Chapter 3
An arena of conflict: the Green Belt debate in the 21st century
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Introduction

The Green Belt is probably the UK’s best known and most popular planning policy. It has successfully limited the outward growth of cities and largely prevented ribbon development along the major transport arteries. The restrictions on outward growth have been an important factor in concentrating investment back into inner urban areas through recycling brownfield land. If traffic congestion has not entirely been averted, then at least the nightmare scenario of widespread low-density, car-dependent suburbs has been avoided. In this respect Green Belt policies have not only protected the countryside, but have also contributed to the broader objectives of environmental sustainability. A compact city is a far more sustainable model for living than are low-density, car-reliant suburbs. The London Metropolitan Green Belt now comprises 153,860 hectares of land covering parts of London and eight adjacent counties (Fig. 3.1).

However, there is a growing recognition among some planners, developers and politicians that Green Belt policy is having unintended consequences. As the need for land for housing to accommodate a growing population meets resistance from rural communities anxious to preserve the amenity of their areas, it is becoming a contentious policy. Is the Green Belt beginning to strangle the growth of the city? Is preserving the amenity of more prosperous communities in the countryside condemning many in the poorer sections of society to live in over-dense and unsatisfactory conditions? Has housing now become so unaffordable
Repurposing the Green Belt

in the UK that the prospect of home ownership is beyond the reach of many?

No policy can withstand the winds of change. And change is occurring rapidly, on numerous fronts. Since 1951 the population of the UK has increased by around 40 per cent and car ownership by 14 times. During this period society’s needs and expectations have also altered beyond recognition. The consequences of climate change are raising entirely new questions around the interrelationship between cities and their regions, urban resilience and the role of Green Belt. Government pledges to reduce carbon emissions drastically can only be credible with radical rethinking of the ways in which city regions function.

Too often, the current policy debate is simplified into polar positions: on one hand to preserve the Green Belt as it is, on the other to relax the policy to accommodate housing and urban growth. For some, the Green Belt is sacrosanct and any ‘nibbling away’ is a highly emotive prospect. Yet those demanding a structured release of Green Belt also make broad assumptions about housing need that ignore the realities of supply, location and tenure. In both options the issues are far more complex than a narrow focus on the release of land for development. The current

Fig. 3.1 Map of the London Metropolitan Green Belt, 2010.
policy debate needs to reflect this complexity. For example, what is the role of Green Belt in relation to the critical issues of climate change and environmental sustainability? Who pays for infrastructure if the city is to expand? If land is released on the periphery of the city, how can this ensure the provision of affordable housing and public space where they are most needed? Is a system where the re-designation of Green Belt land results in huge windfalls to owners really the best way of resolving urban growth? A new policy debate is long overdue.

Section 1 of this chapter provides an overview of the current context within which Green Belt policy is operating. It examines housing development pressures and arguments that are being made for the release of Green Belt or a relaxation of policies. It then considers whether there is evidence that the Green Belt is being lost and explores the political battles that are taking place to protect it. It concludes with an assessment of current government policy. Section 2 considers whether there might be an alternative approach to thinking about the Green Belt and its future. It looks at the condition of the urban fringe and highlights two case studies that have examined opportunities for accommodating new development on the urban edge. This chapter concludes with an examination of the ways in which planning policy operates, along with its implications for land values. In this context it considers options for the capture of land value increases that arise from the grant of planning permissions for new housing. The conclusions in Section 3 consider the options for alternative approaches to the Green Belt and its future operation.

Section 1: An overview of the Green Belt: pressures and policy

Housing pressures and the Green Belt

The shortage of housing at affordable prices in the right locations in England is beyond dispute. While between 1959 and 1988 around 7.5 million houses were built, the total dropped to just 3.3 million between 1988 and 2016. This fall is despite a growing population, more and smaller households and demands for higher standards of individual space. The problem caused by the restriction of new housing is illustrated by the ratio of median household income to median house prices. For England this stood at 3.84 in 1996, but in 2018 it had reached 7.8. In some areas it is considerably higher: Cambridge (12.95) and parts of London (15.54).² The Barker Review of Housing Supply, commissioned by the
UK Treasury, concluded that an *additional* 70,000 houses per annum would be required just to reduce increases in real house prices from 2.4 per cent to 1.8 per cent. However, a report by the National Audit Office in 2019 showed that supply was well below the government’s target of 300,000 a year. Between 2005–6 and 2017–18 an average of 177,000 new homes per year have been built; the number has never exceeded 224,000. To meet its declared target the government would need a 69 per cent increase in the average number of new homes built since 2005–6.

Population growth in London between 1997 and 2016 has resulted in an acute housing shortage giving an assessed shortfall across the capital of 700,000 houses. The unavoidable conclusion is that either commuting or overcrowding is increasing – probably both. The 2013 London Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA) identified a need for 49,000 new homes each year; yet between 2013–14 and 2016–17 just 33,000 homes a year were built. The new 2017 SHMA, published alongside the draft London Plan, found that London now needs 66,000 new homes a year. On top of this, of course, land is needed for new schools, hospitals and other facilities, as well as for open space. Despite the growing pressures to deliver new housing, the Mayor has dismissed proposals to weaken Green Belt policies around London.

The reasons for the national shortfall in supply are complex. They can be traced back (at least) to changes in government policy in the 1980s that first reduced the direct provision of new social housing and subsequently removed any direct grant subsidy for affordable housing. Targets of around 300,000 houses a year have not been achieved since the mid-1970s, and then only when local authorities were major providers. The private sector has averaged considerably less than 200,000 houses a year since the mid-1970s. The housing supply crisis triggered a government review (Barker, K., HMSO 2004) chaired by economist Kate Barker. The situation continued to worsen and, revisiting the the issue in 2014, Barker observed:

> The number of homes built in England from 2010 to 2013 was less than half the official estimate of how many more households would want to find somewhere to live.

The housing market is also distorted by a range of other factors including under-occupation, overcrowding and involuntary sharing, second homes, buy to let and overseas investment. Housing has become an investment and a tradable commodity. The market is also sectoral with different regional demands and a chronic lack of genuinely affordable housing in locations of the highest demand and need. Ultimately there is a finite
supply of brownfield land within cities for housing, and as a result urban housing densities are being pushed to unsustainable levels. The question is whether the relaxation of Green Belt land is the answer.

Arguments for Green Belt release

Over the last decade or so, the worsening housing crisis has stimulated growing calls from a wide spectrum of interests for a review of Green Belt policy – mainly for residential development. In one report the Social Market Foundation Commission stated that it will be impossible to build all new housing on brownfield sites, meaning that ‘a significant proportion (of new housing) will need to be accommodated on greenfield sites’. It argued that there was a case for reconsidering the future of the Green Belt, which ‘often protects neither wildlife nor areas of outstanding beauty’. The National Federation of Builders (NFB) has also called for a reassessment of Green Belt boundaries.

In January 2015 the Adam Smith Institute released a paper questioning the value of Green Belts, describing them as ‘not the bucolic idylls that some imagine them to be’. It stated that over one-third of Green Belt was devoted to intensive farming (with net environmental costs) and compared the Green Belt on the urban edge as ‘indistinguishable from what many understand urban sprawl to be’. The paper argued that there were substantial social costs associated with maintaining the Green Belt, in particular high business costs and volatile house prices. It proposed the abolition of the Green Belt as a move to solve the housing crisis – or, failing that, the release of land within a 10-minute walk of main line commuter railway stations. This, it claimed, would provide one million additional houses. Another paper, published by Freer, a Conservative thinktank, similarly proposed relaxing rules on building homes within half a mile of railway stations, as these are areas that likely to be in ‘high demand’ which are already well served by transport links.

