

New towns - The Taskforce's strange mixed bag



“Adlington New Town”

[Image: Andrew Jackson]



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

Our 2025 report on new towns examined their unsuccessful history and concluded they are a slow, costly and environmentally destructive way of doing large-scale development. The New Towns Taskforce report showed that often “new towns” aren’t new towns in any sense of the words. But they distract attention from the severe imbalances in the UK’s regional economy.

The Taskforce decided that “new towns” need not conform to any conventional definition of the term and repeated the myths that planning holds back building and that achieving targets would secure “growth”. Its lengthy attempts to define what a new town would be amounted to little beyond being a 10,000+ home development. It did, however, rule out locations for new towns or densification where current growth is slow.

Its criteria for identifying new town sites were simply “unlocking” growth and addressing housing supply – despite potential conflict where growth exacerbates housing shortages or home building increases unemployment. It concluded stand-alone developments would best address areas of housing shortage and regeneration where economic growth is needed. But it confirms the real motivation is to facilitate single delivery bodies under Whitehall control.

The 12 Taskforce recommended sites are a curious mixed bunch. Six are rural sprawl, mostly or wholly on greenfield sites, at largely car-dependent locations. One is an urban extension of an existing low-density new town and five are basically large-scale urban regeneration schemes, mostly on brownfield land, and bearing no resemblance to a “new town”.

The Government says it plans to make a start on at least three new towns by July 2029. But at least three of them have already seen work underway. The five brownfield schemes would all enjoy heavy rail access, one already has urban rail transit and two of the others have plans in place; the Milton Keynes proposal has some vague aspirations to this. Four of the greenfield schemes would have railway stations on site.

The 2010s “garden communities” programme included a handful of 10,000+ home schemes and, although some failed and other shrank, four of them are labouring on, though one is “paused” and another is a long-term aspiration.

The 2000s “eco towns” programme also proposed some large communities, but the tortuously slow and poorly served development at Northstowe appears to be the only survivor from that period.

“Forest City” and “forest towns” provide another recent threat of unsustainable, large-scale, greenfield development, with destruction of agricultural land potentially massively increased by plans for forestry on adjacent land.

We see no reason to change our view that, where large developments would form actual “new towns”, they are the slowest, costliest and most destructive form of large-scale development.

We recommend the Government reject those New Towns Taskforce endorsed sites which involve significant destruction of greenfield land, drop the name “new towns” and stick to supporting sustainable urban regeneration sites, especially those involving transit-oriented-development.

1. Introduction

1.1 In our first report on new towns¹, published in August 2025, we examined the claims about the virtues of such developments, the definition of a “new town” and looked at their unsuccessful history. We concluded they are a slow, costly and environmentally destructive way of doing large-scale development.

1.2 The Government’s New Towns Taskforce should have reported by that stage, but its report² actually appeared in September 2025. It contained a great deal of puff for the idea of new towns and their supposed economic benefits, but no critical examination at all of whether they are a good idea. This should not come as a surprise, given the Taskforce’s terms of reference³, which noted that “new towns will be located on large sites that provide significantly more homes, with 10,000 homes the minimum” and that “the purpose of the New Towns Taskforce is to make recommendations to ministers on the location and delivery of new towns”. Any critical analysis of the concept was therefore forbidden and the Taskforce duly delivered recommendations identifying 12 locations.

1.3 As we warned in our report, such “new towns” are not always new towns in any sense of the term, though a handful could be. The Taskforce “considered a range of new town models in identifying sites”, given its vague objectives of addressing “low productivity” and “a significant shortfall in housing stock”. Both objectives, however, carefully distract attention from many serious UK problems which include acutely unbalanced regional economies, unsustainable development and the building industry’s preference for building what’s most profitable rather than the homes that are needed in places that can sustain them.

1.4 In January 2026, housing minister Matthew Pennycook said⁴ locations for new town proposals would be finalised in the coming weeks once strategic environmental assessments were completed. Meanwhile it’s worth examining the 12 locations recommended by the Taskforce and pointing out there are other, 10,000+ home proposals in prospect.

2. What did the Taskforce consider to be “a new town”?

2.1 Most people, asked what they believe would constitute a “new town”, would respond that it would be some kind of substantially new urban settlement built on a new site, though they might accept it could be close to an existing settlement. It’s worth pointing out here, however, that the satellite towns built around London and a handful of other large cities in the 1950s were not regarded as part of the new towns network.

2.2 The Taskforce, however, decided that a wider range of substantial new developments could be regarded as new towns, however far it stretches the credibility of the term. The main criterion would appear to be proposing 10,000+ homes, though even that proved to be flexible.

2.3 Its report’s first chapter sets out what it believes is the case for new towns, based around the erroneous belief that the building industry is only held back from achieving the Treasury’s high building targets by existing planning, and that achieving such targets would “drive economic growth”. Most of the arguments are distorted or bogus, but in this report we are less concerned with their shaky logic than with their proposed locations and the consequences of them.

2.4 As noted above, there is little in the report that defines what the Government considers a new town. It apparently “expects” that each new town should contain at least 10,000 new homes (para.42). They would also be required to achieve five benefits:

- (a) Support and unlock potential economic growth
- (b) Accelerate housing delivery
- (c) Be set within a strategic perspective, addressing long-term population and growth needs
- (d) Deliver strong communities
- (e) Create environmentally resilient places.

These are actually very high bars and the Government should realise any plans will be judged by these and other criteria.

2.5 (a) is going to be problematic given that para. 11 notes it is cities outside the South East of England where there are high potential economic clusters, but where the building industry is plainly unwilling to build. The report notes they may have ageing infrastructure or be held back by low-density sprawl. (b) is plainly at odds with the new town philosophy as builders have increasingly shown themselves unwilling to provide the infrastructure like schools, health centres, shops and community facilities that are increasingly necessitated as the size of a development increases. (c) ought to be the case for all developments (and constraints) whatever their size, but often isn’t thanks to erosion of the planning system. (d) has always proved difficult unless there is strong public sector involvement in provision of housing, community facilities and infrastructure and is undermined by low-density development and lack of dense town

centres. (e) is inevitably a challenge with huge areas of soil-sealing and destruction of the ecosystem services land provides.

2.6 None of this brings us much nearer to what a new town will be considered to be, beyond having at least 10,000 new homes. Para 47 admits their economic benefits would vary “depending on the type of economic geography of each location and the scale and form of the new town”. After further claims about their benefits, para 51 says they can “create new, well-connected, urban communities and expand the ‘effective size’ of cities via agglomeration” (which presumably should rule out new towns at sites any distance from existing large settlements). But this actually tells us little about how such expansion should relate spatially to existing cities.



