

**JANUARY 2013**

**GREEN BELT**

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DEBATING MATTERS  
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ON THE GREEN BELT”**

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## KEY TERMS

Green Belt

# INTRODUCTION

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A green belt is an area surrounding a town or city where building development is restricted. The stated aim of green belt policy is to restrict the sprawl of built up areas on to previously undeveloped land and to preserve the character of historic towns [Ref: [DEFRA](#)]. The first green belts were introduced in the 1950s following the passing of the Town and Country Planning Act in 1947. Today, there are 14 green belts around most of England's bigger cities and amount to 1.65 million hectares, about 13 per cent of the country [Ref: [Economist](#)]. 'Special areas of conservation', 'sites of special scientific interest' and 'areas of outstanding natural beauty' account for a further 29.8 per cent of the country where development is restricted [Ref: [bshf](#)]. A new report by the think-tank Policy Exchange says that by contrast, "developed" land, which includes parks, allotments, golf courses and gardens as well as concrete, covers just 10.6% of England and they suggest relaxing the rules on new development [Ref: [Policy Exchange](#)]. Those who see problems with green belts point to London as an example. They argue that the 40-mile wide green belt around London strangles the life out of the capital - responsible for restricting economic growth, for the high cost of housing, and for encouraging the destruction of valuable green space within cities, such as playing fields, allotments and gardens. [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. Others say that green belts have been a success, saving the English countryside from being disfigured by unthinking development. They are concerned that short-term economic interests will lead us to desecrating our natural heritage and endangering our long-term wellbeing [Ref: [Independent](#)].

### Housing Crisis

House prices in the UK have almost doubled in the last decade and with prices now approaching eight times the average wage [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. Millions of people sit on council housing registers waiting for housing, and the age at which people buy their first home is rising – restricting opportunities for young people [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. Some have estimated that 232,000 new homes need to be built each year in England just to replace Britain's ageing housing stock before we even consider building the extra homes people now need [Ref: [spiked](#)]. Given that over 90% of the UK population now live in cities, many ask how this problem will be tackled unless cities are allowed to expand. Others also argue that we have a romantic view of the green belts – that, rather than being chosen for its beauty or environmental qualities, much of it is used for intensive farming and light industry [Ref: [Economist](#)]. Since 2010, planning consents approvals have fallen by 24% - building more houses would help address homelessness, push down rents and house prices, and provide jobs for thousands who are currently on the dole [Ref: [National Housing Federation](#)]. Freeing up just 1% of green belt land alone could provide space for 300,000 new homes.

### Access to green spaces

Opponents of relaxing regulations on green belt development counter that the countryside surrounding cities is a vital asset that gives city dwellers access to green open space, helps retain the unique character of cities, towns and villages, and is valuable and important farming land [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. They also point out the dangers flooding poses to housing built on new

land – estimating that half of all houses built in Britain since WWII have been built on land vulnerable to flooding. Concreting over the countryside only risks exacerbating the problem [Ref: [Telegraph](#)]. Expanses of green space have environmental benefits, counteracting the 'heat sinks' of cities and enabling local food to be grown, thus reducing food miles. It is not green belts which are the cause of housing problems, they argue, but rather economic issues which are to blame [Ref: [Telegraph](#)].

### Building on the brownfield

Protectors of the green belt don't deny that new housing is not needed. Instead, they recommend building on "brownfield" land – building on previously used, now derelict land within cities. According to the Government's own National Land Use Database, this brownfield land has space for over 1.5 million new dwellings [Ref: [CPRE](#)]. This isn't always in the right place though – London needs approximately 1 million new homes to meet the demands of its growing population as well as addressing a backlog, yet only has 4,000 hectares of brownfield land – enough to meet around a fifth of this demand [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. Others look to addressing the demand side of housing – immigration puts pressure on housing stock and lower levels would reduce the need for so many new houses [Ref: [Daily Mail](#)]. Others point to elderly couples living alone in large family houses, and that encouraging them to downsize could free up housing for families [Ref: [BBC News](#)]. But critics of existing planning processes point to the severe restrictions home owners face when they are prevented from extending their homes on land they already own. These existing restrictions do not protect the countryside, it's argued, and when people have been made to apply for

## THE GREEN BELT DEBATE IN CONTEXT CONTINUED...

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retrospective permission for a child's Wendy House in the back garden [Ref: [Daily Mail](#)] is it now time to review Green Belt restrictions?



