Creating New Communities:
The Role of the Neighbourhood Unit
in Post-war British Planning

ANDREW HOMER

The use of the neighbourhood unit concept was a key element in the majority of the first 'mark one' new towns constructed following the New Towns Act of 1946. The neighbourhood unit represented an attempt to reverse the perceived breakdown of 'community spirit' during the inter-war years. The concept was also used by the 1945 Labour government as a means to eradicate class divisions, and thus make society more cohesive. This article traces the rise and rapid decline of the neighbourhood unit policy from its American origins to its ignominious disappearance in the face of opposition from town planners, architects and sociologists. It evaluates the successes and failings of this policy and argues that the concept reveals much not only about the governance and planning of Britain in the immediate post-war period, but also raises issues about class and social 'cohesion' in British society.

The neighbourhood unit idea was one of the major features in British town planning following the end of World War II. The concept was particularly dominant in the 'mark one' new towns designated between 1946 and 1951. It was employed in 11 of the 14 constructed. It can be argued that the use of the neighbourhood unit stemmed from the post-war political elite's attempts to increase community interaction and, more controversially, to break down class differences. However, by 1955 the influence of the neighbourhood unit had declined, and it was even abandoned by the new town planners. This article will trace the reasons behind the rapid rise and even faster decline of what was a major planning concept. There will also be an evaluation of two of the key social aims of the concept: the breaking down of class barriers and the encouragement of community interaction.

Origins

The neighbourhood unit concept was based upon the ideas of the American town planner Clarence Perry, who published his *The Neighbourhood Unit, A Scheme of Arrangement for the Family-Life Community* in 1929.[1] Perry attempted to create a residential area possessing distinct local characteristics

Andrew Homer, University of Luton.

to meet the needs of family life. This was to be achieved by providing localised services such as schools, shopping facilities and community centres without supplanting the town centre, which the neighbourhoods would surround. The neighbourhood unit was regarded as a method of reinvigorating community feeling at local level within American cities. Instead of unplanned development leading to impersonal, overpopulated, high density areas, it was intended that the more spacious, lower density neighbourhood unit would rejuvenate community life. James Dahir, the compiler of a 1947 bibliography examining the neighbourhood unit, argued that 'modern life, based on an impersonal system of prices and mass production of goods, has created a way of life hostile to neighbourliness'. Dahir feared that the existence of 'mass men in a mass culture' could be 'the raw material for a totalitarian society'.[2]

According to Dahir, the neighbourhood unit consisted of four distinctive local factors.[3] Firstly, there was to be a centrally located elementary school within easy walking distance of all the houses (it was anticipated as being no more than half a mile from the furthest dwelling). The school was intended to be a focal point of the neighbourhood community. It was expected that parents walking their children to the school would begin to associate with each other thus adding to the community's strength. Secondly, ten per cent of the neighbourhood unit area was to consist of parks and playgrounds. This was an attempt to challenge the urbanism of American cities and produce a greener environment that had greater opportunities for leisure activities. The third aspect of the neighbourhood unit was to be the existence of local shops situated together at accessible points round the periphery. While the main shops were to remain situated within the town centre, smaller outlets were intended to provide for daily needs. The fourth aspect of the neighbourhood unit was that they would be residential environments. There would not be any industry contained within the units, it would be zoned in separate areas. The units would be self-contained: there would be no main roads cutting through them to disturb the peace or endanger children. It was anticipated that a community spirit could be stimulated by the careful situation of institutions such as churches and community centres within the neighbourhood units. While it was not expected that the use of the neighbourhood unit concept alone would create cohesive communities, it was intended to create greater opportunities for association amongst the residents and to stimulate community growth.[4]

Although the possibilities offered by the neighbourhood unit plan were first officially recognised in Britain in the 1940s there were earlier precursors of the neighbourhood ideal. For example, Ebenezer Howard, widely regarded as the founding father of the garden city movement in Britain, had written in 1898 of housing being divided into six residential

'wards' away from the centre of the town.[5] A practical inter-war example can be found in the town of Wythenshawe, south of Manchester. Planned by Barry Parker in 1930, the town's residential areas were divided into distinct neighbourhood units.[6]

The neighbourhood unit became established in contemporary British planning thought through its inclusion in James Forshaw and Sir Patrick Abercrombie's *County of London Plan*, published in 1943.[7] The first formal adoption of the neighbourhood unit plan at governmental level is to be found in the Ministry of Health Report *Design of Dwellings,* an addendum to an investigation chaired by the Earl of Dudley in 1944.[8] As in the United States, the *Dudley Report* claimed that the creation of larger towns had led to the break up of community life in Britain. The report sought to 'work out some organisation of physical form which will aid... the full development of community life and enable a proper measure of social amenities'. It argued: 'the idea of the "neighbourhood unit" arises out of an acknowledgement of the necessity of doing this and offers the means of doing it'.[9]

