

**Should urban expansion take
precedence over conservation of the
Green Belt?**



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Summary

Keywords Search:

Urban Expansion, Green Belt, Urban Sprawl, Conservation, Bath, Development, Regional Spatial Strategy, BANES, Housing

Abstract

I have always been interested in proposed building changes in the area surrounding where I live, taking regular notice of development issues within it so upon hearing of the Urban Expansion I immediately sought to further my knowledge by reading the local newspapers and asking people who were taking some kind of role in either supporting or opposing it about it. After the opportunity arose to take part in the Extended Project I felt this was a brilliant topic to research, as it lends itself well to the requirements of the Extended Project as well as the fact that I am very interested in it and want to pursue a career which could potentially deal with issues such as Urban Expansions.

Should Urban Expansion take precedence over conservation of the Green Belt?

Introduction

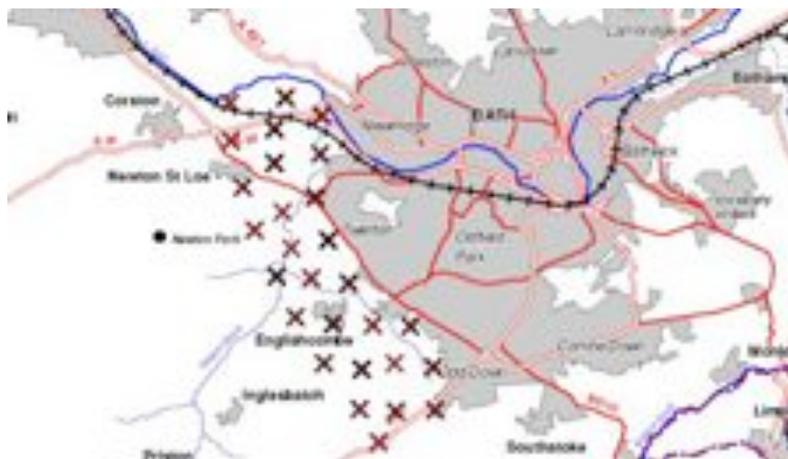
I have always had an interest in buildings and the environment, so when I first heard of the proposal to build more houses in Bath, it immediately gained my attention. I was doing work experience with the Duchy of Cornwall at the time, and they were having a meeting whereby people from the village, in which I also live, came to look at the Duchy's proposed development within the village. At this meeting there was a representative from CAUS (Campaign Against Urban Sprawl) who talked about the proposed plans for the development of Bath, who presented their argument opposing the plans, the argument of which I intend to investigate later in my essay. I found what she said very interesting and this issue combined with my fantastic work experience has furthered my interest in building, and helped to cement my feeling that I would like to study Surveying at University.

In my essay I plan to look at the reasons why BANES (Bath and North East Somerset) council argue that Bath is in need of development in the form of the Urban Expansion, and the benefits that they claim this will have on Bath as a city. I will also research which area of Bath the houses would be built on, and how far this development will actually comply with BANES wishes for them to be sustainable and affordable. I will then look at the counter view, represented by the people of Bath's opinions as well as researching organisations such as the aforementioned CAUS and the CPRE (Campaign for the Protection of Rural England) to see the reasons why they disagree with the Urban Expansion.

Background Information

Urban Expansion is a term commonly known in the Bath area, and it is one that provokes a lot of controversy. Many people are aware of the need for new housing in Bath, and are willing for BANES to carry out their plans drawn up in the Regional Spatial Strategy; and others are adamant that the urban expansion should not be built for a number of reasons, primarily because it would mean building on the green belt.

