

MAY 2017

GREEN BELT

**ANWAR
ODURO-KWARTENG**



DEBATING MATTERS
TOPIC
GUIDES

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MOTION:

**“WE SHOULD BUILD
ON THE GREEN BELT”**

ABOUT DEBATING MATTERS

Debating Matters because ideas matter. This is the premise of the Institute of Ideas Debating Matters Competition for sixth form students which emphasises substance, not just style, and the importance of taking ideas seriously. Debating Matters presents schools with an innovative and engaging approach to debating, where the real-world debates and a challenging format, including panel judges who engage with the students, appeal to students from a wide range of backgrounds, including schools with a long tradition of debating and those with none.

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KEY TERMS

[Brownfield](#)

[Green belt](#)

[Urban sprawl](#)

INTRODUCTION

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For several years, there has been an ongoing debate about the merits of the green belt [Ref: [Wikipedia](#)] in the UK, with supporters and critics clashing over its relevance and necessity in the 21st century. The issue has come to a head more recently however, with the government publishing its new housing White Paper in February [Ref: [Gov.UK](#)], with estimates suggesting that there have only been an average of 160,000 homes built per year in the UK since the 1970's – compared to the more than 275,000 required to keep up with population growth and under supply [Ref: [Gov.UK](#)]. This has led to talk of a housing crisis, with the number of houses available, and the affordability of homes in the UK hitting the headlines [Ref: [Telegraph](#)], leading many to argue that the solution is to build on the green belt [Ref: [spiked](#)]. For supporters, building on the green belt would allow for new towns to be built [Ref: [Guardian](#)], and encourage more radical thinking on how our existing cities are constituted, permitting them to expand and become better places to live. Moreover, they argue that building on the green belt is the most sensible way to alleviate the housing crisis, because: “For too long governments have viewed the green belt as sacrosanct, but with such limited housing supply, action on the green belt is vital.” [Ref: [Huffington Post](#)] Critics though, claim that the green belt is an important planning mechanism that prevents urban sprawl [Ref: [Encyclopaedia Britannica](#)], and preserves the countryside, with Conservative MP Andrew Mitchell warning that: “The green belt was bequeathed to us by past generations, and we should take extraordinary care before allowing it to disappear under bricks and mortar. Once built on, it can never be restored.” [Ref: [Daily Mail](#)] They are adamant that building on the green belt is not the answer, with other suggestions mooted, such as building on previously used brown field land [Ref: [Collins Dictionary](#)], and increasing the housing density in towns and cities [Ref: [Evening Standard](#)]. Considering the competing arguments, should we build on the green belt, or would this irreversibly damage the countryside and do little to solve the housebuilding shortfall?



THE GREEN BELT DEBATE IN CONTEXT

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What is the green belt?

First formally proposed as a Metropolitan Green Belt surrounding London in 1935, the subsequent Town and Country Planning Act of 1947 broadened the remit, to allow local authorities around the country to formally designate their own areas of green belt land [Ref: [Wikipedia](#)]. At its core, green belt policy was conceived to control urban sprawl by ensuring that towns and cities had a ring of countryside where agriculture, forestry and wildlife could flourish, and that city dwellers could easily access [Ref: [Wikipedia](#)]. Moreover, in terms of town planning, the green belt was seen as a way to, “preserve the unique characters of historic towns, safeguard the countryside from development, and encourage the regeneration and reuse of urban land” [Ref: [Independent](#)]. However, the idea of a green belt goes back to the Victorian era when social reformer Ebenezer Howard suggested the idea of a ‘Garden City’, which would provide the benefits of living in the city, but have countryside nearby to offer tranquillity and fresh air for families [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. But recently, the nature of the green belt has come under increasing pressure from critics who argue that it stifles our ability to build vital infrastructure, such as housing. With this backdrop, the debate hinges on what should be done to build the homes and infrastructure that commentators on both sides admit we need, and what we want our cities, towns and countryside to look like in the future.

