

by PETER WITHERINGTON, deputy chairman of RSK Group Plc.

Despite the development sector being brutalised by the global credit crisis, it is of critical importance that the long-term problem of the UK's housing shortage does not fall off the radar.

While the Government's target of three million new homes by 2020 may now appear a tad unrealistic – it would require build rates to soar from an estimated 60,000 last year (down from 175,000 in 2007) to 240,000 per annum over the next decade – the present lull is inevitably a temporary one. Recession or not, future generations need somewhere to live, work and play.

So where is all this building going to take place? The only sensible, environmentally sound (and Government endorsed) answer is, of course, on our brownfield land.

According to the National Land Use Database of Previously Developed Land, England alone has 62,130 hectares of previously used land, 26,510 (43%) of which is suitable for build.

Central to unlocking this startlingly abundant resource is a need to improve the quality of land condition assessments, which are the route maps to cost- and time-effective remediation options. At present that is no easy task: contaminated land legislation is a complex and unpredictable subject and there is a regrettable dearth of skilled assessors to make sense of it all.

Developers need assurances before they tackle brownfield sites. They need to know what they are dealing with, and they must have confidence in the assessors they use. Increasingly, they are turning to those with Specialist in Land Condition (SiLC) certification.

Developed to support the Urban Task Force's Land Condition Record in 1999, SiLC is indisputably the most high-profile, respected professional qualification related to contaminated land. The breadth of knowledge and experience the qualification calls for is extremely rigorous and essential for the safe, measured and effective transformation of UK's contaminated land

legacy into useable sites.

SiLC's credibility is on the rise, with major developers such as National Grid Properties looking for it during the consultant evaluation process and local authorities such as Vale Royal Borough Council stating that it will only work with companies that employ SiLCregistered professionals.

Consultants and assessors are being equally proactive. For example, my company, RSK Group, the UK's largest privately owned, multidisciplinary consultancy, is acutely aware that the UK's contaminated land problem is shared and, as such, we are committed to raising the profile of SiLC as a means of improving assessment standards across the board.

We have made it company policy that any RSK employee with the requisite experience should sit the SiLC exams.

We are pre-empting legislation, raising our own credibility and forcing the issue. Many of our competitors take a similar view, and a movement is building.

SiLC's main problem is that not enough people have sat the exam, with only 130 certified staff in the UK right now. To get to the point where a SiLCregistered professional is involved with every UK brownfield site – the ideal scenario – the figure needs to hit at least 500.

Currently PPS23 Annex 2: Development on Land Affected by Contamination states that all investigations of land potentially affected by contamination "should be carried out by or under the direction of a suitably qualified competent person."

Here competence is defined as a person that is "normally" expected to be a chartered member of an appropriate professional body (ie Institution of Civil Engineers, Geological Society of London, Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors, Institution of Environmental Management) with "relevant experience of investigation contaminated sites".

SiLC is alluded to for signing off Land Condition Records, but that's it. Recent developments suggest this may not be the case for much longer.

In 2004 a Home Builders Federation document entitled *A Way Forward* suggested that certification to a standard of SiLC's stature would be a highly progressive step forward for land assessment. After discussions with the Remediation Licensing Task Force, the proposal was adopted by English Partnerships' National Brownfield Strategy.

Last year the contaminated land skills vacuum was high on the agenda at English Partnerships' National Brownfield Conference, prompting the draft Brownfield Skills Strategy (published by the Academy for Sustainable Communities and English Partnerships) to identify the development of a Land Condition Skills Development Framework as a key action. Further signs of encouragement came earlier this year when funding from English Partnerships was proffered to SiLC to produce a Technical Development Framework that would raise the qualification's profile and encourage more industry engagement, particularly from young graduates.

At present, one of the major impediments to SiLC becoming more influential is its perceived impenetrability. For example, a person only becomes eligible to seek the certification after racking up eight years of industry experience. All well and good; but that has meant it has dropped off the priority radar of many highly skilled people.

The Technical Development Framework should ease that problem and assist newly qualified graduates in developing an accelerated path to the qualification.

In many ways, SiLC has done all the hard work already. The set-up is robust and the quality of assessor it produces is beyond dispute. It just needs to reach out more to its potential participants.

The future of contaminated land assessment standards is already here.

Many people just don't know it yet!

- Peter Witherington has over 30 years experience in the assessment and remediation of brownfield sites.

A respected industry expert, Peter has been involved in numerous research projects for DoE, DETR, DTI and the Environment Agency, and assisted the National House Building Council in the preparation of its land quality standard and its internal guidance on methane.

In addition, he has been involved in the Cabinet Office taskforces for remediation licensing and Soil Guideline Values. Peter was one of the first people in the UK to attain SiLC (Specialist in Land Condition) certification, and currently serves on its professional technical panel. He also serves as chairman of the AGS Contaminated Land Working Group and represents the Home Builders Federation on DEFRA's Contaminated Land Forum.