

**Town & Country Planning
Tomorrow Series Paper 19**

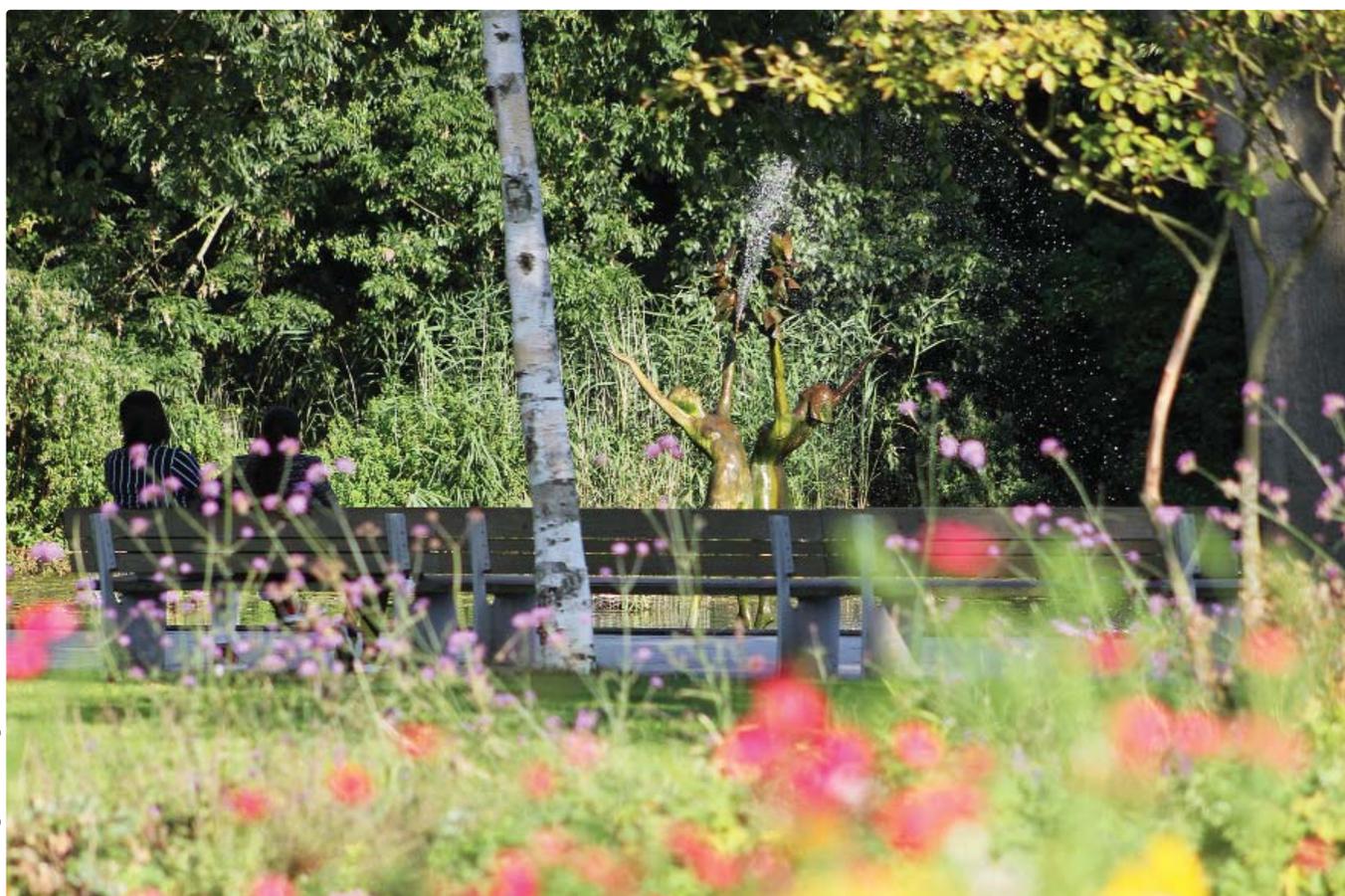
celebrating 70 years of the new towns act



