

# New lessons for new towns

What can we learn from the large-scale settlements under development to shape the next generation of new towns?



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The Housing Forum has over 130 member organisations from across the housing sector. Local authorities and housing associations represent around half our membership.

Our members share a determination to drive quality in design, construction and maintenance of UK homes and a commitment to partnership working to deliver affordable housing.

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# Scene setting

By guest contributor, Victor Nicholls – Lecturer in Development and Planning at the Henley Business School, University of Reading.

This timely report reflects on the challenges and opportunities of delivering sustainable placemaking. It offers practical lessons via a series of case studies representing different delivery models and highlights the benefits unlocked by high-quality, affordable, and sustainable housing. Given the ongoing housing crisis, it is no surprise that the Government is looking afresh at new towns and major settlements to scale up delivery.

There is much that we can learn from the values that underpinned the post-war new towns including where they fell short, and crucially, very recent experience in tackling those deficiencies to meet current and future needs. Previous research I have undertaken focuses precisely on this – defining, reflecting on and sharing the principles and practicalities of successful development.

**There are clear messages that emerge from this research:**

The creation of a shared, coherent vision is an essential ingredient as is effective civic leadership, combined with systematic and considered stakeholder engagement including local communities and businesses.

The adoption of a broad-based approach to placemaking will help to ensure that the shared vision is credible and enduring, capable of withstanding the inevitable headwinds faced by any complex, long-term development project. The approach should embrace the principles of sustainability (in terms of design, construction, energy use and sustainable transport).

A thriving cultural scene and evening economy, health facilities, and open space are some of the key factors that will help to create compelling new places for people to build their lives.

Long-term maintenance of the new assets, including landscape and infrastructure, needs to be considered at an early stage. Planning and design approaches should minimise barriers to future repurposing and regeneration.

Combined with strong partnership working with empowered and driven professionals, these factors will help to unlock the creation and delivery of enviable new places to live and work.

**As the country is poised to embark on developing a new generation of new towns, this report should prove hugely valuable in setting out detailed, practical experiences and lessons to take on board.**

# About this report and its findings

In January 2025 The Housing Forum set up a working group to examine what has worked well in recent new towns and settlements with the aim of informing the debate on how the next generation of new towns should be delivered. This is largely from a housing and placemaking perspective. As the cross-industry body for the housing sector, The Housing Forum is uniquely placed to consider what has worked well and the lessons that can be learned.

## New Towns Taskforce: Report to government (25 September 2025)

This Housing Forum report looks at large scale developments that have been delivered post the New Town Act 1946 and what lessons can be learnt. We are pleased that the recently published New Towns Task Force Report makes many recommendations which we believe will help new towns to thrive.

The Task Force's explanation of the 12 recommended new town locations makes sense and we congratulate all those that have been successful. It looks to be an exciting time ahead. However some of the follow up debate seems to have focussed on “the winners and losers” which we think is a pessimistic view. Our findings show real successes from local authorities, housing associations, developers, property and design professionals and communities who have already collaborated in a variety of partnership models to reflect local and market circumstances in order to deliver large scale communities outside of any such designation - they have not had all the tools to be offered to the new locations to turbo charge delivery.

We are optimistic. Our report shows that local leadership, vision and working in partnership between the public, private, third sector and local communities can result in many other well planned, connected, new communities with appropriate physical and community infrastructure being delivered where there is the determination to do so. We see the 12 recommended locations becoming an inspiration and blueprint for other locations and we hope, in time, that more will follow.

The Housing Forum New Towns Working Group will be carrying forward analysis of a range of more recent settlements into 2026 to continue to inform the industry and evaluate progress.



## New lessons for new towns

This report is in three parts:

**Part 1: Making the place and growing over time** sets out the key things to consider when designing and delivering new towns. It also covers the lessons learnt from these case studies, and from the experiences of The Housing Forum's members from across the housing sector.

**Part 2: Case studies** highlights different delivery models and goes into more detail on each of the five case studies.

**Part 3: Going forward** sets out what we have drawn from this work.

## New towns are back on the agenda

The Government's focus of this new programme has been for new towns, including urban extensions, to be centrally driven by Whitehall and local authorities in a planned manner. However, when you look at the history of larger-scale housing developments, it is clear that this centrally-led model is just one route among many. The case studies in this report illustrate some of the opportunities to grow new settlements by other delivery models. These less planned models have all succeeded in generating new housing supply – though some also highlight the problems of housing growth without sufficient strategy and masterplanning at an early stage. Both their successes and shortcomings present learning opportunities. Different models may work in different contexts, so the range of options should not be overlooked.

**Whatever model is used, there are some key things that all new towns need:**

- New towns will grow over decades, so flexibility for the future needs to be built in, and the details evolve as the town grows.
- New towns should offer a variety of sizes, tenures and types of housing, including market homes, shared ownership, social rent, community-led models and build to rent.
- Placemaking is central. We must ensure that new towns are planned for the future mix of ages, tenures and ethnic diversity.
- New towns aren't just about housing; education, business and industry are part of the mix. Transport upgrades provided early appear to be closely linked to positive outcomes.
- Modern generations of new towns and settlements provide the opportunity to deliver climate positive communities, lower cost living and regenerative design.
- Stewardship should be considered right from the start and enduring structures put in place to facilitate renewal and re-investment over time.

**The case studies we have drawn on are summarised below:**

- These examples do not at present represent the scale of delivery of at least 10,000 homes as envisaged by government and the New Towns Taskforce in "Building new towns for the future", although many have the potential to grow further and the value of our work is to show how additional housing delivery is being accelerated.

- In most of the case studies, ownership and leadership has changed and evolved. We include examples where the private sector has led on development with subsequent additional permissions gained through public/private sector initiatives into expansion areas.
- The case studies indicate whether or not CPOs have been used and the additional value and timing of urban development corporations.
- Overall the delivery of housing keeps pace, but it can be argued that the delivery of non-residential elements is hindered without a master developer.
- When housing associations and other registered providers come in early, they contribute collaboratively to complex developments.
- There is a strong correlation between community engagement and delivery at scale.

### Ebbfleet Garden City

Located in Kent with its first planning approval in 1996. To date 4,000 homes have been provided, 26% of the 15,000 homes anticipated. A locally led urban development corporation was set up part way through and has helped coordination, but more progress would have been made if it had been established at the outset.

### Cranbrook New Town

Located in East Devon, the planning application period spans 1995 to 2024. To date, 3,300 homes have been provided, 35% of the 8,000 homes anticipated. The scheme began as a three-way developer consortium in 1995, following inclusion in the structure plan. Planning permission was granted in 2010, construction began in 2011 with the first residents moving in during 2012.

### Northstowe New Town

Located in South Cambridgeshire, 10 miles north of Cambridge, with first planning approval in 2003. To date 1,200 homes have been provided, 15% of the 10,000 homes anticipated. Northstowe was initially a private sector-led initiative before a joint venture was formed with Homes England. The early stages of the development were delayed by the upgrading of the A14. The first residents moved in in 2016.

