

Planning

What will the Government's green belt shake-up really mean?

Regeneration

'Working with the communities is the best starting point to achieve growth'

Housing

Jackie Sadek takes a look at the renewed focus on new towns

'Revise the rule book'

Stoke-on-Trent city manager warns Treasury's Green Book rules on investment hinder growth

By Heather Jameson

The Treasury should look again at its Green Book rules to help local authorities, a council chief has claimed.

As the new Government pushes towards its growth mission, Stoke-on-Trent City Council's city manager Jon Rouse has highlighted problems with financing large development projects in places with low property values.

He claims councils will only meet the Government's housing and economic growth targets if they are given more freedom around the Treasury rules.

Speaking exclusively to *The MJ*, Rouse said: 'We are fully supportive of the Government's ambition with respect to increased house building and places like Stoke-on-Trent want to play their full part.'

'But that can only happen if there is significant investment in making sure our housing sites are viable and there is freedom in terms of Treasury rules around investment returns.'

Under the current capital investment rules the Treasury sets a minimum funding criteria, typically calling for around a two pound return on every pound invested.

However, the rules ignore market values across different



parts of the country, leaving less affluent parts of the country struggling to secure investment. It also fails to take into account that property values will rise over time.

Instead of harnessing borrowing from private

investors, who are reluctant to take on the level of risk, the Treasury rules leave some councils relying more heavily on their own borrowing, which exacerbates their own financial problems.

High levels of borrowing

then means local authorities are paying interest to the Public Works Loan Board, and requires them to put a minimum revenue provision against the loan.

Reflecting on the future – p28

Housing targets unlikely to be met – Rodwell

The Government's 1.5 million housing targets are unlikely to be met, a former London housing spokesperson has said.

Former leader of Barking and Dagenham LBC and London Councils spokesperson Darren Rodwell told *The MJ*: 'I'm very pleased the Government wanted to bring targets back in.'

'But it shouldn't be about numbers, it should be about people. At the same time, it shouldn't be about profit, it should be about people. Both of those, profits and numbers – will come if people's aspirations are fulfilled.'

He said the 1.5m target was calculated based on the number of homes with planning permission granted. When local plans are added, that figure rises to 2.5m. But he queried: 'Why haven't they been built?'

Rodwell, now an inclusive growth consultant, said the relationships between communities, local authorities and the private sector are 'not sufficient to get to that target that we all want to see'.

Cold data and a warm conversation – p25

Whitehall 'missing a trick' if pan regional partnership support ends

Government would be missing a trick if it stopped funding pan-regional partnerships, the chair of the Thames Estuary Growth Board has said.

The small print of the Budget revealed Government

was 'minded to cease funding for Local Enterprise Partnerships and the Business Board Network, and will consult on ending funding for pan-regional partnerships' as it devolved growth

responsibilities to mayors.

Kate Willard, chair of the Thames Estuary, told *The MJ*: 'Government will be missing a helpful trick if it didn't continue to support growth across the Thames Estuary.'

Listing the successes of the board, including delivering new homes and putting fairness at the heart of

economic growth, she added: 'What's not to like?'

The growth expert claimed the board's unique position, spanning Essex, Kent and east London, mean it could offer a wider economic geography than the combined authorities that will cover the areas under devolved structures.

She claimed the consultation

on the future of pan-regional partnerships was an 'incredible opportunity' to rethink the geography and do things differently. She added: 'If you do the same old, you get the same old.'

'We will always welcome new ways of working, new ways of delivering on the Government's agenda.'

Fade to grey

David Blackman takes a look at the possible implications of the Government's green belt shake-up and wider planning reforms for local authorities

The late John Prescott's verbal slip-ups were, in the main, affectionately recalled following the former deputy prime minister's passing last month. One of the most celebrated of these was a comment that he made about the green belt when in charge of housing and planning policy as head of the sprawling but short-lived Department of the Environment, Transport and Regions in the late 1990s.

