

Speech: New Towns: launch of the All-Party Parliamentary Group

Good evening and thank you, Lucy. It's a pleasure to be here.

Now, we all know the jokes about roundabouts, concrete wastelands and ring roads.

The references to eternity looking like Milton Keynes.

The people who make these jokes have no idea what they're talking about.

If they want to know what eternity feels like, try being a politician waiting for the call from No.10 on reshuffle day!

But, seriously, as the launch of this APPG shows, New Towns have got a lot to offer.

That we need to do more to ensure they're fit for the future.

And that we have an ambitious vision for the New Towns of the 21st century.

One man who certainly wasn't lacking in vision was Ebenezer Howard, the pioneer whose garden cities inspired the New Towns.

But it's fair to say that not everyone bought into his dreams of marrying the best of city and rural living.

Even the progressive Fabian News said rather sniffily:

"His plans would have been in time if they had been submitted to the Romans when they conquered Britain..."

But Ebenezer Howard's achievements; as an urban planner whose influence can still be felt, here and abroad, speak for themselves.

They're all the more remarkable considering that his day job was as a Hansard short-hand copy-taker right here in Parliament.

So maybe I need to look a little closer to home for solutions to the housing crisis!

And it's especially pleasing to have the Town and Country Planning Association...

...the organisation Howard founded...

...supporting this APPG and represented here today.

Your input, and the history behind it, underlines that the challenges Howard sought to address are just as relevant today.

Not enough good quality affordable housing.

Overcrowding.

The belief that everyone deserves to live in a strong, vibrant community.

Of course, the bleak industrial backdrop that spawned Howard's garden cities has long gone.

But the desire for people to live somewhere they can find work, build families, get about easily, and enjoy green space has not.

It's the most basic of desires – the desire for a place to call home.

And it's this issue of place...

...how to build not just more homes, but strong communities...

...that goes to the heart of the challenge we face as a country.

A challenge we're determined to meet – as underlined by the recent change in my department's name...

...to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

And the launch of a new national housing agency, Homes England.

A challenge that the important work of this APPG has an opportunity to inform.

Because there's little doubt that there are valuable lessons to be learned from New Towns.

Many, like those represented by my honourable friends here today,..

... are home to successful companies

...offer affordable homes

...and job opportunities that attract inward commuters.

But the downsides of the rapid development and, in particular, centralised planning, that underpinned New Towns are all too evident.

Dated, often identikit housing, infrastructure and town centres that, too often, look like everywhere and nowhere.

That don't just make these towns the butt of lazy jokes...

...but make it harder for them to be seen as truly aspirational and attract the investment they need to grow and thrive.

Like you, I want this to change.

And I can see that many new towns are stepping up to the challenge.

Some, like Bracknell, are making intelligent use of their existing assets...

...and making a virtue of the need for massive regeneration to offer investors and developers scale of opportunity.

Others, such as Crawley, are introducing a richer mix of shopping opportunities and development...

...by breaking down the original blocky zoning and the inner ring roads.

And we're seeing high quality and better design informing the development of Lightmoor Village in Telford.

A development that, fittingly, is being driven by a partnership between Homes England and Bournville...

...one of the first and still most successful New Towns.

And I see partnerships; between central and local government, between local government and the private sector, as very much the way forward.

For regenerating existing New Towns and driving the delivery of new ones.

Again, Lucy's constituency, is showing just what's possible through initiatives such as the Telford Land Deal.

A partnership between:

- the government
- Homes England
- the local council
- and Marches LEP

...that will deliver 2,800 new homes and 8,500 new jobs.

The key thing with this Deal, is that it's led, not centrally, miles away from the communities concerned...

...even if that approach had worked previously, it wouldn't be right for the times we live in.

Instead, it's led locally by those who know Telford best – the people who live and work there.

This shows that government and New Towns can work innovatively to power further growth.

And that we're open to other New Towns coming to us with ideas.

We're already supporting 24 locally led garden cities, towns and villages...

...ranging in size from 1,500 new homes to over 20,000, from Cornwall to Cumbria.

Some are being built on land where there are few or no houses at the moment.

Others will provide transformational growth to existing settlements.

All reflect their particular local circumstances and share a focus on quality and good design...

...echoing the commitments in our [Housing White Paper](#).

The recent Budget...

...the biggest and boldest for housing for decades...

...built on these commitments to back five new locally led Garden Towns in places where demand is high.

A million new homes in the Oxford-Milton Keynes-Cambridge corridor by 2050...

...a hugely ambitious project which I was delighted to appoint my honourable friend, Iain Stewart, to champion.

And also the first of our ambitious Housing Deals...

...with Oxfordshire, to deliver 100,000 homes by 2031, backed by £215 million of funding for infrastructure.

We all know that the right infrastructure is absolutely vital for New Towns.

So the Budget's doubling of investment in the Housing Infrastructure Fund to £5 billion can only be good news.

As are our legislative changes to reboot New Town Development Corporations – the vehicle for the post-war New Towns.

So you can count on our support.

But I won't pretend that we have all the answers.

Which is why I am keen to learn from the important work you'll be undertaking; to better understand the challenges and opportunities for New Towns.

To consider how can we do more to support the people and places you serve.

And deliver the next wave of garden towns and villages.

So congratulations again on today's launch and all the best for your work ahead.

As a government, we've made some great strides, having delivered more than a million homes since 2010.

And helped over 255,000 households buy their own home through Help to Buy.

But there's clearly a long way to go to deliver the 300,000 homes a year on average we will need by the mid 2020s.

New towns have an important role to play in helping us fix our broken housing market.

But I know we'll really have succeeded when the joke isn't on New Towns, but those who knock them.

Thank you.