



Built Environment Committee

Corrected oral evidence: New towns: Creating communities

Tuesday 11 November 2025

10.45 am

Watch the meeting

Members present: Lord Gascoigne (The Chair); Baroness Andrews; Lord Bailey of Paddington; Lord Cameron of Dillington; Viscount Hanworth; Baroness Janke; Lord Mawson; Baroness Miller of Chilthorne Domer; Viscount Younger of Leckie.

Evidence Session No. 2

Heard in Public

Questions 17 - 26

Witnesses

I: Will Cousins, Partner, Pooleyville; Lucy Musgrave OBE, Founding Director, Publica; Ben Pentreath, Founder, Ben Pentreath Ltd.

USE OF THE TRANSCRIPT

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

Examination of witnesses

Will Cousins, Lucy Musgrave and Ben Pentreath.

Q17 The Chair: Good morning and welcome to the House of Lords Built Environment Select Committee. We have just started our next module in the new towns inquiry, where we are looking at placemaking and what makes communities. Today, we have two panels. The first one is about to start with us. The second one will be in a short while. We are going to be focusing on design and what high-quality and good design looks like. How do we make it a reality? How do we reflect local issues, characteristics and heritage? Today, we have three witnesses who are with us. One is online. Perhaps, Ben, you could briefly introduce yourself and then we can start with Lucy and Will.

Ben Pentreath: Hello, everybody. I am an architectural designer based in London, but working nationally. We have a particular interest, as well as individual houses, in looking at the design of new towns and communities across the country. I have worked in Poundbury extensively for many years, and in master planning new communities at Welborne, which is 6,000 houses in Hampshire, and Tornagrain, which is 5,000 houses near Inverness. This subject is very close to my heart.

Lucy Musgrave: Good morning, everybody. I am from Publica. We are an urban design and public realm practice, looking at the complexity of social infrastructure, public realm and the way that we are addressing character and identity in neighbourhoods in terms of new settlements as well as existing towns and cities. We are based in London. We work across the country, and now internationally, on gender inclusion and the built environment. We have been asked to work for 17 cities around the world to advise on urbanism and some of the issues about inclusion.

We set a lot of policy, so we work with policymakers, because we have a rigorous research methodology about how we survey the complexity of urban neighbourhoods. That research methodology has been robust with regards to an evidence base for statutory decision-makers. We have been identifying some gaps in urban planning around how to make cities child friendly, how to plan and design at night, and how to ensure that our decision-making is participative in terms of civic urbanism and that we are getting the right social infrastructure, as well as the right housing development. We are retained by the GLA here in London, and have been for the last five years, to look at the evening and night-time, and how we design and plan at night. It is a very broad range of subjects.

I am a mayoral design advocate. I am on the committee for Homes England on design quality and sustainability, as well as a number of other roles. That is Publica.

Will Cousins: Good morning, everyone. I am a partner in a small creative agency called Pooleyville, based in Milton Keynes. We are involved in a range of projects around Milton Keynes—we are very locally based—around cultural programming events and supporting those who

come into Milton Keynes with navigating their way through some of the interesting cultural opportunities and challenges that the city presents.

I arrived in that location via having worked at Milton Keynes Development Corporation from the late 1970s through to the mid-1980s as a designer. I then spent four years working at the London Docklands Development Corporation. That took me to work with my good colleague, David Lock, setting up David Lock Associates, an urban planning consultancy based in Milton Keynes. I have deep roots in Milton Keynes and I know that it is one of the subjects of the New Towns Taskforce report.

The Chair: Thank you very much, yet again, for joining us. You are aware that we have a series of questions to get through from the whole committee. I am conscious of your time, so can we all collectively keep questions and answers as short as possible? For me, and many others, it would be great if in your answers you could talk to specific examples of what you have seen throughout your experiences. That would be massively appreciated.

Q18 **Lord Bailey of Paddington:** Good morning to you all. Can and should Government aspire to define what good design is? I think that Governments are bad at almost everything, so for me the answer is no. Lucy almost made me think that the Government should be involved, with some of the stuff she said, just explaining what she has been up to, so I am going to start with you, Lucy.

Taking into account that I think Government should stay away from everybody and everything, particularly design—because I worry that, if we have a Government involved, we will end up looking like Singapore, where all the buildings are the same—should Governments be involved? I suspect that you are going to say yes, so I am more interested in how.

Lucy Musgrave: It is a fantastic question. I think that they should be. I do not think that they are, but they should be, because the built environment is cultural. I just came from an event last night. I was speaking about Theo Crosby. It is 100 years since his birth. I hope that many of you know of Theo Crosby. I really recommend looking into this extraordinary man's career, in terms of culture and participation in the built environment and what it means for civic identity. I strongly believe that we ought to be looking at what works and does not work, in terms of opening up this conversation about the purpose of what we are building and what we need, and involving many people.

When Theo put on an exhibition at the Hayward Gallery in 1973—I brought it here to show you—he used some of the budget for a book. It is called *How to Play the Environment Game*. It is the most accessible, brilliant visual essay for everybody. It was the most popular exhibition that ever happened at the Hayward. This was in a cultural institution, talking about issues of development, new towns, funding, investment, scale, design and many different tools and processes.

When I started my work in the early 1990s, the Arts Council had an architecture unit. My job, eventually running the Architecture Foundation, was to take touring exhibitions with the Arts Council national touring programme. We put on an exhibition in Glasgow Central station about young architects. We took touring exhibitions in vans, just as Theo Crosby and his colleagues did in the 1970s, to many different communities around the country to have public debates about what we are building, how we are building and the role of design in that.

I strongly recommend that the Government should have a position on design. I am sorry to say that I have looked, and I look again, at the NPPF, the new Planning and Infrastructure Bill, the skills agenda, and the new town commission and its excellent report—I look and look and look—and I cannot find the Government's position on design and what design means.

