

Polls, planning and the potential for people and planet

Laura Young
Sarah Crowe
Sue Dawson
Husam AlWaer
Rebecca Wade

This version of the article has been accepted for publication, after peer review and is subject to Springer Nature's [AM terms of use](#), but is not the Version of Record and does not reflect post-acceptance improvements, or any corrections. The Version of Record is available online at:
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1038/s44284-024-00165-y>

Polls, planning and the potential for people and planet.

Laura Young l.young2100@abertay.ac.uk¹

Sarah Crowe²

Sue Dawson³

Husam AlWaer⁴

Rebecca Wade⁵

¹ Faculty of Social and Applied Sciences, Abertay University and the Centre for Water Law, Policy and Science, Energy Environment and Society University of Dundee, Dundee, UK

² Centre for Water Law, Policy and Science, Energy Environment and Society University of Dundee, Dundee, UK

³ School of Humanities, Social Sciences and Law, University of Dundee, Dundee, UK

⁴ Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design, University of Dundee, Dundee, UK

⁵ Faculty of Social and Applied Sciences, Department of Built Environment and Life Sciences, Abertay University, Dundee, UK

In 2024, half of the world headed to the ballot box[[1](#)]. Urban environments were a key focus for many democracies, and political parties set out pledges to reform planning and development systems to entice the electorate. Parties promised to address a shortage of homes and housing affordability, vulnerability to climate change, renewable energy demand and a desire to make places more appealing. This drive for urban development signals that now is a critical window of opportunity to reduce urban sprawl, protect nature and promote local livability. This means that the way that many towns and cities look, operate and feel will change rapidly over the coming years because of the democratic process.

One example of such change is in the UK, where on 5 July 2024, a new government formed after a landslide victory. Within the first few days, the Chancellor of the Exchequer promised to ‘get Britain building again’, by reintroducing house building targets and removing the de facto ban on onshore wind development[[2](#)]. The new government set a target of 1.5 million new homes — which will involve the creation of new towns — over the next 5 years in England[[2](#)].

Brownfield, greybelt and greenbelt locations are all options in this race to house the nation. Although a substantial challenge, this provides the opportunity to redesign new developments in areas where previously the car was prioritized, nature was underutilized and community needs were sidelined. It is essential to use land more sustainably and efficiently. Reducing urban sprawl and encouraging local living through intensification and densification in new and retrofitted neighbourhoods presents a promising strategy. It has the potential to unlock opportunities to achieve a wide range of increasingly urgent policy objectives within cities[[3](#)]. Although increased capacity will help to alleviate the housing crisis, it risks exacerbating other issues and creating a cascade of effects. These include surface water flooding and sewer spills, as an

increase in users put pressure on sewers, and groundwater infiltration is reduced as more land is paved over and runoff enters these systems.

In the UK, planning reform from a new government has the opportunity to address a variety of current issues: the 1.2 million people in food deserts[4]; the 1 in 4 properties at risk of flooding[5]; the 6.5 million homes in fuel poverty[6]; the fact that young people are unable to pursue opportunities owing to poor public transport[7]; and communities in which inequalities are exacerbated by planning and locals are on the fringes of decision-making. All of this is set to the backdrop of communities losing their sense of place, as demonstrated by factors such as failing [high streets](#) and fewer ‘third places’ to facilitate social interactions outside of the home or work. Journalists in cities such as Dundee are monitoring the decline of urban environments, tracking retail vacancy rates and gathering opinion on the social, economic and environmental factors of urban spaces and the weakening of residents’ relationships to city centres[8].

Electoral change can bring new opportunities to work across sectors, apply inclusive decision-making and recognize that intersectional goals can create opportunities to achieve thriving places for people and planet. Progress has started and nations can follow frameworks from countries such as Scotland, which embeds local living values and blue and green infrastructure at the heart of new developments. The Scottish National Adaptation Plan, adopted in 2024, sets out support for communities, services, businesses and nature to adapt to a changing climate in a way that is fair and inclusive. If financed and implemented effectively, it will move Scotland’s preparedness for climate change forwards[9].

An increasingly important part of urban planning is effective communication and community coproduction. This is crucial to combating polarization, [nimbyism](#) and conspiracies, often fueled by social media[10], which have seen concepts such as low emission zones or simple active-travel infrastructure be used as weapons against urban change. This has caused considerable backlash, stalled progress and made policy makers hesitant about implementation. A path has been forged for creative and collaborative planning through concepts such as citizens’ assemblies and AI visualizations and by embracing the imagination of children, all of which help to shape the future of planning through more democratic decision-making methods.

Moving forwards, governments must ensure that they harness the expertise and detail of urban planning. They must build partnerships with communities to deliver and cocreate visions for flourishing places, and to create socially, environmentally and economically sustainable places. It is possible to breathe new life into struggling high streets, create biodiverse thriving green spaces and help communities to rediscover a lost sense of place. There are many inspiring examples in which planning, economic development and communities have worked together. From sustainable urban drainage systems with public art and cycle lanes to thousands of square meters of new public space carved out from some of the UK’s busiest streets, planners can learn

alongside communities what is best for local places. This will build climate resilience, community cohesion and enhanced places to live, work and spend time.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

References

1. Livingstone, H. Elections tracker 2024: every vote and why it matters. *The Guardian* (8 July 2024).
2. Highfield, A. Labour brings back compulsory housebuilding targets. *Architects' Journal*, <https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/news/labour-brings-back-compulsory-housebuilding-targets> (8 July 2024).
3. AlWaer, H. *RIAS Quarterly* **58**, 58–60 (2024).
4. Kellogg's. Can everyone access affordable, nutritious food? *Kellogg's*, https://www.kelloggs.co.uk/content/dam/europe/kelloggs_gb/pdf/Kelloggs_Food_Desert_Brochure.pdf (12 October 2018).
5. National Flood Forum. Flooding is one of the biggest risks facing the UK. *National Flood Forum*, <https://nationalfloodforum.org.uk/flooding-is-one-of-the-biggest-risks-facing-the-uk/> (12 July 2024).
6. Parliament, U. K. Fuel poverty in the UK. *House of Commons Library*, <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8730/> (19 February 2024).
7. Collings, S., Chatterjee, K., Cope, A., Burns, T. & Adeel, M. Transport to thrive: why we shouldn't ignore the transport needs of young people. *sustrans.org*, https://www.sustrans.org.uk/media/13493/sustrans-transport-to-thrive-needs-of-young-people-report_nov-2023.pdf (2023)
8. Kelly, L.-A. Dundee city centre: one year of tracking retail vacancy rates. *The Courier* (26 June 2024).
9. Scottish Government. Climate change: Scottish National Adaptation Plan 2024–2029. *gov.scot*, <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scottish-national-adaptation-plan-2024-2029-2/> (25 September 2024).
10. Royal Town Planning Institute. 87% of planners say social media fuels misinformation on local planning issues. *RTPI*, <https://www.rtpi.org.uk/news/2023/march/87-of-planners-say-social-media-fuels-misinformation-on-local-planning-issues/> (21 March 2023).