

Principles for new towns done well

July 2025



The
countryside
charity

Principles for new towns done well

The government has committed to delivering a new wave of up to 12 new towns across the country, each containing at least 10,000 new homes. CPRE wants to see these in the right places delivering ambitious climate, nature and wellbeing-friendly towns built to high design standards providing genuinely affordable homes.

Our principles

1. Brownfield first, sustainable locations
2. Meaningful community engagement
3. Integrate and protect green space and nature
4. Housing diversity for inclusive communities
5. Encourage market disruption
6. Integrated transport planning
7. What goes where to create a sense of place
8. Carbon neutral development
9. Transparent accountability
10. Secure long-term success

1. Brownfield first, sustainable locations

With multiple pressures on our finite land for housing, nature recovery, growing food, and climate change mitigation, choosing sustainable locations means a first principle of recycling land already developed before considering using green fields, and ensuring the site is well served by outside transport connections, ideally rail.

Our criteria:

1. New towns should be brownfield first, avoiding greenfield sites where possible. If greenfield is required, sites should be near to existing or planned transport infrastructure and services.
2. Rural and urban regeneration projects, in town centres or around transport infrastructure, should be comprehensive and developed before any development of a new town.
3. Areas of land with environmental and agricultural designations should be avoided, such as high-quality farmland or flood zones, and buffer zones planned as needed.
4. Protected landscapes such as National Landscapes, Sites of Specific Scientific Interests, and National Parks should be avoided for any new town development.

5. New towns should be in areas already served by fast digital infrastructure, grid connections, renewable energy generation and other utilities.
6. New towns sites should be selected in line with policies in the land use framework and Spatial Development Strategies.

Case Study

Belgium has rejuvenated brownfield land in Antwerp, [the old docks](#) have been given a new lease of life. This a good example of house brownfield land can be re-used and retain the character of the area.

When communities participate in planning and design processes, the co-created outcomes are more likely to lead to inclusive places where people want to live. New town development corporations and local authorities should engage residents from the outset, involving them in the design process, and ensure the new town meets the needs of surrounding communities, delivering regional benefits. Methods of consultation to attract all people of different backgrounds and ages should be considered to ensure inclusion.

Our criteria:

1. Existing and future communities should be engaged throughout the planning and development phases to ensure plans genuinely reflect the needs of the local population.
2. Local authorities need to be well-resourced to help deliver meaningful engagement and hold development corporations accountable.
3. Engagement should be meaningfulⁱ. This is characterised by communities feeling that they are heard and involved across the various stages of development. In addition, new towns should enhance local area infrastructure and provide benefits that are wider than the new town limits.
4. Development corporations should have real and meaningful representation from local organisations, such as members having voting rights.
5. Community stewardship schemes should be developed to ensure that new towns are well-managed in the years to come.

Case study

[Torbay Council](#) was initially met with opposition to their new sea defences. In response the council commissioned new designs by using co-design and consultation principles. The result was positive community buy in which led to a more beautiful design that had community ownership.

3. Integrate and protect green space and nature

In the context of the nature and climate crises, if Green Belts didn't exist, we would be clamouring to create them today. New town development should learn from the success of what has worked with Green Belt policy in keeping green space open, reducing urban sprawl to create benefits for people and nature, and now helping to mitigate climate change. We want to see a strategic approach taken in locating and integrating green spaces and natural landscapes within and around new towns to ensure that their contribution to nature, climate and wellbeing are protected and maximised for everyone's benefit. The aims of leaving the environment in a better shape for future generations, as set out in the Environment Act, 2021, to combat nature's decline, should be delivered.

Our criteria:

1. The Green Belt should be avoided where possible. If new towns are developed in Green Belt areas, the land should be replaced with new Green Belt areas to ensure that their benefits are maintained.
2. New towns should not be built in protected landscapes such as National Landscapes (NLs), Sites of Specific Scientific Interest (SSSIs), National Parks (NPs), internationally important designations such as Special Protection Areas (SPAs) and associated Suitable Alternative Natural Green Space (SANG) or other locally valued landscapes. The impact on landscape should be central to decisions making on new town locations. Protected landscapes should be safeguarded from any new town sprawl by having clearly defined borders.
3. Have a regional strategic regional approach to deliver a net gain in green space and biodiverse features, such as trees and hedgerows, and incorporate the existing natural environment in and around the area
4. There should be provisions to support and bolster ecosystems throughout the site such as wildflower meadows via the inclusion and adoption of Local Green Space designations.
5. Sprawl from new towns should be mitigated by green corridors, Green Wheels, or 'countryside gaps' which are protected from future development and help maintain the character of the area. A Green Infrastructure Frameworkⁱⁱ should be used to support the delivery of high-quality green infrastructure in new towns.
6. Plans should achieve a net increase in biodiversity, protecting existing habitats and ecosystems and creating new ones such as wedges and wildbelts within the new town perimeters.

