Communicating New Towns:

A story in the public interest

October 2026

Introduction

Public engagement and advocacy is an essential part of the planning process. Its ultimate goal should be to involve communities in setting the outcomes they want to see from new development, while addressing concerns and building support.

This will be especially true of the New Towns programme. The scale of development means that these will be long-term, transformational projects that will impact areas for years to come.

Effective communications will be one of the many challenges this large-scale capital investment programme must address, if it is to deliver against housing targets, reduce friction, avoid delays and manage costs.

In this report, we set out to give development corporations, public and private sector master developers, housebuilders, and key stakeholders such as MHCLG and Homes England a tool to help them understand the communications landscape around the New Towns Programme.

By analysing how communications are received and interpreted by the media and the public, we aimed to demonstrate why leaders need to move beyond short-term, one-way messaging towards a more strategic approach.

With projects yet to be finalised at the time of writing, our research found an already growing gap between early messaging and public perception, as well as a wide range of competing needs and opinions that communications strategies will need to address.

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Background

On 23 March 2026, the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (MHCLG) announced the locations of seven towns being considered as part of the most ambitious housebuilding programme in more than half a century.

The announcement followed the creation of the New Towns Taskforce in 2024.

Each proposed location is expected to deliver at least 10,000 homes, with several delivering 40,000 or more in the decades to come.

The stakes couldn't be higher. The Government is currently aiming to deliver 1.5 million homes over the current term of parliament to help address a chronic shortage of housing in the UK.

8.5

million people in England can't access the housing they need, including 2 million children.

Source: National Housing Federation

The broad consensus is that insufficient new housing supply has contributed to declining affordability, making it harder for first time buyers to get on the housing ladder and stifling demand. This in turn has a knock-on effect on economic growth and ironically makes building more houses less economically viable. That's without even mentioning well documented cost pressures that are affecting the sector, driven by global disruptions.

The result is that current delivery is nowhere near the required number. Just 150,600 housing starts were recorded in the UK in 2025 according to ONS figures; we'll need to double this to hit 1.5 million.

It's a sticky problem, and the New Towns programme is a real test case of whether the UK can kickstart housebuilding after years of stagnation.

A combination of planning reform and economic incentives will be central to delivery, but, with such large projects, it will also be vital to overcome objections and bring the wider public and local communities along on the journey.

Closing the communications gap

Key to the success of any new town will be the ability to inspire, engage and harness support from the local community. Good communication is key, as well as an understanding of how messaging is received and interpreted by audiences with competing needs and opinions.

With such a significant programme sitting firmly within the public interest, communications teams will face significant external pressure, and public narratives will not always follow expectations. Preparation will be key to avoiding misunderstanding and to untangling competing narratives that could quickly derail progress.

To that end we set out to look at the initial announcements around seven New Town locations in March 2026 and used data analytics to find out what went wrong and what went well. We looked at:

- What the initial messaging was trying to convey
- How this was received and interpreted by the media
- How the public responded

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The seven proposed locations

Tempsford, Bedfordshire

Up to 40,000 homes built around a new East West Rail station, linking residents to Cambridge, Oxford, London and Milton Keynes.

Crews Hill and Chase Park, Enfield

Up to 21,000 homes helping to meet London's acute housing need.

Leeds South Bank, West Yorkshire

Up to 20,000 homes capitalising on the city's economic momentum and the government's £2.1 billion local transport investment.

Milton Keynes, Buckinghamshire

Building on its history as one of the original new towns, to take forward the 'renewed town' vision to expand the city by around 40,000 homes and reinvigorate the centre with a new local transport system, boosting connectivity in the Oxford-Cambridge Growth Corridor.

Manchester Victoria North, Greater Manchester

At least 15,000 homes regenerating the heart of Greater Manchester, with a new Metrolink stop connecting residents to jobs across the city.

