



Becoming a nation of townbuilders

From housebuilder to townbuilders. How to deliver 1.5 million new homes by creating locally supported, beautiful town extensions.



Context

On the 20th May the Labour Party set out its first steps towards a new generation of New Towns. Labour's plan set out the following:

"Labour's New Towns Code will mean that each new development must deliver:

- *Affordable housing: With a gold standard target of 40% affordable, including a mix of social, council, and other tenures.*
- *Characterful design: Robust design codes for beautiful buildings and tree-lined streets, that fit in with nearby areas and pay attention to local history and identity.*
- *Fit for the future layouts: High density housing to efficiently use available land, with good links to town and city centres.*
- *Infrastructure first: Guarantees that new houses means new transport links, healthcare and schools.*
- *Green spaces: Access to nature and parks, embedded greenery, and new facilities for kids to play and families to exercise."*

Create Streets has been leading the debate and delivery of codes for beautiful and sustainable places over the last decade. *This document demonstrates our recommendations for delivering Labour's New Town Code.*

About Create Streets

Create Streets is a design practice, townbuilder and think tank. We lead research, master-planning, design coding and community co-design to help develop and steward beautiful and popular 'gentle density' places which residents and neighbours can love for generations. For people, prosperity and planet.

Our goal is to make it easier to co-create beautiful, sustainable, prosperous, economically and socially successful places with strong local support and which residents will love for generations. We also take an active part in the debate about the planning and design in the UK and beyond to help landowners, communities and governments support the creation of sufficient homes and places in which people can flourish.

This is the first of a series of papers from Create Streets during the 2024 General Election, including the *Create Streets Manifesto for hope, homes and health* and the Create Streets indicative masterplan for *Greater Cambridge*.



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From housebuilder to townbuilders. How to deliver 1.5 million new homes by creating locally supported, beautiful town extensions.

The United Kingdom is suffering from an acute shortage of homes, estimated at 1.5– 4.3 million. This housing shortage has led to a severe generational inequality leaving renters and aspiring homeowners with unaffordable costs and savings targets during a cost-of-living crisis.

The standard model for delivering new homes will not and cannot solve this. We have one of the most concentrated housebuilding markets in the world, and this lack of competition has eroded the focus on customer preferences for what new housing development looks like. Create Streets' experience with masterplans, however, has shown that delivering locally popular housing architecture helps to turn NIMBYs into YIMBYs and leads to better wellbeing and happiness outcomes.

This concentrated market and inadequate regulatory regime also means that housebuilders are typically poor at delivering the infrastructure, commercial space, services, shops, schools, public transport and health services that comprise what we all know to be a properly functioning town or city.

The result is a narrow market of low-density, unsustainable housing sprawl that delivers low numbers of homes per hectare, takes up far more land than necessary, and does not provide the agglomeration effects required to support local economic growth or sustainable transport. The failure to integrate transport and housing development in the planning system means that most large housing developments require vast government subsidies for road-building. Once built, these low density, low amenity residential developments then lock in unsustainable patterns of excessive driving, isolation and low productivity.

Fulfilling the mission: getting Britain building again

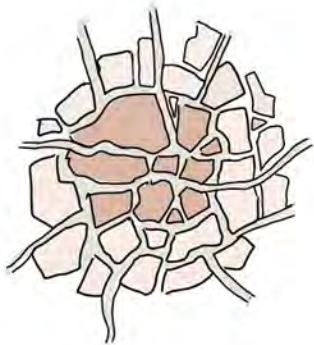
Responding to Labour's call for a New Towns Code we demonstrate how design could help to boost housing delivery in three typical scenarios, by applying 'gentle density' – the higher level of density associated with our historic towns and cities, with more terraces and buildings typically between three and eight storeys high.

These scenarios can deliver more homes on less land than the conventional volume housebuilder model, thereby reducing the impact of development on the environment and the landscape, creating local economic growth and allowing residents to move around in a lower-carbon, more affordable ways.

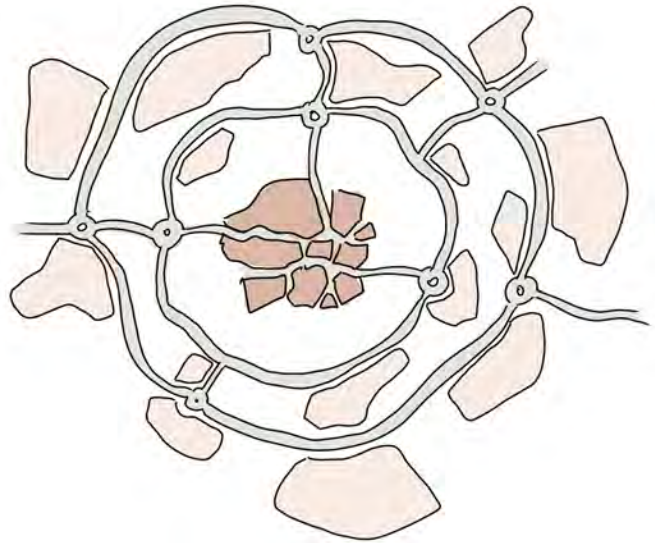
Key principles for design to drive better growth across new town building

1. Town first, not field-led approach to site selection.
2. Gentle density development of three to eight storeys.
3. Vision-led, not prediction-led transport planning.
4. Mixed-use, combining offices, commercial and residential in the same neighbourhoods.
5. Area-wide design coding to unlock and empower small and medium builders and self-build.

**Vision-led gentle
density development**



**Prediction-led
land-hungry development**



Seek to develop new homes in a gently dense way (left) rather than a land-hungry and infrastructure heavy way (right).



This illustrative note draws largely from existing projects Create Streets has worked on. We hope this approach can support ambitions for delivering new homes in attractive places with the infrastructure they need to thrive and grow.

