

The London New Towns in their changing regional context

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Abstract

As the 75th anniversary of the British New Towns programme approaches, this chapter assesses the contribution that London New Towns have made to accommodating population growth in south-east England and examines the extent to which the original New Town principles have left a distinctive legacy in terms of social composition and self-containment. According to the evidence presented in this chapter, the London New Towns have tended to become less distinctive compared to their regional context, but at the same time they retain elements of the features that marked them out as different 40 years ago.

Keywords: London New Towns; Population growth; Social balance; Self-containment; Regional comparison.

Introduction

As the 75th anniversary of the British New Towns programme approaches, there is renewed interest in this approach to accommodating population growth in south-east England where for many years the rate of house-building has been lagging behind projected housing need. The first London – and British – New Town, Stevenage, was designated in November 1946, just a few months after parliamentary approval had been given to the New Towns Act following the recommendations of the Reith Committee (Ministry of Town & Country Planning, 1946). Over the next three years,

seven more designations were made for accommodating households and businesses from London: in chronological order, Crawley, Hemel Hempstead, Harlow, Hatfield, Welwyn Garden City, Basildon and Bracknell (this in June 1949). Nearly two decades then elapsed before a further two designations were made to cater for renewed regional population growth in what is now referred to as the Wider South East (WSE) comprising the South East and East of England regions – Milton Keynes and Peterborough in 1967 – followed in 1968 by Northampton which is located over the border in the East Midlands region.

The British New Towns programme has been the subject of intense scrutiny, not surprisingly given its ground-breaking nature in policy terms, with particular attention being given to the London New Towns owing to their relevance to the planning of major metropolitan areas around the world including the case of Paris in the 1960s. Notably, there was a flurry of reviews around the programme's 25th anniversary. These included the Town and Country Planning Association's (1968) report *New Towns come of age* celebrating the first 21 years of the programme, Heraud's (1968) research on how far the New Towns were achieving their aim of social balance, Thomas's (1969) study *London's New Towns: A study of self-contained and balanced communities*, Evans' edited collection *New Towns: The British experience*, Ogilvy's (1975) case study of Bracknell and Champion et al.'s (1977) *Facts about the New Towns: A socio-economic digest* which was based largely on data from the 1971 Census. Following Aldridge's (1979) wide-ranging assessment *The British new towns: A programme without a policy*, however, attention has been relatively sporadic and partial in nature and none has attempted to emulate the statistical detail provided by our 1977 study.

Now, over 40 years on from that study, this chapter examines the current status of the London New Towns, with a dual focus on whether they retain any of their original distinctiveness and on how they relate to their regional surroundings. First among the topics addressed here is the London New Towns' pace of growth over the seven decades since their inception. While at designation they were set population targets for receiving London overspill for about 20 years ahead, some of these targets were subsequently raised, but in 1986 the decision was taken to close the programme down in the face of conurbation decline. Has this meant zero population growth for the London New Towns since then or have they been sharing in the WSE's renewed growth? Secondly, social balance was a key goal at the outset, as noted above, but the studies by Heraud and others revealed that the selection process strongly favoured skilled manual workers. Are the New Towns still different from their surrounding region in this respect? Thirdly, self-containment was another key goal of the London New Towns, which is why they were conceived as essentially free-standing towns situated beyond the edge of London's built-up area and some 35-50 km from its core, but even though there was a close match between their numbers of jobs and employed residents in most cases, by 1971 they had already developed quite complex commuting links with their sub-regions. Here 2011 Census data are used to see how far their job ratios and commuting independence have altered since then.

But first, a word about the data needed to answer these questions – important given the statistical thrust of the chapter. During the active stages of the New Towns programme, population and other socio-economic data from censuses and other sources were routinely made available for their designated areas, but as the New Towns have had their special arrangements wound up, these areas have been absorbed into England's local government framework, which itself has been reorganised over

time, most notably in 1974 but with local boundary changes also taking place on other occasions. This has important ramifications for data assembly because, while much of the historic data has been revised back in time for the current local authority geography, there is no equivalent source of more recent data for the originally designated areas. In the case of most of the London New Towns, this is not considered a big problem because most such “boundary extensions” took in land which contained little existing development or contained homes that had been built recently to meet their raised targets. In two cases, however, the New Town has been absorbed into a larger local authority, namely Hemel Hempstead into Dacorum and Bracknell into Bracknell Forest, meaning that the population change data for these two places will include any growth accounted for by the parts that were not in the designated New Town and so may somewhat overstate the latter’s contribution to regional growth. Additionally, Welwyn Garden City and Hatfield now constitute the single local authority of Welwyn Hatfield. Lastly, because of this chapter’s aim of studying the New Towns against their regional context, the focus is on those situated within the WSE, i.e. omitting Northampton.

