

The wrong houses, built in the wrong places: what can solve the British housing crisis?

We don't build enough homes, yet the ones we do produce are blighting our countryside and not what buyers want – what's the solution?

By [Alex Preston](#) 2 June 2023 • 6:15pm



While many of us may applaud the building of houses in general, very few of us want them built nearby

Walking north from my home up the Sussex Border Way, or east along the Weald Landscape Trail, it's easy to see why this part of the world has been designated an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). I'm writing this in May, when the hawthorn is out, the verges dense with cuckoo flowers and cow parsley, swallows lacing the sky overhead.

The Weald is a place of ancient woodlands and rolling hills, slow-running rivers and hop gardens. When people think of England, this is the kind of landscape that comes to mind: fields and hedgerows, oast houses and rusticated barns, rose-clambered cottages and country pubs. It feels like a landscape worth protecting, something which, in theory, the AONB designation does.



Looking out over the Sussex Weald from the South Downs CREDIT: Alamy

There's a relatively new experience when you're walking in this part of the world, though. You might know it first from the signs by the side of the road: plangent messages asking the passer-by to help in preventing the latest housing development. A few of these campaigns appear to have been successful – a nearby village, Hawkhurst, has managed to push back against a 400-home development that would have ploughed up the (admittedly dilapidated) golf course.

More often, though, the signs are mere howls into the void – I remember the bathetic sight of several Save Our Sissinghurst placards standing forlornly as the diggers rolled by. Now that site is home to one of the uglier developments in the area – a mish-mash of generic designs, inexplicable use of yellow brick, a smear of houses that would look equally unsightly whether in the Wealden AONB, the Wirral or the outskirts of London.

Tunbridge Wells, the local planning authority, is in a bind, though. Years of nationwide underinvestment in housing stock have led to a situation in which the default response from planners to new development has to be to grant permission. Or, as Peta Grant, head of planning at the Weald of Kent Preservation Society (WKPS) puts it to me: “Councils are required to demonstrate a five-year housing land supply. Tunbridge Wells doesn't have that. And 70 per cent of its land is within the AONB. So, as a result of that, it kind of can't make any other decision than to approve these applications. Because if they refuse it, invariably, the applicant will go to appeal, and it will be granted on appeal.”



Tunbridge Wells, where planning permission is by default given to most new developments CREDIT: Alamy

When I moved to the Kent/Sussex border seven years ago, I hadn't realised that I'd be stepping into a tense psychodrama in which a full cast of grubbily avaricious landowners, shabby developers and hypertensile NIMBYists would play their roles. I remember the sight of a friend and neighbour white with rage at a parish council meeting as the latest carbuncular development of 150 homes in our small and already poorly resourced village was discussed. Housing has become an issue of huge and central importance to the people of the Weald, destroying friendships, estranging neighbour from neighbour and dominating the time and resources of parish and local councils.

It's not just the Weald: from the Norfolk Broads to Cumbria, from Devon to Oxfordshire, the debate around whether and where to build has reached boiling point. Housing policy has become one of the key battlegrounds in the ongoing civil war within the Conservatives, with the centre of the party championing house building as a way of winning back younger voters while traditionalists complain about betraying their heartland from the back benches.

One under-reported aspect of last month's local election results is the manner in which the Liberal Democrats have adopted the traditionally Tory role as champions of NIMBYism – and won big as a result. It's no surprise that Tunbridge Wells – once a Tory stronghold – is now a No Overall Control mish-mash of Lib Dems and Independent councillors. All this feels like a peculiarly British problem: one that arises from the fetishisation of home ownership, deep-held and atavistic impulses about our homes being castles, and a genuine wish to preserve what is unique about our glorious countryside.

The latest chapter in the long-running saga of house building in the Weald surrounds a development two villages away from me, in Cranbrook. It's a story that enacts in microcosm the complexities and contradictions of planning in the country more

broadly. Cranbrook is a pretty market town, home to a bustling red-brick high street, an ancient and well-regarded grammar school and an iconic windmill.

Cranbrook is also symptomatic of a blight that has fallen on larger villages and smaller towns in the area: the sudden arrival of developments that look near-identical, off-the-peg new-build agglomerations of dozens of homes that seep from the town's historic centre into the surrounding countryside, dramatically and irrevocably altering the character of the place. The Weald is being leeched of its charismatic quiddity, development by development, and it doesn't seem as if there's anything anyone can do about it.

One such development, at Turnden, on the outskirts of Cranbrook, has just been turned down by housing secretary Michael Gove on the grounds that the 165 "generic" houses proposed by Berkeley Homes "did not reflect the expectations of the local design code." This refusal of permission by the Secretary of State – after Tunbridge Wells had green-lit the application and a subsequent Public Inquiry also approved it – was heralded as a victory for locals tired of seeing application after application waved through.

