Create Streets
Briefing paper

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Ben Southwood

Learning from History

Suburban Intensification in South Tottenham

Foreword by Rory Stewart

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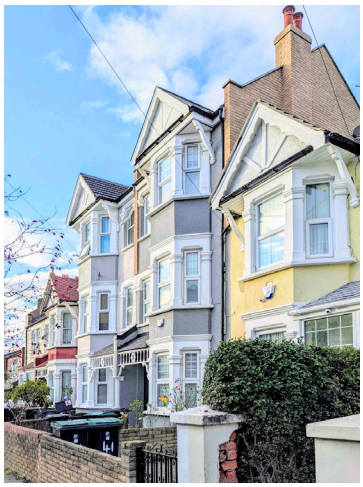
Britain needs more homes in the right places. But we also need to preserve the beauty that we have inherited in our landscape, our skylines and our buildings. Faced with this dilemma, we oscillate between extremes—concreting the countryside and forcing 'hyper-dense' developments into the historic fabric of our cities. But South Tottenham suggests there is another way, that it is possible still to build more gentle density in places, where housing is suitable, needed and welcome.

In South Tottenham, vital space for families has been added not by demolishing our urban inheritance, but by adding to it. Victorian houses have been extended upwards so deftly that the casual observer would not know that the extensions were new. This is exactly the sort of thing the Victorians would themselves have done. In fact, those leading the scheme suggested that they were inspired by exactly such Victorian examples.

South Tottenham has many special features, and that means that we cannot expect every other Victorian or Edwardian neighbourhood in the country to immediately copy them. Nevertheless, there are many lessons that we can learn from what they have done. If we can get the framework right, there may be ways to enable such sympathetic improvements and extensions across other neighbourhoods in England, helping many other growing families with the space they need. Done well, it will bring environmental and carbon benefits. It will allow us to provide housing – and affordable housing – in a way that is sensitive to communities, our built heritage, our landscape and our streets. It is a model that can transform not only London, but cities across the United Kingdom.



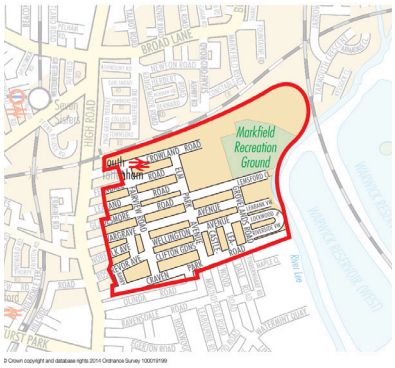
Executive summary

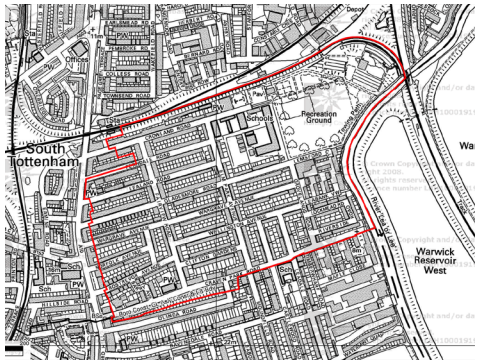
- A neighbourhood in South Tottenham has seen significant suburban intensification, driven by community demand and enabled by creative local government.
- Victorian terraced houses have been allowed to add up to 1.5 storeys (a full storey and a roof storey), subject to a strict design code ensuring that the extensions harmonise with the design of the existing building.
- This was developed as a solution to serious local overcrowding through the work of ward councillor Joe Goldberg, and community leaders Modche Grosskopf and Shmuel Davidson. The design code was carefully prepared by a team at Haringey Council, led by urban design officer Richard Truscott and supported by council leader Claire Kober.
- The South Tottenham example is in some ways a special case. A large proportion of residents are from the Hasidic community, who tend to have relatively large families and who cannot move away to larger homes because they need to be within walking distance of the community on Shabbat. However, there are lessons for other neighbourhoods.
- The average house price in the area is around £650,000, and one-bedroom flats can go for as much as £350,000. An extra floor and a half of floorspace could be worth over £300,000 in value uplift for affected homes, while costing only around £100,000 to build.
- A count from Google Earth suggests that over 200 properties have used the new Supplementary Planning Document rules to extend their houses, out of perhaps 1,000 individual eligible buildings.
- There are lessons for other neighbourhoods with Victorian or Edwardian housing stock, a shortage of appropriate housing, and relatively high land values:
    1. Street-by-street intensification can be a valuable way to deliver extra floor space needed for growing families in high-demand areas;
    2. Local consent is crucial for a successful and lasting local housing settlement;
    3. Visual form-based codes are normally far better than vague statements of policy such as 'appropriate' and 'contextual'.

