



ENGLISH HERITAGE

Suburbs and the Historic Environment

REVISION NOTE

June 2012

On 27 March 2012, the Government published the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF).

The NPPF supersedes Planning Policy Statement 5: Planning for the Historic Environment (PPS5) as Government Policy on the management of change to the Historic Environment in England.

Whilst some of the references in this document may now be out-of-date, English Heritage believes that it does still contain useful advice, guidance and case studies.

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www.english-heritage.org.uk



Suburbs and the Historic Environment



ENGLISH HERITAGE

More than 8 out of 10 people in England live in suburban areas ¹. Many of these areas are undergoing significant change; in some areas by infilling and intensification, in others through a struggle to regain former vibrancy. In this position statement, English Heritage sets out how it sees the future planning of suburbs and how local authorities can best respond to the challenges they face. Although our remit covers those suburbs of historic, architectural or landscape design interest, not all may be designated as conservation areas.

English Heritage believes that the most successful approach to planning, executing and managing change in our suburbs is one based on a sound understanding of local character, including its integral landscape. We are continuing to develop our understanding of the relevant issues, and further research is also underway. Collaboration with partner organisations to analyse suburban issues and possible solutions forms part of our strategy.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY SUBURB?

The English suburb has been the subject of much analysis and many publications, yet a consensus about a precise definition has never emerged. In general terms, suburbs can perhaps be best described as outgrowths or dependencies of larger settlements – somewhere with a clear relationship with a city or town but with its own distinct character. A companion document, *The Heritage of Historic Suburbs*, includes a short discussion of the development of the English suburb, and is available at www.helm.org.uk/suburbs.

Many suburbs have become historic through proving their long-term sustainability. Not only does this reflect their qualities of popularity, adaptability, stability and general fitness for purpose, but over time they have achieved maturity and distinctiveness in relation to their surrounding area.

This may be derived from the aesthetic value of the quality and style of architecture or construction, or their mature landscape. It may be the historical value of the association of the place with the original developer, architect or movement. It may be the communal value of the facilities which serve it or the importance that residents ascribe to its character. It may be the evidential value of the seminal layout or architectural composition which has retained its unity and integrity.

DRIVERS OF CHANGE

There are a number of pressures that currently threaten the historic character and distinctiveness of many suburbs. These are particularly pronounced in areas of high

MANCHESTER CITY COUNCIL

Following extensive consultation with the local community, Manchester City Council designated the Hermitage & Houghton Road Conservation Area in Crumpsall in January 2004. This reflected both the historic and cultural significance of the late Victorian housing of the area and the commitment to its future on the part of the local community and the City Council.

The designation of the conservation area, and its location within the North Manchester Strategic Regeneration Area, led the City Council to recognise the suburb's potential for influencing and leading an upturn in the housing market for the wider North Manchester area, and regeneration funding was therefore identified and allocated. Following careful preparation and planning, a project to repair and refurbish all the properties in the conservation area commenced in September 2005 and was completed at the end of April 2006.

housing demand, where low density, mature suburbs are subject to accelerating demand for new development.

Government moves to encourage housing development on previously developed land ². These are partly an attempt to protect greenfield areas against development, but also part of a wider strategy to promote higher density development in order both to address the imbalance in the supply of new housing that has contributed to house price inflation ³ and to deliver 'compact cities'. Given their relatively spacious nature and low density, certain suburbs have been identified by local authorities as being suitable for infill development. This is not a new phenomenon, but current levels of change against a background of higher acceptable densities increases the potential for local distinctiveness and historically significant features to be lost. Most local authorities have undertaken urban capacity studies to inform local housing provision policies, but these do not always adequately evaluate the historic character of suburban areas.

The buoyant nature of the housing market, relative scarcity of land suitable for development (particularly in the south of England) and designation of gardens as 'brownfield' land has led to developers focusing their attention on suburbs, especially in low density areas – the archetypal leafy suburbs and their potential for higher density development. This has led to an increase in housing land values and stimulated the interest of owner-occupiers in realising the value of some or all of their plot. These trends have led to growing numbers of small-scale, new-build developments on what were previously gardens, or the conversion of large family homes into flats. There has also been a trend for the demolition and replacement of large detached houses with higher density new development. In all cases, amenity spaces such as private gardens and features like mature trees and hedges are being lost and character often eroded as a consequence.

Conversely, in areas of low housing demand, the character of historically distinctive areas of housing, often in inner suburbs, is at risk as a result of abandonment and calls for demolition and selective redevelopment. These pressures are addressed in our position statement *Low Demand Housing and the Historic Environment* ⁴.

Additionally, there are a number of factors that are of national relevance. **Wider demographic changes**, such as the increasing numbers of smaller households have driven the trend for either conversion or demolition of larger family homes typically found in historic suburbs. This, together with the growth in **car ownership** has led to increasing levels of traffic, intrusive standardised traffic management measures and parking congestion.

