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- Julia Thrift on re-thinking the purpose of England's Green Belts

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contents

Town & Country Planning
May–June 2022 • Volume 91 • Number 3

regulars

Julia Thrift on re-thinking the purpose of England's Green Belts, pages 164–173.
Cover illustration by Clifford Harper.
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features

the levelling up and regeneration bill—

radical reform for local and neigbourhood place-making?

Hot on the heels of the Queen's Speech, the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill[1] was given its first reading in the House of Commons on 11 May. At the time of writing, we have had 24 hours to digest the nearly 200 clauses and 17 schedules, and because of the wide-ranging nature of the Bill it will no doubt take time to understand what the government aims to achieve through the legislation, and what the specific clauses will really do in practice. But the explanatory notes[2] state that the Bill has four overarching objectives, the fourth of which is:

> '*To create a planning system which delivers more beautiful and greener homes, with the associated infrastructure and democratic support that neighbourhoods want and deserve.*'

The language in this objective partly echoes the sentence in the Queen's Speech about planning, which stated that the reforms would 'give residents more involvement in local development'.[3] Our initial reading of the legislation has, however, raised concerns that, potentially, the system will be more centralised and more confusing than ever.

Along with the Bill, two further policy papers have been published: they set out more details on the government's intention and are more explicit about the elements of the Planning White Paper[4] that the government intends to take forward.[5] Perhaps the headline message from these documents is the confirmation that the proposals in the Planning White Paper for all land to be placed in three prescribed categories and linked to automatic 'in principle' permission for development will not be taken forward. The reforms are, however, still wide-ranging and substantial.

As expected, the Bill includes provisions for the creation of a new Infrastructure Levy, a chapter on planning data, and a section on Environmental Outcome Reports to replace Environmental Impact Assessment. Much of the press coverage of the Bill has focused on the creation of 'street votes',[6] but, interestingly, the Bill gives next to no detail about how they might work because the relevant clause simply allows the Secretary of State to create such a system through regulations.

One of the areas of perhaps most radical change relates to local development plans. The Levelling Up White Paper stated that Local Plans would be made 'simpler and shorter, and improved data that underpins plans will ensure that they are transparent, understandable and take into account the environment that will be developed', in order to make the planning system easier to engage with.[7]

Clause 82 of the Bill defines the 'development plan' as the following suite of documents (where they exist):

- the spatial development strategy;
- the Local Plan;
- the minerals and waste plan;
- Supplementary Plans (which will replace existing Supplementary Planning Documents);
- Neighbourhood Development Plans; and
- the policies map—each local planning authority will be required to prepare and keep up to date a map that illustrates the geographical application of the development plan for the authority's area.

The content of Local Plans will be limited to locally specific matters, such as land allocated for development, required infrastructure, and the principles of good design. Indeed, local authorities will be required to have a design code for their whole area within their development plan. As suggested

Ben Guerin on Unsplash

Local Plans may be accorded greater weight in decision-making, but much significant detail has yet to be set out in secondary legislation

in paragraph 2.13 of the Planning White Paper,[4] general policies that apply to most areas will be set out nationally in a suite of 'national development management policies'.[8] Planning decisions will then be determined with regard to the development plan and 'any national development management policies' unless 'material considerations ***strongly*** indicate otherwise' [*emphasis added*].

By stripping out development management policies and limiting the scope of Local Plans, it seems likely that Local Plans will become shorter. And the introduction of a stand-alone policies map might help to make plans more visual. However, questions remain about the extent to which the public will find it easier to engage with local planning, as there will still be a suite of documents that people will need to be aware of.

It is also worth noting that the explanatory notes to the Bill state that, through the use of 'strongly', as noted above, Local Plans, Neighbourhood Plans and Supplementary Plans are being given more weight, which will provide communities with more certainty.[9] However, the Bill also states (in clause 83) that in the event of any conflict between the local development plan and national development management policy, the latter has primacy. The primacy of the national policy seems to undermine the emphasis on democracy in the Bill's objectives.

These concerns are amplified by the lack of detail on how national development management policy can be made, revoked, or modified. The Bill, in its current form, simply requires (in clause 84) the Secretary of State to make sure that any consultation with, or participation by, the public and other bodies is 'appropriate'. In a live broadcast by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities on 12 May, senior civil servants recognised that there was work that needed to be done to decide which policies should be considered national development management policies, saying that there was a presumption against there being too many.

Other important points about Local Plans are set out in the accompanying *Further Information* policy paper.[5] The government states that it will re-enforce the plan-led system and incentivise plan-making by removing the five-year land supply requirements where a Local Plan is 'up to date'. It is suggested that this will be where a plan has been adopted within the past five years. Alongside this, a clear timetable for plan production will also be set out in regulations—with an expectation that plans are produced in 30 months and updated every five years.

The Bill also introduces (through clause 15K in schedule 7) 'neighbourhood priorities statements', which can be created by the same bodies that can establish Neighbourhood Plans—parish councils or neighbourhood fora. Such statements will summarise the principal needs and prevailing views of the community in the area on a range of matters relating to the development and use of land, housing, the natural environment, the economy, public space, and infrastructure facilities. Local planning authorities will have to take regard of these statements when preparing their Local Plans.

'Questions remain about the extent to which the public will find it easier to engage with local planning'

We understand that the creation of this new neighbourhood planning tool is seeking to address the low take-up of neighbourhood planning in some areas. The new priorities statements will be simpler than full-blown Neighbourhood Plans but will still offer an opportunity for places to identify key priorities for their local area. While neighbourhood planning can be a powerful tool, if the new statements have to be developed by parish councils or neighbourhood fora, the establishment of the necessary local governance arrangements may remain the main barrier in some areas.

The TCPA will continue to try to digest the contents of the Bill and its accompanying documents to better understand how this reformed system will work in practice. The emphasis in the Queen's Speech on community involvement, rather than speeding up the system (which has been a key part of the narrative for many years), was welcome—although speeding up plan-making clearly remains a priority for the government and questions remain about how we make sure that a reformed system embeds meaningful engagement.

It is also important to note that, despite changes to the legislative framework, important conversations are also ongoing about resourcing and supporting local authorities. The Bill puts in place the ability to amend planning fees. This is clearly important; but for planning departments that still have to develop Local Plans but do not receive high volumes of planning applications the government is going to need to consider how additional resources are provided if planning is to play a central role in levelling up the country.

● ***Fiona Howie*** *is Chief Executive of the TCPA.*

Notes

1 *Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill*. House of Commons, May 2022. https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/3155

2 *Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill: Explanatory Notes*. House of Commons, May 2022. https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/3155/publications

3 *Queen's Speech 2022*. Prime Minister's Office and HRH The Prince of Wales, May 2022. www.gov.uk/government/speeches/queens-speech-2022

4 *Planning for the Future*. Planning White Paper. Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government, Aug. 2020. www.gov.uk/government/consultations/planning-for-the-future

5 See *Levelling Up and Regeneration: Further Information*. Policy Paper. Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, May 2022. www.gov.uk/government/publications/levelling-up-and-regeneration-further-information/levelling-up-and-regeneration-further-information; and *Government Response to the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Select Committee Report on The Future of the Planning System in England*. Policy Paper. Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, May 2022. www.gov.uk/government/publications/future-of-the-planning-system-in-england-government-response-to-the-select-committee-report/government-response-to-the-levelling-up-housing-and-communities-select-committee-report-on-the-future-of-the-planning-system-in-england

6 See, for example, N Eardley and J Scott: 'Gove pledges votes on neighbours' extensions but leaves question mark over housing target'. *BBC News*, 12 May 2022. www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-61400935

7 *Levelling Up the United Kingdom*. CP 604. Levelling Up White Paper. HM Government, Feb. 2022. www.gov.uk/government/publications/levelling-up-the-united-kingdom

8 *Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill: Explanatory Notes* (see note 2), para. 51

9 *Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill: Explanatory Notes* (see note 2), para. 50

the levelling up bill and an inexplicable silence

The planning proposals set out in the newly published Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill[1] outline forthcoming fundamental change to the planning system in England. The Bill offered a key opportunity—and possibly our last in keeping below a 1.5°C global temperature rise—to ensure that the planning system fully contributes to addressing the climate crisis. While it is a relief that the current climate change duty has been retained as a requirement in the complex suite of documents that will constitute the local development plan under the system put forward in the Bill, the wider opportunity to bind together the Climate Change and Planning Acts by making explicit in law a requirement that planning authorities will have regard to the relevant carbon budget has been inexplicably ignored. And the Bill offers no new measures of any kind on climate adaptation.

Consequently there remains an enormous task of fixing the current planning system so as to create a democratic and enabling framework that can meet the huge challenges of delivering sustainable communities in the face of the growing climate crisis. This is the last opportunity before the next general election for transformational legislative change on the scale needed to address the climate crisis, but the Bill offers no answers on the issue and fails to secure the lasting democratic settlement that is so desperately needed by both communities and businesses.

The most recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report[2] sets out the latest climate science; and it is nightmarish stuff. Climate change is already significantly impacting the mental and physical health of people around the world, with the most vulnerable being hit the hardest. The scariest part is that we are already seeing worse impacts than had been predicted from the level of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. This should not be ignored in the planning reform agenda.

The TCPA has been working on planning for climate change for three decades, but recently we have been having some new conversations with members of the insurance and lending sectors which have, if possible, left us even more alarmed about the economic impacts that climate change will have.

We have been told that decisions about mortgages are based on the assumption that if a new-build house has been given planning permission it must be in a safe location and built to a sufficiently high standard. But, as we know, for many of the outcomes of planning decisions this is simply not the case—for a range of reasons, but principally because of the chronic lack of skills and resources in local authority planning teams. In turn, consumers are trusting that they would not be granted a mortgage if a property was not safe to live in, and many are surprised when they are not able to obtain flood insurance. As time passes and the impacts of climate change continue to grow in intensity, this fundamental regulatory failure could have the potential to lead to a major property crash.

Key players in the planning, mortgage and lending sectors are only just waking up to this realisation, and to the potential implications that this will have on communities in the very near future. Normally, when there are high levels of uncertainty in financial or environmental modelling, a precautionary approach is taken. However, in this case a 'close your eyes and ignore' approach has been taken, and we are now racing towards a cliff edge. We must be able to trust the planning system to deliver high-quality homes in the right places. Crucially, the reforms set out in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill do nothing to make sure that is the case.

● ***Dr Hugh Ellis*** *is Policy Director and* ***Jessie Fieth*** *is a Projects and Policy Manager at the TCPA. The views expressed are personal.*

Notes

1 *Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill.* House of Commons, May 2022. https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/3155

2 *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability. Summary for Policymakers. Working Group II Contribution to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.* Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Feb. 2022. www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg2/

Richard Wakeford on a project to re-establish Nature—and country planning that requires strategic vision, innovative policy tools, and time

from landfill to eco-park?

More than a few years ago, I won a government-funded opportunity to spend a year in the United States—and I chose to study American land use planning at Princeton University. Many readers of this journal will know that 'zoning' is at the heart of the American system of planning. I set out to explain it more fully for a British audience. To supplement my university study beyond the then very rapidly urbanising central New Jersey, I joined the American Planning Association and attended its national and regional conventions.

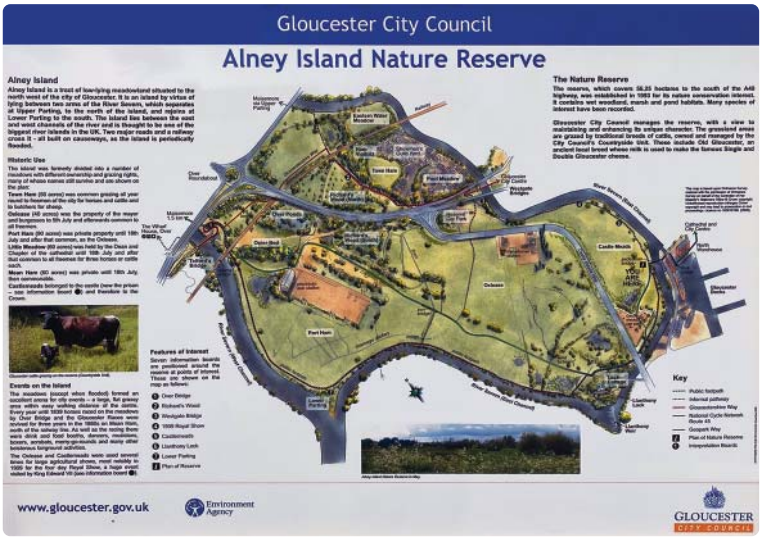
One aspect of those conventions was the chance to choose between local tours led by the organising team, focusing on both the hosts' local challenges and some best-practice outcomes. Unfortunately, going on a tour meant missing potentially interesting conference speakers, but, hey, I could always buy the tapes to listen to those sessions later.

I learned a lot from professional planners on the ground this way. The site visits often earned the phrase 'seeing is believing'. So, when recently the RTPI's South West branch invited members to a 'walking discussion tour', I was interested. And when I read that it was to a 'Nature Park' almost in the middle of Gloucester I was immediately attracted.

The group gathered only a few yards from Gloucester Docks, where the Sharpness Canal terminates. Today's activity is heavily focused on the visitor economy, by contrast with the trade that drove the construction of the canal and docks. A £3.5 million 'Food Dock' is the latest development, overlooking the Victoria Basin and refurbishing two 19th-century brick warehouse buildings.

But crossing over the east branch of the River Severn the visitor finds instant 'countryside'—well, sort of. The study group started the visit walking on what had been railway sidings and waste tips. There is an electricity transforming station in the distance and a battery power station that stores potential energy at night and supplies it to the grid at times of peak demand. The different levels in the landscape all tell stories of what used to be there.

This is the emerging 'Gloucester Nature Park'—part of an emerging 'regional park' alongside the River Severn. Gloucester attracts many visitors, not only to its cathedral, but also to the docks. Covid has caused some retail outlets to close, but the heritage buildings, the canal museum and a choice



Noticeboard interpreting part of an emerging 'regional park' for visitors

Richard Wakeford

Participants on the RTPI walking tour. Seeing is believing—the importance of walking the land that one is planning for

of food and drink outlets are still attractions. But how many of those visitors know what is beyond that lively hub—on the wrong side of the river?

I was reminded of a book I read at Princeton—*Good City Form*, by Kevin Lynch. Published in 1984, the book sets out an urban design theory based on the connection between human values and the physical city. I recall it particularly for the mini map drawings showing the structural shape of cities—and how that shape reflects both geography and society.

Lynch's definition of good city form could, he argued, be used to guide decisions about urban policy allocations of resources, where to move, or how to build something, using the norms about good and bad. The mini drawings could be said to sketch where urban ends and open areas begin—town and country.

Gloucester's shape can be represented as a semi-circle, embracing the original site of Gloucester Castle, HM Gloucester Prison, Gloucester Cathedral and the Roman street plan in the city centre, and then an extensive ring of 19th- and 20th-century urbanisation—almost all on the east side, given the challenge of river flooding on the west. Right next to the urban core there is now open space – and this is becoming the 'Gloucester Nature Park'.

So, what is in the now non-urban half of the semi-circle? Few people would guess a regional nature park—emerging from years of various uses and able to tolerate the river and its regular floods. After all, this is the area where waste has been tipped over the decades, where a power station was constructed, and where railway sidings brought in goods for transhipment to the canal. Oh, and of course, this is where new link roads on embankments above the floods create noisy pollution. And given the two branches of the Severn, how does one even access this area?

In fact, it is an extensive area with grass and trees growing through the remains of roads, railways, and past waste tips. Could this possibly be marketed as the heart of a regional park network—stretching both downstream and upstream, and focusing on nature? That is the vision shared by the Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust on the one hand and waste management service company Enovert on the other (which is now naturalising past waste tips).

Their interventions are leading to an increase in biodiversity, amenity, landscape, and climate resilience. On Alney Island, as part of this area is called, new wetlands are being created, and trees of inappropriate species are being removed. Landscaping is creating areas where kingfishers and sand martins will thrive. Sustrans' national route 45 passes a historic bridge designed by Telford and uses the area to deliver a reasonably quiet route to bring cyclists safely into the city.

Box 1

Extract from Gloucester Local Agenda 21 — from two decades ago

Severnside Countryside Management Project

The stretch of land between the Sharpness Canal and the River Severn is a special area, rich in cultural, landscape and natural assets. All this is a few minutes' walk from the centre of Gloucester, yet very few people know of its existence let alone have been there. If the city is to make the most of the river and canal then this area needs to be opened up and marketed to tourists and residents alike. Being on the urban fringe it does suffer from petty vandalism, dumping and marginal farming. Landowners have not really invested in the land, therefore bringing problems as well as benefits. To address some of these problems and to ensure the area is an asset to Gloucester a countryside management project is proposed. This would involve the employment of a project officer, who with support from local communities, landowners and other stakeholders will help manage the area for amenity, landscape and wildlife. The project will focus on the river and the canal, and for example one of the project's first tasks will be to bring the Severn Way up to standard.

Partner organisations
Gloucestershire Environmental Trust Company/Environment Agency/Severn Trent/British Waterways.

Timetable and funding
A project officer should be in post by January 2001. It is hoped that a project can run for at least 3 years. Funding has been confirmed from Gloucestershire Environmental Trust and the Environment Agency for at least year 1.

Source: A Sustainable Development Strategy for Gloucester. Gloucester City Council, Jan. 2001. www.gloucester.gov.uk/media/1222/la21.pdf

There is a point of natural entertainment where the river splits into two branches; will visitors dare to stand on that point when the famous Severn Bore approaches? Rare-breed cattle graze, and schoolkids are planting trees on the former waste tips, with the aim of locking up carbon.

Is this town planning or country planning? In my view, despite its industrial heritage, it is certainly a lot more attractive than the adjacent unplanned urban sprawl of builders' yards and warehouses. This huge area is still recovering from the damage of past generations. But local strategic planning — whether it's town or country planning — can help to create and deliver a strategy for a very satisfactory range of uses.

This is a different sort of country planning. It requires strategic vision, innovative planning tools, and plenty of time to achieve delivery. The funds to help it happen may come from a range of sources — farm payments, the Forestry Commission, and a whole range of sources reflecting the wide variety of societal goals that a regional nature park can deliver.

Those on the RTPI study tour were much impressed. It is planners' skills that can do so much to bring the various parties and resources together for future generations. It is planning for country creation — reversing past urban sprawl. And Kevin Lynch would note this latest shape of Gloucester, creating green land where there was once brown.

The other point to note is that a project like this — re-establishing Nature — does not deliver instant results. What the RTPI study tour saw this spring was started more than 20 years ago — in a Local Agenda 21 initiative, as outlined in Box 1.

● ***Richard Wakeford***, *formerly Chief Executive of the Countryside Agency, is an Honorary Life Member of the Royal Town Planning Institute and a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences. The views expressed are personal.*

Note

1 K Lynch: *Good City Form*. MIT Press, 1984. With the publication of *The Image of the City* in 1959, Kevin Lynch embarked upon the process of exploring city form. *Good City Form* (first published in hardcover by MIT Press in 1981 under the title *A Theory of Good City Form*) is both a summation and an extension of his vision, a high point from which he views cities past and possible

planning and creating space for teenage girls

The charity Make Space for Girls (of which I am a co-founder) focuses on making parks and similar spaces as welcoming to teenage girls as they are to teenage boys. This does not mean 'girl spaces' painted pink, or signs saying 'No boys allowed'. What it means is encouraging councils, developers, designers, architects and equipment manufacturers to be more creative and inclusive in how they plan and create teenage space so that it works for everyone (including the many teenage boys who do not feel that the current provision is for them).

This article considers the need to plan and create equal spaces by reference to three questions. What is the problem? Why does it matter? And why is planning part of the solution?

What is the problem?

When it comes to teenagers in parks, the standard provisions are multi-use games areas (MUGAs), skate parks, and BMX and pump tracks. All of these spaces are dominated by boys and young men. They are unregulated public areas and, as Doreen Massey said:

> '*Such 'public' space, unregulated, leaves a heterogeneous urban population to work out for itself who really is going to have the right to be there. All spaces are socially regulated in some way, if not by explicit rules […] then by the potentially more competitive […] regulation which exists in the absences of explicit […] controls.*'[1]

A wander round our parks and similar spaces shows what this competitive regulation has done in terms of working out who really has the right to be in 'teen spaces'. Data from Skateboard GB in 2020 showed that 85% of skateboarders are male, and 80% are under 18. That equates to a lot of missing teenage girls. And although grass-roots football among women and girls is seeing fantastic increases, teenage girls still do not get a look in when it comes to an informal kick-about in an MUGA. In short, most teen facilities are dominated by boys.

Why does this matter?

There are three strands to the answer to this question. First, fairness. Why shouldn't teenage girls have facilities that cater for their needs? Feeling welcome in a park is about feeling that you belong in the public realm and are part of the community. At the moment, too many parks send teenage girls the message: 'There is nothing here for you; you might as well go home.'

Second, health. We know that inactivity in teenage girls is leading to serious health problems. At the start of secondary school (years 7-8), only 48% of girls are 'active' compared with 54% of boys, and this decreases to 43% of girls (compared with 48% of boys) in years 9-11;[2] 44% of girls aged 13-15 are overweight. And by the age of 14 one in four girls report experiencing high levels of depressive symptoms, compared with one in 10 boys. We care about these statistics; we want to do something about the issues they highlight. So, as a society, we need to make the link between this level of inactivity and the lack of any welcoming (free-to-use) park facilities for teenage girls.

Being active doesn't have to be about getting sweaty in sports kit. Women in Sport researched the relationship between teenaged girls and 'sport'. For girls who saw themselves as sporty, sport was fantastic. But for girls who didn't, sport was perceived as judgemental, rules based, and yet another way to fail. What good park provision can offer these girls is the chance to be active and outside—whether that's on swings or just walking with a friend—without any pressure.

Finally, the law. Article 31 of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child affirms the right to play for all children, up to the age of 18. Too often councils focus on the play needs of younger children, sometimes having an explicit cut-off at age 12 or 14, ignoring the basic Convention right for older children.

There is also home-grown legislation in the UK, and in particular the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) under the Equality Act 2010.[3] The PSED requires public authorities to proactively consider the need to reduce inequality between groups with protected characteristics. Sex is one such protected

Zdenka Lammelova

Einseidler Park in Vienna

characteristic. So where (as is the case in park provision) girls are disadvantaged when compared with boys, councils have a legal duty to think about trying to reduce this inequality. (Note that not all characteristics are 'protected characteristics' under the PSED. For example, dog ownership is not a protected characteristic for the purposes of the PSED, so councils are not required by law to have regard to making things better for dog-walkers; but they *are* required by law to have regard to making things better for girls.)

Why is planning part of the solution?

Some people might say that the problem is not in the space or the design, which is all good—that MUGAs have to be designed with 3 metre-high fences or they will lose the play value; that skate parks are inclusive, and anyone can use them; and that the absence of teenage girls is down to them: they just need to be empowered to use these spaces.

This argument is superficially attractive – if we could 'fix' the girls, we would not have to change other stuff. But where it falls down is when you try to map out what this empowerment would look like in practice. What form of empowerment works for the footballing girls who want to have a kick around when boys will not give up the space? What form of empowerment will help the 90% of girl skaters who told a survey that they did not feel comfortable skating in their local skatepark? What sort of empowerment improves the lot of the 10-year-old girl who changes her route home from school to avoid the boys playing in an MUGA who yell sexual abuse at her? What sort of empowerment will help the 13-year-old girl taunted by the older boys at the skate park with 'I'd like to ***k you on your skateboard'?

Eva Keil, the leader of gender mainstreaming in planning in Vienna made the point that we should plan and design for the world we live in, not the world as we would like it to be. And if we want to shift the dial, we need to look at the design of public spaces and how they work for girls.

One teenage girl told researchers from Muf Architecture when asked what she wanted from teen space in Newham that she wanted 'a place to meet friends… do activities or nothing. Shelter from the weather and somewhere safe to hang without my ma stressing me.' That should not be too much to ask. And we already have examples of what works in Europe—such as Einseidler Park in Vienna and Rösens Röda Matta in Malmö, both of which have been designed with teenage girls in mind.

As we—gradually—emerge from the Covid pandemic we have a real opportunity to address this issue. Research carried out by Women in Sport, who spoke to more than 1,500 teenage girls between October 2020 and February 2021, found that 82% of them were committed to putting more effort into being fit and healthy after the pandemic. So let's seize this opportunity and engage with teenage girls to change our current thinking and create parks that are more welcoming to them.

● ***Imogen Clark*** *is Co-founder and Trustee of Make Space for Girls (see http://makespaceforgirls.co.uk/). The views expressed are personal.*

Notes

1 D Massey: *For Space*. Sage Publications, 2005

2 *Active Lives Children and Young People Survey: Academic Year 2019/20*. Sport England, 2021. https://sportengland-production-files.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2021-01/Active%20Lives%20Children%20Survey%20Academic%20Year%2019-20%20report.pdf?VersionId=4Ti_0V0m9sYy5HwQjSiJN7Xj.VInpjV6

3 See *The Public Sector Equality Duty. Q& A*. Make Space for Girls/Weightmans, May 2022. https://makespaceforgirls.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/QA-on-the-PSED.pdf

goodbye and thank you— and here's to the sankofa bird

Mary Parsons looks back on ten years as a member of the TCPA Board of Trustees—the last six as Chair—and at the fight to use planning's potential to make a better, fairer tomorrow for everyone

As I write these reflections I am in my final few weeks as Chair of the TCPA Board of Trustees. I stand down from the Board at the July AGM after serving my six years as Chair, and ten years as a Trustee. It feels like the end of an era—a decade that has created some amazing experiences and memories.

I remember well my first Trustee meeting at the TCPA's offices at Carlton House Terrace in London. I was late owing to a tube delays and when I arrived the only seat left was between David Lock and Sir Peter Hall. The phrase 'imposter syndrome' could have been coined for me that day. I felt like a charlatan and a fake—I'm a developer, not a planner, and the wise eyes of Ebenezer Howard in the portrait above the then Chair's seat seemed to be fixed on me. I sat there hardly daring to speak, and when I finally plucked up the courage to make a suggestion the reply came back from a Trustee at the time: 'We tried that in 1971 and it didn't work well…'

To me that sums up the TCPA—the depth of experience and knowledge we have that reaches back through generations. Yet as the saying goes, our greatest strength can also be one of our biggest weaknesses. When I mentioned to colleagues at the time that I was joining the Board, the words 'crusty', 'out of touch' and 'old fashioned' were used back to me (about the TCPA, I think, and not me—but I can't be 100% sure). 'Isn't that the old Garden Cities lot?'. Yet I saw nothing but a passionate and campaigning organisation fighting for better places and the environment at a time when place-making was only just entering the development lexicon.

The portrait of Ebenezer Howard hanging in the TCPA Boardroom

We are, without doubt, a more diverse Board now in so many ways—something that I am proud of. Not just diversity in terms of gender, age, and ethnicity, but also in our professional and personal

backgrounds. However, there is still more work to be done to ensure that we remain a truly diverse and inclusive organisation. That is why I have taken the decision to also stand down from the Board now, even though I could serve another two years and then stand again. I believe that organisations thrive when they have the chance to bring on board fresh thinking, perspectives, and experience. I will always be an active member and supporter of the TCPA, but I hope that we have some new candidates standing for election this time that will bring with them new energy and opportunities.

