

6. Address by Sietske Boeles – Green belt

The Government's House of Commons Briefing Paper on Green Belts, leads off with CPRE's position in Paragraph 1.

That position is that when we lose open Green Belt land, we lose more than just a view, a space to run or play, an easy escape from the city or valuable farmland. We lose land that has its own identity and plays its own role in England's heritage.

Green Belt land is important for our wider environment, providing us with the trees and the undeveloped land which reduce the effect of the heat generated by big cities. Instead of reducing this green space, we should be using it to its best effect. We know from our research that three quarters (79%) of the population would like to see more trees planted and more food grown in the areas around towns and cities. Green Belt land is ideally placed to do this – providing more local produce which will help the environment again, by reducing food miles.

The openness of Green Belt land needs to be cherished and protected permanently. That way, Green Belts will protect our countryside and help regenerate our cities.

Countywide research undertaken by CPRE Oxfordshire as recently as last March, when the City's campaign against the Green Belt, supported by much of the local media, was at its height, were asked, bearing in mind that some would argue that Green Belts are preventing necessary development from happening in the best place, ***"How much, if at all, do you agree or disagree that the green belt around Oxford should remain open and undeveloped, and building on it not allowed?"***

The answer was unequivocal. Three quarters of respondents considered that the Green Belt should be left open and undeveloped, and this hardly varied between City and country residents, homeowners or non-home owners.

Indeed, two thirds of respondents saw housebuilding as the biggest threat to the openness they wanted to see preserved.

As our research shows yet again, the Green Belt is the best loved of all planning tools, and it is not hard to see why.

Born when it was obvious that urban sprawl was destroying both the towns doing the sprawling and the countryside being sprawled over, the purpose of Green Belts was to contain urban area, ensure that cities always had fresh, open land on their doorstep, and protect the integrity of surrounding villages which would otherwise be engulfed.

Just how the Green Belt benefits city dwellers could not be clearer than at the City's key development target area, Grenoble Road. On one side, the housing estates of the Leys; on the other, rural walks, and distant views of the hills, across wide open green fields.

That is why it is Government Advice that the fundamental aim of Green Belt policy is to prevent urban sprawl by keeping land permanently open, and that the essential characteristics of Green Belts are their openness and their permanence.

That the construction of new buildings should be regarded as "inappropriate" for the green belt, and, particularly, Government Guidance is that *Unmet housing need (including for*

traveller sites) is unlikely to outweigh the harm to the Green Belt and other harm to constitute the “very special circumstances” justifying inappropriate development on a site within the Green Belt.

This is spelled out in the October 14 Planning Practice Guidance which deals with the possible conflict between SHMAs and the Green Belt. This says assessing need is just the first stage in developing a Local Plan. *Once need has been assessed, the local planning authority should take account of any constraints such as green belt, which indicate that development should be restricted **and which may restrain the ability of an authority to meet its need.***

In other words, that Local Authorities should put the imperative to keep the Green Belt as a whole to remain permanently open ahead of the objective of meeting notional housing demand in full.

The benefits of the Green Belt are obvious, and the public overwhelmingly endorses its being kept permanently open and, particularly, kept free of housing development.

Government advice, republished as recently as the end of June, is that, even if that means unmet housing need, Green Belts should be kept permanently open.

Instead of wasting public funds on Growth Board driven reviews, Local Authorities should accept that the Green Belt must remain intact and look elsewhere for development opportunities.

This should include, first and foremost, a new Local Plan for the City which concentrated on satisfying housing need, not exacerbating it, and the direction of any need the City is actually unable to meet to the 87% of the County which is not Green Belt.

Let us keep the Green Belt and allow the City to breathe.