainable Communities Plan* proposed housebuilding outside existing towns, as urban extensions or new settlements. The *Barker Review*’s insistence on building more, more quickly, had a profound effect on politicians and the industry alike. The focus shifted to house numbers, rather than settlement design.

The rush to build, and the contradictory noises from government, meant that developers began to adhere to the letter, not the spirit, of the new planning guidance. Many house builders found that the best way to meet density standards was through building one- and two-bedroom flats as part of a development, without radical changes in design or feel of the development overall. Other crucial elements in the Urban Task Force’s report were forgotten. Better design, investment in public transport infrastructure, and essential public services were largely overlooked – and the result was a backlash against density targets.

Minimum density standards will not, by themselves, create better designed, friendlier

20 Richard Rogers, foreword to Urban Task Force Report, 1999, p. 7

21 Planning Policy Guidance 3: *Housing*, issued 2000

22 Nick Johnson, interview, December 2007

23 CABE, *Better Neighbourhoods: Making higher densities work*, March 2005

24 Urban Task Force, *Towards an Urban Renaissance: Final report of the Urban Task Force*, 1999, p. 62

or more sustainable neighbourhoods. As Nick Johnson of developers Urban Splash says, ‘Density should never be talked about in isolation. We should be asking, where is the public transport infrastructure, and local retail provision? Is there a mix of uses and tenures? Does it feel like the sort of place people would want to live?’²² Specifying density levels through planning guidance, without focussing on these wider issues, was bound to be problematic.

By 2006, just six years later, the Government backed away from its insistence on higher density development, scrapping the minimum density standards and the restrictions on car parking spaces. While

ministerial rhetoric still supports the Urban Task Force vision, the detail of policy is no longer so clear cut.

Where does this leave us today? It is increasingly clear that forcing higher density housing through planning guidance alone is problematic. But it does not follow that higher density development is undesirable. It is, in fact, a vital ingredient in creating good neighbourhoods – but will not, in itself, bring them about. Although the debate about density has a rather technical, even esoteric, feel, it has never been more crucial. It is time to take stock and ask what needs to be done if we are to stem the process of dispersal.

25 Javier Mozas, *Density: New collective housing*, July 2006

26 CABE, *Better Neighbourhoods: Making higher densities work*, March 2005

27 Javier Mozas, *Density: New collective housing*, July 2006

28 Urban Task Force, *Towards an Urban Renaissance: Final report of the Urban Task Force*, 1999, p. 61

29 Dominic Church, interview, December 2007

DEFINING DENSITY

In the UK, density is normally defined, by government and planners, in terms of dwellings per hectare (dph). In planning, net density is also used. This measures the density of housing on a site as well as the directly associated uses of that housing, such as access roads, gardens, parking and play areas. Using this net density measurement, Victorian terraces, more modern urban infill developments and the core of historic villages can be around 60-80 dph or higher; suburban semis average around 15-30 dph;²³ and detached executive homes are around 5-10 dph. The high-rise towers of the 1960s were, counter-intuitively, not particularly high-density, at around 75 dwellings per hectare – owing to the amount of land needed around each tower.²⁴

The relationship between density and the size of dwellings is complex – some designs (such as the traditional terrace) provide a good amount of living space in a dense street layout; other designs, such as inter-war semi-detached

houses, may provide the same amount of indoor space but at a greatly reduced density.

London has an average residential density of 42 dph, which is low compared to other European cities.²⁵ Internationally, variations are huge, even within urban areas – from Los Angeles at 15 dph, to Kowloon in Hong Kong at 1,250 dph.²⁶

Perceptions of density vary, and seem to be culturally determined. In the UK, around 50 dph would be seen as moderately high density. Yet one Spanish study classified 100-200 dph as only medium density for an urban area and 50-100 dph was seen as a low-density urban zone.²⁷

Density can also be measured through habitable rooms per hectare, counting rooms except kitchens and bathrooms. This accounts for different types of household. However, the crucial measure is not dwellings or rooms per hectare, but people per hectare. It is the number of people that will determine the viability of local shops and public transport, as well

as the community feel of an area. The Urban Task Force estimated that around 150 people per hectare are needed to make a good bus service viable.²⁸ It is much harder to measure the number of people per hectare as it depends upon occupancy levels. However, the trend is toward fewer people per dwelling, due to demographic changes, as described above. So to maintain people per hectare as a constant, dwellings per hectare would have to increase.

Elsewhere, density is measured differently. For example, in Germany, a combination of measures is used, including plot ratios (the total area of the building – including upper stories – divided by the area of the site); as well as the footprint of a development (the total developed area, including all hard surfaces such as parking).²⁹

Given the crucial importance of density to achieving social and environmental outcomes, there is a need to develop a more sophisticated measure of density for the UK. This is discussed in the final chapter.

2: What do people want?

‘It’s quiet but it is also so close to all the amenities, you can see the sea and all its changes everyday. Everybody talks to everyone else. People will always speak. There’s never anyone who just puts their head down and goes by.’

Resident of Westoe Crown Village

Westoe Crown Village is an unusual development. Built on an old colliery site in South Shields, close to the existing town centre and metro station, the houses and flats are carefully designed. Many are set round courtyards, with small parks and play areas throughout. There is a mix of privately-owned and housing association property. There are no garages but parking spaces are provided off-street. The development includes a primary school, and local shops are planned, but not yet in place.

Westoe’s residents are incredibly positive about their new homes. All had different reasons for moving, and all appreciate different aspects of the design. Jane and Andy Wilson moved to Westoe because they wanted to be near to playgroups, parks and a school for their two young children. Their new house is quite small, but it has everything they need, and they feel lucky to have a garden, as well

as open space nearby. Jane and the children often walk around their new neighbourhood, and Jane likes the fact that the children are out and about in the fresh air. Frank Furness, in his sixties, used the move to Westoe to cut loose from hard-drinking friends and pursue a quieter life, following major heart surgery. He has even taken up cycling, and stores his bike in the communal store. Abi and Jason Wright would like a bit more space in their terraced house, but they have become involved in community life, like summer barbeques and the residents’ association. The shared bins, bike sheds and parking areas have helped Abi meet neighbours and encouraged her to recycle more, too.

All these stories show that the new residents of Westoe have thought carefully about what is important to them. Each household has worked through its own equation of benefits and costs in terms of private space, nearby facilities, community life and affordability. The results for each are subtly different. But they all show that when people buy or rent a house, they are investing in more than that – the community, surroundings and services can be as important as the building itself. The same findings are clear from studies of homebuying, such as those conducted by CABE.³⁰

³⁰ See, for example, CABE, *A sense of place: What residents think of their new homes*, December 2007



Haddenham
Photo: Gillian Thomas

Stimulation seekers or cocooners?

Discussions with householders, both in Tyneside and Cambridgeshire, revealed two distinct schools of thought. Some people are stimulation seekers, wanting to feel that they are in the centre of things, enjoying communal living and valuing convenience. Stimulation seekers are happy to make a trade-off for less personal space. Jane and Andy Wilson are typical of this group. As Andy told us, when describing what was important to his family, ‘the park is literally five minutes walk that way. There’s a train and the swans, you can have a picnic down there and let the children run about.’ Though stimulation seekers were more likely to be town dwellers, there were also some to be found in rural locations, eagerly participating in village activities like the parish council, Women’s Institute and sports groups. Haddenham resident Jean Simmons, who moved there from Luton with a young family, was surprised to find the village far friendlier than an urban setting, saying ‘I know that I can walk up the road and buy a pint of milk and meet people’. One elderly couple in Westoe actively welcomed being overlooked by neighbours, as they felt it offered them security and safety.

