

## Green Belt myths: CPRE's guide to what you need to know August 2015

Green Belt policy was established in 1955 primarily to stop urban sprawl. There are now 14 separate areas of Green Belt that cover 13% of England; mostly open land and countryside around the largest or most historic towns and cities. CPRE has campaigned for Green Belts since our formation in 1926. We remain a strong supporter of Green Belt policy which aims to provide a permanently protected belt of open land through tight controls over certain forms of development.

### Introduction

The National Planning Policy Framework<sup>1</sup> and the 2015 Conservative Manifesto<sup>2</sup> stated clearly that Ministers attach great importance to the Green Belt and will maintain existing levels of protection. In March this year, the Prime Minister declared that protecting the Green Belt is 'paramount'.<sup>3</sup>

Yet, there have been several recent reports, from bodies such as the Adam Smith Institute, Aecom and London First, calling for large scale development in the Green Belt. The reports focus on weakening Green Belt protection to allow greater freedom for large housebuilders. They reflect the growing influence private sector consultancies, and others acting on behalf of large developers, are having in debates over planning issues - a trend highlighted last year by concerned academics.<sup>4</sup> However, the arguments within these reports are based on a highly selective reading of the relevant evidence, and give little consideration to the wide range of benefits provided by Green Belt policy. They urgently need to be challenged.

*Myth 1: Green Belt is an old fashioned idea and it's time to pension it off.*<sup>5</sup>

*Why this is wrong: The benefits of Green Belt remain as vital as ever. By looking at other countries we can see that without the strong protection it offers against most forms of development, more valuable countryside would be consumed by urban sprawl - and the character of our towns and cities would be irreversibly eroded.*

For 60 years, Green Belts have protected agricultural and other undeveloped land. By doing this they encourage the regeneration of previously developed or 'brownfield' land in urban areas. International comparisons<sup>6</sup> suggest that without the strong protection Green Belts offer against many forms of development, much more farmland and woods would be consumed by urban sprawl, especially around large cities. Yet with the increasing global pressures from climate change and population growth, our farmland and woodlands will become more valuable in future, not less. The calls for more development in the Green Belt assume that this land is only valuable if built on, an assumption that is fundamentally flawed. The Green Belt is needed now more than ever.

---

<sup>1</sup> March 2012, available from [www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-planning-policy-framework--2](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-planning-policy-framework--2).

<sup>2</sup> April 2015; [www.conservatives.com/manifesto](http://www.conservatives.com/manifesto),

<sup>3</sup> Article dated 2 March 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/earth/hands-off-our-land/11444802/David-Cameron-I-am-a-countryman-and-I-will-protect-the-Green-Belt.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Gavin Parker et al, 'In planning we trust?', *Town and Country Planning* December 2014.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Adam Smith Institute press release dated 14 January 2015.

<sup>6</sup> See United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN Habitat), *Planning Sustainable Cities: Global Report on Human Settlements* October 2009. Summary available from [www.unhabitat.org](http://www.unhabitat.org); Commission of the European Communities, (i) *Towards a Thematic Strategy on the Urban Environment*. COM(2004)60 Final, 2004, p.25; and (ii) Commission Staff Working Document, Annex To The Communication From The Commission To The Council And The European Parliament On Thematic Strategy On The Urban Environment Impact Assessment, SEC (2006) 16, p.36. Available from <http://ec.europa.eu/environment/>

*Myth 2: Green Belt is safe from development.*

*Why this is wrong: Green Belt is under a renewed and growing level of threat.*

In March the Prime Minister claimed that ‘development on Green Belt is at its lowest rate since modern records began 25 years ago.’<sup>7</sup> But this statement is unlikely to remain true for much longer. Research carried out in June 2015 on behalf of BBC Radio 4’s File on 4 programme by Glenigan, a leading provider of construction data, found a sharp increase in the number of houses securing full planning approval in the Green Belt. In 2009/10, 2,258 homes were approved. In 2013/2014, the number had risen to 5,607. By the following year, 2014/2015, it had more than doubled to 11,977.

CPRE analysis has found that Local Plans are proposing more than 226,000 houses on the Green Belt<sup>8</sup>. As proposals in Local Plans are at an earlier stage in the pipeline than full planning approval, the vast majority, if not all, of these houses will be in addition to the figures mentioned by Glenigan. Ministers have taken action to address some of the most unnecessary Local Plan proposals. The Government now needs to act on the national imperative to protect the Green Belt by making clear that Green Belt land should only be developed in exceptional cases, and that economic growth is not in itself an ‘exceptional case’.

