

President: Rt.Hon. the Lord Randall of Uxbridge Kt.PC.

Matthew Pennycook MP
Shadow Minister of State for Levelling Up, Housing,
Communities & Local Government
House Of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA



19th May 2023

Dear Mr Pennycook

We write in response to Sir Keir Starmer's recent speech to the British Chambers of commerce and his interview with the BBC where he stated he would "back the builders, not the blockers" and that construction would only take place where it does not "affect the beauty of our countryside".

There is no question that the whole approach to planning matters needs to be overhauled so that it can properly meet 21st century challenges. It is something we remain deeply concerned about, principally because we believe the Colne Valley Regional Park (the first large taste of countryside west of London) is possibly the most threatened area of Green Belt in the entire country and would make an ideal case study for building best practice policies that effectively balance planning, farming and environmental needs in the urban fringe.

In our view, Sir Keir's comments suggest a very narrow view of the Green Belt, and we are keen to share our working knowledge and experience with you to help clarify matters.

We urge that any fresh approach to planning must recognise and reflect the positive aspects of access to green space for leisure/informal recreation with all the benefits this brings for physical and mental health, space for nature, food production/the rural economy, forestry and opportunities for climate change adaptation. The importance of this access was amply demonstrated during the Covid-19 pandemic when thousands of people discovered the local countryside on their doorstep.

We were disappointed to hear Sir Keir suggesting that 'beauty' would somehow inform decisions for development in the Green Belt. We feel this rather misses the point of the actual and potential value of access to the countryside where it abuts large urban areas and firmly believe it would lead to 'planning by dereliction'.

We are seeing a significant decline in landscape quality and attractiveness in parts of the Green Belt. The speed of this decline has increased during the last 10-15 years due to a variety of factors, including speculative land banking, planning blight, little or no enforcement and a lack of resources for local authorities. Insufficient remedial action and an absence of any positive vision has become the norm.

Colne Valley Park Trust

Charity Registration Number: 1181303

Colne Valley Park Community Interest Company

A company limited by guarantee. Registered in England. Company No. 08131867

Registered Office: c/o Colne Valley Park Visitor Centre, Denham Court Drive, Denham,
Buckinghamshire, UB9 5PG
www.colnevalleypark.org.uk

President: Rt.Hon. the Lord Randall of Uxbridge Kt.PC.

Our predecessors in the mid 20th Century established the Green Belt as an aspirational vision for countryside recreation, food growing and wildlife. Now, in the 2020s, it appears to be seen by many solely as an adversarial 'blocker' to development. We need to re-focus on the positive benefits for millions of people who live in and around London and restore the Green Belt. In the case of the Colne Valley Regional Park, it is the only formal status we have. There is no other protection.

I urge you to adopt our suggested seven ways to enhance National Planning Policy. See <https://www.colnevalleypark.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/19Nov21-NPPF-Changes-CVRP-Final.pdf>

Please also view a conference we held about the future of the Green Belt, see <https://www.colnevalleypark.org.uk/how-can-we-best-serve-the-green-belt-planning-conference-starts-conversation/> . I especially draw your attention to the contribution from Professor Peter Bishop.

We need to see a change in direction that achieves the following:

- Halting the increasingly frequent exploitation of 'very special circumstances' and 'exceptional circumstances' justifying development in the Green Belt's most vulnerable part – the urban fringe. Certainly, in the Colne Valley Regional Park the system has become a free-for-all and we are witnessing the loss of the Green Belt's long-term benefit for communities, the environment and the integrity of our countryside. What is worse is that this is happening outside of local plans, without a master plan from national government or any co-ordination between local planning authorities.
- Creating a workable national system of strategic planning to identify areas for growth whilst ensuring our natural environment close to cities is cherished, not just because of its special beauty, but because of all the benefits it can bring to people and the environment.
- Specific protection and status for the Colne Valley Regional Park. Its only defence to date has been the Green Belt which is now clearly beginning to crumble. If the Park is to survive, its protection must be underpinned by resources for restoration of landscape quality and biodiversity, proper planning and enforcement.
- Ensuring there is proper consideration and mitigation of the cumulative impact of multiple development proposals.

We stand ready to play our part in finding creative solutions, but the starting point is the political will to effect change

We invite you to visit the Colne Valley Regional Park to discuss using it as an example of how planning policy is failing and to explore opportunities to protect, enhance and restore this vital area on the doorstep of more than three million people who live within 10 miles of its boundaries.

Colne Valley Park Trust

Charity Registration Number: 1181303

Colne Valley Park Community Interest Company

A company limited by guarantee. Registered in England. Company No. 08131867

Registered Office: c/o Colne Valley Park Visitor Centre, Denham Court Drive, Denham,
Buckinghamshire, UB9 5PG
www.colnevalleypark.org.uk

President: Rt.Hon. the Lord Randall of Uxbridge Kt.PC.

The strength of the Colne Valley Regional Park is that the organisational structure is already in place thanks to more than five decades of partnership uniting five counties.

This really is a crucially important issue that is close to the heart of an enormous number of people in this area.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J.C. Whitby', written over a light blue horizontal line.

John Whitby, Chairman.

Cc

- Lisa Nandy MP, Shadow Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing, Communities & Local Government
- Jim McMahon MP, Shadow Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

To Labour MPs whose constituencies include part of the Colne Valley Regional Park (2 of 9 constituencies touching on the Park)

- Tan Dhesi MP. Slough
- John McDonnell MP. Hayes & Harlington

Colne Valley Park Trust

Charity Registration Number: 1181303

Colne Valley Park Community Interest Company

A company limited by guarantee. Registered in England. Company No. 08131867

Registered Office: c/o Colne Valley Park Visitor Centre, Denham Court Drive, Denham,
Buckinghamshire, UB9 5PG

www.colnevalleypark.org.uk