Looking back over my notes from ten years of Trustees' meetings, there was still a coalition government when I joined, and we were still lamenting the abolition of regional planning through the Localism Act. We were also transitioning into what was perceived as a revolutionary new National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) which supported the establishment of 'new settlements [...] that follow the principles of Garden Cities' — a serious result for the TCPA back then! It may have been sadly lacking in the detail of what that actually meant, but it captured our guiding principles within national planning policy and gave local authorities a 'hook' to insist on them, as some have done in drawing up their Local Plans. There was much talk of 'localism', with a Minister seemingly convinced that neighbourhood planning would drive development. We had huge doubts that the duty to co-operate could ever replace strategic planning, and we were waiting to see how 'the presumption in favour...' would play out in practice.

Ten years on, and a few NPPF revisions later, we are now debating what the government's latest proposals for more reform within the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill will mean. While beauty and quality are captured in planning policy, we still fall short, year on year, on achieving housing targets. There is an ever-increasing shortage of truly affordable homes, and many communities still fear and oppose development in their area; viewing the planning system as being weighted too heavily in favour of developers — while developers conversely cite it as one of the biggest barriers to delivery.

The TCPA tackled all of this back in 2018 through the Raynsford Review of Planning in England, resulting in an evidenced-based report that set out a new vision for planning in England and how to rebuild trust in the planning process — something that is still so fragile.

I recently counted how many Housing Ministers there have been during my tenure on the Board — that there have been ten in ten years really does speak volumes. We have had some good ones and some perhaps less so. Some we never got the chance to decide on as they moved on so quickly. Some were genuinely engaged with our work, while there were others who didn't want even to meet with us. But I am writing shortly after the newly appointed Housing Minister, Stuart Andrews, spoke warmly of the TCPA and its work during a recording to open our recent conference on stewardship. I hope Fiona, Hugh and the TCPA team will continue to develop a positive relationship with him and his department as planning reform and levelling up are set out in the statutory programme.

That is not to say that we will not continue to challenge and push any government for real positive change, as we have for so many years. Our speaking out against the appalling outcomes for people resulting from the relaxation of permitted development rights (PDR) and inappropriate office-to-residential conversions did not immediately land well with the current government. However, as one of the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commissioners I always made the point that a government committed to beauty could not turn away from the impact of PDR on the people living in its resulting dwellings, and that:

> *'there is no beauty in a child having to use a car park as a play area or being housed in a glorified shipping container next to a flyover, on the argument that it is better than nothing. We believe that all homes — new build or conversions — should meet minimum standards for space, amenity and comfort, as well as the safety of the people that live there.'* [1]

This has been at the heart of the TCPA's 'Healthy Homes' campaign, and it is rewarding to see, finally, some traction in getting health and wellbeing into the definition of building safety. This campaign is one that I take real pride in being a part of, and it goes to the heart of what the TCPA is about — ensuring better outcomes for people.

We started the campaign in 2019, well before the Covid-19 pandemic hit, but our own experiences of lockdowns have bought home to every one of us the impact that our homes have on our mental and physical health and wellbeing. I, for one, was almost literally 'bouncing off the walls' at times — and I was lucky enough to have plenty of space at home in which to work and a garden that I could find peace in. I'm not sure how there could have been any experience of peace for the families forced to live in a flat not much bigger than a supermarket car park space.

It is not only our homes that impact on us, but the wider places we live in. The TCPA has produced an outstanding body of work on reuniting health and planning over recent years. Our current work on the '20-minute neighbourhood', carried out with our partners, Sport England, has gained so much traction because we all have a different relationship now with our communities. With the NHS at breaking point and the growing burden of funding the social care system, meeting the need for people to live healthier, independent lives for longer and tackling the deep-rooted health inequalities that exist are surely matters of common sense and must be key objectives of the planning system.

The Sankofa bird—'It is not wrong to go back for that which you have forgotten'

Those health inequalities are one of the many inequalities that must be addressed if we as a nation are to truly 'level up'—and it is inequalities not only between regions but within communities that we must work across all sectors to tackle. The TCPA called this 'planning out poverty' and in 2013 produced a report asking: 'How can we re-focus planning to be more effective in dealing with social exclusion?' I live in hope that the levelling-up agenda can finally start to answer that question, but the TCPA had a good go at it back then.

It really should not be difficult to answer that question, particularly if we look back to the birth of the TCPA and how, at the end of the 19th century, planning made such a significant contribution to improving the quality of life of ordinary people:

> *'The early aspirations of planning were not simply focused on bricks and mortar; planning was about creating the conditions for people to live differently, addressing social isolation and founded on a co-operative ethos. The Garden Cities are a clear example of the extent of planning's ambition.'*[2]

Where did planning lose its way? Perhaps the TCPA's 'Tomorrow 125' programme will not only answer that question, but also show us how we can rebuild the crucial connections vital to the true purpose of planning. With morale in the sector at arguably an all-time low, we need clarity of purpose now more than ever. Planning is not just about delivering housing numbers—although providing more homes is obviously important. It should not be viewed simply as a process that, if you tick all of the boxes on the way through, prevents harm from happening; it should be about using our land and resources wisely to create a better, more just future for all.

Which is where the Sankofa bird comes in. I have looked to this odd-looking creature in many presentations since it was first introduced to me by a resident at a community engagement session many years ago. Originally a symbol used by the Akan people of Ghana, the bird looks over its shoulder with its feet facing forward while reaching backwards for a precious egg on its back. It teaches us the proverb 'It is not wrong to go back for that which you have forgotten'—or that we should take time to reflect and learn from the past in order to build a successful future.

That to me is the magic of the TCPA, and I will always take pride in being part of an organisation that has such a rich history and heritage to draw upon; but uses it to look to the future and never stops fighting for a fairer and better tomorrow for everyone.

● ***Mary Parsons***, *Regeneration and Partnerships Director at Lovell Partnerships, stands down as Chair of the TCPA Board of Trustees at the TCPA AGM on 13 July 2022. The views expressed are personal.*

Notes

1 *Living with Beauty: Promoting Health, Well-being and Sustainable Growth*. Report of the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission, Jan. 2020, p.30. www.gov.uk/government/publications/living-with-beauty-report-of-the-building-better-building-beautiful-commission

2 *Planning out Poverty: The Reinvention of Social Town Planning*. TCPA, Oct. 2013, p.7. https://tcpa.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Planning_out_Poverty.pdf

icons, tears and hope in barrow hill

Hugh Ellis reflects on the failed campaign to save the Church of St Andrews, Barrow Hill, designed by Barry Parker and Raymond Unwin, from closure and sale

The Parish Church of St Andrew at Barrow Hill, near Staveley in Derbyshire—an icon of the communal promise of the Garden City idea

The sun was just setting as we shoved open the battered Gothic door and were greeted by the eerie silence that inhabits abandoned buildings. The last sunlight was streaming through the William Morris stained glass, creating a rainbow pattern on the tile floor and catching the specks of dust from the crumbling plaster work. This was our final pilgrimage on a cold April evening in 2022 after a failed campaign to save the Parish Church of St Andrew, Barrow Hill.

Our visit was a far cry from the atmosphere in the building when the TCPA had performed 'Land of Promise' there on a summer's evening in 2018. Then, the building was packed and ringing with the sound of our house band playing a tribute to this Derbyshire church—Raymond Unwin and Barry Parker's first, and perhaps most iconic, design achievement. Back then we felt that we had only just discovered this extraordinary part of British working-class heritage—an untold story of how a group of artists, writers and trade unionist met around Edward Carpenter's Derbyshire table and, inspired by those such as William Morris, began to transform the housing of ordinary people.

Carpenter's open house at Millthorpe was just a few miles from Barrow Hill and was a crucible of humanist ideas which had a profound impact on key figures in the Garden City movement. It was here that the possibility of designing places which support the complex and diverse reality of what being human means came into focus. While Letchworth was to be caricatured as being full of sandal-wearing, naturist cranks, in fact the Garden City was at least 100 years ahead of its time in recognising how design could support human liberation. Planning was not about determining a blueprint for how people live, but about providing a framework to enable people, regardless of their income, to live fulfilling and healthy lives.

Among their many achievements, Unwin and Parker's enduring partnership drove the greatest step forward in the housing conditions of working people ever seen in this nation, resulting not just in the designs of places such as Letchworth but in a blueprint for hundreds of thousands of council houses at affordable rents with generous rooms and big gardens, sited at walkable distances from shops and schools. No-one has ever matched the

genius of their 1903 book *The Art of Building a Home*, and directors of the volume housebuilders should be forced to read it. The formative experiences of working in the coal and steel communities of North Derbyshire lead directly to Unwin's 1919 national design guide,[1] which turned a vision of the good life into reality for millions of ordinary people.

St Andrews was their first and much loved design collaboration, and, knowing that the budget was limited, they designed and hand-made the font and lectern and much else. Their passion was to make practical beauty a part of the everyday lives of the workers of Barrow Hill. Now the dust has settled on these works of art, and the hopefulness of their makers seems long forgotten.

The church that they struggled to build on a shoestring is now being sold, and church law demands that furniture used in religious services be destroyed unless they can be found a home in a reputable museum. Between the support of the TCPA and the kindness and commitment of those few remaining parishioners, we hope, subject to raising £500 for transport, that some of the Unwin and Parker items can be saved and moved to the keeping of the Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation.

The Foundation has been amazingly generous in accepting the items into its care, reuniting these icons of the Arts and Crafts movement with Unwin and Parker's original drawings in their archive. On the one hand we should be grateful that something could be saved; but the fact that one of the most significant parts of Derbyshire's working-class history is going South sticks in the throats of those of us who tried to save St Andrews.

It was difficult to know why that last evening felt so poignant. Partly the tears were for the afterglow of a time when the Garden City ideal offered real hope of a peaceful and humane future. Partly it was anger that this iconic building had been ignored by Historic England, which failed, despite repeated exhortation, to list the building and its contents because it could not grasp the overwhelming social significance of these two brilliant campaigners and designers. Whatever the policy or principles of Historic England might be, something is wrong when we protect the mediocre Palladian houses of the rich while ignoring the people who made their wealth.

St Andrews, Barrow Hill may be modest, but that is because it was built using pennies from people living short lives in atrocious conditions on poverty wages. It seems that their stories do not count as 'heritage'. Derbyshire is full of country houses built using a combination of the profits of slavery and the exploitation of working people, but we nevertheless troop off to buy our William Morris tea towels in a collective act of doffing our caps to a confection that we call heritage. But there is more decency and hope in a single brick of St Andrews than will ever be found in the aristocratic corridors that we are urged to revere.

Nothing can now stop the sale of the church or protect it from unsympathetic conversion or even demolition. It is a bitter irony that something built to celebrate the communal heart of a village will soon be in the hands of a private owner.

We are allowed, at least for a moment, to be angry. We have lost an icon of our founding story, and that is hard for any social movement to bear. But, as the sun set on that April day and we sat in the twilight, talking together on the oak pews that Barry Parker had designed, the atmosphere of this simple work of honest genius wrapped around us and changed the mood completely. The realisation was simple enough. Be careful not to die in a ditch for the icons of the past—icons are ultimately monuments to a moment; it's the ideals that really count, and the ideals are still burning brightly.

We are invested in St Andrews because it was a beacon of hopefulness in a hard time and because we know the part it played in weaving the fabric of the Garden City ideal. That ideal was one of the great threads of progressive change in the 20th century, a guiding light that valued the diverse human condition and social justice over the destructiveness of obsessive pursuit of private profit.

There are so many more important issues confronting us now, including the desperate war in Ukraine, that it may be seen as an indulgence for the TCPA to go on trying to construct a hopeful future. But it has always been part of the Association's role to explore, in the most desperate times of poverty, and even war, the constructive purposes of life—offering a sense of how peaceful coexistence can be achieved in a society founded on social justice is one of the most powerful ways of honouring those scarred by conflict and poverty. The TCPA's 125 project is beginning to reconnect the head and the heart of the Garden City movement and will, with some good luck and good will, demonstrate that there is an immediate alternative; a sustainable and practical model of how we might live together. In short, offering a measure of hopefulness in these bleak times.

So, it is with grateful thanks to Barry Parker and Raymond Unwin and to St Andrews, Barrow Hill for this last, and lasting, moment of inspiration. As befits a church, we say farewell in the glorious expectation of the better world they proved was a practical possibility for working people. If you would like to help us meet the cost of transporting the Unwin and Parker artworks to Letchworth, please visit the TCPA's donations webpage, at https://tcpa.org.uk/donate/. We know that there are many other, more important causes demanding attention, but if you can help us we would be very grateful.

● ***Dr Hugh Ellis*** *is Policy Director at the TCPA. The views expressed are personal.*

Note

1 Local Government Board's Housing Manual, based on the recommendations of the Tudor Walters Committee

working for planning balance

Harpreet Aujla explains how the planning advice service set up by the Southwark Law Centre has been working to balance the scales of justice in planning through community advice and representation

I write this article at a desk in Peckham, where Southwark Law Centre has been based for the best part of the last 50 years. In this time, many places in the borough of Southwark—which stretches from London Bridge in the north to leafier and more residential Dulwich in the south—have developed and changed beyond recognition. The northern riverside has been heavily developed, former factories in and around Bermondsey have turned into luxury housing,[1] and a central area, Elephant and Castle, has seen two landmark developments, the Heygate Estate and the Elephant and Castle Shopping Centre, demolished under two separate massive redevelopment projects.

Advising on planning and developments was an area of work that Southwark Law Centre undertook in the 1970s, again in a time of huge change in the borough. In the years leading up to 2017, enquiries about planning applications and proposed developments were coming forward in increasing numbers. It was also clear that a lot of agreed planning applications in Southwark were doing significant harm. In many places, such as the large redevelopments on the Heygate and Aylesbury Estates, the result was the displacement of people from their homes and communities, with very little affordable housing or community facilities provided in replacement.[2] Many homes lay empty—something which became more apparent during the pandemic; in fact, Southwark has been ranked as the London borough with the most empty homes.[3]

We have argued that Southwark Council's planning committee has not always been properly advised about their duties under equalities legislation, and consideration has not always been given to the psychological harm that can be caused by regeneration, including the disproportionate impact on certain groups—those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, black and ethnic minority groups, older people, and families. There is also a huge environmental cost to demolition and poor development.

Southwark Law Centre applied for funding for a pilot planning advice service—Southwark Planning Voice—in the hope that planning outcomes could be improved, and that the democratic and decision-making processes could be influenced to ensure that Southwark Council's planning officers and committee members enforced their policies, and that they developed robust policies for the future. We questioned how people are expected to exercise their democratic right to participate in planning if they are not given support in dealing with planning officers and the legions of planning consultants. Since we have received funding, our project has been trying in a small way to address this balance.

Our evaluation report on Southwark Planning Voice, which is available online,[4] gives details of the work that we have done, so this article reflects on the opportunities that we have followed up and the challenges that we have faced and overcome in the past four years. We have balanced analysing and disseminating information about major planning applications (such as those in the Greater London Authority-designated Old Kent Road Opportunity Area) with providing the public with advice on them. We have also provided general training on how to get involved with either responding to a planning application or influencing planning policy. Compared with planning consultants and private developers, we have extremely limited resources and a huge amount of work to do in a short time.

It is also striking—and a significant barrier to fair decision-making—that council planning officers and developers have access to pre-decision-making briefings with planning committees to discuss significant applications. Committee members can attend site visits with planning officers, but these visits are not open to local people. Planning officers almost inevitably deepen their relationships with

developers over the course of many discussions on applications, from pre-application stage and over a number of months and years; but the community is never given such unfettered access to the planning decision-makers. So we have recently been lobbying for a community briefing, led by local people, so that they can raise their comments on planning applications with planning officers and committee members.

People who want to influence planning need resilience and determination. We are lucky that there are many committed people, campaigners and local activists that can help others, including the indispensable network and peer-to-peer support provided by Southwark Planning Network (which links people in community groups across the borough working on the effects of planning and regeneration) and the overarching, independent tenants and residents organisation Southwark Group of Tenants Organisation. Through working together, we have been able to scrutinise consultation practices, planning applications, and Southwark Council's policies on regeneration.

One example highlighted in the evaluation report is our work with a local organisation, Southwark Traveller Action Group, with support from London Gypsies and Travellers, to make representations about a discriminatory policy included in the draft of the new Local Plan. This was subsequently changed after the intervention of the planning inspector, following representations made about the Public Sector Equality Duty and the right to be free from discrimination.

We have also been holding Southwark Council to account over the Elephant and Castle shopping centre regeneration, which has been hugely controversial and has displaced a number of long-standing independent traders. The charity Latin Elephant has been working with traders since 2014, and, having made representations on the plans, Southwark Planning Voice has organised training events to engage with the application. Since 2018 we have been scrutinising the trader relocation strategy and trying to obtain more space in the area for displaced traders. This has been a mammoth task, and the displacement that has followed this planning application has shown the damage that regeneration can do to a successful independent business community.

We have also had climate change at the forefront of our minds. Southwark Council declared a climate emergency in March 2019, and we have been working with local people and activists to ensure that this translates to meaningful action in terms of policies which decarbonise buildings, set obligations on developers at all stages of the development process, prioritise re-use and retrofit as much as possible, and conserve and protect natural spaces.

Responding to planning applications and raising representations on planning policy is still only half of the picture, as so many community benefits are left for negotiation when planning permission is granted subject to an agreed Section 106 agreement. These agreements are not currently monitored effectively, and there is no easy route for community scrutiny. We have evidence of social housing being lost through planning committee decisions on Section 106 agreements and through failures by developers to provide what has been agreed in Section 106 agreements.

Finally, we have forums through which we can talk to council officers about how planning and regeneration is, or is not, working in the borough. We bring together officers from public health, regeneration and planning to talk about the overlapping issues that each department faces, with the shared goal of making a healthier, happier and fairer borough. This is a particularly important initiative, even if just for making sure that planning decisions are not siloed but connected with all other local council goals.

There is much work to be done and built upon, but the Southwark Planning Voice project has proved that, with public access to advice and representation, outcomes can be improved at every stage of the planning process. This approach is something that we would like to see taken on by other law centres and, in places where there is where there is no law centre, organisations that provide advice in areas of increasing development.

We want to see good development which serves the needs of people and communities — an aim that should be the bedrock of our planning system.

● ***Harpreet Aujla*** *is a Planning Solicitor at the Southwark Law Centre. The views expressed are personal.*

Notes

1 At the time of writing, the cheapest home available at London Square Bermondsey, on the site of the former Crosse and Blackwell factory, is a one-bedroom flat offered for £675,000

2 For further details, see 'Elephant Park MP5 — the final chapter'. Webpage. 35% Campaign, Aug. 2019. www.35percent.org/posts/2019-08-05-elephant-park-final-phase-affordable-housing/; and O Wainwright: 'Revealed: how developers exploit flawed planning system to minimise affordable housing'. *The Guardian*, 25 Jun. 2015. www.theguardian.com/cities/2015/jun/25/london-developers-viability-planning-affordable-social-housing-regeneration-oliver-wainwright

3 D Wiggins: 'London property: The London borough with the highest number of empty properties in capital, worth £1.25 bn'. *My London*, 21 Jul. 2021. www.mylondon.news/news/property/london-property-london-borough-highest-21111906
See also *Nobody's Home* and *Empty Homes in England 2019*. Action on Empty Homes. www.actiononemptyhomes.org/publications-and-research

4 *Southwark Planning Voice: Project Independent Evaluation, 2022*. Alex Evans Community Consulting, for Southwark Law Centre, Jan. 2022. www.southwarklawcentre.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/SLC-Planning-Voice-Evaluation-FINAL-Jan-22.pdf

planning in a state of full crisis

The planning system and the planning profession are now in full crisis, and continuing decline will only exacerbate the difficulty of attracting into the field those with the calibre of talent that is needed, says Rob Gillespie

I have been professionally engaged in town planning since I graduated in 1979 and, as an RTPI member, have been principally engaged in private practice and the development industry since 1984. While I have written on these matters before, I sincerely believe that the planning system in England and the profession which serves it are now in full crisis. Unfortunately, for well over a decade too many of those in senior positions of influence and authority within the profession and in government have been in denial of this decline.

Recruitment and retention have become fundamentally difficult issues as fewer 'bright young things' want to join a profession that is no longer respected by fellow professionals, the public at large, politicians, and many in the environment lobby. We have also witnessed an almost catastrophic decline in the size and status of local government planning departments as a consequence of very deep funding cuts and an inability to recruit good-quality staff. Morale is generally low. That has had a profound effect upon performance, and has undoubtedly placed stress on those practising within planning authorities. That, in turn, places stress on the 'customers' of the planning system, be they applicants, architects, or agents and others acting for clients.

To date, much of the stress has been identified as principally affecting the public sector; however, in reality those stresses are shared by all professionals within the planning system. Not only is pressure to deliver an issue, but the cultural divide between the applicants and the decision-takers appears to be widening, with an increasing tendency for applicants, particularly those associated with the development industry, to be regarded as a troublesome nuisance and not as customers.

For example, some authorities are imposing limitations on an applicant's ability to amend applications in response to the formal consultation stage. Only those whom have worked exclusively within the public sector cannot see the injustice in such a restriction. Long experience of both the pre-application and application processes, coupled with the often dilatory performances of some of the more critically important statutory consultees, tells me that this inevitably results in yet more cost, delays and frustration, with the consequential stalling of economic investment in local economies. What therefore might seem a neat administrative solution to those within the authority is, to applicants, nothing less than an unnecessarily harsh and obstructive punishing of the applicant—who is, after all, a customer.

Of course, that hinders proactive and constructive working—and chimes with an uninformed media's view of the industry as a whole. The media's generally disdainful treatment of planning decisions, planners and councillors (including the image portrayed to the public in, say, TV dramas) serves to dissuade the younger generation from joining the planning profession.

There is also a very clear lack of respect shown between fellow planning professionals, which is, to say the least, disheartening. Experience apparently often counts for nothing. It is also becoming obvious that few of those left in development management teams have had the time to really study applications until the point is reached when committee reports need drafting.

There is an acknowledged diminution of planning within the career structure of local authorities' hierarchies, and, while there are notable exceptions, an absence of planners in the more senior posts has effectively reduced planning to a secondary career path in local government. Coupled with this is the now more apparent absence of respect being

shown by an increasing number of councillors towards their officers, as witnessed in the public fora of planning committee meetings. Populism in decision-making is seen as a political given, and grandstanding before crowded public galleries an ever more obvious tendency. This increasingly common and poor behaviour does nothing to attract the talent needed, and will almost certainly not retain seriously minded professionals. I cannot begin to recount the number of times that fellow professionals with whom I have attended committee meetings left with a sense of complete dismay and incredulity at what they had just experienced.

'A restoration of faith is urgently needed through the championing of planning as a worthwhile activity, enabling creativity and offering a stimulating and rewarding career'

The underlying cause of much of this is a substantial under-resourcing—and an even more fundamental lack—of councillor training. Too few councillors appear practically informed as to the role, purpose and the remit of the planning process in the discharge of their duties. How often have we seen councillors opening their committee agenda envelopes as they take their seats? Planning often forces politicians into making at times difficult and what may be perceived as locally unpopular decisions, but there is often an unpreparedness to explain to constituents why such decisions have had to be taken. Put simply, the view that 'there are no votes in development' is all too often the mantra.

This should come as no surprise given the government's own abandonment of the brand-new planning system heralded within the 2020 White Paper, as a direct consequence of its own Home Counties MPs' pressure. Planning has become over-politicised, in that it is now a useful subject for campaigning and posturing before the public. The post-war consensus and visionary thinking which created the British planning system has seemingly all but evaporated.

While much more will be said regarding the content of the new Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill, it seems immediately obvious that those needing homes in authority areas constrained by Green Belt or, say, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, will be largely 'written off' as a consequence of the demise of regional planning and more recently the duty to co-operate. The default position will be 'we did our best' but there is nowhere left to allocate land for new homes. How convenient.

Furthermore, junior officers are often left exposed by senior colleagues to unwarranted criticism from councillors. Poor committee chairship and an unwillingness by senior officers to intervene and provide steering when the discussion strays are symptomatic of weak leadership. To an applicant watching such a lack of balanced and fair consideration, the result often appears as a slow-motion 'car crash', following costly and time-consuming research, preparation, submission and consultation processes. In some authorities there is also the added problem that more senior and experienced officers are sometimes conspicuous by their absence from meetings involving the consideration of more complex and often publicly controversial applications. This is when their experienced advice is most needed.

As someone committed to the role and purpose of planning, and having invested over 40 years of my career in the system, I am extremely saddened to write in these terms. There has to be a recognition within the RTPI and the TCPA that the profession is being deliberately marginalised; is now failing to attract the calibre of talent needed in an increasingly competitive job market; and will continue to decline in respect among industry professionals.

Planning is an essential function of any civilised society. Most other western democracies 'get' the need for planning while, ironically, the country which first introduced such a system is now dismantling it. The global environmental challenges now being faced require the recruitment of talented people with ambition and a positive and inventive 'can do' attitude. Such challenges should make for an exciting and rewarding career. Planning is not, however, seen a fashionable career by most youngsters, and especially school-leavers with potential who ought to be encouraged to become graduates and join the profession.

The prospects for any further iteration of the planning system following the government's climb down from its much-promised radical recasting are not good—more tinkering, re-arranging of deck chairs and political expediency to come. A restoration of faith is urgently needed through the championing of planning as a worthwhile activity, enabling creativity and offering a stimulating and rewarding career. This aim must be better pursued through stronger leadership and direct engagement with the very top of government.

● ***Rob Gillespie*** *is Managing Director of Impact Planning Services, but the views expressed are entirely personal.*

solutions hiding in plain sight—

the potential of england's green belts

Julia Thrift argues that, for the first time in a generation, there is a realistic chance to radically re-think the purpose of England's Green Belts and improve their accessibility, quality and benefits for people, the environment and the economy—and that multiple government policy objectives would be delivered by doing so and that the key funding and financial incentives required are already in place

Mike Ellis / NHS England

Play area in the Hogmoor Inclosure on the outskirts of Whitehill & Bordon, Hampshire (part of NHS England's Healthy New Towns project)—creating natural play areas in the Green Belt, accessible by safe walking and cycling routes, would be a relatively low-cost way to provide multiple health and wellbeing benefits for children and families

England, like many developed countries, faces a number of urgent, important and interconnected crises:

- There are large ***health inequalities*** among the population, with people in some communities dying—on average—10 years earlier than those in others, for reasons that are avoidable. The causes of much of this ill-health include ***poor diet***, ***lack of physical activity***, and ***air pollution***. People in poor health pre-pandemic suffered far worse outcomes from infection by coronavirus.[1]
- There is an urgent need to ***reduce carbon emissions from transport***[2] and to provide land for tree-planting to ***offset carbon*** in order to meet the UK's commitment to ***reach net zero by 2050***.[3]

- There is an urgent need to green our towns and cities to ***reduce the effects of climate change***, such as overheating and flash-flooding,[3] and to ***help clean polluted air***.
- There is a reliance on a ***fragile global food system*** that produces cheap, unhealthy processed food; and there are a growing number of families (many in work) who ***rely on food banks*** and cannot afford the fresh vegetables and fruit that are vital for a healthy diet.[4]
- Without properly directed investment in helping people to stay healthy, the cost of treating them when they become ill will ***make the NHS unaffordable***.[5]
- There is a ***rapid decline in biodiversity*** that is now recognised by economists and the government as an existential risk to both the economy and human health.[6]

Unlike many of the countries that face these multiple, interconnected problems, England has an important asset that could, potentially, contribute part of the solution—namely the Green Belt, more than 1.6 million hectares[7] of land surrounding the 16 cities and towns and other urban areas that house the majority of the population.

