

The right housing in the right places

We need to save our countryside from unnecessary and damaging development by improving planning policy and guidance.

The next Government should:

- Make sure brownfield sites are prioritised for new housing over greenfield sites, and strengthen protection of the Green Belt against speculative development, through more effective strategic planning across local authority boundaries;
- Increase delivery of the right housing by investing in affordable housing to meet local needs, and providing incentives for custom-build and small-scale house builders;
- Support local aspirations by introducing a community right of appeal against speculative development in areas where a neighbourhood plan has been prepared.

Why is new housing important?

The countryside is precious, irreplaceable and finite - a beautiful national asset for us all. How we use land is largely determined by the planning system, which can ensure we protect the countryside while at the same time providing for the economic development and new housing that the country, and communities, need. With growing global concerns about climate change, food security, the depletion of nature, and population growth, we need to manage our countryside sustainably and protect it from inappropriate and unnecessary development.

New housing has a bigger impact, in terms of land under development, than any other form of building. At the same time, there is a clear need for more new housing, particularly affordable housing. Good planning should seek to deliver that housing, while minimising the negative impact of development on our countryside. We believe that with the right approach it is possible to avoid sporadic development in the countryside and the unsustainable sprawl of our towns and cities. With the wrong approach, housing will lead to massive, unnecessary loss of our countryside and irreparable damage to our landscapes.

At its best, the planning system enables decisions about the future of areas to be democratic, accountable and made in the long-term public interest. It secures public consent on necessary development. It helps deliver outcomes the market alone cannot deliver, such as affordable housing, urban regeneration, open space, biodiversity, open landscapes and community facilities.

What's the problem?

There is growing evidence that more and more of our countryside is being destroyed by haphazard, badly planned and unnecessary developments.

Changes to the planning system implemented by the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) have resulted in greenfield sites being used when suitable brownfield sites are available. Since 1989, on average, 67 square kilometres of undeveloped land, or an area larger than the city of Southampton, has been lost every year to development. After 2003, the trend of countryside loss slowed. A weakening of the planning policies that were in place until 2012 that required brownfield sites to be used before greenfield ones, looks likely to increase the rate of loss once again. Local authorities and planning inspectors are now increasingly allowing large scale greenfield development when enough suitable brownfield land has been identified for 1 million new homes according to the most recent (2012) Government figures. New brownfield sites become available all the time, and brownfield land that could become available in the future could contribute at least 300,000 further homes based on recent trends. On top of this, local plans across England propose at least 720,000 new dwellings on greenfield sites, with 190,000 of these planned on Green Belt land, despite this land having special planning protection.

CASE STUDY - Fylde, Lancashire

Both Blackpool and Preston have plenty of scope for regeneration, but housebuilders have instead long sought easy market returns by building on greenfield sites in Fylde Borough, which lies between the two towns. The current Fylde Local Plan, adopted in 2005, reduced the number of housing allocations due to an oversupply of housing against the former target.

Since the advent of the NPPF, a number of towns and villages have come under renewed pressure for large scale greenfield development on their edges. In August 2013 a planning inspector allowed 100 dwellings at Wesham, followed in November 2013 by two schemes, totalling 320 dwellings, being allowed at appeal on the edge of Kirkham.

Warton village has less than 1,600 homes and very limited facilities. The July 2014 draft 'Preferred Options' Local Plan now proposes 1,160 houses. In CPRE Fylde's opinion, if major strategic expansion is justified at Warton, housing should be developed on some of the brownfield (former BAE Systems) land adjoining the village rather than greenfield sites, and planning applications have already been lodged for 445 houses on two of the greenfield sites in the draft plan. BAE has released some of the brownfield land for a 240 home development which has just started construction.

While we need more and better designed new homes, CPRE believes that the Government and many local authorities are currently taking the wrong approach. Successive Governments have simplistically argued that if high housing targets are set in local plans, more homes will be built and prices will become more affordable. Unsurprisingly, this approach has not delivered the houses we need, let alone in the right places.

The NPPF requires local plans to demonstrate a five-year supply of 'deliverable' sites for housing. Local planning authorities are pressed to demonstrate that allocated and permitted sites are immediately deliverable and that they will provide competitive returns to both the landowner and developer when developed. In practice, this results in sites being side-lined because of issues such as contamination, even though the sites have planning permission and are well located. It also means that levels of affordable housing being provided by the private sector are being reduced. Meanwhile 'off plan' sites that have a greater environmental impact are being granted permission at appeal, because they are more profitable, and therefore deliverable, in the short term. This is the antithesis of good land use planning.

CASE STUDY - Housing in the Cotswolds

In January 2014 an Inspector allowed an appeal to build 100 dwellings, mostly houses for sale on the open market, on a greenfield site on the edge of Bourton-on-the-Water, within the Cotswolds Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. The Inspector held that, because of a lack of a five-year housing supply, the Local Plan policy restricting development outside settlement boundaries was out of date. He also judged that the harm to the landscape was outweighed by the benefit of meeting 'housing need'.

