



Mark Carwardine's **AT A GLANCE...**

16

GREEN BELT

WHAT IS GREEN BELT?

Green belts are swathes of open space that draw a firm line around towns and cities to stop them merging into one another and forming great urban sprawls. They work by restricting urban expansion and encouraging the regeneration of inner cities. Other benefits include better air quality, flood control, preserving the unique character of rural communities, forming a buffer zone to protect the deeper countryside, providing habitat for wildlife and offering an easy escape from the hustle and bustle of the city.

HOW LONG HAVE WE HAD GREEN BELTS?

They've been around for centuries: a 5km belt around London was ordered by Queen Elizabeth I in 1580, for example, to stop the spread of plague. But green belts as we know them today were first designated in 1938, around London, and then became official government policy for other towns and cities in 1955.

HOW MUCH GREEN BELT DO WE HAVE?

Northern Ireland has 30 green belts covering 16 per cent of the country, England has 14 covering 12.4 per cent, Scotland has 10 covering 12 per cent, and Wales has only one (between Newport and Cardiff). While many of these areas are beautiful, wildlife-rich countryside (England's green belts, for example, contain 34 per cent of our local nature reserves and 17 per cent of our ancient woodland) they also include high quality farmland

and other open spaces. But it's the fact that they are safe from development, rather than their specific environmental value, that is the major concern.

WHY ARE THEY IN THE NEWS?

Despite years of rhetoric, the Government has been slackening the planning process in a way that allows developers to build on this once-sacrosanct land. Many local authorities are struggling to meet housing targets and there are now proposals to build more than 360,000 homes on green belts.

BUT ISN'T THERE A NEED FOR MORE HOUSING?

That depends on your point of view (England is already the most densely populated country in the EU, after Malta). The housing market certainly needs an overhaul, but building on green belts is not the answer, in my opinion. Chipping away at them piece by piece reduces the integrity of the entire concept and, once gone, they will be lost forever. Besides, I believe there are much better options.

WHAT ARE THE ALTERNATIVES?

One is to stop developers releasing houses slowly to maximise profits (in England alone, they are sitting on huge areas of land with permission for more than 280,000 homes). Indeed, the Government recently



At Chipping Norton green belt houses are close to meadows.

issued a White Paper that should force developers in England, at least, to start building within two years of securing planning permission. Another obvious alternative is to build on brownfield sites (places that have previously been developed). According to the Government's own figures, there are enough derelict brownfield sites available and suitable for building more than a million new homes – which would meet the current target for new houses needed by 2020.

SO WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

Politicians support building on green belts, for two main reasons: they are tempted by the false promise of an easy construction boom and, most importantly, brownfield sites tend to be more costly to develop. But I think it's a myth that affordable housing is only feasible on green belt land – quite simply, it's where developers can make the most money.

WHAT NEXT?

The importance of preserving green belts is greater now than ever before, so the pressure to protect them while finding other solutions to the housing crisis continues. In the end I think it will boil down to a choice between economic growth and quality of life. 🐾

MANY GREEN BELTS ARE WILDLIFE-RICH AREAS. THEY ALSO INCLUDE FARMLAND AND OPEN SPACES FOR PEOPLE TO ESCAPE THE CITY."

MARK CARWARDINE is a frustrated and frank conservationist.

Every month he demystifies some of the most important issues affecting the world's wildlife and assesses the organisations that protect it.

● Would you like to comment? Email wildlifeletters@immediate.co.uk

➕ FIND OUT MORE

Find out more at <http://politics-greenbelt.org.uk>