



# Winning back the **English New Towns**

**John Healey MP** | September 2017

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## Introduction

The Labour Party's June 2017 Election result was remarkable – 40% of the national vote and a gain of 30 MPs. Labour and Jeremy Corbyn confounded the predictions of commentators, pollsters and politicians.

But we still fell short. The Conservatives won 318 seats to Labour's 262 with 42.4% of the vote. So to form a majority Government, Labour must win at least another 64 constituencies at the next Election and we can't do this without winning over more of the New Towns.

The New Towns capture the ambition previous Labour governments brought to rebuilding the country, creating homes fit for families, and prosperity through jobs and infrastructure.

Electoral, the New Towns in the Midlands and southern England provide a lens through which to see Labour's big electoral challenge. The essential twin questions are: why did Labour lose the New Towns and how can we win them back?

The 14 post-war New Towns in the Midlands and southern England comprise 16 constituencies. Labour does well in England when it is doing well in the New Towns. In 1997 Labour won all but one of these seats. By May 2010 we held just one, and in 2015 this final New Town seat of Telford fell to the Conservatives. In 2015, one in six voters backed UKIP across the New Towns.

Despite losing our Parliamentary presence in the New Towns, Labour could still win electoral support and retains control of seven of the 13 New Town councils.

At the 2017 Election only Peterborough returned a Labour MP, although Labour saw a big increase in its vote in all the New Towns and seven can now be counted as key marginal seats held by Conservative MPs with majorities of just 5 per cent or less.

I launched this New Towns project in early 2017, commissioned to report to both Labour's Leader and Campaign Coordinator. After two general election defeats, and with Jeremy Corbyn re-elected as Party leader, we wanted to look at the lessons that might lie in the New Towns for Labour's revival in England. The time frame for analysing Labour's lost electoral ground spans our period in government as well as in opposition, and includes the working class voters lost to Labour over the last decade.

The project's work has drawn on research, interviews, discussions with local activists and key-voter focus groups in the New Towns. We examine the issues that matter most to people, sentiment about the Parties and Party leaders and Labour's organisational methods. Much of this work was undertaken before the snap General Election was called for June. Post-election we have conducted further research, interviews and focus groups to update the project's analysis and conclusions.

The project has been supported and strengthened throughout by a Taskforce of former candidates, leading councillors, local organisers and trade union officials from the New Towns. I am grateful to them for their contribution and challenge. I am also very grateful to

Andrew Pakes, who has done a great deal of the work with me on this project, and also for their research to Mark Gill, Danny Konopka and the first-rate targeting and analysis staff in Labour HQ.

I hope this report provides the basis for wider discussion in the New Towns, and beyond. Above all, I hope it helps Labour put in place the policies, campaigns and community action to win back the English New Towns.

## 1. Electoral history

Labour does well in England when it is doing well in the New Towns. The 16 New Town seats in the South and Midlands provide a fine grain focus on Labour's electoral challenges. And Labour can't win a majority at the next Election without winning over more of the New Towns.

In 1997 Labour won all but one of the New Town seats. By 2010, we held just Telford before losing that as well in 2015. In 2017, Labour saw a significant increase in the vote share in the New Town seats, although this only resulted in the gain of one seat from the Conservative Party, in Peterborough. While Labour only holds one New Town Parliamentary constituency, the Party does better in local government. Labour currently runs seven of the 13 New Town council areas. This shows that Labour can still command significant electoral support in the New Towns, even if we find national Parliamentary elections more difficult to win.

	1997	2001	2005	2010	2015	2017
Basildon (and Billericay)	Red	Red	Red	Blue	Blue	Blue
South Basildon & East Thurrock	Grey	Grey	Grey	Blue	Blue	Blue
Bracknell	Blue	Blue	Blue	Blue	Blue	Blue
Corby	Red	Red	Red	Blue	Red	Blue
Crawley	Red	Red	Red	Blue	Blue	Blue
Harlow	Red	Red	Red	Blue	Blue	Blue
Hemel Hempstead	Red	Red	Blue	Blue	Blue	Blue
Milton Keynes North	Red	Red	Blue	Blue	Blue	Blue
Milton Keynes South	Red	Red	Red	Blue	Blue	Blue
Northampton North	Red	Red	Red	Blue	Blue	Blue
Northampton South	Red	Red	Blue	Blue	Blue	Blue
Peterborough	Red	Red	Blue	Blue	Blue	Red
Redditch	Red	Red	Red	Blue	Blue	Blue
Stevenage	Red	Red	Red	Blue	Blue	Blue
Telford	Red	Red	Red	Red	Blue	Blue
Welwyn Hatfield	Red	Red	Blue	Blue	Blue	Blue

Notes: boundary changes mean that the former Basildon constituency held by Labour until 2010 was subsequently split into Basildon and Billericay and South Basildon and East Thurrock.

In the EU Referendum in 2016, estimates by Professor Chris Hanretty suggest there was a strong majority leave vote across the New Towns, with only Milton Keynes North estimated to have voted to remain – just. On average an estimated 60% of people across the New Towns backed leave.

	Result	Leave %	Remain %
<b>Basildon &amp; Billericay</b>	LEAVE	66.9%	33.1%
<b>Bracknell</b>	LEAVE	53.3%	46.7%
<b>Corby</b>	LEAVE	60.1%	39.9%
<b>Crawley</b>	LEAVE	58.4%	41.6%
<b>Harlow</b>	LEAVE	68.0%	32.0%
<b>Hemel Hempstead</b>	LEAVE	55.2%	44.8%
<b>Milton Keynes North</b>	REMAIN	49.8%	50.2%
<b>Milton Keynes South</b>	LEAVE	53.0%	47.0%
<b>Northampton North</b>	LEAVE	60.7%	39.3%
<b>Northampton South</b>	LEAVE	59.6%	40.4%
<b>Peterborough</b>	LEAVE	61.3%	38.7%
<b>Redditch</b>	LEAVE	61.4%	38.6%
<b>South Basildon &amp; East Thurrock</b>	LEAVE	73.1%	26.9%
<b>Stevenage</b>	LEAVE	57.1%	42.9%
<b>Telford</b>	LEAVE	67.1%	32.9%
<b>Welwyn Hatfield</b>	LEAVE	52.5%	47.5%

## 2. Electoral battleground 2017

Labour won an increased share of the vote in all the New Towns in June 2017 – by one point in Welwyn Hatfield to five points in Peterborough and 14 points in Milton Keynes North and Milton Keynes South. Nationally in comparison, Labour’s share of the vote rose by 10 points. The Conservative Party also saw its vote share increase by an average of five points in the New Towns seats, compared to a national increase of six points, although this ranged from no change in Milton Keynes North and just one point in Welwyn Hatfield to 13 points in South Basildon & East Thurrock.