The Regional Spatial Strategy is something that perhaps people are more unaware of. It is a plan drawn up by the South West Regional Assembly, with approval from the Secretary of State, documenting the proposed changes to the South West. Naturally, this incorporates Bath. Bath is currently undergoing a plan for major development, between now and 2026 BANES, under the RSS, plans to build up to 21,500 new homes. In July 2007 the Government published a document named “Homes for the Future: More Affordable, More Sustainable” One of its overriding aims is for everyone to have a decent home of which they can afford, it a place where they want to live and work, the RSS shares this vision and would like to implement it within Bath in the form of the new development. However, there is only a certain area of the outskirts of Bath that can actually be built on. This is due to the fact that most of the outskirts are areas of outstanding natural beauty (AONB), which simply cannot be built on. An AONB is a designation made by the Countryside Agency and then approved by the Secretary of State, “The primary purpose of designation is to conserve and enhance natural beauty” (Anon, 2004-2009) claiming that the specified area of land is a beautiful part of the country and should not be changed by development, the AONB status protects these areas of land. Therefore, this leaves the area of search (the area in which it is permissible for the houses to be built on) where the crosses are on the map below.



BANES is planning this development in order to provide houses for the escalating demand, which has occurred due to the increasing population of Bath resulting in a lack of affordable housing. But BANES also have an overriding aim that Bath will become a “distinctive place, with vibrant and sustainable communities where

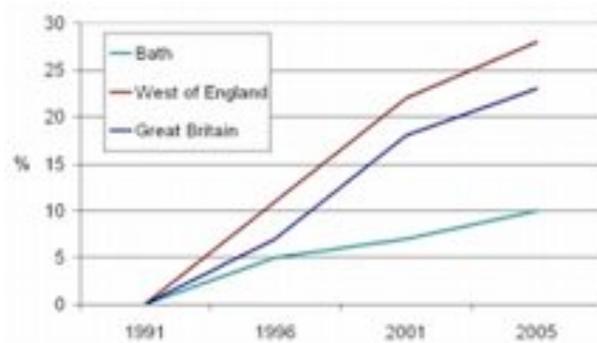
everyone fulfils their potential.” (Bath and North East Somerset Council, 2004) This is a substantial claim for BANES to have made, and some question whether it is feasible, I will investigate the reasons for this opinion later in my essay.

Why BANES feel the development is needed

BANES feel that Bath is increasingly in need of change in the form of development. They claim that “Bath stands on the threshold of the next major cycle in its evolution as a city: an opportunity no less significant than the Georgian transformation.” (Bath and North East Somerset Council, 2004) On the BANES website I have found an article named ‘The Case for Change’ which claims, amongst other things, that Bath’s economic and social problems, “if left unchecked, will lead to the long-term decline of the city.” (Anon, 2004) I feel that this article is infact incredibly biased, as it is evidently trying to persuade people that the development in BANES is necessary. This is due to the fact that BANES need to incite people to be in favour of the development as it would completely revolutionize Bath as a city, therefore BANES need to persuade the residents of Bath that it would unquestionably be a change for the better, which is why BANES have to be biased in the statements that they make in documents and on the internet. However, underneath the biased writing I think the Case for Change article contains some valid reasons as too why Bath needs to develop.

