

# planning for posterity

## Nicholas Falk looks at how to plan strategically to join up infrastructure capacity with new development, with the aim of making the lives of future generations better

How can we rebuild our capacity to invest for the future and think ahead? This article suggests how to make city- and county-regions work through strategic planning that joins up infrastructure capacity with new development.

It follows on from an earlier article on 'Urban policy and new economic powerhouses' in *Town & Country Planning*,<sup>1</sup> and the TCPA's Tomorrow Series Paper *Cities Are Crucial: Four Scenarios for a 21st Century Urban Policy*.<sup>2</sup>

### Filling the gaps

With unprecedented cuts in council services and staffing and low housebuilding figures, planning is no longer trusted. Hard-pressed local authorities, barely coping and focused on scraping the financial barrel, are being asked to sell off land and release bigger sites for building houses to meet continuing shortages without proper spatial plans or mechanisms to ensure that the houses produced are truly affordable.

This policy of austerity cannot succeed so long as the handful of major housebuilders left after the last recession concentrate on the easy pickings, or bank land with planning permission for 'better days'. Strategic planning has virtually been abandoned, and planners end up on the defensive. We have an alphabet soup of unco-ordinated aspirations and are relying on foreign investors to rebuild our worn-out infrastructure.

As many have convincingly argued, we need *more* planning, not less. We should learn from what works elsewhere in Europe – planning for posterity, not austerity. This means joining up decisions on where new housing should go with transport capacity.<sup>3</sup> It means tapping into the uplift in land values to help fund improved local infrastructure.<sup>4</sup> Yet instead of 'transit-oriented development' we are getting car-based sprawl, based on the convenience of motorway junctions rather than the creation of living, working communities along integrated transit systems that favour walking and cycling.

As the Conservative peer Lord Wolfson argued in a House of Lords debate on the economic case for HS2:

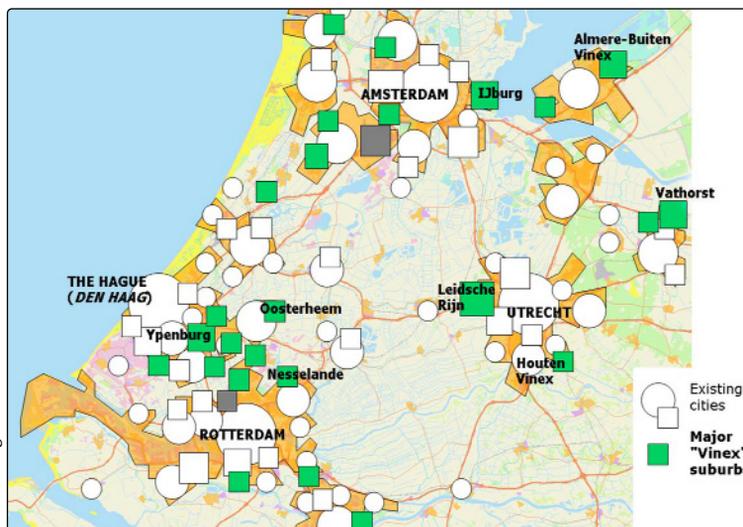
*'The alternative to HS2 is not another grand project; it is myriad small, high-return projects that would deliver benefits in the near future: bypasses, flyovers, underpasses, ... commuter line upgrades, carriage improvements, platform improvements and more. Such projects ... would serve the many rather than the few.'*<sup>5</sup>

Neighbourhood planning and localism cannot resolve the strategic challenge of deciding where we want growth to go, as most local communities are unable to work together at the larger and longer-term scales that are needed.<sup>6</sup> Many of the best sites for growth lie on or near organisational borders – for example North Harlow, which is on the edge of both Essex and Hertfordshire, divided by the River Stort. There are simply too many interests that can block development, too many statutory organisations to reach agreement, and too little trust – for example, six local authorities have very different ideas for the future of Central Oxfordshire, and similar problems occur in most tightly bounded county towns. So-called Strategic Economic Plans operate in a vacuum and are not joined up with housing or infrastructure decisions.