We work internationally and I am very interested in this notion of civic urbanism and social urbanism. Many of our neighbouring countries have very strong design policies. That is not about controlling top-down in terms of what stuff looks like. In fact, I would argue that we have been fettered in this country for the last 40 years by a debate that is irrelevant about style. It is not about design or good design. In other countries, such as Sweden, the Netherlands or Germany, there are big research projects that involve all citizens in subject matters about what we are going to do to build what our society needs.

Lord Bailey of Paddington: Sorry to interrupt you, Lucy; I just wanted to add a bit of direction. None of what you said feels like it needs the Government to do it, other than to facilitate it and make it happen. I think Governments are particularly bad at listening to people, so I am not sure how they are going to listen to people.

My other challenge to you would be about culture. Anybody can give me an example from a place such as Sweden or Denmark, but everybody in Sweden and Denmark is largely the same. It is an opinion. I do not expect you to agree. They are largely the same. They have nothing like the diversity that we have here, on anything such as race or age, or as a young city. How do you facilitate that?

I will take your point that Governments should be involved. The agreement is that they should do something. My point would be that they should allow other people to get on with it. I am asking a direct question: what is the best way for a Government to facilitate being involved in design and having a position, without actually delivering on it? Westminster-based people will not know what people in Devon are interested in and care about.

Lucy Musgrave: Yes, exactly. That is about local participation at a super-local level, in terms of character and identity about a place, married, I would argue, with international examples of what is possible. The reason that it is cultural is that it is about identity. In this country we over consult, but we do not engage. We do not extract the principles of a

place and what the needs assessments are of that community, and translate that spatially into design. Therefore, it is cultural and participative, and it needs the tools and the processes to allow that to happen.

We used to do it very well in this country. I have also brought for you *The School Looks Around*. This was in 1948, chaired by Clement Attlee. It was about how every school child should survey their local neighbourhood and understand the complexity of our housing policy, green space policy, infrastructures, where the milk comes from and how we educate people. This was about civic engagement. It was about education and civic identity. We used to do it very well.

My argument in terms of the skills that are needed around design is that we have a huge skills gap in this country around construction at the moment. We think that there are about 250,000 new construction jobs that are needed. At the moment we have 140,000 vacancies in construction. We also know that there is this incredible story about Britain in terms of our creative industries, our culture and the appetite of young people to get involved in terms of their local environment. I know this because this is what we do. We train young people to get involved in the design process. I have seen the appetite and the civic pride exuded in places such as Coventry, Canterbury and Greater Manchester.

I completely agree with you about Scandinavia in terms of diversity. There are some really intractable issues there in terms of social integration there. We are actually working in Stockholm at the moment. It is very explicit. My point about using the international examples is that national government has allowed and facilitated a bigger conversation about design quality and what society needs, and I cannot find that at the moment.

Lord Bailey of Paddington: That is where we can agree. The most the Government should do is facilitate. I am going to come to our online guest. Lucy has made me a believer. We are closer together than it might appear, Lucy. Ben, what would you say specifically around what the Government could do to impact design standards? One of the British loves is to have a piece of paper that tells you what direction to look in. What should that piece of paper have on it?

Ben Pentreath: It is worth saying that, to a great extent, the Government control everything that is built in the country and have done so for decades in just the basic Town and Country Planning Act. It is quite a shocking thing that, if you think about it, every single facade, elevation and position of every single building in the country has been approved by local government.

The Chair: Ben, forgive me: we are about to observe the two-minute silence.

Sitting suspended.

The Chair: Ben, over to you.

Ben Pentreath: To a certain extent, the Government control these matters, but then the question is the level of strategic control, which is, Lucy, in a sense, what you were talking about as strategic guidance. If you talk to many architects, designers or builders, or in fact owners or housebuilders, who work their way through the planning system, it is unfortunately, not universally but in some authorities, quite a broken system. It feels to me as if it is a system that is constantly in a process of triage or chaos. Deadlines are never met. You submit applications. Things that should take eight to 12 or 13 weeks, or three months to run through if they are a major application, take years. The system feels overwhelmed by paperwork, but there is very little checking of what is actually being delivered and built on sites.

In that whole situation, it is very easy to get caught up in the very detailed, nuanced rules of how to deliver the built environment and dictate things much more than you would imagine, such as turning circles for bin lorries, radiuses for a driver to enter a main road and what the viewing distance from their car is, and so on. This is a very rules-based system. However much one tries to break it, it is so firmly embedded. You are dealing with multiple bureaucracies and different agencies. It is very hard to take a broad strategic overview of what constitutes good placemaking.

A little bit like you, I actually am rather nervous of Governments getting involved. I have a long shelf in my office library of books, rather like the two beautiful examples that Lucy held up, written at any stage in the last 100 years. There are many of these volumes that are telling, informing and guiding people how to do better and create a better world. Unfortunately, I worry that there has been a decades-long disconnect between that intention and the situation on the ground. It is a really troubling situation.

Into the current mix, we have very high projected housing delivery targets from the Government. They sound manageable when you think about them in terms of the number of houses that we might be delivering in a year. If you take the 300,000 houses a year that the Government have a target to deliver nationally, that is something like 5,000 to 6,000 houses a week that need to be built. That means that 6,000 houses a week need to be designed nationally. Every single week that we are talking about these bigger picture issues, that is 12,000 houses that need to be designed the next fortnight. It is a very hard system to think strategically in.

I am fortunate in a way that, in a lot of our projects, we get to work with fantastic landowners or organisations that have a slightly longer-term view of what they want to achieve in the built environment. I find that that is the single most important piece in the mix for us to deliver great placemaking. I would imagine that, Lucy, you might feel the same. The briefs are coming from individual clients, which might be Government or city-based, but you need somebody on the landowning, commissioning

side to create the design quality. If it is just an aspiration from Government on top, it can very often get dissipated.

