

Questions over St Helens Council's claims as 2,000 houses with planning permission go unbuilt in the borough

Developers have failed to start building nearly 2,000 houses that have planning permission in St Helens - despite council claims demand for housing is so great green belt land needs to be released.

Rainford Action Group has seen St Helens Council figures that show planning permission has been granted for a total of 3,171 new houses in the borough - yet work hasn't started on 1,824 of them.

Campaigners say if housing demand in St Helens was as high as the council believes it is developers would have already built - or at least started to build - the houses that have been given planning permission.

Campaigners add it suggests builders aren't confident they can sell the properties and that demand isn't as high as the council claims.

Rainford Action Group has also learnt:

- St Helens Council did not contact other public bodies when drawing up its controversial Local Plan to see if they had any land that could be developed – and the council still hasn't contacted them.
- The council doesn't have a Brown Field Register – an official document detailing the amount of brown field land in the borough.

The St Helens Local Plan says the borough needs 570 new houses every year until 2037. But if the nearly 2,000 houses the council has already given planning permission for were built that would meet the council's target for four years and would mean less land would need to be released from the green belt.

Rainford Action Group uncovered the figures through a Freedom of Information request. The council responded by saying there are 97 sites across St Helens Borough with planning permission for 3,171 houses. Of those, 1,135 have been completed and 212 houses are under construction.

That means building work hasn't even begun on more than half of the houses with planning permission in St Helens, seriously undermining claims from the council that demand is so great that a green belt land release is needed.

James Wright, chair of Rainford Action Group, said: "It's becoming clearer by the day that the justification to take land out of the green belt for housing development in St Helens doesn't exist.

"If housing demand was as high as St Helens Council claims, why aren't developers rushing to build the houses they already have planning permission for? The answer is obvious; there isn't the demand and that means there's no reason to build on the green belt."

Rainford Action Group is one of several campaign groups around the borough set up in response to the council's hugely controversial Local Plan.

More than 400 people joined a rally outside St Helens Town Hall on Wednesday evening to protest against the plans.

In its submission to the council's consultation, Rainford Action Group questioned why green belt land had to be sacrificed when there are more than 3,500 empty properties in St Helens Borough. It also described the council's population growth and housing need figures as inflated.

Rainford Action Group wants the council to commit to no green belt land release until the 2021 census when the official population figures for the borough will be known.

Since the consultation has closed, St Helens Council has sought to use the council's financial challenges as justification for its green belt grab. Councillor John Fulham, who is in charge of the Local Plan, told ITV News last week that "without the extra housing the authority can't make up for government cuts to its funding".

Given government policy is for green belt development to be allowed only in exceptional circumstances and as a last resort, it's unlikely a planning inspector, working under planning law, will judge St Helens Council's dire finances as justification for their proposed green belt land release.

Councillor Fulham is the council's cabinet member for growth. He also sits on the council's planning committee and is a board member at housing developer Torus. He represents Moss Bank ward on St Helens Council. In the current Draft Local Plan, Moss Bank would have 75 new houses. In neighbouring Rainford, at least 1,140 houses would be built.

James Wright added: "The council hasn't even contacted public bodies in St Helens to see what land they might have that could be released for development – a key requirement of

the government's recent housing white paper. This should have been done while the Local Plan was being written.

"And the council doesn't have a brown field register, so it can't properly know what brown field land is available for development.

"We are more convinced than ever that this green belt grab is motivated by money and the council's attempt to justify it is not just incorrect but also cynical. The St Helens Local Plan is fundamentally flawed and in need of a radical rewrite.

"The people of St Helens won't be fooled and deserve much better."

Ends

Notes to editors:

Rainford Action Group asked in a Freedom of Information Request:

Please provide a total for the number of new houses St Helens Council has granted planning permission for that have to date yet to be built, or construction is yet to start, or construction is underway.

St Helens Council replied on March 2. It said:

"We are currently reviewing which sites has started construction or completed since September last year as part of our annual housing monitoring. This work should be complete by early April."

97 Sites with Planning Permission

Total Units - 3171

Completed Units - 1135

Units Under Construction – 212

St Helens Council wants to take seven large sites in Rainford out of the green belt. One site would be used for an industrial unit. The other six would be used to build at least 1,140 houses.

The prices of the new houses would be out of reach to most buyers as they would cost at least £250,000. The council cannot make developers build affordable houses.

Most of the land in Rainford the council wants to build on is rare grade one farmland – the highest possible quality in agricultural terms.

St Helens' population has been falling since 1981, according to official census data.

Home ownership in the borough is above the regional and national average. There is no housing crisis in St Helens to justify building on the green belt.

Government and official council policy is clear – development on the green belt is only allowed in “exceptional circumstances” and as a last resort.