Blended landscapes of Outer London

Lucy Natarajan, Dimitrios Panayotopoulos-Tsiros, Jonathan Manns

Abstract

In March 2020, a Suburban Taskforce was established by Members of Parliament (MPs) in the UK. This Taskforce argued that the experiences of suburbs in England were poorly understood by policy-makers and developers, practitioners, and the general public. Over the two years of research and engagement that followed, a key consideration to emerge was the management of change and in the context of growth pressures evident in Outer London. This event has synergies with recent trends in suburban research that turn away from negative framings of places in extended metropolitan areas, such as 'edgeness' (not in the city) and 'in-between-ness' (neither urban nor rural activity). Instead, there is increasing focus on suburban cultural dynamics and political ecology. Drawing on these ideas, we look at suburbs as *landscapes* with natural and built elements, as well as diverse activities, and focus on the processes of *blending*. The evidence and views presented to the Taskforce are used to investigate the blended landscapes of Outer London. We explore the elements and development rationalities in two London Boroughs, Sutton and Waltham Forest, and the context that shapes choices. Our findings suggest that, while not discounting the significance of growth pressures and limits to local control, suburban landscapes are heavily influenced by responses to local socio-economic concerns, historic urban form, and the politics of local development. We conclude by reflecting on the directions of change in the study areas, and the significance of dynamics of ongoing blending of the landscapes across outer parts of major cities.

Exploring landscape dynamics

As outer city landscapes change, questions inevitably arise around suburban identity. This typically relates to the socio-economic considerations in suburbs and the myriad existing communities, but it also concerns the extent to which those are effectively recognised in development plans and policies. Such was the impetus for a cross-party parliamentary 'Suburban Taskforce' (the Taskforce), established[1] in the UK by Members of both Houses of Parliament, with the support of HM Government, which recently ran an inquiry focused on suburbs in England. The report of that Taskforce (Suburban Taskforce, 2022) was published on 5th September 2022 (i.e. at the time of writing). Data gathered for the Taskforce is revisited in this paper to explore suburban landscapes in London and the associated politics. We take suburbs to be "places of disorder and possibility" (De Vidovitch 2019, citing Keil 2018), and explore the political economy of their landscapes.

Recent studies of suburbia have questioned ideas of peripherality or 'edgeness' and comparative international works (esp. Fillion & Keil 2017, Harris 2010, Keil 2011, Phelps 2017) alongside selected socio-cultural studies in the UK (esp. Vaughan 2015). That literature helps to articulate the diversity and complexity of development processes that are generally associated with extended urban areas.

The paper starts with a summary of this work, which then guides the analysis of blended landscapes in two localities within administrative Boroughs of Outer London, i.e. within the Greater London Authority (GLA) area; Sutton and Waltham Forest. We look at these suburban places in the context of issues related to typical challenges in this part of England, of growth pressures and existing suburban forms. Then we unpack the societal choices involved in

changing local development, highlighting the particular conflicts and tensions, and offer reflections on the implications for grappling with future development in Outer London.

The problem with 'edgeness'

Current political debates about development in London, such as those which the 'Suburban Taskforce' has sought to explore, mirror considerations of a possible 'edgeness' in academic research. There are some well-rehearsed concerns over the critical dimensions of 'suburbia'; for instance Phelps (2017) recaps Harris & Larkham's (1999) listing around edgeness, residential character, low levels of density, distinctiveness of ways of life, and separation of community; and local administration. Edgeness might be regarded as the most reliable dimension, since it describes those places within conurbations that are not central in relation to a physical urban core or inner-city but which also defy rural categorisation. However, there are methodological difficulties in this type of 'cityism' (Connolly, 2019), which assumes there might be some generalizable 'city edge' form or monocentric urban economic force (De Vidovitch 2019).

In those framings, the socio-ecological relations at the rural and urban interface that produce urban forms are underplayed. Equally importantly , when communities 'at the edge' are perceived as economically peripheral, the suburban politics can easily be overlooked. Suburban studies have raised concern over unbounded constituencies (MacLeod & Jones 2011, Keil 2011, Phelps & Wood 2011), highlighting the political difficulties that arise for suburbs when political relations are fluid and lines of accountability obscured. This continues to be evidenced for instance by international studies of suburbanisation that demonstrate the changing nature of 'urbanisms', fuelled by processes of economic growth and spatial expansion (Phelps 2017, Keil and Lynch 2019), and diverse levels of infrastructural provision (Fillion & Keil 2017).

It is concerns such as this that led a group of Members of Parliament, directed by Dr Rupa Huq MP with the support of John Cruddas MP and David Simmonds MP, to establish the Taskforce with the support of what was then the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG)[2]. The notion of a well-served suburban political class, which in England often evokes the image of a dominant middle class, was firmly rejected by the Taskforce in parallel to critiques of city-ism. Huq argued that suburbs had become lost to policy debates, and were not seen as places in their own right. In her introduction to the first 'Call for Evidence', in August of 2020, Huq stated that "unlike "those inner cities" that Margaret Thatcher tasked Michael Heseltine to sort out, suburbs are rarely if ever considered problematic. Suburbs have, instead, been left to get on with it. For the past decade this has meant facing up to the challenges of austerity. However, suburbs are now facing problems of inequality and underfunding whilst being under pressure to expand or intensify." (STF, 2020, p.4). The mission of the Taskforce was therefore to align policy thinking on English suburbs with newer definitions of suburbs, especially those more situated accounts of diverse urban form and character, those focused on place-based socio-cultural phenomena, and those relating to the constitution of wider political relationships in the UK.

