

Campaign to Protect Rural England



West Midlands Region

Housing Density - can we get more homes
without sacrificing the countryside?



A Discussion Document
May 2005

Housing Density In The West Midlands

Background

Land in the West Midlands is a scarce resource and there are many competing demands for its use. Planners and developers need to ensure that land needed for housing is used efficiently, provided this is compatible with the overall character and environment of the area concerned and meets the needs of potential occupiers.

CPRE West Midlands has argued strongly that increasing the density of the development is needed to achieve this and has called for strong action to ensure space is not wasted. This paper sets out how we believe that can be achieved while preserving the quality of the residential environment and providing appropriate levels of open space, car parking and access to facilities, such as shops and public transport.

At the same time the publication of the Regional Spatial Strategy for the West Midlands has brought this issue into sharper relief. A major effort is being made to reduce and eventually eliminate the leeching out of population from the major urban areas into the rest of the region by concentrating housing development in the major urban areas. We strongly support this policy, but we do not underestimate the task of achieving it. Reversing the long-standing trend towards out-migration means not only raising the quality of the urban environment but also using land more efficiently to make the most of what is available. These two requirements need not conflict with one another.

Where Are We Now?

Overall, there has been a considerable reduction in average residential densities over the past 100–150 years. Some argue that this has been a good thing because it has contributed to increased space standards in homes and gardens, greater privacy and better landscaping, and has allowed higher car ownership, but there have also been many negative

impacts such as the growth in traffic congestion with higher car use, the loss of countryside and in some areas greater isolation from neighbours, loss of ‘community’ and reduced accessibility to schools, shops and social facilities.

Wasteful development of land for housing, and under-occupation of housing once it is built, means that more land in total has to be developed to accommodate the same population. The Government has placed stronger emphasis on developing previously developed sites in preference to green field sites and has set a demanding target of 76% of new housing on previously developed land for the West Midlands. However, because previously developed land will normally be used first, most of the ‘extra’ land which will fall to be developed if

Typical Average Densities for Different Types of Dwelling	
Type of Dwelling	Typical Densities (net dwellings per hectare)
Back-to-Back Nineteenth Century Terraces	150
Pre-1919 Terraces	80 - 100
Post-World War 1 Inner City Redevelopment	75 - 100
Central London Average (Present Day)	78
Traditional Cornish fishing villages	60
Tunnel-Back, Middle Ring, Bye-Law Housing	50 - 75
Suburban development with detached and linked housing and low parking provision	50 - 80
Victorian villas with gardens	40
Semi-Detached with Modest Gardens	30
Recent Suburban Residential	25 - 28
Current National Average for New Development	27
Bournville Village, Birmingham	15

densities remain low is likely to be green field - often outside existing settlements.

Because the average household size in the West Midlands continues to fall we are having to build extra dwellings to house the existing level of population – the planning equivalent of running to stand still – before we accommodate any increase in population. The Regional Spatial Strategy proposes that just over 300,000 dwellings should be built over the next 20 years, of which about 180,000 would be for households formed from the current

population. A further 60,000 would replace demolished dwellings. If we are to cater for these houses without using more land we will have to build at higher densities than at present.

Arguments in Favour of Higher Densities

Increasing densities is not just a matter of using scarce land more efficiently. Higher densities are often essential to make public transport commercially viable and justify the introduction of a new route or a major upgrade of an existing one. In Birmingham, for example, the frequent rail services on the Cross City Line are only possible because of the relatively high housing densities in that corridor. In 'Towards an Urban Renaissance' the Urban Task Force suggest an efficient, commercially viable bus service needs a density of 40 to 60 dwellings per hectare (roughly equivalent to 100 people per hectare) similar to the figure they suggest is needed to promote communal facilities.

Raising densities also helps to achieve compact rather than dispersed towns and cities, which in turn reduces journey lengths and increases access to employment, shops and social and recreational facilities by foot, cycle or public transport.

Higher density housing is usually associated with better opportunities for social contact and the development of strong neighbourhoods. Successful 'urban villages' such as Bordesley in Birmingham tend to be built at relatively high densities, and similar principles may apply in smaller settlements where compact, relatively high density towns and villages often have a strong sense of community. Higher density development also tends to promote higher standards of safety and security. With other dwellings within sight and easy earshot, crime becomes more risky and help more readily at hand.

Higher densities help to maintain a customer base for local shops and other facilities and services which give vitality to the areas they serve. More people are within walking distance of the facilities, which become places to meet friends and neighbours as well as to use the services they provide. In a village in particular, this can make the difference between the retention or loss of key services.

