



Green dream: Welwyn Garden City was among the first wave of post-war new towns

New towns: dream vs reality

With a wave of new town sites under consideration, industry experts say the government must clarify how it will fulfil its promises to bring the communities forward. **Tim Clark** reports

Building a new town from scratch is easier said than done. What is conceived of as a utopian endeavour can quickly become caught in a web of contradictory policies and competition for scarce funds.

Last month, the government announced it had received applications for up to 100 possible locations for the next generation of new towns. By this summer, the New Towns Taskforce (NTT) will choose the initial 12 sites to be developed.

In an update last month, the NTT stated that the next generation of new towns would: be vision-led; have higher densities than other towns; create business opportunities; have long-term stewardship; involve community engagement; be well-connected, balanced communities with social infrastructure; and be environmentally sustainable.

It reads like a wish list for a suburban utopia, but delivering on such promises will be the hard part and, in this respect, the NTT report is light on detail. The government has yet to clarify how it expects new towns to fit into local and regional planning regimes, how they will be developed and by whom.

ALEXEY FEDORENKO / SHUTTERSTOCK

Providing agencies with the right information at the outset helps prevent delays down the line

Patrick Clarke, Aecom

Patrick Clarke, lead for UK and Ireland masterplanning at infrastructure and construction consultancy Aecom, says: "We still need greater clarity on issues like infrastructure provision, how to capture land value for public benefit and how to balance speed of delivery with quality of placemaking."

But he adds: "I think the focus on new towns as part of a broad portfolio of housing delivery options is really important. The evolution of the Town and Country Planning Association's garden community principles into the NTT's framework is positive, as it ensures lessons from the last decade are not lost."

According to Clarke, changes to land acquisition, land value assessments and spatial planning need to be carefully managed. The taskforce would also do well to avoid allowing the key aspects of a proposed development to be continually altered, which can lead to delays.

Rules in flux

The NTT is working at a time when ground rules for planning and housing are in a state of flux. The government has stated that the revised National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) is "growth-focused" to ensure the development of 370,000 homes a year – but not everyone is convinced.

David Churchill, partner at property agency Carter Jonas, says paragraph 77 of the NPPF is "probably the key policy statement" from a new towns perspective.

This section of the framework states: "The supply of large numbers of new homes can often be best achieved through planning for larger-scale development, such as new settlements or significant extensions to existing villages and towns, provided they are well located and designed, and supported by the necessary infrastructure and facilities (including a genuine choice of transport modes).

"Working with the support of their communities, and with other authorities if appropriate, strategic policymaking authorities should identify suitable locations

for such development where this can help to meet identified needs in a sustainable way."

Churchill says: "I was disappointed that the final version of the NPPF did nothing to change this text. The development of new towns would benefit considerably from a means of determining planning applications outside the current framework – for example, through development consent orders [DCOs], special development orders [SDOs] or Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project [NSIP] processes, once the broad principle is identified in the local plan."

The NTT has stated that "location selection for new towns should be strategically rational, supported wherever possible by existing infrastructure and ideally with local support to ensure successful development".

It adds: "We will also be undertaking further analysis to understand the impact of different delivery and funding models, as well as the approach to land acquisition and placemaking, to inform our final recommendations for the government."

Matt Clarke, director at planning consultancy Boyer, part of Leaders Romans Group, says that the new towns initiative reignites the debate about the reintroduction of regional spatial strategies, which were abandoned in 2010.

He adds: "With the government's focus on significantly boosting housing delivery rates, it is perhaps not surprising that they are seemingly seeking a return to greater levels of strategic planning than under the previous administration, including the new towns initiative – not that the previous incarnation, in the form of eco-towns, was particularly successful in this regard."

The mechanism for the approval, development and management of new town projects has yet to be decided. Churchill believes that because new towns are an important way to address the national housing crisis, decisions on their development should not be made solely by local authorities.

"The housing minister has committed to rejuvenating the Advisory Team for Large Applications [ATLAS] service to support councils on housing schemes," he says. "It will be important that this revived service works to support new town development proposals and does not, paradoxically, create new obstacles."

