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Townscapes

Social infrastructure and the development of new towns: learning from history

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Executive summary

In July 2024, the Labour Government announced its plans to deliver the next generation of new towns. This makes the government the latest in a long line of British governments of various political persuasions that have returned to the idea of new towns, starting with Clement Attlee's Labour Government, which initiated the most famous new town programme in 1946. By the early 1970s, 32 new towns had been designated in the UK, which are now home to over two and a half million people. But these new towns consisted of far more than just houses. Social infrastructure – the physical spaces in which regular interactions are facilitated between and within communities – was critical. This report explores what the government can learn from Britain's post-war New Towns programme to ensure the successful delivery and long-term maintenance of social infrastructure in new towns.

First, **a range of social infrastructure should be provided from the early stages of development**. In the post-war new towns, the delivery of community facilities was often slow, though residents were quick to adapt and make use of alternative spaces. Today, however, social infrastructure and the necessary transport infrastructure required to enable it are still too often provided too late, if at all, in new developments, with negative impacts on residents.

Second, **cross-sector collaboration, particularly between the public and private sectors, is crucial to the provision of social infrastructure**. In Britain's post-war new towns, some of the most successful privately-owned social infrastructure, notably pubs, were the result of close cooperation between the relevant stakeholders. Other spaces, such as shops and restaurants, were slower to emerge, though in the long-term, many towns developed flourishing retail and leisure facilities.

Third, **community participation and community ownership are key to the delivery and long-term management of social infrastructure**. Fostering a sense of community and accounting for the long-term management of social infrastructure present two significant challenges for those creating new towns. However, the experiences of new towns over the last 70 years suggest that community involvement in planning and governance and the community stewardship of assets generate a sense of belonging while ensuring social infrastructure is safeguarded for the community in the long-term.

As these lessons show, projects of such ambition and scale as the post-war New Towns programme inevitably involve some initial teething problems. However, in the long-term, these new towns have been widely regarded as successful. That said, some steps can be taken to minimise the challenges involved in delivering and maintaining social infrastructure in new towns. Drawing on the successes and difficulties of Britain's post-war new towns, we identify a number of recommendations for central and local government to ensure the delivery and long-term management of social infrastructure in the next generation of new towns.

Recommendations for central government

While the on-the-ground delivery of new towns is likely to be largely the responsibility of local government and private developers, central government still has a key role to play in the provision of social infrastructure in the new towns. To facilitate the early and successful delivery of social infrastructure, central government should:

1. **Guarantee sufficient, long-term, upfront investment in infrastructure, including social infrastructure**

To ensure an adequate standard of core infrastructure is provided from the earliest occupation of the new towns, long-term and upfront government investment is needed not just in traditional infrastructure, such as transport, but also in those social facilities and services that are crucial to the functioning of community life.

Recommendations for local government

Although the capacity of local government to create and maintain social infrastructure has significantly diminished in recent years, they nevertheless have a crucial role to play in convening stakeholders and ensuring that the needs of existing and future residents are prioritised in the delivery and management of the new towns. Therefore, local authorities should:

1. **Engage with the private sector and provide incentives for businesses to move to the new towns**

Although some private sector social infrastructure will inevitably take time to develop, local government should bring together relevant stakeholders to aid collaboration and reduce the risk of private investment in new amenities and services to accelerate the provision of social infrastructure.

2. **Meaningfully engage existing and new residents in planning**

Community engagement in planning contributes to a sense of belonging among residents and is critical to the creation of social infrastructure that is sustainable and tailored to local needs. Therefore, from the outset of a development, local authorities should engage with the community, such as by working with community organisations to run engagement sessions with residents.

3. **Provide flexible social infrastructure that can adapt to the needs of the community**

With a new town, there will inevitably be uncertainty around the needs of incoming residents. Local authorities should provide multi-purpose, flexible spaces and encourage meanwhile use to enable residents to shape their social infrastructure and tailor spaces to evolving local needs. This would facilitate a community-led and responsive approach to the provision of social infrastructure.

4. **Adopt a community stewardship approach to social infrastructure**

Community stewardship can be mutually beneficial for local communities, local authorities, and private developers. Local authorities should therefore establish a community stewardship framework from the outset of a development. They should also use their financial and policy levers to build community capacity to ensure new communities have the skills and knowledge to take on social infrastructure once it is constructed.

Introduction

On 31 July 2024, the new Labour Government announced its plans to construct "the next generation of new towns". Inspired by the post-war New Towns programme, the government is seeking to deliver a number of settlements of at least 10,000 homes that are "well-connected, well-designed, sustainable and attractive places where people want to live". The government has also announced the establishment of the New Towns Taskforce chaired by the former BBC chairman Sir Michael Lyons, which will spend 12 months assembling a shortlist of potential sites for these new towns. While the Taskforce will "work in partnership with local leaders and communities wherever possible", it is notable that the selection of sites "will be made in the national interest".[1]

This makes the current government the latest in a long line of British governments of various political persuasions that have returned to the idea of new towns, starting with Clement Attlee's Labour Government, which initiated the most famous New Towns programme in 1946. Subsequent new towns were designated under both Conservative and Labour governments from the mid-1950s until the early-1970s, totalling 32 in England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland between 1946 and 1970.[2] With the start of the new millennium came another wave of initiatives, including New Labour's short-lived Ecotowns programme and the Coalition Government's Garden Cities programme, though none of the proposals for new settlements within these programmes matched the scale or ambition of the post-war new towns.[3]

While housebuilding will inevitably be the priority, the current government has acknowledged that their next generation of new towns will also require "all the infrastructure, amenities and services necessary to sustain thriving communities". Alongside more traditional types of infrastructure, such as roads, water, and energy, social infrastructure is crucial to the successful creation of these communities. This report lays out what we can learn about the delivery and maintenance of social infrastructure from the experience of Britain's post-war new towns and identifies three key messages for the current Labour government: a range of social infrastructure must be provided in the early stages of new towns; the government should work with the private sector to deliver social infrastructure; and an approach that foregrounds community engagement and stewardship of assets should be adopted to foster a sense of community and maintain social infrastructure in the long-term.

Social infrastructure in new communities

The government's plans to construct new towns are part of a long history of planned communities, both in the UK and internationally, that date back millennia. Throughout history, new towns have always included forms of what we now term 'social infrastructure' – those physical spaces in which regular interactions are facilitated between and within communities – though historical actors would not have conceptualised these assets in such a way.[4] Although these social spaces varied depending on the historical context, there are some that have been common to a large number of planned communities in Europe and North America, whether in the medieval period, colonial era, or modern day. These include commercial spaces (such as shops and marketplaces), places of worship, and public meeting and administrative buildings. From the 19th century, new villages and towns began to be built with health, educational, and cultural facilities like concert halls and theatres, all of which were associated with a particular belief held by those planning and constructing these new communities in the moral uplift and social progress of their inhabitants.

