

Sustainable urban neighbourhoods

How are we to meet the nation's pressing need for affordable new homes, revive our house-building industry and allow communities to adapt to change when resources are tight and environmental standards need to improve?

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The Sustainable Urban Neighbourhoods Network (SUNN) is addressing these issues by drawing on the experience of some of the leading new communities in England. Established in 2009 by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF), SUNN combines the practical knowledge of developers, local authorities, housing associations and community development and regeneration experts. Halfway through this project, key messages are:

Strategic spatial planning

- **Extend growing urban areas.** This would enable employees to live near work, reduce commuting and create child-friendly communities. Where new housing is essential, strong local leadership is vital to overcoming opposition.
- **Get the spatial strategy right.** Neighbourhood planning and planning for land use and infrastructure at local authority and sub-region levels are complementary.
- **Promote green recovery in inner cities.** Long-term public investment is essential to support cities rebalancing their populations and economies.
- **Use creative funding solutions.** Financial certainty requires collaboration between public and private sectors and risk reduction in development.

Better design and more efficient construction methods

- **Design to last.** Given the cost of regenerating 1970s estates, nothing should stop developers building well-insulated homes that will stand the test of time.
- **Speed up development.** It takes too long for new communities to develop because of poor leadership, inefficient planning and a legal framework that over-emphasises the rights of objectors.
- **Cut waste.** Identify where money is spent to little effect or where investment would pay off, and learn from experience.

Long-term stewardship

- **Invest in social capital.** It is easy for residents to feel isolated in a new community, so community development must be built in from the start.
- **Implement long-term stewardship.** The best new communities have arrangements for long-term management through hands-on stewardship or by community management.
- **Achieve continuity.** Over the 20 years it can take to build and occupy a new community, many factors may derail community building. A site-based development team can help ensure a successful community.

Background

What is SUNN?

SUNN was established by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) to foster shared learning about the development of new communities in England. It is a network of practitioners from twelve new communities in different parts of the country. SUNN focuses on modest-sized new communities within towns and cities that are mostly 'urban extensions', and on places that would appeal to families and people of all ages. It includes Millennium Villages, housing renewal projects and brownfield sites. SUNN recognises that it is most efficient to build at locations that support existing services and minimise travel distances to shops and jobs, and on a scale that provides a choice of lifestyles and incomes.

SUNN's regular day-long field meetings involve discussions and a guided walk around the site of the meeting. Meetings have been held in York (Elm Tree Mews, New Earswick), Cambridge (Orchard Park), Newcastle (Walker Riverside) and Telford (Ironstone Lawley and Lightmoor), with 2011 meetings planned in Manchester (Ancoats and New Islington) and London (Grand Union Village, Northolt). This paper summarises the interim findings, drawing on SUNN's workshops and field visits.

Key Messages

New communities are vital to Britain's future well-being. Despite a growing population, a trade deficit and the need to reduce dependence on imported energy, private cars and carbon emissions, we have to build housing on a large enough scale to make a difference. Just as in the 1930s, we can use house building as a means of strengthening our fragile economy and creating jobs. But building new communities is always difficult, and takes much longer than, say, building a shopping centre or a business park. People complain that the results rarely measure up to what was promised, and there is a general

cynicism about whether the UK can ever build what is really wanted.

Members believe it is vital to go beyond simplistic 'architects' masterplans', and complex Section 106 agreements, to get the basic foundations right. This is particularly important on sites where several thousand people are going to have to live together, and which will affect quality of life in the town as a whole.

The message from SUNN members, and also from other countries in Northern Europe that have built to higher standards, is that we need a new business model for volume house building. This is what the review by John Callcutt, former Chairman of Crest Nicholson and English Partnerships, called 'going from the trader to the investor model', in which profits are made by how well developers meet market and social needs and not by how successful they are in winning planning battles. The ingredients are a more strategic approach to spatial planning, better urban design and leaner methods of construction that get full value for every pound spent, and a more responsive and community-based approach to management and long-term stewardship.