Lord Bailey of Paddington: Will, I am going to say some mean things for the benefit of the conversation. Milton Keynes has been accused of being slightly soulless and nondescript. I think that, in this country, if you blindfold someone and wake them up in most inner-city places, they could not tell you where they were because so much of it looks the same. Do you recognise that? Do you think that that is a big problem? Could the Government develop a code to allow local areas to be a bit prettier than they currently are and still retain utility? From Ben's comments, I know that the bin lorry thing should not be as important as it is, but, on a day-to-day basis, it actually is. If you cannot get your bin lorry or fire engine down the road, your community does not work.

Will Cousins: I will bring it back to the question that I have written here, of which the last two words are "new towns", about design control or defining good design in new towns. I will come on to whether to rise to the defence of Milton Keynes's soul or not.

One interesting thing about this current moment in debate about good design, or design of places, is that we now have, I believe, 12 particular locations where the spotlight will be shone on them. Each of them will present its own particular challenges and opportunities. One thing that the Government could do is to accelerate and fuel the debate about what good design is, rather than aspiring to define it and thinking that we have a definition that we can give a pass or fail to. They have done that over the years at moments.

I share Ben's concern and frustration about the legislation that comes right down through from national government to local levels, which tends to take away—how can I put it?—the excitement of design. There is an element of design where people choose to be designers because it is a stimulating and rewarding practice. The issue that we are facing with some of the definitions is the extent to which those hinder that, rather than enable it.

With regard to the Milton Keynes question, one answer is that it is only 50 years old and therefore maturity will come with old age and diversity. Depending on where you are placed, sometimes the fact that it is the same is a virtue, because it has been conceived of over a relatively short period by a single hand. One key message that came from the task force report, and the acknowledgement of Milton Keynes's achievement, is that the development corporation owned the design. It stood by what it was. It owned the land, had the design team and built it.

There are a lot of processes now around new towns where that disconnect about ownership is a challenge. Where you see very good projects that are delivered with either a particular atmosphere or a charisma, you can trace that back to the ownership question. That ownership of responsibility for design is important.

While I have the floor in terms of Milton Keynes, the first general manager, Fred Lloyd Roach, was an architect for the development corporation, at the age of 42 when he took over the role. You think about those criteria and the fact that there is a 42-year-old architect being given the chance to build a new city with a population of 250,000. In terms of defining, the Government's role in that was giving confidence in an organisation to deliver something over a longer period. From my experience of being there, other than very important ministerial and prime ministerial visits, the Government had very little to do with Milton Keynes.

Lord Bailey of Paddington: I want to put on record that I think Milton Keynes is a fine place.

Will Cousins: I am not unfamiliar with the sort of question that you gave me.

Q19 **Viscount Hanworth:** The antithesis of good design is bad design, which might be easier to identify. Might I ask you to provide examples of bad design that should be avoided and might have affected previous generations of new towns?

Ben Pentreath: Even that is quite tricky. Defining good and bad design can be complicated. It is worth pointing out that one generation's bad design can very often, with the forgiveness of a little bit of history, reach new audiences. We all remember that the 1930s neo-Georgian architects were quite keen to demolish big Victorian buildings such as St Pancras station. I remember, in my own lifetime, being rather less keen on the concrete brutalism of my childhood. Now I look on it rather affectionately and think, "Gosh, it was very well designed in comparison to what we are potentially building today". I precis that there is an important lesson to learn there.

Having said that, there are some universal qualities in the built environment that, over a very long period, we can feel collectively are universal qualities in places that we admire. There is something to do with a human scale. There is something to do with human-craftedness, so an environment that is not just industrially produced, but is in some shape or way crafted. For me, there is something to do with a particular scale of delivery that does not require mega blocks, mega land ownership and mega parcels to deliver huge buildings where then, when they reach their natural life, very large areas have to be demolished and reconstructed. In other words, there is a fine-grain aspect to very durable places that is powerful.

There are very broad and incredibly important issues to do with topography, landscape, water and movement that also create successful, robust places over a very long time. This is not necessarily to do with large versus small. It is not a question of cities versus towns or villages, but you look at well-planned and well-evolved communities and they are sitting beautifully within the landscape. So often, we have been very bad at that in the last 70 to 100 years.

The architectural aspect of what is good or bad design is much harder to define. A lot of architects and designers can be quite disparaging about the product of the volume housebuilding industry, and have been for decades, as I mentioned earlier. I hesitate to comment. I am a lucky person because I can get to design nice streets and nice houses on the projects where I am working. I slightly step back from wanting to be in the position of telling too many other people what I believe is good or bad design. There is something about that that makes me a little bit uncomfortable. There are themes that underline eternal or long-lasting design that we could focus on, but I am not sure whether that is quite the right function for this committee. I am dodging giving an answer.

Viscount Hanworth: I am interested to hear that the topography is as important as the individual house designs. Also, your comments lead me to think about the effects of various architectural luminaries upon design. I think that you were mentioning Le Corbusier and I am amazed at the puerile nature of his tract, *Vers Une Architecture*. The same would be true of the proponents of post-modernist toy-town architecture. Perhaps that is something that Lucy can pick up on.

Lucy Musgrave: I think that there is a general consensus that, regardless of the extraordinary technical advances and changes in terms of healthy living and design, modernist town planning was an unmitigated disaster for our towns and cities. It was predicated upon the use of the private car and separating out functions in terms of zoning. We have moved on a million miles from there in terms of thinking about compact, high-density, mixed schemes that have civic identity and are not just about housing. In the new towns debate, in terms of "new" and "towns", it is the towns that I am interested in. How are we going to be designing places of worship, town halls, pubs, community centres or playgrounds?

What Ben says about the multi and cross-disciplinary nature of design is absolutely correct, in terms of understanding, given our very limited resources, how we ensure that there is flexibility, adaptability and respect for landscape and people. At the moment, we are knocking down many things, which we cannot afford to do in terms of our carbon, but also the cost to our communities.

