

Can new towns be joy towns?

How residents of
England's new towns
feel about the buildings
where they live

June 2025

HUMANISE





“ Our new towns will deliver housing fit for the future, shaping new communities with real character that people can be proud to call home.”

Deputy Prime Minister Angela Rayner, 21st July 2024

“ I feel like buildings should be built as something that people are going to see in their day to day lives; it affects how you feel; it affects what you do; and I think that should be put into the decision process a bit more, because they're going to be there for a long time these buildings. And it's nicer to start with something beautiful that then gets a bit old and weathered, than something that was bad to start with and gets worse.”

Paul, 31, Redditch



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Foreword

In 2024, the UK's Labour government announced plans to build a fresh generation of new towns in part to tackle the UK's housing shortage, but also to unlock economic growth.

What lessons can be drawn from the previous generation of new towns and what can we learn from people living in new towns today?

The Humanise campaign commissioned Thinks Insights + Strategy to conduct an independent survey of 1,000 people living in England's post-war new towns, to really understand what they think and feel about the buildings that shape their communities.

The findings show that residents are highly dissatisfied with the buildings that surround them – only 4% of survey respondents spontaneously described their town as “nice”.

The previous generations of new towns have left many residents uninspired, disconnected and disheartened by their everyday environments. Many describe them as “boring,” “ugly,” and “run-down”. This insight shows that most people want more than just ‘units’: they want homes and places they can feel proud of.

The public overwhelmingly backs buildings with character and visual interest; and there's a strong desire to regenerate run-down areas into joyful, meaningful places to live.

As the New Towns Taskforce prepares its final report for the Government, we urge Commissioners to consign drab development and identikit streets to history. Let's lift people up and build with optimism!

Abigail Scott Paul
Global Head of the Humanise Campaign



8 in 10 people want future new towns to feature buildings that inspire pride, create belonging and bring joy.



Can new towns be joy towns?

Section 1

Key Findings



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1

There is an aspiration gap between current perceptions of buildings in new towns and what people want them to be like in the future. Specifically, people want buildings in future new towns to have more of a positive emotional impact.

- Only 4% described their town as “nice” – instead, words like “boring,” “ugly,” and “run-down” dominated open responses. Even more striking, less than half of residents said the buildings where they live made them feel proud (46%) or valued (41%).
- People want homes and places they can feel proud of. 76% said that buildings should add character and visual interest. 89% said future new towns should regenerate run-down areas into joyful, meaningful places to live.

2

Intuitively, people can identify buildings that are interesting and boring, with young people showing stronger positive feelings for visually interesting buildings.

Coupled with their greater concern about the condition of buildings, younger people may be more receptive to the argument for joyfully designed new towns.

3

There is an opportunity for the upcoming new generation of new towns to re-shape what a ‘new town’ means.

Awareness of new towns is low, particularly among younger people, suggesting a weaker legacy of the previous generation of new towns.



Section 2

What do people in
new towns think
about the buildings
where they live?



