

The great garden grab

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Prescott's rules allow more and more new homes to be built on green spaces

ONE-THIRD of new houses in some parts of Britain are being built on gardens as developers take advantage of John Prescott's planning rules to concrete over green spaces.

Campaigners are warning that 30,000 gardens a year are disappearing to make way for housing because Government regulations classify them as 'brownfield sites' - making them a priority for development.

They are urging MPs to back a Private Member's Bill during a Commons debate taking place today to reclassify gardens as greenfield land, to prevent what they claim will be a disastrous loss of open space for Britain's towns and cities.

Critics claim the loophole has

unleashed a wave of 'garden grabbing', where developers in search of quick profits buy up houses with gardens and knock down the building to make way for two or three, or more, homes crammed on to the same site.

Since Deputy Prime Minister Mr Prescott changed the regulations in 2000, the proportion of homes that have been built on land previously used as gardens has rocketed, and the average size of a garden plot is shrinking rapidly.

Latest figures show that across the UK one new home in five is now built on garden land, rising to 30 per cent in the South-East of England - almost double the figure of 16 per cent when Labour came to

power - and 25 per cent in the South-West.

The Government insists more than a million new homes are needed in Britain over the next decade. And with garden grabbing on the rise, campaigners fear that the scale of the loss of green space will accelerate disastrously.

Tory spokesman for communities Caroline Spelman, speaking ahead of today's Commons debate on the Bill - which has attracted support from MPs of all parties - said: 'Across the country there is growing concern about gardens disappearing under concrete, regardless of local opinion.'

'This is the effect of Labour's planning rules, which have put res-

idential gardens on a par with derelict factories and gasworks and triggered a wave of unpopular and unsustainable development.

'Too often gardens which are a rich source of biodiversity are concreted over to make way for high blocks of flats, when the real demand is for family homes with sufficient parking spaces and areas for children to play.'

Parliamentary rules mean the Bill will proceed only if it is adopted by the Government.

Backbenchers have condemned the existing planning regulations as a 'con', since the description of 'brownfield sites' usually conjures up images of disused factories or gasworks rather than cherished

lawns and flowerbeds. Local authorities which try to block such developments often find their hands are tied by Mr Prescott's rules, and that they lose when developers appeal.

Bob Sherman of Garden Organic - formerly the Henry Doubleday Research Association - which is backing the campaign, said: 'Plot sizes are getting smaller and, due to the way homes are being built, the space between dwellings is also decreasing.'

'Gardens are imperative for reducing stress. But if developers keep building on them, that fundamental channel of stress relief will disappear.'

'With modern life becoming more stressful, can Britain really afford to concrete over its gardens and green spaces?'

'Garden grabbing is silently suffocating green spaces across the UK - green spaces which are vital for our social, psychological and physical wellbeing.'

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