



Parliamentary Inquiry Response

New Towns: Creating Communities Written Evidence

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Context

1. Understanding how people feel about the places they live – including what they value and what they want to change – is a vital first step for supporting communities to make plans for their future.
2. We have undertaken three recent overlapping projects at the University of Southampton that address this challenge. [Beyond Bricks and Mortar](#) worked with Test Valley Borough Council (TVBC). It used the [NxtGen Community Researcher Training Programme](#) as a vehicle to assist communities in determining their future development by generating evidence to support individual agency and local ownership. To have communities that work together you need people to drive change, and evidence can support that need. This research, along with the [Mansbridge Heritage Project](#), a collaboration with Abri housing association, demonstrates the importance of heritage in creating communities, with a specific interest in how heritage permeates all aspects of community. We acknowledge the contributions of colleagues and participants across these projects.
3. As a method of co-creation and co-production, these projects created opportunities for meaningful dialogue and trust-building by establishing connections between residents, housing associations, councils, and local government. Rather than relying solely on top-down consultation, NxtGen empowered communities to articulate their priorities with clarity and confidence, helping to shape local futures in ways that are informed, collaborative, and rooted in place.
4. Community researchers used a variety of accessible creative methods, in addition to surveys and interviews, to explore the past, present and future of their places. They found that new development is rarely just about buildings. It is also about identity, belonging, memory, social relationships and how these are connected to the future of the place.

Recommendations

5. The three key recommendations that emerged from this work seek to improve human resilience and wellbeing, enhance social connectedness, promote inclusive planning, support local economic growth, and diversify opportunities for civic engagement and active citizenship.
 - i. We can support residents to plan for the future by understanding how existing communities operate and what they value.
 - ii. Community researchers must be embedded in new communities at the start of their development to establish social connectedness.
 - iii. Heritage is a key driver for leveraging place identity and social connectedness to build new communities and support cohesion.

Committee Questions

- 1. If new towns are to be built in i) inner urban, ii) edge of urban, and iii) rural locations:
 - a. How should the principles of good placemaking adapt in order to build viable places with a positive character and identify?****

Places need to evolve, react and grow, but decisions need to be based on understanding and evidence. Decision-making should be informed not just by use value but by the range of ways in which people value their places and how they link these values to their lived experience. Building new homes should be allied to asset-based community development that goes beyond constructing facilities. It should pay attention to people's needs for physical and social connectedness, and to heritage as a thread that binds past, present and future to create thriving communities.

- b. What are the current barriers to good placemaking in these different locations, and how can they be overcome?**

Residents may not feel confident or equipped to contribute to placemaking initiatives. Formal consultations may feel limiting and disconnected from the everyday realities and concerns of residents. They can also lose the quieter voices. Community-led research and implementation of an asset-based community development lens can, on the other hand, support effective placemaking.

Heritage is important to placemaking because it gives opportunities for people to create shared memories. A lack of heritage in new communities can be mitigated through quick interventions. In Mansbridge, carnivals and community events were remembered as key moments in the life of the place and in residents' own personal biographies. Social infrastructure is as important as built infrastructure.

2. Should new towns be seen as an opportunity to encourage innovative urban design and architecture?

a. If so, what does this mean?

We should invest in heritage-led solutions for the 21st century to help strengthen place attachment and foster the social connectedness and place attachment that communities desire. Build housing that reflects the needs of the community, not just developers, creates opportunities for social innovation that improves connectedness.

b. What lessons can we learn from the experience of other countries?

n/a

3. How can high quality urban design be afforded?

Our research highlighted risks of social fragmentation associated with 'bolt-on' development to existing settlements. Tensions often exist between people living in 'old' and 'new' developments. We should prioritise infill rather than estate development to promote social cohesion and avoid spatial and social divisions. We should provide social activities that bring together people from different spatial locations. We should also locate community assets in places that bridge 'old' and 'new' parts of the settlement so that people 'belong' to both. These interventions are low-cost, and shared social heritage should form a key part of urban design.

4. How can new towns be future-proofed, responding to changing working and lifestyle patterns, emerging economies and new technologies?

People often linked their hopes for the future with things they felt were at risk or already lost. Rather than abstract visions, people imagined futures grounded in connection, care and local continuity.

5. How should nature and biodiversity be incorporated in the development of new towns?

We should celebrate and protect local wildlife, preserving local flora and fauna during development. Protect allotments as valued community green space. Ensure access to rivers for paddling and enjoyment. Use built heritage, as well as natural heritage, as a means of supporting the health and wellbeing of residents. Use the outcomes of archaeology excavation to incorporate biodiversity and support places to improve health and wellbeing.

6. What social and community infrastructure should be prioritised in the early development of new towns and what at a later stage?

Our findings reveal that place-based heritage is critical to a sense of place and to social connectedness. Using heritage as a form of social infrastructure supports place attachment. It offers opportunities for people to come together to create shared memories. It also encourages inter-generational activities. Our research found that these activities were highly valued and supported positive place attachment developed during childhood and adolescence. The NxtGen community research infrastructure should be embedded in communities from the outset to create a sense of heritage through living traditions, not just the built environment.

a. If developing such infrastructure is financially unviable, how can this be overcome?

n/a

7. How can new towns use the built environment to support health and encourage healthy lifestyles, including mental health?

Built and lived heritage is critical to a sense of place that supports health and wellbeing. In Mansbridge, heritage was an important pivot for social connectedness, which is defined as *the extent to which one has meaningful, close, and constructive relationships with others*. Strong social connectedness is vital for health and wellbeing. Residents value spaces, such as allotments, which contribute to their wellbeing because they help to create social networks.

8. How can new towns be designed to ensure they are inclusive and accessible to all groups throughout their lives?

We should listen to the voices of all residents by using multi-layered approaches to information gathering. We should ensure safe footpaths that connect different parts of settlements. In the context of older generations, a community bus, better transport and train stations are key pieces of infrastructure for improving connectivity.

9. What are the critical tools of design governance that should be used to deliver high quality design throughout the development journey of new towns?

Communities should be empowered to conduct qualitative research that equips them and local decision-makers to better understand their places and make

better decisions. There is a need for *a new culture of democratic engagement* that supports the health of democracy through active citizens. We seek to expand the NxtGen programme to develop a network of trained community researchers and build capacity in places. We will pilot flexible engagement models such as evening forums, rotating venues, and 'do-mocracy' projects to suit the needs of different populations.

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