

Let's be brave and plan for the long term

There is opportunity for a further evolution of the proposed localised planning system to take a much longer-term view of their area says Emma Cariaga.



Emma Cariaga is head of strategic projects at Land Securities

The scale of proposed change as a result of the current Government's planning reforms certainly feels groundbreaking, and yet when you look back in history there has been many significant interventions with some sense of continual change in policy over the last hundred years.

When we look back we are very quick to highlight those embarrassing developments or ones that didn't turn out as well as we had hoped. The task should be however to remind communities of the best examples of the past and apply them to the current day circumstances, thus 'mining the wisdom of past lessons learned'.

Garden cities and suburbs remain hugely popular and given the chronic under supply of new housing, their renaissance could contribute hugely to increasing supply. This doesn't mean we will not continue to redevelop city centres and target regeneration opportunities, but equally it accepts that these alone will not meet the level of need, particularly in the most pressing locations such as South East of England. We need to look at the potential for another round of new such places adopting some of the best of the guiding principles of the garden cities and suburbs.

The recent changes to our planning policy are a genuine attempt by Government to persuade communities to plan for growth and to realize the benefits new development can bring. The prospects for success with this new policy will be the extent to which growth can be perceived in the future as a 'force for good', and not instead as a 'scary proposition which will be filled with identikit houses and occupied by people from outside the area'. If we can point to places like Letchworth and Welwyn as examples of the new places we are trying to re-create communities can get a real sense of

what they are getting.

There is an overwhelming sense of nostalgia gripping parts of the nation as we grapple with continued economic uncertainty, and we need to re-state the pioneering spirit of the garden cities and suburbs movements as part of the 'pitch for growth'. Part of the appeal is undoubtedly the visual appearance of these cities and suburbs and is perhaps part of the reason why they are so dearly loved. However, there are many other explanations as to why they are successful, including the original aspiration that the whole of the new community would share in its future wealth, with social and other facilities funded from income accrued.

The 2011 TCPA report into Re-imagining Garden Cities for the 21st Century starts to identify the key benefits and lessons learned in bringing forward comprehensively planned new communities. The report concludes that there are three emerging themes to consider when planning for garden cities and suburbs of the future:

- the vision and masterplan
- the importance of governance
- the model for implementation

It was noted that the earlier Garden cities were conceived and established by entrepreneurs and individuals who had a long-term vision and solid core values many of which are being echoed by the current Government's mission for the Big Society.

The success of new communities relies on there being a clear plan and inevitably this will require compromise on all sides. There is much written about the need for vision as important to the success of a development, and this is evident as being central to the inception of the best Garden cities such as Letchworth and Welwyn. It was the vision however of one man – Ebenezer Howard who set out the



ABOVE: Welwyn Garden City of 1920 was one of the first

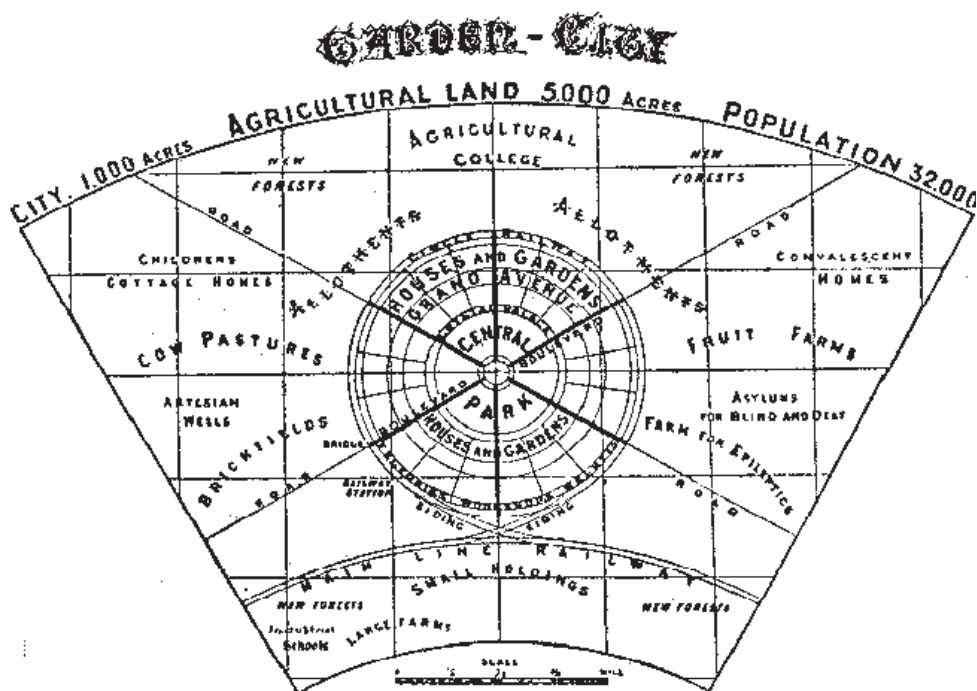
plan for the first large-scale comprehensively planned new communities. Society is no longer prepared to be led by individuals in the same way as at the time of the first garden cities. Instead, a much greater collaborative approach is necessary where strategy and vision is developed with communities and not for them. Communities rightly want a greater involvement at the inception of a project and therefore it is more likely that a vision in the future will come together as a collaborative effort of the key players.

In any wave of new planned communities it is likely that governance or active management will be achieved between the private sector (the land owner) and the local authority and both parties here should consider the importance of demonstrating leadership values from the outset.

A core aspect of the garden city philosophy was the need for continual active management long past the initial development, including for example the importance of dedicated community develop-



First. **TOP RIGHT:** Ebenezer Howard is father of the movement.



expanded settlements and concentrating investment where it can yield greatest results than the default scattergun approach of incremental extensions in all directions of a particular town or village.

There has been a prolonged abstinence in the UK of large-scale new communities and instead thousands of smallish incremental increases to edges of cities, new towns and villages. Each development only tackles those issues that are necessary to allow it individually to go ahead and often the developments themselves are sufficient only for a year or two's supply of housing to a particular area. Many of these developments will be long fought planning battles with resistance communities and developers for very little gain.

The garden cities and suburbs concept proposes a much longer-term strategic approach to planning for future demand. They insist that the long-term needs of the communities are properly planned for and that the correct balance of homes and amenity is designed in from the outset. These larger scale developments, whilst extremely daunting at the outset, can if sufficient in scale avoid the need for continued battles between developers and communities on numerous individual sites. Instead the needs of a particular village or town can be met for a generation or two whilst avoiding the inevitable debate every five years as a local plan is renewed again and prospective applicants come forward with yet more development opportunities. Planning properly for 20-30 years of growth allows communities to properly resist growth in other locations and ensure that growth is located in a location that maximises the poten-

tial for investment of new infrastructure and amenities for the community.

A pro growth sentiment is developing amongst politicians and policy makers as awareness grows of the contribution that development and particularly house building makes to UK GDP. There is an opportunity for a further evolution of the proposed localised planning system to take a much longer-term view of the future of their area. By asking communities to look at their needs and those of subsequent generations there is a real prospect of a pro-growth attitude to good development, and the potential for proper strategic planning for the future. ■

