



Sustainable  
Development Commission

# Building houses or creating communities?

A review of Government progress  
on Sustainable Communities



# Sustainable Communities

**‘Location, location, location’. As every estate agent knows, people want safe, attractive and affordable places to live, well-connected for work, opportunity and education. A good location means a healthy, green and just community, with familiar, reliable neighbours. In short, sustainable communities are fundamentally about creating decent places to live.**

Four years on from its inception, the government’s Sustainable Communities Plan (SCP) is at the critical point when planning becomes reality. As the independent government watchdog on sustainable development, we wanted to find out to what extent the SCP, with its nine Housing Market Renewal Areas and its four Growth Areas (see pages 4 & 5), is helping to create the sustainable homes and communities people deserve to live in.

Through an extensive programme of site visits, public opinion research, stakeholder interviews, in-depth area studies and desk research we assessed the SCP’s delivery against the Government’s five sustainable development principles:

- living within environmental limits
- ensuring a strong, healthy and just society

through:

- a sustainable economy
- good governance, and
- use of sound science.



# Our findings



**Our Review shows that there have been some important steps forward. Our research has highlighted good practice which we hope can be emulated elsewhere, and recent positive government policy commitments. It also reveals that delivery of genuinely sustainable communities is not sufficiently widespread in a programme that seems to have focussed more on building houses than creating sustainable communities.**



We welcome recent 'green' announcements on zero carbon new homes for example from the Department for Communities and Local Government (CLG). But we also believe there can be further ambition in environmental standards for building and land use.

Residents in some areas thought that they were well served with public services, and we found examples of meaningful community consultation on development plans. But our research also revealed disconnected and short-term funding streams, mismatched timetables and examples of poor local community engagement, all of which make sustainable delivery harder.

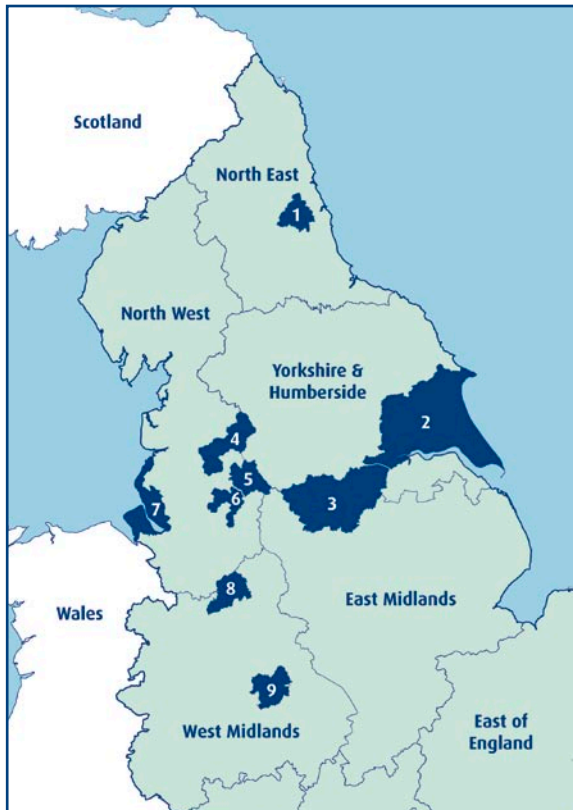


Meanwhile a focus on housing alone is not going to lead to the much-needed economic regeneration of the Midlands and the North and maximise the use of surplus homes, some of which are just an hour and a half away from the over-heated South East market.

