Housing with Values:

Faith and Belief perspectives on housing and community planning

A policy analysis

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The Faith and Belief Policy Collective

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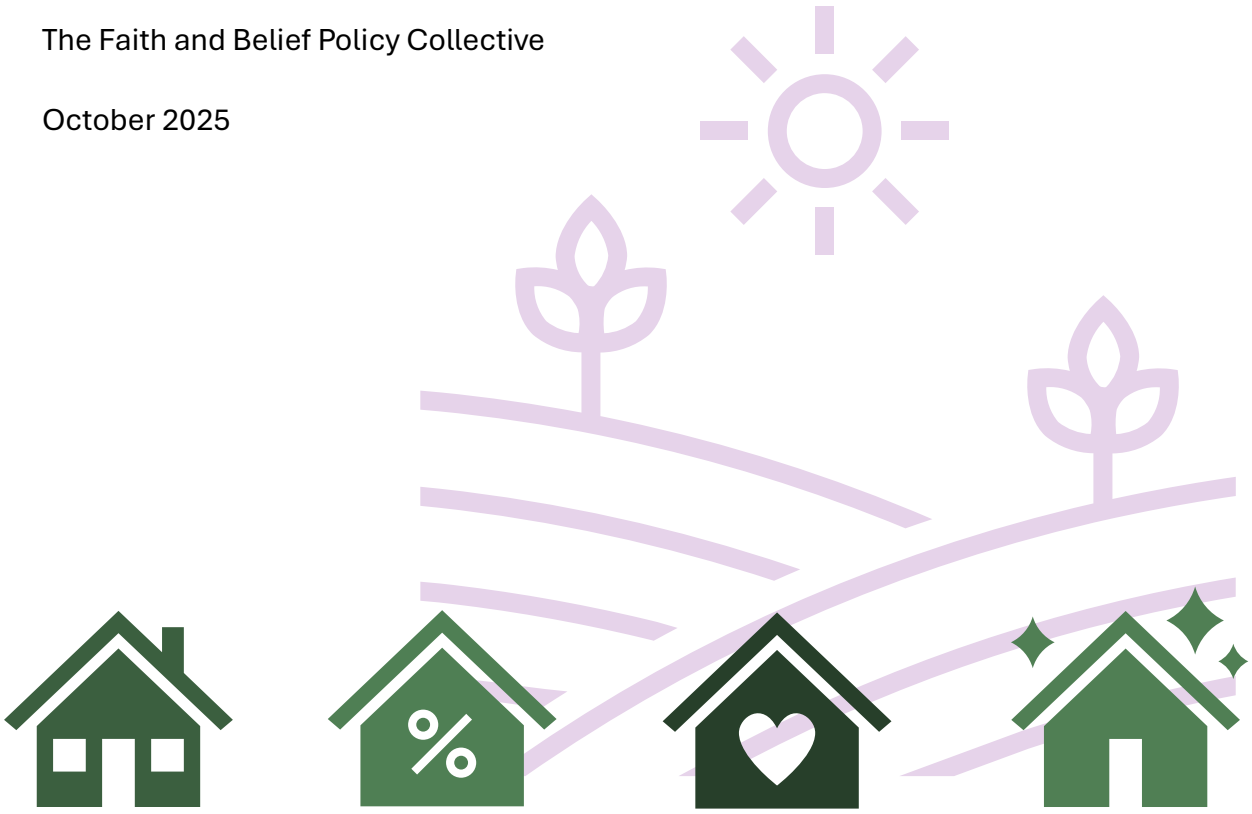

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Foreword

Housing is about more than bricks and mortar. It is about the kind of society we want to build, the values we choose to live by, and the connections we make when plan and share space together.

This report comes at a critical time. The scale of the housing crisis is clear: more than a million households wait for social housing, while thousands of children grow up in temporary accommodation. The Labour government's pledge to deliver 1.5 million homes in five years is bold and ambitious. But numbers alone will not determine whether these new communities thrive.

We believe housing policy must move beyond units and targets, towards values, community and belonging. History shows us this is possible. The visionaries of Saltaire, Port Sunlight and Bournville—all shaped by their deep faith values—understood that homes without places of worship, green spaces, schools, and opportunities for participation were not enough. They built settlements designed to not only provide shelter, but to nurture belonging and flourishing.

Faith and belief communities play a vital role in shaping such flourishing. They bring moral imagination, material assets, and social capital that too often go unrecognised in policy. They also bring concepts of meaning, connection, and purpose that are essential to building resilient places. Yet their contribution is often overlooked.

This report argues for a new conversation. If housing policy in Britain is to deliver not just homes but thriving communities, faith and belief must be seen as integral partners in planning, design and delivery. The evidence, principles and recommendations here—particularly the call for a New Towns Faiths Taskforce—offer practical steps for policymakers, developers and community leaders to work together in shaping places that foster belonging as well as shelter.

—Phil Champain
Director of In-Difference
Co-Founder of the Faith & Belief Policy Collective

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Executive summary

The UK faces a chronic housing crisis. More than 1.3 million households are on social housing waiting lists and over 160,000 children live in temporary accommodation. The Labour government's pledge to deliver 1.5 million homes in five years is ambitious. But building houses alone will not be enough. Without attention to values, belonging and resilience, new towns risk repeating the mistakes of the past: isolation, weak cohesion, and long-term social costs.

> "New towns should establish clear and effective ways to engage the local community in shaping the vision and proposals for each new town, and empower residents to build social capital and help define the cultural identity of the town."
>
> "New towns should support thriving communities by ensuring access to schools, cultural, sporting and healthcare facilities, and other social infrastructure that meets new residents' needs from the outset."
>
> — The New Towns Taskforce Report to Government (28 September 2025), Recommendations 13 & 7

In the commentary on the above recommendations, the New Towns Taskforce (NTT) directly advises that plans for social infrastructure should include "cultural facilities, and creative and **faith-based spaces to enrich communities and open up opportunities for personal development**" (page 73, emphasis added) and that the "community engagement strategy . . . should be **developed along with a range of partners including local cultural, faith and creative organisations**, schools and environmental groups. It should establish foundations for community development **to thrive and create connections** between existing and new residents." (Page 79, emphasis added). The authors of this report welcome these recommendations and offer what follows as early and significant groundwork. More than that, this report aims to illustrate potential benefits of involving faith and belief actors in the flagship New Towns initiative fully, including in the formation of policy and planning principles.

Key findings

From interviews with planners, developers, faith leaders, academics and community practitioners, we found:

What undermines flourishing communities

- Car-dominated, “dormitory” estates that isolate residents.
- Short-term developer models that prioritise profit over social infrastructure.
- Superficial branding that creates places without identity or rootedness.
- Democratic deficits: tokenistic consultation, overly technical processes, exclusion of minority and faith voices.
- Segregated housing patterns that entrench inequality and risk alienation.
- Secular bias and low faith literacy among planners and developers.
- Intergenerational imbalance in new towns, which often skew towards young families, leaving communities less resilient.

What supports flourishing communities

- Walkable, human-scale design.
- Early provision of schools, health centres, cultural, sporting and faith-based facilities.
- Long-term, co-design consultation that builds trust and ownership.
- Shared values frameworks.
- Commons and stewardship models that embed belonging and accountability.
- Integration with natural landscapes and local heritage, deepening attachment to place.

We can learn from international examples— for example, Singapore’s proactive planning for religious diversity.

What faith and belief communities bring

- Hard resources: Land, buildings, housing associations and financial resources.
- Soft assets: trusted networks, convening power, insider knowledge, volunteer capacity, and inter-generational reach.
- Spiritual capital: values of vision, hope and service.
- Cultural contributions: celebrations, commemoration and storytelling.

What prevents the contribution of faith and belief communities

- Institutional secular bias and weak faith literacy.
- Tokenistic consultation that dilutes faith voices.
- Faith communities under-mobilising their own professional skills and assets.
- Flashpoints around parking, noise, or temporary worship use.
- Risk of alienation if groups feel excluded.

From findings to principles

These findings point to four principles that should guide the design and delivery of new towns. Together they provide a framework for translating evidence into policy and practice:

- Postsecular planning: move beyond “faith vs secular” binaries to recognise both as essential.
- Intersectional planning: ensure faith and belief are included alongside race, gender, class and other identities.
- Transformational planning: design spaces for encounter, ritual and shared values that generate solidarity and wellbeing.
- Infracultural planning: build not only infrastructure but also the “software” of community: hospitality, neighbourliness, commons, and stewardship.

For Government and Faith & Belief communities

Establish a New Towns Faiths Taskforce (NTFT) or similar to advance the conversation about how best to harness the vision, resources, and overall contribution of faith and belief communities to the delivery of New Towns.

The NTFT should build on the New Towns Taskforce's recommendations and be funded jointly by government and faith and belief sectors.

The initial task of the NTFT will be to curate conversations between faith groups and planners, architects and developers, drawing on faith traditions' resources for imagining alternative community models while engaging constructively with secular planning frameworks.

The agenda of the NTFT is likely to include, though not confined to:

- **Strengthening multi faith collaboration**, for example by engaging with the Faith & Belief Policy Collective, establishing resource-sharing arrangements across different faith groups.
- **Advising on the design of training programmes** for planning officers to identify and address secular bias.
- **Relationship-building between faith & belief communities and government** to maintain ongoing dialogue across development cycles.
- **Auditing planning and development capacities and resources amongst faith and belief communities**, making information accessible to planning authorities.
- **Ensuring a body of evidence of good practice is available** to relevant stakeholders, with regard to faith inclusive planning.
- **Recommending amendments to the national planning policy framework** to explicitly recognize faith communities as stakeholders with distinctive contributions to the development of new towns, and to the domain of planning and development more broadly.

Faith and belief communities are one of the UK's most overlooked assets in housing and planning. They bring hard resources, soft assets, spiritual capital and cultural capital. They strengthen the social fabric, and support community belonging.

Yet planning systems often exclude them. Secular bias treats faith voices as problematic rather than as legitimate partners. This misses an opportunity to draw on assets that can build trust, support, and meaning into new communities from the outset.

To succeed, the new town housing programme must embrace the principles of postsecular planning, intersectional planning, transformational planning and infracultural planning.

New towns will only thrive if they are designed around values as well as units, belonging as well as infrastructure. In this process, faith and belief communities are not obstacles; faith and belief communities are indispensable partners.

Introduction

As of December 2024, 1.3 million people were on social waiting housing lists with over 160,000 children living in temporary accommodation. Recognition of this chronic housing crisis underpinned a Labour manifesto pledge to build 1.5 million homes (or net additional dwellings) over the next five years. In this interview-based study we seek to consider how faith and belief actors might be engaged in this ambitious project and the process of building communities.

The New Towns Taskforce (NTT) was established in September 2024, tasked to discern the most promising sites from over 100 proposals and to shape the framework needed to deliver on the government's bold pledge. In April 2025, the Faith and Belief Policy Collective set up a subgroup to explore the scope for faith-and-belief-linked policy engagement in the domain of housing. The working group judged it productive to take the New Town agenda as a focus for enquiry. This paper is the outcome of that endeavour. Although modest in scope, the testimony and findings reported here resonate with and extend the NTT's recommendations for involving faith communities as partners in community engagement and recognising the role of faith-based spaces as an enriching component of social infrastructure and development. We are therefore confident in claiming a place at the planning policy table, to work together with relevant stakeholders in the pursuit of thriving communities.

