

For the next New Towns to succeed as sustainable, exemplary communities, the government must commit to a clear strategy for their long-term management and maintenance, argues [Katy Lock](#)

Stewardship: the heart of the matter

The motto of the first designated New Town, Stevenage, proclaims that ‘the heart of the town lies in its people’. In setting up the *New Towns Act 1946* and with it the objects and powers of New Town development corporations (NTDCs), the government provided a framework for the creation of innovative, high-quality places with ‘balanced communities’ and community development at their heart. But the failure to secure a strategy for their ongoing management and maintenance – or stewardship – soon undermined this vision. As the government embarks on what we hope will be a fourth generation of New Towns, it’s worth exploring what went wrong, and what can be learnt from current practice to secure a sustainable future for these modern New Towns.

Community ownership of land and long-term stewardship of ‘assets’ – everything from greenspace to community-led housing and energy – is a core foundation of the Garden City Principles and gives people an opportunity to have a meaningful stake in their community. It also provides the financial mechanisms to ensure that high-quality places which promote healthy and sustainable lifestyles remain so over time.

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The TCPA has explored many lessons from the New Towns programme, but that of long-term stewardship is perhaps the most acute, having had a profound effect on how the UK's 32 New Towns operate today.



A community event in Ebbsfleet in Kent. A long-term stewardship solution is being planned for this 21st-century Garden City

© Ebbsfleet Development Corporation

Learning from the past

The *New Towns Act 1946* included provision for NTDCs to hand over the assets of mature towns (i.e. land, property and financial resources) to local authorities. The early financial success of the first designated New Towns enticed the government to create in 1959 the Commission for New Towns, to take over the assets instead. From this point onward the financial benefits of matured New Towns went back to HM Treasury, rather than to the places that had generated the value in the first place.

When the programme ended and NTDCs were forced, prematurely, to wind up, the remaining assets (after repayment of loans, and following a 'fire-sale' to the private sector) were transferred to the local authority in 'balancing agreements', (i.e. a balance of liabilities and assets, including social housing,

which quickly became a liability after its funding streams were cut). The opportunity for a mutualised community stewardship model, as promoted through the Garden City movement, was broken, at precisely the time when the towns began to require renewal.¹ The lack of a long-term stewardship strategy for the New Towns can be considered one of the major failures of the programme.

Today, many of the UK's existing New Towns require investment and renewal. With notable exceptions, their 'host' local authorities do not have specific funds to pay the high maintenance costs of huge areas of greenspace, public art or distinct architectural heritage that were built, at speed, by the NTDCs. Although the New Town assets continued to generate profits for the Commission for New Towns and its successors, these were used for other projects.

Success stories

In Milton Keynes, development corporation employees had the foresight to set up The Parks Trust and The Milton Keynes Community Foundation as not-for-profit local institutions to receive and maintain in perpetuity some key assets when the corporation was wound up in 1992. Today, The Parks Trust is self-financing and maintains over 6,000 acres of parks, meadows, river valleys, woodlands, lakes and landscape corridors.² This followed a similar model applied in Peterborough with the creation of the Nene Park Trust in 1988 as the NTDC there was wound up. Both trusts were provided with long leases on land and endowed with commercial properties and other assets which now generate some of the income required to maintain them. While these models have faced challenges in recent years, they still provide inspiration for those planning new places today.³

Hope for the future?

Consideration of community ownership and long-term stewardship of assets in new developments has gathered momentum in the past decade. This has been driven in part by the practical need to find resources to maintain assets such as greenspace and community buildings without public sector resources ring-fenced to do so. Meanwhile, some developers and housebuilders have recognised there are financial gains to

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be made if places are managed directly by privately owned management companies. The mismanagement of these companies in many developments has led to a lively debate and legislative change to improve the rights of leaseholders and introduce new forms of tenure.⁴

More positively, interest in the stewardship of new communities has also been driven by ambitious local authorities and enlightened developers who are keen to create better places. Several local authorities have adopted Garden City Principles in their local plans which has led to commitment to develop strategies for long-term stewardship. Places such as Chilmington Green in Ashford, Ebbsfleet in Kent and Calderdale in West Yorkshire are innovating on how to make 'whole-place' stewardship in new communities a reality.⁵

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Milton Keynes residents enjoy a community event in Campbell Park, which is managed by The Parks Trust. The charity was established in 1992 to safeguard the town's green infrastructure in the long-term

© Caroline Brown



There is much to learn from this current experience. The TCPA has explored this in detail, but an overriding challenge is that consideration of stewardship often happens too late in the process, when development values have already been accounted for and the benefits of integrating asset management with the wider task of community development are not fully realised. Recent references to managing places in National Policy, for example through the *National Model Design Code* and reference to Garden City Principles in the *National Planning Policy Framework*, do not go far enough.