Landscapes of English suburbs

Convinced of the need to better articulate the nature of suburbs, the Taskforce set out to examine outer areas of major cities in the UK. It was driven by contestations around the image of suburbs in policy circles, and a sense of lost ideal of harmony or lack of balance. Take for instance the following quote from the initial call for evidence on suburbs:

"The stereotypical suburban lure was as an escape from grime and satanic mills in search of 'the good life' in 'Metroland'. This idea is nonetheless being challenged. Delivering 'the compact city' has supported local services but resulted in physical changes to our suburbs, such as an increase in the number of tall buildings, which do not always reflect the nature of suburbs which many envisage. This is particularly evident in major cities such as London. Suburbs were once envisioned as an ideal balance between town and country. The way in which we achieve that balance may, of course, be different today than a century or more ago." (STF, 2020, p.4)

As has been well argued (see e.g. Forsyth 2012), there is no generally applicable definition of suburban form. Nonetheless, there are two physical elements which are widely used to examine suburbs; being the density and local centres of activity such as high streets and cultural hubs (see e.g. Vaughan, 2015). As regards suburbs in the UK, the urban fabric at the edges of cities has been relatively unchanging (Vaughan 2015, Phelps 2017), and noted for traditionally low density and residential character. However, there is no easy relationship between density and form. Density measures relate only to floorspace rather than the intensity and clustering of the build, and research has focused on the inter-relationship between density and walkability (e.g. Berghauser Pont & Haupt, 2007, Forsyth 2018). This is increasingly seen as critical since the compactness and heights of buildings, and their impact on the brown-blue-green spatial layout are critical to societal effects such as public health and ecological resilience. Regarding suburban centres, these are generally assessed for their socio-cultural value and role in wider spatial functions. Diverse economic connections are seen as important, including those within areas and city-ones, for instance, Palaiologou's discussion of Upper Street, in the London Borough of Islington (Vaughan 2015, p.202), highlights relationships between a suburban high street and 'other' parts of a metropolis beyond the inner-city core.

In London, there have been historical moments of investment in technologies and infrastructures for suburban expansion in response to city growth, for instance transport links and major social housing estates, and these are foregrounded in narratives of place. Major infrastructural, and predominantly transport-related changes have sped up material transformation of the fabric of places and politics of their development. This is evidenced to some extent the very popularity of suburbs where, at least for London, most of the population lives, and by political mobilisation around changes to suburban governance (Holman & Thornley 2015). However, whilst consciousness of the material changes and investment logics are important to place heritage, they don't explain subsequent development and current landscapes. For example, it would be wrong to suggest that the shape of English suburbs *inherently* depends on external forces (e.g. to create communities in dormitory commuter belts) and instead, as others have more fully argued, that they are places that have continually adapted for success in the face of wider urban flows and changes such as globalisation (Phelps 2017; Mace 2011). As such, suburban landscapes can be read through historic urban transitions in edge locations and multifarious political agendas, including those relating to levels of density and local hubs of activity, as well as changing urban technologies and socio-economic trends.

The final scene setting points for the study relate to the organisation of development at the edges of cities in England. The UK's regulatory context can be considered relatively *laissez faire*, given for instance the typical mixed-modes of management of public space or

permissioning of temporary renting of properties, i.e. short-term-lets. (Manfredini, in Zhang & Taufen 2022). At the same time, there are some strict limits in terms of 'green belt' policies (Manns, 2021) that bound suburban expansion, introduced with the idea of preventing uncontrolled urban expansion. Green belts are expected to 'safeguard the countryside' through a separation from the built environment, as well as to prevent agglomeration and 'assist in urban regeneration, by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land' (DLUHC, 2021). Thus, rings of protected land around cities may also help preserve distinct if multiple urban 'centres' (Hall & Pain, 2006), and impact on the perceived value of 'in-between' spaces or Zwischenstadt (to borrow from Sieverts, 2003), see for instance the hopes and fears in studies of 'vacant land' (Freire Trigo, 2019), 'urban voids' (Panayotopoulos-Tsiros, 2020), and 'interstitial' sites (Silva, 2022).

Debates on urban expansion in the UK are key to understanding suburban landscapes in London, which face considerable growth pressures. The pressures can be exemplified by the population growth that has been and continues to be highest in the South East of England (ONS, 2021). Outer London faces a particular challenge, having become especially attractive for younger people seeking work (Hunter 2021). Arguments for greater housing in suburbs resurge (Breach & Magrini, 2020) and the pandemic has only increased those pressures (Hunter 2021). Extended city development may not be inherently or morphologically problematic, but it is societally dysfunctional if it creates problems with urban service provision, such as transport. Furthermore, the impact of unordered development of human settlements on natural ecologies is certainly part of today's global sustainability challenge.

While this is not the place for addressing the complex problems of London's governance in depth, it is important to note that strategic spatial planning of the sort that might engage with the wider ordering of urban expansion, and socio-economic and environmental impacts, has been diminished in England. While Regional Spatial Strategies and Regional Development Agencies were dismantled, retained the London Plan (introduced in 2004) which provides a relative consistency in strategic planning for almost 20 years. Alternative strategies continue to resurge for strategic planning elsewhere (Tomaney et al., 2019), but particularly interesting here are the associated "narratives of retrofitting and compactness" (Silva, 2022). These speak to the in-between elements of urban landscape as well as those traditionally associated with urban functions such as housing and employment balance, and are increasingly alluded to within policy responses to growth. Similarly, urban design tools are given a high level of attention in English planning debates.

Methodology

As suggested in the preceding sections: suburbs can be explored as landscapes which comprise elements of urban form and politics surrounding their production; and data from the Suburban Taskforce offers insights into social and material processes, and perceptions of those. Historically, the edge landscapes of cities fell between the three norms of thinking around coastal, urban and rural development (Howard, 2022), but socio-cultural research on ecologies and aesthetics increasingly challenges this. We are interested in the landscape framing and process of 'blending' that it suggests. Therefore, we focus on key elements of 'scapes' and local understandings of land ordering.

The data on Outer London landscapes comes from the Taskforce's study and includes statistics focused on two zones, one in Waltham Forest and one in Sutton, as well as semi-

structured interviews that took place in the summer of 2021with local decision-makers in the two areas. Howard may be going too far in suggesting that 'perhaps places never visited have no landscape' (Howard, 2022, p.55), but no doubt perception matters to understanding 'landscape', as it is not simply the arrangement of land but also the reasoning behind the systematisation of its elements. For that reason, instead of relying on an 'outsider' view of places, we draw on a more local interpretation of data on landscape character (form and how it is organised), through interviews with local decision-makers, who provided reflections on the challenges for their respective Boroughs.