The reasons for providing these spaces were diverse. Many industrialists in the 19th and early 20th centuries, who built new settlements known as "model villages" (or "company towns" in the US) to house their workers, tried to improve morale and undermine the attractiveness of labour activism through the provision of amenities.[5] Others sought to shape the character of their employees by including or excluding particular assets, for instance by

1. Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government. (2024) *Policy statement on new towns*, 31 July.
2. Cullingworth, B. and Nadin, V. (2006) *Town and Country Planning in the UK*. London: Routledge.
3. Mike's Best Laid Plans. (2024) *A New Career in a New Town*; Town and Country Planning Association (TCPA). (2021) *A New Future for New Towns: Lessons from the TCPA New Towns Network*.
4. Kelsey, T. and Kenny, M. (2021) *Townscapes: The Value of Social Infrastructure*. Bennett Institute for Public Policy.
5. Cherry, G. (1996) *Town planning in Britain since 1900: the rise and fall of the planning ideal*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers; Crawford, M. (1995) *Building the workingman's paradise: the design of American company towns*. London: Verso.

banning pubs and instead building community halls and other recreational facilities to provide alternative activities to drinking.[6] Some industrialists took a genuine interest in the welfare of their employees and tried to improve their health and wellbeing by constructing spaces such as playing fields and health clinics.[7] More recently, state efforts in the UK, including the National Health Service's (NHS) Healthy New Towns programme from 2015, have similarly sought to use the design of settlements and provision of social infrastructure to improve the health and wellbeing of incoming residents.[8]

Social infrastructure has also been constructed to attract residents and buyers to new towns. For example, in 17th-century Philadelphia, William Penn sought to make the emerging town attractive to investors by providing public open spaces and public institutions.[9] In the late 20th century, too, private developers in the United States increasingly began to recognise the financial benefits of including recreational and community facilities in new towns and villages and thus began to invest heavily in public spaces from the outset to provide the settlements with a marketing edge over those nearby that lacked similar amenities.[10]

Britain's post-war new towns

At the end of World War Two, politicians and planners in the UK increasingly began to see new towns as a solution to the poor housing conditions and overcrowding in major cities, which had been exacerbated by the destruction caused by Nazi bombing; as many as one million homes had been destroyed or damaged by enemy action.[11] At the same time, Britain's wartime experience had demonstrated the possibilities of significant state intervention in the economy. By the end of the war, there was a general political consensus that the state should take an active and extensive role in urban planning.[12] When the Labour Party came to power with a large majority in July 1945, therefore, it was not only committed to the nationalisation of industry and the establishment of a welfare state, but also to a far greater role for the government in urban planning.

In October 1945, the Minister of Town and Country Planning, Lewis Silkin, established the New Towns Committee, appointing the former Director General of the BBC, Lord John Reith, as Chairman. The Committee's aim was "to consider the general questions of development, organisation and administration that will arise in the promotion of New Towns… [and] to suggest guiding principles on which such Towns should be developed as self-contained and balanced communities for work and living".[13] The Committee thus began a comprehensive study of new towns, considering all aspects from religion to landscaping to recreation and consulting a range of experts, businesses, and organisations.[14] They even visited Sweden to observe the housing schemes, social amenities, and recreational facilities, which were considered to be "far ahead" of those in other countries.[15] They also launched a public consultation through radio broadcasts in January 1946, requesting feedback via letters or through an official questionnaire, and to which they received a large volume of responses.[16]

By the end of its nine-month lifespan, the Committee had written two interim publications and a final report, which sought to "provide ideas and guidance for those who will have the responsibility of creating new towns". In it, the Committee made a series of recommendations, including

6. Casciani, D. (2003) 'Is this the nicest place to live in Britain?', *BBC News*, 9 July; Patowary, K. (2017) 'The Model Villages of Britain', *Amusing Planet*, 11 July; Reynolds, T. and Dawson, V. (2011) *Iron Will Cleveland-Cliffs and the Mining of Iron Ore, 1847-2006*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.
7. Historic England. (2017) *From Factory to Fireside: 6 Marvellous Model Villages*; Crawford, *Building the workingman's paradise.*
8. National Health Service. (2019) *Putting Health Into Place: Executive Summary.*
9. Foglesong, R. (2014) *Planning the Capitalist City: The Colonial Era to the 1920s*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press
10. Garvin, A. (2011) 'New Towns in the United States', in Peiser, R. and Forsyth, A. (eds.) *New Towns for the Twenty-First Century: A Guide to Planned Communities Worldwide*. Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, pp. 59-87.
11. Alexander, A. (2009) *Britain's new towns: garden cities to sustainable communities*. London: Routledge.
12. Cherry, *Town planning in Britain since 1900.*
13. *Terms of Government Announcement* (1945). HLG 84/1 Constitution, terms of reference, etc. New Town Committee (Reith Committee): Minutes, Papers and Reports. The National Archives, London, UK.
14. Organisations consulted included the Arts Council of Great Britain and the National Federation of Women's Institutes. Osborn, F. and Whittick, A. (1963) *The new towns: the answers to Megalopolis*. London: L. Hill.
15. See HLG 84/4 Representations and offers of evidence. New Town Committee (Reith Committee): Minutes, Papers and Reports.
16. See HLG 84/17 Town and Country Planning broadcast by Mrs Monica Felton: replies from public to questions posed. New Town Committee (Reith Committee): Minutes, Papers and Reports.

the ideal size of the settlements (between 30,000 and 50,000 inhabitants), the model layout for neighbourhoods, and the principle of separating pedestrians from traffic.[17] The Committee also proposed that a government-appointed public agency – a New Town Development Corporation – should be created to deliver each new town, which would then govern the settlement for a minimum of 25 years.[18]

The recommendations of the New Towns Committee were enshrined in the New Towns Act (1946), which, along with the Town and Country Planning Act (1947), created the machinery for the construction of the new towns. Within five years, sites had been designated in 14 locations, such as Stevenage, Hatfield, Harlow, Basildon, and Glenrothes in Scotland. Further acts of Parliament, in particular the New Towns Act (1965), resulted in an additional 14 new towns being designated in Britain by the early 1970s, including the largest and most famous – Milton Keynes.[19]

Crucially, the New Towns Act (1946) set the framework for how the new towns would be delivered, setting in legislation the New Town Development Corporations (NTDCs). Each town had its own NTDC, which was given extensive powers, such as compulsory purchase order powers, to acquire, own, and manage large amounts of land sufficient to build an entire town. They were also able to undertake development, whether that be houses, commercial buildings, or factories, and to employ full-time officers and construction workers.[20] Each NTDC was managed by a board appointed by central government and was financed by fixed-rate interest loans from HM Treasury, though later sources of income also included selling land and rental income. Initiated during a favourable economic climate of low interest rates and relatively low inflation, the earlier NTDCs were economically successful, so much so that they became net lenders to other bodies. The later NTDCs struggled, however, as interest rates and inflation soared and the property market stagnated, resulting in growing financial deficits in the 1970s. It was at this time, too, that private housing developers began to play a much greater role in the construction of the new towns, though the NTDCs were nevertheless still central to the overall delivery.[21]

But to what extent were the post-war new towns successful? There is mixed evidence regarding the experience of living and working in new towns. Some argue that "New Towns are still not regarded as favourable places to live", pointing to the deteriorating infrastructure, bland physical design, and baked-in car dependence.[22] A House of Commons Select Committee report (2002) noted the inadequate provision of community facilities and widespread safety concerns that have arisen as a result of poor natural surveillance. Other observers, however, insist that these new towns are "rather good places to work and to live", providing residents with higher living standards and fostering local economic development. Two prominent academics, Peter Hall and Colin Ward, even concluded that the programme was "perhaps the greatest single creation of planned urbanism ever undertaken anywhere".[23] Testament to their success is their significant population: today, over two and a half million people live in urban areas constructed virtually from scratch in the post-war period.[24]

Structure

Britain's post-war new towns have been recognised as a rich source of transferable lessons regarding large-scale planned urban growth, both because of their many successes as well as their teething problems. While previous reports, such as those produced by the House of Commons and the Department for Communities and Local Government, have examined the general delivery of the new towns, particularly in relation to housebuilding, this

17. Crouch, W. and Bigger, R. (1950) 'Metropolitan Decentralization: Britain's New Towns Program', *The Western Political Quarterly*, 3(2), pp. 244-261.
18. Clapson, M. (2017) 'The English New Towns since 1946', *Histoire Urbaine*, 50(3), pp. 93-111.
19. Clapson, 'The English New Towns since 1946'.
20. TCPA. *Building Successful New Communities*; Osborn and Whittick. *The new towns*; Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG). (2006) *Transferable Lessons from the New Towns.*
21. DCLG. *Transferable Lessons from the New Towns*; TCPA. (2016) *Celebrating 70 years of the New Towns Act.*
22. Karimi, K. and Vaughan, L. (2014) 'An evidence-based approach to designing new cities: the English New Towns revisited' in Carmona, M. (ed.). *Explorations in Urban Design: An Urban Design Research Primer.* London: Routledge, pp. 261-274; Forsyth, A. (2019) 'The British new towns: lessons for the world from the new-town experiment', *Town Planning Review*, 90(3), pp. 238-247.
23. Hall, P. (2014) *Cities of Tomorrow: An Intellectual History of Urban Planning and Design Since 1880.* Newark: John Wiley & Sons; Hall, P. and Ward, C. (2014) *Sociable Cities: The 21st-Century Reinvention of the Garden City.* London: Routledge.
24. TCPA, *Building Successful New Communities.*

report specifically explores the delivery and management of social infrastructure.[25]

The research we have undertaken has led us to draw three key lessons from both the difficulties and achievements of the post-war new towns.