Thamesmead, Greenwich

Up to 15,000 homes unlocking inaccessible riverside land in London, enabled by the planned Docklands Light Railway extension.

Brabazon and the West Innovation Arc, South Gloucestershire

Up to 40,000 homes at the heart of a world-class research and advanced engineering economy.

1: *What they wanted to say*

We analysed official Government communications about New Towns on 23 March in order to identify key messages and themes. By reviewing phrasing and keyword density in this content, we can make some assumptions about what communicators were trying to get across in their messaging. This has provided us with a baseline model to compare media coverage with.

Theme	Words / phrases used	What they were trying to signal
Scale and ambition	"most ambitious housebuilding programme in more than half a century"; "next generation of new towns"; "at least 10,000 homes"; "40,000 or more"	Big national mission, not incremental housing delivery
Future-facing delivery	"built for the future"; "from the ground up"; "turning point"; "new generation"	Planned, strategic communities rather than piecemeal estates
Complete communities	"well-connected new communities"; "homes, jobs, schools, green space and transport links planned from the start"; "whole communities"	Not just housing units, but places with services and a sense of community
Affordability and security	"homes they can afford"; "affordable and balanced communities"; "security and opportunities"; "first-time buyers"	Linking new towns to the housing crisis and household aspiration
Infrastructure-first	"public transport"; "walking and cycling infrastructure"; "utilities, health, education, and digital infrastructure"	Reassurance that infrastructure will be planned upfront
Growth and jobs	"good jobs"; "thriving communities"; "economic momentum"; "advanced engineering economy"; "construction and related industries"	Making the policy about economic growth as well as housing
Pride and quality of life	"instil pride in our communities"; "modern, everyday life"; "shared green spaces"; "vibrant high streets"	Softer place-making language aimed at public acceptability
Unlocking delivery	"unlock housebuilding"; "unlocking inaccessible riverside land"; "unlock homes on brownfield land"; "financial stability and certainty"	Delivery barriers being removed
Planning reform	"planning system has been a direct obstacle"; "grasp the nettle of planning reform"; "stability, investment and reform"	Positioning the announcement within wider planning reform
Consultation / caveat language	"proposed locations"; "named for consideration"; "public consultation"; "final locations will be confirmed later this year"; "no decisions have been made on the names"	Managing expectations and legal / process risk

LMC Tip: Identifying your most important audiences and profiling their main motivations and behaviours is a vital first step in shaping your key messages. This work should be combined with project objectives to form a messaging matrix for each audience.

2: *What the papers said*

The announcement was shared widely in national and trade media, including coverage in The Times, The Guardian and the Daily Mail and in high profile trade publications such as Building Magazine and Inside Housing. We took a sample of 27 articles and found the following:

- National coverage tended to steer towards straightforward reporting of the announcement in the initial coverage, suggesting they were initially on board with sharing official narratives about the new towns
- Trade publications zeroed in on previous announced plans for 12 new towns, suggesting the programme had been cut down from previous iterations
- Both national and trade coverage saw immediate interest in revealing the locations of new towns, setting the scene for place-focused articles.

The interest in comparing to previous iterations of the programme reminds communicators that big announcements are not seen in isolation by audiences. Regardless of your current messaging, you should be prepared for journalists to examine the full context.

LMC Tip: Research the influential journalists with an interest in your topic. In this case, this may include national journalists with an interest in housing, specialist trade journalists and local reporters. Focus on early outreach and developing strong relationships with these people. They will play a role in shaping how your messages are received and while you should respect their independence, good relationships will help you ensure your message is received and interpreted as you intended. This will help avoid early misunderstandings which could derail your communications strategy.

Image credit: BEN ELLIOT on Unsplash

3: What the public said

We analysed over 850 comments made on a BBC story about the announcement (published on 22 March) to find out how the story was received by the public. This analysis revealed significant divergence between the official narrative and audience outtakes.

The comments can be seen as mostly sceptical or even hostile towards new towns, with only a small minority arguing clearly in favour.