### Harlow and Gilston New Town

Located in East Hertfordshire and Essex, the planning application period spans 2018 to 2023. A total of 16,000 homes are anticipated but none have been delivered to date. Initially this was a joint venture with a housing association and is now housing association led.

### Tendring Colchester Borders Garden Community

Located in North Essex, east of Colchester, this is a housing association led Garden Community comprising 7,750 homes plus schools, green infrastructure, employment, retail, public realm and community assets. The local planning policy started in 2020 with the planning application to be submitted in 2025. Determination is expected to be in 2026 and the anticipated start on site in 2027.



# Part 1:

## Making the place and growing over time

Long-term stewardship, governance, funding and infrastructure have to be considered early and secured within the planning system to provide more successful placemaking and thriving communities.

### Stewardship, vision and stakeholders

Stewardship concerns the long-term management of the assets within a garden community or new town. It should seek to maintain assets such as facilities, public spaces and non-adopted infrastructure in a financially self-sustaining manner.

In addition to this functional role, stewardship can also play a critical role in fostering a sense of ownership of a place by the community, bringing together residents, stakeholders and local interest groups in the delivery of shared goals and projects.

**These are things to consider:**

- **Stewardship frameworks** – These can help achieve a sense of ownership, and should be embedded at the heart of a project from its inception. In doing this the project can ensure early identification of interested parties and foster their long-term ongoing involvement.
- **Housing tenures** – Consideration of stewardship needs to take account of a variety of tenures. This may include social landlords, build-to-rent landlords and community groups such as co-housing schemes.
- **Urban Development Corporations (UDC)** – These can be a good way of providing upfront infrastructure and placemaking, which can be critical to success.

### Asset types and stakeholders

A range of different asset types might fall within the remit of any stewardship arrangement, and these need to be identified, costed and earmarked for inclusion within the stewardship vehicle at an early stage. Alongside this, a broad range of wider stakeholders are needed, representing all ages and socio-economic groups, including grass roots organisations already active in the area.

Early engagement with potential stewardship bodies can start when the site is first allocated. Doing this early on allows interested parties to input into the stewardship model. Engagement for this purpose can be facilitated through informal groups which may eventually evolve into the long-term stewardship model.

Identifying potential membership of the stewardship will be dictated by the type of assets the development will have.

**The table below provides some examples of stakeholders and the asset typologies they will have specific interest in.**

#### Community assets:

##### Asset

- Public realm
- Local parks
- SUDS
- Green corridors
- Community centre
- Allotments
- Heritage assets

##### Stakeholders

- Local authority
- Parish/town council
- Resident groups
- Integrated Care Bodies
- Countryside partnerships
- River catchment groups
- Wildlife trusts

#### Community development:

##### Asset

- Community events
- Arts and culture
- Community development
- Sports
- Work and skills
- Covenant enforcement

##### Stakeholders

- Local authority
- Parish/town council
- Resident groups
- Leisure trusts
- Arts and creative groups
- Youth community groups

#### Infrastructure:

##### Asset

- Cycling infrastructure
- Water infrastructure
- Commercial and employment uses
- Nutrient wetlands
- Energy, including community heating, renewables, battery storage, EV charging

##### Stakeholders

- Local authority
- Parish/town council
- Resident groups
- Highway authorities
- Statutory undertakers
- Local business and commerce groups
- Economic partnerships





Things to consider when assembling stakeholders are as follows:

- **Core stakeholders** – Local authorities, parish/town councils and resident groups will be core to the group of stakeholders with interests across all or most asset types.
- **Grouping stakeholders into sub-groups** – Some stakeholders may have multiple asset interests, and where there are many stakeholders covering a broad range of assets, consideration should be given as to whether each one has a role in the core stewardship function or whether they will sit within sub-groups. Additionally, some assets may sit across multiple asset typologies – for example, a wetland is likely to serve as a sustainable urban drainage system (SUDs) for the purpose of nutrient mitigation (infrastructure), and biodiversity, open space and drainage (community assets). In such instances having stakeholders advising across a range of themes can assist in smooth implementation of stewardship functions.
- **Establishing new organisations** – As well as existing organisations, there is a need to establish new initiatives within the area. For example, at Heathlands in Kent, the local community has established a meadows trust to buy and manage wildlife sites within the parish. Such an organisation has the potential to make a significant impact on how the natural greenspace is managed and also opens up a connection with the existing local community.
- **Including local groups to help bring them onboard** – Large-scale developments such as new garden communities often generate a significant degree of local objection. Including existing local groups in the long-term stewardship of the new community can help foster a sense of ownership and agency.

## Setting the strategic vision

New towns need a strategic vision for their design. A strategic design vision ties into the current National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) and therefore benefits from the convenience and familiarity of building on existing planning structures.

**Key considerations are set out as follows:**

- **Strategic vision to provide continuity and direction** – A strategic vision can compensate in situations where a new Local Plan will later be forthcoming, and be broad enough to provide a framework without stifling individual sites.
- **Linking into the existing area** – This strategic vision is critical for delivery, but where new development is delivered as an extension to an existing settlement, it must encapsulate surrounding areas as well as the 'new'. Homes England's "Building for a Healthy Life" provides a current practical guide to delivering a 'good' masterplan and the aspirations of the NPPF but stops short at the red line boundary of new developments. A great masterplan must think beyond this and understand what it is knitting into. This will ensure that new settlements are not 'siloed' and can deliver incidental benefits to existing communities, with greater continuity of identity.
- **Including infrastructure in the vision** – A strategic vision must also take account of not just housing needs, but vital infrastructure to serve and sustain the new residents and existing adjacent communities, inclusive of utilities, transport, amenities, and jobs.

The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) has commissioned fresh guidance on what makes a good masterplan, to ensure decision makers and development control teams are well informed to make decisions on and consent to best practice projects. This will be critical in upholding quality.



## Setting out stewardship through the planning system

Stewardship, governance, funding and infrastructure should be dealt with through the planning system in stages, with each stage going into more detail than the last. In a new town area, planning policy at a strategic level should set expectations and responsibilities early on in the process, while more detailed policy should set specific requirements for sites to allow these matters to be 'priced in' to the development model. These then need to be implemented in a robust way, with implementation supported in policy to ensure consistency of approach. The precise models that will be suitable to secure infrastructure or stewardship will differ from area to area, but there are key principles common everywhere. **Again these are set out below:**

- **Strategic policies** may be set out in local plans and/or spatial development strategies (SDSs) and should set out the broad requirements for major sites and identify the types of sites that they apply to.
- **Area-specific policies** (such as site allocations, SPDs, masterplans and design codes) should set general requirements for the development. For example, where a comprehensive stewardship model is required, this should be addressed in policy so that the costs of required infrastructure are 'priced in' from the outset, with the mechanisms agreed with the authorities pre-planning. The requirements should also establish clear principles for how the various layers of infrastructure, public realm and landscape features are to be dealt with in relation to stewardship.
- **Site-specific planning permission** such as planning conditions, Section 106 agreements and other methods can be used to secure the particular stewardship model or a design code, and provide for the wider needs of the new community.