First, **a range of social infrastructure must be provided in the early stages of development**. Although the New Towns Committee recognised the need for community facilities from the outset, the delivery of these spaces was often slow, though residents were quick to adapt and make use of alternative spaces. Today, however, there are still too many examples of insufficient social infrastructure being provided in new developments, with a detrimental impact on new and existing residents alike.

Second, **the government should work with the private sector to deliver social infrastructure in new towns**. While social infrastructure is often seen as the sole responsibility of the public sector and civil society, the private sector also has a key role to play. Using their extensive powers, the NTDCs encouraged businesses to settle in the new towns, but these often took time to emerge apart from in cases where there was close collaboration between the public sector and private enterprises.

Third, **community participation in the governance of places and stewardship of assets is crucial to the creation of a sense of community and to the long-term management of social infrastructure**. Fostering a sense of community and belonging in planned settlements can pose a significant problem for those constructing new towns. At the same time, the long-term stewardship of social infrastructure has proved challenging in new towns, particularly as local authorities have become increasingly unwilling to take on these spaces in recent years. Community participation in planning and governance and community stewardship of assets presents a solution to these two issues.

The final section of the report brings these three lessons together, identifying some recommendations for both national and local government to ensure the delivery and long-term maintenance of a range of social infrastructure in the next generation of new towns.

25. Select Committee on Transport, Local Government, and the Regions. (2002) *Nineteenth Report: The New Towns: their problems and their future.* House of Commons; DCLG. *Transferable Lessons from the New Towns.*

Figure 1. Timeline of the New Towns programme

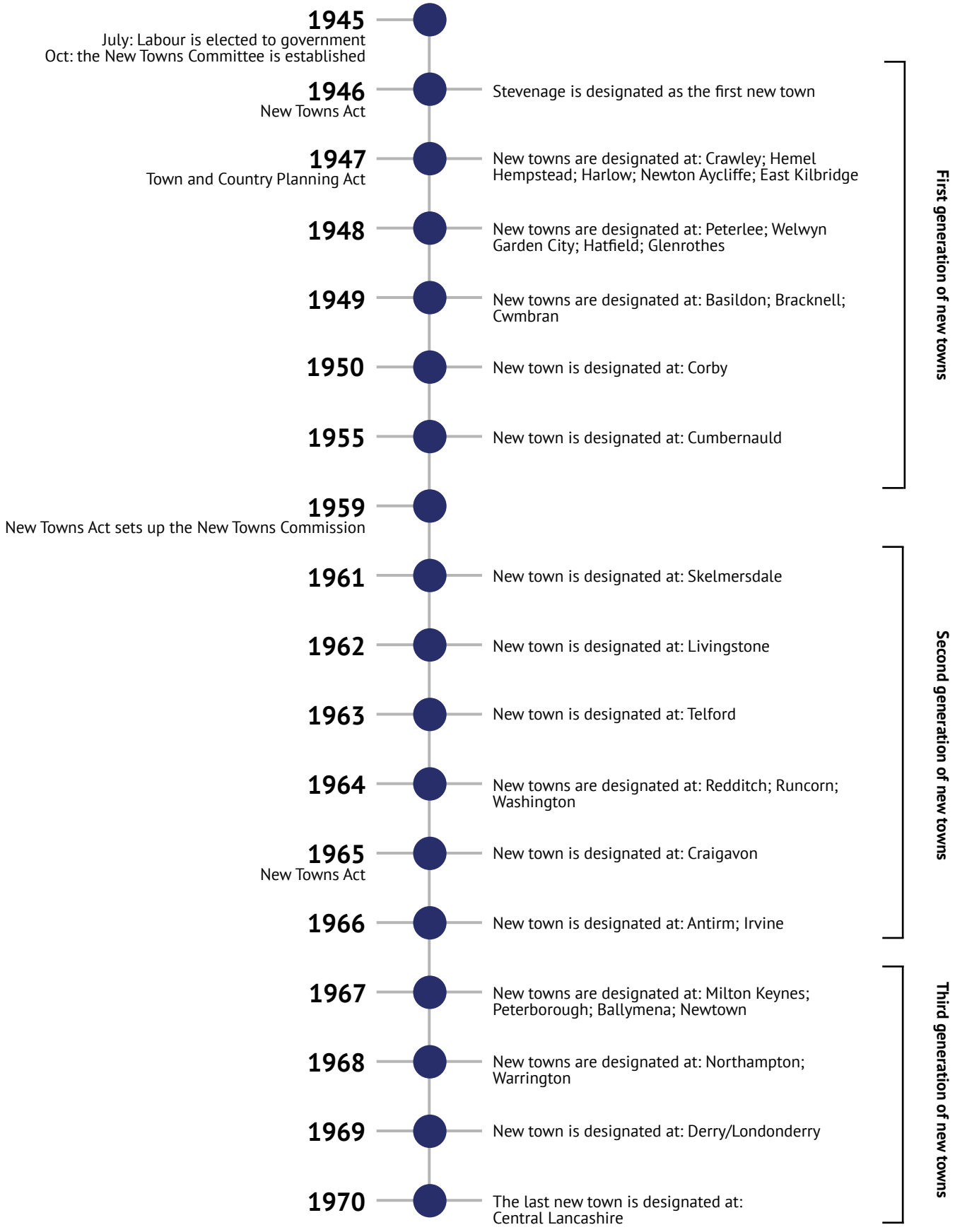
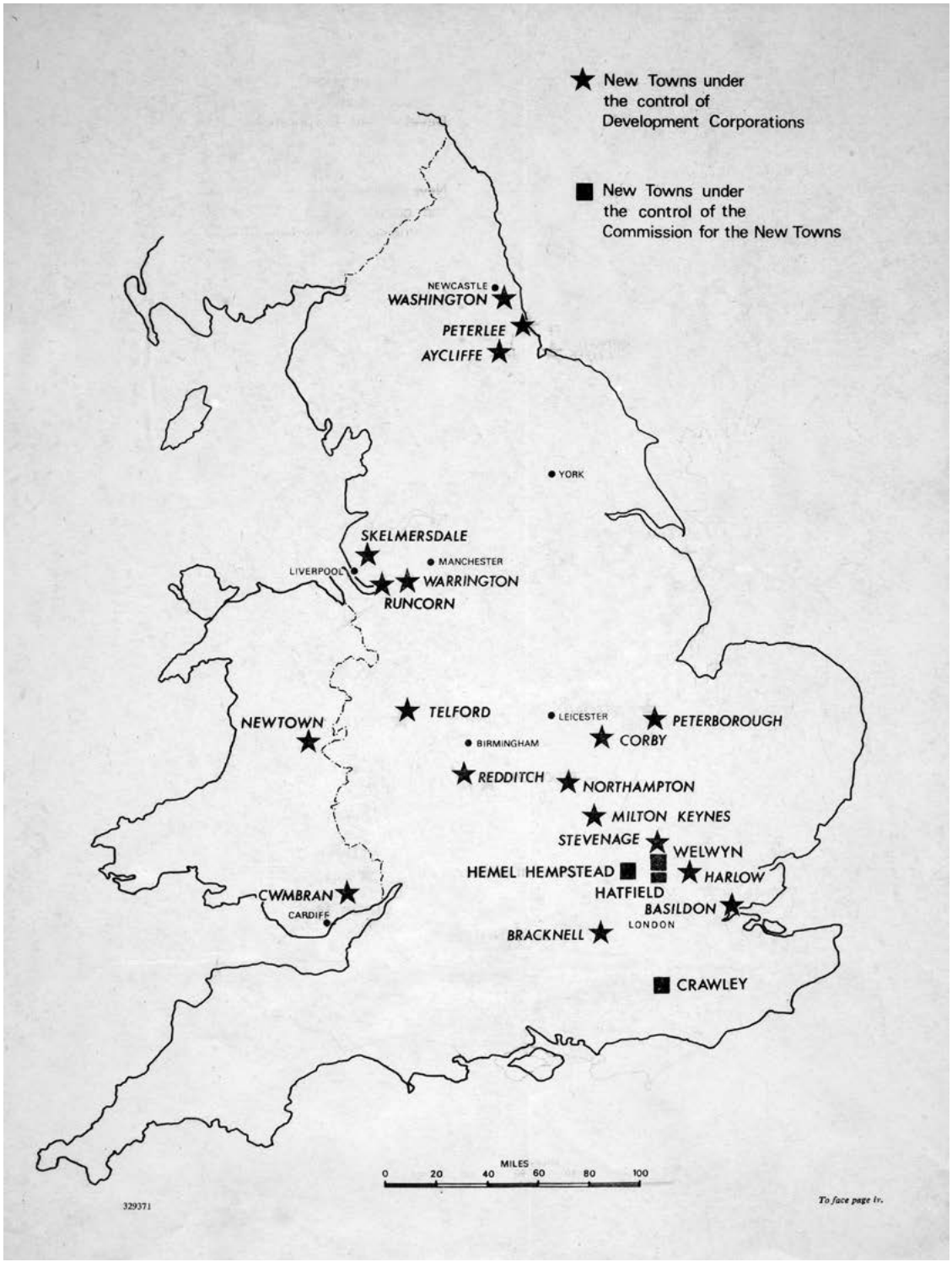


