



London: Contrasting Suburbs

This Factsheet looks at a cross section of London's suburbs. Suburbs were once seen as the homes of London's affluent commuters. But now many of these suburbs face problems of deprivation and neglect.

Definitions

Suburb, suburbia: Suburbia generally refers to the outer residential parts of a continuously built-up city. A suburb is a socially homogeneous district within that area. The term carries connotations of fairly low densities of occupation and of a particular life style suited to family and leisure needs. [The Penguin Dictionary of Human Geography].

Suburbanisation: The outward growth of urban development to engulf surrounding villages and rural areas.

"The suburbs of London have a special place in our imagination and affections. Whether or not we actually live there, we feel we know them. As the inspiration for novels and poetry, the butt of jokes or the setting of sitcoms, they have been part of the cultural landscape for decades. But in this case familiarity has not always bred contempt. Even as we think of cherry blossom billowing across the neat avenues of 'Metroland', or net curtains twitching behind Neighbourhood Watch stickers, we know that the suburbs are more complicated and less cosy than their popular image".

Philip Davies [Director, London Region, English Heritage]

"Suburbs are at risk of becoming new inner cities in terms of deprivation"

[The Guardian December 31st 2003]

Suburbanisation and the Cycle of Urbanisation

The development of urban settlement in the modern period can be seen as a sequence of processes, known as the cycle of urbanisation (Fig 1). The key processes and their landscape implications are: suburbanisation, counterurbanisation and reurbanisation. In Britain, suburbanisation was the dominant process until the 1960s. From this decade counterurbanisation impacted increasingly on the landscape. Reurbanisation of some of the largest cities, beginning in the 1990s, is the most recent phenomenon.

The suburbs of the capital city cover almost two thirds of its area and house more than half its population. According to a recent Greater London Authority publication [A city of Villages: Promoting a sustainable future for London's suburbs] "Unlike other UK cities, London does not entirely conform to the pattern of deprived inner city and affluent suburban ring. Desirable inner city neighbourhoods and deprived outer London estates muddy the picture. The structure of London as a conglomerate of villages when more swallowed up by urban sprawl further adds to the complexity".