7. New towns should encourage local food growth by incorporating community growing spacesⁱⁱⁱ.

Case study

Vauban near Freiburg in south Germany is a widely praised urban extension for its approach to green transport which the district was based around, and design of wildlife areas across the new development. The City of Freiburg has 600 hectares of parks and 160 playgrounds with a reduce lawn mowing schedule allowing biodiversity to thrive.

4. Housing diversity for inclusive communities

New town plans should be ambitious in building affordable, carbon neutral homes. With minimum social and genuinely affordable housing targets for each new town based on assessed housing need, and a mix of types and sizes of homes, they can be inclusive places for everyone across the generations.

Our criteria:

1. 'Affordable' housing needs to be genuinely affordable with affordability based around local wages rather than 80% of market value.
2. There should be clear requirements for high levels of social rent housing backed by sustained central government funding. These homes need to be protected to ensure they remain social housing.
3. Provide a range of different house sizes and types, including a target for larger homes for families and homes for those with accessibility needs.
4. All new homes should adhere to minimum space standards and include balconies and terraces for apartments and gardens for houses.
5. There should not be any substantial visible difference between tenure types to ensure a cohesive aesthetic and ensure everyone has a high-quality designed home regardless of income. This is known as tenure blind.

Case study

In Norwich, UK, there is an award-winning council development of energy efficient homes. There is a mix of two-, three- and four-bedroom flats and houses. All these homes on [Goldsmith Street](#) are social rented.

5. Encourage market disruption

New towns are a significant opportunity to encourage a diverse range of new housing developers, as well as other forms of innovation that can help stimulate growth for the local community and ensure there is broader community buy-in.

Our criteria:

1. Phases should be delivered by a diverse mix of housebuilders with priority given to small and medium developers. This can be achieved by parcelling up the land which allows for more developers to build and provides more local economic growth.
2. Other phases should be set aside for self-build as well as working with Community Land Trusts to deliver more housing.
3. Encourage community assets, such as pubs and shops, either by Community Land Trusts or community owned businesses.
4. Open green spaces should be managed by local community and new local authorities rather than private housing developers, avoiding the need for high management charges.

6. Integrated transport planning

New towns are an opportunity to create a modal shift away from car dependency by having efficient and reliable public transport options from the start supported by a network of active travel routes. This will vastly reduce the carbon emissions and create a sense of community by the new town being internally and externally well-connected.

Our criteria:

1. New towns should be based around rail infrastructure at the first instance, with active travel and public transport options embedded across the new town.
2. Build public transport infrastructure from the start of new town construction, such as tram tracks and cycle lanes.
3. Transport infrastructure should be suitable for those with accessibility needs.
4. Reduce parking provisions in the town centre, employment centres, and the number of houses with parking spaces by having shared parking.
5. The limited car parks within a new town should be covered by solar panels.
6. Mobility or Travel hubs^{iv} should be incorporated to connect rural areas to a new town and its services.
7. Transport planning needs to be strategically developed regarding movement of goods from within industrial areas between new towns and the rest of the UK.

7. What goes where to create a sense of place

New towns need to create a sense of place through connectivity and good design. The design process of each new town should be planned, with public input, integrate existing transport infrastructure and open green space whilst adhering to high quality design standards, including green infrastructure standards. An agreed vision should set out strategic aims and benefit from a masterplan to establish the framework for overarching integration of different parcels of land to be built by different developers. Local design codes should be adopted, setting out design guidance and criteria for each phase of the new town to ensure consistent quality is delivered throughout.

Our criteria:

1. Plans should relate to the vision and the existing features of the site and surrounding context including any heritage or landscape features. The landscape should be used as the setting for all new towns with built and natural assets valued, protected and enhanced by the masterplan.
2. Site plans should promote active travel and easy access to public transport as a priority^v for movement within new towns. Green corridors should provide connections for people and nature and help access to the countryside next door.
3. To create a sense of place there should be pedestrian only areas with plenty of street trees, green and open spaces, including playgrounds, which are safe and accessible.
4. Densities should make the most effective use of land and reflect access to services and public transport, with higher densities proposed in town centre locations and lower densities towards the edges. By having higher densities within the core and along transport corridors it reduces the amount of land needed for a new town.
5. New towns should have a mixed use of land meaning that workplaces are integrated with housing and nearby quality green space to support health and wellbeing. Additionally, there should be work hubs which allows residents to integrate and build a sense of community.
6. The buildings in the new towns must adhere to local design principles^{vi} and use modern building techniques.
7. Towns should be planned around and seek to upgrade existing infrastructure including grid, public transport routes etc. where possible.
8. Industrial warehousing needs should be strategically placed and well served by public transport on the edge of the development near transport infrastructure, namely rail, to limit the noise and light pollution on residents. Additionally, this helps the movement of freight away from lorries and trucks.

Case studies

[Poundbury, Dorset](#) has seen the creation of a recognisable place of character with new housing development at scale and good transport links to the adjoining town of Dorchester.

[Welborne Garden Village](#), Fareham is creating a sense of place by having more than 50% of the site being green space with the streets being pedestrian friendly and diverse creating a community ecosystem of shops, business, schools, parks and public transport.