Urban Architecture advocated in 2015 that the Green Belt should be used for development to avoid the average house price for London reaching ‘a million pounds by 2020’. It inferred that while some parts of the Green Belt are indeed Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and Heritage Coasts, these were protected by other forms of planning legislation. The remaining areas of Green Belt, they argued, should be considered for development.

Such arguments are apparently finding support from some politicians. In 2018 it was reported that a majority of Theresa May’s
Cabinet supported more radical measures, such as liberalising planning laws and relaxing Green Belt restrictions, to help tackle the housing crisis.\(^{15}\) In an interview in 2019 with *The Times* the Conservative MP Jacob Rees-Mogg accepted that an element of Green Belt development would be necessary in order to provide enough new homes (with gardens).\(^{16}\) His rationale was that not all Green Belt land was in areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

These and a number of similar reports essentially rest on arguments that the housing crisis is a supply side problem and that the Green Belt is a reservoir of undeveloped land of mixed amenity value, which if released would result in reduced house prices. However, the assumption is that demand is flexible, that the optimum location for new housing is outside the city and that infrastructure will be provided, presumably by the state. Even proposals to develop just around existing stations assumes that capacity exists in the rail system, a fact that many commuters would dispute. Many of the policy papers that point to the dubious agricultural or ecological value of the Green Belt lack sufficient support from current research.

While accepting that releasing planning restrictions on Green Belt would increase housing supply (and theoretically reduce land prices), it is a leap too far to suggest that there is a direct relationship between the existence of Green Belt land and the shortage of housing in England. The relaxation of policy on the Green Belt is unlikely to address the imbalances in the housing market. Without other policy interventions or programmes, affordable housing is unlikely to be provided at the levels required or in the right locations. The realities of the housing crisis are rather more complex than simply increasing the supply of land, and so too should be the policy responses.

Part of the argument for Green Belt release is that local residents are likely to support the construction of new local homes. For instance, a survey by the Centre for Policy Studies found that 47 per cent of people believed that ‘while most of the countryside around England’s towns and cities should be protected, some ought to be used for new housing and other development’. Those aged between 25 and 34 were particularly likely to support new homes being built locally.\(^{17}\) A citizens’ jury organised by the business lobbyists London First decided overwhelmingly in favour of Green Belt review:

> We came to that decision as a group as we realised that there is a terrible crisis for housing in London and that there is a big need for affordable and social housing for the people that live in London.\(^{18}\)
On the basis of this work London First suggest that ‘genuinely green belt’ should be protected, but that decisions should be made locally concerning the release of low-grade land, including rubbish dumps and construction sites. Such surveys are being used by think-tanks and professionals as evidence that attachment to the notion of the Green Belt is decreasing.

In the absence of any definitive research, however, it is difficult to assess just how strong public opinion is. People may indeed be willing to entertain housing in the Green Belt – as long as the development does not occur in their backyard. There does appear to be a gulf between strategic public opinion, which recognises the need for more housing, and local opinion, which will resist proposals in their particular locality.

The growing concern over climate change, the importance of the natural environment and the number of endangered species are factors that have not yet been added to this complex debate nor attracted much research. Yet public support for responsible environmental policies is becoming an increasingly powerful concern. Most people, if asked, would probably claim to favour better housing at affordable prices – but if this was at the cost of the destruction of the natural environment, their decision might be different. Local opposition has always been counted in terms of votes, but the growing profile of groups such as Extinction Rebellion suggests that the loss of open space and habitats is becoming a higher priority for the public. A survey carried out in 2016 by Ipsos/Mori and the CPRE showed a high level of support for the Green Belt, particularly among those aged 25–35 where 60 per cent of respondents supported the retention of the Green Belt. The policy debate over the Green Belt’s future is certainly more complex than partial surveys or citizens’ juries would suggest.

Erosion of the Green Belt – fact or fiction?

Concern over the loss of open countryside has persisted since the 19th century. In 1928 Clough Williams-Ellis published a book, *England and the Octopus*, to coincide with the establishment of the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE). The book’s cover shows the tentacles of the urban ‘octopus’ strangling the English countryside. Its Preface includes a reprint of a cartoon from the satirical magazine *Punch* that captured the popular mood. It shows Mr Smith leaving his village in 1914 to go to war (to preserve his native soil), only to return four years later to find it engulfed and unrecognisable as an urban dystopia. The writer J.B. Priestley, on a tour of England in 1933, was clearly appalled by the sprawl of new roads and...
suburbs; he commented ‘We might suddenly have rolled into California’.\textsuperscript{20} This sense of an inexorable loss of the countryside persists today.

Green Belt land is indeed being eroded (Table 3.1). In the five-year period between 2008/9 and 2013/14 the total loss of Green Belt amounted to 1,040 hectares – around 0.6 per cent of the total.\textsuperscript{21} More recently the loss of Green Belt has increased.\textsuperscript{22} There was a decrease of 3,290 hectares (0.2 per cent) in the area of Green Belt between 31 March 2018 and 31 March 2019. The extent of the designated Green Belt in England as at 31 March 2019 was estimated at 1,621,150 hectares, around 12.4 per cent of the land area of England. Although Green Belt loss appears to have been relatively small, it is a cumulative process. In the five-year period from 2013/14 there was an approximate loss of 1.1 per cent of Green Belt in England (0.3 per cent in the London area). At this rate it would take 250 years for the currently designated Green Belt in England to disappear completely. That might seem to be a remote possibility, but it is worth remembering that the Green Belt has been in place for almost 90 years and represents a legacy that once lost can never be replaced.

Although the actual loss of Green Belt might be small, there is evidence that the development threat to the Green Belt is beginning to accelerate. Local authorities, under pressure from central government to deliver more housing, have been given housing targets that they are expected to deliver through their Local Plans.

The CPRE was one of the early proponents of the Green Belt and has campaigned ever since for its extension and protection. It argues strongly that housing needs can be met by repurposing brownfield land. Indeed, where studies of land availability have been carried out, they tend to support the contention that there is sufficient land available within urban areas to accommodate new housing requirements for the foreseeable future.

An analysis by the CPRE in 2018 found that more than 12,350 acres were cut from England’s Green Belts by redrawing boundaries in 2017, a loss of 0.3 per cent.\textsuperscript{23} The CPRE reported in 2018/19 that the number of residential applications on greenfield sites in the Green Belt was the highest it had ever been, and would result in 27,308 additional housing units. Maidment (2018) reports that England’s Green Belt suffered its biggest reduction in eight years with more than 5,000 hectares lost as councils across England removed protections on land to meet government housing targets.\textsuperscript{24}

The CPRE has become increasingly critical of the pressures that local authorities face from central government to include Green Belt land
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<th>Region</th>
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*Source: DCLG, 2014.*
in their development plans, despite there being considerable brownfield land available.

A report by the London Green Belt Council (LGBC) in 2019 states:

There appears to be no lessening of pressure on the London Green Belt for housing and this in spite of its importance for farming, recreation, climate change, flooding and a major role in health and welfare especially for those suffering from mental health symptoms, as described in the Government’s report – A Green Future.

