

DEMOS

BEYOND BRICKS

NEW TOWNS AND
THE CITIZENSHIP
OPPORTUNITY

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CONTENTS

| | |
|--|----------------|
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS | PAGE 4 |
| ABOUT THIS REPORT | PAGE 5 |
| EXECUTIVE SUMMARY | PAGE 6 |
| INTRODUCTION | PAGE 8 |
| PART ONE: CITIZENSHIP OF PLACE | PAGE 13 |
| PART TWO: WORKING TOWARDS A NEW MODEL | PAGE 32 |
| CONCLUSION & NEXT STEPS | PAGE 36 |
| APPENDIX | PAGE 39 |

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ABOUT THIS REPORT

Demos is on a mission to upgrade democracy, to one powered by trusting relationships, civic and democratic participation, information and technology.

We are in a democratic emergency, fuelled by the breakdown of relationships - those between state and citizen, between institutions and citizens and between citizens themselves. The 'democratic doom loop' of mistrust, disengagement and political ineffectiveness, inhibits government's ability to deliver on its democratic promises, which in turn further damages trust in institutions. Our answer to this is a raft of tangible policy solutions that have the power to repair and reset those broken relationships; policy solutions that ladder up to a 'new deal'.

This paper looks at these challenges and seeks opportunities to upgrade democracy through the built environment. It sits within our '**Everyday Democracy**' pillar which aims to revitalise the practice of democracy through participation and deliberation, stronger civic power and habits and by tackling polarisation.

Planning policy and the built environment ecosystem lay bare so many of the problems we are experiencing with our political and economic systems. These problems are exemplified in concerns that are felt about the government creating a 'developers' charter' that would weaken social and environmental obligations. It is palpable in the frustration about local communities' power of veto to block housing and infrastructure projects of national importance. And you can see it when public engagement and civic participation are optimised for polarisation, not representation. All the toxicity, stalemates, injustices and mistrust that play out in the built environment are feeding the doom loop.

But in the built environment there is great promise - an opportunity to recentre 'place' as a means to strengthen citizenry and resilience in the face of polarisation. The New Towns programme specifically offers a unique opportunity to tackle some of those long-standing problems head-on and design policy solutions to bring the new deal to life. We introduce a concept: '**citizenship of place**', to provide a framework for the new deal in the built environment.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The UK's promised fourth wave of New Towns offers a once-in-a-generation opportunity. Not only to accelerate housing supply and support economic growth, but to redefine the relationship between people and place. This paper argues that the success of the New Towns programme depends on seizing a largely overlooked dimension: a radical upgrade to our 'citizenship of place'.

Today, the processes through which places are planned, built and stewarded leave citizens with only two roles: disengaged bystanders or angry opponents. Our planning system hard-wires conflict, inviting the public in late, narrowly and reactively. Meanwhile, the neighbourhoods produced by this system too often lack the social infrastructure, governance and stewardship models needed to sustain active, connected and empowered communities.

This paper introduces the concept of a **citizenship of place**, expressed across two domains:

- **Place-making citizenship:** how people participate in shaping places - planning, design, land use, and development decisions.
- **Place-based citizenship:** how people live in and sustain those places - running community assets, stewarding public spaces, building networks, organising, and supporting one another.

Across both domains, current citizenship is typically adversarial, transactional, passive, consumerist and shallow. The ambition for New Towns must be to cultivate citizenship from the outset that is collaborative, proactive, creative, relational and long-term. The benefits of moving towards a new model of citizenship is clear: when citizens are involved early, deeply and meaningfully, the benefits ripple across the system. It means better decision-making, faster delivery, higher trust, stronger social capital,¹ and improved economic outcomes. And countries with high everyday civic participation enjoy more resilient democracies, better wellbeing, and greater productivity. Within the UK, early engagement has reduced planning delays, and activating previously disengaged citizens could unlock billions in economic value.

The Government's New Towns Taskforce has set out an encouraging intent: new settlements should be socially and economically self-sustaining, with early and meaningful community involvement and long-term stewardship embedded from the start. This paper proposes that ambition should go even further.

The New Towns Taskforce has recommended that Development Corporations ought to be the default delivery vehicle for New Towns. But there is an opportunity to be seized here for this new generation of Development Corporations to do better. I argue for a new DevCorp+ model,

¹ Haldane, A., & Halpern, D. (2025, January 12). Social Capital 2025: The hidden wealth of nations. Demos. Available at: <https://demos.co.uk/research/social-capital-2025-the-hidden-wealth-of-nations/>

which would be broadened into genuinely local partnerships that include existing and future residents, local institutions, and community organisations. This model would enable deeper participation in vision-setting, masterplanning, design, and ongoing governance. It would also unlock innovative housing and stewardship models, from community land trusts to resident-led management bodies.

On stewardship, the Taskforce rightly recognises the need for long-term governance and funding arrangements to maintain public spaces and social infrastructure. But the opportunity is larger: to design new towns where community ownership, shared responsibility, and civic participation are structurally enabled from day one.

New Towns are therefore not simply a housing programme. They are an opportunity for democratic and civic renewal. If we get this right, New Towns can become places that actively cultivate citizenship: where people have real influence and a real stake, where trust is rebuilt, and where the built environment supports the way people live, work and connect.

This paper is a provocation, not a blueprint. It sets out the problem, identifies the opportunity, and poses key questions that must be resolved to design a new model of **citizenship of place**. I invite partners to help us deliver the next phase of our work: convening stakeholders and the public to co-design, test and refine practical models for delivery and stewardship.

New Towns can help rewrite the story of housing, place-making and participation in the UK. But only if we seize the citizenship opportunity now.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is intended to provoke a conversation about how we can upgrade our 'citizenship of place' through the New Towns programme. **Let's set the scene with a story...**

We are in a typical market town. Walking down the high street, the national housing crisis is not something you can easily see, but it is there. Hundreds sit on the social housing waiting list, families remain stuck in temporary accommodation, and young people find themselves priced out of the place they grew up. With home ownership slipping out of reach and rents in the private rented sector ticking ever-upwards, many have no clear path to a stable, affordable home.

A site for a large-scale housing development is found on the edge of town. Plans from a big housebuilding company are submitted. A passionate anti-development local campaign is launched in response, citing concerns about unsustainable pressure on local services, roads and utilities that the new housing will bring. The campaign is spearheaded by homeowners. Private sector tenants and those on the local social housing waiting lists don't get involved in the discussion. The local debate becomes deeply toxic, with confrontational town meetings and online abuse. There are rumours that a population of slow worms has been discovered on the proposed site, but they fail to materialise. The planning application becomes snarled up in the system as the local community attempts to derail plans.

Eventually the application is approved, much to the dismay of local protesters. Needless to say there is bad blood left between those local communities, the local planning authority and the company that submitted the planning application.

Many months (maybe years) later, the bulldozers move in. The development that emerges looks like it could be anywhere in the country: neat but uniform houses, a handful of token green spaces, no corner shop, no bus route. Residents move in, and the developer moves on. The new community is car-dependent and poorly serviced; the nearest school is full, the GP oversubscribed, the pavements unfinished. Over time, the playground equipment breaks and isn't replaced, the verges overgrow, and the sense of promise fades. The local authority, struggling to maintain existing infrastructure, can't pick up the slack. It's not that people don't try - community Facebook groups appear, small networks of neighbours form - but the conditions for connection are weak. The place doesn't work with how people live; it works against them...

This is a story that has played out hundreds of times since the turn of the century, up and down the length of the country. It will be familiar to anyone working in the built environment. It will be familiar to anyone who has lived in or near a new housing development. It is a story we desperately need to re-write.

The new neighbourhoods and towns we are building are falling short on many measures. Land-hungry, energy-hungry, cookie-cutter, place-less places; typically swathed in tarmac, car-dependent, built with minimal infrastructure (e.g. transport, social, education and utilities) and poorly integrated into the wider area. The upkeep and ongoing management is often unsustainable, characterised by poor service, rising costs and opaque accountability structures. Getting such places built in the first place is a horribly protracted and painful process for all involved - the developers, the local authorities, the existing communities - and the end result often feels less than the sum of its parts and under-delivers on social and economic outcomes.²

But, rather than focus solely on the bricks and mortar, I want to draw attention to the role that citizens play in this story. Firstly, because it reveals the paucity and limitations of that role as it currently exists - the choice being between profound disengagement and passivity, or deep anger and frustration. Lack of control is the common denominator between these two groups and is something the majority of people feel - 71% say they have no or not much control over important decisions affecting their neighbourhood.³ This has serious implications for the health of our democracy and vitality of our communities. And secondly because I think that upgrading our '**citizenship of place**' holds the key to building radically better neighbourhoods, towns and settlements of all sizes. Places that are fit to meet the challenges of the 21st Century; places that can be drivers of democratic and civic renewal. This, I think, poses some interesting questions and challenges for Labour's New Towns programme, announced almost the moment they came into power in July 2024. But in all the literature and commentary on New Towns, there is little being said about citizenship.

What should citizenship look like in a functioning and sustainable democracy? If a citizen has the inspiration, skills and commitment to pursue positive change, what actions and behaviours might they pour their energy into? What are the conditions that enable such an active citizenship to flourish? And how does citizenship relate to the broader health of our democracy and society?

At Demos, we have been working for over 20 years on such questions, through different political eras and in the face of different social challenges. Tom Bentley wrote his seminal paper *Everyday Democracy* in 2005, arguing for a solution to the democratic malaise that involved reconnecting democratic decision-making with "people's direct experience of everyday life, and to extend democratic principles to everyday situations and organisations".⁴ Demos' *Everyday Democracy Index* (the EDI), created in 2008, showed that countries which do the best job of empowering individuals in everyday life - such as through civic participation - are much more likely to have a strong and vibrant democracy in their more formal political institutions. High scores on the EDI are also closely correlated with other measures of national success, such as greater gender and social equality, higher life satisfaction and better social trust.⁵

2 p.7 Aubrey, T. (2024). Avoiding the pitfalls of private finance initiatives and departmental budgets to fund the next wave of sustainable new towns and urban extensions. Bennett Institute for Public Policy: Cambridge, UK. Available at: <https://bennettschool.cam.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/New-towns-and-urban-extensions-report.pdf>

3 The Quality of Life Framework Evidence Review. (2022). Available at: https://www.qolf.org/wp-content/uploads/QOLF-EvidenceReview_14June-2022.pdf

4 Bentley, T. (2005). *Everyday Democracy*; why we get the politicians we deserve. Available at: <https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/files/everydaydemocracy.pdf>

5 Skidmore, P., & Bound, K. (2008). *The Everyday Democracy Index*. Available at: https://base.socioeco.org/docs/everyday_democracy_index.pdf

More recently, Demos has advanced policy solutions for communities to ‘take back control’ that involve shifting power away from central institutions to local people.⁶ We have proposed new participatory methods which enable the public to improve policy design and decision making.⁷ We have built the evidence that involving the public in strategic planning can help to derisk development.⁸ Our conceptualisation of a Preventative State,⁹ shows how community empowerment, social infrastructure and community organising are critical in alleviating pressure on overburdened public services. And in our paper Mission-ready Nation we make the case for mass citizen mobilisation to contribute to the delivery of the government’s missions.

