

GREEN BELT MYTH BUSTER

Myth 1: Green Belt is an old fashioned idea and it's time to pension it off.

Wrong: The benefits of Green Belt remain as vital as ever. By looking at other countries we can see that without the strong protection it offers against most forms of development, more valuable countryside would be consumed by urban sprawl - and the character of our towns and cities would be irreversibly eroded.

Green Belt encourages regeneration of previously developed or 'brownfield' land. With increasing pressures from climate change and population growth, our farmland and woodlands will become more valuable in future, not less. The calls for more development in the Green Belt assume that this land is only valuable if built on, an assumption that is fundamentally flawed.

Myth 2: Green Belt is safe from development.

Wrong: Green Belt is under a renewed and growing level of threat.

Research (June 2015) by Glenigan found a sharp increase in the number of houses securing full planning approval in the Green Belt.

In 2009/10, 2,258 homes were approved.

In 2013/2014, the number had risen to 5,607.

In 2014/2015, it had more than doubled to 11,977

Myth 3: Green Belt protection pushes house prices up.

Wrong: Much house price inflation is down to economic factors that increasingly treat houses as an investment opportunity rather than somewhere to live. Green Belt policy only restricts housebuilding in the land that it covers.

Myth 4: Green Belt has little or no environmental value.

Wrong: The Green Belt's primary purpose is to prevent urban sprawl, but in doing so it provides countryside close to 30 million people. A huge proportion of it has considerable environmental value. In the face of climate change, it has an increasingly important role in storing carbon and preventing flooding and is a vital economic resource for food security and soil protection.

Two-thirds of all Green Belt land is in agricultural use as a vital economic resource for food security and soil protection.

The National Ecosystem Assessment recognises the huge value to society of agricultural land, both in terms of food production and in 'cultural services' (such as the sense of wellbeing produced by seeing an agricultural landscape). The NEA also notes that biodiversity and some landscape features (particularly hedgerows) have declined in many agricultural landscapes but emphasises that this trend has begun to reverse through better land management. Green Belts provide countryside close to 30 million people, giving us 30,000 km of public rights of way, 89,000 ha of Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) and 220,000 ha of broadleaf and mixed woodland. In the face of climate change, the Green Belt is also likely to have an increasingly significant role in storing carbon and preventing flooding.

Allowing development on land that is poor encourages landowners to neglect it.

Myth 5: Green Belts only benefit people who own property within them rather than the wider public.

Wrong: Preventing sprawl, one of the key purposes of Green Belt policy, produces financial benefits to society by reducing the infrastructure and environmental costs associated with new development. This claim also ignores the vast number of people on low incomes who live in towns surrounded by Green Belt and enjoy its benefits.

Green Belt land is part of the wider countryside, to which

there were 1.3 billion visits in 2013-14, according to Government surveys.

The Green Belt is used regularly by local Ramblers groups, the Guides and Scouts, Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme participants, local schools and many others, with no restrictions on grounds of class or income.

Myth 6: Just building on a small proportion of Green Belt would leave us with more than enough.

Wrong: Much of the integrity and benefits of Green Belt would be lost if we did this, including preventing sprawl, and towns joining up.

Releasing just a small percentage of Green Belt sounds an attractive way of releasing land for housing. But once bits of the Green Belt are removed, the integrity is reduced and so its benefits begin to be lost. Permanence is also an important feature of Green Belt so people, businesses and the Government (through supporting environmentally sensitive farming on Green Belt land) have had the confidence to invest in the area on that basis.

Myth 7: If we don't allow development in the Green Belt, people will leapfrog it and commute in an unsustainable fashion from elsewhere.

Wrong: We need to be creating jobs near where people live or enable them to work across distance, rather than encouraging long commutes. However, commuting from beyond the Green Belt can be sustainable if there are fast public transport links available.

Building in the Green Belt is not a solution to unsustainable commuting. On the contrary, it would lead to more people 'leapfrogging' over the suburbs into city centres. Instead, we need to do more to create jobs near where people live rather than far away from housing they can afford. In large, buoyant cities such as London, there is a particular need for more affordable housing within the inner city.

'Leapfrogging' is also not inherently unsustainable if a

good transport network exists. Dieter Helm argues that 'transport is not about the distance in miles, but rather the speed of connecting links' (between homes and workplaces).

Myth 8: Green Belts have the effect of confining the urban poor to live at high densities in the cities.

Wrong: All cities have areas of urban poor, whether or not they have Green Belts. There is a great need now for new affordable housing, but growing inequalities between rich and poor are a global phenomenon that cannot realistically be blamed on the use of Green Belts in England.

Myth 9: Green Belt policy leads to more land being used for golf courses than new housing.

Wrong: The housing definition used in this argument ignores gardens and access roads - and why shouldn't people use Green Belt land for outdoor recreation? Green Belts are areas where new housing development is strictly controlled.

A wide range of leisure activities take place in the Green Belt, not only golf but also horse riding and other outdoor sports, which reflects the value of a belt of open land to the people in the urban areas the land surrounds.

Myth 10: Green Belt stops any kind of development or beneficial land management at all so land is abandoned and neglected.

Wrong: Green Belt does not restrict development connected with agriculture, forestry or public infrastructure.

Neglect is less of a problem in the Green Belt than in the countryside as a whole.

Green Belt policy restricts housebuilding, but allows many forms of so-called 'appropriate development' to take place, especially in relation to agriculture, forestry, outdoor recreation, and public infrastructure, such as reservoirs, cemeteries and sewage works. Conversely, local

authorities can also use planning powers to improve the environmental condition of undeveloped land, both within and outside the Green Belt.

In 2009 Natural England, found that the quality of the landscape is being maintained on more than twice as much Green Belt land (39%) as where it's neglected (18%). Green Belt has a lower proportion of land classed as 'neglected' than the national average, while just 0.2% of it is described as 'derelict'.

(With thanks to the Campaign to Protect Rural England)