Town & Country Planning
Tomorrow Series Paper 19

celebrating 70 years of the new towns act

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reflections on what the 1946 New Towns Act achieved and what we can learn from it today

contents

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Celebrating 70 Years of the New Towns Act – Reflections on What the 1946 New Towns Act Achieved and What We Can Learn from it Today
Town & Country Planning Tomorrow Series Paper 19

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foreword

70 years ago, faced with the need to rebuild Britain after the ravages of war, the post-Second World War Government was persuaded to embark on a programme of town-building: the New Towns programme. The New Towns Act 1946 detailed how these large-scale new communities would be located and paid for, and how they would be planned and delivered by dedicated single-purpose, long-life organisations called Development Corporations, appointed by government.

Today we are facing many of the challenges faced in 1946, and yet we are supplying half the new homes we need each year to keep up with the housing needs generated by a 21st century baby-boom and rapidly lengthening life-spans.

What are we thinking of? Even in the 'overcrowded' South East, 87% of the land is still green fields, and meeting housing needs would use less than 1% of that space.

I believe the failure to build the homes we need is because the default option for new homes has been endless 'anywhere' estates crammed onto the green fields around historic communities. It is what the economics of rationed land supply and the concentration of development on the urban fringe delivers – but it creates massively unpopular developments. These are the green fields people value precisely because they are on their doorstep, and they are the setting of their historic community. Opposition to these developments is inevitable, and that is why we under-supply the homes that people need.

As I have advocated, housing need would be more readily met through new settlements, using modernised New Towns Act powers with delivery, quality and community services guaranteed through the development body. This opens the path to the US and European model, in which homes are often built to order within beautifully planned settlements, and where the necessary social (and other) infrastructure is delivered by a 'master-builder' and funded by future plot sales. But we need to learn the lessons – good and bad – of what has been done before.

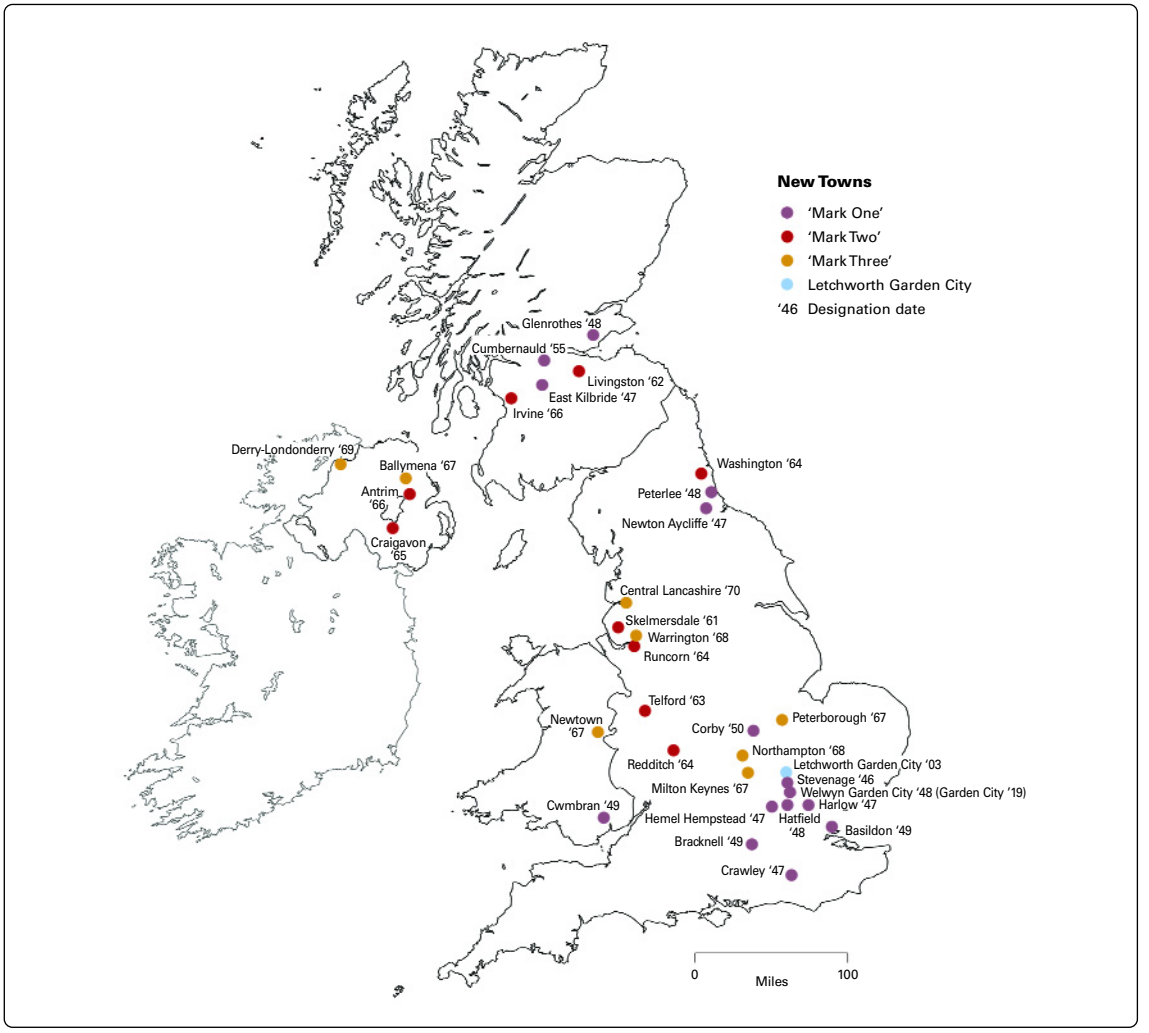
This short collection of articles touches on some of those lessons – and the challenges the Government still needs to address to ensure it meets the aspiration to create genuinely beautiful, thriving communities.