To investigate the complexity of the socio-cultural dimension of 'suburban' landscapes, we unpack local elements of landscapes and relate them to development concerns. Findings are presented from a review of factual data from publicly available quantitative datasets alongside qualitative interviews conducted by UCL and the Taskforce. The data is focused on Sutton and Walthamstow, which were selected as two distinct areas in the same 'suburban' ring around London. These are comparable in terms of size (about 2% and 3% of London's population respectively) yet, as discussed below, the range and diversity of measures is striking. Wider issues appear within this analysis, with key structural factors, such as growth pressures and trends, built environment typologies and the presence and quality of the Green Belt[3], as well as key contextual factors of wider influence that compose, affect, and alter the socio-economic and socio-cultural configurations of both areas.

The quantitative data used to describe the study areas was compiled by an information services provider, Experian drawing on estimates from the 2011 census[4]. The approach used was to create a local suburban area for comparison by clustering datapoints for a notional 15-minute drivetime area surrounding the central point the town centre for each of the two Boroughs. That drivetime dataset comprises basic population information, dwellings and accommodation type, tenure, cars, travel to work patterns, occupation, and the national socio-economic classifications. To provide for benchmarking of drivetime descriptive statistics, the comparable national averages are also included. To provide insights in the local landscape, exploratory interviews were conducted with people who had experience of both politics and historical urban development. This included three people for each area, two senior local politicians and one planner in Sutton, and one politician and two planners in Waltham Forest. The interviewees discussed in depth their understandings of these places, and how the 'local landscapes' work for the communities they serve.

Sutton Study

Within the London Borough of Sutton, data from the most recent census (ONS, 2021) put the residential population of the borough at 209,600 or around 2.4% of London's residents. This represents an increase of 10.2% up from c.190,100 in 2011, while the population in England as a whole had increased by 6.6%[5]. This part of Outer London is explored with reference to the drivetime area shown in figure 1 around Sutton town centre. As anticipated in the definition of landscapes discussed above, that picture sits in tension with the politically informed perspectives of local interviewees.
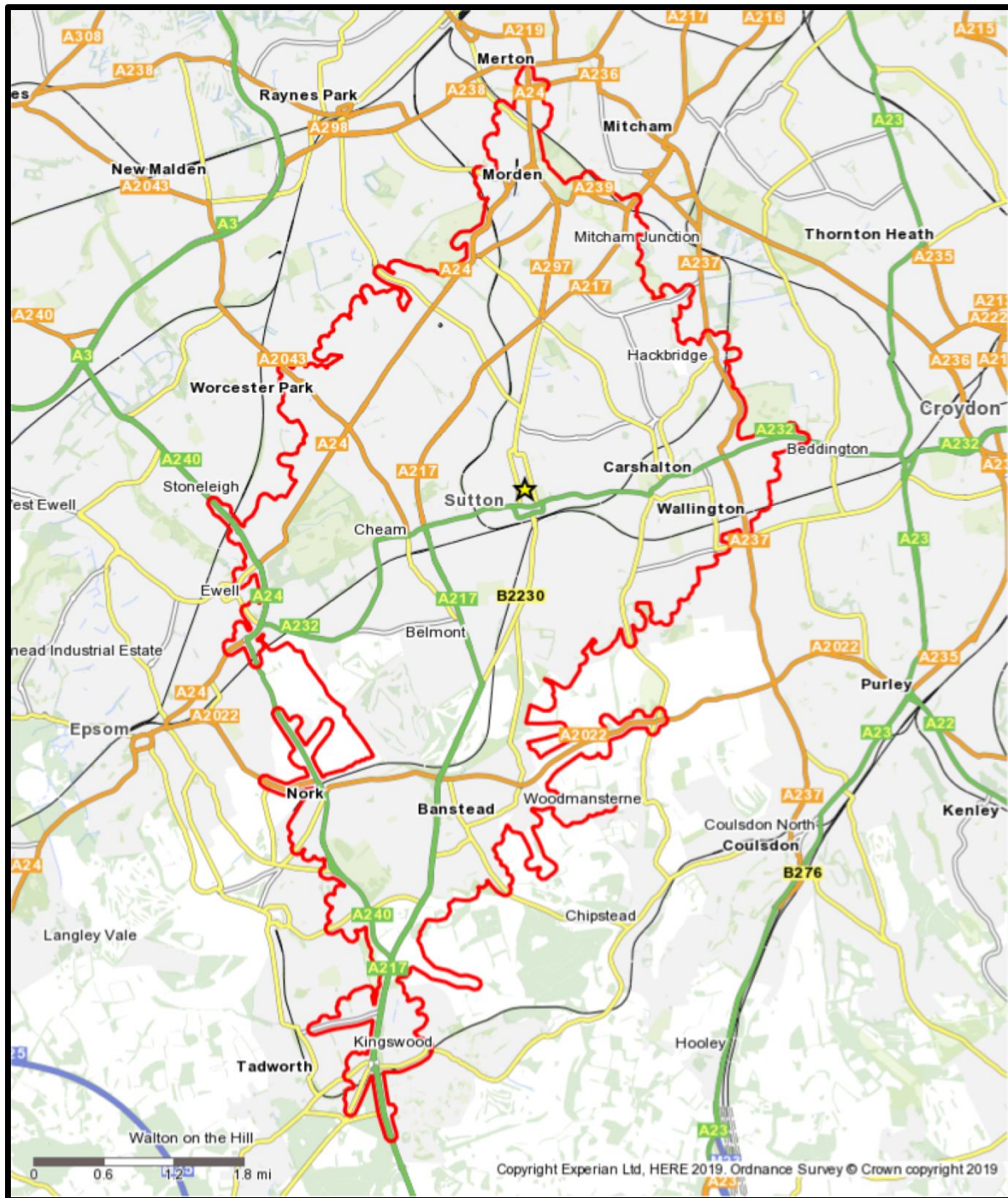
Figure 1: Sutton study area. 15-minute drive time. Source: Experian

Data for the 15 minute drivetime area (figure 1) shows an above national average level for 35 to 44 year olds[6], and below average levels of young adults aged 18 to 29 years old[7]. This type of population mix, with relatively lower prevalence of adults of household formation age and higher prevalence of the population groups with school age children[8], might suggest a typical suburban community. However, interviewees said this was problematic, citing a "generational gap" within the local community and noting issues of competition over local educational provision. While they referenced the reputation of several local grammar schools (with competitive entry criteria)

as a symbol of Sutton's success, they also highlighted how the schooling not only attracted new residents with school-aged children, but also students who travelled into the area for schooling from beyond the local area and administrative boundary of the Borough.

