The New Towns: Their Problems and Future

Nineteenth Report of Session 2001–02

Volume I
House of Commons
Transport, Local Government and
the Regions Committee

THE NEW TOWNS:
THEIR PROBLEMS AND
FUTURE

Nineteenth Report of Session 2001–02

Report, together with
Proceedings of the Committee
and Minutes of Evidence

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Footnotes
In the footnotes of this Report, references to oral evidence are indicated by ‘Q’ followed by the question number. References to written evidence are indicated by the memorandum number, eg NT 01.
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NINETEENTH REPORT

The Transport, Local Government and the Regions Committee has agreed to the following Report:

THE NEW TOWNS: THEIR PROBLEMS AND FUTURE

Conclusions and Recommendations

Successive urban regeneration programmes have overlooked the needs of the New Towns. By 1992, the New Towns had been de-designated by Central Government and were no longer recognised as a separate and identifiable policy area. This de-designation occurred prior to any audit of the regeneration needs of the towns being implemented. The focus on the regeneration of New Towns has, as a result been piecemeal with the level of regeneration investment being partly a function of the region within which they are situated. For example, Halton has been in receipt of Objective One resources since 1994 by virtue of its connection to the Merseyside conurbation. Similarly, an urban regeneration company in Corby has been supported by the RDA in the East Midlands because of the town’s profile in a relatively affluent region. Skelmersdale in contrast, has fared less well in respect of regeneration policy as has South Telford, by virtue of their location adjacent to much larger areas of deprivation.

The Public Policy Framework

The public policy framework applied to the New Towns has been underpinned by the principle that the Treasury should receive a substantial benefit from any uplift in values on publicly owned land that was originally purchased or developed through Central Government subsidy. This policy has been implemented through English Partnerships which has between 1999 and 2001 invested £120 million in the New Towns and raised approximately £600 million in capital receipts. This continued process of asset and land disposal builds on a significant programme of property disposals between 1980 – 1999, which repaid all of the outstanding debt relating to the development of the Towns. The Government is therefore now accumulating a considerable capital windfall in respect of the New Towns, whilst reinvesting only 20 per cent of receipts in these localities.

The key differences between the public policy framework for New Towns and other urban areas can be summarised under three headings: Planning, Finance and Regeneration.

Planning

Historically, a substantial amount of development land within the New Towns has been owned either by CNT or English Partnerships. Local Authorities have therefore, been unable to develop proactive local planning strategies supported by S106 planning agreements. Additionally, the planning consents relating to development sites have frequently been determined by the original New Towns or subsequent residuary bodies. This situation has militated against the development of a spatial development framework which is locally accountable, and has reduced fee income from the administration of the planning system to the local authority.

Finance

During the two decades from 1980, there was a significant reduction in real terms in Government capital investment in infrastructure. To balance this reduction in capital allocations, there has been an emphasis on local authorities setting up public and private sector partnerships to fund regeneration activity. However, in the New Towns this role was stymied by the pattern of land ownership and the fragmented planning system which applied in these local authorities.
In addition any land, which had been developed by the New Town Development Corporation that was subsequently redeveloped, is subject to claw-back provisions at a rate which reduces by 2 per cent a year. This claw-back prevents the local authority in the New Towns exercising their enabling function and places them at a serious disadvantage compared to other local authorities with similar regeneration needs. A similar issue exists in respect of the income from Right-to-Buy housing sales where a proportion of the receipts are currently payable to English Partnerships to reflect Central Government’s original investment in the construction of the property. This is an anomaly, as council housing generally was constructed using Central Government subsidy and no other cohort of local authorities is required to return value to the Treasury in this way.

**Regeneration and Management**

The development of effective regeneration strategies has been hindered by the financial and planning issues highlighted above. However, these factors have been exacerbated by the increasing obsolescence of the infrastructure which requires direct intervention by the public sector to facilitate change.

Fragmented ownership is a key feature of the original New Town housing estates which were often constructed using non-traditional methods on a Radburn layout. These estates were designed for single ownership and unified estate management, but fragmentation of ownership was caused by the asset disposals policies in the 1980s and early 1990s when properties were subject to substantial discounts and sold both to sitting tenants and through the open market. In many cases these estates are predominantly owned by marginal owner-occupiers and private landlords and, because of high turnover and the estate design and layout, they are becoming increasingly difficult to manage.

Urban management strategies are needed to address some of the issues which have arisen as a result of the previous asset disposals policies. These strategies need to reflect the higher costs of environmental maintenance and enforcement associated with semi privatised estates which were constructed initially for one managing agent. The Government should deploy the skills of the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit to assist and resource strategies to stabilise these areas and improve the quality of life for residents.

Decisions about the assets of the New Towns are being made in a strategic void. The New Towns have had successes and have generated a financial surplus for the Treasury. However, they have significant regeneration and reinvestment needs which are not being addressed by central Government. Without a significant policy change, the legacy of this altruistic 20th Century planning initiative may be transformed from a series of projects that have generated some social and economic benefits into expensive net liabilities. This failure of public policy to adapt to change may well create a text book example of how not to manage public assets.

There needs to be a major change in the management of the assets and liabilities of New Towns and in particular the role of English Partnerships. The Government should:

- recognise the full extent of the physical liabilities facing the new towns, resulting directly from their former new town status
- implement the recommendations of Stage 1 of the EP review without delay – namely the transfer of non-strategic sites and planning powers to the local authorities;
- transfer strategic sites to the Regional Development Agencies;
- end the clawback arrangements.
- establish a New Towns Reinvestment Fund to re-cycle the receipts from strategic land sales to be allocated on the basis of need.
Introduction

1. The establishment of 22 new towns between 1946 and 1970 was an ambitious programme to provide new homes and jobs following the last World War. It was based on the ideals developed earlier in the century by Ebenezer Howard’s garden city movement which sought to create better environments for people away from the smog and cramped conditions in inner urban areas.¹

2. While many New Towns have been economically successful, most now are experiencing major problems. Their design is inappropriate to the 21st Century. Their infrastructure is ageing at the same rate and many have social and economic problems. Many are small local authorities which do not have the capacity to resolve their problems. Their attempts to manage the towns are complicated by the role played by English Partnerships which still has major landholdings and other outstanding interests. Neither this Committee, nor its predecessors has looked at New Towns for some years. The transfer of responsibilities from the Commission for New Towns to English Partnerships in 1999, which is itself now subject to review, provided an appropriate moment to hold the inquiry.

3. Our terms of reference were to consider:

- the extent to which the original design of the New Towns is leading to concerns about their long term sustainability, in particular the effect of their design on urban management, how car dependence might be reduced and the balance between new development and the regeneration of older parts of the towns;

- whether social exclusion in the New Towns is being exacerbated by the current Government approach to regeneration and neighbourhood renewal, in particular in relation to small pockets of deprivation;

- issues relating to the organisations and regulations operating in the New Towns, in particular:

  - the consequences of English Partnerships’ control of the land supply and its role in the planning system;

  - the effect of the transfer of assets and liabilities to local authorities; and the role of local authorities, residuary bodies and non-Departmental Public Bodies in promoting sustainable regeneration in the New Towns;

  - the role of the New Towns in their regional economies, in both the industrial/commercial and housing markets and their effect on surrounding conurbations; and

  - whether the Government should change its policy in respect of design, regeneration and social inclusion in the New Towns.

4. We received written submission from 50 organisations and visited Telford, Corby and Harlow. 16 new town local authorities completed a questionnaire based on the Committee’s specific questions. We commend them to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and

¹ 32 new towns were established across the UK between 1947 and 1970. The Committee decided to focus on the 22 New Towns for which the DTLR has responsibility which include 21 New Towns in England and Cwmbran in Wales. The liabilities and assets held by New Towns Corporations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, with the exception of Cwmbran, were passed on to the Local Authorities when the corporations closed but the liabilities and assets of the 22 are held by English Partnerships.
others as essential evidence for policy-making in the new towns. We took oral evidence from English Partnerships and Tony McNulty MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Housing, Planning and Regeneration at the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister in July 2002. We are grateful to our advisor Professor Brendan Nevin from Sheffield Hallam University, Telford, Corby and Harlow councils for their hospitality and all who provided written and oral evidence to the Committee.

History

5. Proposals to set up a programme of New Towns were made immediately after World War II. They were intended to tackle poor housing conditions and overcrowding in major urban centres. The 1944 Abercrombie Plan for London proposed eight new towns within 50 miles of London for up to 500,000 people who would be moved out of inner London. Similar recommendations were made for other major conurbations including Manchester and Birmingham. The 1945 Attlee Government set up a New Towns Commission, which was chaired by Lord Reith, to work out the practicalities of establishing new towns to decentralise populations from congested urban areas.

