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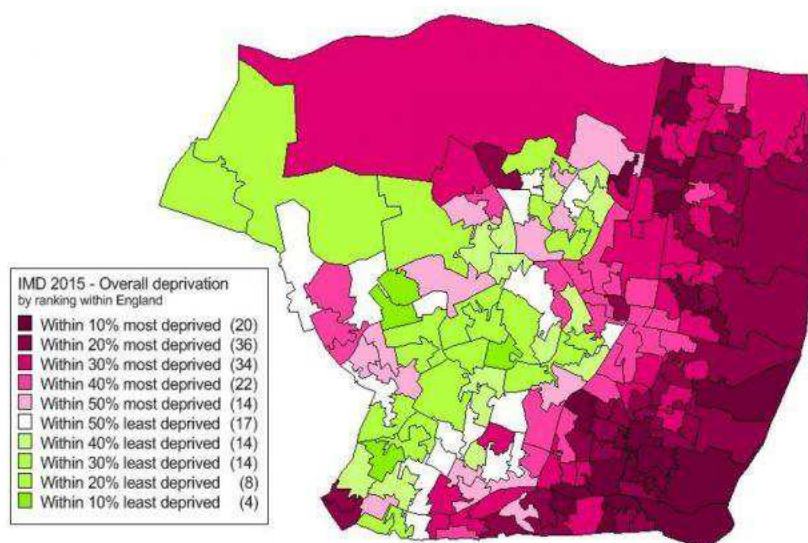


## The Future of Metroland

25 September 2018 by Charli

The suburbs, home to notions of the good life and traditionally the enclave of the middle classes, are changing. In 2016, the Smith Institute [noted](#) that “as inner cities have undergone a renaissance, suburbs have frequently been left behind”.

Concentrations of poverty and development pressures in outer London are growing, but suburbia, or “metroland”, is often overlooked both in policy and academia. As part of the Smith Institute’s wider research programme on [poverty in suburbia](#), on September 10, Future of London joined colleagues from a range of academic, government, architectural, charitable and community organisations to set an agenda for the outer London debate.



*20 wards of LB Enfield rank with the 10% most deprived in England.*

**Paul Hunter**, Deputy Director at the Smith Institute presented findings from recent focus groups in outer London. While most participants were happy living in the suburbs, they feel

their future is uncertain. Rising house prices, increasing incidents of crime, various aspects of welfare reform and service reduction were significant reasons for concern. From focus group discussions, key questions emerging were around regeneration, and who it works for.

Providing first-hand practitioner insight, **Sarah Cary**, Executive Director of Place at **LB Enfield** delivered her view on how the suburbs are changing. Enfield's population increased 19% between 2001 and 2016. House prices and deprivation are also rising. There is a clear need to provide both homes and jobs for local people, but growth tensions such as the availability of land, the extent of green belt and protected industrial land in the borough are challenging.

LB Enfield's strategy hinges on development of an Eastern Growth Corridor, supported by estate regeneration and intensification of industrial land. The borough's approach is to plan "for completions, not approvals", shrinking the gap between aspiration and delivery.

