

## After the New Towns

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This paper outlines what has happened to a key tradition in British planning since the 1980s. It traces policy from the marginalisation of the new towns in the 1970s and 1980s, through the pressures for private new towns in the 1980s to very recent moves to build new sustainable communities in growth areas. It discusses the politics of policy shifts and highlights the evolving concepts of public private partnership in new settlement developments.

The new towns were Britain's best known planning programme of the post-war years. In the 1980s and 1990s, the programme suffered downgrading and abandonment. New towns that were underway remained but their development was completed by private developers. No further new towns were designated. The decline reflected growing concerns to revive declining metropolitan areas, and the shift away from state intervention under the Thatcher governments. The new towns had traditionally been very much state-led projects.

However, there have still been strong pressures to build in outer metropolitan locations. Since the 1980s, there have been several proposals for freestanding private new towns. Almost all have failed to gain planning approval, reflecting very strong local opposition. The only real exception has been around Cambridge. Several large scale private housing developments in the form of urban extensions have, though, proceeded elsewhere.

Recently, however, the policy climate has changed noticeably. The acknowledgement of an acute housing crisis has led to a major reinvigoration of planning of growth areas. In 2003 the Deputy Prime Minister, John Prescott, unveiled a sustainable communities action programme. This involves the creation of large areas of growth around London. Most attention has been focused on the Thames Gateway. This idea of linear development east of London, using large amounts of brownfield land was launched in the mid-1990s but with little real government backing. In 2003, it was enlarged and new 'delivery mechanisms' announced (including two new urban development corporations). Other large growth areas have also been announced. These are Milton Keynes-South Midlands, Harlow-Stansted-Cambridge and Ashford.

Several former new towns are continuing to be key growth areas, particularly Milton Keynes, Northampton, Corby and Harlow. Yet, so far, at least, there has been no return to the statutory new town. It is clear that, even though state intervention is certainly increasing, private developers will play the key role in developing these new settlements, in various forms of partnership with public sector agencies.

## **Introduction**

This paper traces the history of British new settlement planning since the new towns programme. The story is a microcosm of Britain's retreat from state-led forms of planning which were dominant in the early post-war decades. It shows how private developers, initially excluded from the new towns, became more significant and then, after 1979, played a central role in completing the last new towns. The political rhetoric of the 1980s encouraged moves to create private new towns though these ambitions were largely opposed at local and, ultimately, also at central level. After some reorientation in the 1990s, the 2000s and 2010s are set for a return to large scale planned growth in the regions around London. However delivery of this growth, involving greater state intervention, will be much more reliant on private developers than were the new towns.

## **The new towns programme**

The statutory new towns were products of a centralist planning process, creating extremely powerful non-elected development corporations which assumed direct control of planning and development in locations of major growth (Aldridge, 1979). They bought the land needed to develop the new town, built and rented much of the housing (though the role of private builders slowly increased), developed industrial estates and, themselves or in partnership with private developers, developed shopping centres. Except for school provision, the local authorities in the new towns played relatively passive roles in development.

With only one exception, all the new towns that were actually developed were designated in two main phases, under the post-war Labour government from 1946-1950 and under both Conservative and Labour governments from 1961-70 (Cullingworth, 1979). Their relevance was seriously questioned in the early 1950s but the then Conservative government decided to continue those already designated. In the exceptional circumstances of central Scotland, they also designated one further new town, at Cumbernauld in 1955.

## **The decline of the programme**

In the 1970s, however, renewed doubts about the programme triggered its decline. A new town provisionally designated in 1972 for Llantrisant in Wales was dropped the following year. In 1973 a new town was designated at Stonehouse in Scotland, only to be abandoned three years later. A proposed new city at Maplin (associated with a subsequently reversed decision to build a major new international airport) was also dropped. Though existing new towns continued, their ultimate population targets were reduced by the Labour government in 1976. Over the following years they received less public funding.

In the unique case of Maplin, changes in airport policy were to blame for this change but other wider factors were more generally responsible for this shift (Ward, 2004). Sharply declining forecasts of population growth from the late 1960s were very important. In the mid-1960s official expectations had been that the UK's 2000 population would be 75 million (actually it was about 59 million). Even more important were the new 1970s policies on what was now being called the inner city, the older parts of the big metropolitan cities. Previous policies of extensive slum clearance and redevelopment, with the associated need to rehouse part of the displaced populations elsewhere, ended. The emphasis shifted first to rehabilitation and improvement of existing older housing and then, increasingly from 1977, to inner city regeneration.