Prescott described the green belt as 'a Labour achievement and we mean to build on it'. However, what was a gaffe in Prescott's day is turning into official Government policy under Angela Rayner, Prescott's successor as Labour deputy prime minister and housing supremo.

During the summer, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government published proposals for the most far-reaching shake-up of the green belt since it was introduced by the post-war Labour government in 1948.

Labour is proposing to create a new category of land, termed 'grey belt' as part of its wide-ranging proposals to encourage greater housebuilding by reforming the planning system (see box).

So, what are the likely implications of the new Government's green belt shake-up and wider planning reforms for councils?

Tampering with the green belt is one of the trickiest political hot potatoes for any authority. One of the biggest risks for councils from the Government's reforms is an upsurge in costly planning appeals and court challenges, argues Paul Miner, head of policy and planning at the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE).

The campaign is very concerned about the definition of green belt in the revised National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), he says: 'It leaves a lot open to interpretation and it's still very vague.'

As a result, local authorities will come under 'a lot of pressure' to release land from the green belt from developers, Miner says: 'There's going to be a lot more speculative applications and appeals.'

What will make it hard to resist these speculative applications is the 'exhaustive' list of criteria in the new NPPF, which applicants can use to justify development in the green belt, he says.

Stephen Kelly, joint director of planning at the Greater Cambridge Shared Planning Service, suspects that speculative proposals will be the main issue for councils containing 'substantial areas' of potential grey belt.

The area covered by his shared planning service, which covers neighbouring Cambridge and South Cambridgeshire councils, contains few such sites.

But the kind of sites which Kelly sees as potentially vulnerable are those in semi-recreational use like the garden centres that have sprouted on farms in the London green belt around the M25.

Even though they may be much prized local amenities, such sites will be vulnerable to redevelopment for higher value housing if the NPPF go through, he says: 'The diversionary effects of having to engage with and in some circumstances fight those proposals through appeals is potentially a risk in terms of councils' stretched resources.'

Given the lack of rules and precedents for the mooted grey belt designation, definitions are likely to be thrashed out in the courts or the planning appeal process, Kelly says.

He adds that, rather than fighting off a string of speculative applications, it would be better to require authorities to strategically identify what should count as grey belt sites through their local plans.

But Kelly suspects this more measured approach does not fit with the rapid increase in housing delivery rates, which is the objective underpinning the Government's reforms.

Steve Bambrick, Buckinghamshire Council's corporate director, planning, growth and sustainability, is already seeing an 'uptick' in speculative application and appeals even before the grey belt reforms have come into force.

He fears one of the 'big concerns' of the authority, which has become one of England's busiest planning authorities since it became a unitary authority in 2020, is that this trend will be exacerbated by the Government's proposed reforms.

'Lack of clarity' in national policy on the green belt threatens to fuel the number of speculative planning appeals that the council will have to fight, draining scarce legal and technical resources, Bambrick says: 'We can foresee there being a lot of speculative schemes that will take away a lot of resource from planning departments.'

This will divert resources within planning departments away from local plan making as well as from departments like children's and social services that 'desperately need it', he says. And the proposed changes could backfire, Bambrick warns. 'The definitions are so loose and so vague that we potentially find ourselves locked into a system of uncertainty because there'll be ongoing debate and dispute about what is and isn't acceptable in green or grey belts.'

Rather than speeding up the system, which is the intended purpose of the reforms, they could have the 'opposite effect' by slowing it down, he says.

However, the green belt reforms may offer financial opportunities for some cash-strapped authorities.

Catriona Riddell, strategic planning specialist at the Planning Officers' Society, anticipates that some local authority valuers will be licking their lips about the prospect of being able to make money on green belt sites that they have not previously been able to release.

The value of green belt land will reflect agricultural use, which is much lower than it would be worth if it can be developed.

The former Surrey CC planner says that many councils in the Home Counties still own chunky swathes of green belt land that will be typically let out to tenant farmers.

She recalls tensions between valuation officers looking to maximise the return from such sites and planners.

