

# Green Belt vs Our Housing Crisis

Rarely a week goes by without headlines reporting on our housing crisis, but these are often equally matched by calls to “keep our Green Belt green”. Is this a battle in which there will always be a winner and a loser?, or can housing be delivered whilst maintaining the integrity of this long standing designation?

The 1947 Planning Act formally introduced the planning system as we know it and the Green Belt classification. It now accounts for 12.5% of the country's land mass, an area greater than that currently developed. It is often celebrated as the greatest success of our planning system but with an ever-growing housing crisis there is increasing pressure to reevaluate the role of Green Belt and whether it delivers the social and environmental benefits often quoted?

There are often misconceptions about what Green Belt land is. Its main purpose is preventing urban sprawl and maintain openness. What it is not, is a designation which recognises landscape quality or environmental significance. Whilst there is land both classified for its landscape value and ecological significance, which is within the Green Belt, this is not the reason for its classification and this land is subject to its own policies which protect its important status. Statistics from CPRE, The Countryside Charity, actually identifies that over half of Green Belt land is considered to be either diverging or neglected.

There are often claims that the Green Belt plays a vital role in providing outdoor recreation and access to open countryside. It is true that an astounding 7% of London's Green Belt is golf courses, however two thirds of Green Belt is within agricultural use which is largely inaccessible.

Only 3.4% of Green Belt is designated open access land and whilst the policy encourages opportunities for public access and environmental improvements, there are no powers to secure this.

There is also the assumption that Green Belt is in fact green. This again is a slight misconception, whilst many hectares are managed countryside over 110,000 hectares is developed, this equates to nearly 7% of all Green Belt.

The perceived threat to our Green Belt comes largely from the need to find a solution to our long-standing housing crisis. There are an unacceptable 1.6 million families on housing waiting lists and over 80,000 households trapped in temporary accommodation which costs the taxpayer an estimated £1 billion per year.

A recent survey undertaken by Shelter indicates that one in three of us do not have access to a safe or suitable home. There is an undisputable need for a significant boost in the supply of housing but an ever-decreasing amount of land to provide them on. There is no doubt that Green Belt policy has been overwhelmingly successful, and nobody can deny the vital importance of protecting our environment and ensuring communities can access high quality green open space, but have we become blinded to the reality of what today's Green Belt is, and can we imagine an alternative role?

Could Green Belt policy be more sophisticated? A policy which provides effective protection of land which has genuine environmental or recreational purpose whilst releasing suitable land for much needed homes?

There are already numerous land classifications which Councils could use to provide meaningful protection such as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), National Parks and Metropolitan Open Land. These could be extended, or new classifications created to protect those areas that local people feel were significant to their community.

At the same time Councils would need to remove the disproportionate weight given to the protection of Green Belt land. Of course, we need to protect our green spaces, but this shouldn't mean that low quality land is safeguarded at all costs. We need our Councils to judge land on its suitability in terms of best meeting social, economic and environmental aims.

Housebuilders also have their part to play by delivering high quality developments which provide the range of homes needed in an attractive and sustainable environment which are seen to provide tangible benefits to both existing and future communities.

It's time for a well-informed debate on the subject, but we need to avoid assuming the standard positions of Green Belt protection verses housing development. There is an alternative way, but it will require a significant change in policy from Central Government. Despite the commitment by all political parties to resolve the housing crisis, a fundamental reform to the Green Belt will require political courage.

Could your land have development potential?  
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