



HOW THE PLANNING GOALPOSTS HAVE BEEN MOVED

THE ATTACK ON SURREY VILLAGES

SCGB tends to steer clear of conspiracy theories. We adhere to Occam’s Razor¹ to a fault.

We just lay out the facts and let you decide.

Dirty deeds in Westminster

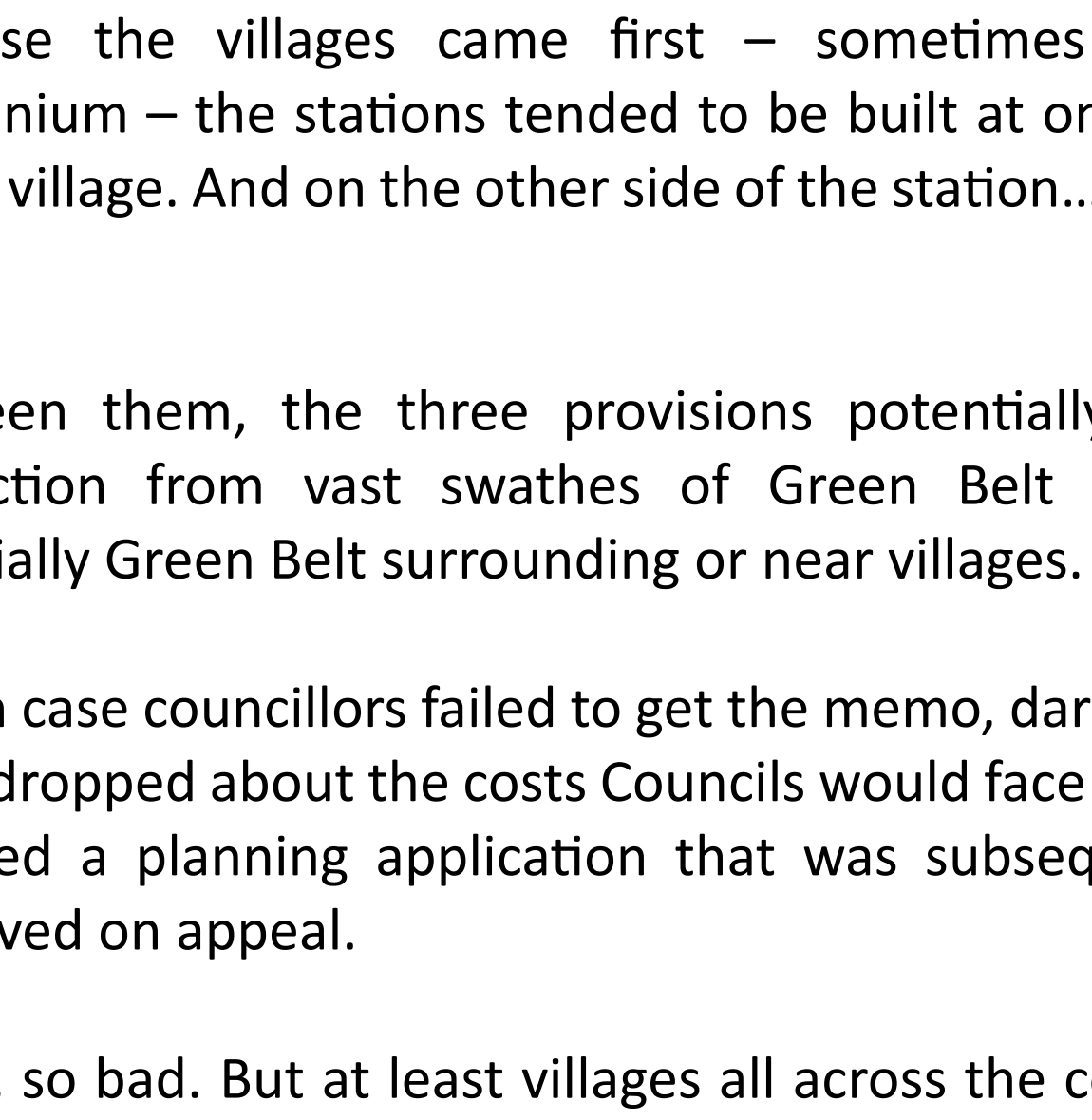
In 2024 the new government issued a new National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) setting out the rules that Local Planning Authorities (like EBC) must follow when they consider a planning application.

NPPF 2024 introduced the concept of Grey Belt – ie Green Belt for which the default answer to a development request would be yes. Politicians like Angela Rayner had previously said that the Grey Belt would be confined to “disused petrol stations and car parks” and “low quality scrub land, mothballed on the edges of towns”, but in a classic bait-and-switch, NPPF 2024 was much, much wider.

- First, it provided that land that is Green Belt because it “assist[s] in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment” (one of the Green Belt’s five stated purposes) would be designated as Grey Belt, all else being equal.
- Second, it provided that Green Belt land that separates a village from a town, or two villages from each other (as opposed to two towns) would also be designated as Grey Belt.