Fig 1: The cycle of urbanisation

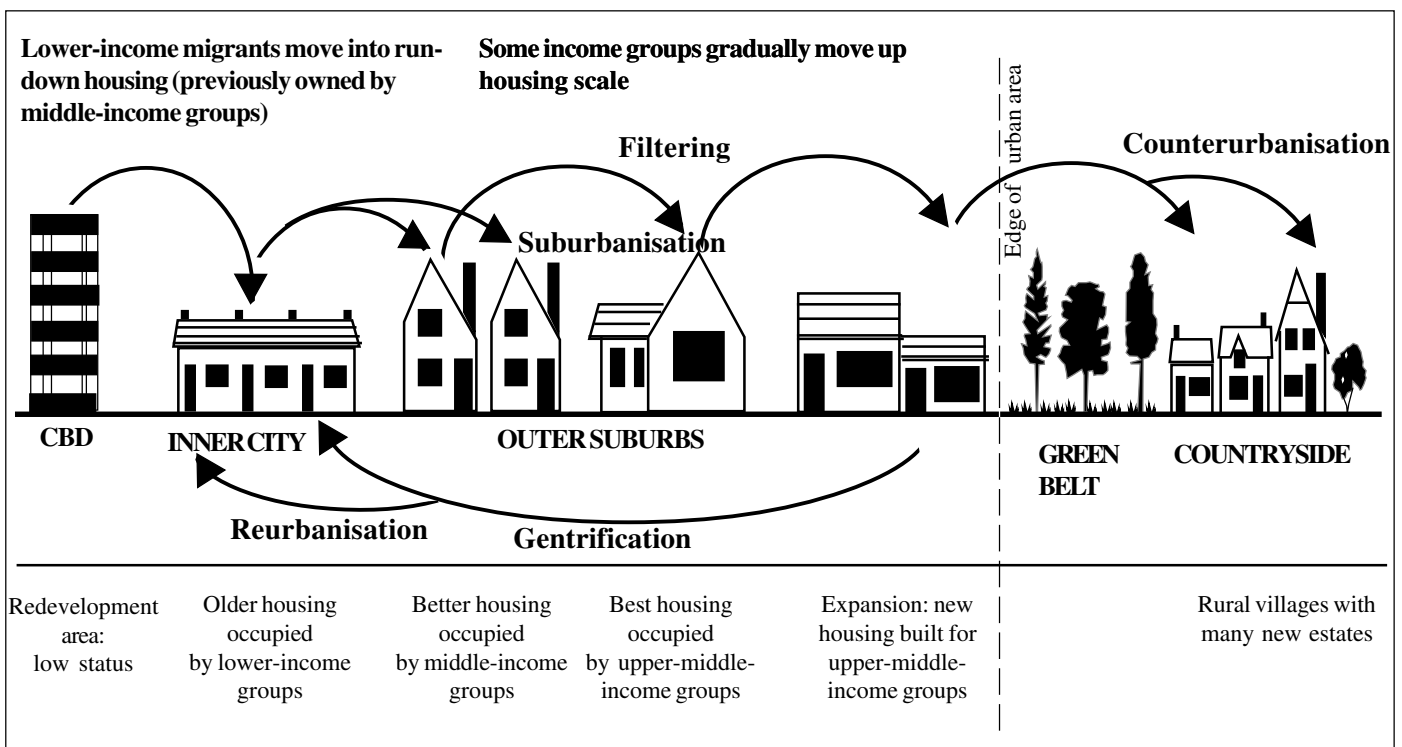


Fig2. Transport and the development of London's Suburbs

It was the rapid development of urban transportation that led to the huge suburban sprawl of London.

London grew relatively little in area yet doubled its population from 1 to 2 million by 1850

Between 1870 and 1914, London, like many other British cities, grew rapidly as a result of cheap public transport systems:

- o Great Eastern which ran cheap trains for workman so they could travel to work from Edmonton and Leytonstone
- o Horse trams and buses developed in the 1870s and 1880s
- o The first electric tube railway opened in 1890 with the first electrified suburban lines in 1905-09
- o Electric trams were introduced at the turn of the century (1900s)
- o Motor buses came just before the First World War

These improvements in transport made suburban living possible, but social and economic change made it probable as workers in shops and offices were paid regular salaries, and could obtain money on credit. These new middle classes aspired to own a house with a garden, bought by a mortgage

Ribbon development
along routeways

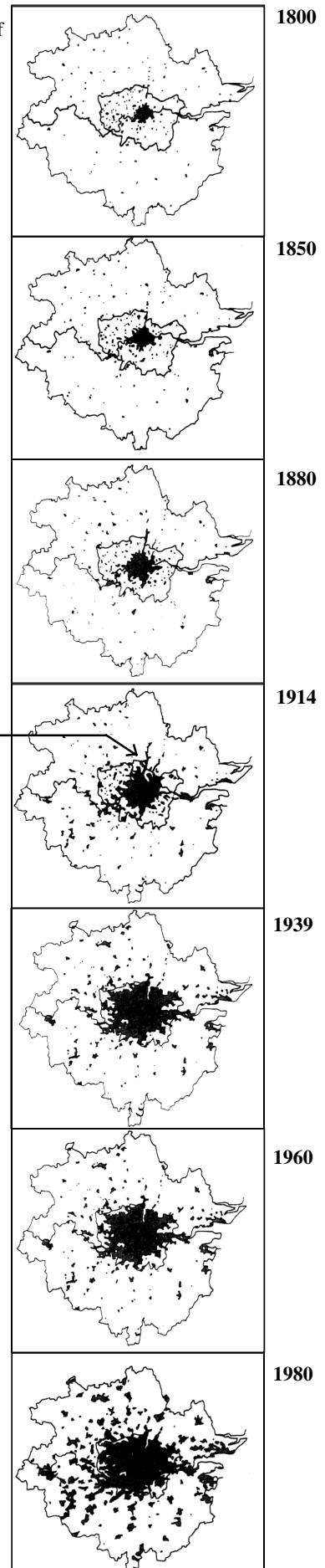
Between 1914 and 1939 the population of London rose from 6½ million to 8½ million (mega city size). The built up region extended about three times in area, with the city becoming a roughly circular shape by 1939