The Neighbourhood Unit in the New Towns

The establishment of new towns was very much a priority for a Labour government haunted by the mocking ring of Lloyd George's unfulfilled 'homes for heroes' policy. To this end the government established the New Towns Committee almost immediately following its election in 1945. The committee was to be responsible for creating the financial and administrative framework for the British new towns. In addition the committee attempted to define social life within the new towns and suggest the principles by which they should be planned. The terms of reference for the committee charged it with considering 'general questions' of:

> the establishment, development, organisation and administration that will arise in the promotion of New Towns in furtherance of a policy of planned decentralisation from congested urban areas; and in accordance therewith to suggest guiding principles on which such Towns should be established and developed as self-contained and balanced communities for working and living.[10]

The New Towns Committee was headed by Lord Reith, who had previously served as the Minister of Works and Buildings in the wartime coalition government. The other members of the committee represented a wide range of differing interests. They included Monica Felton, a member of the Town Planning Committee of London County Council and later chairman of Stevenage Development Corporation; Frederic Osborn, chairman of the Town and Country Planning Association; W. H. Gaunt, the chairman of

Hertfordshire County Council Planning Committee; Percy Thomas, the president of the Royal Institute of British Architects; W. Morgan, the Middlesex County Engineer, and J. Watson, a member of the Central Housing Advisory Committee within the Ministry of Health.[11]

The Reith Committee worked at a frenetic pace: it was appointed in October 1945, and it had completed its final report by July 1946. The committee also produced two interim reports dealing with matters requiring urgent attention. The first was published in March 1946 and dealt mainly with the question of deciding what type of agency should administer the new towns.[12] The second, published the following month, was not planned but was forced upon the committee by the government's attempts to push through the new town legislation ahead of schedule. The report dealt with all matters that needed to be considered before the legislation could finally be framed. These questions included: the acquisition of land; finance; land policy; and the local government status of the future communities. Despite the apparent speed at which the committee was working, this report was quick to head off any charges that not enough attention was being paid to the various problems. It argued that most of the matters raised had 'already reached an advanced stage of discussion' and that it had been a simple matter to pull all the strands together.[13] The *Final Report* of the New Towns Committee was intended to lay down the principles of planning and social life within the new towns. This included discussion of the factors to be taken account of during the preparation of the new town plans and the execution of the plans themselves. It firmly enshrined the concept of the neighbourhood unit within new town planning:

> The principal roads within the town... as well as other topographical features, tend to group the residential areas of the town into more or less clearly defined parts or neighbourhoods. Convenient placing of primary schools, minor groups of shops, churches, refreshment houses, meeting places, and other public buildings, may also, as nuclei, have the same effect. The neighbourhood is therefore a natural and useful conception.[14]

However, there is little evidence that the committee actually discussed the neighbourhood unit or its alternatives. From the beginning, it appears, the committee regarded the neighbourhood unit as the most appropriate and only satisfactory measure for new town planning.[15] There are two main reasons for this. As already shown, the neighbourhood unit was becoming entrenched in British planning culture. Secondly, there was a lack of time, and possibly inclination, to consider any of the alternatives.

The need for a rapid completion of the task in hand was emphasised at the outset of the committee's discussions in a memorandum from the joint

secretaries, L.F. Boden and F.H. Budden.[16] The memorandum suggested that consideration of particular subjects should be devolved to sub-committees, consisting of one or two members, with a view to speeding up the process. This suggestion was acted upon by the members of the New Towns Committee at its first meeting.[17] Two sub-committees were established, one examining constitutional and financial problems, the other, dealing with planning, execution and administrative problems. In addition, there were 15 'special study groups', usually consisting of one or two committee members. These groups investigated a variety of subjects including transport, the provision of shops, industry, and planting and landscape gardening. No special group was set up to investigate the neighbourhood unit concept. In fact the investigation of housing was left to the joint secretaries rather than committee members.

It appears that the use of the neighbourhood unit in the first new towns was a foregone conclusion. Reith distributed a memorandum to the other members of the New Towns Committee as a preliminary briefing before the first meeting. It pre-empted much that was in the subsequent reports. This was despite Reith's emphasis that 'it must not be intended to orientate the committee in any of its decisions. If in places it recommends, or appears to recommend, a definite course of action this is for purposes of argument.'[18] However, much of this 'preliminary appreciation' later directly found its way into the committee's work. Reith argued that the outline plan for a new town should be dealt with under six main headings: the alignment of main roads; zoning; sewerage and drainage; railway facilities; and services and amenities.[19] Sub-committee two of the New Towns Committee replicated the contents of the preliminary document almost exactly.[20] Furthermore, in Reith's preliminary notes discussing the preparation of outline new town plans, he declared that 'residential areas should be split into neighbourhoods'.[21] No other alternative plans were discussed. However, not all members of the New Towns Committee were persuaded of the benefits of the neighbourhood unit plan. For example, Frederic Osborn cast doubt upon the ability of the neighbourhood unit to achieve its social aims in a letter to the American planner Lewis Mumford written in 1952. Osborn declared: 'I do not really believe in the village within the town; I mean that I do not believe it can be created by the physical structure of a neighbourhood and its centre.'[22] Nevertheless, Osborn did not apparently voice his fears to the rest of his colleagues.