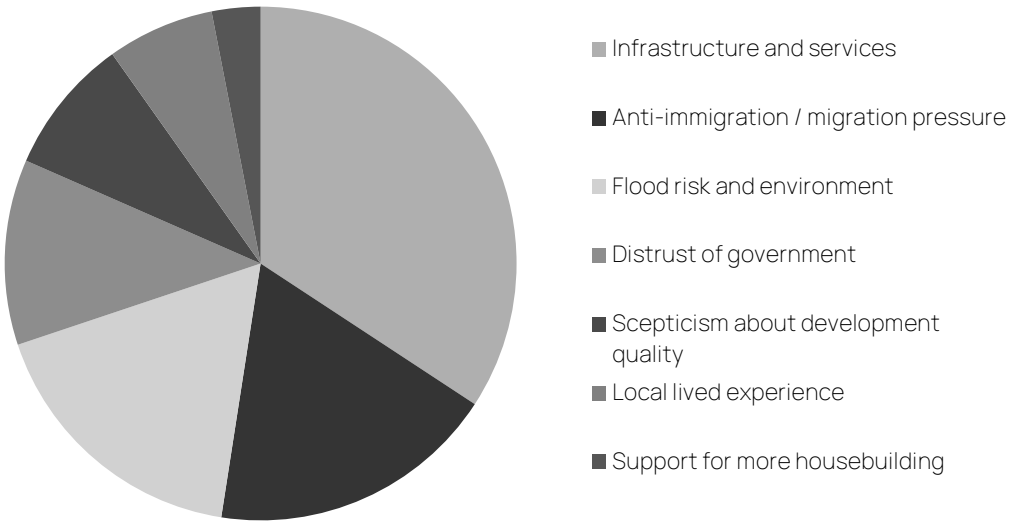
However, there was hope for lead communicators on new towns projects.

Our analysis found that commenters were not specifically anti-building, but rather sceptical of how well-planned developments would be, worried about local impact and concerned about who benefits versus who bears the cost.

Many of these concerns were addressed in the initial announcement, suggesting there is a wider issue of trust and a probem with message framing and prioritisation. Each can be addressed through effective communications with stakeholders.

Another key theme was connecting the housing crisis with anti-immigrant sentiment. This is a reminder that national programmes of significant public interest will always be seen in the context of conversations taking place at a national level and communicators should prepare as such.

Key themes in public response



LMC Tip: Always consider that public perception about your organisation will be influenced by three areas: your direct activities and behaviours; the actions of other similar organisations in your industry; and the social context. For the latter, expect issues that communities care about to be raised, particularly if you have a perceived ability to influence it.

If communicators want to win the argument for New Towns these are the themes they will need to address in future communications:

1. Development of infrastructure

This was the clearest recurring concern. A lot of commenters argued that Britain already struggles with overstretched roads, schools, GP services, hospitals, transport, and local amenities, and that adding large new settlements would make this worse.

2. Anti-immigration / migration pressure

A substantial chunk of comments linked housebuilding to immigration, asylum, and population growth. This suggests many readers were interpreting the policy through a broader political lens rather than just a housing-policy lens.

This matters because it changes the nature of the debate. For many commenters, there was a belief that demand for housing is politically manufactured by migration and that building more homes treats the symptom rather than the cause.

3. Flooding, green space, and environmental suitability

Another major theme was where homes would go. Many comments focused on building on flood plains, loss of green space, damage to the local environment, and suspicion that easy-to-develop land is being prioritised over sensible land.

There was a repeated contrast between greenfield development and brownfield-first development. A lot of commenters felt the government should prioritise reusing existing urban land, empty homes, or derelict sites before expanding into countryside or vulnerable land.