Having abandoned all the regional machinery, and with little left in the Exchequer, what should be done to fill the gaps? How can the spirit of municipal enterprise, which underlies the success of so many continental European cities, be reignited in the UK?<sup>7</sup>

### Making city-regions work

Attention is particularly needed in the areas with the greatest potential for economic growth, and where house prices are highest. In the North and Midlands at least, city-regions, such as those around Manchester and Birmingham, seem to be convincing the Government to delegate important powers, such as over local transport and health services. Alas, some may be taking on responsibilities they come



**The Dutch increased their housing supply by 7.6% in just over a decade, largely through urban extensions**

to regret: there is simply not enough profit from development to develop all the brownfield sites with large subsidies. A few cities, such as Sheffield, are showing that they can prioritise where development should be concentrated, having analysed housing capacity in the functional urban area.<sup>8</sup> But these Northern cities are large enough to employ effective planning teams, with councillors who are concerned about the longer term and who support the 'Northern Powerhouse' (the sparsely resourced successor to the Northern Way) as a means to that end.

In the South, and especially outside London, the situation is quite different. We need to match the standards found in most European cities, and apply what in the USA is called 'smart growth' and 'transit-oriented development'. Often there is not the experience of positive planning to put effective briefs together, let alone the capacity to join up infrastructure with development. Combined Authorities may help in sharing skilled staff, as the experience of Cambridge City working with neighbouring South Cambridgeshire shows. But too much time has to be spent dealing with planning targets and unwanted proposals, so there is virtually no time left to consider the big picture, let alone think creatively, and 20 or so years ahead.

The British planning system builds on strong traditions but needs updating if we are ever to plan strategically and minimise waste. Planning Inspectors will take seriously only those applications that have gone through a series of expensive hoops, while better options are often ignored. Landowners and developers will not spend the time needed when the risks are high, while the 'issues and options' stage encourages speculation and inflates land prices.

Inspectors dismissing plans for not being ambitious enough send all the wrong signals. Combined Authorities that are running social services on falling

budgets can hardly be expected to manage urban change as well. Even where the Government provides funding for housing growth the sums involved (around £20 million) are quite insufficient to provide the advance infrastructure needed.

It is not surprising therefore that in fast-growing cities, such as Oxford or Cambridge, employers complain of the difficulties of attracting skilled staff. Skilled staff cannot find suitable and affordable housing near their jobs, while existing residents are squeezed out and complain of congestion. The very places that might help to rebuild our economy and tackle the housing crisis are hobbled. Government measures to simplify the system are cutting red tape lengthwise.

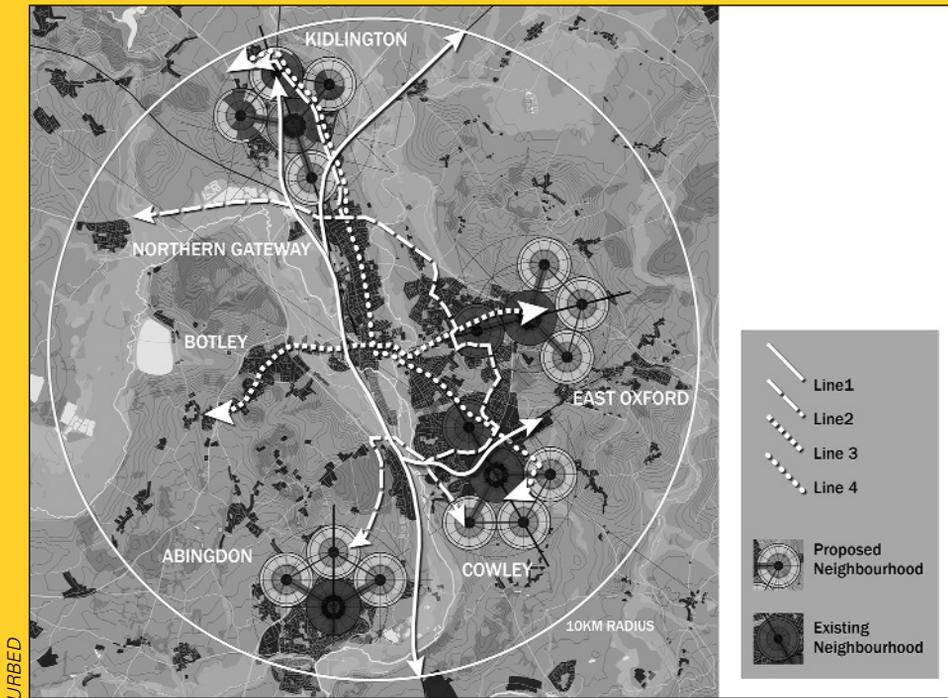
### **New Garden Cities and sustainable urban extensions**