Lord Matthew Taylor of Goss Moor

● ***Lord Matthew Taylor of Goss Moor, Hon MRTPI*** *has advised the Labour, Coalition and now the Conservative Government on planning policy reform. In January 2015 Policy Exchange published Lord Taylor's detailed proposal for new Garden Villages and a modernised New Towns Act, a policy which the Government committed to in the 2016 Budget. He is Visiting Professor of Planning at Plymouth University and Senior Visiting Fellow at Cambridge University School of Planning. The views expressed are personal.*

a landmark in planned urbanism

Katy Lock reviews the history of the legislation underpinning the most ambitious large-scale town-building programme ever undertaken in the UK



The locations and designation/founding dates of the UK's 32 New Towns and two Garden Cities

What typically comes to mind on hearing the words 'New Town'? Modernist housing estates? Bleak architecture? Roundabouts? The New Towns are often the butt of jokes about the failures of modern urbanism (often made by people who have never visited a New Town, let alone lived or worked in one), but their story is an intriguing one: of, among others, anarchists, artists and visionaries; and more than anything else is about the promise of a new beginning for millions of people.

2016 marked the 70th anniversary of the 1946 New Towns Act, and of the designation of the first New Town at Stevenage. It also marked 500 years since the publication of Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* (a publication which itself proposed 54 new towns as a means of preventing 'suburban sprawl' and which was referred to by Lewis Silkin, as Minister of Town and Country Planning, in the Second Reading of the New Towns Bill).

As a new programme of Garden Cities and new towns in England looks increasingly likely (and as Scotland and Wales explore the opportunities for new communities to help meet their housing needs), the anniversaries of the New Towns Act and More's *Utopia* offer a good opportunity to reflect on the lessons of what has been done before – both good and bad.

The post-war New Towns programme was the most ambitious large-scale town-building programme ever undertaken in the United Kingdom, and was described by the late Sir Peter Hall as 'perhaps the greatest single creation of planned urbanism ever undertaken anywhere'.[1] The New Towns were direct descendants of the Garden City movement, upscaled in size of population and strategic economic purpose, and with very different methods of delivery, but with many shared objectives.

Between 1946 and 1970, the New Towns Act, and subsequent legislation in Scotland and Northern Ireland, led to the delivery 32 New Towns across the UK. The legislation set out how they would be delivered by powerful, long-life, dedicated organisations called Development Corporations. The Corporations had a range of borrowing, planning and masterplanning powers and the ability to acquire land by compulsory purchase and proactively manage the values created as the towns developed.

The New Towns programme was ambitious not only in its scale and means of delivery, but also in its objectives to create 'balanced communities'. Reflecting the spirit of the Garden City movement, the purpose of the New Towns was not simply to provide homes and jobs, but to create socially balanced communities that integrated employment, homes and social life to provide opportunities for all. Lewis Silkin famously argued that:

> '*our aim must be to combine in the new town the friendly spirit of the former slum with the vastly improved health conditions of the new estate, but it must be a broadened spirit, embracing all classes of society… we may well produce in the new towns a new type of citizen, a healthy, self-respecting, dignified person, with a sense of beauty, culture and civic pride.*'[2]

To this end the Development Corporations invested huge amounts of time and money in innovative design and masterplanning, in civic art and in community development of all kinds for both new and existing residents.

Designations under the New Towns Act came to an end in the late 1960s, as the programme lost political favour. The New Towns were blamed for draining the inner cities of their most vigorous young people (in fact, only some 17% of those leaving London had actually gone to the New Towns) and for drawing off money that should be spent on regeneration (in fact, money directed to the New Towns was on loan, repayable with interest); and central government turned its attention to the problems of the inner cities, disregarding any part that might have been played by further New Towns and the continuing development of those already designated.

The New Town Development Corporations had acquired, and created, valuable assets in the form of land and property. Although it was originally planned to transfer the assets of mature New Towns to the relevant local authorities once the Development Corporations' work was complete, the New Towns Act 1959 established a national agency, the Commission for the New Towns, to manage residual assets after the dissolution of each Development Corporation. A first tranche of Development Corporations was wound up in the 1960s. Some of the assets were transferred to local authorities and the Commission for the New Towns became landlord for the rest, with rent receipts going back to HM Treasury.

The story began to change in the 1980s, following the election of the first Thatcher Government, which wanted all the New Town Development Corporations to be wound up as soon as possible. The Commission for the New Towns was instructed to sell its existing portfolio of land and property and any further land or property it received from the remaining Development Corporations as they were wound up. In Scotland, Development Corporation assets were transferred to the local authority and the Scottish Executive. In Northern Ireland, New Town Commissions (the Northern Ireland equivalent of Development

1 P. Hall and C. Ward: *Sociable Cities: The 21st-Century Reinvention of the Garden City*. Routledge, 2014, p.2

2 Lewis Silkin MP addressing the House of Commons during the Second Reading of the New Towns Bill. *Hansard*. House of Commons Debate, 8 May 1946, Vol. 422, Cols 1072-184. http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1946/may/08/new-towns-bill

Corporations) took on local authority functions on the passing of a municipal order, and on wind-up retained some of the land and property, with the rest going to the Northern Ireland Ministry of Development.

It was here that the New Towns programme failed to act on one of the most important lessons from the Garden City movement – that of long-term stewardship. The failure to transfer assets to local authorities or community-led organisations, combined with a fire-sale of assets that had not reached maturity, proved to be a chronic shortcoming of the New Towns programme – preventing the towns from retaining the means to look after the high-quality community facilities and assets that the Development Corporations had provided.

