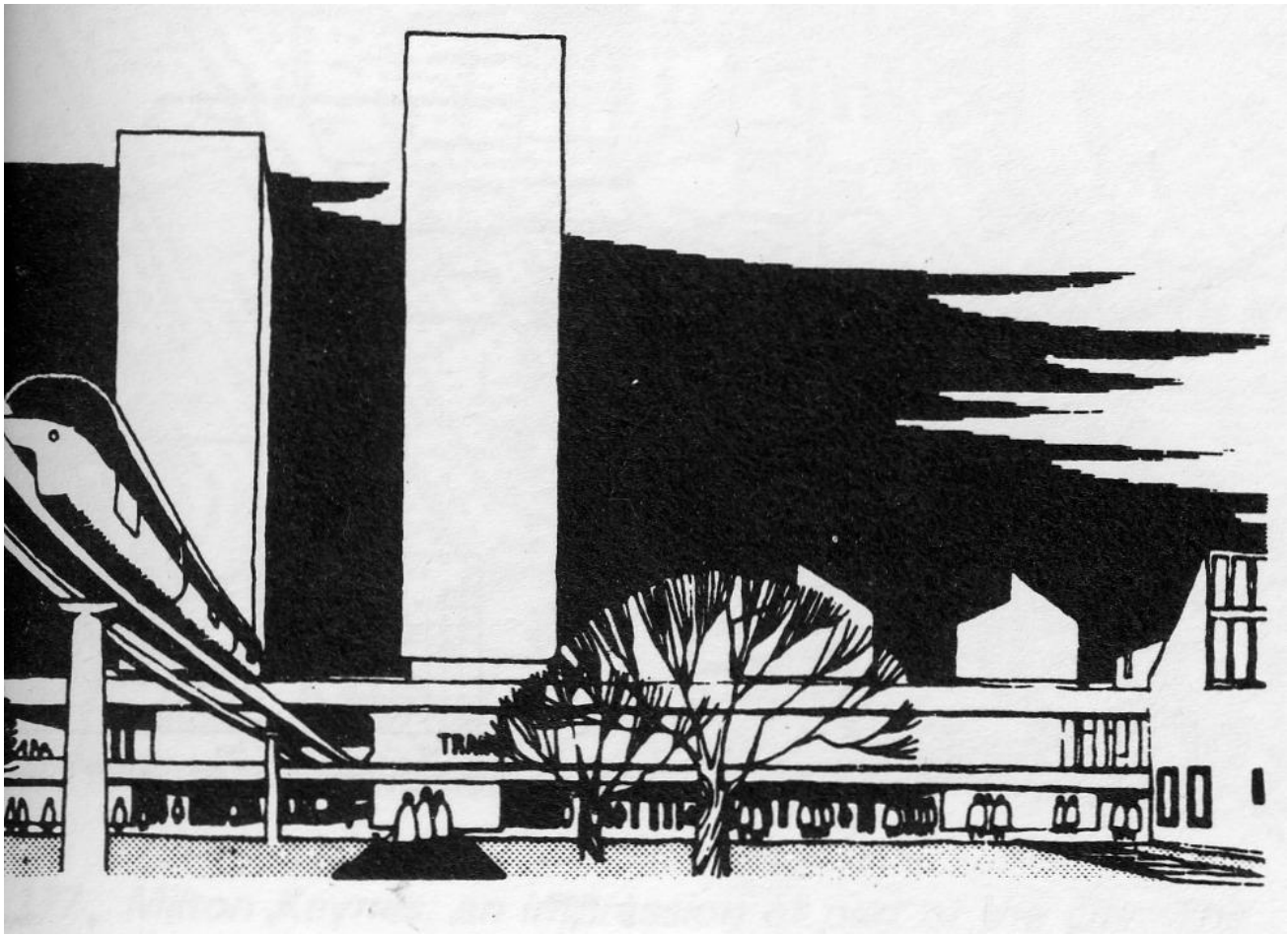
New towns -

slow, costly and destructive



“North Bucks New City”, c1962

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Smart Growth UK is an informal coalition of organisations and individuals who want to promote the Smart Growth approach to planning, transportation and communities. Smart Growth is an international movement dedicated to more sustainable approaches to these issues. In the UK it is based around a set of principles agreed by the organisations that support the Smart Growth UK coalition in 2013:-

- Urban areas work best when they are compact, with densities appropriate to local circumstances but generally significantly higher than low-density suburbia and avoiding high-rise. In addition to higher density, layouts are needed that prioritize walking, cycling and public transport so that they become the norm.
- We need to reduce our dependence on private motor vehicles by improving public transport, rail-based where possible, and concentrating development in urban areas.
- We should protect the countryside, farmland, natural beauty, open space, soil and biodiversity, avoiding urban sprawl and out-of-town development.
- We should protect and promote local distinctiveness and character and our heritage, respecting and making best use of historic buildings, street forms and settlement patterns.
- We should prioritize regeneration in urban areas and regions where it is needed, emphasising brownfield-first and promoting town centres with a healthy mix of facilities.
- Civic involvement and local economic activity improve the health of communities.

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Executive summary

The new interest: New towns are claimed to be a great success story, but history says otherwise. They certainly attract politicians and developers alike, mixing unrealised post-war optimism with the chance of big profits from subsidised greenfield sprawl. Rehashing falsehoods about them being the UK's most ambitious house building project and setting up a taskforce of enthusiasts is no substitute for the serious business of planning for the housing, social and environmental challenges that await us.

When is a "new town not a town? Most areas dubbed "new towns" are just extensions of existing towns or cities, big patches of land within them or expansions around one or more existing towns. Of 32 post-war new towns, only Aycliffe and Peterlee could plausibly claim to be entirely new, while most of the privately driven ones in recent times are simply dormitory suburbs.

Where they came from: The idea of new settlements has beguiled enthusiasts for 250 years and over 400 attempts have been made to create model villages, garden suburbs, garden cities, garden towns, garden villages. But it was post-war planning during World War II that gave impetus to the idea, although the post-war new towns programme proved expensive, slow and more than once was almost abandoned by central government, before it was progressively put out of its misery during the 1980s and 1990s.

Private fantasies – blobs of sprawl: Growth area policies and emphasis on private development in the 1980s saw the emergence of vast dormitory suburb proposals, few of which were realised. In the late 2000s came the "eco towns" scheme which yielded little, despite government subsidy, as most were just unsuccessful private schemes with the dust blown off. The "garden communities" scheme launched in 2016 produced dozens of private-led blobs of sprawl, some backed by the Government, some not, but all attempting to burnish greenfield developments with garden city idealism. But developers were able to use "viability" provisions to wriggle out of providing affordable housing or infrastructure and the Government was forced to allocate billions in subsidy. One of the biggest Government plans was the so-called "Oxford-Cambridge Arc", an ill-judged attempt to dump massive housing developments in some of our most productive, but water-challenged farmland.

The New Towns Taskforce: With a wholly impossible 1.5 million home building target by July 2029, the new government immediately launched a New Towns Taskforce which, rather than starting out with new ideas, instead repeated the "eco towns" and "garden communities" approach by asking developers for ideas.

The case against new towns: There are a range of reasons why pursuing new towns will not help meet housing aspirations but is likely to undermine sustainable development:

- They waste land on the grand scale by building at very low-densities on greenfield sites.

- Although supposed to "make good use of brownfield land", their reliance on private developers securing big rates of return ensures that sprawl will be their default setting
- Despite rhetoric about sustainable transport, most will be built at car-dependent locations lacking the networks of urban transit needed to avoid most journeys being made by unsustainable modes
- Inevitably, given the design, investment process, infrastructure and 100% new construction, they are the slowest way of providing homes and other development. Developers are likely to balk at the cost of such sizable developments.
- Largely or wholly new infrastructure ensures they are by far the costliest way of building major developments and developers will demand central government provides billions in subsidy at a time of financial restraint.
- Greenfield development destroys the many ecosystem services countryside provides and thanks to air, noise and light pollution, while disturbance spreads over vast areas. We can't afford to lose the food and water supply, flood control and drainage, support for nature and the intangible benefits that countryside provides.
- Communities and their elected representatives are being edged out of having any say in the planning process, exactly the approach followed with post-war new towns. New towns are likely to stir up vigorous protests.

Land values: Once again, new towns are set to highlight successive governments' failure to tackle the issue of "hope value" and the difficulties in preventing huge speculative profits by land owners.

We recommend the Government reconsiders its current policies and excludes new towns from its planning and housing strategies.

1. Introduction – the new interest

Have new towns been an amazing success story? History says otherwise.

It's clear from their history since World War II that new towns are the slowest, costliest and most environmentally destructive way of building houses and employment space in a small and densely occupied country, yet the 2024 General Election demonstrated once again this destructive myth's power to entrance politicians.

