

# garden cities **myth-buster**

a short guide to myths and truths about creating new garden cities



## What are Garden Cities?

The TCPA believes that Garden Cities are places in which:

- the community is in control – people have a direct say in planning their future;
- the community owns local facilities and gets income from the profits of development and from providing things like energy;
- we build beautiful and affordable housing in neighbourhoods imaginatively designed so that the kids can walk to school, and buying a pint of milk means just popping round the corner;
- we encourage an exciting nightlife and offer opportunities for people to get involved in the arts and sport;
- we encourage mixed and diverse communities for people from all backgrounds;
- we can grow our own food, either at home or in a community garden, farm or allotment;
- we create fantastic green spaces for people and wildlife;
- we create local jobs to reduce the need to travel long distances to work;
- we provide plenty of opportunities for safe walking and cycling, supported by convenient public transport.

These are the Garden City principles – an indivisible and interlocking framework for the delivery of high-quality places.

## Today's challenges

Building a new generation of Garden Cities and Suburbs enjoys cross-party support, in recognition of the part that new communities can play in addressing Britain's chronic housing crisis. Census figures show that as a nation we require around 240,000 new homes each year up to 2031 to meet the needs of our growing population – although this requirement does not affect everywhere in the same way. Change is not always easy to accept; but we have to answer the question of where our children are going to live. Homes are not the only challenge: we must also deal with climate change, tackle unemployment by providing more local jobs, and help people to lead healthier lifestyles.

## Myths about Garden Cities

The debate about meeting our housing needs can often become very polarised, and there are already many misconceptions about how new communities might help in tackling the housing crisis. This short guide dispels some of the common myths about Garden Cities, and explains why there is a huge opportunity to meet our need for more housing through the creation of a new generation of beautiful, inclusive Garden City communities.

**Myth:** We don't need new Garden Cities because there is enough brownfield inner-city land available to meet the nation's housing needs

**The Truth:** Given the scale of the housing challenge in Britain today, we need to develop both brownfield and greenfield sites

Where we build the homes we need is not a question of using either brownfield or greenfield land, but a matter of choosing the most sustainable locations for new and renewed communities.

Such decisions should be based on a wide

range of considerations – such as the need and demand for new homes, the ability to adapt to climate change and enhance biodiversity, and the opportunity to provide more local jobs and sustainable travel by public transport.

Studies have shown that there are enough brownfield sites to accommodate up to 1.5 million homes.\* However, given that current demographic and population forecasts indicate 240,000 new homes will be required each year up to 2031 (plus further homes to meet a significant backlog of need unmet by years of under-supply), even if all these sites could be developed, they would provide land only for six years of supply. It is also likely that not all these brownfield sites *should* or *could* be developed; some will be cherished by local communities for their current biodiversity and/or amenity value, and other former industrial sites might be difficult and expensive to clean up or poorly served by public transport.

\* [www.homesandcommunities.co.uk/sites/default/files/our-work/nlud-report-2009.pdf](http://www.homesandcommunities.co.uk/sites/default/files/our-work/nlud-report-2009.pdf)



*Myth: New Garden Cities will be soulless commuter towns*

**The Truth:** For any new community to be successful, jobs need to be provided with homes, and the right community infrastructure must be delivered upfront

Garden Cities are not simply about housing: they are about making all-inclusive communities. This requires a broad range of employment opportunities, with the aim of offering no less than one job per new household. The nature of work is changing, and new communities can be planned and designed for more flexible working arrangements.

Shorter commuting distances can both improve residents' quality of life and reduce carbon dioxide emissions. Where travel is necessary, sustainable and smart public transport networks can be planned from the outset to make them as efficient as possible. New Garden Cities must adopt smart systems and must be flexible enough to respond to changes in work and technology.

More people travel to work each day in successful new communities such as Stevenage and Milton Keynes than



commute to jobs elsewhere. The 2011 Census\* revealed that in Stevenage there was a net inflow of over 2,000 workers into the town (18,608 Stevenage residents commuted out for work while 20,770 workers in-commuted). In Milton Keynes the figures are even more impressive: the 2011 Census showed that there was net in-commuting to Milton Keynes of over 16,000 people.

A study carried out by Milton Keynes Council in 2012† predicts that by 2026 around 45,000 people will in-commute to Milton Keynes, compared with out-commuting of around 14,000.

\* [www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk/HTMLDocs/dvc193/](http://www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk/HTMLDocs/dvc193/)  
 † [www.milton-keynes.gov.uk/assets/attach/11658/MKC-25\\_REVISED\\_COMMUTING\\_PAPER-PE.pdf](http://www.milton-keynes.gov.uk/assets/attach/11658/MKC-25_REVISED_COMMUTING_PAPER-PE.pdf)

**Myth:** *New Garden Cities will be low-density, unsustainable urban sprawl that encourages car use*

**The Truth:** There is no specified density for new Garden Cities, and with a 'whole-town' approach to creating a new community they are the exact opposite to sprawling, 'bolt-on' housing estates

A common misconception is that the Garden City approach implies low-density living. In fact, there is no specified density for new Garden Cities, and a range of densities across different areas would be expected – for example, there would be higher densities around transport hubs and neighbourhood centres. The test is the extent to which the density applied allows for the realisation of the Garden City principles (see page 2) – which include creating walkable neighbourhoods and providing access to sustainable public transport.

