Dr Joseph Owen and Professor Nicky Marsh-Written Evidence (NTP0072)

1. Joseph Owen and Nicky Marsh are researchers at University of Southampton. We have led on projects in the Southampton Institute for Arts and Humanities (SIAH), including Feeling Towns, which explored pride, housing, and creative community engagement in towns and small cities. This AHRC-funded work is part of the And Towns network, which hosts a range of policy resources.

2. The Feeling Towns project, funded by the AHRC Place Programme, sought to understand what pride in place means to different communities. Because pride in place was a key exploratory metric in the 2022 Levelling Up White Paper, we worked with policymakers, heritage organisations and arts practitioners to understand how pride could be meaningfully evaluated in towns and cities.

3. Although pride in place is no longer an explicit policy objective for the new government, it is still a prominent feature of local governance and a key driver of New Towns. We are designing pilot projects and testing methods to explore the relationship between pride and housing with neighbourhoods in Southampton. This work will report findings towards the end of 2025.

4. Feeling Towns conducted case-study research in several English towns from 2021 to 2023, focusing on projects that followed the delivery of Levelling Up funding. This work included research on community cohesion in seven places: Bournemouth, Southend, Southampton, Darlington, Herefordshire, Dorchester and the Isle of Wight. We partnered with policymakers in several government departments such as DLUHC and the Community Ownership Fund, and we collaborated with national heritage bodies such as Historic England. We worked closely with English local authorities and community organisations.

5. We spoke with more than 500 people across seven locations, generating rich, ethnographic, place-specific understandings of how relationships in communities were comprehended, enacted and felt. For more on our research, please read our peer-reviewed journal article and practical think-kit for policymakers.

6. For delivering New Towns, we provide five key recommendations from this work:
    a. A mobilisation of people's pride needs mechanisms for imagining alternative modes of being and belonging in New Towns.
    b. Support for small interventions from within New Towns can make important contributions, e.g. grass-roots initiatives that forge new senses of community and energise local democracy.
    c. More critical research is needed on capturing and measuring the felt experiences of living in New Towns, e.g. new qualitative methods that are designed to investigate and register many kinds of pride in place.

d. Increased 'pride literacy' among policymakers is needed, and greater confidence using creative methods in place-based decision-making.

e. Increased social infrastructure is needed to provide the conditions for social capital that can build pride in New Towns.

How can central Government support the planning and delivery of new towns?

7. **Government should avoid proxies that link home ownership to pride in New Towns.** In the recent Levelling Up white paper, three proxies quantified pride in place in the bidding process for Levelling Up funding (HM Government, 2022a: 206–232). The first proxy aims to capture the increase in social capital of an area: 'people's satisfaction with their town centre and engagement in local culture and community […] will have risen in every area of the UK' (HM Government, 2022a: 7). It follows a trend in these types of metric initiatives, such as the UK ONS well-being index and the OECD priority for measuring well-being and progress.

8. **The public realm must be supported in the development of New Towns.** The other proxies in the Levelling Up white paper focused on housing and crime: the second states that 'renters will have a secure path to ownership with the number of first-time buyers increasing in all areas'; the third claims that 'homicide, serious violence and neighbourhood crime will have fallen' (HM Government, 2022a: 7). These proxies illustrate an ideological preference for the private sphere over the public realm, which undercuts the authentic collective possibilities of both civicism and pride in place.

9. **Learn from previous examples of New Towns initiatives.** The association between housing, pride and crime evoked in the Levelling Up white paper has a long history. The radical languages for socially planned housing rejected the distinctions of relationality and rank that pride requires. For Thomas More, pride was problematic because it relies on comparisons 'with the miseries and incommodities of others' (Bruce, 2009: 185); for Ebenezer Howard, it was suggestive of an individual 'luxury' that is antithetical to the 'delightful streets, highways, and passages', which are maintained for the common good (1902: 106). More and Howard influenced Lewis Silkin, a political architect of the postwar New Town movement, but Silkin shifts register by incorporating civic pride into his vision for a new type of town, which would create 'a new type of citizen, a healthy, self-respecting, dignified person with a sense of beauty, culture and civic pride' (1946).

What, if any, are the barriers to the development of good quality new towns?

10. **Social housing is essential to the aims of New Towns.** The history of this failed New Towns movement is embedded in political discourse but contested by cultural historians; in this discrepancy, we see a specific language for pride emerge. The failure of the New Towns was both ideological and inextricable from the fate of social housing. As Lynsey Hanley notes, the flush of the postwar period equated the swapping of the slums for council

housing with 'a fair and equitable stake in the collective wealth of the nation' but it was an ideal that 'barely had time to bear fruit before it was punctured' (2007: 10). Everything that the 'corporation' represented—the council house, the planned infrastructure of work and leisure, and the regulation of green spaces—became incompatible with an emerging economic neoliberalism (Hanley, 2007: 10).

11. **Evaluation is key to the success of New Towns.** A problem that beset the New Towns was the failure of the evaluation planned for these communities. A lack of community-engaged research meant that the lived experiences of those occupying the towns were never captured and there was no serious attempt to go beyond the stereotypes that quickly framed their lives (Alexander, 2009: 112). The assumption that pride could be felt only by those in possession of a mortgage was assumed by the literal architects of social housing. Town planners suggested that 'people don't take responsibility and pride as they do when they have paid £200K' (Rivera, 2021: 55).

12. **Communal spaces should not be demonised as sites of criminality.** The shame projected onto council estates extended to the spaces and communities that operated within them. John Boughton's history of municipal housing emphasises the key role that the associations of criminality played in the demonisation of the physical places of council estates, evoked so powerfully by David Cameron's 2016 assertion that council estates are 'a gift to criminals and drug dealers' (2012: 175). The association between criminality and council housing lay not simply in the denigration of its residents but in the idea of 'defensible space', which suggests that public spaces fail because they are insufficiently observed or owned (Lees and Warwick, 2022). It is this assumption—that the only safe space is a privately owned space—that resurfaces in the twinned proxies of housing and crime in the Levelling Up white paper. It is another way of damning the possibility of a pride in place not rooted in private ownership, despite all the contradictions and problems of privatised pride that have been drawn out by our research.

What role should community engagement play in developing and planning new towns?

13. **The relationship between the private sphere and public realm is inherent to many people's understandings of pride in place.** In Ledbury, there were contradictions between participants' appreciation of green spaces and their acknowledgement that new housing developments were needed. This friction played into a wider local debate about the benefits of including newcomers in volunteering networks against the effects of diversity on established communities. Paradoxically, while residents were proud of the Poetry Festival for attracting temporary visitors to the town, they were wary of strangers coming to live permanently in 'their place' (Interviews, 2022).

14. **Navigating the tension between private and public space is crucial to the success of New Towns.** In Darlington, housing developments earmarked for green spaces were regarded with anxiety and there was a fear that new populations of young people would bring disruptive and antisocial behaviour. For the proposed redevelopment of the derelict Northgate Tower,

some participants hoped that the building would be transformed into offices or a hotel rather than flats. Other views on housing were relayed with nostalgia. As one local leader put it, 'if I ever won the lottery, I'd buy all the run-down houses and build them up to how they used to be' (Interview, 2022). These examples suggest that private ownership is often seen as a solution to public ills, and that pride will necessarily follow from relinquishing public ownership and responsibility to the private realm. We must consider how we can engage communities and develop social infrastructure as a response to this sentiment.

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