4. Distrust of government

There was also a broader theme of government distrust. Commenters often assumed ministers were either:

- Chasing targets
- Imposing change from the top down
- Serving developers or investors
- Ignoring local communities
- Making promises they won't properly fund

5. Scepticism about development quality

Another strong thread was a belief that large developers will optimise for profit over quality. A common belief was that the homes would be delivered cheaply, with poor design, weak infrastructure, and little long-term thought.

That comes through in complaints about:

- Box-ticking
- Ugly estates / eyesores
- Poor-quality planning
- Developers "getting away with" the cheapest possible approach

Critics were not saying: "never build anything," more "this will be done badly, and locals will be left with the consequences".

6. Local lived experience

Many of the more persuasive or detailed comments came from people saying "I live near somewhere this is already happening." Those comments often mentioned problems with road junctions, schools, flooding, or other negative local changes.

That should remind communicators of the importance of personal experience in how people will react. People are often reasoning from what they've already seen with recent housing growth, and then projecting that forward onto these proposed new towns.

7. Support for housebuilding

A smaller set of responses expressed support for housebuilding with an understanding of housing shortages and their impact on house prices.

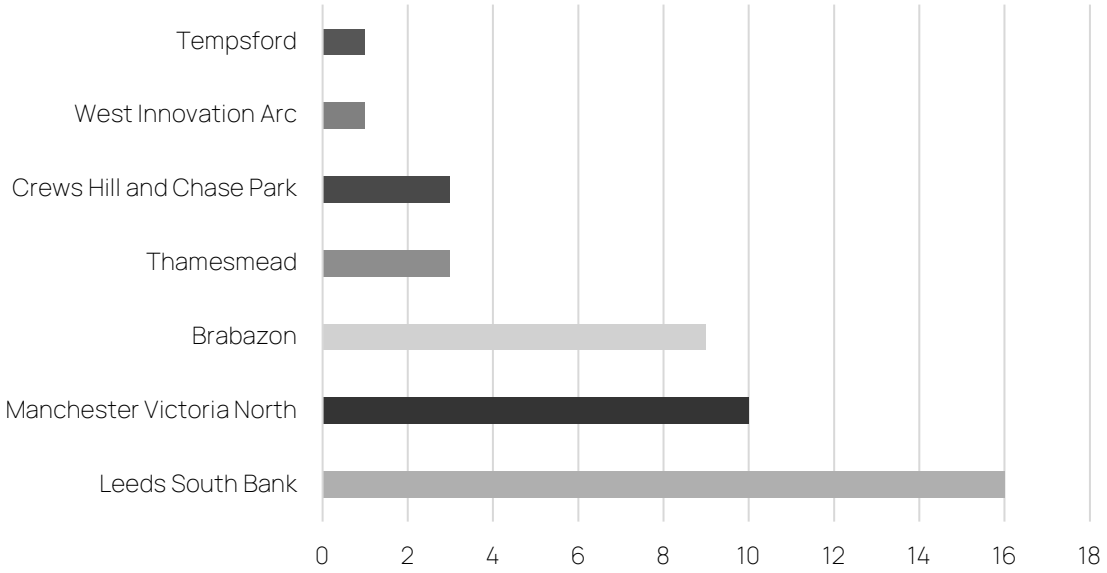
Whilst negative reaction dominated initial reports, this is a reminder that positive sentiment can be cultivated through strong engagement programmes which help identify potential allies and champions for projects (see conclusion).

LMC Tip:
Development is not a neutral topic because it directly ties to potential challenges for your audience, including ability to buy (availability and cost), location and infrastructure, and quality and environmental impact.

Research local demographics and challenges at messaging stage to see how your development can improve local lives.

Message	Public reception
Reassurance that infrastructure will be planned upfront.	Infrastructure won't keep up with housing at this scale.
Linking new towns to the housing crisis and household aspiration.	Where will the new homes go? Will they destroy green space?
Making the policy about economic growth as well as housing.	Distrust of developers - this will be done badly and locals will be left with the consequences.
Delivery barriers being removed.	"We wouldn't need new houses if we got immigration under control".
Positioning the announcement within wider planning reform.	Distrust of government - people assume that the planning process will be opaque, politically driven, and unfair.
Managing expectations and legal / process risk.	"I've seen this done near me and it had negative consequences".

