

Active Design



NEW TOWNS
AN ILLUSTRATIVE PLACE

Introduction

What is Active Design?

Active Design is design guidance that sets out ten principles for the creation of physically active places. It is supported by Active Travel England and the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities, and forms a key part of Sport England’s focus on Active Environments – places where people are able to be physically active.

What are New Towns?

The Government’s New Towns Task Force reported in late 2025 on the key principles and preferred locations for a new generation of up to twelve new towns across England, of between 10–40,000 new homes, each with supporting infrastructure, centres and facilities to make them successful new communities with a clear economic rationale.

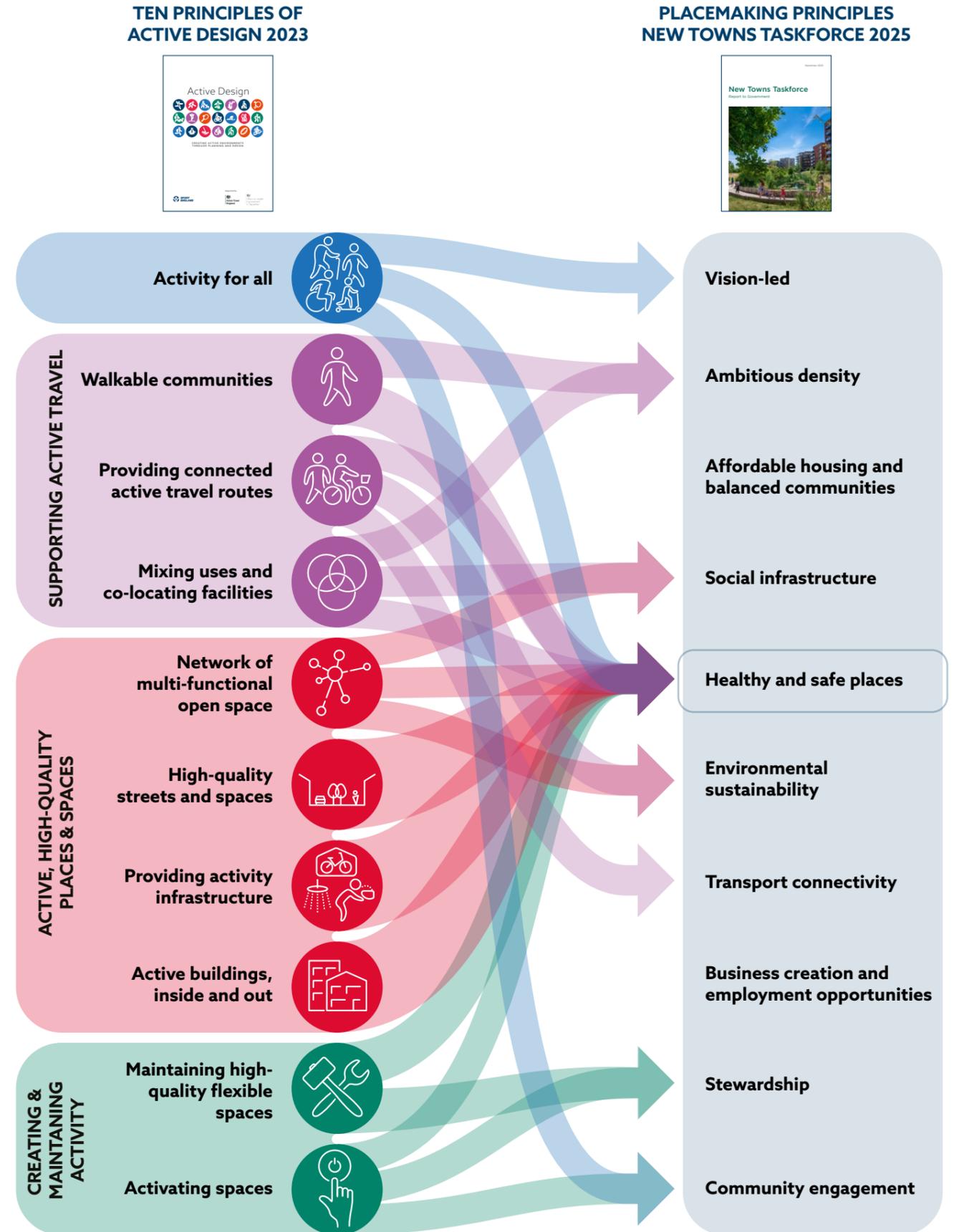
Each New Town highlighted by the Taskforce is different in scale, design and its relationship to wider regions and nearby cities. Some are new urban neighbourhoods, some will be standalone communities, and some will be a series of connected neighbourhoods across a wider geography. All will be intended to benefit existing places and people, tackle inequalities, as well as create new places for the future.