The local economy. The growth in car use and ownership has also had economic implications for historic suburbs, as people have increasingly been prepared to travel further by car to commute, shop and use leisure facilities rather than use local services. This can lead to a rise in vacant retail units and environmental deterioration with a consequent reduction in the range of services and attractiveness to shoppers and others. As several research projects have noted, once this downward economic spiral has gained momentum, it can be extremely difficult to reverse ⁵.

Incremental and unmanaged change has also been taking the form of small scale extensions to buildings, dormer and plastic windows, loss of garden features such as boundary walls, hedges and trees, and the conversion of front gardens to parking space. The Greater London Assembly estimate that two thirds of London's front gardens have been altered to accommodate car parking,

A & B Penkhull, Stoke on Trent.
© English Heritage

C & D Hermitage & Houghton
Road Conservation Area,
Manchester. © English Heritage



⁴ English Heritage *Low Demand Housing and the Historic Environment* (2005)

⁵ In Suburbia Partnership *In Suburbia: Delivering Sustainable Communities* (2004)

RENEW NORTH STAFFORDSHIRE

RENEW North Staffordshire is one of nine Housing Market Renewal Pathfinders established by DCLG (formerly ODPM) to tackle issues of low demand. In 2005, RENEW in conjunction with Stoke on Trent City Council, English Heritage and UrbanVision commissioned a report to provide baseline information about the historic nature of the areas in question.

The study was undertaken at an 'intensive' or detailed level for those areas of major intervention in the housing market, and at an 'extensive' or broad-brush level for the wider Stoke on Trent area. The result is a highly informative assessment of the historic character of much of Stoke and its suburbs. Its use by the key organisations locally will ensure the area's heritage plays its part in revitalising local suburbs by informing the preparation of development briefs and masterplans and the detail of specific development proposals.

reducing biodiversity and exacerbating water run-off ⁶, although the paving over of front gardens and the loss of boundary walls and hedges is a nationwide problem with consequential effects on character, quality and the local distinctiveness of mature suburbs. The age and condition of many historic suburbs also means that without regular and planned maintenance or a positive vision for their future, both the buildings and the public realm are at risk of deterioration.

The opportunity for such unmanaged change could increase in future if suggestions for broadening the scope of permitted development rights or even removing the need for householder consents are implemented.

ENGLISH HERITAGE ADVICE ON SUSTAINING HISTORIC SUBURBS

English Heritage's main role is to offer broad guidance and advice rather than detailed engagement, and we will not therefore normally be involved in individual cases.

While some early English suburbs have been overtaken by the outward expansion of town and city centres, further from the centre many retain original characteristics and relationships with surrounding areas. While they may be suitable locations for new development because of their accessibility, low density and attractive setting, any such development should take into account the historic significance of these characteristics. Most local authorities will have carried

out urban capacity studies of their main settlements, and these studies should have taken into account such characteristics or at least acknowledged the importance of their consideration against any plans for development. If not, the potential loss of distinctiveness should be carefully balanced against the increased density assumed before irrevocable decisions are taken.

Increasing the urban capacity of low density suburbs is not however a new phenomenon. There are many historic suburbs where character is derived from building styles of many periods. Incremental development over a lengthy period can be absorbed by an area, and the variety of built form and layout may be an important element of an area's character. Further infill should respect the scale of earlier phases, avoid discordant shapes, sizes and layouts and add new qualities.

Our general advice is to:

- **Acknowledge that change is inevitable**, often positive and in many historic suburbs necessary to ensure continued success. There will however be some (such as the early garden cities and suburbs) where only the most limited development can be accommodated if distinctive character is to be retained.
- **Encourage analysis** of the local historic environment in future planning. Rapid area assessments of the built environment and historic landscape characterisation can help authorities make better and more sustainable decisions. They are extremely flexible tools, which can be applied at different levels of detail. Rapid appraisals can produce a useful platform for decisions quickly with minimal expense and staff time (see www.english-heritage.org.uk/characterisation).
- **Encourage a long term strategy for the future of a historic suburb that ensures its significance is retained**, particularly where it retains its integrity and character or is valued by the local community.
- Recognise that the diversity of our suburbs means that a uniform approach to tackling problems is not appropriate. In this respect, **English Heritage does not oppose the principle of intensification of housing per se, but this must not be at the expense of an area's special character or historic integrity.**
- **Recognise the relationship between elements of the suburban landscape.** Public parks, open spaces, street trees, private gardens and views in and out of particular areas all play a role in creating local identity and influence how neighbourhoods are perceived. Research has also shown how important gardens in these areas are in terms of biodiversity ⁷.