Myths and reality

Before considering how the Green Belt could provide practical solutions to the problems outlined above, it is important to be clear about exactly what the Green Belt is—and is not.

For many people the phrase 'the Green Belt' suggests images of what William Blake memorably described as 'England's green and pleasant land'—a vague but emotive impression of the best of the nation's countryside.[8] This emotional resonance is amplified by the fact that many people's experience of the Green Belt is little more than a blur seen through a car or train window as they speed away from a town or city.[9]

As a consequence of being both vague and emotionally powerful, the Green Belt has become politically charged. Suggestions that it could or should be changed can be perceived as a threat to its existence—often resulting in vocal opposition, with the result that politicians avoid mentioning it other than to say they support it. Ironically, this intense popular support for a romanticised Green Belt prevents discussion about how the purpose and quality of the real Green Belt could be improved.

The romantic notion of the Green Belt is at odds with the facts in many ways. 'Green Belt' is a simply a planning designation—in essence, just lines on a map, delineating areas within which development is restricted. Although new development is restricted in Green Belt areas, the designation 'Green Belt' signifies nothing about the quality or beauty of the land that is protected: it is protected simply because of its location on the edge of an urban area.

On its own terms Green Belt policy has been a great success: it has prevented low-density development on the outskirts of urban areas spreading until towns and cities merge into each other. However, although Green Belts have prevented urban sprawl, much of the quality of Green Belt land is poor, according to a range of different measures.[10] The urban public is often unaware of the exact location of Green Belt land, and it is often not easy for them to access it (dual carriage ways tend to take people *through* the Green Belt, not *to* the Green Belt). It is not necessarily very biodiverse—especially the surprisingly large areas taken up by golf courses, which rely on pesticides to keep their 'greens' so perfectly green,[11] or farming,[12] which, according to the State of Nature Partnership's *State of Nature 2019* report, is one of the drivers reducing biodiversity.[13] Green Belts are not necessarily deliberately planted or managed to maximise 'ecosystem services'—in other words the sort of 'public goods' that well designed green spaces and waterways can deliver, such as cooling and cleaning the air, purifying water, or carbon sequestration. England's Green Belts could be so much better.

Why does the Green Belt exist?

The principle of 'always preserving a belt of country round our cities' was proposed in 1898 by Ebenezer Howard,[14] originator of the Garden City model of development and founder of the Garden City Association, which later became the TCPA. Howard's radical idea was to deliberately plan and create Garden Cities that, among other things, were surrounded by farms to supply food for their residents. He recognised that as a Garden City grew and prospered there would be increasing pressure to build on the surrounding farm land. His solution was bold: once a city had reached its optimum size (his suggestion was 32,000 people), it should stop growing. The need for more homes would be met by building another Garden City, connected to the first via a railway, but entirely separate in its location, population, and governance.

After the Second World War elements of these ideas were, in effect, embedded in national planning policy. The 1947 Town and Country Planning Act allowed councils to control urban sprawl into the countryside, and in 1955 councils with areas that did not already have Green Belts were encouraged to designate them.[15] Despite numerous changes to planning policy over the last 70 years, Green Belt policy has remained.

What is often forgotten, however, is that both parts of Howard's radical idea influenced national policy and legislation. The 1946 New Towns Act gave the government the power to buy land at agricultural prices and to build New Towns—which it did.[16] Howard's two-part idea, applied (although imperfectly) to a wide range of urban areas, worked: the Green Belt prevented sprawl while the New

Towns prevented a shortage of homes. However, when the government stopped building New Towns, and for a set of complex political, economic and demographic reasons house prices started their decades-long rise, pressure to build on the Green Belt increased. Today, many commentators argue that building on the Green Belt is an obvious solution to the housing crisis.[17]

Shouldn't we build homes on the Green Belt?

As the TCPA has argued,[18] evidence suggests that there are many reasons why creating whole new towns can often be a more successful approach than simply adding housing estates to the edges of existing urban areas.

In recent years much work has been undertaken on the economic value of having green spaces close to urban areas. The work of the Natural Capital Committee, an independent committee of economists established to advise HM Treasury about economics and the environment, demonstrated that green spaces close to where people live are vital from an economic perspective, because of the multiple benefits to health and climate change resilience that they bring. As the leading economist and former Chair of the Natural Capital Committee, Sir Dieter Helm,[19] put it:

'[Many] people think the economics all point towards building on the Green Belt and using it for housing and other developments, whereas environmentalists are against economic development [...]—as if there is some kind of a dichotomy between economics and the environment. This is utter nonsense. The core argument for the Green Belt is economic.'

Consequently, while it is clear that England needs to build many more good-quality and affordable homes, from an economic point of view, and from the point of view of creating high-quality sustainable communities, the Green Belt is not the right place in which to build them.

The powerful work by the economists on the Natural Capital Committee directly informed the government's 25 Year Environment Plan,[20] which was adopted in 2018 and is now being implemented. Chapter 3 of the plan, 'Connecting people with the environment to improve health and wellbeing', sets out the strong evidence that access to green spaces supports good health, and notes that 'In the most deprived areas of England, people tend to have the poorest health and significantly less green space than wealthier areas'. It goes on to say that 'Our aim is for more people, from all backgrounds, to engage with and spend time in green and blue spaces in their everyday lives.' However, Green Belt policy is stuck in the 1950s, with no mention of the benefits of trees and green spaces to people's health and wellbeing, and consequently to the economy.

What is the Green Belt for?

Current planning policy says that the Green Belt serves five purposes:

'a) to check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas;
b) to prevent neighbouring towns merging into one another;
c) to assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment;
d) to preserve the setting and special character of historic towns; and
e) to assist in urban regeneration, by encouraging the recycling of derelict land and other urban land.'[21]

Given that there is now robust evidence of the public health benefits of green space situated close to the places where people live,[22] and an urgent need to offset carbon and reduce the impact of climate change on urban areas, it is clear that this limited rationale for the Green Belt is hopelessly out of date.

A vision for 21st-century Green Belts

The Green Belts around England's urban areas have the potential to:

- help to improve people's physical and mental health and wellbeing, reducing pressure on the NHS;
- improve air quality;
- provide educational opportunities for local schools, for example through forest schools and outdoor learning;
- capture carbon by providing land for tree planting;
- reduce the risk of urban areas overheating in hotter summers;
- absorb rainwater to prevent the risk of flooding in nearby urban areas;
- create spaces rich in biodiversity;
- create jobs in market gardening, timber production, and leisure activities (bike hire, cafés, etc.);
- support the economy by providing affordable fruit and vegetables to the local town or city.

All this could be achieved by:

- creating safe, attractive, tree-lined walking and cycling routes from urban centres to the Green Belts that surround them, and creating circular routes around towns and cities through their Green Belts for walking, cycling, commuting and activities such as mountain-biking, orienteering, etc., thus providing accessible, affordable healthy leisure opportunities;
- using appropriate Green Belt land for planting trees for woodland or planting trees for timber, and planting hedgerows and creating sustainable water management systems; and
- re-purposing arable land from cereals to market gardening, creating jobs and food to supply local schools, hospitals, prisons, and urban markets.

Mike Ellis / NHS England

Community gardens can provide opportunities for friendships to flourish as well as providing skills, training and affordable healthy food—small sites such the garden at Ebbsfleet Garden City, Kent (part of NHS England's Healthy New Towns project) could complement larger urban farms in the Green Belt

None of these ideas are new: all are already being discussed, recommended and even, to some extent, put into practice in England. They are very much in line with, and would help to deliver, the most recent England-wide policies in agriculture, environment, biodiversity, transport, and public health. They would help to deliver the health and wellbeing 'missions' that government has committed to achieving as part of the 'levelling up' agenda. They are also being implemented very successfully in a number of places around the world, as the examples set out in Boxes 1–3 on pages 168-70 illustrate.

How could accessible, productive and healthy Green Belts be achieved?

As a result of the principles underlying the English planning system, the Green Belt is created collectively (through national and local planning policies), even though much of the land itself is privately owned. Consequently, the changes that might be required to implement the ideas set out above will involve changes to national and local planning policies, plus incentives that make it worthwhile for the multiple private landowners to do things differently.

In fact, most of the policy and *all of the funding* is already in place: what is required is updated national policy and political leadership to focus existing funding streams in order to deliver the necessary transformation of the Green Belt.[23] Government action will also be required to ensure that tenant farmers are not excluded from funding because of their tenancy contracts; and to ensure that the considerable amount of public and private money now available for rural areas actually achieves the natural capital objectives for which it is intended.[24]

What might these shifts in policy and a new focus for existing funding streams look like?

Policy changes and funding incentives

Planning (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities)

The Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill, currently going through Parliament, makes it clear that the government will continue to protect the Green Belt. An explanatory document published alongside the Bill states that 'Existing Green Belt protections will remain and we will pursue options to make the Green Belt *even greener*' [*emphasis added*]. This suggests a window of opportunity to update the five purposes of the Green Belt set out in national planning policy to align with the government's 25 Year Environment Plan, its commitment to meet net zero by 2050, its Transport Decarbonisation Strategy, and its commitment to reducing health inequalities.

When the National Planning Policy Framework is updated—and an update is expected within the next 12 months—it should make it clear that active travel networks to, and around, urban areas should be encouraged, and that small-scale development to support local food-growing (for example small distribution centres) and leisure (cycle hire, cafés, and natural play areas) should be supported.

The Local Nature Recovery Strategies that are being introduced across the whole of England[25] as

Box 1
Example — creating walking and cycling 'ringways' around towns and cities

What? Create networks of high-quality walking and cycling routes from city centres, through the suburbs and into the Green Belt, and provide routes around cities, through the Green Belt, to join up the radial routes.

Why? Helping people to become more active is one of the most effective ways to support good physical and mental health. The government's new cycling and walking strategy states that:

'Increasing cycling and walking can help tackle some of the most challenging issues we face as a society – improving air quality, combatting climate change, improving health and wellbeing, addressing inequalities, and tackling congestion on our roads.'[a]

How? The infrastructure (high-quality footpaths and segregated cycle routes) could be delivered as part of the government's £2 billion commitment to cycling and walking.[b] As an outcome of the Agriculture Act 2020, farmers can be paid for 'public goods', including 'supporting public access to and enjoyment of the countryside, farmland or woodland'.[c] The tasks of maintaining, publicising and activating the ring-routes could be managed by local charities, funded from a range of sources, including active travel budgets, public health funds, fundraising events, cycle hire and other activities, cafés, etc.

Where has it been done? The Atlanta Beltline, Atlanta, USA — a partially completed 22 mile ring of tracks, trails and parks around the city. It grew out of grass-roots action and has already resulted in 30,000 jobs, 1,300 acres of new green space, 46 miles of improved streetscapes, and $10 billion of


Peter Neal

economic development. It has created links between better- and worse-off neighbourhoods, and keeps space undeveloped to enable future provision of transit systems and infrastructure (safeguarding space for cables, pipes, etc). It is managed by a not-for-profit organisation.

Is there anything like this in England? The London Loop is a ring of 150 miles of footpaths around the capital, launched in 2001 by the London Walking Forum. Volunteers from The Ramblers help with maintenance. If it was significantly upgraded and publicised, and linked to the city centre and suburbs via high-quality walking and cycling routes, could it provide the starting point for a 'beltway' for London? In Oxford the Green Belt Way is a 50 mile circular walk through the Green Belt, devised by CPRE Oxfordshire.

a *Gear Change: A Bold Vision for Cycling and Walking*. Policy Paper. Department for Transport, Jul. 2020. www.gov.uk/government/publications/cycling-and-walking-plan-for-england

b '£175 million more for cycling and walking as research shows public support'. News Story. Department for Transport, 13 Nov. 2020. www.gov.uk/government/news/175-million-more-for-cycling-and-walking-as-research-shows-public-support

c S Coe and J Finlay: *The Agriculture Act 2020*. Briefing Paper CBP 8702. House of Commons Library, Dec. 2020. https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8702/

Box 2
Example—planting a forest around each town and city

What? Surround towns and cities with woodlands by planting trees. This would have three purposes: to grow mature woodlands that will capture carbon, support biodiversity and also provide places for healthy leisure, play, and outdoor education; to create horticultural nurseries to provide young trees for planting in urban areas, while improving skills and creating jobs that can be easily accessed from the nearby town or city; and to grow timber for future use in sustainable construction, providing local jobs.

Why? The government's 25 Year Environment Plan sets out the health and economic benefits of planting trees, especially in locations close to where people live:

> *'Having more trees in and around our towns and cities, close to where people live and work, brings people closer to nature and improves air quality, with consequent positive health impacts… Green infrastructure brings wider benefits, including sequestering carbon, absorbing noise, cleansing pollutants, absorbing surface water, and reducing high temperatures.'*[a]

In addition, by creating horticultural nurseries close to urban areas it will be possible to grow trees for local planting while creating jobs. Until now, many of the UK's trees for planting have been imported from EU countries. Post-Brexit, this is difficult for reasons of biosecurity and customs, just at a time when demand for trees is increasing. A report for the horticulture industry has indicated that the number of jobs provided by the industry in the UK could grow from 674,200 in 2019 to 763,400 by 2030 if the country's green spaces are protected and enhanced and the industry is supported to meet its potential.[b]

How? Natural England has recently published freely accessible online maps of green infrastructure for the whole of the country, which identify the location, type and accessibility of green spaces, and can be easily cross-referenced with health and social data.[c] This could help to identify suitable land for tree planting in Green Belt areas. The Agriculture Act 2020 enables farmers to be paid for providing 'public goods', including 'managing land or water in a way that protects or improves the environment', which explicitly includes tree planting. Funding for planting trees is available from businesses that want to pay for tree planting as part of their carbon offsetting projects. One of the biggest challenges for such projects is finding land on which to plant the trees.

Where has it been done? Tirana Orbital Forest, Tirana, Albania—as part of wider environmental improvements to address the city's rapid growth and loss of green spaces, schoolchildren in Tirana are

being encouraged to plant 'birthday trees', to create an orbital forest of 2 million trees. The project caught people's imaginations and resulted in large numbers of people donating trees, planting trees, and watching the number of planted trees increasing through a website.

Is there anything like this in England? England has several 'community forests', many of which are close to urban areas. Cambridge City Council provides 'free trees for babies'. Enfield Council is working to restore Enfield Chase by planting 200 hectares of trees (of which 60 hectares have already been planted[d]), as part of the London Urban Forest Plan, which has a goal to plant more trees in the capital's Green Belt.

a *A Green Future: Our 25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment*. Policy Paper. HM Government, Jan. 2018. www.gov.uk/government/publications/25-year-environment-plan

b *Growing a Green Economy: The Importance of Ornamental Horticulture and Landscaping to the UK*. Oxford Economics/Foresight Factory, for the Ornamental Horticulture Roundtable Group, Sept. 2021. www.rhs.org.uk/science/pdf/industry-growth-report-ohrg.pdf

c See Natural England's 'Introduction to the Green Infrastructure Framework – principles and standards for England' webpage, at https://designatedsites.naturalengland.org.uk/GreenInfrastructure/Home.aspx

d A short video on the Enfield Chase Woodland Creation project is available at https://youtu.be/6IrA5PHZLJI

Box 3
Example—growing to supply urban centres with affordable healthy local food

What? Use Green Belt land for growing fruit and vegetables, and for small-scale distribution hubs, to provide affordable, locally produced and healthy food for urban populations, along with encouraging local enterprise, creating jobs, and strengthening communities.

Why? The National Food Strategy, an independent report commissioned by the government, sets out very clearly how dysfunctional our food system has become. Many people cannot afford to eat healthy food and rely on cheap, poor-quality, highly processed food which makes them ill. The strategy states:

> *'The cost of bad diet is astronomical, both in terms of human misery and actual money. The government spends an estimated £18 billion—8% of all government healthcare expenditure—on conditions related to high BMI [body mass index] every year. (This is before you account for diet-related disease not related to weight).'*[a]

Around the world there is increasing recognition that the global food industry is making people ill—yet dismantling this huge, complex, well funded system is extremely difficult. However, at a local level, a large number of projects are successful at helping people to grow local, healthy food, while simultaneously strengthening communities and stimulating enterprise.

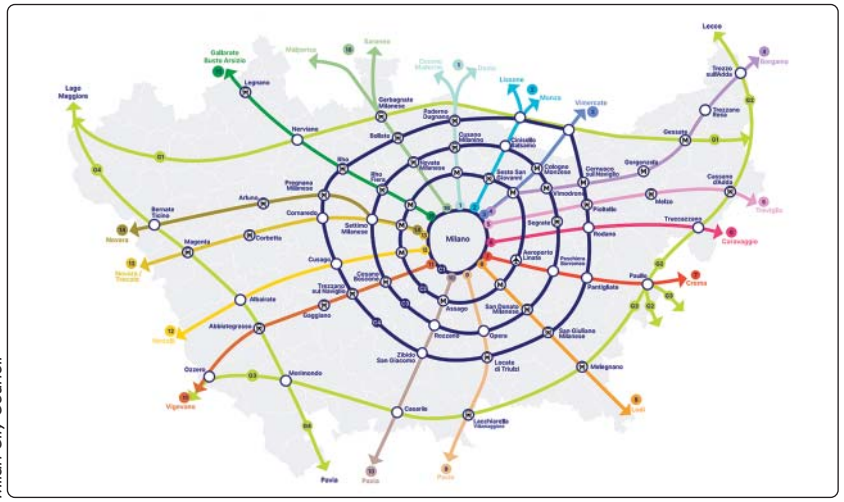
How? A report by Sustain,[b] the alliance for better food and farming, sets out the benefits of local food systems and a series of recommendations for supporting them—including using public investment such as the UK Shared Prosperity Fund to provide strategic support for local food systems, and to help attract private and community investment. Sustain recommends that every local authority area should have a 'food partnership',[c] and that councils and other public-sector organisations should prioritise buying food produced locally by small suppliers—in a 'food version of the Preston model'.[d]

Where has it been done? Sustainable Food Production for a Resilient Rosario, Rosario, Argentina—Rosario, the third-largest city in Argentina, won the 2021 World Resources Institute's $250,000 Prize for Cities, after it responded to a desperate economic crisis, coupled with the effects of climate change, by adopting a strategy to encourage farmers around the city to stop growing soybeans for export and start growing food for Rosario's communities. In addition, public land within the city was made available to local people—along with seeds and tools—to enable them to grow their own food.


World Resources Institute

Is there anything like this in England? Throughout England, local urban and peri-urban food-growing initiatives are flourishing, at different scales—providing multiple benefits, including affordable healthy food, stronger community connections, skills, jobs, and a boost to local economies. In Oldham, Greater Manchester, Northern Roots is a 160 acre urban farm and eco-park that grows edible and ornamental crops as part of a sustainable business model devised with support from the University of Salford[e] and informed by research into similar initiatives worldwide.

a *National Food Strategy — Independent Review*. 2021, p.25. www.nationalfoodstrategy.org
b *The Case for Local Food: Building Better Local Food Systems to Benefit Society and Nature*. Sustain, Jul. 2021. www.sustainweb.org/publications/the-case-for-local-food/
c Sustainable Food Places' SFP Food Partnership and Strategy Toolkit is available at www.sustainablefoodplaces.org
d See Preston City Council's 'What is Preston model?' webpage, at www.preston.gov.uk/article/1339/What-is-Preston-Model
e See Northern Roots' 'Northern Roots Urban Farm; creating a sustainable business model' webpage, at https://northern-roots.uk/northern-roots-urban-farm-creating-a-sustainable-business-model/



Milan City Council

The Italian city of Milan plans to create a network of circular cycle routes crossed by radial routes into the countryside by 2035—if England's towns and cities did this, their Green Belts would become easily accessible, offering huge potential for affordable exercise and employment opportunities for their populations

a result of the Environment Act 2021, and soon to be referenced in planning policy, will be evidence based, locally led and delivered by partnerships of public, private, and third-sector organisations—ideal for taking forward this idea.

Transport (Department for Transport)

The Department for Transport (DfT) now recognises the influence that transport has on public health, and in 2020 promised to invest £2 billion[26] to improve walking, cycling and public transport infrastructure. Although welcome, this investment is modest compared with the £24 billion[27] promised for investment in roads. The DfT's roads funding can be used to provide active travel infrastructure, and the DfT could encourage spending on good-quality walking and cycling routes to and around Green Belts. This would help to deliver the government's ambitious Transport Decarbonisation Strategy. At a local level, policies to promote active travel routes to, and around, Green Belts could be introduced through Local Transport Plans. The £4.8 billion Levelling Up Fund[28] can also be spent on improving active travel infrastructure. The DfT has recently set up Active Travel England,[29] an inspectorate and funding body chaired by the cyclist Chris Boardman—ideally placed to champion and fund active travel networks to, and around, Green Belts.

Agriculture (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs)

The UK's exit from the EU and the Common Agricultural Policy provided an opportunity to create a new agriculture policy from scratch, including reorganising the way that the £3.5 billion in annual subsidies to farmers in the UK are allocated.[30] This was achieved through the Agriculture Act 2020. Consequently, farmers will be paid for providing 'public goods' through the system of environmental land management schemes (the Sustainable Farming Incentive, Local Nature Recovery, and Landscape Recovery).[31] This could be used to incentivise Green Belt farmers to improve their land for public access, recreation, tree planting, and conservation, all of which are included in the definition of 'public goods' in the Act. Local Nature Recovery Strategies will be introduced as a result of the Environment Act 2021. There are currently numerous government grants available for tree planting and other green infrastructure projects—and more on the way.[32]

Public health (Department of Health and Social Care)

Much of the work that Public Health England did to encourage the creation of healthy places has been transferred to a new unit within the Department of Health and Social Care—the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities (OHID). Based on the clear evidence of the health benefits of active travel and better diets, OHID is ideally placed to support relevant government departments and agencies in collaborating to amend policies, focus funding, and motivate local planning authorities to put Green Belt ideas into practice. This could be done through the cross-departmental Health Promotion Taskforce, established to 'drive a cross-government effort to improve the nation's health, supporting economic recovery and levelling up' and chaired by the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care.[33]

Councils

Post-pandemic, and with the cost of living increases disproportionately affecting poorer households, councils are acutely aware of the health inequalities in their areas. Many are prioritising a reduction of health inequalities, either as a corporate priority or by including it as an objective in their Local Plans. In line with national planning and transport policies, new Local Plans should prioritise walking and cycling, creating an opportunity to promote routes to, and around, Green Belts. Local planning authorities—usually district or unitary councils—will also lead

the new Nature Recovery Strategies in their areas, providing an opportunity to bring together private-sector landowners and third-sector charities to help implement this idea. Finally, as major local budget-holders and employers, councils have the power to support local food-growing by creating locally focused purchasing policies and supporting or setting up a local food partnership.[34]

What might stop this happening?

The lines on a map that set out the boundaries of a Green Belt are intended to be fixed and unchangeable. However, Green Belt boundaries can be changed in 'exceptional circumstances',[35] which usually means that a council is required by government targets to build a large number of new homes and has nowhere else to put them and so takes some land out of the Green Belt. Consequently, land speculators and developers buy options on Green Belt land in case it becomes available for development in the future.

If a council moves the boundaries of its Green Belt so that land that was protected becomes available for development, its value increases by an extraordinary amount. For instance, in 2015 agricultural land outside London was worth around £21,000 per hectare, but with planning permission for housing was worth £2.1 million — a hundredfold increase.[36] This increase in value is created by the state (through the planning process), but the benefit overwhelmingly goes to the landowner.

For housebuilders, the ideal land to build on is an open field. This is usually the easiest, and hence the most profitable, type of land to develop. Consequently, many developers are likely to oppose enhancements to the Green Belt land which they hope to develop in future.

Why now?

Reforming Green Belt policy has been a 'no-go' area for governments for decades. However, for a range of reasons, it now looks politically possible.

In 2022, for the first time in more than a decade, the government might be willing to challenge the housebuilders. The Secretary of State at the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, Michael Gove, is currently trying to tackle two scandals: first, the extortionate leases that some homeowners have been sold by some housebuilders; and, secondly, the thousands of flats left unsellable because the cladding used on them is the same kind of cladding that was used on Grenfell Tower. He is also responsible for the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill,[37] which proposes significant changes to planning law and, in tandem, updates to planning policy. Michael Gove has, when dealing with the major housebuilders to try to resolve the cladding crisis, proved to be far tougher with them than previous Ministers. If housebuilders disliked proposed changes to Green Belt policy, it is not at all clear that he would comply with their requests.

Finally, the climate and public health challenges are now so pressing that it is clear to both the public and policy-makers that bold ideas to transform the way we live are essential. Politicians are scared that most of the ideas on offer are negative — don't fly so much, don't eat meat, don't drive your car — and will lose them votes.

Transforming local Green Belts into beautiful, accessible places in which to enjoy nature, keep fit, have fun and grow affordable food could be an incredibly attractive idea for voters of all ages. The Green Belt could stop being a political liability and become a huge political asset. What is required are some minor changes to Green Belt and planning policy, more focused and effective management of funding from the new government grants and private-sector carbon-offsetting schemes, and firm political leadership. The time to do it is now.

● ***Julia Thrift*** *is Director of Healthier Place-making at the TCPA and a Trustee of Trees for Cities. A condensed version of this proposal was voted the best 'Big Idea' at the Trees, People and the Built Environment 4 international conference held in February 2021, organised by the Institute of Chartered Foresters. The views expressed are personal.*

Notes

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2 *Decarbonising Transport: A Better, Greener Britain*. Department for Transport, Jul. 2021. www.gov.uk/government/publications/transport-decarbonisation-plan

3 *Joint Recommendations: 2021 Report to Parliament*. Committee on Climate Change, Jun. 2021. www.theccc.org.uk/publication/2021-progress-report-to-parliament

4 *National Food Strategy — Independent Review*. 2021, p.25. www.nationalfoodstrategy.org

5 *Five Year Forward View*. NHS England, Oct. 2014. www.england.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/5yfv-web.pdf This strategy initiated NHS England's Healthy New Towns project, which aimed to create places that would support good health — see www.england.nhs.uk/ourwork/innovation/healthy-new-towns/

6 *The Economics of Biodiversity: The Dasgupta Review*. HM Treasury, Feb. 2021. www.gov.uk/government/publications/final-report-the-economics-of-biodiversity-the-dasgupta-review

7 *Local Authority Green Belt Statistics for England: 2020-21 — Statistical Release*. Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, Sept. 2021. www.gov.uk/government/statistics/local-authority-green-belt-statistics-for-england-2020-to-2021/local-authority-green-belt-statistics-for-england-2020-21-statistical-release

8 A survey of public views on the Green Belt found that 'Green Belt is often associated in the public mind as a place designated for its natural beauty or as a place where nature is protected' — see *Green Belts: A Greener Future*. Natural England and CPRE, Jan. 2010. http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/38005

9 Some participants at the Trees, People and the Built Environment 4 international conference at which this idea was first presented commented that this reflected their experience of the Green Belt

10 See, for instance, M Frith: *London's Green Belt*. Policy Statement. London Wildlife Trust. Updated May 2019, reviewed Jan. 2021. www.wildlondon.org.uk/sites/default/files/2019-07/LWT%20Policy%20-%20London%27s%20Green%20Belt%20%20-%202007%2C%202019%20revision.pdf — which states that 'not all land within London's Green Belt is of high quality — for wildlife, landscape, or amenity'

11 According to research carried out by architect Russell Curtis (*The Golf Belt: How Sustainable Development on London's Golf Courses Can Help Address the Housing Crisis*. Aug. 2021. https://golfbelt.russellcurtis.co.uk/), there are 94 active golf courses in Greater London alone, covering a total of 4,331 hectares — an area larger than the whole of the London borough of Brent

12 65.7% of Green Belt land is in agricultural use according to *England Green Belts*. CPRE — The Countryside Charity, May 2018. www.cpre.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/England_factsheet_2018.pdf)

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32 An up-to-date list of funding sources is available from the TCPA website, at www.tcpa.org.uk/funding-sources-for-green-infrastructure

33 See the terms of reference and composition of the Health Promotion Taskforce within the published list of Cabinet committees and their membership, at www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-cabinet-committees-system-and-list-of-cabinet-committees/list-of-cabinet-committees-and-their-membership#health-promotion-taskforce

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back to the city?

what are the implications for rural areas?