Again transport helped – faster electric suburban and tube trains could go further and motor buses could penetrate the suburbs in any direction. Note the private car was not important until the 1960s

- After the war, the Green Belt was created around London to stop further urban sprawl.

Much of the 1960s to 1980s expansion took place in the outer suburbs eg Uxbridge or Ewell
Note the population declined largely as a result of declining Inner City areas in the East End, and the planned migration of overspill to New Towns

Since the 1990s, there has been much regeneration in inner areas (gentrification) and many suburbs have been neglected

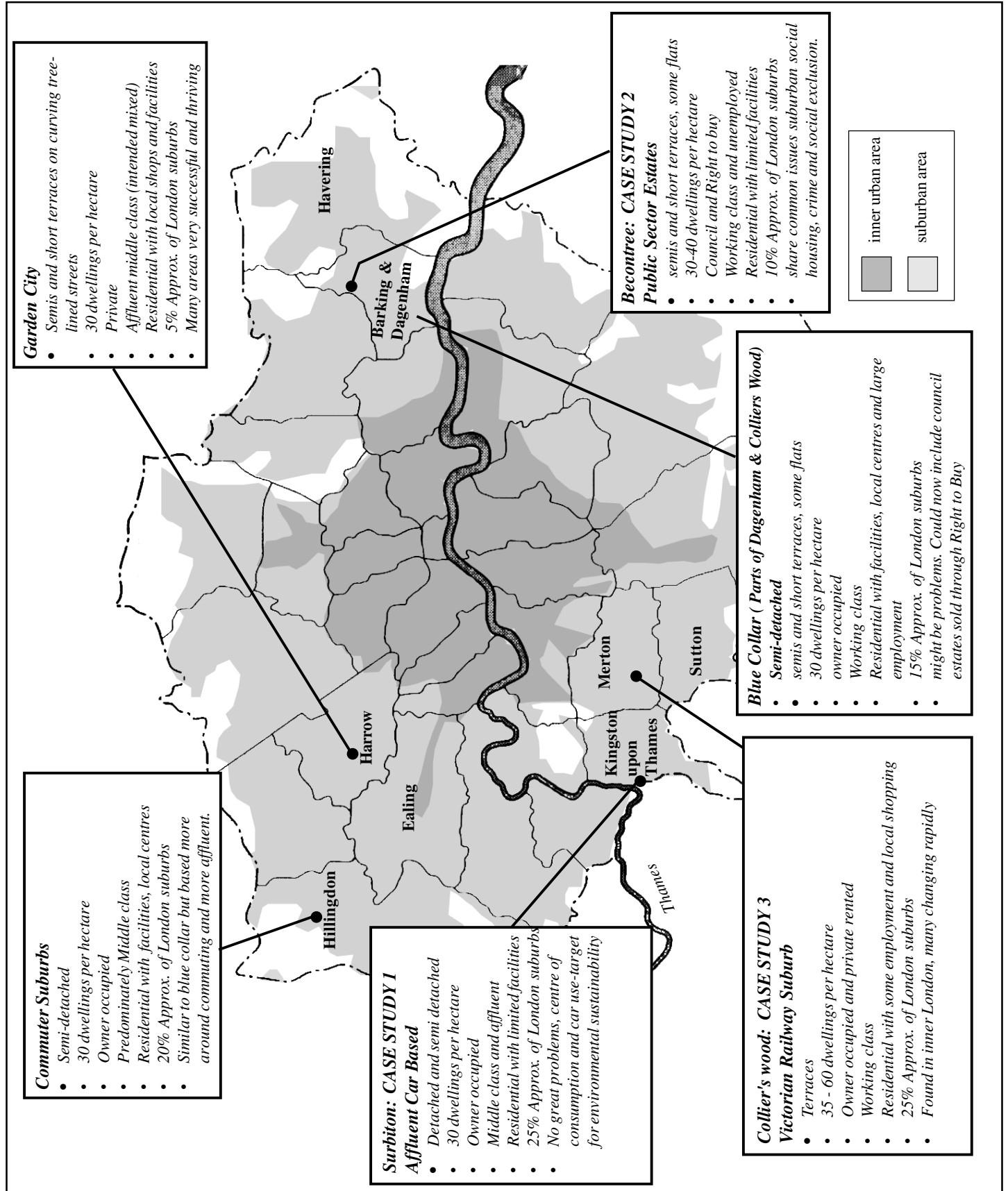


A City of Villages

A City of Villages: Promoting a sustainable future for London's suburbs', published by the Greater London Authority in August 2002, focuses on the ring of suburbs that date from the latter quarter of the nineteenth century. These suburbs cover most of outer London but also parts of some inner boroughs [Fig 3].

Since 2000 the Mayor of London and the Greater London Authority have been developing a Spatial Development Strategy for London. The population of London is growing rapidly and the Spatial Development Strategy will look to accommodate rather than hinder this growth. The key focus of the strategy is urban revival

Fig 3. Inner urban and suburban areas



Case studies of sample areas (see Fig 3) to show varying states of suburbs**1. Surbiton [Borough of Kingston-upon Thames]**

Between 1837 and 1852 the population of Surbiton grew from 200 to 2,800. By 1887 it had increased to 10,500. The most significant reason for such a rapid rate of increase was the opening of the London to Southampton mainline railway in 1830, linking Surbiton to central London. Today the fastest trains reach Waterloo in 16 minutes. For road transport there is easy access to the A3 and the M25.