Population size and growth

The current population sizes of the WSE’s New Towns vary considerably. According to the latest available population estimates (for 2018), the two largest were the two most recently designated ones: Milton Keynes with 268,600 residents and Peterborough with 201,000. This is hardly surprising given that these both contained substantial population in 1967, Peterborough being a long-standing city with a cathedral and Milton Keynes containing the ‘expanded town’ of Bletchley (which had already been receiving London overspill under the 1952 Town Development Act).

The third largest in 2018 was Basildon, with 185,900 people, followed by Dacorum (containing Hemel Hempstead) on 154,300. Smallest were Harlow (86,600) and Stevenage (87,800), though Welwyn Garden City and Hatfield – with a combined population of 122,700 – will individually have probably been smaller than these two. In between, Bracknell Forest and Crawley numbered 121,700 and 112,400 respectively. In all, these London New Towns were home to 1.34 million people in 2018, accounting for 8.7% of the 15.3 million living in the WSE then.

Turning to the question of whether the London New Towns ceased growing after they reached their planned population targets, Figure 10.1 shows the phasing of their growth by decade on the basis of absolute numbers per year, thereby allowing for the final period being of only 7 years' duration. Arranged by date of designation, Stevenage is shown first. Its pattern of growth over the first four decades to 1991 clearly reflects the original intentions with strongest growth in the first full decade after designation, with its annual average then dropping back as it reached its target population for planned overspill but with growth continuing in the 1970s, no doubt mainly through births arising from the focus on accommodating London's newly forming households. The main impact of the latter must have worn off by the 1980s, when growth was close to zero, but since 1991 the data reveal modest growth averaging some 500 people a year.

<Figure 10.1 about here>

The growth profiles for the other New Towns designated before 1950 follow the Stevenage pattern but with some variation (Figure 10.1). Compared to Stevenage, more of Crawley's initial growth was concentrated in the 1950s, as was also the case

for Welwyn Garden City and Hatfield combined, but for Basildon and Bracknell their 1950s' volume of increase continued through the 1960s and even into the 1970s in the latter case. All bar Bracknell share Stevenage's drop to a low point in the 1980s, with Harlow witnessing actual population decline in the 1980s and Welwyn Hatfield effectively static between 1971 and 1991, but thereafter all of them experience something of a revival in growth, with this getting progressing stronger in several cases.

As regards the WSE's later designations (bottom two panels of Figure 10.1), the 'new city' of Milton Keynes parallels the experience of the earlier New Towns in seeing its fastest growth in the first two full decades after designation. Indeed, its annual average growth of over 5,000 people in both the 1970s and the 1980s was greater than that recorded by any of the other New Towns in any single decade. This includes Peterborough, where population growth was considerably more modest in those two decades. At the same time, Peterborough is distinctive in seeing the resumption of its earlier volume of population growth after a lull in the 1990s, whereas Milton Keynes's more recent increases have been at a lower level than previously, albeit averaging some 3,000 a year and still ahead of Peterborough and well above the decadal increases of any of the earlier New Towns individually.

In sum, the phasing of growth for the WSE's New Towns clearly reflects the intentions of London's overspill programme, with their greatest population increases being concentrated in the first full decade or two after their designation. Reinforced by the government's 1986 decision to close down the planned dispersal programme, their growth reduced to almost zero for a while in most cases. More recently, however, most have seen a resumption of population gains, albeit at much more

modest levels than originally though still sizeable for Milton Keynes and Peterborough.

Turning to evaluating the New Towns' performance in their wider regional context, one question concerns the extent to which the New Towns have managed to accommodate the WSE's overall population growth. In the Abercrombie (1945) plan for London, it was anticipated that the whole region would see virtually no overall growth, with the main change being the decantation of households from London into his proposed ring of 10 new towns as the capital was redeveloped at lower residential densities. However, even early on, as documented in the review studies cited above, it was recognised that the New Towns could not accommodate all the region's growth because the latter was swelled by an unexpected baby boom and also by net migration gains from the rest of the UK and abroad – one of the reasons why 22 additional places in the WSE were designated as Expanded Towns during the 1950s. So, exactly what proportion have the New Towns managed to absorb?