Which new towns were mentioned the most by commentors?

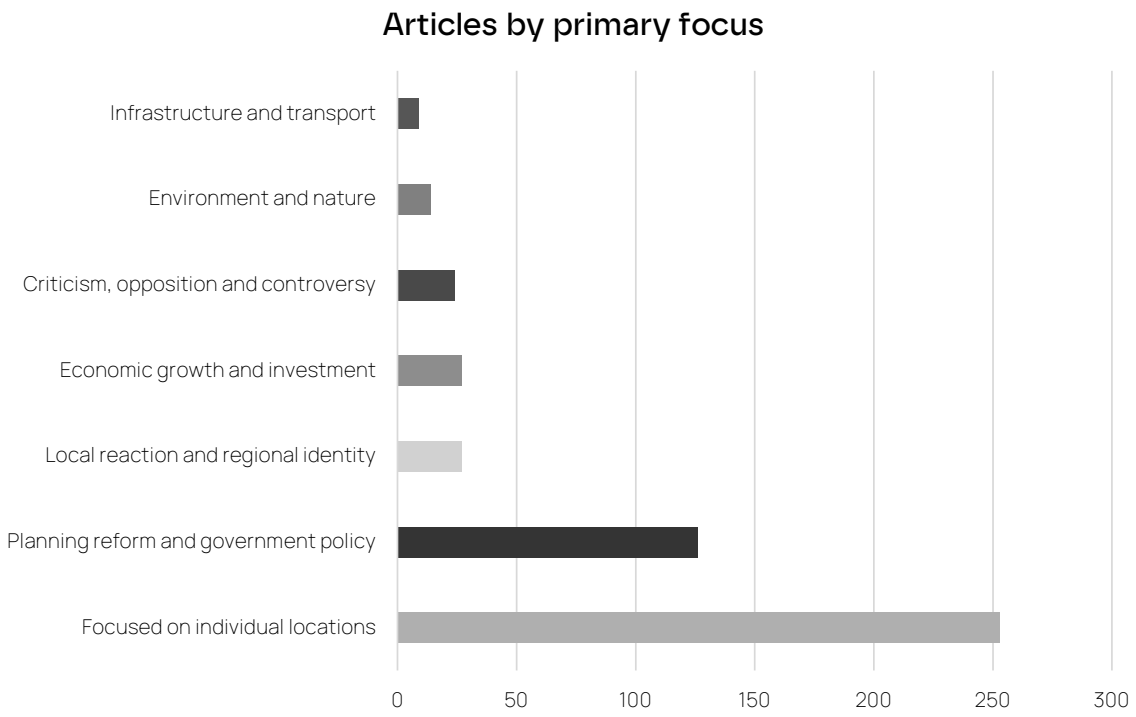


LMC Tip: A good crisis comms plan is vital to enable you to react when your strategy is derailed unexpectedly or messaging fails to land as you expected. You should research similar case studies where possible and combine this with audience profiling to develop responses to likely objections and misunderstandings. Early engagement with stakeholder groups through focus groups can also help surface potential issues.

Image credit: Jeswin Thomas from Pexels

4: How the story developed

We next looked at how the story developed in the weeks after the announcement, identifying 480 pieces of print and online media coverage between 22 March and 1 June 2026.



Recurring themes within articles:

1. The programme as a response to the housing shortage

The strongest theme was about building more homes. A large share of coverage framed the programme as part of a push to tackle the housing crisis, increase supply, unlock large-scale development and accelerate delivery.

2. Government policy, planning reform, and political delivery

Another major theme was the policy machinery behind the programme. Coverage often tied the new towns story to planning reform, wider government housing policy, ministerial leadership and questions about how delivery will actually happen.