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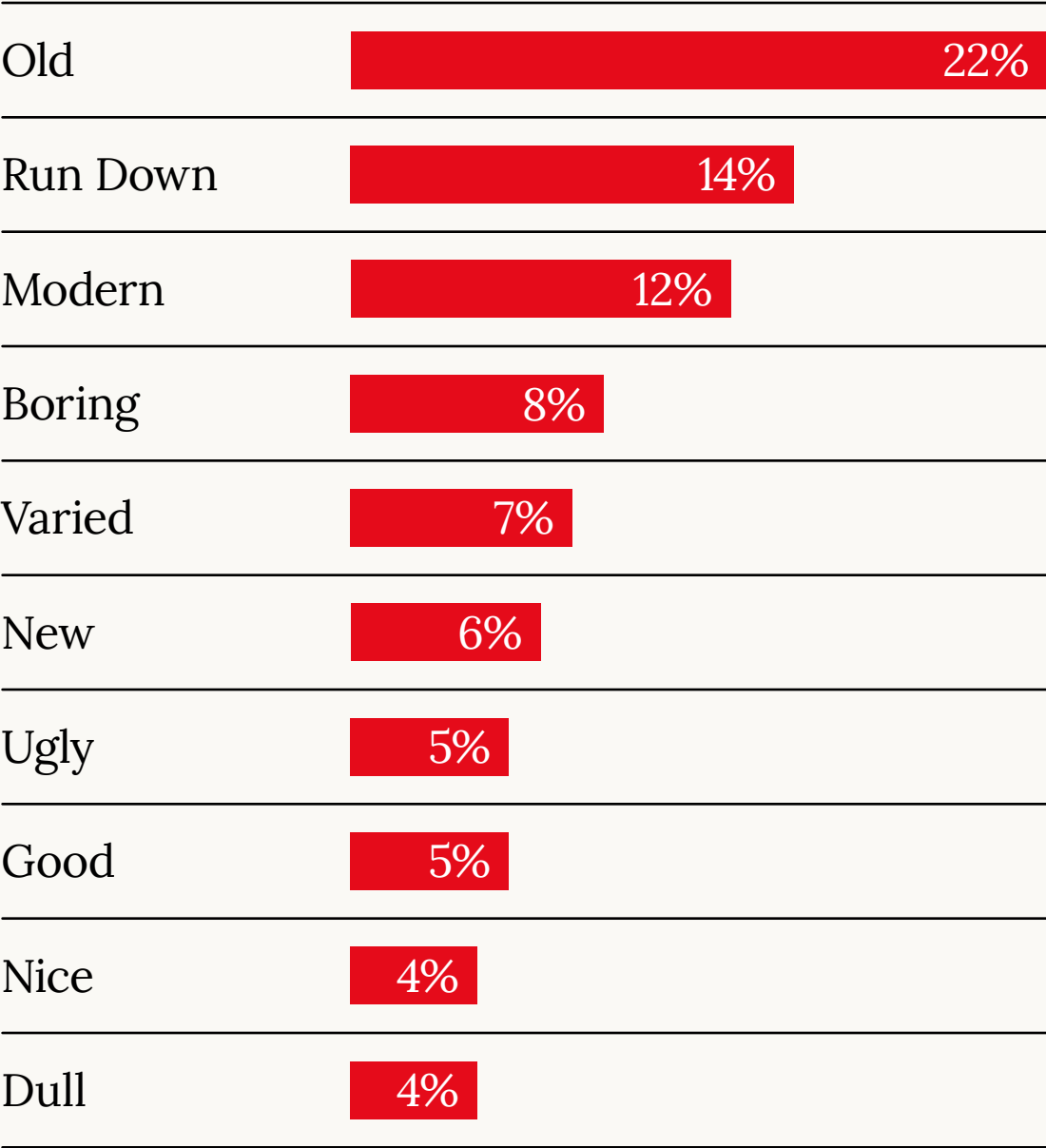
4. What do people in new towns care about?

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The look of buildings in new towns elicits mixed feelings from residents, the strongest being a sense of decline

Top 10 words to describe feelings about how buildings in their town look
Words and phrases were typed in, unprompted





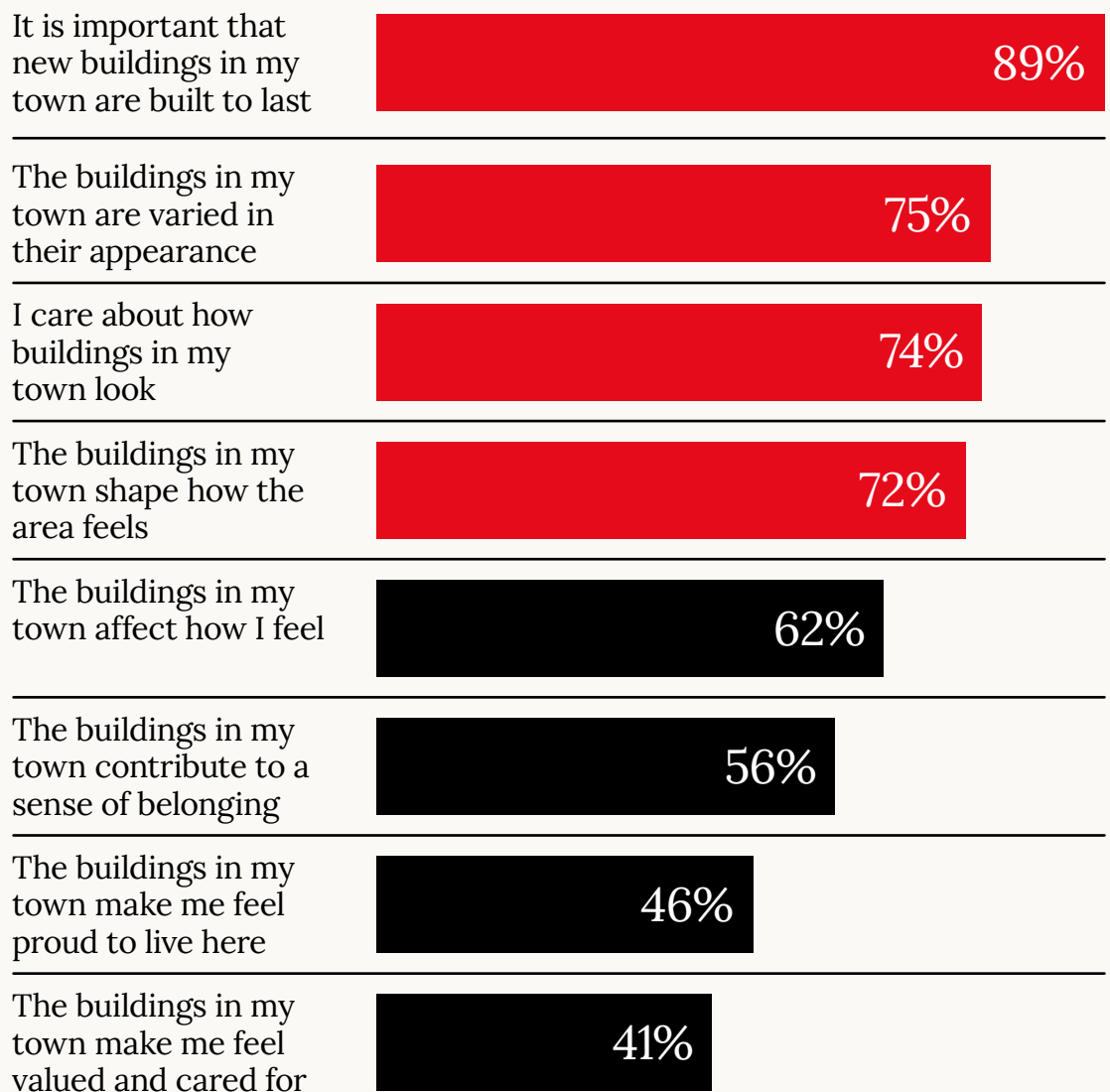
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There is strong agreement that how buildings look is important, but less acknowledgement of the emotional impact they can have.