One of the more successful aspects of the Harlow and Gilston New Town experience has been strong landscape and sustainability skills. These had already built up in the local authorities from previous landscape-led design of an earlier generation of new towns at Harlow by Gibberd.

## Creating the funding environment to secure investment and delivery success

New towns require alignment of financial capacity from all stakeholders towards delivery. **Considerations regarding financial capacity are set out as follows:**

- **Funding strategy** – A bespoke funding strategy for each new town will be needed, which recognises the need for funding to meet gaps. This should include staged funding to support cash flow. The National Housing Bank which will offer loans, guarantees and equity investment may be well placed to support this area.
- **Understanding viability** – The viability of delivery is obviously a key consideration. The costs of doing development at the scale of a new town and in different geographies need to be understood by the local authority setting the policy for developer contributions. **This would include calculating the following costs and benchmarking against other areas to ensure competitive and viable for partners, whilst also supporting the wider infrastructure required for delivery:**
  - The different elements of the costs of housebuilding, as set out in our previous report "The Cost of Building a House", and including new taxes such as the Building Safety Levy
  - Community Infrastructure Levy
  - Section 106 financial contributions
  - Planning fees with regard to any costs arising from development corporations.

## Building cross-party commitment to the project

Cross-political context will always be a factor in local politics, but what is more important is the combined political understanding of the strategic importance of the new town or new settlement and a joint commitment to spatial planning. **Key considerations are set out below:**

- **Sign-up from a wide range of political stakeholders** – Political stakeholders are not always party politicians so negotiating across all agencies to sign up to a long-term project is vital on more complex new town developments.
- **Cross-boundary and cross-party joint committees** – These can be very beneficial even during policy-making stage. They can achieve a more project-focused debate, less influenced by wider political concerns.



- Planning for large-scale development** – Large-scale strategic projects will draw in infrastructure including transport upgrades. The alternative is unplanned small-scale developments which lack the necessary infrastructure. They are often unpopular as they may exasperate the core demands around schools, health provision, waste collection and transport, and are more likely to be politically divisive. Ensuring an up-to-date local plan is in place that plans for larger-scale developments is therefore key to building cross-party support for housing.

Tendring Colchester Borders Garden Community is a cross-boundary site which benefited from cross-party commitment. It progressed relatively quickly from site allocation, through to adopted development plan document. It has benefitted from cross-party alignment at both local and regional council level.

All political parties across Colchester, Tendring and Essex councils have voted to adopt the development plan document. Furthermore, the support of local MPs (from different parties) has been key to facilitating ministerial engagement for a new piece of road infrastructure critical for the project - connecting local A roads when the Housing Infrastructure Fund proved insufficient.

## Dealing with devolution and local government reorganisation

Will the powers of a strategic mayoral authority drive a different political context in championing housing development? Or is there a risk that strategic planning could become more remote, losing the focus that smaller local councils have on meeting housing need? **To build on the opportunities from devolution these considerations are important:**

- Strategic commitment prior to reorganisation** – With the devolution agenda comes the combining of local authorities into new groupings and structures. A higher-level strategy statement of housing need and management could be a means of bringing in a more agile approach to housing need at a community level.
- New opportunities for wider-scale planning** – Local government reorganisation has the potential to improve transport planning and delivery which is often outdated with responsibilities shared between district and county councils at present. Education too has a better strategic fit with local needs as it can better predict those whom services will be engaging with.
- The convening role of local authorities** – The role of the local authorities as long-term stewards of place remains, whatever the structure. A development corporation may be needed to ensure pace of delivery, the local authority will still be identifying and bringing together key partners and stakeholders. This will ensure any new town can benefit from the social networks and institutional capacity that already exists within the place.



## Building a successful community

### Building for everyone

Building a thriving, diverse and sustainable community requires thoughtful planning. Ensuring a balanced mix of residents and economic opportunities will be key to fostering inclusivity and long-term success.

A successful community should include people of different ages, family structures, and socio-economic backgrounds.

**Effort needs to be placed in the following areas:**

- **A mixture of housing tenures** – Offering a range of housing options, including rental properties, homes targeted at first-time buyers and age-friendly homes ensures inclusivity. A mix of social housing, market-rate homes, and co-living spaces fosters economic and generational diversity.
- **Community-led housing** – Self- and custom-built housing and community-led co-housing and community land trusts will broaden the housing mix and add to social infrastructure.

### Employment and economic sustainability, retail and amenities

A community thrives when it supports sustainable employment and a balanced local economy. A mix of retail offerings and services is vital for convenience, community engagement, and economic vibrancy. **Planning should consider:**

- **Local business incentives** – Encouraging small businesses, startups, and social enterprises through grants or subsidised commercial spaces fosters economic resilience.
- **Flexible workspaces and innovation hubs** – With hybrid work now common, incorporating co-working spaces and business incubators can attract a diverse workforce and support entrepreneurship.
- **Green and circular economy jobs** – Developing industries focused on sustainability, renewable energy, waste management, and sustainable construction, ensures long-term employment opportunities while reducing environmental impact.
- **Local and ethical retail** – Prioritising locally owned shops, farmer's markets, and ethical businesses helps keep economic benefits within the community.
- **A mixture of social spaces and events** – Designing spaces where young people, families, and retirees can coexist within the community is crucial. Local events, and cultural programmes provide opportunities for people from different backgrounds and traditions to come together fostering a strong sense of belonging.



### Transport

Too many developments are not located near public transport (or they rely on councils extending bus services at some point in the future) and are therefore very car reliant in their early days.

**For successful developments and well-connected communities consider the following:**

- **Location choice** – Most new towns are large enough to justify a new station, but need to be near a railway line. Brabazon in Bristol is a good case study for the critical mass needed for a station.
- **Sustainable transport and connectivity** – Walkability, cycling infrastructure, and efficient public transport reduce reliance on cars while providing access to employment, retail and leisure opportunities.
- **Subsidised public transport for the early phases** – Early infrastructure investment is critical for success, as demonstrated by Barking where infrastructure improvements (overground extension) transformed the area. Any completely new towns need to have the public transport infrastructure available at the beginning of development to ensure that the town grows around these central transportation hubs. This may require public investment, as services may only be commercially viable later on. Locally led and new models for funding of ongoing maintenance should be considered.
- **Alternative solutions to car parking** – These should be embedded in strategic planning policies because new towns are an opportunity to trial new ways to live and how we deal with car dominance. Car parking often can negatively affect housing density, street design, as well as causing congestion.

In the Harlow and Gilston New Town case study, a challenge has been the gap between wider sustainable transport objectives and the delivery of infrastructure and development in parcels. At each step, arguments were made by applicants that not providing for current levels of car ownership and usage would affect viability and sales, whilst sufficient public transport was not yet in place. This risks 'locking in' high levels of car ownership and usage making it hard to achieve long-term sustainable transport ambitions.