The Labour manifesto, *Change*, promised "a new generation of new towns" alongside urban extensions and regeneration projects – "part of a series of large-scale new communities across England" and "inspired by the proud legacy of the 1945 Labour government" and part of highly optimistic plans to build 1.5 million homes in five years. The Conservatives promised urban development corporations and threatened a 320,000 annual new homes target plus the "Cambridge 2050" plan despite a "cast-iron commitment to protect the green belt" while the Liberal Democrats promised to build "10 new garden cities" as part of a 380,000 annual target.

New towns, therefore, blending Edwardian idealism with post-war optimism, retain their ability to beguile politicians and delight land speculators, developers and volume builders. While politicians admit the need to protect landscapes and food production and to avoid increasing greenhouse gas emissions, they are as immune as ever to the need for holistic policies that provide the homes we need where they're both needed and can be sustainably accommodated.

The Government elected in 2024 sank straight into a destructive blend of Old Labour myths about the value of planning new towns and neoliberal myths about planning being an obstacle to home building, As soon as it was elected, it set up a New Towns Taskforce to "deliver the next generation of new towns".

Having tied itself to an impossible target of building 1.5 million new homes by July 2029, the new Government has responded with a major assault on the planning system and a commitment to the sort of development which requires detailed and comprehensive planning – new towns.

2. When is a "new town" not a town?

So what is a "new town"? Those areas dubbed new towns have long included extensions of an existing town or city, a big patch of land within a city or even just multiple expansions around one or more existing towns (or even villages), as well as the free-standing blobs of urban sprawl normally associated with the term. Any big bit of predominantly residential development can be a new town, and while they may be "new", few are "towns".

Chambers Dictionary[1] defines a "town" as "an urban area bigger or less rural than a village, with some level of local government and defined boundaries". But the odd thing about most of the places which have acquired the term "new town" is that ever-fewer are discrete urban settlements separated from other urban areas by undeveloped land and fewer still are wholly new. Mostly they are just expansions of one or more existing settlements and recent times have seen few willing to dignify those blobs of suburban sprawl dumped in the countryside as "new towns" - though they may have the word "garden" somewhere in their publicity material.

Take "Aylesbury Garden Town", for instance, approved as one of the Government's first tranche of garden communities in 2016. Aylesbury's population had already tripled from under 30,000 in the 1960s and is now projected to increase substantially thanks to urban extensions to the south, east and north-west. But in no sense is this a new settlement as projected in the garden communities programme; it's just an existing town that's being expanded. Indeed, very few of those badged as "new towns" in the post-war programme of that name were actually new towns. Nearly all involved an existing small or large town. Telford, for instance, designated in 1968, took in the towns of Dawley and Wellington whose population was already 70,000 and quite a few already had significantly larger populations at the time they were designated.

Of the 32 post-war new towns, only Aycliffe and Peterlee could plausibly claim to be almost entirely new as only a few dozen people lived on the sites. Indeed, only five of the others could claim initial populations below 5,000: Glenrothes (1,150), Livingston (2,063), East Kilbride (2,500), Cumbernauld (3,500) and Harlow (4,500). Many of the other "new towns" were already a substantial town or towns at the time of their designation, including Peterborough (81,000), Warrington (124,000), Northampton (133,000) and Central Lancashire (235,000).

Nor are they always recognisably towns. Quite a few of those developed privately in recent times are little better than dormitory suburbs, with few facilities beyond roads and schools.

3. New towns – and where they came from

For more than 200 years, however, people promoting the idea would have at least expected something that could be described as a new town to be located away from existing development and also to be, for the most part, actually new.

Without plunging into too much European history, and ignoring the new but wholly insanitary towns of the early industrial revolution, most commentators would say the earliest examples of the idea in Britain were the handful of model villages of the late 18th and 19th century, where wealthy industrialists decided their workforce deserved, or necessitated, something better. Best known are probably Cromford, Saltaire and Port Sunlight, but there were others including Nenthead, Tremadog and Cresswell[2]. Then there were the villages created by aristocrats for their rural dependents, or the late-Victorian garden suburbs like Bedford Park, Calthorpe or Merton Park. One estimate[3] suggests there have been over 400 deliberately planned and created UK settlements down the years.

Without doubt, however, it was the work of Ebenezer Howard (1850-1928) who proposed "garden cities" that spurred the 20th century development of the new town. Howard's legacy is threefold: firstly, his concept of garden cities gave fresh impetus to the idea of new settlements, secondly, he was one of the Edwardian pioneers of the planning system and thirdly, his main passion was promoting a system of communitarian economics and governance which might have made our towns and cities better places - had they been widely adopted.

Letchworth

Howard's dream yielded just the two garden cities he helped found at Letchworth and Welwyn, though other proposals were legion. His main physical legacy, however, was the tidal wave of "garden suburbs" which have been the default development form since the Great War and remain popular to this day, especially with house builders who find them most profitable.

While his admirers deny Howard was a fan of low-densities, the garden city movement's density principles were actually set by Raymond Unwin (1863-1940) who decreed a "12 to the acre" as a *maximum* (around 30dph net). Essentially, garden suburbs consist of very low-density, car-dependent suburbia, mostly semi-detached or very small detached houses with few facilities, layouts that deter walking and cycling and poor public transport

By the 1930s, however, some were calling for larger new settlements and support came from influential figures like Neville Chamberlain who admired the garden city movement. Much impetus came from a series of government reports, started by Chamberlain, with the Barlow report on the distribution of industrial production (1940) welcomed by proponents of garden cities and new towns such as Frederic Osborn. His book, *New Towns After the War*[4], was originally published during the Great War but had failed to persuade, so it was republished in 1942 to take advantage of another war and became more influential.

Among the Barlow report's findings were criticisms of big cities – it argued that housing and public health were generally worse in cities and would be better in small towns, though even then this was far from universal and had mainly resulted from historical factors. It also argued that big cities would be more prone to enemy bombing.

The report spawned a crop of successors; the Scott report on land utilization in rural areas (1942) which did at least propose a planning system to protect farmland for food production, the Uthwatt report on compensation and betterment (1942) - an issue governments have struggled unsuccessfully with ever since - and Patrick Abercrombie's *Greater London Plan* (1945).

Abercrombie proposed a green belt around London and a ring of eight new towns beyond that, each of around 50,000 "overspill" people 35-60km from London, plus a further 600,000 people in expanded towns 50-80km from London. The argument, echoing Ebenezer Howard, was that these would be self-contained as they would be beyond the usual commuting range from the capital. It wasn't true then and certainly isn't today.

Other UK conurbations adopted similar plans.

BBC chairman Lord Reith, a garden city enthusiast, was appointed by the government to head a Committee for New Towns whose final report was published in 1946. It recommended new towns of 30,000-60,000 people, as Howard had suggested, though Howard's communitarian principles were nowhere to be seen; these were to be central government driven. The New Towns Act 1946 was rapidly passed and required that the Ministry of Town and Country Planning designate the new towns. It also stipulated that their construction and management be handled by an unelected development corporation.

4. Public dreams – the post-war new towns

Within the first four years of the New Towns Act, 14 new town sites were designated. Eight were outside London's green belt (Basildon, Bracknell, Crawley, Hatfield, Harlow, Hemel Hempstead, Stevenage and Welwyn Garden City), two in North East England (Aycliffe and Peterlee), one in south Wales (Cwmbran), two in central Scotland (East Kilbride and Glenrothes) and one at Corby in Northamptonshire.

Governments of the time thought they would provide most of the country's new housing, and that most of that would be municipal construction. Neither of these aspirations was realised, but the new towns were launched on the back of the wave of a post-war optimism and belief in better ways of doing things.

Harlow New Town

The new towns' progress in their first five years was extremely slow and even the flagship, Stevenage, had only had 10 homes built by the end of 1950[5]. The new Conservative government in 1951 considered scrapping the whole scheme; just 3,126 homes had been completed in all the new towns by the end of 1951 and the Treasury was complaining at the size of the public debts being run up[6]. In the end the programme was only kept on as ministers decided the sprawl around the eight London new towns would be less destructive than further overspill estates just outside London. Fresh new town proposals, including two in Cheshire, were dropped and the only one designated in that decade was Cumbernauld, in 1955.

In the early 1960s, the Government, however, ordered a further tranche of new towns at Runcorn, Skelmersdale, Livingston, Redditch and Washington and another New Towns Act was passed in 1965. A final crop of new towns covered Irvine in Scotland, Newtown in Wales, Milton Keynes, Peterborough, Northampton, Warrington, Dawley (renamed Telford), Central Lancashire and three in Northern Ireland at Craigavon, Antrim and Ballymena, and Londonderry. Finally, in 1973, Stonehouse in Scotland was designated.

