

A more radical design criterion for Green Belt release

Why not give the land a special category that values a view and preserves protected viewing corridors in perpetuity argues Guy Middleton



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The pressure to release the green belt is at an all time high and it feels almost like as the pressure rises there will be a release in green belt land for no other reason than new homes must be built. Whether or not you believe the green belt should be released, assume that tomorrow your favourite piece of green belt was released for house building.

Is there an opportunity to rethink the design of new homes to ensure the green belt release is a positive benefit not a blight on the existing homes and community that adjoin the green belt.

A view is not protected in planning law

The majority of green belt land provides some stunning uninterrupted views. Probably one of the most common objections to planning applications is the loss of a person's view, which in planning law has no standing. Any development of an existing single dwelling in the green belt, must prove no harm to the openness of the green belt. Openness is undefined and unquantifiable in area or volumetric terms.

Yet when the release of green belt is being considered for larger

projects, once the 'exceptional circumstances' have been proven, there is no due consideration to the openness of the land that once was, Green belt.

So perhaps we should consider this transition more carefully. Green belt land, open or with woods and hedgerow, once provided unique and long views of the countryside. Why should those credentials be lost overnight just because planning law does not recognise the right to a view. If such a right existed on all urban land then you can imagine the battles and conflicts with permitted development. But if the green belt land is released having proven special circumstances then why not give the land a special category that values a view and preserves protected viewing corridors in perpetuity. If those views could be enjoyed by the new residents, they too would learn to appreciate, preserve and protect the view and the remainder of the green belt. Thus helping allay the fear of continual urban sprawl.

I believe there are ways to design 'a long range view from each dwelling' into a scheme and that many designers would relish the chance, if developers can be persuaded to look at what homes might need in the future, not what simply sold last week. That >>>

>>> design led approach might produce a more sympathetic solution, such the new development will become a place where open views can still be enjoyed and the sense of unique, peaceful and tranquil setting, blends into the green belt.

Would this ease the resistance to the release of the green belt. Planning for the future might just need one consideration from the planning lawyers. A right to a view from each new dwelling and no permitted development rights passing with the transition of the green belt to 'diluted green belt'. So whilst the lawyers amongst you consider the fees, here are a few openers on the design opportunities.

One way to blend into the green belt and provide far reaching views for each dwelling: Hardscape and our relationship with the car

A typical housing scheme will comprise of acres of tarmac, pavements and driveways, assuming (probably correctly today but possibly not in 5 years' time) that every houseowner must have immediate access to a car (or two). One of the key features of Centreparcs, is the insistence that cars are left in the car park, and the beauty of the forest is enjoyed or bicycle or on foot.

Before you all groan at the thought of leaving your beloved car at the gateway to a housing development, just think about it for a while. The car is an essential part of rural commuting. The school run, the trip to the shops or the dash down the motorway, but what if that last mile meant a simple transfer to an electric vehicle, dotted around the site to /from shared ownership to/ from the central car park to/from your home? Your car remains in a central car park, safe and secure and only a small pathway for 'golf buggies' to ferry residents to/from home. No cars parked

in the drive, in the roads (no roads) and safe areas for children to cycle and play.

If that one design principle could be adopted by house-builders, acres of tarmac would be redundant and design opportunities open up. The Centreparcs idea has worked since its conception.

The DVLA suggest the number of applicants for driving licences is falling for the first time in many years. As Uber, city car clubs, rent-a-bike etc take off, is our relationship with the car about to change and if so can we rethink the need for a garage and driveway immediately next to the home? Cars parked at the entrance to the site, leave green space unfettered by parked cars on driveways.

Building height / density

The need to release the green belt, which was there to protect urban sprawl, presents the conundrum how to design with the minimal impact or scar on the land that was, before consent was granted, open fields. Some believe 'village life' works because of the close buildings, close community, high density design. Others have a view the plot sizes should be larger and the dwellings should stay limited to single storey.