Nick Gallent looks at the factors behind an apparent reversal of the urban-to-rural flight seen during the Covid-19 pandemic, at what this reversal means for the housing market, and at the implications for popular rural amenity areas

Nick Hawkes on Unsplash

If the flight from the cities seen during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic is going into reversal, what does this mean for rural areas?

The Covid-19 pandemic has been marked by urban flight in England, with people moving to the countryside for space and greenery. But there are now signs of a reversal. Families have been heading back to the cities, and particularly to London.

In this short comment, I suggest that three factors are potentially at play. First, the return of old *working patterns*; second, a rebalancing of *utility and exchange* considerations in housing consumption choices; and, thirdly, shortcomings in the *'ex pat' lifestyles* that down-shifters encounter in the countryside. I begin by looking at each of these reversal factors in turn, before briefly examining how this change is reflected in recent data, how the housing market seems to be moving more generally, and what the current pattern of change could mean for those rural places that have been on the sharp end of this recent flow and ebb of urban migration.

First, *working patterns*. Flips back to office-working are not universal, but long-term home-

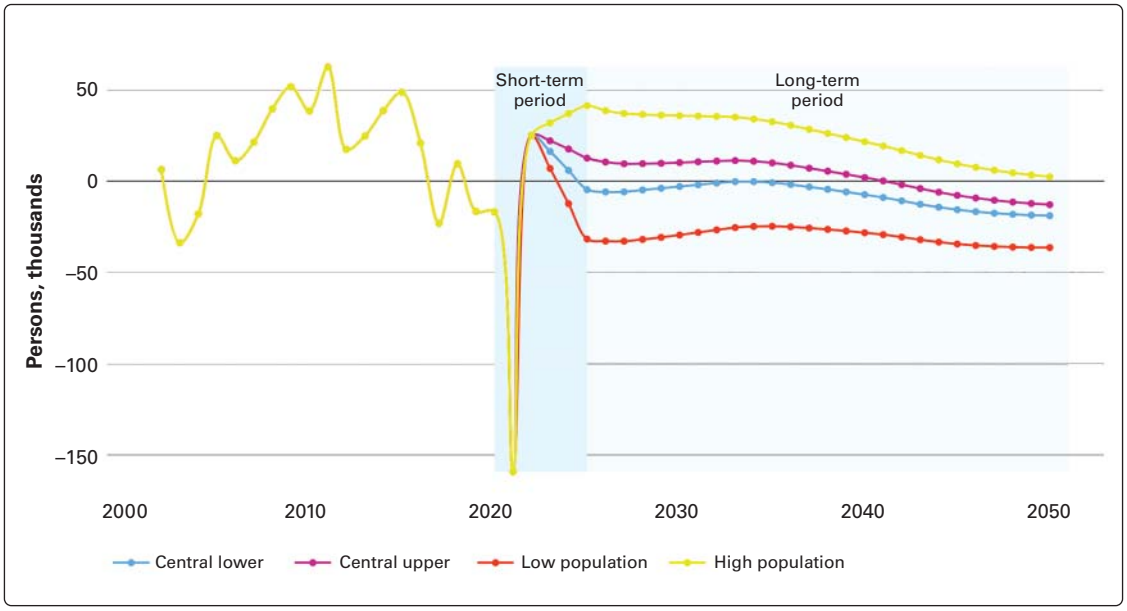


Fig. 1 Total net migration, London
Source: 2020-based Population Projection Results, Demographic Update, September 2021[4]

working has proved challenging for many workers. Some companies have demanded that employees return to offices, at least for a minimum number of days each week. Home-working has made it difficult to integrate new employees and is counter to the working cultures of many sectors, whose innovation models rely on the buzz and exchange of the office or studio environment. This is, of course, not true of all 'head down' professions, whose workers can as easily fulfil core duties in a 'home office' as in a 'work office', assuming that they have access to reliable broadband which can cope with the higher bandwidth needs of daily Zoom meetings.

But just because people *can* work from home does not mean that they wish to do so, forever. For many workers, the novelty of centring their lives at home, rolling out of bed and working in their pyjamas (or 'top dressing') has simply worn off. They want to reinstate the separation of work and home life, see colleagues again, meet people over lunch, and so on. The logistics of returning to offices from less accessible rural locations has therefore resulted in a rethink by some households. A great many will have relocated to well connected villages close to commuter towns with their parkway stations—and can therefore cope with even a daily train ride. But others traded location for space and price and moved to remoter villages, seduced perhaps by the romance of relative isolation. These households may be forced to return, selling up or retaining their homes in the country for weekend use.

Second, the balance between *utility and exchange*. Housing is a 'complex commodity',[1] with consumption choices shaped by expectations of utility (the services that homes provide) and exchange (their investment potential and how this will affect financial wellbeing through the life course).

At the beginning of the pandemic, utility appeared to trump exchange. People headed to rural areas for the space and greenery that they were denied in parts of London. They swapped small flats for big houses. But throughout the pandemic, housing has remained a safe asset relative to the volatility of other commodities. It has also provided a hedge against inflation as economies re-open. The balance of consideration, between utility and exchange, has swung back to the latter—and households are returning to the strongest markets. They also fear that rural prices may have been over-estimated given the difficulties now being faced, marked by the flip back to office-working and the everyday lifestyle challenges encountered by ex-urban residents.

Thirdly, the *'ex pat' lifestyle* has not suited all movers. What do I mean by 'ex pat' lifestyle? When the educated middle classes decamp to high-flying jobs in Singapore or Hong Kong, they send their children to private schools, and their patterns of sociability are dominated by 'ex pat' networks and encounters. This pattern of living is shared by many people heading to the countryside (see Howard Newby's *Green and Pleasant Land?*[2] for an early account of how newcomers live in rural communities).

Where there are many big houses—in the Surrey commuter belt, for example—the 'ex pats' can flock together. But in more distant destinations, they may find themselves isolated, living in the only big house in a hamlet or village. They send their children to private schools but there are no classmates nearby and must therefore ferry their children to friends'

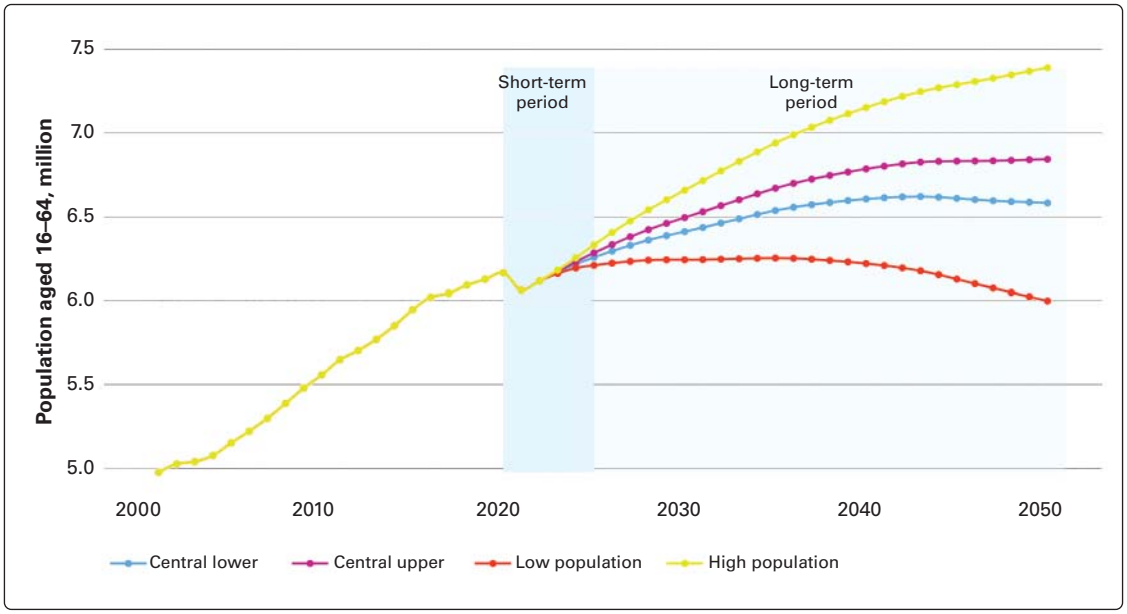


Fig. 2 Working-age population projections, London
Source: 2020-based Population Projection Results, Demographic Update, September 2021[4]

houses and socialise across significant distances. They are driving everywhere to 'ex pat' connections, bypassing local schools, and developing only weak ties within their immediate neighbours. The lack of integration is tiring for many households, who struggle with their urban tastes and predilections. It can be impossible to get a decent 'flat white' or 'matcha latte' in villages lacking a critical mass of former N2 residents.

Effects on the housing market

So what does the consequent return to the city look like, in terms of housing market change? A 'boomerang effect' has been reported in London's *Evening Standard*, evidenced by a drop in the volume of searches for homes in Cornwall and Devon (which soared during the pandemic) and a sharp rise in the number of renters and buyers looking for London flats. The same newspaper also reported data from the estate agency Chestertons, which noted a steep climb in market interest in London homes in January 2022 compared with the previous January.[3]

The same boomerang effect can be seen, very vividly, in the September 2021 demographic update of the 2020-based population projections for London. The chart on total net migration in Fig. 1[4] on the preceding page shows the sharp exodus of population in 2020, followed by a return, or at least positive net migration, from 2022 onwards.

This return then translates into a continuation of working-age population growth in London over the short and long terms—see Fig. 2.[4] London's working-age population dropped by just over 100,000 in the first 12 months of the pandemic. It is projected to recover that loss in 2023. The central-upper projection then suggests that it will continue to grow until 2040, before flattening out. The question here, however, is whether the 'lost 100,000' is returning or being replaced. The answer is that it is likely to be a combination of the two.

The renewed interest in London flats may not originate from families with children. Estate agents report that this interest is mainly coming from 'second steppers' who are looking to trade up from their first homes. Some returners may be heading back to flats, but others will be looking for houses within London's accessible travel zones, or for houses in commuter towns and villages.

This trend is starting to be reflected in house prices, although the latest Office for National Statistics (ONS) figures track price changes only to the middle of 2021. They show falling prices in parts of Central London (Westminster and the City) and in off-centre boroughs such as Lewisham, Lambeth, and Newham. Zone 2 prices, including Camden and Islington, are flat. But with the exception of Wandsworth (which had close to flat prices), Zone 3 prices continued to nudge upwards.

Rural areas that received population during the pandemic saw prices continue to rise in the second half of 2021, albeit at a lower rate than the previous 12 months. Data suggest some ebbing of the tide: a slight fallback in prices in some rural areas, but a continuation of strong growth in coastal districts such as Devon and Cornwall in England and Pembrokeshire and Conwy in Wales.[5]

In short, recent reports of changed patterns of market sentiment and activity in the first months of 2022 have not yet been reflected in transaction

data. Migration figures certainly capture a 'back to the city' trend, but its precise patterning and price impact is not yet clear. What is clear is that house prices are back on their upward track, which has prompted some concerns over sustainability, with more cautious analysts predicting a market correction.

Such warnings are commonplace among property professionals who cannot quite believe that the upward march of house prices can go on forever. But recent warnings seem more credible: inflation is spiralling, and the Bank of England's base rate is expected by some analysts to peak above 3%. The cost of living crisis, underpinned by rising domestic fuel costs and global supply chain snarls, means that household incomes are facing an unprecedented squeeze. The first housing impact is likely to be felt in the affordability of private rents, as more mobile households shop around for better deals. Rents are likely to be suppressed, potentially leading to a release of buy-to-let properties onto the market. The unsustainability of rents relative to falling household incomes will then have wider knock-on effects across the sales market.

The pandemic triggered capital flight into housing as the value of other assets was hit by increased volatility: housing became a safe haven. If the recovery is accompanied by rising interest rates (and saving rates), and if the cost of living crisis places downward pressure on rents and house prices, then housing's role as a hedge against inflation will weaken.

Impacts on rural amenity areas

The main focus of this commentary has been on the factors driving a return to the city. House prices everywhere will feel the effect of changed market conditions, but it is the utility of accessible locations, at least for the working-age population, that will sustain interest in suburban housing. For many people, such housing offers the best trade-off between utility and location.

'This could leave rural households in the worst of all worlds: a magnified housing cost crisis that collides with a new cost of living crisis, further limiting the housing choices of the most vulnerable rural families'

What does this mean for rural areas? There has to be some hope that the extreme price pressures of the last two years will dissipate; that housing will be freed up again for local families. Unfortunately, there is an additional set of factors at work. Restrictions on overseas travel have altered holiday choices, and the staycation market may remain strong into the foreseeable future. Many homes previously rented on assured shorthold agreements, but converted to holiday letting during the pandemic, may remain as holiday lets.

Also, a 'back to the city' movement does not necessarily mean the release of recently purchased rural houses back to the market. Buyers tend not to sell-up *en masse* in response to changing market sentiment, swallowing the cost implications of doing so. Many will retain rural properties for weekend or seasonal use. This could leave rural households in the worst of all worlds: a magnified housing cost crisis that collides with a new cost of living crisis, further limiting the housing choices of the most vulnerable rural families.

The ONS continues to warn that 'rising house prices and private rents mean that some workers are at risk of being priced out of living in rural and coastal areas, contributing to skill shortages in the tourism and hospitality industries that their local economies rely on'[5]—and this is despite a fall in average UK house prices from their June 2021 peak. It seems very unlikely that a return to the city will relieve the housing pressures being faced in England's rural amenity areas.

● ***Nick Gallent*** *is Professor of Housing and Planning in the Bartlett School of Planning, University College London. The views expressed are personal.*

Notes

1 J M Quigley (Ed.): *The Economics of Housing*. Edward Elgar, 1997

2 H Newby: *Green and Pleasant Land? Social Change in Rural England*. Penguin Books, 1980

3 J Prynn: 'The boomerang effect: the hunt for homes hots up in London while countryside searches plummet'. *Evening Standard*, 18 Feb. 2022. www.standard.co.uk/homesandproperty/property-news/london-property-hunt-countryside-searches-b982710.html

4 *2020-based Population Projection Results, Demographic Update, September 2021*. GLA City Intelligence Unit. Greater London Authority, Sept. 2021. https://data.london.gov.uk/dataset/trend-based-population-projections

5 *House Prices in Tourist Hotspots Increasingly out of Reach for Young and Low Paid*. Office for National Statistics, Sept. 2021. www.ons.gov.uk/economy/inflationandpriceindices/articles/housepricesintouristhotspotsincreasinglyoutofreachforyoungandlowpaid/2021-09-28

the planning exchange—a brief history

Former Director **Tony Burton** reflects on the history and achievements of the Planning Exchange, which operated between 1972 and 2002—with contributions from **Linda Houston**, **Peter Roberts** and **Ian Watson**

The Planning Exchange was established in Glasgow in 1972 as an offshoot of the Centre for Environmental Studies (CES), which was established by Richard Crossman, Minister of Housing and Local Government in the Wilson administration of 1964–1970.

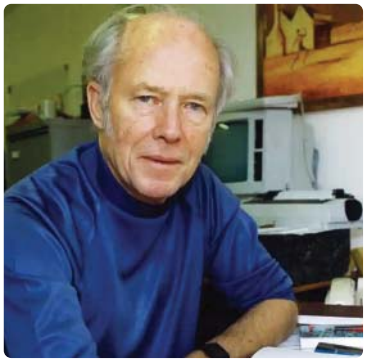
Crossman recounts in his diaries how he was frustrated by the lack of innovative ideas coming from the Civil Service, so he set up a Research Advisory Group (RAG) to examine research needs in planning, starting with a three-day conference at Churchill College, Cambridge, in August 1965. Among those attending were architects, economists, geographers, building contractors, politicians, administrative civil servants, planners, officials of the Ford Foundation (which financed the conference), and directors of research organisations in Britain, the United States, the Netherlands, and Japan.

In his opening address Crossman argued that while independent research councils had been established for research in the natural sciences and agriculture, there were none in the social sciences, and that there was a serious case to be made for setting one up specifically for the urban environment. The consensus of the conference was that research in the still untidy planning field involved many disparate sciences and technical disciplines, and the primary need was for a forum in which the people concerned could be brought together. It also concluded that the agency should have the secondary function of channelling funds to university research centres and other institutions capable of carrying out multi-disciplinary studies in the planning field.

A third function, which the conference had regarded as of equal importance, was to provide an intelligence service—to collect, interpret and disseminate relevant knowledge of the research work being done on planning problems and to impact on the development and retraining of professional practitioners.

The architect and planner Lord Llewelyn-Davies emphasised the massive scale of urban redevelopment which the UK was bound to undertake, with or without the benefit of adequate planning. He argued that the immense problem of obsolescence, which would hit every industrialised country, was hitting Britain first because it had been the first to respond to the constructional demands of the Industrial Revolution. Professor of Planning Peter Hall stated that decisions on the planning of urban renewal and development in Britain were being taken in almost total ignorance of the existing economic, social and physical structure of towns and the countryside, and of relations between them.[1]

CES was the outcome of these discussions and was established in London in 1966 as an independent charitable trust to promote research in town planning and related fields. It began with a $750,000 grant from the Ford Foundation, matched by a grant from the UK government, to be spent on staff and also given to researchers in various universities across the UK. The first Director was Henry Chilver, Professor of Civil Engineering at University College London; the Assistant Director was Dr Alan Wilson, a mathematician and nuclear physicist and a member of the Department of Transport's Mathematical Advisory Group. Chilver and Wilson brought together people with skills in mathematical modelling and started to apply these skills to urban issues and consider how and where research could most effectively be undertaken. Two years later, Henry Chilver left to take up the post of Director of Cranfield



Centre for Environmental Studies Director Professor David Donnison, whose concerns over engagement with local authorities outside London and the South East led to the formation of the Planning Exchange; Professor J Barry Cullingworth, the first Director of the Planning Exchange; and Tony Burton, Executive Director from 1975

Institute of Technology, and Professor David Donnison from the London School of Economics took over in 1969, bringing an interest in social policy issues, particularly housing, and thereby widened the spread of research interests at CES.

In 1971, central government increased its grant to CES, and asked that local authorities should become more directly involved in its work. But Donnison became increasingly concerned that CES was failing to engage sufficiently with local authorities, particularly those far from the South of England, and he introduced the idea of setting up a subsidiary unit away from London to get closer to local authorities and help them better understand and implement the results of urban research.

The idea was taken up by the Scottish Office in Edinburgh, who agreed to match funding, gave the unit the name 'The Planning Exchange', and decided it should be based in Glasgow. Donnison stated that the aim of the Planning Exchange was to provide a forum for the debate of problems in the regions. It would bring in leaders of civic organisations and community action groups. It would start with planning problems, but it was hoped that, in time, it would expand to cover other interests and wider areas, and he saw the Planning Exchange as probably one of the most important ventures launched by CES.[2]

Setting up

The creation of the Planning Exchange in Glasgow was announced on 5 April 1972 by CES:

'It will be the first of its kind in Britain, it will operate initially over West Central Scotland as part of the CES general concern that research work is understood and used in policy making. The Exchange will therefore seek closer relationships between the research workers and the policy makers, developers, property owners, voluntary bodies and the public.'

The first Director of the Exchange was Professor J B (Barry) Cullingworth, Director of the Centre for Urban and Regional Studies at the University of Birmingham. Initial CES finance was £10,000 a year for the first three years, matched by £10,000 by the Scottish Development Department, part of the Scottish Office, for the same period. Welcoming the new 'pioneering planning agency' the *Glasgow Herald* editorial of 6 April 1972 stated:

'It is to be hoped that this will not become merely another talking shop—there are quite enough of these in Scotland at present. We would hope that the new exchange will act as some form of central registry for new ideas […] It is sometimes ridiculously difficult for ordinary people to discover the full extent of plans involving their areas and few realise how much effort amenity bodies make to protect the public interest.'

The *Daily Telegraph* stated on the same day:

'It is hoped that the exchange, which could be the forerunner of similar centres, will be in operation by the autumn.'

It was thought essential that the Exchange was not based in a university. The magazine *New Society* wrote in an editorial:

'The London based Centre for Environmental Studies did a fair amount to foster contact between town hall and the academic world. Something less formal was needed. Hence the notion of an exchange—where useful information could be found and contacts made, in sociable non-academic surroundings.'

The Scotsman newspaper editorial on 6 April 1972 stated:

'As the scope and complexity of the planning function has increased, it has become increasingly clear that there is a need for overall coordination of planning. Planners at all levels need to know what others are doing. They need to share their expertise, to work together rather than in closed circuits: to be as fully cognisant as possible of the work of academics and the researchers; and to be able to benefit from both the successes and

the failures of their counterparts both in this country and abroad. They also need far better information on the needs and desires of those for whom they plan.'

It added presciently:

'One may wonder whether the budget of £60,000 spread over three years provided equally by the CES and the Scottish Development Department is adequate.'

First steps and problems

A committee of CES was established in March 1972, with W L Taylor, former Labour Leader of Glasgow Corporation and a Governor of CES, as interim Chairman. Barry Cullingworth took up his post as Director of the Planning Exchange on 1 October 1972, with the opening of its first office in Glasgow. Cullingworth presented his first progress report to the Governors of CES on 19 October and reminded them that:

'Our major objectives are to increase understanding of planning problems and policies, to facilitate communication between the enormous number of groups and interests who are involved in planning, to encourage the use and increase the relevance of research, and to generally improve the quality of debate on planning.'

But the problem of finance was immediately apparent. Cullingworth went on to explain that the Exchange was immediately operating under:

'... very severe constraints. Essentially these stem from the fact that we are seriously underfunded, and it is proving exceptionally difficult to raise finance. All the traditional bodies we have approached have expressed enthusiasm for the Planning Exchange but have regretfully declined to support us, generally on the ground that our activities do not fall within their terms of reference.'

This was not untypical of the social science research environment of the time. Research funding was more adequate than before, but funding for dissemination, discussion, application and learning was usually meagre, if not ignored altogether. Cullingworth reported that:

*'Nuffield, Leverhulme and the Social Science Research Council all say basically the same thing: they will only support **research**. We have approached 14 bodies, but so far with no success.'*

There was only enough money to pay for the Director, one other member of staff, and a secretary. These outgoings, together with rent and minimum expenditure on furniture and equipment, exhausted the funds. There was no capital fund at all.

To make matters worse, the Scottish Development Department, in announcing the Planning Exchange to local authorities, had promised that they would not be asked to contribute except by way of fees for 'courses' until an initial period of three years was passed. Clearly insufficient thought had been given to the minimum effective size of such a venture, its costs, or how longer-term finance was to be found.

Cullingworth felt that the only way forward was to make a move away from the idea that the Exchange should not itself conduct basic research (that being the role of CES and the universities), by taking on a few of what he saw as more practical research projects on topics such as public participation in planning and housing reform.

Real help came in mid-1973, not from any organisation in the UK, but from the Ford Foundation of America, which sent a cable on 19 July stating that it had approved a $100,000 grant for the Planning Exchange, the money to be spread over three and a half years and paid to CES for the Planning Exchange. The Ford Foundation had been a major funder of CES in the 1960s and was supportive of what the Exchange was set up to achieve. Meanwhile, the official opening of the Exchange took place in March 1973 in rented premises at 186 Bath Street, Glasgow.

By September 1974 the Planning Exchange was establishing itself as a centre of discussion, learning and information across Scotland — no longer seeing itself as restricted to West Central Scotland. The Planning Exchange Committee in Glasgow started a move to become independent of CES, and the Ford Foundation gave its blessing, stating in a letter: 'There would be a bit of paperwork involved but moving towards independent status does have some advantages for both you and CES.'

In May 1975 a complete re-organisation of local government in Scotland resulted in the abolition of the multiplicity of authorities, which were replaced by regional and district authorities, of which Strathclyde Regional Council, with a population of two and a half million, was the largest. Many elected members and officials from the new regional council were enthusiastic for applied intelligence on planning and related matters.

At the same time Cullingworth moved to take up a job as official historian of the New Towns, and Tony Burton was appointed Executive Director. The Ford Foundation confirmed its continued support and wrote:

'It was a rather grim future the Economist painted last week for your city. One can't question the need for an institution like the Planning Exchange.'

A major step in solving the finance problem was the agreement by the Scottish Development Department to match, pound for pound, grants from Scottish local authorities. Burton immediately set out to meet directors of planning in Scottish local authorities to persuade them to become members of the Exchange, with the promise that whatever they paid would be doubled by the Scottish Office — this was found to be very persuasive.[3]

The information service

The development of an information service was a key factor in the success that the Exchange had in acquiring financial support by way of local authority membership in Scotland. From its very beginning the Exchange devoted considerable resources to building up a library, initially for internal use and in relation to providing material for courses, conferences, and seminars,

Instrumental in the creation of the information service for planners was the secondment to the staff of Brenda White, a member of the Planning Research Unit at Edinburgh University. She wrote in the *Surveyor* magazine in September 1974 about the results of a three-year research project[4] into various aspects of planning information:

> *'As work proceeded a bias gradually developed towards the requirements of planners in local authorities, since it is obvious that this is the sector in which the need for efficient information provision is most acute and in which least effort has so far been made. [...] Several planning departments have expressed interest in the planning classification being developed as part of the research project [and] work on testing the classification will form part of the general development of the research results which is now being planned at The Planning Exchange.'*

Brenda White noted that, to work effectively, local authority planning departments needed to have relevant information from all other departments, as well as from the private and voluntary sectors. So any useful information service for planners would have to be developed on an integrated basis which cut across many local authority departments, particularly housing, roads, parks, transport, and economic development.

The library was expanded to gather a wide range of material: official publications, journals, books, and semi-published (or 'grey') literature.[5] This latter category was of vital importance and included material such as Scottish Office Circulars, Planning Advice Notes, discussion papers (for example on public participation in planning), local authority impact studies (for example on out-of-town retailing), policies, local plans, strategic plans, etc. By their very nature, and in the pre-web days, many of these documents were inaccessible or unknown to practitioners. This kind of literature, together with useful articles in journals, provided the basis for the exchange of knowledge, experience and good practice implied in the name Planning Exchange. Although its activities were directed at a Scottish audience, the literature was sourced from throughout the UK and beyond, on the basis that all knowledge and experience was potentially relevant.

By December 1974 the library contained over 6,000 documents relevant to planning, of which some 3,000 items were catalogued using a classification system devised by Brenda White, along with a short abstract written by the librarians.

