



DEBATING MATTERS

sixth-form debating competition

DEBATING MATTERS TOPIC GUIDE

“We should build on the Green Belt”

INTRODUCTION

For several years, there has been an ongoing debate about the merits of the green belt [Ref: [Wikipedia](#)] in the UK, with supporters and critics clashing over its relevance and necessity in the 21st century. The issue has come to a head more recently however, with the government publishing its new housing White Paper in February [Ref: [Gov.UK](#)], with estimates suggesting that there have only been an average of 160,000 homes built per year in the UK since the 1970's – compared to the more than 275,000 required to keep up with population growth and under supply [Ref: [Gov.UK](#)]. This has led to talk of a housing crisis, with the number of houses available, and the affordability of homes in the UK hitting the headlines [Ref: [Telegraph](#)], leading many to argue that the solution is to build on the green belt [Ref: [spiked](#)]. For supporters, building on the green belt would allow for new towns to be built [Ref: [Guardian](#)], and encourage more radical thinking on how our existing cities are constituted, permitting them to expand and become better places to live. Moreover, they argue that building on the green belt is the most sensible way to alleviate the housing crisis, because: “For too long governments have viewed the green belt as sacrosanct, but with such limited housing supply, action on the green belt is vital.” [Ref: [Huffington Post](#)] Critics though, claim that the green belt is an important planning mechanism that prevents urban sprawl [Ref: [Encyclopaedia Britannica](#)], and preserves the countryside, with Conservative MP Andrew Mitchell warning that: “The green belt was bequeathed to us by past generations, and we should take extraordinary care before allowing it to disappear under bricks and mortar. Once built on, it can never be restored.” [Ref: [Daily Mail](#)] They are adamant that building on the green belt is not the answer, with other suggestions mooted, such as building on

previously used brown field land [Ref: [Collins Dictionary](#)], and increasing the housing density in towns and cities [Ref: [Evening Standard](#)]. Considering the competing arguments, should we build on the green belt, or would this irreversibly damage the countryside and do little to solve the housebuilding shortfall?

DEBATE IN CONTEXT

This section provides a summary of the key issues in the debate, set in the context of recent discussions and the competing positions that have been adopted.

What is the green belt?

First formally proposed as a Metropolitan Green Belt surrounding London in 1935, the subsequent Town and Country Planning Act of 1947 broadened the remit, to allow local authorities around the country to formally designate their own areas of green belt land [Ref: [Wikipedia](#)]. At its core, green belt policy was conceived to control urban sprawl by ensuring that towns and cities had a ring of countryside where agriculture, forestry and wildlife could flourish, and that city dwellers could easily access [Ref: [Wikipedia](#)]. Moreover in terms of town planning, the green belt was seen as a way to, “preserve the unique characters of historic towns, safeguard the countryside from development, and encourage the regeneration and reuse of urban land” [Ref: [Independent](#)]. However, the idea of a green belt goes back to the Victorian era when social reformer Ebenezer Howard suggested the idea of a ‘Garden City’, which would provide the benefits of living in the city, but have countryside nearby to offer tranquillity and fresh air for families [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. But recently, the nature of the green belt has come under increasing pressure from critics who argue that it stifles our ability to build vital infrastructure, such as housing. With this backdrop, the debate hinges on what should be done to build the homes and infrastructure that commentators on both sides admit we need, and what we want our cities, towns and countryside to look like in the future.

Loosen the green belt

Critics suggest that there are two main reasons why we should build on the green belt. Firstly, they challenge the picture often painted by advocates, of the green belt being composed of stunning, rolling countryside and abundant wildlife, and instead, like writer Paul Simons, they argue that: “Much of the green belt is not even green – 18% is classed as ‘neglected’ with derelict buildings,

rubbish, electricity pylons and other blots on the landscape.” [Ref: [Guardian](#)] He disagrees with the entire premise of the green belt as having anything to do with the environment or preserving the countryside, claiming that, “the original idea of the green belts was to prevent urban sprawl, not for nature conservation or even beautiful landscapes”, adding that, “only 45% is green and much of it is monoculture farmland too harsh for most wild plants to survive.” [Ref: [Guardian](#)] Secondly, critics point to the fact that we are simply not building enough homes in the UK to cope with demand, meaning that property prices keep rising for buyers and renters, making affordable homes increasingly difficult to find, especially in the South East [Ref: [Telegraph](#)]. They also note how little of the UK is actually built on, and reject the idea that there are small pockets of countryside which must be protected at all costs – as urbanised zones make up only 9.9% of England with 4.2% classed as built up areas, whereas green belts make up more than 12.4% [Ref: [London First](#)]. As such, it is estimated that by building on just 5.2% of existing green belt land around cities, 1.4 million new homes could be built [Ref: [Huffington Post](#)], and with London’s green belt three times the size of the city itself, such a move could have a huge impact on the supply of homes for ordinary families [Ref: [Huffington Post](#)]. For some, a more ambitious, radical and utopian approach to city planning is what is required, with the ability to expand into the green belt key to this vision. James Heartfield says that: “The city has to be able to breathe. Instead of squeezing more flats into every space that becomes available...London needs more green space in its centre, and wider streets.” [Ref: [spiked](#)] He envisions a future where: “If the green belt was built on, and the city was allowed to grow into the suburbs, all of us could lead grander, freer lives” [Ref: [spiked](#)]. Others point to the success of the original garden cities of Welwyn and Letchworth, along with new towns such as Milton Keynes [Ref: [Wikipedia](#)], as a template for how new towns can be built successfully in the countryside [Ref: [Guardian](#)].

