

# What are these Urban Capacity Studies?

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*Dr. Wendy Le-Las, Planning Consultant, describes the new arrangement that local councils might find themselves faced with in light of new legislation.*



When a new local plan looms on the horizon, finding space for new housing is always a vexed question. Readers should find that from now on their local authority should take a rather different approach from that adopted in previous years.

## THE NEW PPG3

*LPAs should follow a search sequence, starting with the use of previously developed land and buildings within urban areas identified by the Urban Capacity Study (UCS), then urban extensions, and finally new development around nodes in public transport corridors. Para.30"*

Can I hear audible sounds of relief from the many communities devoid of facilities or adequate public transport links to their local town? That proposal for 400 houses on a greenfield site on the periphery of such villages is dead in the water - or is it? At the Local Plan Inquiry that developer's strategy will be to attack the LPA's UCS in order to prove that it cannot accommodate all or most of their housing allocation within the urban areas, and that he is doing them a favour by putting forward this lovely greenfield site which can be made to appear "sustainable". Thus it is important for local councils to keep their LPA up to the mark: a bullet proof UCS can save much grief in the countryside.

Many countries and districts have had their studies done in the past, which can be drawn upon for information.



## TAPPING THE POTENTIAL

The DTLR consultation paper, *'Tapping the Potential'*, draws on the best practice from past studies, and sets out a methodology for assessing urban housing capacity. The studies, which are being initiated by local planning authorities nationwide, as part of their preparation for their district wide local plan or UDP, are likely to be far more comprehensive than anything which has been done before. It is not just a matter of looking for the odd brownfield site, all previously developed land should be considered: the government wants as much as possible to be sited on such land, not just housing. Local councils beware! Developers and LPAs are using the excuse that site X is all previously developed land when it does not conform to the official definition.

Above: Urban areas need to maximise space.

## PREVIOUSLY DEVELOPED LAND

Previously developed land is that which is or was occupied by a permanent structure (excluding agricultural or forestry buildings), and associated fixed surface infrastructure. The definition covers the curtilage of the development. Previously developed land may occur in both built up and rural setting. The definition includes defence buildings and land used for mineral extraction and waste disposal where provision for restorations has not made through development control procedures.

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The definition excludes all land and buildings that are currently in use for agriculture or forestry purposes, and land in built up areas which has not been developed previously (e.g. parks recreation grounds, and allotments...) Also excluded is land that was previously developed but where the remains of any structure or activity have blended into the landscape in the process of time (to the extent that it can reasonably considered as part of natural surroundings) and where there is a clear reason that could out-weigh the re-use of the site - such as its contribution to nature conservation - or it has subsequently been to put to an amenity use and cannot be regarded as requiring redevelopment. (ref:PPG 3 HOUSING Annex C)

Within the proper definition of previously developed land there are a number of different sources, which might make a contribution to housing land in your area:

