



Built Environment Committee

Corrected oral evidence: New Towns: Practical Delivery

Tuesday 13 May 2025

10.45 am

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Lord Gascoigne (The Chair); Baroness Andrews; Lord Bailey of Paddington; Lord Cameron of Dillington; Lord Faulkner of Worcester; Viscount Hanworth; Baroness Janke; Baroness Miller of Chilthorne Domer; Lord Porter of Spalding; Baroness Warwick of Undercliffe; Viscount Younger of Leckie.

Evidence Session No. 4

Heard in Public

Questions 41 - 59

Witnesses

I: Kane Emerson, Head of Housing Research, YIMBY Alliance; Elizabeth Bundred-Woodward, Planning Policy Manager, Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE); Professor John Sturzaker, Ebenezer Howard Chair of Planning, University of Hertfordshire.

USE OF THE TRANSCRIPT

1. This is a corrected transcript of evidence taken in public and webcast on www.parliamentlive.tv.

Examination of witnesses

Kane Emerson, Elizabeth Bundred-Woodward and Professor John Sturzaker.

Q41 **The Chair:** Good morning and welcome to our fourth meeting of the Built Environment Committee. We have another series of witnesses here today to talk to us about community engagement and how you, in effect, bring the public along with you. Would our guests mind introducing themselves first?

Professor John Sturzaker: I am the Ebenezer Howard Professor of Planning at the University of Hertfordshire. I am doing some work at the moment for the Royal Town Planning Institute on new towns.

Elizabeth Bundred-Woodward: Good morning. I am planning policy manager at CPRE, the countryside charity, and I am a chartered town planner.

Kane Emerson: Good morning. Thank you very much for inviting me today. I am head of housing research at the YIMBY Alliance, which is Britain's leading campaign for more and better homes.

The Chair: Thank you very much. Welcome yet again to you all. We have a series of questions that we will run through. If there are any questions that you feel you do not have an answer to or you agree with whoever has spoken beforehand, please do not feel the need to fill the time. I am conscious of your time and ours.

The first question I want to ask is: what is your initial reaction to the Government's plans for new towns as part of the 1.5 million target that they have? What are your views also on the Government's messaging behind these new towns? Professor Sturzaker, we will start with you.

Professor John Sturzaker: As you might expect me to say, given my job title and the legacy of Ebenezer Howard, I think that new towns are a good idea. Having more of them, well-planned new towns, is also a good idea. I am in favour of that.

In terms of the government messaging about it, there is possibly some way to go on that. I suspect that the public understanding of new towns and the public perception of new towns is still, I guess, mixed, to say the least. I think that there is a lot more that we could be doing to raise the profile and talk about the positive dimensions of new towns.

Elizabeth Bundred-Woodward: We support the ambition for lots more homes. We recognise that there is a housing crisis, and not just a housing crisis but a rural housing crisis, which is something we need to address. However, the messaging has not been entirely positive from our point of view. Labelling people as blockers and pitting nature against the need for new homes I do not think is helpful and is not helpful with cut-through in the public.

Like with the planning Bill, it would be good to understand the ambition and the vision for the new town programme. Previous programmes focused on public health. We had the healthy new towns programme and, of course, eco-towns under the previous Labour Government. It is unclear what the story is here, so the Government need to set that out and to bring people on board. In areas or locations where towns have been leaked to the press or what have you, there are understandable concerns that, again, have not really been addressed. The Government could set out how they will deal with issues such as water scarcity and inadequate public transport. That would go some way to alleviating some of that initial opposition.

Kane Emerson: We are wholly supportive of the ambition for 1.5 million homes and obviously new towns are just one component of that. I am a yimby—"yes in my backyard". I support densification, but new towns are an interesting and good way to create new development in regions that need new homes. For example, if you look at places like Cambridge or Oxford, an urban extension would do a lot to alleviate some of the housing need in those areas.

Picking up some of the points on nature and building, I do not think that those are mutually exclusive. We can build new towns that put nature at the heart. If you look at Milton Keynes, when the Milton Keynes Development Corporation finished and handed over to the local authority, it created a parks trust. Milton Keynes has some of the best parks in this country and that is because of the development corporation in the new town that went before it.

If we are looking at some of the messaging from the Government at the moment in terms of the urgent need to act on the housing crisis, it is very strong and I am very supportive of that. As for new towns, it has been cautious and limited, but we do not know where these new town sites are yet. It makes entire sense that the New Towns Taskforce is engaging with industry, charities and local authorities. I think that is a good approach.

Q42 **Baroness Warwick of Undercliffe:** Good morning and thank you. It is very nice to meet you all. I would like to focus on the Government's target for social homes because there seems to be general recognition, and perhaps you could say whether you agree, that the major problem that we have in this country is affordable homes. I mean socially affordable homes, not 80% of market price or whatever. First, my question to you all is: do you agree with that? If you do, I will go on to ask you about new towns, but what is your approach to rural communities in particular? What are your solutions to assist the Government in ensuring that we are better at building?

Focusing on new towns now, the proposed new towns have a target size of 10,000 homes, 40% of which should be affordable homes, with an emphasis on social rent. Do you agree with those targets as well? There are two parts to that question. Perhaps I will start with YIMBY. I would like to start with a positive if possible.

Kane Emerson: Yes. On the question of 40% affordable housing, I think that is incredibly important. We do have 1.2 million on social housing waiting lists in this country. With new towns, there is an enormous amount of land value uplift that happens in these places. If you take an agricultural acre in rural Cambridgeshire, you are looking at a market price of £20,000 per acre. When you convert that to residential use, we are talking about 50 or 100 times its value, and 40% affordable housing is a good way to capture some of that by requiring the landowner to contribute and provide a community asset. We see this quite a lot in London with Section 106 agreements, where the land value uplift is so great that developers can provide 40% or 50% affordable and a quite significant component of that is social.

I would just say on the social versus affordable that it is important to have a real mix because, first, there is a squeezed middle. For example, if you take a household earning £50,000, that might seem quite a bit but in certain parts of the United Kingdom that would not be enough to give you a home. You are seeing that with real shortages of nurses in places like Bristol, Oxford and Cambridge. It is important to have a mix. It is also important to have a mix for the success of these communities. Poundbury might be considered one of the most successful new town developments. The Guinness Trust did tenant and resident satisfaction surveys and it found that those social homes in Poundbury were the most satisfied and the happiest social tenants.