Specifically, the New Towns Taskforce (NTT) has advised that plans for social infrastructure should include "cultural facilities, and creative and **faith-based spaces to enrich communities and open up opportunities for personal development**" (page 73, emphasis added), and that the "community engagement strategy . . . should be **developed along with a range of partners including local cultural, faith and creative organisations**, schools and environmental groups. It should establish foundations for community

development **to thrive and create connections** between existing and new residents." (Page 79, emphasis added.) The authors of this paper welcome these recommendations and offer what follows as early and significant groundwork. More than that, this report aims to begin to illustrate the potential benefits of fully involving faith and belief actors in the flagship homes initiative at every possible moment, including in the formation of policy and planning principles.

It is our view that the current understanding of and attention to faith and belief as contributors to local resilience, social cohesion, physical and mental wellbeing, participation, and attachment to place—all issues relevant to the goal of fostering thriving communities—is underdeveloped and has yet to embrace Britain's faith and belief communities as partners.[1] There is a partial exception: the Church of England was one of the stakeholders engaged by the NTT during the production of its September 2025 report, listed in the category of "Real estate and landowners"—a categorisation that acts as a powerful reminder of the privileged position of the Church of England as the established church. As the range of faith and belief represented in England continues to diversify, it will be important to engage and plan in ways that include and indeed celebrate that diversity—and let us be clear to include within that diversity the growing population who do not adhere to any religious or spiritual belief system. Indeed, given the significance of faith and belief as a key cultural identifier for so many citizens, including those that are going to be living in New Towns and settlements themselves, the current gaps in understanding and/or articulation represent a significant weakness.

As of September 2025, the sites recommended for new towns and settlements by the New Towns Taskforce include renewal and expansion of existing towns and cities, development corridors, and four standalone new

[1] As an example of this, consider that key NTT references, such as the Bennett Institute's 64-page report, Townscapes: A Universal Basic Infrastructure for the UK (2023), include no mention of faith, belief, religion or spirituality. A more recent report, Measuring Social and Cultural Infrastructure (2025) shows limited insight into what religious institutions are typically providing to communities, listing only two examples: "prayer" and "Sunday School" (page 17).

settlements. Each site will accommodate a minimum size of 10,000 homes (an estimated 30–40,000 citizens).

Faith and belief represent a significant asset in the community-building task. Consider pioneering faith-inspired settlements such as Bournville, Saltaire, Port Sunlight, New Earswick and New Lanark. These experiments in model communities inspired the building of Letchworth, Welwyn Garden City and Wythenshawe, planned by Ebenezer Howard and designed by Barry Parker and Raymond Unwin. Built in the early 1900s, Howard's Garden Cities in turn paved the way, in their design and ethos, for the 32 postwar New Towns which are currently home to 2.8 million people across the UK. The genealogy of the dozen proposed New Towns will therefore trace back to the Quaker and Non-Conformist voices of the late 19th century and their vision for balanced communities that provided not only housing of the highest quality and technical innovation, but continuing education at the institutes that were provided, the opportunities for a rich communal life offered by many clubs and congregational activities, access to beautiful countryside, parks and clean air and secure, well-paid employment.

This rich historical legacy is not the only claim of faith and belief to the housing policy table. Faith and belief communities have over centuries taken care to work toward the health and wellbeing of those around them including the most vulnerable, establishing schools, hospitals, and other infrastructure that caters to physical and spiritual needs. In the modern era, this has taken concrete form in many ways, including the provision of dedicated housing associations and the custodianship of facilities offered as meeting places for the wider community without prejudice to matters of personal belief and adherence.

It is (at its best) the ongoing ability to curate spaces for social connection, public participation, public ritual and leadership, volunteering and hospitality in a local community (new or old) as well as articulating a deep vision of what it means to live a flourishing and valued life amid both friend and neighbour. These "goods and services"—what we shall go on to call "infraculture"

(following the example of one of our witnesses)—are essential for the provision of flourishing places and communities rich in cultural and social experience, woven together by strong relational capital and a rooted sense of place.

The intention of this paper is not to provide a representative account of this policy area. That is beyond the remit of the current structures and resources available to the FBPC. Rather it is to remind both secular and faith-based agencies and actors in this field that faith and belief have an important role to play in this vital area of policy, and to articulate some of the resources and intellectual vision that contribute to that role. To that end, we hope this paper both informs the nature of what faith and belief brings to the New Town and housing agenda and raises strategic questions as to how this contribution can be best leveraged in wider debates that need to take place now, as well as in the future.

Methodology

This paper collates the opinions, perspectives and experiences of 13 key witnesses, chosen for their professional and/or lived expertise in community and new settlement design. For some, faith has a prominent place in their daily lives and professional disciplines. Others do not primarily identify with a faith or established belief system. Some interviewees reported that the invitation to reflect at length on the intersection between faith and belief and the building of new towns (as housing and communities) was novel. They nonetheless welcomed the dialogue.

The witnesses include architects, housing developers, journalists, lawyers, activists, ordained ministers, policy makers and researchers, social historians, and scholars of religion.

All were nominated by the FPBC or its delegated working group for this topic of enquiry, with around 25 nominees in total. The working group established a target number of 10–12 interviews, scoping according to the available resource while gathering a diversity of professional and practical perspectives. Prior to issuing invitations, the working group agreed criteria including: diversity in terms of faith-and-belief identity and other intersectional characteristics (especially gender); ability to speak to good practice including relevant international examples; perspectives from architecture, development, law, planning, and theology and religious studies; and availability during the funded interview period (late June to early July). Two additional interviews were scheduled to address gaps remaining in relation to the agreed criteria. Two witnesses are FBPC members.

Witnesses' insights were collected via open-ended interview, normally carried out on a one-to-one basis and lasting no more than 40 minutes. Three foundational questions were precirculated, serving to structure the interviews. These were:

1. What makes a good community?
2. What resources might faith and belief bring to the new town/settlement planning and community building agenda?
3. What benefits and/or challenges do you foresee in opening the debate on new towns/settlements to include faith and belief perspectives?

The interviewers were Dr Mohammed I Ahmed (6 interviews with 7 interviewees), Julia Makin (5 interviews) and Dr Iona Hine (2 interviews).[2] The interview schedule was devised and overseen by Professor Christopher Baker and Dr Iona Hine. Interviewers were encouraged to formulate follow-up questions, leading to wide-ranging conversations. Interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed and coded for thematic patterns and clusters. This work was carried out between June and September 2025, and the report finalised shortly following the NTT's own Report to Government.

Professor Baker drafted the overall report with Dr Hine's support, referring it back to the working group and the interviewer team as appropriate. As indicated in the body of this paper, Professor Baker doubled as an interviewee. The interviewers each contributed to the discussion and analysis to some extent, including as participants in the interview dialogues.

The labour of interviewing and transcription was supported by a Pump Priming award from the Cambridge Interfaith Knowledge Hub. All interviewers are members of the University of Cambridge. Research ethics including the storage of data was conducted under the auspices of the Knowledge Hub and with reference to University of Cambridge guidelines.

Most witnesses agreed to waive their anonymity and were happy for comments and insights to be attributed to them. These individuals are introduced in Appendix A, along with those who served in the FBPC working group on Housing.

[2] Professor Baker was interviewed jointly by Dr Ahmed and Ms Makin. Maria Pavlou and Dr Stephen Agahi-Murphy were interviewed jointly by Dr Ahmed.

Findings

In analysing the witnesses' insights and observations, we have implemented four categories of discussion:

1. Planning and design that undermines flourishing and sustainable communities.
2. Planning and design that supports flourishing and sustainable communities.
3. Resources that faith and belief bring to the development of flourishing and sustainable communities.
4. Obstacles that may prevent faith and belief contributing to the planning and development of flourishing and sustainable communities.

This section will relate some of the data that falls into each of these categories. A deeper synthetic analysis of cross-cutting themes is then provided, while in the recommendations we indicate the kind of action that can advance the emergent policy ideas and implications.

1. Planning and design that *undermines* flourishing communities

The observations under this heading combine technical critiques alongside social and relational aspects and refer to the importance of long-term and ethical vision. Our research uncovered that the absence of vision can lead to a *vicious* cycle of social development where a thin ambition for place-making leads to what one of our participants (Witness A) calls high-volume "dormitory" spaces, where people are warehoused for sleeping and eating and privatised activity. These spaces contrast starkly with places of relational attachment and participation in which a strong sense of identity is expressed and reiterated in multiple public and communal settings.

1.1 The architecture of isolation

Many contributors observed (in line with other bodies) that much contemporary housing development follows patterns that actively undermine community formation. Witness B speaks from the Town and Country Planning Association, a charity that was founded by Ebenezer Howard as the Garden Cities Association, to promote the Garden City model of development, and was influential in the creation of the post-war New Towns. She suggests: "Sometimes … house builders will design places to be very car dominated. You really can't live your life without a car. The car is parked on the front drive right by the front door. You get into your car, you drive off. You don't bump into people. You don't get to know people."

This car-dependent design reflects deeper structural problems that go to the heart of what architect Witness A describes as developments "with no transportation links. [. . .] People are just treating the housing development as a dormitory, really, and they don't want people prying. They want to feel that they can do exactly what they want to do … they don't want to contribute to the community either."

Car-dependent design prioritises ideas of accessibility and mobility, often attached to spurious notions of autonomy, choice and freedom at the expense of localised spaces for gathering and chance encounter with those you already know and those you don't. Infrastructure costs escalate as local authorities have to provide extensive road networks while communities become dependent on external retail and employment centres. The absence of the opportunity for casual social interaction inhibits development of that generalised social capital necessary for growing more socially sustainable localities, creating long-term costs for public services around loneliness, isolation, mental health and wellbeing issues.

1.2 Short-term development thinking and lack of long-term horizons

Much of the success of the 12 New Towns and other new settlements and extension areas will be dependent on the DNA that is infused from the start. Our contributors were generally sanguine about the fact that if the ambitious targets of this policy were to be reached, many homes will have to be at the high-volume

end. Witness B describes a typology of developer, the choice of which will influence the medium to long-term prospects of the projected New Towns and new settlement areas.

In this typology, developers have different "motivations". There are "standard house builders" who "buy a bit of land, build lots of houses and sell them as quickly as possible, and then they are gone". They have no "long-term" horizons but simply want to "get the highest price they can on the day they sell it." Such builders have no vested interest "in creating strong communities". Then there are "master builders" who have much larger areas of land to develop and therefore have the chance to create a master plan for an area. Witness B suggests master builders "have a longer-term interest in the place being a success and might take a more thoughtful approach to building community networks."

Finally, there are the "social housing providers" and "housing associations", who may want "to build some homes which they will own for the next 100 years". This cohort of builders, Witness B suggests, ". . . definitely want the community to work, want people to settle in, and have a good life there". She admits that not all housing associations and social housing providers "get it right", but for some at least, there is the recognition that they have got to provide what she calls "social, as well as technical, infrastructure".

1.3 Landscapes of low cultural and ritual expectation

Another cluster of insights related to the theme of short-term planning focuses on the idea of landscapes largely devoid of cultural or ritual depth. Of course, this may be expected within new settlements and New Towns, but even landscapes and existing towns and villages within the designated areas will have *palimpsests*—physical or remembered layers of previous cultures and civilizations, including religious ones—that may be apparent in a place name or ruin. Ideally, planning for new developments and settlements would work with the grain of whatever palimpsest is already there.

But to work with the grain of what is already there often requires a sense of imagination and attention to detail that would not be in the remit of those whom

Witness B has described as “standard house builders” and whose main intention is to build high volumes of housing for maximum convenience and accessibility. This potential lack of imagination also pertains to an over-reliance on a technocratic view of planning and what it is that constitutes human flourishing.