**reflections on what the 1946 New Towns Act
achieved and what we can learn from it today**

stevenage - the building of a brave new world

Former resident **Deborah Garvie** looks at the lessons that can be learned from Stevenage New Town – the first to be designated – to help solve today’s housing crisis



Stevenage Borough Council

Stevenage - ‘with imagination and determination, new town development can be a force for good’

Stevenage had never set the world on fire. Described by Charles Dickens in 1861 as ‘drowsy in the dullest degree’, by the time of the 1946 New Towns Act it remained a sleepy market town with a population of 6,000. My family had lived in the town for generations, running a number of its public houses, where they were at the centre of local debate about the town’s prospects and future.

Yet, when designated as the first New Town in November 1946, Stevenage became the test-bed

for the Act’s utopian, post-war ideas for ‘a new way of life’. In the space of a generation, it was transformed into one of the larger and most vibrant towns in the South East, with families moving from far and wide to join a huge social experiment.

The catalyst for this transformation wasn’t Stevenage or its people. It was London. The city’s exhausted, post-war population had the Hobson’s housing choice of bomb sites or overcrowded and insanitary Victorian slums. In some East End

boroughs, around a third of homes had been destroyed and homelessness was a major problem. Just as they are today, London's post-war housing pressures were immense and would clearly take decades to resolve. So part of the answer had to come from outside.

But what led to Stevenage being chosen as part of the utopian solution, and what lessons can we learn as we set out to solve London's current housing crisis?

First, location and connectivity has determined both Stevenage's existence and its growth. Located 30 miles from Central London on the Great North Road to York, it has always been a convenient London staging-post. The coming of the railway in 1857 further improved its accessibility, and it now takes a little over 20 minutes to reach King's Cross. Connectivity is a key ingredient for sustainable new settlements. If people have to move out of the city, it makes sense for them to settle on a route out rather than in an isolated backwater.

London's current housing crisis means that families (and the boroughs responsible for housing them) are desperate to find affordable accommodation and are increasingly having to search outside the city's limits. Today, surely it would be better to have a 21st century Abercrombie Plan of expanded settlements to provide breathing space for an overcrowded London than for the Home Counties to deal with ad hoc population dispersal.

Second, there was strong leadership in the face of hostile local residents. Although described as a New Town, Stevenage was actually as old as the hills: the six Roman tumuli to be precise, which now sit alongside a town centre roundabout. Stevenage's future New Town status did not go down well with many locals, especially landowners at risk of compulsory purchase. A notable opponent was E M Forster, who had set his novel *Howard's End* in the locality, and who said that the New Town would 'fall out of the blue sky like a meteorite upon the ancient and delicate scenery of Hertfordshire'.

But Stevenage Urban District Council had already recognised the benefits of growth, planning in the late 1930s for Stevenage to expand to a population of well over 30,000 and establishing a special Stevenage Development Committee in 1944. At the prompting of Councillor Philip Ireton, a railway clerk who was enthusiastic and well informed about town planning (and a family friend whom I remember as 'Uncle Phil'), the Council gave guarded support to the Abercrombie proposal.

But the proposal was not without resistance. Lewis Silkin, Minister of Town and Country Planning,

famously arrived at public meeting in the run-up to eventual designation to find 3,000 protesters (half the town's population) outside the Town Hall. A subsequent referendum confirmed that 52% were 'entirely against' the town's expansion.

But Silkin was undeterred, telling the crowd: 'It's no use jibbing, it's going to be done.' He added: 'I am sure that this [wartime] spirit is not dead in Stevenage, and if you are satisfied that this project is worth while, and for the benefit of large numbers of your fellow human beings, you will be prepared to play your part to make it a success.' Having won a legal battle, he appointed the eight-member Stevenage Development Corporation to get on with the job, and a masterplan was drawn up for 60,000 new homes: 10,000 homes in each of six neighbourhoods, each with their own community centre, pub and shops. Shortly after designation, a number of local residents surreptitiously changed the railway station's name boards to 'Silkingrad'.