However, even before the 2017 General Election, the Conservative Party already commanded a higher level of support in the New Town seats compared to their national vote share and across all the New Town seats the Conservative Party won an average of 52 per cent of all votes cast, whilst Labour won 41 per cent.

2017 General Election	New Town Vote Share	National Share
Labour	41%	40%
Conservative	52%	42%

Even though Labour was able to reduce the Conservative majority by over 10 percentage points in five of the New Town seats (Bracknell, Hemel Hempstead, Milton Keynes North, Milton Keynes South and Welwyn Hatfield), the size of the majorities after 2015 meant the party was unable to win. A much smaller swing was required in Peterborough which meant Labour’s gains in 2017 helped to win the seat.

Some other trends emerge from the 2017 General Election results:

- Seven New Town seats have a Conservative majority of 5 per cent or less (Corby, Crawley, Milton Keynes North, Milton Keynes South, Northampton North, Northampton South, Telford).
- Labour failed to make progress in Essex. Despite the national trend that saw Labour close the gap on the Conservatives, in two New Town seats (Basildon and Billericay, and South Basildon and East Thurrock) the Conservative majority actually increased.
- In three New Town seats (Corby, Redditch and Telford) the Conservative majority stayed the same in percentage terms despite both parties increasing their vote share.
- In nine of the 16 New Town seats Labour’s vote share increased by more than the national trend (Bracknell, Crawley, Hemel Hempstead, Milton Keynes North, Milton Keynes South, Northampton North, Northampton South, Peterborough, Welwyn Hatfield).

In particular, there is a cluster of six New Town seats around the South East Midlands (Corby, Milton Keynes North, Milton Keynes South, Northampton North, Northampton South, Stevenage) which share the same regional economy and are priorities for Labour to gain. Despite being geographically close and being part of the same Local Enterprise Partnership, they sit across three Labour Party regions.

## New Towns vote share and majorities 2017

	Labour vote share	Conservative vote share	Labour change	Conservative change	2017 Labour majority	2015 Labour majority
Basildon & Billericay	31%	61%	+7%	+8%	-30%	-29%
Bracknell	30%	59%	+13%	+3%	-29%	-39%
Corby	45%	49%	+6%	+6%	-4%	-4%
Crawley	46%	51%	+12%	+4%	-5%	-13%
Harlow	38%	54%	+8%	+5%	-16%	-19%
Hemel Hempstead	37%	55%	+13%	+2%	-18%	-29%
Milton Keynes North	44%	48%	+14%	+0%	-3%	-17%
Milton Keynes South	46%	49%	+14%	+2%	-3%	-15%
Northampton North	45%	47%	+11%	+5%	-2%	-8%
Northampton South	44%	47%	+12%	+5%	-3%	-10%
Peterborough	48%	47%	+5%	+7%	+1%	-4%
Redditch	36%	52%	+7%	+5%	-16%	-16%
South Basildon & East Thurrock	33%	57%	+9%	+13%	-24%	-18%
Stevenage	43%	50%	+6%	+6%	-7%	-10%
Telford	47%	49%	+9%	+9%	-2%	-2%
Welwyn Hatfield	37%	51%	+1%	+1%	-14%	-24%
<b>NATIONAL AVERAGE</b>	40%	42%	+10%	+6%	-2%	-7%

### 3. New Towns profile

Alongside Labour’s electoral performance, the project examined the social and demographic make-up of the New Towns in order to see if any characteristics or trends stood out to assist our understanding why Labour lost, and how the Party might win again. The research shows a number of characteristics which have in recent elections made the ground tougher for Labour – fewer younger voters, more older voters, and less minority ethnic voters than in urban seats where the Party had done better.

#### 3.1 Age demography

The increase in voter registration and mobilisation of students and young people is widely recognised as a key part of Labour’s electoral coalition in 2017. Labour had clear policies on student funding, affordable housing to rent and buy, and investing in the future. The Labour Party also recorded better results in seats that had higher proportions of students and younger voters.

A number of factors stand out on the age profile of the New Towns seats:

- Only three of the New Town seats have a higher than average proportion of people living in the seat who are 34 or under. This includes Crawley and Northampton North (where over 40% of the population is under 34 compared to 31% of the UK population as a whole) as well as Peterborough – the only new seat we gained.
- However, the increase in turnout in Milton Keynes North, Northampton South and Telford was twice the national average increase in turnout. These three seats have very different proportions of people aged 34 or less (Milton Keynes North, 30%; Northampton South, 25%; Telford, 43%).
- None of the New Towns has a university (with resident students).
- The New Town seats tend to have a lower than national average of people aged 65 or over, varying from 23% in Hemel Hempstead to 14% in Northampton North, against a national figure of 22%.
- Whilst the elderly population is below average, all of the New Towns seats are dominated by older voters. Almost half of the electorate across the New Towns are older electors, compared to 28% nationally.

