solutions hiding in plain sight—

the potential of england's green belts

Julia Thrift argues that, for the first time in a generation, there is a realistic chance to radically re-think the purpose of England's Green Belts and improve their accessibility, quality and benefits for people, the environment and the economy—and that multiple government policy objectives would be delivered by doing so and that the key funding and financial incentives required are already in place

Mike Ellis / NHS England

Play area in the Hogmoor Inclosure on the outskirts of Whitehill & Bordon, Hampshire (part of NHS England's Healthy New Towns project)—creating natural play areas in the Green Belt, accessible by safe walking and cycling routes, would be a relatively low-cost way to provide multiple health and wellbeing benefits for children and families

England, like many developed countries, faces a number of urgent, important and interconnected crises:

● There are large **health inequalities** among the population, with people in some communities dying—on average—10 years earlier than those in others, for reasons that are avoidable. The causes of much of this ill-health include **poor diet**, **lack of physical activity**, and **air pollution**. People in poor health pre-pandemic suffered far worse outcomes from infection by coronavirus.[1]

● There is an urgent need to **reduce carbon emissions from transport**[2] and to provide land for tree-planting to **offset carbon** in order to meet the UK's commitment to **reach net zero by 2050**.[3]

- There is an urgent need to green our towns and cities to **reduce the effects of climate change**, such as overheating and flash-flooding,[3] and to **help clean polluted air**.
- There is a reliance on a **fragile global food system** that produces cheap, unhealthy processed food; and there are a growing number of families (many in work) who **rely on food banks** and cannot afford the fresh vegetables and fruit that are vital for a healthy diet.[4]
- Without properly directed investment in helping people to stay healthy, the cost of treating them when they become ill will **make the NHS unaffordable**.[5]
- There is a **rapid decline in biodiversity** that is now recognised by economists and the government as an existential risk to both the economy and human health.[6]

Unlike many of the countries that face these multiple, interconnected problems, England has an important asset that could, potentially, contribute part of the solution—namely the Green Belt, more than 1.6 million hectares[7] of land surrounding the 16 cities and towns and other urban areas that house the majority of the population.

Myths and reality

Before considering how the Green Belt could provide practical solutions to the problems outlined above, it is important to be clear about exactly what the Green Belt is—and is not.

For many people the phrase 'the Green Belt' suggests images of what William Blake memorably described as 'England's green and pleasant land'—a vague but emotive impression of the best of the nation's countryside.[8] This emotional resonance is amplified by the fact that many people's experience of the Green Belt is little more than a blur seen through a car or train window as they speed away from a town or city.[9]

As a consequence of being both vague and emotionally powerful, the Green Belt has become politically charged. Suggestions that it could or should be changed can be perceived as a threat to its existence—often resulting in vocal opposition, with the result that politicians avoid mentioning it other than to say they support it. Ironically, this intense popular support for a romanticised Green Belt prevents discussion about how the purpose and quality of the real Green Belt could be improved.

The romantic notion of the Green Belt is at odds with the facts in many ways. 'Green Belt' is a simply a planning designation—in essence, just lines on a map, delineating areas within which development is restricted. Although new development is restricted in Green Belt areas, the designation 'Green Belt' signifies nothing about the quality or beauty of the land that is protected: it is protected simply because of its location on the edge of an urban area.

On its own terms Green Belt policy has been a great success: it has prevented low-density development on the outskirts of urban areas spreading until towns and cities merge into each other. However, although Green Belts have prevented urban sprawl, much of the quality of Green Belt land is poor, according to a range of different measures.[10] The urban public is often unaware of the exact location of Green Belt land, and it is often not easy for them to access it (dual carriage ways tend to take people *through* the Green Belt, not *to* the Green Belt). It is not necessarily very biodiverse—especially the surprisingly large areas taken up by golf courses, which rely on pesticides to keep their 'greens' so perfectly green,[11] or farming,[12] which, according to the State of Nature Partnership's *State of Nature 2019* report, is one of the drivers reducing biodiversity.[13] Green Belts are not necessarily deliberately planted or managed to maximise 'ecosystem services'—in other words the sort of 'public goods' that well designed green spaces and waterways can deliver, such as cooling and cleaning the air, purifying water, or carbon sequestration. England's Green Belts could be so much better.

