

# Loophole opens way for green belt homes

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Workers at a residential construction site on the outskirts of Maidenhead. The land was once part of the green belt RICHARD POHLE/THE TIMES

Thousands more homes could be built on the green belt because of loopholes in the government's plan to accelerate housebuilding, according to a conservation group.

Sajid Javid, the communities' secretary, told MPs on Tuesday that the green belt was "safe in our hands" and that the government would keep all its "existing strong protections".

However, the housing white paper contains a proposal for councils to review their plans in which they allocate land for housing at least every five years.

Councils that fail to allocate enough to meet their "objectively assessed housing requirement" could be stripped of their right to control where homes are built.

The Campaign to Protect Rural England said that councils were already under pressure to allocate green belt land for housing when they reviewed local plans and these reviews would become much more regular.

At present local plans have a life of about 15 years and are rarely reviewed more often than every ten years. Only eight local authorities with green belt land have reviewed their local plan more than once in the past ten years.

Almost 300,000 houses in the green belt are already being proposed by local authorities on land around 14 English cities where development is meant to take place only in “exceptional circumstances”. The CPRE said this could double under the white paper’s proposals. It said that a separate proposal in the document effectively encouraged local authorities to review green belt boundaries to meet housing demand. Under the proposal, councils would be under pressure to amend green belt boundaries to allocate land for homes if other “reasonable options”, such as redeveloping existing sites, were not available.

The government previously stated that housing demand alone would not lead to green belt boundaries changing.

Paul Miner, the planning campaign manager at the CPRE, said: “The effect of the two proposals will be that the number of green belt boundary alterations to accommodate housebuilding will increase massively.

“Local authorities are being required to set housing targets well in excess of current rates of delivery and they will be under even greater pressure to sacrifice the green belt.

“There need to be more explicit safeguards against regular nibbling of the green belt than the white paper offers. The government needs to state that green belt changes should be truly exceptional, both in terms

of limiting the number of actual boundary changes but also in terms of the frequency with which boundaries are altered.

“If the green belt has been recently altered then significant alterations should not happen again for at least 15 years, not every five. This is critically important in terms of providing long-term certainty for the green belt to be managed for either farming, woodland or wildlife.”

The white paper proposes that when land is removed from the green belt, there should be “compensatory improvements” to remaining green belt land. It suggests these improvements could be funded by “higher contributions” from developers who build on the green belt.

The Department for Communities and Local Government said that councils were already required to review their local plans at “regular intervals”, though the minimum period is not specified.

A spokesman for the department said: “We’ve been clear that the white paper does not change our strong protections for the green belt.”