

Centre for Cities – Written evidence (UKH0114)

Centre for Cities is the leading think tank dedicated to helping UK cities achieve their economic potential and improve the life chances and opportunities they offer to people. Our research focuses on the UK's 63 largest urban areas.

Why we need planning reform to solve the housing crisis

The UK does not build enough new homes, and the shortage is at its worst in the most dynamic and unaffordable cities. Addressing the housing shortage that these urban areas face is essential for improving local and national prosperity.

Britain needs planning reform if its housing crisis is to end. In particular, the unusually discretionary, case-by-case process of granting of planning permissions should be replaced by more rules-based decision-making process. Centre for Cities has previously set out a number of ways in which this can be achieved, ranging from targeted interventions to the full replacement of England's discretionary planning system with a new flexible zoning system.

Centre for Cities has previously argued in *Homes on the Right Tracks* that releasing land around train stations in the green belt is one such rules-based planning mechanism that would help address the housing shortage and improve housing outcomes. It is possible to build millions of new climate-friendly homes at suburban densities around great infrastructure, while protecting green space of amenity and environmental value, with a simple change in planning policy.

Why the Green Belt makes the housing crisis worse

The planning system has a number of designations which exist to protect land of special environmental and amenity value, including National Parks, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, Sites of Special Scientific Interest among others. Alongside these statutory designations, there are many parks and nature reserves which provide valuable public and ecological benefits.

The Green Belt is not among these. The purpose of the Green Belt is to prevent urban development and the construction of new homes, as the five objectives set out in the NPPF make clear:

- (a) to check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas;
- (b) to prevent neighbouring towns merging into one another;
- (c) to assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment;
- (d) to preserve the setting and special character of historic towns; and

(e) to assist in urban regeneration, by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land.

As the Green Belt exists to protect empty spaces between urban areas – construction in the Green Belt can currently take place only under “very special circumstances” – the quality of the land within is often of minimal environmental and amenity value. Brownfield land such as petrol stations falls under the Green Belt definition, and intensive arable farming is how 39 and 37 per cent of Green Belt land is used respectively for Birmingham and London.

In fact, the Green Belt often causes damage to the environment by forcing new homes to “leapfrog” its boundaries to car-dependent estates, far from railway stations and urban labour markets. The Green Belt also fails to assist urban regeneration, as separate discretionary, case-by-case aspects of our planning system within urban areas make brownfield development difficult and risky. Over a fifth of suburban neighbourhoods have built no new houses since 2011, while half of all suburban neighbourhoods have built less than one home every year.

Homes on the Right Tracks – 2 million new homes near Green Belt railway stations

Centre for Cities has long argued that Green Belt land within a walkable distance around train stations should be released for new homes. This “button development” would align planning policy for land with economic incentives by using it for higher-demand uses, while securing social and environmental benefits.

In a paper for Centre for Cities, Professor Paul Cheshire and Boyana Buyuklieva were able to calculate that between 1.7 million to 2.1 million new homes could be built at suburban densities (40 to 50 homes per hectare) on both Green Belt and unallocated land within 800 metres around train stations within 45 minutes of the city centres of London, Manchester, Birmingham, Bristol, and Newcastle. This would increase England’s total housing stock by between 7 and 9 per cent, using less than 1.8 per cent of existing Green Belt land.

Furthermore, this could be done while protecting all the countryside covered by other designations (such as National Parks, AONBs, National Trust properties, battlefields and cemeteries etc.) and creating 4,700 hectares of new, publicly accessible green space in these new neighbourhoods – which roughly amounts to 15 Hampstead Heaths. No existing buildings would be demolished or residential areas redeveloped under these proposals either.

The wider environment and climate would also be protected under “button development”, as placing new homes within easy reach of railway and underground stations would encourage use of public transport, supporting demand for higher frequency and quality services, and reduce demand for car travel. Centre for Cities recently published a report on public transport and

density showing that only 40 per cent of the residents of Britain's large cities outside London can access their city centre in 30 minutes by public transport, compared to 67 per cent in big European cities. Most of this difference is not down to a lack of infrastructure, but how the English planning system – including the Green Belt – prevents people from living near stations.

In addition, by introducing this clear rules-based process, it becomes possible to quickly and simply raise revenue which could pay for additional infrastructure needed in button developments, such as schools, hospitals, and social housing. If a new Infrastructure Levy along the lines proposed in the Government's Planning White Paper was introduced, a 20 per cent flat rate on the sale price of all new homes built in these button developments would raise between £93 billion and £116 billion depending on the number of homes built.

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