From Garden Cities to New Towns – An Integrative Planning Solution?

1. Introduction

From their foundation in the form of the two garden cities of Letchworth and Welwyn at the start of the twentieth century, the British new towns are now a well established part of planning history. It is perhaps surprising, though, to realise that Milton Keynes, the largest of them, and one of the last to be set up, was designated 40 years ago. So, are the British new towns just history or do they have a continuing relevance?

This paper first traces the evolution of the new towns concept, from the formulation of the garden cities idea by Ebenezer Howard, to the programme of Government new towns that followed the Second World War (WWII). It next seeks to highlight some of the lessons of this experience and then to provide a personal verdict on the successes and failures of these new communities.

An underlying question is whether the new towns achieved Howard's vision for garden cities as well as the wider regional development aims of Government? Related to that is whether they have become successful places in which to live and work. Following the Congress theme, has Howard's inclusive vision been realised – have the new towns proved to be an integrative solution?

In its final section, the paper explores the ways in which the new town idea has been taken forward in the United Kingdom. After a lengthy period during which it was given too little importance, the regional planning - of which the new towns were a product - is once more a priority. In the south east of East of England, four major growth areas are now being pursued through a range of mechanisms. One of these will involve a substantial expansion of Milton Keynes and there are roles for other new towns too. The paper concludes with a brief look at the plan for Northstowe, a proposed new settlement near Cambridge.

2. Ebenezer Howard and the Garden City Movement

The garden cities were the practical manifestation of a simple yet brilliant idea conceived by a shorthand clerk and inventor, Ebeneezer Howard. They were a reaction to the environmental and social legacy of Britain's industrial revolution, the results of a century of industrialisation, and rapid growth, and the poor, unhealthy housing conditions that came with that.

They had as their antecedents the 'model' communities of New Lanark in Scotland (c1800-1810), Saltaire near Bradford (1850-1872), Bournville, outside Birmingham (1879-95) and Port Sunlight, near Birkenhead (1888). But Howard's idea was much broader, providing for a general planned movement of people and industry away from the cities. His book, *Tomorrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform*, published in 1898, argued that garden cities – new settlements with surrounding agricultural belts – would bring together the best features of town and country while avoiding the disadvantages of both. Following the famous three magnets diagram (figure 1.), the desire was to attract people to the 'Town-Country' magnet which would provide a new way of living, a 'joyous union' between town and country.

The essential features of the garden city can be summarised as follows:

1. **Organised planned dispersal** of industries and people to towns of sufficient size to provide the services, variety of occupations, and level of culture needed by a balanced cross-section of modern society.
2. **Limit of town size** (to around 30,000) in order that their inhabitants may live near work, shops and other facilities and within walking distance of the surrounding countryside. New garden cities to be built once population limit reached.
3. **Spaciousness of layout** providing for houses with private gardens, enough space for schools and other functional purposes, and pleasant parks and parkways.
4. **A close town/country relationship** with a firm definition of the town boundary and a large area around it reserved permanently for agriculture, providing a ready market for farmers and access to the countryside for residents.
5. **Pre-planning of the whole town framework**, including functional zoning and roads, the setting of maximum densities, the control of building as to quality and design while allowing for individual variety, skilful planting and landscape design.
6. **The creation of neighbourhoods** as developmental and social entities.
7. **Unified land ownership** with the whole site, including the agricultural zone, under quasi-public or trust ownership; enabling planning control through leasehold covenants, and capturing land value for the community.
8. **Progressive municipal and co-operative enterprise** without abandoning a general individual freedom in industry and trade.

The Garden Cities Association (later to become the Town and Country Planning Association or TCPA) was set up in 1899 to promote the idea of the garden city. By the time that Howard's book was into its second edition as *Garden Cities of Tomorrow,* published in 1902, plans to set up a development company were well advanced. By the following year, a site had been chosen, the company had become First Garden City Limited and Letchworth Garden City was born.

One of the most important decisions taken by the company was to hire Raymond Unwin and Barry Parker as architect planners. Skilfully adapting Howard's theoretical concept, they achieved the physical realisation of the garden city in a style heavily influenced by John Ruskin, William Morris and the Arts and Crafts Movement.