Creating “well-connected, urban communities” [Image: Caulcott Area Residents Association]

2.7 Para 53 at least provides some clue about what should *not* count as a new town. “In places not currently fast growing or with untapped potential from increased densification, new towns are unlikely to be the best way of unlocking potential growth,” it says. “However, with the right mix of interventions as part of a broader, integrated strategy; investment in housing, infrastructure and the local environment can still play a vital role in improving economic prospects.” This, however, is beyond the scope of the report, it says.

2.8 Para 56 claims new towns could play a role in “unlocking” greater amounts of land for development, though whether this means reclamation of brownfield or destruction of greenfield, it doesn’t say.

2.9 What the report does do is spend paragraph after paragraph making big claims about how housing development spurs the economy and how new towns could lead to massive new availability of housing of various kinds and economic benefits. Para 66, however, makes a significant criticism of current policy which tries to secure “affordable” housing through S106. “The model is under pressure due to viability difficulties,” it admits but claims that new towns could “unlock” land in areas unlikely to be released under the current planning system.

2.10 New towns, it claims (para 70), would ensure homes are delivered alongside *all* of the infrastructure, services and amenities that communities need. Yet if the private sector is expected to provide a significant percentage, that could be terminal for the whole programme. The report admits (para 73) that the urban design failures of post-

war new towns show that embedding social value like mental health and community integration is not a given.

2.11 Chapter 1 of the report thus sets out the case for new towns but, while offering big claims about their benefits, offers little clue to what would constitute such a new town *and what wouldn't*. They would have at least 10,000 homes, might or might not be spatially related to an existing city, would include infrastructure and services from the start and would struggle in areas outside South East England with low productivity and low-density sprawl.

2.12 Chapter 3 of the report adds “placemaking principles”:-

- (a) Vision-led
- (b) Ambitious density
- (c) Affordable housing and balanced communities
- (d) Social infrastructure
- (e) Healthy and safe places
- (f) Environmental sustainability
- (g) Transport connectivity
- (h) Business creation and employment opportunities
- (i) Stewardship
- (j) Community engagement.

2.13 In truth, none of these bring us any closer to identifying what would be, or wouldn't be, a new town as they are qualities *all* new developments should demonstrate. It has to be admitted, however, they seldom do.

2.14 With such a paucity of information as to what would constitute a new town, we shall have to look at the Taskforce's “recommended locations for new towns, to see if there are any identifiable commonalities beyond proposing 10,000+ homes.

3. How did the Taskforce approach site selection?

3.1 Despite the vagueness of anything apart from their supposed benefits, the Taskforce set about the core purpose of its terms of reference – the “recommended locations for the next generation of new towns” - in Chapter 2.

3.2 Lacking the specific purposes of post-war new towns (initially, housing shortages and, later, spreading economic activity more evenly) the Taskforce set out to define the purpose of the new generation. Accordingly, its identified locations were based on a desire to meld both these objectives:-

(a) Supporting or unlocking economic growth

(b) Addressing present or anticipated strong housing demand relative to supply.

3.3 The obvious objection is that these are potentially conflicting. Spurring economic activity in an area may exacerbate existing housing shortages, leaving the area playing catch-up, while building homes in areas of low economic activity could increase unemployment. That’s why a comprehensive regional planning approach would have been far more use than a new towns programme.

3.4 Finally, however, in para 95, the report addresses the issue that traditional new towns were considered to be standalone sites with 10,000+ homes; the Taskforce took this as its starting point. But this threw up the obvious snag that much current activity is in the form of urban extensions to towns and cities or even urban regeneration.

3.5 “It has also become clear that the more traditional stand-alone new town development would be most appropriate for areas of the country where there is a greater immediate need to address housing shortages and our recommendations reflect this,” says para 96. “This includes the South East as well as parts of the South West and West Midlands.”

3.6 But obviously just targeting the more prosperous areas would be bad PR.

3.7 “Given the importance of ensuring that the whole country benefits from this level of intervention, we have also considered sites which are more able to directly address the needs of places where in our view city regeneration is the key priority and a new, well-planned and well-connected, community of scale could meet housing need and contribute to economic growth, for example in Northern cities,” says para 97.

3.8 But we’ve departed far, far from anything recognisable as a “new town” here, so the report resorted to obfuscation.

3.9 “These are still sites which are contiguous and clearly recognisable as distinct places, in line with the new towns model, and include the creation of new distinct districts within cities where productivity is being undermined by housing shortages,” says para 98.

“Although these new towns cover a range of approaches, they could all be characterised by the key elements of the new towns vision,” it concludes (para 99).

3.10 Really? “New towns”? At least two of the 12 simply refer to unspecified sites scattered across cities.

3.11 The report admitted the real reason for such a wide catch-all is that they could be run by single delivery bodies like development corporations and mayoral combined authorities - all conveniently under the command of Whitehall, of course.

3.12 Chapter 2 claims the new new towns would:

(a) Relieve growth constraints in “overheating” areas.

(b) Attract investment and talent to places which are already growing but *not yet* overheating [*Our italics*]

(c) Support agglomeration in England’s major cities.

3.13 The report set out 12 recommended sites and opines some might start to deliver by July 2029. As at least three of them have already seen work, this is a very low bar indeed.

3.14 We look at the 12 locations in Section 4 below and examine in what sense they are “new towns”.

4. The 12 New Towns Taskforce locations

1. Adlington



The Adlington site

[Image: Andrew Jackson]

Location: North of Macclesfield, surrounding the village of Adlington.

Local authority: Cheshire East Council

Promoter: [Belport](#)

Approximate area: Nearly 1,000 hectares

Number of homes: 14,000-20,000

Existing land: Green belt, mostly good quality farmland with ancient field patterns and wildlife habitats. All the farmland is best and most versatile – Grade 3.

Rail-based transit access: Adlington station on the Macclesfield-Cheadle line is on the site.

Discussion: The green belt site, of almost 10 sq km, includes good quality agricultural land, with ancient field patterns, as well as valuable habitat. Parts are also subject to flooding. Cheshire East Council voted unanimously to oppose the proposal in December 2025.

Opposition: [Save the Adlington Green Belt, Stop Adlington New Town, CPRE Cheshire](#)

The Supporters of the Adlington Greenbelt are a grass roots coalition of residents, families, farmers and environmental advocates committed to protecting the countryside surrounding Adlington, Cheshire. Our campaign was formed in response to proposals to include land around Adlington in a

large-scale New Town development that could see up to 14,000 to 20,000 homes built on approximately 2,900 acres of designated Green Belt.



Adlington

[Image: Gekko Media]

We believe this proposal would fundamentally and permanently alter the character of our village and the surrounding rural landscape. The land identified is not empty or unused. It is productive farmland, valued open countryside and important natural habitat supporting local wildlife and biodiversity. It also plays a vital role in preventing urban sprawl and maintaining the distinct identities of neighbouring communities.