Virtually none of these "new towns" were wholly new. Most involved plans for extensive sprawl around an existing town or towns. Some already had very substantial populations, including Northampton (133,000), Warrington (124,000) and Central Lancashire (235,000). Collectively, at the time of their designations, the 32 "new towns" were already home to 1,132,973 people.

Cumbernauld takes shape

Initial population targets for the 32 projects collectively aspired to raise this to 2.9 million, and subsequent revisions took this beyond 3.1 million. However, by 1991 when the programme ended, their combined population was just 2.5 million[7], and much of the growth in those areas (during a period of over 40 years in some cases) would doubtless have occurred even if they had not been designated.

In reality, as we've seen, most of the "new towns" were expansions of existing towns. But there were also expansions of existing towns under the Town Development Act 1952 which also aimed to turn (mostly) Londoners into "overspill". This involved several towns in southern England and began really slowly, with just 10,000 homes built in its first six years[8]. Indeed, by 1977 when the Greater London Council abandoned it, only 89,000 homes had been built in the 25 years of the scheme – about 3,500 a year. Though many towns were targeted, the only big town expansions from London overspill

under this scheme were Basingstoke and Swindon. Smaller but similar schemes operated around Glasgow which provided 9,000 homes by 1970, and Newcastle.

Meanwhile in the 1950s, several cities continued with schemes for satellite suburbs for overspill. Manchester had begun Wythenshawe (originally proposed as a garden city) before World War II and expanded it rapidly thereafter. London had Debden, Borehamwood, New Addington, Harold Hill etc., Liverpool had Speke and Kirkby, Glasgow had Drumchapel and Pollok[9] etc.. A few of these later acquired reputations as "outer estates" with social and economic problems during the 1980s.

The designated new towns were imposed by Whitehall, each with its own development corporation. These had a board, appointed by the minister, which was merely required to "consult" with the relevant local authorities on the appointments or any planning applications. Housing was provided by Whitehall's development corporations, rather than the expected local authorities. Many councils opposed imposition of a new town, but their responses were routinely ignored.

The 1946 Act left open what was to happen to new towns once the construction period was over. The Reith Committee expected them to be handed over to the local authorities involved but, in 1958, the Government created a new quango called the Commission for the New Towns to take them over instead. Local authorities protested in vain.

"This aroused a great deal of controversy, but there was an overwhelming reason for it," wrote Peter Hall[10]. "As Ebenezer Howard had prophesied, new town construction proved a very good investment for the community because of the new property values that were created, and it would seem inequitable to hand over these values to the local authority which happened to occupy the area. If the values belonged to the community, they belonged to the whole community."

How the "whole community" was supposed to enjoy these values other than through its elected council, which would perforce already have had to devote considerable resources to the development of the new town dumped on it, was unclear.

House building was slow in new towns (Newton Aycliffe)

The new towns were certainly a slow way of building homes. In their first four years, by the end of 1950, they had seen construction of just 20 homes - at Stevenage. Indeed, over the 41 years in which they were building houses, the 32 new towns saw around 700,000 homes built[11], an average of less than 16,000 a year and accounting for just 6% of all the 11,626,480 new homes built in that period. Nor had they achieved their population targets – collectively these totalled 2,239,000. By 1991, their collective population was just 1,402,000.

In the first phase of new towns everything, land, infrastructure, homes, other buildings, was supplied by the state despite the fact that, in the 1950s, public borrowing was an even higher percentage of GDP than it is now.

"From the outset, the Treasury was familiarly and properly querulous about the price of new towns, where house construction costs may have reasonably compared to those elsewhere, but involved high capital investment in the provision of infrastructure and new services," wrote[12] Strathclyde professor of urban and regional planning Urlan Wannop. "The Conservative government of the early 1950s concluded that heavy infrastructural investment in the first towns made it better to complete than to curtail them. Although the alternative of expanded towns was relatively cheap, it promised less return to the Treasury. Despite their high burden of initial investment costs, the new towns might yield long-term income. So further new towns were added to the programme in the 1960s, although substantial capacity for growth remained in those which were incomplete."

Milton Keynes housing, Netherfields 1974

All 12 of the new towns in England were still net borrowers by the mid-1960s once housing subsidies were discounted, though most had surpluses in their general revenue accounts.

"The hope, forlorn in the case of north-east new towns, was that rent and increased market values on disposal would repay not only construction costs but the cost of infrastructure and amenities," noted an account of the two in North East England[13]. "In consequence development corporations were financed on the basis of long-term

treasury loans from the Treasury, repayable over 60 years by the annuity method, with the interest rate fixed for the life time of the loan."

It's not hard to see why that model fell out of favour with governments once very different economic philosophies took root and financial crises followed.

But even analysis of the costs involved in building new towns and how that compared with development elsewhere proved controversial and the answers tended to reflect who was asking. The new towns in England and Wales also had difficulties in getting the help they needed across a range of Whitehall departments, though the Scottish towns had the simpler task of dealing with the Scottish Office.

As the decades passed and political fashions changed, the private sector began to take over a bigger proportion of the building involved, but there was still no move to return their assets to their local authorities and the Commission for the New Towns created under the 1959 Act continued to take them over when their development corporations were wound up.

"Its essential concern was to prevent the local authorities getting their hands on new town assets," wrote Stephen V Ward[14]. "Initially the Commission was fiercely opposed by Labour (though they did nothing when in office after 1964)."

The contempt for local communities and their elected representatives was evident throughout the new towns programme. Instead, they became vehicles for central government to advance the objectives of the time. In the 1950s it was basically "overspill" from the big cities, but in the 1960s, their role in industrial growth began to be stressed. In the 1970s, it was their ability to give people from the failing inner-cities a better life and in the 1980s, they were seen as vehicles to encourage home ownership, including via right-to-buy.

But while the early new towns may have moved into revenue surplus, none of the later generation could have done so without cancellation of large amounts of debt.

"The Commission for the New Towns assessed in 1993 that Government investment in the new towns had amounted to £4 billion whereas, since the start of the 1980s the Commission had realised £2 billion in asset sales and retained £1.7 billion's worth," wrote Professor Wannop[15]. "However, Sorensen's analysis[16] suggested that Government's total investment in the English new towns up to 1993 had been £7.6 billion but, after deducting returns to Government and the value of remaining assets, the net cost was around £3.3 billion."

But whether or not the new towns did represent good value for the investment made, that investment involved very substantial government borrowing. Nowadays the Treasury looks at the level of Government debt and frowns on borrowing for public investment, yet it seems willing to make a curious exception for this major subsidy to private developers.

Some of the new towns close to London did manage to run into profit towards the end of the lives of their development corporations, offering some prospect of helping the

repayment of the loans. But in poorer areas, like North East England, this was never a possibility[17].

Inevitably this model, rejected in the 1980s and 1990s and never revived, would rightly or wrongly, be politically unacceptable to central government today. If new towns, of any sort, are to be pursued, they would involve private investment - but that brings challenges of its own. Would the private sector be willing to finance the extensive infrastructure and services a new town, unlike a simple housing estate, requires when cheaper alternatives are available?

5. Private fantasies – eco towns, garden communities and other blobs of sprawl

The gradual shift in Governments' economic policy in the later 20th century, from reverence of the public sector to reverence of the private, was reflected too in the way new settlements were planned and, sometimes, delivered.

As we've seen, the cost of land acquisition, site preparation, infrastructure and public buildings in new towns has always been a major obstacle to their building. The Treasury has never wanted to add the cost to public borrowing and the private sector doesn't want to pay for it either. Nevertheless, the Conservative governments of the early 1970s, the 1980s and the 1990s saw a gradual end to the traditional new towns programme and increasingly put their faith in the private sector. Governments since 1997 have stuck with private delivery.

As a result, planning, over the past half century, especially in southern and eastern England, has been littered with attempts to get the private sector to lead on new settlements and to finance them.

South East England saw a number of growth areas emerge from regional planning in the 1960s and 1970s, including south Essex and "Area 8" around the Blackwater valley south-east of Reading. Out of these emerged South Woodham Ferrers in Essex and Lower Earley, on farmland between Reading and the M4. South Woodham Ferrers involved public land and procurement of infrastructure, but at Lower Earley the land was owned by a consortium of developers who paid for roads and some other infrastructure out of the proceeds, and provided land to the local authority for open space and schools. The cost of this was said to have taken up around 8% of the home sale prices but this was, of course, before planning guidance enshrined "viability" and developers' right to a 20% rate of return on capital, plus rights to reject paying for infrastructure if this weren't met. Some 6,000 houses were built in the 15 years after 1977 and the form of the development - very low-density with endless cul-de-sacs and poor facilities for active travel and public transport - was in accordance with the form developers always find most profitable on greenfield sites.