	16-34	35-49	50-64	65+
<b>Basildon &amp; Billericay</b>	32%	30%	23%	16%
<b>Bracknell</b>	32%	26%	24%	19%
<b>Corby</b>	27%	25%	25%	22%
<b>Crawley</b>	43%	26%	15%	16%
<b>Harlow</b>	27%	31%	27%	15%
<b>Hemel Hempstead</b>	31%	22%	25%	23%
<b>Milton Keynes North</b>	30%	26%	23%	21%
<b>Milton Keynes</b>	29%	27%	23%	22%

<b>South</b>				
<b>Northampton North</b>	44%	28%	14%	14%
<b>Northampton South</b>	25%	28%	26%	21%
<b>Peterborough</b>	36%	22%	22%	20%
<b>Redditch</b>	33%	21%	24%	22%
<b>South Basildon &amp; East Thurrock</b>	34%	21%	30%	15%
<b>Stevenage</b>	32%	23%	26%	20%
<b>Telford</b>	43%	21%	20%	16%
<b>Welwyn Hatfield</b>	32%	30%	23%	16%
<b>NATIONAL AVERAGE</b>	31%	24%	23%	22%

### 3.2 Ethnic diversity

The New Towns on average have a lower proportion of non-white voters than other seats where Labour performed better in 2017. In the five New Towns seats where the proportion of white electors is under 90 per cent – Crawley, Milton Keynes North, Milton Keynes South, Northampton South and Peterborough – the Labour vote share increased by over 10 points, and in each Labour won over 40 per cent of the vote. However, Labour only regained one of these seats, Peterborough.

Peterborough also has the highest number of ethnic minority voters of the New Town seats; 18 per cent of electors are of Asian origin compared to 7 per cent of the electorate of the whole of the UK.

	Labour change in vote share	Conservative change in vote share	Ethnicity		
			Asian	Black	White
<b>Basildon &amp; Billericay</b>	+7%	+8%	3%	2%	95%
<b>Bracknell</b>	13%	3%	4%	1%	94%
<b>Corby</b>	6%	6%	1%	1%	98%
<b>Crawley</b>	12%	4%	15%	1%	84%
<b>Harlow</b>	8%	5%	4%	2%	94%
<b>Hemel Hempstead</b>	13%	2%	6%	1%	93%
<b>Milton Keynes North</b>	14%	0%	10%	3%	87%
<b>Milton Keynes South</b>	14%	2%	11%	3%	86%
<b>Northampton North</b>	11%	5%	6%	2%	92%

<b>Northampton South</b>	12%	5%	9%	3%	89%
<b>Peterborough</b>	12%	7%	18%	1%	81%
<b>Redditch</b>	5%	5%	4%	0%	95%
<b>South Basildon &amp; East Thurrock</b>	7%	13%	3%	2%	95%
<b>Stevenage</b>	9%	6%	5%	2%	93%
<b>Telford</b>	9%	9%	4%	1%	96%
<b>Welwyn Hatfield</b>	11%	1%	7%	2%	91%
<b>NATIONAL AVERAGE</b>	10%	6%	7%	1%	92%

### 3.3 Social characteristics

The social demographics demonstrate that the New Towns have a higher proportion of electors in groups where Labour still needs to make gains than in constituencies where Labour won. According to the Mosaic population profiling data used by the Labour Party, compared to Labour held seats, the New Towns have more electors in groups:

- G – ‘Domestic Success’
- H – ‘Aspiring Homemakers’
- I – ‘Family Basics’.

Many voters in these groups proved more open to the Conservative message in 2010 and 2015. Even though Labour’s performance improved in 2017, these are still social groups with whom the Party needs to strengthen its standing. In the 2017 election, the Labour vote share tended to increase most in New Towns seats with a higher proportion of electors in Mosaic Group H (Aspiring Homemakers), although this did not hold in Stevenage. All of the New Towns are home to a higher than average proportion of voters in Mosaic Group I (Family Basics). There was a correlation between the New Town seats with a high proportion of these electors and a lower increase in the Labour vote share.

#### Mosaic Group G - Domestic Success

High-earning families who live affluent lifestyles in upmarket homes situated in sought after residential neighbourhoods. Their busy lives revolve around their children and successful careers in higher managerial and professional roles.

<b>National Average</b>	7%
<b>New Towns above average</b>	12/16

#### Mosaic Group H – Aspiring Homemakers

Younger households who have, often, only recently set up home. They usually own their homes in private suburbs, which they have chosen to fit their budget.

<b>National Average</b>	8%
<b>New Towns above average</b>	16/16

<b>Mosaic Group I – Family Basics</b>	
Families with children who have limited budgets and can struggle to make ends meet. Their homes are low cost and are often found in areas with fewer employment options.	
<b>National Average</b>	9%
<b>New Towns above average</b>	16/16

Information on attitudes shows that the New Towns have a higher mix of floating voters:

- Respondents in New Towns are less likely to consider themselves on the left of the political spectrum than those in Labour-held seats.
- Respondents in New Towns are more likely to have a low chance of ever voting for Labour, and a high chance of ever voting Conservative than those in Labour-held seats.
- The toxicity in which the Conservatives are held in Labour-held seats, was not as evident in the New Towns.

	<b>Domestic (G)</b>	<b>Success</b>	<b>Aspiring Homemakers (H)</b>	<b>Family Basics (I)</b>
<b>Basildon &amp; Billericay</b>	13%		12%	21%
<b>Bracknell</b>	18%		24%	11%
<b>Corby</b>	7%		12%	12%
<b>Crawley</b>	11%		18%	11%
<b>Harlow</b>	8%		15%	20%
<b>Hemel Hempstead</b>	16%		15%	15%
<b>Milton Keynes North</b>	12%		20%	12%
<b>Milton Keynes South</b>	17%		20%	15%
<b>Northampton North</b>	8%		15%	15%
<b>Northampton South</b>	9%		13%	14%
<b>Peterborough</b>	6%		9%	15%
<b>Redditch</b>	9%		13%	14%
<b>South Basildon &amp; East Thurrock</b>	8%		15%	18%
<b>Stevenage</b>	9%		20%	18%
<b>Telford</b>	7%		16%	20%
<b>Welwyn Hatfield</b>	15%		13%	15%
<b>NATIONAL AVERAGE</b>	7%		8%	9%

