

The Green Belt is under greater threat than ever before

The latest Green Belt report from CPRE - the Countryside Charity published in February 2021 gives an alarming warning about the number of houses proposed to be built on land in England which is meant to be protected from further development by law.

The headlines

- A recent review by CPRE Hertfordshire found that **54,537 new homes were proposed on land in Hertfordshire's Green Belt.**
- In addition, over **17,500 have been approved or are already being built** on land recently removed from the Green Belt as part of the local plan process.
- CPRE research nationally has found that new homes being built on former Green Belt are not solving the housing crisis. Of 17,698 homes completed in England between 2015/16 and 2019/20 only **just over 10% (1,786) were affordable.**
- There is a **growing disconnect between recent Government statements and the application of planning policy at local level** by councils and planning inspectors.

We are calling on the Government to issue clear guidance to local authorities that the protection of the countryside is more important than meeting pre-determined housing targets.

What is this about?

Countryside next door: State of the Green Belt 2021 shows that nearly 260,000 houses are proposed to be built on greenfield land due to be removed from the Green Belt in Local Plans being prepared and adopted by councils throughout England. This represents a staggering 475% increase since 2013. There has also been a steady increase in the number of applications for housing on greenfield sites in the Green Belt which have been granted planning permission; over 52,000 homes have been approved between 2009/10 and 2019/20. The full text of the report can be read at http://www.cpreherts.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/30/2021/07/CPRE-State-of-the-Green-Belt-report_February-2021.pdf

What is happening locally?

In Hertfordshire the situation is even more concerning. A recent review by CPRE Hertfordshire found that 54,537 new homes were proposed on land in the Green Belt. This is c.20% of the national figure revealed in the State of the Green Belt report. In addition, over 17,500 homes have been approved or are already being built on land recently removed from the Green Belt, as part of the local plan process in three of Hertfordshire's local authority areas. The total of over 72,000 new homes is equivalent to the combined populations of the county's third and fourth largest towns, Stevenage and St Albans, sprawled across our green fields and hillsides. Most of these homes would become heavily dependent on using cars, being too far from shops, schools and public transport hubs to rely on more active travel.

What is the Government's stated position?

In 2010 the Government announced its commitment to Green Belt protection. The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), which is the main central Government policy document for planning, states clearly in paragraph 11(b) that Local Plans should provide for 'objectively assessed' housing need, 'unless the application of policies in this Framework that protect areas or assets of particular importance provides a strong reason for restricting the overall scale, type or distribution of development in the plan area'.

The NPPF then goes on to identify such protected areas which include Green Belt, Special Areas of Conservation (SACs), Sites of Special Scientific Interest, Local Green Space, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, National Parks and similar designations.

In December 2020 the Government strengthened its guidance in a statement on the Government's response to the public consultation on changes to the planning system. It said: *'we heard suggestions in the consultation that in some places the numbers produced by the 'standard method' (the term used for the process of assessing housing need) pose a risk to protected landscapes and Green Belt. We should be clear that meeting housing need is never a reason to cause unacceptable harm to such places. But harm or homes is not a binary choice. We can plan for well designed, beautiful homes, with access to the right infrastructure in the places where people need and want to live while also protecting the environment and green spaces communities most value'*. The full text of the statement can be found at www.gov.uk/government/consultations/changes-to-the-current-planning-system/outcome/government-response-to-the-local-housing-need-proposals-in-changes-to-the-current-planning-system

At the same time Robert Jenrick, the Secretary of State for the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, said: *'the standard method does not present a 'target' in plan-making, but instead provides a starting point for determining the level of need for housing in an area. It is only after consideration of this, alongside what constraints areas face, such as the Green Belt, and the land that is actually available for development, that the decision on how many homes should be planned for is made'*. His full statement is at <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2020-12-16/hcws660>

In short, the protection of the countryside is more important than meeting pre-determined housing targets.

During 2021 the Government has continued to state its position regarding the Green Belt. Writing about the proposed planning reforms in the Daily Telegraph on 18th May 2021, Robert Jenrick said: *'We will continue to protect the Green Belt'* and went on to say: *'There is a whole generation that now feels priced out of home ownership'*.

Following the Chesham and Amersham by-election on 17th June 2021 there was a flurry of activity from ministers and senior Conservative party members anxious to re-affirm the Government's commitment to the Green Belt, after proposals to build on Green Belt land in the Buckinghamshire constituency were widely blamed (along with HS2) for the Government's defeat. Conservative party chairman Amanda Milling wrote in the Daily Telegraph on 19th June: *'The Government has been clear that any reforms (of the planning system) will focus on brownfield land, thus protecting our green spaces'*. Appearing on the Andrew Marr show on BBC One the following day, the Justice Secretary Robert Buckland said: *'At no time has the Government proposed building on the Green Belt, or on Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty'*.

So, what has gone wrong?

It is becoming increasingly clear that there is a growing disconnect between recent Government statements and the application of planning policy at a local level. As an example, in November 2020 Dacorum Borough Council published a consultation on its new local plan: 'Dacorum Local Plan (2020-2038) Emerging Strategy for Growth'.

The Emerging Strategy states: *'We have known for some time that the level of growth we need to plan for will be significantly higher than before (up from 430 dwellings per year in the Core Strategy) and whilst the final figure from the Government may be adjusted again, we expect this to remain a substantial number'*. It later reiterates: *'One of the major challenges for the Borough is delivering a step change in the level of housing growth as required by the Government'*.