Lower Earley

Lower Earley and Government enthusiasm in the 1980s prompted formation of Consortium Developments Ltd by the private sector. It made four attempts to build relatively self-contained sprawl developments at "Tillingham Hall" in the Essex green belt, "Foxley Wood" in Hampshire, "Stone Bassett" in Oxfordshire and "Westmere" in

Cambridgeshire. At that stage the developers still hoped to provide infrastructure out of the proceeds. But they attracted fierce local opposition and powerful planning objections from their local authorities.

Tillingham Hall was rejected by an inquiry. Foxley Wood also attracted fierce local opposition; an effigy of environment secretary and private sector enthusiast Nicholas Ridley was burned in a local village square after he said he was minded to approve it. It too was rejected by an inquiry and by Ridley's successor, Chris Patten. Stone Bassett saw public clashes between Ridley and Michael Heseltine, in whose constituency it would have been built. Both it and Westmere were rejected on planning grounds by public inquiries, though the latter had won support from Cambridgeshire County Council which was as keen on sprawl then as it is now.

The other big private greenfield sprawl development of that era was Bradley Stoke in South Gloucestershire, essentially a northward urban extension of Bristol on to farmland. It became one of Europe's largest private housing developments in that period but for a long time struggled to establish itself as a town at all, more a vast dormitory suburb. Although planning began in the 1970s, building began in 1987 and it was soon hit by the early 1990s recession when, with properties impossible to sell and the only facility of any kind a Tesco supermarket, it became known as "Sadly Broke". Once again, the development pattern was the usual low-density, car-dependent mass of cul-de-sacs.

In the years that followed, most housing development was private sector and worked through the local plans system with smaller, though cumulatively vast, developments, particularly in areas of high demand. But more recently there have been co-ordinated attempts, encouraged and subsidised by central government, to get larger developments underway.

Eco towns: The "eco town" idea was launched by the Government in 2007. Officially, these were to be new settlements of 5-10,000 homes, "exemplar green developments" with high standards of sustainability, low-carbon technologies, good use of brownfield land and having strong public transport links. Garden city enthusiasts were involved and expressions of interest were sought for five, and later ten. In the event, 50 proposals rolled in, though most proved simply to be old, rejected, sprawl proposals. Initially, 15 were short-listed but these did not include the two which would have made good use of urban brownfield land with good public transport links. The vast majority were on remote, mostly or wholly greenfield, sites. A Government-appointed panel was highly critical of their lack of sustainability.

Millions of public money was spent to progress them, with a further £60m approved[18] in 2009 for infrastructure for 600 homes on just four sites plus a further £5m to develop new ideas. Demands for the highest sustainability standards in the new homes were scaled back and most of the schemes were withdrawn. In the end, the eco towns programme achieved very little actual building, though several of the proposed blobs of sprawl were to re-emerge later.

Garden towns and villages: The next attempt by Whitehall to promote such blobs was the "garden communities" initiative, launched in 2016 with a Government paper called *Locally Led Garden Villages, Towns and Cities*[19]. This proposed "garden villages" of 1,500-10,000 homes and "garden towns" of more than 10,000. Despite its name, and the support of garden city enthusiasts, garden cities weren't included and lack of "local leadership" was highlighted by instructions from Whitehall to councils to facilitate them.

The first tranche saw 14 garden villages and 10 garden towns approved by Whitehall[20]. They achieved "support" from the councils involved after promises of cash and, despite rhetoric about the principles behind the developments, proved to be simply rebadged greenfield proposals. All 14 garden towns were simply major urban extensions (or even aggregations of such extensions miles apart) already proposed, as were 11 of the 14 garden villages. All were, of course, expected to grow outwards further once they were underway.

Nearly all of the developments involved mostly or completely greenfield land and all involved land squandering through low densities. Aggregated together, the developments would have generated, at best, around 10,000 homes a year and their locations failed to respond to the areas where pressure for new homes was strongest.

The low densities and remote locations militated against use of sustainable transport. A few were located close to railway stations but most could only expect low-frequency bus services. All, however, were located beside, or astride, motorways or major trunk roads.

The proposals quickly attracted opposition[21] but, for the most part, this was simply swept aside and other developers quickly jumped on the bandwagon with less sustainable developments still, badged as garden towns or villages despite lack of Government support. The Government, however, did nothing to deter this and spoke of a fresh tranche. By June 2019, 31 "garden communities" as they were increasingly being called had been supported by Whitehall[22], despite the fact they were no more communities than they were towns or villages. All too typical was "Greater Exeter", endorsed in May 2019, simply 20,000 homes in a "garden settlement", which was in reality simply random developments "built across Exeter", but actually spread across three local authorities.

Despite their obvious shortcomings, in June 2019, a further 19 gained Government support. Millions of pounds of funding continued to be pushed the way of these commercial developments. Meanwhile many other blobs of sprawl continued to be badged as some kind of garden community by their promoters.

Also in 2019, the Government put up a further £10 million in "seed funding" for councils to bring forward initial proposals for up to 10 "new towns and communities on the scale of Canary Wharf and Milton Keynes"[23]. Although they were supposed, once again, to be locally led, the idea was to set up development corporations "led by the people who know their community best". A new development corporation was announced for

Toton, site of a proposed station on the since-abandoned Phase 2b(east) section of HS2 which had been included to avoid routeing trains into Derby and Nottingham.

The Housing Infrastructure Fund: If anyone thought that changing public provision of new towns to the private sector would save the Treasury having to borrow vast amounts of money for their infrastructure etc., they were in for a rude awakening.

The changes to England's planning system introduced with the *National Planning Policy Framework* in 2012 were driven by the Treasury's belief that a huge acceleration in market home building would iron out the peaks and troughs of the UK economy. The reforms were intended to unleash much more extensive greenfield housing development, with big developers leading the way with very large urban sprawl developments.

However, by 2017 it was evident that although such developers were willing to come forward with this type of scheme, they were often most unwilling to finance the site preparation and infrastructure such schemes necessitate, even if they are only planned as vast dormitory suburbs. Even at a greenfield location, the site will need preparation and car-dependent-sprawl needs extensive new roads.

Accordingly, to rescue its ambitions, the Treasury launched its Housing Infrastructure Fund in 2017, a £4 billion, four-year package of support for physical infrastructure and land availability. Bids were required to show the infrastructure would "unlock new homes" which could not be funded by any other route. But if public subsidy of this kind were required to build homes then plainly they weren't "viable" and shouldn't have had land allocations in the first place.

The conditions applied were minimal and the environmental and social effects of the development weren't mentioned at all. Two funding streams were approved – the Forward Funding stream offered grants up to £250 million for major projects and over £3.1 billion was allocated to 31 schemes. The Marginal Viability Fund offered support up to £10 million for schemes that were plainly unviable. £735 million was allocated to 95 schemes via this route.

In theory, councils were expected to try to recoup some of the cash handed out to developers – in which case the money just took the form of an indefinite, interest-free loan (they had until 2035 to repay it) – and the council then had to put any cash recovered the way of other developers. But it was so unclear how the money was supposed to be recouped at all that most of it just became, effectively, a government subsidy to developers.

Some of the cash did go to city schemes to reclaim and remediate brownfield land. But the bulk of it went to supporting greenfield sprawl and it was clear the bulk of that went towards subsidising road building.

So the era of new "garden communities", or at least, the new dormitory suburbs they were in reality, still needed to have infrastructure funded eventually by central government, just as it had been in the post-war new towns.

The Oxford-Cambridge Arc: The gradual emergence from Whitehall of plans to dump a million homes on farmland linked by a new motorway across five rural counties north and north-west of London also saw fresh interest from developers. Although no firm proposals emerged over several years before the Arc was officially dropped, millions of pounds of public money were spent on developing the idea and there was talk of building four or five new "garden cities" the size of Milton Keynes on the axis between the two ancient university cities. The Arc was dropped from official policy for a while and 2023 saw alternative plans for huge expansion around Cambridge, also involving new settlements of some kind. Some local authorities kept the Arc idea alive, however, and the destructive idea has recently returned to Government policy.

The 2024 General Election: The election manifestos saw Labour proposing that "a Labour government will build a new generation of new towns, inspired by the proud legacy of the 1945 Labour government. Alongside urban extensions and regeneration projects, these will form part of a series of large-scale new communities across England". No details were given of the size or location of these proposed developments but the development industry was soon abuzz with plans to dust off proposals for major sprawl settlements.

6. The New Towns Taskforce

Following the 2024 general election, the new Government set up a "New Towns Taskforce" to "support delivery of the next generation of new towns".