Prof Christopher Baker’s doctoral work (in the late 1990s) explored the relationship between religion and spirituality in the context of the design and delivery of the post war English New Towns. Having examined the history and tradition of the 19th century pioneers (see case study below), Baker observes that is absurd to think we need to construct spaces where there is zero-sum assumption that meeting physical and material needs are the only priorities when it comes to building new settlements at scale. Investing in the social, educational, wellbeing and spiritual needs of communities is neither irrelevant nor a luxury that cannot be afforded. What is needed to save the impact of bad planning is what he calls “a holistic template” for planning, a both/and way of looking at what makes a flourishing community, not an either/or model. “We need to unlock those binaries and say, No, we’ve all got expertise. We’ve all got good ideas. All faith groups, have got massive, massive experience in envisaging communities, delivering communities, sustaining communities. So I think the biggest challenge in the many ways, is deconstructing the intellectual binaries that we have”. In practice, this means being attuned to local resonances of culture and history and ensuring the provision of public places of ritual connection where people can be reminded of a common bond and express solidarity and empathy in times of disaster and celebration.

Witness B similarly points to this need to avoid an overtly technocratic approach to planning that creates vacuous spaces to pass through, rather than places to live in. New communities need public locations of ritual significance and high aesthetic value—in other words a landscape that aims to meet the non-material as well as material needs of its citizens. She reflects on the role of faith actors “providing recognised ways to celebrate and commemorate things . . . Whether it’s birth or death or major life changes or events, having a formal ritual that can be introduced can be helpful. And that sense of introducing people, getting groups together, helping address social isolation—which can be a big problem in new places.”

Case study: The pioneering work of faithful philanthropists

In the mid to late nineteenth century, wealthy non-conformist Christian and belief-affiliated industrial philanthropists put their own money into the design and delivery of settlements for their workers. Notable examples include Sir Titus Salt (building Saltaire, near Bradford), the Lever Brothers (Port Sunlight, on the Wirral), the Cadbury family (Bourneville, adjoining Birmingham), and the Rowntree family (New Earswick, on the outskirts of York).

Such settlements may seem quaintly paternalistic by today's standards. Salt, for example, insisted on naming all the streets in Saltaire after his family members. Yet all were designed to harness the latest technologies in building materials to create durable, light-filled and generously proportioned homes, power and sanitation facilities, and design features that maximized space, walkability and access to fresh air and the countryside.

Salt and his contemporaries also harnessed the latest social innovations with a commitment to providing public spaces of ritual, education and recreation where workers could relax and improve their lives after work and at weekends. The pioneering settlements boasted places of worship, public institutes of lifelong learning, libraries and galleries, public baths, and so on.

These experiments in social living for industrialized workers heavily influenced Ebenezer Howard and his design for the Garden City, published in the ground-breaking manifesto for new urban design, To-Morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform (1898)—better known as Garden Cities of Tomorrow.

1.4 A lack of connection to one's environment

Developments lacking an authentic and perhaps visionary connection to a sense of place and history (returning to the palimpsest idea) will often struggle to develop community identity. Witness B observes how developers "…think that you can sort of bolt it on quite quickly and give a new development a name, a cheesy sounding name, and that will do the trick. I don't think it will. Landscape is always a good place to start because it's always been there". However, as we will see in the next section, an authentic and deep connection with the existing landscape by which to ground a New Town or settlement still requires grassroots and creative

participation that will take time to reach a critical mass of emotional consensus that a certain community knows what it stands for and what its identity is.

Placeless development contributes to social isolation and mental health challenges. Witness B refers to a recognised medical syndrome that became associated with the post-war New Town experience: “New Towns Blues . . . describ[es] particularly young mothers who moved to a new town after the war and had a much nicer home. . . but didn’t know anyone and had lost their social networks and became very isolated.”

The commodification of place through superficial branding fails to create authentic belonging. When developers treat place as product rather than living environment shaped by human relationships and an interactive engagement with the landscape and its history, communities can lack the long-term perspective necessary for intergenerational development and democratic participation.

1.5 Democratic deficits in planning process

Several insights from our contributors highlight other deficits that can accrue from the lack of a coherent vision for a new community. One is the exclusion of a widespread section of community voices. This presents a specific challenge when it comes to new settlements since, as Witness B reflects, “. . . building a brand-new place . . . you have no community to consult, because they haven’t moved in yet. So there’s always a question about how you consult a community that isn’t there.”

Speaking from his extensive policy experience, Witness C adds a further complication, suggesting that local authorities assume that “Communities don’t really know what they want, and getting communities involved is trouble; this is something that should be done by professionals such as officers and consultants.” Consultation processes therefore often function as legitimation exercises rather than genuine engagement. Witness C gives the example of local authorities “sending out a consultation paper that’s 30-pages long, expecting volunteer groups to fill that out”, commenting that “that’s just not going to happen”.

According to Witness C, where local authorities want to involve local communities in planning, they often "want to involve everybody in the same setting, rather than going down what they see as the divisive route of having separate conversations with specific communities such as Muslims or Hindus". However, Witness C is of the opinion that opting for a one-size-fits-all process only creates issues further down the line: "If you don't get that deeper kind of understanding at the design stage, then you're designing in trouble for the future. So, it's better that we have a more granular approach, and we go down to subsets of the community and discuss with them what they need." A gold standard consultation, Witness C argues, will attend to every variable, including ethnicity, age, and religion. At the same time, the parcelling of religion up as one variable among many may itself indicate why cash-strapped authorities run short on the resources necessary to consider this dimension of community lives.

1.6 Segregation, isolation and radicalisation

As well as being unrepresentative of local voices, planning decisions can also reinforce social divisions. Planning lawyer Witness D warns against the construction of developments that "confine the affordable social housing to one block . . . the private sector housing is another block. . . . in the long term that's not for the betterment of all of us".

Segregated developments clearly undermine social mobility and cohesion objectives. When affordable housing is concentrated in specific areas, this can perpetuate spatial inequalities that limit opportunities and so reinforce social divisions. Witness D notes how the creation of council estates "has not been better for the community or society at large because [they become] ghettos, and we need to get away from that".

Living in highly segregated communities that are physically or culturally disconnected from immediate neighbours, and the wider locality can, in Witness C's view, create not simply a sense of social alienation, but also a sense of political alienation. He reflects that if populations in new and immature localities "are left isolated, marginalized, where their concerns are heightened within this

context of feeling alienated … this could give rise to more extremist voices within those communities which could have a negative impact on what happens [within them]".

1.7 Inflexibility

Populations are often hostile to change. In this respect, New Towns and settlements may have an advantage when compared with difficulties several interviewees alluded to with respect to established settings. Thinking specifically about the challenges newcomer communities face when seeking to designate and develop new places for community prayer or worship, Witness D and Tilak Parekh both highlight how parking arrangements can become a flashpoint. A common interim solution is the use of domestic properties as a gathering place; the demand for parking can make visible activity that would otherwise be discreet. As Parekh put it: ". . . that house will get packed. The roads outside will get packed. The parking will become an issue."

Many drivers will recognise how quickly tempers fray, and if the ability to park near one's own dwelling is threatened, complaints and animosity escalate and can be targeted against the whole enterprise of such community gathering, seeding further inter-communal unrest and aggravation. Since such incidents may plausibly climax at a time when there is strong motivation for communities to gather together—whether for festivities or rites such as funerals—emotions can be high on all sides. "There's parking issues, there's noise issues," explains Witness D, "and when they have certain festivals on, local residents get very upset."

Importantly, sometimes even the perception of a problem can cause tensions and attract hostility beyond the immediate neighbourhood. For this reason, planners benefit from clarifying the scope of the objections that will be attended to in any one case. (Witness D relayed multiple examples where networked objectors had hijacked the process, submitting a barrage of negative responses from people whose day-to-day lives would be wholly unaffected by the proposed development.)

In the case of Cambridge Central Mosque, offered as a success story for co-design and consultation by Witness A, parking was a highly prominent concern

from prospective neighbours. While the leading stakeholders already sought to develop an eco-mosque and therefore to select a site that did not require car travel, it was recognised that embedding parking within the infrastructure (quite literally, via an underground car park available to all) could more fully offset these concerns than a pledge to discourage people driving to and from prayer.

If planning is to adopt long horizons, building in a way that accommodates flexibility and the ability to adapt suitable spaces for group use over time is likely to be beneficial. And if those spaces can accommodate visitors for inter-cultural exchange, so much the better.

1.8 Ongoing secular bias and institutional exclusion

Some witnesses noted while secularisation was intended to enable those who did not conform to the established religion (in England, the state church) to participate on equal terms, it is sometimes used to argue faith voices have no standing in the public realm. As director of policy and research at the Muslim thinktank Equi, Dr Jennifer Eggert senses a widespread secular bias in large parts of society and government, which can lead to faith and belief being excluded from policy conversations. This, Eggert explains, can be at odds with basic rights. Inclusion requires attention to relevant intersectionalities and to the lived experiences of all citizens. Where any set of voices has become dominant—whether faith-based or secular—policymakers need to ensure attention is paid to those whose voices may otherwise be drowned out:

> "[I]f we come into a community and it turns out that in that community, faith-based actors are completely dominating and marginalizing everyone else, then we actively engage with secular actors. . . . So does this mean that we need to go back to faith-based approaches everywhere? No, it all needs to be contextualized and with a really strong focus on inclusion and localization." —Eggert

Qualitative attention to localities goes hand-in-hand with attention to intersectionality. Factors that make a community feel safe for one strand of society—consider the rural idyll—may, in turn, produce feelings and realities of

unsafety for those who stand out as visibly other in an equivalent setting. In this, Eggert acknowledges her own positionality as "a Muslim woman wearing hijab", but also how factors such as race, religion and gender interoperate and merit careful consideration.

Her overall argument is simple. Bad planning processes reinforce bias, whatever those biases may be. This, in turn, will constrain diversity and create problems for social cohesion. Good planning processes (as we explore later) aim to achieve precisely the opposite effects, and will recognise for example, that faith communities and individuals need to be treated as legitimate civil society actors.

Even in situations where local authorities are committed to consulting with differently diverse groups in their new communities, religion and belief is bracketed out. As Witness C says, "You do find some local authorities saying, okay, we'll consult with different parts of the community, but we've got to take a very secular approach; we don't really want to engage with the religious communities, because that's trouble. So, they will discuss with the Bangladeshi community, or the Gujarati community, or the Black communities, or white-working class communities or whatever, but they don't really want to approach the issue from the perspective of faith communities." This tendency to conceptualise faith and belief communities as a source of problems is indicated in previous research, as, e.g., Pennington (2020): "faith is implied as a concerning 'other' and a risk factor for things going wrong; it has also often been subtly racialised as the preserve of ethnic minorities in a broadly secular mainstream".

This may be an appropriate point to emphasise what was also apparent in discussions of this enquiry's second question, that the opportunities for faith and belief to contribute to policy can be interpreted in two complementary ways: (a) regarding the nature of **what** is discussed—taking matters of faith and belief as acceptable and appropriate to discuss within policymaking spaces (contra a specific characterisation of secular); and (b) regarding **who** is involved in the discussion—affecting the space and attention given to diverse faith communities, an opportunity that may sometimes intersect strongly with particularities of race and ethnicity.

2. Planning and design that *supports* flourishing communities

As with the previous collection of responses, our participants reflect both material and technical practices, alongside a series of invisible and yet highly influential ones as being core elements for the production of flourishing communities.

2.1 Human-scale, connected and integrated social & physical infrastructure

Ebenezer Howard's Garden Cities blueprints, Baker explains, required that they should be "relatively small in terms of spatial distribution. The ideal was you should be able to walk within access most facilities within a mile. So they were compact. They weren't sprawling". This finds its parallel in the 15-minute city concept, where a resident can meet their daily needs under their own steam and without travelling far from home.

