Attitudes to Higher Density Developments in the South East

Report on Survey and Workshops with Planning Committee Members from Local Authorities

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A report for the
South East England Regional Assembly

by

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(Urban and Economic Development Group)
with MORI

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ATTITUDES TO HIGHER DENSITY DEVELOPMENT IN THE SOUTH EAST

Report on survey and workshops with Planning Committee Members from Local Authorities

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Seminars on urban renaissance in the South East (*Urban Renaissance: Increasing the Momentum)*, and workshops, run in conjunction with the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors, highlighted difficulties that Councils were facing in implementing government policy for housing (PPG3); opposition to higher density development amongst local councillors and the wider public emerged as a key obstacle to delivery. This led to the South East England Regional Assembly commissioning research to examine attitudes to higher density development.

While development generates opposition throughout the South East, little is known about the precise concerns or what could be done to make the process more painless. This report sets out the findings from a survey of councillors on Planning Committees throughout the South East region, and a series of three workshops held to explore in more detail the issues raised in the survey, as well as mechanisms for addressing them. The report has been produced for a Task Group of the Assembly's Urban Renaissance Advisory Group by URBED with support from MORI in undertaking and analysing the results of the survey.

Innovative methodology

The project was innovative in a number of ways:

- Adopting an 'action research' approach to policy development at a regional level
- Using an email questionnaire linked to a website to secure responses to a range of options, and to allow scope for personal comments
- Holding 'round table workshops' with councillors on their own to probe into attitudes, and to discuss possible solutions
- Discussing the emerging findings with volume housebuilders, whose views have also been taken into account.

The process secured a relatively high response rate, including reaching areas and groups that are easily overlooked, and those involved found it much more satisfying than the usual form of conference or training. It suggests a way of building consensus on controversial issues.

Attitudes and perceptions

The survey found that housing was a top priority for a high proportion of councillors, and higher density housing was seen mainly as having environmental benefits, with a much smaller proportion recognising other benefits, such as affordability. The disadvantages, which were raised more frequently, included extra traffic and parking (62%), opposition from local residents (51%), out of character (44%), and impact on local services (39%).

Mixed-use development was perceived as helping to reduce car travel, and thus being more sustainable, as well as bringing town centres back to life and helping with security. However some felt that mixed used development was more appropriate for cities rather than suburbs, and that although fine in theory it was more difficult to put into practice. In general there was much less resistance to mixed use developments than to higher density developments, and councillors are concerned about retaining a balance of uses, while ensuring that new housing does not put more pressure on over-stretched services.

Towards a toolkit

There was general agreement that the process could be improved by dealing with the different concerns, and hence the idea of a 'toolkit' that reflected the different circumstances in the South East was welcomed. Some 40 different proposals were generated, largely based on what had worked in particular authorities. These were later classified in order to provide a useful framework, under six 'Cs' that will affect progress: **consultation** (engaging the community), **character** (adapting the design to the context), **connectivity** (minimising the impact of parking and traffic), **capacity** (improving services and infrastructure), **capability** (raising skills and knowledge), **and communication and coordination** (streamlining the planning and design processes).

Policy implications

The consultants drew out fifteen implications for action, addressed to the different stakeholders, which in summary cover:

1. Sharing good practice
2. Research on density
3. Planning tariffs
4. Parking standards
5. Internet based toolkit
6. Impact assessment
7. Land assembly
8. Design guides
9. Sub-urban renaissance
10. Study tours
11. Proactive planning
12. Community engagement techniques
13. Publicity for excellence
14. Better presentational techniques
15. Compacts to streamline the process.

1. Introduction

This report summarises the findings from a five month action research project, commissioned by the South East Regional Assembly and undertaken by URBED with MORI, to find out councillors' attitudes towards higher density development, and to devise the basis of a toolkit towards improved delivery. The research follows a series of seminars and conferences on urban renaissance in the South East (*Urban Renaissance: Increasing the Momentum)*, which highlighted the difficulties Councils were facing in implementing government policy for housing (PPG3) including:

- concerns about escalating house prices and low rates of house building.
- a mismatch between forecast demand, and what was actually being constructed
- high levels of controversy over most planning applications
- a lack of capacity to handle the issues, as most of the local authorities in the South East are quite small, and have difficulty recruiting experienced planning staff.

A subsequent series of workshops, run in conjunction with the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors, highlighted the issue of opposition to higher density development amongst local councillors and the wider public as a key obstacle to delivery. The Assembly's Urban Renaissance Advisory Group and Housing Advisory Group decided that this warranted further research, which should address attitudes to urban renaissance across the region, not solely in the larger towns and cities. A small task group was established to manage the research. It decided to focus the research on the attitudes and perceptions of planning committee members as key decision makers, and who to the Assembly's knowledge were not being adequately engaged by other national and regional bodies on this issue.
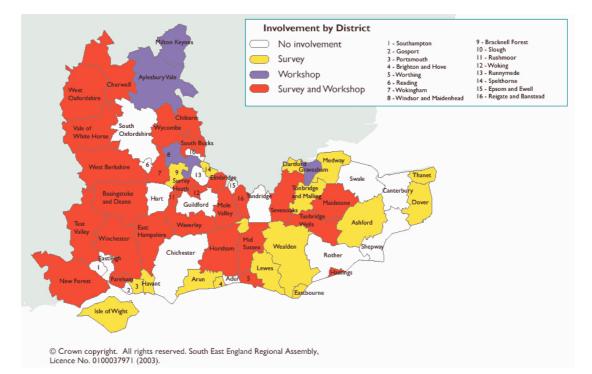
The range of 30-50 dwellings per hectare was used as the starting point for higher densities in the workshop discussions, in accordance with Planning Policy Guidance 3 (Housing), and in the context of low average densities for housing completions in recent decades. However the examples presented and discussed were not limited to this range and included schemes in the range 50-70 and 70+ dph, to demonstrate their suitability for varying contexts.

