

sustainable communities and sustainable development

a review of the sustainable communities plan

Professor Anne Power



The sustainable development commission

We are the independent government advisor on sustainable development issues and report to the Prime Minister and Devolved Administration leaders. Our mission is to inspire government, the economy and society to embrace sustainable development as the central organising principle.

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As well as following up our work on prosperity, our work programme includes the areas of health, energy and regeneration, sustainable consumption and production, and local government. We also look at sustainable development and the Devolved Administrations and the English regions, and in Europe; and aspects of sustainable transport. We are working with Defra on the revision of the UK Strategy for Sustainable Development.

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Acknowledgements

This review would not have been possible without generous support and advice from other SDC Commissioners, senior ODPM officials, the Building Research Establishment, CABI and English Heritage. Many local authorities, particularly Birmingham, Wolverhampton and the Thames Gateway, also contributed. Alice Coulter and Alan Dearling made a major contribution to sorting out the text and the material. I accept full responsibility for the views expressed.

Cover image: Paul Box/reportdigital.co.uk

Design by Positive2

Printed by Beacon Press

Printed on Revive silk (made from 75% de-inked post-consumer waste)

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Executive summary

The Sustainable Communities Plan was drawn up by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister in order to tackle serious housing shortages, particularly in London and the South East; a crisis of affordability for many ordinary households, particularly key service workers; and the decline of low income urban neighbourhoods across the country, but particularly in Northern and Midlands cities and towns. It makes major proposals to raise housing standards, reform planning, speed up house-building, and all within the imperative to protect the countryside, minimise resource use and reduce the environmental impact of development.

The Sustainable Development Commission (SDC) has a wide remit to advise Government on sustainable development, the interdependent social, economic and environmental requirements for our long-term survival in a crowded island. The Plan is extremely important for all these reasons. This review first gives a brief overview of the Plan, its connection with sustainable development and sustainable communities. We then debate the major problems of the Plan for the advancement of our economic and social and environmental wellbeing. In the final section, we summarise the key elements of the Plan, offering a sustainable development perspective on its proposals.

The Sustainable Communities Plan tackles six main issues:

- The need for higher quality homes set in safe and attractive neighbourhood environments
- The large scale problem of low demand and empty homes in much of the country
- The urgent requirement to provide more affordable homes more quickly
- The need to take care of our countryside and support rural affordable housing
- The pressures of growth in London and the South East
- The reform of planning, regional devolution and co-ordinated regional housing strategies.

In order to deliver on these requirements in a sustainable way, the SDC offers four key measures of sustainable communities:

1. how we plan and design where we live, at what density, and with how much open space
2. how much energy we use and what impact our demands make on the environment
3. how we develop jobs and skills to ensure economic prosperity
4. what support we provide to communities and how we manage neighbourhood environments.

In applying these measures to the overall direction of the plan, we raise some critical issues for its fundamental sustainability.

In **creating decent homes**, it will be crucial to raise energy efficiency to excellent eco-standards both in existing and new homes. This will require resources, incentives and political profile, particularly in relation to older semi-detached and terraced housing. **Recycling buildings** is central to this but requires equal incentives with new build and tighter controls on building waste and building standards. Revitalising council estates and turning them into more attractive, better maintained, more mixed communities requires a holistic, community orientated approach and careful reinvestment.

In tackling the problem of **abandoned housing** over large areas of the country, fast reliable transport is an obvious requirement. Congestion problems and delays hamper economic regeneration all over the country. The plan does not offer resources on a scale that matches the problem. More money will go to the growth areas in the South East, following the logic of economic success. But it leaves large areas of the country under-resourced. The emptiness of many neighbourhoods in Midlands and Northern towns and cities underlines the spare capacity that could help relieve growth pressures in the over-congested South.

Decentralising away from London is one of the goals of the plan. Faster rail links will start to make a vast difference from 2004. But finding new uses for the obsolete urban infrastructure of our older industrial heartlands is an urgent prerequisite for success. The option of refurbishment of such historic areas instead of 'large scale clearance' calls for urgent priority treatment – exploiting the 'heritage dividend' by capitalising on historic assets such as canals, workshop buildings, Victorian parks, our civic legacy and older terraced properties.

In proposing **additional, affordable housing**, the Plan does not challenge growth projections, either in jobs or in population, nor does it link the impact of additional supply on demand. For these reasons the proposed scale of growth must be reviewed with caution. Affordable housing must target a broad band of the working population on or below average incomes – 60% of the population, in order to ensure social integration and community viability – drawing on European models. There is considerable capacity in high pressure areas in small sites, in ‘windfall’ brown land and unused buildings. All these have a high value for smaller households when used at high density and with careful design.

In order to **protect the countryside** and rural communities, there needs to be full council tax on second homes, and the power to conserve local affordable stock for local residents and workers and provide careful, new in-fill development. Social landlords can play an important role in these smaller communities. **Greenbelts** are guaranteed in the plan and building on **flood plains** is forbidden, but these crucial measures are only part of a much bigger environmental agenda. Without these protections there is a danger that new developments will simply merge into one another as has already happened.

The pressures of **growth in the South East and London** are the biggest challenges in the plan. The assumptions of massive job expansion in the region to fuel the demand for housing cannot be taken for granted. So the ambitious targets for the growth areas may be hampered, not just by environmental constraints and over-congestion, but by other changes in the economy and social conditions. Growth is likely to spread out from the high pressure areas if the government smoothes its path.

All these different aspects of the Plan make **living at higher density** inevitable, so that less land is needed, so that more smaller households can be accommodated, so that buses, schools and shops become viable in new and existing communities, so that neighbourhoods become more integrated and more secure, with more activity on the streets. However the plan is essentially a ‘top down’ programme, which does little to encourage community involvement or ownership of the proposals, possibly for fear of opposition to its overall purpose. Neither large scale demolition of homes nor ambitious building plans in the South are immediately popular.

The Plan does not propose tools for delivery, to ensure longer-term **community viability and environmental protection**. But, because of the time-scale and sheer weight of the proposals involved, the plan will only be delivered incrementally. This may offer the critical partners in implementation the chance to work out ways in which existing and new communities can be made to work environmentally, socially and economically.

- Energy inputs can be halved, waste dramatically reduced, environmental impact minimised and better designed, more sustainable, more compact communities created.
- Existing urban neighbourhoods can become more ‘liveable’, can house many more people, and can be cared for in ways that will create significant extra capacity.

If we succeed in this, we will conserve land, protect green spaces and enhance the cohesion of our cities, towns and villages so that our children will inherit communities worth living in.

Part I: Overview

1. What is sustainable development?

The UK Government has four main objectives for a sustainable future:

Government goals for sustainable development *Box 1*

At the heart of sustainable development is the simple idea of **ensuring a better quality of life for everyone, now and for generations to come**. It means meeting four objectives **at the same time**:

- social progress which recognises the needs of everyone;
 - effective protection of the environment;
 - prudent use of natural resources;
 - maintenance of high and stable levels of economic growth and employment;
- and **considering the long term implications of decisions**.

Quality of Life Counts, DETR, 1999

The Sustainable Development Commission has developed six core principles that we apply in all our work, helping us to provide a sustainable development perspective on the overall economic,

social and environmental issues facing the country. They apply directly to the Sustainable Communities Plan because of its far-reaching social, economic and environmental implications.

Principles for sustainable development *Box 2*

1. Putting sustainable development at the centre

Sustainable development must be the organising principle of all democratic societies, underpinning all other goals, policies and processes.

2. Valuing nature

We are and always will be part of Nature, embedded in the natural world, and totally dependent for our own economic and social well-being on the resources and systems that sustain life on Earth.

3. Fair shares

Sustainable economic development means 'fair shares for all', ensuring that people's basic needs are properly met across the world, whilst securing constant improvements in the quality of peoples' lives through efficient, inclusive economies.

4. Polluter pays

Sustainable development requires that we make explicit the costs of pollution and inefficient resource use, and reflect those in the prices we pay for all products and services, recycling the revenues from higher prices to drive the sustainability revolution that is now so urgently needed, and compensating those whose environments have been damaged.

5. Good governance

There is no one blue-print for delivering sustainable development. It requires different strategies in different societies. But **all** strategies will depend on effective, participative systems of governance and institutions, engaging the interest, creativity and energy of all citizens.

6. Adopting a precautionary approach

Scientists, innovators and wealth creators have a crucial part to play in creating genuinely sustainable economic progress. But human ingenuity and technological power is now so great that we are capable of causing serious damage to the environment or to peoples' health through unsustainable development that pays insufficient regard to wider impacts.

Sustainable Development Commission, 2002

2. What are sustainable communities?

The Government has made housing a central element in its overall growth and development strategy. It is one of the key factors that will shape the country's decision on whether to join the Euro Zone. Housing shortages and costs are significant factors in the recruitment and retention of key public sector workers in the South East, with resultant major impacts on health, education, transport and social services. Housing and neighbourhood decline are considered major blighting factors in large parts of our urban landscape around the country and the problems of low demand dominate much government thinking. Thus the Communities Plan aims to address the challenge of delivering 'sustainable communities' through a range of measures to meet high housing demand and cope with the environmental and social impact of low demand.

We need to apply new technologies to housing in order to reduce its impact on resource use, waste, traffic, congestion, land use and pollution. For all these reasons the Communities Plan is of great significance to the work of the Sustainable Development Commission and the Commission wants to make a contribution to its implementation in order to help the Government meet its own goals for sustainable development.

2. What are sustainable communities?

For 18 months the Sustainable Development Commission has been investigating the scope for creating more sustainable communities. Over seventy national, regional and local regeneration and development organisations have contributed to our thinking on sustainable communities. Here we set out some preliminary measures that could be developed into a useable tool. Three core aims of sustainable communities provide our starting points:

- **a healthy environment** involves minimal ecological impact, minimal waste or pollution and maximum recycling, protection and enhancement of the natural environment, wildlife and biodiversity, so that all may enjoy environmental benefits such as greenery, careful planning for physical and social well-being, space to walk, cycle, meet, play, relax.
- **a prosperous economy** generates wealth and long-term investment without destroying the natural and social capital on which all economies ultimately depend; minimises resource use and environmental impact; develops new skills through education and training; meets basic needs, through local jobs and services.
- **social well-being** arises from a sense of security, belonging, familiarity, support, neighbourliness, cohesion and integration of different social groups, based on respect for different cultures, traditions and backgrounds.

The measures of sustainable communities that we have identified are not exhaustive or mutually exclusive. Rather they are mutually reinforcing and overlapping. We have divided them into four main groups in order to simplify the process of measuring how sustainable a community is. The following four measures are essential building blocks of sustainable communities:

- **planning, design, density and layout** will influence the shape of a community, the level of services and the way people interact with each other and their environment, e.g. low density sprawl makes public transport and local shops unviable; higher densities support shops, buses, neighbourhood schools and a sense of community.
- **minimising energy use and environmental impact** contributes to sustainability, helps combat global warming and encourages 'long-term stewardship of' communities; e.g. recycling buildings helps to reduce resource use and encourages care and low impact approaches.
- **a viable local economy and services** provide the rationale and underpinning for community development and survival; e.g. loss of manufacturing has made many traditional urban communities unviable and requires a major economic shift and new uses for existing infrastructure if they are to flourish again. They also require transport links to wider job markets, and education and training for new skills.
- **community organisation and neighbourhood management** are essential to social networks and urban viability, ensuring well maintained, secure conditions which are the prerequisite of stable, long-term, participative and cohesive communities; e.g. regeneration companies, local housing companies and neighbourhood management organisations can transform basic street conditions, community safety and security, social contact and youth engagement, by acting as a local conduit for decisions, co-ordinating supervision and frontline service delivery.

The measures derive from our work on sustainable regeneration which largely impacts on urban communities. However, the core measures apply to most communities including more scattered, rural ones. Measures of sustainable communities apply not only to deprived communities, even though regeneration most often targets deprived areas, but to a wide mix of neighbourhoods, settlements and areas. The measures imply a long-term proactive commitment to each specific neighbourhood with a powerful leadership role for local authorities, public services such as schools, the police, health and social services, and a vital role for private investors and community entrepreneurs. We explore the four groups of measures in some detail in section 5.

'Sustainable communities: building for the future', the official document that launched the Government's Plan in February 2003, sets out a reasoned set of ideas and arguments for changing the way we address housing problems, and provides a more coherent framework for delivering ambitious goals. Its definition of sustainable communities highlights some important concerns.

3. What is the Sustainable Communities Plan?

What makes a sustainable community? *Box 3*

Some of the key requirements of sustainable communities are:

- A flourishing local economy to provide jobs and wealth;
- Strong leadership to respond positively to change;
- Effective engagement and participation by local people, groups and businesses, especially in the planning, design and **long term stewardship** of their community and an active voluntary and community sector;
- A safe and healthy local environment with well-designed public and green space;
- Sufficient size, scale and density, and the right layout to support basic amenities in the neighbourhood and **minimise use of resources** (including land);
- Good public transport and other transport infrastructure both within the community and linking it to urban, rural and regional centres;
- Buildings – both individually and collectively – that can meet different needs over time and that **minimise the use of resources**;
- A well-integrated mix of decent homes of different types and tenures to support a range of household sizes, ages and incomes;
- Good quality local public services, including education and training opportunities, health care and community facilities, especially for leisure;
- A diverse, vibrant and creative local culture encouraging pride in the community and cohesion within it;
- A ‘sense of place’;
- The right links with the wider regional, national and international community.

Sustainable Communities, ODP, 2003

These requirements do not attempt to reconcile the four goals of sustainable development but nor do they contradict them. There is the potential to apply them in ways that minimise

damage to the wider environment and reconcile environmental, social and economic needs.

3. What is the Sustainable Communities Plan?

The Sustainable Communities Plan sets out to tackle the problems of housing supply and affordability, land pressures and planning problems, neighbourhood decline and abandonment, environmental and countryside pressures. It contains many vital

facts and figures that inform our analysis of the sustainable development impact of the Plan’s proposals. The following box highlights some of the most significant.

Essential facts underpinning the plan *Box 4*

1. Household growth and house building

- 155,000 additional households are formed each year, mainly by single people;
- most new households need affordable subsidised housing;
- household formation rates are slower than predicted;
- the average annual rate of house building is around 170,000.

2. Owner occupation

- 70 per cent of households own their own home; 90 per cent say they want to become owner occupiers;
- there is a time lag between the aspiration and assembling the resources.

3. Existing or new homes

- Only 36 per cent of prospective buyers would consider buying a new house;
- the vast majority prefer existing properties.

4. Too many large new homes

- One in three new homes in the South East have four bedrooms or more. Two out of three new households comprise a single person.

5. Density

- New build, green field homes in the South East have a current density of 22 homes per hectare, the lowest density in the entire country and far below the Government’s minimum;
- if built at 30 homes per hectare, this would create a 35 per cent increase in new homes in the South East; if at 50 per hectare, it would produce a 110 per cent increase in supply, and represent a radical shift toward social, economic and environmental sustainability.

3. What is the Sustainable Communities Plan?**Essential facts underpinning the plan (continued) *Box 4*****6. Homelessness**

- In 2002 there were 85,000 statutorily 'homeless' households in temporary accommodation – two-thirds of homeless households were families with children, a high proportion from ethnic minority backgrounds.

