



House of Commons
Communities and Local
Government Committee

New Towns: Follow-Up

Ninth Report of Session 2007–08

*Report, together with formal minutes and
written evidence*

*Ordered by The House of Commons
to be printed 30 June 2008*

Communities and Local Government Committee

The Communities and Local Government Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration, and policy of the Department for Communities and Local Government and its associated bodies.

Current membership

Dr Phyllis Starkey MP (*Labour, Milton Keynes South West*) (Chair)

Sir Paul Beresford MP (*Conservative, Mole Valley*)

Mr Clive Betts MP (*Labour, Sheffield Attercliffe*)

John Cummings MP (*Labour, Easington*)

Jim Dobbin MP (*Labour Co-op, Heywood and Middleton*)

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Anne Main MP (*Conservative, St Albans*)

Mr Bill Oler MP (*Labour, Nuneaton*)

Dr John Pugh MP (*Liberal Democrat, Southport*)

Emily Thornberry MP (*Labour, Islington South and Finsbury*)

The following members were also members of the Committee during this inquiry:

David Wright MP (*Labour, Telford*)

Martin Horwood MP (*Liberal Democrat, Cheltenham*)

Powers

The Committee is one of the departmental select committees, the powers of which are set out in House of Commons Standing Orders, principally in SO No 152. These are available on the Internet via www.parliament.uk.

Publications

The Reports and evidence of the Committee are published by The Stationery Office by Order of the House. All publications of the Committee (including press notices) are on the Internet at www.parliament.uk/clgcom

Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are Huw Yardley (Clerk of the Committee), David Weir (Second Clerk), Josephine Willows (Inquiry Manager), Sara Turnbull (Inquiry Manager), Clare Genis (Committee Assistant), Gabrielle Henderson (Senior Office Clerk), Nicola McCoy (Secretary) and Laura Kibby (Select Committee Media Officer).

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Summary

In 2002, the Transport, Local Government and the Regions Committee published a report on *New Towns: their Problems and Future*.

Their analysis was compelling and their recommendations soundly based. In particular, they identified the need for further work to be done to identify the special needs of the post-war New Towns and to learn the lessons of these huge planning experiments for the future.

The Government's response to those recommendations has been partial, half-hearted and inadequate. In this short report we explain why the recommendations of our predecessors remain relevant, and why they should be acted on.

1 Introduction

The establishment of 22 new towns between 1946 and 1970 was an ambitious programme to provide new homes and jobs following the last World War. It was based on the ideals developed earlier in the century by Ebenezer Howard's garden city movement, which sought to create better environments for people away from the smog and cramped conditions in inner urban areas...

While many New Towns have been economically successful, most now are experiencing major problems. Their design is inappropriate to the 21st century. Their infrastructure is ageing at the same rate and many have social and economic problems.¹

1. So began our predecessor Transport, Local Government and the Regions Committee's Report of 2002 on *The New Towns: their Problems and Future*. That Report was a comprehensive review of the issues facing the 22 New Towns for which the Department had responsibility.² Our predecessors considered the current state of the New Towns; the regeneration and management strategies which were in place to address their needs; and the changes in Government policy towards the New Towns which were necessary to ensure an appropriate legacy from this major programme of post-war public investment.

2. In January last year, Professor David Lock, Chair of the Town and Country Planning Association (TCPA), wrote to our Chair asking the Committee to "pick up the trail" of our predecessors' Report. Professor Lock wrote:

[Some time back] the [Transport, Local Government and the Regions] Committee carried out an investigation into the New Towns [...]. One key recommendation was that the New Town experience should be researched and lessons learned, as this had never been done.

The government, after a long delay and evidently with some reluctance, agreed.

The task was delegated by [the then Office of the Deputy Prime Minister] to English Partnerships. After much dragging of feet they finally got round to commissioning a stage 1 "desk study" of the literature which was carried out by Oxford Brookes University and not properly published last year (you have to know it exists in order to ask for it).

The Town and Country Planning Association [...] has always been at the heart of the New Town movement, and we are dismayed that the investment by successive governments in 32 New Towns has never properly been examined. Further, we are dismayed that the stimulus given by the House of Commons has been allowed to run

1 Nineteenth Report of the Transport, Local Government and the Regions Committee, Session 2001–02, *The New Towns: their Problems and Future*, HC 603, paras 1 and 2.

2 Basildon, Bracknell, Central Lancashire, Corby, Crawley, Cwmbran, Harlow, Hatfield, Hemel Hempstead, Milton Keynes, Newton Aycliffe, Northampton, Peterborough, Peterlee, Redditch, Runcorn, Skelmersdale, Stevenage, Telford, Warrington, Washington and Welwyn Garden City. The liabilities and assets held by New Towns Corporations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, with the exception of Cwmbran, were passed on to the local authorities when the corporations closed, but the liabilities and assets of these 22 were at the time of our predecessors' Report held by English Partnerships.

into the sand. With growth areas, many town expansion schemes and at least three official new towns schemes in the planning system right now, it is very silly not to see what was good and what was bad about the earlier experience.³

3. We agreed. Consequently, we asked the Government to submit to us a memorandum following up not just on our predecessors' recommendation regarding research, but on a number of other recommendations which remained relevant. We received that memorandum, which is published with this Report, in November last year.⁴ Following consideration of the Government's memorandum, the Committee decided to seek a response to the work which the Government had done from the New Towns Special Interest Group of local authorities and from the Town and Country Planning Association. Their memoranda in response are also published with this Report, together with a separate memorandum from Bracknell Forest Council.⁵

4. The conclusion we have reached on the basis of the evidence we have received from all these organisations is that there remains a need for the Government to conduct further research on the New Towns experience, particularly on their current reinvestment needs. The research which has been carried out so far, since our predecessors' Report, useful though it may be, is inadequate to ensure that the issues facing the New Towns identified in that Report are properly addressed. There are also valuable lessons to be learnt from the New Towns programme in the context of current planning and development policy, in particular the "eco-towns" programme. Below we consider our predecessors' original conclusions; assess the Government's response so far; and set out the case for conducting further research and evaluation of the needs of the New Towns.

3 Ev 1

4 Ev 1-7

5 Ev 7-11

2 Our predecessors' findings

Reinvestment needs of the New Towns

5. The starting-point for our predecessors' recommendation was the current state of the New Towns. They found that

[...] the New Towns are no longer new. They now require huge new investment and redevelopment. Much of the development was carried out within a 30 year period and is now suffering from uniform deterioration. The construction materials for the housing were experimental, non-standard and often poor quality, and in some areas now require wholesale replacement. Additionally, the infrastructure, the roads and sewers are now in need of substantial upgrading.⁶

6. The Committee identified three particular infrastructure problems facing the New Towns:

- **Transport infrastructure:** “Many of the submissions to the committee pointed to the dispersed nature and low density of development in all the New Towns and the segregation of uses. As a result the residents need to travel further than in many traditional towns and cities. Whilst local services have been provided within walking distance in neighbourhoods, access to the town centres relies heavily on car use. Although some of the Development Corporations included public transport provision within their masterplans, the bus services are inadequate in many towns.”⁷
- **Town centres:** “At the centre of all the New Towns, a shopping centre has been developed to meet the needs of the surrounding populations. Many have suffered from poor design and layout. Most are now out-of-date and as a result, residents are choosing to shop in other locations.”⁸
- **Housing design and public space:** “Much of the housing was put up quickly using ‘innovative’ designs which have not stood the test of time. It now requires demolition or at least major refurbishment. [...] English Partnerships acknowledged that the provision of community facilities such as playgrounds and community centres in many New Towns was not adequate and that some open spaces were not very well planned. It accepted that it was now having to address ‘some of the poorer work that was done 20 or 30 years ago.’”⁹

7. The Committee found that local authorities' attempts to address the reinvestment needs of their towns were hampered both by the inadequacy of standard revenue funding and by the decreasing usefulness of the ‘balancing’ packages intended to cover the costs of maintaining public facilities which were put in place at the time of the wind-up of the New

6 HC (2001–02) 603, para 13.

7 *ibid*, para 17.

8 *ibid*, para 18.

9 *ibid*, paras 22, 28.