The Turnden decision does raise questions, though. Grant tells me she's baffled as to why the proposal was refused. "Why Gove should turn down this one and not others makes no sense to me. I mean we're delighted as it was a huge development but what about all the other sites that just get blanket approval? Why didn't they turn down Brick Kiln Farm, which is just a little bit further down the same road and will be 180 homes of a very similar design? Just as ugly."



Cranbrook, which has had a new development on its outskirts CREDIT: Alamy

She points me to Hawkhurst, whose character has been terminally altered by over-development. "It's just rammed with new-building," she says. "And it's in the AONB

but that just doesn't seem to be taken into account." Tunbridge Wells turned down an application by Dandara Homes for a 75-house development in Hawkhurst based on its impact on the AONB. The decision went to appeal, and Dandara was granted permission to build. "It's a terrible development, it really is," Grant tells me. "Aesthetically and environmentally, it could hardly be worse."

One of the people closely involved with the campaign against Berkeley Homes' Turnden development was Vicky Ellis, General Manager of the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE) in Kent. "We started off by focusing on the AONB angle," she told me. "I mean you shouldn't be building on AONB land except in exceptional circumstances. But in this particular case, the reasoning was more about the overflow of light pollution into the AONB, the recreational damage that would occur around it."

I asked Ellis – as I asked pretty much everyone I spoke to for this piece – how she negotiated what seems an almost impossibly intractable problem: how to balance the need to build homes at a time when it feels like a whole generation risk being priced out of the housing market forever, with the need to preserve our countryside.

"I would look very closely at what kind of demand is driving the houses that are being built and as a result what type of houses are being built," she told me. "There's a big difference between housing need and demand. There will always be a demand for housing because there will always be people who invest in properties to rent out. But housing need is something else completely different. Certain types of housing – whether it's truly affordable or social housing – those are the types of housing that are in need. And that's not at all what was proposed for this development, or indeed for most of the developments in this area."

That we are in a housing crisis perhaps goes without saying. But here are a few numbers to back that statement up. Today's young people are less likely to be homeowners than any generation since the 1930s – home ownership for 25 to 34-year-olds has fallen from 70 per cent in the mid-1990s to 40 per cent now. UK house prices have risen more than 400 per cent in inflation-adjusted terms since 1970, compared with 180 per cent in France and 40 per cent in Germany.

The house price-to-earnings ratio nationwide stands at almost 6x (against a long-term average of 3.9x), while this figure rises to more than 13x for London as a whole and almost 35x in some of the capital's pricier boroughs. Since 2000, the population of the UK has risen by almost 10 million and yet we are building fewer homes than ever. There were just 1.1 million homes built in the 2010s, down from 3.6 million in the 1960s.

While many of us may applaud the building of houses in general, very few of us want them built nearby. We are a nation of NIMBYists and Rishi Sunak has recognised that he placates both Conservative backbenchers and his traditional heartland by accusing Labour of wanting to "concrete over the greenbelt" with their house-building plans. And yet Sunak must realise that reverting to Tory type will not be enough to win him the next election. Solving the housing crisis might still move the needle, though.

In his book Home Truths: the UK's Chronic Housing Shortage, Liam Halligan situates housing as the central political issue of the age. "Millions of hard-working

people denied the security and stability of home ownership” are turning their anger on the institutions that have been complicit in denying them their dreams. The housing crisis, he argues, is one of the key elements responsible for the “significant radicalisation” of a demographic cohort that would once have been firmly in the political centre ground.

I ask Halligan what steps he’d take if he were housing secretary. “In my book I did an interview with Vince Cable in which he says that no one who is serious about solving this problem must treat the green belt as sacred. A lot of it is just scrub.” The green belt as a concept emerged in the UK in the wake of the First World War – there was a recognition that industrial towns had been permitted to bleed into one another in places like Birmingham and Manchester and that buffer zones of countryside were needed to preserve the character of the nation’s landscape.

The term is a kind of shibboleth in British politics – who doesn’t want to be seen to be protecting the noble green belt? But, as Halligan points out, the green belt has more than doubled in size in the last 40 years and now makes up 13 per cent of the country’s land usage compared with just 2 per cent for all residential buildings and their gardens. Whether it’s golf courses or otherwise unremarkable fields, the green belt needs to be part of the conversation when it comes to house building. Halligan’s most strident calls, though, are for a wholesale change to the way the land market works. In other countries, from Germany to Singapore to Australia, local councils participate in a share of the proceeds from any land sold, often receiving as much as 50 per cent of the profits. This money is then reinvested into the local community, meaning that, while landowners are still rewarded for their investments, the area surrounding the new development also benefits.