7. Housing supply and demand

- In the North and Midlands and South West, more homes are built than projected households are expected to form. In the South, household formation outstrips actual house building:

	Household growth	House building (1997-2001)
North	140,000	210,000
Midlands/SW	245,000	255,000
South	425,000	310,000

8. Market hot spots

- Even within low demand regions there are areas of extremely high housing demand with high prices. Conversely in the South East there are 'places where fewer people want to live' including the Thames Gateway.

9. Suburbanisation

- Generally the decline of cities is not part of a major migration south, but of a move to suburbs and rural areas within the same region, fuelled by large scale house building on green fields, often on the edges of conurbations, and reinforced by inner city decline, and lack of reinvestment in older stock.

10. The 60 per cent brown field target

- In the North East 54 per cent of new dwellings are on green fields, i.e. only 46 per cent are on brown fields; in Yorkshire and the Humber, only 50 per cent of new developments are on brown fields;
- Kirklees is growing, mainly around the edges of nice villages, not in its urban centres;
- in London 85 per cent of new development is on brown fields;
- the regions with most brown field sites are furthest from achieving the Government's targets.

11. Empty property

- There are 730,000 empty properties in England – 3.4 per cent of the total stock;
- 1.8 per cent of private housing is empty, but this makes up 80 per cent of all empty property;
- 300,000 homes have been empty over 6 months – more than 40 per cent;
- 40,000 empty properties in London and a further 30,000 outside London in the South East are long-term vacant.

12. Derelict land

- The National Land Use Database (NLUD) identified 66,000 hectares of brown developable land in 2002 – much of it in regions that achieve far below the 60 per cent target for brown field development. There has been a 50 per cent increase in identified brown field sites since 1999. Spare land is equivalent to half the size of Greater London. If used carefully even at fairly low densities, it can produce most of the homes we need:
 - at 30 homes per hectare (the minimum allowed but too low to support a local bus or school) = 2 million homes;
 - at 40 homes per hectare (the density of new towns and given the much smaller household size, still too low) = 2.6 million homes;
 - at 50 homes per hectare (the minimum density for viable shops, schools, public transport and other services but currently the Government's guideline limit) = 3.3 million homes;
 - at 60 homes per hectare (one third the density of Islington) = 4 million homes;
 - at 100 homes per hectare (still far below gentrified Georgian areas) = 6.6 million homes.

13. Green fields

- Since 1997, 30,000 hectares of green land have been designated or proposed for new development. This is equal to one-quarter of the whole of Greater London or three times the size of Sheffield.

3. What is the Sustainable Communities Plan?

The Sustainable Communities Plan sets out a new approach to housing and planning under six main headings:

1. Decent homes, decent places – the problem of liveability and poor housing conditions

The aim is to bring all homes up to a decent minimum standard of basic repair, thermal warmth and modern amenities; and to make all neighbourhoods attractive, secure, sociable places to live in, with well maintained open spaces and supervised streets. About 7 million homes fall below the minimum standard. Urban regeneration, neighbourhood management and neighbourhood warden schemes provide a local framework for investing in and upgrading the housing stock. Importantly, two thirds of the population would not consider buying a new home and prefer existing, older housing, reinforcing the potential for recycling and upgrading existing homes.

2. Low demand and abandonment in the North and Midlands – the potential for housing market renewal

The Government has launched nine housing market renewal pathfinders in the Midlands and the North to tackle low demand and abandonment, now affecting over a million homes in 120 local authorities. The Plan proposes “large scale clearance or refurbishment” with an assumption that large amounts of “obsolete housing” must go. The Plan proposes reducing the oversupply of land and new building outside existing built up areas in these regions.

3. Step change in housing supply – the pressures of affordability

The Government is concerned about the environmental impact of new housing, the extreme low density of new building, particularly in the South East, and the need to respond to much smaller household size, particularly the growth in young and elderly single person households. Better use of brown field land, small sites, existing empty buildings and homes, higher density, better design and management will all play a part in increasing the flow and affordability of housing supply. The Government has already taken steps to curb the right to buy and its misuse in high demand areas, particularly London.

The Plan pushes house providers (somewhat gingerly) towards greater energy efficiency in existing and new homes, and also advocates the adoption of new, faster and more efficient building technology.

4. Land, countryside and rural communities – the impact on the natural environment

The Government recognises the intense pressures on land supply and the wasteful use of much green field land over the last decades. The plan endorses the principle of green belts and guarantees their protection and extension. Higher density, enforced at 30 homes per hectare on all sites, a continuing emphasis on brown field land, progress on decontamination and

remediation, should all help protect the countryside. The Government has declared that no more building will be allowed on active flood plains.

The plan emphasises the need for urban capacity studies, to help identify smaller sites, more brown field land and existing underused buildings. It highlights the success of the ban on out-of-town shopping centre permissions, leading at last in 2002 to more retail outlets opening up in town centres than outside on green field sites. The same sequential approach to housing – using central sites, existing buildings, and brown land first, as spelt out in the Planning Guidance – should have a similar impact.

5. Sustainable growth – the potential of the Thames Gateway and other ‘growth areas’

How to achieve ‘sustainable growth’ is the most serious challenge of the Plan. The Government wants to maintain the economic success of the South East, with its huge significance for the whole country and for Europe. It believes it must create new and expanded communities outside existing built up areas to do this and identifies four large areas, where a million or more new homes may be built over the coming decades. The most significant is the Thames Gateway, an area that stretches for 40 miles from the heart of the city to the mouth of the river at Southend and Margate. Its proximity to London, its large supply of brown field land, its relatively low current density and long-run economic decline (due to loss of industry, tourism and shipping) make it ripe for regeneration. Its potential transport links (some as yet not finally agreed or funded) and its links to Europe make it attractive. The Government is proposing two new Urban Development Corporations for the Thames Gateway, modelled on the 1980s Dockland Development Corporations that transformed core city centres in many parts of the country.

6. Reforming for delivery – a more coherent legal planning framework, structures and decision-making

The Government is reforming the planning system, proposing the beginnings of devolution to the English regions and creating a single regional housing board for each region to decide on housing investment. These reforms are potentially quite radical and could, if measured against the 15 headline indicators for sustainable development as the plan proposes, have a significant impact on how growth and decline are handled. They could potentially redistribute political decision-making, resources and investment away from the intensely pressurised South East, in favour of more balanced and therefore more sustainable growth.

There are several missing elements from the Plan – but two things are crucial to the social, economic and environmental sustainability of towns and cities. One is the concentration of seriously disadvantaged ethnic minorities in urban cores, and particularly in more deprived parts of major urban centres. There is a serious risk that the proposed growth areas in the South East will increase ethnic polarisation by drawing out better

qualified, better connected households. The continued decline of low demand areas elsewhere in the country may have a similar racially and socially segregating effect. Both processes – of growth and decline – tend to concentrate more vulnerable and poorer communities within cities, particularly ethnic minorities. The problem of racial and ethnic polarisation is a powerful barrier to the successful delivery of the Plan, fuelling urban sprawl and congestion as it has done in the United States.

The second missing element is any discussion of community level engagement in delivery of the Plan, even though both this and ethnic diversity are identified as key requirements in the definition of sustainable communities. Unless local communities are involved in the process, it seems unlikely, based on past experience, that the Plan will in fact deliver ‘sustainable communities’.

Over and above these critical gaps, there are questions over the increase in community tensions, implied in the growth areas, and worries over the balancing act regional housing boards will have to perform to meet competing demands for cash, land, building restrictions, building targets and so on.

Among the most serious problems the Plan needs to address are:

- Pressures on land, the natural environment, energy use and waste;
- The need for rapid and significant improvements in public transport systems and other major infrastructure and urban environmental conditions;
- The urgency of building greater social cohesion in an increasingly diverse and international population by avoiding the outward flight of better-off people, which reinforces inner city decline;
- The need to reconcile economic growth, skills shortages, demographic pressures and housing affordability with a more sustainable approach to large scale regeneration and to new development;
- The very different supply and demand problems in housing markets up and down the country.

If the Plan is to achieve its goal of “making [cities] again preferred places to live”, avoiding “urban sprawl” and “poorly designed new communities”, the Plan must “cement real change”. Its success will rely on multiple partners, including local authorities, local strategic partnerships, builders and regional planners. Action must, according to the Government, be integrated with the wider sustainability agenda, although how this can be done or what priority it should receive is not clear.

It is not easy to address these problems in a sustainable way.

4. The challenges of the Sustainable Communities Plan

The Sustainable Development Commission’s role is to advise government on issues of sustainable development, to assess the extent to which government commitment to sustainable development is being applied in its main policy areas, and to raise issues of central relevance and concern to the achievement of sustainable development more broadly in society. The Commission has analysed the contents of the Sustainable Communities Plan bearing in mind the UK Government’s own sustainable development objectives and its goal of achieving a 20 per cent reduction in emissions of carbon dioxide by 2020, and 60 per cent by 2050. The Sustainable Communities Plan is fundamentally important for the sustainable development of the country – buildings use 50 per cent of our energy and the construction industry accounts for 50 per cent of all landfill waste. The energy invested in existing infrastructure and buildings (embodied energy) in a highly developed urban society should help us save on further energy intensive investment. If wasted, this urban inheritance will be a major contributor to greenhouse gases, climate change and the overall environmental decline of the country. The impact of housing on these issues is one of the most significant elements in the overall sustainability of the country.

Housing and the environment

Housing affects many other aspects of the environment: water supply and drainage; the cost of utilities and other infrastructure, such as roads; the pollution and noise impact of development; the loss of green spaces and increased risks of flooding; the ecological imbalances caused by more and more development; the unmanageable congestion and traffic fuelled by the outward building of ever more homes.

The Plan aims to address the challenge of creating sustainable communities in this pressurised context. Adopting a range of measures to meet high housing demand in many areas of the country, particularly the South East, must be balanced with the measures to combat the environmental and social impact of low demand for housing in declining urban areas, particularly in the Midlands and North. The Plan makes reference to many other implications – for protecting ecosystems and biodiversity, for reducing sprawl and congestion, for creating safer, healthier, greener environments, for housing growth and decline.

There are six clear strands to the Plan:

1. Eliminating the backlog of repairs in all sectors but particularly social housing and maintaining more attractive, more liveable urban environments;
2. Eliminating low demand and overcoming housing abandonment, often through large scale clearance, while encouraging refurbishment and curbing the oversupply of land;
3. Creating a far bigger supply of new housing in high demand areas, maximising the use of existing stock, while making the

5. How can the Sustainable Communities Plan contribute to sustainable development?

- supply of housing attractive and affordable for key workers;
- 4. Protecting the natural environment, ecosystems and green belts, while maximising energy efficiency and sustainable development;
- 5. Adopting a strategy of planned growth in the pressurised South East to prevent low density sprawl and even more encroachment on scarce green field land;
- 6. Adopting an urban renaissance approach to existing and new communities through encouraging higher densities, more careful strategic planning, more regional decision-making and a single funding pot for housing in each region to facilitate sensitive decisions with regard to competing needs.

These ambitious goals carry major implications for other spending departments, particularly transport. The Plan attempts to reconcile obvious conflicts such as over-building and low demand; or guaranteeing green belts and proposing large growth areas. Although £22 billion in public money is earmarked in the Plan, much of it is from already allocated budgets. The wider infrastructure costs of the Plan are in the region of £45,000 per new home, and these are not covered within the allocated funds, as the Government explicitly recognises.

Urban renaissance

The Plan suggests that sustainable communities should embrace urban renaissance ideas of higher density, greater use of brown field land and existing buildings, higher quality, more environmentally sensitive design and more mixed communities. It reinforces the Government's commitment to action on housing, both locally and on a much larger scale. But the Plan itself focuses on large scale, without proposing how it can be implemented at community level. Action must, according to the Government, be integrated with the wider sustainability agenda, although how this can be done is also unclear. Energy efficiency and energy saving require far greater prominence for example.

The Plan presents major environmental, social and economic challenges. A small, densely populated island faces increasing pressures as we try to meet competing claims within the finite resources of land, materials, energy. Avoiding waste, minimising impact and reducing resource use have become the overriding concerns of sustainable development. To achieve this while meeting community needs and responding to economic imperatives, is the central purpose of the Plan.

Responding to pressures

The Government, local authorities, housing providers and communities are all under pressure through demographic shifts, migration, household change and rapid technological advances. The following challenges are the most critical to housing provision, which is at the heart of the Plan:

- unaffordable homes in high demand areas are juxtaposed with abandoned homes in many older towns and cities outside the South East. The impact on communities of the mismatch

- between supply and demand is serious;
- the poor quality of local environments affects over one-third of the population and detracts from sustainability; disrepair and environmental decay blight many urban council estates and streets of older terraced property; poor housing, poor environments, poverty, crime and poor health go hand in hand;
- attractive homes in popular areas are often too expensive for people on moderate incomes, particularly key workers, aspiring to owner occupation;
- the decline in the rate of new house building over the past 20 years mainly reflects a fall in building in the social housing sector, while private building has remained fairly steady. Private house builders are not responding adequately to increased demand for low-cost home ownership, according to the Government;
- the collapse in housing markets in parts of the North and Midlands has led to "whole streets being abandoned in some areas" – "the problem has grown rapidly in recent years" – and yet too much land and too many new homes are being supplied in these low demand regions;
- new developments often take far more land than they need or than they have done traditionally, and much new housing is both too big for the typical, smaller household that is forming and therefore also unaffordable.

The Plan sets out clearly how housing problems can be tackled over the next generation. But it raises significant challenges for sustainable development, requiring major new investment, new skills, higher energy efficiency standards and considerable innovation if it is to avoid a repetition of past mistakes and cumulative negative impacts all over the country. A much wider shift in planning, regeneration, economic incentives, social and environmental care must underpin the Plan.

5. How can the Sustainable Communities Plan contribute to sustainable development?

The Sustainable Communities Plan raises the following three critical questions for delivery and for the work of the Sustainable Development Commission:

1. How much new housing is needed and how much growth can the South East absorb?

We need to ensure an affordable housing supply but how much we produce and who it is targeted at can lead to conflict and greater polarisation. The existing stock of homes and land supply is often used wastefully. Higher density and greater proximity, mixed uses and mixed tenure help sustain communities and reduce polarisation, but high quality design and management are essential if mixed communities are to work. The private sector is the main housing provider but is not adapting fast enough to these challenges, nor is the existing stock being best utilised. How far can the existing stock contribute to a more useable supply?

5. How can the Sustainable Communities Plan contribute to sustainable development?

The Government accepts that the capacity to produce significant new housing in the four growth areas presupposes a huge and as yet unidentified investment in transport, education, health, water supply, waste disposal and other physical and social infrastructure. It also assumes a rapid growth of jobs together with at least an equal number of new homes. The worrying economic signs in the UK, and in Europe, raise major uncertainties over current predictions of needs, jobs, costs and affordability.

2. How can housing contribute to an absolute reduction in greenhouse gas emissions?

We can halve energy use in existing buildings, and new buildings can cut energy and materials waste in construction by around 60 per cent. Setting and achieving these targets would make a major contribution to our overall goal of a 60 per cent cut in carbon emissions by 2050. But current incentives are too weak; building regulations are poorly enforced on existing buildings and tighter, higher standards are urgently needed.