The answer can be found in Table 10.1. Over the whole period 1951-2018, the WSE's New Towns accounted for just over 1 in 7 (14.6 %) of the 105,000 annual average increase recorded by the WSE, with one-third of this share being contributed by Milton Keynes and Peterborough (including their pre-designation growth). Even during the rapid-growth phase of the original set of New Towns in the 1950s, their share amounted to barely one-fifth, while by the 1960s it was less than one-tenth, as their growth slowed and regional growth accelerated. The effect of the two 1967 designations becomes apparent in the following decade and, while this could only partially offset the further reduction in the growth of the original New Towns, the overall contribution rose to 19.5% because of the more-than-halving of the region's overall growth then. Over the next three decades, the combined contribution of the

New Towns to regional growth shrank progressively, but it has stabilised since 2011. This can be seen to be due to a substantial uplift in the annual growth of the 8 original New Towns, continuing the resurgence that began in the 1990s.

<Table 10.1 about here>

Leading on from this, to what extent does the performance of the New Towns remain distinctive as opposed to now reflecting the growth rate of their wider region? The answer can be inferred from Table 10.1, in that their 10.8% contribution to the region's total population growth in 2011-2018 was higher than 'expected' from their 8.7% share of the region's 2018 population, noted previously. As a group, therefore, the New Towns have recently been gaining population at a somewhat faster rate than the regional average. The precise figures (not shown in Table 10.1) are annual growth (compound rate) of 0.98% for the New Towns as compared with 0.79% for the WSE as a whole. Just three of the New Towns fall below this regional rate, these being Stevenage (0.58%), Crawley (0.70%) and Harlow (0.75%), while at the other end of the scale Welwyn Hatfield has been growing at an average of 1.48% a year since 2011. Clearly, if there is anything distinctive about these New Towns now, it is that they are still helping to lead growth in the region, though of course not by such a great margin as in the first years of planned dispersal from London and not as consistently across the cases.

Social balance

As mentioned above, social balance – in terms of accommodating a representative spectrum of society – was one of the aspirations enshrined in the Reith Report and

New Towns Act. In the main phases of the development of London's first 8 New Towns, however, the achievement of this goal was hamstrung by the primary focus of the London dispersal policy being on manufacturing firms and accommodating their workers in rented housing provided by the Towns' Development Corporations. Only after the completion of their main phase of planned growth and pressures led their industrial land being allowed for use by service-sector firms did a significant amount of owner-occupied housing get built there, coinciding with the plans for the towns designated in the 1960s adopting a more even balance between public- and private-sector housing. So, has this distinctiveness of the New Towns diminished substantially in the past four decades?

The distinctiveness of London's original 8 New Towns was evident from Champion et al's (1977) analysis of 1971 Census data. At that time, while manufacturing accounted for 30% of jobs across their wider region, the levels ranged from twice this in Basildon and Harlow (62% and 60% respectively) to 47% in Bracknell and Hemel Hempstead. The result in terms of occupational structure, measured for males in their workforces, was an above-average representation of skilled manual workers in 1971. Highest was Basildon's 44%, well above the regional level of 34%, and the only town below the average was Welwyn Garden City (33% when counted separately from Hatfield). The other distinctive feature in 1971 was the below-average share of less skilled manual workers for most of these New Towns, partly because of these being less in demand in the type of manufacturing-sector firms attracted but also because of the lowest paid being discouraged by the relatively high rents being charged for the new housing there.

Fast forward to the results of the latest Annual Population Survey (for 2018), and the occupational composition of the population (based on all in employment) is as

shown in Figure 10.2. The main finding for the 8 original New Towns is that, in aggregate, they still have fewer people working in professional and managerial jobs than the regional average led by more established former market towns, but the margin is relatively small, with this difference being compensated by a somewhat larger share of least skilled workers. The two 1960s New Towns are, however, more distinctive, with substantially greater representation of the least skilled – continuing the structure that was already evident in 1971 and largely inherited from their pre-designation state.