This paper takes those concepts of citizenship, of participatory and everyday democracy and looks at it through the lens of place, especially the places we wish to create.

The ‘**citizenship of place**’ is a new concept we are pursuing in this paper. It is about how individuals contribute to the making, sustaining and improving of the places they live in. It combines the relationship between place and citizenship across two domains: **1) place-making citizenship**: i.e. how citizens are involved in creating places and **2) place-based citizenship**: i.e. how citizenship is exercised in a place. For the former, this would cover any formal processes by which the voice of the public can inform planning proposals and decisions, as well as any informal methods of campaigning and influencing. For the latter, this would cover any social action intended to make a positive contribution to the local community: organising community events, running services such as community centres, parks and childcare, supporting neighbours, leading local campaigns, making representations to local politicians, voting in local and national elections, volunteering, applying for community funding, influencing how money is spent in the local area or taking up a community leadership position. The two types of place citizenship are also interlinked - if citizens are better involved in what types of places get built, then it is more likely that the conditions for a thriving place-based citizenship will be built into the foundations.

By designing for a more active citizenship across these two domains, there are widespread benefits to be gained: better decision-making and delivery, better relationships and better places. There is evidence that greater public participation in planning¹⁰ is an enabler, not a blocker, of developments coming forward. And efforts to activate citizens in a place, to unleash their energy in the purpose of community building, can be clearly linked to economic productivity. This is about a new deal between people and place.

This paper positions 21st C New Towns, as the chance to trailblaze a new relationship between people and place. It is a call to seize the ‘citizenship opportunity’ in the programme.

If the above sets out the conceptual framing, then the New Towns programme provides a tangible opportunity in which to innovate and demonstrate what a new deal between people and place can look like.

6 O’Brien, A. (2024, June). Taking Back Control: Proposals for how to give power and agency to our communities. https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Taking-Back-Control_Paper_final.pdf

7 Levin, M., Curtis, P., Castell, S., & Kapetanovic, H. (2024, July 19). Citizens’ White Paper. <https://demos.co.uk/research/citizens-white-paper/>

8 Levin, M., Kapetanovic, H., & Garner, A. (2025, May 14). The MIMBY Majority: How to unlock housebuilding with early and representative public participation in planning. Demos. <https://demos.co.uk/research/the-mimby-majority-how-to-unlock-housebuilding-with-early-and-representative-public-participation-in-planning/>

9 Glover, B., Curtis, P., & O’Brien, A. (2023, April 25). The Preventative State: Rebuilding our local, social and civic foundations. Demos. <https://demos.co.uk/research/the-preventative-state-rebuilding-our-local-social-and-civic-foundations/>

10 Levin, M., Kapetanovic, H., & Garner, A. (2025, May 14). The MIMBY Majority: How to unlock housebuilding with early and representative public participation in planning. Demos. <https://demos.co.uk/research/the-mimby-majority-how-to-unlock-housebuilding-with-early-and-representative-public-participation-in-planning/>

New Towns are a significant strand of the government's ambitions to 'Build, Baby, Build'¹¹ and they sit alongside a slew of new legislation and policy reforms¹² that aim to remove obstacles and speed up housing delivery across the country. The twin purposes of this fourth generation of New Towns have been set out as generating economic growth and helping to tackle the housing deficit. Specifically, the New Towns Taskforce outlines their site selection criteria as being about places where new settlements have the greatest potential to 'catalyse growth' and improve affordability in overheated regional markets. The target is for New Towns to deliver over 300,000 houses to market in the coming decades.

Against this backdrop, it is encouraging to see the Government and the Taskforce talking about New Towns as being more than just a means to deliver housing units. We know too well now of the links between the built environment and social mobility, physical health, mental health, wellbeing, the natural world and climate change not to consider these potential benefits (and pitfalls) from the very start.¹³ Minister for Housing Matthew Pennycook has referred to New Towns "spreading opportunity and supporting strong communities"¹⁴ and the Taskforce has talked about how they can help "to shape the future of how and where we live and work" and "provide a model for delivering large-scale housing developments".¹⁵ Their chapter on place-making principles underlines their point that these settlements must be socially self-sustaining places - with references to core concepts such as liveability, connectivity, safety, health, social infrastructure, long-term stewardship and community engagement. The recently published report from the Lords Committee of the Built Environment, argues that beyond numerical housing targets, New Towns should drive "inclusive growth, improve life chances, and act as exemplars for contemporary urban design".¹⁶ Indeed the programme can be a chance for us to apply all we know about creating joyful, functional, thriving, sustainable places and avoid the 'soulless' and 'boring'¹⁷ neighbourhoods that are associated with earlier waves of New Towns and indeed many of the large-scale housing developments we are building today.

But there is something else that these New Towns can do; something else they can be. The emphasis so far on community building and community engagement is welcomed, and certainly critical to the success of these new settlements. But we need to push the New Towns ambition beyond simple considerations of 'community' to encompass the much broader and deeper concept of citizenship. Because, to quote Tom Bentley again: "renewing democracy through public participation increases our collective capacity to tackle major problems facing society ... Many of these problems can be addressed only by changing the way we live our daily lives."¹⁸ This is the chance to embark on a suite of hugely ambitious building projects that are co-created and co-owned with the public in a manner and of a scale never seen before. 59% of the public say they want to experiment with new ways of planning, designing and funding New Towns.¹⁹ 76% said that 'people need to be given a greater say over new development in their local area'.²⁰ The appetite is there.

11 Press release, Housing Secretary issues 'call to arms' to 'build, baby, build'. Available here.

12 The Key Cities Report 2025: Turbocharging Housebuilding URBOCHARGING HOUSEBUILDING IN CITIES AND URBAN AREAS. (2025). Available at: <https://keycities.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/Turbocharging-housebuilding-Key-Cities-report.pdf>

13 p.39 Hashmi, I., & Lent, A. (2024). Constructing Consensus The case for community-powered development and regeneration. Available at: <https://www.newlocal.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Constructing-Consensus.pdf>

14 p.9 Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government . (2025). New towns taskforce report to government. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/68d694b79cb44667f7a1cee7/New_Towns_Taskforce_Final_Report.pdf

15 p.2 Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government . (2025). New towns taskforce report to government. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/68d694b79cb44667f7a1cee7/New_Towns_Taskforce_Final_Report.pdf

16 House of Lords Built Environment Committee. (2025). New towns: Laying the foundations (2nd Report of Session 2024–26, HL Paper 183). The Stationery Office. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld5901/ldselect/ldbuiltenv/183/183.pdf>

17 Smyth, C. (2025, August 12). New towns will be boring, soulless and full of roundabouts, say voters. *The times.com*; The Times. Available at: <https://www.thetimes.com/uk/politics/article/new-towns-will-be-boring-soulless-and-full-of-roundabouts-say-voters-gnp8x5lk0>

18 p.9 Bentley, T. (2005). Everyday Democracy; why we get the politicians we deserve. <https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/files/everydaydemocracy.pdf>

19 Public lacks confidence in the next generation of New Towns | Championing the power of planning. (2025). Rtpi.org.uk. Available at: <https://www.rtpi.org.uk/new-from-the-rtpi/public-lacks-confidence-in-the-next-generation-of-new-towns/>

20 Engaging for the Future. (2021). <https://www.commonplace.is/hubfs/Engaging%20for%20the%20Future.pdf?hsCtaTracking=f2f7a455-4eac-493b-865b-03678a40faab%7Cd2126c33-2397-4433-afaa-61110da90ed2>

This paper outlines the limits of our current **citizenship of place** and makes the case for rethinking how we harness the energy and creativity of the public in the delivery and stewardship of New Towns. The government is prioritising devolution, and community empowerment through programmes such as Pride in Place²¹ and Neighbourhood Boards. But in New Towns it has an opportunity to bring these agendas together and create a fresh new way of thinking about citizen empowerment and place from scratch. We draw on a variety of case studies from the UK and beyond, to highlight opportunities for alternative models of place-making and place-based citizenship and their potential for driving democratic and civic renewal. New Towns offer a unique opportunity to focus minds, to innovate and to deliver that change at scale. But we need to move quickly to seize this opportunity in the planning stage, lest we end up reverting to old models.

This paper puts the New Towns programme at the heart of a vital ambition to create a radically new relationship between people and place and transform how we make and sustain new settlements.

21 MHCLG. (2025, September 24). Pride in Place. GOV.UK. <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/pride-in-place>

PART ONE

CITIZENSHIP OF PLACE



First we shape the cities – then they shape us.”

- Jan Gehl

The relationship with our built environment is a critical factor influencing the quality and shape of our lives. It is also a critical factor in the type of citizenship that can find expression in the UK today - that is, the range of roles and responsibilities that members of the public can have vis-a-vis the state; the extent of influence and power they can hold; the types of support and networks they can create in their neighbourhoods.

In this section, I first take stock of the current range of actions and behaviours that people can legitimately engage in as **place-making citizens**, before sketching out what an alternative model of place-making citizenship could look like. I then do the same for the range of citizen actions when one lives in a place - what is available now vs. what a new model of **place-based citizenship** could look like. I cover both the experience of citizenship and its wider impact. Where pertinent, I draw out the links between the two.