There is an International New Town Institute based in the Netherlands. Milton Keynes is a member of it. There is a network of 14. That is just its current programme. It has an international new towns day every year where it looks at the lessons. One lesson it looked at was Hoogvliet, outside Rotterdam, which was a new town for Shell, the oil company. It was knocked down very quickly. We need to look and understand what it is that we are building for. We do not know what housing and development will mean in 50 years' time, but we have to ensure that, given the cost that we will incur both environmentally and socially, we do not keep making mistakes, but we learn from the lessons of the past.

At the moment, my concern with some of the points about the framing of the debate, in terms of planning, is that Public Practice, an organisation that I was a founding member of, which is putting creativity into the

planning system, did a survey last year where over 50% of the public sector at the moment say that they do not have the resources or skills to deliver on the strategic objectives of growth. This is a really big issue about skills.

It is also an issue in terms of design quality that conservation officers are the place where design is actually implemented, whereas we are living with 2 million children who are living in unfit housing. The Government reported in April that 14% of households are not living in insulated houses, with mould and all the subsequent issues in terms of educational attainment, public health and the cost to the NHS. I would urge us to look at design as a multi and cross-disciplinary need in terms of flexibility and adaptability, environmentally and socially, for the future. I do not think that an approach of rolling out a carpet of housing is going to solve the problems of this country.

Viscount Hanworth: One of the luminaries—you have reminded me—who had a very deleterious effect on the environment was Colin Buchanan.

Lucy Musgrave: Absolutely, it was an amazing report, yes.

Will Cousins: We have moved on a little bit from the aesthetics in terms of good or bad design and are coming back to the idea about the function of the buildings or the places that are being created. A clear message that one could take from a place such as Milton Keynes, with respect to some concerns about that, is the fact that it innovated in the late 1970s and early 1980s in a way that has led to our deeper understanding about how our homes perform in energy efficiency. One of the great things that the development corporation was able to do was to be that innovator and work with the Open University and the research team to do that.

The issue then about whether a house's appearance offends versus its performance would be a debate to be had elsewhere. Good design allows people to live well in a warm and secure environment. Going back to all the things that Ben is talking about, we know only too well about how you relate to places where people live, to their streets and communities. All those things can certainly be embedded in there.

As an example of good design, firmness, commodity and delight are the three principles of good design. When I was chair of the Milton Keynes gallery, I was involved in bringing forward an extension to the gallery, which is a small building. There was a £16 million budget. At the time, that was quite significant for a charity. It provided, I think, a step change in our perception about what Milton Keynes could be in the future. With the architect, Tom Emerson of 6a, it was more of a statement about a confidence in the future of Milton Keynes than it was simply a statement about, "Can we have more gallery space? Can we have a café?"

That good design is about the fact that people are cognisant of the context within which they are designing and, more importantly, the messages they want to give to the wider community. It is extremely

popular and successful. I only hope that we could do another 20 or more in Milton Keynes, because we have demonstrated what the impact of that is.

Q20 Viscount Younger of Leckie: There has been a very interesting focus on top-down government versus local. I buy in entirely to what you were saying, Lucy, and what you were saying, Ben. Am I right in saying that the actual challenge, which you raised, Will, was ownership? Who takes ownership for all this? As I see it, there remain opaque lines of responsibility.

My question is for Ben—the others might want to chip in briefly, I realise—and is to look at Poundbury. Poundbury is seen to be a great success and that is all great. To what extent was the success of Poundbury bound into the influence of the royals? The royals, so the then Prince Charles, would have said, “Let’s get rid of all this bureaucracy and red tape. Let’s just get on with this”. Everyone would have said, “Yes, let’s get on with it”. You were involved in Welborne, so I am wondering what the differences might have been in terms of bureaucracy, local versus Government, and what we can learn from that.

Ben Pentreath: I have worked at Poundbury on and off now for 20-plus years. We are just as much subject to every local government control as with any other authority. Because it is an interesting place, possibly planning officers and other officers in the local authority have taken more interest in the schemes coming forward than if I was laying out a Bellway Homes estate on the northern end of Blandford Forum, for example, so possibly we have been subjected to more design control from the local authority, rather than less.

However, that issue of the ownership is important. There is absolutely no doubt that the former Prince of Wales, Prince Charles, had a vision to look at development in a different way and set the Duchy of Cornwall on a different trajectory with its developments more broadly. It is also absolutely crucial in Poundbury that you have a single master planner for the project as a whole. In the case of Poundbury, it was a wonderful man, who very sadly died earlier this year, called Léon Krier.

Inevitably, in the course of a 25 or 30-year project, there will be moments where the master planner has views about how the development is going. Every single time there was a debate and Léon felt exercised in a particular point of view as to how the thing should proceed or not, King Charles backed his master planner. You had a consistent ownership and a consistent vision through the whole duration of the project. In our role as architectural designer, I work very closely alongside a small roster of other architects. Our role there, I very much see, is to execute Léon’s master plan, rather than to challenge it in any way. When you have that sort of strong structure, it can be incredibly supportive of good long-term placemaking.

Poundbury is a much-visited and, these days, much-admired place. It has a huge amount that the committee and other people can learn from in

terms of this debate of how to build and create new communities that are richly layered and have the incorporation of mixed use, social housing and a huge range of housing types. These are very special things that do not happen easily. The issue with Poundbury is that it is almost so special that it is actually very hard for other people to easily replicate. It is dependent on a whole series of quite specific conditions that are very hard to duplicate elsewhere. I do not, however, think that that is anything to do with the Royal Family aspect of your question. It is a bit more nuanced than that.

Welborne is a scheme of 6,000 houses being constructed in east Hampshire. We are now the executive master planners. It took a long time to take through outline planning and we are now the master planners and the lead town architects. We are by no means designing all the buildings. That is many hands. There are many housebuilders and each housebuilder is engaging its own architectural team.

