



Back to *the future*

*Garden cities offered a utopian vision of town planning at the dawn of the last century. But could they be the answer to the current housing crisis? The coalition seems to think so. **Joey Gardiner** reports*

The Garden City movement is just over 100 years old. Started by social reformer Ebenezer Howard at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, this Edwardian vision of a better world is being dug up by prime minister David Cameron and his deputy Nick Clegg as the template for new communities fit for the 21st. Earlier this month Clegg hailed the publication of a much-delayed prospectus inviting bids for new communities, saying he wanted three Garden Cities of around 15,000 people each in the South-east of England, with one site already identified in Ebbsfleet.

The move is the latest government attempt to tackle the housing crisis. It also follows quickly on from the closing date for entries to this year's Wolfson prize for economics, sponsored by Tory grandee and Next Group chief executive Lord Wolfson, which called for innovative proposals for the creation of garden cities that are "visionary, economically viable, and popular". Such is the popularity of the topic, the prize generated 279 entries and caused huge excitement in the development community. But any actual progress risks the wrath of anti-development protesters in rural constituencies. And amid rumours of coalition rifts over the issue, the wording of the prospectus has raised questions over whether the government's move is really a serious attempt to get new communities built, or a cynical ploy to kick the idea down the road.

A new outlook

To some extent, the growth of interest around garden cities is a natural reaction to changes to the planning system introduced by this government. Early coalition reforms saw the widespread redevelopment and densification of existing urban and suburban residential properties and gardens effectively blocked, meaning pressure for new housing shifted increasingly to greenfield

locations on the edge of or outside of towns. "Once that had happened," says Nigel Hugill, executive chairman at property Urban and Civic, "developers had to find somewhere else to put houses. There's not enough brownfield land so the only places were greenfield sites." The subsequent publication of the National Planning Policy Framework made these greenfield applications potentially easier to get through.

At the same time the bruising failure of Gordon Brown's eco-towns programme meant a rethink of what genuinely new communities might look like. Many of the founding principles of the garden city movement - sustainable development incorporating more traditional urban forms, combined with private sector entrepreneurship - made it fit for rehabilitation. Hence the avalanche of interest in the Wolfson prize, far out of proportion to its £250k reward.

While informed observers suggest the majority of submissions will not be fully worked up proposals with real-world sites, it is clear that the 279 bids do include some serious proposals from consortiums, including one containing several major housebuilders. A shortlist for the prize is due to be announced on 4 June, at which point finalists will have two months to work up more detailed submissions before the announcement of the winner in September (see box, overleaf).

David Birkbeck, chair of Design for Homes, says: "There's something very substantial going on across the country. The development industry is recovering, but this time with a planning framework giving it a much better chance of its more ambitious proposals getting adopted. There are major developments being thought of that would never have been anticipated five years ago."

The attitude of housebuilder Barratt, which is understood to have made a submission to the Wolfson prize, is typical of this new outlook. The firm will not comment on its submission, but »

Wolfson prize submissions

Building understands the following organisations and individuals are among those to have submitted bids:

- Barratt Developments
- Sir Peter Hall, Bartlett professor of planning and regeneration, UCL
- David Lock Associates
- Consortium led by architect Urbed
- UK Regeneration

What is a garden city?

The Town and Country Planning Association says a Garden City should contain the following:

- Land value capture for the benefit of the community
- Community ownership of land
- Mixed-tenure homes that are affordable for ordinary people
- A strong local jobs offer in the garden city itself
- Beautiful and imaginatively designed homes with gardens
- Generous green space linked to the wider natural environment, including a surrounding belt of countryside to prevent sprawl
- Facilities for residents to grow their own food, including allotments
- Strong local cultural, recreational and shopping facilities in walkable neighbourhoods
- Integrated and accessible low-carbon transport systems



» group land and planning director Philip Barnes warmly welcomes the government's prospectus. "We're very supportive of the emphasis on garden cities. These things are very difficult to deliver, so it's important the government is saying it wants to help. It's another example where the government is looking like it's taking housebuilding seriously."

The government's brief prospectus (it is only eight pages) certainly talks big, saying it has £1bn over six years to support ambitious proposals which set high standards of design. As well as financial support, it is offering "brokerage" to bring relevant government departments together to support successful schemes, as well as help negotiating the planning system. Unlike Gordon Brown's eco-towns, it makes clear the government will be flexible on design criteria that schemes will have to meet, and instead outlines garden city principles that "localities may wish to consider".

A high bar to reach

However, bidders for government help will still have to meet other tough criteria. This, according to critics, is where problems with the package start. To qualify for support proposals need to be able to demonstrate local authority backing – including from both authorities in two-tier areas, have very good transport infrastructure access, be commercially viable, ideally include some brownfield land, and have space for a minimum

of 15,000 homes.

Ian Tant, senior partner at planning consultant Barton Willmore, says: "It is a reasonably high bar to ask for both local authorities' support. But then the bar is raised even higher by saying a minimum of 15,000 homes. This makes it very difficult for the private sector to get involved. There's nothing here that's going to excite them to bring forward an entirely new proposal."

But it's not just difficult for the private sector: these criteria seem unrealistic even for councils to pull together. Hugh Ellis, director of policy at the Town and Country Planning Association (TCPA), the body which promotes the Garden City movement in the UK, is naturally pleased the government is showing so much enthusiasm for the idea – but is disappointed by the prospectus. "If you think about the possible sites in the South-east, it is hard to think where a development meeting these criteria could come from. It is hard to think of a single local authority in the region that is capable of bringing forward something of this magnitude."