The table below sketches out a high level characterisation how the **citizenship of place** manifests itself now and what the ambition should be:

| PLACE-MAKING CITIZENSHIP | | PLACE-BASED CITIZENSHIP | |
|--|---|--|--|
| Is currently... | But should be... | Is currently... | But should be... |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Adversarial• Reactive• Transactional• Shallow• Polarised• Cynical | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Collaborative• Creative• Relational• Deep• Representative• Trusting• Enabling | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Passive• Consumerist• Transactional• Atomised• Resentful• A privilege | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Proactive• Creative• Relational• Networked• Can-do• A right |

Effecting that shift to a richer and more active citizenship of place would also reap significant dividends for key stakeholders - developers/housebuilders, local authorities and communities:



Specifically, it would entail:

1. Better decision making and delivery

- Higher levels of civic engagement from across the whole community, not just the usual suspects
- Greater local support for new housing
- Fewer objections and speeding up of planning processes

2. Better relationships

- More trusting relationships between local planning authorities, developers and communities
- Improved social relations in communities, cohesion, social trust, resilience, less isolation/loneliness
- Higher levels of bridging and bonding social capital and all the socio-political benefits that is associated with: higher educational attainment, lower crime and fear of crime, improved government efficacy).²²

71% of the public said they would have **more trust in development** if there was more opportunity for local involvement²³

3. Better places

- Places more closely meet the economic, social and emotional needs of residents
- Well maintained places that contribute to resident wellbeing and help places retain/grow in value
- Greater consideration of more innovative housing and stewardship models that deliver economic and social benefits to communities
- Enabling housing design and housing options to be more demand-led (over 50% of people express an interest in building their own home,²⁴ compared to only around 7% of UK homes that are self- or custom-built).²⁵

22 Haldane, A., & Halpern, D. (2025, January 12). Social Capital 2025: The hidden wealth of nations. Demos. <https://demos.co.uk/research/social-capital-2025-the-hidden-wealth-of-nations/>

23 Champ, H. (2019). 98% of public don't trust developers, research shows. Building Design. Available at: <https://www.bdonline.co.uk/news/98-of-public-dont-trust-developers-research-shows/5100575.article>

24 Ash, C., Birkbeck, D., Cerulli, S., Stevenson, C., & Stevenson, F. (n.d.). Motivating Collective Custom Build Report. https://shura.shu.ac.uk/21838/1/Motivating_Collective_Custom_Build_%282013%29_-_Full_Report.pdf

25 Self and custom build action plan. (2019). GOV.UK. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/self-and-custom-build-action-plan/self-and-custom-build-action-plan>

It is also worth clarifying the extent to which an active **citizenship of place** that contributes to better decision making and delivery, better relationships and better places, can be linked to concrete economic benefits. Evidence shows that bringing currently disengaged people into community activity could unlock an estimated £18 billion in productivity gains.²⁶ And in their Demos essay on social capital, David Halpern and Andy Haldane find data that shows a 10% increase in social trust is associated with a rise in economic productivity of between 1.3%–1.5%. That means if the UK increased social trust from its “historic rate of 35% to Nordic levels (of around 65%)” the boost to the UK economy would be to the tune of at least £100bn a year.²⁷

Finally, I draw on a small number of illustrative case studies in this section: chosen to showcase innovations in place-making and place-stewardship that have a demonstrable ‘citizenship impact’ i.e. they exemplify a shift from the current model of citizenship to the new model, and bring forth a range of social and democratic benefits as a result. The case studies are not chosen because they embody ‘perfect’ models that should be transferred directly into the New Towns context; rather they each demonstrate a specific success in activating citizens and thus present lessons and principles worth considering. Some of these case studies will be familiar to the reader, but I hope that by looking at them through the lens of citizenship I can help you to appraise their value anew.

1A. PLACE-MAKING CITIZENSHIP

The legal structures, statutory obligations on local, regional and national planning authorities and the demarcated opportunities for public involvement, set the boundaries around what **place-making citizenship** can mean and how it can be expressed in the UK today.²⁸

The decision-making framework that shapes how places are created and managed was largely set in place by the Town and Country Planning Act 1947. The Act effectively nationalised the right to develop land, by requiring any new building to gain the permission of local or national government.²⁹ In this framework, the participation of citizens in the planning process are all about: submitting a planning application, responding to another person’s application, sharing one’s views on a Local Plan via a consultation process and appealing decisions made by the local planning authority.

It means that opposition and conflict are hard-wired into our planning system.

The public are cast in the limited role of responding to other people’s ideas and other people’s plans for the place they live in. They are set in reaction-mode to plans that a local authority makes for new housing in their area or to a planning application for a new out-of-town housing development submitted by a large housebuilder. The feeling of being ‘done to’ in this system is almost inevitable. It is perhaps not surprising that the vast majority of people who do engage with the planning system to voice their opinions are lodging a complaint about a proposed development and defending the status quo. Demos polling has found that twice as many people have submitted a response in opposition to a development as in support.³⁰

There is very little space for the public to play a creative, constructive role that embraces and shapes change in their local area. The consultation platforms where they are asked to share

26 The Quality of Life Framework Evidence Review. (2022). https://www.qolf.org/wp-content/uploads/QOLF-EvidenceReview_14June-2022.pdf

27 Haldane, A., & Halpern, D. (2025, January 12). Social Capital 2025: The hidden wealth of nations. Demos. <https://demos.co.uk/research/social-capital-2025-the-hidden-wealth-of-nations/>

28 Rankl, F. (2019). Influencing the planning process. Commonslibrary.parliament.uk. Available at: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/influencing-the-planning-process/>

29 p.26 Cullingworth, B., Davoudi, S., Webb, D., Vigar, G., Pendlebury, J., Townshend, T., Menelaos Gkartzios, Hart, T., & Nadin, V. (2015). Town and Country Planning in the UK. Taylor & Francis.

30 Levin, M., Kapetanovic, H., & Garner, A. (2025, May 14). The MIMBY Majority: How to unlock housebuilding with early and representative public participation in planning. Demos. <https://demos.co.uk/research/the-mimby-majority-how-to-unlock-housebuilding-with-early-and-representative-public-participation-in-planning/>

their views feel like tick-box exercises, and the 3-5 minutes³¹ of air time they get if they wish to present their views at a planning committee meeting, hardly invites a deep or nuanced discussion. Legitimate fears about overloading public services, increased traffic, loss of green space and

changing the character of the area are all common challenges, but the debate often feels zero-sum, with problems foisted onto a community rather than jointly shared.

If you've got a vociferous anti-development cohort on one hand, the other issue for place-making citizenship is just as problematic - that the vast majority of people are deeply unengaged in their built environment. Demos polling shows that fewer than 10%³² of the public have ever responded to a planning consultation, and over half (52%) say they wouldn't know how to if they wanted. A Town and Country Planning Association (TCPA) survey of UK young adults aged 16–18 found that 89% had never been asked their opinion about the future of their neighbourhood.³³ All this ladders up to almost half of people (48%) saying that 'new buildings and developments seem to just appear in the local area with no warning'.³⁴ Polling by the RTPi reveals another dimension of that disconnect, with almost a third of people (31%) saying they think their local area is declining, but fewer than one in ten (7%) having taken active steps to help shape its future.³⁵ The data shows that place-making citizenship is patchy. Polarised public debate is one outcome but more problematic for those 'missing voices' is that their needs are not adequately represented in the places that end up being built.

Whether disempowered or disengaged, there is one thing that unites the two groups: deep distrust of anyone involved in bringing change and development to an area. Research by Grosvenor found that only 2% trust developers 'to act in an honest way' driven largely by the perception that their only interest is making a profit.³⁶ Perhaps even more concerning is the fact that involvement in developer-led engagement exercises often has the effect of increasing levels of distrust and the perception that development has 'reduced quality of life or harmed local areas'.³⁷ Recent Demos polling shows that 46% of the public do not trust their council to make decisions on new housing in the best interests of residents.³⁸ New builds are widely perceived to be poorly designed and constructed with a third of the public (33%) reporting a "low level of trust" in housebuilders to build new homes to a high standard.³⁹ The squeeze on affordable housing units on new developments breeds further suspicion and antipathy.

31 Have Your Say - Speaking at the Planning and Regulatory Committee - Surrey County Council. (2024). Surreycc.gov.uk. <https://www.surreycc.gov.uk/council-and-democracy/how-the-council-works/decision-making/planning-and-regulatory-committee>

32 Levin, M., Kapetanovic, H., & Garner, A. (2025, May 14). The MIMBY Majority: How to unlock housebuilding with early and representative public participation in planning. Demos. <https://demos.co.uk/research/the-mimby-majority-how-to-unlock-housebuilding-with-early-and-representative-public-participation-in-planning/>

33 TCPA. (2020, October 20). Young people locked out of changes to their neighbourhood - Town and Country Planning Association. Town and Country Planning Association. <https://www.tcpa.org.uk/young-people-locked-out-of-changes-to-their-neighbourhood/>

34 Engaging for the Future. (2021). <https://www.commonplace.is/hubfs/Engaging%20for%20the%20Future.pdf?hsCtaTracking=f2f7a455-4eac-493b-865b-03678a40faab%7Cd2126c33-2397-4433-afaa-61110da90ed2>

35 One in three Britons say their local areas are in decline, but less than 7% are taking action to improve them | Championing the power of planning. (2025). Rtpi.org.uk. Available at: <https://www.rtpi.org.uk/new-from-the-rtpi/one-in-three-britons-say-their-local-areas-are-in-decline-but-less-than-7-are-taking-action-to-improve-them/>

36 Champ, H. (2019). 98% of public don't trust developers, research shows. Building Design. Available at: <https://www.bdonline.co.uk/news/98-of-public-dont-trust-developers-research-shows/5100575.article>

37 Quality of Life Foundation Literature Review. (2019). <https://www.qolf.org/wp-content/uploads/Literature-Review-of-Quality-of-Life-in-the-Built-Environment-Publica-4-1.pdf>

38 Levin, M., Kapetanovic, H., & Garner, A. (2025, May 14). The MIMBY Majority: How to unlock housebuilding with early and representative public participation in planning. Demos. <https://demos.co.uk/research/the-mimby-majority-how-to-unlock-housebuilding-with-early-and-representative-public-participation-in-planning/>

39 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-67708077>

How could we do place-making citizenship differently?

There is a strong and growing body of evidence that this provocation paper draws on, arguing for an upstream, participatory approach to community engagement in planning and place-making. Demos published a report earlier in the year - The MIMBY Majority - which makes this case exactly and sets out how it might be deployed in the development of Spatial Development Strategies.⁴⁰ According to that research, 67% of the public are people who say 'maybe-in-my-back-yard'; people who are open to development if their needs and concerns are addressed.⁴¹ This fact alone should immediately challenge us to create new ways to engage the public in constructive dialogue.

