

News

£1BN RAID ON SUBURBS TO BOOST LABOUR HEARTLANDS

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SUBURBS have been drained of taxpayers' cash in favour of inner cities in Labour heartlands, it was claimed yesterday.

The outer town areas have become maligned and unfashionable while money is pumped into urban schools, hospitals and transport, according to a report.

Political leaders of suburban boroughs said they had been stripped of £1 billion a year which has been redirected to poorer and less productive areas.

As a result roads, railways, schools and hospitals in residential and middle class districts have suffered compared with those in areas that have the politicians' attention.

Yet an estimated 84 per cent of the population lives in suburbs and small towns.

The report follows years of protests from South East council chiefs over the 'deprivation' measures introduced by then Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott five years ago.

These mean Treasury cash is transferred from richer parts of the country to those said by Labour to need more help. The result has been higher council tax bills and less help for suburban districts.

Many of the areas that have benefited, objectors say, tend to vote Labour.

Yesterday Mike Freer, Conservative leader of **Barnet council**, one of the local authorities involved in production of the report, said: 'We would like to see more of the money the suburbs pay in tax going back to them. This is a non-political approach - there are suburbs led by all political parties.'

'The success of the suburbs is vital to the success of the country, yet they are treated as if they are just commuter housing blocks.'

'Tax money has been sent to the city centres because they are considered deprived, but the balance against the suburbs has gone too far.'

'We accept there will be an element of equalisation, but that has now become unequalisation.'

Yesterday's report, written jointly with the local government think tanks the Leadership Centre for Local Government and the Local Futures Group, names 30 typical suburbs that beat city centres and country districts for the quality of life and the economic dynamism they offer. They include Bromley, Richmond and Redbridge in London, as well as Stockport, Bromsgrove and Solihull.

The report found that they are home to a greater proportion of people from ethnic minorities than many supposedly diverse and vibrant city centres.

The findings run counter to the prevailing political wisdom which insists suburbs are in decline. Eight years ago an influential inquiry declared that many suburbs do not have a 'sustainable lifestyle' and called for flats and cheaper housing to be built amid the detached houses and gardens.

But the new 'State of the Suburbs' report said that suburb dwellers are better educated and better off than others. They enjoy better health, more stable families and are generating new businesses faster. They experience less crime than those who live in cities.

It said what the suburbs need is not rebuilding but more cash to provide transport links, school and hospitals to match those of the towns and cities that have been benefiting hugely from Government

spending since Gordon Brown became Chancellor in 1997.

The report said: 'Suburbs are pleasant places to live and have attracted and continue to attract residents who believe they offer a high quality of life for them and their families.'

'As a result, suburbs in general are relatively prosperous.'

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