While this provided a challenge for authorities who inherited the governance of the New Towns, it did not prevent central government from profiting from the programme. The New Towns were developed under what was a long-term programme of investment that was ultimately profitable for HM Treasury. The total £4.75 billion loan made to the New Town Development Corporations by HM Treasury was repaid in early 1999 (assisted by the sale of sites). After that, by 2002 land sale receipts had generated around a further £600 million, of which only £120 million was reinvested in the New Towns.[3] More recently, between 2010 and 2014 alone land sale receipts generated a further £70,316,130 for HM Treasury.[4]

Today the New Towns provide homes for over 2.8 million people – or 4.3% of the UK's households. As a set of places, they also exhibit a range of successes and failures – including, as they do, both the fastest-growing and most successful yet also some of the most deprived communities in the UK. The Development Corporations left outstanding legacies in the New Towns, including comprehensive green space networks and landscape design, good-quality social housing, and an emphasis on community development.

The New Towns' physical design and architecture, including civic art, are only just being recognised as important modern heritage assets which not only require protection but could also prove to be catalysts in their renewal. But as a result of building at speed – and, often under the constraints of the day, using cheap materials – whole estates are now in need of renewal, putting a significant burden on local authorities, while tired-looking buildings affect contemporary perceptions of what were once ambitious schemes. The central government dictated fire-sale of assets has left – with the exception of The Parks Trust and Milton Keynes Community Foundation in Milton Keynes and Nene Park Trust in Peterborough – no means to look after the facilities provided by the Development Corporations.

The TCPA is working with the local authorities in the former New Town areas through its New Town Network to understand better their specific renewal needs and opportunities and to celebrate their successes. In the New Towns Act's 70th year this work involved bringing together the New Town authorities to explore their opportunities for growth and renewal in a series of roundtables. The next step is to share experience, celebrate success and promote the New Towns through the Network.

Spurred on by the 70th anniversary of the New Towns Act 1946, in 2016 the TCPA organised a number of events and activities, including a study tour, a conference and a short film which takes its name from Stevenage's motto, '*The heart of the new town lies in its people*', and can be viewed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nyCEK8k7jjg. Stevenage's 70th birthday marked the start of a series of opportunities to celebrate the New Towns as they reach significant milestones. In 2017 Milton Keynes will be 50, while Crawley, Hemel Hempstead, Harlow, Newton Aycliffe, and East Kilbride will turn 70. The TCPA, once instrumental in helping to shape these places, will continue to support them and seek out and disseminate lessons from the New Town experience, while campaigning for a new generation of new communities today.

Building the future – modernising the New Towns Act

Today, the New Towns Act is still on the statute books and remains an important tool for tackling the nation's contemporary housing challenge. The Act enabled the fast and efficient delivery of new communities, at a time of austerity, using a financial model that paid for itself (the first generation of New Towns were so economically successful that

3 Memorandum NT 33, submitted by the Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions to the House of Commons Transport, Local Government and the Regions Committee, Apr. 2002. http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200102/cmselect/cmtlgr/603/603m38.htm. Published within *New Towns: Follow-Up*. HC 889. Ninth Report of Session 2007-08. House of Commons Communities and Local Government Committee. TSO, 2008

4 Figure provided by the Homes and Communities Agency, July 2015. Includes all land in the New Towns, and not just land formerly in the ownership of the Commission for the New Towns

they became net lenders to other public bodies). The TCPA has been campaigning for a new generation of Garden Cities which combine the high ideals and place-making standards of the Garden City movement with the effective delivery mechanisms of the New Towns programme, building on the lessons from past experience.

A few amendments to the New Towns Act are required to make it fit for purpose today – for example, new Development Corporations must be required to commit to high standards of sustainability and participation, and, crucially, the legislation should set out provisions for the long-term stewardship of valuable community assets. Details of the necessary amendments are laid out in the TCPA's *New Towns Act 2015?* publication.

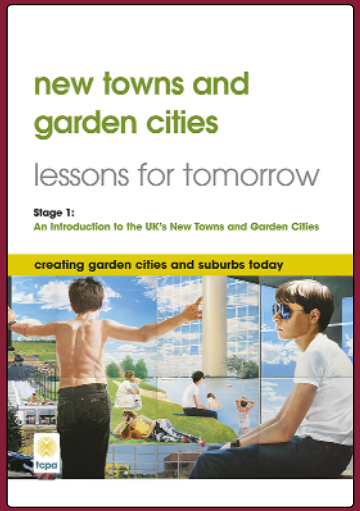
In 2016 the Government committed to exploring how the New Towns Act could be modernised; in 2017 Theresa May's Government has an opportunity to put in place the tools to deliver high-quality, inclusive, affordable new communities that will themselves be celebrated in 70 years' time.

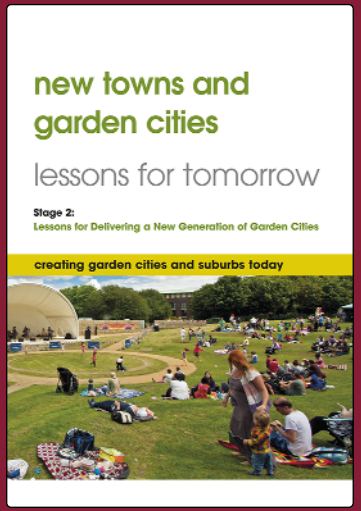
This collection of think-pieces provides a snapshot of how the New Towns Act has touched the lives of individuals and the nation as a whole. It contains personal reflections and commentary from those who have lived and worked in and explored the New Towns, and it touches on what this means for the communities of tomorrow.