If we are to double housing output, and build better neighbourhoods, we need to think and work at scale. The old planning system is broken and never worked very well in resolving regional issues. So in response to the difficulties of implementing large-scale schemes, which include new planned Garden Cities, the five Wolfson Essay finalists agreed on three simple proposals:<sup>9</sup>

- As agreeing sites for growth was so controversial, they first proposed a new mechanism to select strategic sites – some kind of Commission to arbitrate in situations of conflict. Only an outside body can resolve conflicts at local authority borders. We need to start with infrastructure capacity, existing or planned, and respond to market signals as Kate Barker proposed, instead of local authorities having to contend with whatever applications are submitted.
- Second, appropriate land must be assembled at close to existing-use value – as happens, for example, in Germany, where there has been

## Box 1

### Oxford Futures - a tale of two cities



**Fig. A Oxford Metro diagram showing how local transport could be progressively upgraded**

Oxford, with its historic centre and unrealised development potential, is one of the country's least affordable cities to live in, and is the subject of rival bids for various unitary status options. Reorganisation is needed to resolve where new development is to go, and how the necessary local infrastructure is to be funded to maintain the city's position as an intellectual and economic 'greenhouse'. Lord Adonis and the National Infrastructure Commission have been tasked by the Government to look at the best way of connecting Oxford with Milton Keynes and Cambridge; but to many local people more urgent questions include how different parts of Oxford might be connected to resolve intolerable congestion on the north-south A34, and how to make housing affordable for all, not just for first-time buyers.

Oxford, like many British cities, suffers from extreme spatial polarisation between older areas and newer council housing estates, and from deep-

seated political differences between the City Council, which is Labour, and the surrounding Conservative councils, who understandably focus on country towns such as Bicester, Didcot and Witney. The city is tightly constrained by administrative boundaries that hem it in, and by a large green belt, which has been fiercely defended. As a consequence Oxford University is finding it hard to attract or retain junior lecturers and research staff, which threatens its world standing. Private sector jobs are not growing as they should. One of Britain's greatest economic assets is under-performing.

Yet, as URBED's Uxcester Garden City proposal showed,<sup>1</sup> Oxford could double in population by 2050 if just 5% of the tight green belt were reallocated, if development were allowed on the city's edges, and if Ebenezer Howard's principle of tapping the 'unearned increment' were applied. The submission that won the 2014 Wolfson Economics Prize showed how

virtually no house price inflation.<sup>10</sup> Tapping land value uplift to help fund local infrastructure should be non-controversial. There is a degree of agreement among economists from the political left and right that the cost of land is the crucial variable that can pay for the local infrastructure needed for development to be viable. It is unfair for landowners to pocket all the uplift in values (what Ebenezer Howard called the 'unearned

increment') when permission is given for development.<sup>11</sup>

● Third, and as the TCPA has long argued, special-purpose delivery vehicles are needed, ranging from city-developer partnerships to development agencies with New Town Development Corporation powers.<sup>12</sup> Management capacity as well as capable planners will be crucial to ensuring not only that development is located

forecast housing demand over the next 30 years or so could be met through sustainable urban extensions, applying Garden City principles. The differences in land values between housing and agricultural land was sufficient not just to build high-quality and affordable housing, but also to build the first in a series of tram lines, and a new country park.