Witness B notes that "places where people can walk and cycle and places that aren't car dependent are really helpful for helping communities because you know, you bump into somebody, have a chat to them, you get to know them." Another interviewee referenced Jane Jacobs' "tiers of relationship" and the significance of highly informal connections, such as the people you might exchange a smile with when walking the dog, or the storeowner who happily accepts a package on behalf of their upstairs neighbour. Designing with this kind of connectivity in view helps residents to develop a sense of belonging.

Successful community development therefore requires the coordinated provision of social alongside physical infrastructure. Witness D describes how developments need to "include the residential, the commercial, the community, aspects like community halls, amenity space, play spaces, the workspace areas that are now integrated into a lot of development." Others highlighted the need to think intergenerationally: a playground might cater to younger children, but what is on offer for teens? How do people "inhabit spaces collectively"?

Dr Paul Hedges, Professor in Interreligious Studies at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, reflected on its approach to diversity and multifaith integration. Development of new settlements is coordinated to ensure faith facilities are provided, "built in" to the wider infrastructure and arranged to

Case study: Applying shared values in community-building

Al Barrett is a parish priest in Hodge Hill, east Birmingham, where he also manages a long-term, intergenerational community-building project, Together We Can! (TWC)

The goal is to cultivate a pragmatic inter-generational hub that meets people where they are. External stakeholders recognise TWC as an inclusive, reliable and locally-embedded partner that can be trusted to "literally cater for everybody" (a stakeholder's comment recorded in a recent evaluation exercise).

Discussing the role of faith communities in fostering community led Barrett to speak to us about how his team constantly seek to realise a set of shared values and some of the practical steps involved:

> When we have people of faith that are able to speak the language of practical theology, of faith that is engaged with the practicalities of day-to-day living, then I think people of faith are able to bring much to conversations about value in community.
>
> Locally, a lot of our work that has been, at times, very practically focused. We found over the last few years that values conversations are really vital to enable the sustainability and inclusivity of that work. It's kind of paradoxical in a way, but we've got little packs that have cards in around the vision of what we do locally and some of the practicalities of it. But most of the cards in the pack are about what our values are. They've been stuff that we've worked out together. So we talk about things like respectful, generous, compassionate, kind, understanding, hopeful, loving, reliable, committed, rooted, safe, stable, coordinated... In a sense, those are values that we've evolved in quite secular conversations. A lot of our staff in our local community work wouldn't necessarily be people of faith. But I think because some of us have come from it from faith perspectives, actually, we're not afraid—any of the people involved in our work—of talking about love as a core value. And because love tends to be quite a diffuse fuzzy concept that could mean just about anything, actually fleshing out what we mean by that in much more practical terms. So we talk about the root system of the values that shape how we do what we do as being vitally important to how spaces feel.

> We focus on places of welcome as a key kind of component of our practical work, but we've noticed locally that people can come into spaces and can feel very, very different depending on whether values of welcome, the kind of things that I've just listed, are shaping how that space is held. As opposed to spaces that can feel very territorial, suspicious, kind of professionalized in terms of, you come as a Client, and so you have to name your needs and your problems when you come through the door. Or spaces where, you know, they're so focused on service delivery that people are sort of tripping over themselves to provide stuff to you and to meet your needs and to fill your gaps.
>
> So, I think faith communities can bring a lot of that. And at best, they can host spaces that can be honest and vulnerable and reciprocal and mutual.

accommodate the Muslim majority and diverse religious minorities. Prayer mats stacked in the stairwells of shopping centres are simply "part of the landscape". The government provides suitable bins for the burning of paper money, offsetting frustrations about smoke and mess. This proactiveness is matched by bodies such as the Daoist Federation "telling their constituency: be a good, considerate citizen". Where necessary, protocol has adjusted—for example, potential sites for non-Muslim places of worship are no longer offered to the highest bidder, as evangelical megachurches had begun to win out iteratively. Critically, the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act protects the sentiments of faith communities, such that "atheists are very well behaved with faith". Hedges is quick to acknowledge that what works in Singapore relates to its specific context and history, such that there are limits to how policy and practice can translate to other settings.

This level of integration requires an intentional and strategic recognition that what we might call soft assets, such as community facilities, constitute essential rather than optional elements of socially and economically sustainable settlements. This approach can also be resource efficient, creating cost efficiencies while not sacrificing adequate community provision.

2.2 Collaborative and intergenerational planning processes

Integral to connected and integrated planning is effective consultation that moves beyond information-gathering (as was highlighted under the rubrics of what *undermines* flourishing localities) toward genuine co-design with communities as partners. For **Witness B** authentic engagement showcases "not so much consultation, it's more of a co-design process that the community is actually involved in… to really talk to people in depth about how they want to live, what that might mean and to listen to what they say and act on it."

As a researcher focused on inclusive participatory planning, Witness A argues the case for sustained rather than episodic consultation through "engagement work that's very longitudinal, that has a memory of the of what's happened in the past, and grows its network on a very continual basis". This underpins her advocacy for the "urban room" approach (see case study call-out) and the methodical exploration of how the built environment impacts people's quality of life, including the provocations for seemingly intangible experiences such as awe and wonder: "We make digital data maps on the feelings of people, on what they what they value in their place…"

Tracking demographics and ensuring representative engagement can be tricky, Witness A observes: "people don't want to be asked this sort of information straight away when they come into a place". Meanwhile, tokenistic inclusion can reinforce existing power imbalances (something Hedges alludes to with regard to who enters and speaks in designated interfaith spaces).

Witness C meanwhile describes adaptive methodologies in terms of developing social infrastructure. He cites the example of "mothers who drop off their children to school in that area then are able to spend half an hour, an hour at the school, talking about what they want for themselves and for their children," demonstrating how consultation must respond to community patterns rather than imposing standardized approaches.

When talking of children, new town developments often inadvertently create unbalanced communities. The design and availability of new housing stock

Case study: Urban rooms, participatory planning and the place of faith

Architectural design and urban planning are at best creative pursuits, with innovation a natural part of practice. Professionals, practitioners and researchers in this space are constantly advancing their own skills and development, with attention to practical matters such as equality and inclusion as well as quality of life in its broadest sense. Meanwhile, consultation is enshrined as a component of planning decisions at multiple levels, from spatial frameworks to domestic extensions. The capacity of consultation to fall short, in terms of who is engaged and what is open to change, is broadly acknowledged by actors in the field.

Urban rooms are a strategic intervention, intended to help a wider array of people to co-create local futures. As conceived by the Urban Rooms Network, urban rooms share a focus on the built environment (streets, neighbourhoods, public space); an open door for all, especially those traditionally underrepresented; a creative approach, prompting curiosity and fresh thinking; and a presence "on site", in the localities under discussion. Several of those characteristics mirror the facilities and ethos of certain faith community spaces, indicating the potential for collaboration in this endeavour.

The Sheffield Urban Room (facilitated by the University of Sheffield) was the first. The Cambridge Room—recently established as an independent charity—may be the newest. In its ambition to be act as a "collective memory", the Cambridge Room offers an example of longitudinal placemaking. During its inception, people from local faith communities were invited to get involved including as members of its Local Advisory Board, with the intention of embedding attention to faith diversity within the effort to widen participation. As indicated in the interview with Witness A, there remain barriers: measuring the scope of participation of minority faith communities entails a potentially inhospitable demand that people disclose a sensitive component of their identity; relatedly, faith can be a taboo topic for professionals in the field.

disproportionately attract young families. This can exacerbate feelings of isolation for young parents and children without access to familial and cultural supports. It typically takes at least 20–30 years before New Towns acquire age profiles akin to more established communities. Intergenerational design therefore requires

deliberate planning interventions rather than purely market-driven outcomes. Witness B ponders whether the next generation of new towns might be different if they were "deliberately designed to attract some older people as well, because potentially they could be good places to retire".

2.3 Creating a commons: community ownership and stewardship models

A key idea that Ebenezer Howard fed into his prototypes for Garden Cities at Letchworth and Welwyn Garden City was the radical notion that land on which the new settlement was built on was actually a common asset available for the improvement of all citizens, irrespective of class or background. Once the investors had their investments recouped to them at a very modest 5% rate of interest, "any value increase in the value of the land that would accrue through it being developed would be held in a community trust and reinvested back in the community" (Baker). These trusts were enshrined for several years by an Act of Parliament as an intention to encourage other such developments. The idea of developing common land for the benefit of the many rather than the few was felt by several of our contributors to be a key that unlocks and injects much innovation and partnership in the early days of the New Town, thus helping to a deep sense of ownership, belonging and identity that otherwise make take some decades to accrue.

As an example of this, Al Barrett describes local stewardship experiments that he is involved with in his own locality, where communities are encouraged to take responsibility for spaces because "we value and we need those spaces, so we're going to, we're going to crack on and make them, make them good for us."

Under his vision as a local parish priest, flourishing always begins with values that epitomise relational and emotional building blocks: feelings of welcome and safety whilst at the same time exploring radical ideas of common ownership and solidarity across difference and inequality; what he describes as "a place of creativity and compassion, where all feel welcome, all feel connected, all feel they belong, and all feel they can flourish." Barrett deploys the powerfully evocative idea of "infraculture" to describe the elements of building a common life centred on sharing and collaboration, rather than individualism and competition. There is

a deliberate juxtaposition here between neoliberal economic logics that dictate most housing and planning, and which see people and land as assets to be developed for individual and corporate wealth. As lead of the Together We Can! project, Barrett encourages his team to map how their work attends to material, cultural, individual and collective needs.

Barrett characterises this work as intentional community-building "that can include places of welcome, where people can encounter each other as neighbours, where friendships can grow and develop, where community leadership can expand and become more diverse, and where community traditions can be sustained and developed … where people are able to have their mental health and well-being sustained and flourishing and supported, where people are equipped with the tools and skills for coping and surviving and thriving."

Asked about the significance of "infraculture", Barrett referred to Dougald Hine's work: "he [Hine] talks about pockets of habitability and conviviality and that sense that if infrastructure is the stuff that we need to be able to live, infraculture is what we need to be able to live well, to live lives that are worth living." We could equally express this as commensality—i.e., eating together—a mode of cohabitation that resonates with the shared refectories built at the heart of workers cottages in Letchworth. "The idea of kind of shared housing and concepts where we're actually eating together with other … We're exploring ways for people to be able to trade their economic skills locally, to be able to make a livelihood that involves kind of trading with each other, rather than necessarily just having a job that enables you to buy stuff, and also places where people can access good, flourishing green spaces and connect with the more than human world around them."

Maria Pavlou also highlights the potency of cooking and eating together, describing the impacts of an intergenerational, intercultural cooking project. While the project intentionally supports young people to learn about cooking healthily and budgeting, it has additional benefits for community formation: "around the dinner table, when we're eating together, it's such a great time for us to build those bonds of friendship and community that are really long lasting" (see case study).

Case study: The transformative experience of cooking in community

Something that we've been trying to learn about in our [Bahá'í] community is how to build communities that are both vibrant, but they're also quite outward-looking. Ones that see human identity as being more inclusive than being determined by individual, external characteristics like ethnic background, gender, etc.

As part of that community-building process, we've started different service projects. One includes healthy, intergenerational cooking from different cultural backgrounds on a budget. It teaches young people from 11 to 15 how to cook; have these basic cooking skills and being able to make healthy decisions around food for themselves. And then around the dinner table, when we're eating together what we've cooked, it's such a great time for us to build those bonds of friendship and community that are really long-lasting. Dinner also enables the community to have conversations about human identity, who we are and what we do. We also talk about how different forces of society move young people to act in sometimes destructive ways. Then, we can talk about the more constructive and positive kind of environments we want to be creating in the midst of all of those other negative social forces.