Why does the Green Belt exist?

The principle of 'always preserving a belt of country round our cities' was proposed in 1898 by Ebenezer Howard,[14] originator of the Garden City model of development and founder of the Garden City Association, which later became the TCPA. Howard's radical idea was to deliberately plan and create Garden Cities that, among other things, were surrounded by farms to supply food for their residents. He recognised that as a Garden City grew and prospered there would be increasing pressure to build on the surrounding farm land. His solution was bold: once a city had reached its optimum size (his suggestion was 32,000 people), it should stop growing. The need for more homes would be met by building another Garden City, connected to the first via a railway, but entirely separate in its location, population, and governance.

After the Second World War elements of these ideas were, in effect, embedded in national planning policy. The 1947 Town and Country Planning Act allowed councils to control urban sprawl into the countryside, and in 1955 councils with areas that did not already have Green Belts were encouraged to designate them.[15] Despite numerous changes to planning policy over the last 70 years, Green Belt policy has remained.

What is often forgotten, however, is that both parts of Howard's radical idea influenced national policy and legislation. The 1946 New Towns Act gave the government the power to buy land at agricultural prices and to build New Towns—which it did.[16] Howard's two-part idea, applied (although imperfectly) to a wide range of urban areas, worked: the Green Belt prevented sprawl while the New

Towns prevented a shortage of homes. However, when the government stopped building New Towns, and for a set of complex political, economic and demographic reasons house prices started their decades-long rise, pressure to build on the Green Belt increased. Today, many commentators argue that building on the Green Belt is an obvious solution to the housing crisis.[17]

Shouldn't we build homes on the Green Belt?

As the TCPA has argued,[18] evidence suggests that there are many reasons why creating whole new towns can often be a more successful approach than simply adding housing estates to the edges of existing urban areas.

In recent years much work has been undertaken on the economic value of having green spaces close to urban areas. The work of the Natural Capital Committee, an independent committee of economists established to advise HM Treasury about economics and the environment, demonstrated that green spaces close to where people live are vital from an economic perspective, because of the multiple benefits to health and climate change resilience that they bring. As the leading economist and former Chair of the Natural Capital Committee, Sir Dieter Helm,[19] put it:

'[Many] people think the economics all point towards building on the Green Belt and using it for housing and other developments, whereas environmentalists are against economic development [...]—as if there is some kind of a dichotomy between economics and the environment. This is utter nonsense. The core argument for the Green Belt is economic.'

Consequently, while it is clear that England needs to build many more good-quality and affordable homes, from an economic point of view, and from the point of view of creating high-quality sustainable communities, the Green Belt is not the right place in which to build them.

The powerful work by the economists on the Natural Capital Committee directly informed the government's 25 Year Environment Plan,[20] which was adopted in 2018 and is now being implemented. Chapter 3 of the plan, 'Connecting people with the environment to improve health and wellbeing', sets out the strong evidence that access to green spaces supports good health, and notes that 'In the most deprived areas of England, people tend to have the poorest health and significantly less green space than wealthier areas'. It goes on to say that 'Our aim is for more people, from all backgrounds, to engage with and spend time in green and blue spaces in their everyday lives.' However, Green Belt policy is stuck in the 1950s, with no mention of the benefits of trees and green spaces to people's health and wellbeing, and consequently to the economy.

What is the Green Belt for?

Current planning policy says that the Green Belt serves five purposes:

'a) to check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas;
b) to prevent neighbouring towns merging into one another;
c) to assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment;
d) to preserve the setting and special character of historic towns; and
e) to assist in urban regeneration, by encouraging the recycling of derelict land and other urban land.' [21]

Given that there is now robust evidence of the public health benefits of green space situated close to the places where people live,[22] and an urgent need to offset carbon and reduce the impact of climate change on urban areas, it is clear that this limited rationale for the Green Belt is hopelessly out of date.

