

## Garden City

# MythBuster

A short guide to myths and truths  
about the Garden City idea





## Equitable

Sharing land values for community benefit.

## Visionary and collaborative

Strong vision, leadership and community-participation.

## Nurtured

Community ownership of land and long-term stewardship of assets.

## Genuinely affordable

Mixed-tenure homes and housing types that are genuinely affordable.

## Accessible for all

Integrated and convenient walking and wheeling routes and public transport systems.

## Vibrant and inclusive

Culturally diverse, energising, sociable neighbourhoods.

## Landscape-led, climate resilient

Development that enhances the natural environment and addresses climate change.

## Designed to marry town and country

Places that enhance people's health and wellbeing.

## Local employment

A wide range of local jobs.

# Garden City Principles

Nurturing communities and the environment

# What does the Garden City idea mean to you?

**For many people, the term ‘Garden City’ simply means a place with tree-lined streets and nice homes with gardens. This focus on issues such as design and density in fact undermines the power of the Garden City idea. The Garden City is a radical but practical approach to creating and renewing places which enable people and the natural environment to thrive.**

The creation of new Garden Cities, and places inspired by the Garden City Principles, continues to be recognised as playing an important role in the range of solutions needed to tackle Britain’s chronic housing crisis. They also remain key to helping us deal with a whole range of challenges; from the need for healthier lifestyles to dealing with the climate emergency. New Garden Cities, which take a holistic approach to the Garden City Principles, provide a powerful route to meeting these needs.

It is now over ten years since the English National Planning Policy Framework was published in 2012 with reference to the Garden City Principles. While successive Governments have so far avoided implementing a comprehensive programme of new Garden Cities, there has been significant interest in the role of the Garden City Principles and Garden City ‘inspired’ developments.

Today over 50 developments have adopted terms relating to the Garden City Principles in their developments, including through government’s ‘Garden Communities’ programme. And reference to the Principles has been adopted in several Local Plans. This is a positive step for ambitious

councils and developers and will likely lead to some improvements in the way places are designed and delivered. However, this interest has so far failed to result in a holistic realisation of the Garden City idea. In some instances it has led to the creation of places that are a world away from the Garden City model outlined in Ebenezer Howard’s book, but which nevertheless carry its name. In the Interim Report\* for the Tomorrow:125 project, the TCPA has written about why this may have happened, and what we should do about it.

## Myth-Busting

The TCPA’s ‘Tomorrow:125’ project has been exploring the roots of the Garden City idea. This has involved understanding what Ebenezer Howard’s real aspirations were, as well as exploring how to overcome the misconceptions that have grown around the term Garden City. The debate about meeting our housing needs can often become very polarised, and there are already many misconceptions about how new communities might help in tackling the housing crisis.

This short guide dispels some of the myths about Garden Cities and explains why there is a huge opportunity to meet our need for more housing while also tackling the climate crisis by creating a new generation of beautiful, inclusive new Garden Cities.

This guide is designed for anyone with an interest in the Garden City idea. It supplements a 2014 TCPA Myth-Busting Guide\*\* for communities.

\* <https://tcpa.org.uk/resources/tomorrow-125-interim-report/>

\*\* [https://tcpa.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Garden\\_Cities\\_myth\\_buster\\_UPDATED.pdf](https://tcpa.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Garden_Cities_myth_buster_UPDATED.pdf)



## Myth

Garden Cities, Garden Communities, Garden Towns, Garden Villages, New Towns and Garden City Principles are all the same thing.

## Truth

The term Garden City refers to a place which is aligned with a distinct set of practical ideals; New Towns are places which were developed under the New Towns legislation; and the Garden City Principles are a set of principles which provide a framework for creating new Garden Cities. The other terms refer to places which aspire to the Garden City ideals, but for one reason or other are considered not to fully meet them all.





