

APPARENTLY I STRONGLY DISAGREE with 53 per cent of everyone in Britain. I know that because, according to a recent Bright Blue poll, that's how many people support building new homes on the precious green belt.

Admittedly, they were assured that the housing would only be built "if plans comply with government regulations to offset damage to the natural environment". But I've never understood that notion. How can you possibly offset damage to the natural environment when you bury it under concrete?

Green belts are, quite simply, brilliant. These swathes of ancient woodland, meadows, farmland and other undeveloped land draw a firm line around towns and cities. As if by magic, they stop them from merging into one another and forming great urban sprawls. They provide a lot of other benefits, too: encouraging the regeneration of inner cities, improving air quality and flood control, preserving the unique character of rural communities, offering an easy escape from the hustle and bustle of the city and, of course, providing critical habitat for wildlife.

Green belts are supposed to be safe from development. That's the whole point. But, despite years of rhetoric, the state has been slackening and speeding up the planning process in a way that allows developers to build on this once-sacrosanct land. And it's likely to get worse with the apparent planning free-for-all, proposed by the government, that is currently going before parliament.

In fact, according to figures uncovered by *The Times*, nearly 400,000 homes could be built on the green belt in southern England alone over the next five years. Politicians make the claim that it's to meet an ever-increasing demand for affordable housing. What utter nonsense.

The reality is that only about a quarter of the houses approved for building on the green belt meet the government's own definition of 'affordable'. Most are built for profit and don't help the housing crisis at all.

If, as it appears, the government has a vested interest in building on the green belt, then it's pertinent to ask why.

First, is it tempted by

Conservationist Mark Carwardine is desperate to save the green belt for the sake of nature and humans alike

Legislation exists to protect green belt land from unnecessary destruction



“Most houses built on the green belt don't help the housing crisis at all”

MARK CARWARDINE

OPINION

the false promise of an easy construction boom? That would certainly explain why ministers seem to be content to ignore that, according to their own figures, there are enough long-term empty houses to provide homes for more than a quarter of a million families in England. Second, is it allowing its plutocratic developer friends and donors to hijack the planning system to line its own pockets? According to Transparency International, property developers were behind more than one-fifth of donations to the Conservative Party during the past decade – with £891,984 donated in the first three months of 2021 alone.

One of the great benefits of properly enforced green-belt legislation is that it forces developers to build on places that have previously been developed (so-called brownfield sites). It is a neat

way of promoting urban regeneration and, at the same time, keeping new houses and businesses close to services and transport links. According to the government's own figures, there are enough derelict brownfield sites available for building 1.3 million new homes in England – and countless more in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

But the developers don't like it because it's more expensive to build on brownfield sites. They stand to gain financially through construction on the green belt. For this reason alone, we can't rely on developers and their allies in parliament to do the right thing.

There's absolutely no doubt that the housing market needs a complete overhaul. But why is

it so difficult to choose quality of life – for all those people desperate for affordable housing and everyone else desperate for green space – over financial gain? **W**

“Developers find it's more expensive to build on brownfield sites”