

a new nature blog

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Labour commits to building 200,000 new homes a year: Great: where?

Posted on [September 24, 2014](#)

At the Labour Conference both Hilary Benn, Shadow CLG Secretary, and Ed Miliband, both promised massive new house-building, up to 200,000 new homes a year by the end of the parliament.

Benn said " ... we will give communities, as Sir Michael Lyons' report will recommend, the powers they need to tackle land banking; put together the sites; get the design right; put in the infrastructure; and work with small and medium-size and large builders to build the homes that local people need where local people want.

And Conference, we'll work with councils so that they can build more council houses."

Ed Miliband in his very long speech yesterday committed Labour to build the houses the country needs, which is a fairly thin promise, but I understand this is due to the fact that the Lyons report has been delayed. He did promise to double the number of first time buyers getting a house. If this was double from now, it would mean a massive 60,000 first time buyers a year, as pointed out in [the guardian](#). There was no similar commitment to the actual number, or proportion, of new council or social housing in the 200,000 figure.

Going back to Benn's suggestions of giving communities the powers to "put in the infrastructure", I don't think this means we all roll up our sleeves and start digging trenches for superfast broadband. It sounds more like giving local councils more powers to require developments that have the infrastructure integrated into the master plan, rather than having piecemeal housing developments, which make an insufficient contribution towards the delivery of that infrastructure, at some unspecified point afterwards.

It could mean Labour return to the new town concept, which they unsuccessfully tried to camouflage last time as Ecotowns. They didn't get down well, despite having some very powerful concepts, such as a high proportion of green space and nature areas. This Government has been surprisingly lukewarm on Garden Cities, though none have actually come forward. Will Miliband get in?

As ever with housing, the most well masterplanned, all the infrastructure disaster. Take [Lodge Hill](#) for example, schools, etc etc sounds ideal. But in England and one of England's largest wrong place.

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Location Location. Even if a development is superbly paid for up front, the wrong location can still spell disaster for 100 homes, along with GP surgeries, two new primary schools, SSI, with the largest Nightingale population in the country, improved wildflower [grassland](#) – and you've got the

Where is the right place?

As with Lodge Hill, all too often, the places housing gets built is dictated by developers buying options to develop private land. This is in part influenced by local plans identifying suitable places for houses to be built (the [SHLAA process](#)) – but this process is again heavily influenced by developers. Until this is changed to enable local communities to seriously influence where new housing goes in their area, problems will continue to arise.

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Inevitably with such a dramatic change of land-use to housing land, there will be losses of biodiversity, history and community values. How will these be dealt with – will Labour also continue to develop the biodiversity offsetting approach beloved of [Owen Paterson](#)? Let us hope not.

Personally I think it makes sense for large scale housing development to take place as new towns or large new extensions to existing towns, such that they benefit from existing transport infrastructure. Placing a new town in a previously undeveloped area with poor transport links requires so much more infrastructure to connect it to other places where people will work and travel for other reasons. It made sense to put Milton Keynes on an existing major train line, for example.

Taking the area of Lodge Hill as an example, building 200,000 homes a year means building on 40 Lodge Hills – each at around 300ha. That is actually only 12000ha a year.

I have already suggested one place which could be used – [bungalow-land](#).

12000ha a year is really not very much land – there is over 9 million hectares of farmland in England, much of it devoid of any wildlife interest, with its above ground historic features long since swept away. It's not as though we need all of it to [feed the world](#).

Another advantage of developing farmland is that a [tax on land value uplift](#) could generate billions of pounds to spend on the infrastructure needed in new and existing towns and cities, including the NHS.

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**About Miles King**

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4 Responses to *Labour commits to building 200,000 new homes a year: Great: where?*

**[Steve Hallam](#) says:**

September 24, 2014 at 10:02 am

Ah – so there's at least one other person who thinks the best place to build all the new houses we need is on ecologically barren farm land. What's the barrier – the cost of buying the land, relative to everywhere else they try?

[Reply](#)

**[Miles King](#) says:**

September 24, 2014 at 12:15 pm

Thanks Steve. Farmland is generally a lot cheaper to develop than brownfield land, partly because there are few/no remediation costs, which can make brownfields prohibitively expensive to develop.

[Reply](#)

**[Steve Hallam](#) says:**

September 24, 2014 at 12:35 pm

Understood – but what about the cost of buying farmland in the first place? I presume there is some reason why farmland is not being bought to build houses on. Or will the planning system not allow it?

**[Miles King](#) says:**

September 24, 2014 at 12:54 pm

There are developments happening on farmland already. But these tends to be relatively small scale. Large scale building on farmland is opposed by eg CPRE. The planning system does favour brownfield over greenfield, and piecemeal in-filling in towns and villages over large-scale new developments. Cost isn't the issue though.