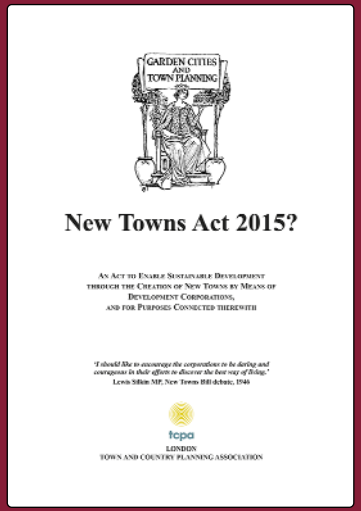
● ***Katy Lock*** *is Garden Cities and New Towns Advocate at the TCPA. The views expressed are personal.*

'Lessons for Tomorrow' – TCPA research and guidance

For further information about the New Towns – how they were delivered, what they achieved, and what we can learn from them to deliver new communities today – is available in the reports of TCPA's 'New Towns and Garden Cities – Lessons for Tomorrow' research project. The Stage 1 report, *An Introduction to the UK's New Towns and Garden Cities*, provides an overview of the New Towns and Garden City movement, including fact sheets about each of the New Towns. The Stage 2 report, *Lessons for Delivering a New Generation of Garden Cities*, looks at what experience from the New Towns can teach us about overcoming specific delivery challenges faced when delivering new communities today. A further TCPA report, *New Towns Act 2015?*, examines in detail how the New Towns Act could be modernised to deliver a new generation of Garden Cities – combining the delivery mechanisms of the New Towns with the values and place-making principles of the Garden City movement, drawing on lessons about what has worked and what has not in the past.







https://www.tcpa.org.uk/research-gcnt and https://www.tcpa.org.uk/campaigning-gardencities

the new towns – a moral crusade

John Grindrod on the sense of moral purpose, can-do attitude and willingness to experiment that made the post-war New Towns possible

The New Towns project was about helping people to live better, more fulfilling lives

1946 was an extraordinary year for morality and the British imagination. J B Priestley dissected the dark moral ambiguities of an English middle-class family in his play *An Inspector Calls*, which opened on 1 October. A month later came Powell and Pressburger's cinematic fantasy *A Matter of Life and Death*, transposing the plight of a wartime fighter pilot against a chorus of dead heroes from history. The year ended with the release of David Lean's adaptation of *Great Expectations*, that timeless tale of assumption and prejudice.

In the midst of these cultural landmarks came something more palpable: on 11 November Stevenage was designated Britain's first post-war New Town. Where you might have expected fatigue to have overtaken the country after seven years of warfare, this burst of energy came partly from the continuity of those wartime efforts on the domestic front. As the fighters began to be demobbed they returned to a country where there was much to be done – not simply correcting the destruction of wartime, but tackling older problems too, like the slums, overcrowding and destitution left over from the Industrial Revolution. The moral tone of these new films and plays illustrated a feeling that was in the air in the early post-war days of Clement Attlee's Labour Government. The reconstruction wasn't just to be without; it was within us all, too.

The New Towns Act neatly ties together these two strands, the physical and spiritual, because the resulting settlements were not simply about constructing some large out-of-town estates; they were about helping people to live better, more fulfilled lives. In the New Towns overcrowding would be a thing of the past, and there would be plenty of fresh air and open space to be enjoyed. Industry would not smother the town; rather, it would be zoned carefully away, to encourage a more healthy work-life balance. The Act had been steered through by Lord Reith, former BBC Chairman and one of the most tireless fixers of the day, and the aims of the New Towns had echoes of his paternalistic BBC ethos.

Mass Observation carried out a survey of Stevenage locals in the spring of 1946, before the construction of the New Town, to discover the attitude of existing residents to it. Around 57% of the people interviewed thought the construction of a satellite town at Stevenage was a good idea, with 19% opposed to it. 'The place needs new life and this new scheme will put [life] into it,' said one interviewee, a 30-year-old coachbuilder. 'It's progress, and it's what we badly need here. I shall be glad to see it.' A woman cinema cashier said: 'I think we'll have more interest and business in the town. I think it's the old people who are a bit prejudiced.' Future residents were expected to come from the then London boroughs of Walthamstow, Edmonton, Leyton and Tottenham, increasing the local population of 6,000 by tenfold at least.

The first wave of New Towns, designated from 1946 to 1950, were at Stevenage, Crawley, Hemel Hempstead, Harlow, Newton Aycliffe, East Kilbride, Peterlee, Welwyn Garden City, Hatfield, Glenrothes, Basildon, Bracknell, Cwmbran and Corby (Cumbernauld, often considered as part of the 'first wave' was designated in 1955). Sociologists Michael Young and Peter Wilmott explored life in a post-war development in their 1957 book *Family and Kinship in East London*. Through extended fieldwork, observation and interviews they created a picture of the young families moving from Bethnal Green to Debden, a new estate in Essex, and how centralised planning had disrupted generations of organic interconnections and relationships. 'New Town Blues' – depression brought on by being cut off from established networks of family and friends – became a popular media trope of the day.

Architectural critics in the early 1950s were not kind to the aspirations or reality of these nascent settlements either, and were quick to criticise the towns' open spaces as 'prairie planning' and the architecture as monotonous and suburban.

But despite all of this criticism the New Towns flourished. Development Corporation funding helped to create communities, not just through the physical act of construction but through the creation of social groups and clubs, especially in the era before the centres of these towns had been built. Before the arrival of new cinemas, shops, theatres and television sets, pioneer residents occupied themselves with sports clubs, amateur dramatics societies, flower shows and choirs. This make-do-and-mend spirit acted as a successful bonding agent for early New Town residents, something which the underfunded modern councils who took over responsibility for the towns have been unable to replicate.