Arguments against Raising Densities

The most often heard argument against raising densities is that it may involve 'town cramming'. This seems to ignore evidence from Georgian and Regency towns such as Bath and Leamington Spa

where high densities are often associated with high housing standards and high quality living environments, with high prices to boot. This does not mean that we should return to nineteenth century densities as the norm, although density should be a consideration in whether to retain older properties and may well be appropriate near town centres. An increase from the present average of 27 dph to an average of between 35 and 40 dph could be achieved over a relatively short timescale without conflict with other planning objectives, and in many cases circumstances are right for even higher densities.

Not all new housing should be built at the same density. There will still be a place for lower density housing, particularly in areas where the choice of house sizes and types is limited, but it should be balanced by higher density development in the same local authority area. There are countless examples, from Llewellyn Davies, Grimley and others, of high density housing which also provides a high quality residential and social environment.

Some of the finest traditional town and village scenery, acknowledged for its attractiveness and interest, exhibits high densities. From these historic examples, many of them in conservation areas, lessons in layout and building grouping can be learnt to achieve high densities without copying historic detailing or resorting to 'pastiche' architecture.

Some argue that higher densities will lead to loss of open space, but again the evidence suggests otherwise. Building at low densities, because it uses more land for the same result, adds to pressure on both amenity space and wildlife areas, especially in towns and cities. The relationship between the size of gardens and biodiversity is complex. Much will depend on how the garden is managed and maintained, with space often given over to 'hard' uses such as parking, as well as on its relationship to neighbouring gardens. Greater emphasis on communal space may provide more opportunity for habitat creation and retention.

There is a justified concern about the potential loss of character when large period suburban houses, particularly in mature suburbs, are replaced with flats and smaller houses, with the potential loss of urban heritage, mature trees and habitat rich gardens. In some areas this is a more significant issue than in others. Proposals in keeping with the area should be allowed to go ahead, but in other cases there will be strong grounds for refusal by local authorities.

Factors Affecting Housing Density

The **sizes and types of dwelling** are among the key factors affecting density. For instance a small flat typically has 80 square metres, whereas a larger executive house may have up to 350 square metres of floorspace. One of the best ways of achieving higher densities without sacrificing the quality of the residential environment is to match the supply of dwellings more accurately to identified housing needs, rather than leaving the market to provide unnecessarily large and expensive dwellings. In its January 2005 proposed changes to PPG3, the Government signals a move in this direction.

Average household size fell from 2.76 to 2.41 persons in the West Midlands between 1981 and 2001. In the 1999-Based Household Projections, it is predicted to fall still further to 2.23 in 2021, when there are expected to be 192,000 more one person households than in 2001, accounting for 92% of the expected growth in the number of households. Other things being equal, this should mean that a high proportion of new dwellings will take the form of flats, maisonettes and small houses. There may be a counter-trend of increasing demand for space, but this seems unlikely to be sufficient to compensate for the demographic trend described above. Demand is heavily influenced by supply, so that if houses with ample space are built, people will buy them.

It is surprising that little attention has been paid in monitoring dwelling completions to the types of dwelling built. No information on this is provided in annual monitoring reports on the Regional Spatial Strategy. We understand that the number of flats being built as a proportion of all dwellings has doubled in three years and the number of detached houses has halved, but these are national figures and do not necessarily represent the regional picture.

The **size of the garden or grounds** is another key factor. Only a small proportion of new dwellings occupy large grounds, but in an estate or other large housing development, garden size can have a major impact on overall housing density. Ten large gardens can occupy the same area as twenty or thirty small ones. Not all front gardens are well used and they may add little to, or even detract from, the street scene. Detailed design can provide ample privacy with reduced housing setbacks which have many attractive precedents in both villages and towns. At

the rear, 40sqm patio provision, as opposed to much larger gardens, may be sufficient for many occupiers as long as privacy and sunlighting is maintained. This is not to suggest that large gardens should be avoided at all costs; merely that there is a danger of providing gardens which are larger than is necessary.

In the past, land was sometimes wasted in housing developments which appeared to be 'high density'. The 1960s tower blocks occupied a great deal of land because of the large areas of (often poorly designed, landscaped and maintained) communal open space provided. These days, blocks of flats and purpose built homes vary greatly in the area of grounds provided, often partly as a response to the size of site available.