Frustrated by the failure of Government to adopt the garden city as a mechanism for reconstruction after the First World War, Howard led the movement to create a second garden city. An early advertisement for Welwyn Garden City extolled its virtues as 'The New Town for Residence and Industry, to be set in the 'Hertfordshire Highlands' and in a series of picturesque cartoons it sought to attract residents and industrialists thus:

'It is not good to waste two hours daily in trains and buses and trams to and from the workshop, leaving no time nor energy for leisure or recreation. At Welwyn Garden City a man's house will be near his work in a pure and healthy atmosphere. He will have time and energy after his work is done for leisure and recreation'.

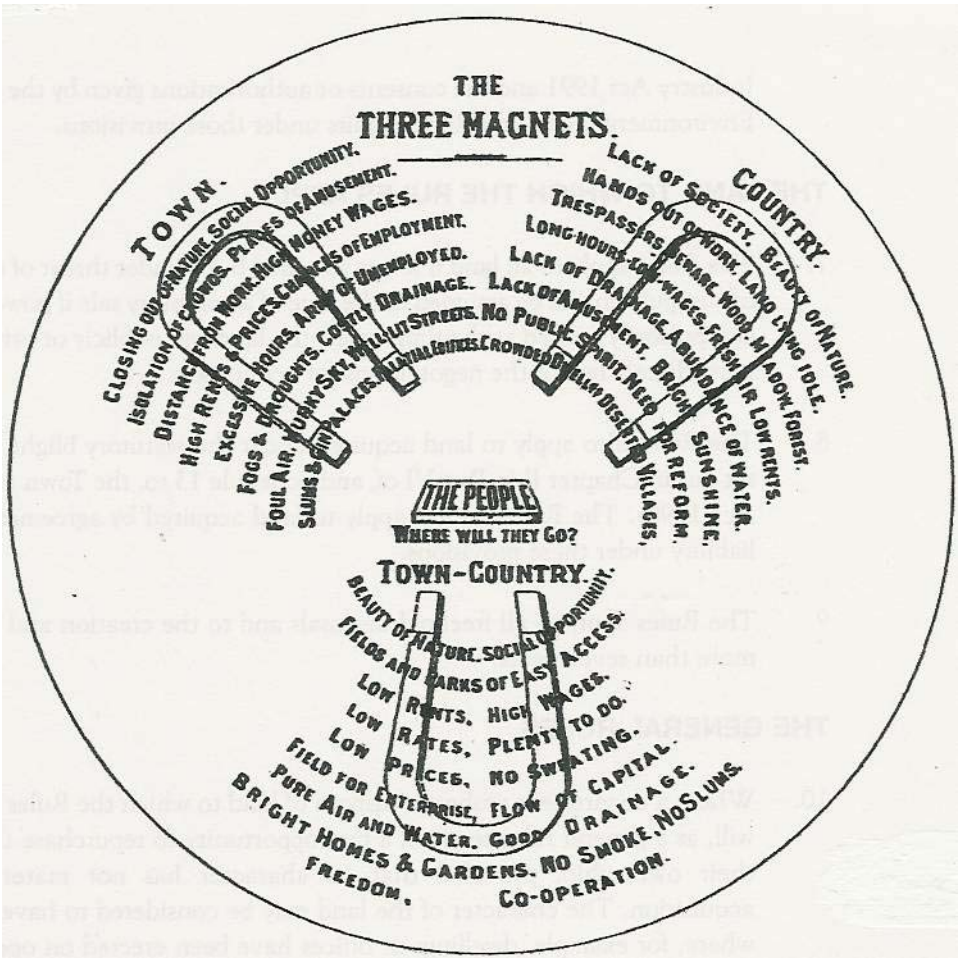

Fig.1 – The Three Magnets Diagram - source TCPA

The reality was a little different. Only 32km from London and with a good rail service to London once the station opened in 1925, half of the population commuted daily to London. Today that proportion is probably about the same. However, many businesses were attracted to the town and it is far more than just a commuter settlement. With its interesting architecture and its fine public buildings and public open spaces, the garden city offers a highly attractive environment. It is much sought after as a place to live.

As with Letchworth, creating it was often a huge struggle. As Colin Ward puts it 'To synchronise the erection of housing, the enticement of industrialists and the provision of public services, to develop from scratch the know-how of town building, has been a hard enough task for the post-war development corporations. That a handful of people achieved it to the extent that the first houses were occupied at the end of 1920 was a triumph of enthusiasm over probability.'

Even so, progress was relatively slow. In 1950, by which time the Government's new town mechanism had taken over from the garden city company, Welwyn's population stood at only 18,500 people. But the bigger problem for the promoters of more garden cities, the TCPA in particular, was that few people seemed to be listening. People and industry were moving out of the big cities, but not in a planned way. The result was uncoordinated sprawl including the tentacles of ribbon development that had begun to spread out from the formerly compact urban areas.