In recent years numerous planning reforms have left local communities with the overall feeling of being disempowered, with decision making becoming more centralised. Currently, judicial review is the only means of checking a poor planning decision, but the need for professional legal support and the risk of incurring substantial costs put it out of reach for the vast majority of community groups. Nor can judicial reviews be concerned with the planning policy merits of a case; they can only consider whether a decision has been made unlawfully. In addition to judicial review, moreover, developers also have the right of appeal against a local refusal or non-determination of planning permission, and on grounds of planning merits; a right presently denied to concerned community groups when a poor quality development is given planning permission.

One recent Government reform that has shown promise is the introduction of neighbourhood planning in 2011. These allow parish councils in rural areas to produce plans that are given the full legal force of policy, which previously had been the privilege of district or county authorities. By April 2014, 691 neighbourhood areas had been designated across England, and 13 neighbourhood plans had been passed at community referendums. But this work has been seriously undermined in a number of cases. Developers have been able to win major planning appeals in Cheshire, Hampshire and Oxfordshire despite work having been begun on a neighbourhood plan in the areas in question. In other areas, local authorities have allowed development not in accordance with an agreed or emerging development plan, for fear of losing substantial amounts of money at a planning appeal.

How can we fix the problem?

- Change the NPPF to (i) reintroduce a clear and consistent 'brownfield first' approach, and (ii) remove the presumption in favour of granting planning permission where the local authority is unable to demonstrate a five-year land supply of housing sites. CPRE believes that both of these changes will help result in new housing development being properly planned and directed towards brownfield sites rather than opportunistic greenfield development being allowed as at present. Following CPRE campaigning, supporting guidance issued in March and October 2014 has given greater encouragement to brownfield regeneration but in our view the NPPF also needs to be made stronger.
- Increase investment in affordable housing to meet local needs, through better targeting of funding and greater freedom for local authorities. Alongside this, providing incentives for custom-build and small-scale house builders could also increase housing supply, whilst boosting standards of planning and design. This involves easier access to finance, and also the adoption of a 'design code' approach which can be followed in building new schemes and thereby helps reduce the uncertainties of applying for planning permission, as is already being seen at Bicester in Oxfordshire.

- Introduce a limited community right of appeal against decisions to grant planning permission, in cases where this would go against a draft or finalised neighbourhood plan. One of the aims of the planning reforms was to empower local communities. If Ministers really want to empower local communities and reduce the use of judicial review they need to rebalance the planning appeals system so that community groups can both plan for their future and challenge bad plans by others.

What CPRE is doing and how you can help

In November 2014 CPRE carried out, with the help of expert academics at the University of the West of England, a full and authoritative analysis of the amount of brownfield land available for development across England and the English regions, using the most up-to-date information available, and stepping into a gap created when the Government decided to stop doing this work. Our report has been welcomed by both the Planning Minister, Brandon Lewis and by Lord Rogers who chaired the highly influential Urban Task Force in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Alongside this, we have run an online crowd-sourcing campaign, Waste of Space, to encourage members of the public to highlight derelict or under-used brownfield sites which can be used for new housing in preference to greenfield sites. By the time the map closed for submissions there were over 400 brownfield sites put forward.

In September 2014 further CPRE research, drawing upon 309 planning appeal decisions as well as a wider literature review, showed that 72% of planning appeals for large housing developments on greenfield sites are successful when the local planning authority cannot meet its housing land supply target.

The current CPRE in-house research programme, called ‘Housing Foresight’, is examining a number of economic problems that are affecting residential development in England. The first paper, entitled ‘Increasing Diversity in the House Building Sector’ called for small and medium sized enterprises to be able to re-establish themselves in the construction sector. It identified a number of barriers including access to land, access to finance and the high cost of obtaining planning. The second paper considered the obstacles that are preventing development on brownfield land. These include complex land ownership structures, the condition of land and planning policy that promotes development on greenfield sites. The paper recommends the taxation of uncompleted housing for which planning permission has been granted, as well as improved funding and assistance for brownfield remediation.

Our ongoing work seeks to influence national planning legislation, policy and guidance in favour of a more sustainable approach. We will look to press for a community right of appeal as the opportunities arise. For example, the Localism Act 2011 made provision for neighbourhood plans in response to our call for more community rights. Ministers have continued to state support for protecting the Green Belt and reusing brownfield land but more needs to be done, particularly to protect ordinary, undesignated countryside.

Local pressure is also vitally important. If you would like to take action please consider:

- Supporting CPRE’s Charter: www.saveourcountryside.org.uk
- Helping develop case studies on some of the brownfield sites that were nominated during our Waste of Space campaign. If you would like to help please email wasteofspace@cpre.org.uk with the subject heading: Case study development
- Contacting your MP by letter or email to raise concerns, and to ask them to support our Charter

- Feeding in relevant case studies from your local area that can help inform our national campaigning work. Please send them to info@cpre.org.uk
- Seeking to influence your local plan and commenting on local planning applications. Visit www.planninghelp.org.uk and www.cpre.org.uk/local-group-resources/campaigning/planning for advice and tips.