Thinking about your town specifically, to what extent do you agree or disagree?
% showing agree to each statement



External / aesthetic factors

Internal / emotional factors



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Intuitively, there are some buildings in new towns that people view negatively.



→
77%
view this building negatively.*



←
63%
view this building negatively.*

Q9. Looking at the building below, please select how you would most likely describe it. Base: All respondents (n=1,000).

*A NET: Negative score was created which means that at least one of the following words were selected; Boring, Soulless, Dull or Depressing



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Buildings viewed negatively are most often described as “boring” as well as “depressing” and “soulless”.



→
33% “boring” or “depressing”

“There is nothing special about this building and the small windows make it look more like a prison.”



←
33% “boring”
32% “soulless”

“It looks like a giant has laid a massive slab of cheap concrete upon the earth and stuck windows on it.”

Q9. Looking at the building below, please select how you would most likely describe it. Base: All respondents (n=1,000).
Q10. Why did you select that description for this building? Base: Respondents who were asked this follow-up question for the Library [image at the top] (n=334), respondents who were asked this follow-up question for the residential flats [image at the bottom] (n=333).



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People intuitively respond more positively to other buildings in new towns.

→

64% “interesting”
45% “characterful”

“Stylish and very eye-catching. I would feel so proud about it.”



←

56% “interesting”
41% “characterful”

“The metal fretwork makes it stand out and provides interest.”

→

49% “interesting”
29% “characterful”

“I haven't seen such a design before, it's interesting to look at and beautiful.”



Q9. Looking at the building below, please select how you would most likely describe it. Base: All respondents (n=1,000).

Q10. Why did you select that description for this building? Base: Respondents who were asked this follow-up question for the office unit [image in centre] (n=333), respondents who were asked this follow-up question for the houses [image at the bottom] (n=335), respondents who were asked this follow-up question for The Bull [image at the top] (n=333).



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Younger people react more positively, showing stronger feelings towards building design.

→
75% “interesting”
26–35 year olds
vs. 64% total



←
51% “characterful”
26–35 year olds
vs. 41% total

→
59% “interesting”
18–25 year olds
vs. 49% total





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Some buildings are more polarising, perhaps indicative of low expectations for housing that is “pleasant enough”.



57%
“Pleasant”

“
It is a fairly standard new build. Lacks character but pleasant enough in its own right.”

22%
“Boring”

“
All new housing estates seem to look mostly the same these days, it’s boring.”



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To complement the quantitative survey, we also spent time in the new town of Redditch in Worcestershire to hear the thoughts and feelings of residents living there.