Town Development Corporations, which had previously been responsible for the maintenance of the new towns:

The inadequacy of the funding arrangements was mentioned by many of the submissions by the local authorities. Telford & Wrekin council argued that the towns were built on the basis of continuing massive capital and revenue support. “The successors to the cash rich Development Corporations are cash-strapped local authorities.” The submissions from the local authorities suggested that the Standard Spending Assessment (SSA) used to calculate the Rates Support Grant to local authorities did not cover the expensive ‘non-standard’ public facilities which the Development Corporations built [...] When the housing was transferred to the local authority, no provision was made to improve and renew it except through the rental income and standard housing funding sources. The submissions by the local authorities pointed out that the scale of renewal needed, especially taking into account the problem of innovative design, was more than could be funded through standard funding regimes.

[...] The ‘balancing packages’ were based in many cases on an over optimistic assumption about the durability of ‘assets’ such as district and estate-based shopping centres. The income-generating assets have all too often become liabilities; and many even need demolition or clearance. [...] The increase in the value from the sale of [other] liabilities for commercial purposes was clawed back by EP. Development sites went to the Commission for New Towns, which was merged in 1999 with English Partnerships. Their main aim seemed to be to dispose of the outstanding sites rather than continue the work of the New Town Development Corporations. The income from land sales went to the Treasury, rather than being reinvested in the New Towns.¹⁰

8. The Committee concluded:

The local authorities now running the New Towns are facing a major task with many areas requiring extensive renewal which they may not have the capacity to tackle [...] **The funds provided for the management and maintenance of the new towns are inadequate, bearing in mind the non-traditional housing design and infrastructure and the extensive landscaping built by the Development Corporations, which is more expensive to maintain and much [of which] now requires wholesale renewal.**¹¹

It continued:

A comprehensive audit of the liabilities inherited by the local authorities from the Development Corporations is required so that adequate funds can be allocated for the maintenance of the towns. This audit should look at the social, economic and environmental impact, urban management impact and long term reinvestment needs of the New Towns.¹²

10 HC (2001–02) 603, paras 47, 49, 51, 45.

11 *ibid*, paras 73, 74.

12 *ibid*, para 78.

Lessons for current policy

9. As Professor Lock noted in his letter to our Chair, one of our predecessors' key recommendations related to the lack of research into the experience of the New Towns programme. This is what they found:

The Committee was astonished to receive evidence from both the DTLR and EP that the New Towns 'experiment' has never been evaluated and the reinvestment needs reviewed, despite the investment of £4.75bn in them. Given the evidence from our inquiry, it would be wrong at this stage to develop new generations of new towns, particularly before the experience of the existing 22 towns is evaluated.

It is very surprising that the New Towns 'experiment' has never been evaluated. This evaluation should include more detailed reinvestment needs of the New Towns. An evaluation is urgently required which identifies both good practice and mistakes before any new major new settlements are considered.¹³

13 HC (2001-02) 603, paras 84, 85.

3 The Government's response

10. The Government's belated response at the time to the Committee's recommendation of an evaluation was half-hearted. It argued that the policy context had moved on and that "much of the good practice in development which [the New Towns pioneered had] already been incorporated into mainstream thinking,"¹⁴ thus effectively setting aside the Committee's analysis of the problems which New Towns continued to experience. The response to the Committee's proposal for an audit of the liabilities inherited by the New Towns, including of their reinvestment needs, was equally dismissive:

It would not be practical to carry out an audit of liabilities inherited by the local authorities at this late stage. The present needs of the New Town local authorities, as with all local authorities, are assessed through the Standard Spending Assessment (SSA).¹⁵

11. The Government did, however, concede that a "review of existing material could be undertaken as part of a feasibility study, with a view to undertaking a more thematic evaluation".¹⁶ The precise nature of that review was kept vague, but the Government suggested that "issues to consider within a thematic study might include community, economic, land use planning and physical design issues", adding "If the New Towns are different from other towns in their region, the work should explore why and the extent to which existing policy tools are appropriate, reinvestment and transferable lessons."¹⁷

12. In our request of last year for a memorandum from CLG, we asked three specific questions:

- a) What further research has been undertaken as part of the feasibility study suggested in the Government response?
- b) What progress has been made towards commissioning the thematic evaluation mentioned in the Government response?
- c) How have the results of such research informed current policy development on issues such as affordable housing (including the recent Housing Green Paper), growth areas, eco-towns, further New Town schemes and urban and regional strategies in general; and how will such research feed into the implementation of the recent Planning White Paper?

13. The Government's memorandum noted that two studies had been completed since its original response to our predecessors' report in February 2003. The first was the literature review by Oxford Brookes University referred to in Professor Lock's letter to our Chair.

14 Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, *Government's Response to the Transport, Local Government and the Regions Committee Report: 'The New Towns: Their Problems and Future'*, Cm 5685, November 2002, para 58.

15 *ibid*, para 50.

16 *ibid*, para 58.

17 *ibid*, para 59.

Entitled ‘Transferable Lessons from the New Towns’, it was published in 2006.¹⁸ The second was research funded by English Partnerships and undertaken by the Institute for Public Policy Research entitled ‘From New Towns to Growth Areas: Learning from the Past’, which was published in May 2005.¹⁹

14. There was, however, still no sign of the “more thematic evaluation” which the Committee recommended and the Government implied. The Government’s response to the Committee’s question on this point referred to work done by the Town and Country Planning Association to support new settlements and eco-towns.²⁰ Whilst no doubt useful, this work appeared to us to have little to do with evaluating the New Towns programme. Furthermore, the Government’s memorandum made no reference to the Committee’s recommendation that any further research should evaluate the reinvestment needs of the New Towns.

15. The remainder of the Government’s memorandum was nevertheless, on the face of it, quite encouraging. As well as listing some lessons which had been drawn from research, it detailed a range of work which has been done on New Towns, including:

- the use of strategic and non-strategic sites held by English Partnerships as a legacy from the Commission for New Towns;
- urban renewal and infrastructure development;
- improving relationships between English Partnerships and local authorities (of which our predecessors were critical) ; and
- transport improvements.

The memorandum also comments briefly on the planning powers held by English Partnerships inherited from the Commission for New Towns and the effect of the creation of the planned Homes and Communities Agency.²¹

18 Department for Communities and Local Government, Department of Planning Oxford Brookes University, *Transferable Lessons from the New Towns* (London, 2006).

19 Jim Bennett, *From New Towns to Growth Areas: Learning from the Past* (London, 2005), iipr.

20 Ev 1–2

21 Ev 2–7

4 Response from the TCPA and the New Towns Special Interest Group

16. In order to test the continuing relevance of our predecessors' recommendations, and to judge the adequacy of the Government's response, we sought responses to the Government's memorandum from the Town and Country Planning Association, whose Chair had suggested that we revisit this issue, and from the New Towns Special Interest Group of local authorities, representing a number of the local authorities which have continued responsibility for the maintenance of the New Towns. We invited them in particular to comment on:

- the extent to which the research referred to in the Government memorandum had met the need which our predecessor Committee had identified, particularly in respect of the reinvestment needs of the New Towns; and whether further research was either necessary or desirable; and
- the adequacy, in the light of the problems identified by our predecessors, of the recent work on New Towns to which the Government memorandum had also referred; and the extent to which the Government was continuing to address the particular needs of the New Towns.

17. The **Town and Country Planning Association** welcomed the research which had been undertaken, describing it as “useful”, “helpful”, and “an important contribution to the debate”. Crucially, however, it argued that “the substantive research recommended by the Committee – a proper evaluation of the New Towns programme – has still not been carried out”, continuing, “the TCPA urges the Government to move to the next and more substantive stage of research on this matter.” The Association went on to suggest a number of areas where “fuller research could prove immensely valuable to fulfilling the current ambitions to deliver more homes and new settlements in the form of eco-towns”:

- the potential role for New Town Development Corporations;
- strategies for land acquisition;
- the nature of the financing of the New Towns, and the results in terms of overall deficits or surpluses to the public purse;
- responsibilities for delivery and governance and the relationships between the various agencies involved;
- the effect of the spatial planning of New Towns on their social and economic sustainability.²²

18. The **New Towns Special Interest Group**'s response likewise welcomed the research which has been done, saying, “Jointly these two pieces of work comprehensively review the areas identified by the TLGR Committee.” However, it continued,

the question of re-investment in the New Towns is somewhat glossed over. It is not suggested that further extensive research is required but a recognition (i) that infrastructure [is] ageing at the same time and needing replacement; (ii) [...] that some early social provision, e.g. local centres, are no longer fit for purpose and need replacing; and (iii) the fact that some New Town estates which suffer from serious deprivation need intervention in terms of community engagement and addressing the problems of worklessness as well as through physical development [is] not particularly strongly emphasised.²³