Surrey has only 27 towns in its 1,663 sq km area. All the rest is villages and countryside. As a result of those two provisions, almost all of the Green Belt surrounding villages or simply protecting countryside is now Grey Belt.

But the *coup de grâce* came with another update to NPPF in 2025 (still in draft but due any time now) which said that Green Belt “within reasonable walking distance of a railway station capable of providing a high level of connectivity” would also be stripped of protection and become “default yes”. The wording about connectivity was defined so that in Surrey it captured nearly all stations.



Surrey has 84 stations, and 27 of them are in villages. Because the villages came first – sometimes by a millennium – the stations tended to be built at one side of the village. And on the other side of the station...Green Belt!

Between them, the three provisions potentially strip protection from vast swathes of Green Belt – and especially Green Belt surrounding or near villages.

And in case councillors failed to get the memo, dark hints were dropped about the costs Councils would face if they rejected a planning application that was subsequently approved on appeal.

So far, so bad. But at least villages all across the country faced the same threat, right? Well, no.

A key element of local plans is to calculate the “housing need” and identify land to meet it. Failure to find enough land, as in Elmbridge’s case, leads to the plan being rejected. The housing need is essentially 0.8% pa of the existing number of dwellings.

But the government ramps up the percentage depending on the area’s “affordability index” – average house prices divided by average earnings. An index of five or lower keeps the housing need at 0.8%; but an index of 10 (very nearly) doubles it. Out of 64 local authorities in the Southeast, 38 have indices above 10 (compared to the North, where it’s one out of 62). Three – all in Surrey, and including Elmbridge – have indices above 15, meaning that their housing need is tripled.

Obviously, this is nothing to do with real housing need. The government would say that it is intended to depress housing prices and thus make housing more affordable. But surely it must know that, *at the margin*, Surrey house prices are driven by earnings and wealth accumulation in London. In 2021-22, the Surrey average affordability index jumped as Londoners moved out of the city in response to Covid, before falling back in 2023 and declining since. Additional supply won’t help that (even ignoring the fact that sales of new homes do not control overall prices).

But the formula does force Surrey councils to release Green Belt around villages to meet the inflated “housing need”, until development joins villages to nearby towns or to the London sprawl.

Villages, and the village way of life, will disappear except in really remote communities.

Why would the government want to do that?

Meanwhile on the other side of town

Let’s flashback to 2022. The largest UK developers/housebuilders have just come off a “supernormal” decade during which they consistently recorded gross margins of 17-32%. But in 2022, margins are compressed by high mortgage rates reducing buyer affordability and by inflated building costs. New home building collapses.

By early 2024, a Knight Frank poll of large housebuilders showed that 70% backed the then opposition – a startling turnaround from the sector’s traditional stance. Donations were up too, although from chairmen and owners rather than the companies themselves.

A housebuilding pledge had been at the centre of the new government’s election platform, and it was desperate to get housebuilding going again.

Is it possible that the developers set a price for resuming building – and the price was the Green Belt?

Because Green Belt sites give developers greater ability to scale up, compared with brownfield sites, margins can be much higher. And developers hold huge “land banks” of agricultural sites, the value of which would skyrocket if development on the Green Belt were allowed.

But the developers might have had another agenda as well. In the long term, those pesky villages are a nuisance. The Crown Estate is proposing a 500-dwelling development on Loseberry Farm – equal to one-sixth of all the homes in Claygate now – but developers *really* want developments of say 2,000 dwellings to max out their margins and bring them back to the good old days.

They know that they would never get away with that in the context of Claygate. But if Claygate became absorbed into Esher, or better still London, then the sky’s the limit.

So is the government’s attack on villages – and especially Surrey villages – the result of a devil’s pact? Or just a bit of luck for the developers?

Wot about us then?

Perceptive readers (that’s all of you) will have worked out that there’s something missing here.

Ordinary residents of Claygate and other villages aren’t being accorded a say in any of this. Despite every poll and election held in Claygate in the last 20 years having underlined our opposition to development on the Green Belt, we are taken for granted. That’s why we have to shout even louder if we want our voices heard.

Our elected representatives in local councils have been emasculated by the changes to NPPF. And just in case they show resistance, the Housing Minister has recently given himself the power to “call in” development applications of 150 or more dwellings and decide them himself.

It is always difficult for ordinary people to win against the combination of power and money. But taking an instance from the world of football (since it has been distracting us recently)...

In 2021 Europe’s elite football clubs tried to present a *fait accompli* in setting up a new Superleague. The clubs had both money and power – but ordinary fans rose up and killed the idea.

So stay optimistic. It can happen.

And next

SCGB and Claygate Parish Council are sponsoring a public meeting on **16th July at 7:30 pm** in Holy Trinity Church.

This is an opportunity to tell our elected representatives at all levels what you think.

Redress the democratic deficit – have your say!



¹ A principle in philosophy that says, given multiple explanations for a phenomenon, select the simplest. In other words, cock-up instead of conspiracy