

The Big Read **UK housebuilding**

## UK housing: a crisis in the Conservative heartlands

Britain is desperate to relieve a housing shortage, but plans to build on 'greenbelt' land around London have angered many of Theresa May's supporters

Jim Pickard in Guildford 10 HOURS AGO

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Leading a new political party requires broad shoulders, as Susan Parker found out after setting up the Guildford Greenbelt Group in 2015.

"I've experienced quite a few things that Theresa May would never have to experience," she says. "The [prime minister](#) will never have to write out her own leaflets on her own computer and pay for the ink herself." Sometimes, she admits, being a political leader is "like herding cats".

[GGG](#) was set up on a shoestring only six months before local elections in 2015 but reaped 20,000 votes, a striking result in the wealthy English market town. The embryonic party won three council seats which in living memory had always been Conservative and came second in nearly 20 other wards.

The emergence of such protest parties is one reflection of the ferocious politics that surround the [issue of housing in the UK](#) and which is hugely divisive for the ruling Conservatives. A decade after the financial crisis, house prices have risen thanks to a combination of record-low interest rates and [sluggish housebuilding volumes](#). For many, property has simply become unaffordable.

Guildford is one of the towns on the front line in a battle taking place across the UK between a Conservative government desperate to tackle a housing crisis and thousands of worried residents, many of whom are natural Conservative voters, who are opposed to mass housebuilding on their doorsteps. They are fighting over the future of the so-called greenbelts — the extensive doughnuts of open land that surround London and other English cities, which were designed to prevent suburban sprawl.



The development of new houses in Guildford and its surrounding greenbelt has been subject to local protest

Some 23 miles north-east of Guildford, in the south London constituency of Mitcham and Morden, there are 9,500 people on the waiting list for public housing, and 190 families in temporary accommodation. Siobhain McDonagh, the local Labour MP, begins her constituency “surgery” at 2pm every Friday. Sometimes she is still there at 9.30pm dealing with an overwhelming array of housing problems.

“I’ve had a five-person family sharing a single bed,” she says. “Now we’re dealing with two parents with six kids in private rented housing for seven years, the landlord wants them out so he can get more money, they are being evicted.”

Ms McDonagh says more than 80 local families are temporarily housed in cramped, damp rooms in a converted warehouse on an industrial estate. “Nobody is saying there isn’t a housing problem in this country,” she says.

Nor is the problem confined to those on low incomes. Many young professionals [in London](#) on decent salaries cannot afford to buy a home. The number of homeowners under 45 in England has dropped from 4.46m in 2010 to 3.56m in 2015-2016.

With younger voters increasingly switching to the opposition Labour party, Mrs May’s government is desperate to find a silver bullet to tackle the housing crisis — described by the prime minister as a “personal mission”.



Housing Secretary Sajid Javid has said that there will be more flexibility about developing brownfield land in the greenbelt © EPA

Sajid Javid, housing secretary, admits that a generation has been “locked out of the housing market” and has set a target of 300,000 new homes a year. He said in March that [planning reforms](#) would include “more flexibility” to [develop brownfield land](#) in the greenbelt. He has also warned councils that if they miss [new housing targets](#) they will be stripped of their planning powers.

Nick Boles, a former Conservative planning minister, says British governments have not built enough homes in the past 20 years. “We have failed through a combination of cowardice, complacency, laziness and incomprehension,” he says.

**Many Tories remain afraid**, however, of alienating their own core voters in places such as Guildford, a picturesque Surrey town next to the North Downs and where 89 per cent of the district council is in greenbelt land.

“It started out as a protest group, we had gone on a big march 18 months earlier, after that it grew by osmosis and it was like our own Arab spring,” says Mrs Parker, a former investment banker turned accountant before she set up the party in Guildford. “I remember one hearing at a church hall with the MP and it was like a Baptist mission, person after person saying ‘I have voted Conservative all my life and you have lost our vote.’”

The greenbelt — designed to prevent cities sprawling ever outwards — holds a special place in the British psyche alongside the NHS. The most famous section is in London, dating back to 1947. But there are 13 others around cities including Nottingham, Sheffield, Newcastle and Bristol.