The initial "vision"[24] repeated a lot of new town myths such as the post-war new towns having being the most ambitious town-building effort ever undertaken in the UK, despite it having produced far fewer homes than, say, late Victorian byelaw home building or even the inter-war suburban sprawl. It said the new towns should be exemplary developments, support economic growth and have 40% "affordable" homes, though only with a "focus" on "genuinely affordable social rented homes". But it also claimed new towns could help meet its ambition to see 1.5 million new homes it hoped to see built between July 2024 and June 2029.

In September 2024, the New Towns Taskforce was set up, chaired by Sir Michael Lyons. Its remit[25] was to "consider key matters including: the strategic case for new towns, location identification and selection, placemaking, design and standards, funding, risk and institutional investment and unlocking delivery and innovation. Its second meeting, on 1 October, however, was held in Cambridge and repeated long-standing myths[26] about "Greater Cambridge" kickstarting economic growth across the country, despite it being one of the least sustainable areas for significant growth.

The New Towns Taskforce

On 4 November 2024, the Taskforce launched a "call for evidence"[27]. This, however, proved to be simply be a call for "proposals that are regionally significant for both housing numbers and economic growth. The unifying principle will be that each of the new settlements will contain 10,000 homes, at the very least"

This was very much a rerun of New Labour's call for sites for "eco towns" in the late-2000s and the Conservatives' call for sites for "garden towns" in the late-2010s. "We expect many potential developments of this size will already be known to the Taskforce through the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government or Homes England," it admitted.

In February 2025, the Taskforce issued an update[28] half way through the 12 months allocated for developing its recommendations. It said it was greatly encouraged by the appetite for the next generation of new towns. It had received over 100 responses to its call for sites of 10,000+ homes, bit admitted the bulk of them were from south, east, south-west and eastern England.

"The majority of the sites submitted were urban extensions to existing towns or cities, with a smaller number of proposals for new standalone settlements," it admitted, confirming few genuinely new towns would feature in the current "new towns" programme.

The update set out the Taskforce's view of the aims of its programme and the lessons it took from previous programmes, including eco-towns and garden communities. Along with other objectives, it claimed that these lessons included a need for environmental sustainability and sites needing effective public transport within the town and links to wider transport networks. Local communities were, however, merely to be "engaged" rather than being required to consent to the sprawl. The taskforce promised to turn to exploring locations for new towns and said the Spending Review would provide more information. But all the Spending Review said was that "the Government will shortly set out plans for new towns and Cambridge".

7. Where is threatened with a new town?

With the New Towns Commission taking its time recommending sites for new towns, various interested parties suggested possible sites for profitable development. The gang of neoliberal think-tanks, "yimby" lobbyists, development sector bodies and other vested interests has worked noisily and quickly to promote the idea of new towns amidst their other lobbying and influencing in favour of urban sprawl. There have been several puff reports about the "need" to build such housing and although the Commission is taking its time before specifying which land should be destroyed for new towns, some of these publications have suggested which sites could prove commercially attractive.

Lobbying group Centre for British Progress was quick off the mark following the general election by calling[29] for new towns at:-

- Tempsford, Bedfordshire
- Cambridge
- Oxford
- York
- Bristol

The lobbyists recommended building a city of 250,000-350,000 people around Tempsford, but admitted the whole idea is undermined by capacity problems on the East Coast Main Line, especially the two-track section through Digswell Viaduct and the two Welwyn tunnels. The publication also involuntarily highlighted another big disadvantage of the Tempsford area, captioning an aerial view as: "The proposed station at the ECML and EWR intersection will stand in empty fields". Those fields are not, of course, empty. They include a large area of enormously productive and scarce Grade 2 farmland. Parts of the area are also prone to flooding.

The same lobby group returned to the subject in January 2025 with another publication[30]. This time it was quite clear that the new towns it advocated should not be new towns at all, but: "extending existing settlements allows us to build on an existing economic infrastructure in our cities". It only suggested one new site:-

- Taplow, Buckinghamshire

Neoliberal lobbying group Britain Remade and consultant Create Streets suggested a "top 12" list:-

- Greater Cambridge
- Tempsford, Bedfordshire
- Winslow, Buckinghamshire
- Cheddington, Bedfordshire

- Salfords, Surrey
- Greater Oxford
- Iver, Buckinghamshire
- Hatfield Peverel, Essex
- Bristol extension
- Chippenham, Wiltshire
- York
- Arden Cross, Birmingham Interchange
- Sheffield Metroland Supertram

Architecture and planning firm Urbanist Architecture suggested a list of 20 candidates[31]:-

- Cambridge area
- M1 corridor around Milton Keynes
- Thames estuary (Ebbsfleet and surrounding areas)
- South Hampshire
- Midlands, particularly Birmingham, Leicester and Nottingham
- Hale, Greater Manchester
- Roundhay, Leeds
- Oxford
- Norwich
- Reading
- Stratford-upon-Avon
- Taunton
- Exeter
- Harrogate
- Preston
- Carlisle
- Guildford
- Peterborough
- Swindon

- Chelmsford

Political and economic analysists WPI issued a publication[32] in May 2025 suggesting the local authority districts it believed had the highest "potential" for a new town. It argued that public acceptability would be key and suggested 12 local authority areas which it claimed had support for such developments above 50%:-

- Milton Keynes
- Leeds
- South Gloucestershire
- Central Bedfordshire
- Wiltshire
- Huntingdonshire
- West Northamptonshire
- Mid Devon
- South Cambridgeshire
- Winchester
- East Hertfordshire
- Northumberland

Other views have been expressed but, given many of these authors' links with developers and the long history of threats (or actual current proposals) at these locations, many are likely to feature in the Commission's recommendations. It's clear that the development industry is most interested in the south of England as offering the highest potential returns.

8. Land values

The Government's proposals to change England's planning rules in July 2024[33] included options to "ensure the appropriate use of viability" in green belts. These were:-

- Government sets benchmark land values to be used in viability assessments;
- Government sets policy parameters so that where land transacts at a price above benchmark land value, policy requirements should be assumed to be viable;
- Government sets out that where development proposals comply with benchmark land value requirements, and a viability negotiation to reduce policy delivery occurs, a late-stage review should be undertaken.

In cases where land-owners did not bring forward land in green belt areas where the Government hoped to promote sprawl developments, it threatened to use compulsory purchase powers, possibly including "no hope value" provisions. Such powers threaten the likelihood of extended legal action and what land speculators will make of this Government attempt to exclude them from the potential commercial returns new town sprawl offers remains to be seen.

9. The case against new towns

Land squandering Low residential densities were a central principle of the garden city movement from the outset, and so it remains. Although Ebenezer Howard's admirers say these densities weren't due to his writing, they were set by his follower Raymond Unwin, who specified 12 to the acre as a maximum for garden cities and garden suburbs. This became the norm as inter-war suburban developers discovered it was the most profitable way of developing greenfield land. The same principles were adopted by the post-war new towns and it has continued to be the model for developers ever since. Although developers in cities now prefer ultra-high densities (equally unsustainable in their way), there is little or no enthusiasm evident among developers for the medium densities which blend functional urbanist layouts with sustainable transport modes and good use of land.

Brownfield illusions The 2007 "eco towns" programme suggested schemes would "make good use of brownfield land", but none of those that made the shortlist did so. That pretty much set the pattern for the big Government-backed developments under its garden communities scheme and the many other big sprawl settlements in recent years that were not a part of it. Very rare exceptions like Ebbsfleet did exist, but very large brownfield sites in sustainable locations like that are vanishingly rare. Sites like former airfields do get described as "brownfield" despite the fact that, usually, 80-90% of the land has never been developed; usually such sites are also at highly unsustainable locations, from transport and other perspectives.

Car dependency All too often, large developments are built far out into the country, far from the rail-based transit networks in big cities and easy use of active travel for anything other than very local journeys. They are, however, almost always built near, or beside, high-capacity roads. Even in the minority of sites where there is a single railway station on or near the site, the majority of journeys will be made by car. The fondness of volume builders for low-density, impermeable layouts with many cul-de-sacs and distance from other urban areas also ensures high levels of car dependency.

Speed of construction Inevitably, when building a "town" (even if the town is just a suburb of an existing towns or several such suburbs), it requires completion of large-scale accommodation works, land reclamation and infrastructure. All these take time. Then, the market may find it difficult or impossible to take on the development given its large size.

The Government has said it would hope to make a start on construction by the end of this Parliament, i.e. in mid-2029 at the latest. Given the complexities involved and the need for very substantial public cash, this seems unlikely. But if a start could be made in 2029, it would be the early 2030s before any homes were available. Even once all 12 were up and running, by the late 2030s at the earliest, it would be unlikely to see more than a few tens of thousands built in any year at its peak in the 2040s, barely noticeable even in current levels of house building, let alone the 300,000 plus annual figure the Government fantasises over.