<Figure 10.2 about here>

At the same time, it is also clear from Figure 10.2 that the patterns vary considerably between the individual cases within the two sets of London New Towns. Peterborough's social composition in 2018 is much more skewed towards the least skilled jobs and less towards the two highest skilled groups than Milton Keynes's. Harlow, Basildon and Stevenage are even further below the regional average for the highest skilled, whereas Crawley and Bracknell are closer to it and Hemel Hempstead (Dacorum) and Welwyn Hatfield are significantly above it. To some extent, it is possible to detect a geographical dimension to this pattern within the wider region, in that there has traditionally been a broad distinction between a more dynamic western part typified by the M4 corridor of high-tech industry and business services and an economically weaker east typified by the Lower Thames corridor: Bracknell and Hemel Hempstead are firmly within the western arc, while Basildon and Harlow are both in Essex. Other factors, however, must also be playing a part, not least the university presence in Hatfield.

Self-containment

The other main aspiration behind the New Towns concept was the goal of self-containment. In theory, this took on several forms including the aim of providing a full set of the services that would be needed by the local population. Unlike the general pattern with suburban sprawl and indeed also with the Garden Suburbs, New Town residents should not have to go elsewhere for all but their most specialised shopping needs: town centres were a key element of their design and amenities should not just include retail, education, health care and professional services but also recreational and cultural amenities. But arguably the most central component was that they should be self-contained in employment terms, in that there should be a close balance between the number of jobs provided and the number of residents wanting to work and, in particular, there should not be the need for residents to commute back into London. This strategy was underlined by the choice of sites well outside London's main built-up area and in some cases without good regional transport connections. It is this latter aspect of self-containment that has been given most attention in past assessments of New Town self-containment, notably by Thomas (1968) and Champion et al. (1977), partly owing to the ready availability of census data on commuting, so this is what this section does too.

The two measures most commonly used in previous studies to assess employment self-containment are job ratio and index of commuting independence. Table 10.2 shows the values of these two indicators for 1971 (as reported by Champion et al., 1977, p.71, Table 14) and for 2011 (as calculated from the most recent population census). Job ratio compares the number of people employed in a place with the number of working residents, with a ratio of 1.00 denoting that the two

are exactly in balance. From the data for 1971 it can be seen that this was the situation for Harlow then and two others – Hemel Hempstead and Basildon – were very close to this. All but one of the others display a ratio above this, signifying that they possess more jobs than working residents and so have net in-commuting, with Welwyn Garden City at the top of the list at 1.27. Peterborough and Crawley also contain at least one-fifth more jobs than working residents, showing that they are strong employment centres for their local areas. The one exception is Hatfield's 0.53, with barely half the jobs needed by the working residents, but as noted by Champion et al. (1977, p.125), this is a special case because several large factories lie just outside its designated area.

<Table 10.2 about here>

Table 10.2's data on job ratio in 2011 suggest that the overall picture remains much the same as in 1971, though with some differences in detail. Harlow and Basildon both retain their almost perfect balance of jobs and workers, but Hemel Hempstead's ratio has dropped back somewhat, perhaps because of its data now including older parts of Dacorum with a long-term tradition of commuting to London. Bracknell's job ratio has also dropped back, perhaps similarly as a result of its boundary extension to become Bracknell Forest. The formation of Welwyn Hatfield has also incorporated land that was originally outside their designated areas, helping to boost their job ratio to an impressive 1.36, while Crawley has become an even stronger job centre as London Gatwick airport has grown. Finally, Stevenage, Milton Keynes and Peterborough have continued their role as job centres for their surrounding areas.

Clearly, only a small number of the London New Towns had the *potential* to be truly self-contained in 2011 and nor did they in 1971, mostly because their employers relied to some extent on net in-commuting, but this is not the same as *actual* self-containment. Even in 1971 the New Towns registered far more cross-boundary journeys than was strictly necessary according to their job ratios. The index of commuting independence expresses the number of a place's residents who work there as a ratio of the combined total of the place's in- and out-commuters, with higher ratios denoting greater self-containment. Harlow scores highest on this indicator, with its locally working residents outnumbering cross-boundary commuters by almost 2 to 1. Also relatively self-contained in 1971 were Peterborough, Crawley, and Stevenage, while apart from the special case of Hatfield just mentioned, the lowest self-containment was for Basildon, Bracknell and Welwyn Garden City, all with more cross-boundary commuters than people working locally.