We are grappling with faster delivery in Welborne than Poundbury. Poundbury built a relatively very small number of houses per year, so 70 to 100 houses in a normal given year. In Welborne we have an ambition to build more quickly. Also, as the lead master planner, I am interested in creating a development that can be, I hope, a little more easily replicable as a wider model. I have a personal interest there.

It takes me back to the importance of the landscape infrastructure. We are working incredibly closely with a fantastic landscape architect called Kim Wilkie. Kim and I have also master planned a Duchy of Cornwall application in Faversham in Kent of 2,500 houses, which is in the planning system at the moment. All these projects have a much greater emphasis on landscape than Poundbury.

Q21 Baroness Andrews: This is directed to Lucy. One problem is that we have moved from the paternalism of 1945 and the building of planned towns, such as Plymouth, to a situation where there is infinitely more choice, because there is a more democratic perception of how people should be involved in the planning of their own environments. We have gained something there, and we have lost something.

It is fascinating to hear about the relative privilege that you have, Ben, compared with the huge challenges simply in the public realm. You talked about the whole community and planning for the gaps. One challenge of these new towns, with their new communities, is to plan for the whole community, so for the isolated child and the isolated pensioner as well.

Your research methodology sounded really interesting. How you get under the radar of ensuring that people feel engaged, and not merely consulted, was such an important point. Can you tell us, not now, but in writing, how that works and can be universalised? One challenge is the difference between leadership and policy. Policy is hugely complicated these days. It is risk-averse. It is trying to plug gaps for the future as well as the present. It is not particularly proactive, frankly, because it is very difficult to make proactive legislation. How do we get the good

practice universalised if we do not have agency to do it?

My bigger question—again, you do not have to answer that now because we are so short of time—is how we invent, create, imagine or put together some respected agency that will be able to amplify the good practice that you have all been talking about. This all comes under whether there is a better alternative to policy-making, which we cannot enforce because we do not have the skills.

The Chair: Or the time.

Baroness Andrews: I am just asking for more stuff on paper really.

The Chair: That would be great if at all possible, please.

Lucy Musgrave: I would be delighted to. Referring back to the elitism that happened in the past, in terms of over-professionalising and making it about one profession, we have moved on from that. It goes back to the points that Ben is talking about. I would also argue that, according to the RIBA, only 6% of UK homes are involving an architect. You have a vision where there are architects. Ben has just explained some of the schemes that he has been involved in. There were lots of architects and designers in the vision there. The huge, vast majority does not have somebody championing good design, and that is an issue.

Ben Pentreath: It is an interesting question for the committee to ask. If we may ask back, are you meeting with the large plc housebuilders as part of your research? Lucy is absolutely right. With the vast majority of new houses built in the country, people like us are not involved. They are being delivered by the housebuilders, with their own internal design departments.

It would be interesting to talk to them. They are very good people, by the way. They are nice and well-meaning people, but they struggle. The large plc housebuilders struggle with the complexity of placemaking that all of us witnesses this morning are talking about, so the mixed use, this broad interrogation into what makes places tick. They are very good at building houses quickly and cheaply.

Q22 **Lord Mawson:** I am a clergyman by profession and have spent a lot of my life in housing estates and places that did not work. I am very conscious, with my colleagues—we now operate across the country—that we can see the quality of the builds, which have been through all these complex processes, not delivering what we hoped they might deliver. It is my view that we are the places we live, work and play within. These environments are creating serious poverty and difficulty.

My question is about complexity. Some of us heard yesterday in this House that here you have a Government democratically elected to deliver 1.5 million homes and all that, which many of us are supportive of, but the numbers in practice are going absolutely the other way. We have created a very complicated set of situations that are delivering mediocrity and worse, and costing us hundreds and hundreds of millions of pounds

on the ground in the places where my colleagues and I work. You see the human catastrophe of a lot of that.

By the way, on your point on the GLA, I have had a look at some of the GLA schemes in London. They use all the right words, of course, because that is what Governments do about placemaking. When you go and have a critical look as a person who has been involved in those places for many years, you see that they are missing real opportunities in plain sight, because they are busy ticking boxes. They are not interested in people. I have sat on design review panels with architects with lots of ideological ideas constantly throwing the designs in the air because it does not fit with their particular ideological point of view.

I suppose my point is whether we have created a situation that is going to be incapable of delivering what our politicians want on any side. It is too complicated. Actually, is it really quite simple? Is it not about getting back to leadership, as we have heard from Ben, the right leaders, with the right vision and practical experience, who have played the music and know what it looks like, and empowering them over time to just get on with it?

Will Cousins: One feature of the achievement of the last and largest new town was that it had exactly that. It was empowered to do all that which was necessary to build a new town—that is the definition—acknowledging the complexity of it and the challenges with it, but delivering all the component parts from the built environment and the natural environment, and supporting community. At the same time, in a small wing of the organisation, it had a thing called the department of silly ideas, which was able to be innovative and challenge that.

An important part of what you are saying are some of the failings is the extent to which any of those places that you are referring to have just been built on a one-theme agenda, rather than taking a holistic view. Behind the question, there is the notion of new towns. It is how each of those 12 will be able to take complete control over its agenda, and to see that as a much longer-term thing. My view would be that that would be an important part to come back to. Empower those organisations that are charged with delivering that in that way. You have raised issues that are much broader about dealing with the millions of homes and millions of places outwith the new towns programme that require that attention.

Lord Mawson: We are also part of the problem here. It is just out there, actually. If you look at how the money works, Governments generate consultants and academics, who all want to earn a quick buck around all this stuff. All the complications start because it is the money that triggers it all.

Will Cousins: In that particular case of new towns, it had its own design teams. It employed 1,500 people at its peak and had its own design teams designing. It had complete control and autonomy over the planning process as well, for better or worse. The issue is about who takes ownership of that. It comes from the top right down through to the

teams working on it. Those who were participants in that process took on the responsibility and the ownership of what was to be built and created. That is an important part, and I am speaking as a consultant of 30 years or so, so I know how those two work.