6. The Reith Commission recommended that:

   - the new town developments should have a population of up to 60,000
   - they should be built as far as possible on greenfield sites
   - there should be predominantly single family housing at low density
   - the homes had to be organised in neighbourhoods around a primary school and nursery schools, a pub and shops selling staple foods and
   - there should be a balance of housing and jobs.²


   - Public Corporations were to be set up, sponsored and financed by the Government through Treasury loans.
   - The New Town Development Corporations were managed by a board appointed by Central Government.
   - They were given planning and compulsory purchase order powers.

8. The Development Corporations drew up development frameworks for a mix of housing, offices, industrial development, transport infrastructure and open space. They used their compulsory purchase order powers and loans from the Treasury to implement their frameworks. Some have been extensions of existing towns, while others have been new stand-alone centres.

9. 22 New Towns were developed in three generations.

   - The first generation set up in the late 1940s concentrated predominantly on housing development on greenbelt sites; eight were in a ring around London.

² Reith’s recommendations were summarised in EP’s evidence NT 33 (b)
They included little provision for cars.\textsuperscript{3}

- The second generation in the early 1960s included a wider mix of uses and used more innovative architecture.

- The third generation towns were larger including Milton Keynes, designated in 1965 and Central Lancashire, the last, which was designated in 1970. Development in the later generations of new towns tended to be designed around car travel.

Overall about 2m people are housed in the New Towns in about 500,000 new homes.

10. All the New Town Development Corporations were wound up by 1992. Whilst some of the remaining assets and liabilities were transferred to the local authority, most went to the Commission for New Towns that was established in 1961. In 1999, the Commission was merged with English Partnerships (EP). Later in this report, we consider the management of the disposal process and the future role of EP in the relation to the New Towns.

**New Towns - Successes, Variations and Shortcomings**

11. New Towns have many similarities particularly in their design and have similar problems. On the other hand, there are also wide variations particularly in their economic situation.

12. There have been successes. According to the submission from the New Towns Group of 10 local authorities, "Most of the New Towns are economically dynamic areas, which have levered in significant business investment. They have also fulfilled an important social function, providing housing for many from blighted inner-city areas, generated jobs and provided recreational amenities."

13. The New Towns are no longer new. They now require huge new investment and redevelopment. Much of the development was carried out within a 30 year period and is now suffering from uniform deterioration. The construction materials for the housing were experimental, non-standard and often poor quality, and in some areas now require wholesale replacement. Additionally, the infrastructure, the roads and sewers are now in need of substantial upgrading.

14. The masterplans drawn up for the towns proposed low density development with large amounts of open space, and housing was segregated from jobs, shopping and business services. Because of the low densities they are now not considered sustainable. In most, car travel is a necessity. They are also expensive to maintain. Welwyn Hatfield Council said: "the early New Towns were built to the requirements of post war communities and without the needs of future generations in mind."\textsuperscript{4}

15. Socially and economically, there are major variations which are reflected to a great extent in the housing demand in the different areas. Corby, Runcorn, Skelmersdale, Cwmbran and Irvine have concentrations of deprivation, including high levels of

\textsuperscript{3} The eight towns around London in the first generation of New Towns were Basildon, Bracknell, Crawley, Harlow, Hatfield, Hemel Hempstead, Stevenage and Welwyn Garden City. The other first generation New Towns were Corby, Cwmbran, Newton Aycliffe, and Peterlee. The second generation New Towns were Redditch, Runcorn, Skelmersdale and Washington. The third generation New Towns were Central Lancashire, Milton Keynes, Northampton, Peterborough, Telford and Warrington.

\textsuperscript{4} NT23
unemployment and low housing demand. The towns in the South East have benefited from the major economic growth around London. Warrington and Telford have benefited from good transport links. Even these relatively prosperous areas have concentrations of deprivation and problems in the provision of affordable housing due to high land prices.
The Problems of the New Towns

Physical needs

16. Submissions to the Committee highlighted the physical, economic and social problems of the New Towns. In this section we concentrate on the physical needs which were:

- the transport infrastructure
- town centres
- housing design and public space

Transport

17. Many of the submissions to the committee pointed to the dispersed nature and low density of development in all the new towns and the segregation of uses. As a result the residents need to travel further than in many traditional towns and cities. Whilst local services have been provided within walking distance in neighbourhoods, access to the town centres relies heavily on car use. Although some of the Development Corporations included public transport provision within their masterplans, the bus services are inadequate in many towns. Milton Keynes Council said the city "was designed for unrestricted car use and the grid road layout and comparatively low gross density of development make public transport difficult to operate commercially with the result that the service is poor, especially at night." The council is now seeking to control car use, introducing car parking charges in the shopping centre and developing more bus-friendly road layouts.

Town Centres

18. At the centre of all the New Towns, a shopping centre has been developed to meet the needs of the surrounding populations. Many have suffered from poor design and layout. Most are now out-of-date and as a result, residents are choosing to shop in other locations. Corby Council estimates that 73 per cent of disposable income is leaving the town.6

19. Bracknell Forest Council described the town’s shopping centre “as an impersonal oblong concrete box.....the town centre, although pedestrianised is separated from the surrounding area by two ring roads giving a fortress effect.” The council said it had undertaken some environmental initiatives to tackle the problems but “the problems have to be addressed by plans to completely redevelop the centre.”7 The Council pointed out that 80 per cent of those living within ten minutes drive of Bracknell centre chose to shop elsewhere.8 Torfaen council said: “Poorly designed and badly lit shopping areas in Cwmbran have led to perceived unsafe or no-go areas, attract anti-social behaviour, provide areas for alcohol and substance misuse, criminal damage and burglary.”9

20. Because the town centres are largely retail centres, in the evening there is little leisure activity. Telford’s MP David Wright said the town’s shopping centre is an “extremely

5 NT20
6 See visit note
7 NT12(a)
8 NT12
9 NT29 (a)
successful out-of-town retail centre built in the middle of the town. At present it does not operate as a town centre as intended in the original new town concept. The centre closes down at 5.30pm and does not provide any night time economy of merit.”

21. In Milton Keynes and Bracknell proposals are being considered to attract a wider range of uses including housing and entertainment into the town centres. Many of the local authorities are seeking to redevelop the shopping centres but they are hindered because they do not own them. The Development Corporations built the shopping centres but then sold them off to private investors.

**Housing**

22. Much of the housing was put up quickly using ‘innovative’ designs which have not stood the test of time. It now requires demolition or at least major refurbishment. The submission from Corby pointed to the poor architectural design and construction techniques which were unsustainable and expensive to repair. Telford & Wrekin council said that 5,000 homes were built with timber frames; 30 years on “a significant number of dwellings in these estates are past or nearing the end of their useful life.” In Runcorn, two estates, Southgate and Castlefields, which included deck access flats built with ‘innovative industrialised methods’ are having to be redeveloped because of their physical condition which had led to low demand in the area. High alumina cement was also used widely which is now requiring major repairs. In Harlow, the Gibson Court flats were built in 1964/65 and won a design award in 1969. Their design, with walkways and garages, is now considered poor, and the council has demolished one side.

23. During our visit to Telford we heard how the Development Corporation had pursued a “fire sale” policy of housing disposals before being wound up, when the balance of housing was transferred to the local authority. The local authority (now a housing association) stock has been reduced by right-to-buy, leading to a fragmented pattern of ownership across the town’s housing estates. This fragmented ownership makes housing regeneration schemes more difficult. In areas where housing markets are weak, problems have been compounded by large numbers of private sector landlords.

24. In Telford we heard that in one area, cheaply bought housing is being rented by private landlords at £80 per week to housing benefit claimants, compared to housing association rents of £45-50 per week. We were told that the Rent Service considered this higher rent to be acceptable because it was consistent with average rents across Telford as a whole. This echoes problems that we heard during our Empty Homes inquiry. The Rent Service, an Executive Agency of the DTLR, established in 1999, was charged with ensuring that landlords could no longer extract higher rent payments from benefit claimants than other tenants. It was not clear in the response from the Housing, Planning and Regeneration Minister, Tony McNulty MP, to our question, whether the Government intends to deal with the problem through the licensing of private landlords, reforms to the Housing Benefit system or the Rent Service, if at all.

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10 NT18
11 NT39
12 NT26
13 NT07 Southgate was demolished in 1989 and replaced by conventional family housing managed by two housing associations. The housing associations which own Castlefields have recently decided to demolish parts of the estate because of the combination of physical and social problems
14 See visit notes
15 This is discussed further in the Committee’s report on Empty Homes HC 240-I March 2002
16 Chapters 5 & 11 of the Housing Green Paper, *Quality and Choice: A Decent Home for All* published in April 2000, set out proposals to license private landlords and limit Housing Benefit
17 Q98 & 99
25. Subsequently, the Minister provided additional information about the Government’s plans for the selective licensing of private landlords: the proposals aim to tackle problems which are particularly prevalent in areas of low housing demand, but, he noted, there may be exceptional circumstances where the powers could be used to tackle poor management practices and anti-social behaviour in other areas. His letter added: “In these circumstances any local authority, including a New Town authority, will be able to seek the Secretary of State’s consent to implement a scheme subject to the need to demonstrate that there is a significant problem caused by those operating in the private rented sector in such areas and that licensing would address the problem”\textsuperscript{18} The selective licensing of private landlords is urgently required. We recommend that the licensing of private landlords, with an explicit link to housing benefit, be included in the new Local Government Bill.