1. Strategic spatial planning

The Government is reforming planning but is in danger of throwing the baby out with the bathwater by valuing 'localism' over the equally important requirement for strategic planning in the local authority and sub-region. A more opportunistic and flexible or market-based approach to planning is called for, but within a robust spatial framework that takes into account housing need, current and planned infrastructure, economic trends and opportunities for regeneration. There are huge variations in UK in house prices and hence land values, and different situations call for different approaches:

a. Extend growing urban areas

House building has been lagging behind in the very parts of our country where the economy has been growing fastest, such as Cambridge or West London. The result has been house prices that are eight times average earnings, which makes the UK uncompetitive because key workers are unable to find places to live near sources of employment. This in turn overloads the transport system. Where new housing is required, local leadership is vital to overcoming opposition, which calls for collaboration between authorities and other agencies that deal with the urban edges.

b. Get spatial strategies right

The experience of SUNN suggests that neighbourhood planning and participation, local authority development frameworks and sub-regional planning are complementary, and that each level is important to national sustainable development. Although each SUNN member represents a viable local community, most local communities owe their existence to a strong strategic vision to meet the need for new homes. It would be a significant mistake to delegate decisions on the optimum location of new housing in England's communities solely to the neighbourhood level. Whether a city, town or village ought to add to its housing stock for the benefit of current and future generations is a strategic decision with significant long-term implications that needs to reflect infrastructure capacity. The people who ought to participate in such decisions are not only local residents but all the residents of the 'community of the local authority' area and members of local enterprise partnerships, who should help all the stakeholders see the bigger picture.

c. Promote green recovery in inner cities

One way to take the pressure off the booming southeast is to continue to regenerate former industrial cities in the midlands and the north. Though much new housing has been built in their city centres, it has largely been high-rise flats unsuitable for families. Economically active households end up moving to the suburbs, and often waste time and money commuting back. At

Orchard Park, Cambridge The economic future of Cambridge is held back by the high cost of housing. The development of one of the first planned urban extensions, on the edge of Cambridge's main council estates and the route of the guided bus, was threatened by builders withdrawing, leaving it looking like 'Beirut' according to a journalist. Thanks to co-operation between South Cambridgeshire District Council and sub-regional partnership Cambridgeshire Horizons with support from registered social landlords (RSLs), action was taken to rebuild confidence, and a vibrant new community, with an active Parish Council, has emerged. Cambridgeshire Horizons links adjacent local authorities and other key players in promoting local development. This confirms the importance of supporting neighbourhood planning at the local authority and sub-regional levels.

the same time, large inner city sites with real assets, like heritage buildings or waterfront access, go to waste. Overcoming dereliction and the problems of mono tenure estates in weak market or falling areas requires more investment than private builders or housing associations are able to commit, although they can make imaginative contributions to reinventing our cities. Even with negative land values public funding is crucial, and this is being cut in places that have already suffered from planning blight and clearance, as well as from loss of employment. Long-term public investment is essential to support cities that are rebalancing their populations and economies. One way forward could be to 'bundle up' sites so that developers have to take on difficult sites along with some easier ones.

d. Use creative funding solutions

When the market was buoyant, land values escalated, and builders agreed schemes that are no longer viable in the short term on the conventional business model. But where housing is needed, plans have been agreed and infrastructure is in place, it is important development is not derailed by financial

Walker Riverside, Newcastle, in the city's East End is one of a number of community regeneration schemes aimed at rebalancing the local economy and population. Attractive, affordable new housing and new open spaces are changing the area's image and creating a mixed-income community close to the city centre, thus reducing transport costs and emissions. The revitalisation of their neighbourhood in a participatory framework is also empowering long-standing existing residents dismayed by decline. However, progress has been disrupted by the withdrawal of funding for regeneration, infrastructure improvement and housing association grant, which puts previous investments at risk and undermines a long-term regeneration process.

uncertainty. This requires closer collaboration between the public and private sectors. Collaboration has to be at a number of levels, both strategic and site-specific. Landowners now need to treat their land as equity, and share in the eventual uplift. Funding from different programmes needs to be combined for greatest effect, so that finance is used creatively. Schemes may need to be rescheduled to build on the parts of sites where it is cheapest, and rather than demolishing all existing buildings, it may be better to make them available to people prepared to do them up.