Introduction

Housing space in London has become steadily more expensive in recent decades, especially since the late 1990s. Many families have found themselves without space enough for each child to have their own bedroom. Renters have found themselves sharing houses in multiple occupation when they would prefer to live alone. Social housing waiting lists have grown. Housing supply in the capital has not been able to keep up with the number of people who want to live there.

This has had striking effects in certain neighbourhoods. For minority cultures, relevant amenities and cultural support networks may be extremely geographically concentrated. This leads to cultural clustering, a feature underlying some of London's most loved and celebrated neighbourhoods: the Turkish and Vietnamese sections of Kingsland Road, Bangladeshi areas in Whitechapel, Pakistani and Sri Lankan communities in Tooting, Chinese residents and businesses in Soho and Bayswater (where there is also a bust of Albanian national hero Skanderbeg), and so on. In recent years, steeply rising property prices have put pressure on many of these communities: individuals are often pushed to move to areas where space is less scarce, breaking up the community.





These changes have been reflected in South Tottenham. In recent years it has become extremely expensive by UK standards, and even by the standards of London. The average property price in the wider area is £650,000. However, this includes many flats. The average property price per square foot is estimated at almost £900, and whole Victorian terraced houses tend to sell for over £1m—often considerably over. At £900/sqft, an extra floor of a normal Victorian plot there (around 400sqft) is typically worth some £350,000.

South Tottenham is one of the centres of Britain's thriving Hasidic community. Hasidic families tend to be relatively large, with the average household in the neighbourhood having 5.6 children. They are also unable to move away to areas in which space is less scarce, as they needed to be within walking range of their synagogue on Shabbat, when other modes of transport are impermissible. This has put intense pressure on these small homes, which rarely have more than three bedrooms. A councillor

reported that many families had children living four to a room. Caught in an extremely difficult position, a number of residents extended their homes without planning permission. This led to much concern about the effect unregulated extensions would have on the character of the neighbourhood.

South Tottenham was developed as a working class suburb of London in the late nineteenth century. It has strong urbanistic fundamentals, with terraced streets, good block patterns and well-built Victorian houses. However, many of the buildings have been refaced and pebbledashed, most original doors have been lost, and most timber sash windows have been replaced with plastic ones. Though basically good homes, they were not the type of listed buildings where almost no alteration is appropriate.

This, then, was the context in which the local councillors were working:

- a scarcity of housing and floorspace within homes;
- extremely high house prices;
- essentially high-quality heritage properties with historic value, but with many features changed; and
- a thriving and close-knit community with large families and a desire to stay local.

Historically, the solution to this would have been urban intensification. In most times and places, cities met the needs of growing populations by making better use of areas that had already been urbanised, adding storeys and using more of their plots while respecting height limits and regulations on facade design. This is the story of Rome, Florence, Toledo and Paris, even as it is the story of Soho, Westminster, York, Ludlow and the Edinburgh Old Town. During the drive towards car-based suburban expansion in the twentieth century, this kind of intensification became unusual, and modern development control tends to make it impossible. Now that we are less willing to allow further suburban sprawl, this has made it very difficult for cities to adapt to the needs of growing populations.

In most areas with comparable challenges to South Tottenham, a satisfactory solution has not been found. People have had to endure higher housing costs or aim for smaller families. Often, they are forced to move to areas where space is less scarce, splitting up communities and creating concerns about gentrification. Uniquely, Haringey Council developed an alternative solution, allowing residents to add storeys subject to a strict design code, and thereby reopening the possibility of the kind of gradual intensification that was normal before the twentieth century. The rest of this briefing note discusses how this was achieved, and whether there are lessons we can learn from this experience.