*Myth 3: Green Belt protection pushes house prices up.*

*Why this is wrong: Much house price inflation is down to economic factors that increasingly treat houses as an investment opportunity rather than somewhere to live.*

Green Belt policy only restricts housebuilding in the land that it covers. Suggestions that it is responsible for pushing up house prices are usually part of a wider critique of the planning system. For example, it is claimed that ‘a near theological protection of Green Belt land explains why millions of young people can’t afford to buy a home.’<sup>9</sup> But if Green Belt affected house prices, then it would be more expensive, all things being equal, to buy a house in a city protected by Green Belt than one that is not. There is no evidence this is the case.

CPRE contends that the significant factors that stimulate housing demand well beyond the capacity of the market to supply it, and so drive up prices, actually include:

- the ability of the major housebuilding companies to control the supply of land for housebuilding and trickle out new houses in order to maximise sales returns, known as ‘landbanking’;<sup>10</sup>
- low interest rates, which make it easier to borrow more;
- a wide range of strongly marketed mortgage products;
- the relatively poor performance of rival investments, such as equities and pensions; and
- the growth in notional wealth tied up in people’s houses, which has enabled many owners to enter the ‘buy-to-let’ market by borrowing against their current homes, or help their children to become home owners in the same way.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>7</sup> [www.telegraph.co.uk](http://www.telegraph.co.uk), 2 March 2015, *ibid*.

<sup>8</sup> For more details see our earlier, March 2015 briefing at <http://www.cpre.org.uk/resources/housing-and-planning/green-belts/item/download/3972>.

<sup>9</sup> Tim Montgomerie, column in *The Times*, 14 May 2015; Professor Paul Cheshire, ‘Are They Green Belts by Accident?’, blog dated 22 May 2015.

<sup>10</sup> For more on this issue see CPRE Housing Foresight paper, *Getting Houses Built: How to Accelerate the Delivery of New Housing*, June 2015.

<sup>11</sup> For more on this and the previous three points see CPRE, *Building on Barker*, January 2005, and *Deconstructing Barker*, March 2007.

If we loosened Green Belt controls or de-designated large areas of it, we would simply allow more land to be built on, where developers can make maximum profit, as has been the experience of other countries in Europe, particularly Ireland and Spain.<sup>12</sup> There is plenty of other, more suitable land that could be built on, and it could be used more effectively. In 2014, a CPRE report found that there is enough suitable brownfield land, available now, for at least one million new homes.<sup>13</sup> It also demonstrated that brownfield land is not a finite resource. It is constantly being replenished, and usually, many more homes can be delivered on a brownfield site than an equivalent area of greenfield land. Government land use change statistics show that, in every year since 2004, we have consistently built an average 50% or more houses on brownfield sites than on equivalent areas of greenfield.<sup>14</sup> We should use this land before even considering going into the Green Belt.

*Myth 4: Green Belt has little or no environmental value.*

*Why this is wrong: The Green Belt's primary purpose is to prevent urban sprawl, but in doing so it provides countryside close to 30 million people. A huge proportion of it has considerable environmental value. In the face of climate change, it has an increasingly important role in storing carbon and preventing flooding and is a vital economic resource for food security and soil protection.*

Two-thirds of all Green Belt land is in agricultural use;<sup>15</sup> not surprising given its proximity to potential markets in the city. This is a vital economic resource for food security and soil protection. Yet some Green Belt critics claim the way it is farmed makes it worthless environmentally. The London School of Economics' Paul Cheshire argues: 'The most important land use in Green Belts is intensive arable, which generates negative net environmental benefits,' referencing the National Ecosystem Assessment of June 2011 in support of this.<sup>16</sup>

It is disingenuous to argue that agricultural land has no positive environmental value, and especially to claim the National Ecosystem Assessment supports such an argument. In fact, the NEA recognises the huge value to society of agricultural land, both in terms of food production and in 'cultural services' (such as the sense of wellbeing produced by seeing an agricultural landscape). The NEA also notes that biodiversity and some landscape features (particularly hedgerows) have declined in many agricultural landscapes but emphasises that this trend has begun to reverse through better land management<sup>17</sup>.