It feels like an obvious move, but Halligan doesn’t believe that the country is ready for it yet. “Sajid Javid was behind the whole 50/50 split idea,” Halligan tells me, “and I think it’s where you eventually need to end up, but I’d start with something simpler. The planning system in this country is broken. It’s slow and it’s bureaucratic and it requires expertise to navigate. That’s why the big guys get all the planning permissions.”

It’s what the big housebuilders, whom Michael Gove has described as “a cartel,” do with the planning permissions once they have them that is exacerbating an already critical situation. “They sit on these permissions,” Halligan tells me. “There are over a million planning permissions that have been granted that haven’t yet been built out. In London 40 per cent of planning permissions that are granted are never used. The problem is getting planning permissions in the hands of people who are incentivised to build out quickly. We need small builders, nimble builders, builders who are actually going to build what they say they will.”

The big housebuilders – Barrett, Persimmon, Bellway, Taylor Wimpey and Berkeley are the largest – have an interest in house prices staying high. Drip-feeding properties onto the market in numbers that do not meet demand means that they will be able to continue to charge elevated prices, whereas building at anything near the government’s target of 300,000 homes a year (or, indeed, the almost half a million homes that we need each year in order to address the housing crisis in the next quarter century) – if it were even logistically possible – would act to depress prices and dampen their profits.

Halligan's solution for this perverse situation is to impose time limits on planning permissions, so they are not just a permission to build but an obligation to build within a certain timeframe. As things currently stand, housebuilders are allowed merely to roll over permissions after two years, or to demonstrate that they've begun work on the project – “a spade in the ground”, as Halligan puts it. “So I would have it that if you get a planning permission and it's not ready for sale within two years, then you immediately start paying council tax on those units. Even if they're not built and ready for sale. And that will incentivise big builders to build because you can't live in a planning permission.”

Many of the housing developments near me are so new that they only exist as plans, or in the form of hi-vis vests and diggers in the fields around the village. I want to speak to someone who lives in one of these developments, though, so I pay a visit to the nearest completed development to my house: Birchfield in Hawkhurst. It's a beautiful day – blackcaps trilling in the trees, the sun coming down through the stately oak in the centre of the development. There are 26 houses here – 17 in private ownership and nine affordable homes. The first door I knock on is answered by a couple, Norman and Ruth McChesney.

Their story is worth telling at length because it is emblematic of the speculative frenzy that the UK housing system has worked itself into. Norman and Ruth – who are in their 60s and, by the way, are delightful – bought their home in 2019, downsizing from a larger property in the village where they'd lived for more than 20 years. Their home on the Birchfield estate is a handsome four-bed red-brick building, a house that looks much like those elsewhere in the village. “It's a lovely property,” Ruth tells me. “A lovely development with houses built to a high standard. We're very happy here. The mix of families and affordable housing works very well.”



Norman and Ruth McChesney in front of their new-build house in Hawkhurst CREDIT: Andrew Hasson for The Telegraph

Affordable housing is a complex area. Toby Lloyd, a housing policy consultant and former advisor to Theresa May, outlines for me the evolution of the term. “When I worked for Shelter,” he tells me, “I used to give new joiners a horribly complicated graphic showing the various different meanings of affordability.”

Essentially affordable housing as a concept was intended to step into the breach left by the decline of social housing in the Thatcher years. Now the term covers a host of projects like shared ownership and Help to Buy, neither of which, in Lloyd’s view, addresses the heart of the problem. “You’re treating a supply-side problem with demand-side solutions,” he says. What’s more, developers now more often than not roll back on their commitments to provide affordable housing in the developments they build. In an environment desperate for more houses of any kind to fulfil quotas, they tend to get away with it.

Riverdale, the builder of the Birchfield Estate, kept to its word, though, and the first houses you come to as you turn off the main Rye Road are a mixture of smaller homes and apartments. These smaller, one- and two-bed dwellings are either rental properties or shared ownership. A two-bed semi sold for £167,500 when the estate opened in 2019. As you get further into the estate, the homes get larger and grander, a mixture of four- and five-bed homes ranging in price – again this was 2019 – from £600,000 to £850,000.

Ruth McChesney tells me of a conversation she had with the estate agents when they first moved in. “They were surprised at how many widows and older couples were buying. They had expected families. But what young family could afford to live here? We need smaller units that young local people and downsizers can afford.”



Toby Lloyd: ‘You’re treating a supply-side problem with demand-side solutions’.

One of the things you get used to living in this part of the world is the various ploys by which landowners, often in collusion with housebuilders and “land promotion” firms specialising in gaming planning laws, seek to get developments approved.