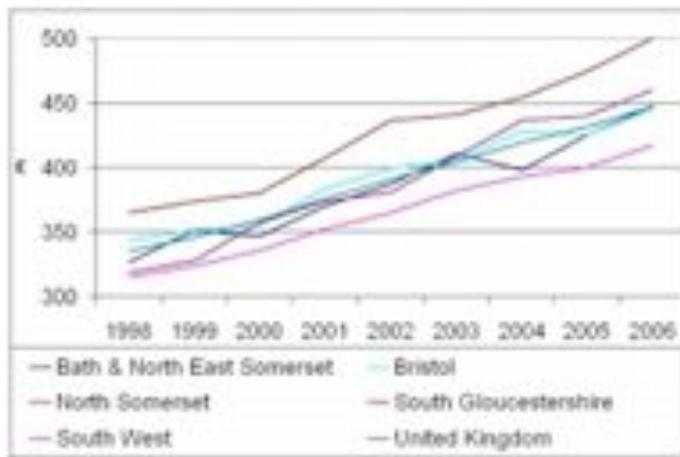
Firstly, there is the lack of possibility for the expansion of the economy. This is due to a number of reasons, namely, the lack of space, the current industries that are the primary supporters of its economy and the fact that Bath needs an increase in the number of highly paid jobs to provide sufficient wealth in the city for its prosperity. Currently, Bath has become increasingly dependent on the tourism and retail sectors. These do not provide a good basis for the city’s economy to grow as they are incredibly reliant on the economic climate, therefore they provide no stability as they decrease dramatically in periods such as this where we are in a recession. Bath’s economy is then made more vulnerable by the closing of some of its main manufacturing industries, such as the Ministry of Defence at Lansdown, which is closing down and will most probably not be replaced by another industry. Therefore BANES believe that “a significant expansion of the city’s existing economic base is required to generate new, higher wage employment opportunities and to create a broader and more balanced economy.” (BANES Council, 2004)

The lack of employment growth is shown in the graph below.



From this we can see that over the past seventeen years Bath has had a substantially lower growth in employment than average for the country and for the rest of the West of England, which has had a higher than average employment growth. This is somewhat detrimental to the city in that it has not been keeping up with the rest of the country and therefore BANES feel it is time to change.

These service industries do not provide high salaries, therefore they do not make provision for the wealth that Bath needs for it to thrive and have a secure economy.



This graph shows the average weekly wage of full-time employees across the West of England. We can see that Bath's weekly wages are approximately average, however when taken into account the cost of living in Bath, which is significantly higher than that of the other cities in the above graph we realise that Bath's wages are perhaps not particularly good comparing to other cities, thus people are commuting from Bath to other cities in order to increase their salaries.

One hugely constricting factor it the lack of space Bath has for companies to coma to

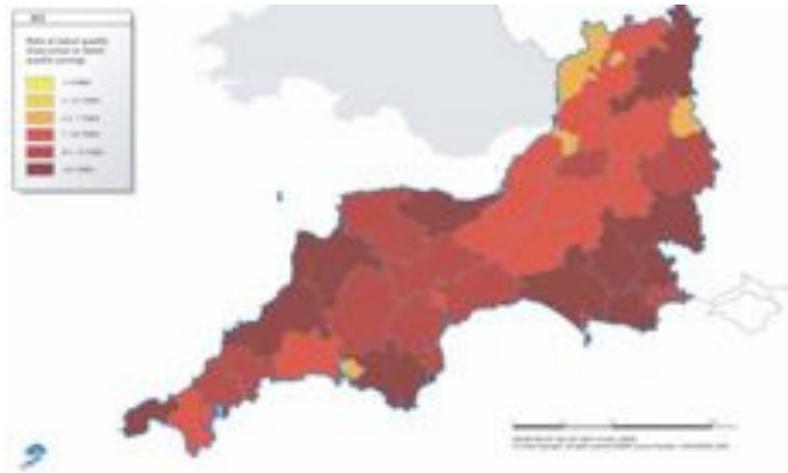
the city, or expand within the city, and thus providing the jobs with higher earning capacity. This is something that BANES wants to address with the development, as they believe “A range of new offices and workspaces must be developed if the city is to achieve future employment and economic growth.”(BANES Council, 2004)

BANES feel that if there was to be more opportunity for companies providing higher salaries with the building of new workspaces then this would increase employment growth and wages and therefore reduce the number of people commuting to other cities, thus reducing emissions as well as expanding Bath’s infrastructure. This seems like an ideal solution to all the aforementioned reasons in which Bath needs to develop.