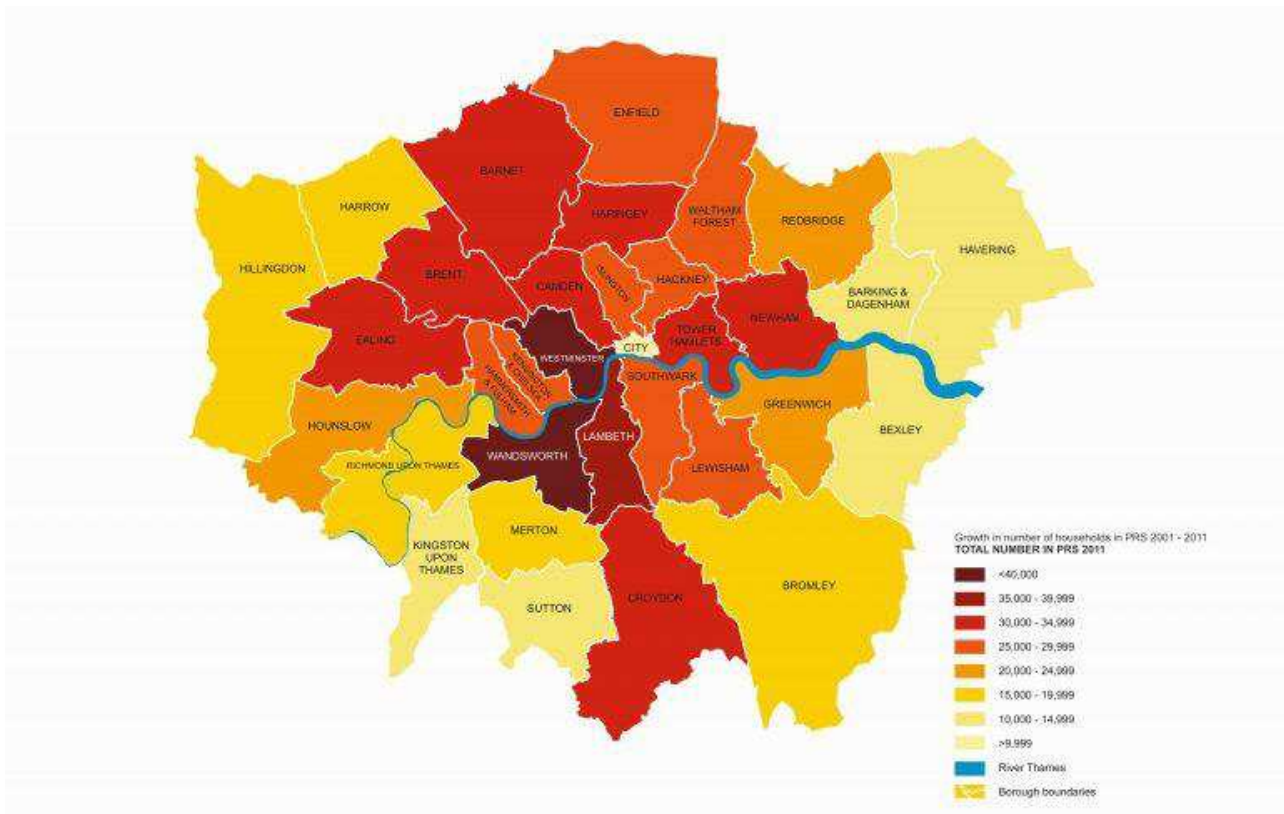
**Neil Sinden**, Director of **CPRE London** responded, adding that the challenge of developing the suburbs is environmental in nature, it should engage local communities in meaningful dialogue and seek to enhance local character. The suburbs are home to a high proportion of green space and underpin the All London Green Grid – rather than seeing this as an obstacle it should be viewed as an opportunity to reshape urban form, taking a green infrastructure-led approach.

Future of London's Deputy Chief Executive, **Nicola Mathers**, opened the debate up to the floor:

## How are the suburbs changing?

Suburban demographics have shifted over the past decade. **2014 research** from LSE found the trend of "poor-country" migrants settling into London's inner districts to be reversing, with concentrations growing in the suburbs. Conversely, "rich-country" migrants saturate the inner west London boroughs. Drivers for this are multi-faceted, but participants agreed the dramatic upswing in inner London property prices is constitutive.

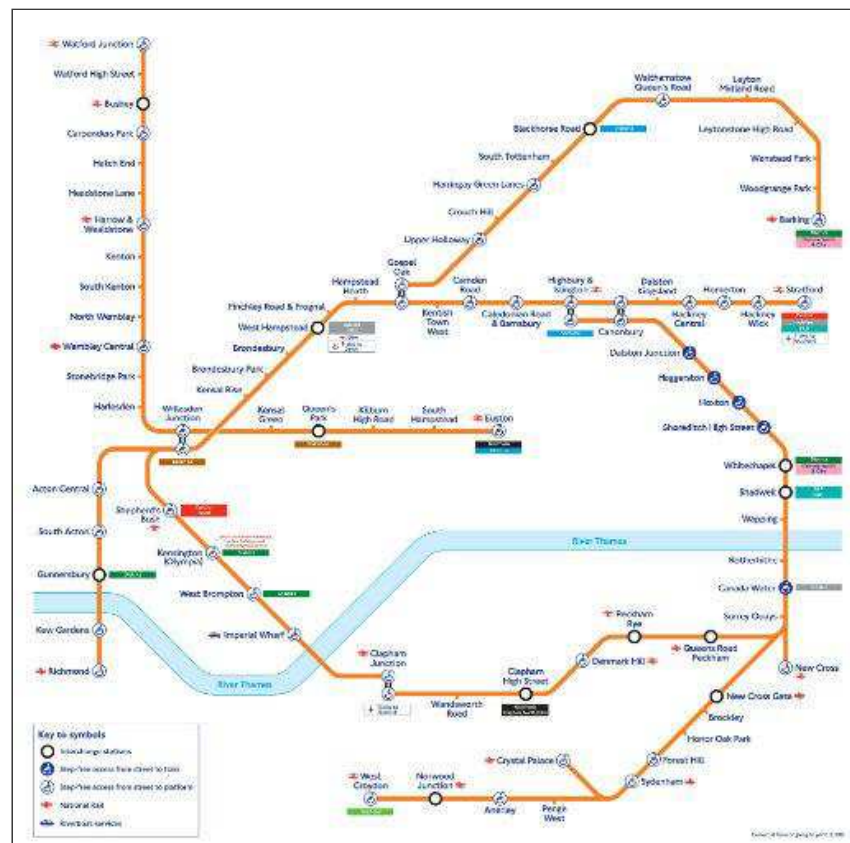
Rising prices in the centre have sparked outward migration, a focus group participant in Croydon noted: "I grew up in Brixton. Mum still lives there. But economically there is only so much you can look to, that's we why moved here". We heard this trend is playing out across the outer boroughs, with migration from Hackney to Edmonton also common.