How does Active Design relate to the New Towns?

The New Towns Task Force report sets out ten placemaking principles for this generation of New Towns. The report references Active Design as a key part of its justification for Principle 5 – ‘Healthy and Safe Places’.

The ten principles of Active Design are arranged across three themes, with a foundational principle of ‘Activity for All’ underpinning them.

As set out in the diagram to the right, Active Design’s principles and the placemaking principles are strongly related, with significant overlap and commonality. Active Design provides a strong basis for considering how to design and develop a new generation of healthy, active New Towns in England.



This guide

This guide shows how the principles of Active Design can be applied to the unique conditions of this generation of New Towns, delivering Active Environments from day one, at scale.

Why are the New Towns different to other types of development for the creation of Active Environments?

New Towns programme offers an unprecedented opportunity to deliver a step change in the development of physically active places because:

- The principle of Healthy and Safe Places is one of the ten principles for the development of this generation of New Towns, as set out by the New Towns Taskforce Report.
- The scale of development is larger and more certain, enabling major networks of open space, active travel and walkable neighbourhoods to be masterplanned and delivered coherently.
- They will benefit from government support, enabling the delivery of key infrastructure to support the New Town from day one, providing an opportunity for the early delivery of infrastructure which supports Active Environments.

How is this guidance structured?

The themes of Active Design correlate strongly to the design and delivery process that all New Towns will follow. This document follows this process through from initial learning and visioning with the community, to the phased delivery of key infrastructure that embeds active habits from day one.



More illustrative places

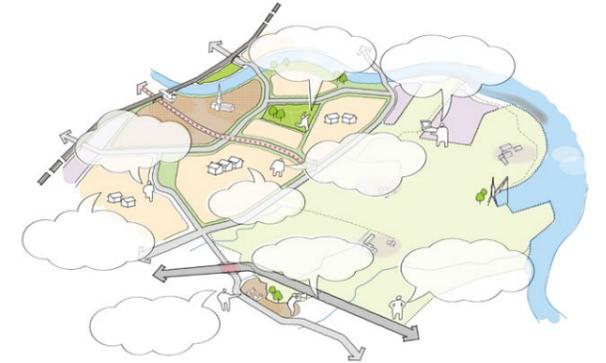
This guide is one of a number of other Illustrative Places available from Sport England to help practitioners explore the possibility of Active Design in a range of different environments. Links to a number of these are available from page 11, or by visiting <https://www.sportengland.org/guidance-and-support/facilities-and-planning/design-and-cost-guidance/active-design?section=case-studies-section>

ACTIVITY FOR ALL

Understand local communities and the physical activity vision

The first stage of design is understanding a place, its people and its needs, to enable the creation of an inclusive and active place for all. The scale of ambition of the New Towns creates opportunities to realise benefits much wider than is seen in typical development.

See p6



SUPPORTING ACTIVE TRAVEL

Masterplan the New Town to be compact, walkable and connected

Creating the underlying framework for success as an active, healthy place through the design of a masterplan for the New Town. This will define the key networks of open space, active travel, streets and walkable neighbourhoods that will make active lives possible.

See p8



ACTIVE, HIGH-QUALITY PLACES & SPACES

Design key places rich in opportunity for physical activity

Active Design principles can influence the design of key places across the New Town to have a major impact on the physical activity of the new community.

See p10



CREATING & MAINTAINING ACTIVITY

Prioritise active habits by front-loading key infrastructure

Early delivery of infrastructure, rapid delivery of neighbourhoods, and the creation of strong stewardship of place, physically active lives and active habits can be supported from day one and sustained throughout.

See p12



ACTIVITY FOR ALL

Understand local communities and the physical activity vision

At early stages of planning and design, engagement and understanding of the local area is vital. Creating the conditions for everyone to be active starts at this point. Listening and learning from all parts of the community is vital through effective engagement and co-design to understand any underlying inequalities, barriers to, and opportunities for physical activity in the New Town and wider area.

This process should be inclusive and can form a key part of the vision and case for the New Town. It should be creative in how views are sought, and should be open to all groups and viewpoints. It should be continuous throughout the design and delivery of the New Town.