The report found that 55 out of the 66 local authorities with London Green Belt land within their boundaries plan to build on the Green Belt. In the local planning authorities within the London Metropolitan Green Belt area, over 202,715 new houses were proposed. Meanwhile a total of 4,934 hectares of brownfield land was available within these planning authorities, able to accommodate at least 260,383 new homes.

The number of Green Belt sites around London under threat from development increased from 203 in 2016 to 443 in 2017 and again to 519 in 2018. In the same period the number of houses proposed increased from 123,500 to 231,653 (Fig. 3.2). Not all of this housing will be built, but the latent pressure identified leads the CPRE to conclude in September 2019 that:

This is a clear indication that the Government’s green belt policy to protect green belt land and prevent urban sprawl by keeping land permanently open is not working. The green belt is being eroded by land being taken, through the local plan process, in order to meet so-called objectively assessed need for housing.

The battle for the Green Belt

The Barker Review of Land Use Planning in 2006 considered public perceptions of the percentage of built-up areas in England. Remarkably, it revealed that 10 per cent of respondents believed that 75 per cent of England was built up, and over 75 per cent of respondents believed that 25 per cent or more was developed. In reality just 9.9 per cent is developed. But this misconception about our ‘small overcrowded island’ is a potent political force. It surfaces repeatedly – influencing, for instance, the fears about immigration that partly fuelled Brexit.
In fact the 9.9 per cent of the land that is developed is somewhat less than the 12.9 per cent of land that is designated as Green Belt. The perception is weakened further when the constituent parts of the 9.9 per cent in urban areas are analysed. Across England, only 8.2 per cent of built-up areas are buildings; the rest (91.7 per cent) is ‘green space’, including water and unclassified uses. Even within the administrative area of Greater London, the built-up area is only 27.5 per cent; green areas amount to 65 per cent, of which 23.8 per cent are domestic gardens. Public perceptions may be inaccurate, but nevertheless they represent a level of anxiety that is having an impact on politics and therefore on policy makers.

Despite figures revealing that the loss of Green Belt to development is less than 0.2 per cent a year, there is growing public concern that the Green Belt is under threat. New houses on what was once greenfield land are highly visible (and who knows who might come and live in them!). The idea

Fig. 3.2  Map showing specific threats to the London Green Belt (203 sites), July 2016.

of developing Green Belt is therefore politically contentious. It also makes good newspaper coverage. Writing in the *Independent* newspaper under the somewhat emotive headline ‘Should Britain Build on its Green Spaces to Solve its Housing Crisis?’, Alister Scott outlines the issue as:

> Alterations to the green belt boundaries can only be made by local governments in exceptional circumstances … In practice, though, it seems the criteria aren’t always quite so strict. Increasingly, green-field sites (undeveloped land, which can include the green belt) are being favoured by developers because they are cheaper to exploit than brownfield sites.  

A central problem with Green Belt development is that opposition is local and focused. Consequently it is not surprising that such objections often find support from local politicians. Local residents who object to development in their locality represent real votes that can be counted. The counter arguments, from those in housing need, are general and unrelated to the local debate. Their votes are purely notional and in any case some way off in the future.

The housing shortage in the UK and the resultant lack of affordability, particularly for first-time buyers, is beginning to impact on public attitudes to the Green Belt. A poll by ComRes in 2018 for the right-wing think-tank Centre for Policy Studies (CPS) found that local residents are significantly more likely to support the construction of new homes in their areas than to oppose them. However, these attitudes do not necessarily translate into local support when specific proposals are brought forward.

In reality opposition from local communities that feel threatened by Green Belt development proposals appears to be growing. For example, the Cambridge Local Plan proposed 14,000 new homes, of which just 3 per cent were to be in the Green Belt. Yet this caused considerable opposition from campaign groups in 2014, who even proposed that a city centre flood-plain site occupied by a bowls club should have houses built upon it instead. The debate is emotive. Writing in the *Financial Times*, Ed Hammond reported that 65 acres of ‘exhaust-smudged scrub’ on the outskirts of St Albans has become the battleground for a clash between ambitious developers and a community who like things ‘the way they are’.

Such conflicts are being repeated across the country. Eleven sites within the Green Belt around Stourbridge are currently under review for possible housing development as part of the Black Country Core Strategy Review. The Save Stourbridge Green Belt website was set up and is now
run by residents to raise public awareness of threats to Stourbridge’s Green Belt and to inform local residents by providing links to publicly available material. It encouraged participation in public consultations and organised petitions to the Council.\(^{38}\) The Tunbridge Wells draft Local Plan, covering the period 2016–36, looked to release more than 5 per cent of the borough’s Green Belt, primarily to accommodate 14,776 new homes. The draft did not designate any land to compensate for the Green Belt that was set to be lost. According to KentOnline, ‘there was strong criticism of Tunbridge Wells Council when cabinet members met to consider whether to move their Local Plan process on to the next stage’.\(^{39}\) The majority of complaints came from residents of Capel and Tudely who objected to the council’s plan to create a ‘Garden Village’, which they referred to as Tudely New Town. An online petition organised by the Save Capel Campaign attracted more than 2,800 signatures and Save Capel has organised two public exhibitions to explain what is being proposed.

In the London Borough of Enfield residents are also opposing the release of Green Belt land for housing. Enfield Road Watch began life in 2015 to object to the potential development of the Crews Hill Green Belt. Their campaign involved local residents, the Enfield Society, the Western Enfield Residents Association and the CPRE. However, wider threats to the Green Belt led the action group to expand its goals and mission. It now has a supporter list of over 1,000, while more than 22,000 people have signed its petition to protect Green Belt land. The campaign group has set up a website, is encouraging responses to the Local Plan consultation and is organising public meetings and awareness raising through social media.\(^{40}\)

While Conservative cabinet ministers might be willing to consider the principle of relaxation of parts of the Green Belt to ease the housing shortage, individual MPs are likely to come under pressure from their constituents – and, when they do, to seek help from their ministerial colleagues. In 2018 the Communities Secretary James Brokenshire intervened to prevent East Hertfordshire District Council from adopting its Local Plan after the local MP raised concerns from local campaigners concerning possible loss of Green Belt. The Plan’s proposals would have permitted 600 new homes on a 17 hectare site.\(^{41}\)

Such battles are having a significant influence on the political landscape. An analysis by the London Green Belt Council (LGBC) of the local council elections in May 2019 showed that where authorities had proposed development on Green Belt land, the ruling party had, in each case, either been voted out of office or had its majority substantially reduced.\(^{42}\) The CPRE Essex reports that:
While in other parts of England, Brexit and other national issues may have determined the course of the recent elections, it is clear that in counties such as Surrey, Berkshire, Essex and Hertfordshire, which are within the London Metropolitan Green Belt (LMGB), the outcome of district and borough councils had been influenced more by communities’ anger at proposals to build housing estates on Green Belt land than by any other concern.\footnote{43}

In Surrey the swing was most striking. The Conservatives – the ruling party in most of the county’s district and borough councils – lost 117 councillors (out of 1,269 national losses in total), meaning that Surrey accounted for almost 10 per cent of all Conservative losses in the 2019 May local elections. According to the LGBC, the Conservative electoral performance was worst in the three Surrey districts where the Local Plans threatened to release Green Belt land for housing: Tandridge, Guildford and Waverley. In each of these areas the Conservatives lost control of the local councils to residents’ associations, local campaign groups and independent candidates, all of whom had stood on a platform to oppose the Local Plans and pledged to defend the Green Belt from development. In Guildford the newly formed Guildford and Villages Group, which stood on a platform of defending the Green Belt, won 15 seats. An existing local party, the Guildford Greenbelt Group, won an additional seat, giving them a total of four.