Supporters are deeply concerned about the potential strain such a vast development would place on existing infrastructure. Roads, schools, healthcare services and drainage systems are already under pressure. Large-scale building on Green Belt land raises further concerns about traffic congestion, flood risk and the loss of agricultural land at a time when food security and environmental sustainability matter more than ever.

Our campaign is non-partisan and community led. We support sensible and sustainable development in appropriate locations, particularly on brownfield sites, but we oppose unnecessary building on protected Green Belt when alternatives exist. We believe local voices must be heard in decisions that will shape our future for generations.

Once Green Belt is lost, it is lost forever. We are standing together to ensure that Adlington's countryside, heritage and community identity are protected for today's residents and those yet to come.

- The Supporters of the Adlington Greenbelt

2. Brabazon and The West Innovation Arc

Location: Takes in the “West Innovation Arc” between the new development called “Brabazon” in the west to Bristol & Bath Science Park in the east. Includes the former Filton Airfield.

Local authority: South Gloucestershire Council

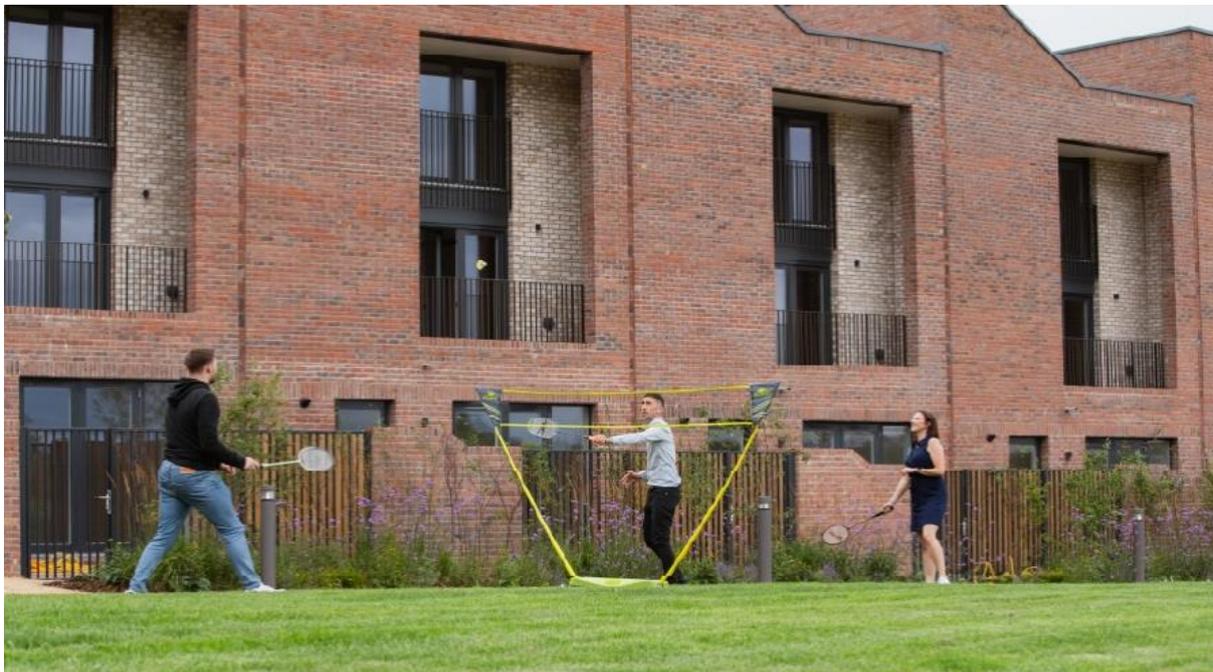
Promoter: [YTL Developments, Brabazon](#)

Approximate area: Not stated

Number of homes: 6,500 – 25,000 (allegedly 40,000 ultimately), plus 1,500 bed student accommodation, an arena and 30,000 jobs. 500 of the homes have already been built

Existing land: Includes brownfield land and the (mixed) former Filton Airfield.

Rail-based transit access: A new railway station is due to open at North Filton with an hourly service.



[Image: Brabazon]

Discussion: The “West Innovation Arc” includes Brabazon, Bristol Parkway station and the Bristol & Bath Science Park. Brabazon is already under construction

3. Chase Park and Crews Hill



Under threat: Vicarage Farm

[Image: Action for Enfield's Future]

Location: On green belt to the north of Enfield and south of the M25.

Local authority: Enfield Borough Council

Approximate area: 884 hectares

Number of homes: Up to 21,000

Existing land: Green belt. Mostly farmland and a golf course, but also involves loss of garden centres and a plant nursery. The farmland involved is Grade 3, and also includes extensive woodland.

Rail-based transit access: Crews Hill station on the Hertford Loop is on the site.

Discussion: Another classic green belt site which has long been the subject of interest from sprawl lobbyists who repeatedly cite golf courses as potential sites to develop.

Opposition: CPRE London, [Action for Enfield's Future](#) ([The Enfield Society](#), [Better Homes Enfield](#), [EnCaf](#), [Enfield Roadwatch](#))

Action for Enfield's Future (AfEF) is a non-political community group bringing together local residents, including members of The Enfield Society, Better Homes Enfield, EnCaf and Enfield RoadWatch . We work to make the borough a fairer and better place to live, by pushing for transparent, evidence-based decisions for residents.

We have been working together during Enfield's long local plan process (2017 to date) to present evidence-based arguments to the planning inspector. Among our issues with the draft plan is the designation of two large green belt sites to accommodate some 9,600 homes. Our evidence shows untapped brownfield capacity among other reasons not to develop these sites.



Merryhills Way on Vicarage Farm

[Image: Action for Enfield's Future]

These two sites would be combined and expanded to a total of 884 hectares for the new town, only about 10% of which is previously-developed land. The rest is rolling countryside, still actively farmed, and, as the last remnants of historic Enfield Chase, a “valued landscape”. While we concede that some, not all, of Crews Hill settlement could be regenerated, we contest the sustainability of developing the greenfield sites. Among our main arguments:

Affordable homes are presented as the primary reason for the New Town, a response to Enfield’s and London’s housing crisis. AfEF believes there are better alternatives to delivering the affordable homes needed.

Connectivity was a key reason for choosing the site. Yes, Crews Hill does have a station, but the service is limited, already over capacity during rush hours, and at the edge of the proposed new town area. The existing road network is hedge-lined rural roads which clog up when there is an issue on the M25 or other nearby main roads. The new town would not be car-free or car-lite, whatever the ambitions.