We know that the environmental and energy costs of demolition are high and so are the environmental gains of higher density, but translating this into practice depends on incentives, careful remodelling, and a critical mass of activity. The environmental, as well as economic and social, impact of better public transport infrastructure and faster, more reliable rail links to cities beyond the South East, is well documented, and can make a critical contribution to the goal of a 60 per cent carbon reduction, but requires vast public commitment. New communities need expensive and energy intensive infrastructure and under all scenarios will make major impacts on the environment.

Tackling the urban environment is central to the wider environmental agenda, and essential for making urban neighbourhoods more attractive in order to reduce demand for green field homes. People's immediate concerns over their neighbourhood environment – rubbish, graffiti, disorder, crime, vandalism, decay, disrepair – drive people to move out. The wider concern to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and protect the countryside should be linked to incentives for people to stay in urban areas. Therefore making cities 'liveable' is a top priority.

3. Can low demand regions with an oversupply of housing and land market their potential, reducing pressures on green fields and on growth areas, thereby making better use of existing capacity?

The cost of withdrawing surplus building land is certainly lower than the cost of continuing the oversupply of land and housing in two thirds of the country, with all the environmental and social consequences of inner decline and outer sprawl. Underpopulated areas outside the built-up South East could contribute to more sustainable communities in ways that have not as yet been sufficiently explored, by addressing this over-supply directly. Fast reliable transport links are one critical key to the

revival of regions, based on European experience. This year, Birmingham will be reached by train as quickly from central London as the outer Thames Gateway.

Below we look critically at each section of the Plan from a sustainable development perspective, in the light of these three questions.

Providing decent homes and decent neighbourhoods for all

It is vital to repair and make better use of the existing stock if it is to last and provide attractive homes far into the future. By focusing on improving neighbourhood environments, the Plan immediately increases the potential of existing neighbourhoods, thereby reducing the need and demand for new building. Social housing and older terraced housing are particularly vulnerable to decay, yet neighbourhood management and reinvestment in the existing stock can often restore declining inner areas.

Tackling disrepair, environmental decay and energy inefficiency in existing homes should receive the highest priority since at least 80 per cent of the buildings we will use in 30 years time are already built, according to the Government's Urban Task Force. Most existing neighbourhoods and homes can operate at much higher energy standards, cutting emissions by 50 per cent and raising SAP ratings to double the 'thermal warmth' standard or the eco-pass standard for new homes, as demonstrated by the Building Research Establishment.

Community level environmental concerns (rubbish, graffiti, vandalism, green spaces, maintenance) are linked directly with the wider sustainability agenda of reducing sprawl since local environmental conditions in neighbourhoods are the biggest single factor fuelling demand for new homes. Therefore focusing on neighbourhood-level sustainable regeneration and renewal makes sense.

Tackling low demand and abandonment – housing market failure and renewal

The Plan demonstrates the **net oversupply of new house building** in many parts of the country as well as underlining acute shortages particularly for key workers and in the intermediate housing market. It is possible to cut the release of green field land for new building in these regions (all outside the South) and to withdraw outline planning permission in some cases. This will cost money in buying out developer interest, but the overall benefit is potentially great. It is possible to market the potential of low demand areas, promoting a new image (as Liverpool has done very successfully in the recent European City of Culture Competition). But there are major barriers to regrowth, and the acute decline of some areas has so accelerated social polarisation as to make many neighbourhoods extremely undesirable. Learning from the US experience of inner city collapse and the high cost of outward sprawl, before it is too late, could save many communities. It is also essential given our population density. We have one twenty-fifth of the land per head of population of the US.

5. How can the Sustainable Communities Plan contribute to sustainable development?

The Government proposes large scale clearance, or where possible, refurbishment. The environmental and energy impacts of demolition are not costed and nor is the impact on existing communities. Most low demand areas are at least 70 per cent occupied, even where there are extreme problems. Therefore displacement is a serious cost too. Communities will often oppose large scale clearance for social and historic reasons. In many low demand areas, historic street layouts and infrastructure are at risk and there is a danger of characterless, suburban-style homes being spread over large areas of the land at great cost, in an attempt to attract new suburban migrants.

Revaluing, modernising and upgrading established and historic communities in currently low value neighbourhoods is critical to the longer term attractiveness of older, ex-industrial areas. Understanding the 'heritage dividend' is crucial. It is important to learn from the lessons of the past and piece together clearly costed, street by street proposals that encourage imaginative redesign, supporting retention of the existing community wherever possible, injecting cleverly designed new schemes within the existing urban frame. Otherwise, blight may drive even more investors and residents away. Urban Splash is pioneering this approach in Salford. A shift in some kinds of investment towards these cheap and potentially attractive areas should happen if transport links are improved.

Strategic rail investment and dedicated national bus routes along inter-city motorway corridors, will speed up the links with wider markets and with areas of growth. So will relocating sections of the government machine away from London. Successful universities in major cities, such as Birmingham, Manchester, Liverpool, Newcastle, and Glasgow, can generate research and development that spawns new enterprise and employment. Government and business should capitalise on this potential. Given the proximity of English regions and the small size of our island, over time these areas have the potential to recover – many of them already are. Above all, beyond the crowded South East there are attractive assets – more space, lower costs, easy access to national parks and heritage sites – that cry out for marketing and civic leadership, of the kind that led to Manchester hosting the Commonwealth Games and Liverpool being chosen as the 2008 European City of Culture. The limits of expansion in the South East drive up the value of other regions.

Delivering a step change in housing supply

The need to increase the affordable housing supply is driven by the decline of the social housing sector and the failure of the market to substitute adequately. In areas of high demand, prices for attractive homes are beyond the reach of essential key workers, even reasonably well paid workers. However, homes in poorer neighbourhoods of East London sell for half the London average.

In low demand areas of the country, many neighbourhoods are unattractive, even though the housing itself may be in reasonable condition and very cheap, creating a different kind of problem. Therefore demand and supply are imperfectly matched in most regions.

The Plan proposes making the best possible use of the existing stock and maximising the significant contribution that can be made by using small plots of land, conversions, infill sites and higher densities. All of these measures greatly enhance the potential for creating and preserving more sustainable communities. This approach requires mixing incomes, tenures and uses in ways that have traditionally been accepted and are common and successful across Europe. The chances of greater energy efficiency, better public transport and enhanced services are greatly improved by this intensified use of land. It should also be possible to radically reduce energy use in transport if we adopt a 'recycling approach' to housing.

New building techniques not only improve energy efficiency but can allow offsite prefabrication of high density, high efficiency flats that are affordable and attractive to childless couples and single households. Pioneering approaches to construction are already proving energy efficient in the Greenwich Millennium Village, the Joseph Rowntree CASPAR schemes and BedZED. The growth of smaller households encourages this approach. A combination of high insulation, brown field reuse and innovative, energy efficient new and recycled building could both supply more housing and possibly halve our current energy use in buildings. Developing new skills to deliver these highly technical innovations is central to success. (Egan Review of Skills, ODPM, 2003)

Protecting the land, countryside and environment while helping rural communities

The Plan recognises the need to protect and enhance the natural environment. It sees the countryside as a resource for all to enjoy. It endorses its critical role in sustaining our ecological balance, absorbing and reducing pollution, limiting the impact of development, reversing earlier industrial damage and reducing the risk of more flooding. Therefore the Plan guarantees the preservation and extension of green belts, prohibits further building on floodplains, and argues that further green field building should be avoided wherever possible.

The measures of sustainable communities must be adapted to smaller towns, villages and scattered settlements, which require special measures to protect affordable housing as richer outsiders buy up property. The key question is how much new housing and new land are needed as opposed to a more custodial use of existing land and buildings. The Plan suggests that much rural building could be avoided (only 5,000 new

5. How can the Sustainable Communities Plan contribute to sustainable development?

affordable rural homes are proposed) by applying the same principles of better use of existing buildings, higher density, infill building, use of small sites and conversions. There are special mechanisms for retaining affordable housing for existing, low-income residents which non-profit housing providers can use. The alternative of incremental building into the countryside is both damaging and unsustainable.

Tackling affordable growth in a planned, sustainable way

There is high demand for housing in the South East and the Government is determined to try and meet it. It therefore plans to subsidise the growth areas more strongly than it does the declining regions. This raises some of the most serious challenges to sustainability. Firstly, the South East is struggling to absorb additional growth without the effects of congestion and development making it a less attractive region to investors. Secondly, most of the projected housing is premised on significant job growth and a strong economy; this looks less certain in the current world economic climate. Thirdly, there are the huge infrastructure and transport requirements for which money has not yet been found or allocated.

Avoiding social and ethnic polarisation through the outward movement of more affluent families from existing areas, concentrating development on brown field sites, mainly in the Thames Gateway, rather than in the Cambridge and Milton Keynes growth areas with their constrained brown field supply and tight green belts, will both be critical to success.

Raising energy efficiency and reducing the environmental impact of growth are central goals of the Plan, and delivering on them will be vital to sustainable development. But the growth areas will not under current plans replicate the successful model of the Greenwich Millennium Village because the level of funding and the tight planning requirements of Millennium Communities are neither in place nor proposed under current reforms.

The potential of lower demand areas to relieve intense pressures on higher demand areas is already showing up in the strategy for the Thames Gateway to attract demand away from Central, West and South London. The same could gradually apply to the South Midlands, West and East Midlands and eventually the rest of the country. The fiscal incentives need to be stronger so that lower growth in the South East translates into better use of urban capacity in the West and East Midlands and further north.

Reforming the planning system and regional government to deliver sustainable communities

There is widespread support for planning reform, leading to stronger, more integrated regional and sub-regional strategies, more flexible local plans and a focus on neighbourhood-level delivery plans. However, there are worries about a 'fast-track, top-down' approach, in spite of understandable impatience with the current cumbersome system, as this belies the purpose of planning and harks back to earlier mistakes often caused through haste and large scale. The proposed powers to impose obligatory housing targets for development on particular areas (reminiscent of a strong 'predict and provide' approach) could create serious distortions in the housing market.

The prospect of regional devolution and the creation of regional housing boards offer important potential for more focused and more integrated decisions, evening out growth incentives and reducing regional imbalances. Adopting a long-term rather than short-term view will be all-important in delivery and the limited funds will, in practice, mean that plans will be implemented bit by bit at a human and community scale rather than at the large scale that is a recurring theme of the Plan. The absence of community-level mechanisms, will ring alarm bells in many housing memories and may trigger more opposition than it should. But the top-down style of the Plan itself will be modified in the delivery by the sheer volume and weight of local opinion. It remains to be seen whether the core idea of creating more sustainable communities through major house building can in practice become anything other than a contradiction in terms.

Critical action

Three factors will ensure a more sustainable outcome:

- adopting a sequential approach to housing, as has already happened with shopping centres, which would at a stroke reinforce the value of existing but declining inner areas and limit environmental damage and social polarisation;
- adopting an 'urban renaissance' approach to sustainable communities – which would reinforce the value of proximity, of community, of mixed uses and of sustainable density – allowing viable services, including transport. This in turn would revalue the existing infrastructure and physical stock;
- revaluing our environmental assets and liabilities will radically change the way we do things and ensure more careful, more sensitive, and more long-term care so that the next and future generations will inherit communities worth living in.

It will take clear commitment, the right incentives and a long-term approach to deliver both the scale of activity required and a major reduction in energy use and environmental impact.

6. Measures of sustainable communities

We have identified four main measures of sustainable communities:

- measures to support planning for sustainable densities, design and layout;
- measures to minimise energy use and environmental impact;
- measures to foster economic prosperity;
- measures to support community organisation and neighbourhood management.

They incorporate all the key requirements of a sustainable community identified by the Government in the Sustainable Communities Plan (see Box 3).

Below we set out the four groups of measures that we have developed in some detail. However they can be adapted, extended and applied according to local conditions and experience. We have so far to go before reaching the goal of sustainability that they must be regarded as starting points rather than blueprints.

Measures to support planning for sustainable densities, design, and layout

1. Around 50 homes per hectare is a comfortable, compact density with sufficient population to support a local school, bus route and shops. Well designed three and four storey semi-detached and terraced family houses with medium sized private gardens are at this density. With a majority of new households comprising single people, many of them young and elderly, proximity to services, facilities and public transport is increasingly essential for social and economic reasons. Flats are generally at much higher densities – around 100 homes per hectare – and if well designed and managed, increasingly attractive to childless households, the majority of all households. Only at sufficient density are mixed uses, local services and public transport viable. For housing to be affordable, given much smaller households and increasing land shortages, a density of at least 50 per hectare is becoming inevitable.
2. Green open public space should lie within 15 minutes walk of every home; and trees and other plants should grow within sight of every home. This will encourage families with young children to stay in urban neighbourhoods. It is achievable at relatively high densities with careful planning, design and management. Open space has important beneficial impacts on flooding and drainage, on pollution and carbon reductions, on health and general well being, as well as on the attractiveness of urban communities. Many small green spaces make built up streets fresher and less polluted.
3. Designing pedestrian and cycle friendly streets, limiting but not excluding vehicle access, car parking, and lowering traffic speeds, will encourage social contact, informal social control

and a greater sense of safety. These measures are particularly important to mothers with young children and to elderly people. They also cut energy use and pollution by encouraging alternatives to the private car, which is essential for higher density to work.

4. Remodelling and redesigning existing buildings, streets and neighbourhoods can create attractive, high density, mixed communities with enhanced amenities, historic character, good location and a strong ‘sense of place’, often missing from new build areas. Already built up areas are almost always closer to town centres, to services and to transport links than more dispersed new communities.
5. Planning for new and regenerated services, such as schools, health, transport and shops, must include measures to build local skills to strengthen the employment base of disadvantaged areas; and it must maximise energy saving, recycling, waste reduction and local provision to reduce the need to travel.

Measures to minimise energy use and environmental impact

1. The planning and design goal for all new building should be minimal resource use and impact on the environment. The ideal would be carbon-neutral homes and activity, but at the very least to cut energy and construction waste by 60 per cent. It is also possible to achieve close to this for existing homes, raising their SAP rating far above the standard currently enforced for new build homes. All new and existing homes should reach the ‘excellent’ energy standard for eco-homes.
2. Reusing and remodelling existing buildings is a highly energy efficient approach, because the embodied energy in the mass of a building (i.e. the amount of energy used to produce the original structures, the foundations, walls, floors and structural supports), is a very large proportion of the total energy used in the life of a building. This would greatly reduce environmental damage and inequality.
3. ‘Wrapping’ buildings with a thick thermal insulating layer is technically straightforward and in energy and environmental terms highly desirable. The tax incentives should favour the refurbishment and upgrading of existing homes to excellent eco-standards, thus encouraging the development of materials, skills, supply chains, building activity and investment to raise the thermal standards of existing buildings beyond current new build standards. The payback time in energy saving from this investment is around nine years. This work is labour intensive and therefore generates jobs in older urban neighbourhoods where there is generally a job shortage, a large supply of manual labour often with relevant experience and a large supply of frequently undervalued homes.