Neighbourhood design, management and security

26. The Radburn housing layout which aims to separate cars from housing was used extensively in New Towns. As a result the houses are accessible to the front only by footpaths. This has created areas with poor surveillance, particularly over car parking at the rear, which have become the focus of crime. In Skelmersdale, tenants are calling for their Radburn style housing to be remodelled so that defensible space is created with parking close to their homes and a reduction in general use areas which give rise to anti-social behaviour.\textsuperscript{19}

27. Green spaces, which are a key feature of many of the New Towns have, caused concerns about safety. Footpaths have been provided linking the widely dispersed housing estates to the centres, which residents are frightened to use. In Bracknell “isolated, dark and secluded footways between and behind properties have been problematic.”\textsuperscript{20} The wide boulevards are segregated from the housing development with landscaping which make pedestrians feel unsafe on these roads. The submission by Halton Council said: “Overabundant vegetation growth in Runcorn has led to worries about personal safety and security at bus stops and on footpaths and concerns over highway visibility on parts of the expressway road.” Halton’s Local Transport Plan now includes a major expenditure items for landscape modification and maintenance.\textsuperscript{21}

28. English Partnerships acknowledged that the provision of community facilities, such as playgrounds and community centres in many New Towns was not adequate and that some open spaces were not very well planned. It accepted that it was now having to address “some of the poorer work that was done 20 or 30 years ago.”\textsuperscript{22}

29. The low density development in the New Towns has created major problems; there is excessive dependence on the car and poor bus services.

30. The New Towns’ town centres are often very unattractive and, as a result, they are losing shoppers to nearby centres. Masterplans are needed to create high quality public spaces and a mix of uses on traditional high streets, including evening leisure activity.

31. A substantial amount of the housing developed by the New Town Development Corporations has passed its useful life and will require phased redevelopment over the next decade. There are particular problems with ‘innovative’ design and materials.
32. The Councils have a major neighbourhood management problem in the housing estates and local shopping centres which they inherited from the New Town Corporations. This is caused by the combination of the Radburn design and the fragmented ownership of property and land which was a result of right-to-buy sales and the 'fire' sales just before the corporations closed down. This has frequently produced neighbourhoods which are poorly maintained and perceived by residents to be unsafe. The poorly designed estate shopping centres tend to attract antisocial behaviour in areas with few social facilities.

33. It is important in any new development to ensure the adequate provision of new community facilities and play areas, rather than rely on existing facilities, and to establish management arrangements and funding to ensure long term maintenance.

Social and Economic Needs

34. There are wide variations in the social and economic needs of the New Towns which are related in many cases to their position in the regional economies and transport links. The New Towns can be divided into three groups:

- the towns around London
- those with good major transport connections
- those that have failed to achieve their potential, with high levels of deprivation

They all have distinctive population profiles which vary from the national population structures and are based on the period when they experienced fastest growth.

Towns around London

35. The New Towns around London have benefited from the strength of the regional economy but have social problems with pockets of high levels of deprivation in areas of general prosperity. The submission by Peterborough Council pointed to neighbourhoods with "anti-social behaviour, breakdown in family life and transport/mobility problems which are not visible in the targets measured to access Government funds." On our visit to Harlow we were told that the original design of the town encouraged evenly spread development of social and professional housing to create mixed communities. This has led to deprivation problems being spread rather than concentrated. The council argued that this lack of concentration counts against it when bidding for regeneration funding.

36. There is a shortage of affordable housing problematic in some of these New Towns. The memorandum from Milton Keynes Economic Partnership pointed out that as a result of the shortage, there was a considerable amount of commuting. The Partnership called for new initiatives to provide a range of affordable homes both for rent and for sale.

Towns with good major transport connections and established centres

37. The situation is similar in Warrington and Telford where their proximity to the motorway network and their established urban centres have helped to promote relatively successful economic centres. However, Telford in particular has pockets of severe deprivation and is suffering from housing abandonment through a "a collapsing housing market, high crime levels, appalling physical conditions, undesirable private landlords and

\[23\text{ NT24} \]
\[24\text{ NT32}\]
high levels of deprivation.” The council points out that, while it has pockets of severe social and economic needs, with wards and enumeration districts in the top 10 per cent most deprived in England, overall the town is not in the top 50 on one of the Government’s indicators of multiple deprivation and is not therefore eligible for Neighbourhood Renewal Funding.

**Towns that have failed to achieve their potential with high levels of deprivation**

38. Towns including Runcorn, Skelmersdale, and Corby have fallen far short of their target populations and have high levels of deprivation. Skelmersdale had a target of 80,000 population but has so far only achieved 44,000, West Lancashire District Council pointed out that the Skelmersdale Development Corporation was wound up too early before it had reached its completed state. Runcorn now has a population of 62,700 against a target of 100,000. Corby had a target population of 125,000 but has so far only achieved 60,000.

39. As well as a poor infrastructure and bad housing discussed above, these towns have higher levels of unemployment. With the exception of Corby, these towns are within the top 50 districts on one of the indicators in the Government’s Index of Multiple Deprivations, which makes them eligible for Neighbourhood Renewal Funding. All the wards in Runcorn New Town fall within the top 10 per cent most deprived in England and has had EU Objective One funding since 1994.

40. The age profile of those who live in New Towns does not reflect national age structures because of the young families which moved in when the major housing developments were built. This is now causing problems for the first generation New Towns. Welwyn has “a problem with a high proportion of its population being elderly putting increased pressure on local services,” according to the local authority.

41. There are wide variations in the economic and social needs of the New Towns, but they almost all include areas of deprivation with high levels of unemployment and housing need. In those towns around London, there is a major need for affordable housing.

42. Towns like Runcorn, which are in regions where there are significant levels of deprivation have benefited from major EU funds and other regeneration programmes. However, only five of the 22 towns which have high levels of overall deprivation are eligible for Neighbourhood Renewal Funds. Those towns that are polarised with areas of prosperity alongside pockets of severe needs are not eligible for major regeneration funds.

43. We recommend the criteria for targeting Neighbourhood Renewal Funds should be reviewed so that small areas, such as enumeration districts which are among the 10 per cent most deprived in England, should be eligible for support irrespective of the prosperity of the wider areas, in which they are located.

44. The population profiles do not reflect national age structures, and the concentrations around particular age groups are placing increased demands on social services, particularly when the population ages.
Continuing Management of the New Towns

45. Between 1977 and 1992, all the New Town Development Corporations were wound up. The local authorities received most of the liabilities and the social housing. But the funds to maintain them were inadequate. The maintenance requirements are such that standard local authority funding streams are insufficient to maintain the housing. Some income generating assets transferred with the liabilities have now themselves become liabilities. The increase in the value from the sale of any of the liabilities for commercial purposes was clawed back by EP. Development sites went to the Commission for New Towns which was merged in 1999 with English Partnerships. Their main aim seemed to be to dispose of the outstanding sites rather than continue the work of the New Town Development Corporations. The income from land sales went to the Treasury, rather than being reinvested in the New Towns.

Local Authorities

46. The local authorities were the main recipient of key public facilities built by the Development Corporations. This included public space, playing fields, roads and footpaths, sewers, community centres and much of the socially rented housing. Funding was to come from two sources;

- Standard local authority income streams
- Income generating ‘balancing’ assets which were transferred to the local council to cover the costs of maintaining the public facilities.

In this section we consider how far these funding sources have proved sufficient.

Local Authority funding streams

47. The inadequacy of the funding arrangements was mentioned by many of the submissions by the local authorities. Telford & Wrekin council argued that the towns were built on the basis of continuing massive capital and revenue support. “The successors to the cash rich Development Corporations are cash-strapped local authorities.” The submissions from the local authorities suggested that the Standard Spending Assessment (SSA) used to calculate the Rates Support Grant to local authorities did not cover the expensive ‘non-standard’ public facilities which the Development Corporations built. Halton Council pointed to the costs of maintaining the 24km bus way in Runcorn which is part of the ‘unclassified’ network. Because the actual vehicle flows are comparatively low, the Council receives only minimal funding through the SSA formula.”

48. Many submissions mentioned the Government’s review of the SSA formula but were sceptical that it would help them. They suggested that the main aim of the Government’s review was to simplify the formula and that the outcome would not reflect their particular circumstances.

