

EXCLUSIVE

Essex town where farmland is being labelled 'grey belt' despite Labour promises

Planning reforms at the end of last year are now leading to agricultural farmland and green fields being concreted over in a growing 'national scandal'



Resident Deborah Taylor said the development approved on the agricultural land behind her was 'awful' (Photo: Alexa Phillips)

Alexa Phillips

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Green fields and farmland in the green belt are being reclassified as “grey belt” to build homes in an apparent breach of Labour promises to voters, *The i Paper* can reveal.

The Government previously described the grey belt as “[poor-quality and ugly areas](#)” and “poor-quality scrub land, mothballed on the outskirts of towns” that lie within the green belt. The green belt is an area of countryside around cities and towns that is protected from development.

In the run-up to the election, Sir Keir Starmer said the relaxation of green belt protections was intended to allow housebuilding on car parks and “similar land”

which “doesn’t affect the beauty of the countryside”.

But planning reforms at the end of 2024 are now leading to agricultural farmland and green fields being concreted over, to residents’ dismay, *The i Paper* has found.

Under the Government’s changes to the planning system, if a council’s housing targets cannot be met, some existing green-belt land will be re-designated as grey belt.

Basildon Council and St Albans City and District Council have approved developments on farmland in the green belt this year, with more expected to follow, according to the Campaign to Protect Rural England.

Kevin Hollinrake, the shadow Housing Secretary, said Labour had invented grey belt land as a “Trojan horse” to undermine green belt protections and “are now bulldozing the countryside”.



Dr Richard Moore said it was “crazy” to describe the area as “grey” (Photo: Alexa Phillips)

What is the green belt?

The green belt is an area of countryside around cities and towns that is protected from development.

According to the National Planning Policy Framework, the “fundamental aim” of Green Belt policy is to “prevent urban sprawl by keeping land permanently open; the essential characteristics of Green Belts are their openness and their permanence”.

Green belt serves five purposes:

1. to check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas;
2. to prevent neighbouring towns merging into one another;
3. to assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment;
4. to preserve the setting and special character of historic towns; and
5. to assist in urban regeneration, by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land

Richard Holden, the Conservative MP for Basildon and Billericay and a shadow minister, called it a growing “national scandal” and accused Labour of betraying voters.

Paul Miner, head of policy and planning at the Campaign to Protect Rural England, warned that the planning changes, which took effect in December, “are going to lead to a loss of valuable countryside”.

He said more developments on green spaces in the green belt are expected to come as local authorities face pressure to meet high housing targets. Labour has raised housing targets in many areas as part of plans to build 1.5m new homes within the current parliament.

Mr Miner said the definition of grey belt is “very vague” and “there’s still quite a lot of detail that hasn’t been properly explained”.



Alasdair Daw said the targets are too high for local need (Photo: Alexa Phillips)

The revised National Planning Policy Framework defines grey belt as “previously developed land and/or any other land” in the green belt that does

not “strongly contribute” to the green belt purposes of restricting urban sprawl, preventing the merging of towns, preserving the setting of historic towns or assisting urban regeneration.

In defence of the plan, Labour previously said: “We don’t think it is right that wastelands and old car parks located on the green belt are given the same protections in national policy as rolling hills and nature spots in the green belt.”

The Government said more detailed guidance would be published but this has not yet materialised.



The fields that have been deemed grey belt are about a kilometre deep (Photo: Alexa Phillips)

Residents fight back

In the town of Billericay, thousands of dismayed residents have joined a campaign group to fight back against plans to build on the green belt.

The local authority, Labour-controlled Basildon Council, has reclassified swathes of greenfield sites as grey belt as part of plans to build 17,000 homes on the green belt by 2043. Some 27,000 homes are being planned in the borough overall, which includes Billericay, Wickford and Basildon.

Last month Basildon Council made what is believed to be the first grey belt decision in the country, approving a proposal for 250 homes on agricultural land near Laindon Road.





Andrew Baggott, leader of the Conservative group on Basildon council, believes what is happening in Billericay is a harbinger of what is coming in other parts of the country. Because "grey belt" is widely open to interpretation, he said it "favours the developer". (Photo: Alexa Phillips)

Another 400 homes were green-lit on a completely green grey belt site three miles away known as Noak Bridge.

A short drive from Laindon Road is another similar proposal for 480 houses, which is expected to be approved next week. Others are set to follow.

It's a similar story in Harpenden, Hertfordshire, where Liberal Democrat-run St Albans City and District Council approved 420 homes on farmland reclassified as grey belt.





A third development on this field is expected to be approved next week (Photo: Alexa Phillips)

Alasdair Daw, who leads the local Billericay Action Group, said it has become “a lot harder” for developments on green spaces to be blocked since Labour won the election.

Richard Holden, the Conservative MP for Basildon and Billericay and a shadow minister, said Labour had apparently “lied” to voters when it said grey belt “was just about small bits of areas that had already been developed”.

“Nobody is opposed to areas which are basically semi-derelict, like a former bus station or a petrol station being redeveloped if it happens to be in the green belt,” he said.

“But the mass switch of what was literally in some of those areas, like in my own constituency just a few years ago, classed as the highest or the second highest grade agricultural land, which has never been built on, to so-called ‘grey belt’ in order to get it through the system – there is a national scandal waiting to come out here.”

He said many of his constituents feel “utterly betrayed by Labour”.





250 homes have been approved on this field (Photo: Alexa Phillips)

‘Sold down the river’

During the election, the Conservatives beat Labour by just 20 votes. Since then, Basildon borough’s housing targets have increased by 24 per cent, from 1,039 to 1,271 homes per year.