### 3.4 Economic and employment profile

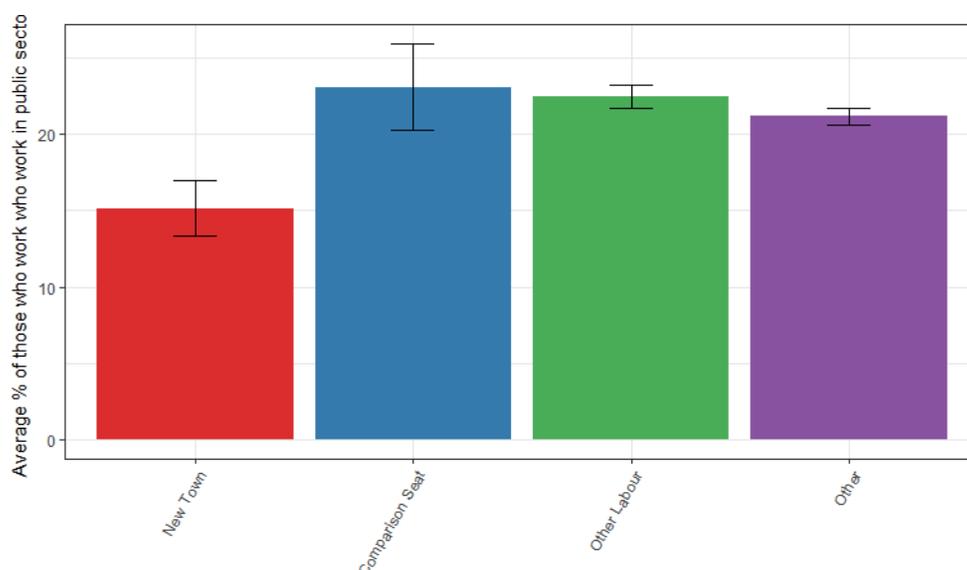
A number of economic characteristics stand out in the New Towns.

- On average, a lower percentage of people work in the public sector compared to other constituencies.

- The London satellite towns have a significant number of commuters – Crawley, Milton Keynes, Harlow (2011 census).
- Nine of the 16 New Town seats are below the England average for home ownership (63.3%).
- All the New Town seats, apart from Bracknell, have a higher than average level of adult indebtedness.

### Percentage of population working in public services

The proportion of electors living in New Town seats who work in the public sector is lower than it is – on average – in all other seat types, data from the Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings show. This difference is particularly large when comparing this proportion in the New Town seats to other seats with similar demographic profiles (based on Mosaic Groups, as outlined above). These seats have a far greater proportion of the electorate working in the public sector and appear to be one of the main differences between such seats and New Town seats.



### Personal debt

The Money Advice Service commissioned a report to look at the level of over-indebtedness amongst the adult population. The definition of over-indebted used was:

- 1) missed bill payments in at least 3 of the last 6 months; and/or
- 2) find meeting month bills/commitments a heavy burden.

	Personal debt Percentage of adult population over-indebted (2016)
Basildon & Billericay	16%
Bracknell	16%
Corby	17%
Crawley	16%
Harlow	18%

<b>Hemel Hempstead</b>	16%
<b>Milton Keynes North</b>	19%
<b>Milton Keynes South</b>	20%
<b>Northampton North</b>	18%
<b>Northampton South</b>	19%
<b>Peterborough</b>	19%
<b>Redditch</b>	17%
<b>South Basildon &amp; East Thurrock</b>	16%
<b>Stevenage</b>	17%
<b>Telford</b>	21%
<b>Welwyn Hatfield</b>	16%
<b>NATIONAL AVERAGE</b>	16%

## 4. Views from the frontline

### 4.1 New Towns Taskforce

The starting point for this project was concern about Labour's lost electoral ground from 2005 onwards, including the working class Labour voters lost over the last decade. Post-2015 little serious, sustained attention had been given to the twin questions of why Labour lost so badly in 2015 and how the Party could win again. The New Towns provide a lens to give a fine-resolution focus on Labour's big electoral challenge in middle England.

Much of the research for this project was undertaken prior to the 2017 snap election being called. The evidence collected came from focus groups with voters, discussions with Labour activists and a series of interviews with councilors, agents and Parliamentary candidates across the New Towns.

Whilst Labour made progress in the New Towns during the 2017 election, the Party only won one Parliamentary seat. The New Town seats remain amongst Labour's top targets in order for the Party to win a majority at the next election. A second round of interviews and focus groups, therefore, were undertaken after the election. The result is a snapshot of the issues and sentiments affecting the New Town seats, and insights into how the Labour Party could improve its campaigning to support activists in these seats.

The work throughout has been supported and strengthened by a Taskforce of former candidates, leading councilors and senior trade union officials from the New Towns. Taskforce meetings were held during the course of the research, and early findings of the project were shared with this group for feedback. The Taskforce provided a valuable sounding board for the project and contributed views directly into our work.

New Towns Taskforce		
<b>Chair</b>	John Healey MP	Shadow Housing Minister
<b>Former MPs &amp; Parliamentary Candidates</b>	David Wright	Former MP for Telford
	Lisa Forbes	Former Parliamentary Candidate for Peterborough, 2015
	Andrew Pakes	Former Parliamentary Candidate for Milton Keynes South, 2015
<b>Council Leaders</b>	Cllr Peter Marland	Leader, Milton Keynes Council
	Cllr Sharon Taylor	Leader, Stevenage Council
<b>Opposition Leaders</b>	Cllr Danielle Stone	Opposition Group Leader, Northampton Borough Council
	Cllr Mohammed Jamil	Opposition Group Leader, Peterborough Borough Council

<b>Trade Unions</b>	Maggie Ferncombe Jennie Formby Joe Morgan	South East Regional Secretary, Unison South East Regional Secretary, Unite West Midlands Regional Secretary, GMB
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## 4.2 Focus Groups

A series of focus groups were undertaken with target voters both before the 2017 election and after. These focus groups allowed a facilitated discussion with voters about Labour's image, electoral challenge and the issues facing the New Towns. The focus groups were held in: Telford, Stevenage (before and after the election) and in Milton Keynes.