A vision for 21st-century Green Belts

The Green Belts around England's urban areas have the potential to:

- help to improve people's physical and mental health and wellbeing, reducing pressure on the NHS;
- improve air quality;
- provide educational opportunities for local schools, for example through forest schools and outdoor learning;
- capture carbon by providing land for tree planting;
- reduce the risk of urban areas overheating in hotter summers;
- absorb rainwater to prevent the risk of flooding in nearby urban areas;
- create spaces rich in biodiversity;
- create jobs in market gardening, timber production, and leisure activities (bike hire, cafés, etc.);
- support the economy by providing affordable fruit and vegetables to the local town or city.

All this could be achieved by:

- creating safe, attractive, tree-lined walking and cycling routes from urban centres to the Green Belts that surround them, and creating circular routes around towns and cities through their Green Belts for walking, cycling, commuting and activities such as mountain-biking, orienteering, etc., thus providing accessible, affordable healthy leisure opportunities;
- using appropriate Green Belt land for planting trees for woodland or planting trees for timber, and planting hedgerows and creating sustainable water management systems; and
- re-purposing arable land from cereals to market gardening, creating jobs and food to supply local schools, hospitals, prisons, and urban markets.

Mike Ellis / NHS England

Community gardens can provide opportunities for friendships to flourish as well as providing skills, training and affordable healthy food — small sites such the garden at Ebbsfleet Garden City, Kent (part of NHS England's Healthy New Towns project) could complement larger urban farms in the Green Belt

None of these ideas are new: all are already being discussed, recommended and even, to some extent, put into practice in England. They are very much in line with, and would help to deliver, the most recent England-wide policies in agriculture, environment, biodiversity, transport, and public health. They would help to deliver the health and wellbeing 'missions' that government has committed to achieving as part of the 'levelling up' agenda. They are also being implemented very successfully in a number of places around the world, as the examples set out in Boxes 1–3 on pages 168-70 illustrate.

How could accessible, productive and healthy Green Belts be achieved?

As a result of the principles underlying the English planning system, the Green Belt is created collectively (through national and local planning policies), even though much of the land itself is privately owned. Consequently, the changes that might be required to implement the ideas set out above will involve changes to national and local planning policies, plus incentives that make it worthwhile for the multiple private landowners to do things differently.

In fact, most of the policy and *all of the funding* is already in place: what is required is updated national policy and political leadership to focus existing funding streams in order to deliver the necessary transformation of the Green Belt.[23] Government action will also be required to ensure that tenant farmers are not excluded from funding because of their tenancy contracts; and to ensure

that the considerable amount of public and private money now available for rural areas actually achieves the natural capital objectives for which it is intended.[24]

What might these shifts in policy and a new focus for existing funding streams look like?

Policy changes and funding incentives

Planning (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities)

The Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill, currently going through Parliament, makes it clear that the government will continue to protect the Green Belt. An explanatory document published alongside the Bill states that 'Existing Green Belt protections will remain and we will pursue options to make the Green Belt *even greener*' [*emphasis added*]. This suggests a window of opportunity to update the five purposes of the Green Belt set out in national planning policy to align with the government's 25 Year Environment Plan, its commitment to meet net zero by 2050, its Transport Decarbonisation Strategy, and its commitment to reducing health inequalities.

When the National Planning Policy Framework is updated — and an update is expected within the next 12 months — it should make it clear that active travel networks to, and around, urban areas should be encouraged, and that small-scale development to support local food-growing (for example small distribution centres) and leisure (cycle hire, cafés, and natural play areas) should be supported.

The Local Nature Recovery Strategies that are being introduced across the whole of England[25] as

Box 1
Example — creating walking and cycling 'ringways' around towns and cities

What?   Create networks of high-quality walking and cycling routes from city centres, through the suburbs and into the Green Belt, and provide routes around cities, through the Green Belt, to join up the radial routes.