Away from benefits of the agricultural land, Green Belts provide countryside close to 30 million people, giving us 30,000 km of public rights of way, 89,000 ha of Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) and 220,000 ha of broadleaf and mixed woodland. In particular, England's Green Belts contain 33% of our Local Nature Reserves and 19% of our ancient woodland, a relatively higher proportion than countryside without the Green Belt designation.<sup>18</sup> In the face of climate change, the Green Belt is also likely to have an increasingly significant role in storing carbon and preventing flooding.

---

<sup>12</sup> For example, see 'Dublin is cited as worst-case scenario of sprawl', Irish Times 4 October 2006.

<sup>13</sup> CPRE, From Wasted Space to Living Spaces, November 2015

<sup>14</sup> DCLG, Land Use Change Statistics, Live Table 223.

<sup>15</sup> CPRE / Natural England, Green Belts: a greener future, January 2010.

<sup>16</sup> Cheshire P, 'Turning Houses into Gold', *Centre Piece* Spring 2014, p.17.

<sup>17</sup> UK National Ecosystem Assessment, *The UK National Ecosystem Assessment: Synthesis of the Key Findings*. UNEP-WCMC, June 2011, pages 18, 23 and 25.

<sup>18</sup> CPRE / Natural England 2010, *ibid*.

Many of the benefits of Green Belt land have grown over time. The protection against development afforded by the Green Belt designation has often played a critical role in this. For example, Windsor Great Park (which lies in the Metropolitan Green Belt) has been valued by the Government's Natural Capital Committee (NCC) as having environmental benefits worth at least £49 million, or £7,600 per hectare.<sup>19</sup> Allowing development on land that is poor will only encourage landowners to neglect it. In April 2015, leading environmental economist and Chair of the NCC, Dieter Helm, published a paper which also seeks to challenge many of the arguments for Green Belt deregulation put forward by developers and other economists.<sup>20</sup> As Helm argues, where the quality of Green Belt land is poor, the solution is to improve it. For example, the Community Forests initiative has turned more than 20,000 hectares of often degraded Green Belt land into woodland or other natural habitats since 1990.

By contrast, the analysis of the value of Green Belts by the Adam Smith Institute relies on a single study of land near Chester from 1992, suggesting that Green Belt land provided environmental benefits to society worth £889 per hectare.<sup>21</sup> The comparison with the NCC's more recent valuation of Windsor Great Park shows that extrapolating a 23-year-old study from a single location will not give a reliable picture of the true current value - let alone the potential value - of the Green Belt overall.

*Myth 5: Green Belts only benefit people who own property within them rather than the wider public.*

*Why this is wrong: Preventing sprawl, one of the key purposes of Green Belt policy, produces financial benefits to society by reducing the infrastructure and environmental costs associated with new development. This claim also ignores the vast number of people on low incomes who live in towns surrounded by Green Belt and enjoy its benefits.*

Green Belt policy is designed to prevent sprawl and all the negative costs associated with it. A recent research report from the London School of Economics found that urban sprawl in the USA imposes costs to society as a whole of more than \$1 trillion.<sup>22</sup> This report shows that the costs of sprawl fall into two significant categories:

- The loss of undeveloped land and all the services that this provides, particularly in relation to food production and reduced ecological services.
- More dispersed activity, including reduced accessibility, higher costs of public infrastructure and longer trip distances. (This issue is discussed further under Myths 6 and 7 below.)

Green Belt land is part of the wider countryside, to which there were 1.3 billion visits in 2013-14, according to Government surveys.<sup>23</sup> One-off survey work done in 2009 as part of the same programme found that a majority (58%) of people had visited Green Belt land in the past 12 months, with most having a day out with friends or family, or visiting for peace and quiet. Nearly two-thirds (65%) wanted to visit the Green Belt more often. The Green Belt is used regularly by local Ramblers groups, the Guides and Scouts, Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme participants, local schools and many others, with no restrictions on grounds of class or income.

---

<sup>19</sup> Natural Capital Committee, *The State of Natural Capital: Protecting and Improving Natural Capital for Prosperity and Wellbeing - Third report to the Economic Affairs Committee*, January 2015, p.9.

<sup>20</sup> Dieter Helm, *In Defence of the Green Belt*, April 2015. <http://www.dieterhelm.co.uk/node/1404>

<sup>21</sup> Adam Smith Institute, *The Green Noose*, 2015, p.31.

<sup>22</sup> <http://files.lsecities.net/files/2015/03/NCE-Cities-Sprawl-Subsidy-Report.pdf>.