New Local⁴² and CreateStreets⁴³ have both published persuasive reports on the same issue. And the Scottish Land Commission has conducted research that evidences the positive effects of early community engagement.⁴⁴ Their extensive interviews with developers, landowners, consultants, and other planning and development professionals show that involving communities early helps identify and resolve potential issues before formal planning applications are submitted, reducing objections and the risk of delays, and in many cases speeding up the development process. For example, in the Countesswells urban extension in Aberdeen, early engagement with local residents informed design decisions and placemaking, helping to smooth the planning process and achieve better community outcomes.⁴⁵

There is also the importance of helping citizens to develop a civic habit. We know that one of the strongest predictors of whether someone will vote in an upcoming election is whether they voted in the previous one. And data from over 1,000 Commonplace projects - a community engagement platform - shows that people who have previously engaged in a consultation are 5 times more likely to participate than those who have never engaged before. As Commonplace put it "engaging repeatedly and often drives more engagement".⁴⁶ Place-making citizenship can't be a one-off activity and then you're done. It has to be regular, long-term, and baked into your everyday life.

The following case studies demonstrate means and models by which this type of **place-making citizenship** might be brought to life:

CASE STUDY 1: Community-led masterplanning in Test Valley

This shows the value of bringing citizen engagement upstream so it can be a creative not oppositional process and how deliberative methods can enable shared ownership of decisions. It also highlights approaches that can be used to ensure the engagement reaches beyond the usual suspects.

40 Levin, M., Kapetanovic, H., & Garner, A. (2025, May 14). The MIMBY Majority: How to unlock housebuilding with early and representative public participation in planning. Demos. <https://demos.co.uk/research/the-mimby-majority-how-to-unlock-housebuilding-with-early-and-representative-public-participation-in-planning/>

41 Levin, M., Kapetanovic, H., & Garner, A. (2025, May 14). The MIMBY Majority: How to unlock housebuilding with early and representative public participation in planning. Demos. <https://demos.co.uk/research/the-mimby-majority-how-to-unlock-housebuilding-with-early-and-representative-public-participation-in-planning/>

42 p.39 Hashmi, I., & Lent, A. (2024). Constructing Consensus The case for community-powered development and regeneration. Available at: <https://www.newlocal.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Constructing-Consensus.pdf>

43 Boys Smith, N. (2018). More good homes: Making planning more proportionate, predictable and equitable by Create Streets. Available at: <https://www.createstreets.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/MoreGoodHomes-Nov-2018.pdf>

44 Wright, N., & Tolson, S. (2020). THE VALUE OF EARLY ENGAGEMENT IN PLANNING Evidence of the benefits of early engagement in land use planning decisions The Value of Early Engagement in Planning: evidence of the benefits of early engagement in the development process. https://www.landcommission.gov.scot/downloads/5ee1fa960b190_20200611%20SLC%20REPORT%20Value%20of%20Early%20Engagement%20in%20Planning.pdf

45 Wright, N., & Tolson, S. (2020). THE VALUE OF EARLY ENGAGEMENT IN PLANNING Evidence of the benefits of early engagement in land use planning decisions The Value of Early Engagement in Planning: evidence of the benefits of early engagement in the development process. https://www.landcommission.gov.scot/downloads/5ee1fa960b190_20200611%20SLC%20REPORT%20Value%20of%20Early%20Engagement%20in%20Planning.pdf

46 Engaging for the Future. (2021). Available at: <https://www.commonplace.is/hubfs/Engaging%20for%20the%20Future.pdf?hsCtaTracking=f2f7a455-4eac-493b-865b-03678a40faab%7Cd2126c33-2397-4433-afaa-61110da90ed2>

CASE STUDY 2:
Community-led co-design in Lewisham, London

This shows the value of engaging prospective residents in vision-setting to guide development and create citizen ownership. It also shows how citizens can push the boundaries of housing norms to create radical new solutions that better meet their needs.

CASE STUDY 3:
Future Design Thinking methodology (FDT), Japan

This shows the value of using deliberative methods to involve citizens in complex trade-offs, push them to think bigger and bolder than politicians may be able to, and co-own the difficult decisions with the local authorities.

CASE STUDY 4:
Neighbourhood Development Plans (NDPs)

This shows how an existing model contains learnings for how citizens can be engaged to manage rather than reject development and how their involvement can lead to wider civic participation.

CASE STUDY 1

COMMUNITY-LED MASTERPLANNING IN TEST VALLEY⁴⁷

How this exemplifies active citizenship:

Test Valley District Council in Hampshire had previously attempted to redevelop its town centres, but its public consultation process had run into difficulties and its plans had been rejected. It decided to start the process anew, but this time with a radical alternative approach - taking a 'blank sheet of paper' to the community and asking them to co-create the master plans for the market towns of Andover and Romsey. A listening, consensus-building approach was taken, and the process was focussed on understanding residents' needs, aspirations and their vision for their town.

The council adopted an informal style and format for the community engagement using citizens' assemblies, or 'mini-publics', that brought a diverse range of residents together to engage in facilitated deliberations. The engagement was structured over several sessions so the council could build strong relationships with residents and to give as many people as possible the chance to have their say. The council made efforts to go to where people spent their time, such as at a playground or in the town centre itself, rather than expecting people to proactively come to them. Voluntary sector partners were enlisted to aid community outreach and playful ways to engage and share ideas were invented to encourage residents to get involved.

The citizenship impact:

- Deep, deliberative dialogue better aligned council imperatives with community needs, moving beyond purely economic considerations and enabling a shift from initially anti-development views toward a broader, more balanced pro-development discussion.

⁴⁷ p.39 Hashmi, I., & Lent, A. (2024). Constructing ConsensusThe case for community-powered development and regeneration. Available at: <https://www.newlocal.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Constructing-Consensus.pdf>

- The approach created a sense of shared ownership over the emerging framework so that when individual projects were later brought forward under the overarching masterplan, they were more readily accepted and supported.
- Community-led rather than developer-led planning was widely welcomed, helping to rebuild trust, especially in historically underserved areas.
- This approach produced bold and deeply considered outcomes; in Andover, for example, residents highlighted green infrastructure, environmental quality, and better use of existing natural and built assets than would otherwise have been the case.

CASE STUDY 2

COMMUNITY-LED CO-DESIGN IN LEWISHAM, LONDON⁴⁸

How this exemplifies active citizenship:

The Rural Urban Synthesis Society (or RUSS as it is better known) is a community-led housing organisation based in the London Borough of Lewisham. Their vision is to create “sustainable community-led neighbourhoods and truly affordable homes right across London.” Located in Ladywell, RUSS’s Church Grove scheme provides 36 new homes ranging from one to four bedrooms, across various tenures (full ownership, shared ownership, London Living Rent and social rent).

To guide their work, RUSS developed a set of ten guiding principles - derived through workshops with members and the broader community - which inform both their organisational purpose and the design of their developments. These principles emphasise resident-control, long-term affordability, environmental sustainability, mixed tenures, community facilities, and flexible design.⁴⁹ For example:

- “RUSS developments should create opportunities for training in organising and building for residents and others”
- “Decisions that affect our neighbourhoods should be under the control of residents.”
- “The neighbourhoods should reflect the local population with a mix of families, couples and single people, both young and old, and with a range of incomes”

Prospective residents participated in co-design sessions with architects and facilitators in 2016, 2017 and again in 2020. These sessions allowed them to influence major design decisions such as layouts, room sizes, self-build opportunities, communal facilities and sustainability features, such as a shared laundry room powered by solar energy.

⁴⁸ An innovative approach to Community-Led Housing – Rural Urban Synthesis Society. (2017). Theruss.org. <https://www.theruss.org/about/our-vision>

⁴⁹ <https://www.theruss.org/about/guiding-principles/>

All residents worked directly on the project, ranging from fitting out flats to community-build days for constructing shared communal resources (e.g. green roofed bike shed, laundry, guest room, and play space) and gardening. The self-build savings were passed on to residents in the form of a discount at final sale.

The citizenship impact:

- The resulting development is not only affordable but tailored to the needs of a mixed community of incomes, ages and household types.
- By allowing residents to help shape the vision, design and construction, the project has higher legitimacy, ownership and alignment with user-needs than a typical developer-led scheme.
- The guiding principles ensured that affordability, sustainability, community and flexibility were core, not add-ons. This means the homes are cheaper to run, socially inclusive, environmentally resilient and resident-centred e.g. the development has: an air-source heat pump for hot water, photovoltaics, highly insulated homes, cycle storage, food-growing raised beds, a community space and shared laundry room and is a car-free scheme.
- The model shows how community-led housing can develop complex sites (in this case a former school/industrial site) with innovative forms of tenure and delivery.
- The community land trust ownership model, ensures homes remain affordable in perpetuity.⁵⁰ The properties can only be resold at the value they were bought at, plus inflation.
- Self-build or “self-finish” opportunities for residents and volunteers, reducing costs and increasing engagement.

“The members of the community land trust have created a place where residents have made a real contribution to creating a healthy, sustainable and resilient community.

The day-to-day contributions to life in the community arise organically out of a sense of pride, belonging, and responsibility. This model of housing means we can be residents – and also be involved custodians of community resources.”

Daniel Hugill, resident and former trustee of RUSS

⁵⁰ An innovative approach to Community-Led Housing – Rural Urban Synthesis Society. (2017). Theruss.org. <https://www.theruss.org/about/our-vision/>

CASE STUDY 3

FUTURE DESIGN THINKING (FDT)⁵¹

How this exemplifies active citizenship:

Future Design Thinking (FDT) is a participatory method, developed in Japan by economist Tatsuyoshi Saijo as a tool to counter short-term thinking in policy processes. It draws inspiration from traditional Japanese decision-making practices, which take into account the effects of today's choices on people seven generations in the future. It invites citizens to engage in long-term planning by stepping into the shoes of future generations.

In a typical FDT workshop, participants are divided into two groups: one evaluates a policy issue or community vision from the perspective of current residents, prioritising immediate needs, while the other adopts the viewpoint of future inhabitants in several decades' time assessing today's decisions with the benefit of hindsight. The groups then come together to discuss trade-offs, negotiate priorities, and explore the balance between short-term convenience and long-term impact.

FDT has been implemented across Japanese municipalities in areas ranging from climate planning and healthcare investment to broader urban development strategies.