While city-centre living in high-rise flats suits some people, 78% of the 6,000 individuals surveyed in a May 2014 poll agreed with the statement 'it is important to provide gardens in new homes that are built in Britain'.\* Because new Garden Cities can deal with housing growth on larger strategic sites, they can meet housing need over the long term in the most sustainable way. They are by definition the complete opposite of unplanned, unco-ordinated housing development.

\* [www.populus.co.uk/Poll/Garden-City-Poll/](http://www.populus.co.uk/Poll/Garden-City-Poll/)



*Myth: New Garden Cities will cost too much for any government to build*

**The Truth:** Building new Garden Cities is a profitable enterprise and will pay back the direct cost of infrastructure, while also delivering broader benefits to the UK economy

Capturing the increased land values arising from the grant of planning permission was the crucial and highly successful funding model used in the development of the original Garden Cities and the post-war New Towns. Today, the Government can play a key role in laying the foundation for action by considering how land values can best be used for the long-term benefit of the community.

Loans from the private or public sectors will also be necessary to fund the upfront infrastructure, but history shows how profitable an enterprise building new communities can be. As well as these direct benefits, there are significant wider benefits to the economy through, for example, construction expenditure.



**Myth:** *New Garden Cities will divert investment away from existing towns and cities*

**The Truth:** **Creating new Garden Cities should go hand in hand with regenerating our existing towns and cities**

No-one is suggesting that Garden Cities are the only way of meeting our housing needs. In fact, we need a 'portfolio' approach of different solutions, recognising the differing needs of England's regions and localities.

Regeneration remains a key priority, and the TCPA has shown how the Garden City principles can be applied to this task. England needs a proper urban policy in which Garden Cities and regeneration are seen as complementary interventions. It is true that by the 1970s there was concern that New Towns were drawing growth away from inner London. However, this was in era in which London's overall population was in decline. Circumstances are very different today: the nation's population has grown by 10 million since 1964, with roughly half of this growth occurring since 2001.\*

\* [www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/pop-estimate/population-estimates-for-uk-england-and-wales-scotland-and-northern-ireland/2013/sty-population-changes.html](http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/pop-estimate/population-estimates-for-uk-england-and-wales-scotland-and-northern-ireland/2013/sty-population-changes.html)



*Myth: The homes in new Garden Cities will not be affordable*

**The Truth:** The Garden City principles were founded on an understanding of the importance of decent homes in high-quality environments for everyone

Garden Cities are defined by their focus on providing genuinely affordable homes for those on low and moderate incomes, so that ordinary people are not denied good-quality housing and a decent quality of life. As a result, new Garden Cities should provide diverse housing tenure options, delivered by a range of providers – from private sector housebuilders to Development Corporation partnerships with housing associations and smaller housing providers such as co-operatives and community land trusts. Self-/custom-build homes are an important part of the housing mix in Garden Cities, and land should be designated for this purpose – preferably as serviced plots.

A third of the homes in Letchworth, the world's first Garden City, are social-rented.\* Today's new Garden Cities should aim to be just as ambitious.

\* [www.leetchworth.com/sites/default/files/attachments/economic\\_assessment\\_nlp.pdf](http://www.leetchworth.com/sites/default/files/attachments/economic_assessment_nlp.pdf)





*Myth: New Garden Cities will be cultural deserts*

**The Truth:** Garden Cities are places that recognise the vital roles that art and culture play in people's lives, and they can both provide and fund the facilities for a wide range of cultural activities

Culture and the arts provided inspiration for the Garden City movement, reflected not just in high-quality design but also in provision for a wide range of cultural activities. Welwyn Garden City's first public building was a theatre. The long-term stewardship of assets by the community can secure funding for the provision and upkeep of buildings, as well as for community activities.



In the case of Letchworth Garden City, the residual assets of the original development company have been incorporated into Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation – a self-funding charitable organisation that reinvests its income for the long-term benefit of the local community. Endowment income generated mainly from its property portfolio enables the Heritage Foundation to provide additionality to services and facilities delivered by the local council. Provision includes the operation of a cinema, a treatment centre for the local community and people who work in the town, a museum, an educational family farm, a community hub, a section of open space, a greenway around the town, a mini-bus service, and a tourist information centre, which incorporates a shopmobility service.

**Myth:** *New Garden Cities will all look like something from the Truman Show – boring or ugly, or both*

**The Truth:** New Garden Cities must provide beautiful homes, in attractive places that are planned, designed, developed and managed to be aesthetically, culturally and environmentally rich and stimulating

Garden Cities are places of high-quality design and innovation. The local built heritage should be married with the best design approaches appropriate to today's context, making the most of new technologies and innovations in construction and design.



