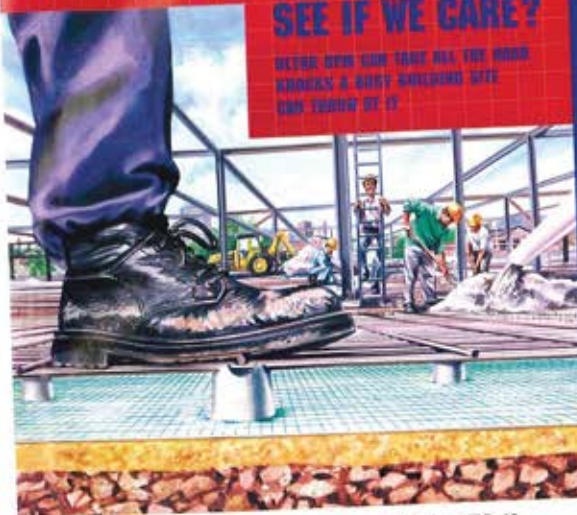


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SEE US IN OPUS

# The best-laid plans ...

**Exactly where the 4.4 million new homes the government says are needed in the next 20 years will go has become the subject of hot debate. Nigel Moor reviews a recent contribution.**

GOVERNMENT STATISTICS PREDICT that by 2016, another 4.4 million new homes will be needed in the UK to cope with changing demographics and lifestyles. Just how these houses can be accommodated has become the subject of much debate as a host of organisations publish reports in an attempt to influence the planning agenda. As more reports appear, the confusion increases as to how many new homes will be required, and where.

One of the first reports to address the issue came from the Town and Country Planning Association, which, together with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, has published its regional inquiry into housing need and provision in England. Its title, *The People: Where Will They Go?*, recalls the question posed by planning guru Ebenezer Howard a century ago. The report was edited by two well-known planning experts, Professors Michael Breheny and Peter Hall, and is clearly an attempt to influence the agenda for environment secretary John Gummer's great debate.

Breheny and Hall's most controversial conclusion is that although government policies promoting the use of former industrial sites have been successful to the point where 50% of housing development is currently on reused "brownfield" land, the average in years to come is likely to fall short of government targets by reaching only 30-40%.

This is a challenge to the government's land-use policy. In PPG7, its draft planning guidance dealing with countryside policy, released at the end of July, the government re-emphasises its 50% target set in the housing white paper, *Our Future Homes*. On this basis, government statisticians calculate that the amount of land in urban use would increase by only 6800 ha a year to 2016.

Other conclusions in the TCPA's report seem to be at odds with the government's predictions and point to potential problems. The report states that:

\* demand for new housing in the South-east is strongest west of London, yet the largest reserves of brownfield land are east along the river Thames and in the capital itself

\* development land in the North-west is available in Manchester and Liverpool, but the greatest demand for housing is in Cheshire, Cumbria and rural Lancashire

\* the main pressure on housing in Yorkshire and Humberside is in North Yorkshire - where there are strong environmental constraints on further development - but the main brownfield sites are in South Yorkshire.

Professor Hall concludes: "The major challenge for planning in the UK during the next decade will be to balance the increase in demand for new homes against the continuing need for environmental protection. The aim should be to achieve new greenfield developments that are sustainable in terms of their transport requirements

countries. That the figures are so heavily concentrated on the conurbations is mainly a result of the migration assumptions made by the population forecasters: much of the inward migration from outside the UK goes to London, while the level of migration out of the cities of the Midlands and the North has been revised downwards.

This last assumption is the one Professor Hall challenges. He argues that pressure to move out of the big cities, fuelled by poor housing, social problems, crime, vandalism and poor schools, should not be resisted. He advocates a "portfolio" of different solutions. Likely ingredients include:

- \* extensions around the edge of towns and cities
- \* in-filling of vacant sites in existing urban areas
- \* new villages and towns
- \* new developments clustered along rail corridors.

**The reuse of brownfield sites for development ... is such a central plank of the government's policy for sustainable development that the issue must be tested much more vigorously**

as well as siting and construction."

I searched in vain through the report for strong empirical evidence to support these conclusions. What I found was anecdotal evidence based on the views of participants in a series of regional seminars held around the country. This hardly amounts to rigorous research on which to assess and question government policy. The reuse of brownfield sites for development, not just for housing but for associated employment, leisure, retail and community development, is such a central plank of the government's policy for sustainable development that the issue must be tested much more vigorously.

The TCPA's report highlights another major issue on which the experts seem to be at loggerheads. Where will the demand for new homes be greatest?

Much of the projected increase in households is forecast for the conurbations, with a 40% increase in London and 34% in the big cities of the North and the Midlands. Only a 26% increase is predicted for the remaining

What is missing from this analysis is any examination of the political hurdles that must be overcome if the "portfolio" approach is to succeed. In the 1980s, housebuilders and developers spent millions of pounds on professional fees as they tried to win planning permission for new villages and settlements. They have little to show for their investment. Even in London, where the greatest increase in new households is forecast, there is controversy over how much new development can be planned.

The debate has only just begun, but a number of central issues need to be addressed now. The prospects for the continued development of urban brownfield sites can be improved if sites with major problems - contamination, poor access, weak demand, high costs - are subsidised. Regeneration agency English Partnerships has recently gained a new chief executive, but it also needs a much larger budget from government if the brownfield target is to be met.

Nigel Moor is managing director of RPS Nigel Moor: The Planning Consultancy.