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Let's put the green into the green belt - now there's an idea

Instead of building on the green belt, let's make it green by name and green by nature.

A re-imagined green belt could give us multiple benefits – if properly managed and protected. But unless we act fast, green belt land will be traded for creeping development and all these benefits could be lost – at great cost to nature, our health and wellbeing, and to action on climate change.

It may sound odd, but the green belt doesn't officially have to be green. Green belt's prime role isn't to be pristine, lush countryside with birds tweeting, bees buzzing and children playing. But it could be.

What is the green belt for?

A green belt's main role is to be open land between town and countryside to buffer urban sprawl. It's typically a patchwork of farms, golf courses and woodlands largely free of built development, which makes it green up to a point. And, yes, in places it can also be a bit scruffy.

The green belt idea started in the 1930s as a way to slow London's growth and protect the surrounding countryside from creeping urbanisation. Today, 14 green belts cover about 13% of land in England, including around conurbations such as Birmingham, Bristol, Leeds, Manchester, Newcastle and Nottingham.

In 2015 the Conservatives manifesto pledged to protect the green belt and when current chancellor Sajid Javid MP became Communities Secretary, he said green belts were "sacrosanct".

In its 2018 planning rules, the government said it "attaches great importance to green belts" and that "Green belt boundaries should only be altered where exceptional circumstances" occur. Some housing is allowed. The rules permit "limited affordable housing for local community needs". But that's often not the kind being imagined when developers push for green belt land to be released.

Honey, we shrunk the green belt

Green belts have done their buffering job well, but with notable exceptions. The Bedfordshire towns of Luton, Dunstable and Houghton Regis once enjoyed plentiful green belt between them. But the new development that was allowed was the thin end of the wedge – the green belt was eroded. Houses are usually followed by roads, warehouses, retail parks and service areas, which make towns swell and fragment much of our green and pleasant land.

Green belt could offer so much more

Green belts could be so much more than just buffer zones. But with the housing crisis leading to land grabs and more urban sprawl, they're under renewed threat.

Some developers routinely say that because green belt is not as green as the name suggests it would be better if they were given the keys to our green belt. We have a housing crisis after all, right?

But we aren't doing ourselves any favours by building housing without considering the climate and nature crises which we must also address.

Green by name. Green by nature

[Here's an idea](#). A multi-purpose green belt could not only be a buffer between towns and countryside. It could do so much more.

For people

Imagine the green belt being a brilliant place for people to breathe and explore, learn new skills, go rambling and running, and for relaxing – from the wonders of forest bathing to experiencing thriving nature.



Group of people walking uphill in Kent's green belt © **Friends of the Earth**

For nature

Nature-rich green belts could help reverse the dramatic decline of nature in the UK. Good quality green belt habitats, including wildlife corridors and wetlands linking town and country, could support more wild species.

For flood control

A nature-rich green belt could also act as a giant store for the water we want during droughts and need to hold back during floods. Wetlands for wildlife can retain flood waters and be used for swimming, boating and other leisure activities.

For food

Imagine more of the locally grown, good quality food people want being grown in the green belt, helping support skills and employment.

For climate

Green belts can help us deal with the climate crisis by having more [tree cover](#) and hedgerows. This in turn can help with all of the above, by providing shelter belts for crops, improving soil and water quality, supporting diverse wildlife and even local timber production.

Imagine a truly green green belt – if we shifted our sense of the value of ‘empty space’ ripe for development to a fully-functioning, properly protected space to breathe.

But it can only play these multiple roles and help us solve the climate and nature crises if it remains as open space and is improved – not covered in concrete and tarmac.

Rewarding failure with the keys to the green belt

Recently I witnessed a host of developers line up in London's City Hall to demand access to build on the green belt between London and the Home Counties. With straight faces some claimed that, if given access to the green belt, any houses would be ultra-green (energy and water efficient etc) with super sustainable transport.

I say "straight faces" because some also argued against – yes, against – policies to ensure development includes nature and green features, like green roofs and walls, and good quality green space. Some said greening their schemes would push up costs, with knock-on effects on house prices – as if new housing isn't already unaffordable for most people.

Among them were some of the top building firms, which have laughed all the way to the bank during the age of austerity, thanks to favourable government policies and financial support.

The housebuilder Persimmon awarded its boss a £110 million bonus (later reduced to £75 million) for its fabulous profits. All this despite customer complaints about construction quality, which saw Persimmon bottom of a 2018 customer satisfaction survey of 60,000 new homeowners.



Close-up of key in front door © Pixabay

Many houses of dubious quality are being built at prices which require people to take on a lifetime of debt for their children to inherit. It's not clear whether most new housing is actually solving the housing crisis or just fuelling the next debt crisis, while adding to climate change and nature's demise. Yet developers push to be rewarded for failure by being handed the keys to our green belt.

Green belt potential

Any development in the green belt should be built to standards that solve the real housing crisis, include high-quality insulation and water-saving features to slash household bills, and is well served by affordable transport and green open space that any community should expect as normal.

Making the green belt truly green – with trees, wildlife and recreation – should be central to government plans to tackle climate change, restore nature, improve public health and make land in town and country resilient.

It's time to green the green belt.