By contrast, cocooners value privacy, view their home as a haven and object to being overlooked. They don’t like noise, traffic or bustle, and don’t want to be too close to other people. As one Haddenham resident put it, ‘you get that politeness, but also the privacy and I think that is something English people prize quite highly’. Although most cocooners live in a more rural setting, some prefer the anonymity of urban life.

Stimulation seekers and cocooners represent different points on a spectrum, and will often change their views over the course of their lives. Young adults and teenagers are more likely to value interaction and the bright lights, whilst families prioritise play spaces and bigger homes. Retired households want pleasant locations with activities and hobbies nearby, and elderly people prize accommodation close to facilities and support services.



A courtyard in Westoe Crown Village
Photo: Gillian Thomas

Space – for people, cars or status?

People differ in what they want from their surroundings. But a surprising finding of our research was that both groups were happy with the amount of space they had in their home. Although the amount of space per person varied enormously between households, most people felt that they had the right amount. A commonly-held view was ‘if you have more space, you just fill it’. Many older people living in larger family homes had done just that, finding new roles for empty rooms: guests, hobbies, pets and storage. Linked to this was a worry about having too much stuff, with some new Westoe residents valuing the chance to downsize and clear out clutter. As one person in Haddenham said, ‘I think we’ve got the right amount of space but just too much junk in it’. Though people generally felt they had enough space, a minority felt too crowded at home – particularly families with children. One mother was using her bedside table as office space and another family had two teenagers sharing a bedroom.

While people tend to be happy with the layout of their homes, many express frustration at the lack of space for cars, and anti-social parking causes a great deal of annoyance. Particularly in the rural locations, people thought that new homes were being developed with too few parking spaces, given the lack of public transport.

But space has an importance beyond this functional role. It has financial value, too. Some interviewees talked about their home as a ‘property’ and an investment for the future. Younger people in particular, those in their 20s and 30s, are likely to spend as much as they can afford on their house, as an alternative to saving or pension provision. So a home with more space is a valuable investment, regardless of whether the household needs the room.

Housing is, of course, intimately linked to status. Most interviewees were proud of their home and what it said about them. Homes say a great deal about who we are and who we want to be. The rose-covered cottage,

the Manhattan-style loft, the Victorian terrace or the seaside bungalow all speak volumes about the owners’ outlook and aspirations. As Tim Jackson writes, houses, cars and other significant possessions:

‘...are far more than satisfiers of functional needs. They are bigger, in some sense, either than the objects themselves or even than their use value. They are both concrete and symbolic. They are themselves; and at the same time they are signifiers of life as it should be, as we would like it to be. They are material representations of our expectations for the future, of the status to which we aspire.’³¹

The size of homes is one, but not the only, determinant of status. In Rowlands Gill, a 1990s development of detached houses with large gardens attracted a lot of attention and was seen as the most exclusive area of the village. However, the enduring popularity of Victorian suburbs like Dulwich in London and Jesmond in Newcastle owes more to attractive architecture and good shops and schools as it does to the size of the houses. The challenge for more compact developments is to achieve status while keeping densities high – something that Westoe seems to have done, because of its innovative design and seafront location.

³¹ Tim Jackson, University of Surrey, *Mapping Models of Mammon: A cross-disciplinary survey in pursuit of the ‘sustainable consumer’*, 2004, p. 16



Rowlands Gill
Photo: Gillian Thomas



Part of the 1990s development in Rowlands Gill, seen as one of the most exclusive parts of the village
Photo: Gillian Thomas

Families: the litmus test

In debates about the links between private space and proximity, families with children are particularly significant. The only households in our study who felt they really needed more space were families with young children or teenagers. This is partly because there are simply more people in the home, and also because children and teenagers need space,

inside and out, for play and exploration. This obvious need leads some critics of higher-density developments to argue that they are not suitable for families, who would be better off in larger houses with gardens.³² The postwar New Towns were actively marketed at young families for these reasons.

Families’ need for space, though, tells only half the story. As anyone who has ever stayed at home with small children can tell

³² See, for example, Town and Country Planning Association press release, *Families need more space in new housing*, October 2007

you, community connections – playgroups, parks, shops and simple contact with others – are vital for the wellbeing of both parents and children. Shops and health facilities play more than a functional role; they are important meeting places for parents and provide structure to a day. Children also act as social glue, binding communities together. One woman in Rowlands Gill said, ‘I didn’t know anyone before I had children, now I know everyone in the village’. As children get older, strong community links enable them to venture further afield, with informal supervision from friends and neighbours.

Though this is intuitively true in smaller towns and villages, it is also the case within cities. Work with families in deprived inner-city areas demonstrates the importance of community contact, often facilitated through primary schools or projects like SureStart.³³

Community links, particularly informal contacts, are more likely to be fostered in more compact settlements, especially where people have priority over cars. A crucial study in 1981 by Donald Appleyard charted the direct link between a person’s number of acquaintances, and traffic volumes. As the number of vehicles travelling along a street increased, the extent of social interaction reduced dramatically. Increases in vehicle numbers also correlated with reductions in people’s perceived home territory.³⁴

So families need space, but they also need the community interaction that comes with compact settlements and space not dominated by cars. Although only one household in four contains children, families are an important litmus test for healthy communities.

Westoe’s garden-square layout, careful architecture and subtle restrictions on car use create friendly, safe spaces for children. A study by MJP architects identified a range of developments providing high-quality family housing at densities of 50 dph and above. Houses with front and back gardens are perfectly possible at 50 dph; in combination with maisonettes and flats for smaller households without children, average densities can be considerably higher, even

if developments are never more than four storeys.³⁵ As these examples show, providing the right conditions for family life is a balancing act, but is achievable with the right design.

The bigger picture

This analysis suggests that people’s wants and needs for housing are complex, and intertwined with their wants and needs at a community level. It shows, in summary, that:

- > some people crave community interaction, and others want peace and quiet, though this does not necessarily mean that some people want to live in denser settlements than others (as other factors also dictate the extent of social interaction);
- > surprisingly, people do not profess to be so concerned about the amount of private space they have, although housing has an important symbolic function too;
- > the links between community interaction and private space are understood implicitly, with people settling for smaller homes in order to be closer to facilities. This trade-off, however, is rarely articulated explicitly;
- > families feel the trade-off most acutely, needing both private space and community interaction to flourish; and
- > higher densities can be achieved through careful design, without sacrificing internal space, and providing houses rather than flats for families.