In the drivetime area, there are large amounts of housing. The proportion of homeowners (66.7%) is above the national average, almost all dwellings (99.9%) are recorded as being unshared accommodation, i.e. for one household. While this might suggest a typically suburban residential character, across the study area there is a relatively high level of dwellings that are flats, maisonettes, or apartments (34.0%) in comparison to the national average (23.3%). In addition, interviewees were keen to position the local housing supply a result of a series of changes over time rather than being typical of a certain period in local history, as well as the perception that the typology of housing in Sutton might be changing. According to interviewees the key moments were; in the 1960s and 1970s which saw a sharp upswing in the development of flats, in response to local demand and resulting in the demolition of significant amounts larger housing stock; and another wave of development and inward investment between 2012 and 2015, further changing the landscape of the town.

Sutton remains one of the greenest London Boroughs with more trees per hectare than any other and containing significant open green spaces and Green Belt within its boundaries. However, there has been a series of pressure to develop on open land and greenfield sites as reported in the synthesis of studies underpinning the present Local Plan (LB Sutton, 2010). Revisions to boundaries, redesignation of areas and more general review of greenfield land in the late 1990s and early 2000s considered local council assessments of development need, and local patterns of new development differ from neighbouring local authority districts. Data for the borough from the 'London Green Belt Council', a lobbying organisation that seeks to protect the greenbelt, demonstrate: a relatively *low* level of building on Green Belt land in Sutton, as compared for instance to the London Borough of Croydon (2017, p.20); and how future plans involve relatively limited changes such as spaces for gypsy and traveller pitches, rather than (e.g.) major development of the type planned for the Borough of Epsom and Ewell in Surrey[9]. However, perceptions of local green space character are rather different. Interviewees highlighted local discussions around the perceived changes in the nature of the borough and local concerns associated with the provision of open space, as shown in the following excerpts.

"I know, for some people, they're struggling because the borough is changing, the physical environment is changing. We started to do a lot of attraction of inward investment a few years ago, back in 2012, 2013, 2015 and a lot of people would say, 'goodness, there's a lot of cranes around' and it wasn't in a negative way, it was in a surprised way because Sutton was seen as a very comfortable place to live, a good place to bring up your family." (Anon, Sutton interviewee)

"We have had quite a few developers coming knocking with interest, rubbing their hands with glee at our greenbelt. They want to develop it because it's cheap, because it's undeveloped, so there's no remediation issues and all that, so it's cheap to develop, but all they want to put on there are very high quality, big houses that they'll sell at a massive profit. If we're going to lose bits of the greenbelt, we don't want to lose it for that, so I think, from a London perspective, we are very protective of the greenbelt space within our borough because if we lose all our greenspace, we end up looking like inner London and what's lacking in inner London is that greenspace." (Anon, Sutton interviewee)

Employment in some industries is significantly more prevalent for the study area for across the country as a whole. These are information and communication (5.9% as compared to 4.4% in the UK) , financial and insurance activities (5.2% as compared to 3.8% in the UK), construction (10.9% as compared to 8.1% in the UK), professional, scientific and technical activities (8.8% as compared to 7.2% in the UK), which are all higher than the national averages. These are normally associated with a level of commuting (DoT, 2016), i.e. being out-of-home working activities are typically high-paying jobs not located in Sutton thus adding to the notion of a stereotypical suburban pattern of out-commuting. The issue of local employment prospects is also a concern of the Local Plan that seeks to grow local office provision, and direct investment towards high-street units and industrial floor spaces, in response to policy, especially new rights to convert office to residential use but also cyclical issues of the supply (see, LB Sutton, 2018). One interviewee stated, "while, overall, [local] economic activity is good, a lot of our residents actually commute, so they're making good money, but [for] the people that stay in the borough, the job offer here is of a low paid, low skilled [job] which is one of the reasons we're trying to improve the local employment offer" (Anon, Sutton interviewee).

Interviewees also highlighted concerns about work-travel patterns changing in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, i.e. with working patterns dramatically altering on mandatory lock-down and the consequent rise of habitual working from home. Interviewees were uncertain how this would change the local economy, but argued that Sutton town centre needed to adapt to these changing conditions. They also raised the prospect of a more active suburb during the day with associated activities linked to local retail, footfall, interactions, community engagement and sociability exemplifying the changing nature of the town.

Again, in what might be considered characteristic of suburbs, around 76.5% of the population in Sutton owns one or more cars emphasising the lack of active connections. Interviewees were very conscious of this problem and the environmental consequences, i.e. in terms of pollution or air quality. For instance, an interviewee said, "In Sutton, we've got the highest car ownership in London, for a borough because of the lack of links, so that makes any transport measures tricky like the low traffic neighbourhoods[10] were very tricky to implement, they were very much needed, but because everybody is so heavily reliant on their cars, that's a problem and you do get people driving through from outside London to get into the sort of less outer London boroughs, so we have that as well." (Anon, Sutton interviewee). However, car ownership level is not notably higher than the national average of 73.8%, and the use of cars to commute is significantly lower than the national average (46.8% as compared to 57.0%). In the study area, 43.1% use public transport, bicycles or walk to work.

The study area data suggest an 'average' suburb in terms of population, housing, car-use, and work-related patterns. At the same time the form of dwellings, decreasing travel to work by car, and probably changes in the work-life travel patterns, highlight the unique nature of the Borough of Sutton, and underlie local people's perceptions of the challenges of future suburban development trends.