Lucy Musgrave: You are describing, really well, a reality check in terms of what actually happens in people's lived experience, so the comings and goings out of buildings and how people care for the spatial, physical environment. I completely agree with you. Too many design ideologies are simply too late in the day and not setting the right spatial brief, with people who will actually understand and use that space. They are doing something that is never going to fit, because it has not actually gone to site, done the fieldwork, done the surveys or been participative. People do not understand, so they are imposing. I completely and utterly agree with you, but there is a commonsensical and different way of looking at it.

I would personally hugely defend the work of Good Growth by Design at the GLA, which has given the policy and challenged the built environment sector to look at the transition to net zero. That has looked at small sites and small buildings. That has looked at issues of the evening and night-time, and women and girls' safety in the public realm. This is a really important policy. The National Police Chiefs' Council has declared a national emergency in terms of harassment of and violence towards women and girls in our public realm. The GLA, to its credit, has set one of the first policies for that. This is design. It is spatialised. It is where we meet strangers.

I would defend the fact that we need to address the gaps around social infrastructure, housing quality and so forth with evidence and good practice. That is really important, but it is not about the ideology of design coming top down. It has to be about setting the right spatial brief. I really look forward to submitting the written evidence in terms of that participative survey methodology, to make sure that the principles of a place and the identity of a space is something that people recognise and that we can turn into built form and spatialise.

Ben Pentreath: Would you mind rephrasing the question that you would like us to answer?

Lord Mawson: At its simplest, have we made it all rather too complicated? In many ways, the Prince of Wales, as he was, led the way, in staying with it for 50 years, getting into the detail, developing some principles and creating a learning-by-doing environment. Yes, I am sure it did not get everything right and made some mistakes, but it learned from them. It is a culture and a way of operating that clearly has had a lot of success. As a practitioner and entrepreneur, I absolutely acknowledge that approach. There are other examples around the country, but I am not persuaded that Government in any form are learning anything from these learning-by-doing approaches, even from the former Prince of Wales.

Ben Pentreath: The tricky thing is that what we are talking about is complicated. It is incredibly nuanced and I really think that we have heard that evidentially this morning. Yet I am extremely aware, as a practitioner, that I always try to design within the system that is going to deliver the place that I am working on.

We are working in some complicated parts of the country with very low-value housing that is being built to extremely tight margins and where there is very little spare money, frankly, for want of a better word, to build a high-quality environment through spending on landscape, buildings or the placemaking characteristics that we all hold dear. In those situations, you have to take life back to the simple essentials. How are we going to get from what is currently, in that instance, large brownfield sites in former mining towns in Nottinghamshire—which we are turning into development sites—into completed housing that, in 50 to 100 years' time, people will hold dear and feel that it is a place where they can live a beautiful life?

In those circumstances, landscape, for me, is the single most important thing. It makes the biggest difference over time. One of the huge strengths of the Milton Keynes master plan is the incorporation of landscape through the place. The older it gets, the better it gets. The architecture is the least important thing. If it is too hard to deliver, you are almost certainly going to end up with failure. I remember that, many years ago, I worked on a site in south-west Wales where I had been involved through the former Prince of Wales's architectural foundation. We were working with a very complex design code and delivery mechanism.

The first phase got delivered by Persimmon builders, which really struggled to deliver the quality and the complexity that we were asking for. The first phase was about 300 houses and ended up being a weird place. It was badly built. They found it really complicated. They could not get their head around what we were asking. I remember leaving that site at the end of a site visit and driving out of there. About half an hour down the road, I saw another Persimmon Homes housing scheme and I called in. I just drove in. There was no Prince's Foundation. There were no architects or designers involved and, in a way, they had done a better job, because it was really basic and simple. It is a very tricky task to make sure that we do not get too complicated in our ambitions.

Q23 Lord Cameron of Dillington: In many ways, Ben has just answered the question I was going to ask. I worry about creating good placemaking and a town that has value that people want to belong to, particularly where the margins of the marketplace do not have the reserves to spend money. Ben was answering my question, but maybe the other two might like to have a stab at that. If you were trying to create placemaking and a really nice place to live, where people want to belong to, what would you focus on if your margins were really tight?

Will Cousins: There is an example of a project I was involved in, which is coming out of the ground. It is next to the former new town of Corby,

on a very unprepossessing quarry site. Market values in there were very low. The issue comes back to how deep the pockets of the promoter are. In one respect, new towns have that advantage in terms of a longer perspective than most, even some of the long-established volume housebuilders or strategic land developers. They should be supported by the Government to deliver the initiatives with some patient funding.

Lord Cameron of Dillington: You said that they should be supported by the Government with patient funding.

Will Cousins: Yes. If the ambition is to build new towns in that way, it is about those long-term loans and investments to get that through. The financial model about what happens when a house is sold goes right back down to what the developer has paid for the land and how much it has cost to build it.

The interesting issue with this Priors Hall project is that it was started with a new academy, Corby Business Academy, designed by Norman Foster. The conversation that we had at the time, when we were planning this, was, "How can you make a start and establish a completely different mindset about what the potential of this place is?" Therefore, there was a significant investment in the design and building of that.

Part of it is not so much at that point when you are developing and selling, whether it is Persimmon or Barratt. It is about how you establish this notion of confidence because you have made your first statement about this new project in a very ambitious way. The landscape, as you were saying, was an important part of it. There were relatively small interventions, but they were idiosyncratic and charismatic, and people connected with them then and do now.

That was 2005. I have been back there, and there is a very thriving and successful community behind it.

Lucy Musgrave: I would start by listening and believing people's testimony in terms of character, identity, values and meaning. Nowhere should be discounted. However bleak it is or however greenfield the site, there is always meaning in place.

We need to listen to people and understand what matters in terms of what is being built. We need to start with that story in terms of character and identity. As well as the landscape, the landscape infrastructure and all the hydrology, we could start with the playground. We could start with what we value most highly in terms of our best design.