The last session, I told people, "Come to our flat on Friday, so we can plan for the workshop on Sunday."

We were going to be doing some logistical planning around outreach; to see which families we want to invite more actively, what we want to have on the menu, the timings, etc. And then I was stuck in traffic on my way back from work on Friday, so I just told people: "The door's unlocked, go in." When I finally walked through the door, it was dinner time and my friend who's 20, from a Tanzanian background, is chopping onions, the older Mauritian lady down the road is boiling the water for pasta. Things were in full swing and everybody had a role to play. It was people from 13 to their 60s all coming together in a flat, to cook and to plan a service project together.

And I had this reflection: what other group of people would I feel comfortable leaving in my house when I and my husband are not in, to cook and feel the space is theirs? At the end of the day these bonds of friendship are so strong, that the trust is there, that they can be in my house when I'm not there.

After dinner, we ate together and cleaned up all and it's . . . this is an extension of my family.

> When you have this framework of thought and action that really unites a community, you can build these relationships that are characterized by such strength of generosity, trust, support and collaboration that I find it's crazy that this can happen. That this kind of community can pop up anywhere. It's only been a year and a half since my husband and I moved to this neighbourhood. It just goes to show, this is not something that needs to take generations. It has such a far-reaching impact and it's really… I don't know, it's just so touching… a beautiful glimpse of a trusting community.

2.4 Values-driven development frameworks

Barrett's vision to build "a new commons" is taken up by other contributors into broader ideas of value-based development frameworks—in other words planning frameworks which foreground deep principles for flourishing communities in their frameworks rather than technical specs and budgets and glossy enhanced images of perfection. Barrister, journalist and author Hashi Mohamed identifies as essential to a values-driven frameworks "a unity in a common purpose . . . a real belief that where you want to build this community also has shared values… a common understanding of what the future looks like". The desirability of shared values was expressed iteratively by witnesses as a component of what makes for good community; importantly, this was not a call to cohabit with coreligionists, but a hope to foster communities that think together about how to live and acknowledge values beyond the purely economic.

Values-driven frameworks support community resilience by providing continuity during times of upheaval and disruption, or changes in policy direction of local and national leadership. When communities find ways of articulating shared values, new residents and leaders understand the expectations that they are asked to bring to the table and contribute to in their own way. Something of this aspiration might be detected in the call for "socially responsible developers" for the emergent New Town of Northstowe.

Case study: Faith in an emergent New Town

To the northwest of Cambridge, the town of Northstowe is under construction, destined to accommodate 10,000 households. A first phase provided 1,500 homes, for an estimated population of 3,000. Already four distinct faith communities have taken shape, providing spiritual care to Christians, Hindus, and Muslims. Promotional videos include footage of a multi-generational, multi-ethnic outdoor gathering where blasts of coloured powder suggest a Holi celebration. The second phase will include a modest development co-designed with Suvana Cohousing, a community "grounded in Buddhist values".

Site planning conditions require that land for faith/voluntary groups be allocated via competitive calls, in consultation with the Northstowe Faith Strategy Group. Across phases 1 and 2, provision includes 0.25 hectares for a development, and a further 1,000m^2 internal floor space. The bidding process requires applicants to demonstrate the developed site will accommodate community activities open to all, regardless of religion, belief and other protected characteristics, and be operated by a charitable organisation. Details such as the ratio of land to residents are guided by a 2008 Cambridgeshire Horizons study which indicated appropriate parameters.

An absence of local facilities—no shop, café, or GP surgery—caused frustration for early Northstowe residents. Yet anecdotally, some Christians found that having no default space to start from provided stimulus "to rethink what a church may be" (Witness A). Meanwhile, the necessity of a diverse consultative body to assist in land allocation may have catalysed interfaith connectivity.

Northstowe's development is overseen by Homes England, the government's homes and regeneration agency, acting in concert with the local authorities including South Cambridgeshire District Council. A dedicated website includes a call out for "socially responsible developers" and "forward-thinking place makers" to advance further phases (the 10,000-house target should be met through a final 1,000 houses due in phase 3b).

2.5 Integration with nature and local landscape

As we have already discussed in the previous section, our experts have identified as a dimension of inhibitive planning that which pays (at best) a cosmetic rather

than a deep attention and dialogue with a landscape's *palimpsest* – namely the struggles and success of previous generations on that land, and their interaction with technology and nature. Several witnesses suggest that integration with the natural landscape creates multiple benefits for resident wellbeing, environmental sustainability, and community development.

As Baker notes, Garden City approaches were about "creating attractive urban spaces that were nevertheless designed to fit in with the contours of nature." He references curvilinear street design designed to mimic the paths found in nature, "rather than the unnatural rhythm of grids and straight lines". Al Barrett describes the importance of "flourishing green spaces that connect with the more than human world around them as well" as an essential form of infrastructure that supports both resilience and place-based identity development. Witness B pithily summarises many of the proceeding arguments in this section. "Landscape is always a good place to start" when developing authentic community narratives "because it's always been there". Natural feature incorporation creates continuity between past and present supporting community attachment to place.

3. The resources that faith and belief bring

For many witnesses, this was an important section of the conversations and interviews in this briefing process, as it begins to lift the life, experience and contribution of faith and belief groups away from generic observations about good and bad planning into a sharper focus and role. As before, the assets that faith and belief groups bring to the New Town planning process are an overlapping mixture of material and immaterial assets and skillsets, or to use another taxonomy, hard and soft infrastructures. (One interviewee captures this as the distinction between hardware and software.)

3.1 Service provision and financial resources

Surprisingly perhaps, many highlight the material assets that faith communities control and have access to that could be significant in the development of services for the wider community in New Towns.

Witness C highlights the fact that many faith communities have substantial property portfolios which they could divert to invest in community services in new communities where public provision is likely to be fragile: “There are many Mosques [for example] and community organizations up north that have a huge portfolio of property that they’ve bought over the years, which is used to sustain the Mosques.”

These assets include not only buildings but also equipment, meeting spaces, and facilities enabling large-group gatherings. Witness B notes faith-based groups can “provide spaces to meet, equipment, the sort of facilities that enable you to bring lots of people together for meetings or discussions or events or celebrations”.

Financial resources represent another significant asset. Witness C documents how “the average person in the Muslim community gives four times more than the average person nationally, in terms of charity . . . there is a developing consciousness in that community, that at least some of that should be retained here and spent on the communities here”.

Faith communities also offer extensive service provision that can complement statutory systems. Witness D describes how she is aware of the comprehensive social infrastructure programming: “They run series of events and seminars and a street cleaning exercise . . . they have youth groups, and they have women-only groups and they have elderly groups. They bring all of that to the table.” Tilak Parekh relays similar examples of “voluntary service” premised upon “service to community as their service to God”. Citing faith community contributions to counselling, youth work, and other social needs, Witness C advocates for “public–civic partnerships” and involving “the business sectors within [faith] communities”—including as smaller-scale housebuilders.

Witness A meanwhile emphasizes the advocacy role that faith groups can play in helping to ensure that potentially excluded citizens get access to the appropriate goods and services. Faith and belief communities are often committed and skilled in “championing the unheard people, the people who are poor and the people who . . . the voices that we don’t hear from and if faith communities

don't champion those voices, then there's [an attitude that] we don't need them anywhere in New Towns either".

3.2 Social capital and networking assets

Previous sections have identified potential faith and belief-based contributions to New Towns in the form of what we might call "hard infrastructure" i.e., buildings, community services and financial resources. However, according to our interlocutors, they also possess deep local connections extending beyond formal membership that encompass relationship networks, trust systems, and mutual obligation structures. In other words, a large contribution to "soft infrastructure" through the generation of bonding, bridging and linking forms of social capital. Witness A reflects, "faith groups are an enormously important part of the infrastructure and the social glue and the support networks of people's lives, and they shouldn't be ignored." Tilak Parekh has witnessed how the Hindu Temple in Neasden serves as "a hub where people can connect, where people can give advice. I've seen people helping each other with their university applications, or personal statements, or even finding a job." Witness D observes that faith groups "have those connections throughout that community, which local authorities probably don't have. And they have that outreach into the community, and they bring that to the table."

Jennifer Eggert reinforces this idea by reflecting that in her opinion, faith communities are often able to provide "insider knowledge, with localized insights that, for government, for example, would otherwise be difficult to access." Attending to such insider knowledge can avoid "repeat[ing] mistakes of the past". In that light, "faith communities, like many other civil society organizations, . . . are just a natural point of contact here".

Alongside these assets such as connectivity and inside knowledge, faith and belief organizations bring what several of our interviewees identify as a "convening capacity"—in other words, they can bring diverse groups together across social boundaries. This capacity, as Witness B notes, can be highly practical: "faith-

based groups can provide spaces to meet, equipment, the sort of facilities that enable you to bring lots of people together".

One area of difficulty already alluded to is that New Towns are heavily skewed in the or demographic makeup towards young families. Witness B further reflects, "I think it's better when there's a wider spread of ages and that's for all sorts of reasons. It's partly to do with children having some grandparents or aunts or uncles or older people who can help out now and again, people who can advise you, people who've been there and done it and had that experience, it's really helpful to have older people around. That's quite difficult if everybody's in the same boat, so there's that. And for older people, very often having a meaningful role and being able to pass on your advice and whether that's looking after a baby or helping somebody grow vegetables in their garden. Having older people who've got experience and perhaps a bit of time to share that experience can be very valuable to help everybody have a meaningful role and support in society."

Faith communities often facilitate intergenerational connections that secular organizations struggle to achieve. Witness B notes how "churches and most faith communities often have that wider spread of age groups" and could "step into that role" of creating intergenerational networks. Equally, Tilak Parekh notes the propensity of young families to reconnect with places of worship—researching how people interact with the Hindu temple in Neasden, north-west London, he has iteratively encountered parents who were drawn back to the community by a desire "to raise [their] children in the right way. To keep them connected to morals, to ethics, to their culture, and spirituality."

A final expression of the assets that faith groups can bring to the New Towns table is their access to a wealth of professional expertise because many professionals working in the industry have faith and belief as part of their identity. However, as with so many other issues, there is the observation that this expertise within faith communities remains largely untapped.

In Witness A's view, "The role of faith groups … is horribly underplayed…". Within the field of architecture in particular, "the whole issue of faith is sort of pushed

under the carpet". This sits oddly with the reality that "people are happier", or experience more "eudaemonic wellbeing" when "part of a bigger thing", and Witness A is quick to observe that the absence of conversation about faith does not mean that students, architects and planners are not people of faith. "I think it's a real shame for architecture, culture, planning, culture, all these things that the role of faith is largely not talked about," she concludes.

Whether or not part of the problem is accounted for by a secularized mindset within the planning and development profession (discussed above, see §1.8), it is also partly down to the faith communities themselves who rarely seem to audit the relevant skill sets that exist within their communities and then support and encourage those individuals to practice those skills on their behalf within development contexts. One of our researchers Dr Mohammed Ahmed, in the interview with Chris Baker, refers from his own experience that "faith communities do not know how much policy impact they can have. They don't know the experts from within their own communities who can address these issues on behalf of religious groups… [There's] no joined up thinking across the faiths." This is a discussion that needs to take place as soon as possible. But the overall picture emerging is that faith and belief groups have a large of skills and assets, and that it is time for them to realise the soft power they have that they can leverage within the policy debates around New Town planning and implementation.