Why?   Helping people to become more active is one of the most effective ways to support good physical and mental health. The government's new cycling and walking strategy states that:
  'Increasing cycling and walking can help tackle some of the most challenging issues we face as a society – improving air quality, combatting climate change, improving health and wellbeing, addressing inequalities, and tackling congestion on our roads.' [a]

How?   The infrastructure (high-quality footpaths and segregated cycle routes) could be delivered as part of the government's £2 billion commitment to cycling and walking.[b] As an outcome of the Agriculture Act 2020, farmers can be paid for 'public goods', including 'supporting public access to and enjoyment of the countryside, farmland or woodland'.[c] The tasks of maintaining, publicising and activating the ring-routes could be managed by local charities, funded from a range of sources, including active travel budgets, public health funds, fundraising events, cycle hire and other activities, cafés, etc.

Where has it been done?   The Atlanta Beltline, Atlanta, USA — a partially completed 22 mile ring of tracks, trails and parks around the city. It grew out of grass-roots action and has already resulted in 30,000 jobs, 1,300 acres of new green space, 46 miles of improved streetscapes, and $10 billion of

Peter Neal

economic development. It has created links between better- and worse-off neighbourhoods, and keeps space undeveloped to enable future provision of transit systems and infrastructure (safeguarding space for cables, pipes, etc). It is managed by a not-for-profit organisation.

Is there anything like this in England?   The London Loop is a ring of 150 miles of footpaths around the capital, launched in 2001 by the London Walking Forum. Volunteers from The Ramblers help with maintenance. If it was significantly upgraded and publicised, and linked to the city centre and suburbs via high-quality walking and cycling routes, could it provide the starting point for a 'beltway' for London? In Oxford the Green Belt Way is a 50 mile circular walk through the Green Belt, devised by CPRE Oxfordshire.

a   *Gear Change: A Bold Vision for Cycling and Walking*. Policy Paper. Department for Transport, Jul. 2020.
    www.gov.uk/government/publications/cycling-and-walking-plan-for-england
b   '£175 million more for cycling and walking as research shows public support'. News Story. Department for Transport, 13 Nov. 2020.
    www.gov.uk/government/news/175-million-more-for-cycling-and-walking-as-research-shows-public-support
c   S Coe and J Finlay: *The Agriculture Act 2020*. Briefing Paper CBP 8702. House of Commons Library, Dec. 2020.
    https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8702/

Box 2
Example — planting a forest around each town and city

What?   Surround towns and cities with woodlands by planting trees. This would have three purposes: to grow mature woodlands that will capture carbon, support biodiversity and also provide places for healthy leisure, play, and outdoor education; to create horticultural nurseries to provide young trees for planting in urban areas, while improving skills and creating jobs that can be easily accessed from the nearby town or city; and to grow timber for future use in sustainable construction, providing local jobs.

Why?   The government's 25 Year Environment Plan sets out the health and economic benefits of planting trees, especially in locations close to where people live:
'Having more trees in and around our towns and cities, close to where people live and work, brings people closer to nature and improves air quality, with consequent positive health impacts... Green infrastructure brings wider benefits, including sequestering carbon, absorbing noise, cleansing pollutants, absorbing surface water, and reducing high temperatures.' [a]

In addition, by creating horticultural nurseries close to urban areas it will be possible to grow trees for local planting while creating jobs. Until now, many of the UK's trees for planting have been imported from EU countries. Post-Brexit, this is difficult for reasons of biosecurity and customs, just at a time when demand for trees is increasing. A report for the horticulture industry has indicated that the number of jobs provided by the industry in the UK could grow from 674,200 in 2019 to 763,400 by 2030 if the country's green spaces are protected and enhanced and the industry is supported to meet its potential.[b]

How?   Natural England has recently published freely accessible online maps of green infrastructure for the whole of the country, which identify the location, type and accessibility of green spaces, and can be easily cross-referenced with health and social data.[c] This could help to identify suitable land for tree planting in Green Belt areas. The Agriculture Act 2020 enables farmers to be paid for providing 'public goods', including 'managing land or water in a way that protects or improves the environment', which explicitly includes tree planting. Funding for planting trees is available from businesses that want to pay for tree planting as part of their carbon offsetting projects. One of the biggest challenges for such projects is finding land on which to plant the trees.