Such tensions are likely to be exacerbated by the Government's decision to loosen the green belt rules, Riddell says: 'These tensions have been around for years and I would expect councils nowadays, given the financial situation many are in, will be looking at rethinking all their land and asset management programmes.'

'If there is land in the green belt that suddenly becomes a more attractive proposition from a grey belt perspective, I would be very surprised if councils aren't looking at that.'



'Councils are strapped for cash and are going to look at every opportunity going.'

Kelly says Cambridgeshire CC, which has historically been one of the biggest council owners of farmland, is using some of its holding to help deliver the extension of a biomedical campus to the south of Cambridge, which is being released from the green belt through the local plan process.

He can see why finance officers will be attracted by the value uplift that releasing sites from the green belt may deliver.

But while acknowledging the financial challenges that councils face, a 'wholesale sell off' of land holdings may not be in their 'long-term interests', Kelly says: 'Essentially using the once and only opportunity to get a capital receipt from land sales is not necessarily going to be the sustainable solution for county council funding.'

And what is effectively a 'fire sale' of county council land risks undermining the integrity of the plan making process, he says.

If sites are sold off, there are likely to be tensions between departments about the 'competing objectives' for how the land should be used, Riddell says.

The clearest will surround whether to secure the fattest receipt or seek to secure other council objectives.

The most pressing of these will be how to use land holdings to deliver much needed affordable housing, which

will be particularly attractive for those unitary authorities grappling with huge temporary accommodation bills.

Planners could see such land as a 'real opportunity' to secure social value by building affordable housing without having to enter long-winded negotiations with private

developers about the level that would be viable for their schemes, Riddell says.

Other factors land-rich councils should consider include promoting biodiversity and food production, Kelly says. And authorities shouldn't expect to see a revenue

bonanza from releasing green belt land.

The council tax from new homes does not typically cover the cost of the new services councils will have to provide, like new waste disposal crews, says Kelly.

Development is not the solution to filling holes in council budgets, says Bambrick: 'That will not go anywhere near to covering that gap.'

Additional tax revenues don't tend to be treated by elected planning committee members as an incentive to approve new development when weighing up applications, says Kelly.

Anthony Breach, associate director of the think-tank Centre for Cities, agrees the existing local government finance system doesn't give elected members much incentive to allow development, including on green belt sites.

He argues that a wider reform of local government finance, which would allow authorities to retain a bigger share of the revenues from new development, would help.

It is no coincidence that the rate of private house building dropped in the 1990s after the move away from rates to the more centralised council tax system in the early years of the decade, Breach says: 'It would make a lot of this stuff maybe not uncontroversial but less controversial than it currently is.'

'The politics of this all goes down a lot smoother if you think about this in terms of a bigger bargain.'

Labour proposals on planning

Before the end of this year, the Government has pledged to finalise its changes to the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), the document that sets out the ground rules for how councils should draw up local plans and make decisions on planning applications.

One of the key changes in the draft NPPF, which was published for consultation by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government within a month of Labour's July General Election victory, is to create a new category of what it calls 'grey belt' land.

This, according to the consultation paper setting out the Government's reforms of the NPPF, includes previously developed land currently in the green belt, like old petrol stations and car parks. The Government is also looking at whether glasshouses and hardstanding should also count as grey belt.

The grey belt would also include sites that have a

largely urban character already or don't contribute to preventing settlements from merging into urban sprawl, which was the original reason why the green belt was dreamt up in the post-war period.

However, if councils face a shortfall of housing or commercial space, they should review their green belts and consider releasing land regarded as poor quality land under the above criteria.

For much of the green belt though, existing rules barring development except in 'very special circumstances' remain in place.

And land within National Parks, National Landscapes and Sites of Special Scientific Interest will continue to be protected from development. In addition, the Government is proposing new rules to secure improved public access to green space on land released from the green belt for development.

The real key to successful city-wide decarbonisation

By Matt Crossley

In today's landscape, delivering city-wide decarbonisation isn't just about investing in new technologies and implementing isolated retrofit measures across the built environment. It requires a deep, cohesive partnership between service providers, local authorities, and the communities at the heart of the city in question, to ensure there is buy-in from all parties.