3.3 Spiritual capital – linking vision and values to action

In the previous section we discussed the importance of values-driven frameworks for delivering flourishing localities. Several participants reflected that whilst values and the desire for creating a "commons" is not specific or unique to the faith and belief communities, nevertheless faith groups are adept at articulating distinctive perspectives on community purpose, human dignity, and social relationships and then living them out.

Hashi Mohamed emphasizes what faith and belief can help bring to the New Town agenda is "in helping to set the foundations of a new community. When you're driving towards a new settlement, you really need to be able to settle a good new

foundation in order for people to be able to get along and to be able to focus. And to my mind, that can be hugely driven by faith and belief." Dr Stephen Agahi-Murphy, commenting from a Bahá'í perspective, suggests that what faith and belief bring to the table is attention to "the social fabric of the community", to "harmonizing our individual aspirations with… our collective goals." This idea of paying attention to creating a resilient social fabric that we can weave from individual and community narratives relies on the establishing of the strong foundations that Mohamed refers to. Some of these foundations we saw articulated in Barrett's vision for a "commons" which whilst universally applicable is equally rooted for him in a Christian faith perspective as a parish priest. Maria Pavlou also from Bahá'í viewpoint articulates how faith and belief provide an "overarching vision" and "a desire to better one's community". In other words, part of the good foundations of a New Town or settlement is to recognise and articulate some of the moral imperatives upon which those foundations rest; namely, the principle of service that cuts across inbuilt assumptions of individualism and materialism evoked in certain planning and development tropes and design.

Pavlou goes on to describe a "dynamic interplay . . . between being of service and feeling yourself being transformed by that act of giving". Spaces that allow such interplay are essential precursors to this type of "transformative experience", an experience that can generate thriving new communities.

Holding space and opportunity to link our deepest held values and belief to public services is precisely what faith and belief groups do best. Baker employs the concept of spiritual capital, "the motivation that faith groups bring in order to create public space that express values of inclusion, community and justice". Baker elaborates via US sociologist Robert Putnam's concept of "moral freighting", the way that faith communities carry over their theological and spiritual beliefs into the public square: "The unique structure of faith groups allows this to happen. Faith communities are like echo chambers. You come on a regular basis to have your faith affirmed and strengthened via the communal experience of ritual and social groups. You are then regularly exhorted to live out your faith in the public domain in the form of sermons or reflections, and you have regular opportunities

to hold yourself accountable for your actions by others, but also to be encouraged and supported in doing so. So the more you live out your faith and belief, the more meaningful it becomes. At its best it's a virtuous [i.e., self-reinforcing] cycle of capital production." Spiritual capital therefore reinforces social capital which in turn reinforces spiritual capital.

Maria Pavlou describes well how this virtuous cycle of spiritual capital provides sustained motivation for community development work that extends beyond immediate material interests. As we have just seen (see also Case study, page 30 above) she describes how being "of service" creates transformation whereby "my motivation is also becoming pure and becoming a little bit more far-reaching, and more spatially far-reaching . . . thinking further into the future and being able to think a little bit intergenerationally."

In similar terms Jennifer Eggert describes the importance of recognizing the value of "spiritual resources" in the formation of new communities, a feature "often overlooked by people who don't have a faith background themselves". For her, these resources include "providing hope, aspirations, a reason to live, a bigger purpose for what we're doing on this earth." This is not, she avers, unique to faith groups. "Secular narratives can also provide that". Yet, Eggert argues, "faith-based [narratives] are often particularly powerful." Importantly, she reminds us: "there is no either/or; we can work with both."

3.4 Cultural & ritual resources—opportunities for transformational experiences

Pavlou's point about the importance of recognising transformational (rather than simply transactional opportunities) in the early life cycle of New Towns and new settlement is further expanded by other witnesses. Consider again the role of faith groups in providing resources and ritualised frameworks for celebration, commemoration, and community recognition of significant events. Witness B notes their role in "providing recognised ways to celebrate and commemorate things. [W]hether it's birth or death or major life changes or events, having a formal ritual that can be introduced can be helpful."

Thinking over the encounters in his fieldwork, Cambridge doctoral researcher Tilak Parekh indicated the unexpected pull of sacred space. On the one hand, the Neasden Temple (where his work is focused) attracts diverse visitors: "My ethnographic observations show that there are many non-Hindus who visit that place every day and, both from their visible reactions and their responses to interviews, leave with some sort of feeling of inspiration, or peace. [. . .] There's no need for someone to become religious by going to a place of worship. Sometimes it's simply for peace of mind". Equally, he has observed that "young people, who are sometimes going through struggles, mental health difficulties, or stresses, have come to that temple as a safe space to experience some healing."

Exemplifying the construction of infraculture, Al Barrett describes spaces "where we can get together and tell stories". People can take turns to share "my gifts . . . my stories . . . my wisdom" across cultural backgrounds. As a faith leader, he sees this as an obvious role for faith communities to play, utilizing the deep connectivity described previously. Storytelling, we may note, is the mechanism through which Pavlou relays her transformational moment; not so much in terms of a transcendent experience of the divine or the sacred, but in a more horizontal way by feeling connected to others (rather than isolated) and having one's identity and narrative valued (rather than ignored or sidelined). Such transformational experiences are vital in helping citizens form early attachments to their New Towns.[3]

4. Obstacles to faith and belief participation in planning

This final section picks up on some of the insights already discussed previously.

4.1 Secular bias in planning systems

Some participants felt institutional assumptions from planners, architects and designers treat secular perspectives as neutral while characterizing faith-based viewpoints as inappropriate for public decision-making. Jennifer Eggert notes how

[3] Pope Francis made a similar connection in his 2015 encyclical, Laudato Si', describing how action motivated by "concern for a public place" and the effort to "protect, restore, improve or beautify it" can create "new social fabric" and "cultivate a shared identity" while the associated actions "can also become intense spiritual experiences", ¶232.

as research director at a thinktank, secular bias "continues to be incredibly widespread in large parts of society, including government . . . [However,] there's still a substantial number of people in this country who believe and for whom faith—in whatever form that may be—is still really important. Planning is for the people, so if people have faith, planning must take this into account."

Barrister Hashi Mohamed meanwhile, in a now familiar trope around the importance of prioritising faith literacy, observes that local authorities "have a knowledge gap about what it means. They just won't know how to react. I think faith-based perspectives are hugely important . . . But I just think that they won't know how to react". In the view of some witnesses, this lack of literacy creates practical barriers to community engagement and service delivery. When authorities lack frameworks for understanding faith-based community motivation and experience, they can miss the opportunity to access social capital, facilities, and local knowledge that could improve development outcomes.

This apparently inherent and unreflexively secular bias has its roots in Western Enlightenment models of historical conflicts between religious and civil authorities that may no longer be relevant to contemporary challenges, but which still exercise an out of touch influence. Paul Hedges acknowledges there will probably be "pushback from atheist voices" at the thought of giving a voice to faith and belief to faith", noting that in his opinion "the atheist voice is going to be, 'something like this doesn't belong here'" and say "Oh, you shouldn't bring faith into politics".

Eggert acknowledges that within the context of a secular European identity, this bias may be "understandable" to an extent because "In many cases, historically, people in this country really had to fight against the church to get their rights" but emphasizes, "we don't need to go back to what we had hundreds of years ago. We can create new approaches that work for all of us".

The mesh of frameworks, policy and frameworks faced by planning officers is complex. Faced by this, Hashi Mohamed suggests, the least demanding approach

may be to process all requests within that framework, asking simply: “Where does this fit into this . . . metric of stuff that we’re supposed to engage with . . ?”

4.2 Inadequate consultation mechanisms

Consultation processes often exclude communities lacking professional planning expertise whilst at the same time appearing to enable democratic participation. Witness D reflects how structural poverty and inequality ensures that in general it is those people who are “the more educated, the more able” who will participate in planning consultations, but that “the majority of people who are not so well informed don’t engage because they’re basically trying to survive on a day-to-day basis.”

These mechanisms particularly impact faith communities as volunteer-run organizations often have limited administrative capacity to respond meaningfully to structured consultations (see §1.5 above). When consultation requires professional planning knowledge or extensive written responses, this largely excludes groups that would otherwise contribute significant community intelligence and resources.

4.3 Structural discrimination and the racialization of religion

Some faith communities, especially in the current context of resurgence in populist and racist opposition to migration, observe that this hostility is spilling over towards existing and long-standing ethnic minority communities in this country. They are experiencing shockingly high levels of religious hate crime as identified in the recent report from the Independent Commission of Community Cohesion entitled *The State of Us* (2025). It highlights the massive spike in anti-Semitic and Islamophobic incidents since the brutal events of October 7th 2023 and the subsequent war in Gaza and the immense tide of suffering and trauma it is causing in the region.

Muslim communities, as reported by several witnesses, face barriers through systematic discrimination in planning processes. Witness D describes how “with all the Islamophobia around in Britain at the moment… if you’re going to open up

an Islamic centre anywhere, you're going to get opposition… The amount of backlash and racism that they face is phenomenal".

This discrimination creates additional costs and barriers where "faith groups spend a lot of money, they've bought centres and they put programmes together which engage the wider community as well as their own congregation. But the crowd that spreads hate against a particular group, can be so vociferous that I've seen the trustees die from the stress." In response to rising anti-Muslim and other expressions of anti-religious sentiment Witness D suggests that some local authorities "cower" and then "refuse the applications and then the charities end up spending thousands on appeals which is completely unnecessary." This pattern increases costs for faith communities while contributing to existing planning system inefficiencies.

Tilak Parekh's testimony intimates that other communities—much of his research is grounded in the British Hindu experience—face similar prejudice and opposition as they seek to support the spiritual and cultural needs of their community. The ability of hostility toward a specific minority to translate into wider discriminatory action is all too firmly attested and we infer that British Sikhs, Jains and Buddhists would recognise elements of what has been described.

4.4 Coordination and leadership deficits within faith communities

As already intimated, faith and belief communities can be architects of their own exclusion from the planning table. They commonly lack the mechanism and strategic vision to co-ordinate mechanisms for engaging effectively as a cohort with planning processes. At interview, Chris Baker described "a lack of resource, a lack of confidence, lack of joined up thinking, lack of leadership", asking "Where's the leadership going to come from?" If planning authorities often fail to understand diversity within and between faith communities, then that deficit in knowledge can lie at door of the faith groups themselves.

A further self-inflicted impediment to participation is what Witness A observes is the difficulty of "interacting with faith groups to find out what's really going on in that community, because there are sometimes very powerful, vocal gatekeepers

who push their own agenda." In the world of community engagement, "it works better if there aren't these gatekeepers, and it's more of an open conversation with the whole community".

Jennifer Eggert emphasizes this point, highlighting the need for intersectional approaches within the faith and belief communities themselves: "It is important to not just speak with the men in the mosque and in the synagogue and in the church, but to actively seek out women as well, youth, And anyone else who may be marginalized in a given community."

4.5 Lack of confidence in engaging with faith groups leads to exaggerated fear of division and conflict

Finally, a consistent theme expressed by witnesses was the perception that engaging with faith groups will have inherently divisive consequences and exacerbate conflict. Issues around inherent institutional secularism and the historical legacies of the Enlightenment have already been highlighted, as have the racist dimensions to this issue where issues of ethnicity and religion are being wilfully conflated.

Part of this legacy is the prejudicial trope that faith is somehow an inherently irrational form of knowledge, wisdom and experience as it not seen to be based on empirical metrics and scientific evidence. Maria Pavlou and Dr Stephen Agahi-Murphy pertinently identify risk of faith being "framed as being kind of immovable because convictions are so strong", and that a default fear of "entrenched positions" will distort reality and in doing so could prevent the development of necessary dialogue between faiths and between faith and secular actors. As Agahi-Murphy reflects, "It's this fear that can stop us from developing a type of 'literacy' on faith and belief that advances meaningful dialogue."