19. Earlier, the memorandum comments, “Of all the many issues facing local authorities with a legacy of a New Town, [the need for reinvestment] is perhaps the most important and yet it is consistently downplayed.”²⁴ A separate memorandum from **Bracknell Forest District Council**, which focuses on the specific issues faced by that New Town, reinforces the point.²⁵ The TCPA agrees, commenting “the specific issues of New Towns today reaching the need for a level of infrastructure investment which goes beyond that in existing towns also merits further attention.”²⁶

20. The New Towns SIG’s response also supports the TCPA’s comments on the nature of the research which has been undertaken. “Given the overall scale of the New Towns Programme,” the Group argues, “it is perhaps somewhat surprising that the research has been substantially desk-based.”²⁷ The TCPA confirmed our impression that the research referred to by the Government in its response to the Committee’s question on progress towards commissioning a “more thematic evaluation” had little to do with evaluating the New Towns programme:

The TCPA is pleased that the Government partly commissioned the TCPA study ‘Best practice in Urban Extensions and New Settlements’ and believes this provides useful advice on the lessons to be drawn from the case studies contained therein. [...] However, neither of these evaluated the postwar New Towns as recommended by the Select Committee.²⁸

23 Ev 10

24 Ev 9

25 Ev 11

26 Ev 8

27 Ev 10

28 Ev 7

5 Conclusion: addressing present needs and learning lessons

21. The response from the TCPA and the New Towns SIG is clear: there is an ongoing need for research into the New Towns. This need is twofold:

- research into the detailed reinvestment needs of the new towns; and
- research which can inform current and future policy development.

22. In our view, it is the former which is most pressing. The memorandum from the New Towns SIG makes clear that the particular reinvestment needs of the New Towns remain as great as when our predecessor Committee conducted its inquiry. In its original response to the report, the Government, as we have already noted, effectively set aside the evidence presented by the Committee about the particular situation faced by the New Towns:

The Government accepts that some of the New Towns have problems relating to their non-traditional housing design and infrastructure. There are, however, many other urban areas that are not New Towns but were built at the same time and to the same specifications. This is not a problem specific to the New Towns.²⁹

Yet, as the Committee's report shows, and as the memorandum from the New Towns SIG points out, there *is* a problem specific to the New Towns. As each New Town was built at around the same time, so the majority of the infrastructure of each town is reaching the end of its design life at the same time. Whereas other urban areas may have pockets of infrastructure now needing renewal, New Towns face the prospect of all their infrastructure requiring refurbishment at once.

23. The urgency of the need for an assessment of regeneration requirements should not, however, overshadow the need for an analysis which can deliver clear lessons for the “eco-towns” programme, for the Growth Areas, and for future development to meet the increasing housing needs in England. It is notable that both the studies already commissioned by the Government comment critically on the lack of research evaluating the New Towns programme as a whole.³⁰ The TCPA has set out a number of areas where the desk-based research which has already been done could usefully be supplemented by further work to ensure that the good practice of the New Towns programme is perpetuated and the mistakes not repeated.

24. Our predecessors summed up this twin requirement in their final conclusions:

Successive urban regeneration programmes have overlooked the needs of the new towns. By 1992, the new towns had been de-designated by central Government and were no longer recognised as a separate and identifiable policy area. This de-designation occurred prior to any audit of the regeneration needs of the towns being implemented. [...] Decisions about the assets of the New Towns are being made in a

²⁹ Cm 5685, para 45.

³⁰ DCLG/Oxford Brookes University (2006), p 5; Bennett (2005), p 18.

strategic void... They have significant regeneration and reinvestment needs which are not being addressed by central Government. Without a significant policy change, the legacy of this altruistic 20th century planning initiative may be transformed from a series of projects that have generated some social and economic benefits into expensive net liabilities. This failure of public policy to adapt to change may well create a text book example of how not to manage public assets.³¹

25. Like our predecessor Transport, Local Government and the Regions Committee, the Town and Country Planning Association and the New Towns Special Interest Group, we are critical of the Government for continuing to neglect the particular regeneration requirements of the New Towns. There remain two urgent and pressing needs. First, we must identify the steps which are needed to maintain the post-war New Towns as successful communities and good places to live. They were social experiments. By their nature they have special and particular needs. If those needs are not recognised, there is a danger that they will fall into social decay and physical dereliction. The Government cannot pretend that they are just like any other urban area of England. They are not. We recommend that the Government commission a detailed examination of the reinvestment needs of the New Towns. This is an essential first step towards ensuring that the significant investment in the New Towns programme, and the social and economic benefits which have been gained from it, are not wasted.

26. Second, we need to learn lessons for the future. The Government has embarked on a massive regeneration programme, aiming to deliver 3 million new homes by 2020. It would be an act of folly not to spend a small sum on trying to learn the lessons of history in order to prevent past mistakes being repeated. Building on the desk-based research which has already been done, we recommend that further original work be undertaken identifying specific lessons for the long-term planning of current and future large-scale urban development such as the “eco-town” programme and the Growth Areas.

31 HC (2001–02) 603, para 95.

Formal Minutes

Monday 30 June 2008

Members present:

Dr Phyllis Starkey, in the Chair

Mr Clive Betts
Sir Paul Beresford
John Cummings
Andrew George

Anne Main
Dr John Pugh
Emily Thornberry

New Towns: follow-up

Draft Report (*New Towns: follow-up*), proposed by the Chairman, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 26 read and agreed to.

Summary read and agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the Ninth Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chairman make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That written evidence received in connection with the inquiry be reported to the House for printing with the Report.

Ordered, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available, in accordance with the provisions of Standing Order No. 134.

[Adjourned till Monday 7 July at 4.20 pm]

List of written evidence

1	Letter from the Chair of the Town and Country Planning Association	Ev 1
2	Memorandum by the Department for Communities and Local Government	Ev 1
3	Memorandum by the Town and Country Planning Association	Ev 7
4	Memorandum by the New Towns Special Interest Group	Ev 9
5	Memorandum by Bracknell Borough Council	Ev 10

List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament

The reference number of the Government's response to each Report is printed in brackets after the HC printing number.

Session 2007–08

First Report	Coastal Towns: the Government's Second Response	HC 70
Second Report	DCLG Annual Report 2007	HC 170 (<i>Cm 7335</i>)
Third Report	Local Government Finance—Supplementary Business Rate: the Government's Response	HC 210
Fourth Report	Work of the Committee in 2007	HC 211
Fifth Report	Ordnance Survey	HC 268
Sixth Report	Refuse Collection: Waste Reduction Pilots	HC 195
Seventh Report	Existing Housing and Climate Change	HC 432
Eighth Report	The Supply of Rented Housing	HC 457-I HC 457-II
Ninth Report	New Towns Follow-Up	HC 889
Tenth Report	Community Cohesion and Migration	HC 369
First Special Report	Ordnance Survey: Government's Response to the Committee's Fifth Report of Session 2007–08	HC 516
Second Special Report	Refuse Collection: Waste Reduction Pilots—Government Response to the Committee's Sixth Report of Session 2007–08	HC 541

Session 2006–07

First Report	The Work of the Committee in 2005–06	HC 198
Second Report	Coastal Towns	HC 351 (<i>Cm 7126</i>)
Third Report	DCLG Annual Report 2006	HC 106 (<i>Cm 7125</i>)
Fourth Report	Is there a Future for Regional Government?	HC 352-I (<i>Cm 7119</i>)
Fifth Report	Refuse Collection	HC 536-I
Sixth Report	Equality	HC 468 (<i>Cm 7246</i>)
Seventh Report	Local Government Finance—Supplementary Business Rate	HC 719
Eighth Report	Local Government Finance—Council Tax Benefit	HC 718
First Special Report	Local Government Finance—Council Tax Benefit: Government's Response to the Committee's Eighth Report of Session 2006–07	HC 1037
Second Special Report	Refuse Collection: Government's Response to the Committee's Fifth Report of Session 2006–07	HC 1095

Written evidence

Letter from the Chair of the Town and Country Planning Association to the Chair of the Communities and Local Government Select Committee

The House of Commons Environment Committee carried out an investigation into the new towns three or four years ago (it was provoked primarily by Wrekin District who were angry with being left a load of problems by CNT and EP and was joined by other local authorities with responsibility for former new towns). One key recommendation was that the new towns experience should be researched and lessons learned, as this had never been done.