The programme was often presented as part of a broader test of whether government can deliver on its housing priorities.

3. Strong interest in specific locations and local implications

Another theme was the place-based angle. A lot of coverage moved quickly from the national announcement to the implications for the named locations.

This suggests that local and regional relevance is a key driver of coverage. Once the programme is attached to a real geography, the reporting becomes more concrete: what gets built, who benefits, what local authorities think, and what it means for growth in that place.

It's about which places are seen as likely winners, test cases, or flashpoints.

4. Local reaction, council politics, and regional identity

There is also a noticeable theme around local political response. Coverage frequently picks up council positions, community concerns and debates about how a place should grow.

This gives the coverage a strong local-government dimension. In some places the programme is framed as an opportunity; in others it is treated more cautiously, especially where questions arise about land use, governance or local consent.

That makes the programme a story not only about national ambition, but about local

5. Economic growth, investment, and regeneration

A lot of the coverage also framed new towns as a growth and regeneration tool, not just a housing tool.

This includes references to investment funding models, jobs and local economy, regeneration and links to wider regional development.

So, there is a distinct economic narrative running alongside the housing narrative. The programme is often presented as part of a broader agenda around growth, infrastructure, and long-term renewal.

6. Environmental tension and land-use concerns

A smaller but still meaningful theme concerns environmental trade-offs. Some coverage raises questions around green belt or countryside protection, environmental impacts, sustainability and balancing growth with nature.

While this did not dominate coverage, it was definitely present. It tends to emerge where there is local sensitivity around development or where campaign groups and critics are active.

7. Some coverage frames the programme through conflict or scepticism

Although the overall tone of the coverage was more positive than negative, there is still a strand of reporting built around controversy, opposition, feasibility and political conflict.

In practice, the sceptical coverage was less about opposing homes in principle and more about whether the programme is realistic, deliverable, properly funded, or locally acceptable.

8. Infrastructure and connectivity as an enabling condition

A recurring secondary theme is that new towns only work if infrastructure comes with them. Coverage often referenced transport links, railway stations, roads, connections and supporting public infrastructure.

This is important because it shows the programme is often being reported with an implicit caveat: homes alone are not enough. The viability of the programme is regularly tied to whether infrastructure, transport access and public services are delivered alongside housing.

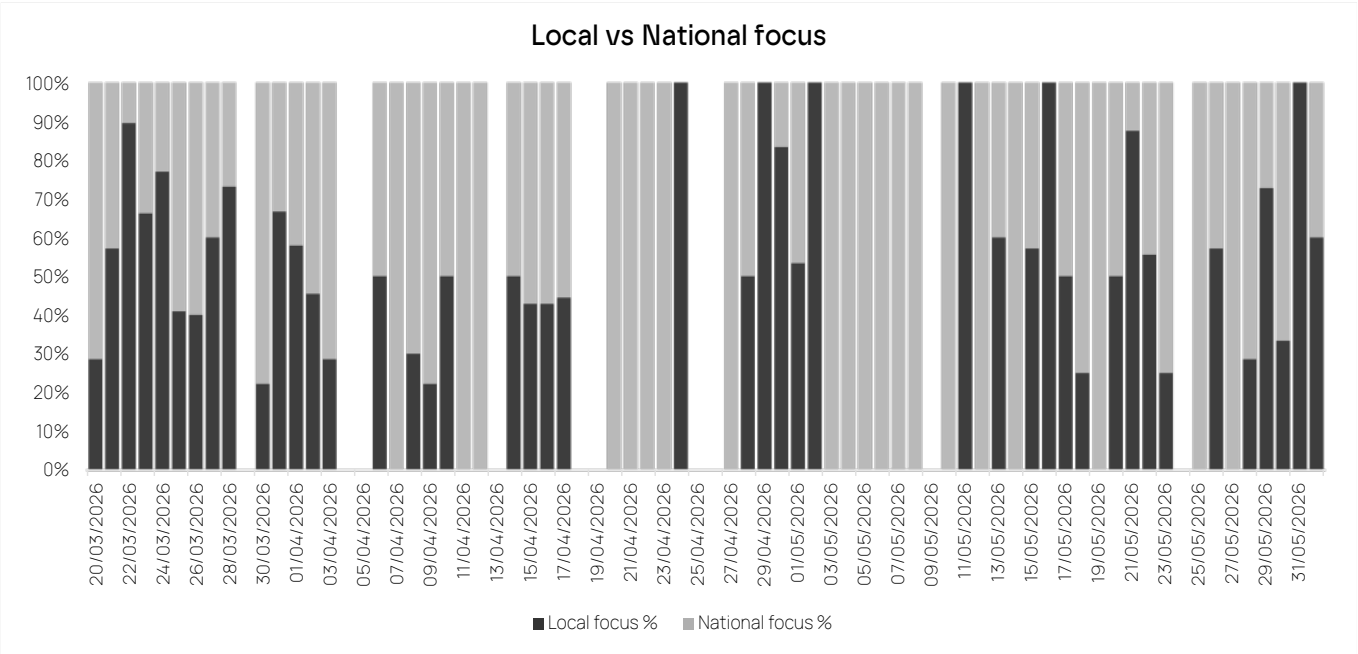
One of the underlying media questions is whether these are truly planned communities or just housing expansion branded as new towns.