The path to net zero isn't simply about reducing carbon emissions. You are asking people to assess and change human behaviour and habits that have built over a lifetime. We can tell people what to do and hope for the best, or we can engage with them, educate them and support them to thrive under a new sustainable, way of living; improving not only the carbon footprint of the city, but the lives of those who call it home.

Equans' partnership with Manchester City Council exemplifies how collaboration, open communication, and community engagement can offer the foundation for transformative change.

In response to increasingly unprecedented weather events, Manchester City Council declared a climate emergency in 2019, pledging city-wide decarbonisation by 2038. The council boldly recognised that this target was only achievable if every resident, school and organisation was actively involved in the process.

As a trusted partner of the council, already delivering repairs and maintenance across the councils social housing stock and public buildings, Equans acknowledged our responsibility to proactively support the council to achieve its ambitious targets. In response, both parties formulated the 'Zero Carbon Partnership': an overarching umbrella agreement dedicated to aligning the priorities and resources of both organisations towards the achievement of net zero carbon emissions.

The Zero Carbon Partnership is an asset-led approach to decarbonisation, which acknowledges the critical role that proactive management of the built environment and assets contained within, play in the achievement of net zero.

The partnership is a cradle to grave approach which covers information gathering; development of decarbonisation plans; securing funding; developing designs; project delivery and operation/



maintenance. When applied to an entire estate, this approach provides a managed pathway to net zero.

It has not only driven tangible environmental results but also enhanced social and economic value for Manchester's residents.

Through the collation of existing information and the generation of decarbonisation plans, we were able to overlay lifecycle modelling across the affected assets. Doing so allows us to model anticipated long-term asset replacement costs against the identified decarbonisation works, to minimise duplication of efforts. Considering both factors allows us to identify the 'optimum year of intervention', the most cost and carbon-effective year to undertake decarbonisation works, aligned with expected lifecycle costs.

This approach ensures, for example, that boilers are not replaced with net zero technology such as Air Source Heat Pumps, until they are close to life expired. This saves cost, as well as embodied carbon. In addition, having a considered

decarbonisation programme covering an entire estate supports Manchester with budget planning, which can also be aligned with grant funding opportunities for the likes of the Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme.

Beyond service delivery, the partnership extends to supporting local priorities such as job creation, social welfare, and innovation, evidenced by social value activities including employment opportunities and community fundraising.

By engaging in stakeholder mapping and research, Equans has built strong partnerships with educational, community and charity organisations, which ensures targeted, meaningful activities aligned with the council's strategic objective to be a progressive and equitable city.

Between March 2020 and March 2024 Equans delivered seven fundraising events, donated 1,708 hours of volunteering and to date, the contract has delivered £4.6m worth of social value across the city. We have also delivered six community-based

workshops, three outreach events, six energy workshops and six business mentoring workshops, actively contributing to Manchester's social and economic well-being and reinforcing alignment with the council's mission.

Collaboration extends beyond the two core partners. We have recognised the significance of transparently sharing our vision, values, and practical examples to cultivate a focused and committed workforce. This involves extending collaboration beyond core partners to include suppliers and subcontractors. By engaging them in initiative development, such as our SMART Buildings solutions for example, we have fostered buy-in and strong collaborations, aligning everyone with the project objectives.

As the partnership progresses, Equans and the council are setting our sights on continued innovation and sustainability. A zero carbon charter, currently under development, will guide future efforts, focusing on workforce education, supply chain decarbonisation, and emerging technologies such as drone-based thermal imaging. This charter aims to equip all stakeholders with the skills and knowledge necessary to continue reducing emissions and improving efficiency.

By blending technical expertise, innovative solutions, and a holistic approach to social value, Equans and Manchester City Council are not only advancing Manchester's net zero targets but also setting a blueprint for sustainable urban transformation.