CPRE Hertfordshire is continuing to challenge these statements, and it's not just Dacorum. In June 2021 Three Rivers District Council published its Local Plan Regulation 18 Preferred Policy Options Consultation, which proposes a total of 8,973 new homes over the plan period to 2037/38, with 7,141 or 80% of them in the Green Belt.

A similar situation may well develop elsewhere in the County as other local authorities like St Albans and Hertsmeire prepare their Local Plans in the next year or two. We should also not forget the increasing number of planning appeals which are eating away at the Green Belt on the basis of there apparently not being sufficient housing allocated in existing Local Plans.

And it's not just the numbers

Countryside Next Door also reveals that land removed from the Green Belt by approved applications and in Local Plans is not even getting close to solving the housing crisis. Of 17,698 homes completed between 2015/16 and 2019/20 only just over 10% (1,786) were affordable despite local planning authority requirements for affordable provision averaging 34% in the areas studied. This isn't going to help many of the 'whole generation that now feels priced out of home ownership'.

We should be able to find a way of building homes that are genuinely affordable without having to accept nine houses that are unaffordable for every affordable one. We have enough previously used (brownfield) land in England, according to CPRE research, to build more than a million homes.

The report also reveals that the average density of developments on former Green Belt land was much lower than on other sites (14 dwellings per hectare (dph) on Green Belt compared with 31 dph on other sites). This, the report says, represents a squandering of precious land.

Why does this matter?

Green Belts and all countryside and green spaces have a crucial role to play in mitigating the climate crisis and enhancing biodiversity. Plants, including trees and hedgerows, capture and store carbon, as does carefully managed soil. Much of Hertfordshire's Green Belt is productively farmed, providing vital food.

Green Belts are intended to safeguard permanently open countryside between built-up areas, check sprawl, stop urban areas coalescing, and retain the setting and character of historic towns. More than half of Hertfordshire is designated as part of London's Green Belt, allowing open countryside to survive even in the south of the county, where without protection much would almost certainly now be developed.

The pandemic has demonstrated as never before the importance of green spaces to the nation's health and well-being. England's Green Belts cover 13% of the land area and are the countryside next door for 30 million people living in our largest towns and cities. During 2020 there was a surge in appreciation of the countryside. A recent CPRE poll found that two thirds of adults think that protecting and enhancing our green spaces should be a higher priority after lockdown.

What is CPRE doing about the threats to the Green Belt?

For nearly 100 years CPRE nationally and locally has campaigned successfully to protect the countryside. We were at the forefront of campaigns which stopped unregulated building, brought in the planning system, and created the Green Belt, National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, including the Chilterns.

More recently in Hertfordshire we have helped local groups to protect countryside from proposals to expand Stevenage and Luton, and regularly provide support and advice to parish councils and community groups facing loss of the countryside on their doorsteps. You can read more about our successes on our website

<https://www.cpreherts.org.uk/about-us/our-successes/>

We are now launching a campaign to focus on the disconnect between recent government statements and the actions of local authorities and planning inspectors where they overturn local decisions.

- We will engage with local groups across the county to offer support and planning advice in relation to Local Plan consultations – ongoing activity in Dacorum, Three Rivers, St Albans, Welwyn Hatfield and North Herts.
- We will write to all local authorities in Hertfordshire that have local plans in progress or who are yet to commence the process to take recent government statements fully into account. (July 2021)
- We will write to all MPs in the county asking that they lobby the Government to issue clear guidance to Local Authorities that align with the public statements that they have already made. (July 2021)

We want to enhance the countryside and stop the building of new homes on land in the Green Belt. We need to stand together now to protect Hertfordshire's Green Belt!

What can you do to help protect your countryside?

You can write to your local MP and local councillor to express your concern at the failure of the Government to protect the Hertfordshire Green Belt and ask them to issue clear guidance to Local Authorities that the protection of the countryside is more important than meeting pre-determined housing targets

You can join CPRE – the Countryside Charity and be part of the movement to protect our countryside and green open spaces. Your membership will help us to protect and promote Hertfordshire’s beautiful countryside. For town and country dwellers alike, the countryside is a vital and increasingly scarce resource and it needs protecting now more than ever.

About us

CPRE Hertfordshire is a local countryside charity. We work to promote, enhance and protect a beautiful, thriving countryside for everyone to value and enjoy.

Founded in 1928 we are a grassroots organisation, with c.1500 members and a team of 4 part-time staff and a few dozen volunteers. CPRE Hertfordshire has a long history of campaigning against inappropriate development on Hertfordshire’s green spaces. We also work with local groups around the county, providing advice on how they can best protect the countryside near them.

If you would like to help, then please consider becoming a member or making a donation. Full details can be found on our website. www.cpreherts.org.uk, or please email office@cpreherts.org.uk for more information. Thank you.

CPRE Hertfordshire is a Charitable Incorporated Organisation Registered charity number: 1162419. CPRE holds and manages data in strict accordance with the Data Protection Act (2018). Read our Privacy Policy on our website.

Reference:

1. “Countryside next door: State of the Green Belt 2021” published February 2021 by CPRE. The full report is available at the following http://www.cpreherts.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/30/2021/07/CPRE-State-of-the-Green-Belt-report_February-2021.pdf