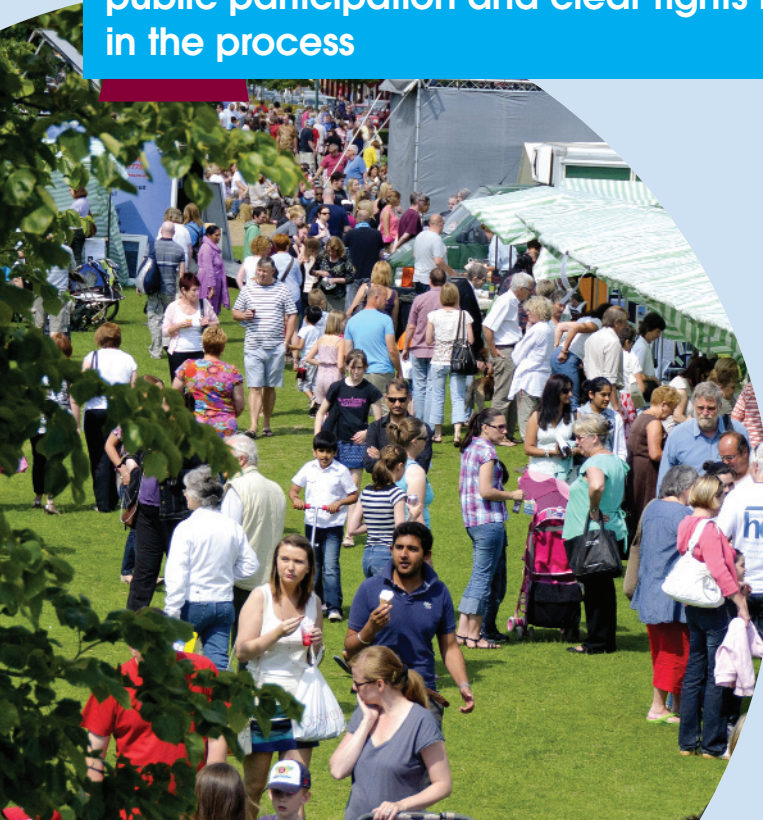
We must heed lessons from the post-war programme of New Towns. They were designed to be exemplars of quality development, but today many look unappealing and run-down because their financial assets were taken away, leaving them without the necessary resources for upkeep and renewal.

The New Towns mainly provided public sector mass housing to meet the urgent needs of the time. The early New Towns suffered because of an acute national shortage of high-quality building materials, resulting in some poor-quality structures. The later examples suffered from being designed or developed under the car-dominated modernism which then held sway – and which has largely failed – throughout the world.

To avoid the mistakes of the past we must focus on the quality of new places – not just the number of houses – and we must ensure that they are endowed with sufficient assets to secure long-term income for future maintenance.

**Myth:** *New Garden Cities will be imposed on communities, and local people will not have a say*

**The Truth:** The designation of new Garden Cities must allow for genuine public participation and clear rights for people to be fully represented in the process



Garden Cities are places that give people a real opportunity to shape the development and ongoing direction of their community once it has been established. However, there is no point in pretending that the process of agreeing where new Garden Cities will go will be easy. The benefits of a new settlement can have local, regional and national significance in meeting housing needs, but the impacts are focused on those residents who live near the site. The best way for designations to come forward is for local authorities to decide that new Garden Cities will best meet their long-term housing needs. Government has a strong role to play in supporting this process with resources to help guide development to the most sustainable locations and through brokering relationships with landowners and neighbouring local authorities.

Designation should be made through the formal planning process, in which people have a civil right to engagement. Furthermore, their participation is likely to lead to better planning outcomes.

## Acknowledgement

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Photographs on pages 7, 9, 10 and 11 are reproduced courtesy of Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation.

## Want to know more about Garden Cities?

In recent years the TCPA has been conducting a re-invigorated campaign in support of a new generation of beautiful, inclusive and sustainable Garden Cities. This 'myth-buster' is part of a suite of documents setting out the practical actions needed to make 21st century Garden Cities and Suburbs a reality:

- *The Art of Building a Garden City: Garden City Standards for the 21st Century* (July 2014)
- *New Towns Act 2015?* (February 2014)
- *Built Today, Treasured Tomorrow – A Good Practice Guide to Long-Term Stewardship Models* (January 2014)
- *How Good Can It Be? A Guide to Building Better Places* (November 2013)
- *Creating Garden Cities and Suburbs Today: A Guide for Councils* (March 2013)
- *Land Value Capture and Infrastructure Delivery through SLICs*. Town & Country Planning Tomorrow Series Paper 13, by John Walker (September 2012)
- *Creating Garden Cities and Suburbs Today: Policies, Practices, Partnerships and Model Approaches – A Report of the Garden Cities and Suburbs Expert Group* (May 2012)
- *Nothing Gained by Overcrowding!* (April 2012)
- *Re-imagining Garden City Principles for the 21st Century: Benefits and Lessons in Bringing Forward Comprehensively Planned New Communities* (June 2011)

All these publications are available as PDFs from the TCPA's website, at [www.tcpa.org.uk/pages/garden-cities.html](http://www.tcpa.org.uk/pages/garden-cities.html)



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