3. Planning and the New Towns Programme

However, that was to change following the publication of a series of hugely influential reports in the period 1940-1947. Spanning questions such as the distribution of industry, the utilisation of rural land and compensation and betterment, they lay the foundations for the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act and the present planning system. The related New Towns Act of 1946 paved the way for the start of a new town building programme that continues to this day.

Sir Peter Hall chronicles the history of that programme. The first wave of new towns was built in a ring some 35 to 60 km from London. Stemming from Patrick Abercrombie's Greater London Plan of 1944, but not always built in the proposed locations specified in that plan, they were to provide for a major decentralisation of people from the inner parts of the London region to an outer zone beyond a newly defined green belt.

That green belt would prevent any further outward growth of the capital, while acting as a valuable recreational tract for Londoners. Beyond it, the plan provided for the rehousing of some one million people; of these some 400,000 would be accommodated in eight new towns, while the remaining 600,000 would go to expansions of small country towns mainly between 50-80km from London. In planning for this decentralisation, the intention was that the slums and blighted areas of inner London would be re-developed to adequate open space standards.

These first new towns proved very controversial and they were often opposed vehemently by local people. In the case of the first one, Stevenage, the visiting Minister, Lewis Silkin had his car tyres let down and sand was put in his petrol tank. And on one December night in 1946, someone changed the station name plates to Silkingrad. Nevertheless, eight new towns were built and their population targets were later increased significantly, well beyond the average of 50,000 level proposed by Abercrombie.

A number of other new towns were built in this early post war period. They had a range of purposes. Thus, East Kilbride, designated in 1947, was intended to rehouse 80,000 people from Glasgow's overcrowded tenements. The following year saw the designation of Glenrothes, also in Scotland, as a town mainly for coal miners and their families; new replacement industries had to be attracted once the coal mines closed. In Wales, Cwmbran, designated in 1949, was planned as a focus for the scattered industrial communities of the Monmouth Valley. To complete the picture: two new towns (Peterlee and Aycliffe) were built in County Durham to serve the development area; Corby, a steelworks town was designated in 1950 to give it a proper town centre and alternative sources of employment; and, lastly in 1955, Cumbernauld was established to cater for further outward movement from Glasgow.

A second round of new towns was designated in the period 1961-1970. They came about, in the main, as a result of regional planning studies. Thus, in England, the north west (through Skelmersdale, Runcorn, Warrington and Central Lancashire) and the midlands (through Redditch and Telford) secured their first new towns, two more (Livingston and Irvine) were designated in Central Scotland and, south of Newcastle, the new town of Washington was designated in 1964. The common purpose was to cater for overspill population.

The 'new' new towns in the south east of England had a rather different purpose. The South East Study published in 1964 identified a need to house a further 3.5 million people in the period 1961-1981. That need had come about through a

combination of the natural growth of the region's own population, migration from abroad and retirement migration to the south coast. The recommended strategy included three new towns sited at a greater distance from London (80-130km) than the first eight, to help channel pressures away from the capital. Of these three projects, those at Peterborough and Northampton were, strictly speaking, city expansion schemes rather than a completely new town. Only Milton Keynes, with the biggest population target of all the new towns (i.e. 250,000) was a 'green field' new town.

Figure 2 New Towns in the United Kingdom Source TCPA

The climate for the new towns changed radically in the 1970s and 1980s. Exacerbated by the effects of the 1973 oil crisis, the national economy began to slide and the spectre of mass-unemployment re-emerged. The new towns were not always immune. Corby lost its steelworks and in Skelmersdale two factories closed with large job losses. In the main, however, the New Towns had achieved an admirable diversification of employment and they were able to weather the storm.

Political decisions, though, were to have a more drastic effect. From 1979, Margaret Thatcher's new Government instituted some major changes in direction for the new towns. Their controlling development corporations were to stop building for rent and, instead, private house building was encouraged. Businesses were to build their own factories and offices or alternatively, speculative developers were to do it for them. The effect was to transform these formerly public sector led towns into places where the market would have a much bigger role.

But the decision to stop building new towns was made, effectively by the preceding Labour Government. In a speech made in Manchester in September 1976, Peter Shore the Secretary of State for the Environment spoke about 'directing the country's resources towards inner-city areas and about reappraising the role of the new towns'. He did not suggest that the jobs created in the new towns had been at the expense of inner city economies but that was widely assumed to be the case. However, the speech did mark a turning point and the inner cities became the policy priority.