It remains unclear why the New Towns Committee was so committed to the neighbourhood unit concept. It is likely that the neighbourhood unit was adopted because it enjoyed significant support within the Ministry of Town and Country Planning. Lewis Silkin, the minister, had already announced his support for the neighbourhood unit concept, although he admitted that

further research was required: 'I would like more thought to be given to the concept of neighbourhoods, even to the whole conception of the idea. I have fallen for it myself, but I would like to think it out again.'[23] Further support for the concept came from Gordon Stephenson, of the Planning Technique Division of the ministry. Stephenson was an advocate of the neighbourhood unit concept who had contributed to not only the *Greater London Plan* but also the *Design of Dwellings* addendum to the *Dudley Report*.[24] Significantly Stephenson was responsible for the planning of the new town of Stevenage.

This view is further strengthened by an examination of the planning of Stevenage. The Ministry of Town and Country Planning was so anxious to ensure that no time was wasted in beginning construction at Stevenage that the town's master plan was begun even before the Reith Committee had sat for the first time.[25] The New Towns Committee was to have little direct impact upon the Stevenage Plan, despite the fact that the sub-committee responsible for examining planning, execution and administrative problems expressed a desire to 'keep in touch with work in progress'.[26] Meetings did take place between the Stephenson and the members of the sub-committee, but it appears that they were little more than report backs from the planner with little or no positive input from the committee members.[27] The Stevenage Master Plan divided residential areas into neighbourhood units containing an average population of 10,000 people, with shopping sub-centres to meet everyday needs.[28]

The Ministry of Town and Country Planning's view of the neighbour-hood unit was outlined in a technical report investigating the planning of residential areas which was completed in January 1947.[29] It was clear that the ministry regarded the neighbourhood unit as a means of recreating village life within the new towns. The report noted that in the 'village or small town where personal contacts are continuos and close, the community spirit is still lively and perceptible'. The neighbourhood unit was intended to recreate this spirit within the new communities by providing them with 'physical backgrounds which will encourage their growth, and to preserve in peacetime the spirit of neighbourliness and mutual reliance which flourished so strongly in civil defence and other activities of war'.[30] The report was quick to warn that the neighbourhood unit was 'not a panacea for all urban planning problems, nor is it the imposition of an arbitrary pattern of self-contained and segregated "units"'.[31] However, this was exactly what the ministry in fact attempted to achieve with its controversial policy of socially balanced neighbourhood units.

While the neighbourhood unit was becoming an accepted planning concept in Britain there was to be a dramatic departure from its American counterpart. Along with reinvigorating community spirit by stimulating

community interaction, the innovation was also expected to spark a greater understanding and interaction between members of different social classes. It was intended that residents with different income levels should live together within the same neighbourhoods. This went against the evidence and accepted planning practice, as summarised in Dahir's *The Neighbourhood Unit Plan: Its Spread and Acceptance*.[32] Significantly, Dahir made no claims that the neighbourhood unit created socially homogeneous communities. However, it is certain that this was firmly intended by the Labour government. Lewis Silkin was to declare at the time of the passing of the New Towns Bill that 'the different income groups living in the new towns will not be separated'.[33]

In its *Final Report* the New Towns Committee attempted to deal with the 'complex problem of founding the social structure of a new town and fostering its corporate life'.[34] The committee returned to its original terms of reference, stating that while the meaning of 'self-contained' was evident, the concept of a 'balanced community' was in need of greater definition. The Report saw the question of 'balance' in terms of social class, arguing that 'if the community is to be truly balanced, so long as social classes exist, all must be represented in it'. It continued:

> In all existing communities there is a tendency towards segregation by income group... If a socially homogenous community is to be created, a conscious and sustained policy to that end will be needed on the part of the agency itself, and of the leaders of local industry and commerce and of social activity. It will not be enough merely to attract a representative cross-section of the population, to locate skilfully the sites for houses of all classes in the various neighbourhoods, and to provide at the earliest stage suitable buildings for various amenities.[35]

However, while it was committed to the concept of the socially balanced neighbourhood unit the Reith Committee was rather hazy as to how it could be achieved: 'We believe this issue is vital to the success of these new communities; that what is achieved here may have an affect far beyond the field of its immediate application, and that there is need for much more thought and study on this subject.'[36]

Again the Reith Committee had borrowed from *Design of Dwellings*.[37] The Dudley Report pinpointed the major failing of housing during the inter-war period as the growth of single-class housing estates, such as Dagenham and Becontree, and exceeded its terms of reference by suggesting ' means for the erection of complete communities rather than the development of purely residential estates for a single social class'.[38] It was hoped that once the different social classes had intermingled any tensions between them would disappear. From a great deal of evidence submitted, the Dudley

Report argued that various types of dwellings should be located within the units, and suggested that the neighbourhood should be '"socially balanced", inhabited by families belonging to different ranges of income groups, or at least not so unbalanced as to be restricted to dwellings and families of one type or income level only'.[39] The report claimed that this could be achieved by 'the grouping of the various types of dwellings in such a way that they satisfy the desires of the various social groups...and yet at the same time are part of the neighbourhood'.[40]