The Haringey approach

Ward councillors Joe Goldberg, Shmuel Davidsohn, Claire Kober, and Modche Grosskopf, who knew the community well, attempted to work towards a compromise solution that restrained ugly extensions, and gave an alternative option through well designed and controlled sympathetic extensions, in keeping with the existing built environment.

A diagram by Haringey council showing the inappropriate extensions which drew complaints and concern

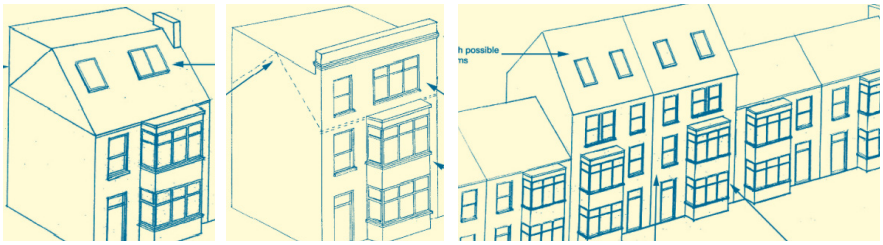
The policy was introduced in 2010 and slightly modified in 2013, since when there has been huge uptake, even greater than the councillors expected. The neighbourhood's character is gradually evolving towards a slightly higher density, with an enclosure ratio closer to the historic European norm of 1:1.

> "What made me proudest of this was that the planning officer really believed the solution is what Victorians would have done if faced with the [problem]. It was an absolute case of what matters is what works."
>
> —Ward councillor Joe Goldberg

Getting to this stage required much work by the council, especially the leading ward councillors. Adding a supplementary planning document (SPD), even a relatively short one covering a small area of the local authority, involves a range of stages: evidence gathering; drafts; consultation; monitoring and so on. This means, for example, preparing a sustainability assessment under the strategic environmental assessment (SEA) framework[1], and preparing an extensive equality impact assessment.[2]

1. https://www.haringey.gov.uk/sites/haringeygovuk/files/house_ext_s_tottenham_sustainability_appraisal_final.pdf
2. https://www.haringey.gov.uk/sites/haringeygovuk/files/house_extensions_in_south_tottenham_equality_impact_assessment.pdf

Ultimately, this resulted in a supplementary planning document to guide extensions in a path that contributed more positively to the local built en vironment. The simplest summary of the rules is that instead of a free for all, with largely unpopular 'dormer-form' extensions, they allowed three types of upward extensions, all with a lower visual burden on the street (or even a positive contribution). The images below show diagrams of the three types permitted under the SPD.[3]



There was an expectation that this would lead to a slow, steady wave of extensions, gradually building towards a new roof line. The design code would ensure that this development was harmonious through each of these stages.

> As new roof extensions are undertaken by individual owners, it is recognised that it is likely to take a number of years before a whole terrace would become extended at roof level. The process is of gradual transition, with a consistent scale and character, built to a good standard of design, and suitable for accommodating appropriate growth.[4]

The code covered facing materials, requiring for example bricks in matching size and colour, or render in matching colour and finish, with new coats of paint to make the extensions seamless. Roofs require the same slate or clay tiles as the original, with some leeway for backs that would not be seen from the street. And window shapes and patterns had to be the same as what was already there. Where alterations to the original building had damaged its character, homeowners applying through this document were obliged to restore original features and facing materials. In this way, prior damage was reversed through the policy.

This continues through a huge range of non-material details, copiously illustrated with clear and useful diagrams: hipped and gabled roofs have to be reproduced where they are currently present; bays must be copied upwards in some circumstances, and so on. The ornamentation of the lower storeys must be emulated in the new ones: the new storeys feature all those admired and familiar details of Victorian facade patterns, from white-painted sills and lintels, through stiff-leaf Gothic capitals, dentil cornices, brick aprons, timber bargeboards and moulded window mullions. Paired houses that share a common gable may only extend simultaneously, to preserve the visual effect they can only have in tandem.

