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CPRE report: Waste of green fields as undeveloped brownfield hits new high

18 November 2021

- [New figures](#) show a continued increase in the amount of brownfield land suitable for housing across England
- Despite the boom in brownfield fresh analysis shows planning permission has stagnated, with long term trends pointing to soaring use of greenfield sites
- The proportion of brownfield housing units with planning permission is the lowest since records began – down to 44% in 2021 from 53% in 2020 – and the actual number, at 506,000, is the lowest for four years.

Housing developers are gorging on precious greenfield land with ever greater appetite despite space being available for 1.3 million new homes in swathes of previously developed sites across the country.

CPRE, the countryside charity's [annual state of brownfield report](#) shows an increase in land available for redevelopment but a smaller proportion being granted planning permission over the past 12 months. So, in short, greenfield development is on the rise while brownfield development is on the slide.

To halt the irreversible and unnecessary destruction of our countryside, CPRE is calling for new national planning policies to prioritise brownfield development in local plans, as part of a package of fresh levelling up investments in the midlands and the north. The analysis of 330 local authority brownfield registers shows a glut of disused and derelict land available in areas that need the most support. The northwest, Yorkshire and the Humber, and the West Midlands have space for a total of more than 375,000 homes on previously used land. There is also plenty in London and the southeast, where just over half a million homes could be built without touching green spaces.

West Midlands Mayor Andy Street, a vocal proponent of a 'brownfield first' planning policy, said:

'The priority for housing has to be providing the homes that are much needed while protecting the green belt for future generations, and that's exactly what we're doing here in the West Midlands. The simple fact is there is no excuse to destroy the countryside while so much brownfield land is available for housing, which is why in our region we use the cash we've won from the government to pay to clean up derelict industrial land. This is vital in the context of protecting our natural environment so it can help in the fight against climate change while levelling up our towns and cities so that they are thriving, attractive places to live and work – with nature on the doorstep to be explored and enjoyed.

'As well as championing a 'brownfield first' approach to housing, the West Midlands is also leading the way on affordability. Not only do we insist on a minimum of 20% of new homes built being affordable when the Combined Authority's cash is involved, but we have also changed the definition of "affordable" so it is linked to local pay rather than the housing market – helping to make the dream of home ownership far more realistic for many. I am sure the approach taken here in the West Midlands can be applied across the rest of the country, helping to keep the green belt safe whilst building more truly affordable homes.'

Focusing development primarily on suitable urban brownfield means that housing is near where people already work and live, with infrastructure such as public transport, schools and shops already in place. A key advantage of this approach is a reduction in car use. CPRE is calling for a 'brownfield first' policy that ensures all new developments include affordable housing, including Help to Buy.

Emma Bridgewater, president of CPRE, the countryside charity, said:

'A brownfield first policy is sound good sense. We need to direct councils and developers to use these sites – often in town centres and city centres where housing need is most acute – before any greenfield land can be released. It is wasteful and immoral to

government to help make this ambition a reality.’

New analysis shows the use of previously undeveloped greenfield land soared by 148% between 2006 and 2017, the latest date for which figures are available. The proportion of brownfield land being used for residential development dropped by 38% in the same period.

Notes to editors

Brownfield land continues to show that it is a perpetually regenerating resource, with the current capacity now standing at 1.16 million new homes, an increase of 101,624 or 9.5%, since we last reported in 2020. Analysis of sites that have been removed from brownfield land registers also show a further capacity for 150,000 new homes on brownfield sites, bringing this total to 1.3 million. This is up from a total of 1.2 million housing units available in 2020, with capacity for 1.06 million homes shown on brownfield registers and a further 113,420 housing units available on sites removed from registers.

Total brownfield housing unit capacity 2021 vs 2020

| Region | 2021 housing capacity | 2020 housing capacity |
|--------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| London | 355,644 | 289,989 |
| South East | 159,779 | 133,192 |
| East | 107,994 | 99,681 |
| South West | 68,081 | 69,355 |
| West Midlands | 99,600 | 99,880 |
| East Midlands | 61,829 | 54,983 |
| North West | 167,461 | 168,194 |
| Yorkshire & Humber | 108,790 | 110,592 |
| North East | 33,791 | 35,480 |
| Total | 1,162,969 | 1,061,346 |

Total brownfield housing unit capacity 2021 vs 2020

Proportion of brownfield housing units with planning permission 2018-21

| Year | Number of housing units | Number of housing units with planning permission | % |
|------|-------------------------|--|-----|
| 2021 | 1,162,969 | 506,086 | 44% |
| 2020 | 1,061,346 | 565,564 | 53% |
| 2019 | 1,077,292 | 535,785 | 50% |
| 2018 | 1,052,124 | 613,052 | 58% |

Proportion of brownfield housing units with planning permission 2018-21

For further information, case studies or to interview a spokesperson, please contact: Sam Relph, CPRE Media Officer, 020 7981 2827 / 07982 805759

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