Various mechanisms of risk reduction need to be explored. It may be necessary to build various forms of affordable housing, such as 'rent to buy', where investors share in the proceeds when homes are resold. By working through partnerships, as the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) has started to do, risks can be shared. Some sales risk can be reduced through innovation and team work, for example through a larger private rented sector with financial institutions agreeing to buy part of a scheme, or through increasing the attractiveness of locations.

2. Better urban design and leaner construction

The experience of SUNN tallies with studies by the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) and others, which show the value of investment in a quality public realm and landscaping. By building a different set of products, new communities could appeal to much wider markets, for example to 'empty nesters' or professionals, as well as young families, and some of the opposition to new housing would be reduced.

a. Design to last

Given the vast cost of regenerating our 1970s estates, nothing should stop developers from building homes that will stand the test of time. To create 'lifetime neighbourhoods', we have to build larger and more flexible spaces and, above all, reduce costs through better insulation. Where there has been visible innovation, for example the Places for People scheme at Walker Riverside, it has proved popular, although it required a subsidy to make the Home Zone and higher energy standards viable. Homes with larger, south-facing windows benefit from natural

Ironstone, Telford This large urban extension benefits from a site office and visitor centre where the project and stewardship managers are based. Close dialogue between the HCA, the local authority and the developer consortium, for example over changes necessary to the design guide and codes, is enabling development to be reviewed and rescheduled to take account of a downturn in demand. Feedback within the HCA, who own the site, should help in developing new approaches.

Ancoats, Manchester A high-quality public realm was prioritised from the beginning in a community which combines regeneration and new build. Even with the downturn slowing development, there is a 'feel' of real quality to the neighbourhood and it means that sites will be well positioned for re-launching when the economic tide turns.

lighting, and by meeting Building for Life standards can avoid the need for expensive central heating. We also have to design places that are pleasurable to walk around, and where short trips can readily be completed on foot or on a bicycle to cut back on car usage. It is not just housing that benefits from innovation. While innovation does not need to necessarily look different, it should offer a better quality of life that brings people together. Good examples are the community schools in Orchard Park, Cambridge, or Lightmoor in Telford, which provide the new communities with a heart.

Lightmoor, Telford, and Grand Union Village, London

Lightmoor is to be a second 'Bournville', which is the highly successful Birmingham neighbourhood managed by the Bournville Village Trust (BVT). In Lightmoor, BVT is providing social facilities that strengthen quality of life. For example, at the heart of the community is a new primary school, and many of its facilities such as playing fields are owned and managed by BVT for the benefit of the neighbourhood out of school hours. Another option is for developers to help establish community development trusts to promote community learning and to manage local facilities, as in Grand Union Village, London.

b. Speed up development

A shared experience of almost all new communities is the amount of time that it takes new communities to get off the ground – generally between 10 and 15 years. Delays arise because of lack of local leadership on the importance of new communities to future generations, an inefficient and slow planning process, a legal framework which over emphasises the rights of objectors to development even if they are just a small minority of the population, and a lack of incentives for landowners and house builders to finish the job quickly.

House building (and sales) rates in the UK are also slow because the building process is

Derwenthorpe, York The Joseph Rowntree Housing Trust (JRHT) has been attempting to develop a small community of 540 new houses in York for 13 years for a growing city with a desperate housing shortage. Although the development has the backing of the City Council and JRHT organised extensive local participation, a small number of articulate objectors from an adjacent neighbourhood have been able to stall the development for more than a decade by triggering a green belt inquiry, a planning inquiry and a village commons inquiry, all of which eventually supported the development. Such delays are common across the UK – at enormous cost to the nation.

outmoded compared with say building offices or cars. House builders claim it does not pay to go for modern methods of construction when volumes are low and labour is relatively cheap. Where development of new communities is much faster, as in Northern Europe, economies have been secured by modular construction, having a multitude of builders working on different sites, thus offering potential residents a much greater choice, and ensuring they do not have to live in a building site for long. This is made possible through the provision of upfront infrastructure

Vathorst, Amersfoort, The Netherlands

Planners, house builders and local councillors in Cambridgeshire have been learning from study tours to exemplary European housing schemes such as in The Netherlands, where the housing stock has been increased by almost 8 per cent in ten years. Half of the new housing has been built by housing associations and is for sale as well as for rent. The keys to rapid community building are local authority participation in joint ventures, the availability of long-term, low-cost funding for infrastructure and a less adversarial planning system. Local authorities are incentivised to promote growth in the places with infrastructure, and the private sector and/or housing association plays a supporting role.

through a public private partnership and through a mix of tenures.

