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Brownfield comes first

Why brownfield development works

CPRE, March 2016

Introduction

The Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE) has long been a proponent of promoting use of brownfield sites for housing.¹ Brownfield redevelopment is a central focus of many of the Government's current proposals for planning reform, with the Housing and Planning Bill leading to the creation of a new statutory register of brownfield sites, identified locally as suitable for new housing. Two new sources of funding should ensure £2.2 billion will be spent on brownfield regeneration over the next five years. Ministers want to see 90% of suitable brownfield sites with planning permission for housing by 2020.

To investigate the extent to which brownfield is a viable option for development, CPRE commissioned construction analysts Glenigan to compare the speed of residential development on brownfield sites with development on greenfield, once these sites have been granted planning permission.

Research process

Glenigan analysed 1,040 development projects that had active planning consent during three years up to March 2015 within a sample of 15 urban and urban-rural fringe local authorities across England (Table 6). Of these sites, 696 were defined as brownfield and 269 as greenfield. Overall the projects were expected to deliver 69,415 houses.

The local authorities were chosen to give a geographical spread. All are outside London (where the market environment is exceptionally buoyant), and yet have relatively healthy building rates and a significant quantity of both brownfield and greenfield land earmarked for development. The 15 authorities were examined as 12 urban and urban-rural fringe areas: Cheshire East; Corby; County Durham; Coventry; Fylde; Leeds; Leicester, Blaby, and Oadby & Wigston; Salford; Southampton and Eastleigh; Stoke on Trent; Swindon; and York.

Findings

Overall speed of development

Brownfield land accounted for 63% of houses with an active planning consent during the three years to March 2015, but 70% of the houses that had been completed by the end of March 2015.

Table 1: Average number of weeks taken for projects to be completed following planning approval by size of scheme

	Brownfield	Greenfield
Below 50 units	80	91
50-99	103	110
100-249	132	164
250+	148	244
Total	92	121

Source: Glenigan

Of the 580 completed projects by December 2015, it was found that both brownfield and greenfield sites took an average of 29 weeks to start after receiving planning permission. However, brownfield sites were then much quicker to develop once work had started: brownfield sites took an average of 63 weeks to be completed in comparison with 92 weeks for greenfield sites.

Looking at the overall average timescales for both types of site from the granting of permission to completion, brownfield sites were developed more than half a year quicker (92 weeks against 121 weeks for greenfield). The finding that brownfield sites were faster from permission to completion was consistent for all site sizes.

Larger sites

Projects of 50 or more units on brownfield land started on site 14 weeks earlier than on greenfield sites, and were completed 47 weeks earlier. So when the two are combined, larger brownfield sites are being developed, from start to finish, more than a year faster than greenfield sites.

Table 2: Number of weeks taken for projects of 50 or more units to start on site and be completed following planning approval

	Start on site		Completion	
	Brownfield	Greenfield	Brownfield	Greenfield
Cheshire East	21	25	107	128
Corby	33	39	183	139
County Durham	18	51	120	229
Coventry	29	57	128	128
Fylde	40	15	68	209
Leeds	22	27	106	198
Leicester Area	27	49	146	147
Salford	25	25	86	127
Southampton Area	24	33	119	122
Stoke-on-Trent	31	-	108	-
Swindon	13	24	132	106
York	21	39	121	156
All areas	24	38	119	166

Source: Glenigan

Smaller sites

For smaller sites of fewer than 50 houses, brownfield projects took 32 weeks to start on site. This was marginally slower than greenfield sites, which took 23 weeks to see work begin. However, brownfield sites were then built more quickly, taking 80 weeks from approval to completion, in comparison with 91 weeks for smaller greenfield sites. This would suggest that smaller brownfield sites are developed quicker, but there are some issues to overcome in trying to begin work.

Stalled sites

Across the 15 local authorities studied, there are 33 sites on hold and 32 that have been cancelled. Altogether this is 2,861 houses on stalled sites in the case study areas.

Broken down into brownfield and greenfield, more than 7% of brownfield sites have stalled in comparison with 5% of greenfield. The number of units represented by stalled or cancelled sites is roughly the same proportion for both (around 4%).

Table 3: Sites that have stalled²

	Brownfield	Greenfield	Brownfield units ³	Greenfield units
Sites that have been granted permission	685	263	42,479	23,146
On hold	25 (3.6%)	8 (3%)	1,102 (2.6%)	738 (3.2%)
Cancelled	26 (3.8%)	6 (2.3%)	856 (2%)	165 (0.7%)

Why brownfield first needs to be strengthened

Some of the local authorities included in Glenigan's research are making efforts to promote brownfield development. An examination of how government policies are undermining these efforts suggests some reasons why brownfield sites stall more frequently than greenfield sites (see Box).