The policy of creating socially balanced communities was supported by senior figures within the Labour government. The Minister of Health, Aneurin Bevan, declared: 'We have to have communities where all the various income groups of the population are mixed.'[41] This view was echoed by Lewis Silkin, the Minister of Town and Country Planning, who proclaimed: 'The first thing that we want is a variety of sections of the community'. Silkin wanted this variety 'in types of persons, in social and economic position, so that each person, each member of the community, may be able to make a contribution to the life of the community, and so that each may enrich by his experience the experience of others'.[42]

However, it appears that the policy of the different classes intermingling went against popular opinion. A survey carried out by Bertram Hutchinson in Willesden assessing popular attitudes towards the new town programme emphasised a preference for living in single class areas. The higher up the social scale Hutchinson surveyed, the stronger the preference was emphasised. Hutchinson concluded that it was 'contrary to the wishes of the majority of the Willesden people that the planning of a new town should result in the close intermixture of classes in the same street'. Hutchinson did suggest an alternative: 'the planning of mixed neighbourhoods, however, is another matter, and might be acceptable'.[43]

Decline

The neighbourhood unit became a dominant feature of British town planning in the immediate post-war period. The concept reached its peak by 1952. Of the 14 'mark one' new towns, the term neighbourhood unit was explicitly used in 11. In 1952 a questionnaire was sent to chief planning officers of the English and Welsh Counties and County Boroughs. The survey attempted to gauge how widespread was support for neighbourhood unit. The responses revealed that 78.8 per cent of planners had used the concept in some development for which they were responsible.[44] Despite this success, however, the planner Sir Patrick Abercrombie felt able to trace 'the rise and decline of neighbourhood planning' by 1956.[45] Use of the neighbourhood unit concept declined dramatically as the idea came under increasing attack from both sociologists and architects.

Utilising a survey of Coventry, published in 1953, the sociologist Leo Kuper stressed that housing arrangements and facilities did not create neighbourliness, only the opportunity for it. Kuper argued that proximity could cause antagonism between neighbours rather than promoting harmonious communities.[46] Ruth Glass's study of Middlesborough, too, introduced qualifications. She acknowledged that the units had practical advantages, but attacked the romantic notions of resuscitating a village type life within a town as being of dubious validity. The sociologists' view was clear: living in neighbourhoods did not make people more neighbourly.[47]

Indeed, Glass was at the forefront of an attack by the left against the concept of social balance, based upon the premise that it was a strategy to keep the working classes in their place and prevent political action. Glass denounced the dispersal of working men to model villages under the aegis of their "masters" as a means of dispelling the danger of working class combination'.[48]

Further condemnation came from members of the architectural profession. The neighbourhood unit was intended to ensure housing densities were at a relatively low level to maintain a feeling of space and semi-rural setting. However, this policy came under a ferocious attack from some architects who called for greater urbanism within the new towns. The most severe criticisms were in *The Architectural Review*, which decried the 'failure of the new towns'. An article in 1953 by J. M. Richards, its editor, declared that the new towns were not towns at all but mere suburbs and that the 'new town neighbourhoods differ but little from the pre-war garden-suburb housing-estate'. Warming to his theme, Richards declared that the neighbourhoods lacked 'the urban qualities required of them'. He argued that by definition towns should be urban areas, but added that the new town residents 'instead of feeling themselves secure within an environment devoted to their convenience and pleasure, find themselves marooned in a desert of grass verges and concrete roadways'.[49]

By the beginning of the 1960s, the neighbourhood unit concept had been completely abandoned by the new town planners. The plans published by London County Council, following the aborted attempt to build a new town at Hook, rejected the idea of separate neighbourhood units dispersed radially around the town centre in favour of a stronger central area with a greater concentration of population.[50] The authors of the 1962 Master Plan for the Scottish new town of Cumbernauld declared that they 'did not contemplate the use of the neighbourhood unit principle'. Rather, as at Hook, Cumbernauld was to be a 'cluster city', with the town centre closely surrounded by residential areas.[51]

The practices of the new town planners in the 1960s marked a clear departure from using neighbourhood units. However, the Ministry of

Housing and Local Government failed to examine the impact of the concept within the new towns. In 1948 the Ministry of Town and Country Planning had established an exploratory committee on social and economic research within the new towns. This was to be a failure. The committee concluded that, as far as the neighbourhood unit was concerned, there were 'still considerable gaps in knowledge' and that this was an area in which 'original research will certainly be required at an early stage'. Yet, the committee failed to produce any investigation into the neighbourhood unit concept and was beset by problems mainly due to personal clashes between members of the committee and representatives of the development corporations.[52] An abject failure, the research unit was disbanded in 1950 before the new town neighbourhood units were fully constructed and inhabited.[53] It would not be until 1962 that the Ministry of Housing and Local Government attempted to carry out further research into the social composition of the new towns.[54] This was *after* the plans for Hook and Cumbernauld had already moved away from the neighbourhood unit.