The Localism Act introduced by the Cameron government in 2011 promised to make the planning system more democratic and introduced neighbourhood plans to allow communities a say in where new houses should go. In practice, the well-off and the well-housed use it to resist, not promote, the development of new homes. A study by Turley of neighbourhood plans found that of 75 published neighbourhood plans, 55 per cent were designed solely to resist development. This rose to 63 per cent in rural areas, mainly Conservative electoral heartlands. Three-quarters of plans were in the south of England, where the need for housing is most acute.\footnote{44} This suggests that more prosperous districts are seeking to protect their areas from new homes and to push undesirable developments into poorer neighbourhoods.

\textbf{Shortcomings of government policy}

The CPRE attributes the blame for this growing threat to the Green Belt directly to the Housing White Paper. This proposes that local authorities should be expected to review Green Belt boundaries every
five years and allocate more land for development if developers fail to build at the required speed. While it acknowledges that development on such land is only allowed by the NPPF under ‘exceptional circumstances’, the CPRE raises concerns that the planning system is too weak at a local level to resist development and that many consents are awarded on appeal.

Although Green Belt loss has hitherto been slow, there is no reason to suppose that this will be the case in the future. The UK planning process is heavily influenced by precedent, and there is a legitimate fear that if a clearly defendable policy is breached then incremental development will be harder to resist on a case by case basis. Although the principle of the Green Belt is not under threat, the interpretation of policy is open to change and there are clear indications that the pressures for new housing are pushing policy makers towards relaxing some of the criteria. In this respect the CPRE has argued that the 2017 Housing White Paper could serve fundamentally to weaken the status of Green Belt.45

Initially this appears strange, as the White Paper states that Green Belt boundaries should continue to be altered only in ‘exceptional circumstances’ and after all other reasonable options for meeting housing need have been ‘examined fully’. However, the definition of ‘exceptional circumstances’ (para 1.39 of the White Paper) specifically includes ‘housing requirements’. The CPRE argues that the test could be used by developers to justify a constant state of Green Belt review. This is a significant change in emphasis from previous policy statements that housing demand alone is not sufficient justification to change Green Belt boundaries. The CPRE also argues that the requirement to ‘examine fully’ other options may be toothless in practice. Since the introduction of the NPPF in 2012, planning inspectors have rarely challenged local authorities who have promoted Green Belt release, even where there are significant amounts of brownfield land available.

A report by Brentwood Borough Council shows that the annual rate of loss of Green Belt has doubled since the NPPF came into force in 2012:

Green belt boundaries are now being changed to accommodate housing at the fastest rate for at least two decades. At least 800 hectares of greenfield land in the green belt have been developed for a range of commercial or industrial projects, such as offices or retail parks, since 2009. Nearly three-quarters of the housing proposed on land to be released from the green belt will be unaffordable for most people living in the local area: planning consultants Glenigan found only 16 per cent of homes built in Green Belt since 2009 were affordable. With the New Homes
Bonus, the Government is providing financial incentives that significantly increase green belt release and development, contrary to its own commitments.

A degree of permanence and continuity is an essential requirement in policy making. If the market senses that policy will be relaxed, development is likely to be deferred. This applies especially to Green Belts, where granting a residential consent might increase the value of the land by a factor of 250 times from its agricultural value. The CPRE argument that Green Belt boundaries, once set, should endure for at least the typical 15-year life of a development plan is difficult to refute. The White Paper, however, suggests that Green Belt boundaries should be reviewed every five years, as part of the five-yearly review of Local Plans. This is a licence for land banking and speculation.

While part of the rationale for development in the Green Belt is the need for affordable housing, most of the development that is proposed is not ‘affordable’. Of the homes proposed for the Green Belt, less than 30 per cent of units were considered affordable. Moreover, the average densities of new housing were around 21 dwellings per hectare (dph), compared to 32 dph outside the Green Belt (and up to well over 400 dph in parts of London). If the option of developing on Green Belt around mainline stations were to be pursued – and if these new settlements were to be sufficiently sustainable to support a primary school and local services – residential densities would need to be around 100 dph.

Low-density development in the Green Belt represents an inefficient use of a scarce land resource. It also is likely to result in a car-based housing model with higher individual carbon footprints and traffic congestion.

Proposals to develop within 800 metres of railway stations make significant assumptions about the amenity or ecological value of the land concerned. They also miss a key point. If access to the countryside for the urban population is a primary purpose of the Green Belt, then surrounding every station that offers convenient access to the countryside with development might rather defeat that purpose.

More recently emphasis has been placed on the importance of Green Belt as a place for nature and biodiversity as well as offering some mitigation against climate change. The importance of the countryside for sustainable food production, water conservation, carbon reduction (through forestry) and ecological diversity are now major considerations. While some of the Green Belt might currently score few points against these criteria, its scores could be enhanced dramatically through careful management. Its development would permanently remove this potential
for ever. The future could be an environmentally rich Green Belt with
greater public access, woodlands, wetlands and natural parks. The envi-
ronmental arguments for protecting the Green Belt are strengthened by
the issues raised by climate change. The Green Belt of the future would
also be an essential component of any strategy to ameliorate extremes of
temperature, flooding and contribute to health and wellbeing.

The arguments for protecting the Green Belt are largely the same
as those made for its creation over a hundred years ago. It protects the
open countryside which is both beautiful and agriculturally productive,
prevents urban sprawl, protects the distinctiveness of existing settlements
and is a place for recreation. Most of those involved in the debate would
accept all of these as being ‘good things’ that have tangible social value.
In addition to arguments concerning the intrinsic value of the Green Belt,
there are other more practical reasons for protection.

- The planning system is unable to make strategic choices as it is too
  fragmented at local level, weak and under resourced
- Under the present policy regime, the partial release of Green Belt is
  unlikely to provide sustainable or affordable housing for those in need
- If the Green Belt is to be reviewed it should be as an environmental
  resource, not as a means for providing houses

Section 2: Towards a new approach to the Green Belt

This section considers various elements that are required if a new
approach to Green Belt policy is to be considered. It argues that given
the ragged edge of the urban fringe, the mix of uses and range of urban
and rural characteristics of the Green Belt and the need for suburban
intensification, detailed surveys are required. It then considers the need
for a National and Regional Strategic Plan to allocate uses rationally. This
section concludes with a consideration of the mechanisms through which
some percentage of the uplift in value that accrues through changing the
designation of land can be used to contribute to the costs of providing
infrastructure and ensuring that any new housing is indeed affordable.

A ragged edge

The urban edge was not the result of a conscious planning process; it was
just the place where development stopped at the outbreak of the Second
World War. This boundary was subsequently frozen when the Green Belt was extended immediately after the war. On close examination, the urban edge often consists of streets that end in open land and uses that are neither urban nor rural, forming a transitional zone between the town and the countryside. These streets along with retail and industrial parks, railways and aerodromes are a random rather than a planned condition, but are now cemented by planning policy. The case study on Northolt later in this chapter illustrates this point. At best, the boundary between town and countryside is a ragged edge.

