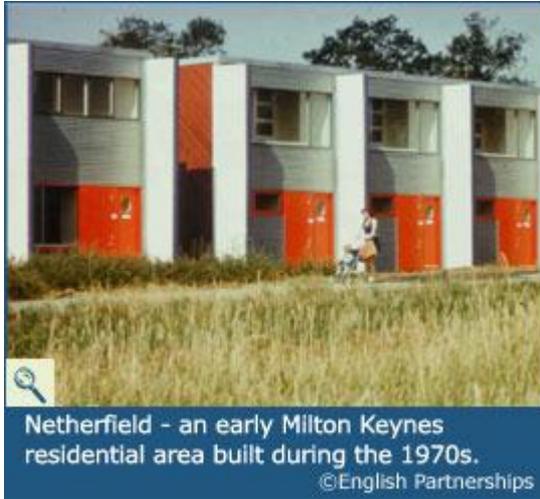


New towns for new times

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Plans for new housing in Britain are coming to a head after nearly eight years of robust debate.

The government last week revealed its intention to re-assume heavily centralised planning powers. In the same week that plans to expand the housing stock of Milton Keynes by 70,000 units were confirmed, Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott also announced that he will be stripping local councils of their power to block new building on **Greenfield** or conservation sites.

The need for new housing became apparent in 1996, when the then Secretary of State for the Environment, John Gummer, announced that lifestyle changes such as a rising divorce rates were leading to housing shortages as more single-person households were being created.

The White Paper entitled 'Where Will We Live?' proposed that 4.4 million new homes should be provided by 2016. At the time, debate centred upon whether **Greenfield** or **Brownfield** sites should be used. Speaking at a Town and Country Planning Association in November of that year, Gummer claimed categorically that 'I am not breaching the Green Belt'.

Goodbye Green Belt?

Gummer's government fell from power the following year, but subsequent initiatives by Labour appeared at first to uphold the '**Brownfield**' principle. For instance, proposals for 120,000 homes along the Thames announced last year make extensive use of abandoned industrial land in East London (Greenwich, Woolwich and Barking) and beyond in Thurrock and Canvey and Southend. It is vital to the success of large scale new housing developments that good transport and social infrastructure (schools and surgeries) are provided. To this end, the government expects that at least £1 billion worth of government subsidy will be required for the 'Thames Gateway' (as this region is known).

However, demand for new housing is spread throughout the country. The processes that drive demand – such as divorcing couples and an ageing population that are living longer, thereby restricting access to existing housing stock for the young – are present in all communities. Equally, since John Gummer's original announcement, meteoric rises in house prices have pushed them beyond the reach of many low income groups, including key public service workers such as nurses and newly-qualified teachers. Average house prices rose by 26.4% in 2002 and continued to rise by 15.4% last year (Financial Times, 07 January 2004).

New housing must now be provided in *all* regions, including green belt settlements, or else large-scale internal migrations will become inevitable in the UK, damaging the fabric of local communities and possibly stripping certain areas of their key workers if they can no longer afford to live there.

The announcement that Milton Keynes, currently surrounded by Green Belt and extensively landscaped, is to double in size over the next twenty years is symptomatic of a growing realisation that we cannot necessarily practise absolute



conservation of green areas while also providing adequate housing to maintain quality of life for local communities.

Much of the 70,000 new houses in Milton Keynes can be slotted in amongst the existing stock, due to the wide-street 'boulevard' style that was adopted by the original planners, giving the settlement over 4,000 acres of parkland (The Guardian, 06 January, 2004). However, it is expected that a further 1,800 hectares of countryside will also be needed. In order to ensure that the plan is driven forward, the government is using planning powers similar to those used to create new towns between 1946 and 1967 under the 1946 New Towns Act and the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act. This will allow a new partnership board or committee that will be responsible for the works to acquire land by compulsory purchase if necessary.

Challenging 'NIMBY' attitudes

It therefore appears that draconian measures must be taken if the 1996 targets are to be achieved. Much of this is against the spirit of 'local governance' that has arisen in recent decades, where local communities have often been able to block new development with the help of planning regulations. However, where applied excessively, the NIMBY ('not in my back yard') mentality of local councils and communities has become a real obstacle to the provision of much-needed new housing and jobs in many areas.

In a related policy development, John Prescott also announced last week that he will be allowing new industrial development in rural areas if it will allow diversification of struggling economies to be achieved (The Times, 05 January 2004). The right for rural councils to designate places with a special conservation status is to be scrapped. It is hoped this will allow more activities such as horse riding, breeding or livery facilities to be developed in addition to the housing their workers may require.

But don't forget about water!

All of these controversial plans – for Thames Gateway, Milton Keynes and rural areas in general – are sure to generate controversy over the months and years ahead. For instance, given the dual problems of alternating seasonal water shortages and flooding that the southeast is increasingly facing (See: "Drought? What drought?"), how will new housing exacerbate matters? Ashford – one of the growth areas in the southeast where 31,000 new homes are to be built by 2031 – is already at risk of flooding (New Statesman, 05 January 2004). With over 200,000 new homes now set to appear in Milton Keynes and Thames Gateway, can water supplies cope?