The Social Effects of the Neighbourhood Unit: Social Balance

One of the first British new towns designated was Hemel Hempstead in Hertfordshire. The master plan for the new town steadfastly followed the New Towns Committee's commitment to ensure that there was a social balance maintained within the town. However, the Hemel Hempstead Development Corporation acknowledged that 'to achieve this in practice and without compulsion it would seem that some compromise should be made in the distribution of the classes of houses'. To this end each of the town's neighbourhoods were to be given different class characteristics depending upon whether they contained subsidised (i.e. primarily working-class) or unsubsidised (middle-class) housing. 'Middle-class' housing would be built at a much lower density. For example, the 'primarily subsidised' neighbourhood of Adeyfield would contain 19.3 persons per acre whilst the unsubsidised area of Warner's End would contain only 11.4 persons per acre. In Hemel Hempstead, there were to be three neighbourhoods containing primarily subsidised housing, with two neighbourhoods containing a majority of unsubsidised housing. However, Hemel Hempstead Development Corporation did not shy away altogether from the prospect of socially balanced neighbourhoods, since two areas, Grovehill and Aspley, were allocated to 'equally subsidised and unsubsidised housing'.[55]

In its final annual report, before dissolution published in 1962, Hemel Hempstead Development Corporation claimed: 'the desired balance has been achieved so far as types of occupation and income groups are

concerned'. The Corporation attempted to justify this argument by comparing types of housing contained within the five neighbourhoods completed by 1960. It replaced the terms 'subsidised' and 'unsubsidised' with 'grade one' (houses and flats with inclusive rents up to about 55 shillings) and 'grade two' (houses and flats renting at £150 per year, houses sold and private enterprise housing). Overall the town had an average of 76.6 per cent 'grade one' housing and 23.4 per cent 'grade two' housing. Within the neighbourhoods themselves, Adeyfield (primarily unsubsidised) had 75.3 per cent 'grade one' and 24.7 per cent 'grade two'. Examining these figures it appears that the neighbourhood had achieved the social balance intended in the master plan. However, in Warner's End, an area intended to be wholly unsubsidised, the figures matched those of Adeyfield with 78.2 per cent 'grade one' and 21.8 per cent 'grade two'. Bennett's End (the eventual name for the Aspley neighbourhood) which had been allocated to equally subsidised and unsubsidised housing showed the greatest amount of social balance, containing 69.7 per cent 'grade one' and 30.3 per cent 'grade two'.[56] This suggests a serious failing in at least one of the first new towns: its predominately working-class population and its failure to attract the middle classes in sufficient numbers.

Many members of the middle classes did not find living in a new town an attractive proposition. In 1953, the Rector of Crawley new town was moved to write to *The Times* that 'higher income groups are not being attracted... in a sufficient proportion'. The Rector feared that this would have a negative impact upon the development of the new town, as there would be 'deficiency of local leadership to which English people are accustomed'.[57] A former Deputy Social Relations Officer of Stevenage Development Corporation recalled: 'senior management tended to look for a house outside the new town... if they didn't want to live in a village then, by and large, their wives did'.[58] He explained that the managers 'tended not to want to live in what they regarded were... council estates. They preferred to pay a lot more for inferior housing, sometimes outside the town.'[59] One of the biggest obstacles to the middle classes moving into the new towns was that, initially, all housing was for rent rather than private ownership. The Ministry of Town and Country Planning was aware of this problem and urged the new towns to increase the number of privately owned houses.[60] Hemel Hempstead Development Corporation was so concerned with its failure to attract members of the middle classes in sufficient numbers that it was prepared to undermine the key policy of self-containment, which required that the householder should work as well as live in the new town in order to discourage commuting. A memorandum from the corporation's General Manager admitted that self-containment had for the middle classes 'been reduced in status from a principle to a mere preference'. The

memorandum also declared that the 'rules governing eligibility for the middle classes are considerably more generous than... for the working classes'.[61] The development of this policy was acknowledged by the ministry who declared that Hemel Hempstead should be 'prepared to sell or let a middle class house to any Londoner, wherever he works'.[62] The memorandum admitted that the dreams of the Labour government and the Reith Committee, that the middle and working classes would live side by side, was not practicable. The middle classes demanded housing which was planned at a lower density and was available freehold rather than leasehold. It added: 'it would be undesirable... to get too much intermingling of freehold and leasehold plots.'[63] Writing in 1961, the former General Manager of Stevenage Development Corporation admitted that not one in ten of the managing directors and senior executives of the new town industries had moved into the town. The General Manager believed an executive would not wish to live 'cheek by jowl with his own work-people, nor they with him'.[64]

The myth that the neighbourhood unit had social properties for bringing the classes together was finally laid to rest in 1968. The sociologist Brian Heraud carried out a study of the different neighbourhoods contained within Crawley new town. He discovered that the different neighbourhoods had 'taken on distinctive class characteristics', rather than becoming class balanced areas.[65] There were two main reasons for this. Firstly, there were the personal preferences of those who moved between the neighbourhoods: middle-class families who had initially moved into one neighbourhood often moved out to those areas which they felt better represented their aspirations.[66] The second reason was a change in policy by the Development Corporations: desperate to ensure that sufficient members of the middle class moved into their towns, the corporations had begun to sponsor the construction of more select neighbourhoods.[67]

The major reason for the failure of the socially balanced neighbourhood unit was that, while it was an honourable intention, it failed to take an account of class prejudice and culture. Very few wished to live in areas that contained a mixture of classes. Indeed, the continuation of this policy severely hampered the abilities of the new town development corporations to attract members of the middle classes. A more realistic and less idealistic policy might have met with greater success.