Key to future development was a Leverhulme Foundation grant for a project to test the usefulness of a weekly bulletin of such abstracts sent to councillors in three local authorities for a period of three months—they were invited to ask for the full text of anything that interested them. Disappointingly, the take-up by councillors was only about 10%, and the project was about to be discontinued on the grounds of its low effectiveness, set against considerable cost. But then several officials in the three local authorities asked for the service to be continued because staff were finding it useful in their work, and this led to the development of a weekly *Information Bulletin*, primarily aimed at officials—not just in planning departments but also in housing and social work.

As demand grew, the number of qualified librarians increased to three, joined in time by clerical support assistants. An important part of the specialist librarian's job is bibliographic control: the identification, description, analysis, and classification of books and other materials of communication so that they may be effectively organised, stored, retrieved, and used when needed. The key to this task is building networks of people and organisations. Links were established with government departments, local authorities, research bodies such as the Unit for Retail Planning Information, professional bodies and organisations such as the Town and Country Planning Association, and many others. These various organisations were encouraged and cajoled into seeing the Exchange as playing an important role in disseminating their research. Much of the librarians' time was spent scanning periodicals (around 120 subscriptions), HMSO lists, etc. to identify and order relevant documents.

Information retrieval

The abstracts were typed on A4 paper, three to a sheet, and several copies were made of each sheet. The sheets were then cut into three to produce multiple copies of each abstract, which were then filed (in cardboard trays) by author(s) and classification code(s) and document number. This cheap and cheerful system worked well, but retrieval by classification code tends to produce high recall and low precision.[6]

To improve precision, a punched-card system was tried. Each subject term had its own index card, which was divided into a grid, with a hole punched at grid locations corresponding to specific document numbers. If document number 25 was about the economic impact of out-of-town retailing, a hole was punched at grid location 25 on the subject cards for 'economic impact', 'retailing', 'town centres', and 'out-of-town development'. To find documents satisfying multiple search terms, the subject cards were held up to a light. Documents having all the subject terms (the Boolean 'AND')

would show up as illuminated spots at their respective grid locations.

This system was time consuming and not very efficient, and by 1984 it was straining to cope with some 10,000 abstracts.

PLANEX online database

In the early 1980s computers were becoming more affordable, and in 1984 a mini-computer (a DEC PDP 11/23 Plus) was acquired along with bespoke software to create a searchable database of the abstracts, print the weekly *Information Bulletin*, and provide a quick way of finding documents that matched multiple index terms. New abstracts were typed directly into the computer while work began on inputting the existing 10,000 hard-copy abstracts.

From the start it was envisaged that remote, dial-up access would be provided to the database, or PLANEX as it came to be known. PLANEX covered urban and rural planning, economic development, and housing policy and practice, with abstracts of articles from journals, research reports, government publications and information from the European Economic Community, and other literature, including semi-published and hard-to-find materials.

PLANEX was signed up to Pergamon Infoline by Charles Oppenheim, then Infoline's Product Development Manager, later to become Professor of Information Science at the University of Strathclyde, and a future collaborator with the Planning Exchange. It was a proud achievement of the Exchange to create what was probably Scotland's first commercially available online database. Meanwhile, membership of the Planning Exchange had expanded to many government agencies, research organisations, charities such as Friends of the Earth, and private developers and consultancies.

Enquiry service and document delivery

There are generally two sides to an information service: current awareness, and enquiries (or research support). The weekly *Information Bulletin* contained abstracts of new publications, mainly on planning and housing, while the growing interest in economic development was covered in the monthly *Economic Development Digest.* All staff in Planning Exchange member organisations were entitled to phone in subject enquiries, such as requests for examples of tenant participation initiatives. The three librarians, now known by the more apposite title 'Information Manager', would search for and supply abstracts. Answering such enquiries enabled the information managers to acquire subject knowledge and an understanding of customer needs which fed back into document selection.

Reports and books were issued on loan, while periodical articles were supplied as photocopies, all by post. In the late 1980s fax delivery of photocopies was offered, but uptake was low. Eventually the arrival of email would render fax redundant.

In the mid-1990s the UK government, through the Scottish Office, decided to re-organise local government again by abolishing regional councils and introducing 32 unitary authorities providing all services in their area. As the Exchange was reliant on local authorities in Scotland for some two-thirds of its funding through membership, it was decided to broaden the range of the information service to cover most local authority services, including, for the first time, education and all social services. Local authorities were encouraged to join as a whole but could join on a single- or multiple-department basis if they wished; and the plan worked in that financial support across Scotland increased by some 10%.

Copyright

Respecting copyright is an important part of an information service, and the information managers kept abreast of developments and opinion on good practice, taking advice from authorities such as Professor Charles Oppenheim. In the early days the view was taken that a single copy of a journal article supplied to an individual for non-commercial research or private study could fall within exceptions to copyright, in particular the concept of 'fair dealing',[7] which was and remains a grey area. One test is to ask the question: 'Would the copyright-holder be pleased or indifferent about the copying?'. The answer 'yes' to either suggests that copying is low risk and unlikely to harm the interests of the copyright-holder. For certain types of trade journals this risk was acceptable, but as the number and range of periodicals taken by the Planning Exchange grew the position was kept under review, and by 1991 it was decided to licence the operation through the Copyright Licensing Agency and pay the required fees.

Planning law and practice

SPADS — Scottish Planning Appeal Decisions

Local authority decisions on applications for planning permission may be appealed to central government. In Scotland the central authority was the Secretary of State for Scotland until devolution in 1999, when authority was vested in the Scottish Government. The decision letters and accompanying Reporter's Reports are a good example of hard-to-find grey literature which is extremely useful. Although the reports explicitly did not create precedents, they offered useful insights into planning law and guidance in practice. In response to demand, from the early days of the Exchange the library and information service published quarterly summaries of decisions, backed up by an on-demand photocopy service.

Scottish planning law

Scotland has its own legal system, and this covers planning and environmental law. Realising that local government planners did not get enough opportunities to meet each other to discuss how they went about


LEDIS
LOCAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES

Initiative A886 August 2007

Food Train, UK

Food Train is a social enterprise that runs community food projects and farmers' markets in Milton Keynes, UK. It aims to bring about environmental, social and economic change through its trading activities.

Introduction

Food Train is based in the Wolverton area of Milton Keynes. It was set up in 2005 to put into practice some of the suggestions that came from the Wolverton Unlimited community association - including re-establishing a fresh produce market locally. Two successful pilot markets had been run in 2004 with funding from the Countryside Agency (now Natural England), and volunteers carried on organising the markets on a monthly basis the following year.

Food Train was put together to look at the wider picture of local food production and the associated issues, and to develop the market and ensure it was sustainable over the long term. It took advice from the pioneering local food organisation, Growing Communities, based in London.

In 2006, six months after it launched, Food Train became an incorporated company. It is a company limited by guarantee with no share capital. All profits generated are invested back into the organisation.

Project founder, Alissa Pemberton, said: "We are a very grass roots organisation in our structure.

"We are working to create sustainable local alternatives to the current food system. We run - and look to run - practical projects."

What Food Train does

Food Train is working to make Milton Keynes an exemplary sustainable city. It is classed as a 'food producing city' and as such, all new housing is provided with space for food growing such as roof gardens and balconies. There is also a widespread network of informal and formal training available about sustainable food growing.

In addition to its own projects, Food Train is keen to work together with other organisations on projects.

Alissa said: "We are an enabling organisation and work in partnership with other organisations that are already very experienced in their area of work.

"We don't necessarily have the aspiration to grow huge. We don't want to use up the limited energies we have on chasing funding and running premises."

Farmers' markets - The organisation runs a farmers' market in Wolverton on the first and third Saturdays of the month. It sells goods sourced from within a 30-50 mile radius of the city, from farmers, artisan food producers and community food projects.

Food Train says farmers' markets play a major role in stimulating rural revival and in market towns and it aims to make them work in the same way in urban areas.

Food Mk project - Food Train produced this report to argue that local food production is central to creating sustainable communities and tackling climate change. The report says Milton Keynes should return to its original garden city vision and that growing spaces such as allotments, community orchards and market gardens should be created, and current facilities enhanced. It also demands improvements in the way local food that is sourced from close to the city is retailed in local shops and markets. It says doing so would help to cut carbon emissions, create jobs and boost the local quality of life.

The report found that most of the food produced in Milton Keynes is done so by community food initiatives and individual businesses. They were also the fastest growing sector of local food producers. The report puts forward plans for the creation of an urban farm for Milton Keynes, which could be used as example of how city farming can progress for the future. Its conclusions also set out an action plan for local food in the city to 2011.

Far left: SPEL (*Scottish Planning & Environment Law*), founded in 1980, continues as an e-journal. Near left: A copy of the *LEDIS* loose-leaf publication

implementing planning law, the Exchange early on set up a Development Control Group. It soon became obvious that planning law journals were essentially focused on English law. Working with Eric Young, a Lecturer in Law at the University of Strathclyde Law School, the Exchange decided to set up a journal dedicated to Scottish planning law and practice, with Young as its first Editor. The Law Society of Scotland agreed to pay for the journal to be professionally printed and incorporated as a supplement to its own journal on a quarterly basis—this meant that over 10,000 Scottish solicitors had access to up-to-date information on planning law and its application, and the modest cost of additional copies meant that planners and other interested persons could buy the journal at a very economical price.

The first issue of *Scottish Planning Law & Practice* (SPLP) came out in September 1980,[8] and the *Glasgow Herald* included a piece on the new journal on 16 September 1980, stating:

> *'The editors of the periodical say that until now there has been no journal devoted to the law and practice of planning in Scotland. The value of the development that passes through the planning system in Scotland every year is over £1 billion.'*

In the late 1980s the journal incorporated the growing field of Scottish and European environmental law, changed its name to *Scottish Planning & Environmental Law* (SPEL, with its own SPEL-binders), and became a bi-monthly journal. It received a substantial grant from the the Law Society of Scotland to go it alone. At the time of writing, SPEL continues now as an e-journal.[9]

Ledis and *Udis*

Ledis

Ledis, *Local Economic Development Initiatives*, was a loose-leaf monthly Planning Exchange publication aimed at all those in local government and elsewhere who were attempting to come up with solutions to local unemployment, a shortage of jobs, and a lack of enterprise in their localities.

The UK had been going through a recession, with low rates of economic growth, and by 1980 there were around 1.5 million unemployed in the UK. In addition, technological change, combined with cheaper production methods in some countries outside Europe, had led to massive redundancies in larger-scale industries. British Steel, for example, had established British Steel Industries to support local economic development in steel closure areas, and British Coal did something similar.

A problem with many so-called local economic development initiatives was that reliable information about them was absent or hard to find. Most started with a press release which often gave an over-optimistic projection of success and the number of jobs to be created, while third-party assessments or evaluations could take months or years. A great many initiatives were being developed across the UK, often with funds from the European Economic Community (EEC), but local authorities and others did not hear about them in any systematic fashion.

Together with URBED, the Planning Exchange designed a method of documenting and disseminating information about these initiatives by creating a network of correspondents across the UK, with an editor based in Glasgow. Working with the Exchange's information service the editor would identify initiatives and commission a contributor to obtain first-hand information about the project, usually by interview. The editor's task was to condense this information onto two sides of A4 and fact check with the initiative before publication.

Sample *Ledis* fact sheets were produced in March 1981, and the full service developed soon afterwards. Some six fact sheets were circulated to subscribers each month, and the scope widened to include fact

sheets on overarching themes such as the government's Loan Guarantee Scheme and European Coal and Steel Community finance. One subscriber remarked that *Ledis* was unique in being a very useful publication held together with a paper clip.[10]

By July 1983, 648 individuals or bodies were receiving *Ledis* monthly; and 1,000 copies of eight *Ledis* sheets were provided to Radio Clyde as part of an information pack to supplement a radio series on community businesses—and following heavy demand a further 1,000 were supplied. Twenty-five correspondents had written for *Ledis*.

Both the EEC and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) had expressed interest in *Ledis* as part of international systems for the exchange of information on best practice in local employment initiatives, with the Planning Exchange identified as one of the leading centres in this field of activity. This interest developed later into the Exchange winning, along with two other organisations, a contract for £160,000 a year for two years from the EEC to set up and manage a European centre for disseminating information on local employment initiatives in Brussels, entitled Elise (European Local Initiatives Service).

In October 1983 the Gatsby Foundation offered a further grant of £44,000 over 18 months to continue the basic *Ledis* service. A year later a three-year review of *Ledis* found that:

- On average, six people used *Ledis* in each organisation that took it, giving a total of some 4,000 users.
- About half the users were in local government.
- Many large firms were also using *Ledis*, including Abbey National, BAT, Bank of Scotland, Legal & General, United Biscuits, and Whitbread, reflecting the perceived needs of many large companies to support local employment and enterprise initiatives.
- 51% of users said that they had contacted other initiatives through *Ledis*.
- 70% of users claimed that *Ledis* had helped them to make better decisions.
- Nearly a third of users said that information in *Ledis* had influenced the format of an initiative that they were responsible for.
- Overseas users included Auckland City Council in New Zealand ('*Ledis* will possibly greatly influence decisions taken here') and the Turkish Grand Assembly ('The philosophy represented in *Ledis* initiatives are highly new and interesting to us').

In addition the Exchange organised a series of annual Ledis conferences around the UK.

Udis

Udis, *Urban Development Initiative Service*, was organised on similar lines to *Ledis* and covered both descriptions of grants and other support available to local authorities and other bodies to carry out improvements to towns and cities and also carefully checked facts on the costs and relative success of individual or area-based initiatives. Like *Ledis*, but often with images, the publication was based on sheets of A4 paper mailed out once a month, with updates on initiatives issued from time to time. An abstract for each *Udis* sheet was created in the information service to enable easy retrieval by members searching for particular aspects of urban regeneration.

The New Towns Record

***The New Towns Record* DVD**

The 32 New Towns developed in the UK since 1946 represent the most sustained programme of new town development undertaken anywhere in the world. The New Towns programme drew on the expertise and enthusiasm of a group of committed and visionary planners and architects. As well as being the driving force behind specific New Town schemes, many of these individuals became major figures in the development of late 20th century architecture, town planning and social planning in the UK. The New Towns programme offered them the opportunity to develop their approach to masterplanning in a post-war environment that was remarkably open to innovation and experimentation.

The Department of the Environment (DoE) asked the Commission for the New Towns—the successor body to the New Town Development Corporations in England—to find a way of marking the 50th anniversary of the passing of the New Towns Act 1946. The Commission consulted the Planning Exchange, which recommended that an electronic library be established to record and make available as much as possible of the documents (reports and plans) connected with the 32 New Towns across the UK, together with interviews with the planners, civil servants, politicians and others involved and as many images as appeared reasonable. Interviews conducted during the 1980s and 1990s with those directly involved in the New Towns programme offer an intriguing insight into the challenges that they faced in creating communities from scratch.

The DoE offered a grant of £200,000 to cover the English and Welsh New Towns, the Scottish Office

added a further £35,000 to cover the five Scottish New Towns, and a smaller sum was made available from Northern Ireland to cover its four New Town developments.

Relevant documents and images were scattered throughout the UK; no central collection of masterplans or other related material existed. Many of the planners and architects consulted made available documents from their private collections for scanning.

Work commenced in 1999, and documents were scanned and converted to searchable text using early optical character recognition technology. Interviews, including some with local residents, were added, along with thousands of images. The first edition was produced on CDs, and two years later it became possible to convert the material to fit onto a DVD.[11]

Seminars, conferences, and short courses

From the start, the Planning Exchange saw the need to provide means for practitioners to learn about new developments in the law and practice of planning and its related fields, together with opportunities to share good and innovative practice. In the 1970s and 1980s there was no consistent programme of continuous professional development (CPD) in any of the relevant professions, so the Exchange pioneered courses on such matters as structure planning, development control, housing management, tenant participation, and local employment initiatives.

As time went on the range of subject coverage was broadened, with events on the provision of life-long learning, the links between social work and housing, and new developments in marine planning. Seminars and other events were designed to encourage a more interactive style of learning than in many conventional conferences, which consisted chiefly of formal presentations and lectures.

The extension to England

With the full agreement of CES, the Planning Exchange was incorporated as an independent charity limited by guarantee on 14 November 1980, and its objectives were widened to cover the whole of the UK. The strap line 'Information into Intelligence' was devised to denote the essential role of the Exchange in helping organisations and authorities to find a way through the mass of information published, semi-published or unpublished across the wide field of local government generally.

Match-funding from the Scottish Office was reduced over the following years, and it was now time to widen the reach of the Exchange's services to all organisations that might find it useful across the UK (on 1 April 1986 Milton Keynes Development Corporation became the first public authority in England to become a member of the Exchange).

To that end, on 28 May 1986 the Director of the Exchange was invited to give a presentation on its economic development work to the Trustees of the Gatsby Foundation, and this led, in June 1986, to the offer of a grant of £225,000 over three years to enable the Exchange to start to expand its operations into England and Wales. This was followed up by a grant in October 1988 of £192,000 over three years from Gatsby specifically to allow the Exchange to open a Manchester office and to continue its expansion drive in England and Wales. The latter decision was made based on evidence that, although the Exchange information services spanned the UK and abroad, its Glasgow base was perceived as making it parochial in coverage. Manchester was chosen for its position, mid-way between Liverpool and Leeds.

The Planning Exchange marked the opening of its Manchester office in March 1989 with a reception at the Museum of Science and Industry, to which John Keith, President of the Regional Plan Association of New York gave a talk. The Deputy Director of the Exchange, Linda Houston, managed the programme from Manchester and, with support from Glasgow, the initial drive was to promote membership and to demonstrate the value of shared inter-disciplinary action learning and semi-published information exchange for sustainable project delivery. None of this was common practice at the time.

In June 1990 the Gatsby Foundation provided a grant of £100,000 to the Exchange to assist Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs) in England in their work in helping small engineering firms to employ best practice management, provided the money was matched by a number of TECs. The Exchange hired John McMahon, formerly Head of Economic Development at the Irish Development Agency, to head up the programme on a consultancy basis, and four TECs signed up, which enabled McMahon and his small team to create training courses for senior managers in small engineering firms based on good practice in world-beating companies.

The Exchange went on to develop good practice information and training programmes related to the government Action for Cities initiative and City Challenge and Single Regeneration Partnerships.

In 1996 the Planning Exchange Board made the decision to close down the Manchester office, it having served its purpose of expanding membership to a good number of local authorities across England and Wales. The Exchange continued to win a number of projects from central government in England. Andrew Lean, formerly a senior civil servant at the DoE, said in 2020 that the Exchange 'promoted joined-up working long before it became fashionable and made a tremendous contribution to urban regeneration'.

The need for change

In November 1996 the former Secretary of State for Scotland, Bruce Millan, was appointed Chairman of the Planning Exchange. He was quoted in the *Herald* newspaper on 20 November 1996 as stating that:

> *'Today's currency is intelligence and the Planning Exchange plays a crucial role in giving ready access to information on good and innovative practice to*

enable policy makers and practitioners to make better informed decisions on policy and strategy and so increase the effectiveness of their work.'

In 2000 the Director submitted a paper to the Board which stated that, although the Exchange had managed, through trading its information, publication, and seminar services, to finance itself for the previous two years without grant funding, it had no working capital or assets with which to invest in development work or weather any problems that might arise with building maintenance. One particular area of activity urgently needed attention: the need to make the information service into a fully-fledged internet service which included full article downloading and enhanced searching. This was estimated to cost around £100,000, which the Exchange did not have, and so Burton went on to recommend that an investigation be made to find a suitably resourced partner who might be interested in providing funds or merging with the Exchange.

At the AGM on 19 September 2000 Edward Cunninghame took over as Chairman from Bruce Millan and immediately held a number of meetings with organisations in Scotland and London, seeking investment. In replying to a Board member expressing concern that the original purposes of the Exchange might be forgotten, the new Chairman said:

'I would certainly like to see the Planning Exchange get into a position where it can perform the role you mentioned. However, I am concerned that the Planning Exchange is not in a financial position to do much more than keep itself solvent with its present functions at their present level. Hence, the necessity, as I see it, to enhance the commercial performance and returns of the one function that has this potential, namely the Information Service.'

Two companies expressed interest, and in May 2002 all the assets of the Planning Exchange were sold to Idox plc, a company specialising in developing IT planning software for local authorities. The Exchange was, of course, a charity and charities cannot be sold—but their assets can, provided the proceeds are made over to the existing charity or some other. All 28 staff were offered identical employment terms with Idox, and operations remained in the same office.

The Planning Exchange charity changed its name to the Planning Exchange Foundation (PEF), and, having no staff or assets other than the proceeds of the sale, decided to make these funds available by way of research grants. Some members of the PEF Board were employees or directors of the Planning Exchange, led by Professor Peter Roberts as Chair and Tony Burton as Honorary Secretary. A website (at www.planningexchangefoundation.org.uk) was created to give details of how grants could be applied for and to act as a depository for any reports so produced, including reports on planning and devolution, health inequalities and planning, and planning for disaster (the lessons learned from the tsunami in Japan). The PEF also produced a website on marine planning and a documentary film on the development of Glasgow's Victorian and Edwardian townscape.

From today's perspective it is noteworthy that both the information service and SPEL continue to thrive (offered by Knowledge Exchange, the information and intelligence arm of Idox) and make a contribution to the business of Idox plc. Other services that the Planning Exchange helped to pioneer—in particular, Continuous Professional Development—are now provided as a matter of course by the professional bodies. But the need for joined-up thinking and practice has never been more pertinent in an age of climate change and pandemics.

● ***Tony Burton OBE*** *was Director of The Planning Exchange, 1975-2002, and is Honorary Secretary of the Planning Exchange Foundation.* ***Linda Houston*** *was Deputy Director of the Exchange,* ***Professor Peter Roberts OBE*** *is Chair of the Trustees of the Planning Exchange Foundation, and* ***Ian Watson*** *was co-manager of the Information Service. The views expressed are personal.*

Notes

1 A report of this conference, together with other papers and Planning Exchange Board minutes, have been deposited with the Glasgow City Archives at the Mitchell Library in Glasgow

2 For further background on the Centre for Environmental Studies, see D Donnison: 'Pressure group for the facts'. *New Society*, 11 Dec. 1969

3 For more about the early years, see T Burton: 'The Planning Exchange'. *Scottish Journal of Adult Education*, 1977, Vol. 2 (4), 25–32

4 B White: *Planners and Information: A Report of an Investigation into Information Provision in Town and Country Planning*. Research Publication No. 3. Library Association, 1970

5 See the Wikipedia 'Grey knowledge' webpage, at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grey_literature

6 See the Wikipedia 'Precision and recall' webpage, at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Precision_and_recall

7 See the 'Fair dealing' section of the UK government's 'Exceptions to copyright' guidance webpage, at www.gov.uk/guidance/exceptions-to-copyright#fair-dealing

8 Editors: Tony Burton, Eric Young and Jeremy Rowan-Robinson. Supervising Editor: A S Phillips. Production Editor: D J Fletcher. The current editor is John Watchman

9 See Knowledge Exchange's 'Scottish Planning & Environmental Law' webpage, at www.theknowledgeexchange.co.uk/products/scottish-planning-environmental-law/

10 The simple A4 format had been preferred to a glossy newsletter format

11 *The News Towns Record* on DVD has been deposited with the British Library and with the other UK Legal Deposit Libraries. See also M Hebbert: 'The New Towns Record CD-ROM by Anthony Burton; Joyce Hartley'. Review. *Town Planning Review*, 1998, Vol. 69 (3); and M Clapson: 'Review of The New Towns Record, 1946-1996: 50 Years of UK New Town Development'. *H-Urban. H-Net Reviews*. Sept. 1998. www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14871

from place-based idea to people-centred realisation—

15-minute neighbourhoods in waltham forest

Councillor Simon Miller explains how Waltham Forest Council is seeking to place belonging and community, expressed in people's understanding of the places in which they live, at the heart of its work to develop a fluid approach to 15-minute neighbourhoods

15-minute and 20-minute neighbourhoods are increasingly popular in urban planning and in local government policy thinking and service provision. There are examples of the model being implemented and tested through localised pilots, such as that in Melbourne, Australia,[1] and more comprehensively as a central policy framework, as in Paris, France.[2]

The principles underpinning 15-minute neighbourhoods are familiar to Waltham Forest. The council has successfully pioneered active travel infrastructure, with Enjoy Waltham Forest[3] prioritising walking and cycling and making streets safer for residents. Low-traffic neighbourhoods have reduced traffic levels inside residential areas and brought communities closer together, with spaces for socialising and play. As the first London Borough of Culture, music, art and more burst from every corner. A child-friendly project proposal in Chingford Mount town centre is being drawn up in collaboration with residents, to create places and streets that better meet the needs of children and young people. The first phase of the Fellowship Square programme involved renovating the Town Hall complex and opening it up to the community, reshaping the council's relationship with residents and creating a new neighbourhood—a type of commons at the very heart of the borough.

15-minute neighbourhoods are one of four priorities guiding the Public Service Strategy,[4] a key part of the council's strategic reset programme[5] and ambitious 'Fair Deal' agenda.[6] As a corporate priority, the model gives us a framework for thinking through a range of challenges, particularly in health and wellbeing, the climate emergency, and tackling inequalities. In keeping with its origins, it is also being applied in planning and transport, particularly to address accessibility issues and re-imagine movement and transport in parts of the borough that are more suburban in character and car dependent. Across the organisation, services are being encouraged to use the model in new and innovative ways.

The decision to include 15-minute neighbourhoods as a priority was made, in part, because of the Covid-19 pandemic. As journeys became less frequent, and movements for many halted, the significance of services and facilities being close by became ever more apparent. Crucially, the decision was also influenced by extensive engagement with residents. Successive lockdowns meant that many in Waltham Forest stopped going out, or going so far, and residents have explored what is local to them and what it means to live closer to home. Resident engagement not only provided insight into

new habits and lifestyles, it also highlighted the incredible sense of community and belonging that exists across the borough and the pride that residents feel for their neighbourhoods—as expressed by residents below:

> *'I've learnt that I can get pretty much everything I need within a 10-15-minute walk of where I live, and I've got to know and appreciate many of the local shops.'*

> *'I think we should spend more time in the local area in general, in the parks, going for walks; there's lots to do here, and we should travel less and spend more time and money locally.'*

The Waltham Forest 15-minute neighbourhood

The initial framework for 15-minute neighbourhoods in Waltham Forest is built on what residents have told us. Resident insight has given a clear indication of what it means to live in Waltham Forest and of what residents need and want in their neighbourhoods. It has also drawn attention to the differences in local context across the borough. Residents have told us of distinct characteristics, as well as strengths and, indeed, problems, known intimately (and sometimes only) by those living in an area. From this, the familiar ideas that define 15-minute neighbourhoods have been adapted, taking the original blueprint further and placing community and belonging at the core.

To conceptualise 15-minute neighbourhoods in Waltham Forest, and ground the model in what residents have said, we started with the troublesome question of what a neighbourhood is. Neighbourhoods can, of course, be understood as spatial entities, with distances and co-ordinates, or understood as, and converted to, travel times, in the case of 15- or 20-minute models. A neighbourhood can include administrative areas, such as a parish, wards, or groups of standard units such as 'Lower Layer Super Output Areas'. They can also be recognised by what they contain—neighbourhood shops, cafés, local parks, and the various infrastructure and services meeting daily and weekly needs. There is also the life of a neighbourhood—the social aspect that is communal, felt, and shared.

