

the **Birmingham** plan
birmingham's local development framework



Mature suburbs -
guidelines to control
residential intensification

Supplementary Planning Document

february 2008

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Mature suburbs





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1

Purpose of the supplementary planning document

1.1 Birmingham's mature suburbs and other residential areas are often desirable and attractive areas that contribute to some of the City's most important assets. Their local character and distinctiveness can be the main reason why people choose to live where they do. The diversity of different residential environments and the maintenance of high quality areas in the suburbs are essential elements in achieving sustainable communities.

1.2 Government planning policies encourage housing development on previously developed land partly to protect greenfield sites and to promote higher density development. The spacious nature and low density of some of the City's mature suburbs has led to development pressure for the intensification of existing housing areas through redevelopment at higher densities and the development of infill plots and backland areas.

1.3 Whilst this form of development is not new and can have very positive benefits through increasing the housing stock and leading to the more efficient use of land, it has become more prevalent in recent years and it can also have a significant impact on local distinctiveness by the erosion of the unique character that makes these places special, particularly if the principles of good design are not taken properly into account. Some proposals have not been well received by local residents who object to 'town cramming' and to the real or perceived threats to privacy, amenity and to the character of the neighbourhood that may be associated with such developments. It is essential therefore that, when these types of development take place, they are appropriate in terms of design and in all other respects such that they make a positive contribution to the environment and community within which they are located.

1.4 The provision of new high quality homes of good design and which are appropriate in their local context, is fundamental to the government's housing policy objectives. Good design should contribute positively to making places better for people and utilise opportunities available for improving the character and quality of an area.

1.5 The purpose of these guidelines is to set out the City Council's aspirations for such types of development within the City's mature suburbs and residential areas. It sets out key design issues for housing intensification and what is expected from developers and designers when submitting planning applications.

1.6 The guidelines are aimed at all those interested in the future of their city and development in the suburbs - residents, developers, architects and local amenity groups.



2 Policy context

2.1 This guidance has been prepared within the context of published national and local planning policy guidance and design advice.

National policy

2.2 Planning Policy Statement 1: Delivering Sustainable Development¹ advises that good design should contribute positively to making places better for people. Design which is inappropriate in its context, or which fails to take the opportunities available for improving the character and quality of an area and the way it functions, should not be accepted. Robust policies on design should be prepared to ensure that, amongst other key objectives, developments respond to their local context and create or reinforce local distinctiveness. Design policies should avoid unnecessary prescription or detail and should concentrate on guiding the overall scale, density, massing, height, landscape, layout and access of new development in relation to neighbouring buildings and the local area more generally. Local Planning Authorities should not attempt to impose architectural styles or particular tastes and they should not stifle innovation, originality or initiative through unsubstantiated requirements to conform to certain development forms or styles. However, it is proper to seek to promote or reinforce local distinctiveness particularly where this is supported by clear planning policies or supplementary planning documents.

2.3 Planning Policy Statement 3: Housing² highlights that good design is fundamental to the development of high quality new housing. Reflecting policy in PPS1, good design should contribute positively to making places better for people. Design which is inappropriate in its context, or which fails to take the opportunities available for improving the character and quality of an area and the way it functions, should not be accepted. When assessing design quality it is necessary to consider how a development integrates and complements neighbouring buildings and the local

area more generally in terms of scale, density, layout and access. Furthermore, how a development creates, or enhances, a distinctive character that relates well to the surroundings and supports a sense of local pride and civic identity is also an important consideration. Housing density policies should be developed having regard to, amongst others, the characteristics of the area, and may consist of a range of densities rather than one broad density. However, 30 dwellings per hectare should be used as a national indicative minimum. Good design is fundamental to using land efficiently. Local Planning Authorities should facilitate good design by identifying the distinctive features that define the character of a particular local area. More intensive development is not always appropriate and there is no presumption that land that is previously developed is necessarily suitable for housing development nor that the whole of the curtilage should be developed. In local areas of special character, where proper attention is paid to achieving good design, new development opportunities can be taken without adverse impact on their character and appearance. The density of existing development should not dictate that of new housing by stifling change or requiring replication of existing style or form.

