# Reviving new towns: balancing delivery and quality in the UK’s housing resurgence



On the eve of the 1946 New Towns Act, Aneurin Bevan, then Minister for Health responsible for housing, highlighted a crucial balance in urban development: while immediate metrics focus on the quantity of housing, true judgement falls on the quality and type of houses built over time. Nearly 80 years later, the UK government is reviving the concept of new towns as part of its housing and economic growth strategy, a reflection of enduring challenges in delivering both adequate and well-designed homes.

The recently established New Towns Taskforce has identified 12 sites across England, with the potential to deliver up to 300,000 homes, including a significant affordable housing component, each settlement expected to contain at least 10,000 homes. The government has embraced these recommendations, committing to the creation of a New Towns Unit to accelerate the delivery of these developments during the current parliamentary term. While thorough in addressing housing supply and economic stimulus, the taskforce's report is characterised by pragmatism, emphasising immediate delivery over visionary planning that attends to the broader social, economic, and environmental fabric of new communities.

Reflecting on historical precedents, the original post-war new towns were ambitious schemes that integrated housing with employment, education, leisure, and landscape, all predominantly delivered through council housing. This coordinated approach depended heavily on state participation, a stark contrast to the contemporary context where affordable housing undersupply has been exacerbated by decades of reduced government involvement since the 1980 Housing Act. The current population has grown substantially amid a dramatic decline of social housing units. The political narrative has evolved from New Labour's eco-towns and the coalition government’s garden villages to the present re-adoption of the “new town” model, though the ambition and scope have arguably narrowed, focusing more on house numbers than long-term community outcomes.

Concerns remain about the mode of delivery. The taskforce largely advocates for top-down approaches through special development orders and partnerships with large-scale housebuilders. However, experience suggests that successful places often emerge from bottom-up, community-driven initiatives, such as co-housing projects like Marmalade Lane in Cambridge. The predominance of a few large developers, limited innovation, and constrained competition in the housing market further complicate efforts to diversify and improve outcomes in housing quality and community engagement.

Key issues include the resourcing of local government, which has been weakened by austerity policies, alongside the building sector’s erosion due to Brexit uncertainties and immigration policy challenges. Design quality remains at risk, with reliance on tools such as design codes and review panels criticized as insufficient. The report’s suggestion for design oversight echoes earlier successful practices where town architects played central roles in shaping cohesive urban environments, a model worthy of consideration in new development projects.

Another critical aspect is governance and stewardship. Historically, new towns generated surpluses that could be reinvested for ongoing renewal and adaptation—particularly important as these communities age and their economies evolve. The taskforce’s recommendation for long-term stewardship models with clear governance and funding structures is a nod to this need, yet without robust mechanisms for localised control and reinvestment, past challenges may persist.

Environmental considerations and climate resilience are acknowledged but warrant greater emphasis given the scale of development and its implications for the UK’s carbon budget. Integrating land use for energy, food, and nature within these new communities aligns with broader environmental goals. Notably, some governmental figures, such as Steve Reed during his time as Environment Secretary, have promoted frameworks that could guide sustainable land use decisions, which remain relevant to current planning thinking.

Underlying the policy is a Treasury mindset still influenced by austerity, potentially hindering investment in infrastructure critical to the success of new towns. Recent governmental hesitancy on spending for strategic projects, such as relocating wastewater treatment in Cambridge for urban innovation infrastructure, signals ongoing tensions between short-term cost concerns and long-term value creation.