It is not necessarily about all the economic issues and the real challenges in terms of delivering what this society needs. It is about respecting local identity, local values and civic amenity. We need to start there.

Q24 **Lord Bailey of Paddington:** Lucy, one of the challenges is that some of these are actually new towns. There is nobody there. Who do you have that conversation with?

Lucy Musgrave: There is always connectivity to land. There is always understanding and meaning in landscape. There is always connectivity: a train station, a bus route, the next village, the next town, the materiality of that, the history, the economy and the industry. We live in this rich and highly densely populated country. We are bursting at the seams with heritage and interesting places. We have not told our story.

Lord Bailey of Paddington: There is always a group of people to speak about any square of land in this country.

Lucy Musgrave: There is. Design codes at a borough level or at a large-scale level do not respect identity. Identity comes of and about the place. If it is for new communities that are yet to come, there are multiple methods of engaging young people in the next generation about why they would want to live there and why, if they want to have a family in the future, they would want to put their roots down there.

Lord Bailey of Paddington: The first step in our fictitious government White Paper is to identify who you should be speaking to.

Lucy Musgrave: It is a process of engagement rather than consultation. It is about extracting the principles of that place and spatialising it in terms of civic architecture and civic urbanism.

Lord Mawson: The truth is that you just need to get nosy.

Lucy Musgrave: You absolutely need to get nosy. You need to be super-curious about what makes this country tick. We have this incredible generation of young people, who are very aware of the cross and multidisciplinary challenges and the challenge around affordability.

We are absolutely world class in the creative industries. I was listening to the former Prime Minister a few days ago talking about this. Some people from the film industry wanted to thank him for the investment that had come to the British film and television industry. It was apparently £38 billion. He wanted to talk about child poverty, the creative industries and the multi-banks that he has been putting together to bring people out of poverty so they can live strong, healthy and active lives.

He was making the case to the audience—it was a private event—that we have these growing creative industries and we could put the creativity and culture that this country does so well into some of the intractable problems in terms of what we are building. That is a really exciting idea for a younger generation.

Will Cousins: If I can just quickly add to that—again, this goes back to Milton Keynes, but there are other examples—look at the Living Archive project in Milton Keynes. In a very practical way, those who were building the city were engaging, recording and responding to those stories of those who were at Bletchley Park, those who were at Wolverton, the first railway town, and those in Stony Stratford, in the coaching inns. They contributed as much to the story of Milton Keynes as they do today through that process.

Lord Mawson: You are talking about the importance of this, but we do not know whether there is any money to put into these new towns. We are talking about all this really important stuff, but the danger is that the way that the machine works means it will cut all of that away and we will just build buildings. Is that not a real danger we should be alert to?

Lucy Musgrave: Yes, absolutely.

Ben Pentreath: Yes, that is a real danger.

Q25 **The Chair:** The last area of questioning has broadly been covered already. It is about the role of Government and where it can enforce quality. I am conscious that we are into the last few minutes that we have. We have argued about the virtue or otherwise of Government being involved in this entire process. This might be what Lord Bailey said about a consultation with the people who will be affected by these new towns, but what is the one thing that Government could do to really drive this agenda?

Separately, I want to pick up on the point that Will made in the first session we were doing. You picked up rightly the point about how a lot of the questioning is based upon the function rather than actual design. Is that where the public now are? Can design be trumped by function? When we talk about design, are we really talking about function? Will, I am going to go to you first, if I may.

Will Cousins: William Morris said, "Have nothing in your house you do not know to be useful and believe to be beautiful". It is that sense of knowing that everything that is happening in your town is useful. The functionality of it, the purpose, is absolutely critical to its success.

It has been defined in lots of different ways through the story of Milton Keynes, but in other projects that have come forward the ability to define purpose has been the foundation stone for determining whether it has been successful.

In each of those locations, the Government could search not for a definition of what the new town is but what its role is. The Government should be clear about its role and function within the economy, the community and the wider region and landscape in which it sits. Projects of this scale are going to have that impact.

If they can be articulate about that, whether it is through Centre for Cities research or in-depth local analysis, that will give people confidence that whoever is in charge of taking these projects forward knows what they are doing, rather than worrying necessarily or unnecessarily about exactly what it might look like.

Ben Pentreath: We have touched on the importance of having a small team at the core of all successful projects. I have mentioned the master planner and the landowner in Poundbury. There is a small team of core people who understand that vision and are tasked with taking it forward.

That is also the case in all the other projects where we are working successfully.

One thing that the Government could usefully do is to look at all the large-scale multi-thousand developments that are coming forward and simply identify those people. In many situations, it will not be a single landowner or master planner. There will be more consensus. There will be more committee or group activity around that.

If the Government were to say, "In each of those cases, let's find those people. If they aren't there, let's find them and identify them", that would be a very simple, useful and effective tool to ensure design quality moving forward. If we leave it to generality, individual champions will not be involved. The individual champions will be the people who make sure the local conversation is happening. They will be the people who make sure they are getting to grips with the history and the meaning of the landscape, as Lucy was saying.

That would be the single piece of advice that I would give. If that individual champion or group is not there and is not dedicated to the task in hand, it becomes extremely generic and rules-based, and it unravels. With these larger-scale schemes, you have the power to insist on that. Then you can let them get on with it.

Lord Mawson: I assume that is on skill, merit and competence. It is not on some of the other stuff that Governments and politicians get over-interested in, which—I suspect this is playing out at the BBC at the moment—is an absolute disaster. The details of those people and their competence, skill and merit, whoever they are, is really important. Is that fair, Ben?

Ben Pentreath: Yes, that is absolutely fair.

Lucy Musgrave: To pick up on the point about civic leadership, we really need a new generation of people who understand the functional and the symbolic aspects of design. If the Government are going to do anything, it is absolutely critical that they understand the construction industry, the design industry and the creative industries. These industries and sectors are made up between 94% and 99% small businesses. In the creative industries, 94% of businesses employ fewer than 10 people. That is the same for nearly everything in the construction industry.