2.4 Planning Policy Guidance Note 17: Planning for Open Space, Sport and Recreation³ defines that open space should be taken to mean all open space of public value and could be in the form of green spaces in and around housing and domestic gardens. In considering planning applications, local authorities should weigh any benefits being offered to the community against the loss of open space that will occur and should maintain or enhance the character of open spaces.

¹ Planning Policy Statement: Delivering Sustainable Development (PPS1), ODPM February 2005

² Planning Policy Statement: Housing (PPS3), DCLG November 2006

³ Planning Policy Guidance Note: Planning for Open Space, Sport and Recreation (PPG17) ODPM July 2002

2.5 Planning Policy Statement 22: Renewable Energy⁴ and Annex to PPS1 - Planning Statement on Climate Change⁵ these documents set out current and emerging government planning policy which require new development to be designed for environmental performance in terms of the use of renewable energy sources, layout, orientation, massing, open space, density, mix, sustainable drainage schemes (SUDS), sustainable waste management and transport to minimise energy consumption, optimise solar gain and use of natural ventilation.

Regional and Birmingham Planning Policy Frameworks

2.6 West Midlands Regional Spatial Strategy⁶ - a strategic objective is to make the Major Urban Areas (which includes Birmingham) increasingly attractive places where people want to live. Policy CF3 (B) contains environmental safeguards in order to ensure that this objective is not undermined. These safeguards include compliance with locally adopted design guidelines consistent with PPS3.

2.7 The Birmingham Plan⁷ contains Environmental Policy 3.8 advising that the environment strategy is based on two principles:

- The need to protect and enhance what is good in the City's environment, and to improve what is less good.
- The need to recognise the key relationship between environmental quality and levels of economic activity.

2.8 Environment Policies 3.10, 3.13, 3.14 and 3.19 resist proposals that would have an adverse effect on the quality of the built environment and emphasises that improving the quality of the built environment is one of the most important of the plan's objectives. New developments will be expected to contribute, in terms of their design and landscaping, to the enhancement of the City's environment. Proposals for windfall housing developments on backland sites, which would detract from the overall environmental quality and character of a particular area will not be supported.

2.9 Housing Policy 5.20 indicates that the City Council will take measures to maintain and protect the existing good quality residential environments, which are one of the City's greatest assets. Proposals for new residential developments in good quality environments are to be carefully designed, so that they do not detract from the character of the surrounding area.

2.10 Housing Policy 5.38 states that a variety of densities are appropriate throughout the City and on particular development sites. The main concern is to emphasise the quality of the development and its impact on its surroundings. The Council will encourage a general increase in average housing densities compared to the densities achieved on development sites in the recent past. Densities of at least 50 dwellings per hectare in centres and within corridors well served by public transport will be expected and 40 dwellings to the hectare elsewhere.



4 Planning Policy Statement 22: Renewable Energy, ODPM August 2005

5 Annex to Planning Policy Statement 1: Planning and Climate Change DCLG, December 2007

6 West Midlands Regional Spatial Strategy, ODPM June 2004

7 Birmingham Unitary Development Plan, Birmingham City Council, October 2005

2.11 Places for Living SPG⁸ seeks desirable, sustainable and enduring residential areas and recognises that higher density forms are not appropriate everywhere. It is important in areas where lower density forms are a positive characteristic, that harm is not caused by insensitive infill and redevelopment. 'Places for Living' is a broad document providing general supplementary planning policy in relation to all forms of residential development across the City.

2.12 Nature Conservation Strategy SPG (1997) identifies the main habitats and features and sets out detailed policy, principles and guidelines for nature conservation activity.

2.13 Conservation Strategy for Birmingham SPG (1999) seeks to raise the profile of conservation in Birmingham and identifies a series of policy objectives, which provide the foundation for this. The SPG also sets out detailed guidance on listed buildings, the 'local list', conservation areas, historic landscapes, canals and archaeology.

Other important guidance

2.14 Suburbs and the Historic Environment⁹ published by English Heritage advises that change in mature suburbs is inevitable and is often necessary to maintain their success. Analysis of the local environment is encouraged together with the preparation of longer term strategies for the future of a historic suburb that ensures its significance is retained, particularly where it retains its integrity and character or is valued by the local community. The diversity of suburbs means that a uniform approach is inappropriate. The advice stresses that the relationship between elements in the suburban landscape, such as parks, open spaces, street trees, private gardens and views in and out of areas, all create local identity. Gardens are also important contributors to biodiversity. Proposals for significant change should conserve and enhance existing character and identity and should not concentrate on residential uses at the expense of commercial and retail elements or green spaces.