BANES believe that if the development does not go ahead then Bath will fall further and further behind its competitors. As at the moment Bath is a very popular short-break destination, comparing with other cities in the U.K., but also European cities such as Paris, Barcelona and Amsterdam, and with the introduction of low cost flights these European cities have become far more easily accessible. As well as the fact that competing cities in the U.K. have undergone huge amounts of redevelopment, making them far more appealing to tourists. BANES feel that Bath also needs to undergo redevelopment in order for the city to still be a highly regarded visitor destination.

The distribution and area of the housing

The RSS claims the need for 21,500 new houses in the BANES area, of which 7,500 would directly be in Bath. The RSS states that 6,000 of these houses are to be built in the city centre, with the Urban Expansion providing the further 1,500 needed to comply with the plans. These houses would be built between now and 2026, increasing the amount of housing in Bath by 19% (BANES, 1999-2009) However, there is some scepticism over whether there will actually be more development than the RSS has first stated. After attending a council meeting, where a Councillor spoke about the RSS and the proposed development in Bath, I became more aware of the potential situation that Bath could in fact be inundated with more houses than first expected as the Councillor said how he felt that in actual fact the RSS would want more houses than first claimed due to more recent household projections and the need to support the forecast economic growth. The council are fully aware of the need for increased levels of housing, as I explained in the earlier section, however, they feel that the city is not capable of withstanding the housing capacity stated by the RSS,



This map shows the house price to income ratio for the south west. It shows the ratio of the lowest quartile house prices to lowest quartile earnings and as you can see Bath is in the 8.5-10 times bracket, which means that Bath's house prices are 8.5 to 10 times more than its inhabitants salaries.

The RSS claims that one of its main aims is to provide “plentiful and affordable housing and good quality public services and community infrastructure.” (South West Assembly, 2006) It is under government policy that all new development under the RSS should be affordable. This therefore is an excellent opportunity for Bath to gain some affordable housing. However BANES believe that this government proposal could potentially be quite problematic. BANES held a Parish Liaison Meeting in Keynsham on Wednesday 11th June 2008 where members of BANES Council met with representatives from many of the Parish Councils surrounding Bath. Affordable housing was one of the many items discussed at the meeting, and from the minutes it is clear that affordability is an issue. Eric Potter who is the chairman for BANES Local Councils group expressed his concern “about the affordable element of the new homes planned for BANES.” (Chairperson-Bath and North East Somerset,2008) And John Everitt, the Chief Executive of BANES “agreed with Eric Potter about the challenge that this [affordable housing] presented.” (Chairperson-Bath and North East Somerset Coucil,2008).

It is also obvious that with the increased amount of housing comes the need for more infrastructure, the RSS does specify that when building the homes the infrastructure needs to be taken into consideration. However, this could cause problems as many people believe that Bath will not be able to cope with the infrastructure needed for the amount of housing, I will develop this further later in my essay.

Aswell as being affordable, BANES, with instruction from the RSS, wish for the development to be as sustainable as possible. According to the RSS Urban Expansions are “part of the most sustainable solution for delivering housing and other development.” (South West Assembly, 2006) The council believes that protecting the built and natural environment is crucial for the future of Bath. The RSS is required by law to be subject to a Sustainability Appraisal (SA). This is a document prepared for the Secretary of State for communities and Local Government by Land Use Consultants (LUC). There are many issues that the SA examines and it then concludes to highlight issues that the RSS can improve. With the influence of the SA BANES have many different categories in which they want to focus on in order to make Bath a greener and more sustainable city. They would like to develop more sustainable methods of transport, possibly with the use of low-carbon vehicles which would also aid their want to develop a low-carbon economy and use as much sustainable energy as possible, promoting Bath as an example of a sustainable city. If this was the case it would probably increase the amount of tourism, thus they would like to develop a more sustainable approach to tourism. They would also like to encourage local sourcing and production of food and materials. Therefore using these materials they would like local people to offer their skills in sustainable construction, energy efficiency measures and the installations of renewable energy systems into people’s homes, and the homes in the development. Aswell as developing the councils waste policy and recycling, of which BANES is a very highly regarded city as it has an award-winning recycling status. These issues would then hopefully go some way to combating the causes and effects of global warming, which is of course the overriding aim for making Bath sustainable. These factors would all be taken into account when building the Urban Expansion, as BANES would be able to put into practice their want to source locally made materials and they would be able to use local builders for the development. However, sustainability does cause some concerns, as it would obviously require a vast amount of energy and resources to build the Urban Expansion and also the houses within Bath, therefore people question how sustainable this development will actually be, I will investigate this issue further later in my essay.