Community needs and aspirations, then, need to be considered alongside housing demand. The two are so linked that it makes no sense to separate them. Yet, this is what government policies on housing do. They state the number of new houses needed, with little acknowledgement that new houses have a profound effect on communities old and new; and without linking housing policy to social and transport policy.³⁶

33 Anne Power, *City Survivors: Bringing up children in disadvantaged neighbourhoods*, November 2007

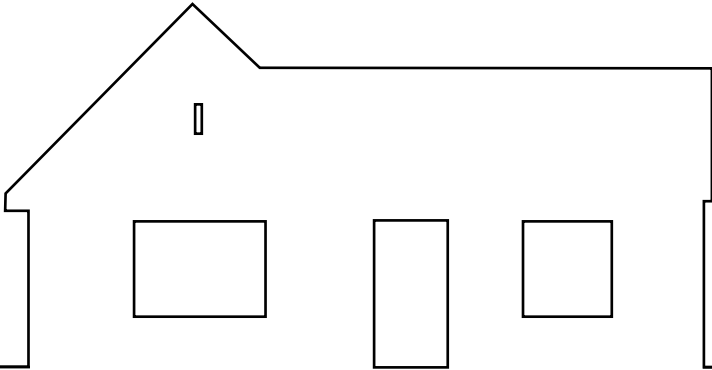
34 Donald Appleyard, *Livable Streets*, 1981

35 A study for Campaign to Protect Rural England by MJP architects, *Family Housing: The power of concentration*, May 2008

36 Campaign to Protect Rural England, *Back Together Again*, March 2004

Meanwhile, local government, given greater powers and responsibilities through newly-created Local Area Agreements, are increasingly involved in place-shaping. Through these agreements, councils work with local partners to design public services, including health, education, children’s services and so on, that meet local needs. But Local Area Agreements have been slow to consider housing strategy, and to make the links between community infrastructure and housing provision. Again, housing strategy is separated off from the other aspects of community provision.³⁷

37 CIH and IDeA, for a discussion of the role of housing in Local Area Agreements, see *Delivering Housing Strategy through Local Area Agreements*, February 2007



3: Proximity and connectivity

‘Our grandparents – even our parents – do not forget how good it feels to have your own bath and an inside toilet, but then neither do they forget what it’s like to live in a place that feels knitted into the fabric of the town or city it forms a part of.’

Lynsey Hanley, Estates: An intimate history

In the nineteenth century, industrial Poblenou, in the south-east corner of Barcelona, was the engine room of the Spanish economy. But, as in Manchester and the mill towns of northern England, the factories and workshops of the industrial revolution closed down, and prosperity declined. Barcelona’s City Council decided on a radical route to regeneration. Rather than signing the land over to housing development alone, they created a new land designation. Not 22a, the traditional industrial designation, but 22@, a new category allowing innovative, knowledge-intensive development, mixed with housing and green space.³⁸ The 22@ zone is part of a wider Catalan policy to build a regional innovation system, based around its universities and major cities.³⁹

A key factor in Poblenou’s success is its proximity to a mix of new industry, housing,

amenities including shops, hotels and bars, and green space within a small, compact urban area. Research for the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts (NESTA) has shown that proximity, density and variety are central to innovation.⁴⁰ But what Poblenou demonstrates, more generally, is that geographical proximity leads to social and economic connectivity.

Somersham couldn’t look or feel more different to Barcelona. But similar forces are at play. Somersham’s compact village centre forms an obvious common destination for villagers, creating the conditions for community interaction, much as Poblenou encourages interaction between the companies and people located there. Shared facilities like the pubs, shops, church, shelter and library form shared spaces for informal encounters and chats. These encounters are of immense importance to people, particularly older people, teenagers, and those with young children.

Proximity also encourages joint solutions and other forms of social innovation.⁴¹ When Somersham’s library was closed by the council, a group of villagers got together to offer a community library service. Now, the library is run by and for local people, acting as a hub for community life.

38 see www.22barcelona.com for more information on 22@ and Poblenou

39 Paul Benneworth, NESTA, *Leading Innovation: Building effective regional coalitions for innovation*, December 2007, p. 59

40 NESTA, *Innovation and the City Report*, 2007

41 See, for example, NESTA, *In and Out of Sync: The challenge of growing social innovations*, 2007

The geography of connectivity

The physical layout of a settlement, whether Somersham or Barcelona, is not the only factor that encourages connectivity and interaction. Demographics and even personal preference play a role – as one man in Rowlands Gill said, ‘wherever we were living we would find something to do. The next door neighbour might say there is nothing to do. It is more to do with the sort of person you are than the type of area it is’. However, the physical layout, in terms of building density and design, does play a role in encouraging both economic and social co-operation.

In its work promoting innovation, NESTA argues that skills, transport, physical infrastructure and the built environment should be central planks of innovation policy. Investing in, and strengthening, community infrastructure can have multiple benefits.⁴² Richard Florida’s analysis of creativity and innovation paints a bleak picture of what not to do, based on experience in the United States:

‘The sprawl that demands and in turn is demanded by traffic congestion also wreaks havoc on our competitiveness. A stretched-out, sprawled metropolis, where professors no longer live near universities, where laboratories and high-tech firms cannot co-locate, where entrepreneurs and newcomers are forced to the economic periphery, will lose the advantages that come from proximity, density, spontaneity and face-to-face interaction. Factor in the hours upon days upon weeks lost to commuting time, missed meetings, and missed breakthroughs that don’t occur when people can’t get together and pool their brainpower, and it’s clear that traffic is clogging more than our streets and the decay is more than environmental.’⁴³

Florida’s analysis of the working world can easily be applied at the community level, too. The Smart Growth movement in the United States was established in 2000 to counter low-density, car-dependent urban sprawl. It argues instead for ‘compact, walkable neighbourhoods that have a strong sense of

community’.⁴⁴ A study carried out in Galway, Ireland compared levels of social capital (measured in terms of how well residents knew their neighbours, political participation, trust/faith in other people and social engagement) across pedestrian-oriented, mixed-use neighbourhoods and car-dependent suburbs. Those living in the mixed-use, walkable neighbourhoods were found to have higher levels of social capital.⁴⁵

Both Somersham and Westoe Crown Village do seem to have a sense of community, or social capital, that comes from a compact neighbourhood. The careful design of Westoe does much to foster social interaction between residents. The courtyard-style design is very popular, and enclosed parks allow children to play outside, with residents leaving toys out for communal use. As a grandparent said, ‘I would like to see new communities having areas like this, with a proper courtyard. It gives you that sense of space and it is also a sense of belonging’.

I will if you will: encouraging action on the environment

Increasingly, the role of connected communities is proving crucial to tackling environmental challenges, too. People interviewed for this study had very different attitudes to the environment. Some were very sceptical about what they saw as green propaganda; some understood the issues but took limited action; others identified themselves as green, and tried to do as much as possible. However, a clear common thread emerges from this and other work: when people try to reduce their impact on the environment, they feel frustrated that their room for manoeuvre is limited. Whilst many have some idea of what needs to be done, they face constraints which prevent them from doing more. The most pressing constraint amongst the residents in this research was, of course, the lack of alternatives to car travel. This is discussed below. But people also felt disconnected from waste and recycling issues, for example, with one woman saying,

42 NESTA, *Innovation and the City: How innovation has developed in five city-regions*, December 2007

43 Richard Florida, *The Flight of the Creative Class: The new global competition for talent*, 2005, p. 200

44 The Smart Growth America Coalition, *Greetings from Smart Growth America!*, 2000, www.smartgrowthamerica.org

45 K. Leyden, *American Journal of Public Health, Social Capital and the Built Environment: The importance of walkable neighbourhoods*, 9(9), 2003



Somersham
Photo: Gillian Thomas

‘most of the things that we use are plastic and all they want is glass and tins. You don’t see the results of what you are doing’.

As the Sustainable Consumption Round Table, a group of experts in consumer behaviour and sustainability, concluded, ‘People often find themselves “locked in” to consumption patterns that are unsustainable... “lock-in” occurs in part through “perverse” incentive structures – economic constraints, institutional barriers, or inequalities in access that actively encourage unsustainable behaviours’.⁴⁶ Put simply, exhortations to do the right thing will have limited effect if taking action is difficult, expensive or out of the ordinary.