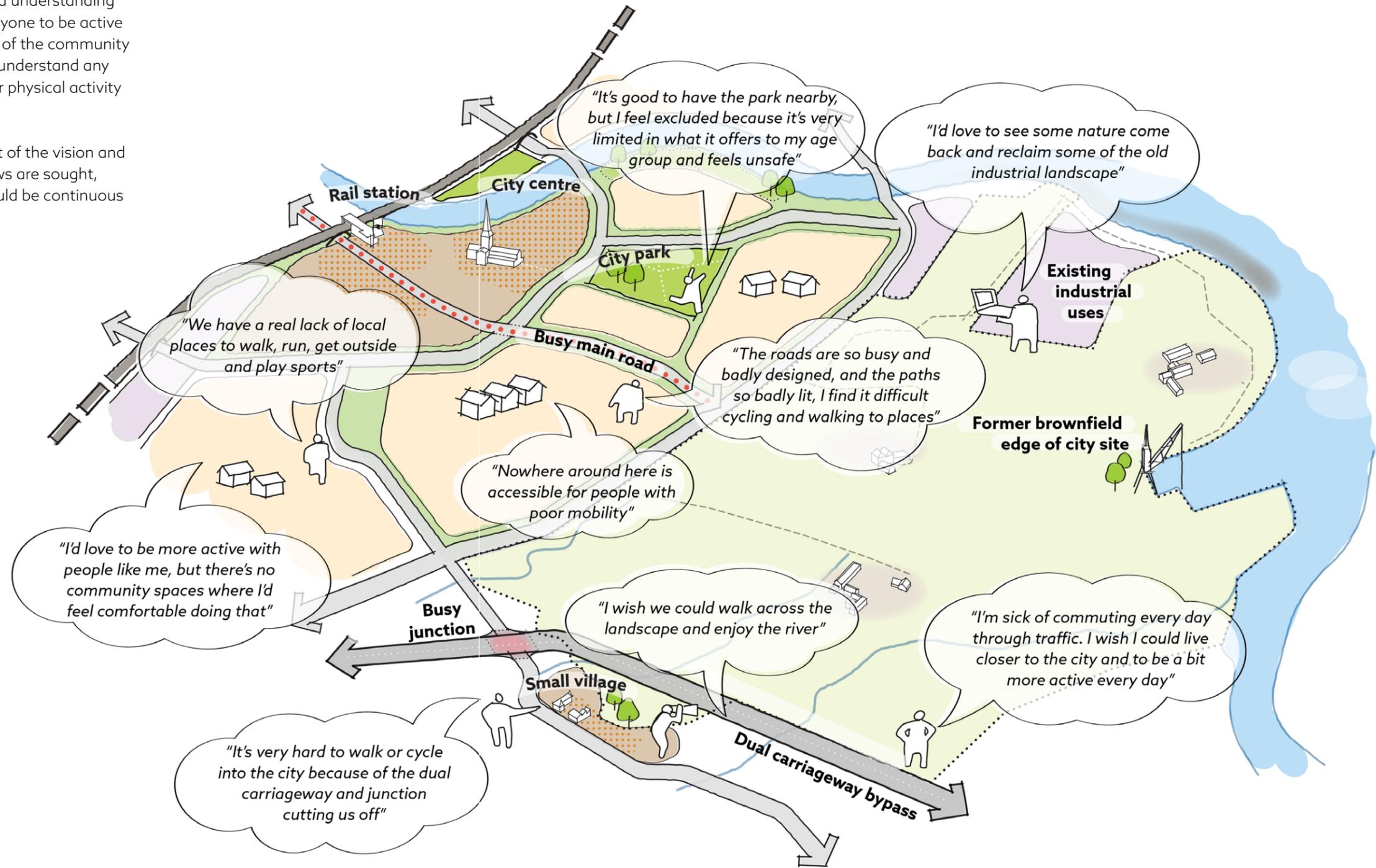
Key actions

- Understand the existing opportunities and weaknesses of a place in getting all groups to be active, and identify what a New Town could do to change that.
- Learn from all parts of the surrounding local community to understand underlying inequalities and the actual and perceived barriers to being physically active.
- Use effective engagement and co-design approaches that aim to identify an opportunity and vision for physically active, healthy new places, across all groups, but particularly those facing the biggest inequalities.

“ **New Towns Taskforce Report p79**

[Community engagement] can generate energy and buzz, and often result in better design outcomes. It also helps ensure the design of spaces and places meets the needs and is accessible by everyone at every stage of life, particularly those whose views are not always considered, building support for resilient and well-loved towns into the future. **”**

ACTIVE DESIGN PRINCIPLES IN ACTION:



Learn more

Discover how a village in Sowerby used effective community engagement to create a valuable asset for the new residents.

