Civic Voice,
The national charity for civic societies in England

New Towns in 2025: a promise for the future without a strategy for the present. (Draft 21-10-2025)

Summary

1. The government has indicated that it will seek to promote housebuilding through new towns. The development of new towns is a long-term process and, in most cases, will only lead to the completion of additional housing in at least five years time. In some cases, the introduction of new towns into an already complex planning system will cause confusion, so delaying investment. The experience of the post-war new towns suggests, in any case, that the long-term contribution to housebuilding is likely to prove small or insignificant.
2. Housing shortages and lack of infrastructure investment is a pressing issue that deserves action, now. We need an investment strategy that links the present to the future and a spatial strategy that links the proposed new towns to their local and regional context.

The current proposals

1. The New Towns Taskforce published its report in September 2025, with proposals for 12 new towns spread over different regions of England, with the exception of the North East. [1] The proposals are of varied character and include four that are best described as ‘in-town’ or regeneration new towns rather than as free standing towns in the countryside or as suburban extensions. All are intended to contain at least 10,000 homes – but most are expected to significantly exceed this target.
2. The new towns are intended to conform to the best current standards of urban design, based on for example healthy and safe communities, on neighbourhoods with adequate infrastructure and a mix of housing types and tenures for diverse demographic needs, all set within a ‘single coherent masterplan’. To ensure speedy delivery, development is to be led by the public sector, with unified land ownership.
3. New towns have played a role in national housing and planning strategies in the past in England, as is recognised by the New Towns Task Force. Their role should not be exaggerated. The Report suggests that ‘the post-war New Towns Programme was the most ambitious town-building effort ever undertaken in the UK’. [2] In fact, the post-war new towns only provided a very small proportion of housing completions. In the period from 1945 to 1970, new towns only accounted for 2.8 per cent of the total housing programme in England and Wales, with a further 1.1 per cent in expanded town schemes under legislation that gave local councils the power to develop local communities. [3] The present

proposal involves a smaller number of new town sites, smaller target new town population increases on each site and makes no reference to the possibility of expanded Council-led towns. The long-term impact will therefore be less than the post-war programme.

4. The conditions for new town development are moreover less supportive than in the post-war years. There is no national spatial strategy for England, no regional development strategies and no advisory plans of the type that guided the expansion of large urban areas in the post-war years. The absence of a strategic context means in turn that each new town has to be justified separately and generally without an in-depth account of the proposal and its alternatives. The New Towns Taskforce claims the existence of significant enthusiasm for new towns and states that it has sifted through over 100 suggestions before fixing on the 12 final sites. However, the list of alternative sites has not been published and has striking omissions, that are neither recognised nor discussed. For example, why are there no sites at all in north east England? Why do Leeds and Manchester each host an ‘in town’, regeneration new town, but not Liverpool or Birmingham?

5. The Planning and Infrastructure Bill currently before Parliament contains proposals for city region and county-wide spatial strategies. These cover smaller areas than the standard English regions but will provide a clearer understanding of the spatial context, when they are completed. These spatial strategies are for the future and in some places involve the reform of local government. As a result, the new towns will mostly be developed outside the existing framework of local plans, some of which are currently under review or are in the process of being revised. The introduction of a new element of new towns outside the existing planning framework is a recipe for confusion.

6. The lack of strategy extends to finance. The post-war generation of new towns were developed in a relatively benign financial context in which government expenditure involved a higher proportion directed towards housing and urban infrastructure. New town development focuses investment on small areas. If introduced against a background of rising expenditure on housing and urban infrastructure, there are no obvious losers. Introduced in the context of a fixed or declining investment programme as is likely in 2025, the effect is to redistribute investment from elsewhere. The New Towns Taskforce report is silent on the implications for the wider pattern of government expenditure.

7. Before houses are built, a new town requires multiple preliminary steps that will consume professional and administrative capacity when there is already a shortage of relevant skills. Some of the sites, notably South Leeds and Filton in South Gloucestershire already figure in local development proposals, as is shown in the report. However, a new town under unified land ownership and a masterplan will require the same preliminary steps, even if development is already underway.

8. The report shows the 12 new towns as circles on a map. There is no detail. The exact boundaries of the designated area have to be fixed and refined by central government. Some proposals may be lost at this stage. Once the designated area has been fixed, government appoints an implementing agency to prepare a masterplan and start the relevant works. The New Towns Taskforce does not name the legislation that will empower the implementing agency, itself an indication of uncertainty compared to the post-war new towns. The absence of any reference to legislation also means a lack of a definite statement on the terms on which sites will be acquired for development- a crucial determinant of who benefits.

9. The appointment of an implementing agency and preparation of a master plan in turn opens the way to infrastructure provision and then the building of housing. Infrastructure investment in the new towns will be generally substantial involving new roads, improved rail or tramway links and improved energy provision.

10. Civic Voice has other concerns about the new town proposals- about the apparent neglect of biodiversity issues and about the involvement of local people, local groups and local councils. However, our main concern is the way that the proposals do not offer a means of helping alleviate housing shortages and the lack of investment in the short-term and may cause confusion and uncertainty amongst developers and local councils, so reducing investment. In addition and like the more ambitious post-war programme, new towns should not be expected to lead to more than a marginal increase to the national house building performance.

[1] New Towns Taskforce, 2025.

[2] Ibid, p. xviii

[3] Hall et al, 1973, p.358

References

New Towns Taskforce, *Report to Government*, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government on, London, September 2025

Hall, P., Gracey, H., Drewett, R. and Thomas, R. *The Containment of Urban England, Volume Two, The Planning System*, George Allen and Unwin, 1973