Boosting economic growth and productivity is another major goal for the new town - yet no weight has been given to the vibrant economy that already exists in Crews Hill’s horticultural centre. It is a key commercial centre for the borough, providing about a thousand jobs in horticulture, retail, catering and more.

More information about these and other arguments can be found on our [website](#).

- Action for Enfield's Future

4. Heyford Park



[Image: Caulcott Area Residents Association]

Location: Former RAF Upper Heyford

Local authority: Cherwell District Council

Promoter: [Dorchester Living](#), [Heyford Park New Town](#)

Approximate area: 500 hectares

Number of homes: 1,200 in pre-new-town phase, 9,000 in new town.

Existing land: Former airfield – so majority greenfield. As an airfield, the extensive open parts of the site are not given an agricultural land classification, but the site is surrounded by Grade 2 and Grade 3 farmland.

Rail-based transit access: The site is over a mile from Heyford station on the Oxford-Banbury line. The promoters say there is “potential” to reopen Ardley station on the High Wycombe-Banbury line, a similar distance away.

Discussion: The proposal envisages building 9,000 homes and other development on what was a key NATO military airfield, with one of the longest runways in Europe and hardened shelters to protect aircraft from attack.

Traffic congestion is already a problem in the area, part of which is also a flood-risk zone. The site has already had 1,500 homes developed and threatens settlement coalescence. Richborough, meanwhile, is seeking permission for 475 homes on greenfield land to the south of the site.

Opposition: [Caulcott Area Residents Association](#)



[Image: Caulcott Area Residents Association]

Caulcott Area Residents' Association has raised concerns about the environmental impacts of proposed new town development at Heyford Park.

Environmental Concerns:

- Proposed new town at Heyford Park poses severe environmental risks to Caulcott and surrounding areas.
- Eight material environmental constraints warrant detailed scrutiny under Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) objectives.

Flood Risk:



[Image: Caulcott Area Residents Association]

- Development could increase flood risk downstream, particularly affecting Caulcott, which has already experienced increased flooding incidents.

- Caulcott lies 20 meters lower than Heyford Park, making it vulnerable to runoff from new impermeable surfaces.

Contamination Risks:

- Heyford Park's history as a military site raises concerns about PFAS contamination in soil and groundwater.
- Ongoing monitoring and transparent disclosure of contamination investigations are necessary to mitigate risks.

Impact on Local Ecosystems:

- Development threatens the ecological integrity of Weston Fen SSSI, which relies on groundwater and surface water conditions.
- Increased impermeable surfaces could reduce natural water infiltration and mobilize historic contaminants.

Community Identity and Cohesion:

- Expansion risks coalescence between Heyford Park and Caulcott, eroding the rural character and identity of the village.
- Maintaining green gaps is crucial for community cohesion and landscape character.

Traffic and Infrastructure:

- Proposed developments could lead to significant traffic increases on rural roads, which are not designed for heavy traffic.
- Extensive road building would be required to connect Heyford Park to the M40, causing further environmental harm.

Lack of Community Support:

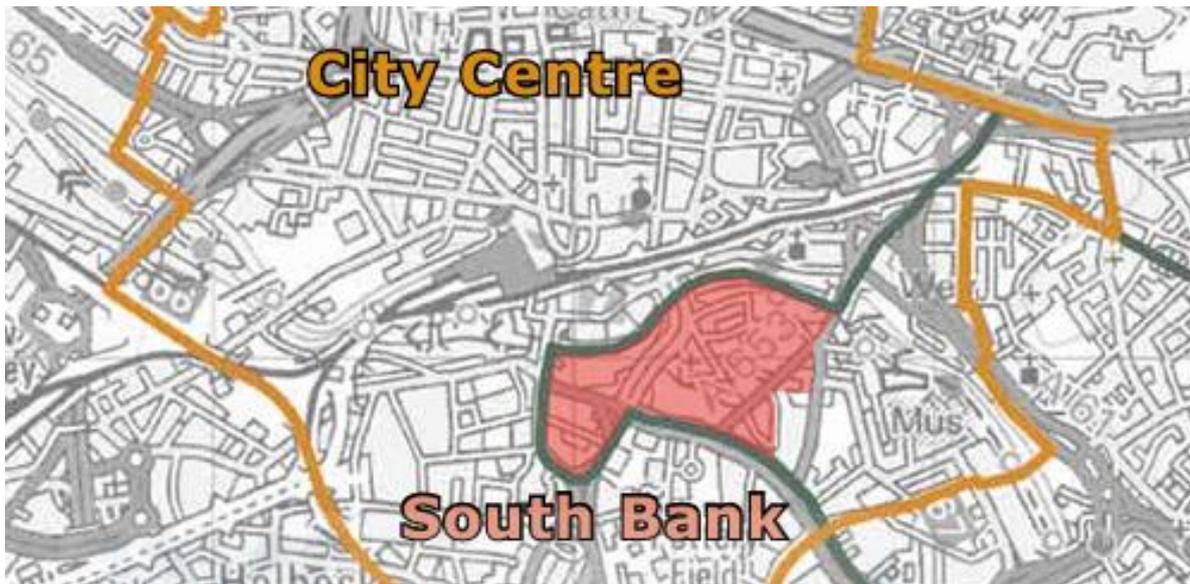
- The proposal has faced substantial opposition from local communities, indicating a lack of social license for development.
- Current plans prioritize developer profit over community needs, undermining trust in the planning system.

Conclusion:

Heyford Park is unsuitable for new town development due to severe environmental impacts, lack of community support, and poor performance against SEA objectives.

- Caulcott Area Residents' Association

5. Leeds South Bank



[Image: Leeds City Council]

Location: The southern side of the River Aire from Holbeck to Leeds Dock

Local authority: Leeds City Council

Approximate area: 253 hectares

Number of homes: 8,000 – 13,000 (+350,000m² of commercial space).

Existing land: Brownfield former industrial land.

Rail-based transit access: Parts of the area are close to Leeds station, albeit across the River Aire; other parts are more distant. Some of the proposed Leeds tram routes would have run through the area though the Government has recently indicated construction is now unlikely before the late-2030s.

Discussion: The Government has claimed that three of its 12 new towns could be underway by July 2029, but given that the Leeds South Bank project had been running for some years and that planning permission was given in 2018 for offices, hotels and shops on a 3.52ha derelict site around Globe Road and Water Lane in Holbeck, that shouldn't be too difficult. The initial phase (312 homes) of the "Climate Innovation District" was completed in 2019. A park on the Tetley brewery site was approved in 2020. Far from being a "new town", however, the project aims to double the size of Leeds city centre.

6. Manchester, Victoria North

Location: North-east of Manchester city centre.