SUPPORTING ACTIVE TRAVEL

Masterplan the New Town to be compact, walkable and connected

The masterplan for the New Town will define the key networks of open space, active travel and streets that will create Active Environments. It will define the location of key facilities and amenities, the ambitious densities they seek to achieve, and how easy and attractive active travel is to use.

New Towns should be fully integrated into both existing and future movement and green infrastructure networks and provide connecting infrastructure to their wider region. All of these opportunities should seek to support physical activity.

Key actions

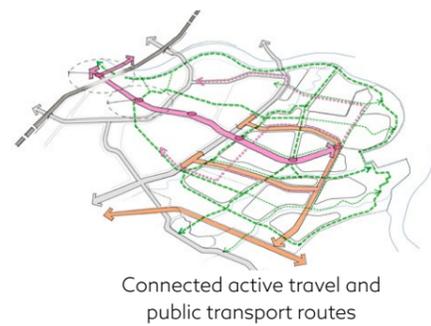
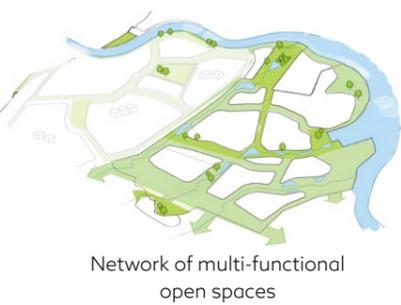
- Create a connected network of active travel routes that run along a variety of streets and open space networks, creating choice for all.
- Integrate New Towns into the wider city and region with active travel and public transport networks, enabling active day-to-day lives for new and existing residents.
- Provide public transport links that integrate with these existing and future active travel networks.
- Cluster neighbourhoods around a hierarchy of centres that meet the needs of new and existing residents.
- Ensure the masterplan can be delivered in a way that front-loads key activity infrastructure to help form active habits early (see 'Creating and Maintaining Activity').

ACTIVE DESIGN PRINCIPLES IN ACTION:



“ New Towns Taskforce Report p68
Each new town should have a clear long-term vision for creating a well-designed and distinctive place, supported by a town-wide strategic masterplan and design code to ensure placemaking quality
”

Learn more
 Learn about effective masterplanning and delivery of large sites through our case study of Houlton, Rugby.



ACTIVE, HIGH-QUALITY PLACES & SPACES

Design key places rich in opportunity for physical activity

Creating a New Town is more than just delivering homes. By developing at scale, with a cohesive vision and at pace, greater ambition in the provision of active environments is possible.

Key places within the New Town should enable a rich and active life for new residents, and should complement the wider offer of the town, city or region to which the New Town is related.

Places should be designed to enable a variety of sports, activities and to encourage people to use and enjoy them on a daily basis. The principles of Active Design can be used to get the details of space and places right, including provision of physical activity infrastructure and active buildings.

Key actions

- The provision of events spaces, sports hubs, town and neighbourhood centres, employment spaces and parks will be vitally important in supporting people to be physically active in their daily lives.
- These spaces should be located at the confluence of key active travel routes, and co-located close to where people live, creating walkable neighbourhoods.
- Spaces created should be safe and feel welcoming to all, enabling all people to be active.
- Existing places should not be neglected and can be considered for design improvements as part of a wider New Towns programme.
- Design places so can be delivered in a way that front-loads key activity infrastructure to help form active habits early (see 'Creating and Maintaining Activity').

ACTIVE DESIGN PRINCIPLES IN ACTION:



Other places
A range of Illustrative Places showing the application of Active Design principles to different types of place are available by clicking on the symbol shown.



“ New Towns Taskforce Report p79
Public spaces, including parks, streets and squares, and community facilities such as sports and recreation centres and grounds, should be safe, attractive, easily accessible and affordable to all. These spaces and facilities not only encourage physical activity, but also foster social interaction and community cohesion, both of which are essential to mental and emotional wellbeing of residents. ”

Learn more
Learn more about the importance of landscape design through our series of project examples.

CREATING & MAINTAINING ACTIVITY

Prioritise active habits by front-loading key infrastructure

New Towns will take many years or even decades to build in full. With government support, they offer an unprecedented opportunity to deliver key amenities and infrastructure from day one.