2.15 Design and Access Statements: How to write read and use them¹⁰ has been published by CABE and provides practical advice on getting the best from statements to help deliver well-designed, inclusive places. Subsequent parts of this document stress the importance of Design and Access Statements to the planning process.

⁸ Places for Living Supplementary Planning Guidance, Birmingham City Council, March 2001

⁹ Suburbs and the Historic Environment, English Heritage, March 2007

¹⁰ Design and Access Statements: How to write, read and use them, Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE), June 2006



3 What is a mature suburb?

3.1 English Heritage describes suburbs⁹ as dependencies of larger settlements - somewhere with a clear relationship with a city or town but with its own distinct character. Many suburbs have become historic through proving their long term sustainability, reflecting not only their qualities of popularity, adaptability, stability and general fitness for purpose, but over time they have achieved maturity and distinctiveness in relation to their surrounding area.

3.2 It is felt neither necessary nor appropriate to define mature suburbs by delineating boundaries on maps. Specific boundary definitions create the problem of properties and areas being either included within or excluded from a policy. In the case of the intensification of residential development in mature suburbs the purpose behind this SPD is to raise awareness of the importance of design principles and to encourage greater contextual analysis and a higher standard of planning application so the decisions can be better informed about the critical design factors that may impact on local character and identity.

3.3 For the purposes of this guidance therefore, a mature suburb is regarded as being any group, area or estate of dwellings (including other types of development that would normally be located in the suburb, such as local shops, public houses, community and health services, and possibly business premises and workshops) that has a generally homogeneous and identifiable suburban and residential character and which has been developed more in a planned rather than in an ad hoc manner. A mature suburb could be a neighbourhood in its own right or a number of suburbs with different characteristics could combine to create a neighbourhood. What is important is that the suburb has identifiable characteristics that distinguishes itself from other areas.

3.4 Examples of mature suburbs can range across a broad spectrum in both age and type. These include the easily identifiable arcadian Victorian and Edwardian residential suburbs of extremely high

quality, frequently characterised by substantial individually designed houses in large plots with well established gardens, as well as the garden village suburbs. However, mature suburbs are not restricted to the more affluent parts of the city. They also include, for example, the extensive inter-war public housing estates of semi detached and terraced housing built to Parker Morris standards often with generous sized and well established gardens and geometric road layouts all of which contribute to the character of the suburb. Similarly, the popularity of pre-war estates of mock Tudor housing creates distinctive suburban identity. Post-war housing estates have generally been developed at increasingly high densities but have suburban character in their own right. Residential areas of small Edwardian and Victorian terraced artisan housing are also included as they may contain areas of backland or underused sites which could come forward for development and which need to be dealt with in a sensitive design manner if the character of the residential area is to be maintained or enhanced.

3.5 From these examples, it will be seen that few developments in residential areas will be excluded from this guidance. However, with the requirement that most planning applications have to be accompanied by a Design and Access Statement, it is considered appropriate for the guidance to have wide application as the principles of good design do not alter from place to place.

3.6 There are some 27 designated conservation areas within the city. Some of these comprise mature suburbs such as in Edgbaston, which represents the early development of Birmingham's suburbs by the land owning aristocracy. However, the fact that a mature suburb may not be within a conservation area does not diminish the need to have regard to the principles of good design.

⁹ Suburbs and the Historic Environment, English Heritage, March 2007

4 Detailed guidance

Design and access statements

4.1 The introduction of the submission of a Design and Access Statement to accompany the majority of outline, full and listed buildings applications from August 2006 has provided an important and useful opportunity for the Council to drive up design standards.

Paragraph 63 of the Circular 01/2006¹¹ states:

“Design and access statements help to ensure development proposals are based on a thoughtful design process and a sustainable approach to access; they allow the applicant to explain and justify their proposals; and they help all those assessing the application to understand the design and access rationale that underpins them. Statements should improve the quality of proposals”.

4.2 The Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) has produced a useful guide on how to write, read and use Design and Access Statements 10. Applicants submitting planning applications for development in mature suburbs are expected to have regard to the CABE document and the more detailed advice below. CABE state:

“The most important message to get across is that the application is based on a good understanding of local character and circumstances. This means that a good statement will explain the design process that has been followed”.