## Building sustainably – meeting the need for housing and also for nature

### Considering nature when choosing a site

Sustainable location is not just about avoiding car reliance and promoting active travel, it is about ensuring that nature is either retained or any harm is mitigated. **In site selection the following factors should be considered:**

- **Choosing a site that has low-quality existing habitats** – This will mean little disruption to the existing habitats. Areas of high biodiversity or irreplaceable habitats should be avoided for development.
- **Flood risk, water scarcity in the local area and capacity of existing sewage systems** – If water scarcity cannot be avoided, ensure that this is mitigated through strategic planning policy to require a high level of water reuse and use reduction (if regulation is not yet sufficient).
- **Protected species** – Sites with protected species should be avoided where practical.

New towns present an opportunity to be the blueprint for sustainable towns of the future and provide the opportunity to set the bar for climate positive and regenerative design.

### Climate-positive urban development

With rapid urbanisation and population growth, cities and towns are facing increased pressure on resources, infrastructure, and ecosystems. Climate change, extreme weather events, and environmental degradation demand a proactive approach to urban planning – one that ensures new developments not only minimise harm but actively contribute to restoring natural systems. **For new towns to become true blueprints for the future, they must incorporate the following features:**

- **Regenerative design** – Urban environments must go beyond reducing emissions and actively remove carbon from the atmosphere. This can be achieved through a whole-life approach to design including green roofs, rewilding or reforestation initiatives, and carbon-neutral or carbon-positive construction methods and materials.

- **Water management and resilience** – Designing towns to capture and reuse water through rainwater harvesting, greywater recycling, and sustainable urban drainage systems ensures long-term sustainability. Green and blue infrastructure are increasingly required and complex. Both provide opportunities for people, climate and nature.
- **Circular economy and material reuse** – Reducing waste and embracing circularity ensures that towns are designed with longevity in mind. Buildings can be constructed using recycled materials, and waste management systems can facilitate repurposing rather than disposal.
- **Energy efficiency and renewables** – Towns must integrate solar and wind power, smart grids, and passive building techniques to reduce energy consumption and reliance on non-renewable sources.
- **Biodiversity and green infrastructure** – Cities must maintain and enhance biodiversity through the introduction of urban forests, community gardens, and interconnected ecosystems that support wildlife and natural habitats.
- **Careful design of space** – The use of space in a new town will need to be carefully planned, and stacking the benefits of these types of infrastructure can make them multi-functional. For example, careful design of SUDs can support biodiversity and provide green spaces for people. This needs to be considered at the masterplan stage to allow nature to be established early on.



## Part 2:

# Case studies

## Ebbfleet Garden City North Kent



### Local authority

Kent County Council, Dartford Council, Gravesham Council.

### Delivery mechanism

Locally led by Ebbfleet Development Corporation. Announced in 2015 by MHCLG. Land promoted and planning obtained initially by Land Securities and Henley Camland.

### Number of homes

Up to 15,000.

### Other key deliverables

New commercial and civic centre, A2 junction upgrades, improved and extended Fastrack network, 50 parks and open spaces, 21 primary and secondary school 'forms of entry' and health and wellbeing facilities.

### Percentage of affordable homes

30%.

### Planning strategy/status

Most of the central part of the scheme had outline planning permissions in place before designation. Ebbfleet central planning was submitted in 1996 and consent granted in 2002. The eastern quarry planning application was approved in 2007. Significant work to implement consensus since.



### Delivery to date

Housing delivery started in 2007, long before the UDC was established. Over 4,900 homes have been built to date, with pace and scale increased since EDC's inception in 2015.

### Key challenges

#### Local support

Local and national government level. Ebbfleet Garden City Trust set up to ensure local community engagement and stewardship. The Trust will take ownership of buildings, assets, and resources to enable local residents and businesses to create inclusive and sustainable neighbourhoods, by promoting good health and well-being, leisure, arts and culture, quality lifelong learning, high environmental standards and innovation in business.

#### Land assembly

Largely already assembled by private sector promoters.

### Infrastructure

The scheme attracted over £200 million in infrastructure plus new rail and grid upgrades. This allowed for more coordinated delivery, particularly on transport, utilities and blue and green infrastructure.

### Other

The UDC removed decision making from multiple local authorities. Homes delayed by environmental designations.

### Government / private sector role

#### Central government role

Granted UDC and North Kent Enterprise Zone funding status. Significant Government support for infrastructure.

#### Local government role (outside local planning authority and housing association)

Support for UDC.

#### Private sector role

Land assembly and investment before the UDC was created was considerable.





## Positives

- Dedicated team leading reinterpretation and implementation of garden city principles.
- Strong and efficient planning functions.
- Brought national attention and coordination to fragmented development.
- Able to attract considerable public sector investment for infrastructure and economic growth, beyond onsite infrastructure.
- Brought together existing landowners and fragmented development to provide a more cohesive approach.
- Strong engagement principles.
- Strong resident satisfaction survey results: [ebbsfleetgardencity.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Resident-Satisfaction-Survey-Results-small-PDF.pdf](https://www.ebbsfleetgardencity.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Resident-Satisfaction-Survey-Results-small-PDF.pdf)
- Ashmere Phase 1 - Winner of 2025 Housing Design Awards.

## Problematic issues

- Majority of planning consents in place long before the UDC was created so arguably there was not the opportunity to use the UDC's powers on planning and land assembly to full potential.
- Little public sector land so little public sector opportunity to influence developers and their pace of delivery.
- Still delayed by environmental designations.

## Lessons learnt

- Delivery of infrastructure at scale is best coordinated through a UDC. This could have been more impactful if the UDC had been created at the outset.
- A strong focus on engagement helped manage the impact of new development at this scale.

1 Image © [www.ebbsfleetgardencity.org.uk](https://www.ebbsfleetgardencity.org.uk)

2 Image © [www.ebbsfleetgardencity.org.uk](https://www.ebbsfleetgardencity.org.uk)

3 Image © [www.ebbsfleetgardencity.org.uk](https://www.ebbsfleetgardencity.org.uk)

4 Image © [www.ebbsfleetgardencity.org.uk](https://www.ebbsfleetgardencity.org.uk)



# Cranbrook New Town East Devon



## Local authority

East Devon District Council.

## Delivery mechanism

'Incidental'. The initial concept was formed in 1995. It is a commercially driven model, initially with no publicly controlled land. The land was promoted and planning obtained by Hallam Land, Persimmon and Taylor Wimpey who have formed East Devon New Community consortium.

## Number of homes

The initial outline planning permission was for 2,900 homes. By 2014 this number had risen to just over 3,500 as a result of additional permissions and is now set for around 8,000.

