



Conflict in the Green Belt

During the 1990s England's countryside has suffered a series of controversies and setbacks : rural blight - including declining services and employment opportunities, rural depopulation, declining farm prices, second homes, CAP induced agricultural intensification and consequent habitat destruction, BSE, anti-blood sports campaigns, increasing rural recreation and tourism, and now increasing counterurbanisation and green belt development.

Green belts were first introduced in 1955 under the provisions of The Town and Country Planning Act, 1947. The Act was a comprehensive instrument for controlling and directing development throughout Great Britain including all building, mining and quarrying operations and outdoor advertising, and the preservation of trees and woodland. Green belts are areas of land surrounding cities and conurbations implemented to:

- check city sprawl
- protect the countryside
- prevent neighbouring towns merging into conurbations
- preserve historic towns
- assist in urban regeneration by focusing development within urban boundaries

Currently the UK's 14 green belts total 4.5 million hectares, which represents approximately 35% of the country (Fig 1 and Table 1).

Fig 1. England's Green Belts

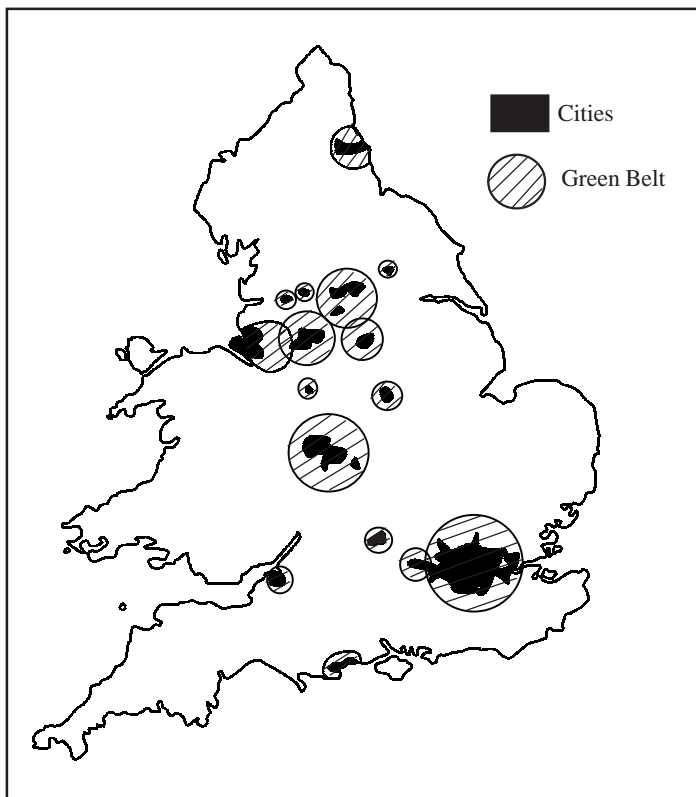


Table 1. Area of Green Belt

England	Size (hectares)
Tyne and Wear	200 000
Lancaster and Fylde Coast	5 750
York	50 000
South and West Yorkshire	800 000
Greater Manchester, Central Lancs., Merseyside and Wirral	750 000
Stoke on Trent	125 000
Nottingham, Derby	200 000
Burton-Swadlingcoat	2 000
West Midlands	26 500
Cambridge	26 500
Gloucester, Cheltenham	20 000
Oxford	100 000
London	1 200 000
Avon	220 000
Total in England	4 495 300

Threats to the Green Belt

Threats to the green belt include :

- mining and quarrying operations
- industries such as business and science parks seeking green field sites
- new roads
- out-of-town shopping centres
- golf courses and other recreational facilities
- new housing.

In 1995 the government projected that an additional 4.4 million new dwellings would be needed between 1991 and 2016. This figure has since been revised upwards to over 5 million of which approximately 1 million has already been built.

The government's policy is outlined in the 'Planning Policy Guidance Note 3 Housing', published March 1999. It "intends that everyone should have the opportunity of a decent home . . . and that housing should not be used to reinforce social distinctions". "New housing should improve the quality of urban life . . . promoting urban renaissance".

The government is committed to "making efficient use of urban land" and "adopting a sequential approach to determine the phased release of land". However, "The Government accepts that where in the past Green Belt boundaries have been tightly drawn, there may be a case for reviewing the boundaries and planning for development . . ." and "is not against new settlements", though new settlements will "not be acceptable if their principal function is as a dormitory of an existing larger settlement".

Originally the government said that 50% of the required housing would be built on greenfield sites and 50% on brownfield sites (derelict urban land, land to be cleared of unfit houses or redundant factory or service sites). These proportions were later altered to 40% greenfield and 60% brownfield.