The Round Table has a clear prescription for encouraging action on the environment, summed up in the phrase ‘I will if you will’. Personal action, they argue, will be encouraged by action at both government

and community level – it is essential to show people that they are part of something bigger. This can be done partly through policy: green taxes which make it more expensive to pollute, for example. But it can also be done through the physical layout and feel of settlements. Westoe’s communal recycling facilities, create an expectation that recycling is something that everyone does – ‘I’m encouraged to do it because the neighbours do it’, as one woman said. In Somersham, residents were encouraged to recycle at the recycling centre in the village car park, because the revenue generated was returned to the village, through projects run by the parish council. A direct link back to their community helped residents to take action on the environment. Local open space – the Derwent Walk in Rowlands Gill, and the dog walking field in Somersham – encouraged walking and community interaction.



Derwent Walk in Rowlands Gill
Photo: Gillian Thomas

46 Sustainable Consumption Round Table, *I Will if You Will: Towards sustainable consumption*, May 2006, p. 3

More widely, recent years have seen the growth of self-styled eco-communities. Ashton Heyes, a small Cheshire village, hit the headlines in 2006 with its pledge to become the United Kingdom’s first carbon-neutral community. A year on, it had reduced carbon emissions by 20%, and a third of residents had become more involved in the community as a result of the project. Similarly, Totnes in Devon spearheads the transition town movement, by actively planning to reduce dependence on fossil fuel energy. These examples demonstrate that environmental action and community engagement can be mutually reinforcing.

Community energy solutions

Compact development is a crucial tool in climate change mitigation, too. A recent United States study⁴⁷ argues that there are significant carbon benefits stemming from walkable land-use patterns based around public transport hubs such as:

- > reduction in car use;
- > more efficient building design (terraced houses or flats require less heating than detached houses or bungalows);
- > reduction in the volume of energy lost through transmission lines; and
- > greater possibilities for district heating and community-level energy generation, such as combined heat-and-power.

The last of these is particularly significant. Numerous studies have demonstrated the possibility and desirability of moving toward a more decentralised model of energy generation,⁴⁸ which has the potential to bring about both carbon and cost savings. Generating energy centrally, in large power stations, is startlingly inefficient. Over two-thirds of the energy input to power stations is lost as waste heat, costing the United Kingdom economy over £5 billion a year.⁴⁹

Further losses occur during transmission and distribution of power. At the other end of the scale, very small-scale microgeneration, in individual houses for example, is capital-intensive and can be inefficient if supply and demand don’t match well.⁵⁰

The community level, then, is widely seen as the optimal level for energy generation. Community heating (where a number of buildings are linked through a heat network) or combined heat-and-power (where electricity is generated, and the waste heat is used in nearby buildings) are a more carbon-efficient model of energy use. In Woking, Surrey, over 60 local renewable and low-carbon generators are linked together in a large network that powers municipal buildings, social housing and some town-centre businesses. Through this network, Woking Borough Council has managed to reduce its energy consumption by 48% and its carbon emissions by 7 per cent over 15 years.⁵¹ London is following the Woking example, establishing Energy Action Areas to look at decentralised solutions to energy needs in several spots across the capital.

Community-level generation is helped by relatively dense development, as in Woking town centre, allowing groups of buildings to pool energy supply and demand. A mix of uses is also beneficial; households tend to use most power in the morning and evening, whereas businesses need power during the day. So the load evens out if the two join together. A recent report for the Sustainable Development Commission showed that installing community heating systems to existing housing is feasible, and economic, at higher densities.⁵²

Decentralised generation has the added benefit of reconnecting people to power: local energy generation offers a much more active role for individuals and communities. Rather than flicking a switch and obtaining power from a distant power station, decentralised energy creates the link in people’s minds between supply and demand as energy becomes part of everyone’s landscape, mentally and physically.

With the right support and investment, there is no reason why the centre of

47 Robert Steuteville (in *New Urban News*), *Cool Spots, Bright Idea*, January/February 2008

48 See, for example, World Alliance for Decentralized Energy/Greenpeace, *WADE Economic Model: Application to the UK*, March 2006; and Green Alliance, *Grid 2.0: The next generation*, 2006

49 Green Alliance, *A manifesto for sustainable heat*, 2007, p. 2

50 For example, a Carbon Trust trial of micro-combined heat and power shows that they work best not in individual houses but in larger units, such as nursing homes or guest houses. ENDS report 395, *Micro-CHP trials produce disappointing results*, December 2007. A similar picture emerges for micro-wind turbines – see, for example, BRE Trust report FB17, *Micro-wind turbines in urban environments: an assessment*, November 2007

51 See Thameswey energy’s website at www.fuelcellmarkets.com; The Climate Group case study at www.theclimategroup.org/index.php?pid=548; and Greenpeace, *Decentralising Power: An energy revolution for the 21st century*, 2005, p. 18 for more details of the Woking story

52 Delta Energy and Environment, *Community Heating CH for Existing Housing, Report for the Sustainable Development Commission*, June 2007

Somersham, for example, could not benefit from a community heating scheme linking houses and shops. In Westoe Crown Village, the new community resource centre will be powered by a biomass central heating system. Proximity makes community energy generation viable. Together with good recycling facilities, and walkable streets, it creates a physical environment which makes it easier and more enjoyable to take action on the environment.

Healthy places

Similarly, physical layout can contribute to better public health. The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) is best known for passing judgement on medical procedures and drug effectiveness. But in January 2008 it published guidance on the built environment, setting out ways to improve the physical environment to improve activity levels and health outcomes. NICE reported that:

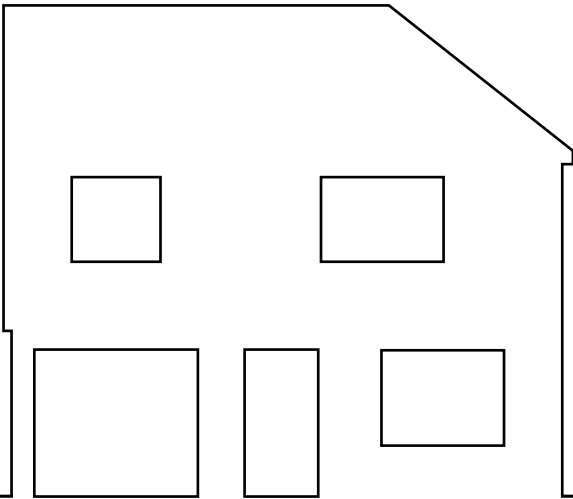
‘Past policy and practice has often – perhaps not intentionally – given priority to sedentary modes of transport and ways of using buildings. Over recent decades, environmental changes in England have made habitual activity less common. Many components of the environment can be modified to make it easier for more people to be physically active. The design and layout of towns and cities can encourage or discourage travel and access on foot or by bicycle.’⁵³

Proximity is by no means the only factor that encourages habitual activity – mixed use, green space, and a feeling of safety all help – but it is a crucial ingredient in creating healthy places.

So proximity is important economically, helping to create the conditions for innovation and creativity, as Poblenou in Barcelona demonstrates. It is a crucial factor in building social capital. Residents in both Westoe and Somersham appreciate the neighbourliness and friendliness of their surroundings. It can help achieve environmental and health outcomes, too. In each case, proximity

by itself will not achieve the right outcomes. A good level of public health, for example, relies on a great many factors, including access to fresh food, health information, and so on. But as these examples show, proximity is an essential ingredient in social, economic and even health outcomes.

53 NICE, *Promoting and creating built or natural environments that encourage and support physical activity*, January 2008



4: Travel – how far, how fast, and how?

‘Cars are our mechanical mothers-in-law. You have to have a good relationship with your mother-in-law, but you cannot allow her to conduct your life.’
Jaime Lerner, ex-mayor of Curitiba, Brazil.