The arguments were summarised in an article in the April 2014 edition of *Town & Country Planning*,<sup>ii</sup> which called for a 'Municipal Investment Corporation' modelled on the Dutch and German state banks such as BNG and KfW. Subsequent research drew on experience in Oxford's twin city of Grenoble and German university cities of how transit-oriented development could help tame the cars that currently dominate the city. An integrated system of local rail services, new light rail, and bus rapid transit along the A40 that runs past the old city would enable the centre to be given over to pedestrians and cyclists, and carbon dioxide emissions to be greatly reduced (see Fig. A). The proposals for 'Swift Rail' could re-energise local government by providing a new funding source from development in the right places.<sup>iii</sup>

*Oxford Central West*, the recent report of a high-level workshop held at Nuffield College, shows that some 200 acres are available to support the rebuilding of Oxford station, possibly on a site closer to the new Westgate Shopping Centre.<sup>iv</sup> The opportunities have become available through Oxford City Council acquiring the former railway yard site at Oxpens, with support from Nuffield College, which now controls the land between the college and the station. Network Rail has deferred electrifying the line until 2024, by which time a new station with four platforms to handle a much greater number of services should be up and running. The event, which brought together local stakeholders and the Oxford Civic Society, with outside experts from the Academy of Urbanism, came up with an agenda for resolving the strategic issues and creating the necessary delivery mechanisms.

In a subsequent visit to learn from Cambridge, a number of differences became apparent. The pace of development there has been much faster. In part this is because of initiatives by some of the colleges and latterly the University – which, for example have raised £350 million through a bond to build exemplary homes and facilities on land which has

been taken out of the green belt. But there has also been much greater collaboration between the local authorities so that the whole area around the station has been redeveloped, even when the original developer collapsed.

Credit was given to the role played by Cambridgeshire Horizons, which helped maintain the vision set out in the County's Structure Plan – for example supporting study tours and the creation of the *Cambridgeshire Quality Charter for Growth*,<sup>v</sup> until it was abolished in the 'bonfire of the quangos'. The County has also played a key role in funding the guided busway, which is the spine along which new developments were proposed.

Although every city is different, the problems of joining up development with infrastructure are common, as experience in Colchester, Gloucester and York has revealed. While the City Deal process goes some way to focus public investment on growth 'hot spots', it does not overcome the forces of inertia, such as colleges hanging on to land, or the complexities of dealing with Network Rail and other public agencies, who have their own agendas and priorities. If the UK is to match the standards achieved by its main competitors, it surely needs to adopt similar approaches to strategic planning and infrastructure funding? The pent-up potential in Oxford, as well as ancient rivalries with Cambridge, should provide the stimulus for introducing long-awaited changes to dealing with land, and creating smarter cities, and could create a model for other British cities.

## Notes

- i D. Rudlin and N. Falk: *Uxcester Garden City*. Submission for the 2014 Wolfson Economics Prize. URBED, Jun. 2014. <http://urbed.coop/projects/wolfson-economic-prize>
- ii N. Falk: 'Funding large-scale new settlements'. *Town & Country Planning*, 2014, Vol. 83, Apr., 183-8
- iii N. Falk and R. Harman: 'Swift Rail – funding local rail transit through smarter growth'. *Public Money & Management*, 2016, Vol. 36 (6), 463-7
- iv *Oxford Central West. Summary of Workshop Findings on Development around Oxford Station*. Oxford Futures, May 2016. [www.oxfordfutures.org.uk/uploads/Oxford\\_Central\\_West\\_Report.pdf](http://www.oxfordfutures.org.uk/uploads/Oxford_Central_West_Report.pdf)
- v *Cambridgeshire Quality Charter for Growth*. URBED, for Cambridgeshire Horizons, May 2008. <http://urbed.coop/projects/quality-charter-growth-cambridgeshire>

in the right places, but that communities grow rapidly with the necessary social as well as physical infrastructure, such as schools and leisure facilities.