“

This is the main street into the town centre. It's a shame for the area, there's been no consideration. It looks poor and shabby. They look like a concrete jungle to me – thrown up in 10 minutes.”

Tracie, 35
Mental Health Life Coach



“

I'm not a huge fan of the Kingfisher Centre. It does look quite daunting. It towers over you. It looks very industrial. It doesn't look very inviting at all.”

Paul, 31
Event Builder



“

I understand offices typically do have that look, but I'd say this one in particular is very boring to look at. There's nothing to really look at, it's not got anything to it. It definitely brings a sense of dread.”

Ayesha, 20
Student



**Watch the
accompanying
video here**



Section 3

What do people in
new towns want
them to look like
in the future?



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In an ideal world, the look and design of buildings will be taken into consideration by developers alongside practical considerations.

In an ideal world, what is the most important thing for developers to consider for new towns?
Top 5 unprompted responses

22% Parks & green spaces

15% Nice looking homes

14% Sustainable/
environmentally friendly

11% Amenities
(shops, pubs, restaurants etc.)

8% Variation of styles
and sizes of buildings

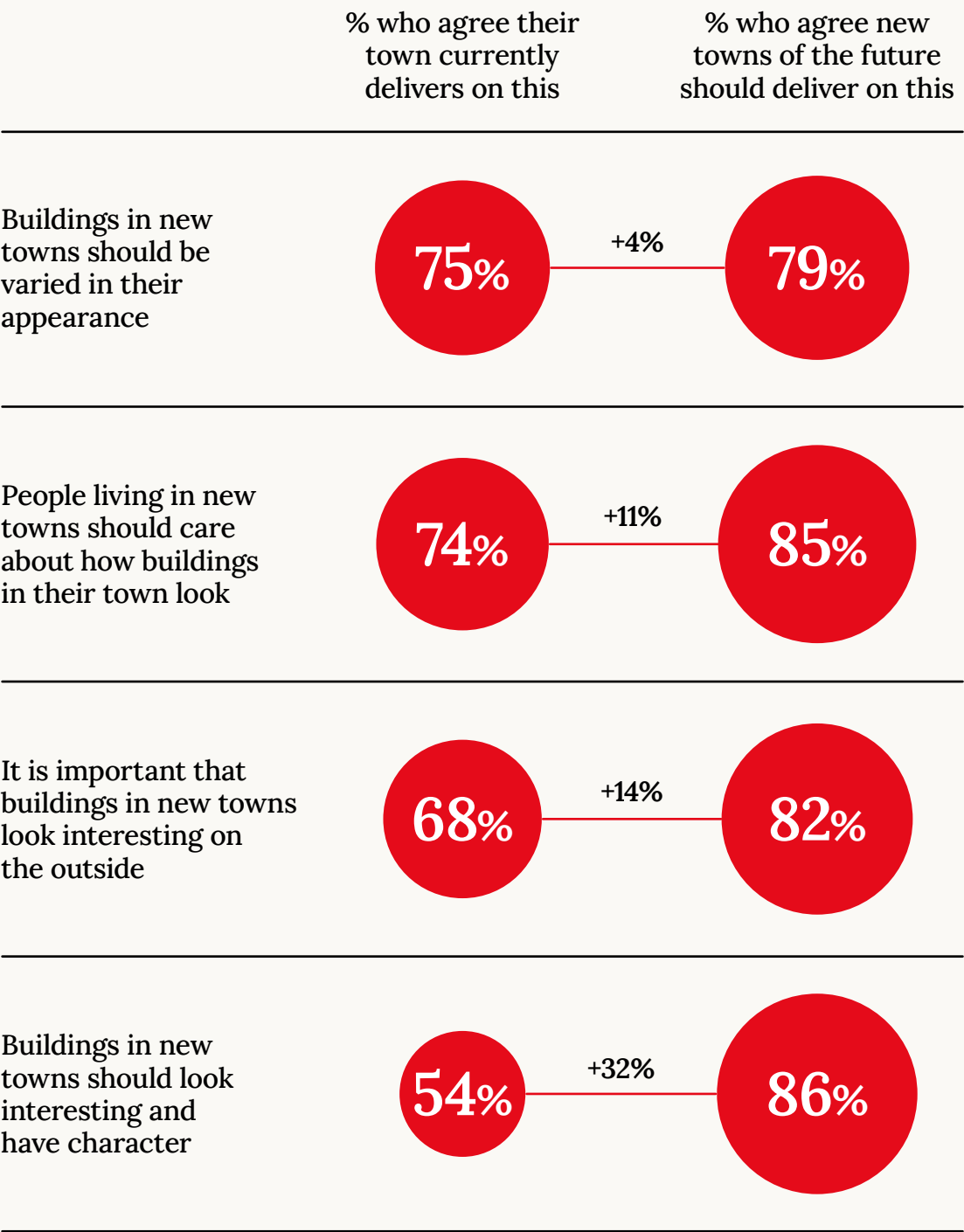


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Previous new towns have left people wanting something better when it comes to how they are designed.



