

How ambitious 'forest city' plan for England could become a reality, *The Guardian*, November 23 2025

In the next few years, spades could be in the ground for a city made of wood, in the middle of the largest new nature reserve created in England in decades, with four-bedroom homes on sale for £350,000.

It sounds too good to be true, but a cross-party coalition of campaigners is trying to make a "forest city" to house a million people a reality, with construction commencing by the end of this parliament. It would be the first such project in England since the purpose-built new town of Milton Keynes in the 1960s.

Shiv Malik, author, investor and former Guardian journalist, came up with the audacious scheme. He spent recent years writing about the rough deal millennials have in terms of housing and debt, and the fact it is incredibly difficult to build a life as previous generations did. Now he is trying to turn his ideas into reality.

"No one's done this before – building in this way which would create a huge net gain for nature. We are trying to build in natural infrastructure," he said.

He is in discussions with the housing department, and shortly after the proposal for the forest city was made public, the government announced its ambitions to build a network of "forest towns" in a similar area.

The Labour government has been accused of pitting nature against housebuilding in its attempt to construct 1.5m homes across the country and address the housing crisis. Ministers are in the process of passing controversial legislation, which environment groups say puts 5,000 nature sites at risk.

Malik's almost 800 supporters span the political spectrum, including Green party campaigners and leaders of rightwing thinktanks. He's also enlisted Paul Powlesland, a nature campaigner and barrister, to join the board of the Albion City Development Corporation, which is overseeing the proposal.

The city would be east of Cambridge, with new rail links, schools and hospitals. It would be under a community land trust – run by a community-led non-profit organisation for the benefit of those who live there rather than for corporate profits. This would help to keep the houses affordable.

The homes would be built to eco-friendly standards, out of modular wooden designs, in communities which are "pedestrianised, human-scale environments where children can run free because the world was designed with them in mind; safe, walkable neighbourhoods". Rather than being car-dependent, they hope to build trams throughout the town so people can use high-quality public transport instead. It would have 12,000 acres of native forest, which would be mostly new planting to link up existing pockets of woodland.

Giving the builders development corporation powers – such as those granted to build Milton Keynes, Canary Wharf and the Olympics infrastructure – would help make the houses cheaper because they would be built at scale, and the special legislation would save the costs associated with going through the usual planning system.

The proposal is to build on mostly industrial agricultural land, which, Malik says, is often sterile, after being routinely sprayed with fertiliser and pesticides, and bereft of nature.

These fields could instead be replaced by desperately needed homes, as well as habitat for wildlife, allowing people to live closer to nature. Numerous studies have found that many people in urban areas are in "nature deserts", with green spaces inaccessible, while the physical and mental health benefits of time spent in parks, woods or the beach are well known.

Powlesland said: "I think the question is, can we build what is necessary for humans to have a healthy, happy society while either not degrading nature or ideally restoring nature? That is the question of the 21st century, and it feels like nobody is answering that question."