

Green belt obsession is hampering us

'Time to overhaul planning laws'

HOUSING

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IT'S TIME to sweep away the current planning system, get rid of our obsession with the green belt and empower local authorities to get building the homes the city and the country needs for long term prosperity.

That's the view of Leeds City Council's housing boss Richard Lewis as new research today reveals that a decade after the recession, less than one in five areas of England are building enough homes every year at a pace to meet the Government's medium to long term housing need estimates.

Analysis of official data by the BBC's Shared Data Unit found that the majority of areas have still not got back to supplying new homes at the same rates they were before the economic crash.

It comes after the Government recently made a renewed pledge to build 300,000 new homes a year by 2020.

Although overall house-building rates have been going up nationally year on year since hitting a post recession low in 2012/13, the pace of supply is not

enough for the country's long term demands.

In England in 2016-17 - the last full year of data available for overall new homes supply rates (which includes new builds, conversions, changes of use and minus any demolitions) - 217,000 new homes were created. This was a five-year high, but still significantly short of the latest government target of 300,000 new homes a year.

One expert suggested the actual number of homes needed was 340,000 a year.

In Leeds, the housing crisis has been defined in recent years

by a row over a council target to build 70,000 new homes by 2028.

The new analysis showed the city has been building around 2,230 new dwellings a year over the past ten years, which works out at around 84 per cent of current government annual estimates to 2026, as laid out in its recent consultation as part of the 'Fixing the broken housing market' pledge.

In pure numbers, Leeds is building the third HIGHEST number of houses per year in the country outside London.

Despite this, the city still has the fourth highest long term annual need outside London according to Government estimates, and the second highest need in the whole country according to the city council's own assessments. The discrepancy between the two numbers (1,011) is also one of the biggest in the country.

Across Yorkshire, the picture is mixed.

According to the BBC analysis, two thirds of council areas in Yorkshire are failing to get home building rates back to pre-recession rates a decade after the financial crash.

Neighbour Wakefield is performing better than Leeds in terms of its percentage build rate versus Government target.



FIXING IT: Government says it can sort the broken housing market

THE GOVERNMENT says it is living up to its pledge to 'fix the broken housing market'.

A spokesman for the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government said 217,000 new homes were delivered in England last year. This was up 15 per cent on the previous year and the highest increase in nine years.

"We have also set out an

HOUSING TARGETS IN LEEDS AND WAKEFIELD



Against a Government figure of 1,033 homes per year, the city has a current build rate of 1,151 (111 per cent).

However the council's own estimate of needs is 1,524 homes a year.

Overall, twelve of 21 council areas in Yorkshire are currently building equal to or above Government annual assessment, as suggested in the formula.

But experts say that "messy"

planning policies and a "fetishisation" of the green belt are hampering the overall pace of building - and thereby slowing the economic growth potential of the region as a whole.

Across the country, experts say the UK faces a "national emergency" in housing of a scale not seen for 40 years.

Shadow housing Minister John Healey, MP for Wentworth and Dearne in South Yorkshire,

said the housing crisis was "a crisis of affordability". A report by the National Housing Federation last year found that average house prices in Yorkshire are SEVEN times average incomes.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?
What are the real causes of the housing crisis?

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'New build rates have reached a 9-year high'

ambitious programme of reforms to boost housing supply - including planning reform and targeted investment to help us deliver an additional 300,000 properties a year by the mid-2020s," a spokesperson said.

John Healey, shadow housing minister, said; "The housing crisis is getting worse.