<sup>23</sup> [www.gov.uk/government/statistics/monitor-of-engagement-with-the-natural-environment-2013-to-2014](http://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/monitor-of-engagement-with-the-natural-environment-2013-to-2014).

*Myth 6: Just building on a small proportion of Green Belt would leave us with more than enough.*

*Why this is wrong: Much of the integrity and therefore benefits of Green Belt would be lost if we did this, including preventing sprawl and towns joining up.*

Releasing just a small percentage of Green Belt sounds an attractive way of releasing land for housing. But once bits of the Green Belt are removed, the integrity is reduced and so its benefits begin to be lost. Permanence is also an important feature of Green Belt so people, businesses and the Government (through supporting environmentally sensitive farming on Green Belt land) have had the confidence to invest in the area on that basis. Conversely, the temptation is removed for people to buy Green Belt land in the hope that it will be de-designated and its notional value for development will increase.

It has been claimed that: ‘You can build 1 million new homes on 3.7% of the Green Belt (or 2.5 million homes on just over 60,000 ha of Green Belt) within walking distance of a train station.’<sup>24</sup> This, and other claims like it, are often presented as a more moderate alternative to abolishing Green Belt policy outright. But closer analysis shows that, in many areas, they would have much the same effect, defeating the key purposes of preventing sprawl and stopping places joining up with each other. For example, Potters Bar, Slough, and Watford would all end up becoming part of London. The Green Belt would also become less accessible to people travelling by rail from the urban area it embraces.

*Myth 7: If we don’t allow development in the Green Belt, people will leapfrog it and commute in an unsustainable fashion from elsewhere.*

*Why this is wrong: We need to be creating jobs near where people live or enable them to work across distance, rather than encouraging long commutes. However, commuting from beyond the Green Belt can be sustainable if there are fast public transport links available.*

Building in the Green Belt is not a solution to unsustainable commuting. On the contrary, it would lead to more people ‘leapfrogging’ over the suburbs into city centres. Instead, we need to do more to create jobs near where people live rather than far away from housing they can afford. In large, buoyant cities such as London, there is a particular need for more affordable housing within the inner city. Also, our biggest cities aren’t the only places where jobs can be and are being created. The Centre for Cities<sup>25</sup> found that Milton Keynes increased employment rates by 18% between 2004 and 2013, creating new jobs faster than any other town in the country. Other high performers included Hastings and Portsmouth - both places with plenty of brownfield land available for regeneration.

Alternatively, people need the tools to be able to work remotely when they choose to do so. The growth of digital technologies reduces the impact of distance and allows appropriately skilled people to offer services from virtually any location in the country, provided there is a fast broadband connection. The digital sector is seen as a key area in which England’s economy is expected to expand in the coming years, and this economic development is already appearing in new digital economy clusters across the country. A recent report<sup>26</sup> found 74% of digital companies are based outside London, including places such as Hull, Liverpool and the north east.

---

<sup>24</sup> Adam Smith Institute 2015, *ibid*; Aecom, *A Manifesto for the London City Region*, 2015.

<sup>25</sup> Centre for Cities, *Cities Outlook 2015*, January 2015.

<sup>26</sup> Tech City, *Tech Nation - Powering the Digital Economy*, February 2015.

'Leapfrogging' is also not inherently unsustainable if a good transport network exists. Dieter Helm<sup>27</sup> argues that 'transport is not about the distance in miles, but rather the speed of connecting links' (between homes and workplaces). Green Belt critics often cite transport problems in historic towns surrounded by Green Belt such as Bath, Cambridge,<sup>28</sup> and Oxford. But in these cases the Green Belt for the most part extends no further than 10 miles beyond the urban edge (and in many instances over a far smaller distance), and thereby adds little in itself to journey distances. Problems with the transport network in these and other areas are far better explained by an over-reliance on car travel, and conversely the often poor quality of public transport, rather than by the presence of the Green Belt.

*Myth 8: Green Belts have the effect of confining the urban poor to live at high densities in the cities.*

*Why this is wrong: All cities have areas of urban poor, whether or not they have Green Belts. There is a great need now for new affordable housing, but growing inequalities between rich and poor are a global phenomenon that cannot realistically be blamed on the use of Green Belts in England.*

Green Belts were established in Government policy in 1955 and then were gradually designated in Local Plans, alongside programmes of urban slum clearance and dispersal to new or expanded towns within or beyond the Green Belts. Many of these places, such as Milton Keynes, Peterborough and Swindon, have large populations of people on average or below average household incomes, but the overall population density in these and other English towns and cities is around average, and often quite low, compared to other cities in the European Union.<sup>29</sup> The idea that post-war English planning policies have somehow 'confined' the poor is not supported by the evidence.