We are not talking about top-down things where we suddenly try to steer the tanker. We are talking about people, and jobs and places where they want to contribute. I was listening to a young woman from Willmott Dixon who was at a Black Professionals in Construction event last week. She was talking about the fact that she was brought up in Walthamstow and she helped build the new Soho Theatre in Walthamstow. She is so proud to be able to tell her community of her skills. We have this huge skills shortage in this country.

We need civic leadership and a broader understanding about the opportunity for learning. The International New Town Institute has this army of research from going to places and speaking to people. We should be unpacking that, not over-professionalising it, and addressing the terrible legacy of elitism in this country around design.

- Q26 **Baroness Janke:** Having heard what you have said on some of the other issues and this whole business of the 6,000 houses a week that need to be built, I wonder whether rolling out a carpet of housing is not the answer. The planning system, we are told, is broken, and yet to some extent the planning system provides reassurance to local people that they are not going to end up with terrible developments that they are going to have to live with for generations to come. How do you answer the issue of making sure that volume developments are also going to have good-quality design and be places where people want to live?

You have said some of the things that you would want to put in place. We have just heard about some of this from Lucy. We can all wish for new civic leaders, but they are not necessarily available. Are there practical things that you can do to reassure people that these developments are not going to be on the lines of the mistakes of the past and that we are pursuing good-quality design, even though finances are sometimes a problem?

Lucy Musgrave: I agree in terms of the accountability of local government, our democratic system, and the ability for us to have this conversation in public and to support with processes and skills.

As an example, we have been retained by the GLA for the last five years to do evening and night-time. Evening and night-time, how we design and plan at night, is not about just the night-time economy, licensed premises or culture. It is also about night workers. It is about where babies get born. It is where bats fly. We have been training night-time borough champions at member level, cabinet level and senior officer level to be responsible for that. In the draft London plan, it will be written into something that all policy can be tested on. There will a night test across departmental things.

It is possible to have this conversation in public, to train and to share best practice. It is not scary. We are really good at it and we can do it. Local government is the answer. It has to be about civic leadership that is accountable.

Baroness Janke: We have been shrinking local government resources as well, though. Councils have had their resources cut back dramatically. One reason why the planning system is broken is that there are not enough planners.

Lucy Musgrave: Yes, exactly. The Treasury's 300 planners is not going to be the answer. We need an injection. That is why it is critical to make it more accessible and less over-professionalised, and to allow communities to help with this transition.

Ben Pentreath: I have a practical suggestion on planning. This is not really so much to do with the world of large-scale strategic planning, but with local planning authorities it does sometimes feel a little bit as if you are dealing with the broken parts of the NHS. On an individual level, the officers are fantastic and really engaged. It is very infrequent that you come across a planning officer or somebody working within a planning department who is not dedicated and really wanting to do a good job. It does feel as if they are very under-resourced and operating in a broken system.

I have a mean joke. If you want to find the planning office in the town, head for the ugliest building that is in really terrible condition. That is where they will be working. Ironically, in the world of private—

Baroness Janke: It is not in my city. In Bristol, that is not the case at all.

Ben Pentreath: No. In the world of private houses, planning application fees are astonishingly low. It is a matter of a few hundred pounds to submit a planning application for a very large new house or project.

Behind that, clients will have invested tens of thousands in private consultation, ecologists, landscape visual impact assessments and heritage consultants. When I first started working 20 or 30 years ago, those activities were all carried out by the local authority. You would take your project and you would meet with the planning officer. There was a heritage officer in the council who would look at these things. There was a landscape officer in the council who would look at these things. They would assess the scheme and give you a yes or a no. The whole system has shifted into a vast consultation world. The bat survey fees, ecology fees and ecology testing on a simple project will be £8,000 to £10,000 every single time.

If the local authority could take back some of that work at a greater cost to the applicant but let the applicant off the need for this insane spend—it is nothing to do with design; it is just bureaucracy and box ticking—it could strengthen planning offices and make them feel like a more creative and more interesting place to work, as it really felt to me 20 or 30 years ago when I first started working. In turn, that could really allow the system to be better financed to expand and take on new planning officers to deal with some of the larger schemes.

This is a very long-term approach. That is just one practical solution for how planning applications are financed. It seems completely crazy to me that people building a £5 million house are spending £200 on the application fee and about £50,000 on private sector consultants to get the application ready to submit. It is just insane.

The Chair: We are going to move on. I am sorry.

Will Cousins: I have a very quick point. We need to disentangle the discussion about the ambition to build a large number of homes over the

next few years—there is a number that is quoted frequently—and that which can be reasonably delivered through the new towns.

This would be my suggestion. It comes back to the point about ownership and clarity. The new towns can deal with many of the problems that we are worrying about in terms of steamrolling over a consultation. They are predicated on engagement. They are predicated on delivery. They own the delivery programme. They are predicated on quality. That is why they are there. They are not there for any other reason.

The idea would be that some of the 12 or so projects will jump forward and be exemplars. They will avoid the problems that you are alluding to, which are often the problems of the system nationally. I am not sure whether the new towns are necessarily going to solve the national planning problems. They have to operate within them or, as in the case of Milton Keynes, under the New Towns Act. That gives them enormous autonomy and independence to deliver many of the things that we have talked about this morning and that you see as virtuous.

The Chair: I am conscious of everyone's time. We have two other witnesses. I am afraid to say that we are overrunning slightly. I am going to suggest that we wrap this session up. If there are some points that you would like to follow up with us, please do. We would be very grateful for examples, as we discussed earlier.

On behalf of everyone here, I would love to continue this conversation. Whether you would I do not know. Thank you so much. Genuinely, thank you for everything that you have shared with us today. It has been massively appreciated. Thanks for your time. With that, this session is closed.