Loosen the green belt

Critics suggest that there are two main reasons why we should build on the green belt. Firstly, they challenge the picture often painted by advocates, of the green belt being composed of stunning, rolling countryside and abundant wildlife, and instead, like writer Paul Simons, they argue that: “Much of the green belt is not even green – 18% is classed as ‘neglected’ with derelict buildings, rubbish, electricity pylons and other blots on the landscape.” [Ref: [Guardian](#)] He disagrees with the entire premise of the green belt as having anything to do with the environment or preserving the countryside, claiming that, “the original idea of the green belts was to prevent urban sprawl, not for nature conservation or even beautiful landscapes”, adding that, “only 45% is green and much of it is monoculture farmland too harsh for most wild plants to survive.” [Ref: [Guardian](#)] Secondly, critics point to the fact that we are simply not building enough homes in the UK to cope with demand, meaning that property prices keep rising for buyers and renters, making affordable homes increasingly difficult to find, especially in the South East [Ref: [Telegraph](#)]. They also note how little of the UK is actually built on, and reject the idea that there are small pockets of countryside which must be protected at all costs - as urbanised zones make up only 9.9% of England with 4.2% classed as built up areas, whereas green belts make up more than 12.4% [Ref: [London First](#)]. As such, it is estimated that by building on just 5.2% of existing green belt land around cities, 1.4 million new homes could be built [Ref: [Huffington Post](#)], and with London’s green belt three times the size of the city itself, such a move could have a huge impact on the supply of homes for ordinary families [Ref: [Huffington Post](#)]. For some, a more ambitious, radical and



THE GREEN BELT DEBATE IN CONTEXT CONTINUED...

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utopian approach to city planning is what is required, with the ability to expand into the green belt key to this vision. James Heartfield says that: “The city has to be able to breathe. Instead of squeezing more flats into every space that becomes available... London needs more green space in its centre, and wider streets.” [Ref: [spiked](#)] He envisions a future where: “If the green belt was built on, and the city was allowed to grow into the suburbs, all of us could lead grander, freer lives” [Ref: [spiked](#)]. Others point to the success of the original garden cities of Welwyn and Letchworth, along with new towns such as Milton Keynes [Ref: [Wikipedia](#)], as a template for how new towns can be built successfully in the countryside [Ref: [Guardian](#)].

Our green and pleasant land

With proposals put forward to build as many as 360,000 new homes in 14 new garden villages on green belt across the country [Ref: [Guardian](#)], including potentially up to 50,000 new homes around Manchester [Ref: [Guardian](#)], the green belt issue has been brought into sharp relief for supporters. For some such as Paul Bryson, “the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act is... the most intelligent, far sighted, thrillingly and self-evidently successful land management policy any nation has ever devised.” [Ref: [The Times](#)] He marvels at the tranquillity that the countryside surrounding cities offers, and challenges the idea offered by critics, that the green belt, “isn’t actually all that special, that much of the land is scrubby and degraded” [Ref: [The Times](#)], arguing instead that, “green belts in England contain 30,000 kilometres of footpaths and other rights of way, 220,000 hectares of woodland, 250,000 hectares of top quality farmland, and 89,000 hectares of Sites of Special Interest.” [Ref: [The Times](#)]

