

The Green Belt Under Siege

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Christchurch, Dorset

In my naivety I always believed that land designated as Green Belt was sacrosanct, and as such, protected from development. It is in Christchurch, Dorset, that the sanctity and security of the Green Belt is now being tested on a scale hitherto unimagined. Christchurch and East Dorset Councils' are working together to set out the 'vision' for the Borough of Christchurch and the main principles and policies which will guide development over the next 15 years.

What will have shocked and possibly dismayed local people is just how much Green Belt could be sacrificed in order to fulfil the requirements of this Core Strategy. Far from being protected, it seems that it is actually astonishingly easy for Green Belt to just be re-designated as non Green Belt and for the building to commence. In total the Core Strategy plans to sacrifice sufficient Green Belt to accommodate approximately 985 new homes across three sites.

Although very aware of the bigger picture, my specific fight has been over CN3, the Marsh Lane proposal, where a residents' group, 'The Marsh Lane Action Group', has formed to try and fight this part of the Strategy. Sticking to the objections which we believe the Council will find hardest to counter argue actually brings us to the environmental core of the opposition.

The land in question is Green Belt, which we believe should be protected. The land is also close to an environmentally sensitive SSSI. The Strategy states that residential development will be located outside a 400 metre heathland exclusion zone, however, vehicular access into the proposed site is difficult and it appears from the information available that a road will have to be provided, which will cross the exclusion zone in order to access the homes. It seems to be a fairly pointless exclusion zone if a road can be built across it with all the noise and pollution that this entails. Having said that it appears that having land designated as Green Belt is worryingly pointless as well.

In addition to these concerns residents are also worried about building on what is recognised to be a flood plain. This has been tried in other towns and cities with sometimes disastrous consequences. The 'Marsh Lane Action Group' has managed to obtain the support of over 500 concerned local households, who wish to see the CN3 part of the Strategy opposed. With the support of so many local residents, our Constituency MP and ward councillors, plus Natural England and the Dorset Wildlife Trust, who will both have raised concerns about the site prior to the June 25th deadline, we hope to at least achieve a review of this component of the strategy.

There may be lessons here for people in other parts of the country who love nature, the environment and wildlife and would wish to see the Green Belt protected. If people do nothing the Green Belt will be lost forever; if local people mobilise and make their voice heard, then there may be a chance of yet saving this precious resource.