

Briefing paper 16: Learning from past policy successes and failures including lessons from abroad:

- We need urban regeneration alongside development of New Towns
- Local communities need to see early benefits
- Strong teams with clear long-term direction from Regional Mayors and access to upfront funding can drive both major regeneration and new town development
- European examples provide clear models of a co-ordinated approach to development

Introduction

Delivering results for Labour's Five Missions requires fundamental changes in the way major housing and infrastructure schemes are delivered. Otherwise we will repeat the mistakes of Gordon Brown's *EcoTowns*. **Beyond Eco-towns** drew on visits in 2008 to European pacesetters such as in Freiburg in Germany and Amersfoort in the Netherlands.¹ The principles were then applied in the *Cambridgeshire Quality Charter for Growth*². The Charter, with its four themes of Community, Connectivity, Climate and Character, helped Cambridge to grow faster and win many design awards, supported by an agreed Structure Plan and a **Quality Review Panel**. In contrast Oxford lagged behind, and the proposals for *Uxcester Garden City* that won the 2014 Wolfson Economic Prize were dismissed by the Conservatives.

Ten years on there are more award winners in the UK, but these are rarely replicated.³ **So the question Labour urgently needs to address is how to scale up best practice.** A start would be to **mobilise under-used land around stations and town centres** to boost confidence and attract investment. This could be part of the remit for the **Great British Rail** along with improving suburban services. Developments would provide jobs and homes without adding to congestion. Places such as Kings Cross, Cambridge or near stations on the London Overground show how regeneration adds value.

Housing will only revive the economy if physical changes on the ground are backed by social capital to restore hope, as Andy Haldane, former Chief Economist at the Bank of England, has convincingly argued.⁴ Abandoned shops, declining local services and streets that feel unsafe have devastated local communities. Investment in *social capital* should be the switch to boost local

¹ [Beyond Eco-towns Applying the Lessons from Europe - URBED](#)

² <https://cambridgeshireinsight.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Cambridgeshire-Quality-Panel-Charter-for-Growth.pdf>

³ [Better housing for the 21st century: a report on housing by the AoU](#)

⁴ [Social Capital 2025: The hidden wealth of nations - Demos](#)

economic growth, and so needs support from the Infrastructure Bank (now the **National Wealth Fund**) as a report from The Smith Institute proposed in 2014.⁵

Brownfield land is a blight on communities. There are more than 27,000 hectares of brownfield land in England which could deliver more than 1.2m homes⁶. Hard-pressed councils should enable local initiatives to take over unused open space and empty shops for art, sport and cultural activities. **Meanwhile Uses** can attract young people into construction and the 'green economy'. A **Common Wealth Fund** to back such initiatives would show Labour cares about tackling waste. Transformational projects like the *Camley Street Natural Park* at Kings Cross offer inspiration. Green foundations for new towns or garden cities cost little and could be created long before most of the new homes are built and occupied.

Learning from best practice

Research for Shelter found the best cities providing affordable housing by using public corporations to unlock land at the right locations and reduce financing and development costs.⁷ The Dutch VINEX policy of building planned new suburbs increased the housing stock by 7.6% over ten years.⁸

The award-winning development of **Vathorst**, a new town of 11,000 homes on the edge of Amersfoort in the Netherlands offers lessons:

- Land was pooled, through a public private partnership.
- A multi-disciplinary development team (OHV) was set up.
- Low cost finance from the state investment bank BNG funded advance infrastructure.
- Eight different house builders provided a wider choice of homes, building at several times the British rate, and
- The local authority took 30% of the housing to rebalance the city.⁹

In the German university city of **Freiburg** 130 *baugruppen* (building groups) turned the old barracks and sewage works into exemplary urban extensions. Housing co-ops in Danish, Austrian and Swiss cities help keep housing costs down and widen choice.

