

NICK RICHARDSON



New settlements, old mistakes?

The government has announced a tranche of new garden villages and towns, but will they be based around sustainable transport?

New housing sites have been identified for development as 'garden villages' and 'garden towns'. However, having some planting and public open space isn't all that is needed for a sustainable community and sensible transport is vitally important for them to function. Rather than trying to fit in some passenger transport at a late stage, they provide an opportunity to design settlements around meaningful services and show how people can travel easily without becoming car-dependent. Will the challenge be met or will these opportunities be squandered in a similar way to many developments in the past?

Locating the new settlements

Fourteen new garden villages are planned: Long Marston in Stratford-upon-Avon; Oxfordshire Cotswolds; Deenethorpe, Northamptonshire; Culm, Devon; Welborne, Hampshire; West Carclaze, Cornwall; Dunton Hills, Essex; Spitalgate Heath, Lincolnshire; Halsnead, Merseyside; Longcross, Surrey; Bailrigg in Lancaster; Infinity Garden Village, Derbyshire; St Cuthberts, Cumbria; and Handforth, Cheshire.

Each will have between 1,500 and 10,000 homes. Notable is the fact that very few of these locations have a rail station - Longcross and Handforth are the exceptions - so perhaps good access isn't the determining feature it should be. I have presented my thoughts on Welbourne previously (PT115) and how it won't work particularly well given the current

transport arrangements proposed and its location next to a busy motorway. Some smack of remoteness such as Deenesthorpe which is a former airfield while others are green belt sites, not well located in relation to transport hubs. The Oxfordshire proposal is a greenfield site six miles from Oxford city centre which will provide 2,200 new homes and a science park. Here the intention is to avoid it being a dormitory for Oxford but if it does achieve this, it will be an exception to the well-established pattern of movement in that area.

Also, three new garden towns will be developed in addition to previous

announcements for Aylesbury Taunton, Bicester, Didcot, Basingstoke, Ebbsfleet and north Northamptonshire. They are: Buckinghamshire (Aylesbury area); Somerset (Taunton area); Essex-Hertfordshire border (Harlow and Gilston)

At least these larger developments have decent rail services and in the case of Ebbsfleet a bus rapid transit network as well. Bicester now benefits from new train services to Oxford as well as to London and is on the East-West Rail corridor. It is worth recalling the most recent proposals for new towns in the form of 'eco-towns', virtually all of which in their proposed form have fallen by the wayside. I had passing involvement in one in which the promoters were convinced that only a quarter of journeys would be made by car despite the relatively isolated location and absence of a railway. The wealth of evidence to the contrary is out there but some involved in the debate continue to spout stupidly irrelevant figures about modal share and how everyone will want to use the buses, even though there is nothing in their great scheme to provide anything like what is needed to promote passenger transport successfully. Inevitably when any new development is planned, it raises concerns about the impact of additional traffic and how to deal with it. Some really good examples exist where planning and transport have been properly integrated such as in north Kent, where the Fastrack busway goes past where housing is being built, and in Cambridgeshire where the guided busway between Cambridge, and St Ives is attracting new users and will accommodate many more as further development takes place along the corridor.

GARDEN SETTLEMENTS



What have we learned to date?

In the light of the recent announcement, it is worth considering how the initial phase of new towns and garden cities have fared since their creation in the 1950s and 1960s. Some of them have benefitted from being on major rail routes such as Stevenage and Welwyn Garden City on the East Coast Main Line, with Harlow and similar new towns accommodating considerable communities. These have expanded over the years but in many instances it is difficult to reconcile the aspirations of an idealised lifestyle with the realities.

Looking at Welwyn Garden City the town

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centre includes access to the rail station directly from the shopping centre (except at night when the station is hidden away) with broad avenues with flowers and a John Lewis store. The flip side is literally the other side of the tracks with the eastern side of the town being much more crowded and lacking in streetscape or architectural delights, apart from an old cereal factory. All this has emphasised the need to plan around transport which means much more than building some roads and hoping that there might be a bus service of some sort.

The rhetoric is all there - ‘high quality, ‘attractive’, well designed’ - but the realities are likely to be defined rather differently; perhaps ‘inconvenient’ and ‘unsustainable’ would be more appropriate. Of course, increasing the housing stock is unquestionably a necessity. For the new settlements, the intention is to address the dire deficiencies of the housing market, notably affecting first time buyers. This raises an interesting scenario of what types of housing will be available in relation to their affordability for potential occupants. Under this scenario, the inhabitants will be of working age and needing to be in proximity to job opportunities. A dispersed and relatively remote location for housing isn’t ideal in this respect, particularly if there isn’t going to be an attractive bus service to anywhere useful.

Gavin Barwell, housing minister, maintains that having the right infrastructure is crucial without defining what that means for transport. All the talk is about ‘infrastructure’, but in this context it is likely to mean a new road to each site rather than anything to

enable comprehensive, sustainable transport or support for passenger transport services - are we ever going to learn? A carefully designed and landscaped community is all very well except if the concept is wrong or applied in the wrong place. Creating another series of dormitory settlements is less than helpful.

As government notes, each garden village will include its own community facilities rather than being extensions to existing urban areas - this detracts from the basic principles of transport provision. This concept of containment is nearly always a fallacy because people will travel to other places for all sorts of reasons but particularly for work and in doing so exacerbate the problems of traffic congestion rather than creating self-absorbing communities.

Should we do better?

In contrast, we can think about what aspiring homeowners might actually need. Useful amenities, such as shops, schools, etc, all need to be within (non-car) reach which is best addressed in an urban setting with denser development. This doesn’t have to be bad and given the right support could be really imaginative. We have suffered from too many housing estates that could be anywhere with no sense of place or connection with their setting. Instead we could provide plenty of space with high quality public environment without compromising on design quality and without wasting land.

If we design development around transport rather than trying to retrofit it once all the cars have been dealt with, we might actually

make some progress. The Poundbury experiment (an urban extension to Dorchester, Dorset) highlights how pastiche architecture doesn’t necessarily generate a new way of thinking; it now provides for those who can afford to live there, with its artisan bakery and retro-looking buildings. Taking the thrust of the recent initiative, designing new settlements around mobility needs can help those most in need of housing.

At the concept stage, new settlements should start with transport and then think about the other design issues. This might involve identifying a priority bus corridor or busway to a key destination and then considering the settlement layout, so that new occupants relate to the passenger services available rather than making them irrelevant by design. Creative thinking for the future would be far more useful than clinging to ideas from the past. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The Transport Planning Society provides professional development, a meeting place for all those working in the transport sector and leads the response to emerging policy issues.

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Nick Richardson is Technical Director at transport consultancy Mott MacDonald, a Director of the Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport (UK) and Chair of PTRC Education and Research Services Ltd. In addition, he has held a PCV licence for 29 years.