A fourth generation of New Towns provides an opportunity to go further on stewardship



Securing stewardship

A fourth generation of New Towns provides an opportunity to go further on stewardship. A bespoke solution will be required for each place, and there is a spectrum of approaches to learn from, but this includes further innovation on the concept of a fully mutualised whole-place stewardship approach, as promoted by the TCPA and explored in a useful recent report by the UK Cohousing and Community Land Trust networks⁶ [to read about this, see pages 41-45].

The New Towns Taskforce report recognises the importance of stewardship, identifying it as one of 10 ‘placemaking principles’. It also recommends that stewardship funding, governance and community development is planned from the outset and that stewardship vehicles are established that can own and manage assets effectively, adapt over time, and promote local accountability. However, the government’s initial response to the report makes no specific commitments in relation to stewardship of future New Towns; it ‘supports’ the placemaking principles, which it clarifies will be subject to consultation and assessment.⁷

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Government's response also leaves space for a range of 'delivery vehicles' for the next New Towns. All provide an opportunity for coordinated stewardship, but the NTDC model provides the greatest opportunity to think strategically and manage development values to provide social infrastructure upfront and coordinate arrangements for long-term stewardship. Making this a reality requires more than a nod to placemaking principles in policy. While nothing is immune from political change, securing requirements in legislation, supported by national policy, would provide the most resilient approach.

There is a real opportunity to reconnect New Towns with their Garden City heritage and put people at the heart of communities



Since 2014, the TCPA has advocated minor amendments to the New Towns legislation to modernise NTDCs, to enable the creation of sustainable New Towns, including in relation to stewardship.⁸ Amendments were made to the *New Towns Act 1981 (Local Authority Oversight) Regulations 2018* to enable the creation of 'locally led' NTDCs. This requires the 'oversight authority' (the local authorities, not the development corporation itself), to plan from the outset for 'the long-term stewardship of the assets of the new town for the benefit of the community'; 'the participation of the community'; and 'the legacy arrangements following the dissolution of the new town development corporation.'⁹ Today's *Planning and Infrastructure Act* includes further amendments to the *New Towns Act 1981* in relation to development corporations but these are not related to NTDC objects and powers, or stewardship.¹⁰

A meaningful commitment from the government to long-term stewardship in the next New Towns is essential for successful, exemplar places. The TCPA will seek to influence

the detail, while continuing to share emerging learning from existing projects. The extent of government's ambitions will be revealed in the coming months, but for now there is a real opportunity to reconnect New Towns with their Garden City heritage and put people at the heart of communities.

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Notes

- 1 K Lock and H Ellis: *New Towns: The Rise, Fall and Rebirth*. RIBA Publishing, 2020
- 2 *TCPA Stewardship Toolkit: Case Studies*. www.tcpa.org.uk/resources/stewardship-case-studies/
- 3 *The Heart of the Matter: Emerging Lessons in Long-term Stewardship*. TCPA, 2022, p. 31. www.tcpa.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/theheartofthematter_report_16.03.22_v1.pdf
- 4 See the 'Leasehold reform in England and Wales' webpage, at: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/leasehold-reform-in-england-and-wales/>
- 5 *Toolkit: Long-term stewardship in new communities*. TCPA webpage: www.tcpa.org.uk/collection/toolkit-long-term-stewardship/
- 6 *Tomorrow 125: Rediscovering the roots of a new society*. Final Report. TCPA, Mar. 2024. www.tcpa.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/T125-Final-Report-27-March-2024-1.pdf and *Creating New Towns: By the People, for the People*. UK Co-Housing Network, Community Land Trust Network and Nationwide Foundation, 2025. www.housinglin.org.uk/Topics/type/Creating-New-Towns-By-the-People-for-the-People/
- 7 See note 1, page 16 for a link to the Taskforce report
- 8 *New Towns Act 2015?* TCPA, 2014. <https://tcpa.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/NTA2015.pdf>
- 9 See *The New Towns Act 1981 (Local Authority Oversight) Regulations 2018* at: www.legislation.gov.uk/ukdsi/2018/9780111169995
- 10 See the *Planning and Infrastructure Act* webpage at: <https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/3946>