49. When the housing was transferred to the local authority, no provision was made to improve and renew it except through the rental income and standard housing funding sources. The submissions by the local authorities pointed out that the scale of renewal needed, especially taking into account the problem of innovative design, was more than could be funded through standard funding regimes. Milton Keynes council estimated that

28 NT07 (b)
over the next 10 years it will require £139m for “wholesale structural and remedial works on non-traditionally built housing stock.”

'Balancing' Assets

50. As the Development Corporations built facilities, such as community centres, public spaces and schools, they were transferred to the local authority as a community related asset. To cover the maintenance costs, the council was given an endowment in the form of an income-generating asset. These have usually been district shopping centres and development sites.

51. The ‘balancing packages’ were based in many cases on an over optimistic assumption about the durability of ‘assets’ such as district and estate-based shopping centres. The income generating assets have all too often become liabilities; and many even need demolition or clearance. Halton Council listed the assets it received as a community centre, four aged shops in the town centre, two pub freeholds and two sports fields.

52. Treasury regulations require that if the community asset is developed for a commercially more beneficial use, English Partnerships should clawback a share of the increase in value. EP explained to us: “Clawback is a Treasury required mechanism whereby the monetary value of local amenities, provided from the public purse can be protected for the benefit of the public sector.” The percentage of the increase in value which is clawed back is reduced by two per cent every year. Clawback also applies to the housing and any land alongside it which is transferred to the local authority. Right-to-buy sales of council housing and developments by the private sector of social facilities including residential care homes or facilities for people with special needs are also included.

53. Many argue that the clawback arrangements are now acting as a disincentive to developing sites, many submissions argued. Telford & Wrekin Council pointed out that it sells up to 50 small areas of land each year “where with clawback at around 80 per cent, the Council spends more on administration than the net receipt left available.” It suggested that land is held back until clawback reduced further even where it is surplus to requirements.

54. The Councils also receive very little if any income from the right-to-buy sales of rented housing transferred to them from the Development Corporations. Telford & Wrekin Council said that every right-to-buy disposal was actually costing it money. It highlighted an example when it received £678,000 from 106 right-to-buy disposals of ex Development Corporation stock but had to pay £887,000 to English Partnerships in clawback.

55. Welwyn Hatfield Council highlighted a large number of EP landholdings which included the subsoil on the roads and ‘ransom’ strips which were inhibiting development. According to Harlow council, there are also covenants over many sites it sold, which require that EP is consulted before the use is changed. This includes schools, health centres and some industrial estates. Harlow added that “EP have seemed reluctant to deal with schemes to vary covenants if they do not raise any substantial revenue, even though the local community could benefit.”

29 NT20(a)
30 NT07 (b)
31 NT25 (a)
32 EP says that clawback applies to approximately 2,000 ha of land or 1,848 sites
33 NT26(a)
34 NT05
56. The Minister confirmed that sub-soil rights, ransom strips and covenants were being considered as part of stage 2 of the EP review. This is welcome. The review should now identify ways to remove these impediments to local improvements.

The Commission for New Towns/English Partnerships

57. The remit given to the Commission for New Towns in 1961 was:

- to facilitate the economic and social well-being of citizens and businesses in the English New Towns and

- To achieve the best price reasonably obtainable for the land and property when sold.

58. CNT had compulsory purchase order and planning powers on a similar basis to the New Town Development Corporations which preceded it. The remit and powers were transferred when CNT was merged with English Partnerships in 1999. The Government is in the middle of a review into the future role of English Partnerships. The first stage of the review, published in March 2002, recommended that EP should:

- relinquish the use of its planning powers in the former new town areas.
- transfer its non-strategic CNT landholdings to other appropriate bodies such as the local authorities.

The second stage of the EP review, to be published in the autumn, is to identify these non-strategic sites which would then be transferred to other agencies.

59. The management of the New Towns is affected by EP’s continuing role as landowner with planning powers over those sites. Submissions to the Committee were concerned that:

- the non-strategic sites should be transferred quickly to the local authorities,
- too many strategic sites would not go to local authorities,
- the strategic sites should go to the RDAs rather than remain with EP,
- planning permissions issued by CNT and EP on all the undeveloped sites which it has not yet sold should be rescinded if they do not conform with the local authority’s plans.

Landownership

60. The £4.75bn loan made to the New Town Development Corporations by the Treasury was repaid in early 1999 from the sale of sites. Since then land sale receipts have generated about £600m of which about £120m has been invested in the New Towns.

61. We received much evidence that CNT had given priority to maximising the commercial returns from its landholding rather than promoting the social and economic well-being of the New Town. John Walker, former chief executive of the Commission for New Towns, said that when the New Towns were wound up the Government was no longer

35 NT33 (d)
36 The legislation has not been amended and EP operates under two acts - the original legislation that set up CNT and the act which set EP up as an Urban Regeneration Agency.
37 Quinquennial Review of English Partnerships, Outcome of Stage One. 2002
38 NT33
“a promoter and guardian of the long term welfare of the towns and became a detached landlord with no apparent policy interest in long term success. It began to see them purely as a source of capital receipts.”\textsuperscript{39}

62. This view has not changed sufficiently since CNT was merged with EP. The New Town's Group said that: “EP operates as an asset manager, but not as a regeneration agency.”\textsuperscript{40} A few local authorities said that they had developed a constructive relationship with EP. Halton Council said that EP “had been a constant, active partner in numerous regeneration initiatives, including various adhoc programmes.” In the last two years, it has also started developing partnerships in Northampton and Milton Keynes. Most however were critical of EP. Stevenage Borough Council commented: “EP tends only to invest in areas from which it derives income. This is despite the fact that the majority of the profit from sale of land in the towns has gone to the Treasury over the years.”\textsuperscript{41} Telford & Wrekin council suggested that EP operates on a narrow project basis, and does not take into account the strategic development needs of the areas.

63. The land held by EP is of central importance to implementing many of the strategies put forward by the councils in the New Towns. In Telford, EP owns 300 hectares which has been set aside for housing and employment uses while the council only owns 11 hectares. In Warrington, Runcorn and Milton Keynes the balance is very similar. The New Towns Group also points out that EP owns land which could have been an important asset for the councils to borrow against.

64. The first stage of the EP review did not set out a timetable for the transfer of sites. Submissions by local authorities following the first stage of the EP review suggested that the transfer of sites should be carried out as soon as possible. The New Towns Group of local authorities warned: “Failure to transfer sites within a short timescale will only increase the risk of fears of a ‘fire’ sale of EP’s sites, with none of the benefits being accrued by local authorities.”\textsuperscript{42} It is also pressing that sufficient funds should be transferred with the sites to ensure that they do not become liabilities and can be developed to maximum benefit.

65. Many of the submissions after the first stage of the review questioned how the second stage of the EP review would define strategic sites and were concerned that an excessively large number would be retained.

66. EP told the Committee that it was likely to retain about 38 strategic sites following the results of the second stage of its review.\textsuperscript{43} There does not seem to be clear a reason why the RDAs should not take on those sites. The DTLR’s EP review pointed out that the RDAs took on EP’s regional regeneration role when they were set up in 1999, with most of its land, which was not of national significance, also being transferred.\textsuperscript{44} When EP appeared before us, it could not explain why it needed to exist alongside the RDAs in promoting regional regeneration. The submission by Halton council said that there was some confusion of roles between EP and the North West Development Agency. It said: “It could well be helpful to all those operating within the region for EP’s New Town residuary role to be handled on a regional basis by the RDA. The broad development issues surrounding the future of the new town holdings would then be handled as part of the regional strategy and due observance to the requirements of sustainable development.”\textsuperscript{45}

\textsuperscript{39} NT30
\textsuperscript{40} NT14
\textsuperscript{41} NT10
\textsuperscript{42} NT14 (c)
\textsuperscript{43} Q17
\textsuperscript{44} Quinquennial review of EP para 4.5
\textsuperscript{45} NT07
67. The use of the receipts from land sales is of particular concern to the local authorities, particularly since the Treasury loan has been repaid. The New Towns Group said that the towns "are being used as a cash cow and local authorities are expected to handle the liabilities they have inherited from the Government." It suggested that "finances from sales should be recycled into the regeneration of the most deprived wards in the area." The New Towns Group considered that the next stage of the EP review must confirm that the receipts from the sale of the assets should be available for use by the local authority rather than being retained by the Treasury.

68. The extent to which the land sale receipts could help to cover the liabilities inherited by the councils from the New Town Development Corporations is unclear. We asked all the local authorities how the cost of all the social, economic and physical liabilities which were a result of the New Town development compared to the remaining assets held by EP in the town. Most were unable to give an informed response. EP's assets are not necessarily in the New Towns where the income is most needed. Almost half of them are in Milton Keynes where 1,352 hectares of development land is held by EP, valued at £440m. The Council said that it requires £139m to bring development corporation housing up to standard over the next 10 years. In the older New Towns very little land is owned, but there are considerable needs. The submission by Welwyn Hatfield Council suggested that the income from the sale of assets in the later New Towns should be reinvested in the first generation New Towns.