Image credit: Ileerogers from Getty Images Signature via Canva

National vs location-based reporting

Since the initial announcement, the main focus of coverage has swung between national level planning reform and government policy-related issues and location-focused coverage. 253 articles of the 480 we analysed focused on individual new town locations.

This suggests that local project leaders can expect continued national interest in the progress of individual New Towns and will need to prepare communications plans accordingly.



LMC Tip: Developments of this scale require a set of messages that can shift based on local perception and changing needs, with projects lasting for many years.

You must review the impact of your messaging regularly and check it against your overall objectives.

Messaging should be reinforced throughout the life-cycle of the projects, and where advocacy has been built, should be communicated.

Fail to do this and you are likely to lose control of the narrative and support for the development.

Conclusion

New towns will remain a topic of significant public interest for the foreseeable future. Our analysis shows there is a clear gap between the government's intended messaging on new towns and how the policy is being received by the public and media. It also shows how important it is to treat communications as a strategic discipline that takes into account different stakeholders with different backgrounds, goals and opinions.

Future leaders of new towns projects would do well to treat PR as more than a launch activity and to bear in mind the potential impact of poor long-term communication. Understanding your audiences, developing a consistent messaging programme and preparing for potential objections are all tools which will help projects stay on track and avoid unnecessary friction.

In a previous report we set out a framework for community engagement which acts as a strong starting point for new town leaders and which is repeated below:

How to build a strong community engagement programme:

1. Bring communities in from the start:

While the wider national ambition is important, the focus must be on local benefits when seeking support. That includes local partnerships, supply chain opportunities, and community-led placemaking and design.

2. Make it local:

Previous large-scale initiatives have failed or been scaled back (examples include the EcoTowns initiative and HS2). It's essential to get the delivery vehicles, land assembly mechanisms, and funding models right from the start.

3. Make it believable:

Climate resilience, low-carbon energy solutions, and nature enhancement / biodiversity will need to be addressed.

4. Consider sustainable development:

For investors and local authorities, focus on long-term certainty, government backing and the economic benefits. For residents, make it about affordability, availability of homes and amenities for local people, and job creation.

5. Adapt your messaging to the audience:

Consultations must communicate how decisions will be made, where funding will come from, and how local voices will be incorporated.

To discuss how LMC can help you analyse your communications and deliver effective communications strategies built on data-driven insights contact:

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Learn more here: www.lizmale.co.uk