There is a great need now to improve access to housing for those who cannot afford to buy on the open market. Much more affordable housing needs to be built. But growing inequalities between rich and poor in this and other respects are a global phenomenon that cannot realistically be blamed on the use of Green Belt policy in England. Some commentators have attempted to suggest a causal link with 'growing housing demand in the postwar period' by referring to the doubling of the designated area of Green Belt since 1978<sup>30</sup>. This is a distortion of the truth and a tenuous claim.

As CPRE and Natural England point out, the doubling in area since 1978 is in the area of formally designated Green Belts. Much of the Green Belts had already been agreed in principle as early as the 1950s,<sup>31</sup> and large scale New Town development and other housebuilding for the council and social sectors took place alongside this until well into the 1980s. Housebuilding has declined since the 1980s due to the end of large scale housebuilding by the public sector, rather than because of the formal designation of Green Belt land.

*Myth 9: Green Belt policy leads to more land being used for golf courses than new housing.*

---

<sup>27</sup> Helm 2015, *ibid*.

<sup>28</sup> See for example Wiles C, 'Green Belt Blues', *Inside Housing* 26 May 2015. <http://m.insidehousing.co.uk/debate/expert-opinion/green-belt-blues/7009920.blog>.

<sup>29</sup> Angel S et al, *The Dynamics of Global Urban Expansion*, Transport and Urban Development Department, The World Bank, 2005.

<sup>30</sup> IPPR and Shelter, *Growing Cities: How can England's successful cities build the homes we need?* 2015, p.57.

<sup>31</sup> CPRE / Natural England 2010, *ibid*.

*Why this is wrong: The housing definition used in this argument ignores gardens and access roads - and why shouldn't people use Green Belt land for outdoor recreation?*

Green Belts are, by definition, areas where new housing development is strictly controlled. Commentators refer to wider problems with a relative lack of new housing (see also Myths 3 and 8 above). Green Belt critics often draw a comparison between the amount of England's land area taken up for golf courses and that taken for new housing. These comparisons are misleading because they usually make a considerable underestimate of the amount of land taken up by housing.

A BBC Radio 4 More Or Less programme, broadcast on 30 May 2014, explored the argument that more of Surrey's land area (2.8%) is taken up by golf courses than housing (2.1%). Most land outside urban areas in Surrey is classified as Green Belt. As the programme went on to highlight, the figures quoted for land area of housing do not include gardens, or access roads. If these are added, then about 14% of Surrey's area is taken up by housing. Nationally, more than five times more land is used for housing when gardens and roads are included, than for golf courses.

A wide range of leisure activities take place in the Green Belt, not only golf but also horse riding and other outdoor sports. These all reflect in some way the value of a belt of open land to the people in the urban areas the land surrounds.

*Myth 10: Green Belt stops any kind of development or beneficial land management at all so land is abandoned and neglected.*<sup>32</sup>

*Why this is wrong: Green Belt does not restrict development connected with agriculture, forestry or public infrastructure. Neglect is less of a problem in the Green Belt than in the countryside as a whole.*

Green Belt policy restricts housebuilding, but allows many forms of so-called 'appropriate development' to take place, especially in relation to agriculture, forestry, outdoor recreation, and public infrastructure, such as reservoirs, cemeteries and sewage works. Conversely, local authorities can also use planning powers to improve the environmental condition of undeveloped land, both within and outside the Green Belt. If Green Belt designation was linked to the quality of land management, there would be an active incentive to run land down the land to justify taking it out of the Green Belt. Landowners would also seek a much higher price for the land in the hope of later being able to sell it for housing development.

Surveys by Natural England in 2009 found that the quality of the landscape is being maintained on more than twice as much Green Belt land (39%) as where it's neglected (18%). In fact, Green Belt has a lower proportion of land classed as 'neglected' than the national average, while just 0.2% of it is described as 'derelict'.

CPRE  
August 2015

---

<sup>32</sup> See, for example, Professor Alister Scott, <http://theconversation.com/how-to-make-the-green-belt-productive-but-still-green-31663>, article dated 17 September 2014.