It is essential that the next phase of delivery helps to create communities where social, environmental and economic components are fully integrated. This summary of our Review highlights key opportunities to help the SCP deliver green and healthy homes and communities. Our full report, together with extensive background material, is available at [www.sd-commission.org.uk/pages/200507.html](http://www.sd-commission.org.uk/pages/200507.html)

# Nine Housing Market Renewal Areas

to rebalance the housing market in low demand areas



- 1 NewcastleGateshead
- 2 Hull & East Riding of Yorkshire
- 3 South Yorkshire
- 4 East Lancashire
- 5 Oldham & Rochdale
- 6 Manchester Salford
- 7 Merseyside
- 8 North Staffordshire
- 9 Birmingham & Sandwell

## Key challenges

- Finding the right balance between refurbishment and demolition and rebuilding.
- Ensuring economic regeneration is stimulated to match the housing programmes, and to achieve vibrant communities in areas currently in decline.
- Taking account of the views of existing communities facing demolition, and developing options that minimise demolition and improve living conditions, the local environment, public services and transport infrastructure.

# Four Growth Areas

to deliver significant new housing developments  
where demand is predicted



- Thames Gateway
- Milton Keynes & South Midlands
- London-Stansted-Cambridge-Peterborough
- Ashford

## Key challenges

- Ensuring housing growth is restricted to infill, and increasing the density of existing towns and cities to avoid urban sprawl across green space.
- Building infrastructure (transport, sewerage, water services) that protects the natural environment and reduces climate change impacts.
- Achieving zero carbon footprint for new buildings.
- Developing new local services and creating social interaction in out of town locations
- Engaging existing communities near new developments.



# Opportunity 1

## Further integration of sustainability impacts into the programme

### Lower carbon living

So if the SCP's emphasis is primarily on housing, how sustainable are those homes? The original SCP did not place a high priority on the environmental impacts of house building – land use, energy, water and materials – but we're pleased to note that's changing, for new build at least.

With homes currently accounting for 27 per cent of the UK's carbon emissions, they offer plenty of scope for significant reductions to our national carbon footprint and contributions to climate change. Our demands for heat and hot water account for 80 per cent of our energy demand within the home. The government is working towards zero carbon standards for new build housing by 2016, and certain HMR schemes are already rising to the challenge. For example, Newcastle's Cruddas Park and Byker schemes are committed to carbon neutral development, which is a good step along the path to limiting the housing carbon footprint.

**"It's lovely in the winter. I haven't turned my heating on since I moved in here!"**

Resident, St Ann's, Barking

But what about the existing housing stock? After all, the homes we're already living in will still account for around 75 per cent of our homes in 2050, and the technologies certainly aren't rocket science: insulation, extra glazing, energy efficient lighting and appliances, and micro renewables to reduce our dependence on fossil fuels such as gas and oil. Government has instigated a range of policy measures to encourage householders to adopt these efficient technology solutions, notably the Energy Efficiency Commitment. But the SCP is not maximising its market leverage to consolidate those policies and connect them to the housing growth elsewhere.

So, while housing developments are gaining planning approval in one part of the South East, there's no link to reducing energy use in existing homes in other parts of the region. Between today and 2017, new homes and their occupants will still be producing carbon emissions, so offsetting these emissions by installing energy efficiency and renewable energy measures in existing housing would be a good way to mitigate the impacts of housing growth.

### Watching water waste

**"We do have a water meter. Think it is good that you pay for what you use."**

Resident, Cambridge

Energy is one precious resource, water is another, and we're using more than ever before – an average of 150 litres every day, nearly double the level considered sustainable (set out in the Code for Sustainable Homes). The SCP's proposed Growth Areas are already facing water shortages, even before the twin impacts of the new housing and drier summers caused by climate change start to bite.

There is some acknowledgement of the problem at a regional planning level, and also in London, where, for example, Barking and Dagenham's approach to housing encourages less consumption, rainwater collection and domestic grey water systems. But in general it's an urgent problem that isn't being taken seriously enough.

We want to see more emphasis on reducing the demand for water and installing water-efficient household technologies in both new build and existing housing. And more forward planning for any environmentally sensitive new infrastructure required.