On the target size of 10,000 homes, it is important to consider the population size of the commuting metro area. The most successful new towns, such as Milton Keynes, slotted into regions with strong economies and good transport links.

Elizabeth Bundred-Woodward: First, and I think that you hinted at it in your question, we need to address the issue of the term “affordable housing”. It is wholly misleading. It enables developers, as Kane said, to hit their affordable housing quota via Section 106 without providing homes that people on lower incomes or in receipt of housing benefit can actually afford. Often the affordable homes delivered are shared ownership with a discount market rent, which is 80% of market rent—so not affordable. Even intermediate products such as shared ownership are still not affordable. I know from personal experience. I have tried to apply for shared ownership; I could not afford it. We want the Government to set a statutory definition for affordable housing and make it clear who those homes are for.

As for targets, these need to reflect local context, as you mentioned—rural context. We need to take account of rural needs. We want to see detailed housing needs assessments. We have spoken to various rural housing enablers. They literally go door to door. They speak to people and they understand the exact housing needs in the area. In certain areas there will be a higher need for social rented homes, homes for multigenerational households or homes for older people. This should be reflected in targets set for these new towns. Targets need to adequately

reflect the data available. We support a minimum baseline. The Government removed the 10% minimum baseline from the NPPF in December last year. We would like to see that reinstated. It ensures a fallback position for councils that perhaps do not have their local plans in place or fully up to date.

I think that the size will likely be determined by site-specific constraints, so motorways or railways, but we also want to think about nature, ancient woodlands, flood plains and things like that. I do not think that it is necessarily helpful to set rigid numbers for each new town. We are also anticipating that a lot of the new towns would be urban extensions and they are likely to be significantly smaller than 10,000 homes.

To your point around assisting the Government in understanding rural communities, we need to understand rural benefits and what rural economies can bring to the national economy. The Government are talking a lot about economic growth but do not seem to recognise the economic growth that rural areas can bring if we understand that and set policy. We would like to see much more emphasis on rural.

Professor John Sturzaker: I agree with most of what has been said. It is very important to be evidence led on these things, in terms of both affordable housing provision and, as Elizabeth mentioned, size—10,000 is not very big for a new town. If you wanted a stand-alone new town like the traditional ones, you might be looking at 10 or 20 times that. The things we are talking about here might be urban extensions or a network—what Professor Sir Peter Hall used to call a social city: a network of smaller 10,000 population communities linked together by good public transport. That is very important, as much as the size of these things. Are they on public transport? Are we trying to get away from car-based development to things that are more accessible, where if people want to use public transport they can. That is the size issue.

In terms of affordable housing, again I agree with what has been said. However, it is important not just to have a target of 40% or whatever it is but to ensure that that is adhered to in the final development so we do not see that watered down through arguments about viability and so on, which quite often happens at the moment with market-led housing.

Baroness Warwick of Undercliffe: Based on your experience, what advice would you give to the Government on that?

Professor John Sturzaker: I would say give local authorities or decision-makers—I know we will come to who makes the decisions on these things later on—the ability to ensure that affordable housing quotas are adhered to and good design is kept to. At the moment, I feel that the balance is too tilted in favour of viability and reducing the cost to developers. If we are going to have a new generation of new towns, they need to be good quality. They need to be places that we want people to be living in now and for 50 or 100 years, not the opposite of that.

Elizabeth Bundred-Woodward: In London, for example, they have applied something called an early and late stage review mechanism. Even if the developer at planning stage is saying that they cannot afford XYZ, once they have started building out they then have to demonstrate that what they have assessed and stated at planning stage is true. If, indeed, they are making higher profits, then some of those profits are recouped for affordable housing. There are ways in which you can recoup more throughout the planning process to make sure that they are adhering to those targets.

Kane Emerson: On the viability question, it would be very helpful if development corporations are more proactive on capturing some of the land value uplift. If you look at the example of Ebbsfleet, Ebbsfleet is fully reliant on private developers. That is where you get into discussions about viability and negotiations. If you look at successful developments such as Eddington in Cambridge, that was developed by the university. That is a successful urban extension in Cambridge and that is because there you had a trusted partner. That is something to consider when we are planning these communities.

Q43 **Baroness Andrews:** I have a quick follow-up. It is very good to see you all. In relation to the first question, Elizabeth picked up the point about the narrative—the message. I think that you said it was not clear enough. You said it ought to be a more ambitious vision or a more clear vision. You began to unpack that in relation to Lady Warwick’s question about the number of homes we need. Do you think that there is, in fact, a single narrative? You raised the issue of growth, which is part of the dual ambition: growth plus housing. What could we do in relation to what you have said about who these homes are for? What should the Government be saying in relation to their own ambitions? How do they make that message clearer so that it is less oppositional, as it were? In particular, in the rural context, should there be a slightly different message for rural communities, which reflects the fact that the Government do understand that these are specific sets of issues in a different context?

Elizabeth Bundred-Woodward: We have found the rhetoric highly unhelpful. Planning is not a blocker. It helps deliver high-quality places. We want the Government to set out an ambitious, positive vision for planning. The planning system was established by a revolutionary and radical Labour Government. We want to see the same thing and we want to be supportive of proposals. We are supportive of any ambition to address the affordable housing crisis and specifically the rural housing crisis. We know rates of rural homelessness are rising. Rural social housing waiting lists take about 80-odd years to clear. This is a serious issue and new towns can form part of that.

Simply focusing on targets and speed will not deliver standards. What we are missing is discussion around design quality, climate change and nature. As Kane said, we do not need to pit nature against housing; we can have both. We do not need to reinvent the wheel here. The eco-towns programme under new Labour had a clear message—healthy new towns as well. We can argue and debate the success of each of those, but

there was an overall vision that is lacking at the moment. We know that for developments that are well designed and take account of local context, objections tend to be reduced when those schemes—and I am sure we will come on to it with other questions—take account of local context and local vernacular, when they are higher quality, when they are energy efficient and when they are affordable homes. If the Government do not want to see objections, they need to start thinking about that sort of thing.

Kane Emerson: On the question of narrative, I think that the narrative of growth is a good rallying one in terms of building out that coalition. Of course, not everyone is in housing need. There is significant housing need in this country, but how do you bring the people who already have homes with you? Growth can be a good way to think about that.