Local authority: Manchester City Council

Developers: [Manchester City Council](#), Far East Consortium

Approximate area: 155 hectares

Number of homes: 15,000

Existing land: Largely brownfield.

Rail-based transit access: Manchester Victoria mainline and Metro station is on the western boundary of the site. Queens Road Metro station lies at its northern tip while Monsall Metro station lies close to the north-east boundary. An integrated public



[Image: Victoria North]

transport hub within the area, including a new Metro stop, is proposed, offering light-rail connections for Northern Gateway residents to a range of leisure, employment and social destinations in Manchester and locations such as the Etihad Campus, Trafford City, Salford Quays and Media City, along with surrounding towns including Altrincham, Oldham and Bury.

Discussion: Formerly known as the Northern Gateway, the scheme is a consortium between the City Council and the Far East Consortium which aims to swell the area's population by 40,000 people and create seven new district neighbourhoods and the new 46ha City River Park. A *Strategic Regeneration Framework*⁵ was approved in February 2019. Work has been underway for some time under the 20-year plan which includes a new tram stop at Sandhills.

7. Marlcombe



[Image: East Devon District Council]

Location: South of the A30 and Exeter Airport.

Local authority: East Devon District Council

Promoter: East Devon District Council

Approximate area: Approximately 500 hectares

Number of homes: 8,000

Existing land: Largely greenfield, productive Grade 2 and 3 farmland with patches of ancient woodland.

Rail-based transit access: The site is at least three miles from stations at Newcourt, Pinhoe and Cranbrook and access will be via the A30 and A3052.

Discussion: East Devon DC long opposed the need for a new town in an area already subject to considerable sprawl from Exeter but changed to support “a new Cranbrook” (another huge east Devon development desperately short of facilities) in 2023. Its initial consultation brought 65% opposition. The Council hopes 40% of its housing stock would be “affordable” and that essential infrastructure would be in place “to ensure it becomes a genuine community rather than a housing suburb of Exeter”⁶.

8. Milton Keynes “Renewed Town”

Location: “Reinvigorating the city centre and expanding to the city periphery” – believed to be north and east of the existing new town up to and beyond the M1, with an unspecified rapid transit system. Plans include 3,500 homes east of the M1, partly in Central Bedfordshire

Local authorities: Milton Keynes City Council, Central Bedfordshire Council

Developers: Milton Keynes City Council with Taylor Wimpey, Berkeley, Gallagher, Hallam Land, the Milton Keynes Development Partnership, Urban & Civic and the Bristol Society of Merchant Venturers.

Approximate area: Unclear

Number of homes: 40,000

Existing land: Includes substantial use of productive farmland.

Rail-based transit access: Milton Keynes has mainline rail stations at Bletchley, Milton Keynes Central, Wolverton and Fenny Stratford but none are obviously connected to this proposal. It does, however, include vague proposals for a mass rapid transit system in the city, though gives no details of this beyond a suggestion it could connect Bradwell to the city centre.

Discussion: The scheme proposed by the Council is supposed to add a further 40,000 homes to the city’s low-density sprawl, though it’s unclear whether this includes the further 39,500 homes already in local plans. The idea is to connect Bradwell and other unspecified areas with rapid transit to correct the city’s “historic mistake” of placing too much reliance on the car. There is also some vague mention of “densification”. However, Hallam Land’s application for 3,500 homes on a 231 hectare greenfield site at “Keepers Place” north-east of the M1 has been submitted to Central Bedfordshire and Milton Keynes Councils.



Opposition: Milton Keynes Conservatives oppose plans for an undemocratic development corporation, loss of farmland and potential loss of road space for a metro system⁷.

9. Plymouth



[Image: Visit Plymouth]

Location: Unclear – “the city centre and surrounding area”

Local authority: [Plymouth City Council](#)

Approximate area: Unclear

Number of homes: Up to 10,000 or up to 12,000

Existing land: Presumably mostly brownfield.

Rail-based transit access: Plymouth has its mainline rail station in the south of the city near the city centre. There are local stations at Dockyard, Keyham, St Budeaux Ferry Road and St Budeaux Victoria Road. There are no current plans for light-rail, though proposals were mooted in 2018 and 2021.

Discussion: The council expects around £4.4bn of investment in Devonport dockyard, which it hopes will generate around 5,500 jobs. It says it wants to create a residential core in the city centre with 8,000 homes and has been working with Homes England. In January 2026 it appointed⁸ Mae to draw up a city centre masterplan to redraw Patrick Abercrombie’s 1941 plan, though some architects are believed to be threatening the city with up to 30 tower blocks⁹.

10. Tempsford

Location: Around the village of Tempsford.

Local authority: Central Bedfordshire Council

Approximate area: Not stated

Number of homes: Up to 40,000

Existing land: Mostly greenfield, involving some of England's best farmland. Around half the land surrounding Tempsford is Grade 1 or Grade 2 and most of the rest Grade 3 (including the historic former airfield). It also involves extensive floodplains - of both the River Ivel and the River Ouse.



Tempsford New Town would destroy a large area of some of the UK's most productive agricultural land

[Image: © Jonathan Thacker under Creative Commons Licence]

Location: Around the village of Tempsford.

Local authority: Central Bedfordshire Council

Approximate area: Not stated

Number of homes: Up to 40,000

Existing land: Mostly greenfield, involving some of England's best farmland. Around half the land surrounding Tempsford is Grade 1 or Grade 2 and most of the rest Grade 3 (including the historic former airfield). It also involves extensive floodplains - of both the River Ivel and the River Ouse.

Rail-based transit access: Tempsford is at the place where the proposed East-West Rail between Bedford and Cambridge crosses the East Coast Main Line (ECML) on an odd route round housing developments. At best, it is several years away

Discussion: This would be a major town in an area of already suffering from serious water shortages and would involve destruction of a significant area of some of the UK's most productive agricultural land and lies within an area prone to flooding.

Although much has been made of its putative rail connections Tempsford New Town would be mostly car-dependent sprawl adjacent to major trunk roads. It currently lacks a station on the East Coast Main Line which already runs at full capacity thanks to the "Welwyn Block" (two tunnels and a huge viaduct restricted to two tracks); a new station serving a settlement of 100,000 people would be beyond its capacity. Plans to reopen the old Bedford-Cambridge line as "East-West Rail" involve diverting it from its former crossing of the ECML at the town of Sandy to the tiny village of Tempsford, apparently because it has long been a target for sprawl builders. Given its proximity to major trunk roads, its claims to have sustainable transport credentials should be viewed with suspicion.