Statue of Sir Ebenezer Howard, unveiled in 2021 to mark the centenary of Welwyn Garden City. Credit: Katy Lock

**What's in a name? A lot when it comes to Garden Cities! The term Garden City is a unique and specific term. It was defined in Ebenezer Howard's book *Tomorrow: A peaceful path to real reform*. Published in 1898, it set out a pathway for a more sustainable future based on a combination of proposals he called a Garden City. The Garden City idea set out how places could be created using a model of participative democracy and a mutualised economy aimed at ensuring human beings and the rest of the natural world could thrive. It remains one of the most practical and powerful attempts to work out how we can live in a fairer, healthier and more sustainable way.**

Terms such as 'Garden Towns' and 'Garden Communities' are all developments which aspire - to some extent or other - to reach the Garden City ideal. Technically, anywhere can call itself a Garden City, regardless of the extent to which it meets Howard's model. Many places have done this, because people associate the term with nice tree-lined streets and homes with gardens, something which is commercially attractive. This mislabelling is the root cause of many of the misunderstandings and myths around the idea.

'Garden Communities' is a specific term identified for a government programme supporting new communities which meet a set of 'Garden Community criteria'. These criteria are inspired by, but slightly different from, the Garden City Principles which the TCPA identified, and which are referenced in National Policy.

Garden City Principles are a distillation of the key elements that have made the Garden City model of development so successful, articulated for a 21st century context. Taken together, the principles form an indivisible and interlocking framework for the delivery of high-quality places. They can be used to improve development at all scales, whether or not something is a real 'Garden City'.

New Towns\* are places delivered under the New Towns legislation, which led to the delivery of 32 new communities across the UK following World War Two.

**Find out more:**

[https://www.tomorrow125.org.uk/downloads/T125\\_IR\\_dps.pdf](https://www.tomorrow125.org.uk/downloads/T125_IR_dps.pdf)

\*<https://tcpa.org.uk/areas-of-work/garden-cities-and-new-towns/new-towns>



## Myth

The Garden City idea is only applicable to new large-scale developments.

## Truth

The Garden City idea can be applied to all development scales and contexts, including urban renewal.



Community-led housing at The Yard – Ashley Vale Action Group, Bristol.

**The Garden City idea is most commonly thought of in terms of the creation of new places. In fact, Ebenezer Howard was just as concerned with urban renewal. In essence, in Chapter 13 of *Tomorrow*, Howard argues for the redevelopment of the existing industrial cities of Britain at much higher standards, to enable a measure of the same quality of life that he hoped would be achieved in the new Garden Cities.**

The foundational principles which underpinned the Garden City idea, of human well-being as part of a thriving natural world, of participative democracy, and mutualised local economic activity, present just as powerful an answer to the regeneration of existing places as they do for the construction of new ones.

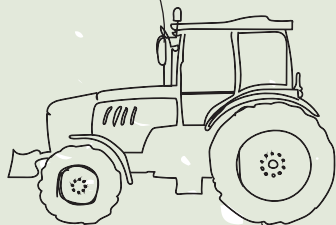
When thinking about new Garden Cities today, it will be for local authorities, developers and communities to work together to decide on the most suitable location and the size needed to provide a sustainable community that enables people to thrive. The Garden City Principles are applicable to different models of large-scale development, including towns, urban extensions, and villages – and the right solution will vary from place to place. While holistically planned new developments provide the greatest opportunity to benefit from the Principles (especially Garden City governance models and land value capture) they can also be applied to smaller urban regeneration sites.

**Find out more:**

<https://tcpa.org.uk/resources/guide-3-design-and-masterplanning/>

## Myth

We don't need any new Garden Cities on 'greenfield' land, we can meet all our housing needs on inner-city brownfield land.



## Truth

Given the scale of the housing challenge in Britain today, we need to develop both brownfield and greenfield sites.



A photograph of a person's hands holding a blue sign with white text that reads "HOUSING IS A HUMAN RIGHT". The person's head and shoulders are visible at the bottom of the frame. The background is a blurred crowd of people. The entire image is framed by a white, torn-edge border with a black line looping around it.

