6/2 Housing Density

Summary

- *Planning Policy Statement 3 (PPS3) Housing* para. 46 sets out a range of issues to which density policies should have regard including the availability of suitable land, capacity of infrastructure, efficient use of land, availability of public and private space, accessibility, characteristics of the area, and the need to achieve well designed high quality housing.

- In line with PPS3, the profile of household types is only likely to directly influence densities at a local level as part of more detailed considerations of housing developments.

- The minimum regional density targets set out in the RSS are too prescriptive and cannot possibly reflect the variety of locations and the type of housing provision likely to be required to meet a range of needs.

- Sub regional targets could unduly restrict development decisions at local level and make it difficult to deliver mixed and balanced communities.

- A more indicative approach utilising bands of densities for different types of location would be preferable.

- Density considerations in the RSS also need to be integrated with the need to achieve other planning outcomes in housing developments including an appropriate mix of housing to support a wide range of households and the need to obtain well designed high quality housing at a variety of locations.

- Draft RSS policies on housing density should therefore be modified to better reflect the guidance in PPS3.

- A more comprehensive consideration of land uses needed to support and ensure sustainable housing development is also required rather simply focussing on the housing element itself.
In setting out the policies on housing density does the draft RSS give adequate consideration to the likely composition of future households and in particular:

a) Do the draft RSS housing density proposals adequately reflect the range of circumstances across the region and is there scope for sub-regional targets?

1. The draft RSS density policies do not specifically consider the composition of future households and the potential effects on density. However, para. 46 of Planning Policy Statement 3 (PPS3) sets out a range of issues to which density policies should have regard and the composition of households is not among them. Factors which are listed include the level of housing demand and the availability of suitable land, capacity of infrastructure and services and availability of public and private space, accessibility, characteristics of the area, and the need to achieve well designed high quality housing.

2. It is difficult to understand how a Regional Strategy could utilise general information on projections of household type, at regional and sub-regional level, to set density levels; there is no direct correlation between any particular mix of future households and a particular set of densities, especially as the existing housing stock, also adapted over time, will generally be the main provider of housing for newly forming and existing households.

3. PPS3 also clarifies that it is at sub-regional and local level that the profile of household types requiring housing should be identified in order to influence housing mix in development proposals, this information will to be a contributing factor to densities, together with site economics and local design considerations.

4. Over time changing household composition, new types of built form, new patterns of living, and demands for personal space, will impact on density trends in new developments but these changes will be gradual. It would be difficult to identify whether the household component was the main factor in such changes. The expectation of such gradual change could be incorporated into a regional approach to housing density.

5. In the West of England this gradual increase in densities has been reflected in development trends between 1996-2006, the West of England average in any year being dependent on the type of sites and the consequent developments within the four unitary authorities, Table 1 below.
Table 1. Net densities (dph) on wholly completed sites 1 April 1996 to 31 March 2006

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Source: Unitary Authority Residential Land Information

Note: Sites of 10 dwellings and over, excludes sites under this threshold

6. Para.46 PPS3 sets down the detailed factors to which densities should have regard. It is unclear how regional policies could reflect such detailed local considerations in the form of regional or even sub regional density targets without unduly restricting decisions on development at local level.

7. The RSS target approach is too prescriptive and cannot possibly reflect the variety of locations and circumstances either within urban areas or at new urban extensions or indeed the type of housing provision which might be required to meet a range of household needs.

8. A draft RSS strategy might, however, set out general expectations in the form of bands of densities for different types of location eg inner city areas, urban extensions, suburban, rural. It would, however, be difficult to refine these to a sub regional level without a detailed knowledge of housing locations in those areas.

9. However, providing there was flexibility at sub regional level to reflect local circumstances, this indicative approach would be preferable to the minimum targets set for SSCTs and urban extensions in H2.

b) Does the draft RSS provide sufficient guidance to ensure mixed and balanced communities?

10. The density policies in the draft RSS, as set down in H2 and also referred to in Development Policy F, are not integrated with the other planning factors which should also be influential in achieving the wider housing policy objectives set out in para.9 of Planning Policy Statement 3 (PPS3), and which are reflected in part in draft RSS policy SD4 Sustainable Communities.

11. Planning outcomes are not simply confined to making “efficient” use of land and increasing the quantum of housing (the density issue) but are also
concerned with ensuring the achievement of an appropriate mix of housing to support a wide variety of households, well designed high quality housing, and provision at a range of suitable locations. The draft RSS should comprehensively address these other issues and more adequately reflect the need to achieve mixed and balanced communities and good design led development which is sensitive to the local context.

12. The draft RSS should also recognise the potential conflict in providing for a wide variety of households and the impact this might have on the achievement of higher density levels particularly where this might involve accommodating family households and their needs for private gardens and informal open space. This will be particularly pertinent in the larger urban areas where many new developments have tended to consist of one and two bedroom flats and where there is often a shortage of family housing for those in need.

13. Net density policies need to be capable of being applied flexibly at local level in order to achieve these other objectives.

14. Finally in its concern for net housing densities the draft RSS only considers one aspect of land-take in new developments. Gross or district densities will give a more comprehensive estimate of the amount of land required after taking account of such non residential components as strategic landscaping, community facilities/services, main roads, and employment provision. The inclusion of these uses across local areas will be vital in delivering balanced and sustainable communities.

15. Whilst precise provision of these other elements will be dependent on location the gains to be made from ever higher net housing densities will tend to reduce as non residential uses are provided. These wider issues also need to be addressed in the RSS.