



[Is the countryside under threat?](#) (Oct 2011)

by [Mark Iddon](#)

Is the countryside under threat from developers and the government with the draft National Planning Policy Framework document?

‘The Government is to hand thousands of acres of land to developers to build homes,’ stated The Sunday Times this weekend (October 2nd 2011), as the Prime Minister unveiled plans for 100,000 new houses to both stimulate the construction industry and address the housing issue of several decades of under provision. It is alleged that property developers who have made donations to the Conservative Party will benefit from the distribution of government owned land for the purposes of housing development.

This news comes amidst concern over Greg Clarke’s (Planning Minister) introduction of a new National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), which reduces over a 1000 pages of planning legislation down to 52 pages. The NPPF is currently available for viewing as draft for consultation until October 2011, and is anticipated to be approved as legislation in April 2012. Although it has been suggested by some to be flawed and a developer’s charter, planning officials have been advised to work as if it is effective immediately in an attempt to revive the ailing construction industry.

Organisations such as the Campaign for the Protection of Rural England (CPRE), the National Trust (NT) along with many other environmental groups are up in arms over what they see as a betrayal of the Conservative Party who had been traditionally allied with wealthy land owners and rural communities. It was the CPRE who were the advocates and proponents of the original 1947 Planning Act, which was introduced to curb the development of the post war building programme where the 'Homes For Heroes' was thought to bring about urban sprawl.



In order to investigate if the countryside is now under threat from development, it is useful to explore some of the myths and facts that have surrounded the housing debate for many years.

Successive Labour and Conservative governments, over the last 50 years, have recognised the shortfall in housing production. A need for new housing occurs as a result of increased population, immigration, changing home life situations (separation / second family etc) along with houses required to replace the existing stock. Many houses built to accommodate workers during the industrial revolution were built in response to immediate needs of the time and may not have expected to have lasted over a hundred years.

Figures vary on the quantity of new homes required each year to meet our society's housing need from 240,000 target of the Government in February 2008, to the 250 New Town's Club / Audacity who suggested that we need 500,000 per year for 10 years back in 2006.

House building fell to its lowest ever since the 1920's under the last Government at 185,000 in 2008-2009 and so far only 73,000 have been constructed this year. It is clear that the 100,000 new homes cited by the Prime Minister is not really the ambitious building programme it is purported to be. Indeed David Cameron has stated that there will be no compromise on the Greenbelt or areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty but will be made up of brownfield site of former barracks, schools and office developments. The shortage of housing in recent years, even before the banking crisis of 2008, has led to many people staying at home with their parents and so the average age at which a people get their first mortgage is now 37 years, often with parental assistance for the large deposits required of mortgage lenders. It is telling of the housing shortage that despite the economic crisis and uncertainty, although house prices have dropped slightly, the fall in value is not in proportion with the severity of economic stagnation that we are currently experiencing.

Greenbelt land is designated as to be protected against development and is distinct from the 'open countryside' and 'Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty'. Greenbelt does not relate to the quality of land and may just be unused shrub land or even a former scrapyard in the instance of Dale Farm. Greenbelt is not an absolute fixed entity but has actually increased over recent years. The Dale Farm issue goes some way to show that it is the upholding of the rule of law and refusal to compromise that takes precedent over needs of society and human sensibilities to provide places to live.