URBED's proposals went further by arguing that new Garden Cities are feasible only in places where demand is strong, and that they should be located as urban extensions, not free-standing settlements,

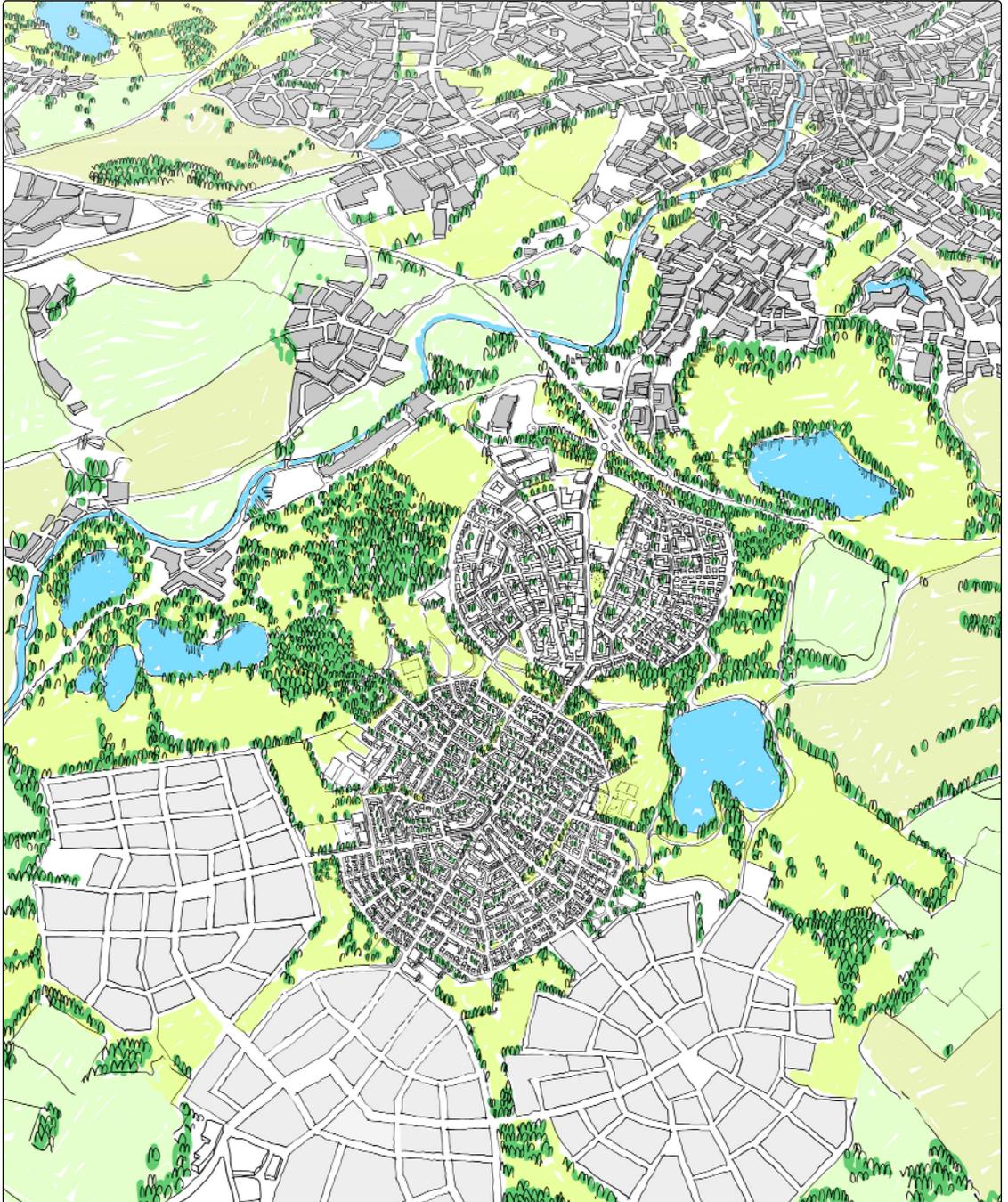
to take advantage of existing infrastructure. Such an approach wins support even from free-market economists, who conclude from a review of all the evidence that urban policy should focus on 'improving skills in declining places and on investing in infrastructure and housing in more successful places.'<sup>13</sup> Further support is provided in the World Bank study of the use of land value capture to fund transit systems.<sup>4</sup>

