

Open Meeting Report

Is building on London's Green Belt inevitable?

The Gallery, Cowcross Street 16th January 2024

This topic has arisen (again) because Enfield council is considering making Green Belt land available to accommodate thousands of new homes. Will other outer London Councils follow suit to meet housing targets? Possibly yes thought **Mike Kiely, Chair of the Planning Officers Society**. Mike reminded us of the purpose of the Green Belt from the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act and that the National Planning Policy Framework ([NPPF](#)) [para 142](#) leaves this policy unchanged, "*the fundamental aim of Green Belt policy is to prevent urban sprawl by keeping land permanently open*". But importantly, in 1947 new towns and planned urban renewal were part of the strategic policy. Regional strategic planning has been abolished, and "the spatial planning system is broken".

So what about those housing targets? Mike was critical of the current housing need assessment based on the [standard method](#). This generates a figure of 66,000 net new homes annually, using 2014 data to project growth, and including an 'affordability factor'. This figure was reduced to 52,000 at the London Plan Examination in Public due to capacity constraints. However, Michael Gove has recently reverted to the 66,000 figure and added an arbitrary 35% "urban uplift". This is the basis on which some councils such as Enfield are claiming "exceptional circumstances" to justify plans to use parts of the Green Belt.

Mike strongly that 2021 census data should be used to more accurately predict factors migration, household formation, and the 30s age group numbers should be taken into account. Furthermore we need regional planning based on city geography, commuting and work patterns, covering London AND the southeast.

The Enfield Society's Dave Cockle and John West presented the work they have done on alternatives to development on Enfield's Green Belt. They agree that there is a huge unmet housing need. Having looked at all available brownfield and other sites, such as underused retail parks, they contest that there is enough space to meet the local need. However, Enfield Council is proposing to build on Green Belt. The most contentious is the Chase Park area, a former farm 9 miles north of London. The farm was bought by a developer c15 yrs. ago and left inactive. He plans to sell the land to the Council to develop for housing. The plans would merge urban areas where there are currently open fields and footpaths. They also highlighted another site, Crews Hill. Currently an area with lots of garden centres and decent road access. They see that there is some opportunity for some development there but plans to urbanise right up to the M25 would completely change the character of the area and cause traffic issues.

Economist, Samuel Watling, speaking on behalf of PricedOut a housing campaign charity argued that the definition of Green Belt is largely arbitrary, and a product of political choices, and that development opportunities on Green Belt land should be considered on their merits. He contests that some Green Belt sites are very degraded and eyesores but because they have to be "kept open", they can't be used for housing, but should be, particularly those 'pockets' near stations – of which there are many around London. He said the issue was how to build more housing with community support and feels neighbourhood panels should be able to promote Green Belt development.

CPRE London's Alice Roberts made the case that such incursions as are mooted for Enfield are neither necessary nor desirable. Yes, we need new houses but building on Green Belt won't solve the problem. All it does is give developers choices of where to build so they cherry pick. It won't bring prices down, just fuels demand and won't deliver affordable housing. It will lead to urban sprawl and high car dependency and therefore higher carbon emissions. Infrastructure needs to be provided.

The crisis is tenure and distribution, and it isn't solved by loosening up the planning system. London continues to lose social housing because of Right to Buy. A quarter of a million housing permissions are not built out. There are issues of foreign investment ownership and Airbnb, and a raft of government schemes which have fuelled house price inflation. And of course, the loss of countryside reduces our capacity to grow food, diminishes habitats and biodiversity and areas for leisure. Even where sites are unattractive, money can/ought to go into improving sites. If we are to truly level up between north and south, we need regional planning and transport policy. She recommended a BBC documentary called: Britain's Housing Crisis: What went wrong? https://youtu.be/pvK_7wT-wpY

Questions from Floor included whether other European cities have the same problem? No! Are we too wedded to houses with gardens? And to home ownership? It is normal to rent in most European inner cities, where long term rental agreements and rent controls are the order of the day. Mansion blocks with safe well designed play areas for children are common. It was noted that there are no references to rent in the NPPF.

There was concern about build creep into Metropolitan Open Land (MOL). Examples of how brown field sites can become green open spaces and/or nature reserves were referenced in Greenwich and Lewisham. Concern that London Councils not meeting housing targets will struggle in planning appeals and how hard it was for Councils to use compulsory purchase orders where there is developer land banking. Mike Kiely raised the interesting concept of 'compulsory selling orders' but said that the government 'was deaf' to the idea. Examples of new builds left empty were quoted, such as Vauxhall Tower with just 12 of 250 flats occupied; but others suggested that this was the exception, not the rule.

There was consensus that it was generally not the fault of the planning system but affordability and distribution and the London housing targets were unattainable. A lot of overcrowding but also under occupation (with insufficient quality options for older people). It is questionable whether building more alone solves the problem and a consensus that government schemes to stimulate demand had simply fuelled house price inflation.

The event was attended by 54 participants.