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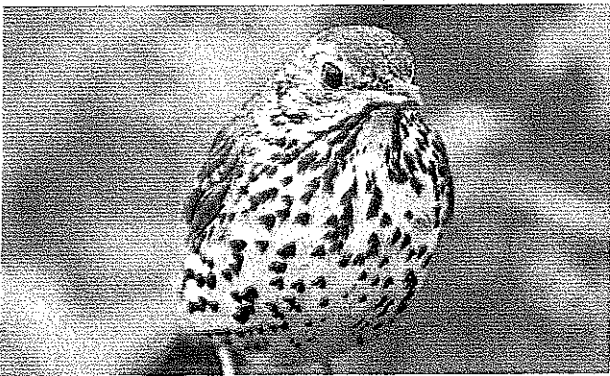
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## Local councils get immediate powers to end garden grabbing

Decentralisation minister Greg Clark announces measures to end rising practice of building new homes in back gardens

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The song thrush, which has suffered a huge decline, will benefit from gardens not being given over to building plots. Photograph: Rex Features/BYB

The government is announcing new measures to stop the practice of "garden grabbing" which has seen swathes of urban green space swallowed up by new housing developments.

The decentralisation minister Greg Clark is giving local councils immediate powers to prevent the building of new homes in back gardens, a practice on the rise in recent years.

According to the communities and local government department, the number of houses being built on gardens rose from one in 10 to a quarter of new properties between 1997 and 2008.

The problem is particularly acute in places including Guildford, Croydon, Southampton and the New Forest in the south-east, Poole and Dorset in the south-west, Sheffield and Solihull in the Midlands, Leeds and Wakefield in Yorkshire, South Tyneside in the north-east and Norwich.

Town halls have struggled to stop the trend as gardens have been classified as "previously residential land", making them brownfield sites in the same category as derelict factories and old railway sidings.

Mr Clark said he would be changing the designation of gardens from brownfield land to make it easier for local authorities to stop unwanted development, allowing them to reject planning applications for new houses and blocks of flats that local people oppose and that would ruin the character of the area.

The step, which he said would not affect people who wanted to build extensions on their homes, was welcomed by garden and wildlife organisations.

The move to stop garden grabbing, promised in both the Conservative and Liberal Democrat manifestos ahead of the general election, is the latest by the government to implement coalition pledges to hand more power to local communities.

Unveiling the plans, Mr Clark said: "For years the wishes of local people have been ignored as the character of neighbourhoods and gardens have been destroyed, robbing communities of vital green space.

"It is ridiculous that gardens have until now been classified in the same group as derelict factories and disused railway sidings, forcing councils and communities to sit by and watch their neighbourhoods get swallowed up in a concrete jungle.

"Today I am changing the classification of garden land so councils and communities no longer have their decisions constantly overruled, but have the power to work with industry to shape future development that is appropriate for their area.

"This is just the start of whole-scale reform I want to make to the planning system, so councils and communities are centre-stage in a reformed system that works for them, and is not just a tool of top-down policy."

The Royal Horticultural Society, which warned at the Chelsea flower show last month that gardens were under threat from development, said it welcomed any measures that would protect the "vital resource".

Simon Thornton-Wood, the director of science and learning at the RHS, said: "Gardens, like parks, are the green lungs of cities, improving air quality, controlling air temperature and flood risk and providing a haven for wildlife.

"Beyond these very practical benefits of gardens, we know that gardening is great for physical and mental health.

"That's why we would like planning measures to go further than protecting existing gardens, to guarantee high quality green space and gardening opportunities in all new building developments, wherever they are."

Ross Cameron, of the School of Biological Sciences at the University of Reading, said: "Research has demonstrated that gardening can improve self-esteem, communication skills, attention span and even educational performance.

"In essence, protecting gardens is important to improve quality of life, and particularly for people in cities."

And it is not just people who benefit from green space in towns and cities, according to the RSPB.

Richard Bashford, project manager for the conservation charity, said:

"Gardens are mini nature reserves on our doorsteps and vital habitats for all sorts of wildlife.

"Many much-loved species rely on green spaces like gardens, such as the song thrush and house sparrow, both of which have suffered massive declines in the last few years.