Tempsford is a good example of lack of co-ordination on planning between local authorities, presumably because the "new towns" are driven by central government . The village is in Central Bedfordshire, but is close to the Huntingdonshire District Council (HDC) border. HDC's recently published *Preferred Options Draft Local Plan to 2046* is 476 pages long, but mentions Tempsford only once (para 4.28): "The East-West Rail project, with a new station at Tempsford, may contribute to improved rail access [in Huntingdonshire]" – note that "may ". What it would do is greatly increase the amount of vehicle traffic in surrounding roads, making a mockery of any hoped-for increase in capacity from the upgraded A428 between St Neots and Cambridge.

HDC's *Sustainability Appraisal for the Preferred Options Draft Local Plan to 2046* (634 pages) does not mention Tempsford at all, despite 281 references to flood risk and flood resilience. Neither does the *Huntingdonshire Integrated Water Management Strategy: Level 1 Strategic Flood Risk Assessment Final Report* (102 pages) . This is particularly remiss given the existing flood risk to the settlements along the Great Ouse downstream of Tempsford. There is also a proposal for a "garden community" of 4,000 homes (438ha) immediately to the north-east of Tempsford and contiguous with it. The absence of any regional perspective on the environmental and social consequences of Tempsford New Town is baffling.

11. Thamesmead Waterfront



[Image: Thamesmead Waterfront]

Location: Thames-side former industrial land to the north of Thamesmead town.

Local authority: Greenwich Borough Council

Promoter: [Peabody/Lendlease](#) joint venture

Approximate area: 100 hectares.

Number of homes: Approximately 15,000

Existing land: Brownfield

Rail-based transit access: Current railway stations at Plumstead and Abbey Wood are a significant distance away. A scheme to extend the Docklands Light Railway to the area was backed by the Chancellor in last year's Budget, but despite a mooted 2033 opening, it still awaits Government approval. The currently proposed line, however, would terminate at the Cannons Retail Park, to the west of the Waterfront site, leaving most of it a long way away¹⁰. There has been pressure to extend the new line further, to Bexley, with a second station on the Waterfront site, but there are currently no plans for this.

Discussion: The scheme aims to use one of the last major undeveloped brownfield waterfront sites in Greater London and could become a rare example of transit-oriented development, were current plans to extend the DLR increased.

Opposition: [CPRE London](#) has questioned whether the land should be allocated for housing and said it should be allocated as public open space.

12. Worcestershire Parkway – renamed Wychavon Town



“Wychavon Town”

[Image: Wychavon DC]

Location: Around Worcestershire Parkway station (opened in 2020).

Local authority: Wychavon District Council

Promoter: [Homes England](#) submitted plans for 5,500 sprawl homes in January 2026. [Hallam Land & Spetchley Estate](#) are proposing 70,000m² of employment space in “Wychavon Town”, in a development called Harkaway. Merton College and Brighton STM Developments are involved in the “Woodhall neighbourhood” with 29 hectares of industrial and logistics space near the M5 and 1,250 homes. Various other developers including Summix, Wain Estates and Bellway are also involved.

Approximate area: 1,150 hectares

Number of homes: 5,500 homes + 50ha of employment space by 2041. Vague plans to increase home building to 10,000 thereafter.

Existing land: Overwhelmingly greenfield farmland, Grade 2 and Grade 3.

Rail-based transit access: Worcestershire Parkway station is at the west side of the site.

Discussion: The site is largely good quality agricultural land and, although it has a station at one end of the site, it’s next to the M5 and A44.

5. The Taskforce recommended sites compared

5.1 **“New towns”?** The 12 locations recommended by the Taskforce are an extraordinarily mixed bunch. Many of them would do huge damage to the environment, though one of the worst victims could be the English language. The post-war new town definition did allow inclusion of small existing settlements (and these became progressively larger as the programme went on). Nevertheless, all of those new towns, barring one or two of the later ones, did at least bear a faint resemblance to something that could be called a recognisably new “town”. That is far from the case with around half of the Taskforce’s recommendations.

5.2 Adlington, Chase Park, Heyford Park, Marlcombe, Tempsford and Wychavon might make such a claim. But none of the other six – Brabazon, Leeds, Manchester, Milton Keynes, Plymouth and Thamesmead would remotely be new towns in any sense, being either straightforward urban regeneration schemes or extensions of existing development.

5.3 The cynical intention would appear to be to add a little glitter (if any remains) from the post-war new towns programme, while disguising those which involve significant urban sprawl and loss of farmland and nature by association with much more sustainable urban regeneration proposals. But most, if not all, of the urban regeneration projects were progressing happily without the need for central-government take-over via development corporations or biddable mayors.

5.4 **Start dates:** Another cynical aspect of the programme is that the Government’s initial response to the Taskforce report said: “We are determined to get spades in the ground on at least three new towns in this Parliament”¹¹. In September 2025, housing secretary Steve Reed told the party conference that priority for construction would be Tempsford, Leeds and Crews Hill

5.5 Spades were, however, already in the ground on at least three of the sites (Brabazon, Leeds and Manchester), so this is a pretty limited ambition. Perhaps the Government fears its determination to take control of the programme away from locally democratically elected bodies would delay work?

5.6 **Brownfield first or last?** One of the benefits of choosing projects which aren’t remotely “new towns” in any sense is that it does at least allow inclusion of schemes which make very good use of brownfield land.

5.7 The land used by the Taskforce’s sites in Leeds, Manchester, Plymouth and Thamesmead would be overwhelmingly brownfield. Brabazon is mostly brownfield though it makes the usual claim that disused airfields are purely brownfield (they’re not). Milton Keynes might involve some densification but definitely proposes extensive greenfield development to the north-east of the town.

5.8 Of the rest, Chase Park would make some use of the sites of garden centres, while Heyford would use another partially brownfield airfield, though at the expense of potentially preventing the use of important defence facilities. Adlington, Marslcombe, Tempsford and Wychavon would be largely greenfield sprawl.

5.9 **Farmland:** All six greenfield sites, plus the Milton Keynes extension, would make substantial use of best and most versatile farmland, at a time it's clear we cannot afford any more large-scale loss.

5.10 **Rail access:** The five largely brownfield schemes would enjoy some heavy rail access. Manchester would also see improved access to Metrolink, while Thamesmead would have an extension of the Docklands Light Railway to the edge of the site, with hopes for further extension. Plymouth lacks anything in the way of metro or light-rail and plans for Leeds metro, which could benefit Victoria North, have recently again been kicked into the long grass. Milton Keynes makes some vague noises about rapid transit but although Brabazon would have a new station, metro proposals for Bristol remain uncertain.

5.10 For the sprawl proposals, Adlington, Chase Park, Tempsford and Wychavon would have heavy rail stations on site, though the likelihood is that most of their inhabitants' journeys would be made by car. Heyford would have a station some distance away and Marlscombe would essentially be road-dependent.