Reduction of inner city populations had been an accepted part of metropolitan planning policies since 1945. Now these declines, which were accelerating, were seen as a problem. Dramatic economic changes during the 1970s brought sharp falls in employment in inner cities as docks and factories began to shed labour or completely close. The ever widening desire of families to own their own houses also played its part, since inner cities contained mainly housing for rent, from either private or public landlords. Building societies were not generally keen to advance loans to buy houses in the inner cities, favouring newer housing in suburbs and commuter areas.

The part that new towns policy played in inner city decline was really quite small. Only a small percentage of those who left the inner cities actually moved to the new towns. In Glasgow at the very peak of slum clearance the figure barely reached 30 per cent, in London only about 10 per cent. As slum clearance ended these proportions diminished sharply. (There was also serious inner city decline in metropolitan cities without nearby new towns.) Nevertheless there was a political tendency in the 1970s to see new towns as contributing to inner city problems. The argument was that they creamed off more able, more skilled and less dependent sections of inner city populations, leaving behind the poor, the frail and the disadvantaged. In response, the new towns tried to change their residential selection policies. Traditionally these had been closely linked to prospects of finding work in the new town. Increasingly in the 1970s, however, new towns began housing more people who were unemployed, unskilled and from ethnic minorities, in an attempt to rebut criticisms.

Another important factor in the downgrading of new towns policy was shrinking state expenditure. The OPEC oil crisis quickly plunged the Labour government from 1974 into fiscal crisis, obliging it to seek a loan from the IMF in 1976. The price of this was a painful policy of spending cuts and the declining relevance of new towns made them obvious targets. This policy was taken much further by the Conservative governments led by Margaret Thatcher and John Major from 1979-97.

Almost from the outset, Thatcherite policies of privatization began to be rigorously applied to the new towns. Funds to build development corporation housing soon dried up and sales of existing housing to tenants greatly accelerated. First introduced for the new towns by the Heath Conservative government in the early 1970s, this policy was subsumed in the much more attractive 'right to buy' programme introduced for all public sector tenants from 1980. Private housing developers, whose role was already growing, began to play a much bigger part in completing the new towns. Commercial property and land assets were also sold off and the winding up of remaining new town development corporations accelerated. By 1997 there were none left.

### **Private developers and new settlements in the 1970s**

The decline of the new towns programme did not, of course, reduce the demand to live outside the concentrated city areas. However, as the hand of public sector agencies declined, there were growing signs that private house builders would begin to fill the gap by promoting the development of substantial new settlements in outer metropolitan areas. Private developers operating for profit had been excluded from playing major formative roles in the new towns of the post-1945 years (Hebbert, 1992). Several of the private builders who built on a large scale in the 1930s vainly pressed this point on the Reith Committee (appointed by the post-war Labour Government in 1945 to advise on new town development) (Reith, 1946a, b, c).

In law and, more especially, in practice the 1946 New Towns Act made the new town a 'statist' instrument. There were occasional challenges, most notably in 1956, when Richard

Costain (a major construction company and housing developer) sought planning permission for a private new town for 25,000 inhabitants in Kent (Cullingworth, 1979). Despite being planned by Sir Frederick Gibberd, the distinguished planner of Harlow, with the same new town's former General Manager as a director, the venture was rejected. During the 1960s, however, this centralist rigidity began to soften a little. Best known, because of its architectural qualities, was the private new country village planned for some 6,000 population, at New Ash Green in Kent. Although it was in the metropolitan green belt, this development was approved in 1966. The original developer, Span, withdrew in 1969, leaving it to be completed by the major house builder Bovis. More significant in development terms, however, was Cramlington, in Northumberland, approved in 1963 (DoE, 1972, Ward, 1999). Here a partnership of local authorities and regional house builders (who already owned most of the land) created a substantially new settlement, now of some 35,000 population.

The relevance of these experiences grew during the 1970s as governments began to search for other mechanisms to promote large scale housing development that relied less on public, especially central government, spending. A Department of Environment Working Party in 1972 identified three major public-private partnership mechanisms that could be used in this way:

- local authority land assembly and planning, before disposal at enhanced value to private builders.
- joint partnership companies of local authorities and developers
- the use of planning agreements ('planning gain').