Along with these issues the SA developed further factors since the draft RSS was made. The SA has recognized that people have found it more and more difficult to find a “home of their wishes in the location where they would like to live.” (Land Use

Consultants, 2008) and they also realised that “The economic outlook is markedly less positive, less settled and less predictable than it appeared when the Draft RSS was prepared.” (Land Use Consultants, 2008) Thirdly they realised that “the science of climate change suggests the need for rapid and radical cuts in human greenhouse gas emissions” and that “The South West, which in world terms is a relatively high producer of greenhouse gas emissions needs to make a significant reduction in its own emissions.” (Land Use Consultants, 2008) This poses a problem for the development as the South West should be cutting down on its emissions yet by developing it will actually be increasing its emissions.

The Counter Argument

There are many people that believe the Urban Expansion should not go ahead for a variety of reasons. Primarily because of the fact it would be built on Green Belt land, which many people feel is not acceptable, and this probes the further question that if it becomes acceptable to consume all the Green Belt land by building houses on it then in many years time when there is no longer any viable Green Belt land left to build on, will people look to building on AONB's? If so, and it is a very real possibility, then the beautiful English countryside will be a mass of buildings, which people strongly oppose.

Many people are also against the way in which the necessary research was carried out. Central Government appointed QUANGO, which is the Quasi Non-Governmental Organisation, to split the South West into regions and then distribute the number of houses needed to be built in the South West amongst these regions. People question whether the designation of houses was sufficiently democratic, some believe it was handled in a rather more dictatorship way as each of the regions were meant to go through a consultation, which they did, however, people feel it was very badly carried out as it limited the scope for opinions by not factoring in certain situations and views as well as not actually listening and constructively using the feedback they were given. The RSS stated that the South West faced growth of 3% when it is in fact around 2%, they then extrapolated this data to say things such as if the economy grows 3% then the amount of jobs will increase by 3%, which is nonsense as in this case there is no correlation between the growth in the economy and the number of jobs. In fact in this case there is more an issue of where the jobs will actually come from, with huge employers such as the MOD closing, thus making many people redundant, people are

questioning where the jobs for all these people will come from.

If Bath cannot provide the amount of jobs needed to match the scale of the development then people will have to look to other cities for jobs such as Bristol, Swindon and most probably in some cases London. This would mean that all of these people would be commuting everyday, contributing to global warming, this does not comply with BANES wish for the development to be sustainable. This will also increase the congestion within an already very difficult city to travel round, making Bath more crowded, and it is already a very crowded city, some question whether it will be able to cope with the increased amount of traffic. One could then argue that people can use public transport to get to and from work, however, it will be a huge cost to BANES to provide the infrastructure needed for all of these people.

Infrastructure is another huge problem, as if the building goes ahead on the Green Belt there will simply not be enough of an infrastructure to cope with the number of people.

There would have to be things like new schools, shops and Doctor's surgeries built within the Urban Expansion aswell as the addition of public transport, many people believe that this will not be done as well as it needs to be in order to cope with the increased housing, and therefore Bath will be suddenly left with far more houses and people that it can cope with. There is also the issue of the houses being sold, which will affect the population of Bath. The RSS claims that the houses will be affordable, though in reality they will probably still be rather expensive, as I said earlier the councilors are envisaging a problem with the housing being affordable, and therefore some people will still be priced out of the market. This introduces the feeling that many people believe the development is profit driven as the developers stand to make an enormous amount of money from this development. They will therefore want to sell the houses for the maximum amount of money they can, this definitely does not comply with the RSS aims of making the development affordable. This question of it being profit driven increases the number of people who are against the development. As some people believe that building on the Green Belt is acceptable if it will provide people with homes that they otherwise would not be able to afford, however, when they learn that this may not be the case then it makes them more against the Urban Expansion.