Matt Crossley is Commercial Director at Equans UK & Ireland

Key achievements

- Since its creation, the zero-carbon partnership has saved in excess of 500 tonnes of carbon from the council's public building portfolio.
- In addition, more than two thirds of the operational estate now has a heat decarbonisation plan, providing technical solutions and budget costs

- More than £4m of grant funding to deliver the decarbonisation works has been secured utilising the information from the heat decarbonisation plans
- More than £20m of decarbonisation capital works completed on the council's Public Buildings estate
- Surveying and decarbonisation spec developed for representative architypes

- of the council's Northwards housing estates of approximately 12,500 homes
- Residential asset information captured to facilitate obtaining central government grant funding
- Work underway to consider innovative contractual and funding solutions to fast track the council's net zero ambitions

Cold data and a warm conversation

Darren Rodwell, key architect of the regeneration of Barking and Dagenham, tells Heather Jameson the traditional model of growth is the wrong place to start. Instead, it is about working with the communities



Councils throughout the UK have struggled to meet their housing targets and economic growth over the past few years, but in a small corner of London one borough has bucked the trend.

With an ambition to build 50,000 new homes by 2037, Barking and Dagenham LBC has already made a significant start – creating a new neighbourhood at Barking Riverside, as well as ambitious plans to build a local film industry.

Former leader Darren Rodwell, who is credited with the renaissance of the borough, may be an expert in regeneration but he cautions others not to think about regeneration in traditional terms. The real question they should think about, he suggests, is: 'What does the community want to see as its future?'

He reverses the usual process of creating a master plan and using that to uplift land and property values 'at the exclusion of the aspiration of the community'. Instead, in Barking and Dagenham, he led a regeneration dominated by inclusive growth. He says: 'It was about saying that everyone had a value.'

That process had its roots back in 2006, when the British National Party took 12 seats on the council. A former community leader, Rodwell wanted to understand why people were voting for an extremist party 'our grandparents had fought wars against'. It was a lack of housing, a lack of aspiration and the resulting frustration that drove the results at the ballot box.

While New Labour had built schools and hospitals, he says: 'They had forgotten the most critical infrastructure for a community is the home.' So, he says: 'Before you start talking about a master plan, before you start talking about regeneration, what you need to unlock is the vision people have of the place and you need to get the cold data.'

'They wanted a home that was warm, safe and affordable to them, regardless of tenure.' And they wanted to live in a place where they felt part of the community, they could meet their ambitions, and they could enjoy the place.

Cold data and a warm conversation is the key, going well beyond the usual community consultation. The cold data showed there was no one-size-fits-all tenure solution for Barking and Dagenham residents: Different people on different incomes need to pay different rents. There is a dilemma facing housing right now that he describes: 'Only people in need can get council housing, and only people who are rich enough can buy a house. There is 90% of our community in the middle that are hardworking, aspirational and need support.'

'That is the role of government, at a national, regional and local level.' And then there needs to be private sector funding – developers need to be able to make a profit if they are going to come onboard.

When it comes to working with the private sector, it takes time to build relationships. 'Get them in the place

where they understand their civic responsibility, whilst not taking the shirt off their back,' he advises.

Rodwell's departure from Barking and Dagenham LBC earlier this year was not the celebration of his achievements he may have hoped for. He was expected to be the local Labour parliamentary candidate but fell foul of a political coup. An allegation of misconduct at the 11th hour forced him to withdraw his candidacy – he was cleared by an internal Labour investigation shortly after the application process closed.

But now he has launched his own inclusive growth consultancy. 'I'm one of the most successful people to have done this in a decade,' he says. 'I know how it feels to be a leader making decisions about revenue and capital. I understand how difficult it is to give power away and I understand the private sector as well.'

There needs to be trust between the community, the local authority and the developers. 'One of the problems I see is local government doesn't know what it is asking partners to invest in and it doesn't have a master vision of place.'

'Before there is a master plan, there should be a master vision. That links to people's civic pride and social responsibility. If a local authority gets that bit right, then they know what they are asking the private sector to do for their community.'