But even if a site and a willing local authority can be found, Barratt's experience on its eco-town proposal in Rackheath shows how difficult this kind of large-scale stand-alone development is (see box on facing page). Hence developers and councils are likely to need significant state intervention, in the form of both money and statutory powers to get a scheme off

Above: Letchworth Garden City was founded in the early 1900s according to the principles of the social reformer Sir Ebenezer Howard

the ground.

It is here where critics are most disappointed with the prospectus. The funding it identifies consists solely of the ability to bid in to pre-existing funding pots where they will compete against other priorities – there will be no dedicated garden city funding. Indeed the most appropriate pot – the £1bn Large Sites Infrastructure Fund – closes to bids within a month, meaning there is no realistic prospect of accessing funding this year.

Even more fundamental is the issue of land assembly: without central government support in the form of development corporations with statutory powers, critics say there is little chance of accessing the land needed at prices which make a garden city viable. Peter Studdert, an independent consultant and former director of planning at Cambridge council, says of the prospectus: "It's feeble really. It doesn't really address the two key issues, one of which is acquiring land at as close as possible to existing use [for instance, agricultural] values, and encouraging councils to use compulsory purchase powers to do that. The other [issue] is money. The hand of the Treasury seems to be on this document."

It's chaos in the department. There is no plan for how garden cities will work and officials will be scrabbling around to stand something up to stop the department looking stupid

INDUSTRY SOURCE

These issues are vital because the reason the original garden cities at Letchworth and Welwyn worked financially – and the later new towns also – was because they could use the value created by the development to fund the huge amount of infrastructure required to create a functioning whole community. This is now very difficult to achieve without state help, because landowners in the UK's current system of planning will expect to receive a huge share of the expected uplift in value if they are to be persuaded to sell to developers. This means the increase in value, created by achieving planning status, goes into the landowners' pocket as cash rather than funding infrastructure. In other words, a garden city is likely to need either huge public funding or some way of accessing land at near the £10,000 an acre it is worth as farmland in order to be commercially viable.

Political stalemate

The prospectus gives no clue how it expects councils supporting a garden city to answer this conundrum. In particular it doesn't clarify the vital issue of whether the government expects garden cities to be on sites that are already identified in councils' local plans. Sites already in plans can, by definition, show public support as they have been through the public plan-creation process. The TCPA's Ellis says: "There's a Catch-22 at the heart of this. If the government wants to see sites that are already in council plans, then it will be very hard to capture land values in a way that allows a garden city to be built. But if they aren't in local plans, then it will be very difficult for a council to demonstrate support."

This lack of local support is what effectively killed Labour's eco-towns programme. The prospectus, whilst saying it is vital proposals are "locally led", gives no idea as to how communities might achieve this public support. The Wolfson prize, in contrast, tackles both the issue of public support and viability head on, asking specifically for entrants to say how they will address them.

Building understands from two separate sources that this lack of concrete help for schemes within the prospectus stems from a political stalemate within government over the

Rackheath: Eco-town to garden city?

In 2010 Rackheath, for which designs for a 200-home exemplar scheme are pictured, was selected as one of four eco-towns by the government of then prime minister Gordon Brown. Barratt is the development partner for the 4,000-home project, which sits just outside of Norwich.

The group of local authorities behind the scheme, which calls itself the Greater Norwich Development Partnership, have successfully battled to get the full site into the local core strategy. However, Philip Barnes, group land and planning director at Barratt, says no homes have been built even where planning has been approved because the eco-town wouldn't make money.

"A development as an eco-exemplar at the standards we have to meet is not viable in the current market conditions – you can't assume that London and the South-east conditions apply for a site like Rackheath in Norfolk."

In response, he says, Barratt is considering two alternatives for the site: first, splitting it into "bite-sized chunks" and progressing each individually. Or, second, looking at re-working the plans into a garden city. "We're looking at ways to unlock the site, and I'd be lying if I said we weren't thinking 'is there a garden city in this?' Could we look at a new identity for it along garden city principles?"



whole idea. Communities secretary Eric Pickles is thought to be opposed to the plan – despite being one of the signatories on the document – which is being promoted in government primarily by the Liberal Democrats.

In January the Daily Telegraph newspaper alleged a version of the prospectus existed with a series of specific sites identified – but any trace of actual sites has been removed from the published document. One source close to the communities department, said: "It's chaos in the department over this. There is no plan for how it will work, and I think the officials will be scrabbling around to stand something up and stop the department looking stupid."

Barratt's Barnes thinks that with state support, an answer to the land value conundrum is within the realms of possibility. "If agricultural land is worth £10k an acre, and allocated land [in the local plan] is worth north of £1m, the question is how can the state broker a deal whereby the landowner receives somewhere around £250k an acre – they still make a huge profit, but there is still the value to make the development happen."

Unfortunately, it seems unlikely the government's current prospectus will elicit these kind of answers – if it receives any bids at all. It is

hard not to suspect the exercise is designed to ensure that no concrete proposals which might have the potential to upset voters in marginal constituencies emerge before the next election. As Hugh Ellis says: "The government now needs to do an enormous amount of work on the detail over the summer to answer the questions people have. Without that work, it is questionable if anything will come forward from this."

Alan Cherry award

The funding and provision of new affordable housing is set to be discussed at a half day conference hosted by housebuilder Countryside in conjunction with Building magazine, at which it will also announce the winner of its annual Alan Cherry placemaking award. Secretary of state Eric Pickles is the keynote speaker, with contributors including David Lunts, executive director of housing at the GLA, Christine Whitehead, from the Cambridge Centre for Housing and Planning Research, and Brendan Sarsfield, chief executive at housing association Family Mosaic.