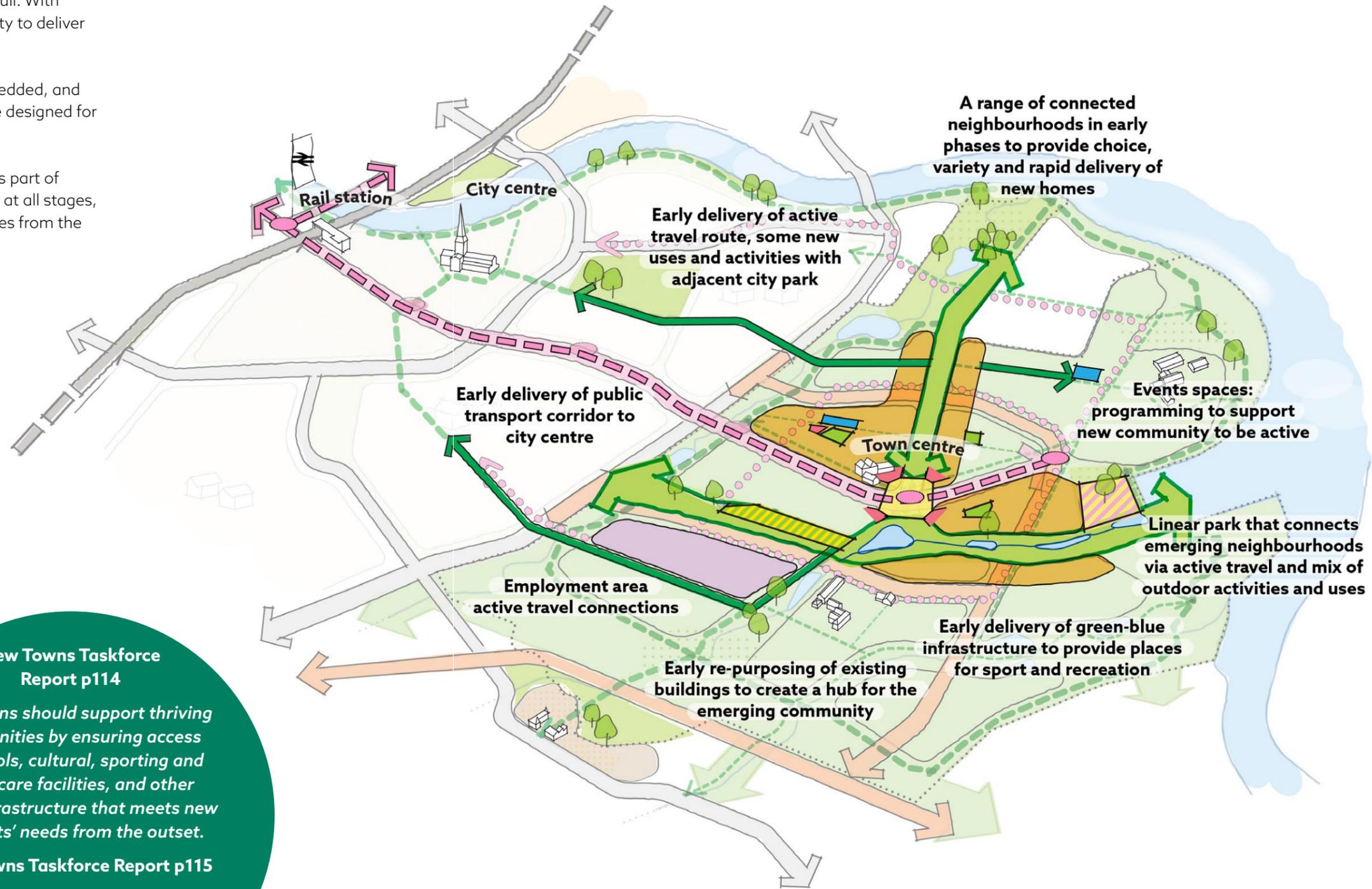
If an early culture of active travel and public transport is embedded, and early opportunities provided, it is easier for later phases to be designed for active travel and people.

A well-designed masterplan anticipates these early phases as part of growth and activation of a place, to ensure it feels 'complete' at all stages, and has the infrastructure in place for people to live active lives from the outset.

Key actions

- Deliver parts of the open space network and key active travel connections as part of the first phases, to connect the new neighbourhoods to each other, to the main centre(s), and to the wider city and region.
- Combine these early links with other essential uses such as water management, ecological links and amenity spaces, to ensure that new infrastructure is multifaceted to create efficiencies and best value.
- Create spaces that the new community can make their own and can use flexibly for physical activity, exercise and recreation, to form social networks for the long-term stewardship of place.

ACTIVE DESIGN PRINCIPLES IN ACTION:



“ New Towns Taskforce Report p114
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.
 New Towns Taskforce Report p115
New town masterplans should include specific measures to support accelerated build out.
”

Learn more
 Learn about how delivery of key infrastructure can enable active habits through our case study on Uppsala.