## Other key deliverables

Cranbrook railway station and new roads. The Clyst Honiton Bypass was created specifically to accommodate the new town and a nearby employment site, improvements to A30 and J29 M5 including a bridge for cyclists and pedestrians over the M5, an all-through school, primary schools, GP surgery, community building, neighbourhood shops including a pharmacy, supermarket and town centre shops.

## Percentage of affordable homes

A blended rate of 28% across the first 3,500 homes. The forthcoming expansion areas, delivering more than 4,000 homes will have 15% affordable housing as a planning requirement to enable wider key infrastructure funding.



## Planning strategy/status

The 1995 vision for the development was for a low carbon community of 4,000 homes, six miles east of Exeter and strategically placed next to a railway line. The first planning application was submitted to East Devon Council in 2003, before the scheme was adopted into the 2006 East Devon Local Plan. Planning permission for Phase 1 was granted in 2010. Further development and extensions to Cranbrook were included in The Cranbrook Plan DPD, adopted in 2022, which will see the town grow to around 8,000 homes plus associated infrastructure.

## Delivery to date

The first homes were occupied in 2012 and more than 3,300 homes have been delivered to date.

## Key challenges

### Local support

Political opposition early on at a local level.

### Land assembly

Largely already assembled by private sector promoters. CPOs have not been used. Land in the town centre was acquired in 2022 by private treaty from the East Devon New Community partners and further town centre land will be transferred pursuant to s106 obligations.

## Infrastructure

Homes England provided £20 million of investment to open up Phase 2 and ensure the pace of building was maintained. £6 million was spent on roads and £14 million on a new secondary school and second primary school. The overall funding package was larger than this as there were monies put into initial highway works to the Clyst Honiton Bypass, Redhayes Bridge and to see early affordable housing delivery. In terms of highway and transport improvements there was a Phased Access Strategy produced by the County Council and this saw the implementation of the suite of improvements necessary not only for Cranbrook but for the wider growth corridor that included strategic employment sites and other large areas of housing growth.

## Government / private sector role

### Central government role

Funding through Homes England. Cranbrook Town Centre is designated as an Enterprise Zone (part of the Exeter and East Devon Enterprise Zone).

### Private sector role

Land assembly and investment was considerable.





## Positives

- Strong engagement principles
- Strong sense of community and vibrancy
- Schools, a train station and district heating were all delivered earlier than required in the Section 106 agreement. The first school was open at the time of completing the 30th dwelling rather than the 500th.
- A community hub delivering multi-agency services was set up in an unused part of the all-through school as a meanwhile use of space, until permanent space is available in the town centre.
- A community development worker was appointed early on by the East Devon Volunteer Support Agency, using s106 funding.

## Problematic issues

- The lack of a UDC impacted delivery of important infrastructure initially but now there is a supermarket, skatepark and first phase retail units that have been built.
- In hindsight, the council acknowledges it should have considered the stewardship of the town earlier. The original management company was unpopular, and the town council stepped in and applied a charge to residents' council tax bills instead to cover its costs.

## Lessons learnt

- Housing delivery has been faster than Northstowe. There is lots of evidence to show that Cranbrook is delivering housing at a scale of a new town. The lack of a master developer role has hindered the delivery of the non-residential elements so critical to placemaking, rather than impacting on the delivery of housing.
- The developer-led model has limitations in terms of placemaking. The role of the council in recent years has been far reaching in addressing and correcting the failures.

1 Cranbrook town centre June 2025 ©Still Imaging.

2 People relaxing in the town centre at Cranberry Farm pub ©GRW-Photography.

3 Cranbrook looking east June 2025 ©Still Imaging.





# Northstowe New Town South Cambridgeshire

## Local authority

South Cambridgeshire District Council.

## Delivery mechanism

Public-sector led, after initially being private-sector led, followed by a private sector delivery of the first 1,500 homes, then Homes England (at the time English Partnerships) delivered the remaining 8,500 homes.

## Number of homes

10,000.

## Other key deliverables

Town centre, eight schools, retail and employment space, public open space as part of a £200 million Section 106 package.

## Percentage of affordable homes

40.5% across Northstowe (20% on Phase 1, 50% Phase 2 and 40% on Phases 3A and 3B).

## Planning strategy/status

Allocated in the local plan in 2003, but progress was prevented in 2010 because of an upgrade to the A14 by the Highways Agency. In 2012 the council issued a development framework and in 2014 outline planning was granted for 1,500 homes. The first homes were built in Phase One in 2016.



## Delivery to date

Approximately 1,500 homes.

## Key challenges

### Local support

At the start, but there have been political changes locally which has resulted in delays.

### Land assembly

Assembled by the private sector with central Government support. Initial delivery of new homes was not on public sector land.

### Infrastructure

£280 million on-site and £2 billion off-site to upgrade highways infrastructure.

### Other

The scheme has been affected by Government's changing political priorities, which saw it begin as infrastructure led and then moving to being placemaking led.

## Government / private sector role

### Central government role

A combination of public/private land, totalling 8,500 homes.

### Local government role (outside local planning authority and housing association)

Land ownership of 1,000 plots was transferred by Cambridgeshire County Council to Homes England.

### Private sector role

Original co-promoter Gallagher Estates with Homes England retained control and sold Phase One of 1,500 serviced plots to five housebuilders. 35% affordable housing and £30 million Section 106 payments. The early homes were all delivered by the private sector.





## Positives

- Scale of delivery not seen since the original new towns
- Peak debt of around £350 million was made possible via Government support
- Single ownership of land post Phase One of 1,500 plots
- Phase Two of 3,500 is delivering 50% affordable housing across a range of tenures
- Three schools were built in advance of requirements
- Private sector parcels delivered new homes quicker than public ones.
- Excellent biodiversity and green space
- The latter year of delivery saw better public/private collaboration to deliver complex phases rather than a strategy of 'public sector design and then sell to private sector to deliver.'

## Problematic issues

- Local and national politics changed priorities throughout delivery, and planning consent was delayed.
- Early public/private collaboration was linked to unlocking land rather than to meaningful delivery
- The build out rate was held back by the need to upgrade the A14 after the delivery of 1,500 homes
- Some infrastructure was provided in advance of need and criticism was levelled at prioritising infrastructure delivery over placemaking. The lack of a neighbourhood centre and dissatisfaction with local services contributed to slow sales, and slow registered provider and private rented sector take up
- Design was at times prioritised over deliverability. An Urban Splash scheme won design awards but the initial town centre contract was terminated as not viable.

## Lessons learnt

- The importance of the role of public investment in bringing forward key infrastructure
- The strength of the private sector to bring about early delivery
- Homes England could have used own planning powers (similar to a UDC) to grant consent to accelerate delivery
- Providing upfront infrastructure and delivering on placemaking are not the same thing
- Planning and placemaking teams need to consider what will attract registered providers / housing associations and the private rented sector early on to create early communities.

It is worth noting that while not perfect, it delivered on a scale of development not seen since the original new towns.