Four decades later, the situation is remarkably different (Table 10.2). In 2011 only two posted a ratio of more than 1.00, these being Milton Keynes and Peterborough which no doubt managed to have more of their residents working locally owing to their large size. Among the original New Towns, Harlow remains the most self-contained, but now with cross-boundary commuters outnumbering locally-working residents by a factor of 2 to 1, while at the other extreme the ratio is 3 to 1 for Bracknell and Welwyn Hatfield. While for some New Towns the high levels of cross-boundary commuting partly reflects their high job ratios, the main driver must be a general increase in longer-distance commuting and a rising level of 'cross-hauling' flows. Data on these New Towns (not shown here) reveal that the mean of their proportion of employed residents who out-commuted was 46% in 2011, with even Crawley – with its high job ratio of 1.51 – seeing more than half of its working

residents commuting out of its local authority area. The equivalent level of out-commuting in 1971 was 28%, much lower though arguably more than might be expected given the economic dynamism of the New Towns.

As such, their degree of commuting independence in 2011 was pretty much typical of the pattern for other places in their wider region. There the most porous local authority boundary for commuters had a score of just 0.12, while the highest – disregarding the special case of the Isle of Wight – stood at 1.61. Harlow, Hemel Hempstead (Dacorum), Crawley, Basildon and Stevenage ranged for 46th to 67th out of the WSE's 114 local authorities in terms of highest commuting independence. Even Bracknell, the lowest of the New Towns at 0.32, was higher than 27 others, but at the other extreme Milton Keynes and Peterborough were both distinctive in their high level of independence. Only five local authorities (besides the Isle of Wight) had indices above theirs and all these were coastal and so with a limited land boundary. Other places in the region with similarly large populations to these two New Towns displayed much lower levels of commuting independence, such as Luton (0.61) and Southampton (0.64).

Conclusion

Over 40 years on from the most detailed and systematic statistical analysis of the British New Towns, this chapter has examined the current status of the London New Towns, with a dual focus on whether they retain any of their original distinctiveness and on how they relate to their regional surroundings. In terms of their population trajectories, the phasing of their growth closely reflects the original intentions of the London's post-war overspill programme, with their greatest increases being concentrated in the first full decade or two after designation. More recently, however,

most have seen a resumption of population gains, albeit at much more modest levels than earlier though still sizeable for those established in the 1960s, and they continue to account for more of the WSE's overall growth than would be 'expected' from their share of its total population. The social distinctiveness that was noted from the 1971 Census – in particular, the over-representation of skilled manual workers – is now less clear, but their occupational structure is skewed towards the least skilled compared to the wider region in overall terms. The main feature in terms of social composition, however, is the marked differences between the individual New Towns, with this partly reflecting the regional imbalance between the more prosperous western half of the region and the economically weaker eastern part. Finally, the New Towns' levels of commuting self-containment have dropped enormously since 1971, but this is a general phenomenon in which they have shared: in most cases, their overall levels of in- and out-commuting are above the regional norm and they are particularly high for Milton Keynes and Peterborough, even compared with other WSE cities of a similar size. According to the evidence presented in this chapter, therefore, the London New Towns have tended to become less distinctive from their regional context, but still retain elements of the features that marked them out as different 40 years ago.

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Figures

Figure 10.1: Annual average population change, 1951-2018, for London New Towns, arranged by date of designation (Source: Calculated from 1951 and 1961 Census data and official mid-year population estimates for 1971-2018.)