Eventually, the Commission for the New Towns took over the assets of the development corporations. The last English development corporation, that in Milton Keynes, was closed down in 1992, and the last of the Scottish ones, Irvine, in 1999.

4. The Lessons

By 1990, Britain's 28 new towns housed over 2 million people and more than 700,000 new homes had been built. Many of them are still growing. They have attracted hundreds of new companies from both home and abroad and created hundreds of thousands of new jobs. Those are clear, numerical achievements, but to what extent have they really lived up to the ideals of the garden city pioneers and the more pragmatic aims of the post WWII planners?

First, on **dispersal**, they have provided a channel for the organised re-location of homes and jobs away from major cities. Dispersal would have happened in any case because of the desire of the 'upwardly mobile' to seek a better environment, either in the suburbs or in smaller towns and villages. However, the consequence of that trend has all too often been the 'swamping' of places that lack the capacity to take further growth. To take one example, in the face of the growth pressures in North Hampshire (to the south west of London), the settlement of Yateley accommodated significant peripheral growth over several decades. Yet its shopping centre remains large village in scale and there is little potential to expand it. The result is severe traffic congestion within the town, and a tendency for residents to look to other centres to provide for their needs coupled with very high dependence upon the car.

By contrast, the planned new town provides the opportunity to avoid such problems by envisaging the amount of development that should be accommodated over a period of decades, and by providing the capacity and infrastructure to match. With hindsight, it could be argued that the country's needs would have been better served had many more new towns, or properly planned town extensions, been built. That

way, some of the pressure could have been taken off places such as Yateley and hundreds of other small towns and villages.

Size However, it is also the case that the new towns that were built were much larger than envisaged by Howard. There has been no practical realisation of his 'social city' concept whereby one garden city 'spawns' another once the 30,000 figure is reached and eventually a cluster of interdependent towns develops. This concentration on larger schemes was, in part, a question of economy of scale, it being argued that a small number of large sites would be cheaper to administer than numerous smaller developments. Another factor relevant to the doubling in size of Northampton and Peterborough was the desire to create new regional centres as counter-magnets to London and Birmingham.

This being said, the **neighbourhood concept** promoted by Howard found its way into the design of many, if not most, of the new towns. Thus, while relatively few people may live within walking distance of their place of work or the countryside beyond the town, the neighbourhood structure (units of about 5,000 people) means that they can live within easy walking range of facilities needed on a day to day basis – local shops, primary schools and public open space facilities.

Fundamental to the garden city concept was the idea of a **balance** between homes and jobs. That was carried forward into the brief for the new towns programme which included the aim that the new towns were to be 'self contained and balanced communities for working and living'. According to Colin Ward, that was interpreted in several ways. The first was that population growth should be matched by that of industry to avoid the need for in or out commuting. In the case of the London new towns, the first two decades of the programme were very successful in that respect and a high degree of self containment was achieved. Secondly, there should be a variety of employment to avoid over dependence on a single employer and several of the new towns were designated deliberately with the aim of attracting employers. Corby and Peterlee are examples.

The third type of balance was a social one – the desirability of encouraging people of all social classes to move to a new town. While there were ideological reasons for that, there was also the practical incentive of attracting every kind of employer and retailer to the town. The development corporations set up to control the new towns could offer plenty of inducements to employers, for example, ready made factory premises on lease. Also, because the corporations built and owned most of the housing stock, key workers could be provided with a dwelling.

Today, the picture on **self containment** is a rather mixed one. Growing personal mobility brought about by increasing car ownership has given many people the freedom to live and work in widely separated places. On the other hand, the new towns have continued to provide a balance between home and job provision so that for many there remains the opportunity to work locally. Indeed there is often a considerable variety of work.

Capturing land values There has been a failure to adopt one of Howard's major ideas, namely that the unearned increment in site values arising from the development of a new town or garden city should accrue to the local community to be used for their benefit. While this was central to his proposals, it has not found favour with either Labour or Conservative Governments. Thus the early revenues were returned to the Treasury and, from the 1980s, the social assets themselves were sold to private businesses.