Darren Rodwell's inclusive growth consultancy can be found at www.igconsultancy.co.uk



Barking Riverside is growing at pace, with Eastbrook Studios (top, inset) providing a focal point for the local film industry

Images: © ba kma cp / Barking, Dig, nhm Council

Look lively

Jackie Sadek opines on the potential for housing growth under the new Government after a series of bold announcements and targets, and what the focus on new towns will look like

Reasons to be cheerful? Well, I think you'll agree, not that many. But – ever the optimist – I do detect glimmers of light in housing growth. I am moderately encouraged by the language and tone of the new(ish) Government. Even by some of the announcements, if you don't fall down the rabbit hole of railing against the preposterous housing targets.

For a start, deputy prime minister Angela Rayner securing £1bn for 'council housing' is to be welcomed – if only for the unabashed use of the word 'council' – never

mind that it is not enough money. The push for new towns and the establishment of the New Towns Taskforce is another positive.

And, whether or not you agree with the moving around of furniture at the helm of Homes England, or the recent nixing of the Office for Place or, indeed, the signal Call-In of the application for a major new settlement in Swale a couple of weeks ago (we can apparently expect more of this) it does communicate a Government on the move. Which I do find encouraging.

Matthew Pennycook is a man with intellectual heft who is tackling his huge job with enormous energy and purpose, and I think you can expect some rather welcome announcements in the area of strategic planning in the forthcoming Planning and Infrastructure Bill.

So... it is encouraging for anyone involved in the debate on the housing crisis, and the push for new towns has to be the way to go, emulating one of the most successful post war housing programmes ever embarked upon in the UK. The taskforce comprises a cohort of genuine experts, who quickly embarked on a call for sites. I do hope *The MJ's* readers are putting their hands up.

The policy's primary aim 'is to create new and expanded sustainable places to boost economic growth and the supply of new homes – as well as spreading opportunity and supporting strong communities' seems to place the emphasis on economic growth first, and housing second. Exactly as it should.

So far, so good. The taskforce reports to ministers by July 2025, but the devil will be in the detail. The taskforce (and the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government, and Homes England, come to that) know full well that picking a number of locations

for 'significant new communities' is one thing, delivering these into fully fledged new settlements is quite another.

A raft of expertise will be needed in hard-nosed delivery: land acquisition, development management, master-planning, place making, stakeholder engagement and so forth and that's just for starters. If I was Sir Michael Lyons, then what would be keeping me awake at night is just who is going to actually build out this stuff, given the demoralised, de-skilled, de-populated and depleted state of the construction sector. But hey! This is not the moment for Cassandras. These are mere challenges, all of which will need to be ironed out along the way. Hopefully not by the host local authority – or, at least, not in isolation.

Look lively then. You have until 12 December to find a nice site for a settlement of 10,000 homes (or preferably more) in your manor. Don't be put off by the small print, the taskforce says: 'We are aiming for a gold standard of 40% affordable housing.'

Don't let your potential applicant or friendly landowner get too hung up on their viabilities. I would urge local authorities and their private sector partners to get on this journey and see where it takes you and worry about the

whys and wherefores later. Not least of all because the taskforce also pledges that 'a core part' of its work 'will be to consider how to fund and deliver new settlements'. So, if your site could work for their policy, they are saying, you will get financial support. Why not look into the whites of their eyes?

This is not the moment for Cassandras. These are mere challenges which need to be ironed out along the way. Hopefully not by the host local authority

And for those (very many) of you grappling with elected portfolio holders with a NIMBY power base, the political argument for clean green inclusive growth in one location, rather than imposed-upon-you piecemeal housing numbers spread throughout your local authority area, must be – at least a bit – compelling.

After all, aren't your residents repeatedly saying that

they might accept growth if it is properly planned, with infrastructure delivered up front, if it doesn't leg over the local community, affect their quality of life, or compromise the natural environment?