People also believe that they need to put in some element of phasing, and we need to be told at what stage the development is, as many people are misled by the belief that the houses will suddenly be built all in one go, which is in fact not the case.

There is also the issue of the impact the development will have on the environment. The Land Use Consultants were employed to prepare a Habitats Regulations Assessment for the Secretary of State which explains the problem that in some areas the RSS could potentially effect wildlife, water quality and air quality. However, in Bath the most pressing environmental concern are Horseshoe Bats, areas of Bath which are potentially going to be built on are SSSI's (Site of Specific Scientific Interest) concerning Horseshoe Bats. Therefore people who are interested in conserving wildlife are against the Urban Expansion because of the effect it will have on the wildlife.

It also seems much more logical to build on the brownfield sites, these are sites that have previously been built on but are no longer in use. There is plenty of brownfield land in Bath that could be built on instead of building on the green Belt. This seems a very logical solution because the brownfield sites are already in the town, which means that the infrastructure is implemented thus solving a major problem. This would also mean that the countryside is not destroyed in any way which many people would be pleased about. Also the brownfield sites within the towns are unattractive sites as often they are left abandoned. Redeveloping them means that old derelict areas can be turned into desirable places to live. Bringing new people to an area causing it to become a strong, inviting community which is also a far more convenient place for people to live as the local facilities and workplaces are much more accessible and with the increased amount of public transport in these areas it becomes a far more convenient place to live than an area of the green belt that has been built on. It also gives a new lease of life to an otherwise rather dull area. Although, developers prefer to build on Green Belt land because it is easier, quicker and cheaper to build on that brownfield sites. Thus increasing their profits which many people claim is one rather important fact on the developer's minds.

Another way in which we can save some of the Green Belt is to use the land more efficiently by getting the design and density right. Government housing policy says that new developments must be built at a density of 30 to 50 dwellings per hectare for developments in the suburbs and it specifies a higher level for developments close to

town centres or with good transport links. Since 2005 the number of dwellings per hectare has improved reaching approximately 40 dwellings per hectare. However, this is largely due to the building of high rise flats within these areas to increase the density. This could pose a problem in that the homes built in Bath would have to be either detached or semi-detached family homes with gardens and parking spaces, these kind of homes take up far more space than high rise flats making the governments housing policy less achievable. However, the people who project housing developments say it is possible to built family homes with the required elements at densities as high as 50 dwellings per hectare.

Campaign Against Urban Sprawl (CAUS)

CAUS is an organisation set up to fight the plans for “new housing developments that threaten to erode hundreds of acres in BANES.” (CAUS, 2007) They believe that the Urban Expansion, or Urban Sprawl as they more commonly refer to it, could change the character of the distinctive towns and villages within BANES, resulting in a less desirable and unique place to live. This is something that they are completely opposed to. By the use of Urban Sprawl we realise that they are infact quite biased, however they do have some valuable points. These include reasons why they believe the Green Belt should not be built on as it encourages an increased use of cars which causes more congestion and pollution. It also reduces space for producing local food, which in these times where oil supplies are rapidly depleting and hence prices are rising, is worrying as we will become more dependent on locally grown rather than imported foods. They also feel it has a negative impact on the environment, destroying havens for wildlife and reducing biodiversity. They also express concern over the issue of lack of infrastructure. But possibly their most prominent concern is that “With less countryside, towns and villages start blending into a continuous Urban Sprawl that leads to the breakdown of communities and accompanying social problems.” (CAUS, 2007) CAUS believe that the RSS and the Core Strategy are very difficult to understand causing people to be unconcerned about the forthcoming development as they do not really understand what will happen. However, CAUS say that the Urban Expansion will have a huge impact on people living within the area and so they therefore have a right to voice their opinions about the development. Therefore, CAUS decided to change the information into a much more accessible format helping inform people about the planning processes and making sure they understand how much Green Belt land may be lost to new developments.