There has been one exception - Letchworth Garden City itself. One of the founding principles of First Garden City Limited was that once the development capital had been paid back, the income generated for the trustees would be used for the benefit of the town's inhabitants. In the late 1950s, however, it came under threat when a group of investors bought up enough shares to gain control. However, defenders of the Garden City, together with the local authority, fought back, an Act of Parliament reasserted the original obligation and Letchworth Garden City Corporation was set up. The Corporation moved into surplus in the 1970s and it has since been instrumental in the provision of numerous amenities, for example a new hospital, leisure facilities and an educational model farm. In a sense, therefore, Letchworth is owned by its inhabitants.

5 A verdict

Overall, there have been both successes and failures. In social terms, the new towns programme contributed significantly to Britain's housing needs, enabling hundreds of thousands of people to benefit from improved housing conditions away from the older crowded urban areas. The availability of so much rented housing, coupled with the job opportunities that the new towns provided, enabled those on lower incomes to join in the movement away from the inner cities.

Moreover the new towns have, in general, become socially very mixed. While the emphasis initially was on rental housing accessible to people with working class backgrounds, most of the more recent housing – from the 1980s onwards - has been for sale with various arrangements for so called 'affordable housing' for those unable to afford the cost of a mortgage.

There have been plenty of errors. In the immediate post WWII period, in particular, there was a need to build quickly and in quantity. Often, that entailed the use of new and unfamiliar materials and construction techniques, and quality suffered. Flat roofs, built too cheaply, did not stand the test of time in the British climate. Also, attempts at 'avant garde' architecture and layout did not always work well in practice and, at worst, some of these less conventional housing areas were later to become 'problem estates', abandoned by those who were able to move, leaving concentrations of the disadvantaged.

By contrast, there is much exemplary housing. With their varied 'vernacular' architecture using traditional materials, the garden cities set a shining start. The Peterborough neighbourhoods are also good examples in the way that their individual design gives them a clear identity. Beyond the architecture though, the new towns have a very good record in terms of their green space provision. Milton Keynes, certainly, is unrivalled anywhere in the UK for its linear parks, its copious tree planting and its ecological management.

This good environment is a critical part of the new towns 'image' that has attracted businesses, especially the new types of enterprise upon which the globalising economy is becoming based. Indeed, some of the towns have been outstandingly successful in attracting prestigious new companies from all around the world.

On the face of it, the new towns have been a general success in economic, in social and in environmental terms. That is the case for most of the people who came to live in them and for the businesses that set up there. There have been wider benefits, in terms of the national and regional economies and, in regional development areas, the physical revival of formerly run down areas. Moreover, the lessons learned have

been of wider application and they have influenced development elsewhere, both in the UK and internationally.

Of course, the danger to be guarded against is that key principles may be watered down in translation, whereas a concept may only work as intended if all or most of its elements are put in place. That certainly happened in connection with the garden cities where the name was often applied to new Council estates that bore only a very superficial resemblance to Letchworth or Welwyn and had few of their vital features such as land use mix.

Opportunity cost? That reservation apart, there is another question and that concerns whether the successes of the new towns have been at the expense of the inner cities. Has there been an opportunity cost? Howard viewed dispersal from the cities as a necessary part of their revival. By thinning the cities out, they could be replanned at lower densities and with plenty of provision for open space.

To quote Howard, '…imagine the population of London falling and falling rapidly; the migrating people establishing themselves where rents are extremely low and where their work is within easy walking distance of their homes! Obviously house-property in London will fall in rental value, and fall enormously. Slum property will sink to zero and the whole working population will move into houses of a class quite above those which they can now afford to occupy… Those wretched slums will be pulled down and their sites occupied by parks, recreation grounds and allotment gardens'.

Things did not happen quite that way, of course. The destruction of the Second World War created opportunities for new housing but, usually, that was in the form of tower and deck access blocks rather than the homes with gardens that the TCPA had advocated. During the late 1960s and 1970s there was a growing realisation that social and economic conditions in the inner cities were deteriorating and that action had to be taken to regenerate them.

By the early 1970s, the new towns had become a scapegoat for the failure to act. It was argued that the success of the new towns had been at the expense of the urban poor, that the new towns had had more than their share of resources, that they had lured away the economically active from the inner cities and that they had enticed the footloose employer who might otherwise have established in the city.

As I have concluded earlier, however, the dispersal was happening in any case and the contribution of the new towns was to make it possible for working people to form part of the exodus. They went, in part, because there were jobs, or better jobs to be had. Many firms had already left inner city areas to seek more efficient locations and those that remained were typically marginal businesses with a doubtful future. Today the situation is more balanced and there is new employment in many inner areas. There has been a wholesale restructuring of such areas but the process has been far more prolonged – and often much more painful – than was envisaged by Howard a century ago.

