

'Build on the boring areas of green belt'

HOUSING

JASON BEATTIE
Chief Political Correspondent

SWATHES of the green belt should be given up for housing development, the Government's environmental advisers said today.

Natural England — charged by ministers with overseeing England's conservation — said the 50-year-old zone

around the outskirts of London should be broken up.

In a radical set of proposals the organisation said the best parts of the green belt should be safeguarded.

However, areas of less environmental importance should be considered for building "eco homes" and other green developments.

The plans prompted fury from environmental campaigners who warned they would lead to concreting of the

countryside. A policy paper being discussed today by the board of Natural England says there should be a "network" of green spaces rather than a blanket designated area.

"We have to consider the option of permitting development on the green belt in order to minimise impacts on the natural environment elsewhere," it says. "None of the current options for development are impact free.

"Of course, some green belt land will

not be suitable for development. This includes environmental designations, flood plains and strategic gaps to maintain separation of settlements.

"These areas could be the basis of a new, less extensive green belt. Its form would probably be one of green gaps, green wedges and buffers rather than continuous belts."

Natural England was created last year through the merger of English Nature and the Countryside Agency. Director of policy Andrew Wood said "large pieces" of the green belt were "comparatively boring".

"The trees are there but they are not high quality in conservation terms," he said.

If the policy paper is agreed by the Natural England board, it will then be passed to ministers at the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Department for Communities and Local Government.

Although ministers have promised in the past to protect the green belt, the Government wants three million new homes to be built by 2020, of which two million may have to go up on new land.

The Campaign for the Protection of Rural England warned that altering green belt policy could "unleash an American-style swathe of car-dependent rule that could change England for the worse".

Thousands of homes built in back yards

MIRA BAR-HILLEL
Property Correspondent

MORE than a thousand new homes a year are being built in London's back gardens, new figures reveal today.

Developers can build on the land because back gardens count as previously developed and are therefore "brownfield" sites.

But opponents fear the resulting lack of grass and soil could make London more vulnerable to flooding because rain is stopped from soaking into the ground. This can cause subsidence.

Campaigners have called on the Government to close the loophole. The figures were released by the Green Party's Darren Johnson, who chairs the London Assembly's environment committee. Mr Johnson said: "Permission is being given to build over a thousand new homes a year in London's back gardens. Records have only been kept since 2004/05, but since then the go-ahead has been given for 3,525 units to be built on gardens.

"There is a vital need for new housing in London, but garden-grabbing developments are not the way to deliver them."

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