Cost The same issues as speed of construction also apply to the cost of construction. Largely or wholly new infrastructure inevitably requires the heaviest capital investment which has to come from somewhere. Plainly, private developers are less and less willing to provide it and the Treasury may eventually become tired of subsidizing the private house building industry.

The WPI report[34] estimated "the cost of building a new town and associated infrastructure to be around £3.5-4.5bn, which should be funded primarily through a combination of government borrowing and private sector patient capital". How much patient capital private developers are willing or able to raise remains to be seen, but most of the capital cost of building 12 new towns – up to £50bn – would be likely to fall on HM Treasury.

Employment The post-war new towns set out to include newly set-up industries and to attract young workers to work in them. Although this initially produced full (albeit unbalanced) employment, over time it left an ageing workforce and ageing industries. Later sprawl blobs may have aspired towards local employment, but the tendency has been for them to be dormitories with residents commuting (mostly by car) to employment elsewhere.

Environmental impact Greenfield development, by its nature, will destroy the many ecosystem services that undeveloped land, with unsealed soils, delivers. Although efforts have often been made to repurpose natural areas within their sites as public open space, it's inevitable that the air, noise and light pollution and disturbance caused by development will substantially degrade the ecology of such areas and the land surrounding the new settlement. That will be most destructive in the case of wholly new, stand-alone developments. Given the climate and other impacts we're now facing, we can't afford to lose the food and water supply, flood control and drainage, support for nature and intangible benefits that countryside provides.

Lack of community control Community control was explicitly rejected in the post-war new town legislation in favour of control by Whitehall. This produced decades of conflict with the elected local authorities in those areas. More recent sprawl developments have mostly been imposed by the Government on areas whether their councils like it or not. Some have wearily accepted the new developments, others have continued to fight them, but the power is all at the centre still. A handful of the garden communities have, however, been rejected by vigorous community protests and the realisation, both by their promoters and government of their many shortcomings.

New towns? A small number of the post-war "new towns" were actually recognisable as new settlements, though all included some existing communities. An even lower percentage of those put forward are anything other than "new suburbs" attached to cities or substantial towns. Given that stand-alone settlements are by far the most destructive and most costly form of such developments, this is probably just as well, but it shows the hollowness of the attempt to sprinkle some post-war optimism on the programme.

10. Conclusions

The varying low degrees of success of new towns since World War II, set against the idylls painted by their proposers, should be a stark warning against creating a new generation of such sprawl. The appendix to this report sets out some brief case-studies showing just how many of them went wrong, were left incomplete or even largely or totally unstarted.

"New towns" are hardly ever new towns*.* The ones that are towns are simply expansions of an existing town, or even towns (plural) while nearly all the genuinely new ones aren't towns in the accepted sense, more dollops of suburbia.

Large, "new" settlements are much the slowest way of building homes. Their widespread adoption would undermine Government hopes of accelerating house building and the chances of making any significant contribution to house building numbers during the current Parliament are vanishingly small.

Opportunities to "make good use of brownfield land" for new towns are very limited. There are precious few very large brownfield sites in sustainable locations and much of what is claimed to be brownfield is actually greenfield.

Most large sites tend to be near motorways and sustainable transport needs more than a single railway station. New towns are inevitably car-dependent.

The very low-densities dictated by garden city principles militate against public transport and active travel. The layouts of low-density sprawl like cul-de-sacs are especially hostile to active travel and low-densities undermine the economics of public transport.

New towns involve extensive and expensive investment in infrastructure which inevitably comes out of the public purse. Private developers have long been clear they expect most of this the cost to be met, one way or another, by HM Treasury.

New towns usually provoke intense hostility in the areas where the Government "designates" them, both from their existing communities and their elected local representatives. Many continue to expand for years after the initial destruction, ensuring opposition does not go away once the first stage is built.

Preference for low-densities and greenfield land ensure such developments will very seldom be sustainable. They are a threat to nature, to food and water security, create challenges for wastewater, drainage and flood control and cause disturbance and air, noise and light pollution.

New towns have seldom, if ever, lived up to the lofty aspirations with which most of them were launched. Utopian visions of socially and environmentally idealised new settlements never survive contact with the reality of limited funds, unsuitable sites, inadequate infrastructure, changes in policy, developer parsimony and greed.

New towns are the slowest, costliest and most environmentally destructive way to provide large numbers of homes. The concept's re-emergence suggests politicians want to sprinkle some glittery dust from long-forgotten Edwardian idealism and post-war optimism. But the challenges of providing the houses we need – as opposed to those the development sector demands – and the multiple other challenges facing our future make this is a dangerous delusion.

We recommend the Government reconsiders its current policies and excludes new towns from its planning and housing strategies.

Appendix: Some case studies

Peterlee New Town

County Durham's second new town was designated on what was mostly farmland in March 1948, but its early development was fought both by the National Coal Board, which knew it would "sterilise" a rich seam of coal beneath the site and by the council in Easington which wanted to implement its own house building strategy. The dispute with the Board, which reached the Cabinet on more than one occasion, meant a Master Plan took four-and-a-half years and included phased developments allowing some coal extraction to take place but leaving the coal under the proposed town centre, to support the buildings.

500 homes were built annually for six years in the 1950s but that fell sharply thereafter and the problems of subsidence meant no private housing was built until the late 1960s. No council housing was built either, by agreement, and so the Development Corporation provided nearly all the housing on a rented basis, though Easington District Council's own building programme elsewhere was restricted.

Peterlee takes shape round the A19

Development of a town centre also took over 10 years. The 1950s plan was scrapped in 1961 on the grounds it lacked parking places and a new design based on "Radburn" principles adopted with a two-level pedestrian precinct with walkways and much more parking. In the end, the sixth town centre plan was implemented by 1968. But the town's concentration on a single shopping centre saw many people using mobile shops[35].

Cumbernauld New Town

Cumberauld was designated in 1955, the only 1950s-designated new town, mid-way between Scotland's two principal cities but mainly intended to take overspill from Glasgow. It was originally intended to house 50,000 people but in 1973 an area north of the A80 was added, revising the target to 70,000.

Sometimes described as the “clearest example of a modernist new town vision in the UK”, it suffered from the worst excesses of the Modern Movement. Housing was built in satellite areas around the town centre on a hilltop. Separation of people and cars was to be achieved on modernist lines, with underpasses, footbridges and separate paths. Ultra-low densities were chosen and more than 50% of the land used remains undeveloped.

Cumbernauld town centre, 1998

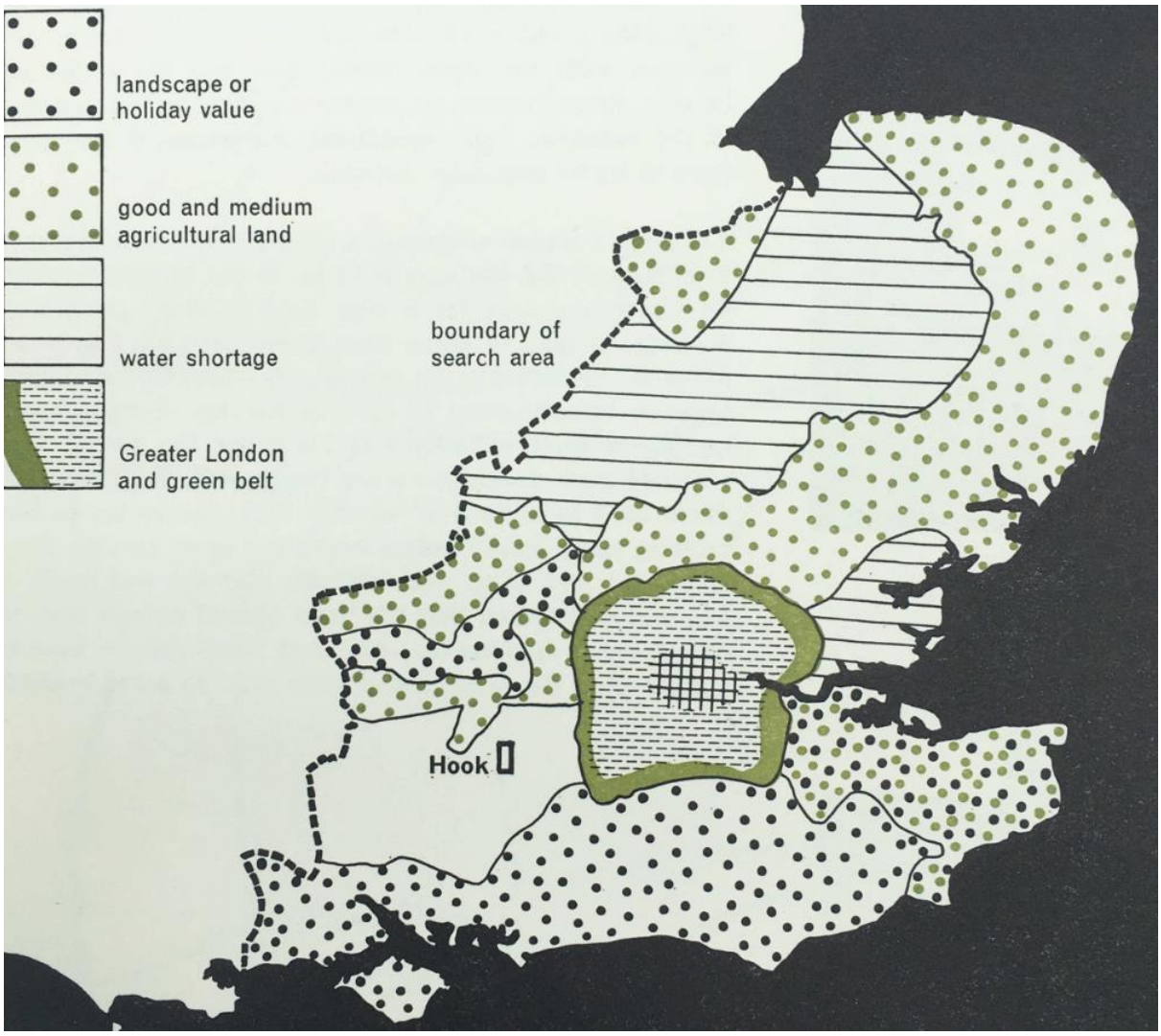
Cumbernauld town centre opened in stages from 1967 to 2007 and was designed to have all its uses contained in one structure. Its award-winning brutalist architecture has often been described as Scotland’s least-loved and ugliest modern building, part was demolished and it has twice won Carbuncle Awards. Plans have been discussed to demolish it. Despite the 70,000 population target, the town’s current population is little over 50,000.