All images ©Northstowe, Homes England. 2025

- 1 Phase One from the sky
- 2 Lockhart Way Phase Two
- 3 Bug hunter waters





# Harlow and Gilston New Town East Hertfordshire and Essex

## Local authority

East Hertfordshire District Council, Harlow District Council, Epping Forest District Council, Essex County Council, Hertfordshire County Council.

## Delivery mechanism

Private-sector led, with four new settlements around Harlow being bought forward by multiple private sector developers/housebuilders.

## Number of homes

The total Harlow and Gilston Garden Town area is targeting 16,000 homes.

## Other key deliverables

Significant transport infrastructure, schools, retail and employment space, heritage assets, increased biodiversity, public open space and sports and leisure facilities.

## Percentage of affordable homes

Will vary across the new settlements depending on viability and the amount of infrastructure required in order to enable the developments.

## Planning strategy/status

Identified in 2003, allocated in 2008 and designated a garden town in 2017. The first planning consent was granted in January 2025.



## Delivery to date

10,000 homes across seven Garden Town villages in Gilston were given planning permission by East Herts Council in January 2025.

## Key challenges

### Local support

Has been provided by the Harlow and Gilston Garden Town, a body made up of East Hertfordshire, Epping Forest and Harlow District Councils, working together with Hertfordshire and Essex County Councils.

### Land assembly

Multiple sites assembled by different developers. The largest development site, known as the Gilston Park Estate was assembled from multiple landowners by Places for People and will deliver c.8,500 new homes.

### Infrastructure

The developers will deliver significant highways and servicing infrastructure, including large new bridges and signalised junctions, as well as a sustainable transport corridor. There is an initial £190 million package of support from central

Government, which has to be repaid which will provide schools, community centres, health centres, a leisure centre and various sports facilities.

## Government / private sector role

### Central government role

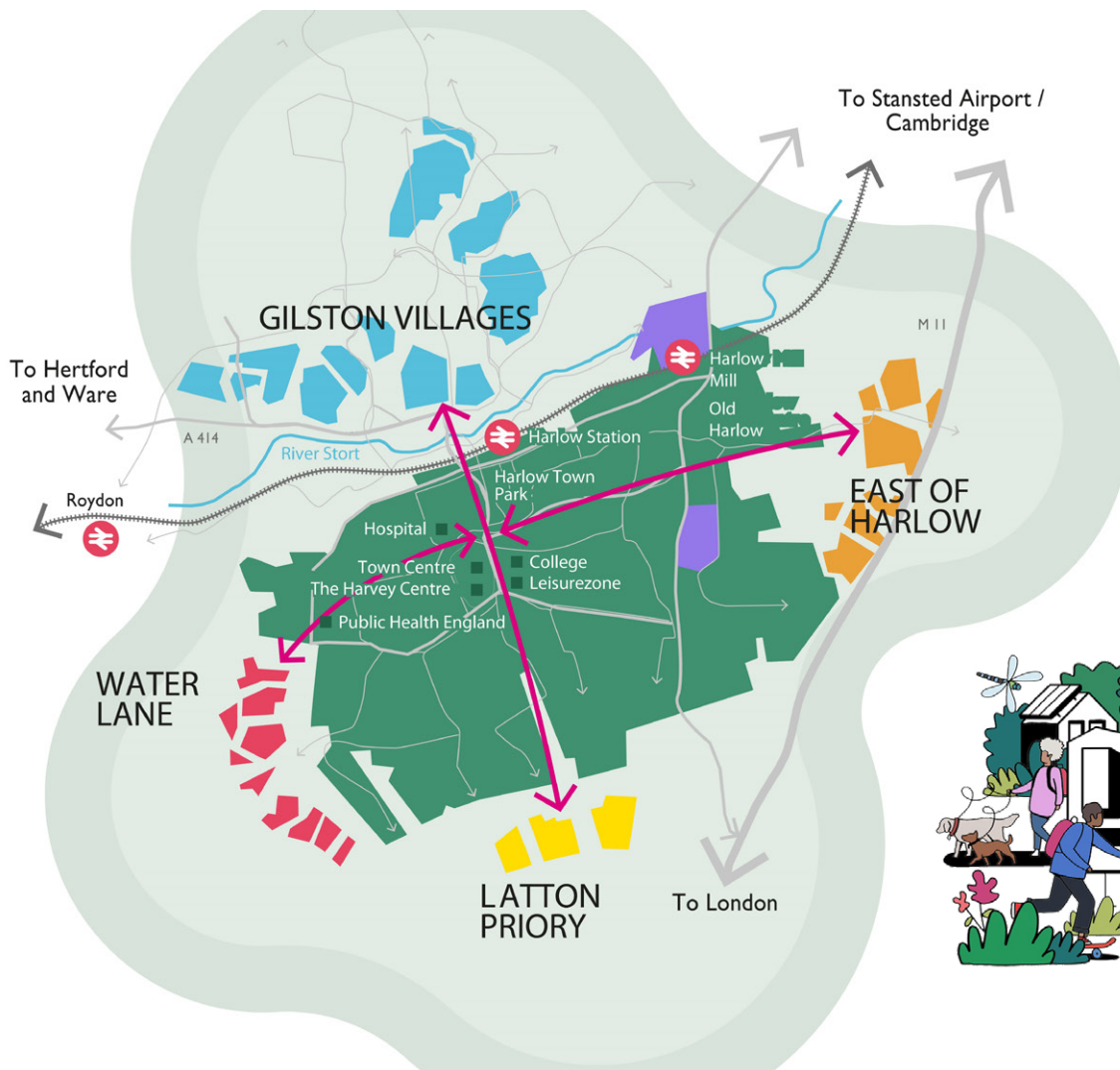
Provided financial support to council to support local delivery team and funded infrastructure.

### Local government role (outside local planning authority and housing association)

Coordinating local planning authorities through a dedicated team. Five planning authorities are acting together, with LPAs determining relevant applications locally.

### Private sector role

The private sector is driving the process and are responsible for delivering the bulk of the infrastructure, as well as bringing forward their own developments and housing delivery.



3

## Positives

- Clear garden town vision
- Focus on long-term stewardship
- Based around improving quality of life and not just delivery of physical infrastructure
- Commitment to best practice and shared learning from the outset
- Largest site is under single ownership by Places for People and will deliver 8,500 plots
- Strong local presence with dedicated local authority delivery team
- Stringent targets on developers to improve sustainable travel and reduce reliance on cars.
- New community assets and leisure activities to provide more services to the local community.
- Significant biodiversity net gain, through dedicated green spaces and woodlands.
- Planning approval recently upheld.



4

## Problematic issues

- The time and budget required from the first developers to achieve outline approval, taking over 15 years
- The infrastructure needed to deliver the first major development will take a number of years to deliver and without government funding would potentially not be achievable.