6. Measures of sustainable communities

4. Recycling and composting waste, as well as minimising its creation, help generate more sustainable life styles and also encourage local planting and growing. Tree planting, balconies, patios and pocket parks within every neighbourhood, all help to support wildlife, sustain our fragile but vital ecosystems and integrate the natural and built environments which should not be seen as separate and competing elements.
5. Giving space and resources to public transport, walking and cycling cuts energy use and pollution, makes streets safer, reduces congestion and health costs and supports families, elderly and vulnerable people.

Measures to foster economic prosperity

1. Creating mixed use neighbourhoods encourages local jobs and enterprises, attracts small businesses and creates demand for more economic activity in an upward spiral of growth.
2. Using ground floor spaces on main streets for shops, workshops, service centres and facilities, with homes above, makes street fronts more attractive, generates street life, maximises the use of space and increases informal social interaction and supervision. It encourages investment and generates employment.
3. Transport links are essential in accessing wider job markets and in encouraging inward investment, so much so that a first measure of economic potential is often accessibility. Moderate density is essential to reducing congestion problems generated by more spread out development. The core cities and regions outside the South East underline the centrality of good transport links.
4. Location is vitally important to economic vitality. Preventing 'employment sprawl' is as important as preventing housing sprawl, for environmental, social and eventually economic reasons. Higher density housing developments provide easier access to employment centres and more viable public transport hubs and make sound economic sense. Attractive housing and neighbourhood environments also drive investment, which in turn drives jobs.
5. Local services create many local jobs – potentially at least 150 for every 1,000 homes. Local educational and skills levels are a main factor in helping local people into these jobs. Raising educational standards is central to urban areas regaining investment appeal, and attracting people with choice, young professionals, entrepreneurs and urban pioneers. The very substantial public sector resources in services such as health, education, police, and housing can play a significant role in strengthening local economies through such locally based jobs.

6. In the clean-up from the damage of heavy industries of the past, brown field reinstatement can support major shifts in economic investment and new-style jobs, as long as housing and community environments act as magnets rather than deterrents.

Measures to support community organisation and neighbourhood management

1. Neighbourhood management, involving a locally based team to repair, maintain and supervise neighbourhood conditions on behalf of the community, is essential for the long-term wellbeing of a modern urban community. Local authorities have a critical role in funding and supporting the creation of local services. It is invariably more economic to deliver front line services from a local base with local supervision, and considerable savings can be made in preventing damage, decay, crime and mounting disrepair. By making neighbourhoods more attractive, safer and better cared for, they become more sustainable, higher value and more attractive to investors, thereby generating more economic activity. Front line, neighbourhood based jobs also encourage social involvement, voluntary and community activity, making communities more sustainable – 'local stewardship' as it is called in the Plan.
2. Community safety – tackling fear of crime as well as crime itself, accidents, pollution, vandalism, graffiti, and all the small signs of neglect that encourage crime – is central to people feeling secure, at home, and comfortable with their neighbourhood.
3. Residents have a vital role in decisions about neighbourhood conditions, plans and initiatives. All ages, classes and groups need to have a stake in local decisions and the real opportunity to help shape what happens. Brokering community relations and community priorities is not easy and requires local leadership, fostered by a real sense of ownership. Local services, local budgets, and neighbourhood management structures greatly help this and there are many successful models, e.g. there are over 400 popular neighbourhood warden schemes, supported by local authorities and the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit.
4. Community organisation and development often happens spontaneously within communities, triggered by a threat or a funding opportunity or a special event or a simple desire to make things work and bring people together. In urban areas where there are more anxieties and lower confidence in the potential to succeed, external support will often be necessary. Local councils, churches, charities and voluntary organisations often play this community development role.

5. Creating meeting points and facilities that are clustered around focal centres of activity such as the local school or shops or health centre, generates a lot of community activity and a sense of belonging, security and cohesion. Higher density neighbourhoods can more easily generate this critical mass of activity and contact. Meeting points are particularly important for mothers with children and can transform the viability and attractiveness of a neighbourhood.
6. Many communities are fast changing and becoming more racially diverse. This raises many questions for existing residents and newcomers alike. Communities will survive the challenges and strains of change if people are prepared for change, if help is to hand and if existing residents' livelihoods are not being threatened. Given a chance to be generous when others are in need, most people will be. For these reasons, brokering community conditions and setting in train measures to foster cohesion and a positive sense of community are crucial to the survival of urban neighbourhoods. Particularly for these reasons, building and reinstating mixed income, mixed tenure, mixed use communities will be vital to our urban future. Over time, smaller communities all over the country will be caught up in the same processes of change and diversification, requiring constant effort to integrate, include and harmonise social relations.

There are many measures that could be added. The four measures we have used give an initial indication of the ways that policy makers and implementers can measure their plans against the reality of how communities actually work. Sustainable communities will be those that pioneer new ways of making the four sets of measures work together, both in existing and new neighbourhoods, to enhance the environment, the economy and the social wellbeing of our society. Integrating the measures of design, density and layout, with reductions in energy use and environmental impact, will be essential to achieving the reductions in carbon emissions and therefore global warming on which our future depends. To achieve this within a socially and economically cohesive framework will challenge our ingenuity and commitment. But it is not a question of unfortunate trade-offs between overcoming social problems and caring for the environment, pursuing economic growth at all costs and exacerbating serious regional imbalances. Rather it is a matter of finding creative new ways to do these things together, holistically.

The following checklist offers questions which can assist this process in local areas.

Checklist for sustainable communities *Box 5*

1. Does the **community** (residents, service providers and other local stakeholders) have a **key role** in analysing the challenges and deciding priorities within the available and potential resources?
2. Do homes have the highest **SAP rating**, including refurbished homes and reuse of existing buildings – is the cost of achieving this for **existing homes** built in to the plan, with a payback time of a typical loan of 10-30 years?
3. Are the materials and components used in **construction** as locally sourced as possible, health friendly (e.g. low toxins), low in embodied energy, and easily and locally maintainable? Are new communities going to have the lowest energy use overall, the **lowest environmental impact** overall and overall beneficial social effects?
4. Is there sufficient **useable green space** within **walking distance** (15 minutes from any home with a push chair) with trees (to absorb carbon and provide shade and shelter) and supervision and maintenance? Does the green space provide wildlife habitats and contribute to urban drainage?
5. Are the streets **pedestrian and cycle friendly** to encourage local contact, informal surveillance and local shopping? Do street fronts include shops and small businesses near bus stops and intersections?
6. Does the settlement have **frequent, reliable, cheap public transport**
 - requiring a density of at least 50 homes per hectare to support bus routes, local shops and schools? Is car parking and car access organised:
 - a) to allow and encourage essential economic and social activity?
 - b) to deter unnecessary journeys?
 - c) to generate income for local services (particularly public transport)?
 - d) to rebalance urban communities in favour of families, young children, elderly – social contact and street life generally?

Parking fees/permits, the limiting of road space, enforcement of speed limits, and the establishment of Home Zones are some techniques.
7. Is the **design and layout** of communities creating a **viable mix of people and uses**, integrating old with new, providing community facilities, parks and play areas, benches, planting, encouraging involvement, commitment, ownership and investment – attracting people of different ethnic and social backgrounds?
8. Do communities have **meeting points**?
 - benches, pocket parks, play areas, cafes

Are there community facilities?

 - centres for meetings, for hire, for parties and weddings
 - churches with social activities and provision attached

Are there ways for residents to make an input into their communities?

Do all sections of the community have a chance to influence and make decisions that affect their future?

What about local schools, training facilities, lifelong learning?
9. Are there **front-line jobs** – with training and recognition – to care for, protect, repair the neighbourhood? This strategy helps people needing work, creates informal supervision and maintains conditions. The park keeper, caretaker, warden, and school assistant are examples.
10. Is there proper **security, street supervision, repair and maintenance and environmental care**? For instance, is there a **neighbourhood management** team responsible for organising this basic environmental and social service and co-ordinating public inputs to maximise community quality of life?

7. Areas for action towards sustainable development

The Sustainable Development Commission is actively engaged through its members in many aspects of the Plan – particularly planning reform, low demand, neighbourhood renewal, the growth areas, and countryside issues. There are two overarching issues and five specific elements of the Plan which involve us.

The Commission is committed to:

- Minimising resource use, energy inputs and waste in housing and construction, with the aim of making the impact of the Plan as near to carbon-neutral as possible.
- Identifying the core features and characteristics of sustainable communities, in order to measure the sustainability of new and existing communities, thereby support their development.

Specific elements of the Plan, where the Commission is involved through its work on sustainable regeneration, planning, energy reduction, local and regional government, are:

- Upgrading and maintaining existing homes and neighbourhoods
- Responding to housing market failure and low demand
- Accommodating growth
- Protecting the natural environment
- Reforming planning and regional development
- Cutting carbon use by 60 per cent.

The Commission can help with the Plan's contribution to sustainable development in the following ways:

- It can contribute to a wider understanding of the overarching need for, and approaches to, achieving energy and carbon reductions that will underpin the long-run sustainability of the Plan.
- It can suggest measures to organise communities more sustainably
 - showing how to limit resource use, waste and environmental impacts
 - advocating and developing exacting energy standards
 - contributing to neighbourhood renewal as the principal route available to achieve social, economic and environmental sustainability in an already built-up and densely developed country
 - supporting 'urban renaissance' ideas as an alternative to urban sprawl.

The Commission will also contribute to the sustainable delivery of specific elements of the Plan:

- With the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment, English Heritage and the Environment Agency and Commission for Integrated Transport, we are helping the Pathfinder Market Renewal Areas to deliver sustainable regeneration. Raising energy efficiency levels and reducing the need for clearance in nineteenth century terraces and twentieth century council estates will be the Achilles heel of this programme.
- dCARB-uk, a regionally focused, area-based programme to test out the potential for cutting carbon emissions by 60 per cent, links the need for additional homes with the Government goal of an absolute reduction of 60 per cent in carbon emissions by 2050.
- To cut the impact of human activity and building on the natural environment, we are working to reduce energy use in buildings by at least 50 per cent. This has implications for planning, design, refurbishing existing homes, energy saving and energy sources.
- Existing communities, Core Cities and the Thames Gateway all have immense potential to contribute to sustainable development. The Midlands, the North and Scotland and Wales offer the potential to relieve unsustainable growth pressures in the South East.
- A more careful approach to planning and urban capacity should result from proposed reforms. We are advising on new and revised planning guidance.
- Cumulative damage to the environment through insensitive, short-term human activity, is leading to a collapse of vital ecosystems and catastrophic loss of biodiversity. We are challenging traditional approaches to economic growth and economic measurement, in order to revalue natural capital in a radical way.
- Multitudes of small community efforts are critical to a more sustainable future, for without community commitment to protecting the environment, building social cohesion, and sharing economic prosperity, sustainable development will be no more than a paper exercise.
- The reform of the planning and housing investment systems and regional devolution, with carefully revised planning guidance, will help the whole country shift towards more sustainable development – through the work of myriad key partners. We are working with ODPM on these issues and want to continue.

The following chart sets out the main components of the Plan, the main issues and questions it raises for sustainable

7. Areas for action towards sustainable development

development and the actions it requires.

Main elements of the Plan	Requirements of the Plan	Issues for sustainable development	Areas of action for sustainable development
1. Providing decent homes and decent neighbourhoods for all	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Upgrading existing stock Prioritising neighbourhood environments Supporting higher densities for smaller households Retaining and improving existing communities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Raising energy efficiency in existing homes Linking community level and wider environmental concerns Reducing energy and environmental impact through conserving existing stock Recycling materials, reducing waste 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Resource use and waste Energy efficiency standards Sustainable regeneration Environmental equality Measures of sustainable communities
2. Tackling low demand and abandonment – housing market renewal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Withdrawing surplus land Restraining land releases Tackling social polarisation Reducing barriers to regrowth Changing the image of inner areas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Large scale clearance Energy loss and environmental impact of clearance Learning from US experience of inner city collapse Strategic rail links and other transport investment Growth areas versus Midlands and North 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pathfinders' links to sustainable development Partners with CABE, English Heritage, Environment Agency Neighbourhood regeneration
3. Delivering a step change in housing supply, particularly affordable housing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Creating an attractive affordable housing supply for key workers in the right locations Using the existing stock and land supply better Maximising small sites, infill, remodelling, conversions, windfalls 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Building at higher densities Creating smaller, better designed units Maximising occupancy in existing stock Creating public transport links Promoting mixed uses and tenures Designing for closer proximity and higher densities Ensuring greater energy efficiency in existing and new homes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Need for homes and absolute reduction in carbon emissions – dCARB-uk Value of new technology, higher density, higher quality design to deliver major energy gains and more smaller units Need for new skills
4. Protecting the land, countryside and environment while helping rural communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Protecting the countryside Meeting rural affordable shortages Adopting and enforcing sequential approach Second homes, incentives, planning What are the full costs? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Environmental protection and sustainable density Charging the cost of environmental impact Guaranteeing the green belt No building on flood plains Using existing stock and higher density 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lowest possible impact on natural environment Cumulative damage and collapse of ecosystems Sustainable regeneration to reduce need for green fields
5. Tackling growth in a planned and sustainable way	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Absorbing growth in the South East without environmental damage matching economic success Responding to high demand without fuelling more demand Subsidy to growth areas and to declining inner cities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Energy standards Role for social and affordable housing Transport and infrastructure costs Reducing polarisation Infrastructure impact on environment Uncertain job growth 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Urban capacity Planning for higher densities Potential of Midlands and North to relieve pressures on South Housing strategy for growth areas linked to existing areas Green belt & flood plain guarantees New approaches to economic growth
6. Reforming the planning system and regional government to deliver sustainable communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regional devolution and the role of communities Fast track large scale planning Overall top-down approach 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sequential approach Short vs. long term Reconciling competing goals Surplus land supply and building versus shortages 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Measures of sustainable communities Revised planning guidance Land shortages Land over-supply

Part II: Issues for sustainable development

Sustainable communities plan and sustainable development *Box 6*

The critical issues for the Sustainable Development Commission fall into two main categories. The first concerns omissions in the Plan. The second relates to priority areas which the SDC would want the Government to address in order to promote sustainable development more effectively. Part II is organised as a response to the six key elements of the Sustainable Communities Plan.

1. Providing decent homes and decent neighbourhoods for all

Standards of energy efficiency

Developers and builders want a clear message on standards of energy efficiency. Builders expect higher demands on energy efficiency, but these directly impact on costs. This would push up the prices of new building and make the restoration and reuse of existing homes more attractive as it is generally cheaper to insulate an existing house than build a new one, allowing for infrastructure and energy costs. Finding ways to enforce higher energy standards on existing homes is critical. Tax rebates on investment in energy saving insulation is one mechanism.

Recycling

Recycling buildings and materials require strong incentives and strong enforcement against dumping of building waste – these are weak at the moment. Far too little recycling happens, except for road aggregate, because the incentives for this are low and the labour and systems costs are high. Landfill tax does not, however, reflect the real cost of waste disposal. Building materials have a high toxic impact, so disposal is in any case problematic. Recycling requires a high degree of local ‘ownership’ to become effective, therefore engaging all elements of local communities is crucial.