The Social Effects of the Neighbourhood Unit: Creating a Community Spirit

The attempt to create socially balanced neighbourhood units had failed. However, to what extent did the concept achieve its main objective of

creating a 'community spirit' within the new towns? It is not easy to answer this question because of the scarcity of research and the fact that 'community spirit' is by its nature an element which is subjective and difficult to quantify. As a result, there are differing views about the impact of the neighbourhood unit.

Gillian Pitt, a sociologist living in the new town of Crawley, provided a positive assessment of the impact of the neighbourhood unit. However, while Pitt claimed that the concept improved community interaction at one level she feared that the concept damaged the overall cohesiveness of the town.[68] For, while the neighbourhood units instilled a strong sense of community comparable to 'village life that develops with its frequent casual contacts, such as while shopping or meeting children from school', this strong, localising tendency had a diminishing reaction on the overall social cohesion of the town.[69] For example, organisations were replicated within the neighbourhoods to form numerically and financially weak groups rather than, stronger, town-wide organisations. Pitt noticed that some were 'unwilling to travel to another neighbourhood for a meeting' and feared that the result of the neighbourhood unit would be a 'permanent emphasis on neighbourhood community life at the expense of the town as a whole'.[70]

Research by Peter Willmott in Stevenage cast doubt upon the ability of the concept to create any sense of community spirit. Although the neighbourhood units were used as a sub-area for local services by the majority of local residents, Willmott argued that they failed to create either a sense of identity or enhanced social interaction. Attempts to gauge the residence of the last visitor to a house failed to establish any discernible unit wide pattern, with 75 per cent coming from an area less than a quarter to a fifth the size of a unit. When residents were asked for the name of their neighbourhood, only 31 per cent gave it correctly, the majority of the remainder gave the name of their housing estate'of which there were five or six within each unit.[71] Willmott claimed that though the neighbourhood units worked well in practical terms, they failed to create any genuine social interaction.

An alternative view of neighbourhood association within the new towns is presented in the annual reports of the new town development corporations. In 1953, Hemel Hempstead Development Corporation recorded the first steps towards community interaction. The neighbourhood of Adeyfield was 'beginning to show some maturity, both physically and in its social development'. This was demonstrated by the spontaneous establishment of the Adeyfield Neighbourhood Council, a meeting of representatives from about 30 organisations within the unit. This body, assisted by the Corporation, published a bimonthly local magazine and was responsible for the neighbourhood meeting hall, a converted building site

office.[72] By 1955, the Adeyfield Neighbourhood Council was thriving and had become integrated into the social service hierarchy. The Hemel Hempstead Council of Social Service now had a representative on the Adeyfield and Bennett's End Neighbourhood Councils, while the chairman of the Bennett's End Neighbourhood Council had become the chairman of the Council of Social Service. An example of how the Adeyfield Council had grown in stature was in the increasing use of its facilities. The newly formed Adeyfield Community Association, affiliated to the Neighbourhood Council, had begun negotiating with Hertfordshire County Council in order to lease property 'in which it can expand and meet the needs of other organisations prepared to affiliate with it'.[73] In its final report, published in 1962, Hemel Hempstead Development Corporation felt able to congratulate itself. It claimed, 'the manner in which schemes for community halls in the other neighbourhoods have been dealt with indicates clearly the gradual evolution, on the part of the local authorities and the new communities concerned, of a sense of responsibility in this matter'.[74]

However, did this drive to acquire community property really indicate community interaction? A counterpoint to this argument came from a working party established by the Social Services Committee of Hemel Hempstead Borough Council, the local committee of the Commission for the New Towns and the Dacorum Divisional Executive in January 1968. The working party attempted to carry out a re-appraisal of community services and facilities in Hemel Hempstead.[75] Published in 1970 as *A New Town Comes of Age*, the working party document challenged the idea that the existence of the neighbourhood councils necessarily indicated a vibrant community spirit. It argued that the acquisition of buildings had diminished community interaction through the neighbourhood councils. Before the community centres had been built, the neighbourhood associations or councils were fairly representative of all local groups and organisations. However, once the centres had been constructed they were managed by executive committees, and these had become the central focus of the neighbourhood organisations. The working party concluded, 'the associations became less representative of the whole neighbourhood and fewer people were actively concerned with the affairs of the association'.[76] The associations had become 'preoccupied with the management of buildings to the detriment of their extra-mural work of providing a community voice and co-ordinating community services in their neighbourhoods'. The working party argued that all the neighbourhood associations in Hemel Hempstead had begun with mass support at meetings of all levels, particularly in attempts to raise funds for community buildings. However, 'as soon as the buildings were erected there was a gradual decline in public support'. This had left the neighbourhood associations as a rump,

'small groups of people on the Executive Committees and the slightly larger group of people who attend the Annual General Meeting'.[77]

While it is clear that use of the neighbourhood unit did not create completely cohesive communities, they did create some interaction. This fact was admitted by Willmott and Pitt. The campaigning programmes to raise funds for community buildings provided an easy starting point for community interaction. The fact that, by 1970, very few residents remained involved in the neighbourhood associations does not mean that the neighbourhood units should be regarded as failures. Instead, this fact should be considered in conjunction with wider aspects of social change that have severely diminished social interaction throughout Britain, not just in the new towns. Two important developments are the increasing ownership of the car, which enables people to move further afield than their neighbourhoods for entertainment, and the television, which means that people do not have to leave their homes at all.