The government, after a long delay and evidently with some reluctance, agreed.

The task was delegated by the then DoE (or it might have been ODPM) to EP. After much dragging of feet they finally got round to commissioning a stage 1 “desk study of the literature” which was carried out by Oxford Brookes University and not properly published last year (you have to know it exists in order to ask for it).

The Town and Country Planning Association (formerly the Garden Cities Association) has always been the heart of the new towns movement, and we are dismayed that the investment by successive governments in 32 new towns has never properly been examined. Further, we are dismayed that the stimulus given by the House of Commons has been allowed to run into the sand. With growth areas, many town expansion schemes and at least three official new towns schemes in the planning system right now, it is very silly not to see what was good and what was bad about the earlier experience.

I have been asked by my colleagues here at the Town and Country Planning Association to plead with you to pick up the trail before it goes completely cold.

If you want a more detailed briefing I can put one together.

Professor David Lock CBE MRTPI
Chair

30 January 2007

Memorandum by the Department for Communities and Local Government Committee

The Government welcomes the Committee’s review of progress on the issues raised in the *The New Towns: Their Problems and Future* (HC 603-I, Session 2001-02). Earlier this year, the Prime Minister announced the Government’s plans for housing growth—with a target of three million new homes by 2020—and the introduction of legislation to create a new homes agency. Earlier this month, Housing Minister Yvette Cooper announced that the agency would be called the Homes and Communities Agency reflecting its role in delivering new homes, in regenerating existing communities and creating new ones

1. *The TLGR Committee recommended an urgent evaluation to identify good practice/mistakes made in the New Towns project before any major new settlements were considered. The Government agreed to a review of existing material as part of a feasibility study, with a view to undertaking a more thematic evaluation. The Committee understands that English Partnerships commissioned a desk study of the available literature from Oxford Brookes University which was published in 2006*

a. *What further research has been undertaken as part of the feasibility study suggested in the Government response?*

The Government commissioned Oxford Brookes University to carry out a literature review of research and evaluation relating to the New Towns programme. The brief included a requirement to identify lessons and recommendations from the New Towns Programme that were transferable to the development of the Growth Areas. The study, ‘Transferable Lessons from the New Towns’ was published in 2006. A copy of the study is attached.

In addition to the Oxford Brookes study commissioned by Communities And Local Government, English Partnerships (EP) has done further research. EP has funded research by the Institute for Public Policy Research, ‘From New Towns to Growth Areas: Learning from the Past’ which was published in May 2005. The paper draws out key lessons from the New Towns experience which should be considered in relation to the Growth Areas.

The policy context within which the New Towns were built is very different from today, although much of what they pioneered has been incorporated into mainstream thinking.

b. *What progress has been made towards commissioning the thematic evaluation mentioned in the Government response?*

Following on from the study ‘Transferable Lessons from the New Towns’, and in the light of the increasing need for new homes built to high environmental standards, The Town and Country Planning Association (TCPA) have been working with the Government since 2006 on work to promote new settlements, and recently, eco-towns. The TCPA have to date produced a Communities And Local

Government-sponsored guide 'Best Practice in Urban Extensions and New Settlements' in March 2007, and have published *Eco-towns: Scoping Report* in July 2007, as part of their programme of work, supported by the Government, to advise on the delivery of eco-towns.

c. *How have the results of such research informed current policy development on issues such as affordable housing (including the recent Housing Green Paper), growth areas, eco-towns, further New Town schemes and urban and regional strategies in general. How will such research feed into the implementation of the recent Planning White Paper? It would be helpful if DCLG could provide the Committee with a copy of the research commissioned by English Partnerships from Oxford Brookes University.*

Lessons from research that have a wider application include:

The importance of regional and sub-regional planning approaches in planning to identify the most sustainable locations for development in strategic terms. Local authorities have been encouraged to consider eco-towns and growth points proposals in the context of work that has been taken forward to inform Regional Spatial Strategies to date, and the requirements of PPS3 (Planning Policy Statement 3) to maintain a rolling supply of housing, and to undertake housing market assessments.

The significance of good partnership working. The TCPA research provides a link from the new towns (and garden cities before them) to options for development in the present, with increasing emphasis on the model of public/private partnership, for example in Upton, Northamptonshire. Partnership working is a key feature of growth areas and growth points, with formal partnership agreements underpinning programmes for sustainable development.

High environmental standards. Eco-towns present a new opportunity to design an entire development with the capability to reach zero-carbon standards, and can act as exemplars to other development schemes. We have made it an essential requirement for eco-towns that they fulfil this objective. Achieving high environmental standards requires an integrated masterplanning approach that takes account of location, links to nearby towns, transport, community management of assets as well as design and build. The previous research has highlighted case studies that have demonstrated how such an integrated approach can help deliver environmental goals.

The lessons drawn from the recent studies have been of most direct relevance to the eco-towns/new settlement programme, which was announced in March 2007, and further developed in July 2007, with the launch of a Prospectus for eco-towns as part of the package for the Housing Green Paper. Eco-towns represent the opportunity to work to develop large-scale housing that achieves a number of outcomes—including a suggested affordable housing offer of 30-50%, high quality design and good facilities in a distinct settlement, sustainable links to surrounding towns and cities; and significantly, the opportunity to design in low and zero carbon living from the start.

PPS3—Planning Policy Statement 3—provides the planning framework to bring forward land for housing and for delivering the Government's housing objectives. This new planning for housing policy has been reinforced by the publication of the Housing Green Paper. PPS3 is a critical element of our work to improve the national policy framework—which was signalled in the Planning White Paper—to ensure the planning system is more responsive to addressing new challenges such as the need for new housing.

The policies aim for a wide choice of high quality homes—both affordable and market housing—and to create sustainable, inclusive, mixed communities in all areas. Some of the points made in the research have been considered as part of the wider thinking in developing the new PPS3 policy approach.

The policy gives more responsibility than ever before to local authorities to decide how and where new development should be built, and gives them more flexibility to shape new development according to the needs of their local areas, allowing them to make decisions on where new housing should be located in those areas.

2. *The Committee recommended that non-strategic sites currently owned by English Partnerships, should be transferred immediately to local authorities and those of strategic importance, to Regional Development Agencies. The Government Response stated that it was not the Government's intention for English Partnerships to divest itself of non-strategic assets but that it would work to ensure their value in achieving the Government's objectives were "realised to the full".*

a) *What proportion of strategic sites held by EP in 2002 have been transferred to RDAs?*

No strategic sites were transferred to the Regional Development Agencies in accordance with the outcomes of the Quinquennial Review of English Partnerships, announced on 24 July 2002. This review charged EP with managing a portfolio of strategic sites, and to take a key role in the delivery of the Deputy Prime Minister's "living communities" agenda.

b) *How successful has EP been in ensuring the value of non-strategic sites? How has this been done?*

Following the Quinquennial review of English Partnerships in 2002 Government decided that it was no longer in the public interest to divest English Partnerships of its non-strategic assets to local authorities.

EP has ensured value by selling sites utilising all standards and regulations operated by English Partnerships including sustainability briefs, and competitive tenders. EP have jointly sold sites with Local Authorities where they have land interests and it is sensible, to maximise value to both parties.

These sales have realised in excess of £90m of receipts over the last three and a half years. All are subject to the appropriate approval/delegations imposed on any disposals.

Not all EP sites have a value. In some cases smaller non-strategic sites such as highway verges and open space are grouped into “parcels” negotiated with the local authority or other recipient as a Community Related Asset (CRA). The freehold of these sites as well as amenity land is transferred to the recipient at nil cost accompanied by an endowment of cash for the management and maintenance of these areas, so they are not a burden to the recipient.

c) What potential is there for this asset base to be exploited to support urban renewal and infrastructure development in the New Towns?

In both its written and oral evidence, the Office for the Deputy Prime Minister sought to address the desire of the New Towns to be ‘normalised’ and to ensure parity of treatment with other local authorities in national programmes on housing, regeneration and social inclusion.