Cumulative decline and demolition

We need to understand and address the cumulative impacts on neighbourhoods. This includes recognising potential ‘tipping points’ which indicate the decline of neighbourhoods. The costs of demolition are not mentioned in the Plan but they are very significant to those displaced, as are increasing compensation payments to the affected parties. They are also cash-consuming at around £20 – £35,000 per home demolished. A redistribution of these resources would go a long way towards rejuvenating many run-down areas.

Social housing

The major task of revitalising social housing estates (as opposed to simply bringing them up to a minimal ‘decent’ standard) is not adequately addressed in the Plan. This is a major requirement if these homes are to survive. Current and past research on the regeneration of social housing estates bears out this requirement (see *Estates on the Edge*, 1999). The

Government does suggest supporting the partial transfer of housing stock to other non-profit landlords to help urban local authorities and attract investment. This is a positive measure that can help urban local authorities like Birmingham and Glasgow.

Liveability

Financing environmental improvements is essential to saving many social housing estates and preventing further decline. The Government’s Green Spaces report and the Urban White Paper can confirm this. The emphasis on ‘liveability’ in the Plan is positive, but the prioritisation of resources is not apparent. Creating neighbourhood delivery vehicles that are focused on local conditions and services is an urgent priority. Unless neighbourhood management becomes the norm in built-up residential areas, as it is in most other European countries, urban environmental problems will continue to mount. Avoiding demolition and negotiating partial but necessary transfers would create resources for this.

2. Tackling low demand and abandonment – housing market renewal

Growth, decline and the social consequences

The proposed strategy attempts to be all-embracing but does not discuss why things are working as they are or how we can address the causes of decline. For example, there is no mention of the problems for the Midlands, Wales, the North and Scotland of a failing national rail network. Nor are the intrinsic land supply problems in Britain discussed; nor the mutually reinforcing problems of inner city decay, ‘white flight’ and ethnic minority concentrations. Consequently the Plan missed the opportunity of tackling the range of deep-seated social problems that drive many of the supply pressures. The assumption appears to be that continued rapid growth in the South and continuing decline in the North and Midlands are inevitable. The SDC does not agree that the response to these twin pressures should be more building in the South and more demolition in the North.

Transport issues

The Plan fails to address ways to encourage regrowth outside the South East or the role of strategic national transport infrastructure, both key factors which should inform new investment decisions in the Midlands, South West and North. Fast rail connections to Coventry, Birmingham and Manchester in 2004 should generate a new climate of confidence. Yet they are not mentioned. This reflects a serious imbalance in the Plan, given that 90 per cent of the population lives outside the South East.

There is no mention of the transport needs of the low demand areas – not just the links to national networks, but also to local centres. There are huge public costs to doing what is needed but also to not doing it. The cost of congestion is very large, particularly in the South East, but there is no reference to this,

2. Tackling low demand and abandonment – housing market renewal

even though estimates (in billions) are available from the Treasury, DTI and the CBI. The strategic national transport links are vital to reducing pressure on the South East, e.g. upgrading the West Coast main line and cross country services. There are many other ways to reduce car journeys such as car sharing, dedicated cycle paths, safe routes to school, etc.

Barriers to regrowth

The barriers to regrowth in the North and Midlands are not adequately discussed.

Some of the most significant include:

- the image of cities and neighbourhoods;
- poor train links – “other parts of the country feel too far away”;
- a feeling of emptiness in many inner neighbourhoods of Northern and Midlands cities;
- a lack of greenery and well cared-for green spaces;
- a serious level of dilapidation;
- low value homes that appear unwanted and potentially unsellable;
- history seen as a negative not positive influence and failure to promote historic street patterns and ‘community level’ landmark buildings;
- job/skill mismatch;
- the whole focus of growth being too London/South East centred;
- old infrastructure seen as a problem rather than an asset;
- too few regeneration skills to cope with infill, conversions and remodelling.

The fundamental strategic barrier is how to affect a sea-change away from the highly centralised national system that favours London, in the face of a chronic legacy of industrial collapse and a vast, depleted urban infrastructure that is not needed for its original purposes and has not yet been reconfigured, but offers huge opportunities.

Managing regeneration

Planners, politicians and social landlords increasingly favour clearing large sites for development. However, regeneration experts including the North East Builders Federation, Halifax, Urban Splash, English Heritage, the Building Research Establishment and CABI are in favour of more ‘site sensitive’ regeneration, reusing as much historic infrastructure as possible and winning “the Heritage Dividend” – which directly adds value to properties and areas (Nationwide Building Society, 2003).

Some areas which are “semi-abandoned” are still 70 per cent occupied, e.g. inner Liverpool. This local resistance to abandonment should be built upon, enabling positive refurbishment of many threatened areas. The implications of “large scale clearance” are huge, yet are barely discussed. Likewise, there is no mention of the racial implications throughout the North and Midlands of the large scale clearance

of older Victorian and Edwardian terraces. Many of these areas are increasingly populated with Pakistani, Bangladeshi and other minority families, living in close proximity with low-income white indigenous communities. The lack of jobs and inter-ethnic tensions are problems that can be made worse by insensitive top-down intervention. The Plan appears to ignore “heritage street patterns”. It does not indicate the actual scale of proposed demolition or the impact on communities, social support, community networks, etc.

The problems already experienced by the rehousing of displaced families in Newcastle, where demolition forced the rehousing of many families, has created knock-on effects on the next layer of neighbourhoods, often blighting them and spreading rather than containing the problem of low demand.

The Plan mentions refurbishment as an alternative to “large scale clearance” without proposing any mechanisms, funding channels or added value. The Sustainable Development Commission could almost certainly interest English Heritage in research on this potential issue. There is scope for vast energy savings on existing homes through modernisation – at a fraction of the cost of new build, if infrastructure and demolition costs are included.

Opportunity for image change

Despite the accent on clearances in low demand areas, there is potential for regrowth and an image change. The fast rail links to Coventry, Birmingham, Manchester and Liverpool, due this year, will open huge opportunities. Heritage value is creeping into many cities through the regeneration of canals, terraces, civic structures, ‘workshop’ buildings, old parks, etc. Wardens and neighbourhood managers are transforming large inner neighbourhoods such as New East Manchester. Similarly new local transport could have a transforming effect, for example, the new Manchester tram extension to Ashton through East Manchester, the proposed riverfront Liverpool tram, and the Sheffield tram extension to the poorer eastern part of the city. The Thames Gateway transit proposals offer a super modern “tram-like bus” that will be far cheaper than trams per se, but could quickly connect up major strategic brown field development areas, like Barking Reach, to the major transport hubs.

Other examples of positive regeneration include the urban walkway with street planting, benches, and iron railings along the new pedestrian route linking Manchester Piccadilly to the Commonwealth Stadium. This is a brilliant innovation in image change. The potential of the Birmingham canal network to link the city centre by foot to most of its poorest and most depleted inner neighbourhoods is another, proposed by Tim Brighouse to the Birmingham Housing Commission.

3. The problems of housing supply, particularly affordable housing

US experience

The UK should be learning from the costly mistakes already made in the United States. As a free-market economy, US investors have abandoned many inner city neighbourhoods, helped by the indirect subsidy of fast road-building. The cost of each 'sprawl' home to the federal government alone is \$15,000. The cost to the US economy of the collapse of inner city ghettos, which is part and parcel of sprawl development, is immeasurable. Around 8 million Americans, the vast majority of whom are African Americans, live in "high poverty inner city ghettos".

The US suffers major congestion around all its major centres, in spite of making a huge investment in roads. This is caused by the effects of urban sprawl. There are major costed environmental, economic, social and health impacts of car dependency. Informed and respected studies have shown that racial polarisation is deepened by sprawl building and road subsidies. The impact on cities as a whole has not been costed, but as Federal support for cities declines under President Bush, so American cities unravel fiscally and cut essential programmes – for instance, childcare and public transport – thereby driving out more people. The work of the Urban Center at the Brookings Institution shows these connections.

3. The problems of housing supply, particularly affordable housing

Need for new, affordable and energy efficient housing

The Plan recognises the different housing needs of the biggest group of new projected households, which are single people, and also tries to respond to the affordability pressures on key workers, but it does not adequately recognise that supply and demand are inter-linked. Single person households form, at least partly, in response to supply.

The Plan makes a clear, if understated, attack on large, low density, detached housing and sprawling developments, particularly in the South East where densities are lowest. The SDC believes that this should herald new developments which provide a more sustainable built environment.

The Plan does not clarify or explore the scope for refurbishment and modernisation of the existing stock. For example:

- Significant housing improvement funds are not in place;
- Local transport needs to enhance the value of inner neighbourhoods;
- There is no mention of the role that traditional streets and terraces have played in London's recovery since the 1970s; nor in the recovery of other popular cities and towns;
- There is potential to deliver the highest eco-standards at much lower costs through conversion of existing homes.

The cost of raising older property to the highest environmental SAP rating, far above the requirement for new build, is around

£10,000 according to the BRE and Energy Saving Trust. The Plan suggests devoting considerable resources to bringing existing social housing up to a 'decent' standard, but pushing thermal rather than energy efficiency in this regard – a SAP rating of 55 rather than 100. The SDC believes that it would not be difficult to achieve 100.

Environmental protection and density

30 homes per hectare is acknowledged in the ODPM as a very low minimum density for housing building, but even this will only be enforced in high pressure areas on larger sites. Density limits need to be enforced on small as well as large plots of land everywhere in the country. It is even more urgent in depleted cities where a sense of emptiness can contribute to abandonment. The Government's hopes are pinned partly on building to more realistic and more sustainable densities. Yet, there continue to be anomalies. Milton Keynes recently refused a planning application at 35 units per hectare as too dense.

The brown field target in the North and Midlands is not ambitious enough. It needs to be set far above the 60 per cent level for a long while to come, yet in the North the 60 per cent target is already seriously undermined through green field building. The Government is attempting to impose tighter restrictions. A map showing brown field supply and use in the North and Midlands, relative to the South East, clarifies the imbalance, with the 60 per cent target being achieved solely because of high brown field reuse in high demand areas. Significantly, London is achieving over 85 per cent brown field reuse.

The issue of demand for housing is critical since:

- population growth is lower than expected;
- there is more sharing of accommodation, particularly between young single people, than expected;
- there are more childless and unmarried couples forming households;
- there are more elderly;
- there are more women working.

The Census of 1991 and 2001 underline these changes. All these factors influence both the scale of demand and the type of demand. Therefore, housing density, ancillary services and facilities and employment, as well as adequate public transport and proximity to the urban centre, become more important. New developments for new style living patterns will only work if we can create a critical mass of people and services in areas earmarked in the Plan as growth areas as well as in housing market renewal areas. Many inner and outer neighbourhoods in cities, towns and rural centres currently lack this sense of vitality and activity – in other words a viable density.

Where do social housing, council housing and affordable housing fit in?

There is no discussion on the specific meaning of affordable housing.

4. Protecting the countryside and environment while helping rural communities

- It could mean targeting anyone at or below 90 per cent of average income – over half the population in the European definition.
- Or, it could mean households spending up to one-third of their income on housing – the American definition.

The SDC suggest that it is important to embrace a broad, inclusive definition of affordable housing to ensure community viability and social integration – the European approach. Otherwise we will continue to generate ‘no go’ neighbourhoods, social housing in certain areas will continue to be hard to let, and the desire to own will swamp other options. It is expensive to subsidise housing for a broad band of the population. An increasing focus on renovation and on restoring existing neighbourhoods will expand the affordable supply. Basically having more, smaller and cheaper units in well-maintained inner neighbourhoods helps the affordable supply. For this to occur:

- Housing associations should become more entrepreneurial in partnership with private developers who are becoming eligible for social housing funds (as in Germany).
- Supporting low-cost owner occupation will be possible through planning decisions in favour of higher density and more mixed housing.
- Councils will be encouraged to look at more partial transfers to attract private investment.
- Smaller sites will be increasingly used for affordable housing.
- Raising neighbourhood environmental standards and reinvesting in the existing stock will make most estates viable far into the future.
- Social housing (subsidised, rented, non-profit housing) should be mixed with low cost market housing for those that can pay.

Infill, windfalls, conversions and reuse

There is a sharp contrast between high value and low value areas in relation to both supply and demand for housing. In high value areas, infill building, windfall small sites and conversions are worthwhile and attractive. In low value areas, whole inner city neighbourhoods are being written off as currently worthless and therefore unsaveable, e.g. Newcastle’s Going for Growth. This approach is coupled with releasing green field land and, in the case of Newcastle, incorporating green belt land for new building.

London concentrates development on brown field sites and achieves 85 per cent brown field building, with an average overall density of under 50 per hectare. However, most new schemes are much higher at between 70 and 200, with some much higher. In contrast, many suburban and rural authorities still encourage low density building at 23 homes to the hectare. Positively, Sainsburys and Tescos are responding to land and housing pressures by opening up smaller stores in town centres and by proposing building at high density “above the shop”.

Car parking takes a lot of valuable land – up to 40 per cent of the total land used for building. Some local authorities like Islington have reduced the car parking requirement to 0.5 per

dwelling, a radical move, far ahead of most local authorities.

Sustainable development requires close partnership working. The Sustainable Development Commission is engaged in these partnerships and shares concerns with English Heritage, CABE and the Environment Agency. These partnerships will hopefully influence the future of sustainable development itself and the implementation strategy adopted in the Communities Plan.

4. Protecting the countryside and environment while helping rural communities

Action on the countryside

The area known as the green belt is a popular, simple, understandable, enforceable tool, as ODPM planners recognise. Any erosion of it is likely to create myriad pressures on the concept itself, yet it has had considerable success to date in protecting the environment around cities. The Government has offered a guarantee to protect and enhance the green belt – but does not say how. By implication, green belts will be breached in many parts of the Southern and Eastern regions. The assumption for the growth areas seems to be that green belt land can and will be used, then ‘paid back’ in some ‘enhanced’ way. The wider public will be deeply sceptical of this approach but developers and farmers may like it.

It should be possible to ensure an affordable supply of homes in popular rural communities and reduce the damaging pressures caused by second homes and new developments, through the purchase of **existing** houses in rural areas and small communities when they come on the market. This would require stronger mechanisms than currently exist. New developments on the edge of existing communities would be far more sustainable at higher densities, more akin to traditional villages (about 50 homes per hectare).

Rural shortage

There is great potential for buying up existing homes and converting them for affordable housing to reduce the need for building new homes on green fields. There are mechanisms for doing this and retaining some equity to ensure future affordability but most funds are currently directed to new build. The role of rural local authorities in this is key. Many do not take a pro-active role in ensuring an affordable supply.

The density of villages and of village extensions is a central element in helping buses, schools, shops, doctors, policing and warden services to be viable. Proximity is also important for the elderly and for the social viability of communities. It also allows far more housing. Therefore rural densities and ‘compact design’ need to be examined for small communities, as well as for the larger scale developments. The use of infill and reuse of existing buildings are approaches that work in rural and protected areas.

5. Tackling growth in a planned and sustainable way

Land use conflicts are everywhere. In the North/Midlands, older industrial sprawl occupies vast acres of land. In the South, both older and more recent extensive over-development creates almost unbearable traffic, noise and competing pressures on the countryside. Attempts to find alternatives to landfill, incineration, road building and airport expansion all draw increasing opposition. 20 per cent of toxic waste comes from construction and demolition and it is unlikely that this level of environmental damage can be allowed to continue. Most toxic materials are dumped in landfill sites that are fast running out. The land pressure and development impacts of the plan on the countryside and the environment are not adequately addressed.