The sections that follow deal in turn with:
- A new methodology
- Members' attitudes
- Housebuilders' attitudes
- Moving forward
- Conclusions and implications.

Quotes from the survey and workshops are included to illustrate the main points. A summary of MORI's findings is set out in an Appendix, and this was distributed at the workshops.

Participation in Survey and Workshops

2. A new methodology

In carrying out the research a number of innovative techniques were used, which provided a different approach to policy development by involving Members (of all levels). A web-based survey was sent out to Members of Planning Committees to probe into the reasons behind the resistance to higher density housing, and Members were also invited to a workshop to discuss the results. Separate discussions took place with members of the South East branch of the House Builders Federation (HBF) to gain a further perspective.

Web survey

A multi-choice on-line email survey was used to explore the pros and cons of higher density housing, ways of improving the planning process, and attitudes to different types of design. URBED and MORI drew up a multi-choice questionnaire, drawing on previous experience, and email contacts were secured through the Regional Assembly. Respondents were also given space to express their own views, which were then analysed. The questionnaire was emailed to over 1000 councillors, with a full response rate of 24%, plus a number of part completed surveys. This is in line with MORI's experience elsewhere.

The pattern of responses was reasonably representative: 12% of respondents were chairs of Planning Committees, 51% were Conservative, 31% Liberal Democrat and only 9% Labour. 24% said they represented an urban district, 25% suburban, and 33% rural. 2/3rds had lived in the area 20 years or longer, and were over 55. 73% were male. There was a good spread throughout the region, and 54 out of a possible 74 authorities took part. Some of the growth areas did not respond.

Workshops

60% of respondents said they would be interested in attending a workshop, and over 100 councillors registered for one of the three events, held in Eastbourne, High Wycombe and Basingstoke. The format involved:

- an introduction by the Chair to explain that 'we are listening to you to help shape policy' and are not here to 'sell government policy or change lifestyles'
- a presentation on the results of the MORI survey (see **Appendix** for a summary of the responses)
- workshop discussions in the morning to explore the advantages and disadvantages of higher density development (with mixed groups, each with an independent facilitator and with a Member reporting back)
- a presentation on attitudes towards design and a discussion on densities
- discussions after lunch took place on how the process could be improved in terms of a number of emerging themes

- a final plenary session to bring together findings from the afternoon with some summary points

Housebuilders discussion group

24 members of the Housebuilders Federation met in Windsor, at one of their regular meetings, and after a brief presentation of the survey findings, a facilitated discussion was held to understand their views on barriers and solutions to higher density development, with presentations from the Regional Assembly and URBED. 10 members agreed to take part in a brief email survey, and four responses were received from which further comments have been drawn.

Conclusions

The entire process was generally judged a success, with some very favourable comments.

- Councillors welcomed the chance of sharing experience, and contributing to policy development.
- It also filled a communications gap between the regional planning body and local planning committee members.
- Though the email survey took longer than expected, it was seen as a good way of finding out what people thought.
- The workshop format was seen as much more constructive than had been expected, and there was surprisingly little conflict.
- The process involved developing ideas for improvement on the back of a shared understanding of the problems.
- Using Task group members as convenors worked well, and the facilitator training, provided by MORI with URBED, was appreciated.
- An unexpected bonus was that it was seen as a 'capacity building' exercise by a number who took part.
- The process could usefully be repeated for other policy issues, as it is relatively cost-effective.
- A good venue (preferably not a Council Chamber) and a good lunch help!

'A better form of training than in our own local authority'

3. Members' Attitudes

The findings from the survey were probed into in more depth at the three workshops, and led to proposals for change in six theme areas (the planning process, training, services, traffic, community engagement and design). The further workshop with house-builders gave an opportunity to test out some of the survey findings and to gather opinions and ideas from their perspective.

Findings of Councillors' Survey

Priorities
Councillors in the South East see housing as one of the top issues for Britain today (in line with the rest of the population), but there are some differences of opinion:

- 42% considered housing one of the top issues for Britain today followed by health, pensions and crime
- Housing and the economy were each considered by 14% as the single most important issue for Britain today
- However attitudes varied, and in Kent many more thought transport was the most important issue (24% versus 5%)
- Conservatives tended to put more weight on the economy and crime compared with Lib Dem and Labour councillors, although only a small number of Labour councillors responded.
- Many believed the South East to be over-crowded, with over-stretched services
- A number thought the answer is to use empty properties in the North.

'The government should… encourage people to settle and site their organisations in areas where housing is plentiful and labour is abundant.'