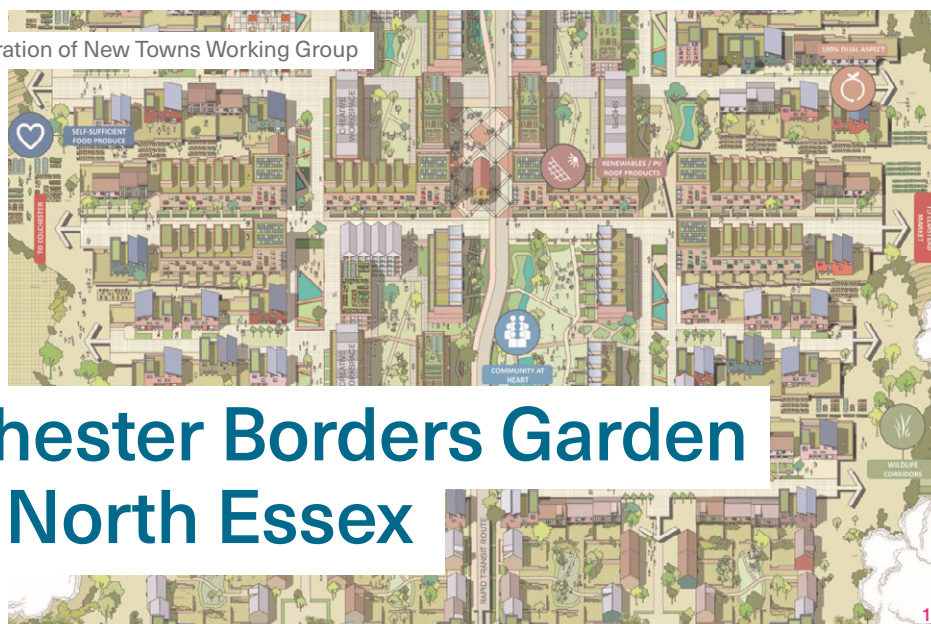
<sup>1</sup> A planning application for up to 1340 Garden Town homes at Latton Priory was submitted to Epping Forest District Council (EFDC) in September 2024. EFDC's Design Code for the development was shortlisted at the 2025 Essex Housing Awards. Credit: Epping Forest District Council

<sup>2</sup> July 2025 saw Government confirm that the UK Health Security Agency will have a new HQ in Harlow by 2038, creating almost 3000 high quality jobs. Image credit: HGGT

<sup>3</sup> Four new neighbourhoods and a regenerated town centre, served by a sustainable transport corridor with walking/cycling routes and bus services. Image credit: HGGT

<sup>4</sup> Replacing the current bus station in Harlow, a new transport hub will radically reshape the area into a vibrant, accessible and modern gateway to the regenerated town centre – creating a seamless connection between public transport, walking, cycling and the wider town. Credit: Harlow Council.





# Tendring Colchester Borders Garden Community, North Essex

## Local authority

Essex County Council, Tendring District Council and Colchester City Council. A joint planning committee has been established to determine all applications within the new community.

## Delivery mechanism

Master-developer led by Latimer by Clarion Housing Group, which has control of the land through option agreements.

## Number of homes

Around 7,750 homes (land allocation 185 hectares).

## Other key deliverables

Around 6,000 fulltime equivalent jobs (25 hectares); 200 hectares allocated to open space, sport and including a 60-hectare country park; four two-form entry primary and a 10-form entry secondary schools (land allocation 18 hectares); three neighbourhood centres and one civic centre; 600 space 'park and choose' spaces together with road upgrades and buses.

## Target housing tenure

30% affordable (breakdown TBC); 70% open market for sale (likely to include single family rent).

## Planning strategy/status

The site allocation was in May 2020 and the scheme is at pre-planning stage with a planning submission expected in 2025. Target for planning determination is September 2026 with a start on site in 2027. Completion is targeted for 2052.

## Project description

Tendring Colchester Borders (TCB) Garden Community is a new settlement project located in North Essex, just outside of Colchester. The joint Section 1 local plan has allocated an area of search of around 715 hectares intended to provide a new garden community comprising of up to 9,000 homes.

Latimer's masterplan work, developed in close collaboration with the local authorities, will seek a hybrid planning application for 7,750 homes with associated infrastructure (and detailed consent for more than 800 homes) and the first employment buildings and open space/ space of suitable alternative natural greenspace.

The new community has been conceived as three connected neighbourhoods, designed around the concept of a '20-minute neighbourhood' and regenerative design principles. As such the homes have been organised into coherent 'clusters' influenced by social anthropologist Robin Dunbar's research on community cohesion, with a range of shared amenities to encourage establishment of tight-knit groups of new residents.

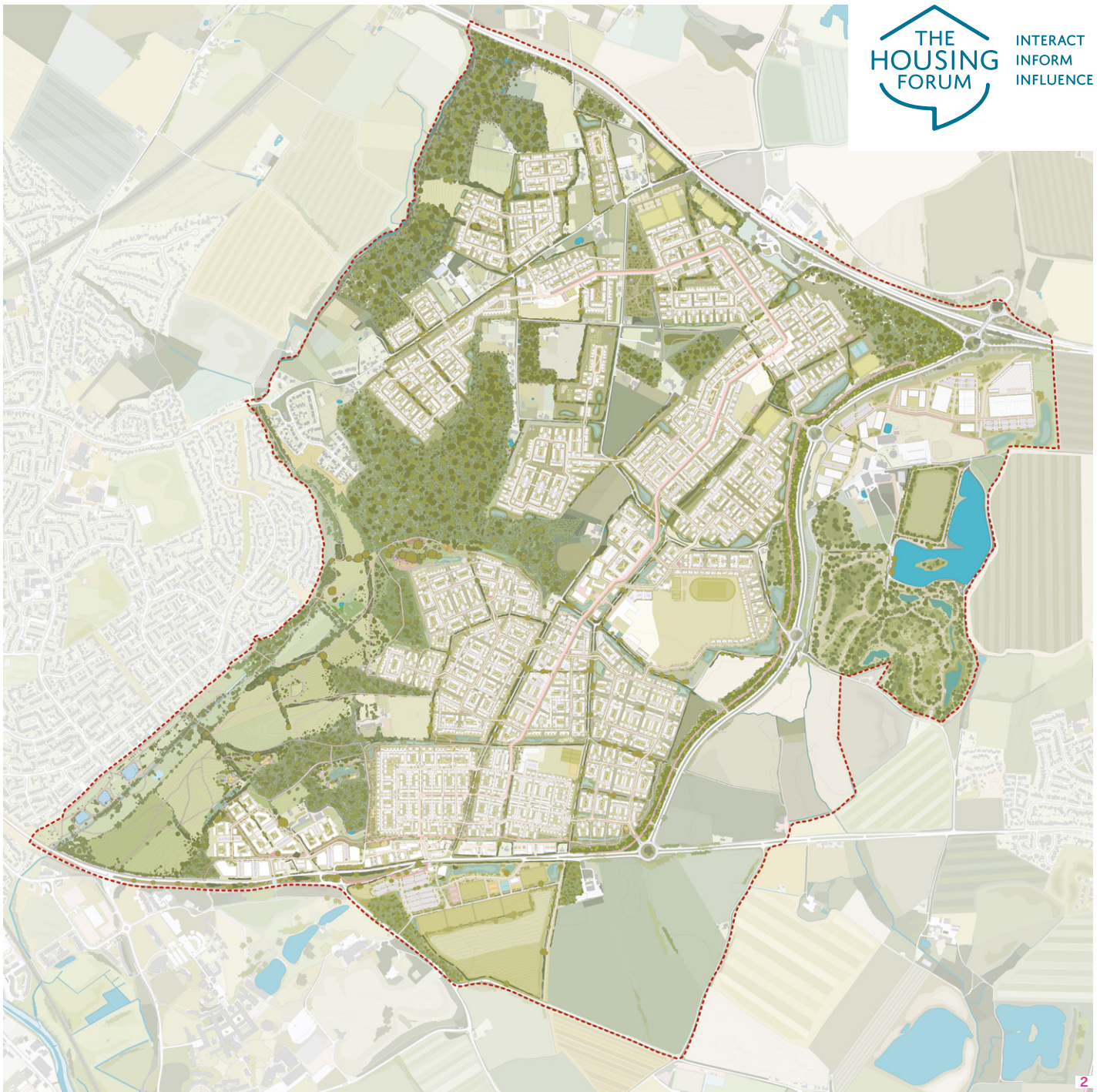
Active travel is prioritised with a lower than policy private residential parking ratio applied to the new homes and aspirations to sequentially lower this allocation on a phase-by-phase basis. Much design focus has been applied to ensuring that active travel is the convenient choice with generous (above policy) cycle storage provision. Critically, the existing country lanes across the site area, which are characterised by beautiful mature hedge rows, will be converted to active travel corridors connecting across all three neighbourhoods and directly into the existing active travel networks that are near the site.