Figure 2. Map of location and control of new towns in England and Wales (1969)
The Commission for the New Towns and Successors. FJ 3/88, National Archives, London, UK.



1. The timing of social infrastructure

The New Towns Committee recommended that a wide range of community spaces, amenities, and services should be provided in the early stages of development but this social infrastructure was slow to develop in practice. Nevertheless, residents proved inventive, utilising and creating spaces available to them to foster social connections with others. The slow delivery of social spaces and the necessary accompanying infrastructure, notably public transport, is still an issue in new settlements today, however, presenting a key obstacle to further development. Following on from our previous research, we suggest that a minimum threshold of a range of infrastructure – what we call universal basic infrastructure – should be provided in new towns to ensure that new communities are self-sustaining and all residents have access to the facilities and services they need.

The recommendations of the New Towns Committee

Rather than "merely dormitories", Clement Attlee's Labour Government wanted to create self-sufficient towns, an idea that drew on the Garden City Movement that emerged around the turn of the 20th century.[26] The New Towns Committee was therefore tasked with proposing "guiding principles" for the establishment of "self-contained and balanced communities". This, the Committee concluded, would require the provision of a range of employment opportunities, housing, amenities, and cultural facilities that would both attract people from diverse backgrounds and enable residents to undertake their day-to-day activities.[27]

The Committee explored a wide range of issues as part of their consideration of this principle. Letters, memorandums, and notes from meetings reveal that the Committee took a particular interest in the provision of what we now consider to be social infrastructure: shops, pubs, parks, religious spaces, healthcare services and the like. From its extensive research, the Committee concluded that community facilities and amenities should be provided from the earliest days of the new town. They proposed that "[i]n the early construction period a food shop, general store, and restaurant-canteen will be essential. As the first residents arrive there must be some shopping facilities for day to day needs".[28] A multi-purpose meeting place with several rooms, "capable of being used for a variety of purposes", from dances and church services to society meetings and classrooms, was also "essential" in the early stages of development. The Committee noted, too, that "it is important to plan ahead" for other amenities and services in order "to reserve sites for all that will ultimately be required."[29] It therefore recommended that educational services, healthcare facilities, parks, and other spaces should be accounted for in the plans for the new towns to guarantee their establishment later down the line.

Social infrastructure in reality

The impact of these attempts to create "self-contained" communities varied. The new towns did avoid becoming "soulless dormitories" and many residents did find work in their local area; in Milton Keynes, over 80 per cent of workers found local employment.[30] Within several years, most of the towns had a post office, local government offices, many pubs, and extensive open space and outdoor sports facilities. Some also had concert halls and theatres.[31]

However, in most of the new towns, the provision of spaces for cultural, recreational, or social activities lagged significantly behind their growing populations.[32] Studies from the 1960s examining resident satisfaction in the first wave of new towns concluded that although most participants were content with their lives, they also complained about the lack of entertainment, urban amenities, community facilities, and the public transport required to access such spaces.[33] In Stevenage, for example, there was a "grave shortage of social facilities", according to

26. Historic England. (2016) *A Brief Introduction to Garden Cities.*
27. New Towns Committee. (1946) *Final Report.* London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1946. Available in HLG 84/21 Final Report: drafts, etc. New Town Committee (Reith Committee): Minutes, Papers and Reports.
28. New Towns Committee. *Final Report*, p. 34.
29. New Towns Committee. *Final Report*, p. 34.
30. Clapson. 'The English New Towns since 1946'.
31. Osborn and Whittick. *The new towns.*
32. DCLG. *Transferable Lessons from the New Towns*; Vaughan, L. (2014) 'Urban renewal needs more than "garden city" stamp to take root', *The Conversation*, 15 May.
33. Marans, R. and Xu, Y. (2021) 'Quality of Life in New Towns: What Do We Know, and What Do We Need to Know?' in Peiser, R. and Forsyth, A. (eds.) *New Towns for the Twenty-First Century: A Guide to Planned Communities Worldwide.* Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, pp. 43-58.

Donne Buck, a resident who remembered some newcomers even moving back to London due to the lack of amenities.[34] Another contemporary observer, Brian Foster, noted that "every space we found was full… it gave us the sense that maybe more things would happen if there was simply more public space… there was a clear sense that there wasn't enough public space for people to meet."[35] While Buck attributed the lack of social space to the development corporation's prioritisation of housing, Foster criticised the "paternalistic" and "top down" planning system, which meant that "the way the town was designed didn't keep up with where people were at".[36]

In Basildon, too, there was "a serious lack of premises for social activities" in the early days. Five years after its designation as a new town in January 1949, there were only two small temporary community halls for a population of around 30,000. This worried the development corporation, who stated in a 1954 report:

> "In fact, there is no building at all in the designated area (except schools) of 5,000 sq. ft. which is the minimum required for such social purposes as dances and other entertainments. The need for community halls is perhaps greater in Basildon than in any other new towns, for our designated area contains an existing population, proportionate to the area, larger than of any other."[37]

Nevertheless, new residents proved resilient and made do with the resources available to them. Numerous associations and clubs were established – more so than in older urban areas – and homes or privately-owned public spaces were used to host them. In Hatfield, the local pub served as the local community centre in the early 1960s, hosting a programme of events, such as film screenings, making money through the room hire fee and beer sales.[38] Some residents even constructed social spaces themselves. In Basildon, all three community halls built by 1955 – the third was constructed that year – were done so predominantly through voluntary labour, highlighting how needed they were. The first large permanent community centre was only completed in 1960.[39]