Pros and Cons
Though many respondents highlighted a range of problems some thought that higher density housing could bring benefits if it were done properly in the right place, and for the right residents. The **main advantages** identified were:

- **Environmental** (mentioned by 41%) e.g. minimising the loss of greenfield land, containing sprawl, and allowing the application of sustainable technologies

  'High density housing is important but must be used carefully and in a balanced way with consideration of the environment particularly in areas of historic and cultural value'

- **Affordability** was raised by 17% e.g. housing for people at the bottom end of the housing ladder

'Affordable homes for the young people who will never be able to buy their own home at today's inflated prices'

- **Social** benefits were identified by 14% e.g. responding to the demand for smaller households, or providing proper community facilities

   'Wider social mix in town centres'

   'Not for the average couple with children who need space/gardens. However, suitable for the increasing number of people living alone, especially those whose lives/inclination leaves little time for gardening'.

- **Infrastructure** was suggested by 9% e.g. making public transport more economic, and reducing the need to travel

   'Enables more people to live nearer jobs and infrastructure'

- **Quality** e.g. potentially better townscape and urban design by 3%

   'Potentially better towns if proper townscape principles are adopted and distinctiveness insisted on'

   'Providing that the build quality is good and the residents have access to local amenities, employment etc, high density housing can offer affordable homes that people want to live in, in defined 'neighbourhoods', whilst preserving the countryside and preventing urban sprawl.'

Previous work had identified a large number of possible reasons why councillors might be opposed to higher density housing, which the survey narrowed down to six **main barriers**:

1. Concerns about the impact on **traffic and parking** (62% of respondents). 26% said traffic was the single biggest barrier, and this is also said to be one of the main reasons why local residents object to new housing developments.

    'I have no problem with high density in town centres areas but in suburban areas it changes lifestyles of the existing residents and the associated parking problems affect visual amenity and safety'

2. Concerns that **local residents** are not in favour (51%)

    ''Higher densities in this country usually mean cramming as many properties as possible on the smallest piece of land'.

3. Concerns that the development is 'out of **character'** with the local area (44%)

'Higher density can only be good if it is of good design and if it blends naturally with the surroundings.'

4. Concerns about the impact on **local services** e.g. schools and hospitals (39%)
    'Perhaps it could provide much needed infrastructure. However we are not wealthy, as wrongly perceived, in the South east and schools, hospitals, police and roads are pushed to the limit.'

5. Concerns about the lack of **public spaces** and play areas (20%)
    'If we are not careful we will create the slums of tomorrow with little green space and nowhere for young people to go'

6. Concerns associated with '**problem families** ' (16%)
    'High rise dismantles communities'

Other reasons, such as higher density developments are perceived to be ugly, or have an effect on reducing house values, while vigorously held by a minority, are probably not widely enough held to sway the outcome. Some factors previously thought to be important, such as that higher density housing was associated with tall buildings, or that the press was against it, were found to be of little general importance, though they matter strongly to some.

Perceptions on mixed-use development

In addition perceptions on the value of **mixed-use development** were explored. Mixed uses were seen as helping to reduce car travel, and thus as being more sustainable. Furthermore *'having residents in town centres brings them back to life, and helps with security'*. However some felt that mixed uses were fine for cities, but not for suburbs. Others thought that in practice the only kinds of shops that would be viable were supermarkets, and that office workers were unlikely to live locally. There was a feeling that it was fine in theory, but would not work in practice.

'I think people like to go out to work, out to the shops; amenities should be close and accessible but not in the same building…'

In general there was much less resistance to mixed use developments than to higher density developments. Councillors perceived that there was far more resistance from local residents than other councillors or the local press, and interestingly even in urban areas, 68% thought there was resistance from local residents compared with 19% from councillors. However resistance dropped when a mix of uses was proposed, falling from 79% of local residents to 39% in suburban and rural locations. This reinforces the point that councillors are concerned about retaining a balance of uses, and ensuring that new housing does not put more pressure on over-stretched services.

Conclusions from the workshops

General concerns

The workshops reinforced the views expressed in the survey, and brought out the need for 'horses for courses':

- Councillors were concerned that PPG3 was too dogmatic (' a straightjacket'), and did not take account of local circumstances, particularly as far as parking provision was concerned. Above all they wanted to conserve the quality of life in the South East.
- They resented government telling them what to do, while not providing the resources to upgrade the infrastructure in advance of new development.
- A number complained about Inspectors' decisions that had gone against their Council
- There was general support however for higher density housing in urban centres, but a resistance to new housing in rural areas, unless it was affordable by those who already lived there or key workers.

Concerns about design

The workshops took forward one of the email survey questions that sought reactions on ten different higher density-housing schemes. They were chosen to reflect a range of locations and styles of architecture, and all had been completed fairly recently. Respondents were asked for reactions on their suitability for different types of location, and different types of resident. The broad results were discussed at the workshops, with the following conclusions:

- The suitability of a scheme very much depended on its context, and almost all the examples were seen as either highly suitable or quite suitable for several different situations.
- The schemes tended to be seen as most suitable for town centre redevelopments and brownfield land releases
- They were not generally seen as suitable for village extensions or greenfield land releases
- Interestingly the schemes that looked most traditional did not always score the highest responses
- Though there were great differences on what constituted good design, opinions tended to shift when the precise location was known
- Quite minor considerations, such as the presence of outside meter boxes or coloured weatherboarding, aroused very strong views
- The discussion revealed the practical difficulties of judging what the density was from a single picture, and the need to understand the layout of the public spaces before reaching a judgement.