Box: How developers cherry-pick greenfield sites

In a Parliamentary debate on 26 February 2016, Housing and Planning Minister Brandon Lewis stated: ‘The [National Planning Policy] framework...makes it clear that local authorities should prioritise suitable brownfield land wherever practicable.’⁴ CPRE is pleased ministers are seeking to strengthen planning policy on brownfield because, at present, the NPPF is often not working in the way that Ministers say they intend.⁵

Some of the local authorities surveyed in our research - Cheshire East, Durham, and Salford - have tried to prioritise the redevelopment of brownfield sites in their local area by attempting to prevent the development of greenfield sites in areas close to brownfield sites that have planning permission but where building has not yet started. Yet during the period surveyed by Glenigan, planning inspectors have allowed appeals by developers to build on greenfield sites on the basis that there is no evidence that releasing additional greenfield sites undermines the development of brownfield that has already received planning permission. In that time, just over 2,000 houses have been built on greenfield sites in these areas.⁶ Such a loss of greenfield land is arguably unnecessary when Glenigan’s figures (Tables 4 and 5) show that in each area the development that has taken place could have been on further brownfield sites with planning permission instead. In total, uncompleted developments on brownfield land in all three areas could have provided just over 5,000 new houses, in addition to the 6,797 houses that were completed on brownfield.⁷

The picture is starker still in Swindon, where far more greenfield land with planning permission was being developed for housing than brownfield. In Swindon, 77% (or 1,328 houses) of the houses developed were on greenfield land compared with 339 (just under 23%) on brownfield, despite 52% (or 1,837 houses) of all houses with planning permission being on brownfield.

The local authorities that saw a particular emphasis on brownfield included Stoke-on-Trent, where 98% of new residential units were built on brownfield sites. Coventry, the Southampton area and York also saw more than 80% of new residential development on brownfield. In both Coventry and York, major releases of Green Belt are now being planned that could serve to make the remaining brownfield sites less economically attractive to develop in future.

Table 4: No. of residential units with active planning consent during three years to March 2015 split by type of site

Local authority area	Brownfield land	Greenfield land	Brownfield and greenfield land	Unknown	Total	Proportion on greenfield land
Cheshire East	3,281	2,638	29	71	6,019	44%
Corby	1,140	1,894	-	-	3,034	62%
County Durham	3,332	3,371	-	256	6,959	48%
Coventry	6,555	551	-	141	7,247	8%
Fylde	1,131	553	87	32	1,803	31%
Leeds	8,388	5,012	81	346	13,827	36%
Leicester Area	5,115	3,122	12	311	8,560	36%
Salford	5,277	2,478	-	27	7,782	32%
Southampton Area	3,983	836	-	1	4,820	17%
Stoke-on-Trent	2,326	231	-	85	2,642	9%
Swindon	1,837	1,836	192	147	4,012	46%
York	1,325	1,366	-	19	2,710	50%
All areas	43,690	23,888	401	1,436	69,415	34%

Source: Glenigan

Table 5: No. of residential units with active planning consent completed by 31 December 2015

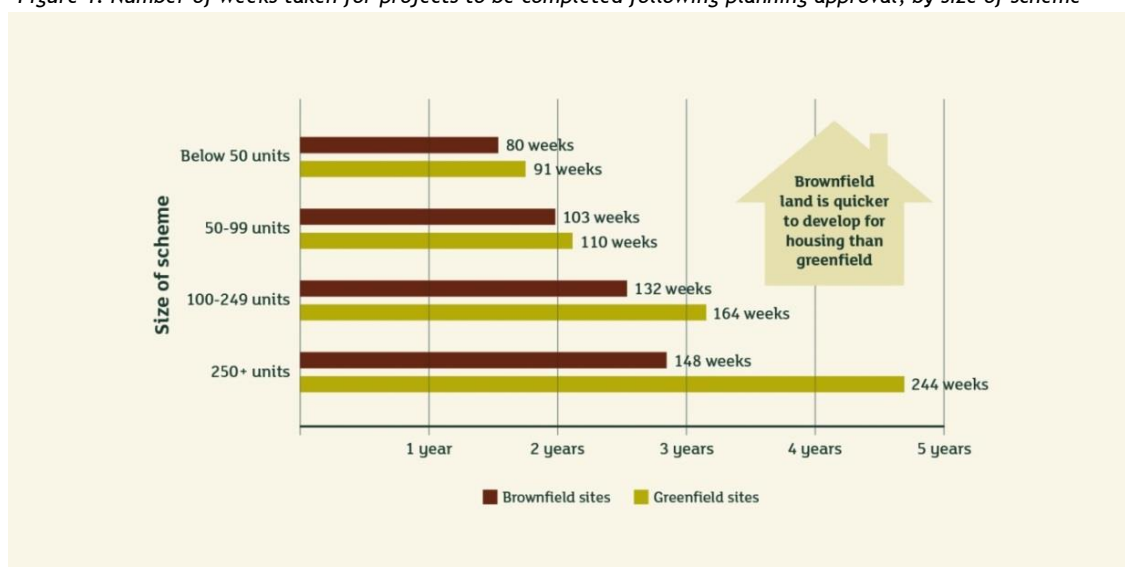
Local authority area	Brownfield land	Greenfield land	Brownfield and greenfield land	Unknown	Total	Proportion on greenfield land
Cheshire East	1,825	803	18	39	2,685	30%
Corby	1,116	1048	-	-	2,164	48%
County Durham	2,301	1,375	-	125	3,801	36%
Coventry	4,953	481	-	141	5,575	9%
Fylde	815	178	87	32	1,112	16%
Leeds	3,377	2,175	11	242	5,805	37%
Leicester Area	1,519	902	12	222	2,655	34%
Salford	2,671	164	-	-	2,835	6%
Southampton Area	2,722	578	-	1	3,301	18%
Stoke-on-Trent	1,598	27	-	46	1,671	2%
Swindon	339	1,328	13	45	1,725	77%
York	475	100	-	19	594	17%
All areas	23,711	9,159	141	912	33,923	27%

