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Why there is no need or justification to build new housing in the Green Belt and/or on farmland – Evidence statement from Salford Environment Group

Introduction

The Government has set a target to build 1.5 million new homes by the end of the current Parliament in 2029 and the new National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF December 2024) could make it easier to build housing developments on precious green field and Green Belt land to meet new statutory housing targets.

According to the Home Builders Federation (December 2024) the UK does not have enough construction workers to meet the Government's target of building 1.5m new homes by 2029.

This means that if Local Planning Authorities like BaNES Council identify land in the Green Belt for new housing developments in the Local Plan and then fail to meet annual targets despite the Government's "brownfield first" priority, developers will submit planning applications for new housing developments on the Green Belt, and the Government would not support the LPA or local community in resisting such developments.

There is no need or justification to build any of the UK's requirement for new homes in the Green Belt and/or on farmland for the following reasons:

There are almost 700,000 empty and unfurnished homes in England. Of those, 261,471 are classed as "long-term empty," meaning no-one has lived there for six months or more¹.

Together's analysis² of Census and Local Authority data revealed that as of 2023, there was a total of 1.55 million residential homes worth £532 billion that stand empty across England and Wales. That alone equates to the Government's new homes target for the next 5 years.

England has enough brownfield land for 1.2 million new homes³.

According to "Planning Portal Weekly News"⁴, the Market Index Report shows that over one million homes with planning permission remain unbuilt, i.e. two thirds of the Government's 1.5 million new homes target.

We need to use the housing we have better. According to ONS data and CPRE (October 2024) in 1971 there was almost one dwelling for every 3 people in the country. Today, there is about one dwelling for every 2.25 people, meaning we have more homes per capita right now than we did 50 years ago.

LOCAL SITUATION IN SALTFFORD

Facilitated by new housing developments, Saltford's population has grown by 114% since 1951 (Census data). It has exceeded its share of new housing and local roads struggle to cope with peak time traffic volumes; any new developments would represent over-development and damage much more than Saltford's rural village status.

Traffic congestion results in economic loss and lowers the quality of life for residents. The cumulative effect of new housing in Keynsham and South Gloucestershire etc. is already causing serious traffic congestion during morning and early evening peak times not just in Keynsham, but through Saltford. Our local roads can't take new housing developments.

In March 2024 Saltford Parish Council declared the Green Belt surrounding the historic village of Saltford an Area of Great Landscape value (AGLV), has produced supporting Landscape and Heritage Sensitivity Assessments of Saltford South and North of the A4, and is in ongoing discussions with BaNES Council over its January 2023 request for a protective landscape designation in the new BaNES Local Plan for Saltford south of the A4.⁵

The evidence referred to above illustrates that there is no grey belt land in Saltford; SEG will want our Ward Councillors to support that analysis and the Parish Council's request for a protective landscape designation. Note: Grey belt is defined in the NPPF (December 2024) as land in the Green Belt comprising previously developed land and/or any other land that, in either case, does not strongly contribute to any of 3 specific Green Belt purposes, namely (a), (b), or (d) - *i.e. (a) to check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas, (b) to prevent neighbouring towns merging into one another, and (d) to preserve the setting and special character of historic towns.*

ECOLOGY, HEALTH & WELL-BEING

There has been a 73% average decline in monitored vertebrate wildlife populations (mammals, birds, amphibians, reptiles and fish) worldwide in last 50 years.⁶

The UK is one of the world's most nature-depleted countries being in the bottom 10% globally and last among the G7 group of nations.⁷

Building on open countryside in the Green Belt reduces the quality of life for rural and city dwellers. The countryside is important for our mental and physical well-being. We should protect the Green Belt not just for rural residents and for wildlife, but for those who live in local towns and cities and appreciate being able to get out to open countryside relatively quickly.

FOOD SECURITY (Don't blight the land that feeds you)

The UK needs to be much more resilient with its food supply and cannot feed itself now; 40% of our net food requirement is imported each year (data source: Defra).

81% of BaNES (Bath and NE Somerset) is farmland compared to a UK figure of 71%. So, BaNES, for example, does and can make a useful contribution to the nation's food production.

Climate change reducing productivity for large areas of food production and causing crop failures, a rising world population, and conflict means that the UK cannot rely on other nations to feed us at current rates for much longer.

Food systems depend on a reliable source of freshwater. Half the world's population already faces water scarcity, and that number is set to rise as the climate crisis worsens.⁸

At present, over half of the world's food production comes from areas experiencing unstable trends in water availability. More than half the world's food production will be at risk of failure within the next 25 years (by 2050) as a rapidly accelerating water crisis grips the planet, unless urgent action is taken to conserve water resources and end the destruction of the ecosystems on which our fresh water depends.⁸

Losing agricultural land and land that provides ecosystem support for food production (e.g. pollinator habitat) is a short-term approach with irreversible longer-term consequences for our food security and higher food prices causing severe hardship for those on lower incomes.

References

Ref. 1. Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government data, 2024, <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-levelling-up-housing-and-communities>

Ref 2. <https://togethermoney.com/>

Ref 3. CPRE, December 2022.

Ref 4. www.planningportal.co.uk, 5.12.2024.

Ref 5. www.saltfordparishcouncil.gov.uk/protecting-saltfords-green-belt/

Ref 6. WWF's Living Planet Report (October 2024).

Ref 7. Natural History Museum's Biodiversity Trends Explorer report, October 2021.

Ref 8. Global Commission on the Economics of Water report, 17 October 2024 (watercommission.org).

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