The citizenship impact:

- By explicitly introducing the dimension of time into public deliberation, FDT helps citizens think strategically across decades, making long-term planning more concrete and relevant.
- Evidence from early trials demonstrates that FDT encourages participants to adopt a longer-term mindset and to propose more ambitious, transformative strategies that prioritise enduring community benefits, even when this requires short-term compromises.
- When future-focused perspectives are combined with present-day viewpoints through structured dialogue, participants often reach a balanced consensus that reconciles immediate needs with long-term goals.
- This method illustrates how well-designed participatory processes can counter short-term biases, foster deeper civic engagement, and generate plans that better reflect the interests of both current and future residents.

⁵¹ Levin, M., Kapetanovic, H., & Garner, A. (2025, May 14). The MIMBY Majority: How to unlock housebuilding with early and representative public participation in planning. Demos. <https://demos.co.uk/research/the-mimby-majority-how-to-unlock-housebuilding-with-early-and-representative-public-participation-in-planning/>

CASE STUDY 4

NEIGHBOURHOOD DEVELOPMENT PLANS (NDPS)

How these exemplify active citizenship:

Neighbourhood plans are community-driven blueprints that give local people a direct say in the future of the places where they live and work. They have been around for almost 15 years now, introduced through the Localism Act 2011.

They must be prepared by a formally designated neighbourhood forum - a body typically made up of at least 21 people who live or work in the area, or by an existing parish or town council. These forums bring together residents, businesses and community organisations to shape development at a very local scale, setting priorities, guiding land use, and influencing decisions on housing, infrastructure, green space and local amenities. They can also make suggestions for the spending of the Community Infrastructure Levy.⁵² Neighbourhood plans carry statutory weight: once approved by a community referendum and adopted by the local planning authority, they become part of the official development plan and must be taken into account in planning decisions.

They are not supported by everyone - integrating NDPs with the Local Plan takes time and resources. And there have been challenges with ensuring the NDP opportunity is genuinely open to all - urban communities and minoritised groups are significantly underrepresented across the suite of 1,800+ NDPs that have been established.⁵³ Even for the most privileged groups in society who do take part, the process remains resource- and time-intensive⁵⁴ and often beyond the skills/knowledge of the lay person.

Example: *Uppingham Neighbourhood Plan, in Rutland (UK)*⁵⁵

The Uppingham neighbourhood planning group ran structured community engagement (roundtables, public meetings) that invited residents to negotiate on the details of the new development (e.g. layout, density, open space). Residents secured 30% affordable housing and about one-third of the development was reserved as community green space.

The process increased local knowledge of planning, strengthened links between citizens and the parish council, and fostered a stronger sense of ownership and identity around the neighbourhood. Citizens who had a voice in site selection or design reported greater confidence that development would reflect local priorities.

Participation in Uppingham's plan led to the creation of ongoing citizen structures (e.g. residents' associations) to steward the new neighbourhood.

52 Quality of Life Foundation Literature Review. (2019). <https://www.qolf.org/wp-content/uploads/Literature-Review-of-Quality-of-Life-in-the-Built-Environment-Publica-4-1.pdf>

53 Sutherland, N., & Lewis, S. (2025, November 27). Debate on the role of neighbourhood plans in planning decisions. House of Commons Library. <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cdp-2025-0155/?utm>

54 Yuille, A., University, L., & Planning, N. (2020). Impacts of Neighbourhood Planning in England Final Report to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government Impacts of Neighbourhood Planning in England Final Report of the Research. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5f96b99de90e077b087c33db/Impacts_of_Neighbourhood_Planning_in_England.pdf

55 Home - Uppingham Neighbourhood Plan. (2018, October 23). Uppingham Neighbourhood Plan - Have a Say in the Development of Uppingham. <https://uppingham-neighbourhood-plan.com/>

The citizenship impact:

The 2020 'Impacts of Neighbourhood Planning in England' report⁵⁶ found:

- When communities allocate housing sites in their NDPs, the selected sites are generally more accepted locally - and that acceptance can reduce delays caused by opposition or legal challenge.
- A very large majority of neighbourhood groups sought to improve design quality (89%) and to tailor development to local needs (89%). Respondents and case studies reported that design policies helped make new development more acceptable to communities.
- Around 61% of communities indicated the NDP process acted as a catalyst for other initiatives in the neighbourhood - ranging from one-off events to the formation of Community Land Trusts (CLTs), Community Interest Companies and new delivery vehicles. These spin-off activities often target social outcomes - e.g. to regenerate town centres or deliver community-oriented housing (e.g. affordable/social housing, community assets, regeneration).
- Evidence of a revitalisation of parish/town council democracy, new collective identity and improved local networks. Nearly half of respondents reported improved or continued community-LPA relations as a result of the NDP process (49%).
- Some evidence that neighbourhood planning improves community attitudes to development, with those reporting improved attitudes (16%) outnumbering those reporting worsening attitudes (8%).

1B. PLACE-BASED CITIZENSHIP

The governance structures and legal ownership vehicles that are available to new communities and the extent to which the new built environment enables or curtails community creation are two key factors that influence what **place-based citizenship** can mean and how it can be expressed in the UK today.⁵⁷

In their report on community-led stewardship,⁵⁸ the Community Land Trust Network (CLTN) makes the case that traditional large-scale housebuilders exit settlements as soon as the last unit is sold and typically have little ongoing interest or connection to the development in terms of its management or upkeep. Instead private companies are usually brought in to place-manage these large, newly built housing estates. Such an arrangement accounts for over 87% of such developments. This model creates consumers rather than citizens, where the relationship is primarily transactional and based on residents receiving services. Poor accountability exacerbates the feeling amongst residents that they lack control over how their estates are run,

⁵⁶ Yuille, A., University, L., & Planning, N. (2020). Impacts of Neighbourhood Planning in England Final Report to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government Impacts of Neighbourhood Planning in England Final Report of the Research. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5f96b99de90e077b087c33db/Impacts_of_Neighbourhood_Planning_in_England.pdf

⁵⁷ Rankl, F. (2019). Influencing the planning process. Commonslibrary.parliament.uk. <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/influencing-the-planning-process/>

⁵⁸ Community Land Trust Network of England and Wales, The European Community Land Trust Network, & Dark Matter Labs. (2025). Community-led place stewardship. https://www.housinglin.org.uk/_assets/Resources/Housing/OtherOrganisation/Community-led-Place-Stewardship.pdf

despite having to pay for ongoing maintenance and services. But that's not the only problem - drawing on evidence from the Competition and Markets Authority's 2024 Housebuilding Market Study,⁵⁹ the authors argue that there is "widespread evidence" of consumer detriment, including opaque service-charge structures, weak resident protections, and little recourse when service standards are poor.

Local authority place management is often not much better. Dwindling budgets mean that community facilities such as parks and community centres delivered as part of a development rapidly become "a liability rather than an asset".⁶⁰ Residents in the new Keepmoat estate in Corby, for example, found themselves dealing with knee-high grass and overflowing bins after the formal handover of green space and play area from the developer to the council never properly took place.⁶¹ The dynamic in such cases is equally detrimental to the creation and enablement of active place-based citizenship - instead it generates passivity and resentment.

Another persistent problem that residents on new housing estates often face is the lack of community infrastructure, or the wrong type of infrastructure in the wrong location. This can range from missing built-in public places and 'bumping places' (e.g. streets, squares, parks, shared amenities, play areas, village halls and community centres) to 'third places' where people can meet informally e.g. cafes, pubs, libraries, shared rooms/workspaces, schools, churches and other places of worship.⁶² Without these places, it can be extremely difficult for new residents to bed in and establish a community. Such new developments also run the risk of being dormitory neighbourhoods - places where people sleep and do nothing else. Without any spaces to gather, to meet, to undertake work and projects together, such estates are simply a collection of isolated private spaces that atomise the population. Opportunities to flex and develop any sort of civic muscle is curtailed.

To residents of Northstowe, a new town in South Cambridgeshire, this will all sound very familiar. Six years after the first residents moved in, there was still no GP surgery, community centre, gym, pub,⁶³ cafe or even a single local shop. One resident described it as being a 'new town without a heart'.⁶⁴ There are attempts by the people that live there to make connections with one another and build the community - or as one person puts it to 'make their own fun'⁶⁵ - but the place itself works against those instincts and has created barriers to doing so. Note also the slightly resentful tone of the resident quoted above, who, off their own bat, has helped organise a weekly market - their **place-based citizenship** is experienced as being in spite of the place and the developers behind the scheme, not because of it.

59 Housebuilding market study Update report and consultation on a market investigation reference. (2023). https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6516bb246a423b000df4c606/Housebuilding_update_report_pdfa_29_September_23_2.pdf

60 Built Today, Treasured Tomorrow: a good practice guide to long-term stewardship. (2014). https://www.tcpa.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/TCPA_GC_Stewardship_Guide.pdf

61 Cronin, K. (2024, July 12). Corby housing estate residents say they've been "abandoned" in squabble between developer and council. Northamptonshire Telegraph. <https://www.northantstelegraph.co.uk/news/people/corby-housing-estate-residents-say-theyve-been-abandoned-in-squabble-between-developer-and-council-4699237>

62 Bagnall, A.-M., South, J., Martino, S., Southby, K., Pilkington, G., Mitchell, B., Pennington, A., & Corcoran, R. (2018). A systematic review of interventions to boost social relations through improvements in community infrastructure (places and spaces). https://whatworkswellbeing.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Places-spaces-people-wellbeing-full-report-MAY2018-1_0119755600.pdf

63 Cambridgeshire County Council Business Intelligence Service, Research Team. (2023). Northstowe: A survey of residents. <https://cambridgeshireinsight.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Northstowe-New-development-survey-Final-Report.pdf>

64 Schofield, B. (2023, July 11). Northstowe: The broken-promise new town built "with no heart." BBC News. <https://feeds.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-cambridgeshire-66156561>

65 Schofield, B. (2023, July 11). Northstowe: The broken-promise new town built "with no heart." BBC News. <https://feeds.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-cambridgeshire-66156561>

How could we do place-based citizenship differently?

The good news is that there are a number of community-led alternative housing, asset management and stewardship models that are proven to be sustainable and effective vehicles for creating and securing community benefits. TCPA says they are “tried and tested”⁶⁶; the CLTN says they are “hiding in plain sight”.⁶⁷ The challenge is how to enable widespread uptake of such approaches so that they are no longer sitting on the fringes of development practice, but a core part of how we manage places and enable active citizenship.