You can quote the *bon mots* from the press notice. 'In new towns, exemplary development will be the norm not the exception' and 'the next generation of new towns must be well-connected, well-designed, sustainable and attractive places where people want to live and have all the infrastructure, amenities and services necessary to sustain thriving communities'. Well not many of us would argue with that, would we? Not even the most hardened residents' group, in even the leafiest of villages, surely?

Don't write in.

Jackie Sadek is co-author, with Peter Bill, of Broken Homes. Britain's Housing Crisis: Faults, Factoids and Fixes

More information on the Government's expectations for new towns and the New Towns Taskforce is available in the Policy statement on new towns



The revival of the municipal architect

Holly Lewis takes a look at the role of the modern town or city architect and, learning lessons of the past, sees the value of getting back to clear design leadership

The idea of municipal architects in the UK generally conjures a particular era in our minds. The 1960s and 70s were a time of bold public building programmes, led by local authority architectural teams. Many of these teams are well-celebrated now, from those working under Ted Hollamby (Lambeth LBC and London Docklands), to Colin Stansfield Smith, (Hampshire CC) and Sydney Cook (Camden LBC).

However, according to Public Practice, 'in 1976, 49% of architects worked in the public sector'; in 2020, this had fallen to 'less than 1% nationally'. The heyday of municipal architecture seems to have passed.

Despite this profession-wide fall from grace, I was delighted to have recently been selected by Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, to be appointed as town architect for Hackney Central, alongside nine other Mayor's Design Advocates in locations across London. The Town Architects programme will run for a two-year pilot period thanks to £180,000 government funding, with the overall aim of improving public spaces across London.

I have had many approaches from interested community members wanting to talk about their ideas for projects. Already, all of this feels meaningful.

The role title certainly invokes those heady post-war years. Sadly – though not surprisingly – I have not been furnished with an army of supporting architects, set squares in hand, ready to get to work on a 70s-style civic revival. So, what, then, does a town or city architect do in the UK in 2024? How can we re-invent the role for the current local authority climate?

While such roles are rare in the UK, elsewhere they are commonplace. More than half of Swedish municipalities have city architects ('stadsarkitekter'), including Public Practice co-founder, Finn Williams, in Malmö. They are also common in Denmark, the Netherlands and Belgium. These are integrated roles, embedded within their respective authorities, raising the architectural agenda within each city's political context.

In Hackney, I will be supporting the council's existing in-house design teams in the delivery of an exciting range of programmes and projects, while retaining my position externally to the authority. I am a critical friend and advisor, more than a dedicated resource.

Already, I am finding that the idea of the role is a powerful tool. I can bridge gaps in knowledge, I can be a visible champion for good design across council departments. Having previously worked in Hackney Central on a Town Centre Strategy with my practice – We Made That – I can hold projects true to the aspirations of that strategy, which was informed and shaped by local voices. I have had many approaches from interested community members wanting to talk about their ideas for projects. Already, all of this feels meaningful.

By now we all know that the Labour administration's 'mission-driven government' is seeking to 'kickstart economic growth' by building 1.5 million new homes across the next parliament. This, too, has resonance with the post-war years, not least because much of this growth is intended to be delivered in 'New Towns', the very same title given to 20 places designated and built after the New Towns Act in 1947, from Runcorn to Milton Keynes.

There's plenty of things that we wouldn't copy from that past era of building. I hope the 'new' new towns will be more human-scale, less car-dependent, greener places than their predecessors, but perhaps the principle of a municipal architect is one that we should resurrect.

Clear design leadership can help to maximise impact within limited resources. Taking a place-based view on proposals cuts across siloed working, and this is most effective when given an opportunity for a global perspective rather than through the lens of an individual project.

While modest roles by comparison to the town architects of the past, or those overseas, I'm optimistic that the new cohort of town architects in London can be the start of a movement towards conspicuous place-specific design leadership. Already there are similar appointments in Bath and Liverpool. I look forward to seeing who and where is next in this great revival.