HOUSING  
IS A  
HUMAN  
RIGHT

Garden City Principles mean making sustainable transport modes the most convenient option. Credit: Shutterstock

**Where we build the homes we need is not a question of using either brownfield or greenfield land, but a matter of choosing the most sustainable locations for new and renewed communities.**

To meet our housing and growth needs within environmental limits will require a portfolio of solutions, from new Garden Cities, to the renewal of our existing towns and cities using Garden City Principles.

Decisions on where we build new homes requires a nationally strategic approach and should be based on a wide range of considerations – such as the need and demand for new homes, the ability to adapt to the climate crisis and enhance biodiversity, and the opportunity to provide more local jobs and sustainable and active travel by public transport. Studies have shown that there are enough brownfield sites to accommodate up to 1.3 million homes.\* However, current demographic and population forecasts along with a backlog of unmet need suggest that 340,000 new homes will be required each year up to 2034\*\*. Even if all these sites could be developed, they would provide land only for four years of supply. It is also likely that not all these brownfield sites should or could be developed; some will be cherished by local communities for their current biodiversity and/or amenity value, and other former industrial sites might be difficult and expensive to clean up or poorly served by public transport. It may not be possible to meet the high standards of design for physical and mental health or environmental benefit in these places.

\* CPRE, Oct 2020, 'Recycling our land: the state of brownfield 2020 An updated analysis of the potential of brownfield land for new homes'. <https://www.cpre.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Recycling-our-land-the-state-of-brownfield-report-Oct-2020.pdf>

\*\* Glen Bramley, Heriot-Watt University, May 19 - Research for Crisis and the National Housing Federation, 'Housing supply requirements across Great Britain for low-income households and homeless people'. <https://pure.hw.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/24741931/HousingSupplyMay2019.pdf> (Exec Summary) referenced in HoC Research Briefing: Tackling the under-supply of housing in England - House of Commons Library (parliament.uk) (Feb 2022)

**Find out more:**

<https://tcpa.org.uk/resources/locating-and-consenting-new-garden-cities/>

## Myth

Garden Cities create low density suburban sprawl that encourages car use.



## Truth

Garden Cities are the exact opposite to sprawling, 'bolt-on' housing estates, and there is no specified density for new Garden Cities.



Garden City Principles mean making sustainable transport modes the most convenient option  
Credit: Elliot Manches, from the Centre for Ageing Better resource library

**A common misconception is that the Garden City approach implies low-density living and results in urban 'sprawl'. This is misleading but perhaps understandable given the types of development which have been mislabeled as 'Garden Cities' or similar over the past century.**

One of the reasons the Garden City idea was powerful was because it considered how theory might work in a real place. Howard's book was not a blueprint for specified densities and design, but sought to illustrate how, in 1898 the Garden City theory might be achieved in an imagined new town.

There is no specified density for new Garden Cities, and a range of densities across different areas would be expected – for example, there would be higher densities around transport hubs and neighbourhood centres. The test is the extent to which the density applied allows for the realisation of the Garden City Principles\* – which include creating walkable neighbourhoods and providing access to sustainable public transport, access to parks and greenspace and local food production. The Garden City Principles may be seen as the origin of popular contemporary concepts such as '20-minute neighbourhoods'.\*\*

The Garden City idea also sought to avoid urban sprawl. If there was need for growth in a Garden City, instead of expanding into the agricultural land around it, a new Garden City would be started a short distance away, creating a network of distinct Garden City towns, linked by rapid public transport, which together provided the benefits of a much larger city. Howard called this 'The Social City'. Today we need a strategic approach to considering patterns of growth and development to avoid unsustainable 'bolt-on' estates without the services or amenities of a Garden City.

**Find out more:**

<https://tcpa.org.uk/resources/guide-3-design-and-masterplanning/>

\*<https://tcpa.org.uk/garden-city-principles/>

\*\*<https://tcpa.org.uk/collection/the-20-minute-neighbourhood/>



## Myth

New Garden Cities are irrelevant to the climate crisis.