## 5. Issues facing the New Towns

Some common themes emerged across the New Towns in the research and focus groups carried about as part of this project. Whilst Labour made great progress in 2017, there are some underlying challenges that the Party needs to consider, many of which were in place before the 2015 election.

Our interviews and focus groups provide an indication of the issues the Labour Party needs to get to grips with to build on our electoral gains in June 2017. Despite the Party's progress with many voters, key concerns for voters were clear from the research – in particular on the economy, immigration and competence. These are longer-run problems which counted against Labour in previous elections and which the Party's 2017 campaign did not deal with.

From the range of research undertaken for this project, we can draw out consistent themes that characterize the New Towns, together with the key concerns that define Labour's electoral challenge in winning them back.

The key themes across the New Towns are:

- Views on 2017 Election result
- Lessons from 2015 Election
- New Towns identity
- Young people

### 5.1 Views on 2017 election result

The two main feelings on the 2017 Election outcome in the focus groups undertaken post-election were disappointment and uncertainty. The uncertainty is driven by no single party having an overall majority, and a lack of clarity about what the government can achieve, as well as the sense that Britain is in a weaker position in terms of negotiating Brexit. Conservative Party leadership was also raised consistently as a concern.

In Stevenage, the post-election focus group found that whilst respondents recalled policies as an important part of the campaign, it is also clear that personalities and the performance of the two main party leaders were salient in shaping the Election and voting behaviour.

“The Tories wanted this election to be about Theresa May; Corbyn made it about the people.”

**Focus Group, July 2017**

“I was going to vote Tory, but I just don't understand how she can call an election and just not turn up at the debates.”

**Focus Group, July 2017**

There was also disappointment, and for some anger, over the deal between the Conservatives and the DUP.

“Jumping into bed with the devil”

**Focus Group, July 2017**

“Corbyn was right to point out to May that she didn’t have a money tree to pay public servants, but she found one to keep her own job.”

**Focus Group, July 2017**

The focus groups largely saw Labour’s manifesto as offering hope, whilst the Conservatives offered a punishment manifesto. When asked to recall policies, the most commonly cited for the Conservatives were: dementia tax; pensions; and promising to overturn the hunting ban. On Labour, the focus groups recalled Labour’s policies on abolishing tuition fees and promising more money for public services. Across the focus groups, there was a consistent concern about the NHS, education and social housing.

Labour’s improved performance was seen to be especially the result of motivating more young people to vote through the party’s campaigns on social media, through targeted policies (such as on tuition fees) and for being more engaging. There was a feeling that Labour had “locked-up” the younger vote, but the Party has more to do to attract older voters and more “stable families”, which includes building confidence in their economic plans.

## **5.2 Lessons from 2015**

The contrast in views on the 2017 election and the 2015 election campaigns could not be clearer.

“Labour’s strongest asset this year was its positive message and vision for the country. This was very much apparent in the manifesto which resonated strongly with those who voted Labour in Stevenage.”

**Stevenage, post-2017 election**

“People on the doorstep understood what Labour stood for traditionally, but they didn’t know specifically what we were about at the 2015 General Election. We could talk about specific policies that might benefit individuals based on their circumstances, but we didn’t have a concise overarching message that made those policies a part of something people could understand and believe in.”

**Northampton North, on 2015 election**

“Labour’s policies were confused and came across far too late to have an impact on the doorstep – messages from the centre were confused and activists felt left out in the cold when trying to sell the party to voters.”

**Bracknell, on 2015 election**

Despite the Conservative’s 2017 focus on ‘strong and stable’, leadership was less of an issue for Labour in the 2017 election. The Labour Party manifesto presented clearer policies that were easier to communicate and understand. The feedback for this project suggests that Labour needs to continue developing its policy offer in a way that builds on the 2017 gains.

“We must protect public services and promote enterprise, offer a better future for ordinary working families whilst being trusted to keep the public finances in check.”

**Northampton South, on 2015 election**

“Labour needs to position itself as the party that understands and will deliver on working-class aspirations such as good housing, good schools, secure well-paid jobs and safe and secure neighbourhoods.”

**Corby, post-2017 election**

### **5.3 New Town identity**

Many respondents raised the issue of New Town identity and the ‘prospectus’ for people when they first settled in the New Towns. Several said Labour needed to understand this local mentality and create local campaigns, whilst also recognizing the impact of under-investment on the New Towns.

“The biggest problem is that the New Towns were built all in one go. As a result, they are all falling apart in one go...Culture and the New Town mindset is something Labour really needs to get its head around. People in the New Towns feel they have lost their communities and pride.”

**Basildon, post-2017 election**

“There is a feeling amongst people in the New Towns, especially working class voters, that Labour has become a party that represents London Boroughs only...Stevenage is only 25 minutes from London but the difference is massive. Labour needs to undertake proper empirical research on voter issues, particularly to get a better sense of New Town residents’ views on immigration.”

**Stevenage, post-2017 election**

The early benefits of the New Towns in creating new jobs, infrastructure and homes was at risk from under-investment and changes to the economy, such as the decline in manufacturing jobs, particularly for older, established residents.

“At the time of the original settlers from London, jobs in Peterborough were plentiful in manufacturing and services and were mainly semi and low skilled, but were well paid. Peterborough become known as a place people moved to for the housing opportunities and well paid work. It was a magnet to many, including my own family who moved into the ‘Boom Town’ in the 1980s”

**Peterborough, post-2017 election**

### **5.4 Young people**

Several respondents mentioned that whilst younger voters were more enthusiastic about Labour’s 2017 campaign, there were not enough of them in order for Labour to win. This is an important issue for Labour to consider. Despite making progress in the 2017 election, many of the New Towns have a lower proportion of university students and a higher proportion of older white working class voters.

