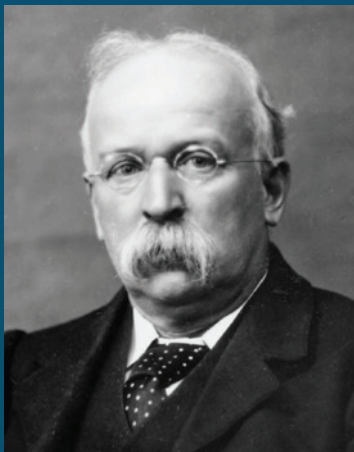


The NPPF and Ebenezer Howard's inconvenient legacy

⊙ Ebenezer Howard's vision for Garden Cities was centred on social justice and underpinned by a radical yet practical economic model



As we face another year of radical planning reform, Howard's genius for imagining a compassionate future remains a demanding inspiration, argues Hugh Ellis

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Last year ended with a flurry of announcements around planning reform, devolution and local government reorganisation and with a new planning bill expected at any moment. At the time of writing – January 2025 – only the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) has been published.¹ However, before rushing into detailed textual analysis of this document, it is interesting to reflect on what an organisation like the TCPA, founded on Howard's Garden City ideals, is to make of this its overall objectives?

The problem with Ebenezer Howard is that he offered a vision of a different kind of compassionate society which placed social justice and the environment at the heart of a holistic vision of better lives. And these lives were to be led in a fiercely democratic context in which people were to have real power to participate genuinely in the decisions that shape their communities. These ideas were interlocking and indivisible and unmistakably socially progressive. The movement which those ideas inspired then had the audacity to make that vision a practical reality by building one of Europe's



⊕
Homes are in harmony with nature in this housing scheme

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largest co-operative communities at Letchworth Garden City. The Garden City went on to be one of the most culturally significant ideas of the 20th century, inspiring, among other things, the New Towns programme. But perhaps the movement's biggest contribution was to provide the moral foundations of British town planning.

It is precisely this moral concern for progressive and holistic social change, in which town planning is seen as an embedded part of progressive democratic politics, which is now so inconvenient for the way that the TCPA navigates its response to planning reform. For example, what is most striking about the new NPPF is the lack of any overall vision for our collective future. Sustainable development is *not* the guiding thread of national planning policy, not least because any internationally recognised definition of sustainable development is effectively marginalised in the opening paragraphs of the document.² In fact, the NPPF is a market-led investment strategy designed to maximise GDP (gross domestic product) growth, predicated on the assumption that democracy and the environment get in the way of profit maximisation. In this development model it is important that the worst excesses of environmental and social harm are mediated, but only when this does not compromise the needs of private investors.

Here it is worth noting that this model has both an intellectual pedigree and a powerful set of advocates at the heart of the new government. The chair of the Chancellor's Economic Advisory Council is the highly respected LSE (London School of Economics) economist, John Van Reenen. Van Reenan has been at the heart of the government's economic policy³ and it is significant that he has written about and endorsed some of the most influential views of the Austrian political economist, Joseph Schumpeter, particularly on the importance of 'creative destruction' and entrepreneurship. Schumpeter also held highly elitist views about democracy and was dismissive about the capability of the average electorate. This may partly explain why we see the government enthusiastically endorsing AI (artificial intelligence), despite the human cost this will have in terms of loss of work. It also helps explain the radical proposals to restrict local democratic accountability of planning decisions.⁴ It is, perhaps, significant

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that there is no sense of a traditional Keynesian approach in the new government. There are no proposals for a Roosevelt-style 'New Deal' programme, of which Schumpeter was so critical. Instead, our future depends on private capital, providing both public goods like housing, and the tax revenues to mediate, in part, the problems caused by the extractive and unsustainable practices upon which the majority of private sector investment depends. Under this model, housing is means to a macro-economic end, not the foundation of human wellbeing.

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Howard's genius was to stand this traditional economic model on its head by putting the wellbeing of people and the environment at the centre of decision-making and then creating an economic framework to support that ambition. Part of the enduring appeal of the Garden City development model is its ability to blend mutualised economics, a passionate commitment to nature, and vibrant democratic and participative governance. Howard would have been simply bewildered at the current rhetoric of politicians which pitches nature and people against each other. They are, quite obviously, an indivisible concept. Whether you want to describe this as the value of ecosystem services or simply the tangible benefits nature brings to our physical mental and spiritual wellbeing, we have to accept that our survival depends on the resilience of the natural world. Housing, as Ruskin said, 'should be an ornament to nature and not its disfigurement.'⁵

The introduction in planning policy, after 1987, of the sustainable development model echoed the Garden City's ambitions for an integrated approach to social and environmental progress. It was also a reaction to the critical social costs and widespread environmental collapse created by both traditional neoliberal economics and soviet-style socialism. Since that point, there has been almost five decades of detailed thinking around; the need to integrate rather than trade off social, environmental and economic objectives; the importance of respecting environmental limits; and the centrality of empowering communities to shape their own future. There has also been the development of progressive economic ideas, including the promotion of a circular economy, foundational economics, and the generation of social value, which all reflect both the need for resource conservation and a fairer distribution of wealth.



The NPPF requires sustainability 'at a high level', but not when making planning decisions

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SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS



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Much of this thinking culminated in the publication of the United Nations' 17 sustainable development goals⁶ (see image on previous page), which the NPPF so expertly ensures can never be applied to any planning decision. It is also striking that none of these sustainable development concepts are represented in the 'presumption in favour of sustainable development'⁷ which is the operational heart of the NPPF.

Continually applying the same failed approach to the development of our nation while expecting different results will not work. Planning, or what's left of it, was not a barrier to housing or infrastructure. As the TCPA has consistently pointed out,⁸ a chronic lack of investment in homes for social rent, along with a complete reliance on the private sector to build the right quantity of homes, in the right place, at affordable prices, are the real cause of this crisis. In recent years, far more planning permissions for homes were granted than the number of homes that were built. Simply continuing to increase the number of planning permissions will fuel land speculation, but do nothing to ensure that more new homes are actually built.

However, it would be foolish not to accept that, for the time being, that argument has been lost. Neither should the TCPA be in the business of defending the status quo, because the lack of ambition and vision in national policy has a much longer history. Prior to the introduction of the NPPF in 2012, national planning policy was shaped by Planning Policy Statement 1.⁹ This made it clear that planning should champion social justice and inclusion, along with participative decision-making. It was swept away in 2012 and replaced by the NPPF. It is striking that the latest version of the NPPF, the first NPPF to be issued by a Labour government, completely ignores both of those agendas.

The government's focus on GDP growth on its own will not meet the needs and aspirations of England's diverse communities. The NPPF suggests a future defined by appeal-led housing, data centres, and new energy infrastructure – but gives no suggestion of what that future England will be like to actually live in. This is even more stark in the context of a nation which has no urban policy and no sustainable

development strategy – in fact no sense at all of what the experience of walking down a street in an English community in 2050 will look and feel like. Articulating a vision of the future is more than just window dressing; it is fundamental in establishing a sense of confidence, and that is key to generating hope and combating extremism.

Articulating a vision of the future is more than just window dressing



The lack of imagination and diversity in economic policy is in stark contrast to Howard's conception of the Garden City, which created space for a vibrant private sector to contribute to the social value of the community. The critical difference between that, and what is on offer in the new NPPF, is that it didn't rely on the private sector to meet people's foundational needs in terms of homes and utilities. In the same way, the TCPA's basic criticism of the NPPF is not that it focuses on GDP growth, but that it refuses to leave space for any other form of economic activity and community development. There is no meaningful content to encourage the multiple examples of mutualised and co-operative activity which the TCPA highlighted in its publication *Practical Hope*,¹⁰ ideas which are providing the only point of hopefulness in many communities across the UK.

It is helpful to understand the scale of the challenge in advocating the Garden City and sustainable development models when these approaches are so at odds with the economic orthodoxy of the government. But this orthodoxy has severe limitations which will ultimately guarantee its failure. For example, it assumes that people and democracy can be ignored and marginalised without a major political and practical costs. In fact, England is a densely populated nation with some strong democratic tendencies. Building without democratic consent will reinforce community resistance, which will be expressed through the law and through protest, undermining everyone's, including investors', confidence in the system.

It is significant that HM Treasury also assumes that nature is infinitely capable of absorbing GDP growth when the evidence is plainly to the contrary. What was needed from the

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new government was a form of economics which can meet the challenges of the climate crisis already playing out in many of our communities. Zero-carbon energy infrastructure is vital for this nation, but so too are the billions necessary to create flood-resilient communities, without which there is no viable economy. The reality is that the private sector will not, and will never, provide the income streams necessary to provide for all the public goods key to our survival. To solve that problem at least two things are necessary: a national government with the ambition of Roosevelt's 'New Deal'; and a much stronger commitment to the fine-grain mutualised economic instruments that can build the resilience of people in places after the damage of austerity.

the problem with technocratic, centralised solutions is that they ignore the reality of the human condition



It is more than ironic that the chair of the Chancellor's Economic Advisory Council is a professor at the LSE, an institution founded by Beatrice and Sydney Webb, who also founded the Fabian movement. Ultimately, that movement was defined by a technocratic assumption that a rational Whitehall, applying command-and-control principles, could drive progressive social change. As a movement it was rudely dismissive of the Fellowship of the New Life¹¹ which inspired the Garden City ideals. For the Fabians, any discussion of hopefulness and utopia was the business of sandal-wearing cranks. But the problem with technocratic, centralised solutions is that they ignore the reality of the human condition and the diversity of our communities. They are emotionally illiterate, and as a result they fail to offer any inspiration for better lives in a hopeful future. If progressive politics will not offer such a vision, then we can be certain that the far right will. That is

why, despite the challenges of advocating the Garden City ideals, those ideals remain fundamental to our collective future and profoundly important in the defence of our democracy.

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Notes

- 1 *National Planning Policy Framework*: Policy Paper. Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 12 Dec. 2024. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-planning-policy-framework--2>
- 2 The interaction of paragraphs 7 and 9 of the NPPF mean the sustainable development goals are 'high level' goals and 'not criteria against which every decision should be judged'. Coupled with a weak legal duty that planning should only 'contribute to the achievement' of sustainable development, and the absence of any text on environmental limits or the precautionary principle, the NPPF's sustainable development commitments are rhetorical, rather than operational policy.
- 3 Heather Stewart: 'He's one of the best': the economist shaping Rachel Reeves's growth plans'. *The Guardian*, 17 Jan. 2025. <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2025/jan/17/economist-shaping-rachel-reeves-growth-plans-john-van-reenen>
- 4 *Planning Reform: In defence of democratic planning*. TCPA, Dec. 2024. <https://www.tcpa.org.uk/planning-reform-in-defence-of-democratic-planning/>
- 5 John Ruskin: *Sesame and Lilies. Two Lectures delivered at Manchester in 1864*. Leopold Classic Library, 2016
- 6 See: <https://www.undp.org/sustainable-development-goals>
- 7 *National Planning Policy Framework*: Policy Paper. Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, Dec. 2024, Paragraph 1. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-planning-policy-framework--2>
- 8 *Our shared future: A TCPA White Paper for Homes and Communities*. TCPA, Jan. 2024. <https://www.tcpa.org.uk/resources/our-shared-future-a-tcpa-white-paper-for-homes-and-communities/>
- 9 The 2005 PPS1 was not perfect but was a coherent and progressive framework operationalising the UK sustainable development Strategy. See archived content: <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20120919122719/http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/planningandbuilding/pdf/planningpolicystatement1.pdf>
- 10 *Practical Hope: Inspiration for Community Action*. TCPA, Oct. 2024. <https://www.tcpa.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/A5Is-20pp-Practical-Hope-ICAction-Aug24-v11.pdf>
- 11 The Fellowship first met in 1883 and included a group of Utopian thinkers including Edith Rees, 'Miss Owen', the granddaughter of Robert, Ramsay Macdonald, Edward Carpenter, Havelock Ellis and many others. The Fabian society splintered from the Fellowship, led by the Webbs and Bernard Shaw. Howard knew all these personalities but was influenced by the Fellowship's desire to experiment in practical Utopias.