Appraising the context

4.3 Applicants for development proposals are encouraged to follow an assessment-involvement-evaluation-design process in the preparation of Design and Access Statements. This will ensure that the final design will be informed by the wider context of the site. Paragraphs 97 to 99 of the Circular 01/2006¹¹ sets out the steps involved which can be summarised as:

- Assessment of the site’s immediate and wider context in terms of physical, social and economic characteristics and relevant planning policies.
- Involvement of community members and professionals and an indication of how the findings of consultation have been taken into account.
- Evaluation of the information collated on the site’s immediate and wider context, identifying opportunities and constraints and formulating access and design principles for the development. Evaluation may involve balancing any potentially conflicting issues that have been identified.
- Design of the scheme using the assessment, involvement and evaluation information collected. Understanding a development’s context is vital to producing good design and inclusive access and applicants should avoid working retrospectively, trying to justify a pre-determined design.

4.4 The circular goes on to say that in the light of the understanding of context, the Design and Access Statement should explain how this has been considered in relation to the proposed use or uses of the site, the distribution of uses across the site, the appropriateness of the accessibility to and between them, and their inter-relationship to the uses surrounding the site. In addition the statement should explain how this context has been considered in relation to the physical characteristics of the proposal, these being the amount, layout, scale, landscaping and appearance of the development.

Determining character

4.5 The principal element present that makes mature suburbs different to other areas within the City is the significant degree of harmony in their positive characteristics. The character of a mature suburb can be defined by a combination of a number of measurable factors or characteristics.

¹¹ Circular 01/2006 Guidance on Changes to the Development Control System. DCLG June 2006e, March 2007

These include built form, spatial composition, architectural style, enclosure, density, levels of landscaping and public realm.

Built Form - this relates to the type of residential units (detached, semi-detached, terrace etc.), as well as their size including depth, width and height. For example, properties dating back to the Victorian and Edwardian periods are generally represented by large detached, semi-detached or terraced houses or villas, often with subordinate rear wings. Inter-war properties are smaller in size, again ranging from detached, semi-detached to terraced properties. Outbuildings such as former coach houses and detached garages also contribute to the character, as well as areas of hard surfacing and provision of car parking.

Spatial Composition - The space between buildings is as important as the actual buildings in influencing the character of an area. Victorian and Edwardian properties are often set in generous grounds, with significant space between neighbouring dwellings and set back from the highway. Inter-war properties are normally set in a tighter formation and on narrower plots, with reasonable distances back from the highway and deep rear gardens. Corner plots on inter-war suburbs are regularly given more space to the side to enable a degree of openness at the junction.



Architectural Style - arrangement of quality features such as porches, bay windows and chimneys as well as the texture, colour and pattern of external materials contribute to the architectural style of a building or area. Victorian properties constructed of facing red brick and slate tiles may contain ground floor bay windows and large chimney stacks projecting from the end gables. Semi-detached inter-war dwellings constructed of a mix of facing red brick and render with clay tiles may contain double height bay windows and smaller, centrally located chimneys.

Enclosure - the layout, size and means of enclosure of gardens, as well as the width and location of any access points can influence the character of an area - as can the degree of privacy to front gardens. Front boundary treatments can consist of brick/stone walls, fences, railings and hedgerows that achieve a variable level of privacy to the dwelling's frontage.

Density - whilst density is a measure of units, it is greatly influenced by the characteristics described within this section and does contribute significantly to the character of an area. Mature suburbs are traditionally associated with medium or low-density levels but not exclusively so. It is important in the design process to understand the implications of increased densities where intensification of residential development is proposed.

Levels of Landscaping - the presence of trees, hedgerows, lawns and other landscaped areas have a fundamental impact on the character of an area. Mature suburbs often have high levels of vegetation along boundaries, or within semi-private areas. Trees within private areas are often visible between or above buildings, or other public realm vantage points, giving a well-vegetated or woodland character to an area. Large, well-stocked gardens can also give a sense of openness and tranquillity, offering a sense of retreat and defensible space to occupiers of the dwellings in the area. Such large areas of green open space that are visible as part of the public realm, or by occupiers of adjoining or nearby properties, can be of significant visual amenity and public value. Gardens grouped together could also form an ecological resource.