“Stevenage young population is very small. One of our initiatives was to send a signed letter to every single 18-25 year old in the constituency that we had data on. The letter contained campaign information, policies and voting details. Anecdotal evidence from pollsters at the revealed lots of young people turned up to the polling station with the letter in hand, asking where to vote.”

**Stevenage, post-2017 election**

“Despite having a university, Northampton does not have a large student population. Nevertheless, the students were energised by the Labour manifesto, particularly its stance on tuition fees.”

**Northampton North, post-2017 election**

“Young voters really liked Jeremy Corbyn but Crawley has a small young person population compared to the national average.”

**Crawley, post-2017 election**

## 6. Key concerns for the New Towns

The key concerns across the New Towns are:

- Leadership and overall Labour message
- Jobs and the economy
- Infrastructure and housing
- UKIP & traditional working class support
- Brexit and immigration

### 6.1 Leadership and overall Labour message

Labour's manifesto and strong message of change stood out in the interviews as a clear contrast to both the Conservative campaign in 2017 and Labour's performance in 2015. Whereas in 2015, voters and key activists showed frustration at the lack of clarity over Labour's message, the Party's approach was much more of a plus in 2017.

There was also a contrast between the research conducted before and after the 2017 election. Questions about leadership and the impact of party divisions came through strongly in both the focus groups and interviews conducted prior to the election. The focus groups carried out after the election, however, suggest that voters changed their opinion of the Labour Leader during the campaign and are now more ready to see Jeremy Corbyn as a Prime Minister-in-waiting. The Labour Leader came across as in touch with ordinary people, focused on helping people and with a positive manifesto. The focus groups contrast this to the negative campaign of the Conservative Party and lack of visibility of Theresa May during the election.

### 6.2 Jobs and the economy

Despite Labour's progress in 2017, one of the common themes was around the changing fortunes of the New Towns. Jobs, insecurity and the changing nature of local economies came through as strong concerns. For some respondents, this was about Labour's approach to dealing with austerity, for others there were still worries about whether Labour understood business.

The interviews with Labour activists showed the Party did well with public sector workers, teachers and others affected directly by austerity and the public sector pay cap. The interviews suggest Labour's focus on the public sector worked well, with several mentioning that the party's campaign against police cuts resonated with voters.

"The Tories' austerity message was well campaigned for in 2010. People genuinely believed it was time to cut back and live within their means. After 7 years, the austerity message is losing its appeal dramatically. Either people aren't buying into it any longer or the Tories have been less effective in selling it, probably both. The anti-austerity vote is there for the taking and it is popular with middle England public sector workers."

**Northampton North, post-2017 election**

Feedback from places such as Basildon, Northampton, Milton Keynes, Stevenage and Telford also placed a high priority on Labour dealing with concerns about our economic record. For some in the focus groups, Labour was still tainted by the Conservatives' attack on our last period in government. With the changing nature of jobs, the Milton Keynes focus group also questioned Labour's understanding of small business as a particular concern.

For some respondents in the focus groups, Labour was seen as anti-big business but also unsympathetic to small business, even if not deliberately so – for example wanting to “massively hike the minimum wage” or “all the regulations they will want to introduce” (Focus Groups, July 2017).

“Basildon is the biggest economy in Essex and is the fastest growing economy in the south after Cambridge. We are not seen as the ‘jobs party’ and we had nothing to say on how we will continue to facilitate the growth of new jobs markets in these areas.”

**Basildon, post-2017 election**

“The manifesto was a great step forward...It should continue to offer fair policies but people need to be convinced that its pledges are achievable. This manifesto was perceived as a bit of a ‘free-for-all’ with many self-employed and small business owners skeptical Labour could deliver on all its promises without raising taxes.”

**Northampton North, post-2017 election**

“Labour needs to become aspirational again and have that strongly reflected in its policies and image – and it's about aspiration for everyone, whether working class, upper-middle class, or somewhere inbetween.”

**Bracknell, post-2017 election**

The post-election focus groups also found that whereas most respondents characterized Labour's approach as ‘offering hope’, questions were still raised about whether the party would be able to deliver on its pledges.

### **6.3 Infrastructure and housing**

Despite the association of the New Towns with expansion, concerns about affordable housing and investment in infrastructure are key issues. There was a feeling that some of the New Towns have had their heyday. Austerity has added to a sense that infrastructure and public services are declining and not keeping pace with change.

Housing was viewed as a particular concern across the New Towns. The original promise of the New Towns was about affordable, decent homes, many of them from working families relocating for a new life from London or other big cities. The difficulty for local authorities in building new council housing, rising private rents and rising house prices were particularly felt by voters in many of the New Towns.

“In Stevenage, the town centre is falling apart and, as a result, there is a widespread feeling of loss. The New Towns had their entire infrastructure built all in one go in

the 1970s/80s. As such, it is all falling apart at the same time...Housing is the biggest issue that needs addressing in Stevenage.”

**Stevenage, post-2017 election**

“The social offer to the ‘London Overspill’ was that so long as you had a job in Peterborough, you would be given a council house to rent.”

**Peterborough, post-2017 election**

“This leads to a real sense of abandonment. It’s not difficult to see this either: the town centre, the state of the roads, the quality of the houses, the fact some housing estates and high rises are just dumped on the side of the road with no care for infrastructure...the list is endless.”

**Basildon, post-2017 election**

“Despite Northampton’s growth in the New Town era, housing supply and quality was a recurrent issue on the doorstep. Oftentimes, it felt we lacked a clear pathway to educate, house and grow the next generation.”

**Northampton South, on 2015 election**

There was some feeling that the 2017 election campaign helped tackle this issue with clear policies around housing and investing in public services. Concerns about public services, in particular the NHS, as well as housing are leading challenges for communication in the New Towns.

“Many people look to New Towns for housing. Yet we have a housing crisis. Pinning responsibility for this on the Government (as opposed to the council) was not easy. It has become easier as the growing national debate helps us locally to pin responsibility.”