We are keen to establish a more fluid approach to 15-minute neighbourhoods—one that moves away from centring the neighbourhood on particular high streets or town centres, or dividing the borough into 15-minute parcels. We want to start with how people understand their neighbourhoods and what they tell us about where they live. For some, that might include a few streets close to their home; for others, a larger and less regular geography. Inevitably, some will point to services and others will talk of specific locations—and we expect people to be mentioned, with feelings of connection to a group or belonging to a local community being vital factors. Our approach will be grounded in what we are told and the experience of residents.

Our broader definition will still be attuned to the services and amenities that people want and need, and the proximity of such provision, but the familiar 15-minute neighbourhood concept will be taken further. It will give prominence to neighbourhoods as sites where residents are socially connected, the importance of the community, and what it means to be a neighbour.

Next steps and challenges

Establishing 15-minute neighbourhoods across the borough is going to take time. This is a programme of systemic change, not a series of quick and light interventions. To ensure that neighbourhoods respond to the needs of residents and are sustainable, a range of challenges deserve attention. Here, we consider three.

Isaac LeQuesne

The Waltham Forest approach seeks to shape neighbourhoods with those that live in them, having found out what they need and what they love about their area

First, the 15-minute neighbourhood approach in Waltham Forest will begin with research, with an emphasis on assessing accessibility and proximity to services across the borough, and sustained resident engagement. Mapping the location of services and amenities and evaluating travel times is a tested approach. Aligning this more closely with resident engagement provides a richer sense of what members of our community want and need from their neighbourhood. With this, there is a challenge to add nuance to the established notion of giving all residents easy access to services and amenities that meet their daily needs within 15 minutes. We appreciate that what is needed in one neighbourhood may vary significantly from what is required in another, and we believe that sustained hyper-local engagement with those living in different parts of the borough will help us to understand the particulars.

Second, as Dunning *et al*. have cautioned in this publication, 'not all neighbourhoods are equal'.[7] There are concerns that 15-minute neighbourhoods do little to tackle, and even risk exacerbating, inequalities. In Waltham Forest, there are areas of deprivation and variations in service provision, as well as more affluent parts. 15-minute neighbourhoods must address economic and geographic inequality, including the social inequality of accessing services. We also want to look at how persistent and structural inequality and exclusion are experienced by people in Waltham Forest. The council's recent *State of the Borough Report*[8] evidences inequality in the borough, and we want to use 15-minute neighbourhoods in work that both highlights and addresses this. To achieve this, we need to carefully consider how we identify and act with groups and communities that are often under-represented and who are at risk of being marginalised by this type of work.

Third, 15-minute neighbourhoods have tended to be associated with walking and cycling. Although this is pragmatic, we worry that this approach overlooks the different ways that people move about and the different speeds with which they navigate urban spaces — for instance, people with disabilities, older people, children, and people with small children. Other forms of mobility and movement need to be more prominent. As well as the tendency to focus on walking or cycling, there is rarely talk of journeys other those involved in commuting or going shopping. While the model cannot capture all journey types, we want to include a broader range of trips and recognise the ways that 15-minute neighbourhoods are connected to other places.[9] The crucial issue is accessibility and its barriers. It is about the capabilities of different people, potential mobility impairments, and ease of movement. We believe that it is important to think more about people's ability to reach destinations and how they do so, rather than focusing on the ability to travel fast.[10]

Conclusion

There is more to 15-minute neighbourhoods than hyper-proximity or a specific spatial scale. We know how proud people are to live in Waltham Forest, and we know about the passion for place found in our communities. We know, too, that our residents want to take part in designing our borough's future.

There are challenges, however. The 15-minute neighbourhood offers a framework that can guide strategy across the organisation and deliver neighbourhoods that work for everyone. This begins not only with identifying areas in Waltham Forest with high and low accessibility to services, but through a commitment to engage, to collaborate, and to co-design. This is about shaping neighbourhoods with those that live in them, finding out what they need, and celebrating what they love about their area.

A 15-minute neighbourhood, then, is one with the right infrastructure, amenities and services; the bits and pieces that residents want, need, and can get to easily — but it is also somewhere that people are proud to be part of, where they feel they belong, and a community that they are a part of. A 15-minute neighbourhood is somewhere we call home.

● ***Cllr Simon Miller*** *is Cabinet Member — Economic Prosperity at Waltham Forest Council. The views expressed are personal.*

Notes

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zeitgeist — the importance of language

Reflecting on the current emphasis upon the '20-minute neighbourhood', Adam Sheppard considers the importance of the new language that the concept has introduced to planning thought and practice

The language that we use in planning is important—in the context of the need for clarity and precision, but also with regard to the need to retain relevance and resonance in current practice. For the past couple of years great emphasis has been placed on the '20-minute neighbourhood' concept. There is some slight variation in how it is defined, but the TCPA's excellent guide[1] on the concept identifies the following characteristics as important:

- diverse and affordable homes;
- well connected paths, streets and spaces;
- schools at the heart of communities;
- good green spaces in the right places;
- local food production;
- keeping jobs and money local;
- community health and wellbeing facilities; and
- a place for all ages.

The guide models the concept as shown in Fig. 1.

But is any of this new? It could be argued that '20-minute neighbourhood' is just a current 'buzzword' for good practice, and the point has been raised that the characteristics of a 20-minute neighbourhood are in fact long-standing principles in many respects. And there is certainly truth to this that can be seen from a quick review of recent history.

We could arguably go back many hundreds of years in our in consideration of the existence of some parallels between the current concept of the 20-minute neighbourhood and historical settlement/place development and decision-making, but for equivalence, with reference to more complete systems and theories of planning, it is appropriate to focus upon more recent times. The Industrial Revolution, with its broadly uncontrolled urban growth and development, creating extremes of living conditions and environmental quality, stimulated reaction and debate on the need for state intervention in the management of place, and also on the characteristics that future place should embrace. The regulatory responses that emerged from the mid-1800s onwards placed emphasis on the physical condition of the environment, focusing upon water, waste, sanitation, and eventually properties, streets and layouts, to avoid further repetition of the slum housing conditions and problematic forms of courtyard and back-to-back housing.

In parallel to this, though, philanthropists such as Robert Owen (New Lanark, 1800), Titus Salt (Saltaire, 1851), George Cadbury (Bournville, 1879), the Lever brothers (Port Sunlight, 1888), and Joseph Rowntree (New Earswick, 1902)[2] were creating more holistic approaches to the idea of 'better' from a place perspective. These new places put great emphasis on housing conditions, but also considered provision at the neighbourhood/place scale for matters such green space, sports and recreation, children's play, wellbeing, health, food production, education, and transport. From the late 1800s onwards the Garden Cities movement was particularly influential, with clearly stated principles for the design of the settlement and neighbourhood scales. And there are still clearly a number of parallels between the aims of the current goals of the 20-minute neighbourhood and the Garden City Principles as drawn up in contemporary form by the TCPA:[3]

- Land value capture for the benefit of the community.

Fig. 1 Features of a 20-minute neighbourhood
Source: 20-Minute Neighbourhoods — Creating Healthier, Active, Prosperous Communities [1]

- Strong vision, leadership and community engagement.
- Community ownership of land and long-term stewardship of assets.
- Mixed-tenure homes and housing types that are genuinely affordable.
- A wide range of local jobs in the Garden City itself, within easy commuting distance of homes.
- Beautifully and imaginatively designed homes with gardens, combining the best of town and country to create healthy communities, and including opportunities to grow food.
- Development that enhances the natural environment, providing a comprehensive green infrastructure network and net biodiversity gains, and that uses zero-carbon and energy-positive technology to ensure climate resilience.
- Strong cultural, recreational and shopping facilities in walkable, vibrant, sociable neighbourhoods.
- Integrated and accessible transport systems, with walking, cycling and public transport designed to be the most attractive forms of local transport.

Reviewing the 20th century, and particularly the latter part of the century after the conclusion of the Second World War, it is all too easy to emphasise the dominance of the motor car and its impact upon place design and use. There is, of course, very good reason to do so—the sprawling suburbs of the inter-war period and development patterns after 1945 in many respects present a challenging legacy (in issues ranging from identity to movement, via infrastructure and design) when addressing the neighbourhood scale today. But the influence of the car on post-war reconstruction in Britain did not preclude, at least in some cases, an emphasis upon the neighbourhood: there is a parallel 20th-century story of development and redevelopment in which the neighbourhood is central, evidenced in both the early post-war New Towns and some other forms of post-war redevelopment.

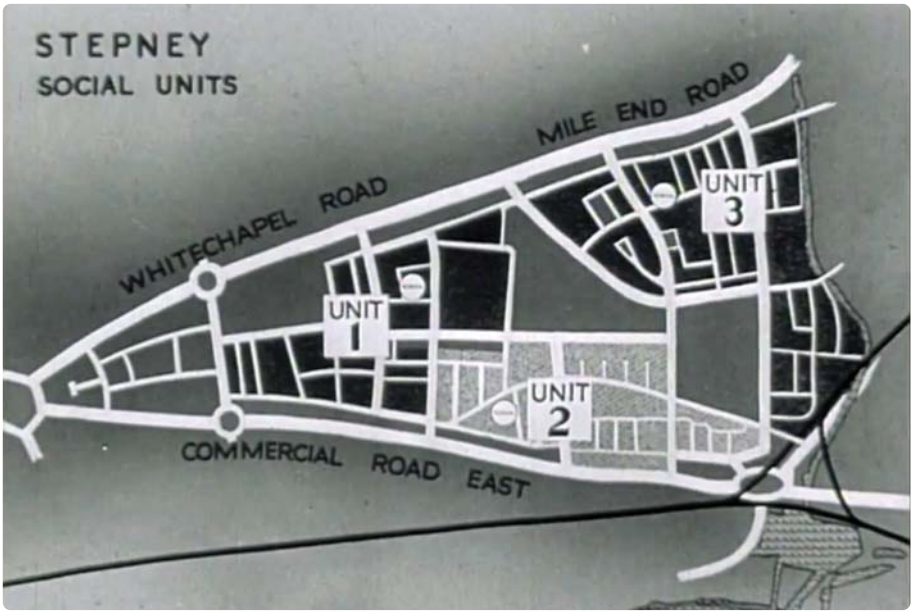

Fig. 2 Neighbourhoods (or 'social units') in Stepney, as envisaged the 1944 London Plan
Source: The Proud City: A Plan for London[4]
Available from the British Film Institute, at https://player.bfi.org.uk/free/film/watch-proud-city-a-plan-for-london-1946-online

In the post-war Ministry of Information documentary film *The Proud City: A Plan for London*,[4] Sir Patrick Abercrombie and London County Council Architect J H Forshaw discuss the 1944 Greater London Plan. Although working up to a city scale, the plan is underpinned by the neighbourhood. The language used here may be challenging today — 'social units' and the city as a 'machine' (not to mention the provision of shops for 'the housewives'), and the emphasis upon transport is evident — but the building blocks of the Greater London Plan are the neighbourhoods (see Fig. 2). The neighbourhood is key, with significant emphasis placed upon schools, services, infrastructure, employment, green space, and high-quality homes all within each neighbourhood. All then interconnected within the city scale of planning and management. As noted in the film:

> *'The result of all this would be all the essentials for living, playing and working, under decent conditions, near at home, and plenty of light, air, and space for everyone.'*

Fig. 3 Sir Frederick Gibberd's masterplan for Harlow, with its emphasis on neighbourhoods
Source: Harlow Master Plan[5]
Image courtesy of Harlow District Council — www.planvu.co.uk/harlow/written/ldp/cpt2.php

And while many of the early New Towns today present challenges in, for example, their urban design and architecture, and the physical and psychological barriers formed by road infrastructure and land segregation (and the sometimes dreaded pedestrian underpass, where the exit or even any sense of light emanating from an end point of safety is lost in its darkness), all of which makes it easy to disassociate them from the Garden Cities movement and current ideas of neighbourhood-scale planning principles, they nevertheless reference these earlier principles and are often unfairly maligned.

They offer much to applaud and are often, again, fundamentally built upon, and defined by, neighbourhoods — exemplified by Sir Frederick Gibberd's masterplan for Harlow[5] (see Fig. 3), which echoes the narratives of the 20-minute neighbourhood through its emphasis upon access to open space, natural landscapes, walkability, cyclability, local employment, services, amenities, instructucture, play provision, education, and health and wellbeing, all provided within the neighbourhood areas.

An enjoyable eight minutes or so spent watching the Central Office of Information film *Charley in New Town* (1948)[6] (see Fig. 4) helps to reinforce the point that early thinking on the post-war New Towns was based on the aspiration to create a town that would be 'a grand place to live in', distinctly characterised by many of the principles

Fig. 4 Frame from the 1948 Central Office of Information film *Charley in New Town*

Source: Charely in New Town[6] Available from the British Film Institute, at https://player.bfi.org.uk/free/film/watch-charley-in-new-town-1948-online

identified under the banner of the 20-minute neighbourhood.

Key aspects of the formative and post-formation periods of the modern planning profession and system in the UK therefore have (alongside some of their more problematic legacies) an identifiable thread of neighbourhood emphasis, with degrees of parallel to current thinking.

This thread is lost somewhat once we reach what is arguably the epoch of car-based urban planning, architecture, engineering and design, running from the 1960s (with the dramatic increase in car ownership) through to the early 1990s. This was a period in which car-dominant development interfaced with development patterns, forms, and approaches to sometimes create sprawling suburbia within which ideas of neighbourhood can be much harder to find. But planning's embrace of the principles of sustainable development, particularly after the publication of the Bruntland Report in 1987, brought with it renewed overt discussion of the neighbourhood. Challenges remained, and indeed continue, but 'sustainability' has been a great driver of positive change and better practices, including at the neighbourhood scale.

Since this point, a diversity of concepts, language and terminology has, to varying degrees, become associated with the neighbourhood scale, including walkability, liveability, smart growth, and compact cities. The diversity of language now used in association with some of these repeating principles is arguably itself somewhat problematic, challenging clarity and raising questions. Sometimes the difference in language and terminology is clearly important and necessary because it reflects difference in the concept and approach, and the evolution of ideas, but there is a degree of challenge that can be identified when we are working in a space of similarity and parallels in the principles but are divided by difference in language and terminology. The language should not matter, and to most will not matter or indeed detract from the focus upon the shared principles; but a diversity of language used in association with similar principles can create a layer of complexity that is at times unhelpful.

The language of the 'neighbourhood' is itself somewhat problematic. Already an amorphous concept, from localism was born 'neighbourhood planning', a new scale of statutory planning theoretically associated with the even more amorphous and ambiguous scale of the 'community' (which transcends geographies of place), but in practice is undertaken at scales and with boundary lines that are arguably incongruous with the labelling of 'neighbourhood'. Neighbourhood planning is undertaken with as much reference to existing structures of governance as it is to societal associations with people and place. This is resulting in neighbourhood planning activity taking place at scales ranging from the genuinely intimate neighbourhood through to that of the medium-sized town (i.e. the Bracknell Neighbourhood Plan, covering a population of around 56,500 people).

For some time now, the neighbourhood (in language, geography and scale) has been back at the heart of the conversation on planning, sustainable development and place. Excellent and influential materials, from policy through to key texts such as *Shaping Neighbourhoods*,[7] have become hugely important in how planning is practised. Within this we see a continuation of principles of best practice with regards to an emphasis upon the neighbourhood scale and the principles now attached to the 20-minute neighbourhood. Given the almost omnipresent nature of some of the principles in this

concept throughout our modern planning practice history and a range of current ideas and theories, does the language of '20-minute neighbourhoods' lack credibility? Does the evolution of the principles and the changing language (and indeed the diversity of language, concepts, and terminology) lead to a loss of understanding, importance and traction of, and willingness to emphasise, the principles of today?

Challenges in the idea of 20-minute neighbourhoods, as a language of the principles with which it is associated, are numerous, even before considering actual implementation of the concept. The language of the 'neighbourhood' has increasingly ambiguous associations, such that even long-standing principles can, to an extent, lose their meaning and impact, and, for some, are even damned by association with historic movements, periods, and forms of development – even though the current ideas and language of walkability, liveability, smart growth and compact cities each remain important today.

Exemplifying this challenge is that fact that in parallel to the 20-minute neighbourhood there is also the concept of the '15-minute city', which can itself include ideas of a 'five-minute neighbourhood'. Popularised by the current Mayor of Paris, Anne Hidalgo, the 15-minute city is derived from work by the French-Colombian scientist Carlos Moreno, who himself referenced the work of Jane Jacobs as historical inspiration. There is therefore a degree of complexity and contestation to the current language of the narratives and principles of good practice at the neighbourhood scale of planning.

'This is a time of great change and challenge, with more to come. The 20-minute neighbourhood can be a place where the diversity of current discourses can come together'

All of which leaves the 20-minute neighbourhood in quite a tricky place. And yet it can be seen as a hugely important opportunity. Now, perhaps more than ever within most people's living memory, the genuine neighbourhood scale is critical, and the principles of good planning associated with this concept are vital to how we can move forward. The Covid-19 epidemic has made us all reflect on the characteristics of our immediate environments. The more time we spend in our homes, including through home/blended working, the more we consider our contexts—the homes we live in, our access to private amenity space and its characteristics, and our access to the public realm, public green space, biodiversity, food, education, mobility, services, and infrastructure; the list goes on.

With the passage of time, ideas can lose impact or change, the evolution of ideas can go unnoticed or be overlooked through a lack of precision or emphasis, and language can become politicised or otherwise lose traction. Complexity can be challenging and off-putting; familiarity can breed contempt. The 20-minute neighbourhood is important because it is an overt representation of the continuing evolution and advancement of planning theory and practice. It reflects current thinking, and turns on a new light to highlight best practice. It re-emphasises key ideas and discourses, re-energises the debate, moves us on from some previous/dating elements of thought, and builds in new elements. It can demand that we reflect again upon the expectations and requirements of the now, and requires us to reconsider and reassess questions of implementation, delivery, resource needs, skills, and policy and regulatory requirements. And we must consider these principles within the context of the now.

The principles of the 20-minute neighbourhood sit alongside often more contained debates on matters such as design quality, design codes and guides, urban mobilities, resilience, green infrastructure, water management, energy, communities, infrastructure, sustainability and so on, with the Environment Act 2021 and associated requirements for biodiversity net gain of particular recent note. This is a time of great change and challenge, with more to come. The 20-minute neighbourhood can be a place where the diversity of current discourses can come together. It can be a new stimulant and an opportunity for conversation, focus, review, and reinvigoration. And in this context of change and challenge, it can reflect, represent, and embrace the zeitgeist.

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Notes

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more than bricks

Peter Roberts reviews the role and work of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive over the course of more than 50 years

Photos: Northern Ireland Housing Executive

New housing in the Donegall Pass area of Belfast in 1994

Most social-housing organisations deliver an impressive but somewhat restricted menu of services to their tenants and other customers. The Northern Ireland Housing Executive (the Housing Executive) goes beyond this standard menu and provides a wide range of services to tenants and other people and organisations that help to shape and manage the communities and places of Northern Ireland (including some functions delivered elsewhere by local authorities and central government departments).

This far-from-normal organisation was formed, in part, as a response to the 'Troubles' of the 1960s and 1970s,[1] but it was also created to respond to the urgent need to address long-standing issues associated with the supply and quality of housing. Although much has been written about the sectarian divides, which to this day continue to dominate many

perceptions of the challenges that face Northern Ireland, there was, and is, also a more familiar parallel agenda concerned with housing, planning and community development that has shaped and frequently challenged the Housing Executive and its many partners.

The first meeting of the Housing Executive Board took place on 13 May 1971, and a year later in the first Annual Report[2] the then Chair, T D Lorimer, set out his interpretation of the vision of the Housing Executive:

> *'The Executive must be more than an agency for the physical task of building houses; we must build with an awareness of all the problems that go with housing and the social implications of our task.'*

This definition of the role of the Housing Executive set the tone and style of the embryonic organisation; a 'beyond the front door' approach that aimed to help shape sustainable communities on the one hand, and tackle the housing crisis at pace on the other.

Even though the Housing Executive was formally established in February 1971, the formation of the new organisation took shape over the following 30 months. In line with an agreed timetable, the Housing Executive acquired functions, staff, resources and, most importantly, properties. By October 1971 the functions of the Northern Ireland Housing Trust had been transferred, and by 1972 arrangements were in place for the transfer of housing functions from local authorities and other public bodies, including three development commissions. As a consequence of those actions, by the early spring of 1972 the Housing Executive was a landlord with a stock of 70,000 dwellings.[3]

A comprehensive agency

The Housing Executive was created to provide a comprehensive service that could address housing need in the context of area management, urban renewal and slum clearance — what today would be described as place-making. From the beginning, the new organisation sought to go beyond the traditional role of a social landlord, offering a range of support and assistance services. This portfolio grew considerably in scope and scale over the next five decades.

However, the immediate and pressing task was to tackle the Northern Ireland housing crisis and, more challenging, the consequences of the 'Troubles'. The latter issue was to test the resources of the infant Housing Executive, with over 60,000 people forced to leave their homes and some 14,000 dwellings destroyed or severely damaged between 1969 and 1973. The urgent need was to find sufficient temporary and permanent accommodation for these people. Above and beyond this period of crisis management, the other priorities were to deal with a substantial backlog of applicants for social housing,

Unfit housing in 1973 — at the time many of the homes in Northern Ireland were in areas in need of comprehensive renewal or extensive regeneration

chiefly by increasing supply, and also to deal with the problem of unfit housing — an issue exacerbated by the 'Troubles'. Above all else, the Housing Executive had to ensure equality of treatment across communities.

Much of the stock was poor, 'characterised by its considerable age and low amenity',[4] and some of the previous landlords had done little to address these problems. The problem of low amenity was stark — in 1961 19.3% of households in Northern Ireland did not even have access to their own cold tap (compared with 1.7% in Great Britain) and 22.6% lacked their own toilet (6.5% in Great Britain). Moreover, many properties were located in neighbourhoods that required either comprehensive renewal or extensive regeneration.

The legislation that established the Housing Executive gave it extensive powers to build new homes, improve and modernise the existing social-housing stock, regenerate and improve neighbourhoods, and assist the private housing sector.[5] In addition, it was able to acquire land (through market purchase and compulsory purchase), carry out area renewal schemes that included social facilities, conduct research on housing and associated matters, and undertake other activities as seen necessary to support its principal functions. In the years that followed, the Housing Executive acquired additional powers and responsibilities, and by the late 1970s its scale as a public-sector landlord was unrivalled within the UK and its range of functions was unparalleled.[6]

From foundation to maturity

By early spring 1972 the Housing Executive was a functioning entity with a stock of over 70,000 dwellings,[3] but there were considerable variations in the condition of the homes, and, more importantly,

differences between areas in terms of allocations policy and procedures, rents, management processes, and many other aspects of landlord operations. As a consequence, and while attempting simultaneously to deal with both the continuing difficulties generated by the 'Troubles' and the considerable task of creating a new-build programme, the organisation set about reforming policies and processes that had in the past generated distrust and resentment.

The most urgent of these tasks was to create an open, fair and transparent scheme for determining the allocation of houses. The credibility of the Housing Executive rested on its ability to win public confidence through impartiality, and in 1974 the Housing Selection Scheme was announced. This scheme, with a number of subsequent reviews and adjustments, has remained in operation to the present day. It is generally regarded as an important element in creating confidence in the Housing Executive as it allocates housing on the basis of need and availability.

Alongside the establishment of the Housing Selection Scheme, rents were restructured on a Northern Ireland-wide basis, common management processes were introduced, and staff were recruited. All of these necessary actions were, however, simply a backdrop to the main business of the new organisation.

This main business was to deal with a worsening housing supply situation. The first House Condition Survey in 1974[7] confirmed earlier studies, with 20% of stock found legally unfit for human habitation—a rate three times that in England. Additionally, many homes were in need of significant repair and lacked basic amenities. In total some 40% of the population lived in dwellings that were unfit, in disrepair, or lacked basis amenities.[8]

By 1975, recognising the scale and urgency of the housing supply challenge, the Housing Executive had started work on over 6,000 new dwellings. This programme, alongside a range of major repair and renovation schemes aimed at delivering the improvements required in the existing stock, led to a significant improvement in the overall condition of housing in Northern Ireland. Between 1975 and 1996 the Housing Executive built over 80,000 homes. Alongside this public housing programme, private-sector new-build provision gradually increased, and from 1976 a renovation grant scheme encouraged and supported the improvement of existing private stock.

In total, the housing stock position in Northern Ireland improved considerably over the first quarter century of the Housing Executive's existence. The total number of homes increased from just over 450,000 in 1974 to over 600,000 in 1996; more importantly, the number of unfit homes fell from 20% of the stock to just over 7%. As John McPeake has observed, this change in housing stock conditions was remarkable: in the early 1970s housing conditions in Northern Ireland were substantially worse than in England and Wales, but by the mid-1990s the converse was true.[8]

This remarkable transformation in the condition of the Northern Ireland housing stock was accompanied by a succession of other initiatives that marked the achievement of Desmond Lorimer's objective of creating a Housing Executive that not only provided homes, but also tackled a wide range of social and other issues, including social deprivation and the provision of care services through sheltered housing.

'In the early 1970s housing conditions in Northern Ireland were substantially worse than in England and Wales, but by the mid-1990s the converse was true'

A change of role

From the late 1970s a series of changes occurred in the Northern Ireland housing market. The housing association sector developed as a result of the 1976 Housing (Northern Ireland) Order, and associations were encouraged by central government to focus their efforts on specialised housing, such as homes for the elderly and accommodation for single people. Meanwhile, the Housing Executive continued to develop general-needs housing, and private-sector housing provision grew rapidly; by 1980 the number of private homes built annually exceeded the number provided by the Housing Executive.

In the early 1980s the Housing Executive's capital budget was cut by over 30% and, as a consequence, the organisation was forced to suspend all new capital projects. However, this suspension was short-lived, and the unmet need for homes was reflected in housing being declared as the government's top social priority in 1982.[6] This resulted in an increase in funding that was reflected in the Housing Executive providing 42% of all new dwellings in 1983.

After this temporary resurgence in Housing Executive housebuilding activity, the number of new homes delivered by the Housing Executive declined and, instead, the organisation focused activity on the improvement of existing homes and the regeneration of neighbourhoods, especially in the main urban areas. The largest programme was introduced through the 1981 Belfast Housing Renewal Strategy, which led to the transformation of many neighbourhoods.

In parallel with the direct delivery of housing improvements, both through neighbourhood initiatives, including Housing Action Areas, and the provision of support for smaller schemes, the Housing Executive also introduced and managed

various schemes to support the improvement of private dwellings. As a consequence of these efforts and the growing importance of the contributions made by the housing associations, the reputation of the public housing sector was enhanced.[9] More importantly, there was also a general acknowledgement that discrimination in the allocation and management of social housing was no longer the problem that it had once been.[10]

As the 1980s progressed the Housing Executive continued to evolve in terms of its scale of operations and the span of its services. New housebuilding continued, but from the late 1980s at a slower pace, while the housing associations increased their contribution; by 1990 some 170,000 social homes were available for rent, with housing associations contributing 10,000 of these.

Another important development at this time was a major expansion of the Housing Executive's tenant and community involvement programme, with its Community Involvement Strategy, developed in partnership with the Housing Community Network. This work programme became even more important and diverse over the following decades and enabled and supported tenants and other residents in making major contributions to the development and management of their neighbourhoods.

The late 1980s and early 1990s saw a further evolution of the Housing Executive, with reduced public spending on housing and a mixed funding regime introduced for housing associations. The latter change in policy led to a more comprehensive adjustment in 1996 when the then Department of the Environment redefined the roles of the Housing Executive and housing associations.