Our green and pleasant land

With proposals put forward to build as many as 360,000 new homes in 14 new garden villages on green belt across the country [Ref: [Guardian](#)], including potentially up to 50,000 new homes around Manchester [Ref: [Guardian](#)], the green belt issue has been brought into sharp relief for supporters. For some such as Paul Bryson, “the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act is... the most intelligent, far sighted, thrillingly and self-evidently successful land management policy any nation has ever devised.” [Ref: [The Times](#)] He marvels at the tranquillity that the countryside surrounding cities offers, and challenges the idea offered by critics, that the green belt, “isn’t actually all that special, that much of the land is scrubby and degraded” [Ref: [The Times](#)], arguing instead that, “green belts in

England contain 30,000 kilometres of footpaths and other rights of way, 220,000 hectares of woodland, 250,000 hectares of top quality farmland, and 89,000 hectares of Sites of Special Interest.” [Ref: [The Times](#)] In terms of building, others claim that we should prioritise urban regeneration, as well as the development of brownfield land [Ref: [Collins Dictionary](#)] if we need to build more homes. Brownfield sites denote derelict land which was once used for industrial or commercial purposes, but which now lie dormant, and estimates suggest that redevelopment of these sites alone, could provide at least 1.1 million homes across the country [Ref: [Telegraph](#)]. Similarly, urban regeneration is a priority for others, and it is proposed that local councils should be granted the power to compulsorily purchase tired, old and unused high streets and retail parks, and turn them into housing [Ref: [The Times](#)]. Another key concern with building on the green belt is urban sprawl [Ref: [Encyclopaedia Britannica](#)], with critics claiming that the global trend of expanding cities into the countryside will have huge environmental effects in the long term [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. They warn that: “To live in sprawl means driving to work, driving to get dinner, driving to meet your friends. It means congestion...and isolation due to the lack of the perks of a compact city life.” [Ref: [Guardian](#)] A radical alternative, suggests Simon Jenkins, is that we increase the housing density within our cities, rather than building on surrounding green belt land. He argues that compared to cities such as Madrid, Athens, New York or Berlin, London is leafy and low rise, and notes that: “Inner Paris has a population density of 20,000 people per square kilometre, four times London’s.” [Ref: [Evening Standard](#)] So, should we build on the green belt?

ESSENTIAL READING

It is crucial for debaters to have read the articles in this section, which provide essential information and arguments for and against the debate motion. Students will be expected to have additional evidence and examples derived from independent research, but they can expect to be criticised if they lack a basic familiarity with the issues raised in the essential reading.

Is it time to rethink Britain’s green belt?

Rowan Moore **Guardian** 19 October 2014

FOR

Green belt is more likely to be wasteland than a slice of countryside

Paul Simons **Guardian** 22 February 2017

For a London a hundred miles wide

James Heartfield **spiked** 27 April 2016

We must build on the green belt to end this housing crisis

Juliet Samuel **Telegraph** 20 April 2016

We've got to dig up the green belt to build more homes

Tim Montgomery **The Times** 25 September 2015

AGAINST

Sajid Javid pledged the green belt was sacrosanct. To betray that would be sheer vandalism

Daily Mail 5 February 2017

The green belt must not be sacrificed for housing

Telegraph 4 February 2017

We need to abandon the delusion that it's the green belt standing in the way of building more houses

Emma Bridgewater **Telegraph** 3 February 2017

The myth of the housing crisis

Simon Jenkins **Spectator** 28 February 2015

BACKGROUNDEERS

Useful websites and materials that provide a good starting point for research.

Britain's delusions about the green belt cause untold misery

Economist 11 February 2017

The green belt is strangling our towns and cities

James Heartfield **spiked** 10 February 2017

Government has missed an opportunity to loosen the green belt

Ben Rochelle **Huffington Post** 10 February 2017

Let's make the best of the homes we have

Alice Thomson **The Times** 8 February 2017

Should Britain build on it's green spaces to solve the housing crisis?

Alister Scott **Independent** 8 February 2017

Brownfield land won't be enough to solve London housing crisis

Sam Bowman **Londonist** January 2016

Why the green belt matters

Bill Bryson **The Times** 30 September 2015

Britain's housing crisis: are garden cities the answer?

Patrick Barkham **Guardian** 1 October 2014

Six reasons why we should build on the green belt

Colin Wiles **Guardian** 21 May 2014

Protect our green and pleasant land

Independent 21 March 2012