Why are so many new houses needed ?

Currently, 160,000 people move into our cities per year compared with 250,000 emigrants, resulting in a net gain in the countryside of only 90,000. So many new dwellings are required because:

- ageing/deteriorating housing stock
- commercial or industrial units replacing houses during urban renewal
- counterurbanisation
- young people leaving home earlier
- people living longer
- rising divorce rate
- trend to marry later

4/5s of the new households are predicted to be for single people.

Table 1. Planned New Housing Provision in England

Region	New Dwellings (1991 - 2011)
Northern	86,000
Yorkshire	310,000
Northwest	310,000
East Midlands	338,000
West Midlands	306,000
East Anglia	205,000
Southeast	855,000
Southwest	438,000

Greatest pressure on the green belt will be south of a line drawn from the Wash to the Bristol Channel where 59% of the new housing stock will be built. The Southeast region alone will have to find space for 595,000 more houses by 2006 and a further projected 316,000 by 20016. Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions predicted urban sprawl rates for 1991-2016 (business as usual projection) places Cambridgeshire at the forefront of green belt conflict with 21.3%, then Somerset 20.8% and Devon 20.7%.

The Case for Building on Greenfield Sites

Developers argue that more housing should be built outside urban areas and that the dangers to the countryside are exaggerated:

- only 11% of Britain is urbanised, if all new dwellings were built in the countryside 87.5% would remain unurbanised
- quality of life is higher in rural areas
- restrictions on developing greenfield sites makes building houses in the city more expensive, especially for the less well-off who remain
- greenfield sites do not need costly cleaning up of industrial contamination, nor do they attract VAT thus housing is cheaper
- parts of the country with most derelict land are not where demand for new housing is greatest
- northwest and northeast regions have over 8,500 hectares of derelict urban land but little pressure for new housing.

The Case for Building on Brownfield Sites

Many people, including architects, planners and environmentalists, believe we should encourage house-building on recycled land and discourage endless urban sprawl. This would protect the countryside, help regenerate inner cities and reduce car dependency:

- Friends of the Earth believes 75% of the new homes needed should be provided within existing towns and cities, even if this figure was only 60% the number of new houses built in the countryside would equal ten cities the size of Bristol
- opposition to new house-building is intense among rural communities who fear the character of the countryside is changing forever
- planning for new housing is deeply flawed, there is no assessment of how many homes an area can take, or the environmental impact of new housing
- there are major uncertainties in household projections, household size is predicted to fall to 2.17 by 2016, if the figure varied by 0.1 (to 2.27), approx one million fewer households would form
- Government figures suggest that over 169,000 hectares of countryside will fall between 1991-2016 - greater than the entire area of Surrey, up to two million houses could be built on greenfields - equivalent to four new cities the size of Birmingham
- there are many opportunities for providing new homes in urban areas (Table 2)

Table 2. New homes in urban areas

Urban Capacity Option	Additional homes
Reduced vacancy rates	325000
Conversions to flats	380000
Commercial space & LOTS	80000
Building on recycled land	2217000
Planned regeneration	246000
Under-used car parks	160000
Total [1]	3408000

[1] Approximately 850000 homes have already been built from 1991-1998

Environmental Impacts of Green Belt Development

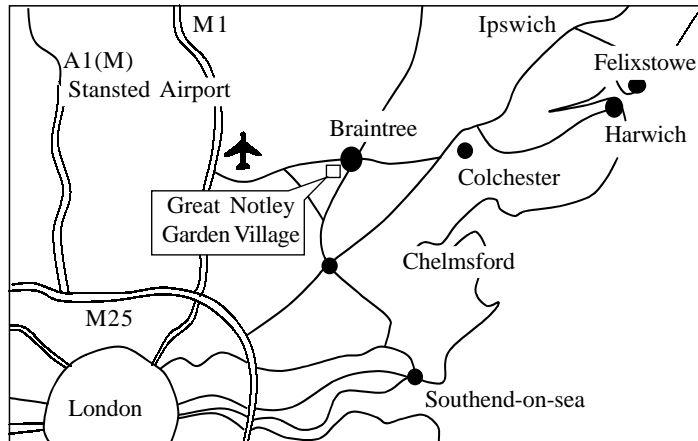
Green belt development will inevitably lead to further decline of the countryside and environmental degradation :

- new housing means new shopping centres, schools, roads etc. leading to habitat fragmentation and loss of biodiversity
- 21% hedgerows lost between 1984-1990
- over half the new housing (2.3 million homes) is planned for the worst drought-hit regions, the Southeast and East
- energy use in houses already accounts for 30% of our total energy consumption, this will increase
- new green belt residents will import more traffic pollution into the countryside
- mining and quarrying for building materials will result in further land take
- since 1945 over 80% of chalk and limestone meadows have been lost
- 50% of ponds have been lost since 1945
- the Institute of Terrestrial Ecology surveyed 1,000 sites in 1978 and 1990 and recorded 14% fall in woodland wildlife species, 13% in meadowland, 13% in downland
- research by the British Trust for Ornithology has revealed dramatic declines in rural bird populations in the last 25 years : skylark down 62%, grey partridge 86%, lapwing 55%
- diversion of Long Distance Footpaths, green lanes and public rights of way
- recreational activities will be forced deeper into pristine and more fragile countryside.