In general housing in the UK has been built with more generously sized gardens or grounds than their continental counterparts, even though the UK is among the most densely populated countries in Europe. In cities such as Barcelona flats with balconies which serve as gardens are common, and suburban dwellings often have small gardens or courtyards. We should not assume that the current pattern of UK demand will remain unchanged. UK demand for large gardens or grounds is likely to decline with the increase in single households and of couples who both work. Given the shortage of land suitable for development it seems logical for local planning authorities to move in this direction in their policies, design guidance and decisions on individual developments. There will remain a large stock of houses with large gardens in Britain. Provided this older stock is appropriately protected, there should be no pressing need for more low density developments.

The quantity and nature of **landscaping** can also have a major effect on density. PPG3 makes clear that open space serving a wider area and significant landscape buffer strips should be excluded from the definition of net density, but most landscaping within an estate or other housing development will qualify. While landscaping will usually make an important, often essential, contribution to the environmental quality and character of the development, and to its relationship with its surroundings, this does not necessarily mean that large tracts of land will be needed for this purpose. Over-expansive landscaping may detract from the community character of the development and make it feel isolated from its surroundings, quite apart from its wasteful use of land.

Net density includes **access roads within the site and car parking areas**, and these can often be among the most significant users of land, reducing the area available for private and public open space. Because they carry less traffic, access roads do not need to be designed to the same technical standards (for example in relation to width, curvature and visibility splays) as distributor roads. Unnecessarily high standards are sometimes applied, reducing the number of dwellings which can be accommodated and encouraging car dominance and aggressive driving. There is evidence of over-engineering in footpath provision, carriageway widths and turning spaces. Wider adoption of 20mph home zones could allow a reduction in road space, land take and an improvement in the quality of layout.

Car parking is a still more significant issue. Each of the region's 2.6 million cars requires about 120 - 150 square feet of space when parked, and much of the parking space required is at or close to the home. At a conservative estimate, parked cars account for 3,000 hectares of land in the region's residential areas.

As PPG3 points out, local planning authorities have applied increasingly demanding minimum car parking standards, driving up the space requirement and encouraging higher car ownership and use. The PPG calls for maximum standards, with no more than 1.5 off-street parking spaces per dwelling on average, a figure which apparently includes both garages and hard standing. In some locations, such as near town centres, there is little need for parking spaces because facilities and jobs can be reached on foot, and a significant number of residents do not have cars.

There is a suspicion that some planning authorities in the region are providing parking above the standard set in PPG3, thereby increasing the overall density of development. Concern is sometimes expressed that reducing the level of off-street parking will encourage more parking on-street. This is often an unfounded fear, and anyway more on-street parking is not necessarily something to avoid at all costs. It can, for example, reduce traffic speeds in some circumstances.

Moves towards higher densities on new estates have often been unsuccessful because developers have tried to graft higher densities onto traditional layouts, with the resulting appearance of over-crowding. New designs such as three-storey houses and corner

blocks of flats have begun to be introduced, but in traditional estates they may result in overlooking and domination of other properties. Therefore more radical and imaginative approaches are likely to be needed.

The Current Picture in the West Midlands

PPG3 calls for local authorities to:

- *avoid developments of less than 30 dwellings per hectare net* which make inefficient use of land;*
- *encourage developments of between 30 and 50 dwellings per hectare net which make more efficient use of land; and*
- *seek greater intensity of development (i.e. by implication above 50 dph) at places with good public transport accessibility.*

* It is important to be clear about the difference between net and gross housing densities. Gross densities include neighbourhood facilities such as open space, shops, public buildings and main roads. They are typically about a third lower than net densities in suburban areas and half lower in central areas. There is scope for more efficient use of land in this wider sense – for example by shared use of facilities and playing fields and sharing of parking space.

Recent monitoring information shows that most West Midlands local authorities are falling well short of achieving this policy. With each authority given equal weight, the average density of new dwelling completions achieved in 2001/2 was 25 dph (similar to the national average), rising to 27 dph in 2002/3. In general the seven metropolitan boroughs are building at higher densities than in the rest of the region, with figures in the forties in Birmingham and Wolverhampton and the low / mid-thirties in the rest of the metropolitan area. No average densities of 40 or above are achieved outside the metropolitan area, but Nuneaton and Bedworth, Warwick, Bromsgrove and Worcester all reached the mid-thirties in at least one of the two years.

At the other end of the scale there are densities of below 20 dph in Rugby, Malvern Hills, Wychavon, Bridgnorth, North Shropshire, Oswestry, South Shropshire, Herefordshire and East Staffordshire. Malvern Hills takes the wooden spoon with densities

of 8-10 dph. Some of these local authorities are substantially rural and it may be easier to achieve higher densities in cities and large towns, but this does not excuse average densities of well below 20 dph.