New communities in the twenty-first century

Following their seminal research into the post-war new towns in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Frederic Osborn and Arnold Whittick concluded that "there should not be too great a lag in providing those social, cultural and recreational facilities which add so much to the interest and pleasantness of life; otherwise some discontent is inevitable".[40] It seems, however, that we have not learned from their observation, despite the government itself recognising in a 2006 report that social facilities should be built before the occupation of new settlements.[41] There are still too many examples today of the facilities and services required to meet the needs of new and existing residents being delivered too slowly, if at all. Like the post-war period, this may be in part due to an overemphasis on housing while town centres and amenities are left until the later phases of development or not considered at all.[42]

Perhaps the best example of this is in Northstowe, a development of 10,000 homes in Cambridgeshire. Despite over 1,000 homes being occupied in 2023 – many since 2017 – there was still no café, pub, shop, or healthcare services, which were only planned for the second stage of development. Residents therefore had to travel to neighbouring villages to access basic facilities and services. A 2023 survey by Cambridgeshire County Council revealed that over 75 per cent of residents who responded were "fairly" or "very" dissatisfied with local services.[43]

The lack of adequate social infrastructure adversely affects resident satisfaction, wellbeing, and community cohesion

34. Donne Buck in Talking New Towns. *Oral histories of Hatfield, Hemel Hempstead, Stevenage and Welwyn Garden City.*
35. Brian Foster in Talking New Towns. *Oral histories of Hatfield, Hemel Hempstead, Stevenage and Welwyn Garden City.*
36. Buck and Foster in Talking New Towns. *Oral histories of Hatfield, Hemel Hempstead, Stevenage and Welwyn Garden City.*
37. Basildon Development Corporation's Report (1954) quoted in Osborn and Whittick. *The new towns.*
38. Donald Hodson in Talking New Towns. *Oral histories of Hatfield, Hemel Hempstead, Stevenage and Welwyn Garden City.*
39. Osborn and Whittick. *The new towns.*
40. Osborn and Whittick. *The new towns.*
41. DCLG. *Transferable Lessons from the New Towns.*
42. Lambert, R. (2022) *Creating new town centres in new communities.* Town and Country Planning Association Silverman, R. and Clark, A. (2023) '"A lot of people are quite angry": Life in a town with 10,000 new homes and little else', *The Telegraph*, 5 August.
43. Schofield, B. (2023) 'Northstowe: The broken-promise new town built "with no heart"', *BBC News*, 11 July; Silverman and Clark. '"A lot of people are quite angry"'.

as well as creating frustration among newcomers at developers and local government for failing to deliver what was promised at the planning stage. It can also generate dissatisfaction among established residents due to the increased pressure on local services. In Ebbsfleet Garden City, a 15,000-home development under construction, both existing and new residents feel that local services are struggling and need far greater investment to account for the growing population.[44] Similarly in Frome in Somerset, new developments have "put a strain" on the "health centre, dentists and schools" leaving the community feeling "cheated", according to one local resident. At the same time, there are no buses to the new estates and no bridge across the river, meaning new residents have to journey outside of the estate by foot to access the nearest train station. It is no wonder that increased pressure on social infrastructure and other services is a key reason for local opposition and likely to increase 'NIMBY-ism' (not in my backyard), a significant and controversial obstacle to new development.[45]

As the experience of Frome demonstrates, it is not just social infrastructure that must be in place in the earliest stages of a development. Transport infrastructure is also crucial. For what is the point of providing social infrastructure if it is not physically accessible to residents? Yet recent research covering over 100 urban extensions and greenfield developments found that public transport was not a priority in the planning stages. Many new housing sites were chosen without considering transportation needs and some roads were even constructed too narrowly for buses to use. The researchers contrasted the situation with the Netherlands, where public transport is understood to be a critical part of new housing developments, considered extensively during planning, and allocated significant funding for its delivery.[46]

New towns require a range of infrastructure – what we term 'universal basic infrastructure' – from the early stages of development. This concept, which we recommended in our previous research as a means of addressing spatial inequality, proposes a minimum threshold of infrastructure in every place to promote inclusivity and equal opportunities as well as to foster economic growth.

Figure 3. First houses of Northstowe
Keith Edkins. Licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0.

With universal basic infrastructure, everyone, regardless of location, is assured a minimum standard of infrastructure, from internet connectivity to healthcare.[47] The provision of universal basic infrastructure in new developments would ensure comprehensive accessibility to a range of infrastructure required for sustainable and successful new communities.

44. Silverman and Clark. '"A lot of people are quite angry"'.
45. Dalton, J. (2024) 'Housing developers accused of failing to deliver vital infrastructure, from GP surgeries to green spaces', *The Independent*, 31 March.
46. Transport for New Homes. (2018) *Transport for New Homes: Project Summary and Recommendations*.
47. Coyle, D., Erker, S., and Westwood, A. (2023) *Townscapes: A Universal Basic Infrastructure for the UK*. Bennett Institute for Public Policy.

2. Working with the private sector

Social infrastructure is typically understood to be the exclusive responsibility of the public sector and civil society. The term often refers to those publicly or community-owned spaces that are designed to bring people together and create a sense of community, such as village halls, youth centres, or libraries. But, as our previous research has shown, people socialise in a far greater range of places, including many that are privately-owned, such as restaurants and supermarkets, and rarely distinguish between spaces that are privately- or publicly-owned. The private sector therefore plays a key role in the provision of social infrastructure.[48]

This was no different for planned communities in the past. Take Sunflower Village, a new settlement in Kansas built in the United States by the federal government in 1944 to house ammunition workers during World War Two and the Korean War. Here, interactions between neighbours were facilitated by two commercial buildings composed of private businesses, some of which were open 24 hours. These included a bowling alley, diner, theatre, and "Teen Town" social hall for young people. The centrality of these businesses to the community was mentioned in almost every interview undertaken by the historian Chris Post with the village's former residents, leading Post to conclude, "[people had to go to these businesses for various necessities, and gradually a social environment evolved there."[49]

The New Towns Committee and the private sector

The New Towns Committee recognised the importance of the private sector in making the new settlements "self-contained". The private sector would provide employment as well as the spaces required for residents to carry out their daily activities. Shops, in particular, were a large focus for the Committee as a source of employment, recreation, and "civic pride".[50] They sought to identify a way to "ensure that a good shopping service is available to all inhabitants; and, at the outset, how to secure quickly a service adequately covering the main class of goods". They therefore investigated the number of shops needed, their ideal size and design, and appropriate leasing policies.[51]

As has been mentioned, the Committee recommended that shops and other privately-owned spaces like restaurants should be encouraged from the earliest stages of development and proposed particular leasing policies that would aid the establishment of businesses. For privately-owned and run public buildings, such as meeting rooms, they suggested that the public agencies responsible for the development of the new towns should "arrange a peppercorn ground rent during the unprofitable period, or even for a time to guarantee a proportion of the revenue".[52] For shops, the Committee recommended that the public agencies build them themselves and "lease them at progressive rents which would be fairly related to the turnover due to the growth in population… The rental value of a shop does not depend on its capital cost, but is the annual sum which a trade would find it worth while to pay… This of course depends on the situation, population served, and number of competing shops".[53] This would enable the establishment of a range of businesses that would otherwise be unable to take the significant risk of moving to a new settlement with a small population

Working with the private sector in new towns

The New Town Development Corporations (NTDCs) did encourage private enterprise in the new towns. The New Towns Act (1946) gave them considerable powers to subsidise companies investing in the new towns and, like the Committee suggested, they often offered special deals, such as rent-free periods, to attract retailers and other businesses.[54] The NTDCs also sometimes worked in close collaboration with the private sector. Most notably, there was particularly good cooperation between the NTDCs, licensing authorities, and private brewers, resulting in the widespread, successful establishment of pubs in the new towns, which often served as important community meeting places, such as in Hatfield.[55]

