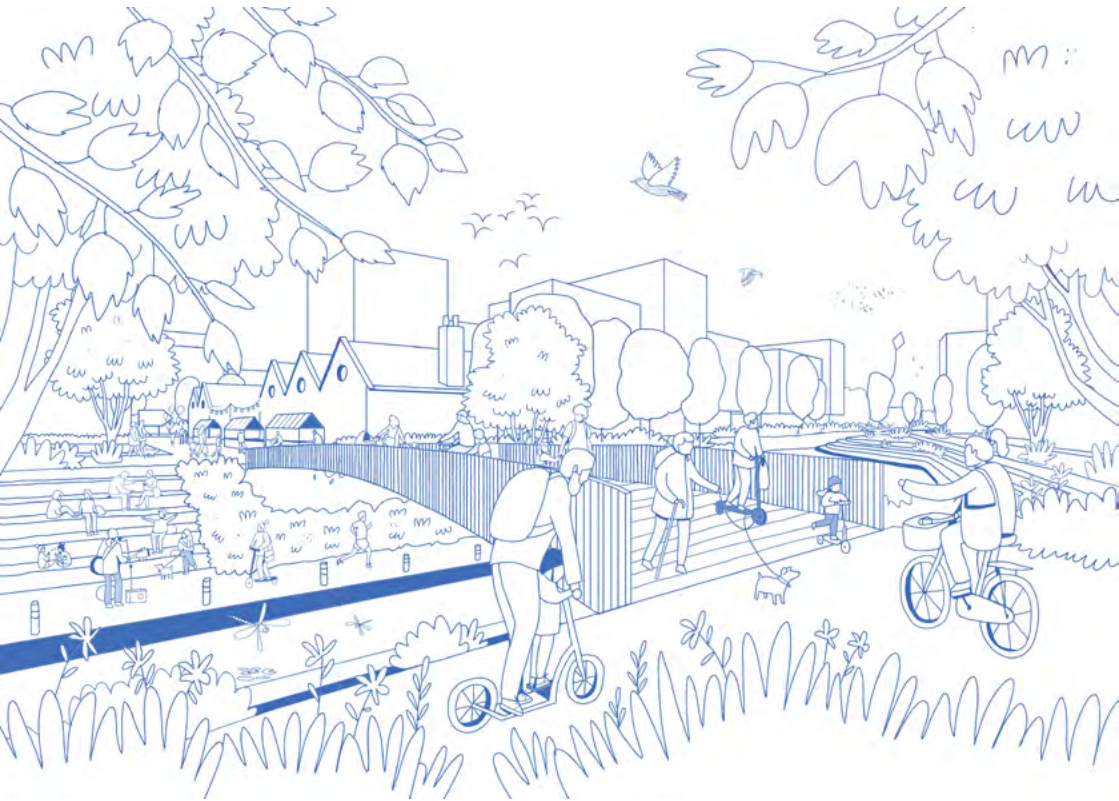


**Towards a Suburban Renaissance
The Suburban Taskforce**



Update Report

An Inquiry into the Future of the Suburbs

February 2021



PURPOSE OF THE TASKFORCE

The cross-party ‘Suburban Taskforce’ was established in March 2020, with support of the Government. It is believed to be the first parliamentary Taskforce to focus exclusively on suburban areas.

The purpose of the Taskforce is to shine a light on the suburbs in order to identify and secure the clear, long-term and properly resourced policies needed to support thriving, sustainable and inclusive suburban areas.



In doing so, it will pay attention to both current circumstances (social, economic and environmental) and policy tools available (taxation, investment and the planning system).

The work of the Taskforce is founded upon original quantitative and qualitative research, coordinated by UCL as Knowledge Partner, supported by an expert Advisory Board and informed by a public consultation which ran from August-October 2020. This note sets out and summarises the themes which are beginning to emerge from these workstreams.

ENGAGEMENT

There has been strong support for the Taskforce from built environment professionals, academics, civil society and the general public. Media coverage and responses to the ‘Call for Evidence’ have emphasised not only the importance of the Taskforce’s work, but also its increased relevance in light of the potential impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic.

UCL have been supported in the gathering and review of quantitative evidence by researchers at Estates Gazette who have provided comprehensive market information and access to critical third-party data. Proprietary data support has also been provided by Colliers International, Savills and Knight Frank.

The public ‘Call for Evidence’ has elicited approximately 50 responses from both organisations and individuals, with members of the public continuing to engage with the Secretariat following the call’s formal close. As of January 2021, respondents can be broadly grouped as below:

Respondents	Proportion
General public	33%
Professionals	25%
Civil Society	17%
Academia	17%
Local Government	8%

APPROACH

The work undertaken during 2020 focussed on both reviewing existing research and gathering new evidence. The purpose was to build a shared assessment of priorities in order to inform consideration of the key issues during 2021. This has helped to scope perceptions of the challenges and opportunities faced.