Attitudes to the schemes also varied in terms of whom they would be suitable for.

- In general the schemes were seen as suitable for households without children with some notable exceptions

- The obvious town centre schemes and blocks of flats were not considered particularly suitable for older people
- The pictures that drew the widest support tended to show clusters of buildings
- Some modern looking schemes, with plenty of glass, drew as much support as more conventional designs

Emerging themes

By the end of the second workshop six themes had emerged and the following tables provide a summary of the main responses (under these themes) from the morning session, which examined advantages and disadvantages of higher density development, and the afternoon session when the emphasis was on finding ways to improve the process.

TRAFFIC	
AM Session: Advantages-Disadvantages	**PM Session: Suggestions**
Advantages • Helps viability of public transport • Benefits of local employment and therefore traffic reduction (especially out commuting) **Disadvantages** • Acceptance that we live in a car owning society with inadequate public transport (especially evenings) that is not well integrated and that this does not tempt people out of cars • Greater pressure on local roads. Residents parking schemes already overloaded, with low parking standards causing parking on adjacent streets	• Require impact assessments • Transport infrastructure developed first • Underground parking for new developments • Encourage schemes that are environmentally friendly • Re- open parking standards debate • Clearer links between plans - particularly transport plans and the capacity of the road infrastructure to accommodate more development

SERVICES	
AM Session: Advantages-Disadvantages	**PM Session: Suggestions**
Advantages **Disadvantages** • Strain on existing infrastructure • Developers are not interested in the impact on infrastructure. Cumulative impacts of smaller developments - little scope for developer contributions	**Suggestions** • Encourage local areas to work out what are the local infrastructure needs that might be met from planning obligations • More talking with utilities etc. early in the process of considering more intensification • Large and "phased" schemes should have a brief or master plan that would also outline infrastructure requirements and how they would be provided • Health provision needs a formal link with planning process • Infrastructure must be financed - government finance should go hand in hand with housing allocations

DESIGN	
AM Session: Advantages-Disadvantages	**PM Session: Suggestions**
Advantages • Mixed use can be visually appealing • Good design was acknowledged to be critical. A number of delegates were very confident that good design can overcome many of the problems that have occurred in previous high density schemes • A recognition that they can be attractive- e.g. historic "old town" areas are high density **Disadvantages** • Intensification leading to loss of local character • High standards of design are not always achieved – often 'lumbered with the design' • A feeling that developers did not invest in good designers, yet generally they felt as members that do have the courage to reject poor schemes or ask for more information/ redesigns • Good schemes spoilt by poorly designed 'afterthought' e.g. bad shops front, signage	• Need for better visual representations of schemes to be presented to committee (including virtual models) • Encourage greener design, energy efficiency and grey water recycling • Suggestion that designs should be forwarded for CABE as external adjudicator - with increased and formalised powers to judge schemes • Design is a matter to be decided locally - avoid uniform design and encourage local identity • Design the open spaces as well as the buildings • Make design statements the 'norm' • Begin dialogue on design early in the process

TRAINING	
AM Session: Advantages-Disadvantages	**PM Session: Suggestions**

• Training for new members should be mandatory
• Do Planning Inspectors have the necessary knowledge/skills to deal with design issues?
	• Additional skills/knowledge training is needed on:
	  ▪ Design and sustainable design (eco-design)
	  ▪ Conservation
	  ▪ The national policy context
	• Training should be a requirements for planning committee members
	• Study tours to sites elsewhere would be welcome
	• Examples of good/bad practice are needed

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT	
AM Session: Advantages-Disadvantages	**PM Session: Suggestions**
• Partnership concept- to include a wider group • Yet members claimed to follow the Local Plan even though this may conflict with resident's views • An observation that new 'incomers' were generally more resistant to change • Reluctance of local residents to communicate about issues	• Ensure community involvement at the policy making stage – make it simple – responsibility of Councillors in the process too • Community consultation must be followed by feedback and results • Need for more public education on the planning system • Ensure accurate advice is given to future residents about restrictions on permitted developments • More use of referenda/polls • Bigger partnerships needed on bigger schemes to win public support • Need for further research into public attitudes to higher density development