‘In our last place we didn’t walk at all. The only time I went out was if he drove me to the shops. I walk to town here, it is safer, the view is pleasant.’
Resident of Westoe Crown Village

Transport has always played a central role in shaping places. Before the railway, London was a long, thin city, spread out along the river – the main means of transport for both passengers and freight. Few people lived more than half a mile from a boat.⁵⁴ The arrival of the railways changed London’s shape, with development spreading along the railway routes like the spokes on a wheel, and railway suburbs developing around stations. Cars changed this yet again, spreading development into the spaces between the spokes and beyond. As mobility increased, so did the distance that people could travel to work, and workplaces dispersed too.

As the example of London shows, without restrictions set by law (particularly land-use planning), development is dictated primarily by access. As transport becomes quicker and cheaper, development can spread further. Estate agents in the United States, where planning is far less restrictive and driving much cheaper, advise clients to ‘drive ‘til you qualify’ – keep heading further out, until you can find a house you can afford.⁵⁵ The spread of low-density development is enabled by cars. But the infrastructure associated with cars – roads, garages and parking spaces – itself requires a considerable land-take. A crucial study of the relationship between car use and urban density shows that, in cities across the world, as people density decreases, the number of vehicle miles increases.⁵⁶

It is not just the density of development, but the location of work, shops and schools that determines transport demand. The

sociologist John Urry writes of the problems caused by zoning in the United States:

‘the development of American cities has been dominated by commercial interests which have found it profitable to locate housing (especially gated communities), (gated) workplaces, retailing (gated shopping centres), leisure (gated theme parks) and so on in separate zones; such zoning being characteristic of much urban planning. These zones necessitate extensive car-based mobility to get from one to another... co-presence in American life requires extensive mobility to move from zone-to-zone even within quite small cities.’⁵⁷

So a more dispersed population, and dispersed facilities, make travel by car a necessity in America. The picture in Europe is more mixed. Particularly in towns and cities it is possible to get around without a car – but cars still dominate the transport and planning systems of most European countries. Only in Denmark is there actually a shift away from car use.⁵⁸ The success of London’s congestion charge shows that it is possible to influence travel behaviour, with the right policies. A combination of investment in public transport and charging for vehicles has resulted in a 21% reduction in traffic levels, a 45% increase in bus use and a 43% increase in cycling within the zone itself.⁵⁹ But London is bucking a national trend – data from the National Travel Survey shows that the average distance walked, per person per year, has fallen from 255 miles in 1975 to 201 miles in 2006, with bicycle mileage per person falling from 51 to 39 miles.⁶⁰

The mechanical mother-in-law

As Jaime Lerner’s memorable vision of the car as a mechanical mother-in-law makes clear, cars have been allowed to dominate. The householder research carried out for this report showed a very ambivalent attitude toward car use. Though the households were mixed in terms of socio-economic background and age, all owned at least one car, and drove regularly. Many, though, were troubled by

54 Harley Sherlock, *Cities are Good for Us*, 1991, p. 65

55 www.smartgrowthamerica.org/housing.html

56 Kenworthy and Laube, *Urban Density and Motor Vehicle Travel*, 1999

57 John Urry, Lancaster University paper, *Mobility and Proximity*, 2001

58 R Pinderhughes, *Alternative Urban Futures: Planning for sustainable development in cities throughout the world*, 2004

59 Transport for London press release, *Fifth anniversary of Congestion Charge that changed transport policy across the world*, February 2008

60 Department for Transport, *National Travel Survey*, 2007

increased congestion, traffic noise and safety concerns, and admitted that their driving contributed to the problem. When couples were interviewed, they often accused each other of hypocrisy, through banter about how they wanted village shops to stay open but were always ready to drive to a supermarket.

Particularly in the Cambridgeshire villages, it was hard to see an alternative to car use. A decline in local shops, together with irregular, slow bus services, gave people little choice. In both Somersham and Haddenham, many workers commuted by car into nearby towns, particularly Cambridge. No interviewees used the bus service regularly. They seemed resigned to this situation, and found it hard to think of ways to stem the tide of increasing traffic. They wanted better public transport, but were sceptical that it could happen.

In Rowlands Gill, a regular bus service to Newcastle did offer an alternative, but the spread-out nature of the development, and the main road running through the village, made walking and bus use less desirable. As one resident said, ‘I don’t like walking to the village because of the traffic, big lorries and heavy trucks’.

The more that settlements are designed with cars in mind, the more that they are required for participation in society. As John Urry has argued, ‘car-driving and its resultant socialities have become central to sustaining social capital’.⁶¹ Urry and others use the term hypermobility to describe societies that require people to travel in order to participate fully in that society. Yet increased mobility itself excludes those who cannot travel. So car use is both a solution to, and a cause of, social exclusion.

The paradox of intensification

Cars enable dispersed development, but they do not make it inevitable or desirable. There is an alternative, based around increased proximity, public transport and active travel (walking and cycling). There is some evidence that the design of Westoe Crown Village is encouraging people out of

their cars for shorter journeys. Residents describe the surroundings as pleasant and safe: ‘Sometimes we walk down to the shops through the park because it’s quicker, and it’s very, very nice’. Even in Somersham, although venturing beyond the village was difficult without a car, the compact village centre, with the library, pubs and shops close at hand, encouraged people to walk within the village. There were signs, too, of self-help solutions to transport needs – one Haddenham resident told us that ‘A lot of us tend to go in twos to shopping, and whoever drives, the other person pays for coffee’.

The relationship between car use and settlement density is not straightforward, however. Low-density settlement patterns necessitate car use. The Independent Transport Commission estimates that the average ex-urbanite drives 25% more miles in a year than the average suburbanite, and 44% more than the average urbanite.⁶² But increasing density leads to what one commentator has called the paradox of intensification: a doubling of density cannot be expected to halve per capita car mileage, and ‘it therefore follows that, in the absence of more radical measures, intensification, whilst contributing to global sustainability, in the localities where it occurs, will increase congestion, traffic noise and air pollution’.⁶³ In other words, while compact settlements reduce the amount of car travel that each person requires, there are more people in a smaller space, so car travel in that particular area increases.

The paradox of intensification explains why increasing density, without providing alternatives to car use, will be unpopular. Residents in Somersham and Haddenham were critical of new developments that worsened parking problems and congestion. Restricting parking places in new developments, as the Government has attempted to do, is not a substitute for a balanced transport policy. Unless proper alternatives are in place, fewer parking places will just displace cars to surrounding locations, rather than curb car use.