Green areas, rivers and flood plains

Rivers and flood plains perform essential environmental functions, cleansing water and land, supporting biodiversity, creating wildlife safe havens and corridors and combating pollution. Over-building and over-extracting of water are simultaneously creating much greater flood risk and reducing the available water supply, particularly in the South East. This is clearly unsustainable and is already hampering plans for the Kent and Stansted-Cambridge growth areas.

5. Tackling growth in a planned and sustainable way

Action on high demand

The Plan promises huge job growth outside London but within the South East, with little evidence to back this other than a mention of current growth patterns.

There is no mention of the polarising impact nor the vast congestion problems that such job growth will generate. The assumption is that job growth is not possible on this scale anywhere except the South East. The Government may believe that unless the South East and London can respond to growth pressures, inward investment will dry up. The experience of European regional cities that are recovering strongly from industrial decline (often following fast rail connections) is not mentioned but is highly relevant: Lille, Marseilles, Lyons, Bordeaux, Turin, Naples, Milan, Barcelona, Seville, Bilbao, Hamburg, Dresden are some examples. There seems no obvious reason why Birmingham, Manchester, Liverpool, Newcastle should not follow this pattern, if there was adequate modern transport infrastructure and a higher quality urban environment. The Government's own work on regional competitiveness (involving ODPM, the Treasury, DTI, Core Cities and RDAs) shows this.

Subsidy to new building and to declining inner cities

There is an implied subsidy to encourage new building through basic infrastructure costs. At the same time the Government pays heavily to keep existing urban areas going. If this capacity is underused then the Government is effectively paying twice, which is both wasteful and ultimately ineffective.

The Plan fails to mention the major issue of equalising VAT between new building and repair. It was originally proposed by the Urban Task Force in 1999. The SDC is focusing attention on this issue, alongside agencies such as CABE and English Heritage.

Assessing or estimating the full costs of bringing brown fields back into use are not spelt out; nor is the potential for reusing existing urban infrastructures, or actively preserving historic environments.

General environmental impact

All development has major implications for the environment. Tarmacing over land hinders drainage and causes flooding. Much of our building land is in flood plains anyway. The whole Thames Gateway is an obvious example. This limits where and how we can build and makes density a central issue.

Green belts are a far-sighted attempt to prevent urban sprawl and stop settlements simply running into each other, as happened in nineteenth century Lancashire, Yorkshire and the Midlands. But on their own they are not enough to protect our landscape or the countryside as a whole.

Other issues include wildlife and biodiversity protection, the pressures on sites of special scientific interest, the loss of viable habitat for birds and animals, and the isolation of small, protected wildlife areas such as ponds and woodland from 'green corridors' that allow and support biodiversity. The Tyndall Centre at the University of East Anglia and Roger Levett have explored these problems in detail.

Consulting a map of the South East shows the likely development impact of the proposed growth areas, with roads, airports, other transit systems, and waste disposal problems adding to the erosion of the environment. We are at risk of getting stuck in 'gridlock' because of the lack of 'sink' space, i.e. space to reabsorb into the natural environment all the damage development causes. The Plan offers no discussion of the overall population density, and land use problems, or limitations to growth in current patterns of the country as a whole and the South East in particular. To preserve the countryside, protect our ecosystems, and meet new household requirements, we have no choice but to opt for higher density living. Fiscal incentives will be required to achieve this – presently not detailed in the Plan.

'Gagging' for growth versus 'managing decline'

Essex, Bedford, Corby and Northampton are all fighting to build lots more housing. So are many towns and cities across the country, particularly in the South West and Eastern regions. The government would like to respond to this. In planning terms, there is a serious danger of places joining up and becoming sprawling, low density new conurbations. There is little 'sense of place' in many new developments. This has become an electoral issue in many areas, e.g. Northampton and Cambridge, and will no doubt continue to polarise opinions.

6. Reforming the planning system and regional government to deliver sustainable communities

Other areas of the country are in such serious decline that it is hard to see a viable future for them within the current policy scenarios. The economic and social pressures of decline are also intense and we must not underestimate them. In essence, some places appear to have lost their rationale for existing.

In parts of the country where development pressures are intense, the cumulative impact of building new low density homes on 'left-over' bits of land is significant. This often happens because roads are used as development boundaries and spare pieces of land encourage 'urban extensions' or filling in. The impact on drainage, water supply, pollution, traffic and so on are discounted in many such planning decisions because they are often relatively small 'add-on' developments. Yet cumulatively, their impact is both ugly and environmentally serious.

Job growth and the economy

The Plan offers no explanation of where job growth will come from in the South East and the Gateway. Presumably it extrapolates forward from current growth patterns and adds in development jobs and "balanced sustainable communities" jobs, e.g. education, health, retail, transport etc. However, the economy is currently stalling and job growth is already far lower than these estimates suggest.

Surely the Plan should recognise economic cycles rather than make straight line projections? Surely it makes sense to try and soak up existing underemployment? At the moment in the South East there is an upward spiral: building _ jobs _ shops _ transport _ need for more homes _ more building. Is this transferable northwards to Birmingham/Manchester/Liverpool? The core cities (the ten major cities outside London) are certainly counting on this, and it would certainly ease growth pressures in the South East if this happened.

6. Reforming the planning system and regional government to deliver sustainable communities

Action on planning to achieve these goals

At the heart of the Plan, a large scale regional approach to planning is advocated but with little discussion of how to limit land supply. There are no proposals or resources for 'buying back' unnecessary planning permissions. There is no mention of the 'sequential approach' to housing, a key successful tool in cutting out-of-town shopping centre permissions- which is promised in the Plan. Yet PPG3 advocates the sequential approach to housing and, if applied rigorously, it would quickly stem unnecessary out-of-town building and act as a strong counterforce to abandonment.

Some of the proposed planning measures are potentially problematic, particularly the proposal to enforce higher building targets in the South East. But changes in regional planning

guidance in the North to reduce the continuing oversupply of land and building, if enforced, will be helpful.

The Government's desire to speed up the planning system, encouraging faster decisions, is understandable. But in a small and built up island, conflicts over land use will become more, not less, intense, particularly in the South East. The planning system will act as an important arbiter of environmental care, curbing development impact and promoting sustainable approaches. Spreading growth with less environmental impact over a wider area of the country must eventually make economic as well as social and environmental sense.

Regional devolution and regional-level planning and resource allocation are advocated in the Plan, thereby offering a clear step away from central control. Communities and neighbourhoods are the essential building blocks of successful cities. Communities will be critical to the success of the Housing Market Renewal Areas, the Growth Areas, rural communities, and social housing areas.

Yet the Plan does not encourage or allow for participation, possibly out of fear of opposition to its wider strategic purposes. There is a strong rationale for maximising infill building in existing neighbourhoods, reversing patterns of decline through major refurbishment, and curbing sprawl building through higher, more viable density requirements and tighter restrictions on land supply in declining regions where there is currently an oversupply of new build homes. The reuse of, and improvement to, existing facilities, services, neighbourhood environments and homes fits with a sustainable approach. But this too requires considerable resources, on a par with spending to restore inner London neighbourhoods to popularity in the 1970s and 1980s.

Overall the Plan offers no way of building up from the bottom, neighbourhood by neighbourhood. The Plan has a strong flavour of a **return to the top down, large-scale demolition and new build approach**, in the face of what are seen as extremely difficult housing supply problems. The problems are as much to do with regional disparities, location, style of housing, neighbourhood conditions and access as they are to do with actual numbers. Yet the Plan itself shows that the current rate of private house building almost exactly matches the rate of household growth (see Sustainable Communities Plan p.10). The case for such major planned growth in the South East and such orchestrated large scale clearance in the North and Midlands is not sufficiently clear.

Because of the time-scales involved, the Plan will only be deliverable in small, incremental tranches. This will help all parties to assess its ambitious aims and work out in practice how to reduce energy inputs, waste, and environmental impact, in order to make existing urban neighbourhoods more 'liveable', and minimise the environmental damage caused by new development.

Part III: Key elements of the Sustainable Communities Plan – a sustainable development perspective

Part III summarises and comments on the Plan from a sustainable development perspective. Comments are highlighted in italics.

The six main sections of the Plan provide a brief overview of what the Government is proposing. Here we focus on the key proposals, issues and problems outlined by ODPM, highlighting the link to sustainable development.

1. Decent homes, decent places – liveability and housing conditions

The measures to produce decent homes and places are mainly about improving the existing stock and neighbourhoods. The proposals to bring existing housing up to a decent standard cover four basic elements:

- a) a statutory minimum fitness standard
- b) a reasonable state of repair
- c) reasonably modern facilities and services
- d) a reasonable degree of thermal comfort (little emphasis on energy efficiency)

The Communities Plan acknowledges the extent and complexities of this agenda.

Local environment

1. According to the English House Condition Survey (a 5-year government survey), 2 million households suffer from rubbish and litter in their area; 1.5 million households suffer from graffiti and vandalism.
2. 85 per cent of the population are interested in the state of their local environment because it affects their overall quality of life. A MORI survey in 2000 showed that 'liveability', i.e. cleaner streets, better parks, a better local environment, are among the top four issues that would improve quality of life.

Environmental measures

1. Local authorities will have prime responsibility for 'liveability'.
 - There will be a £1 billion increase in local authority budgets over three years from which local environmental improvements are to be funded. In addition, there will be a special fund of £210 million for 'liveability schemes'. There will also be a 'liveability fund' of £89 million for parks and public spaces, i.e. £2.5 million per local authority, providing 250 wardens, park wardens etc., per local authority.
2. A green flag standard for well-kept parks will be awarded by the Civic Trust. So far, the Labour Government has created 245 new parks and Millennium Greens, and supported the reclamation of 600 derelict community spaces.
3. A new cleanliness performance indicator will be introduced.
4. Business Improvement Districts will be introduced to improve the environment of commercial areas.
5. Planning Policy Guidance on open spaces will be revised and strengthened.

6. £41 million will go to the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) to drive up urban design standards both in growth areas and low demand areas,
 - proper strategic planning of the overall design is advocated and the creation of CABE Space will help local communities design better local environments.

Existing homes

1. One-third all housing (approx 7 million) falls below the decent homes standard. This includes:
 - a) 1.5 million social housing homes
 - b) 40 per cent of all homes in the most deprived wards
 - c) 40 per cent of homes occupied by ethnic minorities
2. A large majority think that recent housing developments are not well designed
 - only 36 per cent of the population will consider new housing as an option
 - two thirds prefer a refurbished existing home.

Decent homes measures – social housing

1. The Government aims to bring one million additional social homes up to the decent homes standard by 2010 through increased investment in social housing over and above standard major repair funds. Extra resources depend on opting for one of three routes:
 - a) Transfer away from council ownership to non-profit registered social landlords;
 - b) Private Finance Initiative for housing reinvestment (the pilot PFI for housing has proved slow and cumbersome);
 - c) Arms Length Management Organisations which separate the social landlord function into legally autonomous companies (on the European model) without taking ownership away from public bodies.
2. All councils must carry out an appraisal of investment options by 2005.

Councils can now pursue different options for different parts of the stock. This helps large city authorities like Birmingham and it offers communities much more say in their future. It means that large scale voluntary transfer by city authorities (like the Glasgow model) will become less important than community based partial transfers. The Government plans to remove outstanding barriers to transfer by:

- *meeting the cost of early debt redemption;*
- *supporting partial transfers by wiping out overhanging debt on that part of the stock (i.e. where the transfer price is lower than the outstanding debt);*
- *exploring options for gap funding for negative value stock;*
- *developing additional models of funding for transfer so that the whole process becomes more flexible and more financially viable.*

2. Low housing demand and abandonment in the North and Midlands

Decent homes measures – private housing

1. Local authorities will be able to offer loans for the improvement of private homes – with £30 million available for low income home improvements.
2. Home Improvement Agencies and the Supporting People programme are now working and will continue to help low income households.
3. ‘Warm Front’, a programme to improve thermal standards in low quality homes occupied by poor people, has helped 600,000 vulnerable households with insulation and energy efficiency improvements since 2001. The main groups helped are:
 - families with children on benefit
 - people with disability
 - elderly people on income supportThis programme will continue.
4. The Government will introduce mandatory licensing for houses in multiple occupation and allow local authorities to license private landlords in low demand areas.

Regeneration of rundown areas and neighbourhood management

1. 11 urban regeneration companies and 7 millennium communities are being developed to focus effort on visible models of regeneration and good design.
2. Groundwork will become the lead organisation in community led environmental regeneration. It will receive funds for ‘Community Enablers’ to help communities deliver neighbourhood-level environmental improvements.
3. Currently there are 1,100 neighbourhood wardens funded by the Government in 200 schemes. This will expand to 500 warden schemes with £50 million additional funding. The aim is to make all neighbourhoods into safe and welcoming places to live – clean, well maintained, secure, with full community involvement.

Neighbourhood management, piloted by the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit as a way of improving neighbourhood conditions through a locally based service and community involvement, will be extended. But there is to be no more money for Home Zones – resident-led neighbourhood improvement schemes to make small areas environmentally attractive, family and pedestrian friendly, by calming traffic. Local authorities are to develop these popular schemes out of their core resources.

2. Low housing demand and abandonment in the North and Midlands

1. Deprivation and low demand go together – low demand areas have the worst health and life expectancy generally.
2. 1 million homes in 120 local authorities in the North and Midlands are affected by low demand, 5 per cent of the total stock.
 - The nine Housing Market Renewal Pathfinders announced by the Government to tackle the problem of low demand of

low demand comprehensively cover half of the low demand homes.

- one-fifth of social housing that does not meet the decent homes standard is in low demand areas.
- Low demand exists in many communities. Housing in most low demand areas, if occupied, remains potentially viable.
3. The aim of the Pathfinders is to create “better balanced housing markets” within regional spatial and economic strategies. To achieve this, the Pathfinder areas override local authority boundaries. Local authorities in Pathfinder areas are developing strategic plans for whole housing market renewal areas to “replace obsolete housing with modern sustainable accommodation through demolition and new build or refurbishment” – creating a better mix of tenures and incomes and sometimes fewer homes.
 - Longer-term funding is subject to the quality of plans and performance within the Pathfinder partnerships.
 4. By 2005, the Government expects “large scale clearance, refurbishment and new build to be under way” – with derelict and obsolete housing being replaced where appropriate.

