

# New Towns and Town Extensions

## 1 Introduction

- 1.1 The TCPA has long been the leading organisation advocating garden city and new town building as a way of accommodating growth associated with the development of cities and the outward movement of their populations. Its historic campaign, based on environmental, economic, and social considerations affecting the welfare of the population, has led the TCPA to engage with the chief preoccupations of town and country planning: community development and participation; regional planning; urban regeneration; effective transport networks; sustainable development.
- 1.2 The TCPA emphasises that new towns may be a suitable form of development on previously developed sites in rural locations (for example disused airfields) as well as on greenfield land. It does not, however, argue in favour of new town building in all circumstances. It recognises in particular the importance of regenerating the run-down parts of cities, as long as this does not involve building at such high residential densities that people's reasonable housing aspirations cannot be met. The processes of urban renewal need to proceed at the same time as a sensibly planned response to demand for rural sites. Regeneration and greenfield building are not incompatible opposites: they are both necessary parts of any overall development programme designed to meet planned requirements in full. The provision of more housing overall is part of the solution to the problem of house price inflation.

## 2 New Towns – The Portfolio Approach

- 2.1 This policy statement should be read in the context of the TCPA's advocacy of a balanced portfolio approach to development, involving all the main forms of urbanisation – especially urban regeneration, re-use of brownfield sites, and properly planned greenfield development. The portfolio approach is advocated because the need to make use of previously undeveloped land varies from region to region; and because the supply of brownfield sites varies considerably between regions in terms of both the availability of sites and the extent to which sites require remediation before they can be used. First and foremost, the aim must be to ensure the proper housing of the people and provision for the country's environmental and economic well-being, including the prosperity and convenience of the workforce.
- 2.2 For these reasons the TCPA is opposed to arbitrary constraints on the supply of adequate housing, and particularly to over-hasty rejection of the new town option in order supposedly to 'save' land. Greenfield *and* brownfield developments will be needed. In both cases urbanisation is better concentrated in new towns and major town extensions which enjoy a degree of self-containment, social balance, and environment-friendly transport, than in small-scale developments scattered among less well suited locations. The environmental acceptability of all proposed developments should be put to the test: given the right circumstances, a new town or town extension strategically located on a public transport link to the old centre will score well on environmental, economic, and social sustainability criteria. A new town is emphatically *not* merely a 'last resort' option.

## 3 Why New Towns?

- 3.1 The case for new towns in many circumstances remains strong. Dispersal, where it occurs, is best if it is planned in centres which are big enough to sustain jobs, services, and amenities in a balanced social mix, but which are also small enough to create a sense of community and proximity to open countryside. The post-war new towns have shown that it is possible to build at the net residential densities required to meet modern, sustainable, density standards, while planning for the type of house and garden and public greenspace which most people want. Furthermore, even in older industrial regions facing the challenges of restructuring and lack of demand for existing housing, a new town can provide an impetus for growth and may represent an opportunity to improve both the quality of life for residents and the overall environment of an area.

- 3.2 The advantages of concentrating some development into new towns are well established. Large numbers of people can be settled in congenial surroundings on sites of relatively low landscape or agricultural use value. The countryside and existing rural settlements are protected from the effects of scattering development far and wide. The edges of existing major urban areas are not subject to growth which all too frequently takes the form of disfiguring and unsustainable 'sprawl'. Housing can be planned in relation to places of work and entertainment. A full range of retail and community facilities can be provided. A sense of community can be generated. Public transport services can be devised from scratch, to match community needs and incorporate priority measures. Commerce and industry can take advantage of optimum conditions in terms of workforce availability, transport access, and potential expansion. Plans can take account of sustainability issues, especially (since virtually all buildings will be new) through energy conservation measures in building design. A full cross-section of the population can be accommodated and a balance between the numbers of homes and jobs can be struck, leading to a higher degree of potential self-containment than in an older settlement.

#### **4 Urban Extensions**

- 4.1 Many of these positive features of new towns can also be reproduced in substantial urban extensions, which, when properly planned, will avoid some of the worst characteristics of the suburb that tend to result from incremental accretionary growth. The chief advantages of extensions lie in their ability to exploit under-used capacity (for example in shops, transport infrastructure, or employment opportunities) within an existing urban area. They also have a role in preventing the absorption of important village environments and exceptional landscapes into existing towns by channelling growth away from sensitive areas where possible. Urban expansions under the Town Development Act 1952 and more recently in some county structure plans have demonstrated the potentialities of such growth areas when best practice is employed.
- 4.2 For these reasons, the TCPA supports urban extensions in some circumstances, although they lack the virtue of detachment (if only by a short distance) from an older town or city. Urban extensions inevitably damage the interests of the inhabitants of older towns and cities by increasing the distance between them and the countryside, and the argument that they are significantly more sustainable than detached new towns must be considered case by case. They also, by definition, impact on the countryside immediately adjacent to an existing settlement, all of which may be of good landscape or agricultural quality. Nevertheless, the TCPA endorses urban extensions as a valuable element to be considered in a balanced approach to new development, and recognises that, like new towns, they are not all the same in either their physical or social characteristics.

#### **5 Implementation**

- 5.1 The TCPA welcomes government recognition, in PPG3: *Housing* (March 2000), that in the right location new settlements can make a contribution to meeting the need for housing. However, it does not agree that their high initial costs pose a particular problem in getting them built. Expenditure on their land and development should be weighed against the financial return they eventually show and their economic, social, and environmental benefits. Only the private sector has taken the case forward recently; but the public sector could still do so, and by appropriating development value under the New Towns Act (still available on the statute book) or by making use of some similarly effective machinery, it could gain a good long-term return on its investment.
- 5.2 Regional plans should be the mechanism for bringing forward new town proposals – it is not necessary to require that all the local authorities concerned should support such a proposal. It would be entirely unacceptable if coherent and publicly beneficial regional housing and planning strategies were to founder on the veto of just one lower-tier council. Any major new town or town extension proposal affecting more than one county or unitary authority needs to be considered at the regional level. But smaller proposals affecting only a single county or district might be adopted through a county structure plan, a unitary development plan, or a district plan.
- 5.3 The TCPA urges that the new town option be given fair consideration when rural brownfield or greenfield development is contemplated. The balanced portfolio approach should be adopted without any of its elements being subject to especially restrictive conditions. New towns and town extensions remain the one proven method of successfully accommodating large-scale planned new development in rural areas, whether on greenfield or brownfield land.