There are livestock-less ghost farms built only so that they can have farmhouses constructed nearby; caravan parks whose caravans become ever more permanent-looking; log cabins built in woodlands whose presence is then used to justify further building. The McChesneys and their neighbours feel they have been subject to a particularly cruel trick.

Standing at the end of the quiet cul-de-sac outside their home, you look over a sloping field to the characteristic rolling woodland of the Weald. There are no houses in sight: the view looks much as it would have done 300 years ago, when the smugglers of the Hawkhurst Gang ruled over this area. Unfortunately, neither the McChesneys' solicitors, nor those of their neighbours, spotted a clause hidden deep within the legal documents when they purchased their home on the Birchfield estate.

It's a complicated story, but in essence Rydon Homes, a developer, sold the Birchfield plot to Riverdale but maintained an access route to the field beyond. Recently, Rydon has applied to build 70 houses and a medical centre in this field. What was once a quiet cul-de-sac will become a busy thoroughfare.

“It was skullduggery,” Norman tells me. “We feel that all the residents and their solicitors had been hoodwinked. We were legged over with regard to the access.” The Birchfield estate appears only to have been built in order to open up access to the larger site beyond – development breeds development and a village already groaning under too much traffic and too few facilities sees its population expand even further. Rydon Homes was contacted for comment.



A new development by Persimmon Homes and Taylor Wimpey CREDIT: Alamy

Perhaps the solution to our housing crisis lies with artificial intelligence. Euan Mills is CEO of Blocktype, a tech startup seeking to revolutionise the planning system. He previously worked as planning advisor to Boris Johnson when he was Mayor of

London. Mills believes that a rules-based planning system, administered and overseen by technology, is the only way to fix our broken housing model.

“The lack of consistency in planning decisions is astounding,” he tells me. “If that was to happen in the medical profession, doctors would be sued right, left and centre. There is very, very little consistency.” Mills believes that the ambiguity and complexity of planning laws have been deliberately designed for political ends. Politicians want to be able to direct housebuilding to suit the political needs of the day, so they create huge swathes of grey area.

“I don’t think we should be feeling sorry for the property developers,” Mills tells me, “but they are in this world of trying to desperately understand what they would be allowed to build on a plot of land. And it’s really hard, because there are so-called rules that are not rules; the policies are incredibly ambiguous.” Other countries have rules-based systems that give greater clarity to landowners, house builders and councils about what is acceptable from a planning perspective. It feels as if the UK has fashioned a system that gives us the worst of all possible worlds.

Housing is what logicians call a wicked problem: one so complex that any potential solution provides an equal number of new problems. I’m struck by something Lloyd says to me, though. “We need to get back to building communities,” he says. “Not developments, but communities.” I’ve cited a whole host of badly-planned developments here, but there are others – like Greenhithe in North Kent – which have been built with amenities and facilities that are life-enhancing. Lloyd believes that one answer to the current housing crisis is to look to the past.

“All the best developments have been properly planned with the long-term public good in mind,” he says. “It’s not rocket science. This is what the Victorian philanthropists did when they built Bournville and Saltire and all these model village-type places which are still very attractive today. We should be building new towns on that model but to do so you need to be able to acquire the land at a reasonable cost so that all the value is not sucked out before you’ve even started building.”



Bournville village CREDIT: Andrew Crowley for The Telegraph

Bournville seems a good place to end – a development that had something more than mere profit at its heart. Jonathan Coe’s wonderful latest novel, Bournville, is the story of that project over decades, the way good building shapes good lives. I speak to Coe about my time delving into the sorry mess of Britain’s broken housing system, and ask whether he agrees that Bournville might provide a kind of solution, a model for a series of new towns. “Some people might find the Cadbury family’s vision for Bournville paternalistic and outdated,” he tells me. “But nowadays, in an era of ever more ruthless capitalism, the conditions once offered to the factory workers at Cadbury seem truly enviable, and the village itself endures as a living monument to a more idealistic time.”

Meanwhile, the rampant building in the Weald goes on, with villages becoming towns and towns leaching into the countryside that once surrounded them. The wrong sort of houses are built in the wrong places; the young find themselves unable to live the kinds of lives their parents took for granted. The names of the estates – The Oaks, Beechwood, The Limes – seem like a guilty nod to the yes outstanding natural beauty that they are destroying.

It will take a brave government to act decisively to address the housing crisis – by, for instance, building new towns in carefully selected areas of the green belt. It feels, alas, as if political expediency will stand in the way of any lasting solution and we will end up in a lose-lose situation, with neither the housing we need, nor the countryside that we should cherish.