As time went on, the formula was experimented with. All of the early lessons were taken on board, and later new towns, such as Cumbernauld, Skelmersdale and Telford, were built more densely, to give a more urban character, which it was hoped would help to create a more communal spirit than the first tranche. One of the last, Milton Keynes, was sprawling again, but this time planned around a fast road network, meaning that residents could access the many amenities quickly even if they did not live near them. High-tech innovations such as cable TV, eco-building and the Open University featured in the plan, too. These days, driverless cars are being tested there.

Evolution was essential to the New Towns project, and it is fascinating to speculate what might have followed Milton Keynes had the experiment continued. Certainly the later New Towns benefited from the experience of people who had worked on the earlier ones, who took the lessons of Stevenage and Harlow through to new jobs in Irvine or Northampton. With no comparable planning or building of scale since the 1970s, Britain has little lived experience of how to create such vast and complex projects.

1946 saw Britain on a left-wing moral crusade. 2016 sees a right-wing equivalent, and a more divided, uncertain country, one that faces huge housing shortages and a planning system in retreat. The post-war New Town pioneers were all relatively young, from planners and architects to residents and workers. It was their sense of moral purpose, can-do attitude and willingness to experiment that made the New Towns possible. Perhaps now is the perfect moment to think of appointing a new generation of young thinkers to key positions and allow them to innovate to set about solving the problems of our no-longer 'new' century.

● ***John Grindrod*** *is the author of Concretopia: A Journey around the Rebuilding of Postwar Britain (Old Street Publishing, 2013). The views expressed are personal.*

stevenage – the building of a brave new world

Former resident Deborah Garvie looks at the lessons that can be learned from Stevenage New Town – the first to be designated – to help solve today's housing crisis

Stevenage Borough Council

Stevenage – 'with imagination and determination, new town development can be a force for good'

Stevenage had never set the world on fire. Described by Charles Dickens in 1861 as 'drowsy in the dullest degree', by the time of the 1946 New Towns Act it remained a sleepy market town with a population of 6,000. My family had lived in the town for generations, running a number of its public houses, where they were at the centre of local debate about the town's prospects and future.

Yet, when designated as the first New Town in November 1946, Stevenage became the test-bed for the Act's utopian, post-war ideas for 'a new way of life'. In the space of a generation, it was transformed into one of the larger and most vibrant towns in the South East, with families moving from far and wide to join a huge social experiment.

The catalyst for this transformation wasn't Stevenage or its people. It was London. The city's exhausted, post-war population had the Hobson's housing choice of bomb sites or overcrowded and insanitary Victorian slums. In some East End

boroughs, around a third of homes had been destroyed and homelessness was a major problem. Just as they are today, London's post-war housing pressures were immense and would clearly take decades to resolve. So part of the answer had to come from outside.

But what led to Stevenage being chosen as part of the utopian solution, and what lessons can we learn as we set out to solve London's current housing crisis?

First, location and connectivity has determined both Stevenage's existence and its growth. Located 30 miles from Central London on the Great North Road to York, it has always been a convenient London staging-post. The coming of the railway in 1857 further improved its accessibility, and it now takes a little over 20 minutes to reach King's Cross. Connectivity is a key ingredient for sustainable new settlements. If people have to move out of the city, it makes sense for them to settle on a route out rather than in an isolated backwater.

London's current housing crisis means that families (and the boroughs responsible for housing them) are desperate to find affordable accommodation and are increasingly having to search outside the city's limits. Today, surely it would be better to have a 21st century Abercrombie Plan of expanded settlements to provide breathing space for an overcrowded London than for the Home Counties to deal with ad hoc population dispersal.

Second, there was strong leadership in the face of hostile local residents. Although described as a New Town, Stevenage was actually as old as the hills: the six Roman tumuli to be precise, which now sit alongside a town centre roundabout. Stevenage's future New Town status did not go down well with many locals, especially landowners at risk of compulsory purchase. A notable opponent was E M Forster, who had set his novel *Howard's End* in the locality, and who said that the New Town would 'fall out of the blue sky like a meteorite upon the ancient and delicate scenery of Hertfordshire'.

But Stevenage Urban District Council had already recognised the benefits of growth, planning in the late 1930s for Stevenage to expand to a population of well over 30,000 and establishing a special Stevenage Development Committee in 1944. At the prompting of Councillor Philip Ireton, a railway clerk who was enthusiastic and well informed about town planning (and a family friend whom I remember as 'Uncle Phil'), the Council gave guarded support to the Abercrombie proposal.

But the proposal was not without resistance. Lewis Silkin, Minister of Town and Country Planning, famously arrived at public meeting in the run-up to eventual designation to find 3,000 protesters (half the town's population) outside the Town Hall. A subsequent referendum confirmed that 52% were 'entirely against' the town's expansion.

But Silkin was undeterred, telling the crowd: 'It's no use jibbing, it's going to be done.' He added: 'I am sure that this [wartime] spirit is not dead in Stevenage, and if you are satisfied that this project is worth while, and for the benefit of large numbers of your fellow human beings, you will be prepared to play your part to make it a success.' Having won a legal battle, he appointed the eight-member Stevenage Development Corporation to get on with the job, and a masterplan was drawn up for 60,000 new homes: 10,000 homes in each of six neighbourhoods, each with their own community centre, pub and shops. Shortly after designation, a number of local residents surreptitiously changed the railway station's name boards to 'Silkingrad'.

