



The countryside charity
London

Protecting space for sports

The 'golf belt' myth and London's remaining playing fields



Some of the members
of Lewisham Football Club

Mayoral Elections 2024

Protecting London's Green Spaces Part 3

The Campaign to Protect Rural England, London Branch, is a Charitable Incorporated Organisation registered in England number 1200094 and registered charity number 802622

The new London Mayor should refrain from driving speculative purchases of playing fields and golf courses by implying that some bits of protected land are 'worthless'. They should not buy into the 'golf belt' narrative which promotes the false choice: golf or houses.

Summary

Lewisham FC (some members are pictured) now have their home at Bowring Sports Ground. But the ground was out of use for eight years while the owner aimed to profit from it being developed. This was despite it being protected Metropolitan Open Land.

High land values mean developers are buying more and more of London's playing fields for their 'hope value' and taking them out of use in the hope that communities will forget about them.

They then have a vested interest in promoting the lifting of land protections. One way they do this is to create narratives which they feel may gain political traction. These are in fact false narratives: 'we need Green Belt land to solve the housing crisis' (we address this Part 1 of this series); 'much of London's Green Belt is worthless scrubland or 'grey belt' (we address this in Part 2). And, more recently 'London's Green Belt is full of unnecessary numbers of golf courses'.

It clearly suits developers to present a simplistic 'Golf or Houses' narrative. But the reality is golf courses can (if we really feel it necessary, which of course many people do not) be redeployed for other important sports, recreation or environmental uses and, in any event, building on them won't solve the housing crisis (back to Part 1).

The new London Mayor should refrain from driving speculative purchases of playing fields and golf courses by implying that some bits of protected land are 'worthless'. They should not buy into the 'golf belt' narrative which promotes the false choice: golf or houses.

CPRE London October 2023

Playing fields – bought by developers, fenced off and taken out of use

Politicians undermine land protection policies like Green Belt or Metropolitan Open Land by implying the land is somehow worthless. They use terms like ‘grey belt’ and ‘golf belt’ as if to say ‘what a waste of space’. This kind of loose talk drives speculation. It encourages landowners to take sites out of use, leave them idle and hope the community forgets about them, so in future they can apply for, and hopefully gain, planning permission which will deliver substantial profit.

Lewisham FC is a community football club. It now has a lease on the Bowring Sports Ground in Greenwich.

But it wasn’t easy finding a home. Like many London playing fields, the Bowring site had been taken out of use by the owner who, despite the land being protected, wanted to sell it for development so would not make it available for sports. Gaining planning

permission would see the value of the land increase tenfold.

The Bowring site hadn’t been used for eight years, it was overgrown and covered in rubbish. Ultimately planning permission was refused and, following local pressure, the owner issued a lease to Lewisham FC.

This is what happens when developers sense protections like Metropolitan Open Land and Green Belt might be weakened. We know of at least seven other large playing fields which have been fenced off and taken out of use, deliberately neglected to give a sense of worthlessness, and ‘landbanked’ for future profit.

Meanwhile, London’s sports clubs need sites to call home. And speculation driven by loose talk is leading more and more sites to be bought up, taken out of use and left idle.



Arkley Golf Course in Barnet which has been bought by developers U+I who said such acquisitions ‘have potential for longer-term value creation’.*

The myth of the ‘golf belt’ – and how loose talk drives speculation

London’s protected green spaces, Green Belt and Metropolitan Open Land, are home to many sports facilities including football, cricket and rugby pitches and many golf courses. Many of these are on privately owned land, leased to clubs or available for booking. Many are owned by local authorities and leased to clubs or run as bookable pitches.

In recent years, dramatic increases in house prices and land values has made them attractive to speculators: if the protected status is removed it will deliver a huge profit.

Speculators and developers who have bought protected land have a strong interest in getting protections lifted. Part of the way they do this is by creating a narrative which they feel will gain political traction.

- They say “To solve the housing crisis, we must build on the green belt”. Actually, nothing could be further from the truth (see Part 1 of this series) but it’s an easy sell to politicians, and indeed a population, in desperate search of an answer.
- They say Green Belt is unattractive ‘scrub’, or ‘grey belt’, a meaningless term meant to imply Green Belt is worthless (also highly misleading: see Part 2 of this series).
- And more recently they say golf courses are a waste of space which could be better used for housing. Developers see a niche sport and say: “why should a few golfers stop us building houses?”, dubbing London’s Green Belt the ‘golf belt’.

But whatever you may feel about golf, the sites deliver an opportunity for recreation as well as eco-system services which are increasingly important as we tackle the climate and nature crises. If London has fallen out of love with golf, the sites can be redeployed for other types of recreation; or they can be enhanced to deliver new habitat creation targets, for example.

But this is not mentioned. Also not mentioned are: the vast amounts of brownfield land available for house-building; the half a million homes with planning permissions in London not yet built; and the fact that just building homes will not bring house prices down or deliver much-needed social housing.

Proponent of building on golf courses, Russell Curtis, explains how developers buy Green Belt golf course sites to deliver profit: “Arkley Golf Club has recently been acquired by developer U+I having bought the lease from the club for £300,000 (roughly £14,000 per hectare). U+I point out that such acquisitions “have the potential for longer-term value creation” which Curtis says is perhaps “a canny move given the average property prices in this part of Barnet currently exceed £1m.*”

*golfbelt.russellcurtis.co.uk

Candidates: beware of loose talk

The new London Mayor should be under no illusion that mention of Green Belt release creates pressure for lifting of land protections. If election candidates mention such terms as the ‘golf belt’ or imply in other ways that land protections might be lifted, more playing fields and golf courses will be purchased on a speculative basis, developers will apply pressure for their release, and land will sit idle until either planning permission is granted or finally they give up, which might be decades away.

This is very likely to hamper a future Mayor’s ability to promote the use of sites for recreation or to deliver much-needed new habitat and eco-system services which can support adaptation to extreme weather conditions.

The new London Mayor should refrain from driving speculative purchases of playing fields and golf courses. He or she should refrain from implying that some bits of protected land are ‘worthless’. They should not buy into the ‘golf belt’ narrative which promotes the false choice: golf or houses.

Loose talk will just lead to more and more loss of sports facilities.

London’s playing fields: fenced off and out-of-use

Top to bottom: Blackheath Park (Manor Way); Willow Tree Country Club Grounds; Folly Lane Triangle playing fields in Waltham Forest; Barrington Playing Fields; Leigh Road Sports Ground
Opposite: Royston Gardens
Images: Google Maps



The Green Belt: our ‘climate safety belt’

We have previously written about why London’s Green Belt is our [climate safety belt](#), why we need to build ‘[compact cities](#)’ with plenty of parks and green spaces, [10 reasons why higher density living is good for communities](#); and more on [why building on Green Belt won’t solve the housing crisis](#).

CPRE London works to save and promote green spaces in Greater London, and to make our capital city a better, greener and healthier place for everyone to live in, work in, and enjoy.

We are part of the national network of CPRE, the countryside charity, which campaigns to promote, enhance and protect the countryside for everyone’s benefit, wherever they live.

CPRE London
70 Cowcross Street London EC1M 6EJ
T 020 72530300 | E office@cprelondon.org.uk | cprelondon.org.uk
Registered charity 802622
Social Media @CPRELONDON

CPRE London, November 2023