PLANNING PROCESS	
AM Session: Advantages - Disadvantages	**PM Session: Suggestions**
• Can be a way to achieve affordable housing • Can protect the green belt {It is appropriate to use brown field sites wherever possible, in order to prevent pressure on the use of greenfield sites} • Encourages regeneration/urban renaissance • There are some councillors, mostly representing urban areas, who support the principles of both higher densities and mixed use developments • In villages infill can help to bring life to the centre of the community **Disadvantages** • The experience is that affordable housing is not being delivered - the ability of the planning system to deliver was questioned • Planning policy often pushes densities higher than is acceptable locally • Much discussion on the politics of housing - higher densities disturb the "status quo" and therefore the electors are upset, and the attitudes of present house owners are more pressing than the wishes of future home owners • Too many councillors perceived "higher" densities (30-50 dpha) as "high" densities (100+ dpha). As a result too many automatically perceived higher densities as multi-storey blocks of flats full of social problem families	• More consultation is needed (and earlier in the development process), but concerns arose about current levels of resources in planning departments. All agreed that pre consultation is very important and should be encouraged. • Approaches to consultation with developers and site visits vary hugely, and clarification is needed to avoid criticisms of possible 'corruption' • Suggestion that areas of towns/cities etc. could be graded (or 'scored'), thus offering an indication of the sensitivity of the townscape. This could give developers some advanced warning in more sensitive areas to consult earlier, even if the site was not designated with a specific policy in the UDP/LSF. • Clearer definition of terms is needed e.g. brown field, higher densities etc. • Potential use of a tariff to address incremental developments, and in particular with smaller, infill sites • How do we address problems associated with developer seeking amendments to the development after being granted planning permission. This is particularly important where these changes are not subject to planning obligations. Consequently S106 may no longer reflect the true scale of impacts.

Conclusions

The responses to the survey and workshops suggest that it is possible to secure support for higher density housing and mixed use schemes providing:

• the pros and cons are recognised
• policies respond to differences in context
• greater use is made of examples that have worked
• proposals are well presented and capable of easy interpretation.

4. Housebuilders' Attitudes

As well as talking to individual housebuilders and professionals involved with higher density schemes, we set up a discussion through the South East branch of the House Builders Federation. While they often come into conflict with Councils, there was considerable common ground in terms of the main issues, with six main points:

1. While housebuilders appeared to be complying with government guidance, they complained that councils were rejecting schemes that met PPG3 (often winning officer support only to be then turned down by members). As a result of all the delays and hassle, some builders are thinking of moving out of strategic development altogether. Small sites, e.g. developing 12 flats on the site of two houses, present particular problems

2. The biggest problem is local opposition, and general hostility to developers. Residents groups were seen to have an undue influence, and consultation can be counter-productive, for example increasing resistance to affordable housing. Local councillors avoid taking responsibility. There would be less of a problem if there were clear rules that everyone understood.

3. The planning process is far too complex and slow, and housebuilders are sceptical about achieving growth targets through the public sector. Technical difficulties also lead to delays e.g. problems with diverting watercourses and flooding fears

4. Parking standards need to be linked to the quality of public transport and hence the local situation

5. There seems to be a conflict between providing affordable housing for families, and building higher density schemes, in which gardens tend to lose out, and affordability is not always the priority

6. Housebuilders prefer to build standard products, with award winning schemes e.g. Lacuna tending to lose money, and be hard to sell, because outside London there is a limited market for innovative design. Further there is a problem of reconciling different views about what constitutes good design. Councillors are reluctant to visit schemes for fear of corruption.

Subsequently some of the housebuilders went into more detail

'It is a redundant employment site. There are asbestos and contamination issues to be addressed. Employment re-use is unviable. The site is within 7 minutes walk of the railway station and a highly sustainable location suitable for higher density than the PPG3 recommended range of 30-50 dpha. In response to the need for smaller units our office proposed a scheme for a range of smaller units and included affordable housing. In spite of the PPG3 advice the local authority is resisting the scheme in principle and in detail, asserting amongst other matters a lack of need for the change from employment to housing, insufficient car parking and excessive density. '

'We have a PPG3 compliant scheme in a village, which has a disproportionately high 4 and 5-bed percentage; mainly due to two/three storey development…local market conditions do not necessarily support high density housing in terms of smaller units.'

Conclusion

There is some common ground for improving the process for dealing with planning applications, given that councillors provide the necessary leadership.

5. Conclusions

Breaking down the barriers

Discussions in the workshops found great variations in how issues were tackled, as well as in levels of knowledge. However there was a genuine desire to improve the process, which many found very unrewarding, due to the degree of controversy that housing proposals, particularly infill schemes, tended to arouse. Hence there was support for the idea of a toolkit, and for using the Internet to share information. The primary audience for the toolkit would be Local Authority Councillors (Planning Committee members) and its purpose would be to give them the confidence to take a leadership role and not just to reflect constituents' opinions

Agreement was reached at the workshops that the toolkit needed to cover five main themes, as well as a general theme on improving the planning process or control. URBED have subsequently turned these into six headings, all beginning with the letter C, which provide a possible framework for a toolkit:

- **Consultation** Engaging the local community
- **Character** Ensuring quality design fits the context in terms of both the public realm and the houses themselves
- **Connectivity** Avoiding traffic and parking problems
- **Capacity** Paying for improved services and infrastructure
- **Capability** Raising the skills, knowledge and expertise of councillors and officers
- **Communication and coordination** Streamlining the planning and design processes.

In the sections below suggestions for improvement that were raised in the workshops are listed along with examples of good practice that were given at the time.

Consultation

Councils have very different approaches to consultation, and the process can be biased towards negative responses from immediate neighbours to the proposed development. There was a general feeling that developers and housebuilders should do more to improve the way schemes are presented, including the use of easily understood visual material. They should also be involved in finding ways to reduce local opposition with, for example, mediation meetings being trialed in Oxford, community planning events in a number of places, such as Caterham, site visits in Gravesend, and seminars with builders and members of the community in Winchester.