As long-standing residents, my family were proud that their little town had been chosen as Utopia. My grandad, a local master-builder, who couldn't find work or a home for his young family after the war, could not believe his luck: he gained both employment and the keys to a brand-new rented home. In fact, of the first 2,000 houses completed, over a quarter went to building workers and their families: those on London council house waiting lists prepared to work on the New Town for at least six months were granted a Corporation house. On their Sunday walks, my family surveyed the early groundworks, awestruck by the scale and modernity of ambition – although there are still regrets that the first significant demolition was the old Town Hall and Market Square: 'the heart was ripped out'.

Recent Government policy on new towns has been supportive of locally-led development where there is clear local support. But it is worth considering that local views are often split, and it takes bravery from enlightened local representatives, as well as a determined national strategy, to design and build the new settlements needed to alleviate homelessness and ensure that everyone is well housed.

A third lesson is that the town didn't just provide homes: it provided opportunities. English Electric was one of the first employers to locate to the New Town, on a 70 acre site, bringing plenty of employment opportunities to local people (including my mum as an apprenticeship draughtsperson). De Havilland Propellers moved to a 14 acre site in 1953, merging into Hawker Siddeley Aviation in 1959. It was here that my other grandad, an

aeronautical engineer, gained employment and my dad an apprenticeship. They had to commute from an overcrowded flat in Neasden, but local employment gave them priority for a new Corporation home, which allowed the rest of the family to join them from Scotland. If we are to create thriving and sustainable new communities, they must not simply be dormitory towns to accommodate commuters, but must offer exciting opportunities for employment and enterprise so that parents can work close to home.

By the time I was growing up in Stevenage in the 1970s, it was full of youthful vibrancy. A new school had opened nearly every year until the mid-1960s. The Locarno Ballroom had hosted The Rolling Stones and Jimmy Hendrix. The pedestrianised town centre was the first purpose-built traffic-free shopping zone in Britain, overlooked by the Joyride, a mother and child sculpture by Franta Belsky that summed up the nurturing spirit of the town. Its extensive network of cycleways was decades ahead of London's cycle superhighway.

When the Development Corporation was wrapped up in 1980, we had a purpose-built, state-of-the-art hospital, an Olympic-size swimming pool, a huge man-made sailing lake, and a brand new Leisure Centre, incorporating a 1,200-capacity concert hall and theatre. My contemporary, the *Guardian* journalist Gary Younge, describes Stevenage as 'a great place to grow up', not least because the large majority of its inhabitants lived in council housing and this created a great sense of equality: 'There was no sense of incongruity in Stevenage between being a young professional and living in social housing.' The New Town Development Corporations were able to invest in such fantastic infrastructure as well as affordable housing because they could buy farmland at its existing use value.

There are things that Stevenage could have done differently. While the houses were spacious and comfortable, only 12 plan variations were used. Although this was egalitarian (you never had to ask for the bathroom because it was always in the same place), their utilitarian design was architecturally bland, resulting in an uninspiring built environment. This was compounded by frequent use of Radburn layouts and dual carriageways. Despite noble intentions of separating people from traffic – which was rightly anticipated to increase – and to zone industrial and retail areas, this style of urban planning lacked the vivacity of traditional street layouts.

As a young adult, I found the town a bit soulless. Perhaps this could be avoided by greater involvement of residents in the design. The pedestrianised town centre is now in need of modernisation, but the winding up of the Development Corporation without allowing the town to capture the long-term uplift in land value has left Stevenage Borough Council struggling to find funding for renewal.

But Stevenage New Town has taught me that, with imagination and determination, new town development can be a force for good: improving not only the opportunities of existing local residents, but the wellbeing of families desperately in need of a decent home in a place where they can thrive in a new way of life.

● ***Deborah Garvie*** *is Policy Manager at Shelter, which marked its 50th anniversary in 2016. When it was established in 1966, 3 million people were living in slums; 50 years later, there is another housing crisis, with a generation of young people struggling to afford their own home and a growing number of families affected by sub-standard housing and homelessness. On New Year's Day 2017, over 120,000 children in Britain woke up in homeless accommodation. The views expressed here are personal.*

milton keynes – looking forward to the next 50 years

Anna Rose considers how best to take the New Town legacy forward and make it fit for a future population within the growing city of Milton Keynes

Photos: Milton Keynes Council

Campbell Park – one of the generous open space areas in Milton Keynes

Having studied Milton Keynes (MK) as it matured and began to lose its newness, been introduced as it reached adulthood and then got to know it well as it was turning 48, I have a view on what the challenges and opportunities for MK are. Fifty years of age in 2017, MK is celebrating great success, and there is excitement and nervousness in the air as MK looks forward to the next 50 years.

There is nowhere else in the UK that feels like MK. For me, it has all of the natural features of my favourite European cities with the buildings and roads of North America. There is much that I like about MK, but there are also elements that could be better and aspects of other places that MK would benefit from incorporating. In thinking about what could be taken forward into the future

from the original design of MK, I am quite clear that top of my list would be the use of linear parks and waterways to create space, public amenity and definition. For me, it is this that really defines MK – and not the concrete cows and grid pattern of streets that many associate with the New Town.

The forward planning around the simplicity of the six key principles of the original town masterplan – opportunity and freedom of choice; easy movement and access; balance and variety; the creation of an attractive city; public awareness and participation; and efficient and imaginative use of resources – have stood the test of time well. And many of the original professional team that worked for Milton Keynes Development Corporation still live in MK and are active in civic societies. There is very little within MK that doesn't have a special place in the history of its making, and this will always make it a challenge to make decisions about its future.