On a deeper analysis of what growth means through housing, it is not the sugar rush of giving developers lots of money to build homes. It is about being worker centric, putting workers in the places that they want to be. A big driver of housing costs is that homes-to-jobs ratio. A lot of people could afford a house in Middlesbrough on a London salary, but London salaries do not really exist in Middlesbrough. The reason why housing is much cheaper in Middlesbrough than London is because it has lots of housing but it needs help with the job and economy side. Whereas in the south-east in particular and other places such as Bristol and York, you have the inverse where you have lots of jobs and lots of opportunity but not enough housing.

On the environmental point, it is important to think about how housing can lead us to a more sustainable future. Of course, new homes have higher standards than older homes. Many millions of people in Britain live in Victorian housing that is just awful for environmental sustainability. New homes are much better kitted out. An important bit of that is about how we put those new homes next to public transport links because that is vital for any successful new town.

Professor John Sturzaker: I think that there is a need to try to get a more positive discourse around these things in the public realm. When I am teaching my students, as they start I show them a film that was made by the Government in the 1940s called “Charley in New Town”, which you might have seen. It is very dated but what it shows is an almost utopian aspiration. It talks about some of the things we have heard about now, integrating homes, industry, development, shops and everything else, trying to basically paint planning as a positive thing—as a way to improve everybody’s lives—to bring infrastructure along with homes. That would be helpful to try to get away from, as has been mentioned, the view now. It feels to me as a planner that planning is often portrayed fairly negatively in the press and by some of our elected representatives, which I feel is not necessarily productive.

The Chair: Lord Porter.

Lord Porter of Spalding: Thanks, chair. I could go off on so many

tangents that it is probably best if I do not ask a supplementary question because I will ask several and we will not get through everybody else's questions. It is best I be quiet.

The Chair: There is plenty of time to go yet. Next is Lord Cameron.

Q44 **Lord Cameron of Dillington:** Good morning, everybody. My question is: should it be central government that is specifying the design characteristics of new towns to the developers? If not central government, who should it be? Should there be any commanded specification?

Professor John Sturzaker: I think that there should be standards in, for example, solar panels, insulation and so on. I do not think that central government should be saying what all the new towns should look like in design terms. I think that needs to be reflective of local circumstance. We do not want everywhere looking the same. It is a balance between making sure we meet good standards in insulation and so on, as we have heard about, but allowing flexibility so that design should reflect the places that these new communities are being built in.

Lord Cameron of Dillington: Can you not even put criteria into design, such as green space or something?

Professor John Sturzaker: That would be part of the standard. Yes, you might include standards around green space, access to public transport, cycle lanes, insulation as I have mentioned, and renewable energy provision, for example. It is a fine line between that and getting into things that I think would be too specific to determine at a national scale. That is my take on it.

Viscount Hanworth: Would you like to see something like the Parker Morris standards re-implemented?

Professor John Sturzaker: Yes, we would like to see those sorts of things—whether it is those specifically or the standards for new homes that we had until 2011 or 2012. Those standards should be the ones we are looking for.

Elizabeth Bundred-Woodward: We agree. Local context is important; otherwise, you end up with homogenous developments that all look the same. However, setting some good design quality standards is important. We already have this in the form of the *National Model Design Code* and the *National Design Guide*. They set out clear, helpful guidance. They have examples of what good looks like and how it should be applied, and they are for use across the board by local authority planners, stakeholders and developers. Neither document has any statutory weight in planning decisions, so the use of them is inconsistent across the board. The Government might want to think about giving them a bit more weight. A model design code for new towns would be sensible, setting out some minimum expectations for the standards.

Then whoever is delivering these new towns—we might come on to this—or urban extensions, whether it is a development corporation, county council or some combination of both, needs to be able to set design standards as well. The London Legacy Development Corporation had a local plan for the area and it had some great policies around tall buildings and design quality. South Cambs county council adopted an area action plan for Northstowe healthy new town in 2007 and that set out some key principles that needed to be adhered to throughout the development process. That is particularly crucial when it comes to conditions and spades on the site stage.

Lastly, we have been promised these national development management policies that came through the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act. It would be great to see a design quality NDMP setting minimum standards for housing quality across the country, including rural England, which takes, we would argue, more than its fair share of new development. One of the main reasons for opposition to development is poor quality. Trust has been eroded in lots of communities, so if there is a genuine commitment from the Government to high-quality design across these new towns, that would go some way in restoring public trust.

Kane Emerson: I suppose there are lots of trade-offs. If we require much higher standards on new towns than currently exist, then there is a trade-off there on how we use value. If it were up to me, all new towns would be Lutyensesque 1930s arts and crafts, but when we talk about aesthetics we risk becoming almost pub bores. In terms of how we use the space, I think that is important. The master planning element is crucial for a well-functioning, integrated community. The Government would have to do that if they look to create a new town, particularly through a special development order. They would have to look at master planning.

Q45 **Viscount Younger of Leckie:** I want to move on towards the moment where new towns are happening. It has been alluded to already that new towns can take two forms, to put it rather crudely: the urban extension or the stand-alone ones. This is about communities and I know that in this committee we are putting great store on building communities. We know that if communities work well and they are in well-designed homes that are of good quality, that then leads on to better mental health, particularly in the early years, leading on to them staying in the communities. My question is quite simple. What thought should be given to building communities and to consulting with those who are moving in or about to move in? What can be done to form the community? It is quite a big question and it has to start before the homes are built.

Kane Emerson: I have a small thought on this. Primarily, you need to place the new homes where people already live. Most people like the Government to help them live the lives they already live rather than create any new existence for them. The idea of a pioneer is quite romantic, but if we look at Milton Keynes or Basingstoke, that was lots of Londoners who needed to be within a distance of London for familial or work connections. That is how those new towns have been so successful.

On the other side, if you look at a place like Skelmersdale, it had a real, significant struggle in the late 20th century with working-class deterioration. It was almost a forcible removal of the working-class population by cities. Therefore, they have not been as successful in health, economic or job opportunities. The best way to create good, well-integrated communities is by putting them in the right location.

Viscount Younger of Leckie: As a follow-up question, you mentioned Poundbury earlier; are you suggesting, without putting words into your mouth, that Poundbury has been less successful in that respect and that stand-alone new towns are not so successful?

Kane Emerson: There is scope for stand-alone new towns but it is much smaller. There is a lot of housing need in the local area of Poundbury. The local authority was quite supportive and it is also very helpful if your developer is His Majesty the King. There is a certain aesthetic to it that draws people in. However, I would say that is the exception rather than the rule.