Paul Hedges defines the post-secular condition as those contexts where religious and secular worldviews "are increasingly less differentiated, and instead, are more co-mingled spatially, culturally and intellectually". Witness C reflects on cyclical attitudes toward faith, noting the current turn towards a post-secular society in the West is making some people uneasy. These people had perhaps

assumed that secularisation would progress in a linear and uninterrupted fashion. Illustrating this transition in British culture, Witness C recalled how The Economist had eventually followed an issue that reported the death of God obituary-style, with the declaration that "God is Back". When the German political philosopher Jurgen Habermas coined the term postsecular, he defined it as an age "in which the vigorous continuation of religion in a continually secularising environment must be reckoned with". Such reckoning is a moment of significance, one which will inevitably shape the development of Britain's New Town and settlements.

Witness C sees two possible outcomes to a renewed recognition of the significance of faith and belief: "One is that that could be a really positive thing and … the way that it brings people together, and the way that it provides space for people to talk about different issues that we're facing. …it could also be a positive thing in terms of the interfaith initiatives that develop out of that". On the other hand, Witness C observes that failure to manage this could have negative consequences: "If communities are left isolated, marginalized, where their concerns are heightened within their own circles and heightened within this context of feeling alienated, which could give rise to more extremist voices within those communities, that could have a negative impact on what happens [in our New Towns and settlements]."

Feelings of unease around some of these agendas are not misplaced. Witnesses reported occasions when faith and belief groups have conformed to certain stereotypes of not being interested in genuine listening in the context of authentic sharing, but instead have, in the words of Al Barrett, come "with agendas of wanting to convert people" or arguing "why their faith tradition is… more important than others". This inevitably leads to the fragmented situation identified earlier with faith and belief communities each "talking different languages rather than engaging in productive dialogue".

This final point reminds us of the importance of having a grown-up debate when it comes to how we create safe and flourishing new communities in the context of the rapidly increasing plurality and diversity of the British social and cultural landscape of which faith and belief is both a driver and an expression. How do we

ensure that beliefs, values and worldviews, whether religious, spiritual or secular in origin are allowed to authentically, but also respectfully, shape this vital topic of creating Housing with Values?

Conclusions

Bringing a faith-and-belief lens to this topic has yielded four cross-cutting insights that we now present as principles for the planning and development of New Towns: postsecular, intersectional, transformational and infraculture planning. At the end of the articulation of these four principles, we offer a series of integrated recommendations that serve both secular and faith and belief-based constituencies.

As will become clear, the first two principles reflect the twin aspects of faith and belief as relating to policy, the postsecular what and the intersectional who (see above, §1.8). The third and fourth principles are also closely interrelated, as the preconditions of transformation (principle three) support the contours of infraculture (principle four).

Postsecular planning

There is a perceived ongoing secular bias (discussed above) which is commonly presented as a mode of neutrality, but in fact comes with its own set of ontological and epistemological assumptions. As some witnesses identified, the positioning of religious belief as a private matter was intended to enable fuller participation in the public realm for those whose beliefs and practices differed from the established religion (in England, the Church of England), i.e. its goal was inclusion, equality, liberation and emancipation. (Arguably, it is recognition of this inclusive heritage that led extreme nationalists to rip up a “Secular Humanism” flag at the recent Unite the Kingdom rally.) Nonetheless, the privatisation of religion occurred in a context in which evidence-based knowledge was valorised (post-Enlightenment). Meanwhile, the unempirical quality of faith became construed by some as negative, a feature that combined with other secular modes of thought to position (“irrational”) faith as ineligible to influence (“rational”) decisionmaking in the public sphere. Such bias has arguably led to the erasing of memory or discussion about the religious genealogies of modern urban design (and in particular New Towns). The omission of the non-rational from public discourse and decisionmaking also occludes many elements of human experience that

contribute to our quality of life—matters as central to our lives as love and care, for example, alongside the numinous and more-than-human. We will return to this below.

The secular project found success, insofar as it paved the way for a greater plurality of citizenship, and our witnesses deliberated about what adaptations were necessary to allow the plurality of experience to be heard. As the 2021 Census indicated England in particular is now a nation of significant cultural, ethnic and religious diversity, but crucially it is a nation of minorities which brings both its challenges and opportunities. The 2021 Census data shows categorically that we are in some ways "post-Christian" (at least in terms of indicators like attendance and vectors of religiosity) but that is not the same as saying England or others part of the UK are "post-religious, post-spiritual or post-belief".

To be fair, faith and belief perspectives are just as capable of exercising their own forms of bias against people who choose to espouse a No-Religion affiliation, or against adherents of other faith and belief traditions other than their own, as is acknowledged by our contributors. We suggest that the usefulness of a postsecular designation to planning and development is twofold: It acknowledges the often messy and contested nature of our growing diversity and plurality—and this will raise more questions than answers, which we will need to resolve in a mature and respectful way. It also offers an invitation for all parties in the housing debate to recognise their inherent biases towards others and to work strategically from a place of authenticity and transparency to mitigate these biases. This recognises that the complexity of the challenge to create sustainable and flourishing communities requires an open knowledge exchange across all sectors of the community, not just a small minority of already privileged voices.

Postsecular planning therefore starts from a more horizontal, less hierarchical and more inclusive position—fewer platforms and surveys and more roundtables and public conversations that recognise the inherent potential for wisdom and problem-solving interventions across all sectors that sincerely want to work in respectful and authentic partnership. Postsecular planning focuses attention on the need to be far more open to engaging the imagination and resources of faith

and belief—but essentially the principle cuts across all aspects of culture and identity. When invited to participate in a planning process, no one should be asked to leave something that is essential to their own self at the door.

A potential key learning for New Town planning and development comes from the highly effective ways that faith and secular agencies worked in partnership to form innovative and resilient responses in the initial phases of COVID-19. The discovery, in the absence of budgets, of shared values from across different starting places, allowed all actors to recognise that in effect they were "singing from the same hymn sheet". This released more effective and authentic communication and therefore higher levels of trust and problem-solving.

Intersectional planning

This idea is a logical follow-on from postsecular planning principles. It focuses more specifically on the issue of inclusivity of culture and identity when planning new communities rather than policy and partnership. Intersectional theory emerged the late 1980s under the influential thinking of Kimberlé Crenshaw, who linked critical race theory to her training in constitutional law. She explored how the intersection for Black women of race and sex ensured a multiplying of oppressive outcomes in terms of legal and economic systems. Since then, other key elements of identity have been added to this foundational axis, including sexual orientation, gender, disability, etc. There has been a slowly increasing awareness within academia and research of the need to now add religion and belief as part of intersectionality theory. However, evidence from some witnesses shows that public policy is still behind the curve in recognising the centrality of religion and belief in the identities and experiences of many current and potential New Town and new settlement inhabitants.

This unwillingness to treat religion and belief as an intersectional reality expresses itself in a variety of ways. For example, when local authorities treat religion and belief in proxy categories—usually under the categories of culture or ethnicity—rather than on its own terms. It is also highlighted in the ways that the public wearing of religious symbols (particularly by women) is understood as a cultural

symbol rather than a religious one. This undermines confidence in the way that one is being treated in the public square when a core part of your identity is essentially gaslit or rendered invisible by those with power to set the terms of the conversation.

Intersectional planning is therefore a 360-degree approach to consultation and delivery, fully committed to seeing religion and belief as equally integral to the identity and practice of citizens as other foundational characteristics—for example gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation. This enhanced visibility of religion and belief will contribute to much needed religious literacy at policy level. It could also challenge established cultural mindsets in certain professional and institutional settings associated with the New Town delivery agenda.

Enhanced visibility and recognition of religion and belief in this intersectional fashion will also liberate much currently suppressed participation, potential leadership and social innovation from sections of society who feel disempowered because they are expected to leave behind a vital part of their authenticity and personhood when they step into the public square.

Transformational planning

A key insight from several of our participants referred to the importance of cultivating spaces and opportunities for what one (Pavlou) summarised as the chance to experience “transformational moments” within New Town and new settlement settings. These opportunities are specifically linked to ideas of service but also attached to the importance of articulating key values that will serve as the moral foundations for a new settlement. Establishing moral foundations and shared values will enable a settlement to have a sense of identity and shape a common narrative for new citizens to potentially join in and weave together. (This might be seen as support for the call to create shared spaces, a recommendation of Equi’s June 2025 report on Social Cohesion.)

The idea of “transformational moments” and their significance link together two important assets that faith and belief were assumed to bring to the New Town table. The first is an abundance of social capital that flows from that wellspring of

service and commitment to the wider welfare of the community. Our paper highlights some of the many ways faith and belief bring an extra dimension to the social infrastructure of new settlements. Linked to this abundant provision of social capital is spiritual capital which is the motivational power derived from our beliefs, values or worldviews to want to contribute to making the world a better place.

Our witnesses helped us to understand the mutually reinforcing nature (or virtuous circle) of spiritual and social capital especially (but not exclusively) within the structure of faith communities with the opportunities they provide for mutual accountability and social and spiritual support. Transformational moments are described in the research as instilling a larger sense of belonging, and linked to religious and sacred experiences that transcend an individualist perspective or experience. These moments nurture a counternarrative or critique of thin or neo-liberalised accounts of the supposed priorities for individual and shared communal living.

Transformational planning therefore asks how foundational values can be foregrounded in planning documents and in the community and social planning in New Towns. It will pay attention to the desire and willingness of people to connect with each other but also to connect to something beyond the material realities of life. It will encourage in its planning and governance the prevalence of serving others and contributing to their wellbeing. It will also be aware of the importance of creating places of public ritual (including but also outside places of public worship for religious groups); accessible, beautiful and peaceful places and symbols for gathering and recognition of individual and communal celebration and grief, alongside commercial, trading, and residential infrastructure.

Infraculture planning

The ideas associated with this term resonated with many of our respondents, linked to the key idea of “a commons”. In the more radical traditions of the Garden City movement, land was understood as a common asset to be held in trust and developed for the community rather than as a return on the investment of just a

few wealthy individuals. In our contemporary era, we witness some similar understanding in the work of socially-responsible developers including housing associations. In this context, the desire to design for infraculture (so people live well) both supercedes and complements a narrower quest for functional infrastructure. For planners, this is an invitation to consider the "software" that may be generated alongside and in relation to the "hardware" of the built environment.

Infraculture, as defined and interpreted by our witnesses, suggests that a flourishing community has a sense of "a commons" that is co-created and hence unique to each New Town and settlement. This begins with shared values (of welcome, hospitality, neighbourliness, and so on), that in turn support practical modes of living alongside and attending to local need in respect of healthcare and mental wellbeing, economic development and training, food cultivation and provision. These goals can be achieved through careful but sustained and long-term partnership to ensure that as much of the relational, social and economic capital produced within the local community remains within that locality and is not leached away into other economies of scale. This approach to New Town development does not replace the necessary and statutory provision of essential infrastructure. Planning, designing and developing for infraculture should help ensure community resilience and sustainability in the future, as well as fostering an attachment to place and civic engagement.

Faith and belief groups are well-placed to lead in the development of infraculture hubs in new communities. They can serve as custodians for physical assets including land and buildings, providing the trusted and local leadership to curate such assets in partnership with others. Their value-driven investment in social goods may entail direct investment through vehicles such as housing associations and community buildings (a category we take to include places of worship). Faith and belief groups also possess the connections to help ensure that hubs of infraculture include and involve the more disenfranchised members of New Town communities, especially newly arrived refugees and asylum seekers and those enduring food and other forms of poverty.

