

Key takeaways: 'How will New Towns actually work?' roundtable

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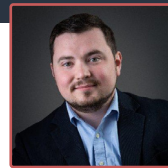
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Introduction

The roundtable brought together senior figures from development, planning, utilities, housing associations and local government to test the practicalities of delivering the latest wave of new towns. Participants agreed that the UK faces deep structural pressures: undersupply of genuinely affordable housing, long and uncertain planning timelines and a lack of coordinated infrastructure strategy.

While new towns are widely recognised as one of the few mechanisms capable of delivering large-scale, futureproof places, the discussion revealed significant divergence on how to deliver them, with concerns that unholistic delivery will undermine that very capability. Several speakers stressed the critical importance of long-term political certainty and the need for a delivery model that does not repeat the slow, fragmented processes of the last 20 years. Others highlighted the political, financial, environmental and governance tensions inherent in large-scale settlement planning, particularly in areas of strong existing communities.

What emerged consistently is that government must decide whether new towns are *additional* to local plan numbers or *part of* local authorities' obligations, must urgently clarify how infrastructure is funded and sequenced as well as thinking ahead beyond housing to long-term stewardship, energy strategy, water, secondary care and economic purpose.

The discussion blended both optimism and scepticism: optimism that new settlements can help unlock 21st- and 22nd-century place making, zero-carbon infrastructure and new governance models; scepticism about viability, capacity in planning authorities, political resistance and the pace of decision making. This document distills the roundtable's key recommendations and the live issues that require urgent resolution.

Key takeaways

- **Government must provide clarity on whether new town housing numbers are additional to or part of local plan requirements.**

Clear national guidance is needed to prevent policy contradictions and planning delays, especially in lieu of the unanimous decision by Cheshire East council to oppose Adlington New Town, where homes are understood to be additional to local plan requirements.

- **Introduce a streamlined, certain planning pathway for new towns using existing tools like development consent orders or local development orders.**

This would reduce 15–20 year lead-ins before delivery can begin. There was concern (as reflected in the New Towns Task Force's report to government) as to the extent to which development corporations are suitable vehicles for this.

- **Provide multi-decade infrastructure funding settlements rather than short-term cycles.**

Long-term certainty is essential for transport, utilities, schools and phased delivery. It also allows for better community buy-in and co-design, as well as more joined-up strategy across infrastructure.

- **Implement a coordinated national utilities strategy covering energy, grid capacity, water and sewage.**

Participants stressed that Ofgem, water companies and the National Grid must plan with new towns in mind, and concern was expressed that current funding strategies might not have done so.

- **Allow flexibility in energy compliance so developers can meet carbon targets at site level rather than only at unit level.**

This could reduce build costs as well as unlocking renewable micro-grids and on-site generation.

- **Use new towns to deliver serviced land parcels for SMEs to diversify delivery and speed up housing output.**

Government should actively structure opportunities for small and medium-sized builders. There was concern among some attendees that there is little sign of this happening at a policy level, despite sector-wide agreement that SMEs will be vital to ensuring delivery is of high quality.

- **Require early community engagement and transparent long-term stewardship plans.**

Stewardship organisations, including housing associations, should have defined roles from the outset, so as to better foster place and community.

- **Develop national guidance on secondary care provision for large settlements.**

New towns cannot rely solely on Section 106 for health or school infrastructure. This was an area of contention for participants, with concerns expressed that placing new obligations upon development to deliver extra infrastructure would hinder housing delivery and viability.

- **Create policy tools to reduce early-stage uncertainty, including clear designation decisions and protection from political oscillation.**

Delivery will require cross-party stability over several decades, especially if only three new towns are expected to begin development before the next parliament.

Issues raised

- **Extremely long planning times make delivery unpredictable and commercially unviable.**

Some participants argued planning is the main blocker, while others cited market conditions as equally limiting.

- **SMEs feel squeezed out by legislative complexity, planning risk and unclear exit routes.**

Many cannot engage in new towns under current models.

- **Public resistance in potential new town locations is significant, especially in affluent rural areas.**

There is a gap between national housing need and local political realities, as flagged by Cheshire East's opposition to Adlington.

- **Environmental concerns, particularly loss of agricultural land, are a major barrier.**

There is currently no coherent national response to food security concerns, despite the creation of twelve new towns signalling significant greenfield usage, despite loss of agricultural land being a key complaint of opponents to development. Some emphasised that the urgency of housing needs would override this.

- **Major uncertainties around energy infrastructure, grid capacity and responsibilities for upgrades.**

There is no evidence that current national infrastructure planning accounts for new towns at the required scale.

- **Viability pressures from build cost inflation, future homes standards and sales market weakness.**

These pressures risk making new towns undeliverable in many regions, however some attendees were keen to emphasise this is a case of working flexibly within new standards rather than compromising on quality.

- **Political inconsistency and slow decision making undermine investor confidence and delivery capability.**

The one-year pause for environmental assessments, as well as planning delays and local opposition, were all cited as damaging momentum.

Conclusion

The roundtable demonstrated both the enormous potential of new towns and the scale of the challenge ahead. Participants consistently expressed that new towns are one of the few delivery vehicles capable of unlocking tens of thousands of homes alongside the infrastructure, energy systems, and employment spaces that existing settlements cannot easily retrofit. Yet the conversation also showed that the delivery environment is fragmented, and that new towns alone are not a solution to Britain's urgent housing need.

Without a clear national strategy for planning reform, infrastructure funding, utilities coordination, health provision and long-term stewardship, the latest wave of new towns risks being delayed or rendered impactless. The appetite exists within industry to deliver, innovate and invest at scale, but the government must provide clarity, certainty and a stable policy environment.

The success of new towns will ultimately hinge on whether they become places of opportunity where communities thrive and choose to stay, not just the number of units that are delivered. That will require sustained cross-party commitment, early and meaningful engagement with local communities, long-term infrastructure planning and governance models that ensure places continue to evolve. Industry is ready to act, but government must remove the structural obstacles that have impeded large-scale growth for decades. With the right framework, new towns can become a defining legacy of this political generation.

We would like to thank the members of our Advisory Board for their contributions and continuing support.



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