6. The future for new towns in the UK

In the 1980s, a number of private enterprise new towns were proposed. The best known of these came from Consortium Developments Limited, who put forward plans for a ring of small new towns around London. Of these, the first four were fully worked up schemes providing a range of community facilities. However, all met huge opposition and none was granted approval.

The lesson from the past decades is that the justification for new settlements is most likely to emerge from planning at the regional or sub-regional scale. A long term perspective is also needed, given the time it takes to get any substantial development up and running. In the absence of such a framework, proposals for any form of new towns are unlikely to be accepted.

With the present Government, there has been a resurgence of regional planning in England, and Scotland and Wales, as well as Northern Ireland, have their own nation wide spatial development plans. Within the framework for England, the Government has formulated its Sustainable Communities Plan. In the south east, there will be a concentration of development within four main growth areas. Of these, Thames Gateway, a corridor stretching eastwards from London, was already defined. The three new areas are: London, Stansted, Cambridge and Peterborough; Ashford; and Milton Keynes and South Midlands.

To take the last of these, Milton Keynes itself is to be the focus of further major growth, with an additional 70,000 homes by 2031. Its selection for this role is a mark first of the excellence of its location on the railway and motorway corridors linking London with Birmingham and the northwest and, secondly, of the adaptability of its land use plan. Milton Keynes Partnership has been established to act as a statutory delivery agency to co-ordinate this new phase of growth for Milton Keynes. The Partnership, whose board is widely drawn and includes local political representatives, has pioneered the use of standardised developer contributions (or 'tariffs'). The aim is to secure substantial contributions from developers to help meet the cost of an agreed package of local and strategic infrastructure and social/educational facilities.

This is yet another case where the prospect of development is proving locally unpalatable. There are two main reasons. One concerns the outward growth of Milton Keynes and the feeling of some residents that their town, or city as it is becoming, is already large enough. They object to the encroachment into the countryside and also to the higher densities of what is proposed, even though that accords with current Government guidelines. Unkindly, perhaps, it could be said that even this newest place in Britain has its NIMBYs – Not in My Back Yard!

The second area of objection concerns the proposed redevelopment (again at higher densities) of some of the earlier housing developments. The challenge must be to develop a plan for the 'even bigger' Milton Keynes which marries the new with the older, retains the fine green environment and, so far as is possible, rectifies current deficiencies such as a barely adequate public transport system.

Turning to the London, Stansted, Cambridge and Peterborough growth area, two existing new towns, Harlow and Stevenage are earmarked for further development. To their north, the Cambridge Sub Region faces particular pressures. The success of the Cambridge Science Park and other high technology enterprises – 'the Cambridge Phenomenon' - have contributed to the continuing demand for new housing. However, because of the Green Belt which contains it, Cambridge itself cannot grow to anything like the extent required.

The new town of Northstowe, beyond the Green Belt, will be part of the solution. Some 8km to the northwest of Cambridge, this project is committed, subject to planning permission. The plans provide for some 8,000 new homes, housing some

18,000 people. They also include a town centre, two employment areas, four local centres, a secondary school and five primary schools. Around 4,500 jobs are to be provided, giving scope for a significant proportion of the new residents to work locally. The whole settlement is to be served by the recently approved Cambridgeshire Guided Bus (CGB) system which will provide fast connections to Cambridge City Centre and other key employment locations such as the Science Park and Addenbrooke's Hospital to the south of the City.

All parts of this garden city sized town are to be within easy walking distance of the town centre or a local centre and the CGB. The recent decision that Northstowe's homes should be built to energy standards at least 50% higher than conventional homes will further boost the town's credentials in sustainability terms.

The example of Northstowe serves to show that, so far as the UK is concerned, the new town is not 'just history'. The likelihood is that there will be a continuing role for new settlements in growth areas, although comprehensively planned town expansion will also have a major part to play. The example of Poundbury, designed by architect Leon Krier for the Prince of Wales as an extension to Dorchester, shows what can be achieved.

As Peter Hall argues, there is no 'one size fits all' solution, for the geography of the country is too rich for that. Instead, there needs to be a 'palette' of solutions that will meet the needs of individual places. In many circumstances a new settlement would not fit the bill but in others, as is the case with Cambridge, it might be precisely what is needed.

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