problems around the country. Most were created by New Town Development Corporations as arms of central government. Innovative funding arrangements meant that the new towns were able to capture and use the increase in development land values, and the mechanism remains on the statute books today. Local government was also a driving force, with Northumberland completing two of its own new towns, followed by Essex’s own version of a new town much more recently at South Woodham Ferrers. Greater control of industry at the time allowed government to relocate major employers to many new towns, and therefore jobs and economic prosperity, at least initially, were assured. Over time the economies of some new towns proved to be more insulated from the economic downturns which affected older towns and, as with the major industrial cities, some of new towns have faltered economically. The innovative architecture employed in new towns has sometimes been the cause of derision, with monolithic shopping and civic centres seen as blighting new towns such as Cumbernauld. In other cases the economic success of new towns has been spec-tacular. Crawley has always benefited enormously from its relationship with a prospering Gatwick airport, while Milton Keynes has become a net importer of commuters and one of the fastest growing local economies in the UK. New towns have also always provided, from their roots in the Garden Cities movement, greener and more environmentally friendly places to live than other towns and cities. Most were built with rail or other public transport in mind. The movement aimed to restore a better balance between natural and urban environments, both within the new towns but also in the major cities to which they were related. However, perhaps the most significant achievement of the new towns programme – a planning achievement – was a social one. The programme has provided homes and communities for some three million people according to the best sustainability practices understood at the time. Many of the new towns are now facing their own problems – since the infrastructure was built all at the same time and is now in need of attention. However, there is much to learn from the programme 60 years on in 2007 as we seek ways to address a major housing crisis.

green belts and new towns

twin achievements of postwar planning

green belts

Outline History

Even in Tudor times the concept of a ‘corridor sanitaires’ around towns was well understood. The first organisation to campaign for green belts was the Town and Country Planning Association (TCPA), which called for towns to be ‘surrounded by a rural belt’. However, it was not until 1944 that Town & Country Planning Association (TCPA) vice-president Sir Patrick Abercrombie included a green belt as part of his famous Greater London Plan (and later in his Clyde Valley Regional Plan of 1946). Green belts emerged out of concern over the negative impact of unrestrained urban sprawl – a consequence of housing growth. Importantly for campaigners such as the TCPA, green belts were always seen as complementing the need for well-planned towns and cities, both new and existing. The first government policy for the whole of England was published in 1955 and added the objective of ‘checking the unrestricted sprawl of the built-up areas, and of safeguarding the surrounding countryside against further encroachment ... by the formal designation of clearly defined green belts.’ (Ministry of Housing and Local Government, Green Belt Circular 42/55).

Abercrombie’s initiative in London, and in the Clyde Valley, was followed by green belts in Oxford, the West Midlands, York, Tyne and Wear and many other parts of the UK. Abercrombie later went on to combine his role at the TCPA with founding the Council for the Preservation of Rural England. Without the comprehensive control of development enacted by the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act there is little likelihood that green belts would have had enduring statutory force through the planning system.

Towards an Urban Renaissance

The Urban Renaissance and Meeting Today’s Housing Crisis

Following growing concern about greenfield development and the extent of dying and derelict urban areas, the 1999 Urban Task Force, chaired by Lord Rogers, proposed an ‘urban renaissance’ to help rediscover the joys and advantages of urban living. Many of the recommendations were taken up by government in the subsequent Urban White Paper. Good design was promoted, while disincentives to developing brownfield (previously developed land) were removed. The populations of core areas are once again rising, the iconography of city centre living has become more positive and, for a significant proportion of small households, fashionable.

A full range of planning solutions – urban regeneration, sustainable urban extensions and new settlements – will be crucial to meet the housing needs of today and the future. The 2003 Sustainable Communities Plan is designed to address the dual problems of growth pressure in the south east of England and low demand in parts of the north. The Plan draws on some of the principles of the Garden Cities and new towns, while taking into account some of today’s challenges.

Green Belts Today

Green belts today cover over 1.6 million hectares (14% of the land area) of England, 150,000 hectares (13%) of Scotland, and 226,000 hectares (16%) of Northern Ireland, while Wales is only beginning its version of green belt policy. The maps in this pack show what might have happened to London’s development had there been no green belt protection. Current government policy on green belts is contained in Planning Policy Guidance (PPG2, 1996, amended 2001). It aims not only to restrict urban sprawl and safeguard the surrounding countryside, but also to prevent coalescence of neighbouring towns, to preserve the character of historic towns and, a more recent aim, to assist with urban regeneration.

A recent review of land use planning by government economists Kate Barker proposed a more flexible approach to green belts. She suggested planners should adopt a more positive approach towards developments that could be shown to enhance surrounding areas, while considering how best to protect and enhance green space in towns and cities.
London’s development had there been no green belt protection

Dr Nick Green, Centre for Urban & Regional Ecology, University of Manchester, 2007. Adapted from original maps in Peter Hall’s Urban & Regional Planning, 2002

Green Belts and the TCPA

The TCPA was the first organisation to campaign for statutory green belts. Its Annual Report of 1919 included a statement from the Executive calling for towns to be ‘surrounded by a rural belt’. The Association continued campaigning for green belts throughout both world wars; for example the June 1937 issue of Town & Country Planning published a new policy statement calling for towns to be ‘surrounded by a permanent country belt’. The creation of green belts meant the realisation of the TCPA’s mission to create towns complemented by a permanent green (or rural) belt for the use, enjoyment and improvement of cities and city dwellers.

new towns
the antidote to sprawl

Outline History

Following the Second World War, despite enthusiasm for Ebenezer Howard’s Garden Cities and the building of Letchworth and Welwyn, overcrowding and inner city slums were rife throughout Britain’s major cities. Entire families could be found living in single rooms in terraces and courts, frequently poorly lit and ventilated and without proper drainage and running water. Worse still, bomb damage had left many thousands of families homeless or in temporary accommodation. Society in post Second World War Britain demanded better places to live and a planned future for its communities.

Added to this, so called ‘ribbon development’, whereby roadside premises sprang up one after the other, extending from one town and eventually linking with the next, was a major concern. The Ribbon Development Act of 1935 made a limited attempt to ensure development became better planned and increased pressure to concentrate growth in properly planned new settlements.

A small number of new settlements had been planned and built before 1947. As with green belts, it was Abercrombie and the London County Council that made the first statutory plan for satellite towns in the 1944 Greater London Plan. But it was the New Towns Act of 1946 that gave rise to the most significant programme, which was for the first time sponsored by government. Shortly after the passage of the New Towns Act, St. Stevenage was designated the first post-war new town. The Town and Country Planning Act of 1947 played an important part by allowing local authorities to limit development in already overcrowded areas and to halt sprawl on the edge of towns and cities.

Abercrombie had been persuaded of the benefits of new towns largely by Frederic Osborn of the TCPA, who had also inspired much of the work of the Reich Committee on new towns (whose 1946 report provided the basis for the programme). Abercrombie’s vision was also key to realising urban improvement in the heart of London. People need more space, and the acres of parks and green spaces taken for granted today were made possible. Examples in London include Burgess Park to the south and the Lea Valley Park to the east, which allowed the protected Epping Forest to be joined up with new parkland to the north and south. This project will be almost completed by the Olympic Park being created for 2012.

Labour and Conservative governments from the 1940s through to the 1970s eventually completed 32 UK new towns, addressing the same social and environmental...