69. When the Housing and Planning Minister Tony McNulty appeared before us, he said that the second stage of the EP review would give an idea of the development needs of the New Towns. He also said that

"hopefully within the context of the Stage 2 of the EP review and the wider context of looking at New Towns, the lessons will be learned.... I suspect there are harsh lessons to be learned almost on a new-town-by-new town basis. The key now in terms of going forward is for EP and the development agencies and all the assorted partners to look at the New Towns and work out within their own localities how to take things forward to regenerate those areas."

Planning powers

70. The planning powers still held by EP were a cause of concern for most local authorities. Under section 7 (1) of the New Towns Act 1981, planning permissions approved by New Town Development Corporations, CNT and EP have an indefinite life. EP said that 1,544 hectares of the 4,538 hectares of New Town Land allocated for housing and employment uses had outstanding section 7 (1) planning permissions. The majority is in Telford, Warrington and Milton Keynes.

71. Councils said that because CNT and subsequently EP had planning powers, they had lost the opportunity to negotiate planning obligations including affordable housing. They

46 NT14
47 There are discrepancies about the valuation of the sites - Milton Keynes council suggested that EP's sites were worth £900m, whilst EP valued them at £440m and Telford & Wrekin valued EP sites at about £270m and EP itself valued them at about £91m
48 NT23
49 Q63 & 66
50 Planning permissions approved by local authorities generally have a life of five years.
51 According to EP's submission to the Committee (NT23(a)) about 960 hectares of green field sites have permission for housing and employment uses
52 NT25 (a)
did not receive the application fees but were required to enforce the planning approvals. It is claimed that many of the outstanding permissions did not conform with current planning guidance. Telford & Wrekin council said that there was reluctance by EP to allocate sites for socially rented housing. The RTPI commented; “National and local planning policy has moved on considerably since these consents were first given, and it must be accepted that many of them are not in accordance with the tests set out in PPG3, 6 and 13.”

Telford & Wrekin council estimated that it had lost about £1.5m in planning fees in relation to EP's land.

72. EP suggested in its submission to the Committee that a phased handover of its planning powers was required so that development was not delayed. It said: “Where sites are in the pipeline, there would be significant delay since the planning process would have to begin again from scratch, where development had not been authorised.”

Telford & Wrekin council said that if the proposals were not contentious there should not be any delays if they are considered by local authorities. It said that delays would only happen if the proposals were contentious. “Those are the very proposals that ought to be subject to local intervention.”

73. The local authorities now running the New Towns are facing a major task with many areas requiring extensive renewal which they may not have the capacity to tackle. Some are not large enough to attract the skilled staff necessary and have little tradition of managing their own affairs including major regeneration projects. In the past the Commission for New Towns has taken on many important aspects of the New Towns. The Neighbourhood Renewal Unit could clearly have a role in advising them on the development of an urban management framework for the most problematic housing estates.

74. The funds provided for the management and maintenance of the New Towns are inadequate, bearing in mind the non-traditional housing design and infrastructure and the extensive landscaping built by the Development Corporations which is more expensive to maintain and much now requires wholesale renewal.

- The Standard Spending Assessment is unlikely to reflect the special conditions in the New Towns.

- The ‘balancing’ packages provided for the New Towns are now not generating sufficient returns and need to be reviewed as some of the ‘assets’ have become liabilities.

- The clawback requirement has meant that a lot of the income from right-to-buy sales is lost to the local authority and acts as a deterrent to the development of sites. The clawback requirement should be abolished so that the New Town local authorities are put on a similar basis to other local authorities.

75. Since the Development Corporations were wound up, the sites have been sold off for maximum value rather than reflecting local needs, and the returns have gone directly to the Treasury. English Partnerships has not worked in partnership with many of the New Town local authorities to promote comprehensive regeneration, focussing almost exclusively on maximising its income through land sales.

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53 NT40 (i)
54 NT25
55 NT26 (b)
76. The vast majority of outstanding sites owned by EP, which are not strategic, should be transferred immediately to the local authorities to enable them to implement their local development strategies and avoid a ‘fire’ sale.

77. The definition of strategic sites should be very tightly drawn to give local authorities maximum control over their areas. Those sites which are of truly strategic importance should be passed on to the RDAs, leaving EP as a national agency which local authorities could bring in where they consider it appropriate to provide consultancy support.

78. A comprehensive audit of the liabilities inherited by the local authorities from the Development Corporations is required so that adequate funds can be allocated for the maintenance of the towns. This audit should look at the social, economic and environmental impact, urban management impact and long term reinvestment needs of the New Towns. We welcome the commitment by the Minister that the second stage of the EP review could include an assessment of the needs of the New Towns.

79. Local Authorities should keep the receipts from the sales of the non-strategic sites that are transferred to them. They should not be subject to clawback. The land sale receipts would help to meet the maintenance costs borne by the Local Authorities. However, the receipts would not meet the needs of all the New Towns. To meet the needs of individual towns, a New Towns Reinvestment Fund should be established which would recycle the receipts from the sale of strategic sites.

80. The planning powers held by EP and the outstanding planning permissions on the sites are anomalous and do not help to promote mixed use, mixed tenure schemes on brownfield sites or in town centres.

81. The outstanding planning permissions issued by the Development Corporations, CNT and EP on land which it still owns should be rescinded immediately where they do not conform with Local Authority plans.
Future Growth

82. There is huge potential for more development in the existing New Towns which the local authorities consider would make many of them more successful urban centres. The Government is also keen to develop more housing in the South East. As we have demonstrated in this report, the approach by EP, CNT and the New Town Development Corporations has major shortcomings. A partnership between the RDAs and the local councils would offer a more coherent approach providing both local and regional perspectives to any future development.

83. We recommend that the Government promotes further expansion in the existing New Towns to help meet its housing targets, particularly where the New Towns have not achieved their critical mass. However the approach to the management of liabilities and the disposal of assets adopted by the New Town Corporations, EP and CNT is not appropriate for future development.
Evaluation

84. The Committee was astonished to receive evidence from both the DTLR and EP that the New Towns ‘experiment’ has never been evaluated and the reinvestment needs reviewed, despite the investment of £4.75bn in them. Given the evidence from our inquiry, it would be wrong at this stage to develop new generations of new towns, particularly before the experience of the existing 22 towns is evaluated.

85. It is very surprising that the New Towns ‘experiment’ has never been evaluated. This evaluation should include more detailed reinvestment needs of the New Towns. An evaluation is urgently required which identifies both good practice and mistakes before any new major new settlements are considered.
Conclusions and Recommendations

86. Successive urban regeneration programmes have overlooked the needs of the New Towns. By 1992, the new Towns had been de-designated by Central Government and were no longer recognised as a separate and identifiable policy area. This de-designation occurred prior to any audit of the regeneration needs of the towns being implemented. The focus on the regeneration of New Towns has, as a result been piecemeal with the level of regeneration investment being partly a function of the region within which they are situated. For example, Halton has been in receipt of Objective One resources since 1994 by virtue of its connection to the Mersey side conurbation. Similarly, an urban regeneration company in Corby has been supported by the RDA in the East Midlands because of the town’s profile in a relatively affluent region. Skelmersdale in contrast, has fared less well in respect of regeneration policy as has South Telford, by virtue of their location adjacent to much larger areas of deprivation.

The Public Policy Framework

87. The public policy framework applied to the New Towns has been underpinned by the principle that the Treasury should receive a substantial benefit from any uplift in values on publicly owned land that was originally purchased or developed through Central Government subsidy. This policy has been implemented through English Partnerships which has between 1999 and 2001 invested £120 million in the New Towns and raised approximately £600 million in capital receipts. This continued process of asset and land disposal builds on a significant programme of property disposals between 1980 – 1999, which repaid all of the outstanding debt relating to the development of the Towns. The Government is therefore now accumulating a considerable capital windfall in respect of the New Towns, whilst reinvesting only 20 per cent of receipts in these localities.

88. The key differences between the public policy framework for New Towns and other urban areas can be summarised under three headings; Planning, Finance and Regeneration.

Planning

89. Historically, a substantial amount of development land within the New Towns has been owned either by CNT or English Partnerships. Local Authorities have therefore, been unable to develop proactive local planning strategies supported by S106 planning agreements. Additionally, the planning consents relating to development sites have frequently been determined by the original New Towns or subsequent residuary bodies. This situation has mitigated against the development of a spatial development framework which is locally accountable, and has reduced fee income from the administration of the planning system to the local authority.

Finance

90. During the two decades from 1980, there was a significant reduction in real terms in Government capital investment in infrastructure. To balance this reduction in capital allocations, there has been an emphasis on local authorities setting up public and private sector partnerships to fund regeneration activity. However, in the New Towns this role was stymied by the pattern of land ownership and the fragmented planning system which applied in these local authorities.

