

Green Belt

Briefing



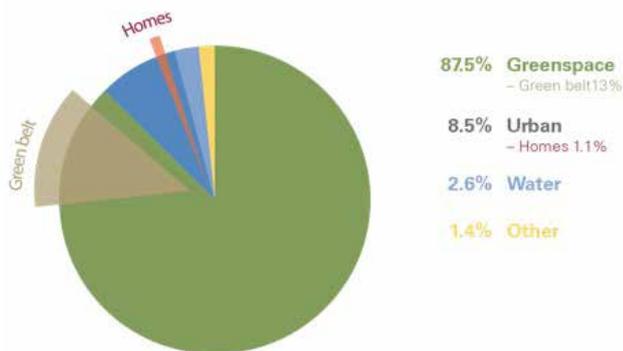
Summary

The green belt is by far the most well-known and popular planning policy in Britain. Green belts have successfully prevented suburban sprawl from swallowing up large tracts of the countryside – as it had done in the 1930s. But with a desperate need for new homes, especially around our most successful cities, pressure to release green belt land is mounting. People worry that unsuitable and expensive homes may be foisted upon suburban and rural areas, adding to the strain on local services. Others argue that only a wholesale relaxation of green belt restrictions can allow the market to deliver the homes we need.

Shelter believes that green belts should generally be preserved, and that the debate has become unnecessarily polarised. Instead, we propose a balanced approach – one which can give local people more of what they value while helping to meet the urgent needs for homes: Green Belt Community Trusts.

Green Belts have worked, and should be preserved

During the 1930s most of Britain's cities doubled their footprint by expanding into the countryside. After 1947 green belts stopped this sprawl, and concentrated the post-war housebuilding effort on existing cities and New Towns. Since then, green belt boundaries have constantly been reviewed and changed. The total area of green belt has doubled since 1997 to cover 13% of England, and a further 20% is protected in other ways such as national parks, while only 11% is classed as developed (half of which is parks and gardens).



Source: Generalised Land Use Database, 2005, Green Belt (Parliamentary Note, Green Belt 2014)

England needs at least 250,000 new homes per year, and although most of that can and should take place within urban areas, some hard choices must also be faced. Releasing a tiny proportion of green belt could go a long way towards providing the homes we need.

Bits of the green belt are suitable for new homes

Just as new areas of countryside are rightly added to the green belt, it is also right, on occasion, to remove some bits. For example, there is a former petrol station on a major road, close to Tottenham Hale tube station in London's Zone 3, that cannot be converted into affordable homes because it is designated as Green Belt. There are many areas of brownfield land within the green belt, and of farmland next to commuter stations, that may be suitable for controlled release.

The green belt cannot be trusted to the current development system

As CPRE argue, when developers do get permission to build on the green belt, they tend to build expensive, executive homes that make the highest returns, rather than the affordable homes rural communities need. In this context, a blanket relaxation of green belt policy would allow far more piecemeal, unsustainable proposals to get planning permission – and would encourage developers and land traders to bid up the price of sites. This pattern of speculative competition for land gives huge windfalls to landowners, but leaves little value for quality design, affordable homes or infrastructure. It doesn't even deliver the numbers of homes or lower house prices we need, as developers who have paid a heavy price for land must eke out supply to keep sales prices up.

A new model is needed

Our housing market is broken. We build far too few homes where they are needed, yet refusal to consider sensible green belt reform means developers can increasingly force through unpopular, piecemeal development on green belt land. Shelter's solution is to learn from the best developments of our past – from Bath to Bourneville, from Letchworth Garden City to the Boundary Estate. All these provided beautiful, affordable homes because they were aimed at maximising the benefits for local people, and because they were able to secure the land at low enough cost to allow for high quality development at prices local people could afford. Today, a few enlightened landowners like the Duchy of Cornwall are taking a similarly civic approach to their assets. We now need government to make this New Civic Housebuilding the norm, not the exception. By acquiring land at reasonable prices, civic bodies can ensure the value created by development once again goes primarily toward the things local people need. This approach could also take the heat out of local debates over the green belt.

Green Belt Community Trusts

Green Belt Community Trusts would be non-profit bodies with the objective of owning and managing a specific area of the local green belt in perpetuity, to be defined via the normal plan-making process. Local authorities, businesses and local communities themselves could all be represented on the Trust board.

For the small number of sites identified as suitable for development, the Green Belt Community Trust would prepare comprehensive masterplans, with the proper engagement of local people. Masterplans would include residential neighbourhoods, infrastructure, commercial uses, affordable housing, community services and public open spaces, which could take the form of new country parks made up of high quality green belt land.

Designated green belt land would only be able to be sold to Green Belt Community Trusts, removing the speculative pressure on land prices. Masterplanning that prioritised community benefit would lower the residual land value. Most landowners would be happy to sell to a Trust, or develop it in line with the plan, as they would still get a higher price than they would previously have expected, due to its green belt status. The lower land price would allow the value created by development to support the quality and affordability of the scheme itself – all under the direct control of a Community Trust representing local people's interests.

Green belts present a dilemma: should they be preserved, or released to provide the homes the nation needs? Shelter believes that both goals can be achieved, by transferring small amounts of the right bits to Green Belt Community Trusts. This would preserve the vast majority of green belt, while channelling the value created by development into the things local communities need: better access to the countryside, exemplary local services, and beautiful, affordable homes.