- **Subdivision of Existing Housing:** Dividing larger properties into flats has potential in certain areas, but can there be problems such as amenity, car parking, the demand for family housing and the fact that the easiest conversions may have been done.
- **Flats over Shops:** Making the best use of the space over shops was an idea pioneered by the Civic Trust in the 1980s in "Living over the shop". Given that retail units tend to be in highly accessible locations they could be useful source of accomodation. Here again there could be problems - most of the space is used for office storage. That is, not to mention fire-escape regulations.
- **Empty Homes:** Clearly there are a number of good reasons why a given property might be empty, and clearly many of them are in private hands. The stock of empty homes usually amounts to 3.7% of the national average. However, in some areas the vacancy rate is much higher e.g. currently in Yorkshire. Studies suggest that where this is the case, it should influence the strategic housing allocation established though regional planning guidance.
- **Previously developed Vacant and Derelict Land and Buildings (Non-Housing):** In common parlance these are brownfield sites: for ease of reference they are divided into large(>4ha) and Small (<4ha). A National Land Use Database is being compiled in England to provide a complete, consistent and detailed geographical record of land-use. So far 345 LPAs have provided information about 30,000 sites throughout England. Many brownfield sites are already on the database.
- **Intensification of Existing Areas:** This is making more intensive use of land e.g. garage courts, large gardens and backlands. Clearly it depends on the character of the area as to wether potential exists.
- **Redevelopment of Existing Housing:** This has particular potential where redevelopment of an area is a possibility particularly if the housing is less than 30 per ha. as is now required by PPG3.
- **Development of Car Parks:** Car Parks can take up a considerable amount of land in highly accessible areas. Those that are badly laid out can be reorganised and the surplus land used for housing. Even those that are well planned can be decked over, and amenity improved for those in the vicinity.
- **The Conversion of Commercial Buildings:** Vacant offices and historic industrial buildings have proved to be a valuable source of housing in many towns and cities.
- **Existing Housing Allocations:** A capacity study gives the oppurtunity to revisit plans for areas already allocated for housing in local plans. Many developers are applying to intensify the number of houses on their sites in line with PPG3, but there is also the matter of car parking and general layout, which may yield yet more accomodation on a given site.
- **Land Allocated for Employment Uses:** This can be something of a political hot potato, particularly in areas of high unemployment. However hope can triumph over experience in terms of take-up: there is one LPA that had reserves for the nest 100 years! Housing or mixed-use development might be better suited to meet the needs of the existing community.
- **Vacant Land Not Previously Developed:** No this is not the town's only park or the village allotments, but rather just waste ground in built up areas: a clue maybe that it is shown on OS maps just as "white" land.

Perhaps local council ought to be thinking along these lines and play the part in the formulation of their LPAs urban capacity study?



Above: Pedestrian shopping areas could be affected by planning changes

## THE CALCULATION

Now for the difficult bit - calculating a realistic figure, to be defended under the fire of cross-examination at inquiry! Whilst one can understand that local councils have better things to do than get into the technicalities, it does help if you know the lingo when watching the battle of the big battalions. Having located potential sites, the £64,000 question is assessing quite how much housing can realistically come on stream from a given site within X years.

A key factor is density. Many of you will be aware that PPG3 has increased housing density to a minimum of 30 per ha. However it is not just a matter of multiplying the area potentially available by 30 - 50 per ha. Larger sites will need space for roads, open space, shops and even a school. Then there is the question of whether the site is in an urban, suburban or rural location. At the end of the day, density multipliers become more of an art than a science.

An alternative is the design led approach. Typical sites are selected and used to explore different density and parking scenarios. The design exercises evolve into a series of design templates for typical sites across the LPA area. When it comes to converting existing buildings for housing, such as sub-dividing offices and large houses, or the vacant space above shops, then yardsticks are used to estimate the likely housing yield from given type of conversion.

The results of all these studies will produce the "unconstrained" capacity: the total number of dwellings that would materialise if all the potential capacity were developed optimally. Even for the non-specialist, a moment's thought makes this an unlikely prospect. So the question is what percentage of the total yield is likely to come forward within a given time i.e. what is the discount rate? When making this judgement it is essential to take into account a whole variety of factors: complex ownership; the buoyancy or otherwise of the property; the objectives of PPG3 e.g. the new prominence given to Previously Used Land; infrastructure constraints; contaminated land; the guidance given in PPG25 on flooding; competing uses of higher commercial value; and the existence of conservation areas. The net result can be a substantial reduction in housing yield: the studies upon which "Tapping the Potential" was based often cut it down to 50%-60%. Thus it is likely that only half the potential number of houses would actually be constructed within, say, the next local plan period.

All this is providing fertile ground for argument between barristers and chartered surveyors at appeals and local plan inquiries up and down the land. However, the key question for local councils, who are suspicious that a greenfield site is being ear-marked for housing, is whether their LPA has undertaken an UCS: if not, why not and if so, is it bullet proof?

May I suggest you read both PPG3 Housing and "Tapping the Potential". Both documents are available from DTLR.

What are these urban studies?

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