Holly Lewis is co-founding partner at architect and urban design firm We Made That

Reflecting on the future

Jon Rouse outlines an ambitious range of projects across Stoke-on-Trent that are reshaping the city while paying tribute to the past



Goods Yard is set to be the most visible project in the city; (right from top) the Potteries Museum & Art Gallery in Hanley, the former Spode Works site and the Grade II-listed Wedgwood Institute

The landscape of Stoke-on-Trent is changing for the better thanks to a series of multi-million-pound developments, which are successfully combining the old with the new.

The transformative projects, supported by Levelling Up funding and shaped by the city council's vision for positive change, are being taken forward with the help of key partners. They will provide jobs and commercial opportunities, unique places for people to live and much-needed leisure and recreational amenities.

Most visible among these is the flagship Goods Yard project which is set to change the city skyline forever. The former train station site, which was neglected for many years, is being transformed into a new, vibrant canal-side neighbourhood by social impact developer Capital&Centric.

Goods Yard, which is on track for completion in spring 2025, will boast 174 brand new homes for rent and 30,000 sq ft of commercial space which will be used for leisure, retail and workspace.

The Signal Box, which will eventually be turned into an independent café bar, will stand alongside shops and a new public square and gardens. There will also be a brand-new pedestrian and cycle route connecting the site to Stoke-on-Trent's main railway station.

But the impact Goods Yard is having on the city is far greater than just bricks and mortar.

Already, the development has added £63m to the local economy and created more than 100 jobs for local people.

Down the line there will be even more opportunities created by Goods Yard with approximately 237 local jobs set to be created in leisure and hospitality.

Elsewhere in the city, a multi-million-pound project to re-model the Potteries Museum & Art Gallery in Hanley is underway.

The £5m masterplan will see major improvements to the city centre venue, with initial work set to start early next year. The vision will see the creation of enhanced gallery, learning and artist-in-residence workshop spaces while the main entrance and café area will be relocated to provide a warm welcome to visitors from the city and beyond.

The museum will form a key part of the council's longer-term plans to establish the city as an international centre for ceramics.

Already, the Goods Yard development has added £63m to the local economy and created more than 100 jobs for local people

Stoke-on-Trent's industrial heritage will also be at the heart of an ongoing plan to regenerate the former Spode Works site in Stoke town. The site, which is regarded as an historic gem, has been earmarked for a major regeneration project which will see former pottery buildings re-invented and re-used by the city's expanding 'crea-tech' sector.

In Tunstall, the most northerly of the city's six towns, a £3.5m plan is in place to convert one of its most iconic buildings: the Grade II listed former Tunstall Library.

The proposals include a mix of apartments, with communal gardens and community space. They will breathe life back into the Victorian building, which is currently standing empty.

The city council has been working with officers from Historic England to make sure conservation is of paramount importance in the development.

Stoke-on-Trent's city centre is also very much in the spotlight and an integral part of the regeneration projects set to take shape in the coming years.

As well as a wider masterplan, which will take into account the views of traders, shoppers, visitors and residents about their priorities for Hanley, a more focused scheme centres on the former bus station and surrounding sites.

The scheme – called Etruscan Square – will aim to provide a multi-faceted, mixed-use development based on priority needs such as housing, commercial space and leisure. A developer is set to be appointed to take forward the project in 2025.

Also in the new year, work is set to start on safeguarding and protecting two of Burslem's most important heritage buildings.

The Indoor Market building and the Grade II-listed Wedgwood Institute, built in memory of 18th century potter Josiah Wedgwood, will benefit from important safeguarding works to ensure they are weather-tight, safe to access and, most importantly, ready for future development.

The city is preparing a year-long celebration to mark its centenary year – 100 years after King George V named Stoke-on-Trent an official city back in 1925. Not only will this be a time for reflection but also an opportunity to look forward and shape the city for future generations.

So it is fitting this exciting range of projects, backed by £6.5m in public realm improvement schemes, are taking shape – blending the past with the present to create real investment and wealth-building opportunities now and in the future.

Jon Rouse is chief executive of Stoke-on-Trent City Council