## Truth

The climate crisis demands that all our urban areas will need to be re-engineered, and the Garden City Principles provide a framework for places which are climate resilient and will help us adapt to the climate crisis.





Passivhaus social housing off Goldsmith Street, Norwich  
Credit: Evelyn Simak

**Although climate change wasn't an issue of concern in 1898, Howard's Garden City idea applied to place, and the design of the Garden City 'experiments' included many of the advantages we know today can help us to adapt to the climate crisis: local food systems, access to nature, integrating town and country for biodiversity, health and wellbeing, walkable neighbourhoods, rapid public transport, and well-built homes using locally-sourced materials.**

Modern Garden City Principles include these characteristics along with a requirement for places to be net-zero and energy positive. Planning for new and renewed communities has a vital role to play in dealing with the climate crisis – by delivering renewable energy systems, ensuring that there are high levels of energy efficiency in buildings, implementing sustainable transport systems, and delivering a whole range of resilience measures, from strategic flood defences to green infrastructure to aid urban cooling. Above all, planning can take the long view, not just addressing the needs of today but also preparing for a changing climate, looking 100 years ahead and beyond.

New communities will also play a unique role in relocating existing vulnerable communities as they become unviable in the face of the impacts of climate change. New large-scale communities must be places that address climate change mitigation and adaptation over the long term and through local democratic processes, if they are to have a sustainable future.

Sadly, the reality is that many places, including some of those that use the 'Garden ...' label have not been located in places which enable a strategic approach to mitigating the climate crisis, and have not been designed to allow for maximum climate adaptation. Planning for growth in a climate emergency requires a national strategic approach to identifying need and location and the delivery of places that are fit for the future and environmentally, socially and economically sustainable.

**Find out more:**

<https://tcpa.org.uk/resources/guide-14-building-climate-resilient-large-scale-new-communities/>  
and Guide 1: Locating and Consenting New Garden Cities - Town and Country Planning Association (tcpa.org.uk)

## Myth

Garden City design is boring and uniform.



## Truth

New Garden Cities must provide beautiful homes, in attractive places that are planned, designed, developed and managed to be aesthetically, culturally and environmentally rich and stimulating.



Housing at Derwenthorpe, York.  
Credit: TCPA

**Garden Cities are places of high-quality design and innovation. New Garden Cities won't necessarily look like the Garden City experiments at Letchworth or Welwyn, they should reflect the context of their specific site and location. The local built heritage should be married with the best design approaches appropriate to today's context, making the most of new technologies and innovations in construction and design.**

This is distinct from many new housing developments, which are often designed and built without any respect for local vernacular or context, leading to 'anywhereville'. There can also be a difference between the illustrations of a proposed development and what is actually built. This combination has led to a negative perception of new development among many people.

One of the powerful things about the Garden City Principles, and the Garden City idea in general, is that they not only require places to be beautifully designed, and developed to be aesthetically, culturally and environmentally rich and stimulating, but include a mechanism for this to be paid for and managed in perpetuity.

To avoid the mistakes of the past we must focus on the quality and stewardship of new places – not just the number of houses – and we must ensure that they are endowed with sufficient assets to secure long-term income for future maintenance.

**Find out more:**

<https://tcpa.org.uk/resources/guide-3-design-and-masterplanning/>

## Myth

Garden Cities are old fashioned and no longer relevant! We need new ideas to deal with modern problems



## Truth

The Garden City approach to growth and renewal can help us deal holistically with contemporary challenges, from the climate emergency to the need for people to be more involved in local decision-making





Long-term stewardship by The Parks Trust, Milton Keynes  
Photo: Caroline Brown – David Lock Associates

**Ebenezer Howard and the Garden City pioneers were seeking to answer the simple question ‘how are we going to live?’ They would recognise that the way we organise society now does not support healthy and fulfilling lives for most people most of the time. Changing the way that we live could have obvious and desirable benefits. But the positive case for change runs in parallel with the grave challenges that confront our society.**

Some of these challenges Howard would easily have recognised: poverty and economic inequality; poor physical and mental health; poor housing conditions; an economy failing to meet the basic human needs of many; and technology making some people’s occupations redundant. But our present is defined by other pressing problems – from racial inequality and the climate crisis to a broken housing delivery model.

