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Lack of brownfield data hampers London housebuilding, study says

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Brownfield sites are seen as crucial to combating London's housing shortage

Half of London's councils have little or no idea how much brownfield land they own, even though such sites could help solve the capital's housing shortage, says a new report.

A new organisation called the London Land Commission was announced in February and given a £1m budget to create a register of commercial and industrial public sector land that could be redeveloped.

But during its own attempt to compile such a register, the London Chamber of Commerce and Industry found a large "information gap . . . which could cripple the [commission]".

The last count of local authority brownfield land in London was done in 2010 and only 45 per cent of boroughs provided information.

The chamber issued freedom of information requests to each borough to update this information.

Fifteen of 32 either failed to respond or said they did not have the information. Another three said they had no brownfield land while seven more said they had only general land and asset data.

Colin Stanbridge, chamber chief executive, said, "Little action can be taken by the London Land Commission until it has at least a basic understanding of the brownfield land owned by local councils."

He added: "The commission must be given powers to compel local authorities to play ball."

At present, there is no statutory duty for boroughs to keep a record of the brownfield sites they possess.

House prices in London are now nine times the average earnings of first-time buyers. Demand is highest for mid-market housing but developers have been criticised for focusing on luxury accommodation.

Richard Blakeway, deputy mayor for housing, said the land commission was still being set up but would begin work in the next few weeks. It would be chaired by a government minister and the mayor, he added.

Mr Blakeway stopped short of backing the chamber's call for boroughs to be compelled to provide information, saying there was already a "partial picture" because the assets of bodies such as the Greater London Authority and, to a lesser extent, the NHS were mapped out.

"Many local authorities are already looking at developing their assets," he said, "and we are talking to a number of boroughs keen to map what they own."

There were "huge incentives" to co-operate with the commission, he added, such as improving procurement and generating more income.

Brownfield sites are seen as crucial to alleviating London's housing shortage. The mayor's target is for 42,000 new homes a year for the next 20 years but at the moment it is thought fewer than half that are being completed.

Large sites such as Battersea Power Station and Old Oak Common are attractive to big developers but one objective of the brownfield survey would be to identify sites that could be taken on by smaller companies if development was made simpler.

The chamber spoke to Pocket Living, a developer specialising in small sites in London, who said it had found acquiring public land could take four times as long as private land, even if the intention was to build affordable housing.

London Councils, which represents all the city's local authorities, said council-owned land was put to a range of uses, "including housing, older people's housing and education".

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