

Plans for thousands of green belt homes based on ‘inconsistent’ data



Coventry city council planned for more than 40,000 new homes after it was forecast that the area's population would rise by 32 per cent in 20 years
PHOTOFUSION/UIG VIA GETTY IMAGES

Neil Johnston, Midlands Correspondent

Official population forecasts used to justify building thousands of homes on green belt land around the country have been overstated, a watchdog has found.

The Office for Statistics Regu-

lation said that ONS population forecasts used by councils to make plans in areas with high student populations were “inconsistent” with local evidence.

The watchdog launched an investigation last year when *The Times* revealed that Andy Street, mayor of the West Midlands, had complained that “implausi-

ble” forecasts were being used to justify building thousands of homes around Coventry on green belt land that once formed the Forest of Arden.

The ONS predicted that Coventry's population would rise by 32 per cent between 2011 and 2031, twice as much as Birmingham, leading Coventry

city council to plan for more than 40,000 new homes.

However, campaigners said that the ONS wrongly assumed that foreign students at Warwick and Coventry universities would stay in the area after their studies. They found that the city's "vital signs" such as births, jobs, A&E attendances and car registrations did not match expected growth.

In a report released today, the Office for Statistics Regulation criticised the ONS for failing to listen to concerns and said that it agreed with campaigners that the projections in some areas were wrong.

"We found that in some smaller cities that had a large student population the population estimates did appear to be inconsistent with, and potentially higher than, local evidence suggests," the report said. It added that the ONS "needs to investigate the root and scale of the issue associated with cities with large student populations" and ordered it to report back in July with plans to sort the problem.

While national estimates were highly regarded, "there is a risk that ONS misses the bigger pic-

ture of what the population data inform and is not regularly checking what it does against local insight".

It added that projections fed into local planning decisions and had "far reaching consequences" that could affect policy targets. "For some local authorities, this means the over-estimation of population in certain age groups is driving policy targets in a different direction to local priorities," it said.

Ed Humpherson, director-general for regulation, said that the ONS "did not adequately consider Coventry's concerns" and that it had "room for improvement in the way it takes on board feedback and handles challenge".

Humpherson confirmed that estimates had been overstated in Guildford, Surrey, but did not name the other towns and cities affected.

Merle Gering, who compiled the study in Coventry, sparking the review, said that he had found inconsistencies in dozens of towns and cities with large student populations, such as Canterbury in Kent and Exeter in Devon.

Street said that he was pleased

that the report backed his concerns but pointed out that green belt land had already been lost.

"Whilst it is great news that we finally have it in black and white that the ONS overestimated Coventry's population growth, it has come too little too late for so much of the city's precious green belt that has already been scythed off by developers for housing," he said.

An ONS spokesman said that it welcomed the report's recognition that overall its methods were "fit for purpose for national level numbers" but it recognised that there was some "variability" at local level. "We are already progressing much work in this area," he said. "We continue to build on new methods, for example exploring the ways in which students leaving university are counted, and the established population and migration statistics transformation programme is making increased use of administrative data." ■