MK was planned and built in a different era, one where there was government funding, where communities were enthusiastic about building, and where national government was prepared to take risks to allow for long-term betterment. Government finance, thinking and legislation have changed and the original environment in which MK was conceived has now gone. It has taken a long time for MK to appreciate this. The challenge this presents is that attempts to plan for the future often get caught up in protecting the past. Whereas in historic towns and cities there is a clear framework setting out what should be protected, in new places there is a need to establish this. It is clear that this principle needs to be established, alongside the plan for the next 50 years, if we are to succeed.

Planning a new town rather than expanding an existing one provides so many more opportunities to fully consider the best use of space. MK is low density in all senses. Some of this use of space is as a result of good planning – retaining areas for future expansion, reserving sites for community use, protecting valuable environmental assets and providing public amenity space. While all of these reasons for retaining land are still valid, in considering how they are to work for the future we need to draw on new evidence about healthy communities, sustainable transport and quality of life to drive new-build, regeneration and asset management decisions. Retaining a sense of space around MK is crucial to its identity, but better use of some of the retained land will lead to vast improvements in how MK operates. As time has passed, people's expectations have changed, and this needs to be reflected in the way in which we plan future development. Just as the use of space epitomised the original planning of MK all those years ago, the better use of land will guide decisions about the future.

Possibly the most significant change in thinking will be centred on mobility and connectivity. MK has the

Milton Keynes' grid roads were planned with space for future transport innovation

Milton Keynes Central railway station at sunset

space and the creativity to ensure that everyone can move easily around the borough. Currently a huge amount of space within MK is used or reserved for grid roads and surface parking. It is very easy to get into and around MK by car, and it is also easy and relatively cheap to park, but MK's grid system, combined with the low-density housing, makes running a more sustainable transport system more difficult than in other urban areas. The communities living within the grid squares often need to walk some distance to access public transport. As a result, some of the bus routes suffer from low patronage and cannot be sustained; and as the public transport options decrease, car travel and pressure on parking increase.

This is seen most acutely in Central Milton Keynes, where businesses and visitors regard the space very much like an out-of-town retail or business park: there is an expectation that you can drive to the door of the building you are visiting, pay little and drive away easily. This does not align with other city models. The spaces that the surface parking (around 25,000 spaces) creates between the various land uses in Central Milton Keynes make the distances between buildings seem further, and so people do not walk and instead use their cars for short distances – the most obvious example being journeys to Milton Keynes Central railway station. Relatively few visitors consider walking to be an option, even if they know that their destination is less than 20 minutes away. The road system around MK is clearly one of the city's assets; we just need to find a way of using this network in a way that can be sustained for the next 50 years.

MK has huge potential. It is economically successful, has a perfect location on the Oxford to Cambridge growth corridor, and embraces new technologies and ideas. MK is fortunate in having a population that is enthusiastic about creating a future that is just as successful as the past. Capturing this enthusiasm and encouraging new pioneers in MK's future will ensure that the benefits of its location at the heart of a major growth corridor are maximised. The challenge for modern planners is rooted in how to take the New Town legacy forward and make it fit for a future population. The original pioneers rallied against looking backwards: they embraced innovation, and now we need to do the same.

● ***Anna Rose*** *is Service Director, Growth, Economy and Culture, at Milton Keynes Council. The views expressed are personal.*

how to renew scotland's new towns?

Faced with the need for renewal on a significant scale, planners and local economic development officers responsible for the Scottish New Towns face some particular problems, as well as many that will be familiar to their English counterparts, says Peter Hetherington

Cumbernauld – as with many of England's New Towns, large areas of the five Scottish New Towns are now in need of renewal

Anyone familiar with the growth of – and the subsequent challenges facing – the UK's 32 New Towns knows the problem. How do they co-ordinate long-overdue renewal programmes, in town centres and surrounding housing estates, when commercial ownership is divided between multifarious owners, and countless social homes have long since been sold off?

It was never meant to be this way. Why, for instance, force the sale of prime town centre land and real estate, bought by the state through the old New Town Development Corporations, and thereby undermine the foundations of these bold enterprises? Answer: blinkered ideology, pure and simple. But that's history.

If this story is well versed in the first post-war New Town, Stevenage – which celebrated its 70th birthday in 2016 – it has equal resonance in the five New Towns north of the border, as those of us attending a TCPA roundtable recently held in

Edinburgh heard. The TCPA – honest brokers, if you like – managed to achieve a first: namely, bringing the five together to discover common problems and chart a way forward. But first a plea from the gathering: stop labelling us 'New Towns' and instead call us 'mature towns'. Makes sense to me!

'We inherited high expectations,' lamented one speaker, 'but we did not inherit town centres.' She told a familiar tale: a feeling among local councillors that 'we've had the money' – so resources had to go to other areas. Nods of agreement all round.

The roundtable was the first in a series of events held in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland in a 'lessons for tomorrow' project as part of the TCPA's sustained campaign to update the New Towns Act. It proved an eye-opener, even though I have worked extensively in Scotland and thought I knew the country relatively well, having once lived close to East Kilbride. One might think that Scotland, with almost full self-government, might have the edge – and the extra resources – over England when it comes to planning the renewal of its New Towns. However, it is a centralised country, with power concentrated in the Scottish National Party Government, and hence – dare one say it – a relative shortage of the inspiring civic leaders who frequently outshine UK ministers and shadow spokespeople south of the border.

Nevertheless, participants at the Edinburgh event – senior officials and planners drawn from the councils which embrace the former New Towns; namely South Lanarkshire (East Kilbride), North Lanarkshire (Cumbernauld), West Lothian (Livingston), North Ayrshire (Irvine) and Fife (Glenrothes) – matched enthusiasm for the renewal challenge with obvious frustration that the towns themselves did not have that higher priority inside local authority areas, where political leaders often have other concerns.