Surbiton, originally an independent village, has a diverse range of housing. The administrative unit is made up of the three wards of St Marks, Surbiton Hill and Berrylands. Housing in St Marks and Surbiton Hill varies considerably in style and age. The centre is characterised by large Victorian houses, with smaller Victorian and 1930s houses towards the river. Berrylands is very different in character to the other two wards, having been developed within a much shorter period during the interwar years and having a much more uniform appearance than the rest of Surbiton. Here three and four bedroom semi-detached houses dominate, along with some modern purpose-built flats. Surbiton contains several conservation areas.

Proximity to the station is the key factor in house price variation, underlining the importance of commuting. Despite being so close to Kingston, a large regional shopping centre, Surbiton has an apparently thriving shopping centre of its own. It is Council policy to retain, and where possible increase, the provision of small retail units in Surbiton to maintain the individual character of the shopping centre.

2. Becontree [Borough of Barking and Dagenham]

Becontree was the largest municipal housing scheme in the world when it was built by the London County Council in the inter-war period. Its purpose was to re-house people from East London slum clearance. Since the introduction of the Right-to-Buy scheme in the early 1980s, about half the houses have been purchased from the Council by tenants. It shows that Council housing can be found in suburban as well as inner London areas.

The original objective was to create an estate of 27,000 houses on 'garden city' principles. Although there are about 90 different house types the general perception is one of monotony. The main housing style is short terraces with small gardens front and rear. Some flats are located near junctions along with local shops and other facilities such as doctors' surgeries. There has been very little in the way of post-war development.

Many of the Council-owned houses have already been improved, and there is a £140 million Neighbourhood Renewal Scheme, one of the largest in the country, to upgrade some 23,000 houses [double glazing, new central heating, bathrooms and kitchens].