Walthamstow study

Within the London Borough of Waltham Forest, data from the most recent census (ONS, 2021) put the residential population of the borough at 278,400 or around 3.2% of London's residents. This represents an increase of 7.8% from the 2011 census (up from c.258,200), a lower increase than that seen in the London Borough of Sutton (10.2%) but still significantly more than for

England as a whole (6.6%)[11]. This part of Outer London is explored with reference to data for a 15 minute drivetime area shown in figure 2 around Walthamstow town centre. The story in the data is clearly running counter to any stereotype of suburban development, and the local trends create different challenges within different parts of the borough.
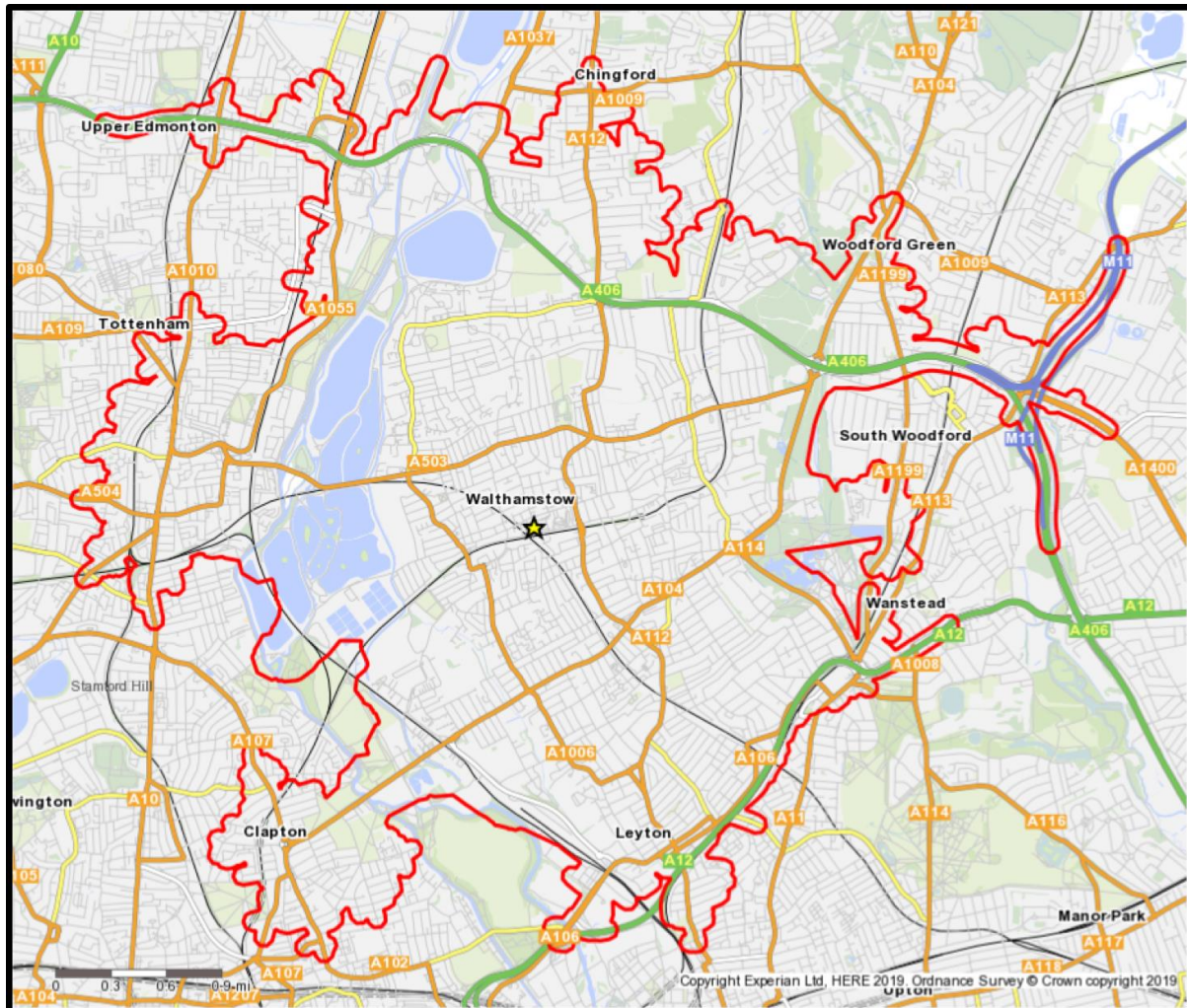

Figure 2: Walthamstow study area. 15-minute drive time. Source: Experian

The Walthamstow study area findings relate to a relatively young population in UK terms. Over one third of the population (37.0%) is aged between 25 and 44 years, compared to just over a quarter (26.1%) nationally[12]. Similarly, those aged between 0 and 4 years old make up 8.8% of the study area population, while in the UK the same figure is just 5.9%. Of families in the area, 61.7% have at least one dependent child, compared to 49.3% in the UK. At the same time, we note the level of full time students (12.4%) is higher than the national average (9.2%).

Turning to consider local housing, 39.7% of households privately own their homes. This is well below the national average (61.5%) let alone the relatively higher level of home ownership in the Sutton study area. We also note that this is despite the ownership figures including shared forms of ownership[13] that in themselves are twice the level found nationally (1.5% as compared to 0.8%) . Over half of all dwellings in this drivetime area are flats, maisonettes, or apartments (51.1%), which is a higher level than in the Sutton study area (34.0%) and more than double that the UK average (23.3%). Around a quarter of households (24.7%) in the Walthamstow study

area are living in either Local Authority or Housing Association properties, and over a third in social rented accommodation (34.5%)[14]. Interviewees highlighted the presence of purpose-built student accommodation in the area and how it attracts students from a range of London universities and colleges.

The Walthamstow study area is highly built up, attracting new and young residents. The figures noted above show that dwellings in the study area are split between family houses and other types of dwelling, with large amounts of residential provision that are fit to pre and early household formation populations, i.e. those who will move on to larger homes. In the interviews for the study area, the recent increase in tall buildings and the expansion of development plans were repeatedly noted. Although, in conformity with the London Plan policy 7.7 (GLA, 2016) tall buildings are set to appear in the area focused on the town centre and with the highest public transport accessibility (LB Waltham Forest, 2012), interviewees emphasised that local people were often concerned. They also recounted local concerns about historic development pressures on the existing housing stock, for instance conversions in the 2000s of single occupancy houses into flats. As one interviewee put it, "The one thing that there is a pressure on, actually, is actual houses as opposed to housing. So obviously, the housing targets and what's going to be built, it's all so many units, that generally mean apartments, so the planning policies are trying to prevent too many conversions of houses into flats, trying to keep single occupancy. [...] There was a huge spate of conversions in the 2000s, so a lot of those single occupancy houses were converted in that time, before Walthamstow and Waltham Forest became a more fashionable place to live." (Anon, Walthamstow interviewee).