The policy also covers areas other than design. The point of the policy is, mostly, to expand homes for large families facing overcrowding. Thus it does not apply to existing houses in multiple occupation (HMOs) rented out to tenants. The SPD is also clear that any house doing such an exten-

3. https://www.haringey.gov.uk/sites/haringeygovuk/files/leaflet_on_house_extension_in_south_tottenham_spd.pdf
4. https://www.haringey.gov.uk/sites/haringeygovuk/files/house_ext_s_tottenham_adopted_spd_nov_2010.pdf

sion cannot become an HMO for at least twenty years after carrying one out.

Undoubtedly many YIMBYs and other pro-housing figures will object that tenants can have important interests in reducing overcrowding as well. However, in this case those involved are confident support for the policy was contingent on its preserving and strengthening the neighbourhood's character. It may have been unfeasible to get such broad community support had the councillors decided to broaden the scope of the permissions. In general, satisfying the demand for large houses with extensions will nevertheless help private tenants, as it will tend to take pressure off the market for other large properties that tenants may want to jointly occupy.

Overall, the policy has been successful, with high takeup, careful steady implementation, and broad consent as implemented.

Consultation

After two and a half years of the policy, the council consulted with the affected residents on how it was turning out in practice.[5] This involved, among other things, two community meetings, in South Tottenham Synagogue and St Bartholomew's Church.

The takeup in the intervening period had been high: the map to the right logs the successful roof extension applications as of 2013. A Google Earth review suggests that some 200 extensions have been carried out in the entire ten year period the system has been in force. The colour code shows the wide variety of design situations that the council dealt with, with almost every street having substantial differences in their precise design, and hence in the appropriate design code the council had to apply.

The consultation led to a range of clarifications and tweaks in the design guidelines. Many of these related to issues that locals were reporting with the design of extensions. For example, some of the 'type 2' extensions, turning a roof into an entire attic floor, were being built without a parapet or a cornice. In most cases, the council simply clarified uncertainty around what it would and what it would not approve and give planning permission.

5. https://www.haringey.gov.uk/sites/haringeygovuk/files/discussion___consultation_document_for_consultation.pdf

Once again, the document came with a lot of very good pictures for clearing up ambiguity. Above: the two approved types; below the two prohibited types that the policy was introduced to restrict.

Ultimately it seems that the consultation, and the consultation report, [6]were successful. Although there were a number of objections voicing standard concerns with development around congestion, light, overcrowding, infrastructure and biodiversity, there were dramatically more positive than negative responses. For example, 114 responses strongly approved of type 3 extensions (which add 1.5 storeys), and 24 approved, as compared to 18 which disapproved, and 14 responses which strongly disapproved.

The consultation resulted in a revised SPD with additional detail to make sure the extensions continued to be popular and respectful of heritage.[7]

Extending the approach

In the right circumstances, this appears to be an approach with the potential to be popular and successful. Right now, other councils around the country, especially in areas of overcrowding or high land values, but with valuable heritage and neighbourhood amenities, may wish to facilitate similar additions to planning rules to encourage such organic increases in housing space and improvements in streets. However, such officers and councillors might face a substantial burden of risk and potential blame if they were to spearhead such efforts.

We hope that local authorities will learn from the innovative South Tottenham example and apply best practice in other appropriate cases. However this will often be very difficult for them to do under the present system, requiring huge input from officers and members. The changes in Haringey were facilitated by unique features of the neighbourhood, including the presence of a tight-knit community suffering severe overcrowding but

6. https://www.haringey.gov.uk/sites/haringeygovuk/files/final_draft_soto_dc_consultation_report_appxs_june_2013.pdf
7. https://www.haringey.gov.uk/sites/haringeygovuk/files/house_ext_s_tottenham_revised_spd_consult_draft_comp_july_2013.pdf

lacking the option of moving elsewhere. Where these circumstances are lacking, this may be more difficult.