Most people tend to use Dagenham rather than Barking for shopping. Becontree contains six parades of shops which are characterised by closures and a poor environment. There are several large empty pubs, closed because of anti-social behaviour.

Parking is a significant problem as this suburb was designed with a much lower rate of car ownership in mind. Hopper buses are being introduced but the low density of the estate presents problems in providing a good public transport service.

This is essentially an extensive one-class area, largely white, in a borough that has the lowest average incomes in London. According to a City of Villages "Currently, Becontree's main attraction tends to be that it is the cheapest place to find somewhere to live in London, and this in turn means that house prices have tended to be flatter than elsewhere". Becontree has suffered from the weakness of the East End economy and the decline of traditional riverside industries.

3. Colliers Wood [Borough of Merton]

Colliers Wood is a Victorian industrial suburb that has changed into a commuter suburb as local industrial employment has declined. Its situation on the River Wandle [a tributary of the Thames] made Colliers Wood one of the earliest industrial locations in London, with a cluster of textile designers [Liberties and Morris], and then paper industries. Colliers Wood benefited from:

- Location on the suburban rail system
- Being on the borders of the London tram system
- The southern extension of the Northern Line to Morden in the 1930s.

For a time the appearance of this suburb was blighted by a number of large scrap yards but in recent years it has been redeveloped for out-of-town retail use.

Although the main type of housing is two storey Victorian low status terraced, there is quite a mix. This includes the Phipps Bridge housing estate, the subject of a Single Regeneration Budget scheme, as well as a range of fairly recent 'starter' housing.

The old shopping parades on Colliers Wood and Merton High Streets struggle due to intense competition from the huge Sainsbury's Savacentre hypermarket. There are very obvious signs of gentrification in the area as very high house prices in neighbouring areas such as Wimbledon, Southfields and Merton Park have forced many people to look to previously unfashionable areas such as Colliers Wood.

The Three Suburbs Compared: 2001 Census

Fig 6a shows how the three suburbs compare according to the neighbourhood statistics from the 2001 census. Surbiton's status as an affluent suburb is clearly confirmed as is the relatively low quality of life in Becontree. Colliers Wood occupies a middle position between the other two areas. As data on housing type is not available at the ward level, Figure 6b shows data for the boroughs in which the three wards are located. Again, there is a very clear contrast. However, the proportion of flats in all three outer London boroughs will appear surprisingly high to many people outside. It reflects the very high cost of housing.

Fig 6a

Indicator: 2001 census	Colliers Wood ward [%]	Surbiton Hill ward [%]	Becontree ward [%]
Population white	67.0	87.6	83.4
Average age	34.9	38.3	33.8
Unemployed	4.0	2.3	4.4
No car or van	39.7	27.4	35.9
Two or more cars or vans	14.4	23.8	17.2
Without central heating	13.0	10.0	11.7
Owner-occupied	60.7	66.9	57.5
Rented from Council	9.4	5.0	28.0
Qualified to degree level or higher	36.9	41.8	12.2
No qualifications	18.6	12.6	36.7

Fig 6b

Housing type	Merton [%]	Kingston [%]	Barking and Dagenham [%]
Detached	5.9	13.0	2.3
Semi-detached	18.1	32.1	17.6
Terraced	40.6	18.7	54.2
Flat	35.4	36.0	25.9

As Fig 3 indicates there are major differences between suburbs although the conclusion was that none were in absolute decline. Some suburbs were showing signs of strain such as:

- Lack of identity
- Poor transport links
- Eroded social capital as a result of the decline of local facilities and deterioration of parts of the housing stock
- Anti-social behaviour

In contrast, the other suburbs exhibited:

- A higher quality in terms public services
- Community groups more active
- A higher occupancy rate in shopping centres and shopping parades

Table 1 sums up the different pressures facing London’s suburbs.