6. Garden communities

6.1 The “garden communities” programme of the late 2010s saw the Government supporting “garden villages” of 1,500-10,000 homes and “garden towns” of more than 10,000, though in the end the distinction between the two became blurred (Ebbsfleet, with 15,000 homes, was excluded from the scheme). By 2020, a number of other projects were added to the original 17 garden villages and six garden towns.

6.2 However, the garden towns were even less likely to match the definition of anything which could be regarded as a “new town” than the Taskforce recommended sites. Lack of anything resembling an identifiable community was no bar to becoming a “garden community”, however. The North Essex and North Northamptonshire Garden Villages, for instance, were simply a scatter of cowpat estates, while several, like “Aylesbury Garden Town”, had no specific site at all and simply designated unrelated developments around the town. “Greater Exeter” proved to be simply a designation for a plan to build 20,000 homes in three separate local authority areas.

6.3 While spirited local opposition (and in one case MoD objections) saw off some of the worst schemes, others have been abandoned and some others have shrunk in size, a number of them have been smashed through the planning system and a handful of them could still potentially result in creating housing estates of more than 10,000 homes with some sort of identifiable boundary.

Chelmsford Garden Community

Location: On farmland north-east of the city.

Local authority: [Chelmsford City Council](#)

Promoters: Countryside, L&Q, Ptarmigan Land and Halley Developments

Approximate area: 374 hectares

Number of homes: 10,000 when the Beaulieu and Channels housing estates, already underway, are included.

Existing land: Greenfield, productive Grade 3 farmland.

Rail-based transit access: The site is several miles from Chelmsford station and bus services are proposed, though a new station nearer the site at Beaulieu Park has opened.

Discussion: Hyper-low density and maximum land take has been achieved by inclusion of 238 hectares of “green and blue infrastructure” and 17 hectares of sports facilities.

Gilston

Location: Gilston, north of Harlow

Local authority: East Herts Council

Promoters: Places for People, Taylor Wimpey

Approximate area: 1,500 hectares

Number of homes: 10,000

Existing land: Greenfield, productive Grade 2 and 3 farmland. Mostly green belt, though the status is being removed.

Rail-based transit access: Harlow station is some distance from the site.

Discussion: Very high land consumption thanks to ultra-low-density. “Most of the land within the Gilston Area is currently quite intensively farmed,” say promoters. “Our proposals will restore much of this land to open countryside, enabling residents to enjoy new walking paths, trails and open green space.”

Opposition: [CPRE Hertfordshire](#) has demanded the developers stick to their original promise of 40% affordable housing.

Otterpool

Location: Beside Junction 11 of the M20 between Folkestone and Ashford.

Local authority: Council

Promoter: [Otterpool Park LLP](#)

Approximate area: 770 hectares

Number of homes: Originally 12,000, reduced to 8,000 in a masterplan.

Existing land: Productive Grade 3 farmland and Folkestone race course.

Rail-based transit access: Westenhanger station is at one corner of site, though it's also beside the M20.

Discussion: Scheme is paused at time of writing as it has run into viability and deliverability issues, although the tit-for-tat in the current review includes consideration of an even vaster development area. Folkestone & Hythe District Council is heavily exposed financially.

Opposition: [Shepway Vox](#) has been scrutinising the proposal.

St Cuthberts Garden Community

Location: On farmland south of Carlisle

Local authority: Cumberland Council

Promoter: Still to be confirmed

Approximate area: 1,323 hectares

Number of homes: 10,325

Existing land: Productive Grade 3 farmland.



“St Cuthbert’s Garden Community”

[Image: Smart Growth UK]

Rail-based transit access: The site is several miles from Carlisle station but has a new link road to Junction 42 of the M6.

Discussion: Described as a long-term plan (30-40 years), the scheme is being pursued on productive farmland well outside a city where pressure for new homes is low.

7. “Eco towns”

7.1 “Eco towns” began the 21st century’s tortuous, expensive, politically damaging and generally unproductive attempts by central government to support large, new housing estates. Eco towns started life in the mid-2000s and attracted 50 proposals, mostly old schemes revived. Only four were ever selected by the Government, three went ahead to a greater or lesser extent (all with well under 10,000 homes) and what was left of the programme eventually morphed into garden towns and villages in the 2010s. They became an object lesson in why new towns of any description are, as concluded in our first new towns report, the slowest, costliest and most environmentally damaging way of doing large-scale development. The contemporaneous Northstowe scheme wasn’t actually part of the programme, but is included here as the most appropriate section for this abject failure of a programme.

Northstowe

Location: On the site of the former Oakington Barracks, west of Cambridge

Local authority: South Cambridgeshire District Council

Promoters: Various

Approximate area: Not stated.

Number of homes: 10,000

Existing land: Part brownfield, part greenfield former airfield and barracks

Rail-based transit access: The site is several miles from Cambridge station but the Cambridgeshire guided bus road runs along one side of the site.

Discussion: Not strictly an “eco town”, though its long and tortuous history has extended from the “eco towns” era, through garden communities to the new towns age. The idea began nearly 20 years ago in 2007 when the first planning application for an eco town was submitted and planning inspectors recommended raising the housing total from 8,000 to 10,000. The Council eventually agreed a planning framework in 2012 for a phased development for the first 1,500 homes, a school, roads and a local centre. A further 3,500 homes were consented in 2015 and consent for the final 5,000 homes was sought in the 2020s. Homes England has invested tens of millions of pounds in the site which, by mid-2025 had seen 1,750 homes occupied and primary and secondary schools opened. A town centre strategy was drawn up in 2020 and a medical facility in temporary buildings was opened in 2023. The development has been widely cited nationally as an exemplar of how not to do large scale development.

7.2 As noted above, several other garden communities involving more than 10,000 homes are still struggling on, but do not occupy identifiable areas and are mostly just agglomerations of new housing estates. They should certainly never claim to be “new towns”, though why they should even claim to be “communities” is a mystery.

8. “Forest towns and cities”

Forest City 1

Location: On a still to be defined 230 sq. km site between Haverhill and Newmarket.

Local authorities: East Cambridgeshire District Council and West Suffolk District Council

Promoter: [Albion City Development Corporation](#)

Approximate area: 18,200 hectares + 4,900 hectares of forestry.

Number of homes: 400,000

Existing land: Mostly highly productive, Grade 2, farmland, natural sites and some small villages.

Rail-based transit access: The site is several miles from existing railway stations in Cambridge and Newmarket. The developers propose an extension eastwards of East-West Rail, as well as a “multi-line tram and metro system (unclear which) and extension of the M11 to give access to Stansted Airport.