91. In addition any land, which had been developed by the New Town Development Corporation that was subsequently redeveloped, is subject to claw-back provisions at a rate which reduces by 2 per cent a year. This claw-back prevents the local authority in the New Towns exercising their enabling function and places them at a serious disadvantage compared to other local authorities with similar regeneration needs. A similar issue exists in respect of the income from Right-to-Buy housing sales where a proportion of the receipts
are currently payable to English Partnerships to reflect Central Government’s original investment in the construction of the property. This is an anomaly, as Council housing generally was constructed using Central Government subsidy and no other cohort of local authorities is required to return value to the Treasury in this way.

Regeneration and Management

92. The development of effective regeneration strategies has been hindered by the financial and planning issues highlighted above. However, these factors have been exacerbated by the increasing obsolescence of the infrastructure which requires direct intervention by the public sector to facilitate change.

93. Fragmented ownership is a key feature of the original New Town housing estates which were often constructed using non-traditional methods on a Radburn layout. These estates were designed for single ownership and unified estate management, but fragmentation of ownership was caused by the asset disposals policies in the 1980s and early 1990s when properties were subject to substantial discounts and sold both to sitting tenants and through the open market. In many cases these estates are predominantly owned by marginal owner-occupiers and private landlords and because of high turnover and the estate design and layout, they are becoming increasingly difficult to manage.

94. Urban management strategies are needed to address some of the issues which have arisen as a result of the previous asset disposals policies. These strategies need to reflect the higher costs of environmental maintenance and enforcement associated with semi privatised estates which were constructed initially for one managing agent. The Government should deploy the skills of the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit to assist and resource strategies to stabilise these areas and improve the quality of life for residents.

95. Decisions about the assets of the New Towns are being made in a strategic void. The New Towns have had successes and have generated a financial surplus for the Treasury. However, they have significant regeneration and reinvestment needs which are not being addressed by central Government. Without a significant policy change, the legacy of this altruistic 20th Century planning initiative may be transformed from a series of projects that have generated some social and economic benefits into expensive net liabilities. This failure of public policy to adapt to change may well create a text book example of how not to manage public assets.

96. There needs to be a major change in the management of the assets and liabilities of New Towns and in particular the role of English Partnerships. The Government should:

- recognise the full extent of the physical liabilities facing the new towns, resulting directly from their former town status

- implement the recommendations of Stage 1 of the EP review without delay – namely the transfer of non-strategic sites and planning powers to the local authorities;

- transfer strategic sites to the Regional Development Agencies;

- end the clawback arrangements.

- establish a New Towns Reinvestment Fund to re-cycle the receipts from strategic land sales to be allocated on the basis of need.
List of conclusions and recommendations

(a) The selective licensing of private landlords is urgently required. We recommend that the licensing of private landlords, with an explicit link to housing benefit, be included in the new Local Government Bill (paragraph 25).

(b) The low density development in the New Towns has created major problems; there is excessive dependence on the car and poor bus services (paragraph 39).

(c) The New Towns’ town centres are often very unattractive and, as a result, they are losing shoppers to nearby centres. Masterplans are needed to create high quality public spaces and a mix of uses on traditional high streets, including evening leisure activity (paragraph 30).

(d) A substantial amount of the housing developed by the New Town Development Corporations has passed its useful life and will require phased redevelopment over the next decade. There are particular problems with ‘innovative’ design and materials (paragraph 41).

(e) The Councils have a major neighbourhood management problem in the housing estates and local shopping centres which they inherited from the New Town Corporations. This is caused by the combination of the Radburn design and the fragmented ownership of property and land which was a result of right-to-buy sales and the ‘fire’ sales just before the corporations closed down. This has frequently produced neighbourhoods which are poorly maintained and perceived to be unsafe by residents. The poorly designed estate shopping centres tend to attract antisocial behaviour in areas with few social facilities (paragraph 32).

(f) It is important in any new development to ensure the adequate provision of new community facilities and play areas, rather than rely on existing facilities, and to establish management arrangements and funding to ensure long term maintenance (paragraph 33).

(g) There are wide variations in the economic and social needs of the New Towns, but they almost all include areas of deprivation with high levels of unemployment and housing need. In those towns around London, there is a major need for affordable housing (paragraph 51).

(h) Towns like Runcorn, which are in regions where there are significant levels of deprivation have benefited from major EU funds and other regeneration programmes. However, only five of the 22 towns which have high levels of overall deprivation are eligible for Neighbourhood Renewal Funds. Those towns that are polarised with areas of prosperity alongside pockets of severe needs are not eligible for major regeneration funds (paragraph 52).

(i) We recommend the criteria for targeting Neighbourhood Renewal Funds should be reviewed so that small areas, such as enumeration districts which are among the 10 per cent most deprived in England, should be eligible for support irrespective of the prosperity of the wider areas, in which they are located (paragraph 53).
(j) The population profiles do not reflect national age structures, and the concentrations around particular age groups is placing increased demands on social services, particularly when the population ages (paragraph 54).

(k) The Minister confirmed that sub-soil rights, ransom strips and covenants were being considered as part of stage 2 of the EP review. This is welcome. The review should now identify ways to remove these impediments to local improvements (paragraph 56).

(l) The Neighbourhood Renewal Unit could clearly have a role in advising them on the development of an urban management framework for the most problematic housing estates (paragraph 73).

(m) The funds provided for the management and maintenance of the New Towns are inadequate, bearing in mind the non-traditional housing design and infrastructure and the extensive landscaping built by the Development Corporations which is more expensive to maintain and much now requires wholesale renewal.

- The Standard Spending Assessment is unlikely to reflect the special conditions in the New Towns.

- The ‘balancing’ packages provided for the New Towns are now not generating sufficient returns and need to be reviewed as some of the ‘assets’ have become liabilities.

- The clawback requirement has meant that a lot of the income from right-to-buy sales is lost to the local authority and acts as a deterrent to the development of sites. The clawback requirement should be abolished so that the New Town local authorities are put on a similar basis to other local authorities (paragraph 84).

(n) Since the Development Corporations were wound up, the sites have been sold off for maximum value rather than reflecting local needs, and the returns have gone directly to the Treasury. English Partnerships has not worked in partnership with many of the New Town local authorities to promote comprehensive regeneration, focussing almost exclusively on maximising its income through land sales (paragraph 75).

(o) The vast majority of outstanding sites owned by EP, which are not strategic, should be transferred immediately to the local authorities to enable them to implement their local development strategies and avoid a ‘fire’ sale (paragraph 86).

(p) The definition of strategic sites should be very tightly drawn to give local authorities maximum control over their areas. Those sites which are of truly strategic importance should be passed on to the RDAs, leaving EP as a national agency which local authorities could bring in where they consider it appropriate to provide consultancy support (paragraph 77).
(q) A comprehensive audit of the liabilities inherited by the local authorities from the Development Corporations is required so that adequate funds can be allocated for the maintenance of the towns. This audit should look at the social, economic and environmental impact, urban management impact and long term reinvestment needs of the New Towns. We welcome the commitment by the Minister that the second stage of the EP review could include an assessment of the needs of the New Towns (paragraph 78).

(r) Local Authorities should keep the receipts from the sales of the non-strategic sites that are transferred to them. They should not be subject to clawback. The land sale receipts would help to meet the maintenance costs borne by the Local Authorities. However, the receipts would not meet the needs of all the New Towns. To meet the needs of individual towns, a New Towns Reinvestment Fund should be established which would recycle the receipts from the sale of strategic sites (paragraph 79).

(s) The planning powers held by EP and the outstanding planning permissions on the sites are anomalous and do not help to promote mixed use, mixed tenure schemes on brownfield sites or in town centres (paragraph 80).

(t) The outstanding planning permissions issued by the Development Corporations, CNT and EP on land which it still owns should be rescinded immediately where they do not conform with Local Authority plans (paragraph 81).

(u) We recommend that the Government promotes further expansion in the existing New Towns to help meet its housing targets, particularly where the New Towns have not achieved their critical mass. However the approach to the management of liabilities and the disposal of assets adopted by the New Town Corporations, EP and CNT is not appropriate for future development (paragraph 83).

