

A man and a woman are walking a black dog on a gravel path in a new town. The man is wearing a yellow beanie, a blue jacket, and jeans. The woman is wearing a grey beanie, a grey jacket, and jeans. They are both smiling and holding hands. The background shows red brick houses under a blue sky.

New towns and communities: Placemaking, standards and materials

**MPA Masonry
roundtable report**

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Proposals for new towns and settlements are being prepared as part of a major housebuilding drive.

Deliverability is only part of the challenge. To build new towns and settlements that put community needs first, more consideration must be given to the role of placemaking and the choice of materials to deliver warm, safe, high-performance homes.

The revised National Planning Policy Framework now places a strong emphasis on climate resilience within the plan-making process for new towns and settlements, ensuring that the future health and robustness of communities remain central to development proposals.

In light of all this, MPA Masonry gathered together a group of expert developers, designers, consultants, lawyers and materials experts to discuss these issues and more.

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Context

The UK government has committed to a wave of new towns as part of its drive to deliver 1.5 million homes across the current parliament.

The draft new towns programme sets out plans for seven new communities, of which three – at Leeds South Bank; Crews Hill, north London; and Tempsford, Bedfordshire – are being prioritised for start on site by 2029.

Together the seven locations have plans to build nearly 200,000 homes. As well as simply providing new homes, ministers have said the programme is designed to “release the productive potential” of constrained towns and cities, and is integral to boosting innovation, quality and competition in the housebuilding sector.

New prime minister Andy Burnham has said he remains committed to the 2024 Labour manifesto – which featured new towns strongly.

The projects are not just classic greenfield new towns such as Basildon or Harlow. They take in a range of types – from traditional greenfield sites such as Tempsford, through urban extensions, to radical urban redevelopment programmes such as in Manchester and Leeds.

But, in some senses deciding on the locations is the easy bit. The thornier questions relate to how these places should be planned and delivered, particularly given current market challenges around build cost and viability.

Creating new towns is not, of course, just about building. New places must also become successful economies and develop heart and personality if they are to be places that people want to live in. In that sense, placemaking is not a separate consideration, but the thread that connects questions of delivery, design, infrastructure, materials and long-term value.

And from a construction perspective, there are fundamental questions about the standards they should be built to, the extent to which they should be set up as exemplars – and the potential risks and costs of doing so.

Moreover, the need to both be low carbon and resilient to climate change poses the question of which building materials should be prioritised in delivering these communities.



Participants

With thanks to the participants
at the roundtable discussion:

- **Eddie Hughes**
Former Planning Minister, Hughes Housing Consulting
 - **Rob Lamond**
Head of Strategy and Analysis – Housing and
Regeneration, West Midlands Combined Authority
 - **Tom Pepper**
Regional Head of Land and Partnerships,
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 - **Marcus Adams**
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 - **Katherine Evans**
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 - **Lucy Wood**
Director & Founder, Emanate Consulting
 - **Paul Shaffer**
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 - **Elaine Toogood**
Senior Director, Concrete & The Concrete Centre, MPA
 - **Calum Forsyth**
Chair, H+H
 - **Helen Raymond**
Senior Sustainable Design Architect, MPA
- Discussion chair:
- **Joey Gardiner**
Built environment journalist



1 The need for speed

Much of the discussion stressed the need to properly plan communities to ensure that new places are not only initially successful, but able to sustain that success for the long term. Participants said that meant local sponsors of new towns will need to think holistically in the long term about what new places will need, rather than just fitting designs and plans around the available silos of central government funding.

However, while new town sponsor bodies such as Development Corporations and their masterplanning consultants must carry out this long-term thinking, some participants said that diligent planning of these places must not be allowed to stagnate into endless reworking, tweaking and consultation as a substitute for proper decision-making.

The discussion underlined that good placemaking depends on early, confident decisions – not a process that continually revisits settled questions.