Conclusion

Maurice Broady, the sociologist and planner, has described the use of the neighbourhood units as an episode where 'dubious social theory was grafted on to a reasonable technical solution'.[78] It is certain that the social objectives of promoting community and class interaction by the use of the concept met with only limited success. The concept did provide a basis for initial contact within the new towns through the formation of neighbourhood associations. However, these initial relationships were soon undermined by more general social changes, which weakened the importance of the immediate community in the majority of residential areas. The attempts to use the new towns to create class cohesion delineates both the desire of the government to break down class barriers and its outright rejection by both the middle and, to a lesser extent, working classes who preferred to remain with the people they regarded as their own.

Who, then, was responsible for this 'dubious social theory'? The examination of the neighbourhood unit policy also reveals much about how the post-war Labour government worked. The policy was adopted and, subsequently, cast aside without detailed research by the Ministry of Town and Country Planning. It was taken up because the neighbourhood unit enjoyed significant support from key politicians and civil servants within the planning field. The neighbourhood unit appeared to meet a practical and ideological need: a better residential environment would be created; community life would be rejuvenated; and social cohesion encouraged. The neighbourhood unit declined because by the mid-1950s the Ministry of Housing and Local Government no longer had key personalities committed

to it. There was no-one to defend it in the face of attacks from both sociologists and architects.

Nevertheless, the use of the neighbourhood unit did have some benefits for the new town residents, as a 1961 article in *Town Planning Review* noted:

> most of the new neighbourhood units... represent a qualitative advance over most pre-war housing estates. The neighbourhood units built in Britain were the first real attempts on a nation-wide scale to plan residential areas comprehensively with shops, schools, community buildings and open spaces fitted into residential areas as part of a planned pattern.[79]

The neighbourhood unit concept was widely regarded as a failure because it had not met its social objectives. However, its success in providing a better quality of life for many of the new town migrants should not be overlooked.

NOTES

1. James Dahir, *The Neighbourhood Unit Plan* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1947), p.5.
2. Ibid., p.7.
3. Ibid., p.17.
4. Ibid., pp.19–20.
5. Ebenezer Howard, *Garden Cities of To-morrow* (reprinted, Bristol: Attic Books, 1985), p.14.
6. Peter Hall, *Urban and Regional Planning* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp.39–41.
7. James Forshaw and Patrick Abercrombie, *County of London Plan* (London: Macmillan, 1943), pp.28–9.
8. Ministry of Health, *Design of Dwellings* (London: HMSO, 1944).
9. Ibid., p.58.
10. New Towns Committee, *Interim Report* (London: HMSO, 1946).
11. Other positions on the committee were filled by the editor of the *Observer* newspaper, the former Accountant General of the Post Office, and the chairmen of the London Brick Company and Cadbury Brothers, the chocolate manufacturers who had established their own 'new town' at Bournville in the late nineteenth century.
12. New Towns Committee, *Interim Report* (London: HMSO, 1946).
13. New Towns Committee, *Second Interim Report* (London: HMSO, 1946), p.3.
14. New Towns Committee *Final Report* (London: HMSO, 1946), p.16.
15. Public Record Office, Kew [henceforward PRO] : HLG 90/39, Reith to New Towns Committee, 16 Oct. 1945.
16. PRO: HLG 90/39, Joint Secretaries to New Towns Committee, 16 Oct. 1945.
17. PRO: HLG 84/16, New Towns Committee, Sub Committee II, minutes, 7 Nov. 1945.
18. PRO: HLG 90/39, Joint Secretaries to New Towns Committee, 16 Oct. 1945.
19. PRO: HLG 90/39, Reith to New Towns Committee, 16 Oct. 1945.
20. PRO: HLG 84/16, New Towns Committee, Sub Committee II, minutes, 1 Nov. 1945.
21. PRO: HLG 90/39, Reith to New Towns Committee, 16 Oct. 1945.
22. Michael Hughes (ed.), *The Letters of Lewis Mumford and Frederic J. Osborn* (New York: Praeger, 1971), p.203.
23. Lewis Silkin, 'Address by the Rt. Hon. Lewis Silkin, MP', *Journal of the Town Planning Institute*, Vol.34, No.5 (1948), pp.151–2.
24. Patrick Abercrombie, 'The Rise and Decline of Neighbourhood', *Housing Review,* Vol.5,