In **France** provincial cities such as Montpellier have grown much faster than the capital thanks to local ambition. Mayors use *CDTs* (spatial development contracts) to broker different forms of investment together¹⁰ *ZACs* (*Zones d'Amenagement Concerte*) or Land Assembly Zones focus efforts and align stakeholders, such as the utilities, that in the UK hold up progress. In the mixed use quarter called Rive Gauche in central Paris a fifth of the land came from covering over the railway lines into the Gare d'Austerlitz. Funding from the state investment bank, the *Caisse des Depots* made it easier. Continuity is critical, and the head of the delivery body (SEMAPA) outlived three Mayors of Paris, all of whom were committed to the project.

⁵ [Funding Housing and Local Growth: how a British Investment Bank.](#)

⁶ <https://www.cpre.org.uk/news/brownfield-land-for-1-2-million-homes-lying-dormant-our-report-shows/>

⁷ [International examples of Affordable Housing | URBED Trust](#)

⁸ Nicholas Falk, Urban Policy and New Economic Powerhouses, Town and Country Planning, August 2015

⁹ [Making Eco-towns Work: Developing Vathorst, Amersfoort NL, URBED](#) <http://urbed.coop>

¹⁰ Nicholas Falk, Land for Housing, report for John Healey MP, 2019, <http://urbed.coop/news/land-housing-urbed-trust-research>

Accelerating change

- **Designate Growth Zones for land assembly and investment** Digital intelligence should help pick the best areas for growth and avoid speculation.¹¹ Development Corporations with multi-skilled teams will provide the leadership to resolve conflicts. *Land Assembly Zones* backed by streamlined CPOs will speed up land assembly in complex areas.¹²
- **Fund in advance infrastructure to reduce risks** Transport and infrastructure finance is needed to improve connectivity and make new settlements viable. Finance can come from institutional investors using bonds and Tax Increment Finance, as in progressive North American cities such as Portland Oregon. The *National Wealth Fund* could act as broker. Parliamentary approval for ten year investment programmes would boost confidence.
- **Use Building Exhibitions and Festivals to accelerate demand** just as the Festival of Britain in 1951 provided a 'tonic for the nation', the government should support innovation. An example was Milton Keynes Future World (1994) sponsored by the National House Building Council (NHBC). Germany and Sweden use *Building Exhibitions* to kick-start major development programmes such as Emscher Park in the Ruhr, Kronsberg in Hanover, or Bo01 in Malmo's old Harbour.¹³ Innovative housing should serve groups the market misses such as elderly people downsizing or young people starting out.
- **Train multi-disciplinary teams to speed development.** Many of the essential skills have been lost. New settlements require dedicated people working together over time. Leadership courses backed up by study tours would break down the barriers. Regional Centres of Excellence should cross professional and sectoral boundaries and engage both the National Infrastructure Commission and Homes England in projects that will act as beacons.
- **Modernise construction to cut costs** as with cars and electronics better housing requires economies of scale. Small and specialist builders should be allocated sites early on with local authorities' under-pinning demand until demand takes off. The Construction Industry Training Board (CITB) has highlighted that the construction industry workforce is falling and proposed mechanisms to improve training and recruitment¹⁴. Replacing imports should be a priority.
- **Reform property taxes to correct market failure** Property taxes can be used to influence behaviour as well as fill funding caps. It is unfair for property owners who benefit most from public infrastructure not to contribute. A charge on land values, as in Denmark for example, encourages building to higher densities, discourages hoarding, and helps create a more equal society. As the subject is complex and controversial a **Commission on Property Tax** should be set up to draw on the wealth of experience and to recommend the most efficient, effective and equitable ways of modernising our outmoded system¹⁵.

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¹¹ [A Digital Future for Planning](#)

¹² [Capital gains: a better land assembly model for London](#)

¹⁴ <https://www.citb.co.uk/about-citb/news-events-and-blogs/over-250-000-extra-construction-workers-required-to-meet-demand/by-20>

¹⁵ [Sharing the Uplift in Land Values – TCPA Policy Paper - URBED Trust](#)