English Partnerships retains assets within the majority of the New Towns. In line with English Partnerships’ key principles and policy outcomes (to accelerate housing growth and the reuse of brownfield land, to achieve comprehensive and integrated regeneration) there will be considerable involvement and development within New Town areas, continuing to work with the Local Authorities to deliver their and Communities And Local Government objectives. English Partnerships still has interests of some kind in 21 New Towns in England, with the main land holdings now in Milton Keynes, Telford, Warrington and Central Lancashire. For example, EP has brought the following to New Towns:

- Millennium Communities in Milton Keynes and Telford,
- the Urban Regeneration Company in Corby,
- regeneration and renewal of Castlefields in Runcorn,
- sustainable town extensions in Northampton and Basildon
- town centre strategies for Telford and Milton Keynes
- and the Milton Keynes Section 106 ‘tariff’.

The Woodside Regeneration Project is a housing market renewal scheme located in south Telford. The 10 year project centres on sustainable physical and social regeneration of a 1970s estate originally developed on the failed Radburn principles. The project area covers some 100 hectares including potential development land and at the outset of the project contained approximately 2200 dwellings, of which 368 were deck accessed flats and maisonettes. The project involves joint working and partnership between English Partnerships, The Borough of Telford & Wrekin, The Wrekin Housing Trust, The Housing Corporation, and Advantage West Midlands.

The Castlefields estate in Runcorn is typical of the modern architecture-led New Town based on the Radburn model of development. Over a period of time, since its completion in the 1970s, the area experienced high turnover rates and low demand. In 2002 the Castlefields Partnership, including English Partnerships and Halton Borough Council, was created to deliver a comprehensive regeneration approach. Particular key aims were highlighted, such as the selective clearance of deck access blocks and replacement with RSL (Registered Social Landlord) led affordable housing and demolition of the existing poor quality local shopping centre and replacement with new facilities. English Partnerships investment has already contributed towards the cost of the demolition of over 700 deck access flats. In addition EP has supported the removal of the segregated bus way and construction of a new shared use link road for buses, cars, pedestrians and cyclists to the proposed new Village Square, public realm and pedestrian link improvements such as new street lighting, closure of subways and replacement with surface level crossings.

Three of the first housing estates built in the New Town of Skelmersdale were Digmaor, Tanhouse and Birch Green, providing approximately 7000 homes. The estates fall within the 20% of most deprived wards and are rapidly achieving ‘sink’ status by the Local Authority and residents alike. EP retains two allocated residential sites on the Digmaor and Birch Green areas which could be incorporated into the Housing Renewal programme for each and act as a catalyst for regeneration.

d) The Committee was critical of the way in which EP worked with local authorities in the former New Towns. How has EP’s role in New Towns developed since 2002, what is its current role in the co-ordination of regeneration and housing strategies in former New Towns and how will this be affected by the merger of the Housing Corporation and EP?

English Partnerships is now acting in partnership or as facilitator with many of the Local Authorities. Identifying, through jointly agreed strategies, how EP’s assets may best be used to meet local strategic goals. English Partnerships overall, has a better, more productive relationship with Local Authorities in the New Towns.

Town centre renewal projects EP is facilitating include: Telford, Bletchley, Crawley, Welwyn, Harlow, Northampton. Joint Venture with local partners: Milton Keynes, Stevenage, Northampton, Welwyn, Lightmoor & East Ketley in Telford. Of 126 development projects only 41 are not in new towns and many of these are in growth areas nearby such as Bedford, Aylesbury, Luton, Kettering.

EP and their main partners, Milton Keynes Council (MKC) work alongside each other to deliver key growth projects. EP have supported negotiations with Government to provide MKC with £3m funding to help deal with the impact of growth on services and hope to provide ongoing support over a further two to three years to ensure new posts are created to work alongside the MKPC (Milton Keynes Partnership Committee) teams and other partners.

In Northampton, the first demonstration of a sustainable town extension is being undertaken in full partnership with the local authority and other stakeholders.

EP has established a close and productive working relationship with West Lancs District Council during the development of proposals for Skelmersdale Town Centre, and as a result, WLDC extended an invitation to EP to join a Technical Appraisal Team formed to take forward the project on Tanhouse Estate.

A central part of the Growth Area proposals is to work with local partners to agree the right local delivery arrangements to reflect local needs. Local Delivery Vehicles (LDVs)—which include EP—are being established in the Growth Areas to drive forward the targeted investment and co-ordinated decision making necessary to achieve the objectives of the Sustainable Communities Plan. The LDVs take on different forms depending on the particular circumstances in each of the development areas, including Milton Keynes, Harlow and West Northamptonshire.

Our intention is that the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) will continue to build on the positive experiences of partnership. It will work with Regional Development Agencies helping to develop and deliver more integrated and better aligned strategies for economic development, land and housing. It will also be an expert delivery partner for Local Authorities, supporting them in strategic place-making, helping to create and shape prosperous and cohesive communities.

The HCA will be tasked to take an integrated approach to housing and regeneration, and to respond positively to partners in meeting the demands for decent places as well as decent homes. This issue has been highlighted in our consultation document and responses are currently being analysed.

e) *How does the Government expect the creation of the new housing and regeneration agency to benefit New Towns in particular?*

The creation of the HCA, which will work more closely at a regional level with partners in other agencies, will ensure growth and development are complementary and support the priorities agreed in regional strategies. All places requiring regeneration are important. Economic modelling suggests that creating the new agency should create savings of over £1billion to 2013/14, compared to modernisation of existing structures. This is based on recovery and recycling of efficiency savings throughout the period.

This and other benefits garnered from the creation of the new homes agency mean that it will be better able to support work, including in the New Towns, than under the existing delivery structures, offering a more holistic, supportive approach to place-making.

3. *The Committee noted that low-density development in the New Towns has created 'major problems' in terms of excessive dependence on the car for travel and poor public transport provision. The Government's response was upbeat about the improvements that could be made in the context of the then new sustainable communities agenda, noting that the New Towns in the Regional Planning Guidance 9 area in particular were capable of further growth and development in a holistic way. It also notes that Local Transport Plans, first produced in 2000, would set out integrated transport solution for the New Towns.*

a) *To what extent has dependence on the car for travel purposes in the New Towns declined since 2002? How have these reductions been achieved?*

The first and second generation New Towns were designed to have a bespoke public transport system. In Milton Keynes the grid roads were designed for fast, bus-based transport. Density levels in the New Towns, like many other towns, are very low. The New Towns were intended to give people clean air and open space, as an alternative to the high density industrial cities. The New Towns very much reflected best practice of their time. Since the development of the New Towns the reducing cost of car ownership and greater personal wealth overall have both contributed to the huge increase in car ownership throughout the country.

However, where New Towns are part of a growth area, their relatively low density and good strategic infrastructure makes provision of a comprehensive, new and sustainable mode of transport possible.

The local authorities responsible for transport in the New Towns acknowledged in their first Local Transport Plans that they had to address the impacts of development programmes which had been historically car focused. These had resulted in the dispersal of key facilities and services, leading to high car ownership and accessibility problems for those socially excluded groups who do not have access to a car.

In their first Local Transport Plan Delivery Reports of 2006, Bracknell Forest Borough Council, Halton Borough Council (for Runcorn), Milton Keynes Council, Peterborough City Council, Telford & Wrekin Borough Council and Warrington Borough Council reported on their progress since 2000/01 in addressing these problems. Examples of evidence in these reports for the reduction in dependence on the car for travel purposes in these New Towns include:

- In Milton Keynes, bus use had increased by 11%, cycling by 29% and traffic flows had reduced across Central Milton Keynes by 7%.
- In Bracknell Forest there had been a solid reduction in traffic within the borough, exceeding the council's targets for road traffic and peak traffic. Road traffic had reduced from 386,000 in 1996 to 372,000 in 2005/6 and peak traffic was also down from 69,000 in 1996 to 65,500 in 2005, easily meeting its target of 14% above the 1996 figure. Access to bus services in rural areas had increased by 18%.
- In Peterborough, since it became a Sustainable Travel Demonstration Town in 2004, public transport trips have increased by 13%, walking trips by 21%, and cycling trips by 25%. Car trips were down 13%.
- In Halton, the number of people cycling had more than doubled since 2002/03. Accessible transport services patronage also almost doubled.
- Telford reported a 20% increase in bus patronage in the borough.
- Warrington Borough Council introduced travel plans to cover 29000 employees and 34 schools.

HOW HAVE THESE REDUCTIONS BEEN ACHIEVED?