Hook New Town

The early new towns were all promoted by central government and often provoked opposition from the local authorities where they were dumped. However, the powerful London County Council was irritated by this exclusion and decided to show it too could plan and build a new town. So, in 1957, it decided to build a new town with a 100,000 population.

Its analysis of the sites in southern and eastern England did at least take into account factors like the quality of the agricultural land to be destroyed, the quality of the landscape and, most strikingly perhaps, water shortages. Lack of water ruled out a small area of south Essex and a large area which bears a striking resemblance to much of the

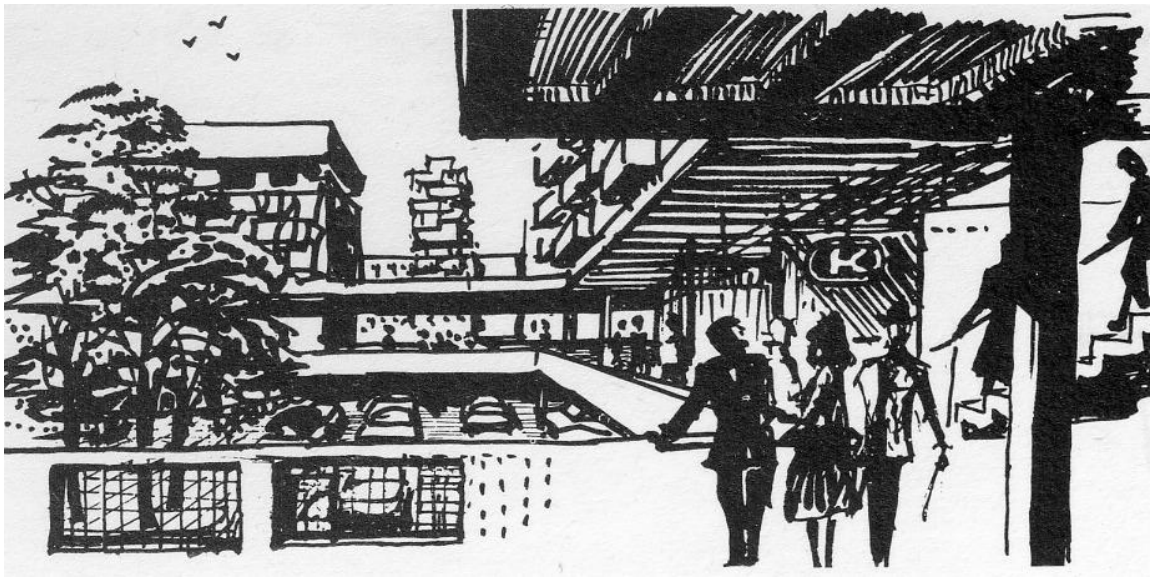
area defined for the so-called “Oxford-Cambridge Arc”, particularly the area round Cambridge now being pursued for accelerated growth despite its water shortage.



The LCC’s “area of search”

Also avoiding other new and expanded towns, the LCC eventually settled on Hook in Hampshire and, in 1958, held a meeting with Hampshire County Council. In a move which reflected the Government’s style, Hampshire was not invited to comment and subsequently refused all co-operation.

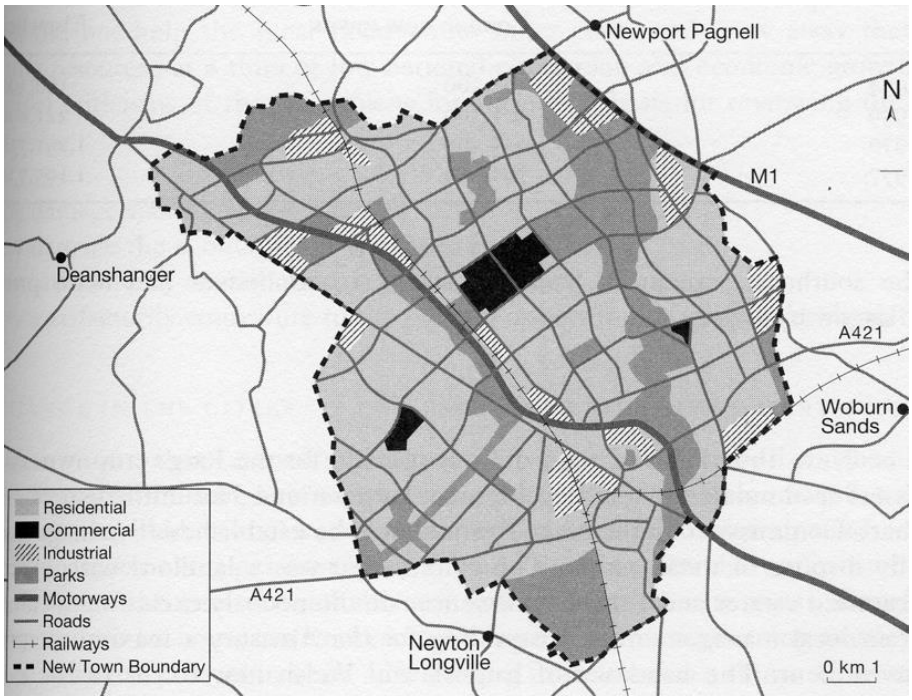
The proposed new town would have covered 11 square miles and the plan involved all the fashionable ideas of the time – deck-access centre, Radburn layouts etc.. It was eventually dropped in 1960 following the County Council agreeing to the expansion of existing towns – Andover, Basingstoke and Tadley.



Hook: central area from the pedestrian deck

Milton Keynes

Announcing establishment of the New Towns Taskforce in September 2024, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government described Milton Keynes as "one of the most successful 20th century new towns". MK is certainly very large, but its initial growth was slow and car dependency makes it one of the least sustainable large settlements in the country.



What it didn't say was how far the freedom of people unable to use a car would be restricted in such car-dependent sprawl, but its layout and ultra-low-density ensured maximum destruction of farmland and biodiversity, car-dependency and poor, inevitably subsidised, public transport.

Milton Keynes' roads-dominated masterplan, 1970

"North Bucks New City" was originally conceived by Buckinghamshire County Council in the early 1960s, but central government demanded control and a "new city", was

designated in 1967 with the aspiration of growing to a population of 250,000. The site lay around the towns of Bletchley, Stony Stratford and Wolverton, but most of its initial designated 8,855ha area was highly productive farmland. One reason the site was chosen, officially, was on the bizarre basis that it was equidistant from London, Birmingham and Leicester and midway between Cambridge and Oxford.

From the start it was clear this was to be textbook car-dependent-sprawl. Its initial development plan accentuated the need for "the easy movement by private cars and their penetration to every point in the city. The individual car offers its users a freedom of choice and opportunity which more and more people will want – and be able – to take advantage of". Its proximity to the new M1 motorway proved irresistible, and although Bletchley was on the West Coast Mainline and the Oxford-Cambridge railway line, the latter was mostly closed in 1967, the year the new town was designated, including most of the section through it.