Scenario one: towns and cities with high housing pressures

Many towns and cities, typically in the south, have enormous land value, but also encounter serious political opposition to development. This is where building more compact urban extensions, at gentle densities, with a strong focus on creating locally popular, attractive neighbourhoods, can generate real economic benefits. With the right strategic planning and delivery model such developments can be largely self-financing, as evidenced by the Vinex programme of urban extensions in the Netherlands, where population and density challenges are comparable to the South of the UK.

These vision-led housing designs demonstrate the overall concept and character of new towns and town extensions. Create Streets have produced these for developments in Rochdale, Sunderland, Leeds, Mid Sussex, Cambridge and Ayrshire to name a few.

"Building more compact urban extensions, at gentle densities, with a strong focus on creating locally popular, attractive neighbourhoods, can generate real economic benefits."



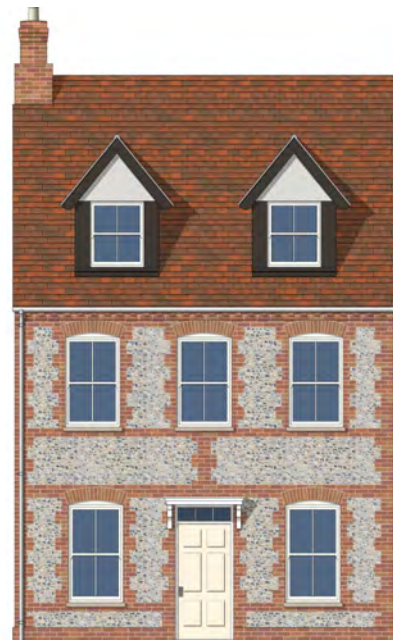
New communities can prioritise walking and cycling, creating vibrant new centres with jobs, services and leisure mixed with housing.



A pattern book is like a recipe book for creating homes.

It enables smaller developers to enter the market by de-risking planning. Ideally, pattern books are created with the community at a town or borough scale such that the democratic element of planning happens at a higher level than individual buildings. They were especially common in the 18th century and supported housing booms as they made it easier for builders, craftspeople and landowners to build high-quality homes by following simple patterns without relying on employing specialist architects.

Today, pattern books help communities to understand and shape what kind of building will take place in their neighbourhood. Create Streets has produced pattern books for local authorities in Worcestershire, Lichfield, Chesham, developers and land promoters in the south west and community groups in Chatham and London.



A pattern book of house types, co-created with the local community, can be readily applied to sites in existing towns to create places with character.



A sketched illustrative vision for new, walkable, gentle density developments (example showing city centre development in Lichfield)



Three-storey terraces at the edge of urban extensions in Chippenham and Mid Sussex.

Hand sketched illustrations and images can be used for engaging communities and locking in design decisions at the planning stage.

Key design features for southern town extensions

1. Create locally popular and attractive street and building design to win over residents.
2. Create new local centres with GPs, schools, services and public transport infrastructure.
3. Use low- and mid-rise terraced building to achieve higher densities in a locally popular way.



An urban extension in the West Country with a new high street, multiple neighbourhood centres and a network of green walking and cycleways with direct routes to new primary and secondary schools.



A 7,500 homes urban extension in Chippenham using two and a half times less land and better public transport than the previous failed plan, which had relied on a £75m subsidy for a new road.

Scenario two: inner city development

Inner city areas typically encounter less political opposition to development but are usually more complex and need more funding support due to lower land values and higher costs for land remediation. Many post-industrial town and city centres have been hollowed out by inappropriate fast roads, which sever communities, lower values and damage economic growth prospects. A default starting point is to restore the historic street pattern and use a bit more height in the centre for commercial and residential building.



Beautiful new mansion blocks (above) can rejuvenate city centres and raise densities more effectively than occasional towers. Townhouses (below) work well to create family homes in urban areas.

"Many post-industrial town and city centres have been hollowed out by inappropriate fast roads."



Light rail is essential to connecting communities and bringing people into the heart of business and leisure areas. Without it cities will suffer from congestion due to the spatial inefficiency of driving.

Key design features for inner city regeneration sites

1. Restore a 'fine grained' street pattern, with many narrow streets instead of fast, wide roads.
2. Use more height across entire blocks to raise densities, rather than towers amid low-rise, but ensure façades have more architectural detailing and vertical lines breaking up large surface areas.
3. Combine new development with the good light rail and bus networks that busy cities need.

Scenario three: economically successful but neglected places

Places like this often have a strong employment base and significant economic growth potential but lack identity or high-quality centres. They are normally in regions with high housing demand, with good transport links, but are currently unfashionable and avoided by many. There are opportunities to use new development to improve the attractiveness of such places. These areas often have been carved up by fast roads, damaging amenity and undermining local agglomeration effects: however, these historic design flaws create the opportunity for brownfield infill to turn these roads into streets and provide more homes.

"There are opportunities to use new development to improve the attractiveness of such places."



A Create Streets example of under-used land in central Swindon, only minutes from the station, that could be put to much better use.



New gentle density housing can be taller than average but still fit in gracefully with existing communities.



We can make better use of the inefficient and damaging inner city 'grey / road belt' so common in our towns and cities by transforming roads into beautiful boulevards (before and after illustrative sketch in Rochdale).



Plan view of new development combined with road-taming in Rochdale leading to economic growth, new homes and less severance between communities north and south.

Key design features for economically successful but neglected towns

1. Use area-wide brownfield infill to create new neighbourhoods and tame wide, fast roads.
2. Focus on creating locally popular buildings to give back a sense of place.
3. Use mid-rise to deliver density and avoid the temptation to build the odd large tower, which will often erode the sense of place further in these towns and cities.



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