

Why the Green Belt in B&NES is so important

Article by Phil Harding, Chairman of Saltford Environment Group, published in THE WEEK IN East Bristol & North East Somerset, 5th December 2018 (Issue 554)

An American politician (not Donald Trump) once said “The economy is a wholly owned subsidiary of the environment, not the other way around”. It’s hard to think of a more relevant sentence in today’s world with the growing pressures on the natural environment and the land that sustains life from the interlinked problems associated with manmade climate change, plastics, poor waste management, consumerism, and unhindered population growth leading to habitat and wildlife species loss.

As B&NES Council consults on and works up its proposals for the B&NES Local Plan to determine where housing and other infrastructure should be developed for the 2016-2036 period, the Green Belt comes back into the forefront of the debate about where we should build new homes. Like most people, I for one am in favour of building much needed affordable new homes, but they have to be in the right place.

Whether people live in villages, towns or cities, we all benefit from the local green open spaces surrounding the area where we live for rest, recreation and the ecological support such land can provide to farmland and thus towards our food security. Our health and well-being really do depend on easy access to green open spaces. Saltford Environment Group is of the opinion that a rural town like Keynsham has just as much reason as Saltford to retain its own Green Belt buffer surrounding the town and within its own boundary.

These startling facts underline the importance of the Green Belt in B&NES. 81% of B&NES is farmland. That is much higher than the national average of 57% yet only 5% of B&NES is natural or semi-natural land (heathland, natural grassland etc.) compared to a national average of 35%*. Farmland requires the eco-system support, for example habitat for pollinating insects, of surrounding Green Belt and natural or semi-natural land to function. It would be irresponsible not to protect the natural and semi-natural land in B&NES that underpins the economy of B&NES and the wider West of England area; our future food security in a changing climate made more critical by unmanaged population growth will increasingly depend on it.

Anyone who was driving a car 30 to 40 years ago and compares the high number of insects splattering the front of their car during summertime car journeys then to the much lower number that hit their cars in 21st Century summers cannot fail to have noticed just how the Britain’s insect population has declined. That significant reduction is coupled with a decline in bird life. There are many reasons why insect life has declined but habitat loss just makes matters worse.

The inter-linked problems of unmanaged population growth, climate change, plastic pollution, the unsustainable creation of waste, and environmental degradation threaten the health of our natural environment that should be protected to underpin our already diminishing food security. Where and how we build new homes to meet a relentless need for new housing gives us a clear choice. We can choose to be either part of the solution or part of the problem.

We desperately need to build new affordable homes but these need to be on brownfield sites wherever possible or even the re-use of former retail sites as shopping habits change. And new homes need to be close to places of employment, leisure and retail facilities to reduce the need to travel for work and everyday needs so that our road network becomes less congested.

The new homes recently built in Keynsham are already contributing to increased gridlock at peak times on local roads in and out of Keynsham and through Saltford. If we as a modern society fail to recognise the real value of natural and semi-natural land and allow its loss through development we unwittingly put the UK into an increasing need to rely on other countries to feed us. And those other countries who feed us, currently providing around 40% of our net food requirement and about half of what we actually eat**, will be facing their own climate change challenges and may be less willing or able to supply food to the UK at affordable prices.

When people want to protect the Green Belt, it's not just for themselves, but for everyone.

Phil Harding
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*Farmland/natural land data source: Dr Alasdair Rae, University of Sheffield, using Co-ordination of Information on the Environment (Corine) land use codes, 2017.

** Food import/export statistics from Defra, 2018.