From the start it was planned at ruinously low densities around rigid 1km road grid squares rather than any radial pattern, effectively ensuring its attempts to create a centre have never really worked. Its extensive landscaping was lavish, but wasteful and active travel facilities are awkward, with cycle ways and footpaths through underpasses. The aim was "community without propinquity", but it was admitted privately from the start that the low densities would militate strongly against public transport and that even bus services would need significant subsidy. This was a motor car city.

Central Milton Keynes under construction

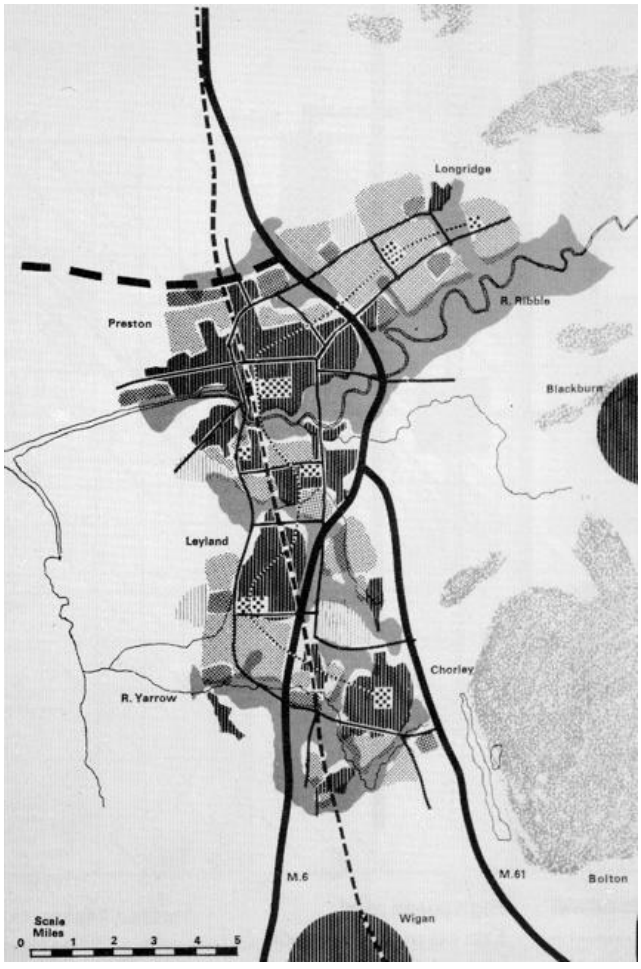
Heavily influenced by modernists, its design was described in 1980 by the RTPI president Francis Tibbalds as "bland, rigid, sterile and totally boring". Its original ultra-low-rise stipulation has been abandoned to create a central business district.

Its initial population growth was sclerotic and there was talk, around the time of the update of the plan for South East England in the mid-1970s, of abandoning it altogether. It survived, however, and has continued to add population slowly while consuming countryside rapidly. The population of its urban area in 2021, was 264,000, very slightly about the original 250,000 target set 57 years earlier.

If MK is one of the most successful new towns, suggesting most of the others are even less sustainable, that should be a fatal objection to their replication.

Central Lancashire New Town

Of the post-war new towns designated under the various new towns acts, Central Lancashire was perhaps the supreme example of a "new town" that wasn't a single town - and wasn't new at all. One of the "third wave" new towns, it was designated in 1970. Originally it was to have been called "Redrose", but the name proved unpopular.



"The Central Lancashire development offers a bonus over the green field sites which were the starting points for the earlier generation of new towns as the scheme does not have to start from scratch," Chorley MP George Rodgers told a 1976 Commons debate on the scheme[36]. "Thus advantage can be taken of the social capital that already exists in parts of the older towns."

But environment minister Guy Barnett told him the whole new towns programme was being reappraised as part of a review of the policies to disperse inner city populations.

The Development Corporation was designated in 1970 to drive regeneration and development in three towns, Preston, Leyland and Chorley and around the M6 motorway, covering 142km^2 of Lancashire. At that time, the combined population of the area was already 235,000 and it was never actually intended to have a new town as such, but instead expand the three

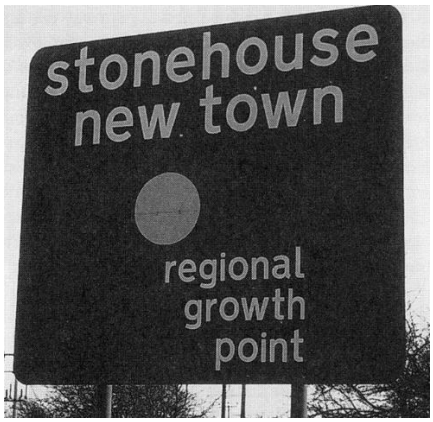
towns, though still separated by “areas of open space and tree belts”. The initial format was to be a “ladder” of seven townships linked by a dual-carriageway.

A 1973 draft development plan foresaw 72,000 new homes The population was supposed to rise to 321,500 by 1986, by which time 22,000 homes were supposed to have been built, and 420,000 by 2001.

In the end the development corporation was wound up in 1985 after just a few thousand houses had been built. The population had increased by just 20,000.

Stonehouse New Town

But if Central Lancashire was a short-lived phenomenon, Scotland’s sixth and final new town at Stonehouse was briefer still. It was designated in 1972 to take overspill from Glasgow and the East Kilbride and Stonehouse Development Corporation entrusted with its development



It became a lack-of-growth point

Its 1974 outline plan envisaged an initial population of 35,000, rising to 70,000, with 22,000 homes. There were also to be four employment parks and a reintroduced train service. But the new Strathclyde Regional Council, set up in 1974, finally realised that exporting the brightest and best young people and demolishing the city was not a recipe for urban renewal and shifted away from “slum clearance” towards tackling urban deprivation and shortage of jobs in the city.

A basic plan was published in 1975, but political support was draining away. The first 96 homes were completed in May 1976 and tenders for building factories invited. But two days after the first tenants of Murray Drive moved in, the Government axed the project and sold the land back to previous owners or put it on the market. £4 million of public money had achieved nothing and enthusiasts’ hopes that the Scottish Development Agency would take it over were not to be realised.

Northstowe

“Northstowe” is being built on the site of RAF Oakington, which became the Army’s Oakington Barracks in 1975 and was taken over by the Home Office in 2000 as an immigration centre, closing in 2010. In March 2006, the site was handed to English Partnerships, then the Homes and Communities Agency and later, Homes England.

Northstowe was supposed to be “an exemplar of sustainability in the use of renewable energy resources and reducing carbon emissions”[37], but the site now has a link road to the nearby A14 trunk road, while the adjacent mothballed railway line, despite calls to

reopen it, was converted to a guided bus road. It was not included in the Government's "eco towns" programme as it "predated the eco towns programme".

A joint venture with Gallagher saw plans to use the site, together with adjacent farmland. Outline planning consent for Phase 1 was granted in 2014, for 1,500 homes, a primary school and some community facilities on the greenfield part of the site. Phase 2 for 3,500 homes, a town centre, three schools, a link road to the A14 and the guided busway won consent in 2015 and a third phase, for 4,000 homes, two primary schools, shops, open space and sports facilities in 2022. In 2024, Homes England said work on Phase 3A would take place alongside work on Phase 2 and was expected to begin in 2026.

In July 2024, the Treasury announced a taskforce would be set up to speed up the glacial development of Northstowe, although Whitehall's usual villains - green belt, planning or local objections - had caused none of the delays. By 2023, after six years' construction, only 1,200 homes and three schools had been built; there were no shops or community facilities[38]. In total, only 10,000 homes are expected to be built between 2014 and 2040.

Otterpool Park Garden Town

"Otterpool Park" was designated as a garden town in 2016. The original plan was to build 12,000 houses on 615 hectares of land, partly farmland and partly the former racecourse, beside Junction 11 of the M20 between Folkestone and Ashford. Plans included 85 hectares of employment space plus schools. "The new community will not be an extension of the existing surrounding villages," said its publicity, although it adjoined Lympne and Sellindge.

Garden communities were supposed to enjoy local support, but two consultations carried out by Folkestone & Hythe District Council, which had received public funding, registered just 3% public support. There were also local demonstrations against the project. Opposition was, however, ignored.

After seven years, the first 8,500 homes, plus 29,000m^2 of retail, 87,500m^2 of employment, 8,000m^2 of hotel space, 8,500m^2 of leisure, nine schools and other development won planning permission. Densities of the development will be extremely low as 50% of the site will be left open.

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