"Over the last eight years, we have seen home ownership

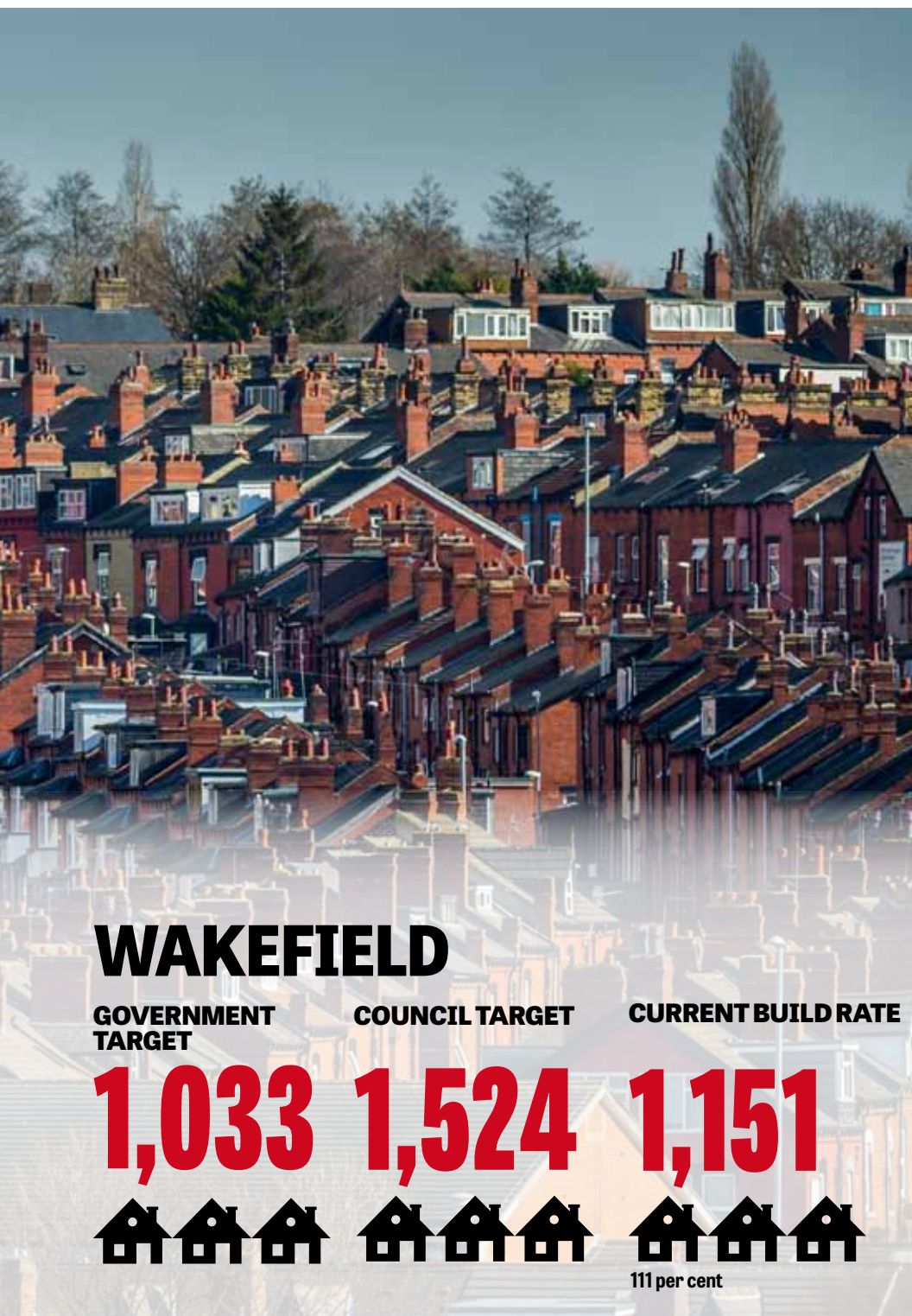
levels fall. We have seen the level of house building still not back at its pre-global financial crisis peak, and for many people, the housing crisis is a crisis of housing affordability.

"And whilst there are certainly failures at a local level, the main responsibility must lie with Government.

"When you have deep cuts in investment in new affordable homes, when you

have government weakening the powers of councils to drive a better bargain with big house builders, when you get a Government chopping and changing the planning rules as they have done in five separate acts of Parliament, you get a system which is failing."

COMMENT: See page 14 for one expert's view on housing in Leeds



OPPOSITION

City could be unrecognizable'

OPENING UP more green belt sites for development would risk changing Leeds beyond all recognition, a senior opposition councillor says.

Andrew Carter, leader of the Conservative group on Leeds City Council, called on the administration to "plan properly for where new housing should go, protect our green belt and green spaces, and build affordable homes of the right type in the right places". "Green belt is hugely important and valued by communities across the city. But once it's gone, it's gone for good," he said. "The effect of losing all those green belt sites would be to transform Leeds beyond recognition. In that context, it's right that we do all we can to protect it, particularly as the latest evidence says the city doesn't need the level of housing currently being proposed."

DEVELOPMENT

'Building on green land has helped triple size of Leeds over 80 years'

COUNCILLOR RICHARD Lewis, Leeds City Council's cabinet member for regeneration, transport and planning, believes the current planning system itself - and our "fetishisation" and "politicisation" of the green belt - are the biggest problems.

"I think we need to sweep away the current planning system and come up with something that is radically different that enables people to have a democratic input," he says. "Secondly, take away the cap on local authorities' borrowing. Enable them to build."

He also claims there is a clash between what ministers are telling council decision-makers in private and in public about targets.

"We do need to look at the world differently," he says. "We just get wrapped up in repeating an argument that's been going on ever since the green belt



RICHARD LEWIS: 'Suburban dream is self-defeating'

was introduced. Well, Leeds has built on so much green land - not green belt always - over the last 80 years, and Leeds has probably tripled the size that it was back then. We all buy into the lie that the green belt was ever intended to stop development. It wasn't. It was to control urban sprawl. It wasn't to control the building of new houses on greenfield sites."

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'A CRISIS OF CITIES'

Anthony Breach
Centre for Cities think tank

"The housing crisis only really make sense if you understand it from a city perspective. "It's not even just a big city problem. The number of people who want to live in these cities and experience that growth is very high but supply of housing has completely failed to keep up with that. The national housing target of 300,000 homes a year sometimes obscures the problems in our cities. How do you supply enough housing to support economic growth?"



'SME BUILDERS VITAL'

Andrew Dixon
Federation of Master Builders

Andrew Dixon believes that the small sites and SME builders are crucial to solving the crisis. "Back in the 1980s most of the new homes in the country were being built by companies who build less than 500 units a year," he says. "By last year that was down to 23 per cent. We are hopeful that we will begin to turn a corner and local authorities...are looking to see what they can do in terms of encouraging smaller scale builders or a more healthy, diverse mix of housing providers."



'NATIONAL EMERGENCY'

John Myers
London YIMBY (Yes In My Back Yard)

"We must put the politics aside, empower communities to build for themselves - and pull together as a nation to sort this mess. For 40 years, we haven't built enough in the right places. The planning system is a mess right now. This is a national emergency. This should require a national effort on the scale of what we did after the Second World War. We just need to pull together as a nation because if we don't, this is just going to get worse and worse."

