



Spatial Economics Research Centre

Monday, 15 February 2016

Greenbelt Madness: or how to get it back to front

By Paul Cheshire, SERC and LSE Geography & Environment

A couple of year back I [blogged](#) about how the legalistic mechanics of land designation were threatening to destroy one of our most special wildlife site. The most important nesting site for nightingales in the British Isles it might be but it was also a former Ministry of Defence site on the Hoo Peninsula. So it was a 'Brownfield' site and thus 'judged' suitable by Kent to accommodate 5000 houses. Goodbye nightingales....

Almost ever since I wrote the nightingale blog in 2013 planning lawyers have been locked in battle and earning a fortune arguing about whether the site on the Hoo Peninsula is, or is not, truly and legally 'Brownfield'. No one is arguing about the real point: its importance to our rapidly diminishing remnant population of nightingales. Our planning system does not deal in reality; only legally constructed reality.

Now we have another case in Cambridge which [illustrates the point in microcosm](#). The City is short of land for housing and housing is unaffordable (we Brits have constructed a magic formula that means we build [twice as many houses in Doncaster and Barnsley each year as in Cambridge and Oxford](#)). Cambridge, in its desperation, has even [proposed building some houses in its Green Belt](#). But now there is a proposal for 3 houses CLOSE to the Green Belt and this is causing an outcry.

The tragedy is that there are reasonable grounds for opposing building these three houses, on this particular site. Not because it is close to the Green Belt - less than 200 metres from the boundary. But because, unlike Cambridge's Green Belt land, this site actually has significant environmental value and is probably used as an informal adventure playground by local kids. It is a part of the old Cherry Hinton Chalk Pits – from which the lime to build many of Cambridge's ancient buildings came. Quarrying ceased in the 1980s and most of the site reverted to nature and is now a designated wild life area with rare chalkland flowers and butterflies. One of its plants – [the Moon Carrot](#) – is found in only 3 places in Britain; the [Cherry Hinton Chalk pits, Beechy Head and Knocking Hoe in Bedfordshire](#). The 3 houses proposed are on a small section of the Chalk Pits filled with excavations for the new Addenbrooks hospital building. So probably no great rarities on this site: just a pleasant semi-wild little urban green space.

The real madness is that the outcry is not because it is a pleasant urban green space with a potential for nature and informal recreation: but because it 'near the Green Belt'. 74 percent of Cambridge's Green Belt is intensive agriculture, providing no wild life habitat and no recreational value: just private owned, subsidy-attracting, 'tax-efficient', chemically-drenched desert. Bounding the Chalk Pit Wildlife reserve is an endless expanse of arable crops. Google earth suggests heavily sprayed cereals in the nearest field – perhaps 30 hectares – and maybe rapeseed in the next 30 hectare field. Developing 60 hectares at 50 houses /Ha would mean 3000 much needed houses and still have a net gain in terms of environmental quality, biodiversity and equity.

According to [Kate Barker in 2010](#) agricultural land at the edge of Cambridge – despite its subsidy and tax avoidance advantages – was worth only £18,500 per Ha: but with planning permission for houses the value shot up 150-fold to £2.9m. As [Martin Wolf said in the Financial Times](#) a year ago: ". building an economy upon a massive and growing distortion in the market for land is foolish. We do not need to concrete over England. We do need to stop constraining the growth of the places where people really want to live." We do not need 3 houses on a pleasant little green urban patch: we need 3000 more, please, on the adjoining intensive agricultural land!

Posted by [Neil Lee](#) on [Monday, February 15, 2016](#)

+1 Recommend this on Google

1 comment:

Anonymous said...

This project was all but given planning permission at the recent Planning Committee meeting. It was a shambles; if anyone had filmed it would have gone viral as an example of ineptitude and worse. The plan could not be turned down because, on its previous submission, the objection was for one particular aspect of the windows on the houses. Of course the developer achieved a solution to that so, when resubmitting, the committee had no legal grounds to refuse it.

This is what the problem is -- the planning system has no policy or regulation that starts at the Natural Capital level. So officers tick the other boxes and recommend approval. The politicians just pass it on.

Cambridge is being developed and often very poorly and hideously, one committee meeting at a time.

16 February 2016 at 07:09

[Post a Comment](#)

[Newer Post](#)

[Home](#)

[Older Post](#)

Subscribe to: [Post Comments \(Atom\)](#)

Simple theme. Powered by [Blogger](#).