## Refurbish more, demolish less

**“It is like a family almost – everyone in our street they know each other – and when the children play, they all play together, and there are very nice neighbours.”**

Resident of refurbished home, Blackburn

In Housing Market Renewal Areas our research has found that demolition and new build has often been the default option, even though Government policy has shifted away from a reliance on demolition. Not only does this break up an existing community and destroy an area’s built heritage, but it also costs the environment and the taxpayer. The demolition industry creates 33 per cent of the UK’s waste, four times what we collectively produce at home. Demolition and replacement costs up to 10 times more than refurbishment, although the zero rate VAT on new build versus the 17.5 per cent VAT on refurbishment encourages developers to opt for the more destructive option. We want to see HMRA take a more imaginative approach to retaining the best of what’s already there (see ‘City living in a proper street’).

## ‘City living in a proper street’

Chimney Pot Park in the Housing Market Renewal area of Langworthy, Salford, is an inspiring example of how imaginative design and a positive attitude to sustainability can overcome social stigma and financial disincentives. With 90 per cent of its small terraced houses vacant in 2003, the area was a prime candidate for a demolition programme. Instead, property developer Urban Splash, working with the local authority and English Partnerships, decided on a radical redesign and refurbishment programme. Forced to remove more of the existing structure than necessary in order to qualify for new build zero rate VAT, the design retained the heritage and community feel of the terraces’ exteriors and streetscape whilst literally turning the interiors upside down.

The revamped homes all have two double bedrooms on the ground floor, with a first floor open plan loft style living space comprising a mezzanine, living and dining areas, and a kitchen, and an outside deck area. Around 350 homes were given this makeover, and priced between £99,500

and £118,000, all sold swiftly, highlighting the area's rapid transformation from no-go zone to city hot spot. Existing residents were invited to either opt for the Council's 'Home Swap' scheme, trading their existing house for a newly refurbished house elsewhere, or take first choice on the new Chimney Pot Park houses. [www.chimneyopotpark.co.uk](http://www.chimneyopotpark.co.uk)

## Higher density for health and transport rewards

**"The fact that you're served with 2 mainline trains and 2 tubes I don't really know why people do drive around here"**

Resident, Barking

Whilst 74 per cent of new housing in 2005 was built on previously developed sites, well exceeding the government's 60 per cent target, that still leaves a quarter of new homes built on greenfield land. One solution to make the best use of the land available is a greater density of housing. Density doesn't need to involve noisy, nosy neighbours and cramped conditions; we believe that good design can prevent those problems. After all, Victorian terraces were built to a density of 70-100 houses per hectare incorporating open space, and can be a highly desirable type of property.

New housing is currently being built at an average density of 40 dwellings per hectare. This is above national planning policy's unambitious guidance of 30 dwellings per hectare. However research suggests that greater density, at least 50 homes per hectare, is needed to help to support local services like frequent buses, and can reduce environmental impacts. Getting people out of their cars and into the streets maximizes individuals' opportunities to get to know their neighbours and to use local shops. Walking and cycling improve fitness levels and good public transport reduces congestion and CO<sub>2</sub> emissions.

We are pleased that a significant proportion of the funding specifically allocated to the sustainable communities programme has been spent on public transport. However overall the government's major transport concern appears to have been to combat congestion. Developers have often responded with proposals to improve road transport flows,

which mean that residents are more likely to get into the hard-to-break habit of car use. One rare but notable exception is at Eastern Quarry in the Kent Thameside area. Kent County Council, the DfT and the developer are planning a new bus service to account for 60 per cent of passenger journeys. The council has provided up front funding so that the bus is operating from the day the homes are occupied, and the developer will promote the service in its marketing. This example, along with a recent policy shift by the Highways Agency towards minimizing transport harm, are welcome signs for encouraging more sustainable transport solutions in future.

The ten year old BedZed development in the London Borough of Sutton is still the best example of a community with sustainable transport. Deliberately designed around pedestrians, not car drivers, street lighting is good, drop kerbs are wheelchair and pushchair friendly and vehicle speeds are kept low. A local bus stop and train service is nearby and a car pool is available for occasional car users, with electric kerbside recharging points available for the electric vehicles.

