

Built-up Britain: Green land gobbled up by urban sprawl

The space occupied by buildings and roads has grown more than 10% in the past decade. Now ministers are planning a construction boom

The Sunday Times, Nicholas Hellen, Social Affairs Editor - January 5 2020

Britain's green and pleasant land is turning grey. The land occupied by buildings has grown by more than 11% in just a decade.

In the first study of its kind, the Ordnance Survey has measured land use to the nearest square inch to reveal how the country has changed since 2010.

Danny Dorling, an Oxford geography professor, said: "In absolute terms this is very likely to be the largest increase in the number of square miles that have been tarmacked or paved over in any decade in British history."

In a decade when the population of England, Scotland and Wales rose by 5m, or 8%, buildings secured an extra 129 square miles, roads expanded by 132 square miles and artificial surfaces such as car parks and hardstanding grew by 282 square miles.

The result is that 8.3% of Britain's land mass of 90,500 square miles is built up, compared with 7.7% in 2010. Visually, however, the effect is much greater because, no matter how tall a building, the figures only include its "footprint" — the area it occupies on the ground. Britain's gardens are also expanding, by 142 square miles (a 5.3% rise) with the largest growth in Scotland (11.3%) and Wales (8.7%). Only London experienced a drop, possibly because planning regulations allow housing development in gardens because they are classified as built-up land — a practice known as "garden-grabbing".

Dorling said he was "surprised and shocked" by the figures and Britain was going the way of Los Angeles by giving in to urban sprawl. "This has happened even though we have not solved the housing crisis, because instead of building apartments in the cities we are building starter homes in the countryside where people need to commute by car."

Future developments were entrenching car dependence, he said. "The [proposed] Oxford-Cambridge expressway has 13 junctions on it, and on either side of each junction it has space for a town the size of Didcot or Abingdon. So that is 26 car-dependent towns strung out on an arc from Oxford to Cambridge." Emma Bridgewater, president of the countryside charity CPRE, urged the public not to accept urban sprawl. "We have to resist the terrifyingly high rate of encroachment on our green spaces or we will go mad," she said.

"We each have to understand we can make a difference. It is about saying no to the patio, and yes to digging up that terrible decking in your garden. If you give nature a chance, it will come galloping back with thrilling results."

There were sharp differences in the rate of development across the country. In the southeast, buildings occupied an extra 22.6 square miles, up by 15%, compared with nine square miles in Yorkshire and Humber, up 8.9%.

Roads claimed an extra 12.3 square miles in the East Midlands, up 12.3%, whereas in London there was room for only an extra 1½ square miles, or 3.3%. In Wales, the area covered by car parks and hard surfaces rose 25.8 square miles (44%) whereas in London a little more than a square mile (2.9%) was covered. Even so, nature is not surrendering to the builders without a fight. The area covered by woodland rose from 12.5% to 13.7% and rivers and lakes grew from 1.5% to 1.6%, partly because of ponds to stop heavy rain causing floods. Agriculture accounts for 45.3% of Britain's land.

Even after the construction boom, built-up areas cover less space than peat bogs, which take up 9.4%.

Alasdair Rae, a professor of urban studies and planning at Sheffield University, calculated that figure using data from 2012.

As the government prepares to oversee another building boom, Hugh Ellis, director of policy at the Town and Country Planning Association, urged a different approach.

"We have not used our land wisely or well," he said. "We now have to decide if we want to model ourselves on the dereliction of Detroit or the green future of Copenhagen."

The Danish capital is seen as a model because it has energy-efficient housing and has cut its dependence on the car.