

OPINION Everything in garden communities is not exactly rosy

Garden communities are supposed to be self-sufficient and based around sustainable transport modes. But, are they heading in the wrong direction? asks **Jenny Raggett**

Transport for New Homes has recently released its report: *Garden Villages and Garden Towns: Visions and Reality*. From our research it seems that for the new homes of the future, 'smart transport' cannot be achieved without 'smarter planning'. We are concerned that, for many, the smartest transport choice for a family moving into one of these new places might be to buy another car.

Garden villages and garden towns are where we are building hundreds of

thousands of new homes (see also page 8). The 'villages' are generally located in the middle of the countryside sometimes miles from any large conurbation. Garden towns generally involve expansion as urban extensions.

Although the idea of living locally is a much-vaunted concept in the Government Garden Communities Prospectus, and also in visions present for garden communities individually, the transport infrastructure envisaged goes squarely against the idea.

More than half of the garden communities we looked at wanted a nearby motorway junction to be enlarged to take the new traffic from the development. In some cases, completely new motorway junctions were deemed necessary.

Other garden communities were associated with a brand new 'strategic' link road, a big bypass, a series of



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Transport for New Homes and was the lead author of its two reports, *Transport for New Homes*, 2018, and *Garden Villages and Garden Towns: Visions and Reality*, 2020.

new roundabouts and other new road 'improvements'.

With this new skeleton of roads in position, land is quickly opened up not only for car-based housing, but also for out-of-town town supermarkets, drive-to fitness centres, employment parks and all manner of US-style road-based development. These all come with substantial car-parking and are all hard to get to if you are a pedestrian or on a bike.

We can imagine people living in these new estates in years to come.

Based on our visits to garden estates already built, cars are all parked in the drive and everyone seems to have two or three vehicles. The 'rapid transit' that people talked about has somehow not materialised because it was never funded and there were questions about ridership and viability. There was talk about a new railway station and integrated transport hub, but nothing has happened yet.

Walking to and from the town centre or village a few miles away is really only for the very dedicated and no good in the dark or bad weather. In some, the walk anyway involves an underpass or bridge across the motorway and the route generally feels exposed and unsafe.

Few cyclists want to find themselves alongside a busy 'A' road with roaring lorries, even with a cycle lane. Meanwhile within the estate there are some informal green areas and a primary school provided, but the high street, the vibrant centre and the other community facilities are still not there. There is a new large supermarket off one of the roundabouts. It's only a seven- or eight-minute drive away and there's lots of parking. There's a café there and a chemist – the 'local centre' out of town, and it could be anywhere.

Garden communities are supposed to be self-sufficient and self-sustaining and based around sustainable transport modes. They are, according to the Government's Garden Communities Prospectus, supposed to be genuinely mixed use with local facilities and new homes combined to give a walkable and sociable place.

So, what is going wrong and why are these places showing definite tendencies to lean exactly in the wrong direction?

We think it is a combination of the wrong place to build (most important), the lack of money for rail, light rail, rapid transit/ trams, bus infrastructure, cycleways and footways, and an undue emphasis on access by private car.

There is also a lack of firmness to stop out of town 'creep' while failing to give monetary and other advantages to businesses to tempt them into town, around a carefully designed walking environment.

It doesn't have to be this way, but there is no magic. Words on paper are not enough. Fine visions and good intentions are insufficient. Smart planning needs to enable 'smart' transport; the two need to come together.

People tend to dismiss talk of 'how they do it in the Netherlands' as pie in the sky for the UK. We do things differently here! When we visited the Netherlands however, we did see that their way of doing it brings results.

Planners there are in charge, and they use their expertise to shape places in ways that our planners here cannot. Rather than developers and house-builders taking the lead, the local planners make sure that a quality place is built. Land value uplift is captured for the public benefit. Using local and regional funds, the elements of sustainable transport are put into place early on, including rail/

rapid transit/ trams which are integrated into the fabric of the place. Streets, cycle paths, pedestrian routes, urban parks and greenways through the area are all mapped out in detail, as are outdoor recreational areas, and the location of employment and community uses, and, of course, retail. There are even 'community architects' who make sure that the place will be pleasant for everyone, rather than a boring estate. The housebuilders build to the planner's specification.

What about roads? The Dutch planners were very clear on this. Do not, they explain, design a place for easy access to the strategic road network. All you will get is distant commuting and hold-ups for long distance traffic and freight. What about out of town giant supermarkets? 'We banned those in the 1970s because they would have depleted our high streets and town centres.'

Bringing transport and planning together seems to us, essential.

In a world of data, phone apps and internet-enabled devices, we also need to come down to earth and get the right things built 'on the ground'. Sustainable transport comes into its own only in the right context.

Smart planning and smart locations in which to build are key as much as smart transport.

SOURCE



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