Amendments to the NPPF are one thing; striking the right balance between strategic and discretionary planning is another. The government has recognised that the statutory consultee process, under which councils must

Ebbsfleet Valley: the Thames-side area is a good example of a site with existing infrastructure suitable for expansion into a new town



consult public bodies such as the Environment Agency before making decisions on certain applications, can slow down development.

To tackle this problem, the government has allocated £1m to speed up response times from bodies such as the Environment Agency, National Highways and Natural England.

Boyer's Clarke notes that the Environment Agency's stance on water scarcity has led to delays in granting planning consent for some schemes, such as ones in Cambridgeshire. Like Churchill, he believes a mechanism such as a DCO regime, allowing applications to be decided outside the standard planning framework, may be appropriate.

"Treating proposals as NSIPs, proceeding via the intensive DCO consenting regime or alternatively establishing development corporations could arguably process

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David Churchill, Carter Jonas



Case study: Brookleigh

Formerly known as the Northern Arc, the Brookleigh development on the northern edge of Burgess Hill in West Sussex has been led by Homes England and is set to create a sustainable and vibrant community.

When complete, the scheme, for which plans were approved in October 2019, will include around 3,500 homes, with 30% designated as affordable housing.

Brookleigh will also feature three new schools, a further three neighbourhood centres, a business park, public parks and an extension to the Bedelands Nature Reserve.

The project has been designed as a '10-minute neighbourhood' and incorporates modern construction methods, such as the use of timber frame, to enhance energy efficiency and reduce carbon emissions.

The scheme has been built in phases, with the first residents moving in in the summer of 2023. Last year, Hill Group was appointed to develop an additional 266 homes.

applications more rapidly, if given appropriate powers and resourcing," he says. But he adds: "The latter proposal was not met with open arms by the existing LPAs [local planning authorities] when recently suggested."

Why size matters

Meanwhile, Aecom's Clarke says the size of new towns could be limited by the amount of risk developers are willing to take on. "The 10,000-home threshold presents a challenge," he explains. "While sites between 1,600 and 7,000 homes are manageable for developers, once projects exceed 10,000 homes, fewer organisations are capable of acting as master-developers.

"That's where public sector involvement may be necessary to ensure delivery. It's essential we stop seeing the private sector as just developers and promoters. Consultants, planners and master-developers have valuable expertise that should be leveraged to accelerate high-quality housing delivery."

Churchill adds: "The size of any new town is important, as it dictates the level of infrastructure. Planning policy is quite rightly clear on the fact that new housing must be supported by appropriate infrastructure

levels. I don't mean smaller schemes can't come forward; but the greater the scale, the potentially more ambitious proposals can be."

But Churchill is clear that location is equally important to minimise the cost of developing infrastructure. "Where there is existing high-quality public transport accessible to the site, capital expenditure on transport can be reduced and used to improve other facilities and services for the settlement. Where there is no existing public transport network, sites can be made sustainable, but are likely to require far greater capital expenditure."

Aecom's Clarke points out that on some projects, processes and infrastructure plans can be 'front-loaded' to ensure a smoother and faster transition from finding a site to gaining consent and starting to build.

He also warns against developers delaying technical assessments to manage cost and risk, "which can lead to unforeseen constraints that require the masterplan to be reworked, causing delays and extra costs".

He adds: "The planning system should front-load engagement with statutory stakeholders – Highways England, Natural England and others – so potential constraints are addressed early."

Brookleigh, near Burgess Hill in West Sussex, is one example of an accelerated delivery scheme (see box, above). Homes England acquired the site in June 2018, had an approved masterplan and infrastructure strategy by that September and submitted the outline planning application by December.

According to Aecom's Clarke, the consent process was completed in 16 months. "This shows what is possible with early investment, a clear delivery strategy and proactive engagement with stakeholders," he says.

The government hopes to see new town projects coming out of the ground by 2029. For that to happen, the NTT would do well to look not only at previous new town schemes but also at recent projects that have been developed to a high quality at speed.

The taskforce says it has undertaken a "review of previous government programmes", including post-war and garden villages.

The Planning and Infrastructure Bill, promised this month, could outline progress towards meeting the government's housing goals; and when the NTT's final report is published this summer, it may fire the starting gun on a generation of developments. Until then, the taskforce has plenty to ponder. ■