One delegate said there was a danger in extensive new town consultation processes that the huge numbers of people languishing in poor quality temporary accommodation in need of housing

get forgotten. The government has already said that just three of its new towns will see physical starts on site before the end of this parliament. And one of those projects – Crews Hill in Enfield, north London – is now, following May 2026's local election, directly opposed by its new local council administration, which was elected on a mandate to scrap the scheme, making delivery more uncertain.

The feeling was expressed that a balance needed to be struck between the need to plan and to consult, and the need to “put their foot on the accelerator and get on with it” – not least because delivery itself would create its own optimistic economic ecosystem which would assist delivery.



“Just think, what would it do for the country, for the sector, if you genuinely believed that the government was absolutely, resolutely determined to deliver new towns? We’d all be bought in excitedly to how we can contribute.”

“Think of the jobs that it will create, and think of the optimism it generates.”



2 Material choices can build resilience

Specifying construction materials isn't likely to be the first item on the Gantt chart of a new town project management team. However, that doesn't mean that there aren't crucial advantages to be derived from picking certain materials over others early on. Those choices also shape the long-term quality, resilience and value of place.

The roundtable discussed how building with timber is often perceived as a lower-carbon construction approach, partly due to its renewable origins. A current proposed new settlement in East Anglia, Forest City, has even pledged to build a large proportion of its homes from timber frame.

However, some participants questioned the logic of this route. They pointed out that the environmental performance of traditional brick and block construction is not understood. And that it retains other big advantages over wood-built homes.

Brick and block housing can offer the same high levels of energy efficiency as timber frame housing, participants said. And, in addition, recent research has shown there is little difference too in the embodied carbon emissions – the emissions derived from manufacture, construction and use of materials – from timber or block-built homes.

A study by the independent Future Homes Hub (FHH) reported that the upfront embodied carbon in timber frame homes with a brick skin was only 3-5% lower than that of an equivalent masonry build house. And when measured over a 60-year whole life cycle this reduced to an insignificant 1-2%.

Meanwhile, brick and block houses not only benefit from more established supply chains but also almost entirely domestic production, and reliable insurability.

In addition, the use of mineral products ensures long term durability, thereby protecting expensive investments and ensuring continued customer demand.

One panellist said: "One of the first things to note is that masonry is a mineral-based, water-resilient material that is naturally non-combustible. It also has a higher thermal mass, helping to protect from temperature extremes. If we are going to build these homes to keep their value, they need to be attractive early on, but also keep their value so they can be remortgaged and financed, rather than being at risk of future flooding or overheating because we didn't use thermal mass."



*"True sustainable development:
it's the "bones" of getting the
buildings right."*



3 Focus on better outcomes, not the build process

The publication of the Future Homes Standard (FHS) in March confirmed the environmental benchmark that all new houses – including those in new towns – will have to reach as they are built out.

It leaves the expected fabric efficiency of houses at broadly where it was in Part L 2021 with 2023 amendments (the part of building regulations guidance that defines energy performance). The burden of getting the energy performance of new homes to net zero will fall to an increasing reliance on renewables and the decarbonisation of the electricity grid.

Panellists said they were encouraged that the costs of meeting the new standard did not appear to be “significant or drastic”.

However, participants said new communities will be looking to meet, in addition to the FHS, a range of other placemaking outcomes, such as promoting healthy lifestyles and well-being, encouraging biodiversity, promoting sustainable transport patterns, climate change resilience, and water neutrality.

Key to being able to do this in new towns, some participants said, would be the ability of regulators and public authorities to be flexible about adherence to specific codes and standards – for example around highways design – as long as common agreed outcomes were being met.

Related to this, panellists said the desire by government and some public bodies to push non-traditional construction methods should be dropped in favour of a focus on delivering the outcome of the best possible places, however they are built. One panellist said the recent government drive for Modern Methods of Construction was “not worthwhile” and “highly problematic”.

Another panellist said: “There is a misconception that in order to meet net zero we must rely heavily on modern methods of construction (MMC).

