

Losing landscape

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The need to build houses is putting pressure on Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, claims the Campaign to Protect Rural England. Emma Marrington reports on research that the charity commissioned into major housing applications

England's 34 [Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty \(AONBs\)](#) cover 15% of the country, are part of our landscape heritage and provide an important source of enjoyment and inspiration for millions of people. AONBs' primary purpose is to conserve and enhance natural beauty, but also to take account of the needs of rural industries and communities. Unlike national parks, however, which have their own planning authorities, decisions on development in AONBs are made by local authorities and planning inspectors.

Planning in AONBs

The [Campaign to Protect Rural England \(CPRE\)](#) commissioned independent consultants David Dixon, Neil Sinden and Tim Crabtree to analyse data supplied by construction data analysts Glenigan on major housing applications – that is, those of more than 10 units – in AONBs from 2012 to 2017. Their research revealed that there has been a dramatic increase in applications for major housing projects in AONBs in that time, with a corresponding leap in the number of units approved and the amount of land used. CPRE's summary report [Beauty betrayed](#) was published along with the detailed research late last year.

The research made several findings.

1. Since 2012, 15,485 housing units have been approved, with an increase of 82% from 2,396 units approved in 2012?13 to 4,369 in 2016?17. The average number of units per application approved in 2015?17 was 43.37, compared with 36.29 in the previous 3-year period.
2. Decisions are pending on a further 12,741 units. Based on the 2016?17 approval rate of 64%, this could mean another 8,154 units, resulting in 23,639 new approved housing units since 2012?13.
3. The amount of land approved for housing each year has increased at least fivefold since 2012, from 41.06ha in 2012?13 to 211.93ha in 2016?17, based on 190 applications – totalling 7,807 units – where site area was known.
4. The number of units approved on greenfield sites in the past 5 years is 6,580, or 42%, with a further 8,301, or 54%, approved on brownfield land; 604 units or 4% were also approved on a single mixed-use site.
5. In the past 5 years, applications for major housing schemes are up 105%, from 80 in 2012?13 to 164 in 2016?17. The amount of proposed units increased from 2,530 in 2012?13 to 6,633 in 2016?17.
6. Large-scale housing development is not uniformly distributed across the AONBs. Housing pressure – defined by the number of applications, approvals and housing units – is most intense in the South East and South West. Here, 8 AONB areas – Cotswolds, High Weald, Cornwall, North Wessex Downs, Dorset, Chilterns, Kent Downs and South Devon – accounted for 74% of housing applications and 79% of approved housing units from 2012?17. These areas have seen a significant increase in the average number of units built each year;

- in High Weald, an average of 311 units were approved each year during 2012?15, almost trebling to 895 from 2015 to 2017.
7. The Cotswolds and High Weald AONBs have the highest number of appeals, accounting for 42% of all cases between them, thus putting huge pressure on local authority and AONB resources.
 8. The number of appeals against decisions to reject major housing developments has grown. Government planning inspectors have refused a significant proportion of these ? with the trend growing as the [National Planning Policy Framework \(NPPF\)](#) has bedded in ? which suggests that many local authorities could take a stronger line on resisting housing developments in AONBs. In the past 5 years, the success rate for appeals has gone down from 71% in 2012?13 to 24% in 2016?17, meaning a total of 1,882 housing units have been approved on appeal.

CPRE analysis: lost land

Based on the data underpinning finding 3, above, 435ha of AONB land have been approved for housing in the past 5 years. However, this is a major underestimate of the total loss, as our researchers did not have access to site area information for another 200 schemes totalling 7,678 units. By using the housing densities of the schemes where site areas were known, we can extrapolate the overall land area approved for housing in the past 5 years. This calculation suggests that 792ha of AONB land has been approved for development since 2012.
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Housing that is community-led, including community land trusts, community self-build and affordable co-housing, has been shown to secure greater levels of local support at the planning stage, and also means landowners are more likely to bring forward appropriate sites and volunteers to help develop the projects. They are led by local people and include allocation policies that ensure all homes go to people with a local connection.

CPRE recommendations

CPRE wants the NPPF to set a presumption against proposals for large housing developments in AONBs: demand for housing or the lack of a 5-year supply should not be used to justify such schemes in these areas. The statutory duty of regard should also be integrated into the NPPF, making it the overriding factor in decision-making.

NPPF policies should be amended to state that new housing in AONBs must be affordable and relate to local needs unless the case is exceptional, such as regenerating brownfield sites on town or village boundaries. CPRE also believes the government?s [New Homes Bonus scheme](#) should be reformed for local authorities so that it no longer encourages large-scale housebuilding in AONBs. Annual statistics should be published on the rate of development and other change of land use in the areas, as is already the case for the green belt.

CPRE urges local authorities to develop specific policies in local plans that recognise the importance of their AONBs and uphold them in development management decisions. They should also make sure all AONB management plans are treated as material considerations and ensure they are given appropriate reference in local plans.

Councils should promote and support community-led housing processes as a means of meeting local housing needs in AONBs. The right balance can be struck by working with communities, not by building any housing at any cost.

Positive examples

South Devon AONB: South Hams District Council and Plymouth City Council are consulting on a joint local plan, setting out where potential development could take place in the South Devon AONB and how the area will change up to 2034, and they are looking to neighbourhood plans to identify a proportion of their housing allocation target.

Many of the neighbourhood planning groups in the AONB are responding directly to the growing pressures for housing allocations and the increase in speculative allocations prompted by the lack of an up-to-date 5-year housing supply. This is a positive community-led solution that allows people to protect what they value about their local environment while influencing the location and design of housing development.

Cornwall AONB: Over the past 20 years, Cornwall has faced significant development pressures, and has the highest number of properties with no usual resident. The level of ownership of second homes for holiday use or bought to let in Cornwall's AONB is considerably higher than the national average, making housing unaffordable for local people and displacing them into larger urban areas.

Given the scale of the target ? 47,000 new housing units are needed by 2030 ? there will be pressure on the AONB to allow some level of development. There is a role for housebuilding in the Cornwall AONB, but it needs to be small in scale, linked to local housing need and 100% affordable. This is being achieved through the work of [Cornwall Community Land Trust \(CLT\)](#) , which to date has completed 16 developments.

CLT projects include 1 at Rock, near Padstow, just outside of the AONB, where 12 self-build properties were developed in 2011. Other CLTs in Cornish AONBs have completed 6 properties at St Just in Roseland, 8 houses at Pendeen, 2 at Nancledra ? although a subsequent application to build further houses was refused due to the impact they would have on the AONB ? and 3 at Lizard. Many of the developments are on rural exception sites, that is, small plots dedicated in perpetuity to affordable housing that would not normally be used for such schemes.

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Further information

- This feature was taken from the [RICS Land journal](#) (June/July 2018)
- Related categories include: [Planning](#) , [Applications](#)