Q6. Thinking about your town specifically, please tell us the extent to which you agree or disagree with each statement? Base: All respondents (n=1,000).
Q12. How much do you agree or disagree with each of these? Base: All respondents (n=1,000).

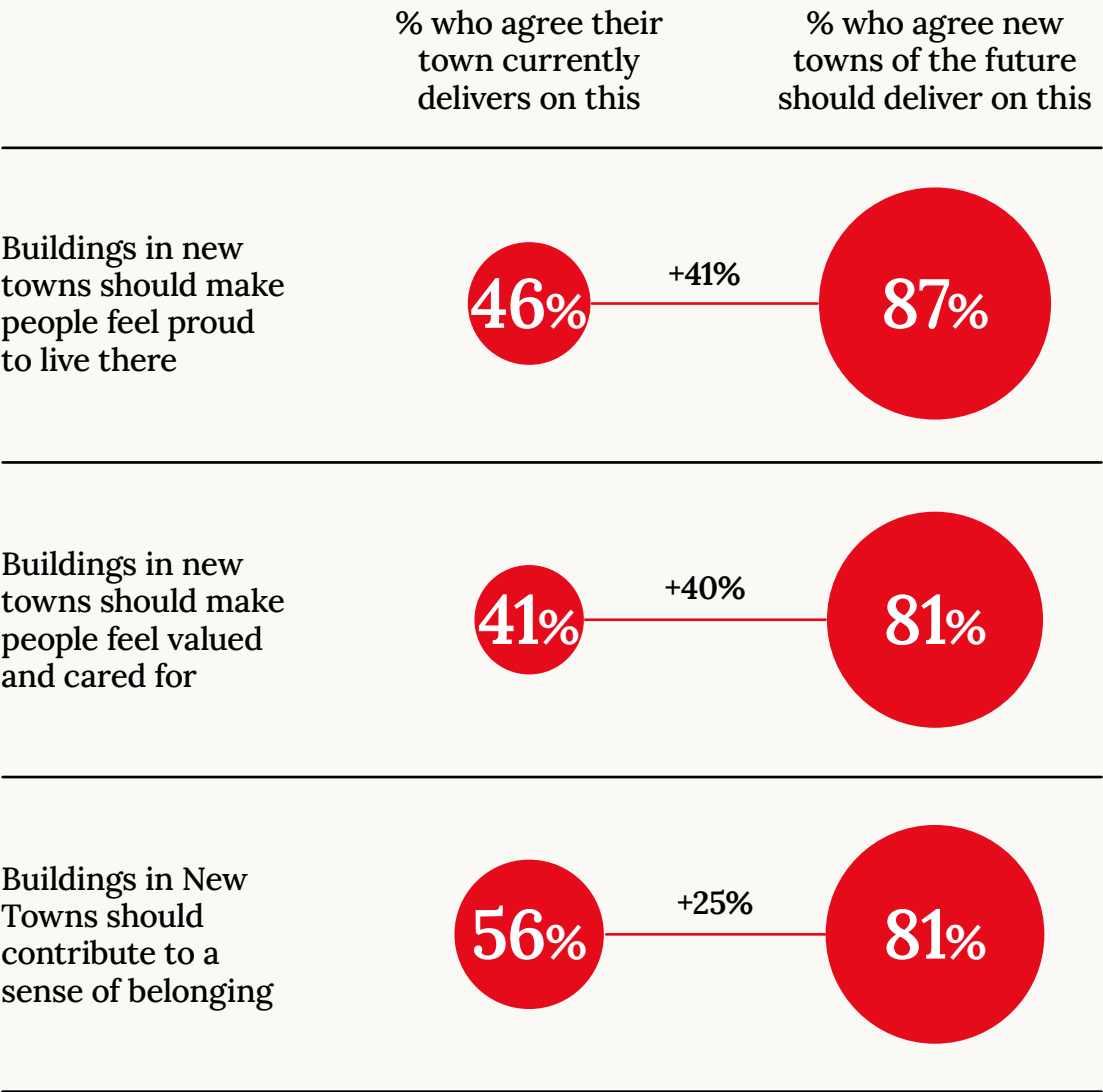


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And there is a significant gap between how new towns currently make residents feel and how they would like to feel.