This redefinition saw housing associations become the sole providers of new social housing, leaving the Housing Executive as the manager of its existing stock and the administrator of the public funding programme that supported the work of the housing associations. While some of the impetus for this change of focus for the Housing Executive was attributable to the desire of government to reduce public-sector borrowing,[11] other factors were also at play, including a wish to see the replication of the model of social housing then being introduced in England and Wales,[12] whereby the transfer of local authority housing stock to housing associations was promoted. In proposing this change, the success of the Housing Executive was acknowledged: £9 billion invested since 1971, with the Executive having 'never been found to exercise political or religious discrimination in making over 250,000 housing allocations since its inception'.[6]

Despite the acknowledged success of the Housing Executive, the transfer of responsibility for new build to housing associations proceeded, leaving the Executive to focus on the management of its existing stock. However, the role of the organisation as the strategic housing authority for Northern Ireland was reinforced in other ways, with the Housing Executive acquiring new functions, including responsibility for homelessness, housing benefit, and energy conservation.

The changes brought about by a review carried out in 1996 marked a turning point for the Housing Executive. Since the 1970s tenants had been able to buy their homes—a policy reinforced in 1979 with the introduction of Right to Buy legislation—and this had reduced the stock of houses available to meet need. From 1996 further sales to tenants eroded the size of the stock in absolute terms and, much to the dismay of the Housing Executive, the transfer of stock to housing associations was proposed.

By 2001, as Gray and Porter[6] observe, after 30 years 'the Housing Executive had built over 80,000 new homes, housed more than 500,000 people, improved 350,000 homes in the private sector and sold over 90,000 homes'. More importantly, both directly as a developer-landlord and through its strategic role, the Housing Executive had reduced the level of housing unfitness and addressed the worst inequalities in housing management.

From reorientation to revitalisation

The Good Friday Agreement of 1998 marked the return to devolved government for Northern Ireland. This change was accompanied by an increased emphasis on the promotion of improved social and community relations, and, not surprisingly, the Housing Executive acquired new responsibilities as a consequence. Yet again the organisation evolved, as both a landlord of choice and a trusted broker of neighbourhood improvement. However, given the continual erosion of the organisation's stock portfolio and its inability to replace homes sold to sitting tenants, the scale of its housing stock began to shrink; this reduction in scale was also accompanied by the ageing of stock and the inability of the Housing Executive to re-provision homes that were at the end of their expected life.

Although the Housing Executive continued to command the respect and support of tenants, politicians and communities, it was by now the subject of a series of reviews, not least as a result of the recurrence of a shortage of social homes. In short order a number of inquiries into housing were conducted by the Northern Ireland Assembly's Committee for Social Development (in 2002), the Northern Ireland Executive (in 2002), and the House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee (in 2004)—with the latter report noting the need for an increase in social-housing supply.[13]

These investigations were followed by more governmental and independent reviews, including the Semple Review into Affordable Housing[14] and a commission of inquiry on the future of housing sponsored by the Chartered Institute of Housing.[15] The latter inquiry, together with a subsequent review undertaken for the Northern Ireland Department for

New housing at Annsborough, County Down, in 1988

Social Development—now the sponsor department for the Housing Executive—provided the foundations for what emerged as the Social Housing Reform Programme (SHRP) as part of the Housing Strategy for Northern Ireland.[16]

The SHRP, in part, was a response to the increasing pressures on public expenditure that made it difficult to allocate sufficient funds to support the building of new social homes. However, it also reflected other issues, including the perceived need to enhance service delivery through the creation of a new landlord function from the division of the Housing Executive into two elements: a social landlord; and a strategic services organisation that would remain as an arm's-length body. It was envisaged at the time that the new social landlord would be a housing association (or associations) and that it would have the freedom to borrow and build, alongside maintaining and managing the existing housing stock. In the event, the changes proposed did not materialise, and the subsequent suspension of the Northern Ireland Assembly in 2017 effectively terminated the SHRP.

Despite the uncertainty and divisions caused by certain aspects of the SHRP, from 2012 the Housing Executive continued to adapt and improve the quality and scope of its service provision. New maintenance and management programmes were introduced, corporate assurance processes were improved, and, yet again, new functions were acquired. At the same time the Board of the Housing Executive decided in 2013 to agree to the separation of the landlord and strategic services functions; this was followed by the reclassification, by the Office for National Statistics, of the landlord element as a quasi-public corporation and the strategic services division as a non-departmental public body. For the landlord this had financial consequences, because subsequently the landlord became liable to pay corporation tax; this resulted in the Housing Executive becoming the only social landlord in the UK liable for this tax.

Following the resumption of the devolved administration in January 2020, which was accompanied by a document, *New Decade, New Approach*,[17] setting out the priorities for the restored

Northern Ireland Executive, housing was once again identified as an important and immediate issue and measures were identified in order to tackle a number of challenges. For the Housing Executive, *New Decade, New Approach* identified needs to remove the Housing Executive's historic debt and exclude it from paying corporation tax; set a long-term trajectory for rental charges; tackle the growing maintenance backlog; and, more generally, revitalise the housing sector as a whole and the social-housing sector in particular.

These priorities were brought together and presented as a new direction for housing policy in a Ministerial Statement on housing policy made by the Minister for Communities, Carál Ní Chuilin, before the Northern Ireland Assembly in November 2020.[18] The statement outlined the key issues facing the housing sector, with particular emphasis on the high and rising level of households in housing stress. Alongside a comprehensive set of proposed changes in policy, the revitalisation of the Housing Executive was put at centre stage. The objective of this part of the statement was to enable the Housing Executive to borrow and invest in its own homes—a return in many senses to the origins of the organisation. Although the statement proposed that the landlord division of the Housing Executive should become a mutual or co-operative organisation, at the present time the exact nature of the revitalised landlord has not been determined. It is currently proposed that the remaining strategic services division of the organisation will continue as an arm's-length body.

Other important items contained in the statement included the review and re-setting of rents, the exemption of the Housing Executive from corporation tax, the review of the house sales scheme, the ring-fencing of investment in order to meet the demand evident in a number of communities experiencing acute housing need, and a series of measures to help improve and extend the social-housing allocations system.

Many of the policy changes in the 2020 statement proposed the reintroduction of aspects of social-housing policy that were either eroded or eliminated in the various changes of direction that occurred from 1996 onwards. While some of the more recent changes to the role and responsibilities of the Housing Executive have enhanced its ability to deliver a comprehensive range of services to the communities of Northern Ireland, such as the pioneering work done through the Supporting People and Homelessness Programmes, other changes fettered the organisation, especially the restriction on accessing private capital and building new homes.

Although the outcomes of the revitalisation programme for the Housing Executive and for the other elements of the housing sector that were included in the Ministerial Statement are as yet unknown, the progress made so far is promising, including the exemption of the Housing Executive from corporation tax in March 2021.

In one sense this policy of reform and revitalisation can be seen as the restoration of the capabilities that allowed the Housing Executive during the 1970s and 1980s to develop and deliver a comprehensive programme which resulted in massive improvements to housing supply and the condition of the neighbourhoods of Northern Ireland. However, this new direction in policy also includes a number of accompanying initiatives designed to modernise social housing in other ways in order to reflect immediate and emerging challenges, such as the safety of high-rise and other buildings, the need to address growing socio-economic disparity, and the challenge of addressing climate change. So it is not so much back to the future; rather more shaping the future.

Rise, fall, and rise again

After 50 years, the fundamental purpose and the principles upon which the Housing Executive was founded largely remain valid. Northern Ireland, more

Retrofitted homes in Newry

than any other part of the UK, requires the presence of an open, honest, transparent and unbiased central housing authority and social landlord in order to ensure that tenants, residents and communities are treated fairly and justly.

As this brief review of the life and times of the Housing Executive has illustrated, although the challenges that confront society in Northern Ireland have evolved over the past five decades, many of the underlying issues and tensions still remain. It is in the context of these circumstances that the achievements of the Housing Executive should be judged.

In addition to the mainstream activities associated with any social landlord, the organisation has been engaged in a series of initiatives designed to promote social cohesion, neighbourhood harmony, and cross-community living. Over the past decade these initiatives have resulted in a gradual move towards what can best be described as the achievement of a greater sense of common purpose in many communities—with particular examples, such as the Building Successful Communities and the Housing Social Enterprise programmes, providing striking illustrations of the benefits that flow from enhanced stock improvement, neighbourhood regeneration, and socio-economic interventions. Other initiatives that reinforce cohesion include activities that are central to the Housing Executive's housing management and Supporting People schemes.

However, the real strength and most important achievement of the Housing Executive remains its role as a trusted landlord of choice. The foundation for this cross-community trust was, and still is, the Housing Selection Scheme which, since 1974, has ensured that housing is allocated on the basis of need. As ever, in facing the future the Housing Executive is focused on achieving its central purpose, which was reflected in the ambition set out by the Minister in November 2020:

> *'Houses are homes. Everything that we do must be based on that fundamental principle. It is a basic human right for individuals and families to have a safe and secure home.'*[18]

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Notes

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the changing relationship between public and private space

Peter Jones explores changes in the relationship between public and private space and examines some of the debates raised

In November 2021 BBC Scotland carried a report noting that 'Edinburgh's heritage watchdog is concerned that temporary structures erected during the pandemic for outdoor eating and drinking could be made permanent'.[1] The Director of the Cockburn Association (the watchdog cited), Terry Levinthal, was quoted as saying that:

> *'there are a substantial number of planning applications now for them to be made permanent. This means public places are being given over for private use. […] Moving from a temporary arrangement to a permanent one becomes a Trojan horse for the privatisation of public space.'*[1]

Although the concerns expressed about Edinburgh covered small spaces in relation to that city as a whole, they drew attention to a wider debate about the changing relationship between public and private space.

Public space has long been an important theme in planning. While Bahar[2] has argued that 'town planners have a critical role when it comes to integrating and designing public space', Duivenvoorden *et al.* have argued that 'managing public space is a big and important blind spot of urban and regional planning and design'.[3] At the same time, Leclercq and Pojani[4] claimed that 'under the neoliberal practices that have taken root since the 1980s in cities around the world', governments have allowed private interests to take over public spaces in order to save on planning and management funds, and have sold out public interests.

This article explores changes in the relationship between public and private space, and rehearses some of the debates raised by these changes.

Public space

Littlefield and Devereux[5] suggested that defining public space posed problems in that it 'can be considered either as space owned by public institutions, or space used by members of the public'. At the same time, they also argued that the term 'public' is often used to describe 'everyone' and that this generalisation ignores the range of the population for whom public space is being made available, and makes it difficult to assess the success or failure of public places. For Sendi and Marusic,[6] 'public space is […] a place outside the boundaries of individual or small-group control, used for a variety of often-overlapping functional and symbolic purposes. Accordingly, people have access to spaces, access to activities, access to information, and access to resources.'

The Greater London Authority Planning and Housing Committee 2011 report *Managing London's Public Space*[7] argued that:

> *''public space' (also called 'the public realm') considers all spaces including streets, squares and parks that everyone can use and access in principle, regardless of who owns or manages the space. There may be restrictions to the activities that are deemed acceptable in some of those public spaces, i.e. cycling might not be allowed or a park might be closed at night-time.'*

Brett Jordan on Unsplash

Public spaces are vital to the quality of urban life, but in recent years the ways that such space have been managed and maintained have raised a number of issues

In her Chair's foreword to the report, Nicky Gavron suggested that 'public spaces and places—our streets, squares, parks, waterfronts and footpaths—define how people perceive and live in a city. They reflect the priority we give to the wellbeing of our city and its citizens. They are vital to the quality of life London can offer.' The report emphasised that the capital's 'public spaces should be secure, accessible, inclusive, connected, easy to understand and maintain, relate to local context, and incorporate the highest quality design, landscaping, planting, street furniture and surfaces.'

CABE Space's 2014 report *The Value of Public Space*[8] suggested that high-quality public spaces 'create economic, social and environmental value'.[8] In terms of economic value, for example, it argued that:

'A high-quality public environment can have a significant impact on the economic life of urban centres big or small, and is therefore an essential part of any successful regeneration strategy. As towns increasingly compete with one another to attract investment, the presence of good parks, squares, gardens and other public spaces becomes a vital business and marketing tool.'

It also argued that, on the social dimension:

'Public spaces are open to all, regardless of ethnic origin, age or gender, and as such they represent a democratic forum for citizens and society. When properly designed and cared for, they bring communities together, provide meeting places and foster social ties of a kind that have been disappearing in many urban areas. These spaces shape the cultural identity of an area, are part of its unique character and provide a sense of place for local communities.'

At the same time, public space is also seen as having a positive impact on physical and mental health, in reducing crime and the fear of crime, and in enhancing biodiversity within the urban fabric. In a similar vein, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation[9] suggested that public places play a vital role in the social life of communities and offer many benefits, including 'the 'feel-good' buzz from being part of a busy street scene; the therapeutic benefits of quiet time spent on a park bench; places where people can display their culture and identities and learn awareness of diversity and difference; and opportunities for children and young people to meet, play or simply 'hang out' '.

However, public spaces within urban areas are also widely associated with a number of problems and challenges, although Carmona and de Magalhaes[10] have suggested that many people's negative perceptions of public space have reflected how it has been managed and maintained, rather than its original design. More specifically, a wide variety of problems identified within public spaces include the proliferation of litter, graffiti, dereliction and empty shops, people sleeping rough on the streets at night and begging during the daytime, the aggressive behaviour of charity fund-raisers, and, contrary to

some of the benefits claimed for public space, the fear of crime.

Privatising public space

In simple terms, while private space might be seen as the opposite of public space, with the former being wholly owned by an individual or an organisation and the latter in the public domain and in public ownership, the notion of the privatisation of public space is not straightforward. Littlefield and Devereux,[5] for example, have claimed that the 'consideration of the 'privatisation of public space' leads to a wide variety of similar, inter-related concepts including: public access to private space; quasi-public space; relationships between ownership and use; and modes of governance which might be situated along a spectrum ranging between the polarities of public and private'. Pratt[11] defines quasi-public spaces as 'open spaces that look and feel like public places, open to all; however, they are in fact private spaces that are only conditionally made available to the public'.

Furthermore, real estate services and investment company CBRE[12] has used the term 'privately owned public spaces' but suggests that it does 'not necessarily mean that [such spaces are] owned by profit-making enterprises. Such spaces could also be owned by non-profit organisations and charities.' In some ways, Carmona[13] turned the issue on its head, arguing that, while the majority of dialogue has been about the privatisation of public space, 'in London at least, we have actually witnessed the reverse, a 'public-isation of private space'. That said, and for simplicity, in what follows in this article the terms 'private space' and 'the privatisation of space' are used as umbrella terms to refer to all these concepts described.

The privatisation of public space has a long history, but in modern times within the UK the process has been largely, although not entirely, underpinned by urban regeneration or retail development. On the one hand, for example, in the 1980s the creation of a number of Urban Development Corporations led to major redevelopment projects such as Canary Wharf. More recently, urban regeneration and redevelopment has effectively increased the privatisation of public spaces, and a variety of private sector urban redevelopment projects have been pursued in a number of cities on land previously in local authority ownership. Gillespie and Silver,[14] for example, have charted two phases of such development in Ancoats and New Islington, to the east of Manchester city centre, which saw the remediation of land and the construction of new houses and apartments for both sale and rent.

On the other hand, from the mid-1980s onwards a number of large retail developments, in both out-of-town locations and city centres, saw the creation of a new generation of private spaces specifically designed for public use. The first out-of-town centre, the Merry Hill Centre at Brierley Hill in the West Midlands, was developed between 1985 and 1990 in an Enterprise Zone to house over 217 stores, with a total retail floorspace of over 150,000 square metres. A number of large new out-of-town centres followed, including the Metro Centre (Gateshead), the Trafford Centre (Greater Manchester), Meadowhall (Sheffield), Bluewater (Kent), Cribbs Causeway (near Bristol), and Braehead (near Glasgow). The space within all the out-of-town shopping centres is privately owned, initially usually by the developer, although in many cases the ownership and management of the centres has changed hands over time; but the creation of these centres has generally not involved the privatisation of spaces that were previously publicly owned.

Within town and city centres, the development of new enclosed shopping centres — including the original Bull Ring in Birmingham, the Arndale Centre in Manchester, and Eldon Square in Newcastle upon Tyne — can be traced back to the 1960s and 1970s. From the late 1990s onwards, a new generation of enclosed retail developments were constructed in town and city centres, such as The Oracle in Reading, Buchanan Galleries in Glasgow, the Saint David's Centre in Cardiff, and West Quay in Southampton. Here again, while these central shopping centres were privately owned and managed, they were developed and designed to provide a modern shopping environment to meet perceived public needs and demands. That said, while they have not physically replaced the city centre's streets, they effectively provided new privately owned and managed spaces and environments for shoppers.

However, Liverpool One, in the heart of the city, involved the redevelopment of 170,000 square metres of land. It was developed, and is owned, by a private property corporation, and the city centre, embracing some 170 retail outlets and over 30 streets, has effectively been privatised. Liverpool One was opened in 2008, and, in addition to its shops, there is a 14-screen cinema, a golf centre, restaurants, a Hilton hotel, some 700 apartments, a small park, extensive car parking, and a public transport interchange.

Reflective discussion

A number of issues merit reflection and discussion. First, there are issues concerning the role of town planning in the changing relationship between public and private space.

Traditionally, many early urban plans were based on the concept of a centrally located public space, which usually provided a focus for markets and trade and for the life of the community. In the late 19th century, the creation of new public parks (as in Birkenhead and Manchester) offered fresher air and leisure and recreational opportunities. Two of the

distinctive features of Ebenezer Howard's Garden City concept were green spaces and public amenities, and the spirit, if not the letter, of this approach underpinned the landmark 1947 town and country planning legislation—in the Second Reading of the Town and Country Planning Bill in Parliament, the Town and Country Planning Minister, Lewis Silkin, suggested that its primary objective was to 'secure a proper balance between the competing demands for land, so that all the land of the country is used in the best interests of the whole people'.[15]

'There are issues about the social impacts of privatising space within towns and cities… Pratt argued that cities were losing control of the public realm and a crucial opportunity to shape public culture and that culture is often an instrumental hook to place branding and attracting foreign direct investment'

Changes in detailed planning guidance and policies during the second half of the 20th century effectively saw an erosion of commitments to public space, and in some ways, although often indirectly, planning served to encourage the growth of private space within developments. In reviewing the 'ins and outs of retail development' since the late 1960s, Jones and Hiller,[16] for example, charted the establishment of the new out-of-town shopping centres noted above. They argued that a 'relaxation in central government thinking and controls concerning new retail development and a seemingly greater enthusiasm to leave the impetus for retail growth and change to retailers and developers, as well as increasing uncertainty at local authority level in the face of powerful development pressures, meant that traditional planning policies were often honoured more in the breach than the observance'.

More recently, in the 'Achieving well-designed spaces' chapter, the latest version of the National Planning Policy Framework[17] states that planning policies and decisions should ensure that developments 'optimise the potential of the site to accommodate and sustain an appropriate amount and mix of development (including green and other public space)'. The 'Promoting healthy and safe communities' chapter states that planning policies and decisions should aim to achieve places which 'are safe and accessible […], for example through the use of […] high quality public space'. That said, the dominant focus is on providing 'a framework within which locally-prepared plans for housing and other development can be produced', and although the government's proposed planning reforms are now under review, it remains to be seen how the protection of existing, and the creation of new, public space will fare in that process.

Secondly, concerns have been expressed about the impact of the privatisation of formerly public space on sustainability. A critical literature review conducted by Ntakana and Mbanga[18], for example, revealed that the privatisation of urban public space raises questions about the sustainability of urban settings, and about the impact that privatisation has on social inclusion and access to urban land and well developed public spaces. The authors found that, while local authorities partnered with the private sector in an attempt to build environmentally friendly cities, privatisation serves as a vehicle for economic development and financial revenue, to the detriment of social and environmental goals. More generally, in a study of the 'incremental demise of urban green spaces', Colding *et al.*[19] claimed that privatisation schemes can lead to a gradual loss of opportunities for people to experience nature.

At the same time, the development of modern new shopping centres also has an impact on sustainable development. There is general, although not universal, consensus that any transition to a more sustainable future will require a reduction—many would say a substantial reduction—in consumption, particularly within advanced capitalist economies. However, new shopping developments such as Liverpool One are specifically designed to stimulate consumption behaviour and to offer consumers a seemingly ever-wider range of goods and services, and as such they can be seen to be the anthesis of sustainability. Furthermore, where private transport is used to visit new shopping centres (and Liverpool One, for example, advertises that it has over 3,000 dedicated car parking spaces on three sites in the city centre), this will do nothing to contribute to a reduction in carbon dioxide emissions.

Thirdly, there are issues about the social impacts of privatising space within towns and cities. Minton,[20] for example, claimed that 'the privatisation of the public realm, through the growth of 'private-public' space, produces overcontrolled, sterile places which lack connection to the reality and diversity of the local environment, with the result that they all tend to look the same'. More critically, Pratt[11] argued that cities were 'losing control of the public realm and a crucial opportunity to shape public culture', that 'culture is often an instrumental hook to place branding and attracting foreign direct investment', and that 'consumer culture, and retail consumption (or increasingly the experience of shopping) is the end point'. This led him to suggest that 'this must mean that the market is for the richest and most privileged, it is not profitable to

Herry Lawford/Flickr, CC-BY-2.0

Westfield Stratford City, shortly after opening in 2011

promote the cultural diversity that would appeal to the whole community, non-elite shopping experiences, or non-'high-culture' venues.

There have been concerns about where, and how, people fit into the private/public debate, and more specifically about the threat to people being able to celebrate and protest in public places. Minton,[20] for example, has argued that the privatisation of formerly public land raised 'serious questions about democracy and accountability. But perhaps most worrying of all are the effects on cohesion, battered by the creation of atomised enclaves of private space which displace social problems into neighbouring districts.' Furthermore, she suggested that while 'economic viability is important, successful places must be about more than a balance sheet, or they will fail to connect with local communities. City centres which are designed purely with shopping and leisure in mind produce strangely 'placeless' places, cut off from their original wellsprings of local life and vitality.'

In looking to examine where users fit into the public/private debate, Leclercq and Pojani[4] posed the question of whether users are concerned about public space privatisation. Their approach to addressing this question was based on surveying users and observing their behaviour in three public spaces in Liverpool. It led the authors to conclude that 'users appreciate a privatised area for the pleasant, clean, and safe environment it offers—not to mention shopping and entertainment opportunities'. Furthermore, they suggested that 'privately-produced and -owned spaces can therefore be characterised as social spaces, in which one can meet others and engage in daily encounters', that 'the meaning of 'private' and 'public' is not necessarily clear to all', but that 'privatised spaces send subtle signals to users that certain activities, people or behaviours are not tolerate or encouraged'.

Finally, some pressure groups, investigative journalists and academic researchers have expressed concerns about the transparency of the process by which public spaces are privatised and managed. Gosling,[21] writing for the pressure group, The Land is Ours, reported that a number of local authorities, including those in Manchester, Liverpool, Birmingham, Bristol, Leeds and Glasgow, would not provide details of the spread of privately owned public areas, or provide details of 'their secret prohibitions, which may include protesting or taking photos'. The Greater London Authority Planning and Housing Committee[7] argued that the 'lack of transparency and clear lines of accountability' at Stratford City, which includes the Westfield Shopping Centre, as well as a large residential area, commercial offices, a number of hotels, community facilities, and open space, is a cause of a concern.

Conclusion

In recent decades many of the UK's towns and cities have seen a growth in the amount of space that is privately owned and managed but which is designed for public use—and new retail and housing developments have been the major drivers in this process. However, the very existence and nature of the process is contested, and while some

commentators are critical of the privatisation of urban space, others have called into question the characterisation of the process as one of privatisation. It remains to be seen how public/private space debates will be played out in the future, but planners, both in local authorities and in private practice, will want to keep a watching brief on such discourses.

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on flying fish and little hitlers

When I arrived in London in May 1985 to take up the editorship of this august journal, I had come from Oxford, where I had been Arts Editor of the *Oxford Star.* As such, I came to know Bill Heine a little, as he was the owner of two local cinemas. I could hardly claim to know him well, before his rise to prominence via Radio Oxford, but there was one link between us. In 1986, the TCPA published a report on the inner cities (everyone was writing about the inner cities in those days), called *Whose Responsibility?* It was primarily the work of John Harwood, at the time Chief Executive at the London Borough of Lewisham. I remember how hard I worked to get him and the then TCPA Director David Hall on the airwaves to promote it.

The night before the launch, I heard from the BBC's *Today* programme that they would have David Hall on the next morning's edition. But when I turned on my radio, having woken up early, I found that they had cancelled all their other guests, because—during the night—the US Air Force had bombed Tripoli in an attempt to scare Colonel Gaddafi in Libya. I remember David faced the situation with impressive aplomb, but the coincidence of timing did little for the report's reception.

It turned out that the bombers had taken off from the then US Air Force base at Upper Heyford, just north of Oxford, and as they roared over the city that night, they had woken Bill Heine. That was why, as he explained later, Heine decided to commission his favourite sculptor, John Buckley, to build a 25 foot fibreglass shark falling through the roof in New High Street, Headington, in Oxford's western suburbs.

Oxford City Council was horrified and suggested, first, that it was a danger to passers-by—which it clearly wasn't—and then that it had not been given planning permission. This was true and quite deliberate. As a transatlantic liberal, Heine said he had 'put up two fingers to bureaucracy and stood up for creativity'.

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Bill Heine's 25 foot fibreglass shark in Headington, Oxford

Creativity? Well, there was something about the shark which spoke to a generation that might wake up and find sharks of a sort falling through the ceiling. 'It is saying something about CND, nuclear power, Chernobyl and Nagasaki,' Heine told the *Guardian* later. Which makes it peculiarly relevant these days, because, if you live in Lviv or London, you might well be woken by falling fish at any moment.

It took six years of planning wrangles before the government—to its great credit—let the shark stay. 'It is not in dispute that the shark is not in harmony with its surroundings, but then it is not intended to be in harmony with them', wrote planning inspector Peter Macdonald in his ruling:

> *'The council is understandably concerned about precedent here. The first concern is simple: proliferation with sharks (and heaven knows what else) crashing through roofs all over the city. This fear is exaggerated. In the five years since the shark was erected, no other examples have occurred […] any system of control must make some small place for the dynamic, the unexpected, the downright quirky. I therefore recommend that the Headington Shark be allowed to remain.'*

So why am I writing about it now, 35 years later? Because time has moved on, as it does, and Oxford City Council has now decided to embrace the shark. Bill Heine has since died, and his son Magnus now owns the house in New High Street. It was remortgaged in 2007 and, when it looked as though the banks might repossess it and take the shark down (it is a truth universally acknowledged that people prefer their homes easy to buy and sell, and therefore not very interesting), in 2017 Magnus stepped in and bought it.

'There is no point in devolution if all we are able to do is to devolve powers from Whitehall to little Hitlers standing on their dignity in the town hall'

Now, three and a half decades later from when it was installed, Magnus is fighting the decision of the council to list the shark as 'heritage'.

I remember thinking, some years ago, at a meeting of council leaders around Cardiff, that there may be nothing quite so nauseating as a group of local elected officials standing on their dignity. I imagine something similar was happening in Oxford City Council when they first realised that someone had had the temerity to try to cheer the city up a little with an unauthorised fibreglass fish.

