Preface

I have long held an interest in the planning of new and expanded towns. As an undergraduate I studied Estate Management but what really interested me were the modules on Town and Country Planning: the works of theorists like Abercrombie, Keeble and Gibberd and planning historians such as Ashworth and Mumford. In the post-war years Britain faced a huge shortage of housing and there was a pressing need to redevelop the inner cities, remove slums and reduce densities. Overspill to satellite towns seemed to be an obvious policy. Two approaches emerged: new towns developed under the New Towns Act 1946 and a programme of town expansion schemes under the Town Development Act 1952. Both internationally and locally, most interest was in the new towns and many books and articles were written offering theoretical insights into their planning, or analysing their achievements.

So, having qualified, I got a job with Bracknell New Town Development Corporation and went on to spend five years employed as a planner in new town development corporations. The work involved many aspects of physical planning: calculating dwelling mix and densities, provision of amenities and open space, urban design and housing layouts. It was exciting to help create new urban areas and to see development quickly appear on the ground.

In the early 1970s I moved to Liverpool to join the Merseyside Structure Plan team. This offered a different kind of satisfaction: developing the urban regeneration policies that would shape the city region over future decades. The work was rewarding but lacked the immediacy of my previous tasks. By 1977 I had entered academic life. Planning theory had developed beyond concerns about physical planning and urban design to include the social and economic problems of existing urban areas and policy responses to the economic decline and restructuring that was overtaking many British cities. New towns seemed an irrelevance as urban populations tumbled and inhabitants moved to the suburbs and beyond. Much of my time in academia has been spent writing about the problems of conurbations: applying urban economic and planning theory to questions of regeneration and sustainable development, sometimes using Liverpool as a case study but often working in a European comparative context.

By the millennium it was becoming clear that some 30 years of urban regeneration policies were having an effect on British cities and most were seeing economic recovery on a substantial scale, albeit based on new consumption

and service economies rather than their former industrial structures. Urban populations were growing too, especially in the city centres. Suddenly a new crisis emerged: there was a shortage of housing, especially in London and the South-East. This started a renewed interest in old familiar questions: where and in what form should this new housing be built? In response new books and reports were published about the merits of new towns, garden cities, eco-towns and the design of neighbourhoods. But less was heard about the idea of solutions based upon town expansion. As in the post-war years the rather prosaic idea of accommodating urban growth through the expansion of existing towns was being neglected in favour of discussion about the more politically exciting prospect of building new towns. Despite this, town expansion schemes have always been said to offer better value for money and to be more locally democratically accountable than new towns: so might they have a place in modern urban policy, especially in a world where Coronavirus is endemic?

This book is an attempt to redress the balance of discussion between new and expanded towns. Although the book contains a general description of the evolution of policy, it is not in any way a definitive history of the expanded towns programme or of individual schemes. But through an examination of the changing nature of the policy and its implementation in selected case studies, it generates a discussion about the achievements of the programme, the lessons to be learned and what such a policy might contribute today. Although I started the book in 2019 much of the research and writing has been completed in 2020 during the time of Coronavirus. This has been a challenge. University libraries were closed for many months. Travel to case study areas in England was difficult and it was impossible to visit other European countries, so there has been a greater reliance on secondary sources, email exchanges and my own established knowledge than I would have liked. Nevertheless 'lockdown' also provided the time in which to get the writing done.

Chris Couch, December 2020