In terms of building, others claim that we should prioritise urban regeneration, as well as the development of brownfield land [Ref: [Collins Dictionary](#)] if we need to build more homes. Brownfield sites denote derelict land which was once used for industrial or commercial purposes, but which now lie dormant, and estimates suggest that redevelopment of these sites alone, could provide at least 1.1 million homes across the country [Ref: [Telegraph](#)]. Similarly, urban regeneration is a priority for others, and it is proposed that local councils should be granted the power to compulsorily purchase tired, old and unused high streets and retail parks, and turn them into housing [Ref: [The Times](#)]. Another key concern with building on the green belt is urban sprawl [Ref: [Encyclopaedia Britannica](#)], with critics claiming that the global trend of expanding cities into the countryside will have huge environmental effects in the long term [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. They warn that: “To live in sprawl means driving to work, driving to get dinner, driving to meet your friends. It means congestion... and isolation due to the lack of the perks of a compact city life.” [Ref: [Guardian](#)] A radical alternative, argues Simon Jenkins, is that we increase the housing density within our cities, rather than building on surrounding green belt land. He argues that compared to cities such as Madrid, Athens, New York or Berlin, London is leafy and low rise, and notes that: “Inner Paris has a population density of 20,000 people per square kilometre, four times London’s.” [Ref: [Evening Standard](#)] So, should we build on the green belt?



ESSENTIAL READING

[Is it time to rethink Britain's green belt?](#)

Rowan Moore *Guardian* 19 October 2014

[The garden city movement: from Ebenezer to Ebbsfleet](#)

Oliver Wainwright *Guardian* 17 March 2014

FOR

[Green belt is more likely to be wasteland than a slice of countryside](#)

Paul Simons *Guardian* 22 February 2017

[For a London a hundred miles wide](#)

James Heartfield *spiked* 27 April 2016

[We must build on the green belt to end this housing crisis](#)

Juliet Samuel *Telegraph* 20 April 2016

[We've got to dig up the green belt to build more homes](#)

Tim Montgomery *The Times* 25 September 2015

AGAINST

[Sajid Javid pledged the green belt was sacrosanct. To betray that would be sheer vandalism](#)

Daily Mail 5 February 2017

[The green belt must not be sacrificed for housing](#)

Telegraph 4 February 2017

[We need to abandon the delusion that it's the green belt standing in the way of building more houses](#)

Emma Bridgewater *Telegraph* 3 February 2017

[The myth of the housing crisis](#)

Simon Jenkins *Spectator* 28 February 2015

IN DEPTH

[Housing White Paper](#)

Department for communities and local government *Gov.UK*
7 February 2017

[The green belt, a place for Londoners?](#)

London First January 2015

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BACKGROUNDERS

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[Where is the world's most sprawling city?](#)

Douglas Murray *Guardian* 19 April 2017

[Britain's delusions about the green belt cause untold misery](#)

Economist 11 February 2017

[The green belt is strangling our towns and cities](#)

James Heartfield *spiked* 10 February 2017

[Government has missed an opportunity to loosen the green belt](#)

Ben Rochelle *Huffington Post* 10 February 2017

[Let's make the best of the homes we have](#)

Alice Thomson *The Times* 8 February 2017

[Should Britain build on its green spaces to solve the housing crisis?](#)

Alister Scott *Independent* 8 February 2017

[The curse of urban sprawl: how cities grow, and why this has to change](#)

Mark Swilling *Guardian* 12 July 2016

[Brownfield land won't be enough to solve London housing crisis](#)

Sam Bowman *Londonist* January 2016

[Forget new homes, we are not making the most of what we have](#)

Simon Jenkins *Evening Standard* 6 October 2015

[Why the green belt matters](#)

Bill Bryson *The Times* 30 September 2015

[Britain's housing crisis: are garden cities the answer?](#)

Patrick Barkham *Guardian* 1 October 2014

[Build new homes on brownfield land](#)

Eric Pickles *Telegraph* 13 June 2014

[Six reasons why we should build on the green belt](#)

Colin Wiles *Guardian* 21 May 2014

[The green belt sacred cow: it pens in the poor for no environmental gain](#)

Paul Cheshire *City A.M* 11 November 2013

[High rise living is the only way to protect the green belt](#)

Hannah Fearn *Guardian* 13 September 2013

[Protect our green and pleasant land](#)

Independent 21 March 2012

[Milton Keynes](#)