There seem to be two lessons from this affair, for this column, at least.

First, even in a highly centralised society like ours there needs to be some kind of release valve—like the one which a previous Environment Secretary, Nicholas Ridley, insisted on, to allow for new country houses on the grounds of special architectural peculiarity or merit (which has mainly been used to build forest settlements like Tinkers Bubble, but none the worse for that).

Second, that there is no point in devolution if all we are able to do is to devolve powers from Whitehall to little Hitlers (not a phrase one hears much these days) standing on their dignity in the town hall.

It has to go further to parish, ward and, yes, to household level if we can. Because, in the end, localism is about handing down power and responsibility to us all, individually and collectively.

● ***David Boyle*** *is co-founder of the New Weather think-tank and Radix Big Tent, and is the author of Tickbox: How It Is Taking Control of Our Money, Our Health, Our Lives—and How To Fight Back! (Little, Brown). The views expressed are personal.*

quality streets

The front cover of *Living with Beauty*, the Report of the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission published in 2020,[1] features a photograph of The Piece Hall in Halifax, the only surviving example of a late 18th-century cloth hall. This Grade I listed building has recently been re-purposed as a cultural hub and is home to a theatre and art gallery, together with independent shops, cafés, and bars. The original design of The Piece Hall has been attributed to Thomas Bradley, a 22-year-old apprentice engineer with no formal architectural training.[2]

An image of The Piece Hall also features in another publication from 2020, the Planning White Paper.[3] While every indication is that the more radical reforms contemplated in the White Paper will not feature in the forthcoming Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill, other measures, including a number advocated in *Living with Beauty*, have already found their way through to national policy.

The July 2021 iteration of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) has elevated design to a higher-order policy consideration. Paragraph 134 provides that poorly designed developments should be refused and that 'significant weight' should be ascribed to development which reflects local design policies and government guidance. These changes to the NPPF were accompanied by a new National Model Design Code, to complement the existing National Design Guide. This overarching guidance is intended to inform the production of local design codes and guides, which should also reflect the outcome of local community consultation.

Taking forward another *Living with Beauty* recommendation the Office for Place has been established with a remit to support the production and use of design codes and guides. The rather nebulous concept of 'beauty' also now features in the NPPF, with paragraph 8b) stressing the importance of well designed, beautiful and safe places when realising the 'social' element of sustainable development.

The Piece Hall Trust

The Piece Hall, Halifax—a testament to the power of good design

What are the potential barriers to ensuring that these changes to policy result in improved design outcomes? The first point to note is that maximising the weight to be attached to design considerations requires long-term commitment and investment by local planning authorities when it comes to formulating local design guidance. This will present real challenges to many authorities. According to research conducted by Place Alliance in 2021,[4] two-fifths of local planning authorities have no access to urban design advice; almost two-thirds no landscape advice; and three-quarters no architectural advice.

In the absence of local design guidance, paragraph 129 of the NPPF suggests that the National Model Design Code, along with the National Design Guide, should be used to guide planning decisions. However, the National Model Design Code is not a statement of national policy; it is in essence a toolkit incorporating design considerations that authorities will be expected to take into account when producing their own bespoke design codes and guides.

There is also a timing issue for authorities. In order to ensure that they attract the enhanced statutory weight associated with the development plan, design policies will need to be promoted through the Local Plan process. Authorities that have recently adopted Local Plans will have missed the boat when it comes to embedding design polices, and may struggle to promote them as Supplementary Planning Documents in the absence of a suitable development plan policy hook on which to hang them.

The increased use of permitted development (PD) to deliver housing also means that many development proposals will bypass the need to address design requirements altogether. The Royal Institute of British Architects has already cautioned against the continued expansion of PD rights, arguing that it will result in 'shoddy, small and inadequate homes'.[5]

Finally, while community consultation has an important role to play in informing local design codes and improving the prospects of new development being embraced by communities, there is a concern that it may discourage more innovative design proposals.

The Planning White Paper had more to say on the topic of design. It adopted another *Living with Beauty* recommendation, namely that planning authorities should appoint a chief officer for design and place-making. This is by no means a new concept; the role of city architect was central to the redevelopment of a number of cities in the post-war period, with Leeds retaining the post until 2010.

Another design innovation, the 'fast track for beauty', is unlikely to come forward in the way envisaged in the White Paper. The idea was that where proposals came forward which complied with pre-established principles of what good design looks like (again informed by community preferences), then it should be possible to expedite development through the planning process. However, the White Paper envisaged this being integral to the now jettisoned proposals for zonal planning, with masterplans and codes being prepared by the authority alongside Local Plan allocations for growth and renewal areas.

The Piece Hall has long outlived its initial purpose but continues to make a significant contribution to the wellbeing of Halifax. This is testament to the power of good design and illustrates the benefits of aiming for quality over quantity when planning for sustainable communities. Hopefully, the changed emphasis in national policy will play its part in securing future high-quality outcomes.

● ***Bob Pritchard*** *is a Legal Director at Shoosmiths. The views expressed are personal.*

Notes

1 *Living with Beauty: Promoting Health, Well-being and Sustainable Growth*. Report of the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission, Jan. 2020, p.30. www.gov.uk/government/publications/living-with-beauty-report-of-the-building-better-building-beautiful-commission

2 P Smithies: *The Architecture of the Halifax Piece Hall 1775-1779*. Philip Smithies, 1988

3 *Planning for the Future*. Planning White Paper. Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, Aug. 2020. www.gov.uk/government/consultations/planning-for-the-future

4 See E Hopkirk: '75% of planning authorities have no access to architectural advice'. *Building Design*, 22 Jul. 2021. www.bdonline.co.uk/news/75-of-planning-authorities-have-no-access-to-architectural-advice/5112931.article

5 'RIBA condemns plan to extend permitted development'. News Story. RIBA, 14 Jan. 2019. www.architecture.com/knowledge-and-resources/knowledge-landing-page/riba-condemns-plan-to-extend-permitted-development

Matthew Carmona on how proactive place-based intervention focusing on place quality and attraction factors could help to ensure a healthy future for our high streets

high streets—what future? part 2: the place attraction paradigm

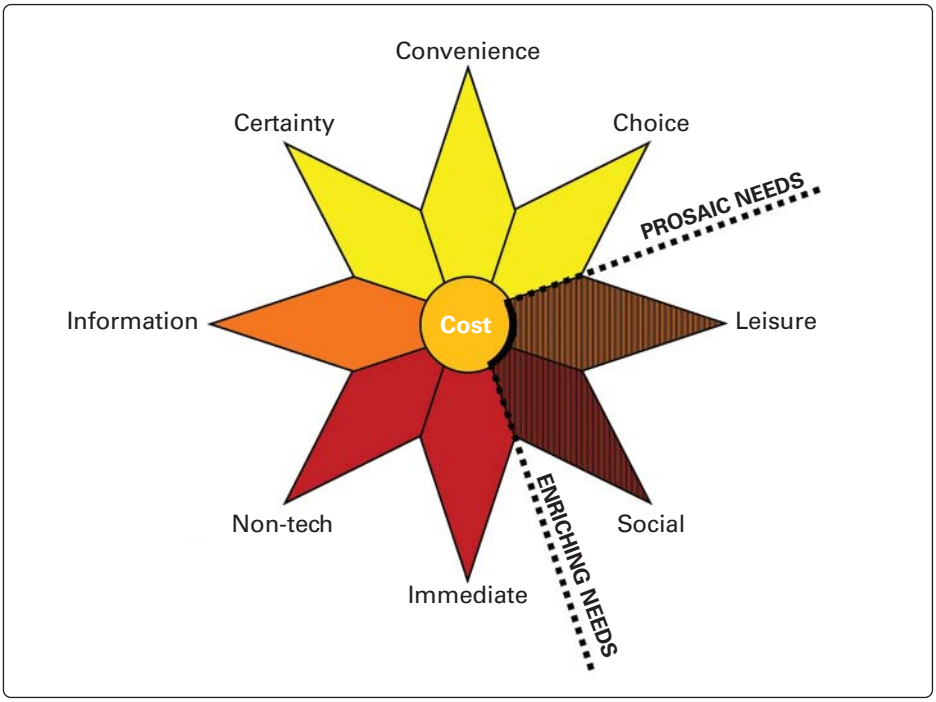
In the previous 'Design Matters' column,[1] I explored the crisis on our high streets driven by the move to shopping online—and then proposed a new 'sun model' for thinking about shopping choices. I concluded that, faced with the challenges, the UK government is adopting a rather confused combination of deregulation and intervention to address the problem. Let's pick up where the last column left off.

Deregulation—ad hoc renewal

The first approach is reflected in the deregulatory predilections of government as encapsulated in the increasing use of permitted development rights (PDR)—bypassing the need for planning permission—to deliver more housing.

Undaunted by reports of the poor quality of accommodation being delivered in this way, further liberalisations in March 2021 were justified almost entirely on the need to tackle the crisis on England's high streets. The changes introduced PDR for a new mega-use-class (Class E) allowing the conversion of

Spatial strategies for high streets



Shaping through proactive design—enriching versus prosaic factors

all commercial, business and service uses to residential uses.

The government argued that allowing more housing in high street locations will diversify uses and, by bringing larger numbers of people within walking distance, will help to support retail activity. A side effect, however, is the removal of almost the only (albeit crude) mechanism, short of public sector ownership, for local authorities to 'direct' an appropriate mix of uses on high streets. A key danger, therefore, is that deregulation might reduce the very diversity that it seeks to inject. Given the choice between the uncertainties of a retail industry in crisis, an office market also in transition (as white-collar workers choose to work from home), and the low values associated with small-scale manufacturing and community functions, the logical approach for investors will be to run to the residential market, leaving a 'gap-toothed' appearance on affected streets.

Intervention, as the alternative to deregulation, is far more complex, cutting across the realms of planning, design and curation.

Intervention—shaping through proactive planning

In contrast to its deregulatory instincts, the UK government, with increasing urgency, has also encouraged a more active approach to the nation's high streets, moving from a small £1.2 million fund in 2011, to implement 'Portas pilot' schemes, to a £1 billion support fund in 2019. The step-change in resourcing has not, unfortunately, been followed by a step-change in vision, with funding tending to focus on limited one-off capital projects, rather than on the fundamental re-thinking of high streets called for by some commentators.

Retail executive Bill Grimsey, for example, has argued that every town centre should have a dedicated plan, through which the core retail area should be defined and protected while retailing in secondary areas should be allowed to shrink through a combination of conversion to residential uses and the active relocation of valued local retailers. Research carried out for the Greater London Authority notes that planned shrinkage can encourage an intensification in the frontage that remains—including by building residential properties over and behind retail premises—avoiding the problem of permanent holes appearing in frontages (see the 'spatial strategies' diagram on the preceding page).

Such a strategy relies on regulation, alongside more proactive planning, public-private partnerships, and potentially land and property assembly and development. It would benefit from the already well established trend of a growing population living within walking distance of high streets—a population that has been increasing at double the rate of other locations.

Intervention—shaping through proactive design

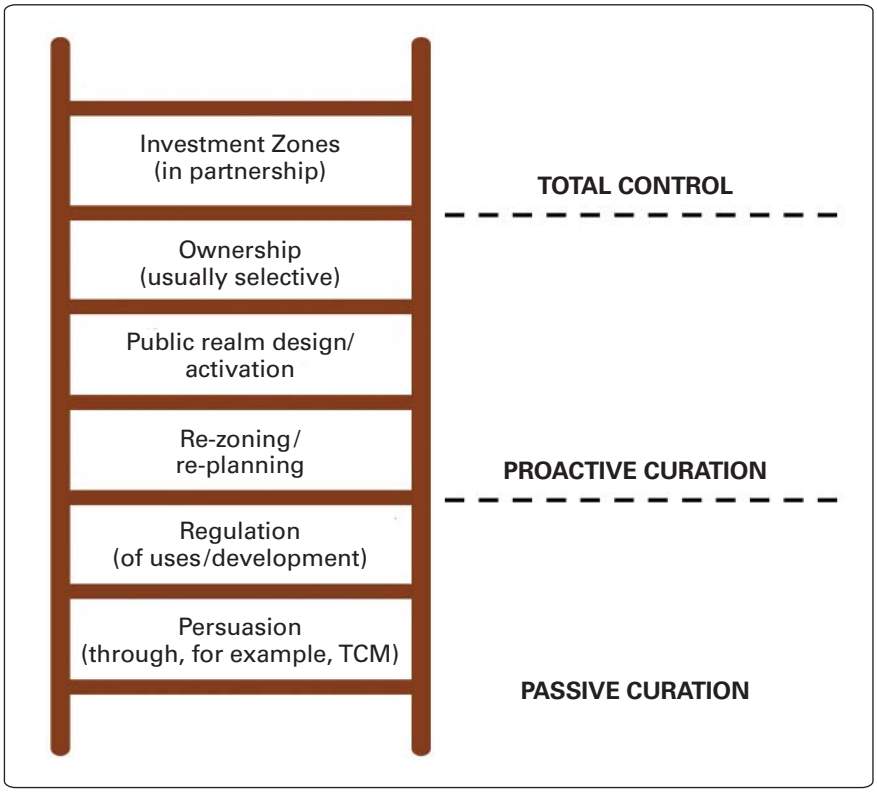
Jan Gehl famously distinguished between necessary, optional and social activities in the use of public space, reflecting the idea that, if people are to really engage in places, they need to want to do so because the place is appropriately conducive. The 'sun model' discussed in the previous 'Design Matters' column can be interpreted in a similar way, with the more prosaic factors associated with shopping set against a smaller number of enriching factors related to the very human desire to be together and enjoy ourselves (see the sun model diagram on the preceding page).

My own pre-pandemic research confirmed a strong association between these enriching needs and the quality of streets. By comparing high streets that had been subject to significant public realm re-design and investment with those that had not, the work identified that improvements to the quality of the street fabric encouraged people to walk more and to stay longer, and ultimately boosted the desirability of surrounding retail space and reduced vacancy levels.

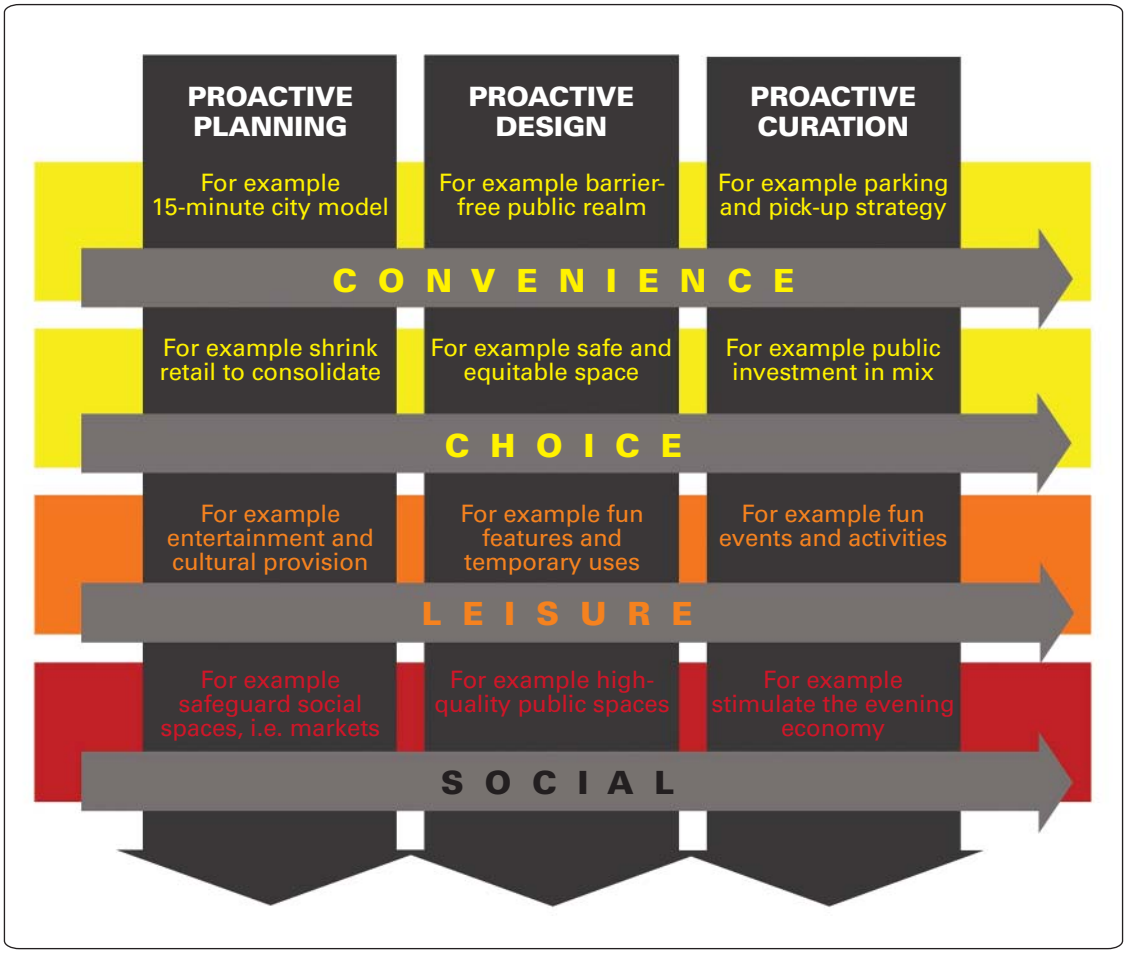
UK government funding for emergency design interventions in the country's high streets in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic envisaged similar possibilities. As an unpublished letter from the Department for Transport to local authority chief executives argued: 'We have a window of opportunity to act now to embed walking and cycling as part of new long-term commuting habits and reap the associated health, air quality and congestion benefits.' Resulting changes have sometimes been temporary and sometimes permanent, but, in focusing on a 'new era of walking and cycling', have driven changes nationally that have a proven track record of boosting spend in shops.

Intervention—shaping through proactive curation

It has been widely argued that, in order to survive, the high street will need to find new purpose, becoming the latest arena for customer experience innovation. Extrapolating to the larger scale, the street itself now also needs to be part of that positive experience. This represents a major challenge for traditional shopping when the competition—internet platforms, shopping malls, and even out-of-town retail parks—is highly curated in order to optimise the experience in terms of its convenience, the choice on offer, and the experience of navigating those choices.



Ladder of retail curation



The place attraction paradigm—place-based shopping choice factors against proactive intervention factors for traditional shopping streets (and indicative policy responses)

Managers of large shopping malls, for example, have long understood the value of mixing retailing, entertainment venues, event spaces and restaurants in order to keep users coming back and to encourage movement in a manner that optimises spend. The thought of giving up control on the mix and incorporating non-active uses as suggested by the deregulatory (PDR) changes impacting on English high streets would be an anathema. Town centre management, in various guises, and Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) have developed in an attempt to transfer private sector methods to publicly managed streets, but the reality of fragmented ownerships, limited resources and a lack of focus in the public sector on the growing threats to traditional high streets have combined to limit their impact.

While the public sector, typically, has direct control of only a limited stock of buildings in most town centres, it does have control over the key public services—with the potential to relocate them back onto high streets—and over the public realm. Local authorities can (along with private partners) deploy temporary uses in the public realm in order to curate the experience, ranging from fun activities (for example events, fairs, and demonstrations) to retail opportunities (for example farmers' markets), to works of art and performance. More proactive English local authorities are also stepping in to pick up cheap retail assets in order to re-purpose them to better serve local needs. More radically still, models such as Town Centre Investment Zones (TCIZs) seek to pool ownerships and responsibility in a single investment vehicle focused on collectively curating entire streets.

Together, the range of different approaches can be represented on a ladder that moves from

Matthew Carmona

Eltham High Street — proactive planning of higher-density apartments in marginal secondary retail locations; proactive design of the public realm, including widened pavements, new public space, and bike lanes; and proactive curation, with a local-authority-developed cinema complex on the site of a former department store

passive approaches to curating retail environments (the normal approach in England) to more active ones, and to total-control models (see the 'ladder of retail curation' diagram on page 213). The challenge is now to move up the ladder!

A place attraction paradigm

In the longer paper from which this discussion is drawn,[2] I argue that traditional shopping streets face an existential crisis, and that how they react will determine whether they have a long-term future or are doomed to inevitable decline. Drawing from the analysis, it is possible to conclude that central government, local government and those with management responsibilities for high streets need to systematically consider their response to the four critical place-based shopping choice factors contained in the sun model.

'If we wish to avoid the sun setting further on these valued places and the rich ecologies of functions that they host, then the answer can be found only in more and better public sector intervention, not less, working in partnership with private actors'

Setting these against the three proactive intervention factors begins to answer the previously posed question of what key place-based factors will help to guarantee a future for traditional shopping streets (see the place attraction paradigm diagram on the preceding page).

In doing so I conclude that if we wish to avoid the sun setting further on these valued places and the rich ecologies of functions that they host, then the answer can be found only in more and better public sector intervention, not less, working in partnership with private actors. What is clear is that we have moved beyond the old movement economy and centrality paradigm — in which just to be in the right place was enough, because people would come — to a paradigm in which place quality is all. High streets that prioritise proactive intervention in order to address the place-based factors that make people actively wish to visit them will survive and thrive. Those that don't will surely decline and die.

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The views expressed are personal.

Notes

1 M Carmona: 'High streets — what future? Part 1: The sun model'. *Town & Country Planning*, 2022, Vol. 91, Mar.–Apr., 140–42

2 M Carmona: 'The existential crisis of traditional shopping streets: the sun model and the place attraction paradigm'. *Journal of Urban Design*, 2002, Vol. 27(1), 1-35. www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13574809.2021.1951605

Mike Teitz on a new Act that could make a difference to housing provision in California

an old tool is revitalised

After years of disappointment in housing for planners and policy-makers in California, there finally seems to be movement. The legislature has passed a bill, Senate Bill (SB) 9—the California Housing Opportunity and More Efficiency ('HOME') Act—that could make a real difference. The bill's provisions are quite mild—it permits homeowners in single-family zoned areas to split their lots, adding an extra unit. There are some exceptions, but the right cannot be overcome by local governments. And in order to cement that right, the State government has declared that it will enforce a mechanism that has long been on the books but has been largely disregarded. The mechanism is RHNA (pronounced Reena), the Regional Housing Needs Allocation. To understand it, one needs to look back at the history of planning in California.

Planning has a long history in the State, beginning in the 19th century with the formation of planning commissions that were only loosely connected to local governments, although permitted by State statute. Some, such as that in San Francisco, were quite powerful politically, but their formal powers were limited. At the same time cities also began regulating new construction by means of zoning.

The modern era of planning at the local level began in the 1950s, when the State permitted cities and counties to adopt General Plans for their development, and mandated that the plans should cover certain elements, such as land use and transportation. The concept was advanced by T J Kent, who had been the youngest Director of Planning in San Francisco, and later was the founding Chair of the new Department of City and Regional Planning at the University of California, Berkeley.

Over the following decades, the concept was expanded in two ways. New planning elements were added, notably for housing, and the scope of planning was expanded with the addition of regional planning agencies for transportation, and the creation of regional Councils of Governments (COGs) consisting of representatives of local governments. Both were heavily affected by the growth of Federal funding in the 1960s.

The tools for this purpose were the housing element of the General Plan and RHNA enacted in 1969. The housing element is part of the General Plan, but RHNA requires a more complex process. The State Department of Housing and Community Development produces an estimate of the housing needs in each metropolitan region, and then transmits

Karthikeyanpandian. CC BY-SA 3.0

Emeryville in California, where the new housing element exceeds its quota for low- and moderate-income family housing

it to the regional COG, which allocates it to local communities. As might be expected, this process could be fraught with local conflict. However, in fact the allocations were mostly ignored or postponed with a variety of explanations. In short, the housing did not get built, and the State drifted into crisis.

Proponents of housing complained but turned their attention to reforming zoning. Numerous bills were defeated or sidelined until the passage of SB 9. Although its provisions are quite minimal, they include two vital elements. Applications are exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), which has been used to defeat housing proposals; and local governments are prevented from calling for public hearings. Equally important is the State's new-found intention to enforce RHNA allocations by scrutinising the required reworking of localities' General Plan housing elements to take account of the RHNA allocations, together with the determination to hold communities to account. As a result, local planning departments are seriously working to generate new housing elements. Some are very positive.

The small Bay Area city of Emeryville was once known for its industry, including paint and steel rebar. (I used to take my students studying local economic development to its small rolling mill to show them what industry looked like.) In recent years, it became famous as the headquarters of Pixar, the film production company, as well as building box stores and housing. Its recently released housing element exceeded its quota in housing for low- and moderate-income families.

Other places are less accommodating. One wealthy neighbourhood in San Francisco has just received its designation as a historic district, an exemption under the law. To be fair, it had applied much earlier, and its designer was Frederick Law Olmsted. Other cities are more egregious. Woodside, a small wealthy community on the San Francisco peninsular, declared itself a wildlife habitat for mountain lions. It is true that the species has been seen there, but the State swiftly made it clear that this would not do.

So far as I know, California has not seen the practices in New Jersey, where wealthier cities pay poorer ones to accept their share, or else they exile new housing to the borders of neighbouring cities, hoping that they would deal with problems. Nonetheless, we can look forward to new stratagems as cities try to evade their social responsibilities.

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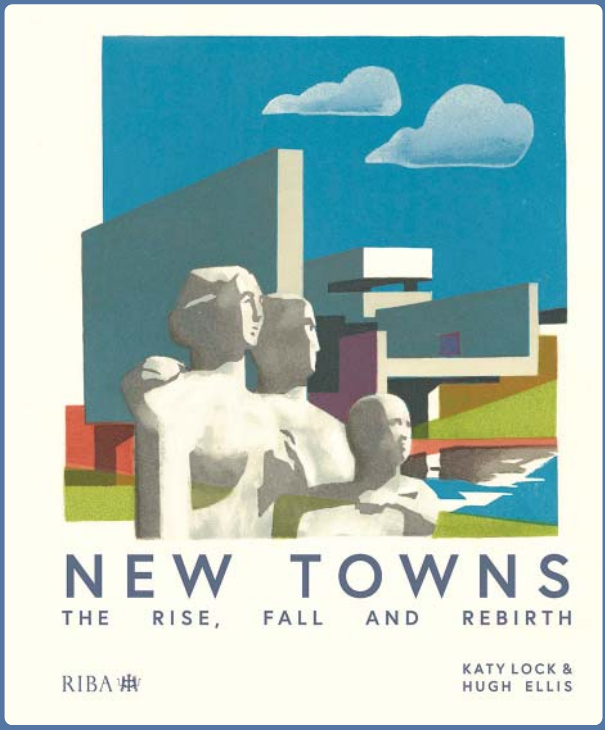
designing new communities for the 21st century

new towns: the rise, fall and rebirth



New Towns: The Rise, Fall and Rebirth
By Katy Lock and Hugh Ellis
Published by RIBA Publishing,
May 2020, HB, 192 pp
ISBN 978 1859469286, £40

Often misunderstood, the New Towns story is a fascinating one of anarchists, artists, visionaries, and the promise of a new beginning for millions of people. *New Towns: The Rise, Fall and Rebirth* offers a new perspective on the New Towns record and uses case studies to address the myths and realities of the programme. It provides valuable lessons for the growth and renewal of the existing New Towns and post-war housing estates and town centres, including recommendations for practitioners, politicians and communities interested in the renewal of existing New Towns and the creation of new communities for the 21st century.

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