As long-standing residents, my family were proud that their little town had been chosen as Utopia. My grandad, a local master-builder, who couldn't find work or a home for his young family after the war, could not believe his luck: he gained both employment and the keys to a brand-new rented home. In fact, of the first 2,000 houses completed, over a quarter went to building workers and their families: those on London council house waiting lists prepared to work on the New Town for at least six months were granted a Corporation house. On their Sunday walks, my family surveyed the early groundworks, awe-struck by the scale and modernity of ambition – although there are still regrets that the first significant demolition was the old Town Hall and Market Square: 'the heart was ripped out'.

Recent Government policy on new towns has been supportive of locally-led development where there is clear local support. But it is worth considering that local views are often split, and it takes bravery from enlightened local representatives, as well as a determined national strategy, to design and build the new settlements needed to alleviate homelessness and ensure that everyone is well housed.

A third lesson is that the town didn't just provide homes: it provided opportunities. English Electric was one of the first employers to locate to the New Town, on a 70 acre site, bringing plenty of employment opportunities to local people (including my mum as an apprenticeship draughtsperson). De Havilland Propellers moved to a 14 acre site in 1953, merging into Hawker Siddeley Aviation in 1959. It was here that my other grandad, an

aeronautical engineer, gained employment and my dad an apprenticeship. They had to commute from an overcrowded flat in Neasden, but local employment gave them priority for a new Corporation home, which allowed the rest of the family to join them from Scotland. If we are to create thriving and sustainable new communities, they must not simply be dormitory towns to accommodate commuters, but must offer exciting opportunities for employment and enterprise so that parents can work close to home.

By the time I was growing up in Stevenage in the 1970s, it was full of youthful vibrancy. A new school had opened nearly every year until the mid-1960s. The Locarno Ballroom had hosted The Rolling Stones and Jimmy Hendrix. The pedestrianised town centre was the first purpose-built traffic-free shopping zone in Britain, overlooked by the Joyride, a mother and child sculpture by Franta Belsky that summed up the nurturing spirit of the town. Its extensive network of cycleways was decades ahead of London's cycle superhighway.

When the Development Corporation was wrapped up in 1980, we had a purpose-built, state-of-the-art hospital, an Olympic-size swimming pool, a huge man-made sailing lake, and a brand new Leisure Centre, incorporating a 1,200-capacity concert hall and theatre. My contemporary, the *Guardian* journalist Gary Younge, describes Stevenage as 'a great place to grow up', not least because the large majority of its inhabitants lived in council housing and this created a great sense of equality: 'There was no sense of incongruity in Stevenage between being a young professional and living in social housing.' The New Town Development Corporations were able to invest in such fantastic infrastructure as well as affordable housing because they could buy farmland at its existing use value.

There are things that Stevenage could have done differently. While the houses were spacious and comfortable, only 12 plan variations were used. Although this was egalitarian (you never had to ask for the bathroom because it was always in the same place), their utilitarian design was architecturally bland, resulting in an uninspiring built environment. This was compounded by frequent use of Radburn layouts and dual carriageways. Despite noble intentions of separating people from traffic – which was rightly anticipated to increase – and to zone industrial and retail areas, this style of urban planning lacked the vivacity of traditional street layouts.

As a young adult, I found the town a bit soulless. Perhaps this could be avoided by greater involvement of residents in the design. The

pedestrianised town centre is now in need of modernisation, but the winding up of the Development Corporation without allowing the town to capture the long-term uplift in land value has left Stevenage Borough Council struggling to find funding for renewal.

But Stevenage New Town has taught me that, with imagination and determination, new town development can be a force for good: improving not only the opportunities of existing local residents, but the wellbeing of families desperately in need of a decent home in a place where they can thrive in a new way of life.

● **Deborah Garvie** is Policy Manager at Shelter, which marked its 50th anniversary in 2016. When it was established in 1966, 3 million people were living in slums; 50 years later, there is another housing crisis, with a generation of young people struggling to afford their own home and a growing number of families affected by sub-standard housing and homelessness. On New Year's Day 2017, over 120,000 children in Britain woke up in homeless accommodation. The views expressed here are personal.