Monitoring information for 2003/4 indicates that for the region as a whole, about 75% of housing completions were at densities of over 30 dwellings per hectare. In the major urban areas, this figure rose to 86%, whereas it dropped well below the average in the more rural areas of Herefordshire and Shropshire.

Given the in-built inertia in the planning system, it may be too soon to see the full results of the PPG3 density policy on the ground. A separate table in the December 2003 monitoring report gives the assumed average density of housing commitments (in five separate categories) at April 2003. Information is particularly patchy here and may be speculative, but it suggests that the policy may have more effect in the future, with 14 authorities expecting increases in density and only 7 expecting decreases. Nevertheless the unweighted average creeps up to only 28 dph, and 16 of the 22 authorities remain stubbornly below the government's minimum figure of 30 dph. There is clearly still a great deal of work to be done.

What Densities Can We Achieve in the West Midlands?

We have set out above a number of ways in which higher densities could be achieved in new housing development without the loss of environmental quality or overall attractiveness. This needs to be done sensitively, selectively and with imagination. Arbitrary or mechanical standards of density or layout are not appropriate.

It is impossible to proscribe appropriate densities for each part of the region over the next twenty years. This is a matter for each local authority to propose in its local development framework. However, in its objections to the submitted version of Regional Planning Guidance, CPRE West Midlands suggested the following average density ranges for three main types of area:

Major Urban Areas	-	40–50 dph (net)
Other Urban Areas	-	35-45 dph (net)
Rural Areas	-	30–40 dph (net)

We consider these to be relatively modest proposals: it may be possible in practice to do even better. The use of overlapping ranges, all falling within the PPG3 target range, provides considerable flexibility for local authorities to reach their own conclusions on appropriate densities. These averages apply to the whole of a district, and considerable variation would be expected around the average figure to reflect different types of area within the district.

Two authorities – Birmingham and Wolverhampton – are already meeting the densities we propose, but others would need to raise densities, in some cases very considerably. Overall, it should be possible to raise the average density across the region from its present level of 27 dph to between 35 and 40dph, if not more. **At current Regional Spatial Strategy rates, this would save between 2,600 and 3,700 hectares of land from development** over a twenty year period.

There is no doubt that this can be done. Although originally built on Green Belt land to which we objected, the Dickens Heath development in Solihull has achieved reasonably good standards of design and environmental quality at a gross density of some 39 dwellings per hectare. Housing on the Great Barr Hospital site will achieve densities of at least 30dph. In the Lyng Regeneration Project in Sandwell, densities of 70 – 80dph are likely to be achieved in a mixed development of social and owner occupied housing. The G V A Grimley Report included case-studies of a number of sites to show that PPG3 densities and high quality design were compatible.

Conclusions

A significant increase in housing densities from recent unprecedentedly low levels should be possible, but the approach must be sensitive to a wide range of factors, including the nature of the area, the size of the site and the types and sizes of dwellings proposed. An overall average of at least 35 dph net can easily be achieved without detriment to the environment and character of the region, while still allowing for a wide range of densities between areas and individual sites around the average. This should be done in conjunction with suitable policies to protect the mature suburbs of our cities and towns from redevelopment in ways which damage their character.

Much higher densities will often be possible in particular circumstances and for particular types of

new housing. To achieve this goal we would like to see:

- *planners take much more interest in the sizes and types of dwelling provided in particular parts of the region with a view to seeking higher average housing densities. These factors need to be picked up in regional and local monitoring, and in the policies in the Regional Spatial Strategy and local development frameworks. The late January announcement of proposed changes to PPG3 encourages this approach.*
- *particular attention paid to the issue of off-street parking. Local authorities and the Regional Assembly should monitor the extent to which the PPG3 policy is being met, and take action where it is not.*
- *particular district councils with consistently low housing densities over a period of not less than five years required by the Regional Assembly to explain why densities are so low.*
- *every available opportunity taken to demonstrate (with the aid of case-studies, preferably from the West Midlands) that increasing density can be compatible with improving the quality of the development. The housing mix we advocate should lead to the achievement of neighbourhoods and communities that match in attractiveness the best of traditional and historic towns and villages, both in the UK and abroad.*
- *density policy integrated with other policy goals rather than treated as an end in itself. We*

must continually emphasise the underlying reasons why raising densities is important, and the contribution it will make to achieving the spatial strategy for the West Midlands.

CPRE West Midlands
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