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THREE MILLION NEW HOMES: HOW MUCH LAND?

Do we really have to ‘concrete over the countryside’ to meet our need for new homes? How much farmland would be lost to ‘urban sprawl’ if we built as many homes as we need?

2007 was the last time a clear target for the delivery of new homes was set, when Gordon Brown announced that 3 million were needed by 2020. This was subsequently recast as a yearly target, but the simplicity of the original proposition ensured that it stuck in people’s minds. It also increased public alarm that we were about to ‘concrete over the countryside’ and lose large tracts of our farmland. I wondered how much farmland we were talking about, but couldn’t find an answer on-line...so I had a go at the calculation myself. It goes like this:

Number of new homes needed.....	3,000,000
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Source: 2007 government target

<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/politics/article2058570.ece>

New homes on brown-field land.....	1,200,000
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New homes on green-field land.....	1,800,000
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Source: Social Market Foundation: Internal Commission Report 2007

<http://www.smf.co.uk/assets/files/publications/Housing%20Commission%20Interim%20Findings.pdf>

1.8m homes at 40dpha and 100% efficiency.....	45,000ha
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Assume development efficiency of 50–75%

Source: CLG Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment: Practice Guidance

<http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/planningandbuilding/landavailabilityassessment>

1.8m homes at 40dpha and only 50% efficiency.....	90,000h
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Amount of farmland (assume ‘farmland’ means the UK’s

‘Arable and Horticulture’ and ‘Improved Grassland’

(excludes other types of grassland).....9,100,000ha

Source: Office for National Statistics, Environmental Accounts, Land Cover Great Britain 1998-2007

<http://www.statistics.gov.uk/STATBASE/ssdataset.asp?vlnk=5325>

By this calculation, satisfying the target for 3m new homes would cost only **1%** of our farmland.

No doubt this calculation is flawed in many ways; I am no expert. For instance, it doesn’t begin to suggest where the new homes will be needed and where the farmland is located. But it does make allegations of ‘concreting over the countryside’ sound rather alarmist. Interestingly, the Social Market Foundation Internal Commission Report cited above mentions a survey in which half the respondents thought that over 50% of the UK’s land was developed; the total is in fact only 13%.

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