Elizabeth Bundred-Woodward: At CPRE we talk about meaningful consent. This requires genuine engagement with people rather than consultation, which often feels like a tick-box exercise and quite tokenistic to residents. This involves early discussions with as broad a range of people as possible. Once locations have been decided, we would expect the mayoral authority, development corporations or whomever to hold engagement sessions across the region, which will enable those who do not necessarily live in the location identified to have a say early on in the proposals.

We would also recommend looking at council housing waiting lists and engaging with these people, understanding their housing needs so you can adequately plan for that. It is perhaps useful to do a bit of a soft callout for interest in new towns if they are stand-alone. As Kane says, at CPRE we are brownfield first and we would like to see a genuine commitment to using brownfield sites first so you already have a community. For those stand-alone settlements, those interested could perhaps have a dedicated website or social media. That has been done in the past—Northstowe in Cambridgeshire, for example. Those updates should be positive, again setting out the vision and ambition—why do people want to move here and how will your quality of life be improved if you choose to move here?—rather than the usual communication that is primarily around offsetting negative impacts rather than the positive benefits that this new community could bring.

Viscount Younger of Leckie: That is helpful. Just before I move on to John, are we not talking about sustainable communities? It is all very well engaging people before they move in, but it is really to try to set things up for these communities, whatever they are called, to continue meeting. There probably needs to be a town hall or a village hall or something. John, what are your thoughts on that?

Professor John Sturzaker: You have taken the words out of my mouth. That is what I was going to say. It is important that the infrastructure to support these communities is going in before or at the very least at the same time as new housing, whether that is a village hall, schools or shops, so that you do not have people living the pioneer lifestyle, which in some of the new towns meant they were walking across muddy tracks to get to their house for the first two or three years until the roads were put in. We need to have an infrastructure-first approach, which is common in other parts of Europe, for example. That helps build that community from the ground up.

Q46 **Lord Porter of Spalding:** On Kane's point about new towns not being the ideal and urban extensions, Stevenage and Thetford were both built with London money to take populations to a place that was nowhere near London, so they do work. Stevenage is a brilliant new town and Thetford is a great new town, but they serve different purposes. They were to allow London population to not be in London. While London is attractive to some people, there are a lot of us who say London for two or three days a week is nice but then the real life is outside of it.

Kane Emerson: Yes—to respond to that, some people choose living outside of big cities for amenity value, I do not dispute that. What makes it helpful, particularly with Stevenage, is that a lot of the East End of London moved out. They may still have family in the East End of London so it is quite important to be at least within a sensible driving or train distance. Stevenage is well connected into King's Cross.

Lord Porter of Spalding: Now it is; it was not.

Kane Emerson: Yes.

Lord Porter of Spalding: The population that moved to Stevenage then were pioneers to go further out. I do not think that we have done any mapping as a country, but where do people land when they hit a new town and where do they move to from a new town? Do they migrate backwards or do they move further out and do their future generations move further out? If we were really bothered about putting people where jobs were, should we not just move all the departments out of London to somewhere else in the country? That in itself would stimulate demand everywhere else—not the tokenistic thing that we do at the moment. Sorry, rather than a debate it should be one question and let us just have a chat.

Kane Emerson: Could I just respond on the point about economics? Housing as a stimulus I think is incredibly expensive and, particularly if you are a Government with fiscal constraints, you do not want to spend hundreds of millions—billions—of pounds to put homes where there is no existing economy. You could spend billions of pounds building more housing in rural Yorkshire, but there is already a surplus of housing in many areas in Yorkshire, Doncaster—

Lord Porter of Spalding: I was suggesting the reverse of that. I was

suggesting that you move the jobs from London to Doncaster. Take a whole department, such as Defra: why does Defra live in town? Defra should be in the country somewhere. Move it all out.

Kane Emerson: I would not dispute the need for economic stimulus through other means, but I do not think that housing is the appropriate way to do that. I often think of or conceptualise the housing crisis as having differing forms and in the most economically productive areas you have a supply shortage. In other areas you have an economic issue where the Government need to spend more on transport to enable better economic connectivity to other cities and towns.

Lord Porter of Spalding: Yes, that worked well; get people back to London quicker.

Q47 **Lord Bailey of Paddington:** Good morning to you all. I will start with Elizabeth. It is likely that the majority of proposed new towns will be urban extensions. How best can the residents of those existing communities be engaged? I ask you that question first because I am a Londoner born and bred so the rural piece is a mystery to me. I am interested in how you connect rural communities together or to big towns. I like the idea of a soft callout and positive consent or positive support. How do you engage people? I am interested in the community that does not exist yet. I am one of the people who think that too much of this is negative. Planning is also talked about negatively, and so are developers, who are putting in lots of their own money—we will need that money. How do we remove some of that negativity at least from the public discourse side?

Elizabeth Bundred-Woodward: First on engagement, we talk about meaningful consent. That involves front-loading engagement. I have done my fair share of sitting in a town hall on a Thursday evening. You get about three people and they are already engaged in the process. As you say, we need to reach out to people and that will require an engagement programme. There are lots of examples of that being done well out there: resident steering groups and design review panels, for example.

I worked on a project in Newham, so London based, where we upskilled the residents. We gave them training in planning and architecture, in MEP engineering and landscape architecture, so that they could meaningfully review the proposals as they were being designed and developed and make positive suggestions for changes. For example, on another scheme, in the earlier phases the landscape architects had gone a bit AWOL and they had put in some play boulders that the kids had not used. In the second phase the residents told us, "We desperately want some swings" and those swings materialised because those residents had been engaged throughout the design development process.

We need to stop looking at engagement in a negative way leading to delays and blockers. It can produce much more positive outcomes if people are genuinely engaged, but it does require going to them. For

example, teenagers tend to prefer online meetings; elderly people tend to prefer meetings in the daytime, weekends and in person. It is meeting people where they are, I would say. That definitely then will help reduce objections. The main reasons for objections to development, from our research, are a lack of trust, a lack of positive engagement, and then around design services and sense of place. Could you repeat the second part of your question?

Lord Bailey of Paddington: The second part is less important because of what you have just said. What does this do to cost? Engagement begins to sound costly. Is that correct?