Other suggestions for improving consultation included:
- Engaging the community at the policy making stage, and in working up development briefs for key sites

- Making more use of referenda, polls and citizens' panels to reach beyond the 'usual suspects'
- Holding site visits to gauge opinion
- Using variants of the Village Appraisal or Market Town Health Check process to help build community awareness
- Involving ward councillors, and creating a sense of partnership
- Buying in community consultation or 'action planning' skills for key projects
- Being open and honest about the ground rules, constraints and the way in which feedback will be given following consultation events
- Maintaining momentum when consultation has taken place, and making sure that feedback is timely and next steps in the process are always put forward
- Ensuring feedback on key decisions taken centrally, and especially explaining the reasons for going against local views where necessary
- Engaging the community in considering and putting forward ideas for wider community benefits.

A house builder subsequently commented:
'Councillors are caught up in the Homes don't win votes trap. The more productive councillors seem to support development but only by providing significant planning gain and avoiding housing in their ward.'

Character
As well as the misconceptions about what higher densities actually mean, there was a strong resistance to the loss of character, for example, villages being turned into more urban areas. It is essential to recognise the different character of areas, e.g. suburban/higher density villages/dispersed villages. Councillors want to retain local distinctiveness, and felt that they were often 'lumbered with the design', with little choice.

Further poor urban design and low building standards, especially noise insulation, were likely to create future problems. There is also the problem of developers who make changes midstream, having gained planning permission and built a first phase to high standards. While the answer may lie in local authorities being more positive on what they want, there is a real issue about lack of expertise, and a need to share what there is. Yet the new Regional Design Panel process, and Design for Homes, which provide information on good practice were virtually unknown.

Suggestions for improvements included:
- Showing the context on the plan, and using ITC or 'virtual models' to illustrate how the scheme will look from different points
- Asking for sustainability assessments such as energy ratings, and giving sustainability considerations more weight
- Requiring developers to put forward Design Statements to back up applications that would show the proposals in context and explain their rationale

- Encouraging the use of better architects, and using local advisory design panels for sensitive projects, with major schemes going to CABE
- Insisting on pre-application discussions, and then getting the application right first time
- Producing design guides (that take into account local materials etc.) for counties or areas of distinctive character
- Recognising good practice with awards.

'There is still a widespread misconception amongst local authority councillors (and it is the councillors and not the officers in most cases) that high density equals high-rise and low quality. The key way to change this perception is to actually show councillors that this is not the case.'

Connectivity

The number of cars generated by a development varied with the context e.g. urban vs. rural, and the age of the occupants, as well as their affluence. Many councillors were cynical about the scope to change behaviour in the South East. It was seen as quite unrealistic to set maximum national standards, and low parking standards could end up imposing cars on the adjoining streets. Where and so long as alternatives to the car are not in place (including walking), a more realistic set of guidelines is needed. One possibility would be for parking standards to be set at the regional level for different types of location, and to bear some relationship to the quality of local public transport. This could be part of a transport strategy for the South East. Standards need to be applied systematically to take account of, for example, railway services not just proximity to a railway station. There were a few examples of good practice in urban areas for example a taxi bus from the door to the station in Bicester, cycle usage in Oxford, and restricting purchases of flats to those without a car in Brighton. Some councillors appreciated that one of the benefits of mixed uses could be to share car parking.

Suggestions for improving the process included:
- Linking transport planning to housing growth, and providing the increased transport capacity first
- Applying creative thinking, for example funding as part of Section 106 agreements, on major developments or providing vouchers for public transport in locations that are near railway stations and town centres
- Reintroducing school buses
- Agreeing Green Travel Plans with major employers
- Using underground and semi-basement space for car parking in blocks of flats so that the public realm is not dominated by cars, and to use land more intensively
- Encouraging cycling by providing safe routes to stations, and adequate space for parking or taking bikes on public transport.

'Councillors will understand and put up with innovative designs, layouts and so on. But the one they will not put up with is lack of parking as insufficient parking provision results in complaints, neighbour

disputes and destruction of planted areas and verges, as people park their cars wherever they are able, regardless of any consideration for visual amenity.'

Capacity

The demands made on services very much depend on the type of occupants, and not just on the tenure. This could change over time, with, for example, large Victorian houses being replaced by higher density houses or flats. However higher densities do not necessarily lead to pressures on schools, as the example of sheltered housing illustrates. Councillors were concerned about the pressures on already over-loaded services, and that there was a 'lot of pain for very little gain'. There was therefore considerable support for the ideas not only of housebuilders assessing the impact on services (as they already may do on the environment) but also on setting some kind of 'tariff' to help recover the costs. It is difficult to secure infrastructure contributions from small housing sites, and it is probable that housing on greenfield sites can afford to make a much higher contribution, (as it could be taken off the land value). So as well as assessing the capacity of the physical infrastructure, such as roads and sewers, there was also a need for a method to take account of schools and health services.

Suggestions included:
- Requiring proposals to consider the social impact in terms of the lifestyles of likely occupants
- Charging a tariff on a prearranged basis (perhaps in relation to the value of the scheme or its location?)
- Pooling contributions over a wider area
- Preparing masterplans for larger sites to show how infrastructure provision can be phased
- Talking to the utilities early on in the process
- Providing finance for infrastructure linked to housing allocations
- Promoting the idea of sustainable development through the schools

'Infrastructure development i.e. roads, sewer capacities, public transport, healthcare and leisure facilities rarely receive enough investment to sustain growth at high densities.'