These reductions have been achieved by councils working in partnership with operators and stakeholders to reduce traffic, to make town centre parking less attractive and to improve alternative methods of travel, including public transport, walking, cycling and demand responsive services. Examples of improvements include:

- The Sustainable Travel Demonstration Town of Peterborough, which is receiving £3.24 million over 5 years for a sustained programme of 'smarter choices' measures, such as workplace, school and personalised travel planning, car clubs and car sharing schemes.
- Warrington's integrated passenger transport unit, which has enabled significant co-ordination of health, community and voluntary sector transport provision.
- Halton Community Transport, which introduced a 'Dial a Ride' scheme, 'Woman's Safe Transport' and a hospital service. The full package caters for the elderly, lone parents, post 16 learners and the disabled.
- A 30% increase in cycle parking at Milton Keynes Central Rail Station.
- The construction of some 16.5km of new or refurbished cycleway, including key missing links in the network in Bracknell Forest.
- The Telford and Wrekin student travel scheme, which was introduced in July 2002. The Council report that 25% of all pass holders would have not gone to college without it.

Best practice has been shared via the Local Transport Plan Benchmarking Group, which was established in 2002 and consists of the local transport authorities for the New Towns of Peterborough, Telford & Wrekin, Warrington and Milton Keynes, as well as Swindon.

b) *What impact have Local Transport Plans had on the provision of public transport facilities in the New Towns? Please provide examples of the evidence the Government has drawn upon to reach its conclusion on the impact of Local Transport Plans on New Towns.*

The delivery of the first Local Transport Plans in the main New Town local transport authorities was assessed by the Department for Transport in 2006 as: Halton (Excellent), Bracknell Forest (Satisfactory), Milton Keynes (Good), Peterborough (Satisfactory), Telford and Wrekin (Excellent), Warrington (Good). These assessments, accompanied by the Atkins report on the key achievements and good practice from the first round of Local Transport Plans, *Delivering Better Local Transport*, form the basis of the Government's evidence for the positive impact of Local Transport Plans on the provision of public transport facilities in the New Towns

In general, public transport provision has improved considerably since the introduction of Local Transport Plans, with improvements to bus services, better information and marketing, infrastructure improvements and demand-responsive services to the fore. Many of these, and their impacts, have been examined in the Government's answer to question 3a. Good examples of the delivery of public transport strategies by the New Towns local transport authorities can be found in Milton Keynes, Telford and Warrington. For instance, the Telford Mobility Management Centre provides 'one-stop shop' information, ticket and marketing with wider provision of transport services, such as taxi and car sharing and concessionary travel.

The increasing bus patronage in Telford, highlighted in the Government's answer to 3a, has been achieved by continued consultation with the local operator via the Quality Bus Partnership and the setting up of 5 quality bus routes (including the very successful Ruraline) to reduce social exclusion and increase accessibility to public services. The provision of transport information services and interchanges have contributed to an increase in overall customer satisfaction with public transport services of nearly 60%.

In Warrington, improvements have been made to services across the network, making them more accessible. Audible Real Time Passenger Information facilities have been installed at bus stops. The delivery of the new town centre interchange will further improve public transport provision in the borough, linking bus and rail travel. A number of Quality Bus Corridors have been developed and new bus services have been introduced, for instance between new housing developments and the town centre.

Milton Keynes Council has delivered a permanent park and ride scheme between Central Milton Keynes and the Coachway and a Quality Bus Initiative serving areas with lowest access to a car.

4. The Committee concluded that the planning powers held by English Partnerships, deriving from the Commission for New Towns, were anomalous and did not help to promote mixed use, mixed tenure schemes on brown-sites or in town centres. The Government declined to take action at the time although it noted that it would expect planning arrangements under the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 to become more the norm.

a) How frequently has English Partnerships used the planning powers inherited from the Commission for New Towns since 2002? How has the frequency changed over time?

Under section 7 (1) part (a) of the New Towns Act 1981, Development Corporations could submit proposals for the development of land within the area of a New Town and under part (b) the Secretary of State could approve these proposals.

The Commission for New Towns ('CNT'), which constitutes a part of the administrative unit that is known as English Partnerships, inherited approved sites from the Development Corporations at the time of their dissolution, as well as the ability to implement extant Section (7) approvals. Some such sites which were approved under Section 7 (1) and (2) of the New Towns Act have been progressed under these approvals, with the agreement of the Local Authority, particularly in areas where local plans were in or just beginning the review process and the NTA powers provided stability and consistency of approach during that review period. The intent being to deliver development within the spirit of a new local plan but prior to its adoption.

In very limited instances EP has used the NTA after a local plan has been adopted but only with the agreement of the Local Authority and only where use of the NTA would enable a substantially developed area to be completed in accordance with an approved masterplan without seeking a new outline planning consent. The last example of this was Monkston Park Local Centre in Milton Keynes where a S7(2) authorisation was issued in March 2007. In most other instances responsibility for development control has reverted to the Local Authority and EP projects on remaining undeveloped land are being progressed under the TCPA.

b) Will Communities England retain these planning powers?

We have consulted on the basis that the Homes and Communities Agency will have powers that are at least as wide as its constituent parts; this includes the Commission for New Towns. This will involve granting the Homes and Communities Agency specific planning powers as well as transferring rights in relation to existing planning permissions. As the responses to the consultation document are currently being analysed and the legislation forming the Homes and Communities agency has not yet been through Parliament it is impossible to say with certainty what planning powers the new Agency will have, but our intention is that they will be retained.

c) What other residual powers from the Commission for New Towns have been retained by English Partnerships or Government? To what extent and over what timeframe will these be transferred to local authorities or Communities England?

English Partnerships combines the CNT and the Urban Regeneration Agency ('URA') (established under the Leasehold Reform and Urban Development Act 1993) as an administrative unit. The name English Partnerships was adopted by that unit, but there is no separate legal entity bearing that name. Under this name, CNT and URA remain as two separate legal entities, the powers given to them by statute remaining unchanged at present

The Homes and Communities Agency will be a new statutory body, with a new structure, new systems of operation and framed by new legislation. However, we have consulted on the basis that it will have powers at least as wide as its constituent parts, including the Commission for New Towns. The extent of the new agencies powers and the time frame for granting it such powers is subject to the legislative process, however, it is hoped that the new agency will be established by April 2009.

CONCLUSION

This Government believes that lessons provided by the New Towns are being used to help our plans for delivering the three million new homes by 2020 as announced in the Housing Green Paper. Our plans include: more homes—backed by more ambitious building targets, increased investment, and new ways of identifying and using land for development, more social housing—ensuring that a decent home at an affordable price is for the many, not the few, building homes more quickly and to high environmental standards and flagship developments leading the way. To help families across the country find affordable, quality housing we need to build far more houses. But we also need new measures to protect the environment. The greatest environmental challenge we face is from climate change. As housing accounts for nearly one third of carbon emissions, we need to substantially cut emissions from new homes and work towards zero carbon housing and development. These challenges can only be tackled by building on experience of previous programmes—including the New Towns. Initiatives such as the Millennium Communities Programme, the Design for Manufacture initiative, the Town Centre Renewal Programme and sustainable urban extensions are all playing a part in revitalising New Towns and once again introducing development and design techniques that will be viewed as today’s models of best practice.

Memorandum by the Town and Country Planning Association

Transferable Lessons from the New Towns

I am writing following your letter to the Chair of the TCPA dated 26 November 2007 inviting further comment from the TCPA on the CLG report “Transferable Lessons from the New Towns” and the Government’s Memorandum to the Committee on this matter. I apologise for the delay but your letter did not reach as soon as intended.

The TCPA is pleased that the Government partly commissioned the TCPA study “Best practice in Urban Extensions and New Settlements” and believes this provides useful advice on the lessons to be drawn from the case studies contained therein. The case studies are recent new settlements (South Woodham Ferrers, Essex and Dickens Heath Solihull for example) and urban extensions such as at Northampton. The research paper produced by the Institute for Public Policy Research was also helpful. However, neither of these evaluated the postwar new towns as recommended by the Select Committee.

The Department commissioned a first stage Literature Review from Oxford Brookes University which the TCPA welcomes as an important contribution to the debate. However the substantive research recommended by the Committee—a proper evaluation of the New Towns programme—has still not been carried out and the TCPA urges the Government to move to the next and more substantive stage of research on this matter.