Elizabeth Bundred-Woodward: Yes, there is obviously a cost to that, but there is also a benefit from it. Doing that cost-benefit analysis, we want these to be positive places where people live. We do not want objections that also lead to costly delays. Judicial reviews lead to costly delays. It is good to bring people on board from the start. We would say that when you do that it leads to much more positive outcomes for the local population and, indeed, the new population moving in.

Q48 **Lord Bailey of Paddington:** Professor, I will talk about something specific with you. On the positive reason for moving to a place, it sounds to me like infrastructure could be a big part of that conversation. Has that happened enough? Could it be important to promote a new town?

Professor John Sturzaker: In short, no, it has not happened enough and, yes, it could be important. The way that planning works at the moment is very adversarial. Around where I live, I make a hobby of taking pictures of protest signs and opposition signs saying, "No development here". Everywhere you go, that happens at the moment. That is partly because of the way development is happening in a not terribly well-planned way. New towns should be planned coherently and consistently and involve infrastructure as well as housing. That is often one of the objections we are getting: "We are getting new housing built here but the GP surgery is already full, the roads are full and the trains are full". If you are providing new infrastructure, that is a better deal for communities than pepper-potting of lots of small housing developments, which is essentially what is happening at the moment over much of south-east England.

Q49 **Lord Bailey of Paddington:** Kane, I will quickly come to you again about the economic cost. Engagement is beginning to sound as if it could save money, could promote new towns and could make the planning process simpler and cheaper. Planning is where things often fall down just because of the sheer cost and objections.

Kane Emerson: The issue that a lot of builders have with engagement and consultation at the moment is that it heightens risk and it elongates the process. Where engagement and consultation are important is where you build a coalition of people who are in support of new homes. Elizabeth made a good point about a soft callout and finding who the people are in that local area who would naturally be incentivised to

support housing. Those are people such as overcrowded households and people on the social housing waiting list.

Q50 Baroness Miller of Chilthorne Domer: Good morning. You have touched quite a lot on a variety of ways that opposition to the idea of a new town could be overcome. I was especially struck, John, with your mention of a promotional film from the 1940s. First, I would like to know whether you think that the Government should be doing more very active promotion of the idea. Secondly, you just touched on the issue of worry about services being overwhelmed. Would you like to say a little bit more about how you think the services could be front-loaded in a way, so that people moving in are not left with no doctor for ages and so on?

Professor John Sturzaker: To take the first part of the question, I think that there is much more that could be done to promote the positive aspects of planning and development, specifically new towns. Again, I talked about "Charley in New Town" but I suggest something like that—a public information campaign that says these are positive things and will make life better for people. That is what planning is trying to do, in my view. More of that is only a good thing.

In terms of how we plan infrastructure alongside housing, I guess what I would be arguing for as a planner—no surprise—is more planning. The Government are introducing spatial development strategies, a new form of sub-regional planning across England. I think that is a good thing. Large-scale new development should be planned through the new spatial development strategies so it is not divorced from other considerations like infrastructure and some of the ones you have mentioned, and so that we are looking across local authority boundaries. There has been a tendency in the last decade or so for each local authority to try to contain its own smoke, as it were. Looking across boundaries, thinking about how we move people between places, how we think about jobs provision and so on across boundaries is the only sensible way you can plan at the scale we are talking about. One and a half million houses over this Parliament will need that integrated thinking.

Baroness Miller of Chilthorne Domer: Can I follow up on something you said, Elizabeth? Consulting with council waiting list people, that is probably one already hard-to-reach group because they may not have a fixed address anyway. Do you have some examples of how to reach the hard-to-reach groups that you would want to consult with? They might be those in the most housing need, for example. You have mentioned teenagers online and so on. Can you give more examples of those?

Elizabeth Bundred-Woodward: There are community engagement consultants right across the country who are far more qualified than me, but I will give it my best shot.

It is recognising that people are not homogenous. Rural communities are not homogenous. Therefore, why would you choose a one-size-fits-all approach to consultation and engagement? We need to recognise generational differences, as you say. Perhaps people do not have access

to the internet, so just posting everything online is not helpful. That is why there has been pushback in some rural areas against having those planning notices tied to trees and lamp-posts. It feels very antiquated but not everybody is online and has access to the internet. We need to make sure that we are covering all bases.

An example that I did very recently back in the north-west in Cheshire is we plopped a table in the middle of the village centre and just spoke to people about what was going on in their area, what they thought was working well and what was not. It is having those conversations. Planning is often seen as primarily negative, unfortunately, by the Government, politicians and the media, but the public do not necessarily have a view. It is seen as something quite technical and far away. When you start talking about planning consultations, people probably switch off. If you start the question with, "What do you like about your area? What would you like to see? What do you think the problems are?" you are much more likely to have an effective conversation with people. It is about connecting with people where they are rather than where you want them to be, I suppose.

Kane Emerson: To also comment on the same question, there is a theme of planning as being negative, and consultation and engagement is a large component of that. Yimbys are disproportionately younger and do not own a home and therefore do not have any form of housing security. Current engagement and consultation processes in the planning system tend to have a wealthier, older group that engage with the process, and those who do not have a home often feel left out. I think that doing the soft callout is quite important.

If you look at London, for example, in another area of housing, you have estate regeneration. Since 2017-18 you have had estate ballots where residents get to vote on whether they regenerate their estate. That has been very good in engaging residents who have a stake in where they live to vote for development. I am not suggesting that for new towns, but, with the simple act of planners or advocates knocking on people's doors and asking opinions, you tend to get a much more representative view. YouGov did polling in October 2023, even before new towns were really on the agenda, and it found that 53% were in support of the idea of new towns.

On services, land value capture is very important to ensure that we can pay for services. The ideal situation is where the Government are acting proactively either through land assembly or as a development corporation doing a joint venture with a private developer and getting some cash up front to lay the groundwork for GP clinics and schools. Providing services is incredibly important. If you look at some of the stories about new towns that are not seen as nice places to live, often it is because they lack any form of community assets—even a pub. Those are important for people to have.

Q51 Lord Faulkner of Worcester: Continuing this theme, I am particularly interested in Elizabeth's answer to that last question. It is about the role

of central government versus local government and, indeed, local opposition. The earlier new towns were pushed through by a determined Government and they felt they had the power and the authority to override that opposition. Do you think that power should be given back to local people now or would that stop the new town development in its tracks?