Capability

There was a widespread feeling that councillors received inadequate training for the difficult job they had to do, and had to rely too much on officers' recommendations. This particularly applied to urban design, and members would welcome visiting other parts of the region, and sharing experience. There were obvious conflicts between better informed and smaller committees, and representing wider interests. The planning committee was there to take a wider perspective than that of local ward members (who would be under obvious pressure). Planning Inspectors came in for a lot of criticism, as there was a feeling that they generally did not have the right background to deal with design issues.

A number of proposals were put forward in the workshops for improving communications, and raising capacity:

- Setting up a forum to bring councillors (and possibly others such as builders) together from time to time to discuss ways of improving provision of new housing
- Disseminating case studies and examples of what has worked, using the Internet or a web site
- Undertaking study tours to find out what has worked in different areas
- Scoring completed schemes against a range of different performance criteria
- Providing training in how to assess the context of a scheme, and how to judge design in context
- Using IT to show the impact of new housing, including arrangements for car parking etc.

'In summary therefore, there is a lot that can be done to change attitudes in terms of education and increasing councillor awareness of quality developments. However nothing will persuade them of any positive aspect of the PPG3 parking stipulations.

Communication and coordination

There are very limited supplies of brownfield sites in the areas where housing demand is strongest, which is one reason why many of the councillors were anti PPG3. While the planning process may help protect amenity, it is not seen as a particularly good way of delivering results, for example in terms of affordable housing, or of alleviating house owners fears of their property losing value as a result of new homes being built. Also simply building more houses would not necessarily make them affordable by the groups that were losing out. The concerns of current homeowners far outweigh future considerations. Participants were informed of the views of house builders, which were basically that the system was too negative, and that councillors should provide more leadership, and not go against their officers when the application conformed to PPG3.

However councillors often felt under pressure in meeting the targets for turning round applications, with the result that officers as well as developers can end up being seen as the 'enemy'. A less confrontational process is needed. While some councillors can never be persuaded, others (including the electorate) need to be convinced through examples that show that higher density schemes can be made to work, and that different planning processes, such as engaging the community in agreeing design guidelines, can be made to work. Suggestions for improving the process included:

- Developing a 'thesaurus' of terms to meet the expressed need for clarity of definitions e.g. brownfield, density
- Ensuring better quality of information is presented to committee (both visual and in terms of content)
- Documenting and sharing good practice.

Winchester City Council put on a good seminar recently with a good range of speakers and knowledgeable experts who explained what PPG3 was all about in layman's language. I was pleasantly surprised by the response of councillors, which wasn't as hostile as I was expecting.'

Conclusions

The workshops raised almost 40 ideas for dealing with the disadvantages and barriers raised earlier, including a number of proposals that would justify further research and development at a regional or national level:

- Taking account of service capacity in allocating future housing growth
- Assessing the likely impact of new developments on housing demand and affordability
- Using Planning Tariffs as a contribution towards expanding service capacity
- Ensuring that developer commitments, e.g. design quality, are honoured

6. Moving Forward

To move things forward PPG3 has to be seen as a framework for action not a straightjacket. The evidence from the survey and workshops shows that councillors on the whole recognise the importance of bringing the housing stock into balance with changing demands, and the value of building to higher densities in certain circumstances, but lack the tools to make the planning process work better. While their aims are not the same as house builders, both feel that the planning systems is not working properly, as it is over confrontational. With local residents wanting generally to keep the status quo, better incentives and safeguards are needed if councillors are to take a wider and longer-term perspective. In particular councillors want there to be different policies for different contexts, differentiating, for example, between town centres, suburbs, and rural villages.

While many changes are underway, such as the development of sub-regional spatial strategies and the role of CABE (the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment), in raising design standards, we also found that few people understand what higher densities really mean, or how better quality design can be secured. As the previous section showed, there is no simple recipe for success, but a whole range of ways in which the process could be improved. Hence achieving the real objectives of the Sustainable Communities Plan depends on securing a 'step change' in the way all the councils in the South East act. This requires a much better exchange of information on good practice between local authorities, not simply the production of more guidance from the centre.

URBED have therefore made fifteen recommendations, directed at the different stakeholders who need to work together if a step change is to be achieved. They are essentially about achieving Smarter Growth, that is development that not only looks attractive, but also makes more intelligent use of limited resources and existing transport capacity, to adapt a term used by the New Urbanism in the USA. In each case we have first identified an 'easy win', and also gone on to suggest more fundamental changes that would produce larger but longer-term pay-offs.

Nationally

1. **Sharing good practice** Good practice should be shared among local authorities through research into what works, dissemination through Architecture Centres, an expanded programme of Design in Context events, and the promotion of sources of information on better new housing e.g. **www.buildingforlife.org**. The workshop techniques used in this study suggest the value of 'learning by doing' rather than just listening to experts.