Q6. Thinking about your town specifically, please tell us the extent to which you agree or disagree with each statement? Base: All respondents (n=1,000).
Q12. How much do you agree or disagree with each of these? Base: All respondents (n=1,000).



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The next generation of new towns needs to be practical, with quality, durability and cost most important.

How important are the following when designing the new generation of new towns?
% quite/very important

Ensuring buildings are of good quality

94%

Ensuring new buildings are built to last

94%

Reducing the cost of housing

93%

Ensuring new buildings are energy efficient

91%

Increasing the availability of housing

90%



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However, there is also a clear appetite for these new towns to be visually interesting and create joy for residents.

How important are the following when designing the new generation of new towns?
% quite/very important

Ensuring the design of new towns values and meets the needs of residents living in them

91%

Regenerating a run-down area to create a joyful and interesting place to live

89%

Ensuring buildings add character and visual interest to where people live

76%

Consulting with the public on the design of buildings

74%



Section 4

What do people in new towns care about?

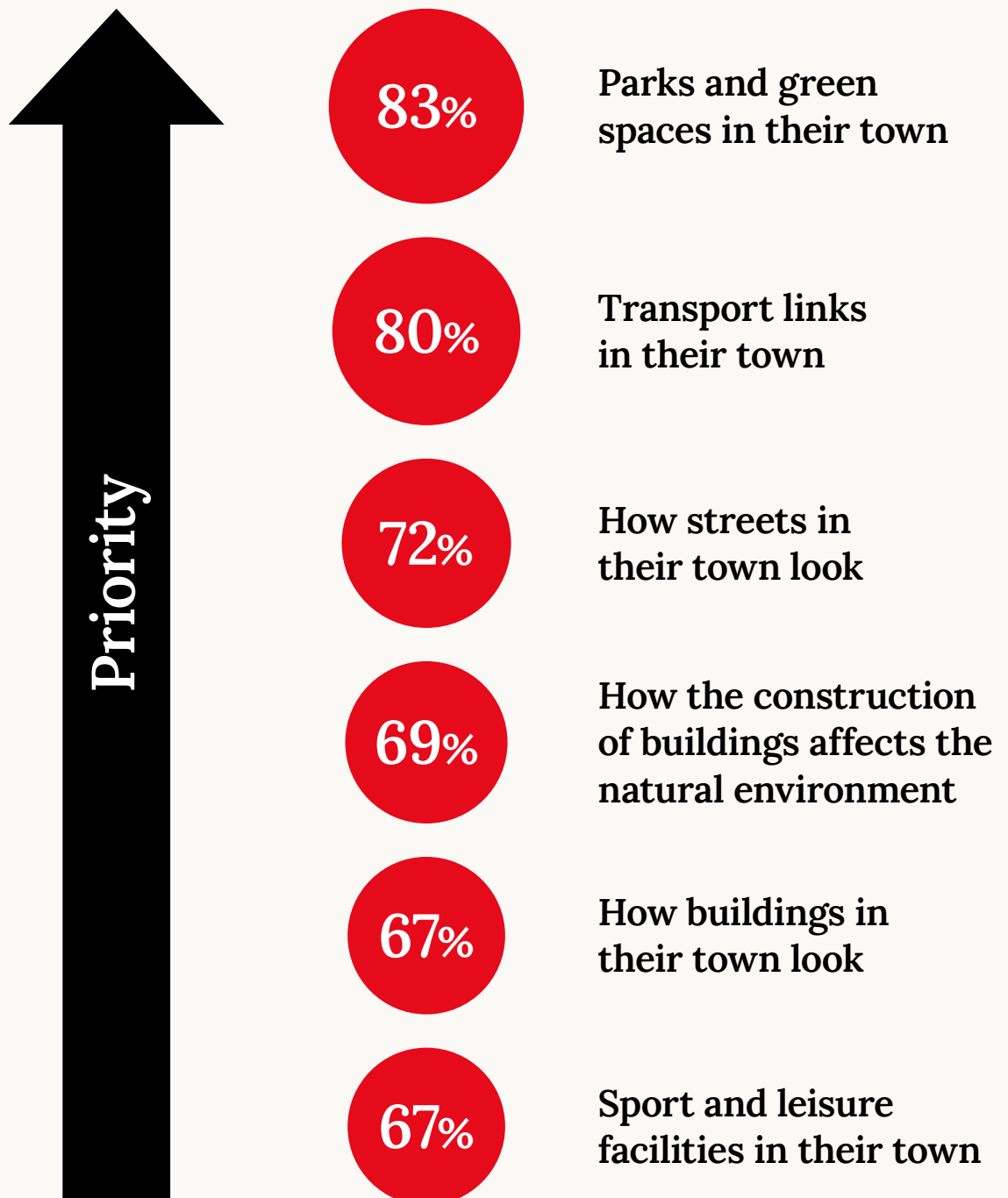


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New town residents are interested in the aesthetic of where they live, with how buildings look as important as leisure facilities.