**Milton Keynes South, post-2017 election**

“Housing, or the lack of it, and health are the two major issues here in Corby. We have built lots of new homes in Corby in recent years. We have successfully built new council houses, despite the many obstacles put in our way by central government. We need to do much more of that and councils such as Corby should be given the power and access to resources to do that.”

**Corby, post-election 2017**

#### **6.4 UKIP and working class support**

UKIP saw a strong increase in support across the New Towns at the 2015 election. One in six people voted UKIP in the New Towns and this rose as high as 18.3% in Northampton South and 26.5% in South Basildon and East Thurrock. In many ways, this was indicative of the wider backing that UKIP drew from disenfranchised working class communities across England. The social characteristics of the New Towns show a significant older, white working class population, many of them first generation New Town settlers, who were attracted to UKIP.

According to interviews and focus groups, immigration, Brexit and the economy remain as strong issues for older working class voters in the New Towns. Even though UKIP support was greatly reduced in 2017, and Labour's vote greatly increased, the challenge of winning back working class support was raised by local activists particularly in those New Towns that have fewer young people in professional jobs, such as Basildon, Corby, Crawley, Northampton, Stevenage and Telford.

"Labour needs to address the drift of white working class voters...It did better on this front in 2017 than 2015, but the feeling of less among these voters remains very strong...The working class have borne the brunt of the decline in manufacturing jobs and are unsure that Labour knows where the economy is going. They remain skeptical that Labour has a long-term economic plan."

**Stevenage, post-2017 election**

"The white working class vote feel Labour has become a young, idealistic and cosmopolitan party."

**Northampton, post-2017 election**

"Labour played to socially liberal values in its national campaign. However, in Crawley, like in many of the New Towns, large portions of the population are socially conservative working class voters."

**Crawley, post-2017 election**

"We have lost the white working class and those on lower incomes...The biggest change from 2015 to 2017 was that the UKIP vote swung massively to the Conservatives."

**Basildon, post-2017 election**

## **6.5 Brexit and immigration**

The impact of Brexit and immigration were closely linked to concerns around Labour's appeal to traditional working class voters. UKIP support had been a significant factor in poor 2015 election results in many of the New Towns, as it was for many of England's older towns. Whilst immigration was a less prominent issue in the 2017 election campaign, it was still raised as a continuing concern in several of the New Towns.

"Stevenage voted strongly in favour of Brexit and the Conservative candidate is a hard-line Brexiteer. Voters are still unsure on where Labour stands on Brexit and immigration."

**Stevenage, post-2017 election**

"Despite running the Conservatives close, we did relatively less well in some of our older, more traditional areas. There were areas where UKIP did well in 2015. We have some of our traditional voters who are still drifting away or who voted Conservative this time around."

**Milton Keynes, post-2017 election**

“The UKIP vote was squeezed out. Some of this went to Labour as the anti-establishment vote. But the Conservatives were perceived to be stronger on immigration. The traditional post-war New Towns have bigger UKIP areas of support than we previously thought and we are still lacking a clear stance on immigration.”

**Northampton North, post-2017 election**

“Voters are unsure where Labour stands on Brexit and immigration.”

**Crawley, post-2017 election**

“There was and remains a perception that large scale immigration from the EU has driven down wages and standards in the local economy. Despite unemployment being no worse than the national average there is a feeling also that local people are not getting access to jobs.”

**Corby, on 2015 election**

In the focus group discussions, respondents felt that the reason the Conservatives increased their vote share was because of the collapse of UKIP driven by the Tories having a very clear message on Brexit. Respondents did not feel so sure about where Labour stood on Brexit – or at least the details of how it would be delivered. Instead, respondents felt Labour’s success was down to ensuring the election was not just about Brexit and so could appeal to voters on other issues and in other ways.

## **6.6 Focus groups summary**

Reviewing the feedback from the pre- and post- election focus groups, we can identify the following challenges for Labour to attract these types of voters in order to win in the New Towns. These are:

- **Party unity:** the most striking finding from the pre-election focus groups was that hardly any of Labour’s messages were getting through because of the widespread belief that the Party was divided.
- **A non-traditional base:** Labour is unable to rely on its traditional, post-industrial base in these New Towns. Many of these voters are pro-public service but this does not mean they are automatically anti-private sector. They worry about the quality and future of public services – especially the NHS and childcare/education – but they do not believe that pumping more money into them is the only answer. They are just as keen to see public services reformed, so waste, duplication and fraud are also tackled. They are more relaxed about the role of the private sector in public services so long as “big businesses” are not seen to be ripping off the taxpayer.
- **Deliverability:** Labour’s campaign was praised for connecting with people and talking about issues that mattered to voters. There was some concern about how deliverable a number of the flagship policies are, particularly how the Party would fund their promises without “wrecking the economy”.

- Forward looking: Labour's campaign was praised for offering hope rather than pain. However, to some extent the Party is vulnerable as being perceived as looking back. Instead, these voters want to see how a modern Labour government would implement its policies and values while taking advantage of modern technology and new ways of working.

Focus group respondents felt that the main challenges for the Conservative government were to avoid an early election (as most feel Labour would win it) and to deliver a good Brexit deal. Given the Prime Minister's performance in the election campaign there is widespread scepticism about the government's ability to achieve a good Brexit deal, as well as to tackle the other key problems facing the country.

## 7. Labour's approach to campaigning in the New Towns

There is a strong sense from respondents that Labour had fought a better national and local campaign in 2017 supported by a positive manifesto and more activists on the ground. The contrast was regularly drawn with the 2015 election, where Labour was felt to have done well in the 'ground war' but failed to gain traction nationally.

There is a wide recognition that Labour had tried new campaigning approaches in 2017, in particular with success via social media, but that there is more the Party can do. A strong theme was around the need to localise messages and approaches, and to recognise that each area is different despite the common themes.