Table 1. Pressures facing London suburbs

Population cascade:	Suburbs could <i>be</i> at risk if the outward movement of population from the centre were to slow. London’s suburbs, lost population in the 1970s and 80s since when there has been a small recovery. Growth however has lagged behind inner London and while some suburbs have grown rapidly, others have remained static.
Exported inner-city problems:	There is a perception that suburbs are being invaded by inner city ills such as drugs and crime. However crime figures show crime still to be predominantly an inner London issue.
Suburban council estates:	The marginalisation of social housing in the 1980s and 90s led to stigmatisation and to the decline of some suburban ‘cottages estates’ in London. This situation has however improved markedly.
Private renting:	Despite pockets of deprivation the private rented sector as a whole has seen significant growth.
Obsolescence:	Interwar suburban housing needs careful maintenance to avoid becoming obsolescent.
Retail change:	London’s suburbs contain more than 60% of its town centres. Larger town centres have not suffered greatly by out-of-town development however smaller centres in poorer suburbs are experiencing problems.
Economic trends:	Despite the suburbanisation of employment in the 1980s, suburban jobs growth has lagged behind both the centre and the Home Counties. Some suburbs have seen rapid jobs growth while the former ‘blue collar’ suburbs have lost significant employment.
Cultural diversity:	Ethnic minorities are as likely to be found in the suburbs as the inner city. They represent a significant strength for many suburbs although the ongoing discrimination that remains in some suburbs needs to be addressed.
Transport difficulties:	There is a correlation between accessibility and the popularity of suburbs. At risk suburbs are likely to be those with poor connections to the centre and to employment growth areas.

With the suburbanisation of some jobs and the growth of public services, suburbs are also now major employment locations. In 1999, employment located in the suburbs totalled 1.68 million jobs.

- 19% in manufacturing (down by half since 1990 because of deindustrialisation)
- 6% in construction
- 23.5% in whole sale and retailing
- 6.5% in hotels and catering (London Heathrow the largest concentration)
- 9% in transport and communications
- 23.5% in financial and business services
- 17.5% in health care
- 5% in other categories

Even so the suburbs are still net **exporters** of jobs as people commute to CBD and city employment.

A Crisis of Neglect?

Some suburbs have suffered the social breakdown long associated with inner cities.

A report by the Civic Trust and Rowntree Foundation in the late 1990s concluded that many suburbs built in the middle of the 20th century were approaching a “crisis of neglect”. This was, in part at least, a result of out-migration by middle income groups. The Office for National Statistics estimated that the suburbs could lose one million people by 2010. Fig 7. provides a check list as to why some suburbs are in a greater state of decline than others.

Fig 7. A City of Villages: Conclusions from Case Studies

Accessibility is key: There is a correlation between the accessibility of a suburb and its desirability in poor areas public transport is cut back.

Local links: District centres can decline if they are difficult to access compared to competing town centres. Red routes lead to parking restrictions so people cannot reach shops.

Positive image: A poor image, low aspirations and low values can override the advantages of accessibility

The importance of the centre: A strong retail centre is essential to economic and social confidence. In poor areas retail areas high streets decay and are dominated by low grade shops.

The importance of public realm management: There are not the resources to provide the level of public realm management required in at-risk and crime rates rise

Tenure mix: Affluent suburbs are keen to increase the mix of tenures, poorer areas are less interested. In poorer areas property prices stagnate.

Environmental Sustainability: Other than car dependency and public transport, sustainability issues were not a major concern raised in the case studies.

AS Exam Question

- Using the data from tables 6a and 6b, compare the quality of life in the three suburbs. [10]
- What further aspects could you investigate to provide more detailed assessment of quality of life [10]

Answer Guidelines

- Define quality of life. Look at factors which can lead to multiple deprivation, such as access to work, good quality housing and education.
- Think about access to services, freedom from crime, good quality environment (pollution, congestion etc.)

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