Discussion: The proposal is the brainchild of a few individuals and apparently has no institutional backing, though it claims some land owners are on board despite its plans for a community land trust. The promoters aim to secure “special economic zone” status to free them from some planning, regulation and tax obligations. They also propose a development corporation and a community land trust model, giving them an ability to decide who would become residents.

Opposition: West Suffolk MP [Nick Timothy](#) has been campaigning against Forest City.

“Forest towns”

Locations: Yet to be defined.

Local authority: Unknown, but probably somewhere in the “Ox-Cam Corridor”

Approximate area: Unknown.

Number of homes: Unknown

Existing land: Unknown but likely to be mostly greenfield.

Discussion: On 5 November 2025, the Government announced¹² plans for a second “national forest” at an unknown location in the “Ox-Cam Corridor”. That same day, environment minister Mary Creagh told an interview in *The Guardian*¹³ that a new set of forest towns would be built in the area between Oxford and Cambridge, “nestled in the middle of a new national forest”. No locations were given but the new homes would be a 10-minute walk from the forest. “It’s about creating places and spaces where generations of people are going to build a home, make their families, they’re lovely for people to live in and where nature can thrive,” said Ms Creagh.

9. Food and water security

9.1 The threat to large areas of farmland by new towns such as Tempsford and the other big developments outlined here sets the context in which to sound the alarm over the threat that greenfield new towns - and big sprawl developments - pose to our food and water security.

9.2 Parts of a national intelligence report¹⁴ on security and economic threats were eventually published in January, following freedom of information requests. The report, by the Joint Intelligence Organisation, details threats to national security from planetary ecosystem collapse, but had been blocked by Downing Street.

9.3 It identified six ecosystems on the path to collapse, threatening to increase migration, geopolitical competition, pandemics and economic insecurity. But a principal concern was UK food supplies.

9.4 "Ecosystem degradation or collapse will challenge the UK's food security," it said and pointed out the country relies heavily on imports. It said domestic production is vulnerable to ecosystem degradation and collapse, while such collapses in world food-producing regions would drive up global food prices.

9.5 A copy of the full report was obtained by ITV News¹⁵ which discovered it went further than the abridged version published by Whitehall. It said the "UK [is] increasingly exposed to state threats, particularly if our food system becomes a more vulnerable or desirable target." It also highlighted the "risk of NATO being drawn into escalating conflicts over arable land" such as the "breadbaskets" of Ukraine and Russia and notes the UK already needs to import around 40% of its food.

9.6 "The Government has admitted for the first time that climate and biodiversity loss are parts of our national security," retired Lt Gen Richard Nugee, a strategic advisor on climate, security and defence, told the programme. "They don't do that lightly, and what that shows is that actually, we should be concerned for our security as a homeland. We must build our homeland resilience because otherwise we are putting our citizens at risk."

9.7 This serious threat has been ignored by successive governments' attempts to promote sprawl building of homes and distribution depots. The New Towns Taskforce makes absolutely no mention of it despite recommending seven sites involving massive destruction of food-producing land.

9.8 The intelligence report noted too the threats to water security in several parts of the world, like the Himalayas, which is causing regional instability, mass migration and threatens to exacerbate polarised and populist politics in the UK.

9.9 But the new towns report also ignored growing chronic water shortages in parts of the UK and recommended new towns at places like Tempsford where it would severely exacerbate existing regional challenges.

9.10 The nation's security is the first responsibility of government. Successive governments have ignored that responsibility in their desperate desire to promote sprawl building.



[Image: Caulcott Area Residents Association]

9.11 Developers find large areas of the most productive farmland magnetically attractive as they're the cheapest places to develop. That usually involves the arable land our food security depends on. The houses on the left (above) are some of those already built on the former Upper Heyford airbase by developer Dorchester.

9.12 Now, however, the same developer is pushing to develop outside the base on to the productive arable land owned by New College Oxford and has secured an option agreement on it. It argues it needs greenfield land to ensure that developing the brownfield parts of the airbase yield a satisfactory rate of return for its shareholders. Local people fear that would increase the flooding problems they are already suffering.

9.13 But similar destruction of productive farmland is happening all over the country thanks to the Treasury's obsession with building raw numbers of houses, of which the greenfield new towns programme is a symptom. It's clear that sections of the Government do not regard national security as a priority compared to their extremist economic views.

10. Conclusions

10.1 The 12 sites proposed by the New Towns Taskforce are an extraordinarily mixed bunch, but one bizarre contradiction stands out strongly - those that could claim to be sustainable are not remotely “new towns” in any sense whatsoever, while those that could claim to be new towns are destructive destroyers of land and would, essentially, be largely car-dependent developments.

10.2 In the context of the Government’s aspiration to have three of the schemes underway by July 2029, it’s worth noting that at least three of the developments were already at the time of the Taskforce’s 2025 report.

10.3 Beyond the Taskforce recommendations, other 10,000+ home developments are proposed in the light of successive Governments’ big pushes for urban sprawl. Most are at strikingly unsustainable locations, including the inaptly named “Forest City 1”.

10.4 The Government will shortly be deciding which of the Taskforce approved proposals to take forward. We could certainly, at least in principle, commend the plans in Leeds, Manchester, Plymouth and Thamesmead and Brabazon and possibly some of the less certain aspects of the proposal for Milton Keynes. That, “in principle” is important of course as we know little of what’s actually proposed (there is already the threat of multiple tower blocks in the Plymouth scheme, for instance). However, the proposals for Adlington, Crews Hill & Chase Park, Heyford Park, Marlcombe, Tempsford and Wychavon Town are largely, or overwhelmingly, greenfield land, involving massive destruction of productive farmland, natural sites or, in one case, high-quality defence infrastructure. They all include substantial areas of best and most versatile farmland, including significant areas of the precious Grade 1 and Grade 2 land.

10.5 Most of the larger (10,000+ home) “garden communities” bear no relation to single communities, merely being aggregations of developments in particular areas and several have been reduced in size or fallen by the wayside. It seems about four of the larger ones with definable boundaries are struggling on, as is Northstowe, from the “eco towns” era.

10.6 “Forest City 1” has shown how enthusiasm and “yimby” thinking can generate a massive scheme on a hopelessly unsustainable site which should have been obvious to the promoters. Other plans for “forest towns” would appear to suffer from the same myopia; the concept is out-of-date and potentially destructive.

10.7 Generally speaking, we see no reason to depart from the conclusion of our first new towns report last August that big, new town developments (those that would actually be new towns) are the slowest, costliest and most destructive way to do large-scale development.

We recommend the Government reject those New Towns Taskforce endorsed sites which involve significant destruction of greenfield land, drop the name “new towns” and stick to supporting sustainable urban regeneration sites, especially those involving transit-oriented-development.

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