



The countryside charity
London

Think building on Green Belt will solve London's housing crisis? Think again...



Mayoral Elections 2024 Protecting London's Green Spaces Part 1

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 protect London's Green Belt, strictly apply 'brownfield first' policy, be clear that building on Green Belt will not solve London's housing crisis, and instead support housing policies which have a realistic chance of helping the millions of Londoners now facing devastating costs just to put a roof over their head.

Summary

We need to build new homes in London. But building them on Green Belt is unnecessary and the worst possible option for London.

CPRE London wants to preserve our Green Belt because it's purpose is to control urban sprawl (high-carbon, car-dependent and land-hungry as it is) and promote inner city regeneration. In performing these functions, Green Belt also preserves countryside which is increasingly valuable in tackling the climate and nature crises: it is a home for nature, and helps manage rainfall and air temperature during extreme weather events. It's also the countryside on our doorstep for millions of Londoners.

But we also want to see much stronger action on housing and we are increasingly concerned to hear politicians say building on Green Belt will solve the housing crisis, despite this being at best a distraction and at worst highly misleading.

This report explains why it's misleading: land-supply is not the problem. There are half a million homes with planning permission which haven't been built. This line of argument assumes building homes (increasing 'supply') alone brings house prices down: it does not.

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CPRE London October 2023

Ten reasons building on Green Belt won't solve the housing crisis

1. There's no need to release Green Belt. Enough land has been allocated for 20 years of housebuilding. Plenty of space has already been allocated for development. Local authorities are also delivering sites, allocating them in their Local Plans: many more than can possibly ever be built out in the next twenty years. And urban land is constantly recycled: brownfield is not finite. Land supply is not the problem. CPRE research shows there's space for at least 1.2 million homes on previously developed land and this is just the tip of the iceberg. The housing crisis is not a crisis of availability of suitable land.

2. Planning permissions are being granted. The 'planning system' is not the problem. Half a million homes already have planning permission but aren't being built. The LGA has said for years that councils are delivering the planning permissions we need. This is not a crisis of failure to permit development.

3. Simply allocating more land does not translate to more houses being built. It just means developers have a choice of sites. Housebuilding 'highs' were seen in the 1960/70s driven by the programme of social house building. Outside of a programme like this, the number of new homes built is constrained mainly by finance and available skills and workforce; and by the market (how many homes can be sold at the right price).

4. Building on Green Belt won't speed up house building. The speed at which the market delivers is related to what the market thinks it can sell in any one year – as well as constraints like lack of labour and materials and financing.

5. Building on Green Belt won't deliver affordable housing. Green Belt developments are rarely affordable: they deliver expensive 'executive homes' in unsustainable locations, marketed for people on high incomes who are able to afford cars – usually more than one.

6. Building on Green Belt won't bring house prices down. It's frequently argued that the only way to bring down house prices is to increase supply. But housing markets are more complex and often regulated for this reason. 'Supply and demand' economics are used – saying increasing supply is the answer to the housing crisis. But if demand stays high, for example, the impact is negligible. Private rents and house prices remain stubbornly high.

7. Building on Green Belt will lead to urban sprawl. Urban sprawl is high-carbon development, car-dependent development – when what we really need is compact cities, where people can live near to amenities, where older people and people on low incomes are not isolated by lack of public transport, where teenagers and even younger children can get about independently, where we do not face air pollution, inactivity-related health problems, congestion, noise and road danger – these are all the consequences of urban sprawl.

[Building near to train stations in the Green Belt isn't an answer. It's often said 'Building around train stations is sustainable from a transport point of view.' But 2015 RTP1 research showed in reality most journeys are not made on radial rail routes: the majority of trips e.g. to schools, shops, even to work, are not made on the one available rail route. See also CPRE London's publication *Driving in Circles: traffic growth in London's Green Belt.*]

8. Building on Green Belt will mean that urban regeneration opportunities are ignored. The fifth purpose of Green Belt policy is "to assist in urban regeneration, by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land." Rather than develop on our greenfield land, regenerating previously developed land and buildings, often left neglected and decaying anyway, can instead breathe new life into our towns and cities, and provide places to call home near to where we live and work.