Public Realm - the public realm contrasts with the private realm in that this is the aspect of the suburb that is visible and accessible to all. In many suburbs, local character is derived as much from the spaces between the buildings as from the architectural quality of the actual buildings themselves. There may be carefully composed relationships between the public and private realms or the relationships may have developed over time as a suburb and its landscaping have matured. Whether planned or not, the public realm is an essential part of local distinctiveness and placemaking. Even relatively minor changes in the public realm can be intrusive.

Assessment of proposals

4.6 The starting point for the creation of any new residential development proposal is to analyse the positive and negative characteristics of the site and the local context to determine their special qualities. Using the measurable factors influencing character and described above coupled with the advice in the CABE document¹⁰ and Circular 01/2006¹¹, this contextual appraisal and the resulting findings should confirm whether the site can appropriately be redeveloped in a more intensive manner. The contextual appraisal should also include an assessment of the contribution the existing site gives to the character of the area.

4.7 All application submissions must include a design statement including this context appraisal, which describes how the proposal will relate to the identified character of the site and area. This should form part of the 'Design and Access Statement'. Applications not accompanied by satisfactory design statements will either not be validated and registered or be the subject of a formal request under town and country planning powers¹² for the submission of such information which, should it fail to be provided, will lead to a refusal of the application on the ground of inadequate information to carry out a proper assessment of the proposal.

4.8 To achieve the main sustainability objectives, new residential developments in urban areas need to be suitably located to day-to-day facilities as well

as public transport links. Mature suburbs will normally have some form of access to jobs, local services and local amenities by public transport. However, the degree of accessibility to convenient and regular public transport as well as facilitating more walking and cycling will vary from site to site and this factor will ultimately influence car dependency. Therefore higher density residential schemes are most appropriately located in centres, transport hubs or along major transport corridors rather than in mature suburbs. Some locations within mature suburbs will not be within reasonable walking distance from good public transport links and thereby the likelihood of the occupiers of proposals in such areas being dependent on the private car is greatly increased.

4.9 Planning policy and guidance are focused on achieving the more efficient use of land with residential developments. Broad density targets are given in relation to particular locations. However, the design of a proposal must address the underlying principle of improving the character and quality of an area rather than achieving a particular density. Therefore design should determine density rather than density determining design. The contextual analysis is fundamental in achieving this.

4.10 Many mature suburbs do not warrant formal designation as conservation areas or the protection of individual dwellings. However, it is reasonable and desirable to ensure that their distinctive characters are not harmed when new development is undertaken. The demolition of existing houses that make a positive contribution to the character and quality of an area is undesirable.

4.11 Proposals should be informed by the context appraisal undertaken and its findings respected in the planning process, reinforcing and evolving local characteristics that are considered positive. Local characteristics considered negative in terms of urban design and which undermine the overall character of an area, should not be used as a precedent - in other words the aim should be to protect and enhance what is good in the City's environment, and to improve what is less good as required in Policy 3.8 of the Birmingham Plan⁷. Applicants will also need to be aware of any covenants which may have implications on how a site can be developed.

¹² Regulation 4, Town and Country Planning (Application) Regulations 1988

Design criteria

4.12 Proposals in mature suburbs will be assessed against the following design criteria:

Plot Size - building plots should be of appropriate size (width, depth and shape) to reflect the typical form of plots in the area and the urban grain.

Building Form and Massing - the frontage width, depth, height and massing of the main building should be in keeping with those in the area. Secondary parts of the building should be subordinate to the scale and design of the main building. The amount of floorspace provided within the building(s) should normally be similar to other buildings in the area.

Building Siting - new buildings should respect established building lines and set backs from highways. Separation distances between buildings should also respect the separation distances, which generally characterise the area.

Landscape and Boundary Treatment - proposals should retain important landscape and boundary treatment features such as trees, hedgerows and walls and should not disturb wildlife corridors and any potential adverse affects should be mitigated. New landscaping and boundary treatments should reflect those present in the area and provide opportunities for increasing biodiversity. Mature, suburban gardens can be ecologically important and provide wildlife habitats. Large gardens that are of high quality and make a significant contribution to the character of the suburb should not be lost.