48. Zia, N. et al. (2023) *Community perceptions of social infrastructure.* British Academy; Marks, R., Craig, J., and Garling, O. (2024) *Private space, public good: working together to deliver social infrastructure.* Bennett Institute for Public Policy and Power to Change.
49. Post, C. (2008) 'Modifying sense of place in a federal company town: Sunflower Village, Kansas, 1942 to 1959', *Journal of Cultural Geography*, 25(2), pp. 137-159.
50. New Towns Committee. *Final Report*, p. 32.
51. New Towns Committee Shops Group. (1945) *Retail Shops in New Towns*, 6 November. Available in HLG 84/3 Representations and Offers of Evidence. New Town Committee (Reith Committee): Minutes, Papers and Reports.
52. New Towns Committee. *Final Report*, p. 43.
53. New Towns Committee. *Final Report*, p. 32.
54. Clapson. 'The English New Towns since 1946'; DCLG. *Transferable Lessons from the New Towns.*
55. Osborn and Whittick. *The new towns.*

In general, however, much privately-owned social infrastructure was only "gradually" provided.[56] Even 13 years after being designated a new town in 1947 and with a population of 54,000, Harlow's evening life consisted of just one restaurant, some pubs, and a cinema, which had only recently been established by a company that had taken many years to be convinced of the commercial opportunities of establishing a branch in the town. According to one journalist in 1960, residents frequently complained that they wanted "a decent dance-hall, a Marks and Spencer's, a C&A, and a good bus service".[57]

In France, where post-war planners similarly sought to achieve the self-containment of their new towns, the government seemed to have more success in establishing a wide range of recreational and shopping facilities in the new towns around Paris. As one observer commented in the late 1970s, just a few years after the start of their construction, "the new towns are achieving considerable success with regard to the provision of retail facilities".[58] In France, the Etablissement Public d'Amenagement, the development corporation for each new town, worked closely with private developers when creating public facilities to promote the integration of different services and spaces. Libraries, youth centres, galleries and other facilities provided by the public sector were therefore integrated with privately-owned amenities, such as cinemas and cafés.[59]

Shops in Britain's new towns

Much like many other privately-owned spaces, shops were slow to develop, despite the preoccupation of the New Towns Committee, leaving residents struggling to access basic retail facilities. Barbara Metcalf, a newcomer to Stevenage, remembered feeling "slightly cut off because the nearest shops were about a mile away and to get there you walked on a road that went through an estate which was being built… and there were only about six shops when you got there".[60] With limited or non-existent public transport, the long walk to the shops was even more difficult for the large proportion of households with small children. As a new resident of Hatfield later recounted, "you had to walk right down to Hatfield with a pram because you hadn't got a bus service" to the larger shops.[61]

In response to the lack of retailers in residential areas in the early years of the new towns, some businesses set up travelling shops. In Stevenage, Mrs Nunn remembered that although "there was no town centre" nor any "shops to get your food and everything" in the early days of the town, there were vehicles that "used to come round with food".[62] Though these travelling salesmen tended to charge more than ordinary shops, they often served as a lifeline for new residents. Lawrence Guard, a travelling grocer in Stevenage was later called "the first social security officer in Stevenage" by a local resident: "the idea was you paid it up at the end of the week… quite a lot of people didn't and perhaps left two or three weeks before he got his money, but the fact is he kept a lot of families ticking over."[63]

In Hatfield, the development corporation came up with an alternative short-term solution to the lack of shops in response to pressure from the local community. In 1956, new residents in Hilltop only had limited access to shops and the town centre was still "fairly rudimentary" according to former resident, Donald Hodson, despite a large number of households having already moved in. This "didn't go down well with people… particularly those who had small children". Rather than build shops, the development corporation, whose "priority was the supply of housing," designated five houses on a small cul-de-sac as provisional shops. "They put those aside and they offered them to businessmen who would take them on as temporary shops with the agreement that when the permanent shops became available, they would have first refusal", Hodson recalled. The row included two grocers, a newsagent, a greengrocer, a butcher, and later, a chemist.[64] Though this example does demonstrate the difficulties involved in providing private sector social infrastructure,

56. Osborn and Whittick. *The new towns.*
57. Furlong, M. (1960) 'Harlow: New Town', *The Spectator*, 30 September.
58. Rubenstein, J. (1978) *The French New Towns.* Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.
59. Rubenstein. *The French New Towns.*
60. Barbara Metcalf in Talking New Towns. *Oral histories of Hatfield, Hemel Hempstead, Stevenage and Welwyn Garden City.*
61. Anonymous respondent in Talking New Towns. *Oral histories of Hatfield, Hemel Hempstead, Stevenage and Welwyn Garden City.*
62. Mrs Nunn in Talking New Towns. *Oral histories of Hatfield, Hemel Hempstead, Stevenage and Welwyn Garden City.*
63. Mr Udell in Talking New Towns. *Oral histories of Hatfield, Hemel Hempstead, Stevenage and Welwyn Garden City.*
64. Donald Hodson in Talking New Towns. *Oral histories of Hatfield, Hemel Hempstead, Stevenage and Welwyn Garden City.*

it also reveals the creativity and flexibility required when building a new town.

Despite the challenges in the short-term, however, many towns later developed retail, recreational, and leisure facilities that flourished in the long-term. Milton Keynes became a regional centre for shopping, drawing customers from Oxford, Bedford, and even London.[65] In the early years, many businesses were reluctant to establish branches in towns with a small customer base, despite the efforts of the NTDCs, but this became less of an issue as the towns grew. Today, therefore, there is certainly an important role for the government in convening stakeholders and reducing the risk of investment in new amenities and services to accelerate their provision.

Figure 4: Shops and Christmas decorations in Milton Keynes shopping centre - 2018
Richard Humphrey. Licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0.

65. Edwards, M. (2001) 'City design: what went wrong at Milton Keynes', *Journal of Urban Design*, 6(1), pp. 73-82.

3. Meaningful community participation

Fostering a sense of community and belonging can pose a significant problem for those constructing new towns. At the same time, too little consideration has been paid to the long-term management of social infrastructure. The experience of the post-war new towns and the approaches adopted for planned communities today suggest that community involvement in the planning and governance of new settlements and community stewardship of social infrastructure may be a potential solution to these ostensibly separate problems.

The long-term management of social infrastructure

The long-term ownership and maintenance of social infrastructure has too often been an afterthought both in existing urban areas and new settlements, including the post-war new towns. As a House of Commons Select Committee report found in 2002, many new towns have underused and tired town centres, inadequate community facilities, and poorly designed and unsafe public and green spaces.[66]

This is in part due to the failure to embed long-term stewardship of assets into these new towns. While delivering the new towns, the New Town Development Corporations (NTDCs) acquired and created valuable assets in the form of land and property, over which it had short-term ownership. When the first generation of NTDCs in England were dissolved in the 1960s and 1970s, their rented housing was transferred to local authorities while other assets (and their rental income) were handed over to the Commission for New Towns, a national agency established to manage these residual assets. In the 1980s, the New Towns programme came to an abrupt halt as the Conservative Government pushed for the dissolution of all NTDCs and instructed the Commission for New Towns to sell its existing land and property. This quick-fire sale of assets "proved to be a chronic shortcoming" of the New Towns programme as it prevented the new towns from retaining the means to look after the community facilities that the development corporations had provided.[67] In Stevenage, for example, the former leader of the borough council dated the decline of the town centre and community facilities to 1980, when the NTDC was wound up and many town centre buildings were privatised, meaning the local authority was unable to undertake the regeneration projects the area needed.[68]