A more collaborative approach could well be taken for future developments in the UK if the private rented sector continues to grow and if the 'green infrastructure bank' gets going. SUNN members suggest modular (or 'flatpack') construction is entirely possible in the UK and could reduce the price of housing by up to 5%. But a site needs to be designed for full modular construction from the outset and the technology needs to be top-notch, with windows pre-fitted in modular panels at the factory.

c. Cut waste

Value engineering, as in the motor industry, can identify items where money is being spent to little effect or where investment would pay off, and enable lessons from experience to be applied in subsequent phases. A good example is the way many kitchens are prefabricated, but building sites are still notorious for the amount of waste they generate. Here are some examples of well-meaning but misguided expenditures found on SUNN study tours:

- **Get it right first time.** Costs are often increased by changing requirements during the building process, sometimes as a result of political pressures. It is almost impossible to change layouts after houses have been built, so design requirements need to be right during the first phases of a masterplan.
- **Tame the motor car.** Roads can be expensive, and overprovision serves no purpose. In some cases through roads and a multiplicity of roundabouts needed to meet outdated highways requirements makes communities less attractive for short trips on foot, with original commitment to promote walking and cycling lost along the way.
- **Plan for parking from the outset.** An honest assessment of likely car ownership levels from the beginning is essential to avoid parking chaos later. Problems can include inconvenient driveways that end up empty and cars straddling every available open space as residents are determined to park near their

front doors. Parking needs to be properly regulated, with car owners paying the cost of provision. It is naïve to assume that cutting back on spaces will lead people to give up their cars.

- **Put shops and services where they work.** Well-meaning but misguided attempts to build shops in the centre of small new communities, rather than on the edge where they could serve a wide catchment area, result in units that are hard or impossible to let. Social facilities such community centres can also go of the edge of communities and help integrate new and existing communities.
- **Insulate well.** Expensive technologies such as solar panels and wind turbines are sometimes added as a kind of 'eco bling', which is highly visible but not all that useful, while measures that really cut energy consumption, like good insulation, are neglected.

Elm Tree Mews, New Earswick, York.

A small development built with the expectation of achieving Level 4 carbon standard in the Code for Sustainable Homes using fabric insulation, communal ground-source heat pump system and solar water heating. The project was monitored prior and post occupation to establish actual performance of the building. Although residents were pleased with lower heating bills, actual heat loss was 54 per cent higher than designed. The study concluded that processes and cultures within the building industry and its supply chain need to change if zero carbon housing is to become a reality. Priority needs to be given to construction quality and to supporting low carbon lifestyles, with design focusing on whole system performance. Monitoring during construction and early occupation can improve performance.

3. Responsive long-term stewardship

Creating balanced communities in a turbulent economy is difficult, resulting in complaints when people end up living in a building site with un-built or unsold units. Yet at its best, a well-managed new community can offer a better lifestyles to

new residents, giving rise to real enthusiasm for the neighbourhood. Careful on-site management can also boost confidence in hitherto failing locations, thus raising the morale of existing residents. The lesson of SUNN is that skilled long-term management of buildings, public spaces and social facilities is as vital to the sustainability of communities as the original design.

Ironstone Management Services, Telford

An innovative agreement between Bournville Village Trust, Sanctuary Housing Association, and the Ironstone consortium means that all new residents receive a high level of estate services for a charge of £250 pa. This gives rise to high quality, well-managed public spaces, whatever the tenure and is helping to build a sense of community. Neighbourhood Watch, and TV/radio provision for all, has been put in place from the beginning.

a. Invest in social capital

It is easy for residents to feel isolated in a new community, and efforts must go into community development from the start. Where this is properly managed and trust is built up, as in the case of Orchard Park's Parish Council or Grand Union Village's Development Trust, it pays dividends. Creative approaches, like the use of artists in Orchard Park or temporary sports pitches in Lightmoor, can help give a new community a sense of identity, just as important as physical provision like a new community centre.