Where has it been done?   Tirana Orbital Forest, Tirana, Albania — as part of wider environmental improvements to address the city's rapid growth and loss of green spaces, schoolchildren in Tirana are

DriveAlbania.com

being encouraged to plant 'birthday trees', to create an orbital forest of 2 million trees. The project caught people's imaginations and resulted in large numbers of people donating trees, planting trees, and watching the number of planted trees increasing through a website.

Is there anything like this in England?   England has several 'community forests', many of which are close to urban areas. Cambridge City Council provides 'free trees for babies'. Enfield Council is working to restore Enfield Chase by planting 200 hectares of trees (of which 60 hectares have already been planted[d]), as part of the London Urban Forest Plan, which has a goal to plant more trees in the capital's Green Belt.

a   *A Green Future: Our 25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment.* Policy Paper. HM Government, Jan. 2018. www.gov.uk/government/publications/25-year-environment-plan
b   *Growing a Green Economy: The Importance of Ornamental Horticulture and Landscaping to the UK.* Oxford Economics / Foresight Factory, for the Ornamental Horticulture Roundtable Group, Sept. 2021. www.rhs.org.uk/science/pdf/industry-growth-report-ohrg.pdf
c   See Natural England's 'Introduction to the Green Infrastructure Framework – principles and standards for England' webpage, at https://designatedsites.naturalengland.org.uk/GreenInfrastructure/Home.aspx
d   A short video on the Enfield Chase Woodland Creation project is available at https://youtu.be/6lrA5PHZLJI

Box 3
Example — growing to supply urban centres with affordable healthy local food

What? Use Green Belt land for growing fruit and vegetables, and for small-scale distribution hubs, to provide affordable, locally produced and healthy food for urban populations, along with encouraging local enterprise, creating jobs, and strengthening communities.

Why? The National Food Strategy, an independent report commissioned by the government, sets out very clearly how dysfunctional our food system has become. Many people cannot afford to eat healthy food and rely on cheap, poor-quality, highly processed food which makes them ill. The strategy states:
'The cost of bad diet is astronomical, both in terms of human misery and actual money. The government spends an estimated £18 billion — 8% of all government healthcare expenditure — on conditions related to high BMI [body mass index] every year. (This is before you account for diet-related disease not related to weight).'[a]

Around the world there is increasing recognition that the global food industry is making people ill — yet dismantling this huge, complex, well funded system is extremely difficult. However, at a local level, a large number of projects are successful at helping people to grow local, healthy food, while simultaneously strengthening communities and stimulating enterprise.

How? A report by Sustain,[b] the alliance for better food and farming, sets out the benefits of local food systems and a series of recommendations for supporting them — including using public investment such as the UK Shared Prosperity Fund to provide strategic support for local food systems, and to help attract private and community investment. Sustain recommends that every local authority area should have a 'food partnership',[c] and that councils and other public-sector organisations should prioritise buying food produced locally by small suppliers — in a 'food version of the Preston model'.[d]

Where has it been done? Sustainable Food Production for a Resilient Rosario, Rosario, Argentina — Rosario, the third-largest city in Argentina, won the 2021 World Resources Institute's $250,000 Prize for Cities, after it responded to a desperate economic crisis, coupled with the effects of climate change, by adopting a strategy to encourage farmers around the city to stop growing soybeans for export and start growing food for Rosario's communities. In addition, public land within the city was made available to local people — along with seeds and tools — to enable them to grow their own food.

World Resources Institute

Is there anything like this in England? Throughout England, local urban and peri-urban food-growing initiatives are flourishing, at different scales — providing multiple benefits, including affordable healthy food, stronger community connections, skills, jobs, and a boost to local economies. In Oldham, Greater Manchester, Northern Roots is a 160 acre urban farm and eco-park that grows edible and ornamental crops as part of a sustainable business model devised with support from the University of Salford[e] and informed by research into similar initiatives worldwide.