“We shouldn’t just focus on the immediate construction phase; we should focus on outcomes, how homes are going to perform, and how they are going to last. Yes, we need to do things better, but that doesn’t mean you completely abandon traditional construction methods.

“I am very concerned that we’re sleepwalking into building homes that aren’t future-proofed.

“At the moment we are importing materials that rot and rust. But masonry products are largely homegrown, homemade. With them we can do it; we know how to do it.”



4 Viability is king – but there are ways around challenges

Several participants raised the question of viability and deliverability of the new towns in the discussion – particularly given the current market, where housing starts have remained resolutely low amid widespread industry concern over site viability.

The Home Builders Federation recently reported that £76k of additional costs have been added to sites through regulatory changes and material cost increases since 2020, while research by web platform Zoopla last year found that half of sites in England are de facto unviable – a situation likely exacerbated by materials price rises in the wake of the Iran conflict.

One participant described some of the aspirations for new town development as “utopian”, given this “incredibly challenging” viability situation, with new policy requirements just making that harder.

Developers compete on price to acquire sites from landowners, forcing buyers to minimise build and infrastructure costs, as well as what that participant called “nice-to-have” environmental features”, that don’t provide a direct return. If they don’t, other bidders will be able to offer a higher land price, meaning developers lose access to the lifeblood of their business: land.

Developers, therefore, will not voluntarily absorb these costs. However, where clients such as local authorities, registered providers or Homes England specify certain outcomes, that allows developers to compete on a baseline of higher quality, the participant said.

In addition, others made the point that delivering increased sustainability, for example, doesn’t necessarily add a big cost, particularly given product innovation. And, further, that the biggest sustainability benefits can be derived from building in a smarter way, not specifying different products.

One participant said: “Achieving low-carbon masonry isn’t expensive. But the real carbon and cost savings come from material efficiency and waste control on site. That’s where you need to focus.

“Blockwork is a highly inexpensive, utilitarian material, but because it is cheap, site workers often treat it carelessly.”



5 Sustainability and viability don't have to be in opposition

Participants talked enthusiastically about how smart investment in great site infrastructure can not only deliver a better place – but also pay back financially. Several examples showed how placemaking, sustainability and viability can reinforce each other when infrastructure is planned intelligently from the outset. The discussion threw up a couple of examples of this. One was a proposition around 'skinny streets' – developments where the traditional road and pavement widths required by highways engineers were reduced, delivering human scale 'streets' rather than 'roads', forcing vehicles to move more slowly, having the design effect of creating places for people rather than cars.

At the same time, one of the panellists argued, this reduced the long-term liability for road resurfacing, and – most vitally – increased the developable area on a site, by minimising the space necessary for grey infrastructure. "It is quite easy to secure an extra 10 per cent Net Developable Area just by shrinking the street widths," they said.

The other example used was around the management of wastewater and sustainable drainage. Clearly, viewed from one perspective, the requirement to install Sustainable Drainage Systems (SuDS) on developments above 10 homes can be regarded as a cost and another potential impact on viability.

But SuDS can be delivered through a combination of hard infrastructure and landscape measures such as ponds, swales and wetlands, which can be very attractive to home buyers. Not only that, this infrastructure, supported by materials such as gravels and permeable paving, can be the heart of the biodiversity offer that ensures a development meets its BNG requirement, as well as offering passive cooling.

Combined with the re-use of existing landscape features, therefore, SuDS and more effective management of water from the outset can deliver a solution to a number of development "problems" at the same time as becoming a major draw for potential purchasers.

One panellist said: "When you think about land, nature, and water as enablers of development, that's when you get the real positive, win-win situations for the householder, the local authority, and the developer.

"There's evidence out there to suggest that a property that has sustainable drainage is a lot more attractive to house buyers. We've got a real opportunity to make better places for people, and also developments that people actually want to buy."

The roundtable's central message was that successful new towns will depend not only on where they are built, but on the practical decisions that shape them into resilient, viable and desirable places over the long term.