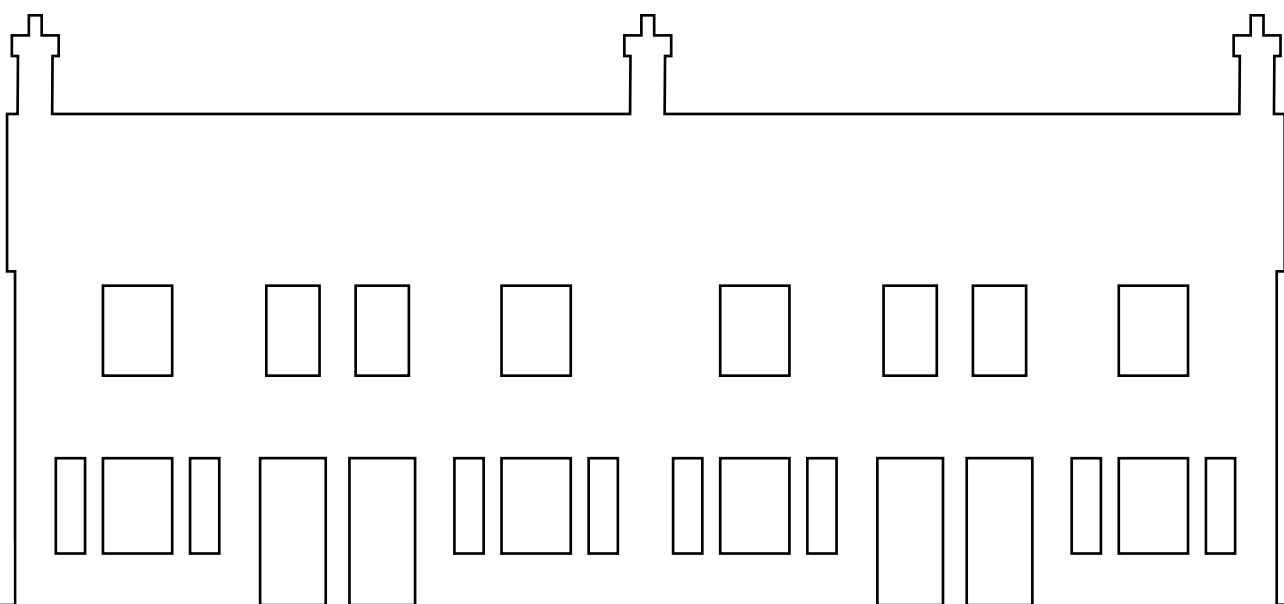
61 John Urry, Lancaster University paper, *Mobility and Proximity*, 2001

62 Independent Transport Commission, *Suburban future*, 2004

63 Steve Melia, *Carfree development and the paradox of intensification*, 2008www.carfree.org

Many residents in rural villages resented the lack of public transport, and its inconvenience. One, for example, said ‘the woman across the road goes into Cambridge [on the bus]... and she leaves home at quarter to seven to get to work at nine. She has to change buses, which I think is disgusting, really.’

Improving existing settlements and increasing the density of development reduces the need to travel by car and increases the viability of alternatives. However, as the paradox of intensification shows, proximity cannot, on its own, solve transport problems. It needs to be accompanied by better public transport, and also by encouraging car-sharing and community transport schemes.



5: Ideal homes and eco-towns

‘The simple issue to be faced, and faced resolutely, is: Can better results be obtained by starting on a bold plan on comparatively virgin soil than by attempting to adapt our old cities to our newer and higher needs?’
Ebenezer Howard, Garden Cities of Tomorrow, 1902

This question, posed by Ebenezer Howard in 1902, is strikingly relevant today. Howard had no doubts about the answer: the old cities had failed in so many ways, he believed, that the only sensible move was to start again, with new towns adapted to the needs of modern life. Howard, and the movement he inspired, helped to create a generation of garden cities and new towns, including Letchworth, Stevenage, Harlow and Milton Keynes, each intended as a model of modern living. Over a hundred years later, Howard’s views still exert a surprisingly strong hold over policy. The Government’s proposal for ten new eco-towns, designed to be exemplars of sustainable living, can be traced directly back to the Garden City movement. And the Town and Country Planning Association, formed by Howard to promote new towns, is working closely with the Government on formulating plans for eco-towns.

It is not surprising that eco-towns hold such allure. Building design, transport infrastructure and service provision in many of our existing settlements is problematic, to say the least. Whether measured in terms of carbon use or social mix, many of our existing cities, towns and villages are found wanting. And the fabric of existing settlements – the buildings themselves, the road layouts – is difficult to change. So can’t we just admit we got it wrong, and move on? Why not start with a blank slate, and create eco-towns as beacons of sustainable living?

The lure of the new

The science historian David Edgerton warns of the dangers of emphasising novelty and invention. Edgerton’s account of the narrative of technological innovation is strikingly relevant to the housing question. ‘Too often’, he writes, ‘the agenda for discussing the past, present and future of technology is set by the promoters of new technologies’.⁶⁴ Likewise in housing, the agenda is set by the promoters of new flagship developments like eco-towns. A bias toward novelty blinds us to the significance of what we have already – existing settlements, where the vast majority of us live, and which should be a central part of the solution to our housing needs. Edgerton suggests that we should develop a use-based history, focusing not on innovation but on the way that people use and interact with things, including their surroundings.

Following Edgerton’s analysis, a focus on eco-towns could actually be counter-productive. Concentrating our attention on new towns could divert us from the question of how we can make our existing settlements work better. Eco-towns will account for less than 3 per cent of the Government’s projected three million new homes, which are in turn a fraction of the existing building stock. Eco-towns may, to a limited extent, stimulate wider change by acting as a testbed for innovation, providing a lead market for sustainable technologies such as renewable power, green construction methods and so on.⁶⁵ However, designing a sustainable settlement from scratch is very different from retrofitting existing settlements, where the room for manoeuvre is so limited in comparison. So the learning from eco-towns could be limited.

Far from helping our existing settlements, eco-towns could actually cause further problems. As other research has shown,⁶⁶ new settlements (whether new towns or urban extensions) normally lead to greater social polarisation, as those who can afford to move to new areas, do so – leaving behind those who do not have the luxury of choice.

64 David Edgerton, *The Shock Of The Old: Technology and global history since 1900*, 2006

65 Rebecca Willis, Molly Webb and James Wilsdon, *The Disrupters: Lessons for low-carbon innovation from the new wave of environmental pioneers*, July 2007

66 Anne Power and John Houghton, *Jigsaw Cities: Big places, small spaces*, 2007

Communities: creation or evolution?

More fundamentally, a thorough look at the history of Garden Cities and New Towns shows that reality has not always matched the high ideals that inspired them. Howard only managed to build two Garden Cities – Letchworth and Welwyn – after struggling to raise the resources and support required. The ideal of the Garden City as a self-contained community, with employment nearby, was not realised, as the Cities soon became commuter zones for nearby London.⁶⁷ Evaluations of the New Towns show similar problems. The New Towns that have fared better economically are those around London, who have benefited from the strength of the regional economy. Others have done less well, with high levels of unemployment and deprivation.⁶⁸ Higher than anticipated build costs in the New Towns, and difficulties with providing infrastructure and public services, resulted in serious funding issues and a debt write-off in the 1980s. The post-war New Towns were largely built through public agencies and public money, which would not happen today; it remains to be seen how much money private investors will be willing to plough into eco-towns, given the high set-up costs of new developments.

Socially, the experience of the new towns has been mixed, too. Many new residents were young families, moving away from extended family and support networks, with consequent feelings of isolation – the so-called new-town blues. The age bias toward young families in the beginning is leading to uneven demographics today, with a larger-than-average ageing population.

The problems of the New Towns stemmed in part from their physical layout, and particularly the low density of development. A House of Commons Select Committee Inquiry in 2002 heard evidence from many sources of ‘the dispersed nature and low density of development in all the new towns and the segregation of uses... whilst local services have been provided within walking distance in neighbourhoods, access to the town centres relies heavily on car use’.⁶⁹

While residents appreciate the space, they also suffer from the consequences of this – distances that make walking difficult, car domination and the consequent lack of community feel – characterised as placeless aesthetics or prairie planning’.⁷⁰ This has been exacerbated with declining household size. Houses in Letchworth, the original Garden City, were designed for an average of seven people; today occupancy rates are far lower.

So the experience of the New Towns offers a sobering lesson for today’s eco-town planners. As the Commons Select Committee concluded:

‘While many New Towns have been economically successful, most now are experiencing major problems. Their design is inappropriate to the 21st Century. Their infrastructure is ageing at the same rate and many have social and economic problems.’