Source: Glenigan

CPRE conclusions

Both brownfield and greenfield projects took an average of 29 weeks to start on site, but brownfield sites were then built out in 63 weeks compared with 92 for greenfield land. This suggests that once a commitment is made to build on a brownfield site, it is often significantly quicker to develop than a greenfield site (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Number of weeks taken for projects to be completed following planning approval, by size of scheme



It is also clear, however, that greenfield land is being released and developed, often after planning appeals, in areas where local authorities want to see brownfield sites being built on first. Much of the greenfield development that has taken place in these areas is arguably unnecessary when there is more than enough brownfield land with planning permission to provide for what has been built.

A relatively small number of brownfield sites stall after securing planning permission, however, and this happens to a higher proportion of brownfield sites than greenfield. Taken alongside the other findings, this reinforces the idea that investing in these sites to get building going will provide worthwhile returns.

Overall, our findings suggest that the Government's pledge to invest £2.2 billion on brownfield regeneration in two new housing development funds and to establish a brownfield register are necessary and worthwhile investments. It will help speed up the rates of housebuilding as intended, and help minimise the unnecessary loss of countryside. Other proposed Government initiatives, however, such as forcing local authorities to release more sites for development if housing targets are not met, are unlikely to have a direct impact on the overall numbers of new homes provided but will instead lead to developers cherry-picking increased amounts of greenfield land.

CPRE recommendations

The findings above reiterate the need for a stronger focus on bringing **brownfield land** forward for development.

The Government should:

- amend the NPPF to make the intentions of Ministers clear and prioritise the use of suitable brownfield sites in urban areas over greenfield, including empowering councils not to allocate greenfield sites in local plans and to refuse planning permission on greenfield sites where these would compete with suitable brownfield sites
- commit to seeing development started on 90% of suitable brownfield sites by 2020, rather than just aiming for planning permission on 90% of suitable sites by 2020
- make suitable brownfield sites the first priority for any public funding, and prevent public funding for greenfield sites where these would make competing demands. The New Homes Bonus offers an opportunity to bring more brownfield sites back into use, and the Government should use this alongside its £2 billion Housing Development Fund to prioritise brownfield
- make clear that planning and fiscal policies promoting brownfield development are focused on existing towns and cities and exclude brownfield sites of high environmental and heritage value.

CPRE, March 2016

¹ CPRE, *From Wasted Space to Living Spaces*, November 2014.

² Stalled sites are sites on which planning permission has been granted but where Glenigan's data indicates that construction has been cancelled or is on hold.

³ The sites analysed in the research are primarily residential - however, a very small number of sites also contain some commercial units. The projects included within the analysis for *Table 3* encompass a very small proportion of commercial units as well as residential units. In some cases these could be mixed use (for both residential and commercial) units.

⁴ [House of Commons debate](#), 26 February 2016, vol 606, col 654.

⁵ See planning appeal decisions from Cheshire East (reference 2141564, dating from 2013); County Durham (reference 3005376, dated August 2015); and Salford (2157433, dated July 2012). All these decisions can be downloaded from <https://acp.planningportal.gov.uk/>

⁶ See *Table 5*, column 3.

⁷ Compare *Table 4*, column 2 (showing the number of residential units with planning consent on brownfield land) and *Table 5*, column 2 (showing the number of units built on brownfield land).

Appendix

Table 6: No. of projects with active planning consent during three years to March 2015 split by type of site

Local authority area	Brownfield land	Greenfield land	Brownfield and greenfield land	Unknown	Total	Proportion on greenfield land
Cheshire East	80	36	2	6	124	29%
Corby	10	21	-	-	31	68%
County Durham	76	39	-	14	129	30%
Coventry	55	13	-	3	71	18%
Fylde	20	8	2	1	31	26%
Leeds	138	46	2	13	199	23%
Leicester Area	84	40	1	13	138	29%
Salford	61	13	-	2	76	17%
Southampton Area	75	15	-	1	91	16%
Stoke-on-Trent	45	7	-	5	57	12%
Swindon	27	22	4	5	58	38%
York	25	9	-	1	35	26%
All areas	696	269	11	64	1,040	26%

Source: Glenigan