### No more muddling through

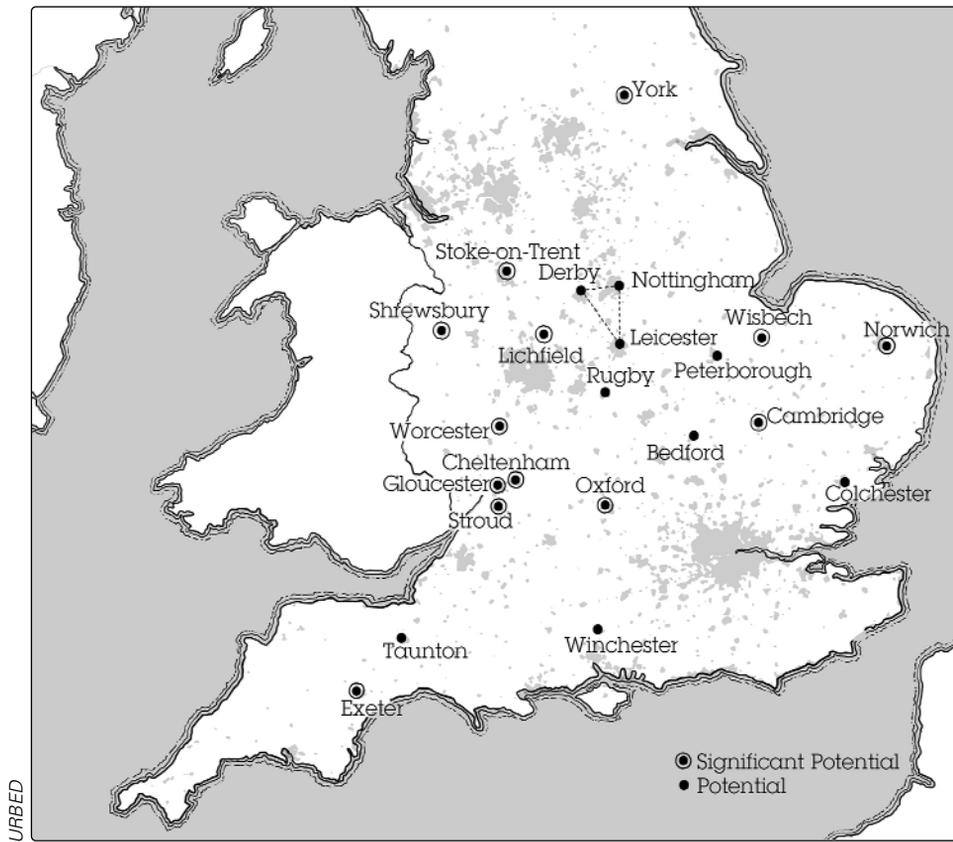
The Government's commitment to devolution follows international trends, with the striking difference that the UK, almost uniquely, has no constitutional framework for sub-national control. With Brexit in the air, we need to rethink how we plan. Other countries have formal rights of devolved decision-making within a context of legally

binding subsidiarity.<sup>14</sup> Here, the opportunities now presented are important, but ephemeral. For there needs to be overriding common purpose and leadership before collaboration across boundaries can work.

Developers' promotion of individual sites, sometimes fiercely contested, creates a patchwork of new development that is hard to relate to any



**Fig. 1** A plan for Uxchester Garden City, showing how cities can grow sustainably on their edges, using the example of Oxford



**Fig. 2 Possible 'Swift Rail' locations with housing potential**

broader vision or to good planning principles. Green belts, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and the rest can obstruct creative solutions to local challenges and restrict local opportunity, and can stop us thinking about the longer term and the bigger picture.