The 1970s saw a few examples of the first approach. Most unusual was the Buckingham Borough Development Company, formed under local legislation in 1971. This was a joint local authority company created to triple the size of the small historic town of Buckingham. It operated by buying through agreement the land needed for expansion. The incentive for the landowners was that they would keep three quarters of the land's enhanced development value. In a way that was reminiscent of Ebenezer Howard's original garden city idea, the remaining quarter was used by the company to enhance Buckingham's social facilities.

Another significant example begun during these years was South Woodham Ferrers in Essex, expanded from a village to a small new settlement of about 17,500 inhabitants (Neale, 1984). Here the local authority designated a comprehensive development area. This allowed them to buy the land (in exceptionally fragmented prior ownership) needed for development. The local authorities, particularly the county, then planned the settlement and provided necessary infrastructure, schools and most recreational facilities. Land was then sold to house builders at enhanced development value, enabling tight planning and design controls. South Woodham Ferrers duly became a showpiece of the pioneering *Essex Design Guide*, issued in 1973 (thereby attracting both praise and criticism).

However, such approaches, while avoiding direct central government spending, merely transferred costs to local government, thus contributing still to high public sector spending. The result was a growing interest in using planning agreements (under section 52 of the 1971 Town and Country Planning Act) to facilitate very large private sector developments while minimizing calls on public expenditure. Such agreements worked best where private developers already owned, or could readily acquire, the necessary land. In return for planning permission, the local planners could demand a substantial amount of comprehensive planning and contributions, either of land or money, to fund, at least partly, provision of infrastructure and community facilities.

The first really large scale application of planning agreements in green field development was at Lower Earley, near Reading (Healey *et al* 1982; Short *et al*, 1986). Strategic regional

planning had identified the Reading-Wokingham M4 corridor area as a major growth area. The specific growth location was confirmed by locally commissioned reports in 1972. Suitably encouraged, a consortium of local landowners commissioned a full comprehensive development plan. In 1974, this plan formed the basis of a planning application, by which time two housebuilders and the University of Reading owned virtually all the site. After lengthy negotiations, permission was granted in 1977 for a development of some 6,000 dwellings. Concurrently a planning agreement was signed which stipulated that 8 per cent of the houses' selling price would be given to local authorities, to fund roads and other public facilities. In addition, land for open spaces was conveyed free and there were guaranteed options to purchase school sites.

Lower Earley was largely developed during the 1980s and often used to exemplify the horrors of Thatcherite planning. As a planning achievement, it certainly compared badly with the public new towns. Yet it was extremely important in demonstrating that substantial new settlements could be created by private developers on land that was not under public ownership. Generally the planning agreement of 1977 was seen as a qualified success, though planning intentions were compromised by disposal of land to many more builders. Also heavy 'front end' costs fell on local authorities. Overall, though, Lower Earley was an important stage in the evolution of the more ambitious approaches of the early 1980s.

### **Consortium Developments Ltd**

Meanwhile the shrinkage of public sector house building was triggering other shifts, especially in the remaining statutory new towns which were farthest from completion. These had the biggest reserves of land allocated for green field development. Those charged with their development corporations now began to involve private house builders in their completion. They realised that, as never before, future growth depended on forging such links. The leader of this reorientation was Fred Roche, General Manager of Milton Keynes who led the new towns' discussions with the Volume House Builders' Study Group (VHBSG) about their assuming a more active role (Roche, 1986). The VHBSG comprised the ten biggest private housebuilders, together responsible for roughly a third of British housing production by the early 1980s.

Roche found an important ally in Tom Baron, head of Christian Salvesen Properties (then a major house builder). Baron and Lawrie Barratt, head of the Barratt housebuilding group, were the dominant figures in the VHBSG. Baron was also eager to expand the horizons of the house building industry to embrace, amongst other things, large scale green field developments. Others were reaching similar conclusions by different routes. For example, the Chairman of Telford Development Corporation, Lord Northfield, the former Birmingham Labour MP William Donald Chapman, devoted his maiden speech in the Lords in 1977 to Labour's need to come to terms with the market economy (Northfield, 1989).