Community development can also help link new and existing communities which may require social development efforts. For example, the developer at Yours South Lynn has funded a community worker to help existing residents living alongside the new Millennium Village to develop their life and employment skills. Sufficient investment in 'social infrastructure' needs to be in every new community's business plan, perhaps on the basis of a 'per cent for the community' – rather like the idea behind 'per cent for public art' policies.

b. Design and fund long-term stewardship

A key finding of SUNN is the best of new

communities almost always reflect the commitment of development partners to high standards in community building and to the long term sustainability of the development. This may be either through hands-on stewardship, or by empowering community management, or both. Within SUNN there are a variety of excellent models of long-term stewardship, sometimes involving Registered Social Landlords, as in New Earswick or Telford, or at Grand Union Village, a management company which works for the property owners' company in parallel with a community development trust.

c. Achieve continuity and learn from experience

Over the 20 or so years it takes to build a new community, residents will come and go, and governments and developers will change. Hence it is vital not only to have a strong sense of vision, but also mechanisms that can keep the development on course, and adapt to change. There is a vital role for multi-disciplinary community management teams, preferably site-based, as in Ironstone. But such provision requires developments on a scale that makes proper management economically viable, which is why properly planned urban extensions need to form key parts of growth plans. At a national level, learning networks like SUNN may be vital to capturing the lessons of experience to inform future practice in community building.

'Next steps'

SUNN has identified a number of key areas to look at in the coming year, including drawing in outside expertise. These include:

- options for creative finance that address high land costs and reduce construction costs;
- the relationship between transport engineering and the creation of high quality public spaces in new communities;
- long-term stewardship models in both the voluntary and private sectors;
- localism and the role of parish councils.

About the project

Despite volumes of published advice, and sophisticated websites, it is still hard to know why

the UK has lagged far behind other European countries in building new communities. *The Local Growth White Paper* highlights the cause as 'the lack of house-building enabling infrastructure'.

SUNN was set up following a short feasibility study by Dr Michael Carley and Dr Nicholas Falk. SUNN's new communities are developments that are under way and partially occupied, and all are committed to the highest standards in community building. In total they account for some 13,000 new homes.

SUNN's aims are to:

- showcase innovation in leading-edge new communities;
- foster learning on what does and does not work;
- identify and influence aspects of national policy;
- identify financial barriers and ways to overcome them; and
- enable the JRF to contribute to national policy and practice in relation to building new communities.

The Joseph Rowntree Housing Trust (JRHT) has started to build a new community at Derwenthorpe and has sponsored setting up the network with a two-year programme to bring new evidence together. There are number of distinctive ingredients:

- Twelve leading examples of new communities under development across England were identified in the feasibility study.
- There is a 'code of practice' for how the network should operate that is based on visits to members and facilitated discussions, which are frank and not attributed.
- The initial list of issues to be addressed were refined through round table workshops. The core problems were seen as identifying a

stronger role for the public sector, achieving balanced communities, fostering connectivity and good design, managing technical innovation, and raising development finance for sustainable communities.

- Illustrated project profiles and workshop reports have been produced and information shared through file-sharing website Basecamp.
- The project is being co-ordinated and written up by Dr Michael Carley, and Dr Nicholas Falk and Anne Wyatt of URBED. Meetings are chaired by John Hocking, Executive Director of the Joseph Rowntree Housing Trust.
- As well as producing interim reports, including evidence to the House of Commons Committee on the Localism Bill, the general findings will be made public in early 2012, and responses sought from government.
- These Interim Findings are based on a synthesis of the four workshop reports, and were discussed at the meeting at Dickens Heath in April before being made more widely available.

For further information

For more information about SUNN please contact John Low. Tel: 01904 615936 email: john.low@jrf.org.uk

SUNN members include practitioners active in planning and building the following new communities:

Orchard Park, Cambridge
Graylingwell, Chichester
Yours South Lynn, Kings Lynn
Grand Union Village, Northolt, London
Ancoats Urban Village, Manchester
New Islington, Manchester
Walker Riverside, Newcastle
Dickens Heath Village, Solihull
Ironstone, Telford
Lightmoor, Telford
Derwenthorpe, York
Upton, Northampton