

re-imagining garden cities

We need to look at how we can apply the Garden City concept today, says Housing Minister Grant Shapps



Left

Welwyn Garden City - 'there is real potential to provide some of the new housing in Garden Cities'

I am intensely proud that I represent the people of Welwyn Garden City. It became and remains a really attractive place to live – as Ebenezer Howard put it, the health of the country with the comforts of the town.

I am also proud that the Garden City is a great British idea that has influenced town planning around the world. In the UK we tend to see Garden Cities as part of our heritage – but in China there are 300 million people who are being housed in new cities and urban areas. There are nearly 150 British design, construction and architecture businesses, as well as investors, looking to increase their share of that huge market. Many are drawing on green development and eco-cities ideas that all start with Ebenezer Howard and Garden Cities.

As Housing Minister I want to harness some of this creative force and see it applied to help solve the chronic shortage of housing that we face over the next 10-20 years. I think there is real potential to provide some of this new housing in Garden Cities if we get the two most important elements right – private investment and community ownership.

So I really welcome the invitation by the Town and Country Planning Association to 're-imagine the

Garden City'.¹ I think we need to go back to Howard's original concepts. In particular, I think we need to strip away some of the baggage that later projects added – such as the state control that imposed new towns on communities.

Howard's original idea was to create a new community big enough to have its own employment and services and laid out in a way that was attractive and well designed. The Arts and Crafts architecture of Letchworth and Welwyn Garden Cities is now hugely admired. Remember much of it was stimulated through open competition.

Just as important as the idea was the way Howard wanted to do it. Not relying on government, not spending public money, and not waiting until official bodies took over his ideas. He knew that he would have a long wait.

Howard saw that he needed the right blend of private finance, enlightened planning and guaranteed returns to the community. He strove to get the best from each of these and to realise the goal of a better life for all. Investors got a return, but it was at a fixed rate. Planning created confidence in the future. Residents bought leasehold, and the

rents paid for a wide range of community services, facilities and infrastructure.

This was far-seeing, and the community facilities were better than in most neighbouring towns. Howard saw how he could use land value uplift over time to go on funding and improving transport, schools and amenities. Unlike the enlightened industrialists who created Saltaire and Port Sunlight, he created a basis for the community to help to manage the project and to create something which was sustainable and which met people's needs. But he reflects the ideas of the time. When Welwyn Garden City was planned, the workers' homes were placed in the east, downwind from the factories in the middle, while the bosses got the larger west-side homes in Handside. This sort of social engineering (including the absence of pubs!) would not be acceptable today.

We need to look at how we can apply the concept today and improve on these basic ideas to reboot the Garden City concept so that it is shaped and owned by the community rather than the planners.

That's why this Government is stripping away the barriers to this type of large-scale investment and, through measures like the New Homes Bonus, enabling communities to see for themselves the benefits of growth rather than telling them where and what sort of development they should have. That top-down approach is the surest way to ruin any chance of building up real community buy-in and ownership.

Some of the later new towns showed how relying on a state vision can come off the rails – like the architects of early 1970s social housing in Milton Keynes who were obsessed with preventing the tenants having any opportunity for decoration or ornament in their homes. They didn't want to cause offence to the principles of modernism.

The last Government tried to tell people where eco-towns should be located. It is telling that these projects have only survived where a local authority has got the support of the community and created its own version of the idea.

So how can the Government help? We are already taking forward a comprehensive reform programme which is replacing central control with local choice. We have already introduced the powerful incentive of the New Homes Bonus. We are introducing a radical simplification of the planning system, giving developers greater confidence and communities more power. We are also making more public land available, and making sure that public bodies co-operate in the planning of major new projects.

In June, I announced Government plans to release surplus public sector land for up to 100,000 homes by 2015. Some of that land will be on sites that could generate new communities of over 5,000 homes. And this is just a start – we are encouraging councils to follow the Government's lead and make

their unused land available for development. If local communities want to use the provisions in the Localism Bill, once it is enacted, they will be able to take control, to plan and to own and manage assets, and with visionary investment backing we could see some new Garden Cities in the near future.

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The trick will be, as Howard saw, to bring all these elements together – a developer seeking to progress a large scheme will have a very hard time unless he engages the community early. By creating a plan that is well supported by the community, the developer gets a good start; by going further and giving the community a real share of control of assets and management, and using the potential of a Local Development Order, there is the potential to really speed things up.

We need to encourage and develop partnerships bringing together the most imaginative developers and community groups who are willing to take on a visionary task of this kind.

I don't have fixed ideas on how this should be done, and in the new world of localism it won't be up to me. It will be up to people who support the Garden City concept to win the arguments – not to impose their ideas, but to work with communities to realise their own vision for the future. The scale of housing need that we now face means that we need imaginative proposals to come forward which get us back to Howard's original ideas.

I think the TCPA is excellently placed to help facilitate this process, and I invite the TCPA to start a discussion with developers, investors, designers, local authorities and, most importantly of all, community groups, to reinvent the Garden City for the 21st century.

● *The Rt Hon. Grant Shapps MP is Minister for Housing and Local Government and MP for Welwyn Hatfield. An edited version of this article, 'Garden cities: reshaping the ideas of the past for the 21st century', was published on the Guardian Housing Network on 19 September 2011 – see www.guardian.co.uk/housing-network/2011/sep/19/garden-cities-grant-shapps-housing?INTCMP=SRCH*

Note

- 1 *Re-imagining Garden Cities for the 21st Century: Benefits and Lessons in Bringing Forward Comprehensively Planned New Communities*. TCPA, Jul. 2011. www.tcpa.org.uk/pages/re-imagining-garden-cities-for-the-21st-century.html