Title: Aims of the 250 New Towns Club
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The 250 New Towns Club is for all those willing to learn how to get practical and build, for all those willing to create solutions to development problems.

Many of us are having great difficulty in accessing decent housing, work, and low-cost transport and energy. Meanwhile Britain’s elite of pontificating politicians and their experts are increasingly advising, telling, nudging, or forcing us to live in ways that suits their agendas. This is done variously in the name of sustainability, well-being, happiness, cohesion, engagement, or most recently, localism. Planning needs to be popularised, and that is why the 250 New Towns Club has three clear aims.

Three Aims


Development is vital to improve the living standards of everyone, and a precondition for economic growth. Development requires a supply of cheap land to build low cost housing for all, to expand productive employment, and to advance the infrastructural networks of utilities, transport, and communication. We believe that planning should be about development, not an obstruction to it.

A growing economy with a cosmopolitan outlook is what we need, not a call for austerity, immigration controls, and a crippling housing market. The value of mortgage debt is almost equal to Gross Domestic Product. Britain needs to grow in population and productive ambition. The construction industry has plenty of capacity, and this is being wasted. Meanwhile the housing market appears to be a financialised antiques market.

We have to decide whether we want to improve the built environment for all. New Towns are clearly about more than just housing. Perhaps people prefer to be satisfied with the appreciation in value of a dilapidating but insufficient stock of houses that the planning system, in containing development, serves to protect. Live in a museum, or encourage a developmental dynamic. That’s the choice we face as a society.


The intrusive power of the planning system should be limited today, by giving Britain’s landowners their Freehold Right to Build, denied in the post-war emergency after the Second World War. That was over 60 years ago, and we should trust people today.

The vast majority are small landowners in owner occupation. Of those renting, many also want a home of their own. Great plans were built when landowners were free to take the initiative. In 1947 development rights were nationalised partly to focus the construction industry on the New Towns, of which 33 were built before the 1970s. Today there is no such ambition. Instead today vast sums of money are spent on producing plans that conclude development should be opposed. Of 50 Eco-Towns planned none are built.

We want to recover the pro-development outlook and immediacy that characterised planning when people were free to build, lost since the necessity of the post-war reconstruction period. Development is more opposed than encouraged today.

250 New Towns is the club for people with big plans to build – where enthusiasts meet with experts to argue about where and how we live in Britain
We reject the qualified Community Right to Build of the Coalition Government, which is another privilege for those comfortably off within the planning system. Planning reform is intended as a privilege for Rural Village residents. However there is the potential for popular innovation in a Right to Build if extended to all owning land. We insist on a universal Right to Build. That means everyone with land having the freedom to develop it in accordance with the Building Regulations, with planners relying on their powers of persuasion, stripped of their present power to refuse planning approval.

The universal Right to Build worked perfectly well before 1947 when owner occupation was enjoyed by a social minority. Now more than ever, with owner occupation a fact for the majority, the public need their democratic right to develop returned.

3) The 250 New Towns Club aims to lower the cost of Owner Occupation.

Most want to tinker with the planning and financial systems, either to change the tax regime to make owner-occupation less attractive, or to tighten planning controls in an effort to extract more development revenue from planning gain to subsidise affordable housing. Both punitive approaches depend on owner occupation becoming unaffordable.

We want to dramatically increase the supply of land for housing, extend freehold, so that people can more easily buy from builders or commission the building of their own homes.

Most people want houses with gardens, which the planning system now opposes as sprawl. People need space to live, and with construction being good value even with ambitious Building Regulations, it is the high price of land within the planning system that maintains the unaffordability of new homes. There is plenty of developable land in Britain. Many farmers will be willing to offer their land as a location for a New Town.

500,000 new and replacement homes a year is our aim, with 260,000 demolitions. That is the way to make the housing stock affordable and comfortable for ourselves, and for generations to come. 250 locations building 2000 homes a year for 20 years will do it.

Why these aims sound risky

People are understandably cautious because everyone knows that the people of Britain face a challenge to build in a country with plenty of landscape. People are worried that too much new house building will collapse the value of their own homes. The worry can co-exist with the recognition that younger generations are unable to afford comfortable and spacious housing even by working hard. It is a real predicament.