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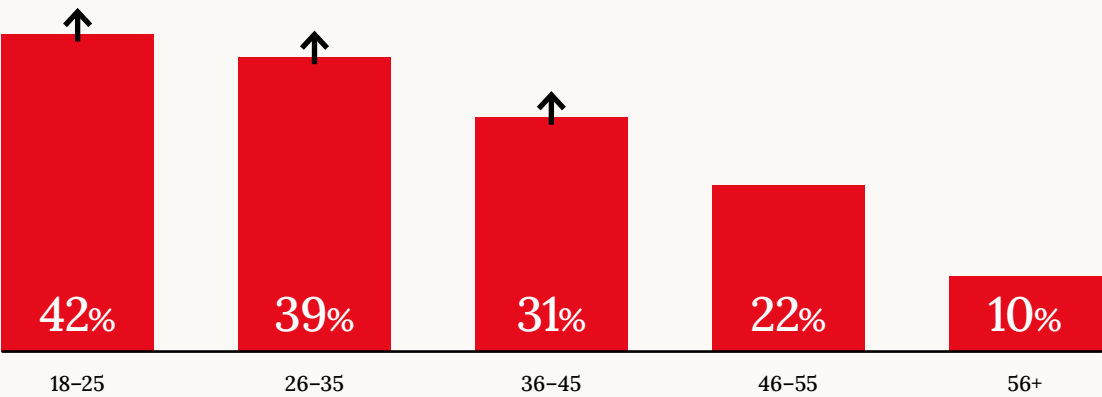
Overall, though, there is low awareness of what new towns are, with younger people particularly unaware.

22% have never heard of new towns before

Younger people are more likely than older people to have never heard of new towns before

I have never heard of new towns before

↑ Indicates results are significantly higher compared to 46-55 and 56+





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Even among those generally aware of new towns, knowledge is limited.

68%

have heard
of new towns

33%

knew the term “new
town” but nothing else

19%

could give examples
of new towns

15%

knew that they live
in a new town



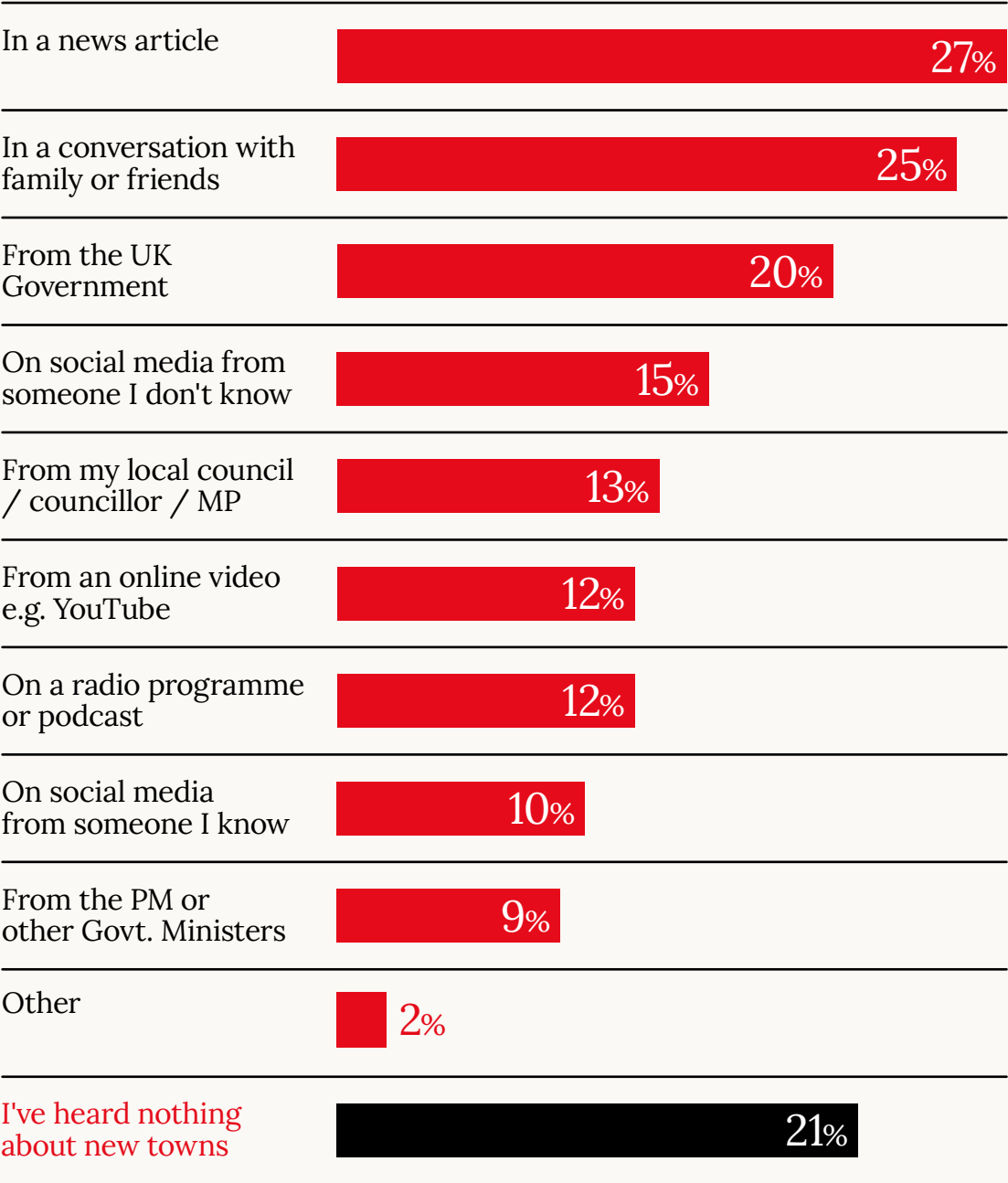
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New towns have been in the news but 1 in 5 haven't heard anything about them in the past 12 months.