Plot Access - where possible, existing vehicular and pedestrian accesses should be retained. New accesses should reflect the position and width of those in the area as well as the material of the hard surfacing.

Parking Provision and Traffic Impact - hard surfaced areas and garaging for the provision of parked vehicles should not differ significantly from the size and location of those existing in the area. New parking areas should be discreet and sympathetic, avoid being located adjacent to neighbouring private gardens and not dominate the road frontage or result in the loss of mature boundaries. Off-street car parking requirements are a significant determinate in the amount of hard surfaced areas required within a site. Lower levels of off-street parking may be appropriate in sustainable locations, such as close to public transport corridors. The impact of parking and traffic that may lead to higher capacity road layouts and the construction of controlled junction crossings will need to be carefully evaluated in terms of the effect on the street-scene and character of the area.

Design Styles - A high standard of design is required, although proposals are not expected to be a copy or pastiche of existing design styles in an area. Innovative and contemporary designs that respect their context are encouraged, however landmark buildings will rarely be appropriate unless they add to the characteristics that provide identity of the suburb in a positive way. References to existing architectural forms, materials, fenestration, proportion of solid/void areas and the public realm



will be encouraged. The development of increasing numbers of apartment blocks in recent years has led to some that were designed at a scale and massing that had little regard for their neighbours, which has led to a confused relationship between the building, its external space functions and the public realm. As a general rule, flats designed with respect to the form and character of the street may be more appropriate design solutions in the mature suburbs with larger apartment blocks being located closer to local centres and transport corridors.

Public Realm - the impact on the public realm of the proposals will be considered. Any significant detrimental impacts will be resisted. Developments should seek to contribute to an overall improvement in the public realm.

Archaeology, Statutorily Listed and Locally Listed Buildings - proposals must have regard to any below or above ground archaeology and must not compromise the setting of any nearby buildings listed as being of architectural or historic interest.

Design Out Crime - proposals will be assessed to ensure that they create safe and accessible environments where crime and disorder or fear of crime does not undermine quality of life or community cohesion.

Renewable Energy and Climate Change - current and emerging government planning policy statements require new development to be designed for environmental performance. Details of how the proposals take account of the principles of renewable energy and climate change objectives should form part of the Design and Access Statement.

Cumulative Impact - a succession of developments with negative impacts, however small, on the character of a mature suburb, can have a cumulative impact resulting in the erosion of high quality environments across the City. Account will therefore be taken of the potential precedent set by development proposals.

4.13 A new development within a mature suburb could easily appear unrelated to that area. The key is to ensure that a development does not harm the distinctive character and identity of an area. To ensure that this is the case it is essential to

understand the context of the proposal by following a systematic process of assessment-involvement-evaluation-design. This contextual analysis should then be incorporated into the Design and Access Statement.

4.14 Proposals that undermine and harm the positive characteristics of a mature suburb will be resisted.



5 Contacts

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Sustainability Appraisal

A Sustainability Appraisal accompanies this SPD. It can be found on the Council's website at: www.birmingham.gov.uk/maturesuburbs

Most Birmingham City Council publications can be made available in alternative formats or languages.

If you have difficulty reading this document please call us on (0121) 303 1115 to ask if a full or summary version can be made available in large print, another format or another language.

If you have hearing difficulties please call us via Tynetalk 18001 0121 303 3030 or e-mail us at: info.devdir@birmingham.gov.uk

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Appendix: Further references, legislation and useful guidance

- 1) Supplementary Planning Document – The Future of Birmingham’s Parks and Open Spaces – Birmingham City Council (2006).
- 2) Supplementary Planning Document – Public Open Space in New Residential Development – Birmingham City Council (2007).
- 3) West Midlands Economic Strategy – Advantage West Midlands (2007).
- 4) Planning Policy Statement 9 – Biodiversity and Geological Conservation – ODPM (2005).
- 5) National Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 – Office of Public Sector Information. Includes duty of local authorities to conserve biodiversity.
- 6) Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 – Office of Public Sector Information. Includes regulation on protecting species.
- 7) Planning Policy Statement 25 – Development and Flood Risk – DCLG (2006).
- 8) Manual for Streets – Department for Transport and Communities and Local Government (2007).
- 9) Safer Places: the Planning System and Crime Prevention – ODPM (2004).



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