Elizabeth Bundred-Woodward: We already know there are clauses around development corporations within the Planning and Infrastructure Bill, so we are anticipating particularly the stand-alone new towns to be delivered by development corporations. We would expect to see them be locally led and democratically accountable. They cannot be making decisions behind closed doors. There needs to be adequate engagement, consultation and public scrutiny—everything that we would expect.

Urban extensions and perhaps others will be delivered by county councils. We are expecting devolution and the English devolution Bill to come up. We know that the Government are also planning spatial development strategies akin to the *London Plan*. Essentially, the process needs to be plan led and democratically accountable, as we would expect our democratic planning system to be and to operate.

Lord Faulkner of Worcester: Yes, but what happens if there are two different groups claiming democratic accountability? You may have residents and local councillors taking one view but central government may have a firm policy. I would like Kane's view on this. I suspect you are prepared to see government take central powers if it is necessary to get this programme through, are you not?

Kane Emerson: If we are talking about democracy, I think the Government have a democratic mandate to tackle the housing crisis: 1.5 million was actively campaigned on. There is a democratic mandate for central government to provide homes for people who currently do not have them.

As for local opposition, it is important to bring people along with you and build a coalition. That is some of the stuff that we are talking about with those people on the waiting lists. Local authorities are very keenly aware of their social housing waiting list and their temporary accommodation bill. In 2022-23 local authorities spent £1.7 billion on temporary accommodation, so there is a real strong incentive for local authorities to support new homes in their area, particularly if 40% of those are affordable.

If we are looking at the past versus now, most of the opposition in previous new towns focused on compulsory purchase orders rather than the concept of the new town itself. Ideally, land will be assembled and purchased not necessarily at market rate but CPOs are used as a backstop rather than the main method of acquiring land.

Q52 **Lord Faulkner of Worcester:** I have a question for John. As a bit of personal history, I worked for a new town development corporation many

years ago and the icon for senior officers of that corporation was Ebenezer Howard. What do you think Ebenezer Howard would make now of how these new towns have developed?

Professor John Sturzaker: I get that question quite a lot about various aspects of planning. What I normally say and the obvious answer is I have no idea. He died nearly 100 years ago. His ideas emerged at the end of the 19th century in a very different context to that which we have now, but there are some similarities: housing shortages, problems in cities and problems in rural areas. He espoused principles as much as the design—you can look at Letchworth and Welwyn Garden City. Some people like them and some people do not, but his principles translate—among them land value capture, as we have heard about.

I have no doubt that he would be bewildered by the state of the world now. He grew up in a completely different time, but I think that he would recognise the ambition of the new towns programme and see the desirability of that. He was very much in favour of bottom-up development, building a coalition perhaps, as we have heard. He was not so much in favour of state intervention, but we are in a different period of time now than we were 127 years ago.

Q53 **Baroness Andrews:** I have a very specific question to do with the Planning and Infrastructure Bill. I applaud what you say about the creative possibilities of planning and the way it can be used to imagine a better future and deliver it. There are some contradictions within the Planning and Infrastructure Bill. For example, there is a reduction of consultation processes. First, how do you think that now relates to what you have been saying? Secondly, although it liberates, it takes us back to where we were 15 years ago on spatial planning. There are things within the Bill that you probably think could be improved in order to deliver more expeditiously some of the things that the Government want to do in relation to new towns. I would like to know how you feel about that and what you might be proposing to do in the context of that.

Kane Emerson: Picking up on the Planning and Infrastructure Bill and some of the reforms to consultation, I think that we all agree that planning should be outcomes focused. It should deliver the good communities and the good homes that we want. The Planning and Infrastructure Bill does reform and cut down the time to do nationally significant infrastructure projects such as water reservoirs. I think that is incredibly important. Water scarcity is a huge issue in the south-east of England, not even just for delivering new homes but looking further into the future it will start impacting everyday life. We already have hosepipe bans in the south for a good portion of summer every year. The Government's focus on reforming that in order to deliver the outcomes of having drinking water coming through a tap is important.

Elizabeth Bundred-Woodward: Perhaps unsurprisingly, we are not overly keen on the changes. I think that the changes are using a hammer to crack a nut: the removal of the national scheme of delegation planning committees and the removal of applications being done by planning

committee. We know that over 90% of applications are already delegated. The delays that are added by schemes going to planning committees are minimal. In terms of public consultation on schemes, the public have 21 days to respond to planning applications. They are not the reason for planning delays. They are not the reason for homes not being built. We are entirely looking at the wrong thing.

Sir Oliver Letwin did a review in 2018. He found that it was the homogenous nature of the housing stock that we build and something called the market absorption rate—namely, a small number of volume housebuilders are controlling the price, drip-feeding the market. That is the cause of the housing crisis. It is not people commenting on planning applications.

CPRE will be supporting amendments to those clauses and opposing reductions in consultation. It is important that there is public scrutiny on decisions that affect the public interest.

Baroness Andrews: In summary, you do not think that the Bill will make much difference to the delivery of the new towns plan.

Elizabeth Bundred-Woodward: There is very little in the Bill on new towns.

Baroness Andrews: Yes, it is just the delivery of housing.

Elizabeth Bundred-Woodward: I think that part 5 covers development corporations. In terms of delivering homes, no, it focuses entirely on the wrong thing. Again, it is focused on this very negative rhetoric that planning is a blocker and that people who are concerned about homes being built on flood plains, for example, are blockers rather than having legitimate concerns. There is very little on affordable housing as well, which we all know is a key issue. We are also supporting amendments to redefine affordability.

Professor John Sturzaker: I have to agree. I think that it is a mistake to blame public consultation for delays. Making a planning system less democratic is, I would say, unwise and usually not desperately popular.

Most opposition is not self-interested nimbyism as it is often portrayed. A lot of opposition to development comes from some of the things we have heard about: concerns about infrastructure, design and affordable housing. The way you address that is by listening to what people are saying and meeting them where they are, as Elizabeth said, trying to find ways to ensure that new development addresses those concerns and not trying to ignore them. The political pushback from that I think will be enormous. We have seen previous attempts to streamline the planning system and avoid consultation, and what tends to happen is it gets watered down in the face of local opposition.

Baroness Andrews: Of course, there is a difference between consultation as it is set out in terms of a planning application and the public engagement that you have so strongly advocated and the

intelligent ways that you want to see it happen. I think that it is important to make that clarification, Chair. Thank you very much.