As for natural space, Walthamstow has access to substantial green and blue infrastructure including the Lea Valley and the Queen Elizabeth Park, and Epping Forest. As interviewees confirmed, these open spaces will have played a substantial role for residents during periods of lockdown during the Covid-19 pandemic. The local Green Belt is well protected from proposals to build[15]. Interviewees suggested that preserving the quality of the existing natural environment is a priority of the Local Council, and highlighted a tension between the need to support the growing population and the need for green infrastructure. They noted that green routes and active travel connections were of poor quality, but the access was varied. This is a point worth quoting at length as it speaks to the diverse nature of the borough: "Waltham Forest is really blessed because it's got Epping Forest and it's got the Lea Valley, so it's sandwiched between two, huge green/blue spaces which are also highly protected. The north of the borough, in particular, also sees itself as the gateway to the forest, so that's something very important and there are a lot of pressures on Epping Forest, not in terms of building directly on it, but the impact of more people using it, so there's a lot of work being done around that by a group of stakeholders in that. In terms of the actual greenspace within the borough, so the south of the borough is quite poorly served for greenspaces, although it does have access to the Queen Elizabeth Park, the Olympic Park which is obviously a massive greenspace, but the connections are poor in terms of people using it." (Anon, Walthamstow interviewee).

Recent changes in the area were repeatedly raised as a concern by interviewees, who particularly noted increased population density, low levels of parking space provision, and perceptions of new developments 'not respecting' local character. As one interviewee explained, "Waltham Forest does have a characterisation study and part of the talk around the local plan is that they are keen on maintaining local character" (Anon, Walthamstow interviewee). Interviewees also highlighted the need for infrastructure around which communities can come

together. Discussing Walthamstow's High Street market, it was mentioned that "they've been awarded the first London Borough of Culture destination, to try and capitalise on that and hopefully draw some of those different strands together and kind of build a bit of cohesion" (Anon, Walthamstow interviewee).

Turning to employment in the study area, the level of economic activity (73.6%) is relatively typical for the UK and the level of retirees (6.1%) is less than half the national average[16]. There is also a relatively high level of self-employed (14.0% compared to 10.0% in the UK). Those industries with relatively high prevalence in the study area were: accommodation and food service activities (8.9% compared to 6.3% in the UK); administrative and support services (7.3% compared to 5.3% in the UK); information and communication (5.9% compared to 4.4% in the UK); and real estate activities (2.1% compared to 1.6% in the UK). These industries are associated with the types of services required by students and people new to the area, i.e. since they are offering accommodation, support, everyday services, and goods that might be used more frequently by those types of residents. The local employment context was discussed in interviews, and sustaining and growing work and learning opportunities locally came across as a high priority in relation to the younger local population, notably those experiencing economic difficulties. For instance, saying, "The young people who've been given work opportunities and learning opportunities because that's on their doorstep and to hear their stories and hear how their confidence has gone from nothing [to] then starting a career journey because that site is down the road from them and how amazing that is." (Anon, Walthamstow interviewee)

In the study area, car usage is well below the national average; 49.1% of households do not have a car[17]. Also higher than average, are the proportions of residents who commute by public transport (58.6% compared to 16.2% in the UK) and cycle to work (4.2% compared to 2.7% in the UK). This trend in local transport might be associated with the study area demographics or the geography of employment, i.e. where people work and the transport provision. The town centre lies close to the North Circular that connects to other parts of Outer London while central London can be accessed by public transport would be the choice to travel to inner London. Interviewees' discussions of the travel patterns within the local area suggest that these are equally shaped by forces within and beyond London. For instance, "My experience of Walthamstow is that it is very outward facing, like if you get a tradesperson here, they always come from Essex, rather than elsewhere in London because you're on the North Circular, it's 500 metres away from the junction with the M11 and that puts you straight up to Cambridge." (Anon, Walthamstow interviewee)

Walthamstow study area clearly falls outside of the 'average' suburb in terms of population, housing, car-use, and work-related travel patterns. The high proportion of younger people, the type of tenure, transportation choices, character of build, suggest transformation in an urban direction, which is perceived differently. For some people, in the words of one interviewee, "they don't particularly want to see it changed because that's the culture that they've grown up with." (Anon, Walthamstow interviewee). For others, there are material challenges, of employment and greenspace.

The challenge of blending, in Outer London
We have argued that suburban identity needs to be studied in the face of changing local development, and have explored two places in Outer London as well as perspectives on these.

As set out in the introduction, the idea of suburban 'edgeness' is contested both in existing research and by the UK Parliament's 'Suburban Taskforce'. The studies presented here reinforce that point and validate it for London. They also demonstrate that the context of development choices matters greatly. The 'urbanisms' of suburbs (Airgood & Obryki 2019, citing Hamel & Keil 2015) and associated political perspectives informed by suburban research has roundly rejected unhelpfully rigid framings of suburban subordination to a supposed 'city proper'. Likewise, narratives of dependency on the economic workings of an inner-city core are out-dated. For the study areas of Sutton and Waltham Forest, the critical constitutive elements in the landscapes arise under pressure to densify and associated patterns of demand for housing. In this final section, we reflect on the spatial ordering and local politics around urban form, in relation to these 'blended landscapes'.

The London Boroughs of Sutton and Waltham Forest both face pressure to accommodate additional development. Local attractors such as Sutton's educational institutions and relatively green space or Waltham Forest's cultural and affordable housing offer were both pulling in new residents alongside the delivery of new homes. They are also fuelling development rationalities or approaches to steering urban form in response to demographic change and consequent socio-economic need. In a sense this is nothing new, it is the story of all planning work and the nature of all urban change. However, there are very particular suburban politics in the face of dynamic change. While the borough-wide story may be one of success, after all these are places accommodating new cohorts in a country with a major housing crisis, in each Borough a shared perspective about change and its meaning is elusive. These are places with a historical ability to accommodate change, but such changes are increasingly rapid and local understandings of the policy context and aspirations for conservation may, to put it crudely, lag behind current realities. This is particularly so in Boroughs such as Waltham Forest where the opportunity for change, such as through redevelopment of former industrial land, is significant and raises a range of fears in the local community around themes of 'gentrification' and 'over development'.