London's PRS growth 2001-2011, download FoL's report here: <https://bit.ly/2lfSEEm>

A vital but problematic tenure, the PRS has doubled in the past decade (see Future of London's report). At the bottom this can bring unplanned growth and overcrowding, problems previously associated with city centres.

When asked whether they would like better transport links into the centre, or better jobs locally, residents surveyed overwhelmingly responded in favour of the latter. While high-paid commuters may be willing to make the trip in exchange for the good life, for lower income workers: "after you pay for the train and the time it takes, it isn't worth it".



London Overground orbital link: connecting Anerley to Leyton

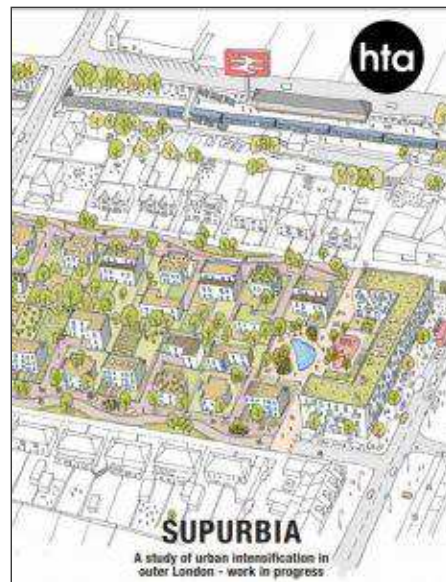
A key issue for the future success of the suburbs is the creation of local jobs, combined with internal connectivity. The Overground orbital link has connected outer centres from Croydon to Clapton, transforming the places it passes through. Participants noted the thorny challenge of ensuring this increased connectivity benefits low income families and small businesses.

The pace of suburban change is about to accelerate. 2018's GLA housing targets are unprecedented, most outer boroughs are asked to double, even triple, their build rate. Responding to the Draft London Plan, LB Richmond upon Thames argue that if realised the targets "would lead to a radical change in the nature of Outer London with far greater densities".

In the context of a housing crisis and booming population, densification is not a choice. The question now, is how can all this be harnessed to create inclusive growth that benefits all?

## What can be done to ensure good growth in metroland?

**Understand the demographic:** the populous is evolving, understanding their needs, particularly in terms of homes and jobs, is a top priority. There are concerns around the lack of family homes and specialist housing in sought-after, well-connected areas.



HTA's 2015 report, available:  
<https://bit.ly/2OcjouK>

**Smart approaches to housing:** HTA's *Superbia* project found that doubling the density of just 10% of the outer London Boroughs creates the capacity for 20,000 new homes per annum. Helping older people to move away from under-occupation would also help, FoL's *Ageing Cities* programme explored this issue.

**Balance homes and jobs:** permitted development rights and the focus on housing are both threats to the workspace that places need to be locally resilient. Commercial and industrial uses are worth fighting for; the challenge is attracting industry and bucking the agglomeration trend.

**Learn from successes:** reducing car dependency is particularly important and challenging in outer London. But, Waltham Forest's *Mini Holland* scheme is already *evidencing* health benefits and *Cycle Enfield* is encouraging new cyclists onto the roads. Such precedents can help make the case for further investment.

**Community-centred renewal:** adopting a bottom-up approach, embedded in existing networks boosts resilience by linking economies to local demand. Just Space's *Community-led London Plan*, calls for "a network of Lifetime Neighbourhoods and Lifetime Suburbs, providing many key amenities and job opportunities locally".

**Have a vision:** many designers and architects state a desire to create a "new typology" for the suburbs, setting out a better offer for local people. There is a need to think visually about what is to be built.

**Build trust:** public trust in all levels of government is low, development often met with scepticism. Communicating the need for homes and borough-wide plans as early as possible can help make the case for changes.

**Lead the change:** roundtable attendees observed a leadership gap in relation to the suburbs. As the Urban Taskforce led the urban renaissance, there are advocates for a suburban equivalent to shape and scale change.

As it stands, there is a lack of clarity around the future of metroland. Debate is needed, and this needs to be with people who live and work in the suburbs. While planning professionals and think tanks have a clear role in communicating changes and opportunities, an umbrella body could help oversee and integrate these activities. In the context of coming growth, shrinking budgets and turbulent politics, it is vital we don't sleep-walk into the future of suburbia.

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