Ultimately, the legacy of new towns must be redefined. Politicians and planners need to champion not just more homes but fairer, more inclusive places that embody public benefit and community resilience. Echoing Labour’s municipalist traditions, empowering local authorities and communities to lead and innovate in new town developments could foster deeper engagement and lasting success. The government's new towns endeavour, while pragmatic in its first steps, will require courage and vision to truly fulfil the promise of high-quality, sustainable living environments that Aneurin Bevan envisaged so many decades ago.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/news/opinion/new-towns-will-fail-without-a-plan-to-deliver-quality-at-a-local-level), [[4]](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/new-towns-taskforce-terms-of-reference/new-towns-taskforce-terms-of-reference)
* Paragraph 2 – [[2]](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/new-towns-taskforce-report-to-government), [[7]](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/new-towns-taskforce-report-to-government/new-towns-taskforce-report-to-government)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/news/opinion/new-towns-will-fail-without-a-plan-to-deliver-quality-at-a-local-level)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/news/opinion/new-towns-will-fail-without-a-plan-to-deliver-quality-at-a-local-level), [[5]](https://www.gov.uk/government/calls-for-evidence/new-towns-taskforce), [[6]](https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/the-new-towns-taskforce)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/news/opinion/new-towns-will-fail-without-a-plan-to-deliver-quality-at-a-local-level)
* Paragraph 6 – [[1]](https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/news/opinion/new-towns-will-fail-without-a-plan-to-deliver-quality-at-a-local-level)
* Paragraph 7 – [[1]](https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/news/opinion/new-towns-will-fail-without-a-plan-to-deliver-quality-at-a-local-level)
* Paragraph 8 – [[1]](https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/news/opinion/new-towns-will-fail-without-a-plan-to-deliver-quality-at-a-local-level)
* Paragraph 9 – [[1]](https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/news/opinion/new-towns-will-fail-without-a-plan-to-deliver-quality-at-a-local-level)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/news/opinion/new-towns-will-fail-without-a-plan-to-deliver-quality-at-a-local-level> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/new-towns-taskforce-report-to-government> - The New Towns Taskforce, established in September 2024, has published its report recommending 12 locations for new towns across England. These sites aim to boost economic growth and address housing demand, with each town expected to have at least 10,000 homes, 40% of which should be affordable. The government has welcomed the recommendations and plans to establish a New Towns Unit to accelerate development during this parliament. The taskforce's report outlines the potential locations and delivery strategies for these new towns.
3. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/building-new-towns-for-the-future> - An interim update on the new towns programme, published on 13 February 2025, provides progress on developing recommendations for a new generation of new towns. The update outlines the programme's unique benefits, vision, and aims, as well as publishing emerging principles for what makes a great new town. The New Towns Taskforce, appointed in September 2024, is tasked with making recommendations to the government on the location and delivery of new towns, with a final shortlist of site recommendations expected in the summer.
4. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/new-towns-taskforce-terms-of-reference/new-towns-taskforce-terms-of-reference> - The terms of reference for the New Towns Taskforce, established in September 2024, outline its purpose and objectives. The taskforce is to advise ministers on appropriate locations for significant new communities, including large-scale urban extension and regeneration schemes, recommending locations to ministers by July 2025. The taskforce will work in partnership with local leaders and communities, with its selection of sites made in the national interest. The terms of reference detail the activities the taskforce will undertake to support the government's new towns programme.
5. <https://www.gov.uk/government/calls-for-evidence/new-towns-taskforce> - The New Towns Taskforce, established in September 2024, is an independent expert advisory panel tasked with supporting the government to deliver the next generation of new towns. The primary objective of the new towns programme is to create new and expanded places to boost economic growth and the supply of new homes, spreading opportunity and supporting strong communities. The taskforce is interested in proposals that are regionally significant for both housing numbers and economic growth, with each new settlement containing at least 10,000 homes.
6. <https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/the-new-towns-taskforce> - The New Towns Taskforce is an independent expert advisory panel established in September 2024 to support the government in delivering the next generation of new towns. The primary objective of the new towns programme is to create new and expanded places to boost economic growth and the supply of new homes, spreading opportunity and supporting strong communities. The taskforce's policy statement outlines its role, terms of reference, and membership, including Sir Michael Lyons as Chair and Dame Kate Barker as Deputy Chair.
7. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/new-towns-taskforce-report-to-government/new-towns-taskforce-report-to-government> - The New Towns Taskforce, established in September 2024, has published its report recommending 12 locations for new towns across England. These sites aim to boost economic growth and address housing demand, with each town expected to have at least 10,000 homes, 40% of which should be affordable. The government has welcomed the recommendations and plans to establish a New Towns Unit to accelerate development during this parliament. The taskforce's report outlines the potential locations and delivery strategies for these new towns.