- Q54 **The Chair:** Before we move on, I have a quick question to both Elizabeth and Kane. Kane, I will start with you. You mentioned in one of your previous answers that the Government were democratically elected on the 1.5 million. Obviously, the Government have not stated where those sites would be and there will come a point, and perhaps we are there now, in the electoral cycle where you will have local elections with their own equal democratic mandate. For example, where we are now, there will be some that will have specific views that may run counter if the Government say, "This is where we want to build a new town". How do you balance that? To Elizabeth, equally from a count view, when the Government do say, "This is what we want to do", how do you ensure that from a local point of view, if they have a different view, the two positions are balanced?

Kane Emerson: I suppose the tension between the local and national is real and there may be some instances where it is insurmountable. However, it is important to build coalitions early on. Local authorities do have a real stake in building new homes in their communities. Enabling the local authority to shape what that looks like and how many social homes it can get out of that is a good incentive.

If we are talking about electoral cycles, it is important to have a local partner committed to the project because it makes it sustainable. It makes it harder for any future government to undo if the local people want it. I think that working with local authorities and local people is very important.

Elizabeth Bundred-Woodward: First, councils are more than incentivised to try to meet it. They have targets that have now increased in many areas, particularly in rural areas, due to a change in the standard method formula. Previously, we were told that new towns would not count towards council targets, and I think that will demoralise councils so I hope that there has been a change in direction in that.

As for getting local government on board with locations, the Government have published a consultation on a land use framework this year. We would like to see the land use framework have a bit more bite and look at spatially where locations are best for new towns or urban extensions, looking at available brownfield sites, directing them there, to Lord Porter of Spalding's point earlier, not just putting them all in the south-east around London but looking to address regional inequality, putting them in the north-west and north-east in areas where we want to see economic growth. It then trickles down, so we would like to see those regional spatial strategies setting out the plan and the ambition for where things are going to go. Then you go through the planning process to the more detailed stages.

- Q55 **Baroness Janke:** We hear that it is quite likely that the new town programme is to be delivered through development corporations. After

what we have been discussing earlier, I just wonder how local people can feel confident that their democratic rights and institutions will have the checks and balances that they need and that they will not feel that the process is in the charge of a development corporation that is largely dominated by developers. How do you feel that will be overcome? I know we have talked about lots of ways of having public engagement and consultation, but there is a danger that you have a forest of institutions that make it much more difficult for local people to get to grips with what is being proposed and to have some form of agency in what happens in the end. I wonder what your views would be on that.

Elizabeth Bundred-Woodward: We do not want to see development corporations ride roughshod over local interests. Development corporations have planning powers akin to local planning authorities. They hold planning committees. I know that Old Oak Common and Ebbsfleet Development Corporation are currently active at the moment. They make sure that a certain number of committee members are local people interested in the local area, who are able to make decisions on plans. It is also making sure that those committee meetings are recorded and are publicly available—that it is not decisions being made behind closed doors, and people feel they have a genuine collective say in the decision-making process.

Professor John Sturzaker: One model that could be worth looking at is the model that national parks are governed by, where you have national park authorities that are a mixture of local representatives and appointees from the Secretary of State in that instance. You have some local voice and then you have some from the national level, with the private sector as well. That mix could give a good balance between local accountability and the national priorities.

Baroness Janke: If there is a feeling on the part of the public that these institutions are being put in place to streamline and prevent what people are calling blockers—what others might see as democratic control—do you believe that public confidence can be restored by simply making sure you have a few local representatives on board or do we need to think of other things?

Professor John Sturzaker: I think that the language of blockers is not helpful. As we have mentioned a couple of times, we need to raise the quality of the debate here and raise the quality of the arguments to get away from simple pro-development or anti-development and talk about what we want the future of these places to be. Most people, as we have mentioned, are not opposed to housing in principle. Most people want more housing, more jobs and better infrastructure. If you can find ways to make the discussion about that as opposed to a simple binary between, “Do you like that particular development or do you not?” then you get a much more positive environment for decision-making.

Baroness Janke: To follow up, you were talking about the importance of good-quality design in response to Lord Cameron’s question about the guidance and advice that was available that is not statutory. Do you feel

that these should perhaps be given stronger teeth? The reputation of so much of the big housing build schemes is so poor and there seems to be very little that people can go and look at and say, "Gosh, I really would like to live there" that perhaps we ought to be more reassuring on quality of design and build.

Elizabeth Bundred-Woodward: Absolutely. Fortuitously, CPRE did a housing design audit in 2020 with Place Alliance. We found that across 142 schemes new housing design was overwhelmingly poor. Against the 17 criteria that were set out in the audit, one in five schemes should have been refused permission. The quality that is being delivered at the moment is not good enough and I think that is one of the reasons why there is low trust in development from the public sector. We would love the Government to recommission a new audit to see whether we have improved on that or, I hope, not got worse.

In terms of the *National Design Guide*, yes, this needs more teeth. We know that national development management policies are coming through, so perhaps we could have a high-quality design or place-making policy there. I do not think that there is sufficient emphasis in the National Planning Policy Framework either on the need for high-quality design and for recognising context, character, local vernacular and all these things that people care about. It is missing from national policy at the moment.

In terms of the new towns and restoring interest in development corporations, it is important that they are still plan led. It should not just be top down. There needs to be a planned process and that should involve enshrining design quality from the start.

Q56 **Lord Bailey of Paddington:** I want to return to this question of government power or decision-making. Who should ultimately have the say? I live on an estate that is brand new—what I like to call a Lego estate. The locals thoroughly hated it, but everybody who lives there seems to love it dearly, so somebody had to say no to the locals and yes to the future locals. Who should that power lie with? I would argue that the Government have the ultimate democratic mandate to say, "This will happen". Once you get past the point where you cannot get local agreement or alliance, do you believe that the Government have the right to say, "We will do it anyway"?

Elizabeth Bundred-Woodward: If they followed a plan-led process, if they have genuinely utilised their land-use framework, if they have looked at where the best places for these locations are, and if they have looked at affordability and design, then we should be supportive. CPRE and local people do not want to oppose developments by and large. We all know that we need housing, but it needs to be good quality and we are right to point out when it is not or when it is—

Lord Bailey of Paddington: We can all agree that it should be good quality, but as a practising politician I can tell you that people can be difficult. Do the Government have the right to say it will happen? Do you

believe they have the right to do that? That is all I am asking.