This transitional zone blurs the distinction between town and countryside. Often there is no clear-cut boundary but rather activities that span both zones – allotments in the city and businesses in the Green Belt. Some settlements on the fringe of outer London exhibit more of the characteristics of rural than urban areas, while some settlements in the Green Belt are undoubtedly more urban in character.

In January 2010 CPRE and Natural England commissioned a report that assessed Green Belt uses in England. Around London it found that only 58 per cent of Green Belt land was registered as being in agricultural use (compared with 71 per cent of all land in England) and that there was a high prevalence of ‘semi-urban’ uses on open land, such as golf courses, paddocks and riding stables. Within the Green Belt, woodland covered 18 per cent of the overall land area. On the edge of metropolitan areas some districts are considerably more rural than urban in nature. Shepperton to the south-west of London, for example, is 65 per cent Green Belt, while Brentwood to the north-east of London is described as being 10 per cent built-up area, 8 per cent recreational area, 76 per cent agricultural and 6 per cent woodland. Figures 3.3 and 3.4 show the amount of the London Metropolitan Green Belt that is designated as having particular environmental significance and open public access. In both cases the areas are relatively small.

In many places the open countryside penetrates the city as much as the city sprawls into the countryside. The London Plan has a specific category of protected open space called Metropolitan Open Land. This is almost indistinguishable from Green Belt in terms of status and protection. In 2007 Design for London produced the East London Green Grid, which in 2010 evolved into the All London Green Grid, subsequently incorporated into the London Plan (Fig. 3.5). This policy framework seeks to connect ‘fingers’ of open land in the urban area to the open countryside beyond the M25 and aims to form a network of linked spaces and wildlife corridors. Many areas of Metropolitan Open Land London have significant importance for recreation, food production and ecology.
The London Green Grid developed ideas from the 1944 Abercrombie Plan for London, which promoted a network of publicly accessible parks and open spaces. Such strategies, dating over 70 years, demonstrate that there is no clear edge to the city; the city and the Green Belt are a single zone and should be considered as such.

The condition of the urban fringe has been examined in various academic studies, most notably by Marion Shoard. She describes this urban periphery as ‘edgeland’ – a disorganised but often fertile hinterland between planned town and over-managed country. This landscape is part man-made and part natural, but it provides an untapped resource both for wildlife and for human exploration. These informal peripheral sites are as much a part of the broader urban economy as housing and shops. Although they might not all allow
general public access, some have recreational value and many have significant ecological importance. A dismissal of such landscapes under the auspices of ‘tidying up’ the urban edge does not represent a rigorous understanding of the important function of the urban fringe. These are the terrains vague; their importance has attracted many writers and practitioners who value those everyday elements.
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54 The debate over whether or not to release Green Belt land must carefully consider the nature of the urban fringe. It does not just concern the release of greenfield sites or the reuse of brownfield land. It must also embrace how better use can be made of the low-density outer suburbs. The concept of suburban densification has been on and off the policy agenda for a considerable period, viewed by many as desirable in theory, but ultimately dismissed as too difficult. Suburban land is mainly in highly fragmented ownerships and existing house prices usually preclude individual redevelopment. This does not mean that its potential should be dismissed by policy makers, however, especially when the default options are hyper-density or building on open land.

A recent study by Hunt Thompson Associates, Supurbia, advocates the densification of the outer London suburbs. It calculates that there are 725,000 detached and semi-detached low-density houses where opening up parts of the gardens could provide an additional 100,000 new houses. The study also calculates that doubling the existing density of the outer London boroughs would provide one million new houses. While accepting that these are hypothetical numbers

Fig. 3.5 Map showing Greater London Green Belt and Metropolitan Open Land, 2016.

Source: The London Plan, 2016 (GLA).
and that there are significant barriers to overcome in just releasing a proportion of this land, it does suggest that any review of the urban edge should consider a deep zone that includes the suburbs on the urban periphery.

There are a range of possible ways in which the Green Belt could be reconfigured and some of these are considered further below. Research papers published by the LSE explore a range of options from maintaining the status quo through to new settlements in the countryside and even complete abolition. The papers also consider a spatial rethink of the Green Belt in the form of growth corridors and ‘green wedges’, such as the idea of a London–Stansted–Cambridge corridor, and make a set of specific design and planning propositions. The Centre for Cities argues for release of land within 800 metres of railway stations with a maximum 45-minute journey time of the centre of the five major cities in England (excluding any land of amenity or environmental value). It argues that this could provide 47,000 hectares of housing land and would increase the supply of new housing by between 7 and 9 per cent. The total loss of Green Belt would be around 1.8 per cent. The London Society, which was instrumental in creating the Green Belt, commissioned research that concluded there is a ‘need to move away from the idea that the countryside is a sacrosanct patchwork of medieval hedgerows’ and towards the recognition of ‘housing as a need to be met in locations with appropriate environmental capacity’.

London First, an organisation that represents business in the capital, argues that the lack of affordable housing is now one of the main concerns of business and that brownfield land alone cannot accommodate London’s growth. The London First report concluded that:

London must continue to protect its valuable green spaces and beautiful open countryside, but this is wholly compatible with seeing how the green belt can play a small part in helping to accommodate the new homes that London needs. London’s boroughs should be encouraged to review their green belt and consider how the land within it can be most effectively used and what the options are for re-designating a small fraction for new homes.

This ignores the fact that the majority of the Green Belt is outside London’s metropolitan boundaries.
Any case for the release of Green Belt for housing needs to focus on a qualitative assessment of Green Belt land, site by site in specific areas. The case study of Enfield (below) illustrates one way forward.

Case study of Enfield: an assessment of development opportunities

The London Borough of Enfield is on the western edge of London and contains a significant amount of Green Belt land. Development for new housing was proposed in the Council’s latest Local Plan document. Some 37 per cent of Enfield is designated Green Belt land but, with a new homes target of 1,876 a year, the Council’s draft Local Plan proposed a fresh look at Green Belt boundaries. The Local Plan options included the release of between 5 and 10 per cent of Green Belt land for new family housing, in particular land around Crews Hill station – only 30 minutes from King’s Cross. The main existing use of this land was horticultural nurseries and garden centres. Interestingly the draft Local Plan did not consider the release of Strategic Industrial Land (SIL). Although this is protected under the London Plan, so too is Green Belt.

In response to this the Enfield Society and CPRE London published a detailed survey of the London Borough of Enfield to identify a range of large and small sites that might provide space for new housing. The sites were selected on the criteria that they currently made poor use of space and could be intensified and put to better use. The research demonstrated there is theoretically space to build at least 37,000 homes on previously developed land (PDL) in Enfield, without the need to build on Green Belt. This would represent 10 years supply at the current GLA targets for the borough (which the report authors considered in any case to be at least 30 per cent too high).

The study identified alternative development options. The main proposals focused on two areas where there were concentrations of retail warehousing and low-density industrial parks. In the Southbury area the study suggested that an intensification of the area around the station might yield 15,271 new houses and that the development on industrial land at Ponders End would yield another 2,500 units. Similarly, the intensification of land around Lower Edmonton, currently in similar retail use, could provide another 10,000 houses. A survey of micro sites carried out at the same time identified a further 510 possible sites comprising 480 hectares of land that might be suitable for housing. Allowing for the fact that not all of these sites would be suitable, the study concluded
that even if 30 per cent were to be developed a further 1,953 houses could be developed in the borough without encroaching onto Green Belt land.