Case study: Infraculture, faith and opportunities for growth

In two socio-economically deprived communities, community actors have planted fruit orchards.

In Wincobank, on the north-east fringe of Sheffield, derelict land was transformed with financial support from local residents and community groups. Planting includes apple and cherry trees, shrubs, and spring bulbs. Two local manufacturers supplied and fitted a secure trellis. The site adjoins three roads, with the local post office occupying a corner of the plot. Alongside the footpath—itself an effective cut-through for residents steering clear of the main road—sits a bench carved in the shape of boxing gloves. The site commemorates Brendan Ingle (1940–2018), who at the invitation of the local vicar established a boxing gym in the parish hall, redirecting youthful energies and ultimately training four world champions. In spring daffodils are followed by blossom, while in summer fruit ripens with each free to help themselves. The space requires care and finds it, aided by Ingle and co's community-building legacy.

Tree-planting initiatives have become a commonplace activity for faith and interfaith organisations, thanks in part to patterns of green investment. The MECC Trust, a Muslim-led education organisation in inner-city Birmingham, had a vision to transform this opportunity with infracultural consequences. Enlisting households to bed in a different fruit tree at each garden along a street, community tree-planting laid roots for "a future of connectivity and food exchange" complementing ecological benefits such as shade, flood mitigation, and enhanced wellbeing. Meanwhile, the MECC Trust also collaborates with a second Birmingham charity, Fruit & Nut Village, to offer Balsall Heath residents training in fruit tree care—including how to create new trees through grafting.

In these two cases, faith communities were not acting alone. In the Sheffield example, one might argue this was not even faith-led activity—though Ingle's achievements began with the vision, invitation and resources of a vicar and his parish. Tracing the story back that far reminds us that spacemaking is a slow and evolving process, and the contribution of faith communities is

sometimes subtle. What both cases illustrate is the possibility of taking over spaces, of planting seeds (and saplings) as a mode of collective placemaking enhancing connectivity and the shared environment for all inhabitants. Both started from the opportunity of a certain emptiness. Neither required the scale of investment seen in physical buildings. Infraculture planning leaves space, wide and deep enough for a tree to set down its roots. As at Balsall Heath, even small pockets of space can suffice for a shared vision to translate into shared action.

As an intangible thing, infraculture evolves in relation to the boundaries of the (more) permanent built environment. Where such infrastructure is unconducive, infraculture may necessarily manifest as a form of resistance, a weft distorting the warp. But it is far better to anticipate infracultural needs, to provide a warp that accommodates and supports such weft.

Infraculture planning asks us to consider what supports the cultivation of shared values. How can spaces, paths, and material resources support the modes of encounter and engagement that foster welcome, hospitality, and neighbourliness? If, as our witnesses suggest, commensality is a critical element, then how and where will communities have the ability to gather at table together, and to do so not only with chosen family and friends but in a way that has permeable boundaries and the capacity to foster new relations? How and where can pockets of hospitality form in neighbourhoods? For those who learn through example, we append a further case study, that is at once concrete and yet also a metaphor for infraculture investment and spacemaking. A reality of infraculture planning is that its infrastructural support may be as much about leaving emptiness to allow something unexpected to emerge.

Recommendations

We see multiple opportunities to enrich understanding of what faith and belief communities can bring to the policy table. However, our core recommendation is to move forward in partnership.

Our call is therefore addressed to those we view as key stakeholders and (we hope) partners in this endeavour.

For Government and Faith & Belief communities

Establish a New Towns Faiths Taskforce (NTFT) or similar to advance the conversation about how best to harness the vision, resources, and overall contribution of faith and belief communities to the delivery of New Towns.

The NTFT should build on the New Towns Taskforce's recommendations and be funded jointly by government and faith and belief sectors.

The initial task of the NTFT will be to curate conversations between faith groups and planners, architects and developers, drawing on faith traditions' resources for imagining alternative community models while engaging constructively with secular planning frameworks.

The agenda of the NTFT is likely to include, though not confined to:

- **Strengthening multi faith collaboration**, for example by engaging with the Faith & Belief Policy Collective, establishing resource-sharing arrangements across different faith groups.
- **Advising on the design of training programmes** for planning officers to identify and address secular bias.
- **Relationship-building between faith & belief communities and government** to maintain ongoing dialogue across development cycles.
- **Auditing planning and development capacities and resources amongst faith and belief communities**, making information accessible to planning authorities.

- **Ensuring a body of evidence of good practice is available** to relevant stakeholders, with regard to faith inclusive planning.
- **Recommending amendments to the national planning policy framework** to explicitly recognize faith communities as stakeholders with distinctive contributions to the development of new towns, and to the domain of planning and development more broadly.

Appendix A | References and further reading

Case study sources

The pioneering work of faithful philanthropists

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Applying shared values in community-building

Extracted from an interview with Rev Dr Al Barrett, July 2025.
The interview refers to Barrett's work at Together We Can!—an intergenerational, community-building project within the Firs & Bromford an outer estate in Hodge Hill in the East of Birmingham.

Urban rooms, participatory planning and the place of faith

Informed by interview with Witness A.
Live Works: an urban room in Sheffield city centre.
The Cambridge Room, CambridgeRoom.org.
Urban Rooms Network: UrbanRoomsNetwork.org.

The transformative experience of cooking in community

Extracted from interview with Maria Pavlou (& Dr Stephen Agahi-Murphy), July 2025.

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Appendix B | Authors and contributors

This paper was prepared by Professor Christopher Baker (Goldsmiths, University of London) and Dr Iona Hine (University of Cambridge) with the support of Phil Champain and a Faith & Belief Policy Collective (FBPC) working group. The authors are grateful to Dr Mohammed I Ahmed and Julia Makin for their contribution to this study.

Witnesses

Witness A–D prefer to remain anonymous, along with one further witness whose remarks are only occasionally cited in this report.

Dr **Stephen Agahi-Murphy** is a member of the Bahá'í community. Currently a Fellow with the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity, his academic research is focused on migration and social change. He and his family spend much of their time learning with youth and families in their locality about building environments of unity based on diversity.

Professor **Christopher Baker** is Professor of Religion, Belief and Public Life and Director of the Faiths and Civil Society Unit at Goldsmiths, University of London. He is a co-founder of the Faith & Belief Policy Collective.

Revd Dr **Al Barrett** has been Rector of Hodge Hill Church (east Birmingham) since 2010 and has played a key role in the leadership of a long-term, intergenerational journey of community-building in his local neighbourhood, alongside neighbours and partner organisations of diverse backgrounds and faiths.

Dr **Jennifer Philippa Eggert** is Director of Policy and Research at Equi. Equi is a leading think tank committed to producing ethically driven research and policy recommendations on issues affecting the UK, drawing on Muslim insight.

Dr **Paul Hedges** is Professor of Interreligious Studies at RSIS, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, where he is also Associate Dean (Scholarly Ecosystems), and a Life Member at Clare Hall, University of Cambridge, UK. His most recent book is Christian Polytheism? Polydox Theologies of Multi-devotional and Decolonial Praxis (Routledge 2025).

Hashi Mohamed is a barrister at Landmark Chambers and the author of A Home of One's Own, Why the Housing Crisis Matters. He has been consistently listed as one of the highest-rated planning barristers in England and Wales. He is the Chair of Coin Street Housing Cooperative on the South Bank, responsible for 220 high quality affordable homes.

Maria Pavlou, member of the Bahá'í Community and discourse officer at the UK Bahá'í Office of Public Affairs. Maria lives in London but her work takes her all over the UK, exposing her to its diverse physical and cultural beauty. She loves to co-create events that connect people from disparate backgrounds together to contribute to a common cause.

Tilak Parekh is a Cambridge PhD candidate researching Hindu temples in the diaspora. He holds a BA in Theology and Religion (Oxford), an MPhil (Cambridge), and an MSc in Anthropology (UCL). His work spans Hindu theology, religious leadership, youth religiosity, digital religion, and sacred architecture.

Research team

Professor **Christopher Baker** (see above)

Dr **Iona Hine** is based at the University of Cambridge, where she manages the Cambridge Interfaith Programme and cross-sector Knowledge Hub. A member of the Faith & Belief Policy Collective and convenor of Cambridge Interfaith Research Forum, Hine is committed to co-production and knowledge exchange.

Julia Makin is a recent Theology MPhil graduate from the University of Cambridge. With her focus on Religion and Conflict, Julia focuses on the dynamics of religion in society, exploring how they can collaborate to create a thriving society.

Dr **Mohammed I Ahmed** is a Post-Doctoral Research Associate at St Edmund's College, Cambridge. He completed his PhD in Asian & Middle Eastern Studies in 2025 and is now Policy Lead and Research Fellow at the Woolf Institute. He was previously Lead Consultant at the Good Faith Partnership and is Associate Fellow at the Developments, Concepts and Doctrine Centre (UK MOD).

FBPC working group: Housing

Christopher Baker (lead, see above)

Iona Hine (see above)

Phil Champain

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About the Cambridge Interfaith Knowledge Hub (CIKH)

The Cambridge Interfaith Knowledge Hub is an initiative of the Cambridge Interfaith Programme, a research and engagement centre based in the Faculty of Divinity at the University of Cambridge. CIKH seeks to catalyse opportunities for cross-sector knowledge exchange and collaboration with external organisations, drawing interdisciplinary expertise from dozens of researchers across fields ranging from architecture and economics to anthropology and engineering. Academic direction is provided by Professor Esra Özyürek, Sultan Qaboos Professor of Abrahamic Faiths and Shared Values, working closely with Programme Manager Dr Iona Hine. Activities take many forms, including communities of research and practice, embedded researchers, and skills-oriented training.

CIKH received initial funding from the Higher Education Innovation Fund, a portion of which was made available to support Cambridge work on this paper, via a Pump Priming award. FBPC co-founder Phil Champain sits on the CIKH Advisory Board, alongside representatives from industry, public sector, and faith and non-faith contexts.

About the Faith and Belief Policy Collective (FBPC)

The Faith and Belief Policy Collective was initiated by Phil Champain (then Director of the Faith & Belief Forum) and Prof Christopher Baker (William Temple Professor of Religion and Public Life and Director of the William Temple Foundation, Goldsmiths University of London) in October 2023. The FBPC's first publication was an Open Letter to the new government, issued ahead of the July 2024 election. This articulated a series of values, "compassion, integrity, stewardship, community, and peace and reconciliation" and called for greater recognition of the faith & belief sector and its communities as stakeholders in policy formation. Drawing on the expertise—professional, academic, and lived—of around forty individuals and their networks, the FBPC seeks to foster policy conversations that take religion, faith and belief seriously. The vision, expertise, leadership and innovation that lie at the heart of faith and belief-based engagement are a national and local asset that merit a place at the policy-making table. This paper is a contribution toward that goal.

This report is the first Faith and Belief Policy Collective paper, providing an indication of how faith and belief can be brought into fruitful conversation with key UK policymaking debates.

The New Towns Taskforce (NTT) has advised that plans for social infrastructure should include "cultural facilities, and creative and **faith-based spaces to enrich communities and open up opportunities for personal development**" and that the "community engagement strategy . . . should be **developed along with a range of partners including local cultural, faith and creative organisations**, schools and environmental groups, . . . establish[ing] foundations . . . **to thrive and create connections** between existing and new residents."

The authors of this report welcome these recommendations and offer what follows as early and significant groundwork. More than that, this report aims to illustrate some potential benefits of fully involving faith and belief actors in the Labour administration's flagship homes initiative at every possible moment, including in the formation of policy and planning principles.