By implication, if modern, sustainable homes can be produced through refurbishment, then this should be supported. From the sustainability perspective:

- *there is no mention of demolition costs within the Plan*
- *nor the landfill problem, should large scale clearance proceed*
- *nor are the affected communities made partners in the plans – these are designed to be driven on a large scale, at a level far beyond the reach of local residents*
- *the environmental aspects of the plans, such as improving existing homes to high eco-standards, recycling building materials, the issue of embodied energy, are likewise not discussed.*

Action in housing market renewal

1. £166 million per annum will be spent in housing market renewal areas, i.e. around £18 million per area per annum. This is in addition to the decent homes and affordable housing programme and Neighbourhood Renewal Fund. The Housing Corporation, English Partnerships and Regional Development Agencies will also help with funding.
2. The Government will improve the system of compulsory acquisition with new powers and higher loss payments through the ‘Planning and Compulsory Purchase Bill’ now before Parliament.
3. In an attempt to limit oversupply, the Government will prevent the automatic renewal of outline planning consents – old non-activated green field consents will disappear. New applications must be justified against current policy guidance. If planning permission is not exercised after 3 years, it will lapse.
4. The Government has already reduced urban fringe building permissions in the North West and North East through special planning guidance for these regions – setting “stretching targets for reusing brown fields”.
5. Gap funding will be available in deprived and low demand

3. Step change in the housing supply

areas to encourage new investment and new value where the costs of private development exceed the expected sale value. *It is unclear whether this applies equally to new build and refurbishment, but it would help a lot if it did.*

6. Enterprise areas will be created to encourage new businesses.
7. Specialist local teams will tackle the environmental/health/housing/anti-social behaviour problems within the areas – this suggests that there will be neighbourhood level responses.
8. The Government is producing guidance on Housing Demand Assessment.
9. Under the various Housing Market Renewal proposals there are several references to “large scale clearance, new build and refurbishment”.

The meaning and implications of “large scale clearance” are not spelt out. Potentially, this approach has major ramifications in terms of time-scales, costs, displacement, impact on surrounding neighbourhoods etc. There is no mention of residents’ views or consultation.

3. Step change in the housing supply

The Plan states that development must:

- Respect the principles of sustainable development – for all aspects of development, especially housing.
- The impacts on the environment must be considered alongside social and economic goals.
- Housing itself must be environmentally sustainable.
- Local authorities must help to address environmental impacts.

This commitment should drive future decisions on implementation.

1. We need more homes of the right type in the right places, particularly more affordable and attractive housing for key workers.
 - One in five public sector workers leave their job for housing related reasons (travel and transport are major influences on housing decisions that relate to the location of housing)
 - We also need to make the best use of the existing stock.
2. The Government has set itself the task of providing the right numbers of homes built in “the right places” with minimum impact on the countryside.
3. The Government advocates modern construction methods. There is a target of 1,800 pre-fabricated homes in 2003-04 through the Housing Corporation challenge fund of £100 million. These homes are to be used on a priority basis for those in ‘priority housing need’, especially key workers.
4. The Government has begun to modernise the right to buy – limiting discounts on sales in high demand areas.

This kick start may encourage private investment in factory production and new technology.

We currently build about the same number of homes as the number of new households. But we also demolish some older and poorer quality housing each year. And many homes are

built on the edge of declining conurbations. The shortages in London are acute and many more popular places are also under severe pressure.

Action on supply

In 2004/5 – 2005/6, £1.1 billion will be available for London, the South East and Eastern region, to support an expansion in affordable supply, particularly in the 4 growth areas. The Thames Gateway receives more of these resources than the rest. English Partnerships, with a new and broader remit, will receive £521 million for assembling sites for housing.

More homes must be designed for smaller households and be more affordable for modest income earners. Local authorities must from now on seek to provide a proportion of affordable housing on smaller sites – previously only required on **bigger** sites.

In the South East – 80 per cent of housing sites are less than half a hectare. Most offer the potential for 15-25 homes, usually near transport routes. This change could greatly increase the affordable housing supply. The Plan does not mention the contribution made by “windfall sites” that occur outside the formal planning system and accounting for 35 – 50 per cent of all new housing. With higher densities, these could contribute significantly.

1. *Reform of planning is key to the “proper use of land” and to well designed developments.* The Government reaffirms that it will no longer follow the “predict and provide” model. The emphasis is now on “plan, monitor, manage”. *But the strong powers the Government acquires in the Plan to enforce delivery of a target number of homes across the South East suggest a continued “predict and provide” approach.*
2. Within the reformed planning system, regional spatial strategies will become very important.
3. Reformed development plans, produced at regional and local authority level, will make local authorities responsible for delivering planned levels of housing “while ensuring quality”. Government will have powers of statutory intervention if local authorities fail to provide. *There is no reference to responding to demand signals, cutting supply if required, or monitoring housing market signals in the South as well as the North.*
4. Developers have a right to expect prompt planning decisions on brown field sites as long as their proposals are within statutory guidance. They will have the automatic right of appeal if their applications fail under these conditions.
5. *The new planning framework carries major risks for the countryside and land use, although the Government firmly asserts – “We will protect our countryside”, by making the best use of land, particularly brown field and urban land.*
6. The Plan highlights the problem of location, affecting much recent development. Flood risk is a major concern. “No development will take place on functional flood plains” where water must flow freely in times of flood. *The Thames estuary is one of the country’s major flood risk areas.*
7. *Under the planning obligations system, requiring developers*

3. Step change in the housing supply

to reinvest some of their profit from specific developments in “community benefit”, negotiations between developers and local authorities are often protracted, conflictual and secretive. The Plan advocates an “open book” approach and time limit for negotiations.

8. English Partnerships and the Housing Corporation are to work closely together to reinforce their mutual interest in land holdings (English Partnerships) and affordable housing supply (Housing Corporation). They should use available mechanisms to speed up supply, such as converting surplus office space, using space above shops, working with volume housing builders. The Housing Corporation may consider funding other bodies than housing associations to provide affordable housing – private property investors and managers, businesses, employers.

9. There will be major funds to aid supply in the South East growth areas.

Planning consents will now only last three years (down from five) creating an incentive for housing to be delivered more quickly, and opening up the prospect of withdrawing land where there is an oversupply. The issue of density is not clearly addressed as an essential part of planning

Action on easing shortages

1. The Government has set a goal of helping 10,000 key workers into home ownership:
 - employers and Government departments are to design “employment and housing models” for attracting and retaining public service workers. They can then contribute to the cost of housing them.
2. There are several measures (already in place) to help increase supply and reduce empty property:
 - VAT has been reduced for the renovation of long-term empty property (*a measure widely considered too limited*)
 - there are new local authority powers to lease long-term empty property, including powers to improve it and bring it back to use
 - councils can charge up to 90 per cent of full council tax on second homes – *which will discourage pressure on the affordable rural supply*
 - local authorities can end council tax discounts on long-term empty property, *giving owners an incentive to find new uses.*
3. Several measures are designed to increase housing and employment mobility, and to relocate from high demand areas to lower demand areas. *Councils are also being encouraged to adopt choice-based lettings, which involves advertising and other forms of marketing available stock. It can increase demand, and has done so spectacularly in some places, e.g. Bradford. Councils are urged to make better use of existing sheltered housing. They should aim to create a better social mix with more affordable homes for modest income households, especially key workers within new private developments.*
4. The Government is anxious to discourage profiteering in exercising the right to buy in high demand, popular areas by:

- lowering maximum discount in areas under pressure – this has already been done for key high pressure London boroughs
- encouraging other forms of low cost home ownership, such as shared ownership, with an equity loan from a housing association
- extending the right to acquire to more housing association tenants so that they can purchase existing homes with the help of a grant
- expanding the cash incentive scheme that encourages local authorities to pay tenants to move out of council homes in order to free up council housing. *This policy is extremely contentious and basically unsustainable. It has been tried in the US, Ireland and Germany and in all countries was quickly abandoned because of the negative impact on community stability, cohesion and management difficulties.*

5. In order for the construction industry to deliver a better, more efficient product (it comprises around 10 per cent of GDP), there should be better procurement methods, improving the quality of design, using more modern methods of construction, and not necessarily opting for the lowest short-term cost.

The overall costs of housing are not clearly accounted for, so it is often unclear what comprises good value, e.g. the realistic, affordable scale of demolition, the scope for refurbishment, the potential for reuse of existing infrastructure, materials and buildings etc.

Energy efficiency in homes

The Plan stresses the need for new housing to be more sustainable in the use of resources.

1. It recommends that all new homes should reach the eco-homes ‘pass’ standard and argues that developers and other bodies e.g. housing associations should aim to raise all buildings to the “good eco-standard” *The Plan is deliberately vague on building regulations but promises to “keep them under review” and implies that they should be tightened.*
2. The Energy White Paper made a strong commitment to tighten energy efficiency standards for homes. *The connection between the Energy White Paper and the Plan is not made clear. Nor is the important role of the Department for Trade and Industry in the construction industry clarified. Vital as the Department of Transport is to the success of the Plan, so too is the DTI. The need for solid research on the energy use, waste production, transport implications and overall environmental impact of the Communities Plan is pressing.*
3. As part of the drive for energy efficient homes, all homebuyers should be able to access information on energy performance.
4. The ODPM commits itself to consult on fiscal proposals to encourage energy efficiency and take further action following the Energy White Paper – *leading to a step change in levels of energy efficiency. This is an important, if undefined, commitment.*

4. Land, countryside and rural communities

5. The ODPM argues that models of sustainable development will be created through the Millennium Communities – seven of which are agreed. These are new urban villages that aim to:

- use brown field land
- reduce construction waste
- use new construction techniques
- reduce accidents
- increase energy efficiency
- reuse and recycle waste
- reduce water demand and recycle grey water
- use renewable energy
- integrate social and market housing
- attract different types and shapes of household
- create attractive public spaces and environments
- build in social and community facilities
- create pedestrian, cycle and public transport friendly neighbourhoods.

The Greenwich Peninsula was the first such community, started in 1998. It is already exceeding targets for energy efficiency, waste, and water use.

There is very little mention of the role of basic repair in both sustaining the existing stock and modernising it and bringing it up to full eco-standards. Yet more is spent on repair by a long way than on new build (see Annex 2). The potential for improving the sustainable use of these repair resources is immense.

4. Land, countryside and rural communities

The Plan sets out to “protect the countryside for the benefit of all”, with development extending into the countryside only “where that is the best option”. In 2000, for the first time since 1991, new in-town shopping space exceeded out-of-town provision. *This will make a radical difference over time to town and city centres, as well as to green areas. It is a major, unsung achievement of the planning system, particularly the adoption of the “sequential approach” where existing shopping potential within towns is assessed and prioritised over out-of-town development. Since 1999, a similar sequential approach was incorporated into the Planning Guidance for Housing (PPG3). There is little evidence that it has been enforced.*

1. Where green field land must be used in high demand areas, it must not be used wastefully. *This means increasing density, linking housing to public transport to reduce the need for roads etc.*
2. The Government will support an affordable supply of new housing in small communities (5,000 homes by 2006). Local authorities will be able to limit the resale of ex-council homes and reserve them in some circumstances for “locals”. *There is nothing on the purchase of existing housing, retaining a “social equity stake” to ensure an affordable supply. Nor is the targeting of 5,000 homes considered at all adequate.*

3. The Government has committed itself to maintaining and increasing the amount of green belt land in each region and for the longer term. *The phrase “guarantee the green belt” is conspicuous but there are major questions over how the growth areas may impact on existing green belts. The trade-offs may involve many unpopular compromises. Greenbelts are not sufficient on their own to ensure respect for the countryside. Nor can they resolve many more complex decisions about development, location and planning.*

4. Other changes are under way:

- By 2016 the Density Directive, imposing a minimum density of 30 homes per hectare, should save 4,000 hectares of green fields from development (an area the size of Peterborough)
- The Regional Development Agencies will fund remediation from a single pot – the plan is to remediate 1,400 hectares per annum for all uses – 15,400 hectares by 2016 or one quarter the current brown field supply – *too slow in our estimation*
- All local authorities must now do an urban capacity study to expose how much empty land and buildings they have. *Chester has done this and remarkably is delivering almost all its new homes on brown field land in spite of being a walled, historic city with a tight green belt. Much of its new housing is in high density smaller developments along canals*
- Land Restoration Trusts (a partnership between the Environment Agency, English Partnerships, Groundwork, and the Forestry Commission) will work to turn used, damaged and unwanted land into parks, woods and open countryside again. There are already 12 community forests including one outside Manchester. These will be replicated around towns and cities as they provide a boost to economic confidence and help attract investment. Community forests help to blend development into the countryside and win considerable public support
- Regions and local authorities must develop brown field land action plans – to fit within regional housing and economic strategies
- The Government (operating through regional and local levels of government) will set up a register of surplus public sector sites. There are 42 strategic empty sites, mostly in the growth areas
- The Plan will ensure that “land is not used in profligate ways”. Planning applications for larger sites to be developed at less than 30 homes per hectare are liable to be called in and justified. *This enforcement clause must not only apply to “larger sites”, since over 80 per cent of development sites are small scale. It should obviously apply to all sites since 30 homes per hectare is the minimum density in the Planning Guidance of 1999, and most small sites should fit several homes if used well.*

5. Sustainable growth

5. Sustainable growth

The Government gives the highest priority to:

- sustaining the economic success of the South East
- alleviating pressures in London and the South East by increasing housing supply beyond the existing areas
- using the mechanism of new and expanded communities
- expanding affordable and key worker housing.

The Government has identified 4 growth areas

- Thames Gateway, running from the City of London to Southend
- Milton Keynes/South Midlands
- Ashford/Kent
- London/Stansted/Cambridge.

A. The Thames Gateway

The Thames Gateway is a remarkable resource:

- it is 43 miles long by 20 miles wide at its mouth
- it is close to London, in fact much of it is part of London, with 10 East London boroughs having a stake in it
- it provides major transport links to the rest of the country
- it has the largest concentration of brown field sites in the country
- there are many existing communities within the Gateway, many of them very deprived. The loss of industry has had severe impacts
- over the next 30 years, it should attract 300,000 new jobs.

The new growth within the Gateway must integrate the following four elements:

- a focus on brown field development
- the need for economic growth to fund the infrastructure requirements and overcome high unemployment in the Thames Gateway
- environmental improvements to make the area more attractive to investors and to overcome long-standing problems of contamination and industrial blight
- urban renewal to make existing communities more viable and more attractive.

It is unclear from the Plan how these goals can be delivered. This is critical for sustainability.

The Greater London Authority, three Regional Development Agencies, the Housing Corporation, English Partnerships, the Environment Agency and the many Gateway local authorities must all play their part in this immensely complex Plan.

There will be new and expanded communities in the Thames Gateway by 2005 and agreed plans for the other 3 growth areas. *The infrastructure needs cannot be met out of currently available funds. Whether the major demand from single person households can be accommodated in these areas also remains unclear. House prices in the mid-Gateway (Barking) are half the London average, although rising rapidly.*

The Government has promised a statement on the Gateway concerning:

- the level of expected development (units per hectare)
- protecting and enhancing the “surrounding countryside”
- addressing infrastructure and public service needs.

According to the Plan, there is potential to accommodate 200,000 additional homes over and above those already in the guidance. In practice the potential may be far higher. The GLA is producing a new capacity study and a spatial development strategy. Depending on the provision of basic infrastructure and adopting a “sustainable approach to growth”, the Thames Gateway in particular could enhance London’s capacity without taking more green field land. However, there are many environmental, financial and social constraints. At London densities, the inner Gateway on its own, i.e. the part already reasonably accessible by public transport, could accommodate the proposed level of growth if planning and financial resources are carefully orchestrated.