These shifts in thinking assumed greater significance following the election, in 1979, of the Thatcher government committed to 'rolling back the frontiers of the state'. In ministerial statements, decisions and actual policy shifts, came clear signs that the rules of planning and urban development were changing. As noted, the trend away from public sector house building soon became almost total. Moreover, the government seemed set on serious deregulation of the planning system, giving much more freedom to developers. Of course, Conservative ministers had mouthed such sentiments before, but now there seemed to be real indications that it was actually going to happen. Everywhere public planning was weakened, that of market forces increased.

We have mentioned the accelerated winding up of the statutory new towns and privatisation of their assets. Alongside this went a marked retreat from strategic regional planning. In the highly pressured region around London, this brought a virtual end to the planned identification of areas where large scale growth could occur. If planners were not going to be able to make strategic decisions about growth areas, this increasingly seemed to imply that developers would be obliged to fill the vacuum. One of the most tangible signs that this would be possible came in 1983. When the Environment Secretary, Patrick Jenkin, sent out strong signals that green belt policies were likely to be relaxed (Elson, 1986). Truly, nothing in the world of planning seemed to be sacred any more.

These upheavals prompted the VHBSG to take the final step of proposing new settlements that were entirely privately developed. To this end a company called Consortium Developments Ltd (CDL) was registered as a name change at Companies House in August 1983 (Ward, 2002). Its objects were to promote and develop country towns in the south east of England. As its name suggested, it had a consortium form, with the major volume house builders as its members, on the model of the VHBSG. The exact composition of the consortium varied slightly over time, partly reflecting changes in the structure of the volume house building industry.

At the outset its members were Barratt, Bovis, Broseley, Christian Salvesen, Comben, Leech, New Ideal Homes, Tarmac, Wilcon and Wimpey (HC Environment Committee, 1984). At the peak of its activities, in 1988, its membership comprised Barratt, Beazer, Bovis, Ideal Homes, Laing, Lovell, Tarmac, Wilcon and Wimpey. By 1991, Ideal Homes had been replaced by McCarthy and Stone. Throughout, day-to-day management fell to the Executive Director, Andrew Bennett. Though Bennett was himself a qualified planner, the forecasting, planning and design work, was undertaken by two consultancies. These were Conran Roche, the planning arm of which had begun as a spin-off from the Milton Keynes Development Corporation, and Barton Willmore, which had prepared the master plan for Lower Earley.

At its launch CDL revealed its general intention to build up to fifteen 'new country towns' in the outer south east. The exact locations of the initial fifteen are not clear. In 1986, however, a list was published of ten possible locations (Potter, 1986) at West Horndon near Basildon; Great Lea, near Reading; Hook and Bramshill in Hampshire; Caddington near Luton; Bishops Park and Brenthall Park in Hertfordshire; Leybourne near Maidstone; Maidenbower on the edge of Crawley and Southwater near Horley in West Sussex. All were close to motorways and sometimes other transport routes. Some would have been expansions of existing towns though most were to be relatively freestanding settlements.

The new settlements, which they stressed would not be mere commuter villages, would ideally contain 5,000-7,000 dwellings, with a population between 13,000 and 18,000. They would cover an area between 340-400 hectares, of which about 60 per cent would be housing, 15 per cent business, 15 per cent health, education, parks and recreation and 10 per cent roads and general landscaping. Though CDL and its member companies would act as developers and themselves build many of the houses, they would also involve smaller builders and housing associations. It was anticipated that each would take about 15 years to build,

CDL's most novel feature was that they promised to plan and develop the towns in their entirety. This would include directly providing or funding all necessary roads and infrastructure, without call on public funds. Beyond this, free serviced sites would be provided for primary schools (and secondary if this proved necessary) and CDL would make a capital contribution to their building costs. A health clinic in each town would be similarly supported. An even more generous offer was made for the community centre, which would be built with running costs met by CDL until a residents' association was formed. A serviced site would also be given for a church.

CDL's promised approach thus involved taking planning agreements onto a completely new plane. It marked a notable advance in developer responsibility compared to Lower Earley. The

Consortium hoped that the offer would prove irresistible to central government and otherwise reluctant local planning authorities. Yet there was a paradox at the heart of all this: such unprecedented promises of generosity (later extended further into social housing provision) were only possible because developers could buy the land at not much more than existing use value. In turn, this depended on the proposed sites not being allocated for development in local plans. In other words, options to purchase had to be acquired by stealth before detailed plans for the towns were revealed and certainly before planning approval was granted. If and when that approval was granted, they also had to ensure that final acquisition costs were kept as near existing use value as possible.