(v) It is very surprising that the New Towns ‘experiment’ has never been evaluated. This evaluation should include more detailed reinvestment needs of the New Towns. An evaluation is urgently required which identifies both good practice and mistakes before any new major new settlements are considered (paragraph 85).
Visit to Telford, Corby and Harlow

17 and 18 June 2002

Members, Staff and Advisers Participating During the Visit

Andrew Bennett, MP
Mr Clive Betts, MP
Mr John Cummings, MP
Mr Brian H Donohoe, MP
Mrs Louise Ellman, MP
Ms Oona King, MP
Christine Russell, MP

Dr David Harrison - Clerk
Claire O'Shaughnessy - Committee Specialist
Emma Sawyer - Committee Assistant
Brendan Nevin - Specialist Adviser

Telford

Designated in as a New Town in 1968

Cllr Phil Davis (Leader), Cllr Pauline Picken (Deputy Leader), Cllr Charles Smith (Cabinet Member), Michael Frater (Chief Executive), Steve Wellings (Corporate Director, Resources), Meredith Evans (Corporate Director, Environment), Michael Barker (Head of Planning), Mark Donovan (Economic Development Manager), Richard Bifield (Tourism Manager), Cllr Ian Baker, Cllr Derek White, Melvyn Biddulph, Chair of Woodside Residents Group, Cllr Dave Morgan, Cllr Jim Hicks (local ward members), Kevin Kane-Brookes (Community Liaison officer), Pete Jones (local heat manager)

Telford and Wrekin Council members and officers gave a presentation highlighting the large number of issues facing the borough as a result of what they describe as its “former new town status”:

- Telford was built on a brownfield site which has meant more remediation issues than other new towns;
- the town accommodated an overspill population from the black country - “you don’t remove the cycle of deprivation simply by putting people into a better environment;”
- the planning assumptions which underpinned the design of the town were idealistic at the time and are now out of date. A population of over 200,000 and 100% car ownership were originally assumed;
- housing estates are surrounded by green areas - leading to a sense of isolation,
- zoning has separated uses - making it hard to get to work without a car;
- the town centre is a privately owned shopping mall, surrounded by car parks, roads and trees - there is no nightlife in the town centre;
- commercially Telford has been very successful - although many of the companies which have located there have their headquarters on the other side of the world -leaving Telford particularly vulnerable to changes in the global economy;
- a ‘fire sale’ policy of housing by the Development Corporation just before it was wound up has in the long term resulted in many of those homes ending up in the private rented sector;
• the council presented its regeneration needs to the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit, which had not realised that there were any issues in this new town - despite areas of significant deprivation, the borough falls outside the criteria used for the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund;
• 'shrewd' investment is needed now to prevent further to decline and greater regeneration needs in future;
• the council has very limited assets of its own.

English Partnerships

English Partnerships (EP) owns 820 ha of land in Telford - an area exceeded only in Milton Keynes (NT25). 819 ha of land are covered by clawback arrangements. (NT25(a))

EP has for all intents and purposes been the planning authority for the town. It has worked to the agenda it was given - ie income maximisation as a higher priority than promoting well-being.

EP has tended to focus on the larger sites - there are small pockets of housing and commercial land that receive very little attention.

Transport

The design of the town has led to a series of small communities each surrounded by green space. This has made it difficult to develop viable bus routes.

This has been compounded by the zonal approach to the development of the town, with employment areas separated from housing areas.

It was assumed that there would be 100% car ownership so there are few footpaths and those that there are, are away from the roads and people feel unsafe using them.

Clawback

Extensive areas of the town have been transferred to the council by the Development Corporation and its successors. Clawback means that the council must repay (currently) approximately 80% of the receipt\(^{57}\) to EP (and the Treasury). This is different to 'normal' councils which would be able to keep the receipts. This use of capital receipts to fund regeneration activity is a common feature of regeneration programmes.

Clawback means that Right to Buy actually costs the council money (rather than being a receipt). Each time a house is sold, the council has to make a payment to English Partnership, which is greater than the value of the receipt that it receives.

Assets and liabilities

The council recommends that a profit and loss account approach should be developed for the entire town - with assets used to cover the cost of regeneration liabilities.

The council also argues strongly that investment is needed now to stop future decline.

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\(^{57}\) Land transferred to the council at the time of the wind up of the Development Corporation is subject to clawback for 50 years from the time of transfer. At the date of transfer, any increase in the value of land was all clawed back by CNT. This figure reduces by 2% a year.
Woodside

Woodside is a poorly designed housing estate, south of Telford. Many of the houses are in the Radburn layout. Radburn design assumes that cars should be separated from housing. The front of the houses are accessible only by footpaths. There are garages to the rear. The design reduces the physical security of the houses and flats and creates footpaths which attract crime. The buildings were constructed for a short life - which they are now nearing the end. The estate needs to be remodelled and replanned.

The estate is surrounded by roads and green space - making residents feel isolated.

We visited the Courts - a series of deck access flats - many abandoned and in very poor physical condition. There have been significant problems with arson and many of the flats which remain occupied are owned by private landlords. Housing association rents in the area are approximately £45 per week but housing benefit pays £80 per week to private landlords (based on average rents across the town as a whole). Vacant privately owned flats are also more problematic as the council has no information about them and cannot secure them.

The council proposes to demolish the deck access flats, sell the site and reinvest the receipt, along with Housing Corporation funding in a new development.

The council originally approached EP, wanting to demolish the flats but was told “it is not part of our remit.” EP has more recently agreed to the principle of its involvement. Currently EP’s position is that its involvement needs to be on the basis of a long term regeneration strategy for Woodside. Such a strategy needs to be in place before EP will commit to the demolition of the Courts. The site is also subject to clawback, meaning that a percentage of any receipt will go to the Treasury, rather than being invested locally in a housing regeneration scheme. The housing trust and council have successfully bid to the Housing Corporation for a ‘national pathfinder scheme’ to acquire private interests in the Courts.

The local shopping centre at Woodside was transferred to the council as part of the balancing package when the development corporation was wound up. Income has declined and maintenance costs have increased - turning it from an asset to a liability.

Madeley and Sutton Hill

Madeley is an older area and is the district shopping centre. The green spaces between communities make it hard to get to Madeley from Woodside and the road has been blocked off.

Sutton Hill is an area of timber framed housing which is now 30 years old and much of which is at the end of its natural life. The housing trust is investing £10,000 in each of its properties to sustain them. Owner occupiers cannot increase the value of their home by £10,000 if they invest that much in its upkeep - the council has no access to capital receipts which might be used to fund grants for owner occupiers.

Brookside

The Brookside housing estate was also built according to the Radburn principle and the housing is only accessible down narrow footpaths, many of which (such as the “Drug Alley” we visited) are dark and have significant crime problems.

The local shopping centre is in very poor condition and again is a magnet for crime.

We heard that EP does not see itself as having a role in the joint regeneration of the town centre, district and local shopping centres.
Lawley Vale

Lawley Vale is a large housing development. It covers 241 ha (including green space - 110 ha will be developed for housing) and 3,100 houses will be constructed on the site, providing 25% of the housing supply to Telford over the next 5 years.

The site has a Section 7(1) planning consent and was originally planned around car use and at low densities. The council has no planning powers over the site but has been seeking to negotiate increased densities with EP, increasing the number of houses on the site from 1,900 to 3,100. The housing trust told us that there were no affordable houses planned for the site.  

Corby

Designated in as a New Town in 1950

Phil Hope, MP, Rob Hearne (Leader of Corby Borough Council), Willie Smith (Deputy Leader), Nigel Rudd (Chief Executive), Lynne Aisbett (Deputy Chief Executive), Jon Whowell (Communications Officer), Clare Pavitt (Assistant Communications Officer), John Hill (Chief Executive, Catalyst Corby), Alf Butler (Catalyst Corby), Keith Redshaw (Catalyst Corby), Duncan Mills (Education Action Zone), David Watson (Corby Business Group), Mike Jackson (Government Office East Midlands), Sue Wilson (NHS), Peter Gould (Chief Executive, Northamptonshire County Council), Peter Nelson (Cofoton Ltd), Lynn Johnson (FORTAC), David Grace (Chief Executive, Rockingham Speedacal)

Town centre

We visited the town centre. Corby did not achieve the size originally planned (its population is approximately 60,000 compared to an original target of 125,000) and we were told that as a result, demand for the shopping centre in the centre of the town was low. The centre is privately owned. Its regeneration is seen as a key to the regeneration of Corby as a whole in all the public sector consultation exercises that have been carried out. Currently its physical condition is poor and outdated and we heard that local residents choose to shop elsewhere - 73% of disposable income leaves the town. The shopping centre owners hope that the town’s population will grow to at least 80,000 to attract a new range of stores.

Urban Regeneration Company

Catalyst Corby - the Urban Regeneration Company - identified some of the key challenges facing Corby in its regeneration:

Transport

Although car ownership in Corby is low, current public transport provision is poor. We heard about the Urban Regeneration Company’s plans to bring a passenger station to Corby to improve its attractiveness as a place to live. Corby is the largest town in the country with no railway station.

We also heard that poor bus services were leading to increased car usage. Poor layout was seen as one of the contributing factors to poor bus services.

58 Since our visit we have been advised by the council that as planning authority, it is expecting affordable housing to be provided at Lawley and is in negotiation with EP on this and other provisions
Local population

We heard about the pride and resilience of local residents, particularly in the period following the closure of the steelworks. 18,000 jobs have since been created in Corby but these have been predominantly in low value sectors.