Ministers repeatedly claim that they will not undermine the principle that no new building should occur there unless all other options have been exhausted. Mr Javid says the greenbelt is “sacrosanct”. Mrs May has declared: “The government is very clear that the greenbelt must be protected.”

Yet this protection is not inviolable. Under pressure from the government, councils are designating swaths of greenbelt land for housebuilding. Research by the Campaign to Protect Rural England, a conservation group, claims there are a “startling” 425,000 new homes planned for land released from the greenbelt in local government blueprints — an increase of 150,000 in just one year. In Greater Manchester alone, nearly 60,000 homes are planned under a 30-year “spatial framework”. Andrew Mitchell, the Tory MP for Sutton Coldfield in the Midlands, has protested at the “monstrous dump of concrete” heading his way.

The building industry insists that the projects under way represent little more than a nibbling around the edges of the protected areas. But Guildford residents say their town is proof that the protected area is being bent out of shape. According to Sir Paul Beresford, an MP in a neighbouring constituency, some 57 per cent of housing in Guildford Borough Council’s 15-year “local plan” will be built on greenbelt sites.



The Hindhead Tunnel, part of the A3 motorway, near Guildford, under construction in 2011

Some of those 12,426 homes will be built in the town itself, including a lengthy development above the station already nicknamed “The Stalinist Great Wall of Guildford” by unimpressed locals. But most of them are earmarked along the A3 road which links the town with London’s southern suburbs, at sites including an old airfield at Wisley.

“All the way along the A3 will be ribbon development with lumps on one side or the other,” says Mrs Parker. “There are lots of places around the country which could be improved by building, especially in London, where you have semi-derelict land . . . where you could build affordable flats for people to live in.”

Guildford’s protesters are educated, articulate and angry. Amanda Mullarkey, chair of the Guildford Residents Association, described a “feeling of despair” as the national government imposes ever more homes on the area. “People are feeling that their scope to influence and shape things has slipped away and in that situation they have to choose whether to fight or just give up.”

Campaigners place the blame on the 2010-15 coalition government: ministers in 2012 edited the “national planning policy framework” — the key planning rule book — to make it easier for developers to use greenbelt land. Councils were told that although they should try to avoid earmarking the protected land for houses, it could be fine in “very special circumstances”.

The CPRE says that this has allowed housebuilders to “cherry-pick” sites in those protected areas. Paul Miner, who manages the group’s campaigns about planning, says ministers need to do more to encourage builders to develop old urban sites instead. Richard Rogers, a prominent architect, has argued that more than 1m homes could be built on existing urban or suburban plots.

## Recommended

**As pressure builds on** the government to tackle the housing crisis, the political debate seems to be

shifting. The average age of a first-time buyer in the UK has risen from 25 in 1969 to 36 in 2014. The affordability ratio of median houses to median incomes in England has jumped from 3.5 to 7.6 since 1997.

Ministers are starting to think the previously unthinkable about housebuilding. For example, a few months ago Mr Javid suggested that the government should borrow £50bn to build 140,000 homes — although the idea was later blocked by Downing Street.

Elsewhere, others are asking if the time has come to rip up some planning protections. Paul Cheshire, professor of economic geography at the London School of Economics, believes “almost every reasonable person” would agree on the need for a radical overhaul of the current system.

He suggests that if all land which had no particular environmental value and was within 800m of an existing station in London’s greenbelt was built on, it could enable the construction of around a million homes. “No doubt many people who live close to the locations identified here would rabidly oppose building . . . that is more or less inevitable,” he says.



Labour MP Siobhain McDonagh: 'Nobody is saying there isn't a housing problem in this country' © AFP

Ms McDonagh, the Labour MP, has published an early day motion (EDM) calling on the government to consider this idea. “People may think that greenbelt means beautiful open spaces or parks like Box Hill, but a lot of this is scruffy bits of land,” she says. “I don’t want to ruin anyone’s view, but I don’t want thousands of families to spend the rest of their lives in temporary accommodation.”