Therefore, this paper suggests some frameworks to help such forward thinking planning officers and planning departments to replicate the enormous success of South Tottenham, where appropriate, and with a range of checks to assure that quality is guaranteed and local preferences are respected. This is only one possible approach, and there may well be other practicable, or even superior mechanisms. But we should start to pilot policies like this, to discover what works in this area.

Suggested update to policy:

1. Individual streets or clusters of streets should be able to collectively request that the local planning authority produce for them a design code for upward extensions as a supplementary planning document. That request must contain witnessed signatures from at least two-thirds of the residents registered on the electoral roll with addresses on each street making the application at the time the request is submitted. If they wish to proceed with such a request, LPAs should have the right to charge a fee that reflects the time and effort necessary to produce high-quality work of this type.[8] That fee could be set initially based on an estimate of the cost of the time invested into the SPD by officers in South Tottenham.
    a. Locals would also have the option to produce their own code, which would go to the LPA for approval.[9] They may choose to write it entirely anew or adapt an existing code from a public database to be maintained by the Office for Place, subject to agreement with the holder of copyright of that existing code. They may also (on payment of a fee) seek the comments and support of Historic England, in the same way that Historic England advises as part of a local plan. If the LPA rejects their proposed code and Historic England supports it, legislation should provide an appeal to the Planning Inspectorate. In general, the LPA will know best.
    b. Each adopted design code must be provided in machine-readable format to the Office for Place, with contact details for the rightsholder and, if desired, terms on which copyright consent will be granted for re-use. The Office for Place which will put those details into a publicly available database to build a store of learning on how to solve these problems in different contexts, and to allow the spreading of planning and design coding best practice around the country. Use of such codes will remain subject to copyright, although no design code may be adopted as policy unless the rightsholder has granted copyright consent for construction on that street according to that code, subject to payment of a fee set by the rightsholder at no more than a maximum set by the Office for Place.

8. Legal provision should be made for this via existing pre-planning application advice services.
9. The NPPF or the National Design Guide and National Model Design Code should be amended to permit this.

2. At least initially, any application of this proposal should completely exclude all conservation areas and nationally or locally listed buildings, including their curtilage. The Government may in future wish to consider ways in which a version of this policy might be extended to conservation areas, but it will be necessary to build a firm and consistent practice of reliable enhancement of historic streets before further change in any conservation areas should be considered.

3. Evidence requirements set by central government can dramatically increase the cost of any change in policy, hamstringing important efforts by planners and the communities they represent. In this case, the policy would by definition improve the key goals of tackling overcrowding and lack of living space, so there is no need for each council team to prove and assess this individually. The key issue is maintaining standards of amenity: therefore the only evidence base required for adoption of the design code should be rectified unobstructed photographs of all the affected facades.[10] This would make it easy to verify that the design code is in fact in sympathy with existing buildings in the affected area. Statutory provision should relieve councils of all other considerations and central government requirements relating to adoption of the code as an SPD.

4. Residents could then apply to extend their houses in the normal way, with confidence that compliant applications will meet with success. The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) should provide for a strong presumption of approval for applications that conform with the design code save where there is a fundamental conflict with local planning policy, other than on matters solely related to appearance (which will have been resolved by local agreement at the design code stage). The NPPF should set standards on overlooking and loss of light to be applied in such cases. The Government should ensure that the fees for householder extensions in such cases properly reflect the amount of local authority work involved.

5. All codes under the system should have two key characteristics:
    a. Codes should be precise, visual and numerical, rather than relying on vague abstract language. The intention here is not to provide advice for sophisticated conservation architects meditating an artistic response to the existing building: it is to provide completely explicit rules that can be readily followed by every builder, and that guarantee a good standard if they are respected. Discretionary planning permission for bespoke approaches will of course continue to be available through the existing system.
    b. They should permit extensions that emulate the style of the existing building with respect to their outward appearance, as in South Tottenham. Contrasting modern extensions may of course be considered through the existing planning system, but the kind of broader changes considered here need to preserve the stylistic character of the existing neighbourhood if they are to maintain legitimacy in the long run. There is never likely to be a durable coalition of support behind adding glass boxes to Victorian houses.

10. https://www.buildingconservation.com/articles/rectified/rectified.htm

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