Some of these lessons have been learned. Indeed, one of the strands in the Government’s plan for new homes is a proposal to increase the residential density of Milton Keynes, in an attempt to right past wrongs. Better understanding today of the need for careful design, community engagement and mixed communities may allow eco-towns to avoid the worst experiences of the New Towns.

What this story shows, above all, is that the project of creating new communities in new towns is problematic. Houses can be built easily enough, but communities are complex and evolving. They are historically grounded, and develop organically, through the interplay of people and surroundings.

Dampening the lust for novelty in housing does not rule out new development. But it does ask whether this focus on new developments means we are in danger of neglecting everything else. A harder look at existing towns and villages, and the need to meet housing needs within existing areas, is urgently required.

67 Anne Power and John Houghton, *Jigsaw Cities: Big places, small spaces*, 2007, pp. 38-39

68 Department for Communities and Local Government, *Transferable lessons from the new towns*, July 2006; House of Commons Transport, Local Government and the Regions Committee, *The New Towns: Their problems and future*, 2001-2

69 House of Commons Transport, Local Government and the Regions Committee, *The New Towns: Their problems and future*, 2001-2, p. 11

70 Department for Communities and Local Government, *Transferable lessons from the new towns*, July 2006

6: Existing settlements – city slickers and rural realities

‘We wanted a village that was big enough to have a bakers and a post office and things in it, so if you get to a point when you can no longer drive then you can manage. When we first moved to the village, a lot of new building was going on, and in our view that meant the village would be big enough to keep those shops.’

Resident of Somersham

‘We want to allow villages to evolve in the way they did in the past – they can’t just be preserved as they are. Most rural communities can probably absorb some more houses as long as they are in scale and character.’

Elinor Goodman, Chair, Affordable Rural Housing Commission

Westoe Crown Village has a lot to thank the Urban Task Force for. Its recommendations have shaped the fabric of the village. The use of brownfield land, higher densities of development, limited space for cars, integration with existing communities, good transport links and careful design are all in evidence.

There is a danger, though, that the benefits of proximity are only understood in an urban context. The stereotypes of loft-living, cappuccino-drinking urbanites, and bucolic, traditional rural dwellers are hard to shift. But proximity is just as important in villages as in towns and cities. Arguing for proximity is not to say that we should concentrate people into cities. It is an argument for clusters of varying sizes, from village to city. In fact, many traditional villages have a dense core, around 60dph.⁷¹

Somersham is a good case in point. The dense hub of the village centre provides a focal point for villagers, and customers for the shops and pubs. But as more people travel beyond the village, for work, shopping and leisure, the village community, and the businesses that it supports, become more and more fragile.

A narrative of rural decline

Residents in both Somersham and Haddenham offer a clear narrative of rural decline. Many long-term residents list the closure of local businesses, and the decline in facilities such as libraries, public transport and local policing. Jobs within the village are limited, reflecting a national decline in rural land-based industries, like farming. Most workers commute to nearby towns, leaving villages empty during the day. Declining numbers of children and young people are a worry for residents, and people express a desire for a better mix of ages in their area.

This narrative is confirmed by data collected by the Commission for Rural Communities, who report a decline in services such as banks, doctors’ surgeries and post offices in rural areas, as well as an out-migration of young people. The Commission also confirms the necessity of cars in many rural areas – around 80% of the lowest income group own a car, compared to around half in urban areas. As the Commission argues, ‘a lack of accessibility is making low income households in rural communities run a car when they might not if they lived in areas with better transport services’.⁷²

Housing pressure is, though, more acute in rural than urban areas, with a particular lack of social housing in rural areas. This is in part because of the attraction and accessibility of rural villages for people who commute to nearby towns. Many Cambridgeshire residents speak of the difficulty of finding affordable housing for younger people and families. Rural areas face the contradictory situation of booming housing demand and declining services. But within this contradiction lies a possible route forward.

Strengthening settlements

The Urban Task Force argued strongly that there was a need to support existing communities, through regenerating inner cities

71 Urban Task Force, *Towards an Urban Renaissance: Final report of the Urban Task Force*, 1999

72 Commission for Rural Communities, *State of the Countryside Report 2007*, 2007

and reusing derelict land, rather than building elsewhere. Though the Task Force, by its very nature, focussed on towns and cities, a similar argument can be made for villages. There are three vital ingredients to a sustainable rural community: affordable housing supply; good transport links; and viable local services, including jobs.

It seems strange that government does not do more to link housing provision to these other ingredients. Given the decline in household size and the prevalence of commuting, more homes will be needed to maintain village services. A good case could be made for increasing the number of dwellings within villages in order to achieve this. In fact, proposals for new housing could be used to galvanise discussions about the future of a village. Some village residents in Cambridgeshire expressed high levels of support for additional homes within the village, feeling that this would strengthen the community, provide customers for the shops and children for the schools. This is confirmed by research for the Urban Task Force which showed that a settlement of around 7,500 people can support a viable hub of local services, including a primary school, GP surgery, shops, pubs and public transport.⁷³ Somersham, with a population of 4,000 people, and Haddenham, with 3,000 people, are both below that threshold, and are struggling to maintain their services.

The viability of settlements like Somersham and Haddenham will not be improved by large-scale housebuilding through eco-towns or similar proposals. Next door to Haddenham, there is a proposal for a new village development of 5,000 homes on greenfield land, called Mereham,⁷⁴ which was the subject of a recent public enquiry. With just 5,000 homes, it seems unlikely that Mereham would be able to support a hub of services either. Large-scale housebuilding separate from existing settlements could result in neither the old nor the new having the facilities they need to function effectively.

A focus on existing communities

Government policy does recognise the need to support existing rural communities. Policy on rural planning states that ‘planning authorities should focus most new development in or near to local service centres where employment, housing (including affordable housing), services and other facilities can be provided close together’. In practice, though, developers, particularly the larger housebuilders, are reluctant to bring forward small schemes for just a few extra houses in a village. In both Somersham and Haddenham, residents reported that most development had been carried out by local builders. Providing affordable housing in existing villages is particularly problematic – so much so that it has been the subject of two high-profile reviews commissioned by government, first by Elinor Goodman, and second by Matthew Taylor.

One of the ways in which existing rural communities could be better supported, and development encouraged, would be through shared ownership and investment models like Community Land Trusts, in which land is bought by a trust formed by local residents. Working with developers and the planning authority, these trusts can develop affordable housing, create or maintain community facilities, and ensure the value remains within the community.⁷⁵ Such schemes have enabled affordable housing development in High Bickington in Devon and Stonesfield in Oxfordshire, for example. They can also work in larger settlements; for instance, a scheme was established in Stroud to refurbish and reuse empty buildings.

The challenges faced by rural and urban communities are different. But they have an important factor in common: they both stand to lose from a strategy of dispersal. Increasing proximity, and strengthening existing settlements – whether rural or urban – is preferable to greater dispersal through the building of new towns and villages.

73 Urban Task Force, *Towards an Urban Renaissance: Final report of the Urban Task Force*, 1999, p. 61

74 www.mereham.info

75 see www.communitylandtrust.org.uk for an explanation of this model

7: Where do we go from here?

‘We shall be judged for a year or two by the number of houses we build. We shall be judged in ten years’ time by the type of houses we build.’
Aneurin Bevan, Labour Minister of Housing, 1945

‘We know what to do, and we have an amazing capacity not to do it.’
Tim Williams, Chair, Williams Commission on Affordable Housing, 2007⁷⁶

Proximity brings with it real advantages, both social and environmental. It enables greater social contact and connectivity, and sustains local services. It makes public transport provision easier, and cuts down on energy use. It supports and strengthens existing communities, both rural and urban. Yet government is ambivalent in its support for proximity.