9. Building on Green Belt will lead to loss of countryside which many of us value – and which is now increasingly needed to plant forests, to adapt to and mitigate climate change, to grow food locally to cities, to help manage rainfall, to moderate the urban heat island effect, to provide habitat to address species decline, for recreation – and on and on.

10. Green Belt can be enhanced. Politicians use the term 'grey belt' implying much of the Green Belt is worthless in green terms but even where Green Belt is unattractive 'scrub land' (an argument often used to say green belt should be developed), there is no reason it can't be restored and made more useful and attractive. In fact, the National Planning Policy Framework says: "Once Green Belts have been defined, local planning authorities should plan positively to enhance their beneficial use". And the reality is we need to make better use of Green Belt land for adapting to climate change, securing nature's recovery and food security. (And, for what it's worth, 'scrub land' is actually an important type of habitat.)

Focusing on Green Belt is a red herring, a distraction

The reality is, talking about building on Green Belt as a means to solve the housing crisis is a red herring. It's a distraction. Worse, it is misleading, and drives speculation and landbanking which forces prices up further.

Why do politicians focus on housing supply (building more homes) as a way to manage house prices down? This has been driven politically by successive Government's unwilling to tackle the more difficult aspects of housing policy like the need to end Right-to-Buy or fund social housing. This overly simplistic response has been enabled by substantial financial gain for particular interests, not least one sector of voters.

Why the focus on Green Belt?
Speculators and developers buy protected land because it's worth ten times more with planning permission. To gain planning permission, they need political support and part of the way they do this is to create a narrative which they feel will gain political traction, including with voters. The 'build on Green Belt to solve the housing crisis' story is one such narrative. When politicians buy into this narrative and vocally support building on Green Belt, it fuels a vicious circle and more land is purchased for its 'hope value'... Meanwhile the housing crisis gets worse.

So what should we be doing to solve the housing crisis?

To be clear, we strongly agree that we need to build new homes. However, insofar as the crisis is one of affordability - we challenge the proposition that 'increasing supply' alone will bring costs down (rental or house prices): housing markets are more complex.

For one thing, if supply increases but demand keeps up or even outpaces supply, 'supply and demand' economics don't work. But there are other things which drive up the cost of housing: availability and cost of credit are also important in driving prices up. Supply alone has manifestly solved nothing while cheap credit and schemes like 'help to buy' have in fact propped prices up.

- Should we be talking about how to ensure social housing is actually available to people who need it?
- Should we end the Right to Buy in England, like they did in Scotland in 2016 and Wales in 2019? The Chartered Institute of Housing has called the policy a strategic failure which has led to the loss of over 300,000 council homes in London with only a small proportion replaced.
- Should councils have more financial freedoms and powers to build new council homes (homes for social rent)?
- Should we talk about how to make private rents affordable: should we consider rent caps, which the current London Mayor has called for?
- Should politicians agree to stop fueling house prices by subsidising house-buying with "help-to-buy" schemes?
- Should there be a real effort to actually level up between the north and south of the country to take the heat out of house prices in the south?

- Should we bring empty homes into use, controlling foreign investment like in New Zealand, or restricting AirBnB as in New York?
- Should the current land value capture mechanism (S106 and CIL) be reformed, since they are tinkering around the edges of what is actually needed to capture land value and stop the accruing of money at the land value level?

Probably some of these policies might actually help. But building on Green Belt will not.

In the meantime... The new London Mayor needs to make sure 'brownfield first' policy is strictly applied, particularly in Hounslow and Enfield where Green Belt is currently under threat despite widescale availability of brownfield land. We need to build in the right place - making better use of previously developed land within our towns and cities especially in areas needing regeneration.

- In Hounslow, the council proposes releasing Green Belt land for logistics businesses linked to Heathrow Airport. But the airport is surrounded by huge areas - over 80 hectares - of surface car parks which make very poor use of space and could be used to accommodate these needs.
- In Enfield, the council proposes releasing historic Enfield Chase for housing, when there is a vast retail park on the A10 with single-storey retail and surface car parks, and when it has failed to bring forward the 10,000 home brownfield development at Meridian Water.

New council houses in Southwark, built on the site of an old car park (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.

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CPRE London, November 2023