

# No way to avoid building on green belt



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THE NEW Conservative Government has placed rectifying our current housing shortage at the top of its agenda. The party's manifesto promised 200,000 new starter homes and 275,000 additional affordable homes by 2020.

So far, so good. But it also contained a promise to protect the green belt. I'm afraid it is difficult to see how these two promises can be reconciled; where will we find sites for all this new housing without building on green belt land?

The Queen's Speech referred to the promotion of a Housing Bill to introduce a register of brownfield land. It would also require local authorities to have Local Development Orders (automatic grants of planning permission for specified development) in place on more than 90 per cent of said brownfield sites deemed suitable for new homes by 2020.

But local authorities throughout our region have been promoting policies for developing suitable brownfield sites for years – where are all these new brownfield sites going to come from?

There's no way to hit targets without developing the green belt. Leeds – ahead of the game – adopted a development plan last year which, while promoting brownfield development first, recognises the need to take land out of the green belt for new homes.

A further document showing sites where Leeds propose the housing should go will be published for consultation later

this year and guess what? Some housing sites will be in the green belt.

To be fair, our previous government agreed to alternative new housing measures, including allowing offices and other buildings to convert to homes without planning permission.

But these measures expire in less than a year and so far, there's no extension planned. And even if we get one, we're still going to need green belt land if there's to be any chance of meeting new homes targets.

The Government also promised local people they would have more control over planning.

In the Queen's Speech, the Housing Bill was identified as a mechanism "to simplify and speed up the neighbourhood planning system to support communities that seek to meet local housing and other development needs through neighbourhood planning".

But I see conflict brewing between the aims of building a high number of houses and further empowering local residents to control development through neighbourhood plans. In Leeds over 20 Neighbourhood Plan Areas have already been designated, with a further 20 or so emerging.

It's a reasonable assumption that the majority of residents in these Neighbourhood Areas may wish to resist housing on green belt land near them.

The Government hopes that by providing for communities that draw up neighbourhood plans to receive 25 per cent of the planning levy charged on new developments in their area, some will be encouraged to accept some new housing.

The Queen's Speech also introduced a Cities and Local Government Devolution Bill, proposing powers over housing, transport and planning be transferred from central Government to England's cities.

It is already happening in Greater Manchester and might well happen here – moving towards the creation of a "Northern Powerhouse".



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All well and good, and it might lead to better planning of bigger strategic developments such as roads, other infrastructure and large housing sites, but it still won't resolve the housing in the green belt issue.

The answer may lie in accepting that if we are going to build the numbers of houses proposed, we have to take land out of the green belt. By all means let's revisit our brownfield sites and see if any more can be developed for housing (the proposed brownfield register will help with this), but ultimately we need a sensible debate about which bits of the green belt can be released to provide the housing we so desperately need.

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