Case study of Northolt: a planned reassessment of the Green Belt

In 2016 the London Borough of Ealing and Catalyst Housing Association commissioned Allies and Morrison to carry out an assessment of part of London’s urban fringe in Northolt.63 The brief was to appraise the clients’ land holdings and review the quality and development potential (if any) of the surrounding Green Belt and Metropolitan Open Land (MOL).

Northolt is typical of many areas of outer London. Having been a cluster of small farming settlements in the 19th century, it grew rapidly on the back of new bus and rail transport systems. Development was largely halted by the outbreak of the Second World War. The designation of London’s Green Belt in 1955 then effectively froze the area in time with streets that had been partially developed becoming dead ends. In many ways the Northolt area remains an ‘unfinished project’. Residential densities at 40–45 units per hectare are below the London average and hamper the provision of efficient transport and local services. The Northolt area has large areas of both Green Belt and MOL, although surveys show that there is little discernible difference between land in the two designations. The Green Belt around Northolt consists of a mixture of parks, farmland, private leisure, golf courses, mineral extraction and open countryside. A relatively low percentage of land allows direct open public access.

The study mapped and analysed the Green Belt and MOL to assess its accessibility, environmental function, intrinsic landscape quality and character (Figs 3.6, 3.7, 3.8, 3.9 and 3.10). It found a significant range in the quality and value of the land – some areas had very high recreational and ecological value, but others, such as mineral extraction sites and golf courses, had little. While there was a very important chain of connected landscapes around the canal and watercourses, other areas of Green Belt were not connected and were not part of a coherent urban landscape. In terms of flood mitigation and water quality, however, much of the open land played an important role in rain and storm water drainage, particularly along the Yeading Valley. Finally a subjective assessment of landscapes was carried out using site visits and photography (Fig. 3.10).

The various criteria were then amalgamated into a composite plan to provide an overall assessment of the Green Belt and MOL landscape (Fig. 3.11). This identified sizeable areas of Green Belt and MOL that were significantly underperforming and where either development or
Fig. 3.6  Street map showing Northolt (north-west London): a suburb frozen in time, 2016.


Fig. 3.7  Plan showing the Green Belt and Metropolitan Open Land (MOL) around Northolt, 2016.

Fig. 3.8  Map showing public access to open land around Northolt, 2016.


Fig. 3.9  Map showing the nature conservation value of open land around Northolt, 2016.

environmental upgrading, for ecological or recreational purposes, might be considered. One of the findings was the difficulty in differentiating between Green Belt and MOL. In planning terms, the degree of protection and the rules applied to any development within the Green Belt and MOL are more or less identical. The study found that there was greater public
access to MOL than Green Belt – leading to a conclusion that MOL sits within the city and effectively joins neighbourhoods together, whereas Green Belt specifically separates districts from one another.

The study proceeded to analyse areas that might be released as part of a wider strategy of neighbourhood intensification and densification. This suggested an opportunity for some land exchange, and some release of areas with low amenity value – in particular exhausted gravel extraction sites and disused golf courses. In total some 55 site opportunities were identified representing 160 hectares of land. Not all of these sites would have been suitable for development, but theoretically they could have accommodated up to 13,000 new homes (assuming densities of between 50 and 100 units per hectare).

This detailed study of development opportunities in Northolt concluded that all growth could be accommodated while leaving the Green Belt largely untouched. The approach taken in Northolt was a dynamic study that looked at sophisticated land swaps to rationalise the urban edge. The approach taken in Enfield similarly involved a detailed study of development opportunities, but would not rationalise the urban edge.

Planning and the Green Belt

The English planning system has a high degree of flexibility. When drawing up Statutory Plans different interests are ‘balanced’ through consultation and negotiation. Individuals and organisations have the rights for representations to be heard by an independent inspectorate. Once a Plan has been approved, each individual development is then decided on its merits with reference to material considerations, the principle one being the Local Plan and national policy guidelines. This is a pragmatic but not necessarily fair process, as it tends in practice to be weighted towards development. In addition, it has been significantly weakened by governments over the past 35 years through cuts in local planning resources. There are few defendable lines in planning, but the Green Belt is one of these. This is not absolute, however, and changes in interpretation of development are made by successive governments. This is undoubtedly leading to the slow erosion of the Green Belt.

In a rational world any assessment of the development potential or otherwise of Green Belt land would be undertaken strategically. Each district differs in character and it would be a reasonable assumption that some areas might be able to accommodate more development than others. This would require comparisons to be made at a regional level. Unfortunately, England currently lacks any organisational capacity to
do this. The NPPF is a national planning policy framework, but England is highly unusual in not having a national spatial plan: Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and most European countries do. When the 2011 Localism Act abolished the Regional Development Agencies, England was also left without any tier of regional authority. Consequently strategic decisions – whether about airport capacity in the South East or growth corridors related to the new high-speed railway line (HS2) – have no clear forum for debate. Without some form of regional framework, strategic questions on how to meet housing need – whether through new settlement planning, brownfield land development or Green Belt land release – are impossible to resolve. The consequences, as Section 1 on recent Green Belt battles demonstrates, are piecemeal decisions, sub-optimal spatial distribution, a disjuncture between new housing provision, employment and infrastructure, public opposition and political dilemmas.

In the absence of any regional planning mechanism it is up to Local Plans, drawn up by district councils, to make decisions regarding any changes to the Green Belt. This is clearly unsatisfactory for several reasons. The first is strategic. A Local Plan is restricted to a specific local area; it is not able to make wider judgements concerning the appropriateness of development in its own area against any other district. Consequently considerations concerning the future size, shape and direction of growth of cities have no proper forum for consideration, let alone public debate. The absence of a regional planning framework also means that decisions on infrastructure are not related to land use planning.

This is illustrated by many examples including the proposed HS2 railway line, where the siting of stations outside city centres (with a ‘park and ride’ facility) has no relation to spatial development opportunities at a sub-regional level. The economic policy arguments that should be promoting the regeneration of regional cities in order to rebalance the national economy are generally subordinate to transport criteria. In the case of Green Belt policy, the result is an incremental approach that is likely to be sub-optimal. This is compounded by the imposition of housing targets and their use by planning inspectors on appeal to justify Green Belt loss. The second drawback is political. By devolving decisions on Green Belt release to district councils, it is unlikely that a radical approach to rethinking the Green Belt will ever take place. In such a context so-called NIMBYism is completely understandable. Any councillors brave enough to take on the challenge are unlikely to remain in office for long. The result is a long and unsatisfactory war of attrition that sees the Green Belt slowly eroded (and in the wrong places).
Furthermore, the urban region represents not just opportunities for new housing, but also the chance to generate energy, grow food, clean and store water, recycle and reuse waste materials. Green Belts create/contribute to lower temperatures and mitigate heat waves; they are fundamentally important in building urban resilience. They can also provide a biodiverse ecosystem and a place for recreation, exercise and enjoyment. Any rethinking of Green Belt land therefore also needs to be accompanied by a sophisticated strategy for sustainable development.

Decisions regarding the future of Green Belt land are strategic in nature and should be embedded into regional spatial strategies. For this, regional planning is an essential but missing ingredient. If the debate is centred on the Green Belt then there may also be an argument for Green Belts to be properly planned by a single planning body – or preferably by a regional body that also incorporates metropolitan areas.