Action on the proposed Gateway developments

1. The amount of money allocated for the Gateway – £446 million – could support around 9,000 affordable homes, allowing £50,000 per home over 3 years. The costs of site assembly, remediation, essential local infrastructure and wider regeneration are additional (at least £45,000 per new house) and must also form part of the delivery effort. The cost of these is extremely high; therefore the amount for “additional affordable homes” is only a kick start to the whole process.
2. New delivery mechanisms (i.e. development bodies) will be created, that are:
 - transparent, agreed locally, but with powers to progress rapidly
 - form a non-statutory partnership of key stakeholders similar to urban regeneration companies, which bring together English Partnerships, Regional Development Agencies, local authorities
 - based on the model of the Urban Development Corporation based on the New Town Corporations and the Docklands Developments Corporations of the 1980s with equivalent powers. These are “robust” bodies operating outside normal bureaucratic constraints. The earlier model of Urban Development Corporations had statutory powers and it is proposed that these will too, e.g. planning. Two development corporations are already confirmed for the Thames Gateway.
3. The regional planning guidance will be revised in the South to accommodate the planned new growth, making sure that strategies are consistent between regional spatial, housing, economic and transport strategies.
 - English Partnerships will assume the massive task of supporting development and regeneration across the four growth areas

5. Sustainable growth

- High priority will be given to accelerating development. *This commitment has major implications for communities, for public bodies, for planning, for infrastructure investment and for overall sustainability.*
- 4. The Environment Agency will take responsibility for “creating sustainable communities”, taking account of the flood risk in Thames Gateway. The Plan advocates a “practical approach to the strategic role of flood defence infrastructure”. *This is a huge and expensive issue that is not clearly tackled in the Plan.*
- 5. The Department for Transport is reviewing the 10 year Transport Plan:
 - The Plan acknowledges the longer term transport needs of the four growth areas
 - The role of transport infrastructure is central in promoting land use change
 - Transport planning must be more integrated into regional/local planning
 - The Highways Agency will have a lead role in “setting in place new arrangements to unlock existing growth potential”.
- 6. The Government recognises the funding implications of the infrastructure needs of the Gateway. The practical delivery of the Plan is driven by the idea that “whoever benefits can contribute to the cost” with a financial claw-back mechanism on the potentially very large profits to be made from early, subsidised development. This could help fund some of the proposed infrastructure. Developers will be expected to pay back some of the projected windfall gain from developments that are facilitated by wider public investment in infrastructure.

Overall, the biggest unresolved issues in the drive for the four growth areas are undoubtedly the transport requirements, acknowledged to be a major issue, and congestion, which is barely mentioned.

The role of government and other actors in the Gateway

In order to facilitate the planned growth, the Government will establish precisely how much development is needed and the expected infrastructure costs. Effective delivery systems with special powers for specific places must be in place in order to implement the Plan, including responsibility for land assembly, the development of local infrastructure etc.

1. **Urban Development Corporations** – Special planning powers will be given to two urban development corporations in Barking/London Thames Gateway and Thurrock/Outer Gateway with “full engagement of key local players” and private sector interests.
 - The UDCs will use “locally tailored means to deal with land assembly, master planning, and local infrastructure” in order to secure competitive, complete and comprehensive regeneration.
2. **The London Gateway Board** will co-ordinate the efforts of the main regeneration partners.

- £446 million has been set aside for land assembly, site preparation, affordable/key worker housing and neighbourhood renewal
- The core goal is to “deliver an urban renaissance east of the city”.

3. **The Department for Transport** – The Sustainable Communities Plan states clearly that in the Thames Gateway:
 - “in order to improve accessibility and make the Gateway more attractive, transport links are crucial”.

The Government has already approved **in principle** support for the following:

- extend the Docklands Light Railway to City Airport
- establish a new transit systems to link East London, Greenwich, and Kent Thameside to the City
- deliver road improvements and upgrade major link roads
- create a new crossing over the Swale.

These are all major developments that will over time expand the potential and attractiveness of the Gateway.

There are other significant transport proposals, some of which have been on the books for a long time but are not yet agreed:

- creating a Light Rail Link to Barking
- improving the London, Tilbury and Southend lines with new stations along the route
- building a Thames Gateway Bridge at Woolwich
- negotiating domestic passenger services on the Channel Tunnel Rail Link that will connect Ashford, Ebbsfleet and Stratford to King’s Cross.

All these schemes are “under appraisal”. “No final decision has been taken on them”. The Thames Gateway is a critical part of the 10 year Transport Plan review currently underway; however, it can only be considered “alongside other priorities” – of which there are many.

4. *Thames Gateway partnership initiatives must include education, health, transport, the environment.* The stress will be on innovation to bring about the necessary changes. To achieve all this, several “zones of change” have been identified.

The favoured models of development are all large scale, new-build schemes. There are no proposals for housing developments that would integrate and improve existing communities. Local authorities will play a major role in this. Much of the existing housing in East London is council owned. There are also many active housing associations.

B. Action in the other growth areas

There are three other growth areas:

- i) The **Milton Keynes** growth area, joins the South East with Central England.
 - There are five growth centres in this area covering Milton Keynes itself, Luton, Dunstable, Houghton Regis, Bedford, Northampton, Wellingborough, Kettering, Corby
 - There need to be new East-West transport links in the growth area with a cross-boundary approach to the overall development of the area

6. Reforming for delivery – legal frame work, structures, and decision-making to support the Plan

- There is potential between now and 2031 for 300,000 additional jobs and 370,000 additional homes. In 1991-2000, employment growth in Milton Keynes and Northampton was three times the national average.

There is no discussion of the direct infrastructure implications of the scale of proposed growth but, in a special scoping study for ODPM, the estimated funding requirement for infrastructure alone was £8 billion to deliver the Plan. This money is not currently allocated. The Milton Keynes growth area will receive around £150 million over the next three years (see Annex 2).

The Milton Keynes growth area is now sometimes referred to as the South Midlands. It almost touches Coventry, which will only be one hour from London in 2004. The proximity of the new “South Midlands” to the West Midlands is not mentioned. The potential for significant growth using existing infrastructure in the West Midlands is obvious. The faster rail links to Coventry and Birmingham, scheduled for 2004, makes this connection obvious and important for a more deliverable, more sustainable and more cohesive approach, linking the ‘growth’ and ‘decline’ areas.

ii) Ashford

- The high speed rail link will be completed in 2007, opening up Ashford in the way that Lille has been transformed through Eurostar;
- But there is a need to diversify employment. It is a relatively depressed area. The growth plan would redevelop the town centre and increase new housing.

By 2031 the Plan aims to deliver 31,000 new homes and 28,000 new jobs. The Ashford growth area needs a new junction on the M20, new funding for the town centre redevelopment, and an adequate water supply (*which it doesn't currently have*) and reliable flood defences, better education, social and community infrastructure. *Ashford may be the most readily deliverable potential growth area, a) because of the fast rail link; b) because it is currently under capacity. Water supply is the most critical, most expensive and most difficult element of this area, because of the particular problems in East Kent.*

Example of growth area development

Ebbfleet and **East Quarry** in Kent Thameside around the new international passenger terminal will create 10,000 new homes; 5.5 million square feet of commercial space; a new community centre at Ebbfleet; 2 million square feet of retail, leisure, community facilities, and supporting space; over 20,000 new jobs, generated through new public transport, the development of previously used land, opportunities for live/work homes near open space and park land; leisure, sport, ecology, social and community facilities, a civic environment including public space.

iii) London – Stansted – Cambridge (LSC)

This growth area contains valuable and growing clusters of very successful businesses in the biotech/life sciences/ICT/and software industries. Stansted airport with its planned expansion could support the significant growth potential. No mention is made of environmental or congestion impacts. *Here the issue is how to handle growth that is already pressurising the Eastern region, and Cambridge in particular.* The upper Lea Valley and new settlements in North Essex and South Cambridgeshire, Harlow and Cambridge are all part of this strong growth pattern.

There is, according to the Government, capacity in this growth area for a quarter of a million new homes now; this could rise to half a million. Delivering this will require significant improvements in transport. Three are particularly highlighted – the M11, the East-West rail link and better rail links to London. There are other major issues – e.g. Cambridge is particularly short of affordable housing.

The detailed plans for the growth of the area will be affected by airport capacity studies and other transport infrastructure decisions.

Overall, the assumption of rapid growth, outward movement of population and new development implies considerable overlap with sustainable development concerns:

- **environmental** in land use, energy, waste
- **social** in dispersal, selective out-migration of the more affluent, and decay of older communities; and
- **economic** in recognising the growth pressures on the South but failing to capture the growth potential of the Midlands (and further North).

6. Reforming for delivery – legal framework, structures, and decision-making to support the Plan

The Sustainable Communities Plan sets out the many measures, already being acted upon or proposed, that will enable the different elements of the Plan to work. This is only a summary list since many are technical in nature. It is important to bear in mind just how many changes, support and co-ordinating vehicles are required.

1. The main changes are:

- reform of the planning system
- devolution of powers to the regions
- more freedom to local government
- the creation of regional housing boards.

Potentially these will all have far-reaching effects.

2. The most radical proposal is the creation of Regional Housing Boards with resources for particular areas coming from a single regional housing pot.

- It will involve the regional director, the Housing Corporation, the Government Offices, the Regional Development

6. Reforming for delivery – legal frame work, structures, and decision-making to support the Plan

Agencies, English Partnerships, Regional Chambers etc

- It will allow and encourage a sub-regional approach to housing which will be vital for housing market renewal, for the recovery of inner cities, and for handling growth pressures.

Regional Housing Boards offer a critical tool for sustainable development. They will come in to being in 2003/4

- The Plan also proposes further reform of local authority housing finance, which will become dependent on the new single pot for housing at regional level, combining the previously separate Housing Corporation and local authority capital allocations
- The Government will also take strategic action to encourage Elected Regional Assemblies.

3. The overall amount available for housing investment will be at least equal to current levels. At least 70 per cent of the current Housing Investment Programme for local authorities will continue to be directed to them. But each region will need a clear and solidly grounded and agreed regional housing strategy if housing needs are to be met and housing delivered in a socially and environmentally sustainable way.

The regional spatial planning strategies must obviously be closely tied in with the regional housing strategy. The devolution of housing to the regions will happen through the Regional Assemblies. This represents a very big shift in resources and decision-making powers; and it implies the integration of competing interests within major conurbations. It should lead to more sensible decisions on land use.

Action to deliver

1. There are three major bills before Parliament and one on the way:
 - a) Regional Assemblies (Prep) Bill – leading to a full bill once regional devolution is agreed
 - b) Local Government Bill allowing:
 - i. Prudential borrowing for major improvements
 - ii. Business Improvement Districts
 - iii. Reducing the 50 per cent discount on second homes to 10 per cent
 - iv. Removing the 50 per cent discount on long-term empties.
 - c) A Planning Bill to allow:
 - i. Stronger regional plans
 - ii. More flexible local plans
 - iii. Quicker decisions
 - iv. Acquisition of land for regeneration to foster social/environmental/economic wellbeing
 - v. Bigger loss payments for displacement.
 - d) A Proposed Housing Bill giving local authorities power to:
 - i. License HMOs
 - ii. License private landlords where they are proved negligent
 - iii. Tackle unsafe/dangerous housing
 - iv. Modernise the right to buy.

- By 2005 all local authorities should have new local plans
 - By 2004, 80 per cent of planning decisions referred to the Secretary of State will be resolved within 16 weeks (achieve 50 per cent + now)
 - By 2006, 60 per cent of all applications must be decided within 13 weeks
 - £350 million in planning delivery grant has been earmarked for more planners for local authorities to develop evidence-based plans to deliver the changes proposed
 - £6 million will go to develop Regional Chambers
 - £17 million has been allocated to improve urban design skills
 - £28 million is being invested in the neighbourhood renewal skills and knowledge programme (including £18m for the community learning chest). *This, if well spent, could generate a lot more locally based renewal activity.*
2. The home buying/selling process will be speeded up and simplified.
 3. Building regulations will be kept under review:
 - in order to maximise energy efficiency
 - and ensure fire and sound standards.
 4. The Government will aim to remove unnecessary regulations on the housing market. It will help people to access home ownership and in particular make the incentive schemes easier for people to move from renting into home ownership.
 5. ODPM will review all planning policy guidance.
 - This includes developing special guidance on environment/energy/climate change and the impact of development. *This is a very important and urgent commitment.*
 6. At regional level, the Government proposes a Regional Sustainable Development Framework (RSDF).
 - This will involve the regional chamber/Government Office/Regional Development Agency/local authorities/businesses/voluntary organisations and charities.
 - It will be crucial to make the RSDF and the actions in the Community Plan integrated. Community strategies will provide the overarching framework.

The Plan is clear in its endorsement of sustainable development as an underlying principle. It uses the UK's 15 headline indicators as key measures of sustainability. The Plan suggests a clear role for the Sustainable Development Commission in responding, monitoring, advising, and helping shape the new planning guidance on environmental issues. But, as it stands, the Plan itself may not be sustainable unless some critical issues are addressed.

Additional information

Table 1: New housing completions in UK 1977 – 2000

	All dev	LA	RSLs	Private
1977	323,836	146,444	23,096	155,296
1980	241,999	88,534	21,476	131,989
1990-91	198,074	16,550	19,342	162,182
2000-01	179,160	915	24,612	153,633

Note: The big reduction in public building accounts for virtually *all* the fall in building.

Table 2: Value of housing construction (2000)

New Housing	£ billion	Repair and maintenance	£ billion
Public	1.3	Public	6.6
Private	8.6	Private	10.4
Total	9.9	Total	16.9

From: *Understanding the Financing of Welfare*, H Glennerster (2003)

Table 3: Summary of resources

£m	02/03	03/04	04/05	05/06	Total 2003/04 to 2005/06
Housing – London, East and South East	995	1,573	1,558	1,605	4,736
Housing – other regions	719	852	892	914	2,658
Arms Length Housing Management Organisations (ALMOs)	59	323	851	820	1,994
Transitional Funding for Housing Finance, Reforms	500	175	140	65	380
Disabled Facilities Grants	97	99	99	99	297
Homelessness/B&B	90	93	83	83	259
Other housing programmes	501	466	394	355	1,215
Market Renewal Pathfinders	25	60	150	290	500
Thames Gateway	0	40	198	208	446
Other growth areas	0	40	58	66	164
Local environment/liveability (incl skills)	13	41	79	81	201
Regional Development Agencies	1,322	1,521	1,551	1,607	4,679
European Regional Development Fund	210	229	229	229	687
English Partnerships	145	163	179	179	521
Other urban programmes	21	35	30	29	94
Planning (including Planning Delivery Grant)	27	73	153	194	420
Neighbourhood Renewal Fund	300	400	450	525	1,375
New Deal for Communities	350	265	287	298	850
New Ventures Fund	77	99	99	94	292
Grand Total	5,451	6,547	7,480	7,741	21,768

(Source: ODPM, 2002)

Note: In July 2002, following the Spending Review, the Government announced overall funding for the programmes covered in the document ‘Sustainable communities: building for the future’. The table above shows how these resources will be allocated. In some cases announcements have already been made – for instance funding for the Housing Corporation’s Approved Development Programme for 2003 – 04 was announced in September 2002. The resources shown are just part of a major investment right across government in a range of programmes to support sustainable communities. Funding is only confirmed for the period to 2006.

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