

Natural England Policy Position Statement: Housing Growth and Green Infrastructure

Key issues

- The Government is seeking an additional three million homes by 2020 and has pledged that at least 60% of these will be built on brownfield land, leaving a substantial amount to be provided elsewhere. We have not endorsed the proposed housing numbers but accept that a high level of expansion will have significant implications for the natural environment. Housing growth, however, can also deliver substantial benefits for the natural environment and people together.
- Various attempts have been made over the years to use assessments of environmental capacity to inform the search for the most environmentally sustainable locations for development. Current work on the related concepts of environmental capacity, eco-system services and the cumulative impacts of development needs to be developed further to underpin strategic development decisions.
- Green Belt policy has been effective in containing urban areas but there is a danger that it can increase pressure for the development of more environmentally sensitive sites elsewhere. Much Green Belt land is of uninspiring quality and there is potential for it to deliver more positive benefits for the natural environment and people's enjoyment of it, and to play a role in climate change adaptation.
- The quality of much new housing is mediocre and needs to be substantially improved, both in terms of design quality and resource efficiency. The provision of multi-functional green infrastructure as an integral part of all new development can considerably enhance the quality of development and deliver a wide range of benefits for people and the natural environment.
- Natural England is a statutory consultee on spatial plans and on many development proposals. We can use this role to influence both the broad location of new housing and the nature of new development. We have particular opportunities to influence Growth Areas, Growth Points and proposed Eco-towns.

We believe

- That necessary housing growth should be accommodated with minimum impact on the natural environment and deliver maximum benefits for the natural environment and people together.
- That the most environmentally sustainable locations should be found for new housing development.
- That an assessment of environmental capacity should be central to decisions on future development.
- That the environmental quality of all new housing development should be substantially improved.
- That the provision of green infrastructure should be an integral part of the creation of sustainable communities throughout England.

We want

- Valued environmental assets to be conserved through policies and decisions on major development proposals seeking first to avoid loss or harm, before considering the need for mitigation or compensatory measures.
- The search for the most environmentally sustainable locations for future development to consider all potential options. This will include brownfield sites (recognising some are of high environmental value) as well as strategic reviews of green belt boundaries as an integral part of the regional appraisal of development options.
- A refreshed Green Belt that continues to contain urban growth while evolving to fit twenty-first century circumstances and deliver more positive benefits for the natural environment and people's enjoyment of it.
- A thorough assessment of the environmental capacity of the area to inform decisions on locations for future development.
- All new development to create high quality, locally distinctive, resource efficient places where people want to live and work. This should include the provision of substantial benefits for the natural environment and people together.
- Growth Areas, Growth Points and Eco-towns to become genuine exemplars of environmentally sustainable development and be built to stringent environmental standards.
- Networks of multi-functional green infrastructure providing a wide range of environmental and quality of life benefits to be identified in regional and local plans and designed into all major development and regeneration schemes from the outset.
- Substantial funding to be provided for the creation and long-term maintenance of extensive green infrastructure, including use of the proposed Community Infrastructure Levy.
- Private gardens to be recognised as a valuable part of green infrastructure networks.