Andrew Schrader, a Conservative councillor in Billericay, said they have been “sold down the river”.

“I have never known the planning system to be as stacked against residents and in favour of developers as it is right now,” he said.

“‘Grey belt’ is a sleight of hand by the Labour Government, designed to enable local councils like Basildon to downgrade and give away their irreplaceable green belt.”

The development near Laindon Road, which is covered in hay, is the first to be approved on a large expanse of agricultural farmland and open fields that stretches out for more than a kilometre.

The whole area has been earmarked for development under the council’s local plan, which will make it easy for builders to get planning permission on its other parts. A walk along its footpaths reaches Frith Wood, an ancient woodland.

Dr Richard Moore, a Conservative councillor who lives nearby, said the idea that this was a “grey” site was “crazy”.

“Look at it,” he said, gesturing around the site. “This is not grey. This isn’t land that’s been used before for rubbish dump or whatever. This is arable land. We’re going to lose that.”



Alan Barford said this was the “last place” that should be built on (Photo: Alexa Phillips)

Locals like Deborah Taylor, 64, share his disbelief.

“It’s absolutely preposterous that it’s been classed as grey belt,” she said. “This is a classic example of something that really is nowhere near a grey belt definition.”

Ms Taylor, who lives near the proposed development, believes the Government is “getting rid of our future food supply” and should be using agricultural land to grow crops instead of importing food.

“It’s very much the developers that are running housebuilding in this country, aided and abetted by this Government and this council,” she added.





Richard Walker doubts locals will be able to afford these new homes (Photo: Alexa Phillips)

Residents cast doubt on 'affordable' housing promises

In accordance with Labour's rules for grey belt sites, the developer has promised that 45 per cent of the homes built will be "affordable" – but residents have grown wary of such promises.

Following lobbying by builders, Labour watered down an election promise for 50 per cent affordable homes on grey belt sites, reducing the figure to 15 percentage points more than in the local housing plan.

"For a lot of the promises that both the council are making and the developers are making, there are no consequences for not achieving them," said Deborah Taylor, who lives near the proposed development. "For things like affordable homes, we're already seeing builders saying, 'It's not financially viable for me to do that now, so I'm going to cut it.'"

Labour's planning changes have made it harder for developers to back out of affordable housing commitments on green belt sites, but the Campaign to Protect Rural England said this has yet to be tested.

Richard Walker, 60, said his children cannot afford to buy a home in the area and he does not see how the new builds will change that.

"When they say it's affordable – affordable for who? I don't believe that," he said.

Mr Walker, a deployment manager who has lived here for 30 years, remembers buying his first three-bedroom semi-detached home with his



wife here 30 years ago and paying £62,000. A similar home would now cost upwards of £300,000, with two-bedroom flats at upwards of £200,000.

The Government's definition of affordable homes includes social homes rented out by councils, but it also considers more expensive options such as those at 80 per cent of local market rents, those at rents between market rents and social rents, and shared ownership homes.

Ms Taylor, who is retired, wants to see developers use the planning permissions they already have – and lose them if they do not.

Developers have left more than 1.4 million homes unbuilt since 2007 despite securing planning permission for them, according to a report published earlier this month by the Institute for Public Policy Research think tank.

'Build on brownfield sites'

Alan Barford, 65, said it "feels like it's the last place you should build on".

When he comes to meet me, he has brought a sign from one of residents' protests, which is addressed to Basildon Council leader Gavin Callaghan but makes a playful reference to the sitcom Gavin & Stacey, which is partly set in Billericay, Essex. "Hay" Gavin, Stacey says Wot's occurin' to our lush green belt, the sign reads.



Gavin Taylor holds a map of the green belt areas that have been earmarked for development in orange (Photo: Alexa Phillips)

Mr Barford, a restoration specialist who lives in a home that backs on to the field, said it is a “lovely place” to be. Bats land in his garden and birds are regularly spotted in the area, in addition to other animals. As we walk around, others pass us with their dogs along the footpath that cuts through the fields.

Mr Barford worries the extra homes will worsen traffic on already-busy streets. “Most of the week, there’s no car parking spaces,” he said. “The whole place is going to get jammed up.”



More developments are expected to be approved here (Photo: Alexa Phillips)

A lack of supporting infrastructure proposed was another concern raised by residents. The [local GP has just shut](#) and classrooms at schools close by are full.

Gavin Taylor, who works in the City and lives in a home by the site, wants to see [brownfield sites built on](#) instead.

“With grey belt ‘golden rules’, it really is a charter for developers to just blast the whole of the green belt land around Billericay,” he said.

Kevin Hollinrake, the Shadow Housing Secretary, said the Government must prioritise building on brownfield land in urban areas.

He said: “The Labour Government have used their sleight of hand invention of ‘grey belt’ land as a Trojan Horse to undermine important national Green Belt protections and are now bulldozing the countryside by disproportionately moving development into Green Belt and rural areas.”

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A Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government spokesperson said it was taking action to deliver 1.5 million homes to address a housing crisis.

They said: "We are clear that councils should build on brownfield land first, and any grey belt development should prioritise previously developed land like disused car parks.

"Our reforms will protect our natural landscapes and deliver the homes and infrastructure we need at the same time, so we can restore the dream of homeownership to families across the country."

The St Albans City and District Council declined to comment.

A Basildon Council spokesperson said the developments will meet the borough's current housing needs, act as a long-term investment in its growth and sustainability, and enhance communities with vital amenities and infrastructure.

They said each planning decision undergoes "rigorous assessments" to ensure it aligns with national and local policies. In 2025, the council will give protective status to every green space that is not allocated in the local plan.



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