2. **Research on higher density** Further research is required into better ways of assessing density, developing guidelines that reflect basic differences in context e.g. proximity to transport infrastructure. Research is especially needed into parking standards in new housing, and how to reduce the space occupied by cars, e.g. by greater use of underground parking and cycling as on the Continent, taking account of the full range of situations in the South East, and allowing for the time it takes to improve public transport and modify behaviour. This may be just as important than pre-fabrication in securing better value from scarce resources.

3. **Planning Tariffs** Government needs to address the problems of funding infrastructure and services in advance of development, for example through making a charge on development schemes (over one acre) that can be used to overcome bottlenecks. The Planning Tariff therefore sounds promising, but needs guidelines (such as up to 2% of the achieved value of the development) if it is to overcome the current barriers, along with a robust methodology that can cover the range of situations in terms of development profitability.

Regionally

4. **Parking standards** The Regional Assembly and SEEDA can help not only in sharing good practice, for example through the new Design Champions, but also by drawing up standards for parking provision and charges to cover different kinds of situation. This appears to be the single easiest way to improve relationships between all the stakeholders.

5. **Internet based toolkit** Councillors expressed support for using the Internet as a means of sharing information, and it provides a cost-effective way of building up a toolkit and reinforcing local networks. The toolkit needs to start with information on changing lifestyles in the main types of household and with practical methods for identifying the best locations for promoting growth, taking account of different forms of capital (social and economic as well as environmental) and the costs of alternative ways of overcoming capacity constraints. It can also help to publicise good practice, and support local design initiatives.

6. **Impact assessment** Further work should be undertaken on how to assess the impact of new housing schemes on services as well as infrastructure capacity, (and going beyond the physical potential) to refine the process of assessing

capacity, and setting targets for housebuilding in each region. This should make full use of Geographic Information Systems to take account of the main constraints on development.

7. **Land assembly** The South East suffers particularly from the problem of high land values and pressures on the Green Belt. Acquiring land in advance of development proposals could take some of the heat and conflict out of the system, and here the Brownfield Land Assembly Trust should help to show the way. Lessons might also be usefully drawn from other countries, such as Holland, where the process seems to work more smoothly.

Counties

8. **Design guides** The use of design guides to highlight local character and promote better layouts should remove some of the objections, but needs to be backed up by a capacity building or training programme. An example is the one being proposed under the auspices of the South East Rural Towns Partnership. Some of the Counties such as Kent and Surrey have already made good progress in promoting better design, and their experience should be tapped.

9. **Sub-urban renaissance** There is a particular need to share good practice on tackling the issues raised in the suburbs, for example in terms of infill development and the development of large gardens in locations close to shops and services both within and between counties. There are very few recognised examples and yet these, along with sites on the edge of town centres, probably offer the most potential outside industrial and coastal areas. Councils could recognise quality and innovation, for example through awards and study tours to visit model schemes. Involvement in learning networks, such as Interreg, which operates at the European level, would help to break down prejudice and ignorance. The Urban Renaissance Advisory Group might provide the necessary leadership, and the consortium involved in Design for Homes provides another possibility.

Districts

10. **Study tours** Study tours to find out what works pay dividends, and here bodies like the growing network of Architecture Centres could help fill the gap, including developing better links with Continental practice.

11. **Culture change** There are clearly very different practices, and a genuine desire to learn from others, which needs to be fostered. This means making this kind of 'action research' the norm rather than an exception. The work that some Districts are doing on Future Scanning and Agenda 21 e.g. Milton Keynes should be extended. The ODPM's grants for Design Initiatives and for changing the culture of planning should provide the means of piloting new approaches.

12. **Community engagement techniques** Councillors on Planning Committees have important roles to play not just in adjudicating on controversial proposals, but also in helping to shape public opinion. However they are in a poor position

to represent the views of the future generations who will benefit from new housing, or to ensure that new housing is truly sustainable. Hence the required statements on Community Engagement need to consider a range of techniques for going beyond the 'usual suspects', such as opinion surveys and round table workshops

Housebuilders

13. **Better presentational techniques** Instead of new housing being seen as a poor substitute for an old house, or something just for 'yuppies in large cities' it should be sold, as on the Continent, as offering a better lifestyle. It also has to show that it can meet the special needs of both the young and elderly, not just families, who represent the minority of the potential market, but who dominate the minds of decision makers. This means improving the standard of presentation generally, for example, the use of 3D computer aided models that show a scheme in context, and Impact Assessments that identify the likely occupants, and the use they will make of local services, based on previous experience.

14. **Publicity for excellence** While house and landowners may have benefited from the recent rises in house prices, the housing industry is relatively vulnerable and defensive. Furthermore builders are in competition with each other, and are generally too small and profit oriented to do much to change the climate of opinion. However by recognising, evaluating and publicising achievements, attitudes can be changed over time. Here collaboration with local authorities, for example in producing guides or toolkits, should produce dividends.

All

15. **Compacts to streamline the process** Our final recommendation, addressed to all, is to use the process of Quality Assurance and Design Codes that is being canvassed by CABE (and also the emerging findings of both the Barker and Egan reviews) to provide a 'faster track' method for planning major schemes (e.g. over 50 units). By entering into 'compacts' with both public agencies and private developers to expand the infrastructure to cope with population growth, house building in the South East could make the 'step change' needed to meet both the housing and sustainable development targets.