We heard that there are pockets of deprivation, in part reflecting the lack of housing choice within the town. In addition, the development of Corby as a new town meant that a large population was ‘dropped into the middle of Northamptonshire’ all at once. There remain some diet and health issues.

There are also problems with low levels of staying on at school and generally low aspirations amongst young people although we heard that in one school, excellent results had been achieved.

Housing

The Urban Regeneration Company is looking at models to increase the population to up to 100,000, potentially bringing about the construction of 20,000 new homes. The town has not seen the growth in housebuilding found elsewhere in Northamptonshire and hopes in future to be identified in the County structure plan as a key housing growth location.

The aim is to increase the choice of housing on offer to include more houses in higher council tax bands.

The general layout of existing housing is good - but the quality of build and materials is poor.

English Partnerships

EP has a very limited presence in Corby as a landowner. Its main role is now as a member of the Urban Regeneration Company. English Partnerships owns 29 ha of land (NT25) and 8 ha are covered by clawback arrangements (NT25(a)).

Oakley Vale

Oakley Vale is a large brownfield (former ironstone quarry) site. It covers 436 acres and it is anticipated that approximately 3,000 new homes will be built on the site. This site is being used to develop more up market houses. The majority of homes marketed so far are being sold to Corby residents ‘trading up’ and staying in the town.

Kingswood and Lincoln Estates

These estates contain poor quality housing with a mixture of tenures and pockets of anti-social behaviour problems.

Rockingham Speedway

Rockingham Speedway is a new development on the outskirts of the town. It is seen as important to the town’s regeneration as it has an important impact on perceptions of the town amongst residents and visitors end is intended to generate significant expenditure in the local economy.
Harlow

Designated as a New Town in 1947

Bill Rammell, MP, Cllr Andrew Johnson, Cllr Laura Spenceley (Leaders of Harlow Council), Cllr Nicolas Churchill (Chair, Regeneration), David Ellerby (Chair of Harlow 2020 Partnership), Pam Court (Vice Chair Harlow 2020 Partnership), Doug Patterson (Chief Executive, Harlow Council), Claudette Forbes (Executive Director, Regeneration), Anne Bonsor (Regeneration Manager), Ruth Osborn (Communications Consultant, Harlow 2020 Partnership), Kevin Madden (Executive Director, Environment), Clive Crake, Head of Planning), Keith Andrews (Partnerships Manager for Housing), John McCue (Manager Building DLO)

The Local Strategic Partnership outlined some of the main issues facing Harlow in its regeneration:

Housing and assets

1950s and 1960s infrastructure is aging simultaneously.

20,000 houses were built 50 years ago - £47 million is needed to bring council stock up to a decent standard and £36 million in the private sector.

There is a problem with the lack of affordable housing. The town is, however, seen to have the potential to grow to provide more housing and affordable housing. A study is currently being undertaken along the London / Stansted / Cambridge corridor and one scenario suggests doubling the town’s population. This raises issues both about the green belt around Harlow and the green spaces within it.

The community provision (theatres, sports facilities etc) is aging. Such provision was designed to meet the needs of the sub-region but the district authority bears the costs.

25% of the town is green space and the cost of maintaining green spaces (£2.1 million pa is not adequately reflected in the Standard Spending Assessment).

Population

The original design of the town encouraged evenly spread development of social and professional housing, to promote mixed communities. This has led to deprivation problems being spread rather than concentrated and the council argues that this lack of concentration counts against it when bidding for regeneration funding.

Educational achievement is low - six wards in the town are in the bottom 5% in educational achievement nationally and GCSE points are lower than all but one London borough.

The population is aging - the number of over 75s is anticipated to increase by one third in the next decade.

Transport

When the town was planned in the 1950s one in two households had a car, now there are many two car households.

Pathways are separate from car routes - this encourages crime and radical redesign is needed.

There are high levels of in-commuting and problems with congestion.
Image

The council is working to overcome any negative image associated with being a new town and to instill confidence amongst current and potential residents.

English Partnerships

English Partnerships owns 77 ha of land in Harlow (NT25) and clawback arrangements apply to 16 ha (NT25(a)).

£4.8 million will go to the Treasury in clawback on the town centre south development.

There were two examples of slow decision-making by EP, which had delayed projects unnecessarily:
- the footbridge from Harlow College to the town centre; and
- the town centre south redevelopment - it had taken over 1 year to agree the marketing strategy.

Town centre

The town centre is a pedestrianised mall with loading access to the shops around the exterior. The council argues that it needs to be ‘turned around’ so that many of the shops look outwards.

The town centre south development is intended to bring in evening uses to the town centre.

The foyer project in the town centre is intended to address some of the issues facing the town’s young people.

The Briars

Generally, later Development Corporation housing projects in the town were built to lower standards than earlier constructions. Poor design / materials have led to higher heating and maintenance costs. The design has also led to crime problems.

In the Briars housing estate, non-traditionally built flats have now been demolished as it has not been possible to refurbish them. It is hard to get a mortgage on the remaining bungalows, given the materials and construction methods used.

Harlow as a debt free council, is concerned about the effect of the new prudential regime proposed under the Local Government White Paper - Strong Local Leadership: Quality Public Services.

Gibson Court

The Gibson Court flats were built in 1964/65 and won a design award in 1969. Their design, with walkways and garages, is poor and the council has now demolished one side of the court.

Bishopsfield

The problems caused by poor quality buildings on this housing estate have had to be addressed in a piecemeal way and as a result, several attempts have had to be made to regenerate the area.
Harlow Civic Society

Stan Newens (Chair), John Deards (Secretary)

The Civic Society stressed the role of Harlow in creating new communities for people moving out of the east end of London - but 50 years on there is some need for regeneration. There is a shortage of homes for the second and third generations of new town residents. The diminishing manufacturing sector in the town means that employers are now looking for different skills.

We were told that the plan for Harlow was based upon mixing together tenants and homeowners of different social groups and that this mix should not be lost in any plan for expansion since it has largely prevented the growth of deprived areas. We heard that plans for any additional homes need to be based on preserving the green belt and the 'green wedges' within Harlow. The Society considers that planned enlargements are possible but the doubling the population would unbalance the town. The new towns were planned developments and the benefits of this planned approach needs to be carried forward.

Particular issues mentioned include the ongoing ownership by EP of small pockets of land, the transfer of housing from the Development Corporation to the local authority, which has led to significant maintenance liabilities and the fact that deprivation is not concentrated (and hence the town is not eligible for regeneration funding). We heard that the assets still owned by EP should be transferred to the local authority without clawback and more funding is required for housing repairs and landscape maintenance.
PROCEEDINGS OF THE COMMITTEE RELATING TO THE REPORT

WEDNESDAY 17 JULY 2002

Members present:

Andrew Bennett, in the Chair

Sir Paul Beresford  Helen Jackson
Mr Clive Betts  Miss Anne McIntosh
Mr Brian H Donohoe  Mr Bill O’Brien
Mrs Gwyneth Dunwoody  Dr John Pugh
Mrs Louise Ellman  Christine Russell
Chris Grayling  Mr Bill Wiggin

The Committee deliberated.

Draft Report [The New Towns: their problems and future], proposed by the Chairman, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the Report be read a second time paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 96 read and agreed to.

Annex agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the Nineteenth Report of the Committee to the House—(The Chairman.)

Ordered, That the Chairman do make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That the provisions of Standing Order No. 134 (Select committee (reports)) be applied to the Report.

Ordered, That the Appendices to the Minutes of Evidence taken before the Urban Affairs Sub-Committee be reported to the House.

[The Committee adjourned:]
LIST OF WITNESSES

Wednesday 3 July 2002
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ENGLISH PARTNERSHIPS

Ms Margaret Ford, Ms Paula Hay-Plumb, Dennis Hone and Dr Pauleen Lane ........ 1

OFFICE OF THE DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER

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Second Report: London Underground (HC 387)

Third Report: Public Spaces: The Role of PPG 17 in the Urban Renaissance (HC 238-I)

Fourth Report: The Attendance of Lord Birt at the Transport, Local Government and Regions Committee (HC 655)

Fifth Report: European Transport White Paper (HC 556)

Sixth Report: Empty Homes (HC 240-I)

Seventh Report: London Underground - The Public Private Partnership (HC 656)

Eighth Report: 10 Year Plan for Transport (HC 558-I)

Ninth Report: Road Traffic Speed (HC 557-I)

Tenth Report: Ordnance Survey (HC 481)

Eleventh Report: Air Transport Industry (HC 484-I)

Twelfth Report: The Need for a New European Regeneration Framework (HC 483-I)

Thirteenth Report: Planning Green Paper (HC 476-I)


Fifteenth Report: Draft Local Government Bill (HC 981-I)

Sixteenth Report: Tall Buildings (HC 482-I)

Seventeenth Report: The Bus Industry (HC 828-I)

Eighteenth Report: NATS Finances (HC 789)

Nineteenth Report: The New Towns: their problems and future (HC 603-I)