## Better green space

As Natural England has recently highlighted, getting off the sofa and into the great outdoors improves people's physical and mental wellbeing. But there's little incentive to make the effort if there's nowhere attractive and safe to exercise and socialise. In 2001, the Public Parks Assessment showed that only 18 per cent of parks were in good condition, and six years on, there is no dedicated SCP funding for quality open space. However, some schemes are managing to enhance local biodiversity and offer locals somewhere green and pleasant. In the Newcastle/Gateshead Walker Riverside development, the Area Action Plan prioritises local sites of nature conservation interest and creates green corridors to the River Tyne, funded by the Council's development partners. And in South Cambridgeshire where over 60 per cent of development is on green field land, plans propose green corridors for walking and cycling, sustainable urban drainage systems and improvements to nationally important wetlands reserves.



# Opportunity 2

## Better co-ordination of public funding and wider service provision

Creating sustainable communities is a highly complex project, and whilst central government is responsible for developing and supporting the SCP, its delivery depends on a whole chain of regional, local and private sector partners. Our research highlighted concerns that the plethora of different partners, funding streams and timetables means public services and other facilities may not be ready by the time new residents move in.

We want to see all partners involved in housing and services working holistically from the outset. We found evidence that some people thought their local area was well served in terms of public services – for example in Blackburn. But we also found examples of disconnection between housing and access to public services like schools.

Although public funding for sustainable communities is available, it's not always in the

right place at the right time, it can be uncertain or short-term and it can lack co-ordination. Creating sustainable communities is a long term process which requires long term funding. For instance, it takes more than two years to plan and deliver genuinely integrated and sustainable transport services for communities, but that's the current timeframe for spending Community Infrastructure Fund money.

More generally there are opportunities for local public services to champion and encourage more sustainable behaviours. For example extended school services can contribute to local community development, while the NHS can contribute to local population health and well being as a local employer, purchaser of goods and services, and as a champion of preventative health measures such as walking, cycling and fresh food availability.



# Opportunity 3

## More effective and meaningful community consultation and engagement

We believe that sustainable communities can only be created with the active consent and participation of the people who are actually going to live there. Thorough community engagement is possible, as demonstrated in Newcastle-Gateshead. However we have also found examples of apparently swift, 'tick box' consultation, where residents are left with more questions than answers about their local area. Engagement with communities should cover a wide variety of interests, and should run throughout the duration of the programme and beyond, highlighting the need for change before even beginning to explore future options.

The best examples of an engagement programme, in the Walker area of Newcastle/Gateshead and New Islington in Manchester, have given residents real influence over their community by including them in choosing developers and designing their new localities. Regeneration will be more successful in the long term because of this solid foundation. As well as shaping the physical infrastructure of new developments, quality engagement can shape the social fabric of emerging communities. As residents get to know each other by working together, this builds trust across different ages, classes and races.





# Opportunity 4

## More sophisticated monitoring and evaluation of outcomes

Our research has highlighted that current delivery and monitoring processes (such as the Audit Commission's six monthly monitoring of the HMR areas) tend to measure short-term outputs rather than sustainable development outcomes. An annual tally of new and refurbished housing is not enough to ascertain the longer term health and wellbeing of communities, and we urge the government to monitor the SCP against its own principles of sustainable development (see page 1).

As plans are finalised and delivery starts, we are also concerned that commercial pressures, skills gaps, lack of timely public funding, poor infrastructure, or local political pressures can lead to unsustainable outcomes. We found some evidence of this in Stoke-on-Trent. An earlier assessment of development proposals against sustainable development principles, monitoring during and after delivery, and better guidance from government on funding options will all help to create the healthy, vibrant and close-knit communities people deserve to live in.



The challenge of helping communities adapt and develop within the principles of sustainable development is complex, but exciting and essential. We look forward to working with others to help achieve this aim.

If you want to discuss our conclusions about the SCP, share your experiences or suggest a case study, join our mailing list at [www.sd-commission.org.uk/sign\\_up](http://www.sd-commission.org.uk/sign_up)

Hard copies of the main report are available from the address below.



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