Options for capturing land value uplift

Agricultural land in the south-east of England is worth around £20,000 a hectare on average. The same piece of land with a planning consent for residential development on the edge of London is worth £3 to £7 million a hectare. There is an obvious argument to capture this uplift through some form of betterment taxation. The LSE’s work cited above explores this concept.

Essentially the proposition is that a percentage of value uplift, considered a windfall, should be taxed. There have been numerous attempts within the planning system to do just this. However, development land taxes of different forms, introduced in 1947, again in 1967 and again in 1976 (with the Development Land Tax), have not been successful. This is largely down to politics. Such legislation has generally been introduced by Labour governments and abolished by Conservative ones. Their introduction has been hampered by the belief that they would be abolished under a change of government. This causes developers to delay their housing projects. The resultant sluggish development market and perceived planning blight is then used to justify scrapping the policy. Although betterment taxes per se have not been used in the UK for over 40 years, stamp duty and planning gain through Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) or Section 106 agreements are in effect today’s quasi-betterment taxes.

An alternative approach would be to introduce specific legislation that allows the state to acquire land at existing use (agricultural) values.
This might relate to a particular area such as the Green Belt or to a particular initiative such as the development of new settlements. The model behind the development of the New Towns in the immediate post-war period was based on the acquisition of land at existing use (agricultural) values. The 1946 New Towns Act incorporated specific powers to buy and sell land, provide infrastructure, utilities and housing. This land was acquired at agricultural values. As already noted in chapter 1, the idea of state intervention to acquire land in response to national needs was well established in the immediate post-war period. The appetite for state intervention diminished in the 1970s onwards and widespread land acquisition was largely abandoned as the UK government moved towards a mixed economy and public/private partnership.

By the end of the 1970s state intervention in direct housing provision and large-scale land purchasing had greatly diminished. As far as the Green Belt was concerned, the Town and Country Planning Act (1947) meant that development could be controlled on open land without resorting to expensive purchase schemes. The Planning Act effectively ‘nationalised’ development rights in order to plan development properly. In doing this it steered a delicate path between national needs and the jealously guarded rights of the landowner to ‘enjoy’ their land. Successive governments since have rightly been cautious about intervening in an individual’s property rights, and this includes an individual’s right to profit from the development of their land. Have circumstances changed that might warrant a new approach? The shift in the role of government from supplier to enabler, especially in the housing sector, that has taken place over the past 35 years has coincided with a significant reduction in house building and growing shortages.

The reduction in state expenditure on housing has been partly offset through placing the burden for the provision of affordable housing and infrastructure on the private sector through Section 106 agreements and Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) that is effectively a fixed rate development tax. Like betterment levies, planning policy is not a constant. In London, successive Labour and Conservative Mayors have varied the percentage of affordable housing required from developers from less than 35 per cent to 50 per cent, causing considerable uncertainty in the housing development sector. Either way the planning system is increasingly being used to extract public benefits that have traditionally been provided by the state through taxation. Local planning authorities are not in reality the most effective organisations to administer what is in effect taxation. Planners are not trained as accountants. The result is that they are often accused of a lack of transparency and a conflict of interest.
An argument that supports some form of betterment tax or compulsory purchase at existing agricultural values is the fact that it is the grant of consent that conveys the uplift in value, not the development itself. Obtaining a beneficial planning consent involves low costs and limited risk, but it is this that allows the land to be traded as a speculative commodity. The eventual developer who acquires the land pays a high price, takes all of the risks and is then taxed through CIL or Section 106. The subsequent squeeze is often manifested in reductions in quality, amenity or in the percentage of affordable housing. Making planning decisions that rely on viability assessments only compounds the situation, as the super profits have already been taken out of the system by the landowner. The introduction of viability assessments has in fact resulted in many substandard schemes that paid too much for the land being approved. Put simply, planning based ‘taxes’ occur at the wrong stage in the process.

Forms of betterment levy operate in other countries, including Germany. A land readjustment charge, Umlegung, is commonly used by public authorities to obtain land for housing development and fund the supporting infrastructure. The consent of landowners is not required; local authorities can take 30 per cent of the value on greenfield land and 10 per cent on brownfield. In addition, the provision of local infrastructure is the responsibility of the local authority which can charge landowners to recover part of its cost. Landowners pay a maximum of 90 per cent when the site is to be developed for the first time and the local authority pays a minimum of 10 per cent.

In 2004 Milton Keynes introduced a Strategic Land and Infrastructure Contract. Effectively a building tariff or roof tax, this was used to fund social and physical infrastructure in the town’s strategic expansion areas. Developers agreed to pay standardised contributions of £18,500 per residential dwelling and £260,000 per hectare of commercial land, using Section 106 agreements. Milton Keynes then borrowed money from the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) to forward-fund infrastructure. This form of prudential borrowing was approved by the Treasury. The charge to the developer was made on completion of the development. The model has not been used elsewhere in the UK, however, although CIL charges are typically around £25,000 per new dwelling in central London.

The research by the Centre for Cities, discussed above, argues for release of land around railway stations and proposes establishing ‘Green Belt Development Corporations’ (under the powers of the Local Government, Planning and Land Act 1981). The land would be acquired by railway authorities and a development charge of 20 per cent would be made
against the uplift in value. Surpluses would be used by local communities for a range of needs including affordable housing. Profits might also be used to reduce public subsidies to the railway companies. Part of the argument is that if some of the uplift in value could be made available to local communities then there would be an incentive for them to release land, which might in turn make development approval easier.\textsuperscript{69}

Another proposal to capture value uplift from the planning process was set out by URBED in its winning submission for the 2014 Wolfson Prize for a new Garden City.\textsuperscript{70} The submission proposed the extension of an existing, medium-sized settlement to provide housing for an additional 200,000 people. This would be divided into four neighbourhoods of 50,000, each with a secondary school and three primary schools. These were then further divided into smaller neighbourhoods of 10,000 that could support a local centre and employment. The model proposed a form of ‘betterment tax’ with the land being acquired at near to existing agricultural use value and then being vested in a foundation (a partnership of local authorities, the Local Economic Partnership (LEP) and others, including investors who might only hold a minority stake).

The proposal was based on Dutch and German systems that allow the value generated by development to be invested back into infrastructure. Primary legislation would have been required in the form of a ‘Garden Cities Act’ to enable this. The foundation body would be both development and management agency. URBED’s case for a form of land value capture was based on its conclusion that both physical and social infrastructure should be in place at the beginning of development and therefore requires subsidy. With public finances under pressure, land capture was the obvious solution.

There have been a number of reviews, mainly sponsored by the Labour Party, into responses to the housing crisis. The Lyons Housing Review recommended new powers for local authorities to be able to purchase land compulsorily and the introduction of land taxation.\textsuperscript{71} In 2018 the Raynsford Review made a number of significant criticisms of the planning system over the last decade, in particular deregulation and under investment. Its recommendations included:\textsuperscript{72}

- Making planning more proactive
- Creating a sub-regional planning framework
- Using stamp duty and capital gains tax from land transactions to fund services for local communities
- That councils should be able to CPO land and take a percentage of the development uplift to fund local planning
Many recent studies such as those by the LSE\textsuperscript{73} are now advocating some mechanism to capture a percentage of the increase in land value that occurs when planning consent is granted. In the light of housing pressures and the competing demands for public spending, some form of land value uplift tax would seem to be a solution. The revenues could subsidise affordable housing and fund the purchase of open land for public access and ecological uses. The idea of purchasing large swathes of the Green Belt using public funds would be a return to the original concept of the Green Belt.

