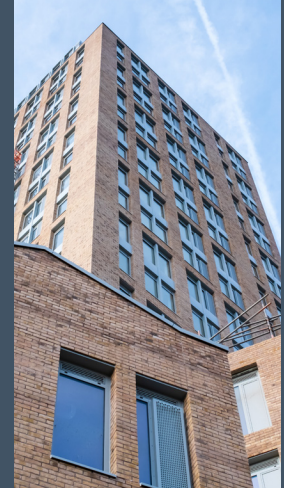


Roundtable - Reimagining New Towns for the 21st Century

With Dr. David Mountain, Research Fellow - The University of Manchester
Maurice Lange, Analyst - Centre for Cities

Chaired by Lee Barron MP
Portcullis House & Online via zoom



Introduction

Held ahead of the anticipated announcement from the government's New Towns Taskforce on which sites will be taken forward, **Reimagining New Towns for the 21st Century** brought together a diverse group of experts across planning, housing, land promotion, regeneration, and placemaking. Against a backdrop of renewed political interest in new settlements, the roundtable provided a timely forum to reflect on the lessons of the past and the challenges and opportunities of the present.

Participants explored what it will take to make a new generation of new towns genuinely successful, from the role of Development Corporations and land value capture, to the importance of infrastructure, leadership, long-term stewardship, and public legitimacy. Crucially, the discussion emphasised that new towns must be more than housing schemes, they must be economic, social, and civic projects that can adapt over time and deliver the kinds of places people want to live, work, and thrive in.

Key Takeaways

- A consistent theme from the discussion was that new towns should not be treated as housebuilding exercises alone. Successful post-war examples worked because they combined housing with economic opportunity, civic infrastructure, and a

sense of place. Attendees stressed the need for new settlements to attract jobs, foster social life, and offer flexibility in how people live and work, not just provide units to meet housing targets. The best outcomes will come from a “**housing-and-work, housing-and-civil-society**” approach, not one that treats homes as the end goal.

- Land value uplift remains a critical tool for funding infrastructure and unlocking delivery at scale. However, its viability is highly sensitive to geography. Research presented at the roundtable showed that only in high-demand areas, typically in the greater South East, does land uplift generate enough value to pay for upfront costs like transport and schools. This means either new towns need to be located in such areas, or the government must step in with subsidy or direct intervention. Without this, projects are unlikely to be financially self-sustaining.
- The complexity and long timelines of new town development require dedicated delivery bodies. Ad hoc planning processes and fragmented land ownership undermine the ability to deliver at scale. Development corporations, with control over land, planning powers, and long-term funding, are useful to coordinate infrastructure, manage risk, and hold a consistent vision through changes in political or economic conditions. Without such mechanisms, new town proposals risk stalling due to local political shifts, market pressures, or a lack of coherent leadership.
- Successful new towns depend on early investment in leadership and long-term stewardship. This includes dedicated leadership teams with the capacity to manage complex multi-stakeholder environments and make strategic decisions over decades. Stewardship arrangements must be defined from the start, covering long-term maintenance of public realm, community facilities, and shared infrastructure. Existing models such as leasehold management companies have proven inadequate; more robust, place-based stewardship frameworks are needed to avoid burdening residents with unsustainable costs or service decline.
- The dominance of large housebuilders in new settlements leads to uniform design and limits the pace of delivery. Allowing small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to participate through land parcelling diversifies design, increases housing mix, and enables more developers to build concurrently. Public and quasi-public landowners, such as Homes England, are well-placed to control the structure and pace of land release. While this approach may reduce peak land values, it delivers higher overall quality, faster build-out rates, and a more resilient market for housing delivery.
- New towns are highly vulnerable to political instability, both at local and national levels. The success of past new towns was supported by long-term political consensus and insulated delivery vehicles. In contrast, current projects often suffer delays or cancellation due to shifting priorities, leadership changes, or lack of alignment with local authorities. Embedding delivery mechanisms in statutory frameworks, and ensuring continuous community engagement, are critical to securing buy-in and avoiding derailment. Without political continuity and local legitimacy, even well-planned new towns will struggle to progress.
- New settlements must respond to the realities of 21st-century life. That means aligning with modern employment models, such as digital and creative industries, and ensuring connectivity to regional growth centres. Settlements must be designed for mixed demographics, including young renters, families, and older

residents. Car dependency must be reduced, with walkable neighbourhoods, accessible public transport, and integrated amenities. High-density development is often promoted, but flexibility and adaptability should be prioritised to accommodate uncertain future needs. Place-based economic strategies, integrated with housing delivery, are essential to long-term success.

Issues raised

- A shortage of skilled workers, both in construction and planning, was identified as a major constraint to delivering new towns at scale. While the current workforce may be sufficient for existing levels of activity, scaling up will require investment in training pathways now to meet future demand. The sector also faces demographic challenges and a reliance on migration, making long-term workforce planning essential.
- Participants stressed that major infrastructure bodies (e.g. National Highways, utility providers) often won't commit to investment until development is certain, but development often can't proceed until infrastructure is committed. This creates a policy and funding gap that hampers deliverability. Resolving this will require more flexible planning frameworks and early public sector coordination.
- There was concern that a focus on "new" new towns might unintentionally draw attention and resources away from existing settlements, including post-war new towns and their struggling neighbourhoods. Many of these places are still home to significant populations but face economic stagnation, ageing infrastructure, and underinvestment. A more integrated strategy is needed to ensure that new settlements don't come at the expense of regeneration elsewhere.
- The uncertainty around future devolution deals and local leadership structures creates planning instability. Questions were raised about who leads and governs delivery, especially in areas without mayors or combined authorities. Without clarity on how new town proposals align with evolving devolution frameworks, some areas may fall behind or miss out entirely.

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