As the Town and Country Planning Association has noted, there were some important exceptions to this experience. In Milton Keynes, a handful of local not-for-profit organisations were established to take on and maintain some significant assets when the development corporation was dissolved, including the Milton Keynes Community Foundation and the Parks Trust, which is self-financing and responsible for the care of the city's 6,000 acres of green space.[69]

Today, the maintenance and management of social infrastructure is still too rarely considered in the early stages of development, yet it is arguably an even more important issue now than in the past. In recent years, cash-strapped local authorities, who historically took on social infrastructure to own and manage, have become increasingly unwilling to do so and have therefore become more reliant on private management companies. This has resulted in inadequately maintained public spaces, poor customer service, and unduly expensive, unregulated charges for residents.[70] In the newly developed village of Cranbrook, outside Exeter, for example, the council admitted that they "should have considered the stewardship of the town earlier" as the original management company they used for public amenities turned out to be deeply unpopular with residents.[71]

Fostering a sense of community

The long-term stewardship of assets is not the only obstacle to creating a successful new town. Fostering a sense of community and belonging has also been a continual challenge, particularly in the post-war era, which saw the emergence of a new expression, the New Town Blues.[72]

66. Select Committee on Transport, Local Government, and the Regions. *Nineteenth Report.*
67. TCPA. *Celebrating 70 years of the New Towns Act*; Karimi and Vaughan. 'An evidence-based approach to designing new cities'.
68. Halford, J. (2016) 'Stevenage: The town that aimed for Utopia', *BBC News*, 11 November.
69. Community Foundation. *About Us*; The Parks Trust. *The Parks Trust Milton Keynes*; TCPA. *A New Future for New Towns.*
70. Competition & Markets Authority. (2024) *Housebuilding market study: Final report.*
71. Lambert, R. (2022) *Lessons from Cranbrook – 10 years on.* Town and Country Planning Association.
72. DCLG. *Transferable Lessons from the New Towns.*

The term, which was first recorded by the Oxford English Dictionary in the Britannica Book of the Year in 1962, was "used to describe the dissatisfied, discontented condition of people from large cities who found the recreational amenities of the new towns inadequate".[73]

However, the evidence suggests that "the grim diagnoses" of New Town Blues "were misleading". In the UK, families that moved to the new towns tended to settle in quite happily and joined groups and societies in much greater numbers than older settlements.[74] A number of reasons have been suggested for this, from the physical design of planned communities to the homogeneity of the population, which may have enabled community cohesion to emerge through common interests and shared values rather than physical proximity.[75] Indeed, the newcomers to the post-war new towns were predominantly white and working-class up until the 1960s, in part because of the Industrial Selection Scheme, which offered employment and housing to workers willing to move from older cities to new towns.[76] There was also a large number of families, which may have facilitated social connection. As Barbara Metcalf from Stevenage recalled, "I felt really cut off in the beginning but the road… got filled up very quickly and everybody made friends with everybody else… partly because we all had the same problems, we'd all got small children… it was a very companionable street".[77]

But what should not be overlooked is the importance of community participation in planning and governance to the development of a sense of community and belonging. The best example of this is Sunflower Village in Kansas where United States federal officials established a village government for residents to collaborate with officials in decision-making and helped them to create a local newspaper. The federal government saw these institutions as a way to acclimatise new residents quickly to their new environment to ensure maximum efficiency at work during World War Two and they were relatively successful in their ambitions.[78]

In Britain's post-war new towns, although community involvement was limited, the NTDCs did take more steps to involve residents than local governments in existing towns, particularly from the 1960s. For example, they established neighbourhood councils and associations and hired Community Development Officers to promote participation in decision-making and planning.[79] These initiatives were accompanied by extensive efforts to build social networks and connections by the NTDCs, who recognised that their role was not just to provide jobs and housing but also to create a sense of community. Some employed research officers to examine the provision of social spaces and "arrival workers" to provide information and encourage social connection between newcomers. As one new resident to Hatfield later recalled, "there were great attempts to develop a community spirit. When we first came here the development corporation had a reception for us to meet the local dignitaries… And there were great efforts to establish groups".[80] Some NTDCs also had a dedicated "community chest" to fund small-scale community projects. As historian Mark Clapson argues, the higher levels of participation in local clubs and associations compared to older towns were in large part due to the efforts of the development corporations.[81]

Community cohesion and long-term stewardship – two problems with one solution?

In recent years, some places have pioneered alternative approaches to the management of assets that involve meaningful community participation and community ownership, which fosters a sense of community at the same time as providing a solution to the long-term stewardship of social infrastructure.

In the 5,000-home development of Chilmington Green in Kent, a community management approach to the operation of community assets has been adopted. This means that the community can influence the direction and ownership of Chilmington Management Organisation, which was

73. Oxford English Dictionary. *new town blues.*
74. Mark Clapson in Hall. *Cities of Tomorrow.*
75. Marans and Xu. 'Quality of Life in New Towns'.
76. Clapson. 'The English New Towns since 1946'.
77. Barbara Metcalf in Talking New Towns. *Oral histories of Hatfield, Hemel Hempstead, Stevenage and Welwyn Garden City.*
78. Post. 'Modifying sense of place in a federal company town'.
79. DCLG. *Transferable Lessons from the New Towns*; Clapson. 'The English New Towns since 1946'.
80. Gerald Model in Talking New Towns. *Oral histories of Hatfield, Hemel Hempstead, Stevenage and Welwyn Garden City.*
81. Clapson. 'The English New Towns since 1946'; DCLG. *Transferable Lessons from the New Towns.*

established before the occupation of the first homes in 2019 so that new residents could shape the direction of the organisation from the outset. With a sustainable and diverse income base, including an endowment of commercial property and a 10-year developer grant, the organisation has a range of roles from the operation and management of community assets to community development and engagement.[82] In Lightmoor Village in Telford, the Estate Management Committee enables residents to have a meaningful say in the evolution of the community and management of assets and services, which, according to the Town and Country Planning Association, has been key to the delivery of the new community.[83]

But the ability of local communities to shape their area and participate in the governance of assets significantly depends on their capacity. As Jane Wills' research into neighbourhood planning has found, communities with existing organisations, civic leaders, and local institutions have a much greater ability to engage with the public and private sectors and take action around planning than those with weak civic capacity.[84] Supporting new communities to grow their capacity, whether that involves strengthening skills or building confidence, is therefore crucial to enable them to take on the stewardship of assets and shape their area's future.

This could be done by funding local organisations to build capacity within the community, such as in the case of Sherford, a new town outside of Plymouth. Here, the councils and housebuilders involved in the development ensured the establishment of Sherford Community Land Trust with an endowment of one million pounds through a Section 106 (S106) agreement with the Sherford Consortium, a partnership between Vistry Group and Taylor Wimpey. This will enable the local community to take on public assets, such as the local medical centre and town hall, once they are constructed. The S106 agreement also earmarked funding to build community capacity to ensure that local residents, working with local social enterprise, the Real Ideas Organisation, have the knowledge and skills necessary to own and maintain Sherford's assets in the long-term. At the same time, these activities and governance arrangements have brought new residents together and given them a stake in their local area.

Figure 5. Photograph of Sherford
John Allen Photography for the Sherford Consortium.

82. TCPA. (2023) *New Communities Group Webinar: Governance and Stewardship in Large Scale Developments*; TCPA. (2018) *Building Successful New Communities: Lessons from the TCPA's New Communities Group.*
83. TCPA. *Building Successful New Communities*.
84. Wills, J. (2016) 'Emerging geographies of English localism: the case of neighbourhood planning', *Political Geography*, 53, pp. 43-53.

