

Protected green belt could be developed after minister's ruling

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GREEN belt land can be built on if there is a significant local need for housing, the Government has said in a landmark ruling which campaigners fear could open up protected countryside for development.

Greg Clarke, the Communities Secretary, has given the go-ahead for 1,500 new homes near Gloucester in one of the biggest developments on green belt land for a decade.

Lawyers and rural campaigners yesterday warned that the decision could open a "Pandora's box" and lead to swathes of green belt land being developed across the country.

The decision to push ahead with the development comes despite previous claims by ministers that the need for new housing is "unlikely to outweigh harm to the green belt".

It comes even though, in the run-up to the general election, David Cameron said: "Green belt land is extremely precious. Protecting the lungs around our cities is paramount for me."

Paul Miner, planning campaign manager at the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE), said: "We are worried about the principle that is being set down. It is saying to local authorities that housing need might be a reason for building on the green belt. It's cer-

tainly encouraging them [developers] to push more sites forward. We think it's a step in the wrong direction."

Planning rules only allow building on the ribbon of greenfield land around towns and cities, designed to prevent urban sprawl, in "very special" circumstances.

However, last year the CPRE published a report that found 219,000 houses are planned for England's green belt, 60,000 more than in August 2013.

The Government's decision in Gloucester means that the need for new housing can be used by developers as a reason to justify new developments.

In his ruling, Mr Clarke concedes that the plans will be "harmful" to the green belt and result in the "loss of the essential characteristic of openness". However, he goes on to conclude that there would be a "substantial benefit" from the new homes.

Ashley Bowes, a planning barrister, said: "It is a significant change because the Government's view generally is that housing need is unlikely to amount to the special circumstances for building on the green belt."

"This could open a Pandora's box. The reasons could be replicated on many other sites up and down the country. It has opened the door to what a lot of the industry saw as no-go. Development on the green belt was largely seen as pretty unlikely to succeed."