Where have you heard about new towns in the last 12 months?
Among those aware of new towns





Can new towns be joy towns?

Section 5

Which town
would you
rather live in?



Can new towns be joy towns?

Which town would you rather live in?

To further test what residents of new towns want them to look like in future, Thinks Insight also sought responses to three imaginary streets.

Design 3 received an overwhelmingly positive response from a pilot sample of respondents, who said it makes them “**feel more valued and cared for**” and described it as “**not just your regular street**”.

Illustrations by Heatherwick Studio. Image 1 based on [Create Streets image released by the Labour party June 2024](#)





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This research was conducted with residents of new towns in England to understand:

- 1** Priorities for current residents of new towns in England
- 2** What people in new towns think of the design of buildings in their local area
- 3** How people describe the buildings in new towns
- 4** How those buildings make them feel and the impact they have
- 5** What they would like new buildings to look like in any future new towns.



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Approach and Sample

Methodology

This research took place in February and March 2025. A 10-minute online survey was completed by 1,000 people living in new towns in England. Quotas were set for age, gender, ethnicity and socio-economic grade (SEG).

The survey covered the following areas:

- Contextual information around housing and new towns
- Views on local buildings
- Responses to images of buildings in new towns
- Hopes for future new towns

Sample

Total 1000

Age

18-25 200
26-35 200
36-45 200
46-55 200
56+ 200

Gender

Male 447
Female 550
Other 1
Prefer not to say 2

Survey respondents are from a spread of new towns in England

Basildon51	Peterborough.....106
Bracknell48	Peterlee.....23
Corby.....39	Redditch33
Crawley.....30	Runcorn.....26
Harlow31	Skelmersdale.....10
Hatfield18	Stevenage.....33
Hemel Hempstead.....12	Telford.....93
Milton Keynes.....99	Warrington.....102
Newton Aycliffe.....17	Washington18
Northampton.....184	Welwyn Garden City27



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Washington
Peterlee
Newton Aycliffe

Skelmersdale
Warrington
Runcorn

Telford

Redditch

Corby
Peterborough

Northampton

Milton Keynes

Stevenage
Welwyn Garden City
Hemel Hempstead
Hatfield
Harlow
Basildon

Bracknell

Crawley

Humanise: campaigning for more joyful buildings and cities

The Humanise campaign is a global movement calling for more joyful, engaging and human buildings and cities. Inspired by Thomas Heatherwick's book *Humanise: a maker's guide to building our world*, we're drawing on a growing body of research which proves that the buildings around us affect our health and wellbeing, our economies, and the planet. We're inspiring everyone to recognise that what's around us, shapes us – and to demand buildings which lift us up, connect us and bring us joy.

Find out more and join the movement at humanise.org

Acknowledgements

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