Recommendations

In an appearance on ITV's This Morning on 31 July 2024, Angela Rayner, the new Deputy Prime Minister and Secretary of State for Housing, Communities, and Local Government, emphasised the importance of infrastructure, particularly social infrastructure, in new developments:

> "People are not NIMBY for NIMBY reasons. They're saying, 'Well, hang on a minute, our roads are already congested, we can't get a GP appointment and now you want to build more houses here?' So, infrastructure is critical. And that's why our rules will make sure that we get that infrastructure as well, because I've heard what people have said on that: 'We need these homes but Ange we need the infrastructure in place as well. You can't just land us with 900 new homes without a new GP or a new school.'"[85]

As Rayner identifies, social infrastructure will be critical to the success of the next generation of new towns. Far more than just houses will need to be constructed to create new and sustainable communities. But delivering social infrastructure – and safeguarding it in the long-term – is easier said than done, as the experience of Britain's post-war new towns demonstrates.

However, projects of such ambition, innovation, and scale as the post-war New Towns programme inevitably involve teething problems, particularly in the short-term. Yet in the long-term, these new towns have been widely regarded as successful. While the New Town Development Corporations (NTDCs) struggled to provide public and private social infrastructure in the early stages of development, many retail centres and other leisure and recreational facilities flourished as the new towns progressed. In the meantime, a strong sense of community emerged as a result of the NTDCs as well as the new residents themselves, who utilised the spaces available to them for social connection in creative and unanticipated ways. It is therefore likely that social infrastructure in new settlements today, such as Ebbsfleet and Northstowe, will emerge in the long-term, although 'when' remains unclear.

Nevertheless, there are still steps that can be taken to minimise initial teething troubles and account for the long-term maintenance of social infrastructure in new towns. Drawing on both the successes and difficulties of Britain's post-war new towns, we identify a number of recommendations for central and local government to ensure the delivery and long-term management of a range of social infrastructure in the next generation of new towns.

Recommendations for central government

While the on-the-ground delivery of the new towns is likely to be largely the responsibility of local authorities and private developers, central government still has a key role to play in the provision of social infrastructure in the new towns. To facilitate the early and successful delivery of social infrastructure, central government should:

1. **Guarantee sufficient, long-term, upfront investment in infrastructure, including social infrastructure**

To be sustainable and successful, the new towns will require a range of infrastructure, or 'universal basic infrastructure'. Providing this would guarantee that new and existing residents alike have a minimum standard of infrastructure regardless of their location, therefore promoting inclusivity and equal opportunities as well as fostering economic growth. This would ensure that the social infrastructure provided is accessible; as the experience of Britain's post-war new towns shows, social infrastructure can only be used by communities if it is physically accessible.

To ensure an adequate standard of core infrastructure is provided from the earliest occupation of new towns, long-term and upfront government investment is essential. This investment should not just focus on traditional infrastructure, such as transport, water, and energy, but also on those social facilities and services that support community life, such as healthcare, education, community centres, and green space.

85. ITV. (2024) 'Angela Rayner on her determination to implement change', 31 July.

Recommendations for local government

Although the capacity of local authorities to create and maintain social infrastructure has significantly diminished in recent years, they nevertheless have a crucial role to play in bringing stakeholders together and ensuring an approach to the delivery of new towns that prioritises the needs of existing and future residents. Therefore, local authorities should:

1. **Engage with the private sector and provide incentives for businesses to move to the new towns**

As both the example of pubs in new towns (see page 16) and our previous research on privately-owned social infrastructure demonstrates, the successful delivery and maintenance of private sector social infrastructure – and social infrastructure more generally – requires cross-sector collaboration.[86] Harnessing their convening powers, local authorities should bring stakeholders together and encourage meaningful cooperation between the public and private sectors to ensure a coordinated approach to the provision and long-term maintenance of social infrastructure in new towns.

Moreover, as the New Towns Committee recognised, moving to a new town presents a significant risk to many private businesses. While today, private developers have a much greater role in the construction and ownership of commercial premises compared with the post-war period when the NTDCs were largely responsible and so had a greater capacity to subsidise private enterprise in the new towns, local authorities still have a part to play. Local authorities should encourage developers and owners of commercial space in new towns to provide incentives to businesses that serve as social infrastructure, such as rent-free periods and turnover-based leases.

Although some social infrastructure will inevitably take a long time to develop, by convening public, private, and community stakeholders as well as reducing the risk of private investment in new amenities and services, local government could accelerate their provision.

2. **Meaningfully engage existing and new residents in planning**

Meaningful, positive, and ongoing community engagement in planning – both before planning permission is obtained and during construction – is critical to the creation of social infrastructure that is sustainable and tailored to local needs as well as to the development of a sense of belonging among residents. Such an approach also offers myriad benefits for local authorities and private developers by increasing the likelihood of acquiring planning permission, improving the quality of the development, and leading to greater community support for the development thus reducing the chance of NIMBY-ism (not in my backyard).[87] It also provides local authorities and private developers with a far better understanding of what social infrastructure the existing and new community needs and how it can be maintained in the long-term. From the earliest possible stages of a new towns' development, therefore, local authorities and private developers should engage with the existing community, such as by working with trusted community organisations to run engagement sessions with residents.

3. **Provide flexible social infrastructure that can adapt to the needs of the community**

With the delivery of a new town, there will inevitably be some uncertainty around the needs of incoming residents. While this should not prevent local authorities from working with existing residents, they should also adopt other approaches to account for this uncertainty. For example, as the New Towns Committee proposed, flexible and multi-purpose spaces should be included in the new developments from the outset. This would allow a diverse cross-section of the community to use the spaces for a variety of activities and enable the spaces to evolve in response to the changing needs of the growing community. Given the long length of time that new settlements take to deliver, local authorities should also encourage the meanwhile use of empty space during the development process. Meanwhile use can help the public and private sector understand what social infrastructure is needed

86. Marks, R., Craig, J., and Garling, O. (2024) *Private space, public good: working together to deliver social infrastructure.* Bennett Institute for Public Policy and Power to Change
87. Harding, C. (2023) *Involving people in planning will help us build a better city.* Centre for London; Quality of Life Foundation. (2023) *A Quality of Life: Code of Practice.*

and offer a testing ground for new ideas, which can then be supported more permanently. In a new and growing community, meanwhile spaces can also provide new residents with opportunities to socialise in the early stages of the development before more permanent spaces have been constructed.

In Britain's post-war new towns, the new communities made use of the spaces available to them in creative ways unforeseen by the NTDCs. Together, meanwhile and flexible social spaces would support such an outcome but to a greater extent, offering new residents the ability to significantly shape their social infrastructure and tailor spaces to evolving local needs. This would guarantee a community-led, responsive rather than overly-structured, top-down approach to the provision of social infrastructure.

4. Adopt a community stewardship approach to social infrastructure

Community stewardship or ownership of social infrastructure in new towns can be mutually beneficial for local communities, local authorities, who are increasingly unable to take on assets, and private developers, enabling a smooth exit for those companies who do not want to take on the costly and complex responsibility of managing the spaces they construct. Community stewardship also means that spaces remain in the hands of those best placed to understand the needs of the local community and run the asset sustainably. At the same time, similar to community involvement in planning, community stewardship cultivates a sense of belonging by bringing new residents together and giving them a stake in their area. Local authorities should therefore work with developers to establish a community stewardship framework at the outset, as has happened in Chilmington Green (see page 19).[88] They should consider integrating such a framework with their community asset strategy or local growth plan.

However, the ability of communities to take on the ownership and stewardship of assets depends on their capacity. Local authorities should therefore use their financial and policy levers to build community capacity and ensure new communities have the skills and knowledge to take on social infrastructure once it is constructed. As occurred in Sherford (see page 20), for example, local authorities could use Section 106 agreements with developers to establish community land trusts, which enable communities to take on the ownership of assets, as well as fund community organisations to help local residents develop the skills necessary to manage and maintain social infrastructure in the long-term.

88. TCPA. *New Communities Group Webinar: Governance and Stewardship in Large Scale Developments.*

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