London continues to grow and the study areas have particularly high growth levels that can't be disassociated from the wider pressures and policy context. Indeed, greater policy protection and fewer large sites in central London it's understandable that the Outer Boroughs feel such 'growing pains' most acutely. However, importantly, the responses to growth in each Borough are distinct, and in relation to housing for instance, targets are set for each Borough by the Greater London Authority in policy 3.3 of the London Plan; but the completion rates look rather different across the city (London Assembly, 2021). Further, the more detailed investigation in the two study areas reveals the variety of local policy preferences, with approaches to Green Belt and infill development, and more importantly, the diverse experiences of these changes and associated considerations of local perspectives on how urbanism might be changing places as a whole.

The two very distinct areas studied here, the London Boroughs of Sutton and Waltham Forest, both struggle with identity and change in the context of new development. Sutton looks far less like its neighbouring London Borough of Croydon. It has more development similarities with its neighbouring Surrey districts, which are also Conservative or right-leaning politically, and often 'looks' beyond the Greater London boundaries. By contrast, Waltham Forest appears to be hybrid in its urbanism and politics, and looks to both London and Essex (typically depending on whether one lives north of south of the North Circular ring road). Areas such as Walthamstow have greater economic connectivity with the centre of London and are, in parts, very urban. The

result may be that, whether as a result of demographics, infrastructure or geography it may be easier for the study area around Walthamstow town centre to 'wear the change' of further dense development and or loss of greenspace.

In conclusion, there is a very particular set of development politics rooted in divergent blended landscapes in an extended city. The urban challenges in London around housing markets and density may be intensified by Mayoral or National policies, but they are not caused by them. The experiences explored here show the dynamics of blending of 'green' and 'brown' landscape elements, and more critically how change begets change and increasing development becomes a dominant policy narrative for certain neighbourhoods. One possible implication is that Outer London may become more divided, both within and between Boroughs, as different local perspectives on landscapes encourage future development directions. Such dynamics of blending might develop into path-dependency in suburban development, which is highly relevant to international debates around environmental balance and urban sustainability, as discussed for instance in recent research on Seoul (Choi et al., 2019).

The key, it appears to us, is nuance. Suburbs need to be appreciated for their local character and identity, rather than being defined by their supposed 'edgeness'. This is, in practice, often challenging. Despite arguably being necessary, the granularity that is required doesn't always fit neatly with strategic policy making or target-setting, which then places significant pressures on the design of future landscapes. In this respect, the wider and local political 'meaning' of development still needs to be articulated and mediated. Whilst the nature of the democratic processes of development are beyond the scope of this paper, relational and enormously challenging, our assessment serves to underscore the critical importance of this as an area of focus for research and practice. In the words of one of our interviewees, "I've had it in the past, where someone is really enthusiastic about a scheme, they think it's really good for an area, but they're frightened to go along and speak in favour of it in case they get… you don't want to be on the street at 10 o'clock at night with six of your neighbours who think you're a shit bag…". Whilst not always the case, particularly where growth pressures are acute, we would like to think that there is a way of ensuring that strategic priorities can be translated into 'on the ground' changes, which the whole community can 'wear'. Perhaps the rise of a Suburban Taskforce offers hope in promoting debate around the politics of blending urbanisms and circles of influence when it comes to suburban landscapes.

References

Airgood-Obrycki, W., Hanlon, B., & Rieger, S. (2021). Delineate the US suburb: An examination of how different definitions of the suburbs matter. *Journal of Urban Affairs*, *43*(9), 1263-1284.

Berghauser Pont, M., & Haupt, P. (2007). The relation between urban form and density. *Urban Morphology*, 11(1), 62.

Choi, C. G., Lee, S., Kim, H., & Seong, E. Y. (2019). Critical junctures and path dependence in urban planning and housing policy: A review of greenbelts and New Towns in Korea's Seoul metropolitan area. *Land Use Policy*, *80*, 195-204.

Connolly, C. (2019). Urban political ecology beyond methodological cityism. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, *43*(1), 63-75.

De Vidovich, L. (2019). Suburban studies: State of the field and unsolved knots. *Geography Compass*, *13*(5), e12440.

DoT (2016). *Commuting trends in England 1988-2015*. Available from https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/877039/commuting-in-england-1988-2015.pdf

Filion, P. & Keil, R. (2017). Contested infrastructures: Tension, inequity and innovation in the global suburb. *Urban Policy and Research*, *35*(1), 7-19.

Forsyth, A. (2012). Defining suburbs. *Journal of Planning Literature*, *27*(3), 270-281.

Forsyth, A. (2018). Congested cities vs. sprawl makes you fat: Unpacking the health effects of planning density. *The Town Planning Review*, *89*(4), 333-354.

Freire Trigo, S. (2020). Vacant land in London: a planning tool to create land for growth. *International Planning Studies*, *25*(3), 261-276.

GLA (2016). *Policy 7.7: Location and design of tall and large buildings* https://www.london.gov.uk/what-we-do/planning/london-plan/past-versions-and-alterations-london-plan/london-plan-2016/london-plan-chapter-seven-londons-living-spac-12

Hall, P. G. & Pain, K. (Eds.). (2006). *The polycentric metropolis: Learning from mega-city regions in Europe*. Routledge.

Harris, R. (2010). Meaningful types in a world of suburbs. In *Suburbanization in global society*. Emerald Group Publishing Limited.

Harris, R. & Larkham, P. J. (2003). Suburban foundation, form and function. In *Changing Suburbs* (pp. 17-47). Routledge.

Holman, N. & Thornley, A. (2015). Backlash in the London suburbs: the local-strategic tension in multilevel governance. *Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy*, *33*(3), 496-511.

Howard, P. (2022). An English Life in Landscape: Watching Landscape Research over Half a Century. *Journal of Landscape Ecology (Czech Republic)*, *15*(1), 47-60.