Furthermore, despite so many objectives or constraints, there is no proper evaluation of the full impact of options, as required by the Treasury (and hitherto the European Union), as Ian Wray has clearly shown in his book on British planning, and instead we blunder along.<sup>15</sup> Nationally, green belt policy is under great pressure, not least from the Government's policy of a presumption in favour of 'sustainable development'. The interaction between the two policies is highly uncertain and contested.

So, now, perhaps the central questions are whether the current and evolving planning processes can be used to resolve the conflicts and how better plans can be devised and implemented. URBED's winning Wolfson 2014 Economics Prize submission (see Box 1)<sup>16</sup> showed how local infrastructure could be funded from land value uplift by building new homes in sustainable urban extensions in strategic locations. URBED has followed up these proposals in Oxford (see Fig. 1), as well as in cities such as Sheffield.

### Planning for smarter growth

A new approach to strategic planning is needed for the places with most economic growth potential, places where people most want to live and work – 'greenhouses', so to speak. As research by the Centre for Cities has shown,<sup>17</sup> these include many of the historic cathedral cities with universities that attract brain power. These are usually county towns as well, and sit on railway junctions, often with under-used local capacity (see Fig. 2). To succeed in growing ancient cities such as Colchester, Gloucester, Oxford or York in a sustainable way, we will need to draw on European models, such as those used in Montpellier in France and Amersfoort in the Netherlands, as well as, of course, Freiburg in Southern Germany, 'the city that did it all'.<sup>7</sup>

Of course, we cannot predict the future, but we do understand demographic trends, and so should be thinking more than a generation ahead, say to Britain 2050. The Foresight *Future of Cities* reports provide a good starting point.<sup>18</sup> The final report argues that success should not be judged simply by GDP per capita, as cities are also *social hubs* and *environmental beacons*, as well as *economic assets*. It suggests assessing different possible scenarios against multiple criteria.

The available research evidence shows that current patterns of dispersed growth lead to higher

costs per head for service delivery and infrastructure; so urban form really matters. By 2036, the populations of major cities, especially London and in the South East, are forecast to grow by 21%, large cities by 16% and small cities by 15%, compared with 12% nationally. However, housebuilders find it more profitable to build around villages than to take on complex sites. So without changes to urban policy, the natural results in growing cities like Oxford or Gloucester will be gridlock, bankrupt county councils, and quite likely more urban riots. A much better urban policy would therefore follow our Uxchester approach<sup>16</sup> or the Dutch VINEX model, and extend major urban areas where the infrastructure allows – for example, extending Harlow New Town in Essex across the railway line and River Stort into Hertfordshire.<sup>19</sup>

Instead of focusing on inter-city links we would get more value and community support and also save costs by concentrating first on cutting commuting times (and consequent pollution), and then promoting transit-oriented development. This could greatly reduce dependence on national taxation by tapping into pension funds, attracted by the higher returns from local infrastructure.<sup>20</sup> Research for the World Bank shows that the best returns come from joint ventures that share in the uplift in land values, rather than tax increment financing schemes. Most of the value comes within half a mile of a station or tram stop.<sup>4</sup> Smarter growth means extending cities in ways that would cut travel times and energy consumption, and would be a suitable topic for the National Infrastructure Commission to take up.