As a result, the question of how people can live together in peace and in harmony – both with each other and with the planet upon which they depend – is the political question of our time.

The original Garden City idea, founded on the principles of ensuring humans thrive as part of the natural world, of the need for participative democracy, and for local economic systems which recycle the profits of development and enable local control of assets can help us deal with contemporary challenges. The Garden City Principles distil the key elements that have made the Garden City model of development so successful, articulated for a 21st century context. Taken together, the principles form an indivisible and interlocking framework for the delivery of high-quality places. The model has high ideals but with practical application.

We can repackage the model with different and more fashionable words - terms such as sustainability, long-term stewardship, walkable neighbourhoods, 20-minute neighbourhoods, all have their roots in the Garden City idea – but the Founding Principles of the Garden City idea and the practical application in real places are more relevant now, than ever.

**Find out more:**

[https://www.tomorrow125.org.uk/downloads/T125\\_IR\\_dps.pdf](https://www.tomorrow125.org.uk/downloads/T125_IR_dps.pdf)



## Myth

Garden Cities are a utopian ideal – we need realistic and practical solutions.

## Truth

The Garden City model of development is uniquely practical, and achieving it simply requires a strategic approach and the political will for action.



Community-led food growing with Incredible edible  
Photo: Incredible edible

**Ebenezer Howard and the Garden City pioneers were practical idealists. *Tomorrow: A peaceful path to real reform* set out in detail how the Garden City idea might be realised in a real place. They then went on to try these ideas out in practice in two places, at Letchworth and Welwyn Garden City. Later, Sir Frederic Osborn, another key figure in TCPA's history, felt that delivery by this approach was too slow, and campaigned for government to play a role in delivery of new communities, to enable the Garden City vision to be realised.**

This campaign led to the post World War Two New Towns programme, which was inspired by the Garden City approach, but was distinct from it, partly in terms of the scale of development, but also because central government had an important role to play in their delivery. The TCPA has looked in detail at the lessons from the Garden City and New Towns and the private sector attempts at delivering new communities that followed. Learning the lessons – good and bad – from these approaches, the TCPA has developed a model for new Garden Cities, which combines the practical ideals of the Garden City movement, with the delivery mechanisms of the post-war New Towns, updated for the 21st century. Our report on unlocking large scale new communities\* summarises our work on how to make that a reality.

The 'Tomorrow:125' project has also highlighted how many aspects of the Garden City idea are far from utopian – and in fact are already operating on a smaller scale across the UK and the world. From Community Land Trusts and co-operative energy, to networks such as Incredible Edible – community led action for the creation of better and more socially just places is happening. The project is exploring how to create a framework to enable this to happen at a wider scale.

**Find out more:**

[https://www.tomorrow125.org.uk/downloads/T125\\_IR\\_dps.pdf](https://www.tomorrow125.org.uk/downloads/T125_IR_dps.pdf)  
<https://tcpa.org.uk/resources/unlocking-the-potential-of-large-scale-new-communities/>  
[https://tcpa.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/NTsGCs\\_P1\\_LR.pdf](https://tcpa.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/NTsGCs_P1_LR.pdf)



**tcpa**

**Town and Country Planning Association**

Working to secure homes, places and  
communities where everyone can thrive

**17 Carlton House Terrace**

**London, SW1Y 5AS**

**[www.tcpa.org.uk](http://www.tcpa.org.uk)**

This publication was designed by Social Communications and kindly  
supported by the Lady Margaret Patterson Osborn Trust.

Cover photo: Howard Park, Letchworth Garden City. Courtesy of  
Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation