

Leeds achieves 85 homes a hectare in its urban areas. Sheffield plans for 35 to 50 - and calls Green Belt release a necessity

Sheffield and Leeds are the two least dense authorities in England's major cities - 6.84 and 6.68 homes per hectare - for the same reason: both have large boundaries containing extensive rural land, in Sheffield's case around a third of it inside the Peak District National Park. That makes them a fair comparison. That difference is not that starting point, however. It is how each city plans to use the land it has.

85 dph Leeds achieves in main urban areas and larger towns	35–50 dph Sheffield plans for the same kind of area	30–40 dph Sheffield plans on land released from the Green Belt	2,870 extra homes in the city centre alone at Leeds' density
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What Leeds delivers, against what Sheffield assumes



Sheffield's planned density (dark) as a share of the density Leeds already achieves; red is the shortfall. The urban row is drawn at the top of Sheffield's range, the most generous reading. Sources: Leeds Local Plan (achieved); Sheffield HELAA 2023 (assumed).

Leeds delivers 85 dwellings per hectare in its main urban areas and larger towns. Sheffield assumes 35 to 50 for the same kind of land - 41% below what Leeds has already built. Sheffield's planning assumptions appear frail against Leeds' actual completions.

Sheffield plans to build on Green Belt at almost the density it plans for brownfield. Green Belt sites are planned at 30 to 40 dwellings per hectare. Urban brownfield sites are assumed at 35 to 50. On some sites the Council proposes near-identical densities on city-centre brownfield land and on open countryside miles from the centre. Applying Leeds' achieved city-centre density to Sheffield's central area alone would yield roughly 2,870 additional homes, a 16% increase, without touching a hectare of Green Belt - and that is before any change in the urban areas, where the gap is far wider.

Where the assumptions come from

How much of a site can actually be built on - the net developable area - is the assumption that decides how many homes the city's existing land can hold, and so how large the shortfall is. Sheffield's figures rest on rules of thumb drawn from analysis by Bolsover District Council, shared with Chesterfield, North East Derbyshire and Bassetlaw: all small, predominantly rural or semi-rural authorities. Sheffield adopted the approach in 2008 through its joint housing land assessment with Rotherham. Even then its authors could not establish when the Bolsover analysis had been carried out, and left the reference marked “(date?)”. No other English core city we can find uses it. Gloucester's 2025 urban capacity study instead applies the National Model Design Code, which assumes 60 to 120 dwellings per hectare for urban neighbourhoods - two to three times Sheffield's figures.

(date?) how the Bolsover analysis is dated in Sheffield's own source document	2008 adopted by Sheffield through the joint assessment with Rotherham	2023 still underpinning the land availability assessment behind the Plan	2026 used to justify releasing 234 hectares of Green Belt
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England's fourth largest city calculates its developable land using undated rules written for rural Derbyshire, **and uses the result to justify releasing 234 hectares of Green Belt.**

Low densities are still being approved on brownfield land. In 2025 permission was granted for eight executive homes on part of a 37-acre former industrial site off Baslow Road: previously developed land, in the Green Belt, built out at a density that barely registers. The council is not merely being asked to find new sites. It is being asked to use the ones it has appropriately.

Sprawl makes Sheffield poorer

Centre for Cities research finds that the number of people who can reach a city centre within 30 minutes by public transport is a principal driver of economic performance, because it sets the size of the workforce city-centre firms can hire from. In Sheffield that figure is 35% of the population, giving the city an effective population of around 298,000 - closer to Dresden than to a comparably sized city such as Bilbao. Between 2011 and 2019 development in Sheffield reduced the city's overall density: land was consumed faster than homes were added.

Leeds, which began from almost the same overall density, now has the highest wages outside London and more large corporate headquarters than any city outside the capital. Denser central development grows the workforce within reach of the centre, supports the viability of public transport and sustains high streets. **Homes on the Green Belt fringe, distant from the centre and poorly served by public transport, move Sheffield towards yet lower density with obvious implications.**

Higher density does not mean tower blocks

Leeds City Council puts it plainly: higher density “doesn't have to mean high-rise buildings”. Sheffield's most sought-after streets already run well above what the Plan assumes, and Paris achieves its character almost entirely through buildings of five to seven storeys.

30–40 dph	40–60 dph	60–100 dph	100–200 dph
what Sheffield plans on land released from the Green Belt	traditional terraced streets - Nether Edge, Crookes, Hillsborough	low-rise apartments and townhouses, three to five storeys	mansion blocks and medium-rise - Kelham Island, the Paris model

The argument is not new to councillors. When the Green Belt allocations came before full council, Cllr Douglas Johnson of the Green Party argued that climate change made it important to build in city centres, so that people could “walk to work from warm, well-insulated homes” rather than drive in from the outskirts.

What we ask

- 1 Set density assumptions in line with what Leeds already delivers, particularly in the city centre and the main urban areas, where the gap is widest.
- 2 Test the claim that brownfield capacity has been maximised, by asking whether conservative density assumptions have created a shortfall that need not exist.
- 3 State why a core city calculates its developable land using an undated methodology drawn from a small rural district, and what the figures would be under the National Model Design Code.

The 3,806 homes planned for Green Belt sites could largely be delivered on land the city has already identified, planning for densities its nearest comparable city already achieves.

Reaching for the Green Belt is not a necessity. It is a failure of ambition.

Sources: MHCLG Live Table 126, dwelling stock density estimates by local authority district (2024 provisional). Leeds Local Plan, achieved densities; Sheffield Housing and Economic Land Availability Assessment 2023, density and net developable area assumptions. Sheffield and Rotherham joint housing land assessment, 2008. Gloucester Urban Capacity Study, 2025, applying the National Model Design Code. Centre for Cities, public transport access and city density research, 2025. Cllr Douglas Johnson quoted in the Sheffield Star, full council meeting. City centre uplift of 2,870 homes calculated by Sheffield Green Belt Alliance by applying Leeds' achieved city-centre density to Sheffield's central area. Density comparison research drawn from the representation by Stephanie Oliver-Beech, July 2025, REF1.1933. Full article and links: saves13greenbelt.org.uk/sheffield-housing-density