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Britain's green belt is choking the economy

Aug 17th 2023 – The Economist

The Kidlington gap, north of Oxford, is a forgettable spot. It includes a large car park and some fields wedged between busy roads. But locals hold their corner of England's green belt in high regard. When Suzanne McIvor, who runs a neighbourhood group, heard that the local authority had agreed 4,400 homes could be built there, she was "horrified". The thriving city is desperate for housing but she objects that, by letting it grow together with Kidlington, a dormitory town, "we are going to lose what is special about Oxford."

Britons love to block building. A circular issued by the ministry of housing in 1955 allowed "the formal designation of clearly defined green belts", for "checking the unrestricted sprawl of built-up areas". This followed the designation in the 1950s of a belt up to ten miles wide around London. The effect was to help land prices in cities to rise (without it, by one estimate, prices in the south-east would today be about one quarter lower). Voters, in general, love it. Thus, despite recent efforts to reform planning to ease a housing crisis, the belt has steadily grown.

Oxford, like many of England's towns and cities, attracts more would-be residents each year. But there are not enough homes for them. That is because building is restricted in much of the country. Some 37% of England is protected from development, much of it through designations such as national parks. But a third of restricted land is set aside as a "green belt" that encircles towns and cities, preventing urban sprawl by prohibiting development. Rishi Sunak, the prime minister, shows no appetite for anything that could threaten the belt.

Britons agree the housing market is broken. Just one-quarter of adults in England surveyed in July, called housing in their area affordable for people like them. Real house prices are up by 80% in the past 20 years. Rates of home-ownership have fallen and around 300,000 households in England are homeless or at risk of it. People also appear to favour building more: just 28% of survey respondents said they would oppose new homes in their area. Despite this, England builds an average of only 230,000 new ones a year, and just one-fifth of our respondents agreed with the idea of focusing on "meeting the country's housing needs, even if this comes at the expense of some green-belt land."

To build more, England needs to look harder at its protected land.

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