Prof Cheshire points out that greenbelt across England has declined by only 0.1 per cent in the past 10 years. Furthermore, much of the land designated as greenbelt is either brownfield — previously used land that includes buildings such as military bases or old aircraft hangers — or it is golf courses and arable farmland, he argues. “In Surrey more land is golf courses than houses,” he says.

He adds that the fetishisation of the greenbelt has also diverted developers into places of ecological importance. Prof Cheshire cites Lodge Hill on the Hoo peninsula in Kent, where Medway Council wants to build thousands of homes at a nesting ground for endangered nightingales.



Developers prefer building on fields because it is easier than remediating old brownfield sites and dealing with complex urban planning rules. The most attractive fields for developers are near cities and — therefore — in greenbelt.

**Andrew Whitaker, planning director** at the Home Builders Federation, says there is an erroneous perception that the greenbelt is always rich in wildlife. “It’s not that it has wildlife, it is merely there because it happens to be around an urban area,” he says. “It includes land that has been previously used, such as power stations or sewerage works.”

The HBF argues that only 11 per cent of Britain’s land mass is currently developed. Even if 250,000 homes a year were built for 20 years in the countryside that figure would only rise to 13 per cent, it says.



Old Oak Common in north London, an example of a brownfield site earmarked for development in 2016 © Bloomberg

Mr Whitaker says he understands why Guildford residents would be unhappy about having thousands of new homes built around the town. “But at the end of the day we have a housing crisis and we need to build houses for people, the people that complain about houses being built are people who already have houses,” he says. “The challenge is giving a voice for the people who are moving into the houses that are built, you never tend to hear from them.”

Ruth Davidson, executive director of public impact at the National Housing Federation, cites a survey by NatCen, a research organisation, suggesting 73 per cent of Britons now support affordable new homes in their local area. “To build the number of homes we need, we should consider all sites and all options — brownfield and greenfield, large and small, greenbelt, high density,” she says.

Those arguments do not persuade campaigners in Guildford. Mrs Mullarkey of the residents’ association says it is “crazy” to build over the fields along the A3. “Where is it going to end?” she says. “If every time we do a local plan they say it’s only say a tiny fraction of the greenbelt, but then they keep doing it, it’s not a sustainable solution.”

Sir Paul, the Surrey MP, is a former leader of Wandsworth council in London and believes there is plenty of space left in London to build at greater density and height. “Once you build on green

fields you never get it back again,” he says.

## Politicians wary of new building in their areas

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The UK government has made building new houses one of its signature issues. Yet some cabinet ministers are more reticent when it comes to their own constituencies.

Prime minister Theresa May has opposed several new developments in her seat of Maidenhead, for example a Berkeley Homes project in the village of Cookham. “Even talking about the need to build in the greenbelt is still taboo,” says one Tory MP in private.

Gavin Barwell, Mrs May’s chief of staff, was housing minister until he lost his seat in Croydon in last summer’s election. In 2016, he was accused of hypocrisy after he described three planned local developments in the south London constituency as a “pile of nonsense”.

Nor is the opposition Labour party in any hurry to rip up existing protections in the greenbelt. Jeremy Corbyn, the party’s leader, recently told the CBI: “If you take away this cordon of green space and cleaner air around big cities, I think you have the danger of massive ribbon development.”

For now, an uneasy compromise continues, whereby the belt remains “protected” even as chunks of it are turned over to housebuilders — a situation that pleases neither side.

Sir Crispin Blunt, a Conservative MP, has set up a group of about 70 mostly Tory MPs opposed to any more encroachment by developers. He dismisses the idea that lots of greenbelt is not countryside: “It’s not a grey area,” he insists. “A green space such as a golf course is still a green space.” He compares London to Los Angeles, which have had the same population growth since the second world war. If you laid a map of LA over London, he says, it would stretch all the way from Cambridge to Brighton.

“The Treasury is saying, build in the south-east, that’s the motor that will drive the economy,” Sir Crispin says. “They don’t give a shit about protecting the environment.”

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