The Future of Green Belt Development ?

In March 1993, Countryside Properties PLC announced plans to convert 187 hectares of rural land into a new, completely detached, 'countryside village' called the Great Notley Garden Village (Fig 4).

Fig 4.



Prior to the development the site had been used for intensive arable farming. The only natural features being a two hectare deciduous wood and watercourses.

Construction is scheduled for completion in 2007 and will include three hamlets, a Tesco superstore, community centre, doctor's surgery, nursery, public house, cricket green, and play areas for children. The village will provide 2,000 homes and 37,000 square metres of business space.

There has been little environmental opposition since the company has announced its intention to 'improve the quality of the natural environment' by : planting over one million trees and shrubs, landscaping 73 hectares, creating new village ponds whilst retaining existing ones, retaining and repairing all existing ditches and hedgerows to create wildlife corridors, managing the 2 hectare Cuckoo Wood, laying a large village green and planting a 40 hectare country park. The country park will feature large tracts of broadleaved woodland, 2 new lakes - one with a reed bed to filter the water, and an amphitheatre for open-air concerts and fairs created from subsoil excavated when building the bypass which has saved more than 15,000 return journeys by 20-tonne lorries.

Only time and ongoing environmental monitoring will ascertain whether the venture is deemed a success.

Conclusion

There is clearly a need to provide substantial numbers of new dwellings. The real issue is where these homes will be located. Further greenfield developments would mean more suburbanisation, loss of countryside, congestion and car dependency. Or we could choose urban renaissance, protecting the countryside, and better public transport.

Friends of the Earth is calling for specific policies :

Planning policies for regeneration :

- 75% of new housing to be provided within existing urban areas, with regional targets as appropriate;
- a flexible approach to housing numbers, decided at local not central government level;
- a presumption against greenfield development, favouring recycled urban land through a sequential and phased approach to release of land;
- planning policies to encourage more medium density housing, especially around public transport nodes;
- reduced car parking provision for new houses, with maximum rather than minimum standards.

Fiscal policies for regeneration :

- a greenfield tax or similar levy;
- VAT to be harmonised between newbuild and restoration;
- grants for conversion of urban land, plus new programmes for home improvement;
- taxation of car parking spaces, especially private non-residential;
- end Council Tax rebate on empty homes.

In the meantime, the government should ensure less valuable greenfield sites are used first; offer more protection for important green belt land such as SSSIs, AONBs, NNRs, ESAs, country parks and community forests; and strengthen protective legislation and the powers of government bodies such as the Countryside Agency.

Case Study Vodafone at Newbury

Vodafone is a major employer in Newbury, providing 3 000 jobs and putting £100 million into the community each year. It is set to expand further over the next few years, expanding its work force by almost 50%. Vodafone started on a very small scale, and its expansion has left its operations scattered over 57 properties within the town.

Two years ago, the company applied for planning permission to build seven linked buildings covering 50 000 square feet on a greenfield site north of the town. The council originally set three conditions for the acceptance of the application: the provision of a £10 million "green transport" scheme to discourage employees from driving to work, a commitment to at least 10 years on the site and a donation of £5 million towards local housing. Although Vodafone has complied with the first two, it has rejected the third, saying it would be interpreted as a bribe.

Vodafone has now threatened to leave the town if planning permission was not granted, taking with it the jobs and community investment. Councillors then readily granted permission, fearing the economic effects of the firm leaving. Critics say that Vodafone have "put a gun to the council's head" to get its own way. They point out that 45% of the company's employees do not even live locally, and that Newbury's very low 1.2% unemployment rate shows that the jobs are not really needed. The plan is now to go before the Department for the Environment; opponents of the scheme are hoping for a public enquiry.

Exam Hints

A topical issue likely to be tested by comprehension question or essay. Be sure you know which legislation and government organisations protect green belts and the various types of landscape conservation.

Essay titles:

1. With reference to specific examples outline the environmental impacts of green belt development.
2. What strategies are available to central and local governments wishing to limit green belt development ?

Acknowledgements;

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