Hunter, P. (2021). *Planning for the recovery and the shift towards homeworking: implications for poverty in Outer London*. The Smith Institute. Available from http://www.smith-institute.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Planning-for-the-recovery-and-the-shift-towards-homeworking-implications-for-poverty-in-outer-London.pdf

Keil, R. (2011). The global city comes home: Internalised globalisation in Frankfurt Rhine-Main. *Urban Studies*, *48*(12), 2495-2517.

Keil, R. (2020). After Suburbia: Research and action in the suburban century. *Urban Geography*, *41*(1), 1-20.

Keil, R. & Lynch, L. (2019). *Suburban change is transforming city life around the world.* The Conversation. Available from https://theconversation.com/suburban-change-is-transforming-city-life-around-the-world-125598

LB Sutton (2018). *London Borough of Sutton Local Plan: Sutton Local Plan 2016-2031.* Available from https://www.sutton.gov.uk/-/the-local-plan

LB Waltham Forest (2012). *Waltham Forest Local Plan: Core Strategy.* Available from https://www.walthamforest.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2021-11/adopted-core-strategy.pdf

LGA (2021). *Stakeholder engagement in an emergency: Lessons from low-traffic neighbourhoods.* Available from https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/stakeholder-engagement-emergency-lessons-low-traffic-neighbourhoods

Mace, A. (2011). *Inner and outer London: a tale of two cities?* Available from http://www.lse.ac.uk/geography-and-environment/research/lse-london/documents/Archive/HEIF-4-2010-11-Series/Inner-and-Outer-London-A-tale-of-two-cities.pdf

MacLeod, G. & Jones, M. (2011). Renewing urban politics. *Urban studies*, *48*(12), 2443-2472.

Manns, J. (2021). Green Belts. In: *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Urban and Regional Futures.* Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. Available from https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-51812-7_113-1

ONS (2021). Population estimates for the UK, England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland: mid- 2020. *Statistical Bulletin.*

Panayotopoulos-Tsiros, D. (2020). *From 'void' to 'voidness': a trans-scalar and relational approach to urban voids in post-industrial cities. Learning from Eleonas, Athens, Greece* Doctoral dissertation, UCL (University College London).

Phelps, N. A. (Ed.). (2017). *Old Europe, New Suburbanization?: Governance, Land, and Infrastructure in European Suburbanization.* University of Toronto Press.

Phelps, N. A. & Wood, A. M. (2011). The new post-suburban politics?. *Urban Studies*, *48*(12), 2591-2610.

Silva, C. (2022). *The Interstitial Spaces of Urban Sprawl: Geographies of Santiago de Chile's Zwischenstadt.* Routledge.

Suburban Taskforce (2020). *Call for Evidence: An Inquiry into the Future of the Suburbs.* Available from https://suburban-taskforce.org/

Suburban Taskforce (2022). *The Suburban Taskforce: An Inquiry into the Future of the Suburbs.* In Press, details from authors.

Tomaney, J., Natarajan, L., Ilie E., & Hamiduddin, I. (2019) Towards a second generation of spatial planning in the UK? *Town & Country Planning,* 88(11):475-461.

Vaughan, L. (Ed.). (2015). *Suburban Urbanities: Suburbs and the Life of the High Street.* UCL Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1g69z0m

Yang, Y. & Taufen, A. (Eds.). (2022). *The Routledge Handbook of Sustainable Cities and Landscapes in The Pacific Rim.* Routledge.

---

[1] The Suburban Taskforce was formed at the invitation of HM Government and came into being on 6 March 2020. The invitation followed a parliamentary debate on the suburbs, secured by Dr Rupa Huq MP, in January 2020. In closing that debate, Jake Berry MP, formerly Minister of State for the Northern Powerhouse and Local Growth, invited Huq to form a Taskforce and committed the Government to considering its recommendations. The Secretariat for the Taskforce was provided by the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for London's Planning and Built Environment; members of which voted formally at Parliament to support the establishment of the Taskforce on 5 March 2020.

[2] The Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) has since been reformed as the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC). Both perform the same function within the UK Government which is to act as the department for housing, communities, local government and 'levelling up' policy in England.

[3] i.e. the Metropolitan Green Belt managed by the London Green Belt Council (LGBC): https://londongreenbeltcouncil.org.uk.

[4] 2021 estimates for the range of data not yet unavailable

[5] As handily visualised on the ONS website: https://www.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/censuspopulationchange/E09000029/

[6] Reported as 8.0% for 35-39 and 7.7% for 40-44 year olds in the area of study, as compared with 6.0% and 6.6% respectively in the UK.

[7] Reported as 1.8% for 18-19, 4.5% for 20-24 and 5.6% for 25-29 year olds in the area of study, as compared with 2.2%, 6.2%, and 6.8% respectively in the UK.

[8] ONS estimates suggest over half of parents with one of more school age children fall into population groups 35-39 (27%) and 40-44 (25%). For details, see https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/educationandchildcare/adhocs/11865estimatesoftheagedistributionofparentsofprimaryschoolagedchildrenenglandocttodec2019

[9] These are presented as 'threats' by the London Green Belt Council, see data visualised at https://londongreenbeltcouncil.org.uk/threats-map/

[10] The new powers for Local Authorities to reallocate road space away from use for motorised vehicles proved highly controversial, usefully outlined in the report on research for the Local Government Association (LGA, 2021).

[11] Visualised on the ONS website:
https://www.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/censuspopulationchange/E09000031/

[12] With 8.8% of 25-29 year olds, 10.5% of 30-34 year olds, 9.9% of 35-39 year olds, and 7.8% of 40-44 years olds in the area, as compared to 6.8%, 6.7%, 6.6%, and 6.0% for the UK equivalents.

[13] Whereby landlords, who are typically social rented property providers, offer a scheme for tenants to purchase a share of between 10 and 75% of the full market value of their homes
https://www.gov.uk/shared-ownership-scheme

[14] Corresponding to the relatively low level of homeownership, levels of renting found in the study area were higher than the corresponding national averages, i.e. 17.4% (social renting) and 19.8% (private renting).

[15] See for instance, https://londongreenbeltcouncil.org.uk/threats-map/

[16] The comparable proportion of the UK population retired is 13.3%, and the rate of economic activity is 70.3%.

[17] The comparable proportion of the UK population owning a car is 73.8%