The existing ecology of the site will be protected and enhanced through the introduction of generous buffer zones, and pockets of ancient woodland that exist along the perimeter of the new country park will be connected with new tree planting to provide a new, connected, woodland landscape along the western edge of the new neighbourhoods.

## Other notable aspects of the project include:

- Housing association acting as the master developer
- Tri-partite local authority with established joint committee
- £99.9 million from the Housing Infrastructure Fund for transport infrastructure delivered by Essex County Council – the new A1331 link road and rapid transit bus service connecting the community with central Colchester
- 30km of existing hedgerows retained, protected and enhanced
- Award-winning young person public engagement strategy
- Identified as part of the New Homes Accelerator Programme.





## Gross development value

Approximately £4 billion

## Residential density

41 dwellings per hectare (dph) (assumed range 35-50dph).

## Residential parking ratio (parking space per dwelling)

1.42 (including visitor parking).

## Target housing type

14% detached houses  
13% semi-detached houses  
59% terraced houses  
5% 'walk-up' homes (flats-over-garages)  
9% apartments.

## Target housing occupancy

3% one bedroom 3%  
44% two bedroom  
38% three bedroom  
13% four bedroom 13%  
1% five bedroom.

## Accessible housing provision

10% M4(3)  
79% M4(2)  
11% M4(1).

1 Detail - ©HaworthTompkins Architects.

2 Site wide Illustrative Masterplan with boundary. ©HaworthTompkins Architects (21 March 2025).



## Part 3:

# Going forward

Now that the New Towns Taskforce has reported on proposed locations for the new towns, there is a clear expectation that Government and its delivery partners will need to hit the ground running.

**Ministers declared at the time of setting up the Taskforce exercise that shovels in the ground were essential before the end of this parliament. But if there is one key message coming through from the case studies in our report, it is that an unfeasibly large number of stars must align to meet this timetable.**

New towns and urban extensions require years to obtain approvals, line up funding, get communities on side and put in place the infrastructure that makes them viable - both as places developers want to invest in and places that make people want to live there. Two of our cases studies are yet to build a single house many years after being allocated.

To build the 10,000-home settlements which are planned (far larger than those featured here) several key 'must haves' will be vital.

Most importantly, we need all government agencies firing on every cylinder. Homes England needs to be allocating sufficient funds so that social housing (and we would suggest affordable makes up a good portion of these new homes) can be built quickly. Around 40 percent of the new homes should be social and affordable homes, we believe.

The Ministry for Homes, Communities and Local Government needs to be working closely with the Department of Transport to provide support for new highways; and the Department for Education and relevant local authorities need to be planning for schools. Early delivery social infrastructure like schools and health facilities has proved a key part of the success at Northstowe New Town in South Cambridgeshire, for example, making the area attractive to new homebuyers.

Attractive green space and ample biodiversity is of course an important part of any new settlements – but who will pay for maintenance of parks, squares and playgrounds in years to come? Thinking of the future, with a clear plan in place to cover upkeep, will be as vital as building in the present.

While the new settlements we have featured have been successfully developed using a number of different delivery instruments, evidence points to the importance of using urban development corporations to orchestrate the necessary elements and achieve the requisite degree of delivery speed and heft.

Using a UDC can unite existing landowners with fragmented development to provide a more cohesive approach, coordinate delivery of infrastructure and lead on the all-important engagement with existing communities. For any of the new town stars to truly align, they need to have UDCs set up without delay to help cut through red tape and bring stakeholders together.

However, momentum is beginning to build with Ebbsfleet an award-winner due to its distinctive local character and the recent upholding of planning approval for Harlow and Gilston.

**So many governments before this one have made the creation of new towns a centre piece of their housing policy, only for momentum to fall off once the hard knocks start. If we are to go beyond that this time around, what's needed is full and enthusiastic commitment from government over many years – and the financial support to provide solid foundations on which public private partnerships can build.**

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Over many years, we’ve collaborated closely to support the Forum’s initiatives, championing innovation, quality, and sustainability in housing.

As a multidisciplinary practice, we bring together design, engineering, and consultancy expertise to help shape thriving communities. Our shared commitment to better housing outcomes drives us to support this important work, and we look forward to contributing to the conversation around new towns and their role in addressing the UK’s housing challenges, through our extensive experience in delivery at scale.

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housing sector allows us to advise from experience and provide innovative ideas to achieve results for our clients. We are excited to sponsor this report and be part of the work being done to deliver the proposed new towns.

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For each project we undertake, we tailor our approach to suit local communities, focusing on quality, design, and long-term value. Lovell is proud to bring its extensive experience to the new lessons for new towns initiative, continuing its commitment to sustainable, community-focused housing delivery.

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Peabody looks after 109,000 homes across London and the home counties, plus the community centres, play areas, and green spaces that bring these areas to life. It also provides care and support services to around 25,000 customers. With an average rent of £147 a week homes are significantly more affordable than the market. Last year, Peabody spent £431 million in maintaining and improving residents’ homes.

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Our investment in quality developments and timber frame factories supports future delivery and sustainability. This approach enables us to build at pace, drive efficiency, and create communities people love for generations.





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