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Land use and consumption in England: how is land use controlled and monitored? How has land use changed?
Keiron Hart

The formalised development of the Town and Country planning system in England was driven in the late 18th and early 19th century by public health needs. This was becoming more critical following a population explosion, and the social shift to living in towns and cities. These issues were so acute that Government intervention was required. The initial planning system did not develop from a vision of land consumption control.

A variety of Planning acts created by Central government have developed to provide us with the system England has in place today. This will continue to reflect the needs and requirements of an evolving population. England has a system of official Planning policy statements (Pps) and Planning policy guidance (Ppg), as well as best practice documents. These provide a framework for Local planning authorities (Lpa) in determining issues of balance and priority on land use matters, all of which is delivered under the national Town and Country planning legislation. At a local level each Lpa must produce Development plans, which detail proposed land uses.

Land use today

In England there is a clear strategy to recycle previously used land wherever possible. Demand for housing and the associated infrastructure constitute the main pressure for the development of land in rural areas. Within existing urban areas it is the need for housing that also drives the recycling of land that has previously been used.

Central government guidance on the recycling of land (Pps 3: Housing - Dclg, 2006) states that by 2008 60% of all housing needs should be met by using previously developed land, or the conversion of existing buildings.

In 2005 73% of new residential dwellings of all types were built on previously developed land. Only 3% of this figure was the conversion of existing buildings (Dclg). To maximise the efficiency of land use Pps3 seeks to guide the density of residential dwellings per hectare (ha): a figure of 36 per ha could be achieved. In 2006 the actual average number of dwellings per ha being developed stood at 41 (Dclg 2007).

During the period 1996-1998 approximately 8,000 ha of land changed from previously developed, to developed. Approximately 2,700 ha went from developed to undeveloped (mainly from mineral works being returned to 'undeveloped' land). In 2002 an estimated 66,000 ha of previously developed land was available for re-development, 29,000 ha of which were both suitable and potentially available for housing with an estimated capacity of 880,000 new dwellings.

Housing is not the only pressure on land use in England.

England has an established system for data collection which is delivered both nationally, and locally, by different organisations. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) delivers the collation and coordination of much of this work. However, this Government agency works closely with the Department for communities and local government (Dclg) and other government agencies. In the spring of 2006 the most recent version of the Land use and Land cover

classification was published. This sought to harmonise existing classifications to facilitate. This system ensures that multiple organisations adhere to similar principles when collating data.

Accurate land use data is vital to provide the basis for sustainable development. Central government have been sponsoring this data collection since the early 1970's. It is widely accepted that this information is incomplete.

A National land use database (Nlud) has been established. The objectives are:

- to establish a national system for naming and defining groups of land use and land cover features;
- to provide a nationally consistent basis for identifying, recording and reporting land use cover;
- to serve as a standard classification.

In summary this system splits England into 13 divisions which contain a total of 51 classes (not shown).

Conclusions

Pressures on land use within England are acute. A well developed system of delivery for guiding policies, statements and law from Central government is effectively delivered at a local level. Accurate data on land use is fundamental to the process of long term strategic planning.

Standardising the data sets facilitates multiple organisations to feed information to a central data base.

Housing places one of the strongest pressures on the consumption of land. A clear strategy of recycling previously developed land has been established.

This is supported with Central government policy, which seeks to achieve prescribed minimum densities to ensure efficient land use when new dwellings are built.

The value of accurate data

collection and clear enforcement and delivery of national policies delivers a regionally consistent development pattern that can be effectively monitored. This monitoring, combined with an awareness of all the other issues, facilitates the management of land consumption in England.