In a curious way, this showed some similarities with Ebenezer Howard's approach in developing his two garden cities, before the 1947 planning act. The difference was that CDL and the house builders were not limited profit companies, unlike those which built the garden cities. Nor did they have the privilege, enjoyed by public bodies such as the statutory new town development corporations, of being able to acquire land at existing use value. CDL was eager to place itself as part of this tradition, the 'flower of the English planning system'. They regretted that local planners opposed their proposal to continue the new town movement by novel means.

In total, despite initial talk of up to fifteen new towns and more specific proposals in 1986 for ten, CDL formed subsidiary companies to develop only six towns and developed detailed planning proposals for only four (Hebbert, 1992). These were in Essex ('Tillingham Hall'), Hampshire ('Foxley Wood'), Oxfordshire ('Stone Bassett') and Cambridgeshire ('Westmere'). The first, in the London green belt, was rejected in 1987 (McLaughlin and Woolley, 1986; Woolley, 1986). The Environment Secretary, the arch-Thatcherite Nicholas Ridley indicated though that he sympathized with the concept of new, privately developed settlements outside green belt locations. The real breakthrough for the developers seemed to come on the second proposal, Foxley Wood (JPL, 1989). The area was, in Ridley's own words, 'hardly a jewel of the English countryside' (Ridley, 1992, p. 116) and he provisionally approved CDL's proposal, in July 1989. Approval was short-lived, however, as the pendulum swung sharply in favour of green issues. Within a few months his successor, Chris Patten, had overturned the decision (JPEL, 1989). Stone Bassett and, slightly later, Westmere also suffered rejection, in 1989 and 1991 (Hebbert, 1992).

At this point, CDL, without a single success, was mothballed. The late 1980s property boom was over; weakening demand and rising interest rates made the risks unacceptable. It is not unclear exactly how much CDL spent, but each individual planning proposal probably cost more than £0.5 million. There was also much work on proposals that never reached planning application stage, especially those for which subsidiary companies were formed. The Kent company was the only one actually to buy land (sold subsequently at a loss). Total expenditure over eight years may have been about £5m, with absolutely no tangible return.

### **Large private developments in the 1980s and 1990s**

It was also, perhaps, galling that others had managed to gain planning approval for large scale residential developments when (though not exactly where) CDL failed (Amos, 1989). In 1987, for example, work began on a 400 hectare site at Bradley Stoke, north of Bristol. Developed by a consortium of Ideal Homes, Beazer, Tarmac, Costain, Prowting and Taylor Woodrow (the first three some time members of CDL) (SGC, undated). It is essentially a peripheral suburban expansion. Now almost complete, its 8500 dwellings and 20,000 inhabitants make it Britain's largest completely privately developed new settlement. Its planning has been much criticised, not least for the failure of its planned shopping centre to materialise.

Of course, the region around London, where CDL largely operated, was a more difficult planning environment, with stronger 'nimby' tendencies. But the approval, in 1986, of Chafford Hundred at Grays in Essex proved that it was possible to succeed even there (EG, 1992). This was, however, a brown rather than a green field location, with no local objections. Covering some 330 hectares of former chalk pits and planned by Barton Willmore, it was a joint venture of the Blue Circle Properties (50 per cent), Pelham Homes (40 per cent) and the Pearson Group (10 per cent). Eventually about 5,000 dwellings will be built (by a variety of builders apart from the development partners), along with associated commercial and community buildings. Elsewhere in Essex, at Brenthall Park near Harlow a development of some 3,500 dwellings was jointly developed from 1987 by Countryside Properties, Wates and Croudace (Potter, 1986).

There was little of planning interest in any of these developments. However in 1988 the most celebrated of the new settlement proposals of these years was unveiled. This was Leon Krier's plan for the Prince of Wales new neo-traditional village at Poundbury (Thompson-Fawcett, 1998). This was much smaller than the other new settlements proposed or approved and its development did not though begin in earnest until the early 1990s. Yet it was soon exerting an important influence on the thinking of both planners and developers. At that time, though, the question of new settlements was no longer so pressing. The failure of CDL's 'Westmere' proposals in 1991 and the rejection in 1993 of Eagle Star's well prepared scheme for a new country town at Micheldever Station in Hampshire (Eagle Star, undated) drew a line under the 1980s approach of developers trying to challenge the local planning system .