In the report “Transferable Lessons from the New Towns” there are some findings which the TCPA would question and others where fuller research could prove immensely valuable to fulfilling the current ambitions to deliver more homes and new settlements in the form of Eco-towns. In addition a number of lessons clearly required action as stated in the report. Some of these are highlighted here and the following represent some of the key areas the TCPA believes proper research as originally envisaged by the Committee could clarify:

“1.1 NTDCs were exceptionally powerful delivery vehicles which dominated the entire development process, not just as ‘lead developers’. Delivery on the scale comparable to that of the New Towns will involve creating agencies of similar potency, even though their actual form will probably differ. Key lesson requiring action”

The TCPA believes that the key attributes of the NTDCs which made them enormously successful in delivery terms appear in danger of being overlooked. The Government made clear in “Eco-towns Living a Greener Future” (CLG, April 2008) that “A new town development corporation, established under the New Towns Act 1981, could be an appropriate delivery option” for delivery today and thus the need to establish the key benefits of this kind of vehicle need to be understood as soon as possible. The current choice of vehicle by Government in Milton Keynes (the Urban Regeneration Area), the TCPA believes, is one step less accountable than an NTDC (the latter being directly accountable to the Secretary of State). The TCPA is also concerned that **the importance of the long term and single purpose nature of the NTDCs has not been captured** by any of the interventions more recently in terms of local delivery vehicles, these key lessons need to be further evidenced and disseminated.

“1.11 All necessary land for delivery should be acquired well in advance of anticipated development and ownerships consolidated as much as possible. Key lesson requiring action.

1.13 Where public land ownership is involved then the pattern of using additional value to underwrite other development may not differ significantly from what occurred in the New Towns. Care should however be taken to ensure that any returns to public agencies based on enhanced values are retained within the Growth Areas concerned. Key lesson requiring awareness.

1.15 Finance from central Government is likely to be critical in establishing the growth momentum in the early stages. Key lesson requiring action.”

The acquisition of land remains key if public bodies are to share in the proceeds from development in any meaningful way. Therefore a strategy for modern **land acquisition and criteria is needed** and would be informed by substantive research on these points flagged up from the literature review. The Review published **does not cover the important issues surrounding the fixing of land value at a point in time** insulating acquiring / public bodies from the inflationary effects of the development process. This is a vital issue that needs to be considered properly both in evaluating the new towns experience and urgently in taking forward the Eco-towns programme.

“2.3 It is important to think ahead about different scenarios in the event of possible changes in the economic climate. . . The lack of flexibility in the financing of New Towns led to significant deficits, the scale of which could have been avoided. Key lesson requiring action.”

The TCPA believes this lesson shows only a selective part of the picture and importantly fails to highlight that the overall debt of the Commission for New Towns was repaid with interest and in surplus ahead of time. While some NTDCs ran deficits the overall result of **the programme in financial terms was positive for the public purse** thanks in part to the enormous economic success of Milton Keynes. Ray Thomas reported in “The 1972 Housing Finance Act and the Demise of the New Town and Local Authority Housing Programmes” (Urban Law and Policy No 5 1982) that **“Overall the 21 new towns for which reports were available made a profit of £671,000”**. The financial success of the new towns is also evidenced by the repayments from the Commission for New Towns early. These matters go unreported and a different impression is provided by this early literature review. The NTDCs were also significant in being loan funded by Government guaranteeing a return at a healthy margin, unlike the Urban Development Corporations of the 1980s which were grant funded and massively more burdensome on the public purse.

There is a real danger these issues will be lost sight of unless they are properly evaluated and placed before today’s decision makers.

“4.1 Clarity of responsibilities for delivery and related governance in the Growth Areas will be essential, especially so since delivery partnerships will be far looser entities with more diffused power structures than those which characterised the New Towns programme. Key lesson requiring action”

This assumes the New Towns Act will not be used whereas “Eco-towns: Living a Greener Future” (ibid) assumes it may well be used. This again stresses the importance of single purpose and clearly accountable nature that NTDCs require if they are to work well. It is possible to **have effective relationships between Development Corporations and Local Authorities** as the “partnership” New Towns such as Peterborough evidenced without compromising the single purpose mission of an NTDC. The practice in Urban Development Corporations (UDCs) such as that currently operating in East London where different parts of the UDC are administered and planned by different public agencies is the antithesis of the intention of a development corporation. This finding clearly needs to be considered further.

“6.5 Working with existing topographical landscape creates places that can generate a sense of personal affiliation. The “New Town blues” were partly a product of low density (and hence compromised access), and anonymous or placeless aesthetics (as well as issues of community). It should, however, be acknowledged that psychological responses to places are not dependent merely on the physical setting, but are also the product of social, community and economic factors and conditions. Key lesson requiring action.”

This assertion of new town blues, the critique of density levels and the focus elsewhere on the need for higher densities are sweeping judgments on the New Town experience which are not clearly substantiated. Colin Ward in his 1993 “New Town Home Town” (Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, London) reports objective studies that concluded that there are no low density new towns (page 15) and that New Towns, according to medical research, lead to improvements in health and well being (page 13). (Feelings of anxiety were identified in studies of residents in new developments, not a feature related particularly to New Towns). These points need further consideration and the TCPA believes the mix of residential densities, displayed by many New Towns provides a highly sustainable way of life.

The TCPA also believes that the specific issues of New Towns today reaching the need for a level of infrastructure investment which goes beyond that in existing towns also merits further attention. I hope this is of interest and look forward to hearing whether the substantive stage of the research recommended by the Committee will be progressed.

The Town and Country Planning Association (TCPA) is an independent charity working to improve the art and science of town and country planning. The TCPA puts social justice and the environment at the heart of policy debate and inspires government, industry and campaigners to take a fresh perspective on major issues, including planning policy, housing, regeneration and climate change.

Our objectives are to:

- 1 secure a decent, well designed home for everyone, in a human-scale environment combining the best features of town and country;
- 2 empower people and communities to influence decisions that affect them; and
- 3 improve the planning system in accordance with the principles of sustainable development.

Trustees: Prof. David Lock CBE (Chair of the TCPA), Anthony Fyson MBE (Vice Ch), Richard Butt (Hon. Treas.), Lynda Addison, Sir Brian Briscoe, Julie Cowans, John Deegan, Rob Gillespie, Prof Sir Peter Hall (President), Keith Hill MP, Andrew Shipley, Lee Shostak, Pat Thomas OBE (Vice Ch.) and John Zetter.

Memorandum by the New Towns Special Interest Group

The review by Oxford Brookes University was comprehensive and focused on eight themes:

1. Delivery;
2. Finance;
3. Creating communities;
4. Governance;
5. Economic Achievement and Competitiveness;
6. Physical, environment and design;
7. End user experience;
8. Long term sustainability.

At the end of each theme a table on the lessons learned provides a useful summary. This spread of interest encompasses all the concerns of the New Towns SIG and demonstrates that the review has been extremely comprehensive. Interestingly, it notes significant early research into New Towns with a significant decline since the late 1970s. The research (Section 3.5) identifies some key points of similarity between New Towns and present day Growth Areas where there is a need to learn the lessons from the past. However, of this list of eight similarities, only one (6. “There are likely to be comparable problems of major infrastructure provision which will be critical before large scale development can proceed”) picks up on a major point of concern expressed by the SIG and even then the issue is more concerned with initial provision than maintenance and dealing with infrastructure coming to the end of its useful life all at the same time. Revenue Budget considerations are flagged as an issue in itself in section 5.2.2. (4) and reference is made to the fact that “reinvestment needs of New Towns have not been addressed by government and that a significant policy change is needed to tackle issues of run-down public facilities, deteriorating public spaces and ageing housing estates”. A suggestion is made that a way forward in financing maintenance and repair in the Growth Areas would be by way of capturing increased land values. However, disappointingly, the subsequent table 5.2 on the key lessons from the literature on finance does not identify this ongoing revenue issue as a “key lesson requiring action”.

Of all the many issues facing local authorities with a legacy of a New Town this is perhaps the most important and yet it is consistently downplayed.

In the sixth theme, Physical environment and design/master-planning it is correctly noted that “extensive green spaces have sometimes created unsafe environments: footpaths between widely dispersed housing estates are perceived to be unsafe by residents. The use of extensive planting has in turn created unforeseen expenditure in both maintenance and landscape modification to overcome safety problems.” This is picked up in the lessons table but only to the extent of noting that different types of landscaping can have different revenue effects. That is, large expanses of heavily planted land can require greater maintenance than other forms (eg restricting planting to private spaces). However, the need to ensure that successive maintenance bodies (in most cases the local authority) have sufficient resources available is not specifically highlighted.