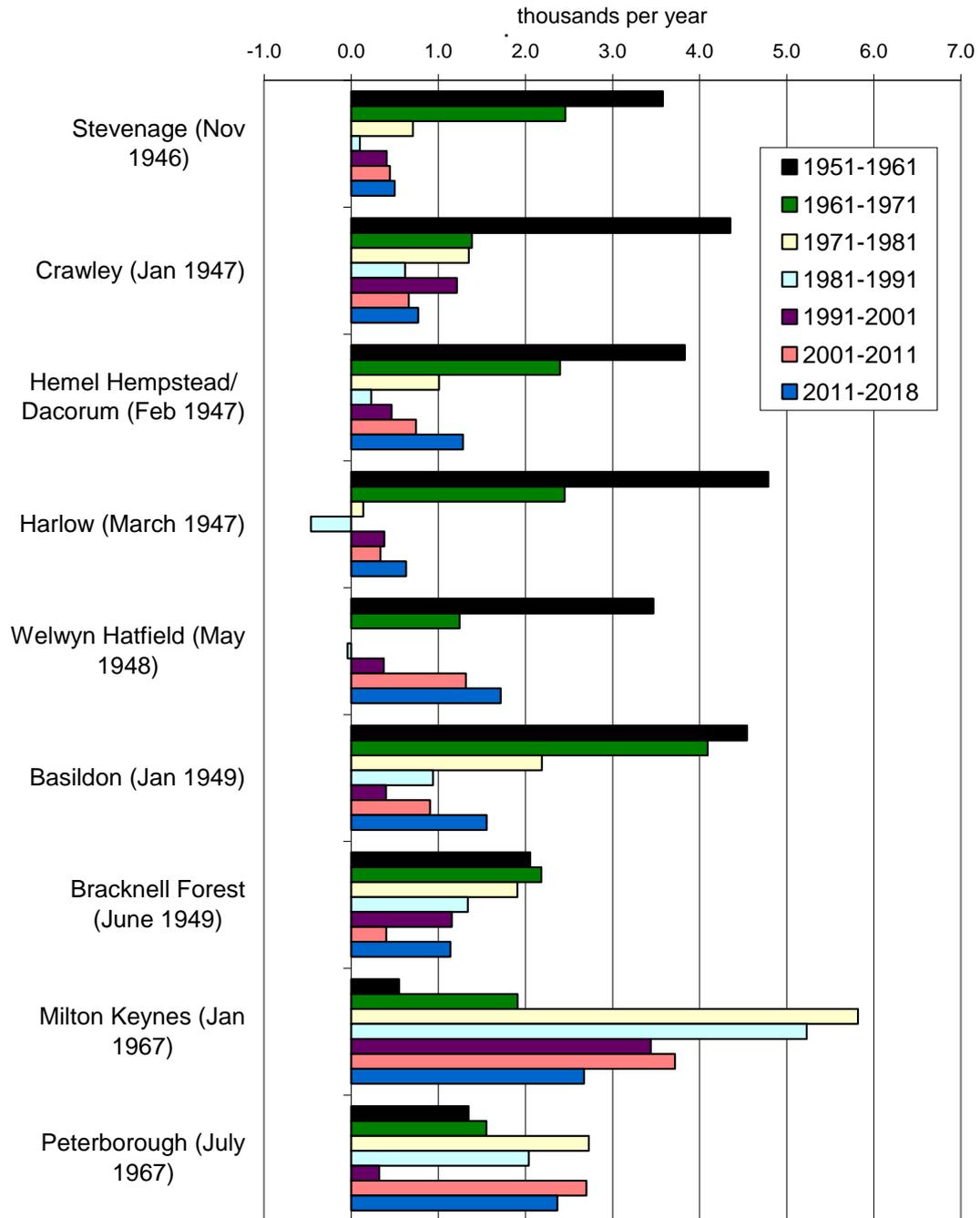
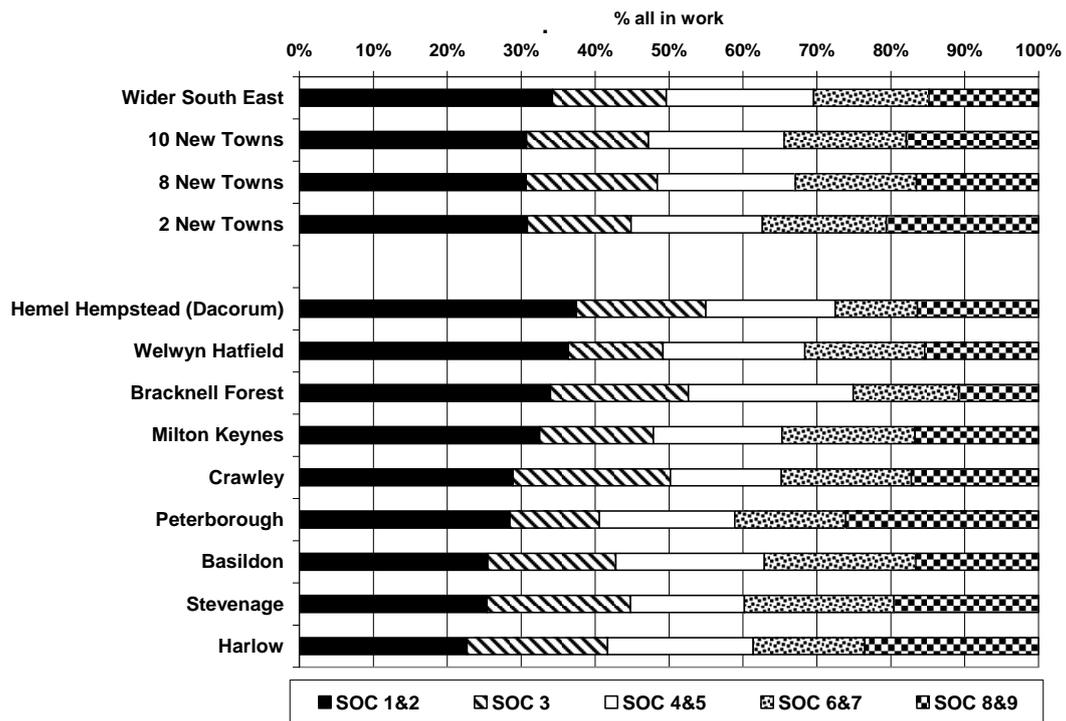