DATA ANALYSIS

Initial data analysis suggests that suburban areas are distinct from urban locations, but also cautions against a one-size-fits-all approach.

A key workstream has been to collate and review descriptive statistics such as those related to land use, built form, population, transport and infrastructure. Focussing on London, where the pressures of growth are most apparent, this has had regard to both regional information and ward-level data for 'case study' suburban areas (for which we have assessed the Outer London Boroughs of Sutton and Waltham Forest). This analysis confirms that there are clear differences between Inner and Outer Boroughs.

The evidence makes clear that suburban areas are significantly more residential in character than inner-city locations. Conversely, Inner Boroughs contain almost five times as much office floorspace as Outer Boroughs. This is testament to the different functional nature of each area. It is also reflected in the urban grain and form, with a far higher proportion of flatted residential accommodation in Inner Boroughs than Outer Boroughs.

However, there is also variation within suburban areas, indicating that there may be more than one suburban 'character'. Certain wards and local centres may, for example, display characteristics which are far more 'urban' than 'suburban' as a result of their scale, connectivity or the amount of retail and commercial floorspace they accommodate. It may be therefore that it's possible to think of suburban characteristics against a sliding scale in terms of their attributes. This could offer possibilities both for benchmarking and to inform policy-making decisions.

The type of attributes which could be considered include local services and infrastructure and this is deserving of further investigation. Central areas see a higher concentration of pubs per capita than suburban ones, whilst the latter have a substantially higher proportion of surgeries and schools, which is perhaps a logical reflection of their function. However, despite the clear distinction between Inner and Outer Boroughs, it remains important to note that the provision of social infrastructure is also uneven within suburban areas and appears correlated to more urban characteristics.

CALL FOR EVIDENCE

The “Call for Evidence” reveals concerns about the impact of growth upon the nature of development and the quality and cohesiveness of existing communities.

Key to understanding the quantitative data has been the public “Call for Evidence”. The feedback has highlighted the continued relevance of long-established ‘suburban debates’ about the character of suburbs, their relationship to urban centres and management of growth pressures, in addition to the potential impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Despite general support for the intensification of suburban areas, the feedback sets out clear concerns about the way in which the pressures of growth are managed. This includes, in particular, doubts about the impact that new development has on the wellbeing of existing communities, not least in terms of the additional pressure which it creates on the availability and quality of social infrastructure and green space.

The strongest opinions to be expressed were concerns about density and intensification, as well as the impact of growth on local infrastructure (i.e. social, community, transport). There were also concerns that the lower values associated with suburban areas resulted in reduced design quality. On balance, feedback was generally conservation-oriented and anti-gentrification in tone. There was support for ‘gentle’ and sensitively located areas of densification.

Aligning with the quantitative data, respondents suggested that there were discernible suburban characteristics in terms of both vernacular (i.e. architecture and design), processes (i.e. traffic congestion, refuse storage, service provision, etc) and experience (affect, agency, etc). They also identified the diverse and unequal nature of experience, with many respondents citing concerns about the housing market and problems of affordability, not least as this affects the young and less well resourced.

There was a recognition that the Covid-19 pandemic has the potential to result in structural social and economic changes which could influence the nature of suburban areas. This raises important considerations about the potential for greater polycentricity, which in turn raises questions about wider travel patterns and the need for greater connectivity between suburban centres. There was an acknowledgement that the function of existing transport infrastructure follows the historic form of development but support for sustainable modes of travel to be prioritised including walking and cycling.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

The initial quantitative and qualitative research undertaken indicates several areas which require further analysis and in-depth consideration by the Taskforce. These are:

1. **The drivers of key trends;**
2. **The nature of live-work patterns;**
3. **The role of centres;**
4. **The provision of services and transport;**
5. **The nature of land use and incremental change;**
6. **The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, and;**
7. **The relationship of suburban change to the ‘levelling up’ agenda.**

It is also possible to identify key questions which would benefit from being particular attention. These are:

- **How can we respond to pressures of growth and decline in such a way as to ensure that change does not erode the quality of place or sense of community?**
- **How can we ensure that full account is taken of the diversity of lived experiences?**



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NEXT STEPS

This update note summarises workstreams undertaken during 2020 and is intended to inform detailed consideration by the Taskforce during 2021. Further information is available on request from the Secretariat via Secretariat@Suburban-Taskforce.org





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