No.5 (1956), p.144.
25. PRO: HLG 90/39, Reith to New Towns Committee, 16 Oct. 1945.
26. PRO: HLG 84/16, New Towns Committee, Sub Committee II, minutes, 1 Nov. 1945.
27. PRO: HLG 84/16, New Towns Committee, Sub Committee II, minutes, 6 Feb. 1946.
28. Stevenage Development Corporation, *Stevenage Master Plan* (London: HMSO, 1949), paras.128–132.
29. PRO: HLG 90/208, *The Planning of Residential Neighbourhoods,* Jan. 1947.
30. Ibid., p.6.
31. Ibid.
32. Dahir, pp.17–20.
33. *Hansard, House of Commons Debates,* fifth series, vol. 422, col. 1089, 8 May 1946.
34. New Towns Committee, *Final Report* (London: HMSO, 1946), p.5.
35. Ibid., pp.10–11.
36. Ibid., pp.10–11.
37. Ministry of Health, *Design of Dwellings,* pp.8, 61.
38. Ibid., p.8.
39. Ibid., p.61.
40. Ibid.
41. Aneurin Bevan, 'Conference on Housing Layout in Theory and Practice. Part I', *Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects,* Vol.55, No.9 (1948), p.382.
42. Lewis Silkin, 'Conference on Housing Layout in Theory and Practice. Part II', *Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects,* Vol.55, No.10 (1948), p.431.
43. Bertram Hutchinson, *Willesden and the New Towns* (London: HMSO, 1947), p.2.
44. Peter Collison, 'Town Planning and the Neighbourhood Unit Concept', *Public Administration,* Vol. 32, No. 4 (1954), pp.467–8.
45. Patrick Abercrombie, 'The Rise and Decline of Neighbourhood', pp.143–5.
46. Leo Kuper, *Living in Towns* (London: Cresset Press, 1953), pp.116,158.
47. Ruth Glass, *The Social Background to a Plan* (London: Routledge, 1948), p.132.
48. Ruth Glass, 'Urban Sociology in Great Britain', in R.E. Pahl (ed.), *Readings in Urban Sociology* (London: Pergammon Press, 1988), p.71.
49. J.M. Richards, 'Failure of the New Towns', *Architectural Review,* Vol.114, No.679 (1953), pp.29–32.
50. London County Council, *The Planning of a New Town* (London: London County Council, 1961), p.16.
51. Cumbernauld Development Corporation, *Cumbernauld Master Plan,* (London: HMSO, 1962).
52. PRO: HLG 90/142, Exploratory Committee on Social and Economic Research, Preliminary Outline of Research, 13 Sept. 1948, p.6.
53. PRO: HLG 115/593, Metcalfe to Schaffer, 28 Mar. 1962.
54. The file researching the neighbourhood unit concept has yet to be released into the public domain.
55. Hemel Hempstead Development Corporation, *Hemel Hempstead Master Plan,* (London: HMSO, 1947), paras. 71–79
56. Hemel Hempstead Development Corporation, *Annual Report* (London: HMSO, 1962).
57. *The Times,* 29 June 1953.
58. Stevenage Museum Oral History Project, Stevenage, Hertfordshire [henceforward SOHP]: Transcript, A090/2.
59. SOHP: Transcript, A090/2 .
60. Hertford Public Record Office, [henceforward HPRO]: Stevenage Development Corporation, meeting 204, minute 112, 28 Feb. 1956.
61. HPRO: HHDC/CNT/HH/Box 209/ Misc. 37, Hemel Hempstead Development Corporation Papers, Housing Policy, 1 Oct. 1952.
62. HPRO: HHDC/CNT/HH/Box 209/ Misc. 37, Sheepshanks to Wells, 22 Aug. 1952.
63. HPRO: HHDC/CNT/HH/Box 209/ Misc. 37, Hemel Hempstead Development Corporation Papers, Housing Policy, 1 Oct. 1952.
64. Alan Duff, *Britain's New Towns* (London: Pall Mall, 1961), p.72.

65. Brian Heraud, 'Social Class and the New Towns', *Urban Studies*, Vol.5, No.1 (1968), p.53.
66. Ibid., p.49.
67. Ibid.
68. Gillian Pitt, 'Neighbourhood Planning in a New Town', *Town and Country Planning*, Vol.28, No.7–8 (1959), pp.263–5.
69. Ibid., p.263.
70. Ibid., p.265.
71. Peter Willmott, 'Housing Density and Town Design in a New Town', *Town Planning Review*, Vol.33, No.2 (1962), pp.124–6.
72. Hemel Hempstead Development Corporation, *Annual Report* (London: HMSO, 1953).
73. Hemel Hempstead, *Annual Report* (London: HMSO, 1955).
74. Hemel Hempstead, *Annual Report* (London: HMSO, 1962).
75. Hemel Hempstead Borough Council, *A New Town Comes of Age* (1970), p.1.
76. Ibid., pp.18–19.
77. Ibid., p.40.
78. Maurice Broady, *Planning For People* (London: NCSS, 1968), p.14.
79. Anthony Goss, 'Neighbourhood Units in British New Towns', *Town Planning Review*, Vol.32, No.1 (1961), p.80.