Professor John Sturzaker: Yes, I think so. In the fairly centralised country that we have, I think that ultimately the decision has to remain with central government.

Kane Emerson: Yes, ultimately. I can take you to places across the UK with existing housing that is very poor quality—slum-like conditions, overcrowding, poor insulation, people sharing rooms and working people sharing rooms because they cannot afford a home of their own. We have a quality issue, but it is our current housing stock that has a huge quality issue. I am very supportive of new housing built to the standards that we have.

On the question of public trust, public trust in lots of different areas, not just planning, has been eroded. Sometimes we put too much emphasis on the process rather than the outcomes. This is outside of housing, but look at the Lower Thames Crossing and what we spent on the idea, the preparation, the consultation and the shuffling of papers between bureaucrats' desks—on coming up with it. Meanwhile, other countries have built impressive infrastructure projects using that same amount of money. If you look at a country like France, the UK has 4.3 million fewer homes than France. If we built at the French rate of building, we would have 4.3 million more homes, and that would be transformative for young people across the country.

Q57 **Viscount Hanworth:** It has been suggested that new towns might benefit from having local champions. Do you think that this is an effective strategy and, if so, how can these individuals be identified? We have had several examples from the past to draw upon. Perhaps the most egregious of these was T Dan Smith, or "Mr Newcastle", if people can remember. Professor John Sturzaker may have the longest perspective on such matters.

Professor John Sturzaker: Yes—having studied and lived in Newcastle for some time, T Dan Smith is, to say the least, a divisive figure. I suppose that is the risk if you have individuals championing new towns. You would, I hope, have checks and balances in place to stop some of the things that happened then. Even without those, there is a risk in placing a lot of emphasis on individuals because individuals are always divisive. Some people will like them; some people will not. Social media being what it is, no doubt 10 years ago they posted something they should not have done on Twitter and you can lose the support you might have behind something.

To be honest, I am a bit sceptical about associating things with individuals. It is about building a coalition of support for new towns through the strategic and local planning systems. That would be my favoured approach rather than necessarily tying things to key individuals for those reasons.

Viscount Hanworth: There are good examples of individual leadership

from abroad—in the Netherlands, for example. Do you perceive that or do you deny it?

Professor John Sturzaker: You are quite right. If you have key local figures like powerful mayors—Andy Burnham in the north-west context, and Steve Rotherham, for example—they are important figures for local democracy and so on. I think that there might be a difference between that and saying that this person will be the champion for new town X, which is slightly different in my view.

Viscount Hanworth: Are there other opinions?

Kane Emerson: Yes. An easy way to find a local champion is walking into the local NHS trust or a local primary school. Institutions rather than people can be very powerful advocates for more new homes. You have this, for example, in the universities of Oxford and Cambridge, which find it incredibly difficult to recruit junior researchers because even a highly educated junior researcher cannot find a home in the local area. You find a lot of support for new homes from employers and local institutions.

Elizabeth Bundred-Woodward: We would say no to individuals. I suspect they would be people who are already engaged in the process. As we spoke about previously, pioneer groups or people who are not usually involved in the planning process are heavily impacted by it. It is important to get a diverse range of views, so perhaps have more of a steering group of a diverse range of local champions.

It is important that different voices, different needs and different backgrounds are represented in the planning process. If it is just determined by a homogenous group of people, the development is unlikely to meet the needs of others. It is important that people with disabilities are represented. It is important that older people and younger people are represented. For that, you do have to go out to them. We would oppose placing an individual in charge of championing a development.

Viscount Hanworth: Thank you. That sounds very judicious.

The Chair: Thank you very much. Our final question is from Baroness Andrews.

Q58 **Baroness Andrews:** The basic question is: how will we make this work and how will we guarantee that these are long-term projects? They will take a long time before people move in and the community feels settled and so on. During that time we could have at least two elections. Issues will change; priorities will change. The funding structures will change and so on. You have set out a lot of the prescriptions for what makes a success for new towns, whether they are new towns or extensions. If you could briefly summarise the one thing that you think is critical to ensure sustainability in the long term for these communities that will be created, what would it be?

Professor John Sturzaker: I will wave the flag for planning again. Strategic planning, thinking in the long term and building support in that way is critical. I think that you will get nowhere without that.

Elizabeth Bundred-Woodward: I would be inclined to somewhat agree. We need to make sure that they are plan led. We know that planning does produce good outcomes, but it is also a question of ensuring we are able to hold developers or development corporations accountable. It is making sure that whatever plans are set out at the start are adhered to and that that is what is delivered at the end.

Kane Emerson: Is the new town solving a problem? A new town that is solving a problem in the particular area can guarantee some support from the Government if it will deliver a solution to an enduring issue. It is also ensuring that as many hands as possible are on the shovel. That might be joint ventures or partnerships with local authorities.

Baroness Andrews: Thank you very much. Those are terrific.

Q59 **Baroness Warwick of Undercliffe:** I have one very quick question. Given all the emphasis we have placed on communication and ensuring that people know and understand what is happening and how they will be involved in it, what one thing would you suggest the Government should do when the New Towns Taskforce announces the sites that it has chosen?

Kane Emerson: That is very difficult. I suppose I would not necessarily rush out and do engagement straightaway unless there is a defined boundary and idea of what the governance structure will look like. Once you have that, then go out and talk to local people so they can shape whatever development will take place in their area.

Elizabeth Bundred-Woodward: I would hope that locations would not come as a surprise because they should have been adequately planned and we should be looking for the best places to put them. We at CPRE know that there is sufficient land for 1.2 million homes through urban extensions, looking at brownfield sites and regenerating rural areas. It should be plan led, as I have said.

Baroness Warwick of Undercliffe: I asked for one thing.

Elizabeth Bundred-Woodward: Sorry, yes—I think that engagement is crucial. It comes back to what we spoke about at the start around ambition. What is the vision for this? How will they raise standards? How will they improve people's quality of life? Setting out that story is critical at the start.

Professor John Sturzaker: I would say it is remembering that we do not need to reinvent the wheel. There is lots of excellent practice with the delivery of new settlements in this country and elsewhere. Make sure we are learning from that good practice, which comes back to where I started. That is what the Royal Town Planning Institute is in the process

of doing now, so I would hope that they would listen to experts such as the RTPI.

The Chair: Thank you very much. You will be pleased to know that that is the end of this session. Thank you so much for your time today. We all massively appreciate it.