a   *National Food Strategy — Independent Review.* 2021, p.25. www.nationalfoodstrategy.org
b   *The Case for Local Food: Building Better Local Food Systems to Benefit Society and Nature.* Sustain, Jul. 2021. www.sustainweb.org/publications/the-case-for-local-food/
c   Sustainable Food Places' SFP Food Partnership and Strategy Toolkit is available at www.sustainablefoodplaces.org
d   See Preston City Council's 'What is Preston model?' webpage, at www.preston.gov.uk/article/1339/What-is-Preston-Model
e   See Northern Roots' 'Northern Roots Urban Farm; creating a sustainable business model' webpage, at https://northern-roots.uk/northern-roots-urban-farm-creating-a-sustainable-business-model/
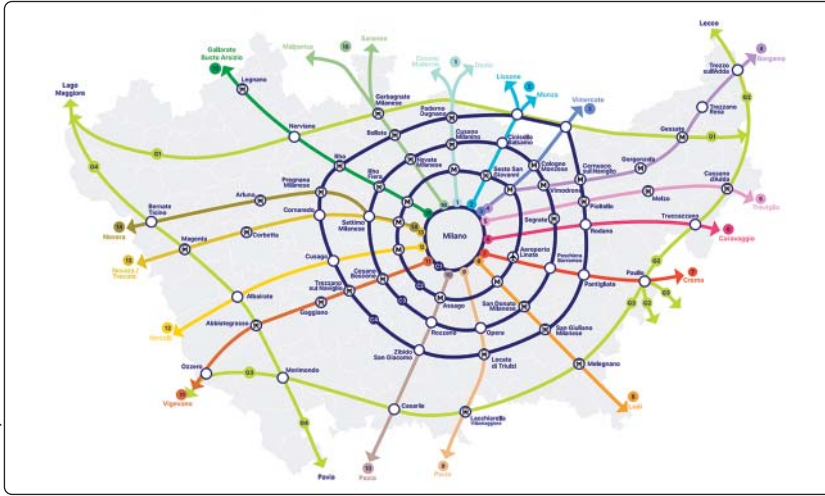
The Italian city of Milan plans to create a network of circular cycle routes crossed by radial routes into the countryside by 2035 — if England's towns and cities did this, their Green Belts would become easily accessible, offering huge potential for affordable exercise and employment opportunities for their populations

a result of the Environment Act 2021, and soon to be referenced in planning policy, will be evidence based, locally led and delivered by partnerships of public, private, and third-sector organisations — ideal for taking forward this idea.

Transport (Department for Transport)

The Department for Transport (DfT) now recognises the influence that transport has on public health, and in 2020 promised to invest £2 billion[26] to improve walking, cycling and public transport infrastructure. Although welcome, this investment is modest compared with the £24 billion[27] promised for investment in roads. The DfT's roads funding can be used to provide active travel infrastructure, and the DfT could encourage spending on good-quality walking and cycling routes to and around Green Belts. This would help to deliver the government's ambitious Transport Decarbonisation Strategy. At a local level, policies to promote active travel routes to, and around, Green Belts could be introduced through Local Transport Plans. The £4.8 billion Levelling Up Fund[28] can also be spent on improving active travel infrastructure. The DfT has recently set up Active Travel England,[29] an inspectorate and funding body chaired by the cyclist Chris Boardman — ideally placed to champion and fund active travel networks to, and around, Green Belts.

Agriculture (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs)

The UK's exit from the EU and the Common Agricultural Policy provided an opportunity to create a new agriculture policy from scratch, including reorganising the way that the £3.5 billion in annual subsidies to farmers in the UK are allocated.[30] This was achieved through the Agriculture Act 2020. Consequently, farmers will be paid for providing 'public goods' through the system of environmental land management schemes (the Sustainable Farming Incentive, Local Nature Recovery, and

Landscape Recovery).[31] This could be used to incentivise Green Belt farmers to improve their land for public access, recreation, tree planting, and conservation, all of which are included in the definition of 'public goods' in the Act. Local Nature Recovery Strategies will be introduced as a result of the Environment Act 2021. There are currently numerous government grants available for tree planting and other green infrastructure projects — and more on the way.[32]

Public health (Department of Health and Social Care)

Much of the work that Public Health England did to encourage the creation of healthy places has been transferred to a new unit within the Department of Health and Social Care — the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities (OHID). Based on the clear evidence of the health benefits of active travel and better diets, OHID is ideally placed to support relevant government departments and agencies in collaborating to amend policies, focus funding, and motivate local planning authorities to put Green Belt ideas into practice. This could be done through the cross-departmental Health Promotion Taskforce, established to 'drive a cross-government effort to improve the nation's health, supporting economic recovery and levelling up' and chaired by the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care.[33]