⁶ Greater London Assembly Environment Committee *Crazy Paving* (2005)

⁷ Sheffield University Biodiversity in Urban Gardens (www.bugs.group.shef.ac.uk)

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WYCOMBE DISTRICT COUNCIL

In recent years, Wycombe has been experiencing a large number of planning applications to demolish single dwellings within suburban streets to enable access to rear gardens and the subsequent construction of a number of houses at the rear of properties in historic areas such as Cressex and Booker. This creates several issues, including noise, disturbance and a fear of crime, but perhaps more importantly comprehensive or 'proper planning' is precluded. As more land is released from back-garden areas, there have been examples of further poor quality cul-de-sacs being created, while the access roads impact on the character and appearance of the original street.

Given that many applications were then the subject of appeal and lengthy determination processes, the District Council in 2005 consulted on and adopted an SPD on this issue. The guidance provides detailed information on design parameters for development on these back garden areas focusing on layout, comprehensiveness, landscape, designing out crime, scale of proposals and local character. This enables developers and designers to be aware of the Council's expectations early in the process, provides greater certainty for all and creates a framework for development that will enhance rather than erode local character.

- To ensure that proposals for **significant change conserve and enhance existing character and identity**, and recognise and address the historic nature of the area. They should not simply concentrate on residential uses at the expense of commercial and retail elements or parks and other green spaces.

A CHECKLIST FOR LOCAL AUTHORITIES

1 Develop a comprehensive vision for local suburbs that includes the historic environment. Local character and distinctiveness are crucial elements in why people choose to live where they do, yet incremental and piecemeal change is putting these at risk in many historic suburbs. Local planning authorities should develop a long-term, strategic approach to their effective management which is underpinned by an understanding of historic character and which has been developed with community involvement. This should not only identify areas where there are development pressures but also those where there are opportunities for the intensification of housing – perhaps around transport hubs, or where local amenities are of an appropriate level

to support it. Good design and the use of masterplanning are crucial in this process, while 'retrofitting' historic suburbs, in the sense of adding shops and other services, new green space and public realm will help create sustainable communities containing high quality, successful places with higher density where appropriate.

2 Ensure that the results of urban capacity studies inform decisions on the future of historic suburbs.

Research for such exercises should cover the historic and architectural significance of the suburbs in question, and information gathered as a result should be taken into account when considering proposals for any future development.

3 Understand what is there. Decisions on all historic suburbs should be made on the basis of sound information about their historical significance, their contribution to the character of the wider neighbourhood, the value placed upon them by the local community and how the various elements of the suburb relate to each other. Local authorities should carry out characterisation studies of their historic suburban areas as part of the preparation of their Local Development Framework Core Strategy, especially in those areas where development pressure is greatest. Advice on carrying out these appraisals is available on the English Heritage website, although the first step in almost all cases will be to consult the historic buildings specialist within the local authority.

4 Use control mechanisms carefully. Where the assessment of the authority's historic suburbs indicates that a neighbourhood is of significant historic or architectural interest, the local authority should give consideration to designation as a conservation area. This step will not prevent modernisation or updating of buildings within the conservation area, but will help ensure that new development or alterations respect and respond to their surroundings. Article 4 directions to restrict permitted development rights are appropriate where the local planning authority can demonstrate that historically significant character is at risk. Any such designation or direction should be accompanied by advice to owners and residents on how to value and care for the historic character of their property, and should only be introduced after extensive public consultation. Village Design Statements ⁸ have proved a useful model for this approach in rural areas and the general approach can be adapted to urban neighbourhoods.

5 Consider issuing a Supplementary Planning Document (SPD). Incremental change can take several forms – the sub-division of family homes into smaller flats, installation of dormer and plastic windows, the conversion of front gardens into parking spaces and inappropriate traffic management schemes are just some of the trends affecting historic suburbs. An assessment of the historic suburb (even those not designated as conservation areas) can inform the development of SPD and give guidance on what areas should be covered and what works can and cannot be undertaken.

6 Engage the local community. In developing a strategy for the future of their historic suburbs, local authorities need to consult the local community to listen to how they value their suburbs. Early communication with residents associations, tenants groups, amenity and local history societies will help build up a picture of what it is about an area that the community regards as important and wishes to protect.

7 The public realm. In many suburbs, local character is derived as much from the spaces between the buildings as from the architectural quality of the buildings themselves. There is often a carefully composed relationship between the private and public realms, forming an essential part of local distinctiveness and placemaking. Even relatively minor changes can be highly intrusive. Local authorities should actively manage works to highways and the public realm and follow the best practice set out in English Heritage's *Streets for All* manuals. Close cooperation between planning and highways interests can also help to protect the future of street trees.

8 The impact of traffic and parking on historic character can be significant. Current levels of car ownership demand more on-street and front-garden parking, and demand higher capacity road layouts. The consequences of these on the street-scene, the character of individual properties and wider and longer views (in particular of suburbs with extensive mature landscape in streets and private gardens) must be carefully evaluated before any of it is lost through inappropriate management.

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⁸ See www.naturalengland.org.uk.