The case studies selected here illustrate some of those vehicles and their impact. It is worth noting that there are a number of other legal entities and financial models⁶⁸ that would also meet the criteria for inclusion here - but rather than go for an exhaustive list, I have selected case studies where I have been able to evidence the citizenship impact and knock-on social benefit:

| | |
|--|--|
| CASE STUDY 1: Community Land Trusts, Kennet Garden | <i>This shows how citizens can gain financial ownership and decision making powers that sustain benefits to the community over the long term.</i> |
| CASE STUDY 2: Cohousing, LILAC and Lancashire Cohousing | <i>This showcases a different model for community living and collaboration, demonstrating how such models can help hone democratic skills and overcome polarisation.</i> |
| CASE STUDY 3: Self-Build Community & Civic Engagement, Almere | <i>This showcases a radically different model of housebuilding and place ownership, with evidence for spillover effects into wider examples of civic participation.</i> |
| CASE STUDY 4: Participatory Budgeting, Antwerp | <i>This shows the ability for members of the public to process complex trade-offs, steer places towards meeting their needs and own difficult decisions.</i> |

⁶⁶ Built Today, Treasured Tomorrow: a good practice guide to long-term stewardship. (2014). https://www.tcpa.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/TCPA_GC_Stewardship_Guide.pdf

⁶⁷ Boorman, B. (2025, June 26). Put communities at the heart of new towns | Community Land Trust Network. [Communitylandtrusts.org.uk. https://www.communitylandtrusts.org.uk/news-and-events/put-communities-at-the-heart-of-new-towns](https://www.communitylandtrusts.org.uk/news-and-events/put-communities-at-the-heart-of-new-towns)

⁶⁸ Community-led Place Stewardship: Lessons from and pathways towards transforming management of large, housing-led sites in England and Europe - Resource Library - Resources - Housing LIN. (2025, January 21). [Housinglin.org.uk. https://www.housinglin.org.uk/Topics/type/Community-led-Place-Stewardship-Lessons-from-and-pathways-towards-transforming-management-of-large-housing-led-sites-in-England-and-Europe/](https://www.housinglin.org.uk/Topics/type/Community-led-Place-Stewardship-Lessons-from-and-pathways-towards-transforming-management-of-large-housing-led-sites-in-England-and-Europe/)

CASE STUDY 1

COMMUNITY LAND TRUSTS, KENNET GARDEN

How this exemplifies active citizenship:

Community Land Trusts (CLTs) are community-led organisations that acquire and steward land for the benefit of local people, ensuring that homes and other assets remain genuinely affordable and protected from speculative market pressures. At their core, CLTs give communities long-term collective control over land, with the trust holding land in perpetuity while homes or facilities on it are leased or sold at prices linked to local incomes rather than market values.

CLTs have grown rapidly in the UK since the mid-2000s. There are now more than 350 CLTs either established or in development, making the UK one of the most active CLT sectors in the world.⁶⁹ Public interest continues to rise as communities look for ways to address affordability pressures, safeguard local assets, and shape development in line with local priorities.

Example: Kennet Garden⁷⁰

The Kennett Community Land Trust is the community-led steward behind Kennett Garden Village, a planned 500-home garden-village development in East Cambridgeshire. Under the CLT's stewardship, roughly 150 homes will be 'affordable', with 60 of those directly owned or managed by the CLT. The trust will also hold substantial public open space - including green areas and communal amenities - ensuring long-term community control over both housing and land. By embedding affordable housing, infrastructure and shared green space from the start, Kennett CLT aims to create a socially mixed, sustainable neighbourhood rooted in local control and civic stewardship.

The citizenship impact:

- Through open membership and democratic structures, CLTs provide a mechanism for ordinary citizens to influence land-use, development and long-term stewardship - embedding civic participation and collective decision-making in housing and place.
- Community stewardship encourages citizens to adopt more long-term thinking and make active choices about their place, that prioritises community value over short-term profit extraction
- The democratic governance structure builds capacity and civic habitat amongst citizens.

⁶⁹ State of the Community Land Trust Sector 2023. (2023). https://thegoodeconomy.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Research_Report_Community_Land_Trust_Network_State_of_the_Sector_Report_2023.pdf

⁷⁰ Community Land Trust Network of England and Wales, The European Community Land Trust Network, & Dark Matter Labs. (2025). Community-led place stewardship. https://www.housinglin.org.uk/_assets/Resources/Housing/OtherOrganisation/Community-led-Place-Stewardship.pdf

CASE STUDY 2

COHOUSING, LANCASTER COHOUSING AND LILAC

How this exemplifies active citizenship:

Cohousing is a form of intentional community in which individuals or households live in private homes while sharing a range of communal spaces, facilities, and activities. It is designed to encourage neighbourliness, mutual support, and collaborative decision-making. The model originated in Denmark, where the first cohousing community was built in 1972 near Copenhagen for 27 families. It has since become well-established across northern Europe: around 1% of the Danish population now lives in cohousing; Sweden has a long-standing tradition; the Netherlands has more than 100 “Centraal Wonen” schemes and around 300 senior cohousing communities; and Germany, particularly Berlin, has seen rapid expansion.⁷¹

Cohousing emerged in the UK in the late 1990s and has grown steadily, though it remains relatively niche. There are currently around 30 established communities - both new-build and retrofit - ranging from small groups of ten households to larger schemes of forty. Interest is rising rapidly, with over 65 groups developing new projects and more than 1,000 people registered nationally as seeking cohousing opportunities. UK schemes vary widely in setting, tenure, and legal structure, but typically arise when a group forms around shared values and collaboratively designs, funds, and manages a place that supports community, sustainability, and mutual support.⁷²

The citizenship impact:

- Members of cohousing communities who are involved in their communities develop capacities, confidence, and a sense of efficacy, and hone skills that facilitate participation in electoral politics. In this way cohousing can be “a means of revitalising democratic citizenship”.⁷³
- Cohousing sites have been found to promote a strong sense of community among residents, fostered by events and shared amenities.⁷⁴
- In the Lancaster cohousing site,⁷⁵ citizens talk about how their experience living in a community with others has helped develop consensus-building skills, build trust, resilience and use dialogue to overcome differences. There is also evidence from this community of how caring responsibilities undertaken by neighbours can alleviate pressure on health and care services.⁷⁶

71 Cohousing in the UK and worldwide. (n.d.). UK Cohousing Network. <https://cohousing.org.uk/cohousing-in-the-uk-and-worldwide/>

72 Cohousing in the UK and worldwide. (n.d.). UK Cohousing Network. <https://cohousing.org.uk/cohousing-in-the-uk-and-worldwide/>

73 Berggren, H. M. (2016). Cohousing as Civic Society: Cohousing Involvement and Political Participation in the United States. <https://www.umassd.edu/media/umassdartmouth/political-science/facultydocs/Cohousing-as-Civic-Society.pdf>

74 Bagnall, A.-M., South, J., Martino, S., Southby, K., Pilkington, G., Mitchell, B., Pennington, A., & Corcoran, R. (2018). A systematic review of interventions to boost social relations through improvements in community infrastructure (places and spaces). https://whatworkswellbeing.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Places-spaces-people-wellbeing-full-report-MAY2018-1_0119755600.pdf

75 <https://www.lancastercohousing.org.uk/>

76 Positive News: Know your neighbours. (2019). https://www.positive.news/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Positive_News_99_Oct-Dec-2019_digital-edition.pdf

- In the LILAC cohousing development in Leeds, polling of the community has shown the impact on wider empowerment in the community. Compared to a national average of 27% of people who agree they can influence decisions in their local area, 96% of LILAC residents agree to this. And compared to a national average of 15% of people who have participated in 'social action' within the past 12 months, 63% of LILAC residents say they have done so.⁷⁷

CASE STUDY 3

SELF-BUILD COMMUNITY & CIVIC ENGAGEMENT, ALMERE

How this exemplifies active citizenship:

Homeruskwartier is a 106-hectare district in Almere Poort, Netherlands, and is widely regarded as the country's largest large-scale self-build neighbourhood.⁷⁸ The greenfield site of Oosterwold spanning 43 square kilometres is near the town of Almere and relies on a framework that includes land-use rules rather than a master-plan.⁷⁹

Homeruskwartier was launched in 2006 under the "Ik bouw mijn huis" ("I build my house") programme, run by the municipality of Almere, which sold around 1,400 serviced plots to individuals with a building "passport" outlining only basic restrictions.

This model marked a shift in Almere's planning ethos: the municipality acts as facilitator rather than traditional developer, giving residents high creative freedom while maintaining broad guiding principles.⁸⁰

The city installed the infrastructure (roads, utilities) while citizens design and build their own homes, giving them decision-making power and a strong sense of ownership. This approach delivers affordable housing with low profit margins and strong economic resilience, while also creating highly personalised neighbourhoods. The lots were sold at a controlled price, helping to keep construction more affordable, and a mix of building types and household income levels was encouraged. By 2012, around 1,000 homes had been completed and ambitious plans aimed for up to 3,000 units.⁸¹

77 Living in Lilac Assessing the first Mutual Home Ownership Society in enabling sustainable living 2. (2021). <https://lilac.coop/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Lilac-Impact-July-2021.pdf>

78 Burcu Kisacik, A. (2025). View of Level of participation in land development: The case of Almere, Netherlands. Drarch.org. <https://drarch.org/index.php/drarch/article/view/234/166>

79 Panagidis, A. (2023). Self-Organisation in a New Dutch Suburb: Housing development in Oosterwold. Re-Dwell.eu. <https://www.re-dwell.eu/case-library/self-organisation-in-a-new-dutch-suburb-housing-development-in-oosterwold?>

80 Burcu Kisacik, A. (2025). View of Level of participation in land development: The case of Almere, Netherlands. Drarch.org. <https://drarch.org/index.php/drarch/article/view/234/166>

81 Ash, C., Birkbeck, D., Cerulli, S., Stevenson, C., & Stevenson, F. (n.d.). Motivating Collective Custom Build Report. https://shura.shu.ac.uk/21838/1/Motivating_Collective_Custom_Build_%282013%29_-_Full_Report.pdf

The citizenship impact:

- The self-build approach in neighbourhoods such as Homeruskwartier and Oosterwold has cultivated a strong sense of ownership, creativity, and civic responsibility among residents. By designing and constructing their own homes, citizens have developed a pioneering, “do-it-yourself urbanism” mindset that encourages experimentation, collaboration and long-term stewardship of the neighbourhood.⁸² Architectural diversity is wide-ranging—from modest affordable homes to large bespoke dwellings—and this variety reflects the autonomy given to citizens to shape their built environment.
- Crucially, self-builders do not only influence their individual plots: they collectively participate in the design and management of wider infrastructural components, including roads, waste and water systems, energy solutions, and shared green spaces. This participatory governance strengthens social cohesion and demands a higher degree of civic engagement than conventional developer-led schemes.
- Because the municipality acts as facilitator rather than controller, citizens are required to negotiate, deliberate and coordinate, fostering a more active and empowered civic culture. These processes have enabled communities to develop practical problem-solving skills, build trust, and take long-term responsibility for their surroundings. Economically, the model offers affordability and resilience; socially, it produces confident, empowered citizens whose everyday engagement shapes a neighbourhood that genuinely reflects local needs and values.
- Stewardship in Almere followed the same theory as its delivery. After construction citizens created associations that jointly managed buildings and shared areas. This makes the stewardship model collective and social, encouraging cooperation and mutual support. The municipality takes a backseat in oversight, but leaves day-to-day running to residents. Compared to Development Corporations where management is often passed over to LPAs or firms for maintenance, Almere keeps the responsibility in the residents - boosting community ownership and a feeling of belonging.⁸³

82 Panagidis, A. (2023). Self-Organisation in a New Dutch Suburb: Housing development in Oosterwold. Re-Dwell.eu. <https://www.re-dwell.eu/case-library/self-organisation-in-a-new-dutch-suburb-housing-development-in-oosterwold?>

83 Burcu Kisacik, A. (2025). View of Level of participation in land development: The case of Almere, Netherlands. Drarch.org. <https://drarch.org/index.php/drarch/article/view/234/166>

CASE STUDY 4

PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING, ANTWERP

How this exemplifies active citizenship:

Participatory budgeting (PB) is a democratic process in which residents directly decide how to allocate part of a public budget. PB typically begins with authorities allocating a portion of the municipal or district budget for citizen decision-making. Participants are usually invited through open calls, sometimes targeting underrepresented groups to ensure inclusivity. Residents submit proposals, often through workshops, online platforms, or public meetings, which are then refined, debated, and prioritised. The community votes on final proposals, and winning projects are implemented by the local government or in partnership with community organisations, ensuring transparency and accountability throughout the process.

Example: *PB in Antwerp*^{84,85}

Antwerp's PB initiative, launched in the district of Antwerp in the mid-2010s, is one of Europe's most substantial and long-running PB programmes. Each year, the district allocates 10% of the city's budget (c.1.1 million euros) for residents to decide how it should be spent. The process is open to all district residents aged 16 and over, creating a wide and inclusive civic base.

There are several stages to the process: idea submission, collaborative refinement with city officials, public debate, and a final district-wide vote. Citizens can propose a wide range of projects - from street improvements and community green spaces to social initiatives and cultural programmes. The process deliberately combines online tools with in-person workshops, ensuring accessibility for diverse groups. Decisions made through PB are binding, and winning projects are delivered by the district administration or through partnerships with community organisations.

The citizenship impact:

- PB often works as a "school of democracy": participants report gains in civic knowledge, understanding how local government works, and improved deliberative skills.
 - Studies from Porto Alegre (Brazil), Rosario (Argentina), Maribor (Slovenia), Reykjavík (Iceland), Chicago, Guelph (Canada), and more show PB participants say they understand municipal budgeting, make better proposals, and engage more confidently with public institutions.⁸⁶

84 Democracy Starts at Home: Improving Democratic Engagement in the Housing Sector. (2019, January). <https://ceci.hact.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/The-Democratic-Society-Democracy-Starts-at-Home-report.pdf>

85 Wat is de Burgerbegroting? (2024). Burgerbegroting.be. <https://burgerbegroting.be/wat-is-de-burgerbegroting>

86 How Participatory Budgeting Can Support Education and Learning | Deliberative Democracy Digest. (2021). Publicdeliberation.net. <https://www.publicdeliberation.net/how-participatory-budgeting-can-support-education-and-learning>

- Specifically, according to a review by People Powered, PB can help people learn to “rank priorities, monitor government [and] develop proposals”⁸⁷
- Meta-analyses show PB can significantly increase public trust in institutions and improve perceptions of transparency and fairness.⁸⁸
- PB has been shown to increase participation among marginalised and low-income groups, giving them a voice in budget decisions that affect their communities.⁸⁹

87 How Participatory Budgeting Can Support Education & Learning. (2021, November). People Powered. <https://www.peoplepowered.org/news-content/how-participatory-budgeting-can-support-education-learning>

88 Almasi, M., & Amiri Ebrahim Mohammadi, J. (2024). The impact of participatory budgeting on public trust and government efficiency. *International Journal of Applied Research in Management, Economics and Accounting.*, 1(2), 100–112. <https://doi.org/10.63053/ijmea.16>

89 Participatory Budgeting: A Growing Approach for Citizen Empowerment in Marginalized Communities and Promoting SDGs - Sanford Journal of Public Policy. (2024, October 4). Sanford Journal of Public Policy. <https://journal.sanford.duke.edu/article/participatory-budgeting-a-growing-approach-for-citizen-empowerment-in-marginalized-communities-and-promoting-sdgs/>

PART TWO

WORKING TOWARDS A NEW MODEL

In their final report, the New Towns Taskforce set a clear direction of travel in terms of the delivery and stewardship models that it recommends; it also emphasised the importance of proper community engagement from the outset and throughout the entire process stating it as “essential to the success of new towns”. The detail, however, needs to be worked through.⁹⁰

DELIVERY - WHAT ARE THE OPPORTUNITIES FOR PLACE-MAKING CITIZENSHIP?

The New Towns Taskforce has recommended the use of Development Corporations as the model for New Towns delivery, stating that central, mayoral and local development corporations, and public-private partnership are all models that may be deployed in certain places.

Development Corporations were the public sector vehicles that masterplanned, financed, delivered and governed the post-war new towns.^{91,92} It is generally accepted that their powers of land assembly and ability to draw on Compulsory Purchase Orders if needed will be critical in most locations⁹³ and important to maintain pace and momentum. Beyond that, their “singularity of purpose”⁹⁴ is seen as valuable in offering accountability, galvanising support, overcoming barriers⁹⁵ and derisking investment. They have significant power “to coordinate investment, develop expertise, assemble land and facilitate faster delivery, ensuring joined up infrastructure and amenities are in place from the outset, as well as providing more certainty about the future path of delivery.”⁹⁶

90 Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government . (2025). New towns taskforce report to government. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/68d694b79cb44667f7a1cee7/New_Towns_Taskforce_Final_Report.pdf

91 Built Today, Treasured Tomorrow: a good practice guide to long-term stewardship. (2014). https://www.tcpa.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/TCPA_GC_Stewardship_Guide.pdf

92 Clapson, M. (2017a). The English new towns since 1946: What are the lessons of their history for their future? https://westminsterresearch.westminster.ac.uk/download/c8ba6c476ea0b4f2177e6f93495d38bc8b6889298bc3e5cbc4b62d56644145fd/904292/HU50_TAP_Clapson.pdf

93 Clapson, M. (2017a). The English new towns since 1946: What are the lessons of their history for their future? https://westminsterresearch.westminster.ac.uk/download/c8ba6c476ea0b4f2177e6f93495d38bc8b6889298bc3e5cbc4b62d56644145fd/904292/HU50_TAP_Clapson.pdf

94 House of Lords Built Environment Committee. (2025). New towns: Laying the foundations (2nd Report of Session 2024–26, HL Paper 183). The Stationery Office. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld5901/ldselect/ldbuiltenv/183/183.pdf>

95 Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government . (2025). New towns taskforce report to government. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/68d694b79cb44667f7a1cee7/New_Towns_Taskforce_Final_Report.pdf

96 Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government . (2025). New towns taskforce report to government. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/68d694b79cb44667f7a1cee7/New_Towns_Taskforce_Final_Report.pdf

The reception to this particular recommendation of the Taskforce has been met with broad approval. But there is still scope for innovation and variance in how they will operate on the ground. Indeed, the TCPA notes that “today traditional DCs aren’t used’ but rather the approach is multi-disciplinary and collaborative, involving developers, landowners, regulatory bodies and other stakeholders to achieve “shared goal and collective delivery”.⁹⁷ There are also some calls for their power to be extended to include transport in addition to planning.⁹⁸ And there are concerns about whether they create a democratic deficit at the local level.⁹⁹ Certainly the earlier iterations of Development Corporations were not overly concerned about community influence or involvement.¹⁰⁰

In this context, I see a clear need for a new local partnership approach that seizes the opportunity for Development Corporations to do delivery right: a ‘DevCorp+’ model that draws on the whole diverse partnership of place – local authorities, local housing associations, local builders and local institutions, and crucially involves both existing and future residents in a deep and meaningful way. This model should prompt consideration of new and alternative models of housing and neighbourhood design, taking into account current and future needs. It should prioritise community ownership, enable models of community stewardship and support innovation. It should be a model that can be applied equally in designated new towns and those that are not part of the official programme.

One case study that contains elements of such a partnership model is the Langarth Stewardship Working Group (LSWG), put in place at Langarth Garden Village, Cornwall - a proposal to deliver 3,800 new homes. As development on the site progressed, tensions started to emerge, stemming from the lack of councillor engagement and buy-in. Cornwall Council worked with Inner Circle Consulting to establish the LSWG in 2023 in a process that brought together representatives from all relevant local authorities. Through regular, facilitated workshops, councillors and stakeholders co-designed the stewardship model and its governing principles - sharing ideas, learning from national best practice, and shaping the organisation’s structure together.

So, we are not starting from scratch. But there is much more work that needs to be done to colour in the detail and work through how it would operate in practice. The key questions that this paper poses for such a model are:

How...

1. Can we get started on citizen engagement from day 1, not just when the Development Corporations are up and running?
2. Can we deepen understanding of the challenges that local planning authorities face in new towns delivery (especially as they relate to community involvement) and design a model that supports them?
3. Can we realise opportunities to build capacity and capabilities at the local level, rather than extract or displace them?

