

The Sunday Times November 20, 2005

## **The greening of 10mph suburbia**

Hugh Pearman

A BLUEPRINT for a "sustainable suburbia" has mapped out a future in which cars glide along at 10mph, children play in the streets and back gardens are reduced to tiny yards.

The government-backed plan stipulates in minute detail the green requirements developers will have to fulfil before they are given planning permission for new estates.

These include an elaborate system of "green points", in which builders must install features to encourage biodiversity, from ponds and climbing creepers to nectar-laden flowers and bat boxes.

Electricity will have to come from street-corner stations powered by wind, ground heat or other renewable sources.

Ministers in John Prescott's department, the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, are pushing for the plan, drawn up by Essex county council, to be adopted by other local authorities as they try to accommodate the 1.2m new homes the government has said must be built in southeast England by 2021.

"We want to see this adopted elsewhere," said Baroness Andrews, the housing minister. "We would like this to be a template for people to change their communities. That is why roof gardens, balconies and public gardens are important. We need to redefine our notion of private space without thinking we have to build private gardens."

This week the document will be reviewed by professionals at a three-day forum of organisations involved in the huge housing expansion planned for the "Thames Gateway" on both sides of the river's estuary.

The government hopes the new homes will be the opposite of the "Identikit estates" criticised last week by the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (Cabe), the government's architectural watchdog.

Cabe's audit of new housing found that a quarter of all homes were poorly designed, with only 6% qualifying as good.

The guide will be used to win over builders to the new buzzwords of high-density, low-energy and biodiversity.

With an estimated 3.8m new homes needed in Britain over the next quarter century, according to government estimates, tomorrow's suburban family home is more likely to be a flat in a small block on a "play street" rather than a detached house in a cul-de-sac.

Cars will be allowed into play streets, but obstacles such as trees, cycle racks and sand pits will be placed so that drivers have to slow down to 10mph to weave through them. The idea is that parents will feel confident enough to let their children play in the street without worrying about the traffic.

To achieve the required density of housing and minimise the amount of countryside destroyed, the government wants householders in the new developments to settle for spaces such as roof gardens, play streets and balconies rather than private gardens. Because of the need to pack many more homes into each acre, few will be allowed private gardens or yards of more than 15ft by 15ft.

Kitchens in the new homes will have to have six fitted recycling bins, each for a different material. The bins must be of 10-litre capacity for one-bed properties and 20 litres for larger homes.

To win planning permission, builders' designs will have to score at least 100 "green points" per hectare. Points will be scored for everything from trees (one point each) to grass meadows on the roof (half a point per 10 sq m); nesting boxes or bat boxes (0.2 of a point each) and even 0.01 of a point for every plant "with a good source of nectar, berries, seeds or nuts" to attract birds and bees.

Any development of more than 10 houses will have to generate at least 10% of its own electricity, using everything from solar panels to wind turbines.

The biggest developments will produce all their own power from mini-stations burning "biomass" fuels such as harvested willow.

To counter the drain on scarce water supplies, rainwater will be collected in underground tanks and a new breed of wildlife-rich village pond. According to a council spokesman, Essex in some years receives less rainfall than Beirut.

Many of the ideas in the blueprint, including corner shops, are deliberately old-fashioned. "It's the Victorian model of good neighbourhoods, where spaces link up and people feel part of a wider community," said David Balcombe, head of the built environment department at Essex council. "There has been a rash of developments in the last 20 years where cul-de-sacs have become the dominant street pattern. But these can lead to people becoming isolated."

The aim is not to produce scores of retro-styled villages similar to the the Prince of Wales's Poundbury development in Dorset.

Balcombe insists he does not want to dictate the style of homes, only the way they are built. Since Essex has to build at least 110,000 new homes in the next 15 years, he has plenty to worry about.

One aim of the plan, which is expected to come into force next summer, is to persuade builders to provide big family apartments on the continental model, rather than large numbers of small detached houses. The attraction will be that the environment around the new high-density homes will be much better.

"We'll be doubling the density but quadrupling the quality," says Balcombe.

Others are wading into the housing debate. Concern about the quality of new estates in the Thames Gateway has led to a proposal by the leading architect Terry Farrell to turn it into a new national park of forests and wetlands. Farrell's scheme, which would amount to the creation of a garden city on both sides of the estuary, is being considered by Yvette Cooper, the housing minister, according to Building Design magazine.

Emma Appleton of Cabe said: "A lot of the focus at the moment is about the quantity of housing that needs to be built, but quality is so important. This scheme has raised the bar."

Additional reporting: Will Iredale