CAUS say that building houses within the countryside increases greenhouse gas emissions, resulting in global warming as well as increasing traffic and congestion and quarrying in the countryside and putting more strain on the water sources. However, CAUS does understand that there is a need for more affordable housing, so they are looking to investigate factors such as are the economic projections on which housing numbers correct? And Are the number of new homes that are proposed more than we actually need? In answering these questions CAUS will be able to identify whether all the housing is needed, which will be very useful for all those concerned. They then want to investigate the effect the development will have on the community, questioning Will the growth in homes reflect a parallel increase in jobs? And Will the growth in homes reflect a parallel increase in investment in local infrastructure? Which will then allow us to see whether the jobs and infrastructure required by the Urban Expansion will actually be created or not, as some people fear.

CAUS understands the need for increased housing and therefore feels building on the Green Belt should be a last resort. They believe that land is a finite resource and once it has been built on it can never be retrieved and therefore we must use it wisely so this means that we should use all brownfield land first and using land more efficiently by increasing the number of dwellings per hectare.

Campaign for the Protection of Rural England (CPRE)

CPRE is a charity that campaigns for a sustainable future for English countryside. They campaign for the countryside to be protected for everyone. They believe that much of the destruction, namely the Urban Expansion, is unnecessary. They are less understanding than CAUS in that they simply believe the Green Belt should not be built on regardless of the need for more affordable housing. They believe that Green Belts keep the city in the city and that it is specifically designated to protect the countryside from Urban Expansion and to stop towns from merging into each other, instead favouring Urban Regeneration. They say that if the Green Belt is maintained then it “will bring greater health, social, recreational and quality of life rewards.”

(CPRE)

There are clearly very strong arguments for both sides. I comprehend fully the need for more affordable housing within the BANES area however I do not believe it is

necessary to build on the green belt for a number of reasons. The most prominent one being that if we build on the green belt we will never be able to get that area of countryside back, I also agree with causes concern that the Urban Expansion will lead cities to merge into each other, resulting in less defined cities and thus communities. I also think the Urban Expansion would have a detrimental effect on the environment in a number of ways, firstly the actual building of the houses would use a huge amount of energy and then the increased use of cars would contribute pollution to the atmosphere as well as causing unwanted congestion within the city, the building of infrastructure would also use up a huge amount of energy providing the required infrastructure was actually built. This is another concern; I do not believe that the government and BANES would provide the necessary amount of infrastructure needed for the scale of the development. I also agree with the arguments proposed by CAUS and CPRE as I think there are a lot of detrimental factors which make building on the green belt seem irresponsible and insensible such as the effect it would have on the environment by increasing pollution, destroying habitats and reducing biodiversity. As well as the fact that the green belt status was introduced purely for the protection of English countryside, if the green belt is built on this has obviously not been an effective measure and one could question whether any other measures taken to protect the environment such as AONB's are actually going to be successful. The Government is forcing BANES to build a certain number of houses under the RSS, so BANES have to build some houses somewhere. I believe the best possible solution as to where to build the houses would be to build them on brownfield sites. This would eradicate people's worries that the Urban Expansion will ruin the countryside and have a detrimental effect on the environment whilst making the unattractive deserted brownfield sites come to life by creating new communities within them, this seems to me to be the most logical conclusion. However, it is probably unlikely to happen because it takes longer, is more difficult and more expensive to build on brownfield sites therefore developers prefer to build on the green belt as it increases their profits.

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