Even so, where local planners were sympathetic, most notably in Cambridgeshire, the new settlement idea continued. In 1994 a consortium of three housebuilders (Bovis, Bryant and Wimpey) gained approval for a freestanding new settlement of about 3,300 dwellings at Cambourne near Cambridge ([www.cambourne-uk.com](http://www.cambourne-uk.com)). Its Poundbury-influenced master plan by Terry Farrell set a high standard (with a commensurate impact on house prices), with careful articulation of three villages within the town, a town centre, good community facilities, nature parks and business park. Its development has, though, been rather slow.

## **A return to large scale planned urban growth**

The 1990s also saw a return to a more nationally orchestrated approach to strategic planning. The first signs came to the east of London. In 1991, the government commissioned a study of the Thames estuary area eastwards from the London Docklands (DETR, 2001). In 1995 the Thames Gateway strategy was launched as a major regeneration project, providing many (perhaps 110,000) new homes and jobs in major growth areas (RPG9a). Following the pattern of the 1980s, however, private developers were to set the pace and the strategy was described as providing no more than 'runway landing lights' for growth. This was certainly no return to the state-led development process represented by the new town.

At the same time, however, the government began to acknowledge the scale of long term housing needs. New estimates published in 1996 showed a massive 4.4 million homes needed by 2016 (this reflecting smaller households rather than net population growth) (DoE, 1996). Yet, as the most buoyant region, the south east would obviously need to provide a big proportion of these. Privately developed Chafford Hundred, now part of the Thames Gateway thus became an early sign of what could now be expected on a much larger scale, mainly on brownfield sites within and beyond London itself. Yet development of the whole Gateway had proceeded only slowly, reflecting the area's traditionally poor transport links and the tortuous problems of developing brownfield sites on a planning agreement basis.

By the turn of the century, the theoretical deficit in housing began to manifest itself in a real crisis of affordable housing, with wider economic implications. Increasingly the second Blair government recognized a need for more decisive action. In 2003 it launched its sustainable communities action programme (ODPM, 2003a). Amongst many other things, this re-energised and extended the Thames Gateway strategy. It also identified three other broad areas of major growth (ODPM 2003b). These involved the major expansion of the former new town of Milton Keynes and a cluster of nearby towns in the south Midlands (including the former new towns of Corby and Northampton), around Ashford in Kent, and in the Stansted-Cambridge area.

Introducing these growth areas, the government indicated three main ways of delivering growth. Various kinds of local development partnerships were to be used in some places. In others, new style bodies would be formed, combining the attributes of urban development corporations (extensively used by the previous Conservative governments) and new town development corporations. Finally new urban regeneration companies, formed following a recommendation of the 1999 Rogers Report, would be used in some cases (Rogers, 1999).

At present (January 2004), the exact arrangements for specific area are being announced. New urban development corporations have been announced for the London Thames Gateway and Essex Mid-Gateway, and it seems there may be another one for West Northamptonshire in the south Midlands. Milton Keynes's expansion (from 210,000 to 370,000 population will be led by a partnership of English Partnerships (the successor to the Commission for the New Towns) and local partners. Arrangements of a similar type will operate in other parts of the Thames Gateway. Ashford will also be expanded by a essentially local partnership. In Corby (in the south Midlands ) the local urban regeneration company will manage the growth. The Stansted-Cambridge growth area remains at a very early stage

## **Conclusion**

Overall hundreds of thousands of new dwellings are promised in these growth areas over the next 10-15 years. We can expect detailed planning proposals to emerge before very long, marking the biggest exercise in planned urban growth since the new towns. It seems that, although the state's role has grown compared to the 1980s and 1990s, the most interventionist and effective model for achieving planned urban growth - the new town development corporation - has very pointedly been shunned. Why this is so must be an open question, though the high costs of the new towns must be suspected as a key part of the answer. The new towns, though, undoubtedly set a high and internationally admired standard in their planning. Whether the growth areas, with their palpably weaker delivery mechanisms, will be able to match that standard remains to be seen.

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