The research concludes (Section 6.8) that sustainability of the New Towns has not been evaluated in any depth—whether this applies to economics, society or the environment—and suggests further research is needed in a number of areas. This conclusion can be supported if this includes an assessment of revenue budget considerations. The New Towns were built in an era when capital costs were carefully assessed but sometimes cheap and not particularly long lived solutions were erroneously promoted. Today, it is essential that any long term planning must take account of whole life costs. At the same time as a scheme is being promoted the long term asset management plan must be completed.

The second piece of research specifically referenced is the IPPR report from 2005 “From New Towns to Growth Areas; learning from the past” which seeks to apply key lessons learned from the New Towns experience to new Growth Areas. As with the Oxford Brookes University report, the IPPR review comprehensively covers the subject. The split of lessons into six themes is helpful. Again, however, whilst in the chapter of Delivery, it is recognised that “a mechanism for financing up-front capital investment in infrastructure which does not create unsustainable long term financial burdens on delivery agents is essential” there is no acknowledgement of the long term financial burden that has to be borne in maintaining extensive infrastructure. The eleven lessons grouped under headings of Community, Economy and Delivery, identified in the conclusion provide a useful summary and point of reference for those involved in the new Growth Areas.

Jointly these two pieces of work comprehensively review the areas identified by the TLGR Committee but the question of re-investment in the New Towns is somewhat glossed over. It is not suggested that further extensive research is required but a recognition (i) that infrastructure ageing at the same time and needing replacement; (ii) the fact that some early social provision, eg local centres, are no longer fit for purpose and need replacing; and (iii) the fact that some New Town estates which suffer from serious deprivation need intervention in terms of community engagement and addressing the problems of worklessness as well as through physical development are not particularly strongly emphasised.

Given the overall scale of the New Towns Programme, it is perhaps somewhat surprising that the research has been substantially desk based. It is also surprising that there does not seem to be much recognition that the origins of the New Towns is very varied. Some New Towns start from Greenfield sites, others are based on town expansion, in some the focus was on regeneration and in the case of Central Lancashire, there is the single examples of a polycentric New Town. The New Towns also show enormous variety in size and in the timescales for their development. If lessons are to be learned from the New Town experience, it is important that this variety is recognised.

If the lessons to be learned from the New Towns are to be applied to the new Growth Areas, it is suggested that the following should be given a high priority:

1. The Growth Areas and subsidiary neighbourhoods within them, need to comprise mixed communities with a range of housing types and tenure providing accommodation for a cross section of society;

2. The IPPR study suggests that “unlike the New Towns, in the Growth Areas, the goal is not to create self-contained new communities. Indeed, much of the debate about the Growth Areas has focused on whether the proposed investment in transport infrastructure will be adequate to support the level of commuting anticipated from the Growth Areas to regional economic centres.” In fact, to fail to provide employment opportunities and even more importantly opportunities for training and skills development within the Growth Areas could continue a failing manifested in some New Town neighbourhoods and needs to be avoided at all costs;

3. It seems from looking back at the review that securing capital for necessary investment has been achieved without a clear understanding of the long term funding implications. In Runcorn, for example, (i) the dedicated bus way runs parallel to some relatively quiet roads and significantly increases highway maintenance budgets whilst bringing very marginal benefits; (ii) the independent footpath network brings with it problems of security and perceptions, if not actual problems, of crime and disorder and high maintenance costs; (iii) the extensive areas of public open space and the complex road systems are not only in some cases extremely wasteful of land, they bring with them significant problems of funding necessary maintenance.

4. Again, using the example of Runcorn, the Award winning residential development of Southgate had to be demolished over a decade ago, whilst in Castlefields there is an on-going programme of regeneration involving the demolition of significant numbers of the balcony access flats which proved both hard to maintain and unpopular with tenants. Innovative design and building techniques are to be encouraged and applauded but the clear lesson to be learned is that very careful consideration needs to be given to whole life costs, problems of maintenance and changes in society’s needs and aspirations before capital expenditure is committed.

5. There is a tendency for the research to try to draw general conclusions and if lessons are to be learned, there is a need to also look at specific examples. For example, there is a danger in developing New Towns where the focus has been on a very narrow economic base. The dangers of large scale problems if that employment base is adversely affected are, perhaps, exemplified by Corby. Whereas in Milton Keynes, the lessons had been learned and a broader economic base established. Over time employment needs have changed radically since the first New Towns were built and in many cases the economic rationale behind their implementation is no longer valid. Local Authorities need the potential for both investment and flexibility in land use allocations to deal with significant changes in employment structure in their areas.

The Government Memorandum highlights a number of positive actions that have been taken which cover the main concerns of the New Town SIG in terms of planning powers. The SIG has long argued that any residual powers or land holdings should be transferred to local authorities to further effect a “normalisation” of the New Towns. It is noted that the extent of the new Homes and Communities Agency’s powers will be subject to the legislative process and the SIG would wish to reserve its right to comment on proposals as the Government’s wishes become more clear.

Memorandum by Bracknell Forest Borough Council

I refer to our conversation last week regarding the above report, and thanks once again for allowing me to send you my comments.

In my view, much of the comments raised in the LGA New Towns Special Interest Group can be supported. The central issue of maintenance of a substantial public assets, built contemporaneously, is significant for Bracknell as a former New Town. However, I believe that Bracknell's experience has a singular dimension which may not apply in some of the other former New Towns. In particular, remedying the problems of our town centre has been a focus for the Council for over twenty years.

Bracknell Forest is rated 320 out of 364 in the Indices of Multiple Deprivation 2007. We are one of the most affluent boroughs in England by income, productivity is among the highest, too, based on Gross Value Added per head. In short, Bracknell has benefited by being in heart of the Thames Valley economy. However, a consequence of this situation is that Bracknell Forest is poorly placed to attract funding based on any serious deprivation indicators, especially those which normally trigger "traditional" regeneration funding.

Engagement with business last year made clear that they see the condition of our town centre to be their principal issue (together with transport) in terms of retaining staff. Businesses looking to consolidate from a number of locations are choosing to go elsewhere partly as a consequence of the town centre and its attractiveness to families. Plainly unhelpful, given the importance of Bracknell in the Thames Valley region/South East economy. Last year, we concluded a development agreement with Legal and General/Schroders (who own the majority of the town centre's assets) to transform most of the town centre. However, whilst this represents a major milestone in redeveloping our town centre, the development agreement unavoidably, leaves untouched significant parts of the town centre infrastructure.

In common with many of the other New Towns, Bracknell is exceptional because it was built from a standing start during a very short period (50 years, 20 for the town centre). All the infrastructure is aging at the same time, compared with older or historic towns.

The town centre comprises a substantial amount of historic public investment, including large areas of public realm which are in need of regeneration.

Because Bracknell doesn't appear to qualify for public funding, the public realm problems will have to be solved using private money. The costs are substantial and have resulted in a high-value scheme (ie one that relies on raising Zone A rents significantly). We're striving to make a step change which is unparalleled in towns of our size/type. The developers are also "value-engineering" the scheme to take out some of the quality and this is likely to be a continuing pressure.

Middle order towns like Bracknell are hampered in comparison with centres like Reading in that it can't simply generate more value by adding more retail floorspace. Indeed, neither the Council nor the developers want to do that.

Given the South East Plan objective (supported by the Panel) to tackle polarisation between centres and improve middle order towns, we are trying to find creative ways to deliver our community-led masterplan.

English Partnerships are the inheritors of the CNT/New Town Corporation. EP has been very supportive but its brief is focused on delivering affordable housing and raising environmental and construction standards (apologies for my shorthand). Therefore, its interest is no longer in dealing with the unique public realm problems that Bracknell faces. Our work with EP has been very constructive and we have spoken about ways to promote renewable energy in the town centre (and beyond) and also whether there might be creative ways that EP funding could pay for public realm improvements if they unlocked other Council budgets to deliver affordable housing.

So: In short, we believe that the situation in Bracknell is unique (Basingstoke and Crawley are the only other New/expanded towns in the region and both are higher in the "network/hierarchy" and identified centres for growth). SEEDA paid half the costs of our urban design consultancy to prepare the Masterplan in 2001/2. This was extremely helpful. However, we think that there is strong justification for targeted public funding to reduce the financial pressures on the scheme, maintain high quality public realm and reflect the objectives of the South East Plan and the particular challenges of regenerating a New Town in the Thames Valley. This should be recognised much more clearly in taking forward the Government's policies for New Towns.

Victor Nicholls, Assistant Chief Executive

9 May 2008