Respondents identified a number of areas where the Labour Party could work to improve its campaigning approach:

- Reaching out to new voters and in different ways, including on social media
- Improving how we engage on the doorstep
- Better use of community engagement
- Clearer messaging

### 7.1 Social media

Some of the 2015 shortcomings were fixed in the 2017 election, in particular around the use of social media. Several respondents said that the Conservatives in 2015 were much better at Facebook and online marketing.

"Undoubtedly, we won the ground war. We knocked on more doors and put more things through the letterbox than the Tories, but without a totally overwhelming effect. The Tories were very successful in their targeting and direct mail. We did as much direct mailing as they did but probably less targeted and less effective in messaging terms."

**Milton Keynes, on 2015 election**

In 2017, Labour's social media – both local and national content – was felt to be much more effective.

"Social media was one of the most important factors in my win in Peterborough. Leafletting has its use but social media is far more efficient, and a far more effective means of outreach. It was the best way to reach younger voters who found it far easier to engage in politics this way."

**Fiona Onasanya MP for Peterborough, post-2017 election**

Some local parties, such as Milton Keynes North and South, developed their own social media approach for 2017, building on the expertise of some activists, to train other Party members on campaign videos, online marketing and sharing content on Twitter and Facebook. The result was lively localised content-based around the Parliamentary Candidates to supplement national messaging on social media.

Other respondents identified the need to use social media better, but said they do not have the skills to do so.

“I utilized Twitter and Facebook but would have made more use of video looking back.”

**Parliamentary Candidate 2017**

“There was confusion over Facebook advertising. The Party issued instructions about the legality of certain types of political advertising on Facebook when using public money. The fear of misconduct meant we didn’t make any use of Facebook advertising to avoid the risk.”

**Parliamentary Candidate 2017**

## **7.2 Improving what we do on the doorstep**

There was a clear view that traditional campaigning was limited in reaching out to new voters, particularly those in blocks of flats or new developments where there is a less established sense of community.

“As a New Town, still growing, we have a large proportion of the population which are newcomers to the area and who we have no previous link or relationship with. This is proving a challenge particularly in terms of campaigning and canvassing, because the data we hold is either not there or inaccurate.”

**Telford, post-2017 election**

There was also some criticism of the drive for ‘contact rates’ in those New Town CLPs that were also target seats in 2015. The message was that the Labour Party needs to develop a broader approach to reaching out and engaging with the electorate.

“Door knocking and canvassing with the sole aim of collecting voter ID is of limited use. In 2017, door knocking was a missed opportunity. Too much onus is on data collection without actually using the interactions to have a conversation with voters.”

**Stevenage, post-2017 election**

“The way we collect voter ID is not particularly useful. Usually we ask “if there was an election tomorrow who would you vote for?” But this gets asked weeks before the election, when many voters are uncertain and will change. We should start asking ‘scaled question’: “How likely on a scale of 1-10 are you to vote Labour if there was an election tomorrow.” This would allow us to identify floating and uncertain voters.”

**Northampton North, post-2017 election**

“The national door knocking targets also severely hampered targeting and shifted campaign sessions to areas with a higher ‘in’ rate than areas we needed to be in. It developed a ‘scattergun’ approach to our campaign emphasis and diverted time and resources away from other campaigning areas such as community engagement and local issue-based campaigns.”

## Milton Keynes, on 2015 election

### 7.3 Community engagement

Several respondents felt that the Labour Party should consider putting in place organisers and candidates early on to help local parties prepare for the next election. Enabling candidates to build local links and to raise their profile, against well-funded incumbent Conservative MPs, was felt to be an important priority. Similarly, there was a view that Labour should consider whether the Party can afford more local organisers or work with local CLPs/Labour Groups to co-fund community campaign staff.

“Target groups, not individual data...Groups talk, share the same concerns and cover far more individuals through networks and word of mouth.”

**Fiona Onasanya MP for Peterborough, post-2017 election**

“We need to know more about voters and therefore need a much more sophisticated way of measuring voters’ feelings that quantifies the shades of grey that can be used to our advantage.”

**Northampton North, post-2017 election**

Starting early would allow candidates to engage more effectively with community groups and different groups of voters.

### 7.4 Party membership

Party membership has increased in all the New Towns seats since 2015, as the table below shows, which should now create more capacity for local campaigning.

	2015	2017
Basildon & Billericay	134	411
Bracknell	146	484
Corby	343	904
Crawley	226	736
Harlow	184	584
Hemel Hempstead	216	676
Milton Keynes North	323	1,073
Milton Keynes South	250	840
Northampton North	244	644
Northampton South	247	657
Peterborough	222	672
Redditch	188	445
South Basildon & East Thurrock	147	447
Stevenage	228	708
Telford	266	626
Welwyn Hatfield	247	747

## 7.5 Conclusion – next steps

In doing this report, I have been able to draw on views direct from the New Towns. The next important step is for the Party to open up a wider discussion in the New Towns, which I want to encourage between now and the end of 2017, so that Labour can then come to conclusions and decisions about how best we work to win again.

Everyone will take their own points for discussion from this report but there are clear challenges for Labour, including how to:

- Draw up Labour plans for the New Towns that create a prospectus for a new era of growth, regeneration and prosperity
- Develop Labour policy that takes account of the key concerns across the New Towns
- Recognise the New Town identity – and that more widely in other English towns and small cities – in Labour policy and political communications
- Campaign and widen Labour’s social media reach and community-based networks in the New Towns
- Support the further growth of the Labour Party in the New Towns, involve more of the newly-joined members and fund local organisers
- Link those New Towns that share the same sub-regional economy but sit in three separate Labour Party regions.

However, I believe important points in this report about the demographic profile, sense of identity and key concerns of the New Towns are also relevant to many more of Britain’s towns and small cities. So I hope the report will help open up a wider discussion well beyond the New Towns, especially in constituencies that are now marginal after the 2017 Election.

Above all, my purpose in producing this report “Winning back the English New Towns” is to help Labour get to grips with the big political challenges we must face for the next election. So I hope it plays a useful part in doing so and then in Labour also winning back Government