There is a 100 fold discrepancy between the price of a hectare for agricultural use and the value of one for housing within the planning system. If all farmers were free to sell hectares for housing the difference would close to more like £100,000 a hectare for housing as the market rate, or more like 10 times agricultural value. Then a new family home could be built affordably. That would liberate the twenty-first century construction industry in Britain from the burden of the aftermath of the Second World War.

The news today is full of the Blitz of 1940 to 1941. In 1946 the New Towns Act started the post war reconstruction. However it was obvious that government could not direct development to New Towns without the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act. This clever and unprecedented legal reform gave government control to allocate the right to develop private land. The 1947 law was explicitly not the nationalisation of the property of land, but the innovative denial of the freedom to build on freehold land. To make that work government needed the agreement of farmers to abandon their freehold in exchange for a continuation of wartime fixed food prices through to an era of rationing. That agreement led to the 1948 Agricultural Act. 33 New Towns were built before the British economy faltered in the 1970s. 41 had been planned.

Today we are building too slowly for a growing population. This is not the austere 1950s but the twenty-first century. Giving farmers back their development rights could release cheap land in plentiful supply, and see a revival in the construction industry. The talk is of localism and a Big Society, but government refuses to end the nationalisation of development rights dating from the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act. That law needlessly contains the population.
Club organiser and architect Ian Abley says:

‘The 250 New Towns Club is a popular response to the fact that Britain should be building five times as many homes as the 100,000 that were built last year. Of course, housing does not exist in isolation. We all want to live near good facilities, and close to work. Towns take time to grow and become established.’

‘The Dutch and North Americans have been notable at creating new places to live in new landscapes. We see ambition too in Brazil, Russia, India and China. We should learn from that ambition and get established.’

With farmers free to sell freehold again Britain could build 250 New Towns, some in the country, and some in run down areas. In place of the building of New Towns then there might be New Cities, or numerous New Villages. The aim is to build 500,000 homes a year – five times the number built in 2010. The most housing built in a single year in Britain was 413,000 in 1968. So the aim is unprecedented as a productive target.

The alternative to building on this ambitious scale is overcrowding, the burdensome cost of housing, and further retreat into the financialisation of the British economy.

A much larger construction industry is not only desirable but possible. Construction is a significant source of employment. The 250 New Towns Club aims to help the manufacturers of construction products to connect with the people who want to build, whether contractors, designers, or the public.

We aim to do that in a way that is intelligently accessible – by drawing on maps.

The process of map making is highly enjoyable while painstaking, and throws up interesting questions and surprises. We can set challenges to architectural, engineering, and planning students. Who would live there, and what would they do for a living?

The important thing is to start drawing, and to use the wonderful mapping media this century enjoys, from the Ordnance Survey to Google Earth. Photographers, poets, planners and plumbers are all welcome to attend the drawing club. The contribution may not be simple drawing, but others may draw the ideas that people put forward in their own way. All of this activity is to be posted online for free access. That of course will take sponsorship, and we welcome pioneering sponsors.

**Work to be done**

The work that the 250 New Towns Club might undertake could include:

- The establishment of a 250 New Towns Community Trust, with a board of trustees
- Creating a dedicated website with the capacity for professionals and the public to register and upload proposals, to offer a critique of the site content
- Collaborations with social software companies like Google Earth or StickyWorld
- Investigating facilities for the digital storage and representation of photographic, drawn, and modeled information
- Formalising a relationship with Ordnance Survey online
- Presentations of progress to schools of architecture and planning
- Setting up a regular venue for the 1:50,000 map of Britain requiring a 22 x 11 m hall with seating
- Forging links with international New Town organizations
- Attempting to capture the 50 abortive Eco-Town proposals
- Reviewing the New Towns Record and presenting papers on the 33 built and 8 planned post-war New Towns
- Considering the Town Expansion programme
- Studying historic examples of philanthropic “model” towns, and the early Garden Cities and Garden Suburbs
- Arranging study tours to these settlements to forge local associations
- Working to obtain a commercial publishing deal of 5 annuals, to graphically present 50 New Towns every year
- Organising a network of academics and speakers

**Listen again**

The 250 New Towns club has received cautious endorsements from Kate Henderson, Chief Executive of the TCPA, and from the Housing Minister Grant Shapps on the Radio 4 programme *You and Yours*. Listen again on:

[www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p009xv98](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p009xv98)