97 Built Today, Treasured Tomorrow: a good practice guide to long-term stewardship. (2014). https://www.tcpa.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/TCPA_GC_Stewardship_Guide.pdf

98 Boys Smith, N. (2018). More good homes: Making planning more proportionate, predictable and equitable by Create Streets. Available at: <https://www.createstreets.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/MoreGoodHomes-Nov-2018.pdf>

99 House of Lords Built Environment Committee. (2025). New towns: Laying the foundations (2nd Report of Session 2024–26, HL Paper 183). The Stationery Office. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld5901/ldselect/ldbuiltenv/183/183.pdf>

100 p.15 Hashmi, I., & Lent, A. (2024). Constructing ConsensusThe case for community-powered development and regeneration. Available at: <https://www.newlocal.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Constructing-Consensus.pdf>

4. Can we design a prototype of the model; and test its applicability across the system, not just in areas designated new towns?
5. Can we realise the full potential of a collaborative and partnership model?
6. Can we overcome the perception that citizen involvement will delay delivery instead of expediting it?
7. Exactly should citizens work with Development Corporations in terms of governance, power-sharing and engagement methods, to mitigate against a democratic deficit?
8. Can we invite, involve and support the traditionally 'lesser heard' citizens to be part of the process?
9. Might the corporation work with a citizen-base that will be changing over the delivery period, both in terms of the individuals themselves (who may move or pass away) and in terms of their needs as they pass into different life stages?

STEWARDSHIP - WHAT ARE THE OPPORTUNITIES FOR PLACE-BASED CITIZENSHIP?

The Taskforce recommends that sustainable long-term stewardship must be built into new towns from the very beginning, not treated as an afterthought. They argue for clear governance and funding structures to manage communal assets - such as parks, open spaces, public realm, and social infrastructure - over decades. They are keen that any delivery body should establish these stewardship mechanisms early, defining roles and responsibilities, and exploring models like community trusts or public-private partnerships to ensure both financial viability and local accountability. The Taskforce also recommends that each new town "establish clear and effective ways" to involve local residents in shaping the town's vision, design and identity, and to build social capital through mechanisms like community-led housing, gardens and resident groups. It argues that delivery bodies should develop a formal engagement strategy that includes education, events and partnerships with cultural, faith, creative, and environmental organisations.¹⁰¹

There is much in these recommendations to be welcomed, especially the emphasis on empowerment and participation. However, they leave the question open as to the precise purpose of involving citizens at each stage and the implications for how people relate to the new places. There is also little detail on exactly how engagement should happen in practice, what level of decision-making power citizens will have, and how to ensure that involvement is meaningful rather than symbolic.

In Section 1, I set out the many other innovative and ambitious ways to involve citizens in shaping, managing and steering the places they live in, that might be an inspiration for New Towns. The questions I think will be necessary for a next phase of research, if we want to build in long-term stewardship from the outset and create the conditions for innovative forms of place-based citizenship to thrive, are:

¹⁰¹ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government . (2025). New towns taskforce report to government. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/68d694b79cb44667f7a1cee7/New_Towns_Taskforce_Final_Report.pdf

How...

1. Do we knit together the delivery and stewardship models?
2. Do we educate and empower citizens to demand new ownership models?
3. Do we tackle other barriers to instituting alternative community-led models?
4. Exactly should citizens be involved in setting up the long-term stewardship bodies?
5. Should long term stewardship bodies relate to other organisations in the local context and complement not duplicate their work?
6. And, relatedly how do we find the right balance of professional and citizen involvement in stewardship?
7. Can we put in place support that citizens will need to actually get involved and play an active role (especially those from vulnerable and minoritised groups)?

CONCLUSION & NEXT STEPS

I started this paper with a provocation. A stuck-on-repeat story about our built environment that we need to rewrite. Let me now sketch out an alternative...

We are in a typical market town. Walking down the high street, the national housing crisis is not something you can easily see, but it is there. Hundreds sit on the social housing waiting list, and young people find themselves priced out of the place they grew up. Many have no clear path to a stable, affordable home.

A new town settlement is proposed on the edge of the existing town. But before sketches are drawn or applications submitted, something unusual happens. The Development Corporation works with a public engagement board that will feed directly into their decision-making; local people are brought into the delivery partnership from the outset. There is no promise that every need can be met, but a commitment to working through the trade-offs together and taking the aspirations of local people to the heart of project.

Existing residents, prospective residents, local institutions, authorities and community groups take part in a series of deliberative forums. The cohort doesn't include everyone, but it is broadly representative, and includes people in housing need. Participants work step by step through the key decisions, keeping sight of both near-term priorities and long-term ambitions. The Development Corporation listens and learns. Ideas are introduced, tested and debated with seriousness and curiosity: co-operative housing, build-to-rent, car-free neighbourhoods, self-build plots, shared allotments, community land trusts, a BMX park, and more. People explore what would genuinely fit the place: What would make this somewhere I'd choose to live? What would make me proud to call it home?

The tone locally begins to shift. Instead of the familiar standoff between 'stop everything' and 'build anything', there is a growing sense of purpose. The 'future residents' group in the deliberative forums set up a WhatsApp chat off their own bat to keep their conversations going. Some long-standing residents contemplate downsizing into the scheme. A small anti-development campaign appears online but struggles to gain real traction. The local newspaper carries a range of stories about the new development, including quotes from young families who say they are excited about the new place that's being planned.

When the masterplan is published, it feels recognisably rooted in local needs and aspirations. As construction begins, early infrastructure arrives on time: the school opens with the first residents, the health centre follows shortly after, and bus services run well before completion. Green spaces form the backbone of the settlement, owned and stewarded through a community land trust, while a cohousing scheme for older people - strongly supported in deliberations - takes shape.

Mid-way through the build, local elections bring in new political leadership to the area. The scheme endures because community backing is deep and broad enough to carry it. By the time people move in, they are not all strangers arriving in a blank-slate suburb. They are joining a community they have already helped imagine. From day one there is a functioning residents' association, a community-run hub, early-stage community businesses, shared spaces designed for connection, and long-term stewardship arrangements that are transparent and locally accountable.

Right now, there is an opportunity to reset the story of how we build and live in new places in this country. This paper has expanded on the principles of the New Towns Taskforce but is designed as a provocation, to draw attention to that opportunity and the scale of the ambition that we can set ourselves. It is an attempt to push our consideration of the public beyond a concept of 'community' towards a '**citizenship of place**' - an ongoing and active engagement from individuals; a genuine collaboration in the making and sustaining of places; a new mindset underpinned by real decision-making powers and real ownership. It is an invitation to revisit moments of innovation and success in the built environment - case studies which contain radical examples of an active **citizenship of place**. This paper is the first stage in sketching out a new deal between citizens and the public institutions and private bodies that shape where they live.

New towns present a once-in-a-generation opportunity for careful planning to foster thriving local economies, lift up communities, develop local job markets, and deliver affordable, high-quality homes. They are a call to action for the whole industry to deliver the vibrant high streets and community hubs that support social connection, and safe, healthy environments where urgent challenges like climate change and clean air are addressed. Done well, New Towns will be able to provide residents access to education and training that equip them with skills and opportunities to grow and thrive. They also offer a vital chance to build a preventative model into the foundations of new developments - where design and partnership working can help avoid the serious health and social problems that currently put so much pressure on our public services.

The ambition for New Towns is long-term. They will be decades in the making. But that is not the same as taking things slowly. Doing something big and doing something differently are not easy tasks and the time to start working out how to do this is now. The direction and delivery of this generation of new towns is far from certain. Local (and national) anti-new-town campaigns, shifting local politics and changes in political leadership at the national level inject risk and uncertainty. We've seen comparable projects - Eco-Towns and Garden Villages - stumble and fall in their ambitions for such reasons.

There will also be dozens of local authorities whose regeneration or growth proposals will not be officially designated, but who still need the funding, skills, and capacity to deliver. How can we make the most of this opportunity to replicate the delivery of new towns across the whole sector and maximise the impact of successes?

All this is to say, there is much work to be done.

The announcement of the New Towns programme and the work of the New Towns Taskforce has generated much interest and energy from across the sector. The time has come to start bringing those voices together. If I have thrown down the gauntlet in this paper, then the next stage of work will be about answering the questions I posed in Section 2. It will be about drawing together experts and stakeholders - including the public - into roundtables and design sprints and finding routes to influence and pilot the emerging solutions. It will be about how to bring these ideas and ambitions to life.

If you wish to share your view on the paper, if you are interested in partnering with us or otherwise finding a way to get involved, please do get in touch: lucy.bush@demos.co.uk

APPENDIX

METHODOLOGY & A DIEJ STATEMENT

The methodology used was a literature review, drawing on a range of sources from academia and in grey literature. I used desk research to identify papers, articles and reports that were relevant to the research topic and used links and references in those papers to build out the bibliography. All ideas, quotes and case studies that originate in other sources are fully cited. There was no primary research data included (aside from one quote from a resident at the Church Grove development in Lewisham).

As part of Demos's ongoing efforts to facilitate greater diversity, inclusion, equity and justice in all areas of our work, we assess and publish our approach to meeting our goals in each of our publications.

At Demos, we recognise the urgent need in this country for better policies, a stronger citizenry and more trust in politics. We need the policymaking process to be more diverse, inclusive, equitable, and just in order to achieve these things. Our commitment to Diversity, Inclusion, Equity, and Justice (DIEJ) is at the heart of our strategy, and our charitable purpose. Our ambition, in an age of division, is to be "radically inclusive", seeking out the voices that are otherwise left behind.

We embedded DIEJ considerations into this research by:

- Ensuring that the ideas and solutions being put forward in this paper are inclusive of vulnerable and minoritised groups and that the ideas proposed take into account the needs of those groups in order for them to achieve their goals and be of benefit to those groups.
- Ensuring that the value of our ideas are tested by their ability to improve the quality of people's lives and to reduce inequalities between different groups in society, especially those created or worsened by the housing crisis.
- Making the report publication accessible through ensuring we use 'plain English' as far as possible and employing accessible design practices such as:
 - Using structured headings (H1, H2, H3) and built-in styles
 - Using sans-serif fonts at a minimum of 12pt
 - Ensuring high colour contrast
 - Using labels in addition to colour in graphs
 - Limit use of tables for layout
 - Adding alt text to images and mark decorative ones accordingly
 - Using clear, descriptive hyperlink text
 - Exporting as tagged PDFs and validate accessibility settings
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Licence to publish

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