Aspects of government policy favour it. Planning guidance that recommends higher density and brownfield development; encouragement of mixed-use development and town centre regeneration are all helpful steps in the right direction. But other policy favours dispersal. Encouragement of large new settlement areas, such as urban extensions and eco-towns; taxes favouring new build over refurbishment; a focus on road transport; and limited investment in public transport alternatives. All of these work against the proximity principle.

The Government’s plan to build three million new homes brings us to a decision point. With the right policies, new homes could be built largely through organic growth of existing communities. Or these same new homes could further disperse our population.

At this critical juncture, the Government must prioritise proximity if it is to meet its environmental and social objectives alongside housing needs. The recommendations below provide a starting point for this renewed focus on proximity.

Support for existing communities

Government should clearly state that it favours proximity over dispersal, and that it will link the provision of new housing to the achievement of wider social and environmental objectives. It should prioritise development within existing settlements, and encourage finance models and ownership schemes which support existing communities. This does not mean that there should be no building outside existing settlements. But it does mean that such building should only take place when opportunities within towns and villages have been fully exploited, including refurbishment and regeneration of existing buildings. This can be achieved through:

- > linking debates about new housing to the new approach to place-making being developed through Local Area Agreements. Local Strategic Partnerships could be used as a forum to discuss how to link housing provision to wider objectives, such as regeneration or service provision;
- > careful consultation and planning with local communities, again linking housing provision to wider objectives. One successful example of this is the ‘Enquiry by Design’ process put forward by the Prince’s Foundation. Their enquiry into a regeneration strategy for Walthamstow resulted in a Town Centre Plan which linked retail, employment, transport and housing provision in an overall strategy for the area;⁷⁷
- > new public sector buildings, such as schools and hospitals, sited within existing communities, and reachable by walking, cycling and public transport; and
- > tax incentives for refurbishment and re-use of land and buildings, and development of financial models for small-scale developments.

76 Speaking at Sustainable Communities 07 Conference, 7 November 2007, at the Barbican, London

77 Prince’s Foundation, *Walthamstow Town Centre Plan and Strategy Report*, May 2007

Rebalancing the books

At the moment, it is cheaper and easier to build large areas of new housing than it is to refurbish existing properties or develop within existing communities. This situation needs to be reversed. Currently, VAT is charged at 17.5% on refurbishment, but is not levied on new build. This is a perverse incentive. VAT levels should be equalised, at 5 per cent, on both new build and refurbishment.

Dispersed housing requires greater infrastructure spending, on roads, transport and other infrastructure, but this is not adequately reflected in the costs to developers or homeowners. Section 106 agreements, between developers and planning authorities, could be based on the density of proposed development, with lower-density developments attracting higher charges, to reflect these infrastructure costs.⁷⁸

The Government has recently committed to including a carbon price to assess the climate change implications of policies and projects.⁷⁹ This should be applied to all new housing developments, and should include the carbon emissions from construction and projected increases in travel. It should be compared to carbon costs of development within existing settlements, and used as a consideration in setting planning priorities.

The appraisal system for transport projects should be radically restructured. At present it favours road building over low-carbon transport infrastructure. For example, if a project reduces car use, the fuel duty revenue foregone is counted as a cost of the project to the public purse.⁸⁰

More sophisticated measures of density

Measuring density through dwellings per hectare is too approximate. It does not take account of the type of dwellings built (whether flats or houses), or the size of dwellings. Developers can meet minimum density standards set in national or local planning

policies through increasing the number of small flats, rather than looking at increasing density by improved design throughout the development.

A study for East Thames Housing Group showed that many high-density developments elsewhere in Europe had more generous internal space standards, and higher ceilings, than a typical British housing association development. This shows that the relationship between density and internal space is complex, and influenced considerably by design.

Using more accurate measurements that include habitable rooms per hectare, or the German system of plot ratios (the total area of the building – including upper stories – divided by the area of the site) would help achieve this.

Minimum space standards (the ‘Parker Morris standards’) were removed from building regulations in the 1980s. Re-introducing an updated minimum space standard, alongside a density requirement, particularly for family accommodation, would ensure enough living space while encouraging innovative design.

Planning for housing, transport and employment

Regional Development Agencies will shortly take over responsibility for planning at the regional level, including the development of Regional Spatial Strategies. This is an opportunity to consider housing, transport and employment together. The following changes would encourage proximity:

- > the principle of sequential planning should be applied to housing. Sites within existing settlements should be developed before urban extensions or free-standing settlements. In drawing up their assessments of available land for housing,⁸¹ local authorities should be required to develop a hierarchy, starting with refurbishment of existing buildings to create new housing, then infill development. Large new areas of development should only be considered when the options within existing settlements are exhausted;

78 See London Assembly Planning and Spatial Development Committee, *Who Gains? The operation of section 106 planning agreements in London*, March 2008, for a discussion of different ways in which section 106 agreements can be used

79 ‘Ministers ordered to assess climate cost of all decisions’, *The Guardian*, 22 December 2007

80 Green Alliance/Campaign for Better Transport, *Decision-making for Sustainable Transport*, February 2008

81 Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessments: see www.communities.gov.uk/documents/planningandbuilding/pdf/399267

7: Where do we go from here?

- > as part of this process, local authorities should include an allowance for windfall sites (sites for housing development that are released unexpectedly, through a change in the use of land, for example). Government currently discourages councils from including such an allowance, meaning that larger areas outside existing built-up areas are prioritised;
- > the target for building on brownfield land should be extended to employment sites, to reduce travel to work;
- > reducing transport demand, and particularly car travel, should be a stated aim of planning policy, and considered in Regional Spatial Strategies as well as local plans; and
- > restrictions on parking and car use should be linked explicitly to public transport solutions, so that people are provided with a viable alternative.

Eco-towns

New settlements should only be considered when there is clear demand for additional housing that cannot be provided within existing settlements. In terms of carbon, land take and flood risk, the most environmentally benign development is infill and refurbishment of existing buildings. All new settlements should be eco-towns, built to the highest social and environmental standards.

When measuring the carbon impact of eco-towns, the impacts of construction, and of the predicted increase in travel, should be factored in. Eco-towns should be built to a density of at least 50 homes per hectare, or 150 habitable rooms per hectare, to ensure compact, walkable developments but with minimum space standards as described above. Eco-towns should, where possible, be self-sufficient in energy, providing a testing ground for distributed energy solutions and small-scale renewables. Planning for housing should be linked to employment planning, to ensure opportunities within the towns rather

than simply increased commuting. All eco-towns should be large enough to sustain a local transport system and services, and should be easily accessible by a range of public transport options.

Community involvement and greener living

Involving communities in decisions about development is crucial. Consultation about new housing should be linked to community involvement processes like Local Strategic Partnerships. The Department for Communities and Local Government should take joint responsibility with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs for encouraging greener living, in particular through:

- > working to reduce car use through car clubs, lift sharing and personalised travel plans, as has been successfully piloted in the sustainable travel towns of Darlington, Peterborough and Worcester. In these towns, traffic fell by 10% and public transport, walking and cycling all increased;
- > joint responsibility for ensuring that settlement patterns enable people to live healthy, sustainable lifestyles; and
- > community ownership of energy assets, and energy solutions, such as community heating and local combined-heat-and-power, should be encouraged through the planning process.