Section 3: Conclusions

The creation of the Green Belt was undoubtedly an enlightened approach to urban planning, particularly when set alongside other 20th-century policies that sought to provide decent housing for all, healthy environments and a wide range of civic amenities. These were part of a consensus that was based on a central role for government and the belief that it was possible rationally to plan a better and more equitable future. Public space and the open countryside were seen to be self-evidently part of the public good, even if this good was defined by a relatively small group of professional planners.

The consensus within society that led to the creation of the Green Belt is now under stress. Society has changed and its needs are pluralist. When considering the future of the Green Belt it should be self-evident that an institution designed 70–80 years ago is unlikely to be ideal for today’s circumstances. That is not to argue that the Green Belt is outmoded, but its role and purpose, as well as some of its unintended consequences, should be reviewed. The debate concerning Green Belt release is highly emotive, but rarely sophisticated.

As noted above, the wider urban region represents not just opportunities for new housing, but also opportunities to generate energy, grow food, clean and store water, recycle and reuse waste materials. We know that Green Belts can produce or contribute to lower temperatures and mitigate heat waves, with an extremely important role in building urban resilience. They are biodiverse ecosystems and provide places for recreation, exercise and enjoyment. Decisions regarding the future of Green Belt land should therefore be wider than just the provision of housing and must be integrated into regional spatial strategies.

Although Green Belt is not being eroded at an alarming rate, it is being lost, and the rate of loss is increasing. National planning policy has
facilitated this through subtle changes in policy guidelines. The imposition of housing targets and the piecemeal responses through local plans is not a rational approach to dealing with such a valuable resource as the countryside surrounding our cities. The incremental loss of Green Belt, driven by development pressures, is fuelling an emotive (and largely unproductive) reaction against new development. Studies show that there is a supply of land within cities that could, in theory, provide new housing without encroaching on Green Belt. The problem is that planning at a local level is not sensitive enough to identify small sites.

Even if it could do so, there are problems in unlocking many of these sites. These sites have often not been developed because there are barriers concerning ownership, access, contamination and viability. Planning restrictions protect other activities such as existing industrial uses and in many cases developing on greenfield sites is seen as an easier option. Other sites, especially out of town shopping, are undoubtedly too valuable in their existing configuration to warrant redevelopment despite the obvious advantages of doing so. The inability to release these sites is an example of the failure of the existing planning system to work proactively. Years of underinvestment in local authorities have made them reactive. In the absence of any mechanism to respond to opportunities within the urban area, pressure mounts on Green Belt sites.

The two case studies of Northolt and Enfield demonstrate that there are other options that might be explored before Green Belt land is built on. The Enfield study does involve loss of strategic industrial land (SIL) that would be contrary to planning policy. But the loss of Green Belt land is also contrary to the intention of planning policy. The Enfield study successfully identifies sites near to good public transport nodes within the city as opposed to proposing releasing land around stations in the Green Belt. Moreover, the major land use losses would be to out of town retail that is largely car-based and has undoubtedly contributed to the decline of local town centres. The Northolt study was based on a qualitative assessment of existing open land and proposed a degree of infilling to boost residential densities that in turn would support better local services. The two studies also highlight the fact that planning assessment of vacant and brownfield land is undoubtedly too coarse grained and is constrained by broad assumptions regarding suitability and availability. In the absence of finer grained planning assessments there is almost certainly an underestimate of the amount of land potentially available for development within existing urban areas. As a consequence there are dual pressures both to release Green Belt and to build at very high densities on the brownfield land.
The missing element in all of the arguments for and against release of Green Belt land is a discussion of the role of planning. In England there is no system for making strategic decisions on a regional basis. An effective planning system would be able to assess land availability and demand on a regional basis. It would then develop long-term spatial plans that would consider the shape and distribution of new development and relate this to the necessary transport and infrastructure investment. The timeframe would need to be at least 25 years and reviews should be conducted on no less than a 15-year cycle. Such a system would need to be proactive and to have the powers and resources to intervene in the market at scale.

Possible models would be variations on the Regional Development Agencies (abolished in 2011 and requiring new legislation) or Development Corporations that could be set up under existing powers. In other words, the Green Belt should be subject to a coherent planning regime.

The second issue is around land value capture. By the time most land enters the planning process values have already been inflated and any financial flexibility has been removed from the system. The result is a struggle for the planning system to extract value from schemes that already have extremely tight parameters. This results in delays and cost reductions that mitigate against design quality and high environmental performance. As a consequence, housing prices remain high. A reliance solely on the market through easing Green Belt restrictions is likely to make brownfield development less attractive. It is also unlikely to deliver affordable housing to areas where it is most needed.

A possible response could be to set up regional planning agencies based on city regions with the powers of Development Corporations. This would require primary legislation, but the Green Belt is already specifically designated. A Green Belt Development Corporation could have the primary purpose to protect and enhance the Green Belt (and even to look for possible extensions). It would plan strategically and consider release on a set of clear criteria. If it had powers to acquire land at agricultural values and capture the uplift, this Corporation would have funds to acquire further land for permanent open access or ecological enhancement, including rewilding, and for energy generation and flood mitigation. Land profits would also cross-subsidise both new physical and social infrastructure and affordable housing in areas where it is needed. Finally, a planned approach to the Green Belt would enable environmental and resilience planning to take place on a regional level. The scope for the city and its hinterlands to mitigate climate change is developed further in chapter 4.
There are overwhelming arguments for the reassessment of the Green Belt to accommodate growth and respond to climate change through the planned management of the urban hinterland. But any reappraisal should be strategic, planned and based on a thorough understanding of the varying qualities and potentials of each and every part of the Green Belt. The crux of the debate is whether the presently designated Green Belt area still fulfils its original objectives, whether there are trade-offs at the margin for the Green Belt land to deliver present policy requirements and others such as housing or whether circumstances have changed and a new approach is needed, particularly to mitigate climate change. The alternative is piecemeal erosion through development that is divorced from any rational planning context. If a fundamental reappraisal is beyond the present capabilities of government and the planning system, then there is a compelling argument for the Green Belt to be left untouched for future generations. Once lost, it will be lost forever.

Notes

1. MHCLG 2019.
4. NAO 2019.
6. GLA 2018.
7. GLA 2014.
19. The arguments against HS2, for example, are focusing on the loss of ancient woodlands and wildlife habitat (rather than the potential negative impact on local house prices).
22. MHCLG 2019.
23. CPRE 2018.
25. The London Green Belt Council brings together over 100 organisations including councils, residents and environmental groups with a shared concern for London’s Green Belt. https://londongreenbeltcouncil.org.uk/.
27. HM Government 2018.
References


28. LGBC 2019, p.12
29. LGBC 2019, pp. 5–6.
34. Scott 2017.
38. Save Stourbridge Green Belt 2019.
42. Popplewell 2019.
43. CPRE Essex 2019.
44. Turley Associates 2014.
46. The New Homes Bonus is a grant paid by central government to local councils to reflect and incentivise housing growth in their areas. www.parliament.uk 2017.
47. Brentwood Borough Council 2018b.
51. CPRE 2010.
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55. HTA Design 2015.
57. Mace et al. 2018.
60. London First 2015.
61. Wright 2018.
64. MHCLG 2017.
68. German Federal Building Code (Section 129).
70. URBED 2014.
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