The biggest influence is the land value and the price is determined by what the developer can squeeze in. But if this is set and controlled before the site in the green belt is released then the land values will adjust and homebuilders will bid accordingly. Remember the windfall is usually going to a landowner and the land had little value before the consent is granted, so it just represents less of a windfall, not a loss and a project that becomes unviable. Increasing the density offers quieter pedestrianised access with far reaching views at the rear of each dwelling.

Softscape

Six foot high panelled fences are the developers 'quick fix' for the demarcation of the territory we know as the back garden. Is there any point moving to what used to be the green belt, to a home that then stares at a 6ft high fence. Privacy maybe an issue but can clever design can provide privacy , without carving the land into tiny gardens. The communal garden, can be a benefit to those who enjoy the open space without the hassle of mowing the lawn each week. The result could lead to open views from each dwelling that characteristic that the green belt was seeking to preserve.

Bungalows

A persons housing need changes with time. From the first time buyers apartment, family home and then the inevitable downsizing, bungalows still serve a purpose, but because the inefficient (less profitable) use of land, bungalows rarely appear on the masterplan.

OPPOSITE and BELOW:
Modular house types by
Ilke Homes



Garage space vs storage space.

It is not unreasonable to expect a family of four to need 4 cars at some time in the families development. Building four garages would seem excessive, but whatever garage space is built some of that space is used for storage (bicycles, garden furniture, garden tools etc). The hobby room/workshop or storage facility would seem logical in the basement (expensive) or if pitched roofs must be included in a housing scheme, then the loft space should be clear and practical. Otherwise the volume of the pitched roof, is just reducing the openness of the green belt by adding one storey of architectural 'aesthetic' for no reason that to let rain run off a building.

I once stayed in a Swiss Chalet, with a series of communal underground nuclear bunkers, all of which were used to store cycles and skis. Warm , dry and well ventilated , far better than a shed! Reduced infrastructure gives rise to vast expanses of green feathering into the surrounding countryside

The Home office

The government recognise the desire for people to work from home. Less commuting, more productivity. But the interaction with other team members is stifled and perhaps the home office or 'on site business lounge' will be an added design feature to encourage the community spirit and allow homeowners to work from home 'on site' in designated building. [expand on this , home working has its distractions, but has privacy and storage printing etc.]

I am seeking to establish if the release of green belt would be more acceptable if a more radical design criterion were applied. The house builders will tell you the values would not make sense and I believe that is a weak argument. If the design is right, the money spent the standard designs for urban dwellings, could be diverted to create better spaces for affordable and non-affordable homes. Just a few suggestions but I am keen to hear more.

- A right to a view in 'Diluted green belt ' land and no permitted development rights therefore restriction addon extensions and preserving long views and the diluted openness.
- Central parking and 'last mile' shared transport for deliveries and car loading/ unloading – reduction in roadways and hardscaping
- Open garden designs including neat purpose built communal allotments for shared enjoyment
- Some single storey buildings that give the ownership and privacy of a bungalow and but designed without pitched roofs and sheds
- Re-think the garage, workshop, storage space and home office requirements to balance communal/ central facilities with home owners on site requirements.
- Avoid cookie cut design and where green belt is released, create a land category that has stricter design criteria for the proposed scheme and any future development like a conservation area. ■



3.1 PPG2 states that the fundamental aim of Green Belt policy is to prevent urban sprawl by keeping land permanently open", PPG2 (2001).

The five purposes of including land in the Green Belt listed are:

- to check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas
- to prevent neighbouring towns from merging into one another;
- to assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment;
- to preserve the setting and special character of historic towns;
- to assist in urban regeneration, by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land

3.2 PPG2 also recognises the positive role that land identified in the Green Belt has in fulfilling the following land use objectives:

- to provide opportunities for access to the open countryside for the urban population;
- to provide opportunities for outdoor recreation near urban areas;
- to retain attractive landscapes, and enhance landscapes, near to where people live;
- to improve damaged and derelict land around towns;
- to secure nature conservation interest; and
- to retain land in agricultural, forestry and related uses.