Councils

Post-pandemic, and with the cost of living increases disproportionately affecting poorer households, councils are acutely aware of the health inequalities in their areas. Many are prioritising a reduction of health inequalities, either as a corporate priority or by including it as an objective in their Local Plans. In line with national planning and transport policies, new Local Plans should prioritise walking and cycling, creating an opportunity to promote routes to, and around, Green Belts. Local planning authorities — usually district or unitary councils — will also lead

the new Nature Recovery Strategies in their areas, providing an opportunity to bring together private-sector landowners and third-sector charities to help implement this idea. Finally, as major local budget-holders and employers, councils have the power to support local food-growing by creating locally focused purchasing policies and supporting or setting up a local food partnership.[34]

What might stop this happening?

The lines on a map that set out the boundaries of a Green Belt are intended to be fixed and unchangeable. However, Green Belt boundaries can be changed in 'exceptional circumstances',[35] which usually means that a council is required by government targets to build a large number of new homes and has nowhere else to put them and so takes some land out of the Green Belt. Consequently, land speculators and developers buy options on Green Belt land in case it becomes available for development in the future.

If a council moves the boundaries of its Green Belt so that land that was protected becomes available for development, its value increases by an extraordinary amount. For instance, in 2015 agricultural land outside London was worth around £21,000 per hectare, but with planning permission for housing was worth £2.1 million—a hundredfold increase.[36] This increase in value is created by the state (through the planning process), but the benefit overwhelmingly goes to the landowner.

For housebuilders, the ideal land to build on is an open field. This is usually the easiest, and hence the most profitable, type of land to develop. Consequently, many developers are likely to oppose enhancements to the Green Belt land which they hope to develop in future.

Why now?

Reforming Green Belt policy has been a 'no-go' area for governments for decades. However, for a range of reasons, it now looks politically possible.

In 2022, for the first time in more than a decade, the government might be willing to challenge the housebuilders. The Secretary of State at the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, Michael Gove, is currently trying to tackle two scandals: first, the extortionate leases that some homeowners have been sold by some housebuilders; and, secondly, the thousands of flats left unsellable because the cladding used on them is the same kind of cladding that was used on Grenfell Tower. He is also responsible for the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill,[37] which proposes significant changes to planning law and, in tandem, updates to planning policy. Michael Gove has, when dealing with the major housebuilders to try to resolve the cladding crisis, proved to be far tougher with them than previous Ministers. If housebuilders disliked proposed changes to Green Belt policy, it is not at all clear that he would comply with their requests.

Finally, the climate and public health challenges are now so pressing that it is clear to both the public and policy-makers that bold ideas to transform the way we live are essential. Politicians are scared that most of the ideas on offer are negative—don't fly so much, don't eat meat, don't drive your car—and will lose them votes.

Transforming local Green Belts into beautiful, accessible places in which to enjoy nature, keep fit, have fun and grow affordable food could be an incredibly attractive idea for voters of all ages. The Green Belt could stop being a political liability and become a huge political asset. What is required are some minor changes to Green Belt and planning policy, more focused and effective management of funding from the new government grants and private-sector carbon-offsetting schemes, and firm political leadership. The time to do it is now.

● *Julia Thrift is Director of Healthier Place-making at the TCPA and a Trustee of Trees for Cities. A condensed version of this proposal was voted the best 'Big Idea' at the Trees, People and the Built Environment 4 international conference held in February 2021, organised by the Institute of Chartered Foresters. The views expressed are personal.*

Notes

1 M Marmot, J Allen, P Goldblatt, E Herd and J Morrison: *Build Back Fairer: The COVID-19 Marmot Review. The Pandemic, Socioeconomic and Health Inequalities in England*. Health Foundation and Institute of Health Equity, Dec. 2020. www.health.org.uk/publications/build-back-fairer-the-covid-19-marmot-review