## **‘By setting the level of infrastructure investment to match international competitors, and then allocating it where it will do most to close the gaps in living standards, we would reduce inequalities and achieve the goal of social justice’**

A national strategy for smarter growth could form the basis for a new generation of City Deals between central government, smaller local authorities, and other interest groups. These should then be formalised in Local Investment Agreements, with contractual status to provide private investors with the confidence they need. A ‘Charter for Quality Growth’ (as drawn up in Cambridgeshire) could be used to shape partnerships between the public and

private sectors.<sup>21</sup> Such a policy would require three basic and relatively simple steps:

- **Upgrading local public transport**, with better services and new stations, would provide easier access for jobs and services in neighbouring cities and help to overcome potential opposition on the grounds of congestion. URBED’s proposals for ‘Swift Rail’, modelled on the German Stadtschnellbahn system, show how modal shift in urban conurbations could be secured at relatively low cost.<sup>22</sup> Multi-criteria analysis for local infrastructure projects would secure better value from investment with less argument. Improvements early on, as with London’s Congestion Charge, would help overcome the sceptics.
- **Assembling strategic sites** (some already publicly owned) would enable the uplift in land values from development to be channelled into high-quality infrastructure, rather than producing windfall gains for landowners. Reviewing some of the green belts would enable pressurised cities to ‘flex their belts’, and to tap into land value uplift. Organisations as different as the CPRE, the London School of Economics and the London Society seem to agree that development should be along transport corridors.<sup>23</sup> Land value uplift could fund what proponents such as Dieter Helm want by creating a ‘living landscape’ in place of arid fields.<sup>24</sup> The required changes to land compensation are quite simple, as Thomas Aubrey shows in a well-researched proposal.<sup>25</sup>
- **Growing sustainable cities and healthy new towns** would minimise the need to use a car, and maximise the use of cycling and walking to support healthier lifestyles. An intelligent growth strategy would create what Brian Love calls ‘ConnectedCities’<sup>26</sup> through the kind of chain or network that Ebenezer Howard envisaged in his diagram for the Social City. Implementing joined-up development will require dedicated forms of governance, such as agencies with New Town Development Corporation powers, with measures for active community engagement, such as Community Land Trusts. Housebuilders should then be chosen on the basis of the quality of what they build, as in the best of developments in other parts of Europe,<sup>27</sup> not the size of their financial offer.

### **Harvesting the benefits**

While these proposals may sound ambitious, they are all needed to give younger people a stake in a more sustainable future, and to plan for posterity rather than austerity. Furthermore, by setting the level of infrastructure investment to match international competitors, and then allocating it where it will do most to close the gaps in living standards, we would reduce inequalities and achieve the goal of social justice. By ensuring new housing

is linked to investment in local infrastructure, and taking advantage of low rates of interest, we can also cut the costs of development, and start to make housing both more affordable again and environmentally sensitive.

When these projects then raise productivity, as they should, and help minimise waste (for example by cutting the time taken to get to work, or avoiding the need to build expensive bypasses), we will also score on the goal of boosting economic growth. Of course, political judgements will still need to be made, but at least they can take some account of longer-term consequences rather than short-term electoral arithmetic.

Naturally there is nothing new in this. It is what Ebenezer Howard originally proposed and what the post-war New Towns started to do. All it needs is conversion to the cause of making the lives of future generations a little better – a mission that people from all sides should support.

● **Dr Nicholas Falk** is an economist and urbanist who founded URBED 40 years ago, and is now sharing experience through the URBED Trust. He was joint winner of the 2014 Wolfson Economics Prize for showing how to build Garden Cities that are visionary, viable and popular, and helped to get Oxford Futures going. His grateful thanks go to Graham Garbutt, Ian Green, Reg Harman, Brian Love, David Rudlin, Richard Simmons and Ian Wray for their helpful comments. The views expressed are personal.

## Notes

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- 18 *Future of Cities: An Overview of the Evidence*. Foresight. Government Office for Science, Mar. 2016 – plus supporting reports (such as K. Williams: *Urban Form and Infrastructure*; and M. Edwards: *Prospects for Land, Rent and Housing in UK Cities*) – all at [www.gov.uk/government/collections/future-of-cities](http://www.gov.uk/government/collections/future-of-cities)
- 19 *Learning from Dutch New Towns and Suburbs*. Report of the Harlow Renaissance Study Tour, Mar. 2007. <http://urbed.coop/projects/harlow-renaissance-study-tour>
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