Wikipedia



IN THE NEWS

[House price growth hits 12 year high in some northern cities](#)

Telegraph 28 April 2017

[Build on the green belt to boost the economy, OECD tells Britain](#)

Telegraph 17 March 2017

[Loophole opens way for green belt homes](#)

The Times 13 February 2017

[Housing minister vows building on green belt land is not the way to solve the shortage of homes](#)

Evening Standard 5 February 2017

[PM to reaffirm green belt pledge despite plans to ramp up house building](#)

Guardian 5 February 2017

[Housing minister vows building on green belt land is not the way to solve shortage of homes](#)

Evening Standard 5 February 2017

[Ministers shelve plans to bulldoze the green belt](#)

Daily Mail 21 January 2017

[English green belt set to get 360000 new homes](#)

Guardian 15 January 2017

[Fourteen garden villages to be built in England totalling 48,000 homes](#)

Guardian 2 January 2017

[Theresa May faces forceful Tory opposition over plans to build on the Green belt](#)

Huffington Post 13 December 2016

[Housing crisis: ministers to urge councils to build on green belt land](#)

Telegraph 26 November 2016

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[Government cuts funding for making brownfield sites suitable for new homes](#)

Guardian 2 June 2016

[New homes eroding green belt 'at fastest rate for 20 years'](#)

Guardian 25 April 2016

[Build on the green belt to solve housing crisis, say developers](#)

Independent 10 July 2015

[Labour architect peer says building on green belt 'a ridiculous idea'](#)

Guardian 8 September 2014

[Why Surrey has more land for golf courses than for homes](#)

Guardian 26 April 2014

[Sprawl threatens to engulf England's heart](#)

Telegraph 25 November 2012

ORGANISATIONS

[Campaign to Protect Rural England](#)



ADVICE FOR DEBATING MATTERS

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FOR STUDENTS

READ EVERYTHING

In the Topic Guide and in the news - not just your side of the argument either.

STATISTICS ARE GOOD BUT.....

Your opponents will have their own too. They'll support your points but they aren't a substitute for them.

BE BOLD

Get straight to the point but don't rush into things: make sure you aren't falling back on earlier assertions because interpreting a debate too narrowly might show a lack of understanding or confidence.

DON'T BACK DOWN

Try to take your case to its logical conclusion before trying to seem 'balanced' - your ability to challenge fundamental principles will be rewarded - even if you personally disagree with your arguments.

DON'T PANIC

Never assume you've lost because every question is an opportunity to explain what you know. Don't try to answer every question but don't avoid the tough ones either.

FOR TEACHERS

Hoping to start a debating club? Looking for ways to give your debaters more experience? Debating Matters have a wide range of resources to help develop a culture of debate in your school and many more Topic Guides like this one to bring out the best in your students. For these and details of how to enter a team for the Debating Matters Competition visit our website, www.debatingmatters.com

FOR JUDGES

Judges are asked to consider whether students have been brave enough to address the difficult questions asked of them. Clever semantics might demonstrate an acrobatic mind but are also likely to hinder a serious discussion by changing the terms and parameters of the debate itself.

Whilst a team might demonstrate considerable knowledge and familiarity with the topic, evading difficult issues and failing to address the main substance of the debate misses the point of the competition. Judges are therefore encouraged to consider how far students have gone in defending their side of the motion, to what extent students have taken up the more challenging parts of the debate and how far the teams were able to respond to and challenge their opponents.

As one judge remarked *'These are not debates won simply by the rather technical rules of schools competitive debating. The challenge is to dig in to the real issues.'* This assessment seems to grasp the point and is worth bearing in mind when sitting on a judging panel.



**“A COMPLEX
WORLD REQUIRES
THE CAPACITY
TO MARSHALL
CHALLENGING IDEAS
AND ARGUMENTS”**

**LORD BOATENG, FORMER BRITISH HIGH
COMMISSIONER TO SOUTH AFRICA**