8. Carbon neutral development

Climate change is the single greatest threat to the countryside, and new towns present a unique opportunity to build places fit for the future. New towns should be climate resilient with their location choice and materials used.

Our criteria:

1. All buildings within the new town should adhere to Future Homes and Building Standards that meet carbon neutral standards through re-use of materials, sustainable design, construction and the adoption of renewable energy sources such as solar panels, air source heat pumps, roof mounted wind turbines, along with nature friendly features such as swift and bee bricks, where applicable.
2. Existing buildings and structures should be reused as far as reasonably possible to reduce the amount of embodied carbon created during construction.
3. There should not be an increase in carbon emissions from transport as carbon neutral public transport will be the main source of movement around new towns and beyond. The need for private vehicles should be limited.
4. Electric vehicle charge points should be prevalent encouraging the use of electric vehicles.
5. New towns should meet the WHO targets for air quality^{vii}, with light^{viii} and noise pollution minimised.
6. Where applicable, new towns should adhere to 'rural proofing' to ensure they integrate seamlessly to the surrounding environment and ensure that those who live further away still receive the benefits of having a new town close by.
7. It should be possible for new towns to be self-sufficient through off-grid private energy networks, enabling local generation and management of energy use.
8. The waste hierarchy to reduce, reuse and recycle should be followed to support a circular economy and avoid landfill of waste.

Case Studies

Climate conscious practices as outlined in Sponge Cities, which are being trialled in East Asia, are a sensible approach to New Towns being developed in area which are prone to flooding What Is a Sponge City and How Does It Work? | ArchDaily And Freiberg, Germany is 100% renewable <https://www.greencitytimes.com/freiburg/>

BedZed, Wallington is a UK example of climate friendly practices incorporated in a development.

9. Transparent accountability

For new towns to be successful there needs to be clear and identified responsibility for governance, delivery, and monitoring of perform against anticipated outcomes throughout the lifetime of the new town.

Our criteria:

1. National government should direct broad locations, set minimum standards for affordability and design, and ensure adequate investment.
2. New spatial development strategies, which are integrated with the Land Use Framework alongside energy and transport planning, should reflect national guidance and provide further detail for the development of new towns. These spatial development strategies should be set locally.
3. Town and parish councils should oversee any new assets in the New Town.
4. Development corporations should be locally led and democratically accountable to ensure decisions are transparent and in the public interest.

Case study

[Marmalade Lane](#), Cambridge, is a good example of community led housing which provided affordable homes for local people. The co-housing scheme is a self-managing community living in a sustainable way.

10. Secure long-term success

CPRE believes new towns need long-term plans to ensure their viability. Incorporating local housing targets into designated new town areas can help limit urban sprawl, whilst effective master planning ensures they reflect the needs and ambitions of residents and local authorities. Development corporations also need a clear strategy for ongoing funding, so new towns remain well-resourced, and for shared spaces to be well managed over time.

Our criteria:

1. New towns should be included in local housing targets to help distribute growth more evenly and avoid placing undue pressure on surrounding areas.
2. Urban regeneration should occur within existing settlements and towns to avoid long term displacement of local centres and existing community centres
3. Development corporations should be set up with long-term investment and longevity in mind, ensuring new towns remain well-resourced for generations and are adaptable to future needs.
4. Robust, detailed masterplans give developers a clear vision, and local authorities can hold them accountable, while also protecting against sprawl through defined boundaries – such as accessible Green Wheels or wildlife corridors to offer Green Belt plus benefits.
5. Development corporations should work with local authorities to adopt an area action plan or similar for new towns, which should be adhered to throughout the lifetime of the development.

Future countryside ambition

Successful new towns should be models for how great places can be designed for the future – places that are inclusive, well-connected and climate resilient. Communities should be meaningfully involved throughout the development process, ensuring their voices shape new towns from the outset. New towns should offer access to nearby countryside and promote healthy and low carbon lifestyles.

New towns should make the best use of brownfield land first, which can enhance the character of an area by reusing existing buildings, recycle brownfield land for industrial or commercial purposes. Future new towns should be well-designed, fit for a carbon-neutral future, and seamlessly integrated with local shops, community centres, green spaces, schools, and potentially a job no more than 15 minutes' walk or wheel from people's homes. Through locally Inspired, high-quality design, these towns can protect and enhance the natural environment, with pedestrian friendly areas intertwined with nature-rich spaces, fostering a strong sense of community and belonging.

A successful new town should support cohesive communities by including high levels of social rent and affordable housing and a range of different housing types. Further allowing a sense of community by allowing spaces for children to play. The scale and density of building should support extensive public transport and adhere to local design codes. Integrating new towns into the local area and wider region can boost local growth, and efficient public transport and active travel options can reduce noise, air and light pollution.

New towns are a major opportunity for government to take a visionary approach to how people live — building places that are sustainable, inclusive, and fit for future generations.



The Campaign to Protect Rural England is a company limited by guarantee. Registered in England number: 04302973. Registered charity number: 1089685.

References

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