## ESSENTIAL READING

Green Belt: Under Renewed Threat?

*Campaign to Protect Rural England* August 2012

Home is where the money is

*Economist* 30 June 2012

### FOR

Shire Tories and greens are denying Brits homes

James Heartfield *spiked* 20 September 2012

Belt too tight

*Economist* 8 September 2012

The housing crisis: a nightmare caused by our sanctified suburban dreams

Ian Birrell *Guardian* 20 August 2012

London's Green belt: the forgotten strangler of the capital

Colin Wiles *Guardian* 16 May 2012

### AGAINST

The bulldozers are coming for the Green Belt

Harry Wallop *Telegraph* 10 September 2012

Relaxing Planning Laws Will Damage British Housing

Marton Roberts *Huffington Post* 7 September 2012

The Government must stop the insults, and listen to our concerns

Fiona Reynolds *Telegraph* 3 September 2011

We must protect England's green belts

Oliver Hilliam *Guardian* 28 July 2010

### IN DEPTH

When young people buy their own homes, they feel like citizens with a stake in society

Nick Pearce *Observer* 9 December 2012

Anger over plans to build on greenbelt

Jim Pickard *Financial Times* 23 September 2012

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## BACKGROUNDERS

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Build more houses on the countryside? I've got a better plan

Michelle Hanson *Guardian* 11 December 2012

In Britain, everyone has a place in the country

Roger Scruton *Telegraph* 1 December 2012

How permanent is your Green Belt?

Tim Stansfeld *Planning* 27 November 2012

Pay residents to accept building on Green Belt

Tim Ross *Telegraph* 13 September 2012

Govt need to U-turn on planning

Craig Bennett *Politics.co.uk* 9 September 2012

Ending Expensive Social Tenancies: Fairness, higher growth and more homes

Alex Morton *Policy Exchange* 20 August 2012

The green belt isn't as green and pleasant as you'd think

Isabel Hardman *Spectator* 17 August 2012

Protect our green and pleasant land

*Independent* 21 March 2012

Planning in a free society

*Adam Smith Institute* 8 March 2012

Britain needs more houses, but it doesn't need them everywhere

Andrew Carter *Centre for Cities* 23 January 2012

What would Britain look like without a green belt?

*BBC News* 15 September 2011

Build on the green belt, and build now UK land directory

*Land Directory*

Suburbia has never had a good reputation

Tim Leunig *Inside Housing*

## ORGANISATIONS

Campaign for the Protection of Rural England

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs  
(DEFRA)

Home Builders Federation

## IN THE NEWS

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Northern leg of HS2 'will slice through north Warwickshire country parks'

*Coventry Telegraph* 29 January 2013

Anger over plans to develop Reigate green belt

*Surrey Today* 23 January 2013

Archbishop of Canterbury asked to save greenbelt land

*BBC News* 10 January 2013

UK needs more houses not higher benefits, thinktank says

*Guardian* 22 December 2012

Countryside threatened by new planning rules

*Telegraph* 4 November 2012

Free up green-belt land for new housing, says Policy Exchange

*Guardian* 13 September 2012

We need to build houses on a third more land, says planning minister

*Guardian* 20 August 2012

Radical plan to create new Midlands city on green belt land to cope with population growth

*Daily Mail* 26 March 2012

Hands off our land: Build on the greenbelt says Cameron  
thinktank

*Telegraph* 23 November 2011

750,000 homes to be built on England's Green Belt

*Telegraph* 13 August 2011



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