Therein lies a problem. In England, for instance, the former New Towns often (but not always) take the name of a local authority whose boundaries can be fairly co-terminus with the former Development Corporation area – indeed, Warrington, Milton Keynes, Peterborough and Telford and Wrekin are all-purpose unitary authorities, while much of the Stevenage local authority (a district council) area coincides with the New Town area. Not so in centralist Scotland, where councils, starved of resources, are emerging from a nine-year council tax freeze effectively imposed by the SNP Government. Whether it values a New Town heritage is an open question.

Like other 'baby-boomers', I remember a time when policy across the UK was so synchronised – from the development of New Towns, to planning legislation and industrial strategy, for instance – that information-sharing across national borders added considerable value to decision-making.

Nevertheless, given resources relatively more limited than their English counterparts, planners and local economic development officers responsible for the Scottish New Towns have high ambitions. In Cumbernauld, for instance, high-rise flats – an enduring image of the town – are earmarked for demolition; Irvine has a new masterplan for its centre to update ageing amenities; Glenrothes is trying to improve its housing stock ('crumbling', volunteered an official) using compulsory purchase orders on blocks of flats; Livingston, once the heart of a late, lamented 'Silicon Glen', would like its town centre to become more of a hub ('it closes at 6 pm,' railed another official).

As a participant from Cumbernauld, sharing concerns of others, said: 'The New Town is now an old town and we're trying to renew it.' For its part, the TCPA gained a valuable insight into the challenges and opportunities facing the 'Scottish Five', and – yes – might well return to share experiences from a celebratory year.

● ***Peter Hetherington*** *is a Trustee and previous Chair of the TCPA. The views expressed are personal.*

new towns act 2017?

The UK is stumbling along the way to realising that we need large-area long-term plans for those parts of the UK that are undergoing great demographic or economic change, but a crucial tried-and-tested development instrument lies waiting for rediscovery, says David Lock

Milton Keynes Council

Central Milton Keynes – 'the underlying features of the New Towns Act remain awesome in their conception and in their demonstrable achievements'

More than 70 years on from the passage into law of the New Towns Act 1946, the UK is confronting large-scale town and country planning tasks, many of which echo those that our grandparents faced in 1946.

We, too, have an acute shortage of housing, not only in terms of numbers, but also in terms of decent quality, being well located for work and offering the chance of a fulfilling life. While the central areas of many old towns and cities have been regenerated, we still have vast swathes of damaged and decaying suburbs in which people are just managing to survive. We also have great population pressures – partly because of a surge in the birth rate; partly because many of us are living longer; partly because our relationships do not hold together; and partly because there are high levels of net in-migration into the UK each year.

But there are also other strategic planning tasks unique to our time. The nature of work, and its geography, is transforming. More people work from home and in small businesses, and many have multiple part-time jobs which are insecure and poorly paid. There are widening extremes of wealth

and poverty which are fracturing social cohesion. Our civic and cultural life is diminished as public services shrink. Social mobility is reduced because further and higher education has to be self-funded, and (as if all that wasn't enough) we have to deal with climate change and what that means for where and how we live.

London is overspilling with too many people and not enough homes – the Mayor is seeking to make deals with surrounding local authorities to take on some of London's housing needs. Outside London, with statutory large-scale planning abolished, each local council is required to meet locally arising housing needs, regardless of the bigger picture. Ordinary towns and cities are overspilling too, into 'sustainable urban extensions' (too often jargon for add-on suburbs which move the countryside further away from those in town, and place new homes in edge locations poorly connected to the town).

The UK is stumbling along the way to realising that we need to make large-area long-term plans – not for everywhere, but for those parts of the UK that are undergoing great demographic or economic change. And it is obvious that when we make such plans, in some places at some time sooner rather than later, we shall need to make whole new towns and cities on a serious scale.

Thanks to the New Towns Act we know that planned new towns are the best way of protecting the wider countryside, by focusing and managing urbanisation. Thanks to the New Towns Act we have proof that a fair share of rising land values that are created by well designed and carefully located new towns can be captured for the public good. We know that the scale of monies so captured can not only pay a major proportion of the cost of making each new town but can, if we so choose, keep yielding a return to the local community in perpetuity, reducing the local tax demand and enriching the variety and quality of urban life.

We have proof that a dedicated not-for-profit corporation – given a long enough life, a wide enough brief, and the powers to assemble undeveloped land and to borrow against its rising value, all with the necessary accountability – can bring whole new towns into being at pace and to high quality.

We know that the identification of the need for whole new towns can quickly emerge from wide-area planning – national, regional and sub-regional plans in old language – carried out with an integral inclusive public discourse that takes the long view. But whether opportunities are first spotted by local councils, or by groups of local councils, or by the various larger-than-local public bodies of the day – Local Enterprise Partnerships, for example – is not the point. The need for a large development and its possible location must be tested, implementation arrangements must be properly established, and planned mitigation of impacts must be carried through.

The original New Towns Act 1946 has been adjusted several times, and polishing it to meet the needs of today – as recommended by the TCPA – is easily done. The underlying features remain awesome in their conception and in their demonstrable achievements. This is understood throughout the developed world, and the model has been copied widely.

Here in the UK we need to rediscover this part of our national heritage and put it to work without delay. The Act is absurdly simple and its power can be deployed directly. It is a 'no-brainer'. It is a legacy for which we should be truly grateful. It is capable, if tuned carefully to today's circumstances, of being a powerful tool in peacefully reshaping the way we live. It provides us with affordable means of creating great places. All we have to do is recognise the power of the legislation and deploy it with care.

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