2 *Decarbonising Transport: A Better, Greener Britain*. Department for Transport, Jul. 2021. www.gov.uk/government/publications/transport-decarbonisation-plan

3 *Joint Recommendations: 2021 Report to Parliament*. Committee on Climate Change, Jun. 2021. www.theccc.org.uk/publication/2021-progress-report-to-parliament

4 *National Food Strategy — Independent Review*. 2021, p.25. www.nationalfoodstrategy.org

5 *Five Year Forward View*. NHS England, Oct. 2014. www.england.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/5yfv-web.pdf This strategy initiated NHS England's Healthy New Towns project, which aimed to create places that would support good health — see www.england.nhs.uk/ourwork/innovation/healthy-new-towns/

6 *The Economics of Biodiversity: The Dasgupta Review*. HM Treasury, Feb. 2021. www.gov.uk/government/publications/final-report-the-economics-of-biodiversity-the-dasgupta-review

7 *Local Authority Green Belt Statistics for England: 2020-21 — Statistical Release*. Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, Sept. 2021. www.gov.uk/government/statistics/local-authority-green-belt-statistics-for-england-2020-to-2021/local-authority-green-belt-statistics-for-england-2020-21-statistical-release

8 A survey of public views on the Green Belt found that 'Green Belt is often associated in the public mind as a place designated for its natural beauty or as a place where nature is protected' — see *Green Belts: A Greener Future*. Natural England and CPRE, Jan. 2010. http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/38005

9   Some participants at the Trees, People and the Built Environment 4 international conference at which this idea was first presented commented that this reflected their experience of the Green Belt

10 See, for instance, M Frith: *London's Green Belt*. Policy Statement. London Wildlife Trust. Updated May 2019, reviewed Jan. 2021. www.wildlondon.org.uk/sites/default/files/2019-07/LWT%20Policy%20-%20London%27s%20Green%20Belt%20%20-%202007%2C%202019%20revision.pdf — which states that 'not all land within London's Green Belt is of high quality — for wildlife, landscape, or amenity'

11 According to research carried out by architect Russell Curtis (*The Golf Belt: How Sustainable Development on London's Golf Courses Can Help Address the Housing Crisis*. Aug. 2021. https://golfbelt.russellcurtis.co.uk/), there are 94 active golf courses in Greater London alone, covering a total of 4,331 hectares — an area larger than the whole of the London borough of Brent

12 65.7% of Green Belt land is in agricultural use according to *England Green Belts*. CPRE — The Countryside Charity, May 2018. www.cpre.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/England_factsheet_2018.pdf)

13 *State of Nature 2019*. State of Nature Partnership, Oct. 2019. https://nbn.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/State-of-Nature-2019-UK-full-report.pdf

14 E Howard: *Garden Cities of To-morrow*. Swan Sonnenschein, 1902 (Second Edition of *To-morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform*), Chap. 12: 'Social Cities'

15 Through Ministry of Housing and Local Government Circular 42/55, *Green Belts*

16 For more on the history of the New Towns, see K Lock and H Ellis: *New Towns: The Rise, Fall and Rebirth*. RIBA Publishing, 2020

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23 Although government funding is being made available, the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee states, in a highly critical report, that Defra's administration of the new Environmental Land Management Scheme (ELMS) has been slow and disorganised, and many farmers are deeply concerned and disillusioned with it. See *Environmental Land Management Scheme*. HC 639. Committee of Public Accounts. House of Commons, Jan. 2022. https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/8357/documents/85142/default/

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27 Government funding for the strategic road network was reduced from £27.4 billion to £24 billion in the Autumn Budget and Spending Review of October 2021

28 See *Levelling Up Fund: Prospectus*. HM Treasury/Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government/Department for Transport, Mar. 2021. www.gov.uk/government/publications/levelling-up-fund-prospectus

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32 An up-to-date list of funding sources is available from the TCPA website, at www.tcpa.org.uk/funding-sources-for-green-infrastructure

33 See the terms of reference and composition of the Health Promotion Taskforce within the published list of Cabinet committees and their membership, at www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-cabinet-committees-system-and-list-of-cabinet-committees/list-of-cabinet-committees-and-their-membership#health-promotion-taskforce

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