Figure 10.2: Occupational structure of London New Towns compared with the wider region, 1981 (Source: Annual Population Survey data derived via NOMIS. See Table 10.1 notes for a list of the 8 and 2 New Towns. Definition of Standard Occupational Classifications (SOC): 1&2 Managerial & professional; 3 Associate professional & technical; 4&5 Administrative, secretarial and skilled trades; 6&7 Service occupations; 8&9 Operatives and elementary occupations.)



Tables

Table 10.1: London New Towns' contribution to regional population growth, 1951-2018

Period	Population change (000s/year)				Share of regional growth (%)		
	8 NTs	2 NTs	10 NTs	Region	8 NTs	2 NTs	10 NTs
1951-2018	10.0	5.2	15.3	104.8	9.6	5.0	14.6
1951-1961	26.6	1.9	28.5	127.1	21.0	1.4	22.4
1961-1971	16.2	3.5	19.7	170.1	9.5	2.1	11.6
1971-1981	7.3	8.5	15.9	81.4	9.0	10.5	19.5
1981-1991	2.7	7.3	10.0	65.3	4.2	12.1	16.3
1991-2001	4.4	3.8	8.2	67.4	6.5	5.6	12.1
2001-2011	4.8	6.4	11.2	109.1	4.4	5.9	10.3
2011-2018	7.6	5.0	12.6	117.1	6.5	4.3	10.8

Note: 8 NTs: Basildon, Bracknell (Forest), Crawley, Harlow, Hatfield, Hemel Hempstead (Dacorum), Stevenage and Welwyn Garden City; 2 NTs: Milton Keynes and Peterborough. Region refers to the Wider South East (WSE) comprising the South East and East of England (see text). Numbers may not sum exactly because of rounding.

Source: Calculated from 1951 and 1961 Census data and official mid-year population estimates for 1971-2018.

Table 10.2: Job ratio and index of commuting independence, 1971 and 2011, for London New Towns

New Town (in order of designation)	Job ratio		Index of commuting independence	
	1971	2011	1971	2011
Stevenage	1.06	1.06	1.63	0.44
Crawley	1.20	1.51	1.70	0.46
Hemel Hempstead / Dacorum	0.98	0.88	1.43	0.49
Harlow	1.00	0.99	1.92	0.54
Hatfield, Welwyn / Welwyn Hatfield	0.53, 1.36	1.43	0.32, 0.90	0.33
Basildon	1.00	1.00	0.87	0.45
Bracknell / Bracknell Forest	1.17	0.95	0.87	0.32
Milton Keynes	1.14	1.16	1.36	1.08
Peterborough	1.24	1.18	1.84	1.07

Note: Separate figures are given for Hatfield and Welwyn Garden City in 1971 and a single figure for Welwyn Hatfield in 2011. See text for definition of the two indicators.

Source: For 1971, as calculated from census data by Champion et al. (1977); for 2011, calculated directly from census data downloaded from NOMIS.