

Policy changes offer better access and biodiversity in the Green Belt

Nigel Moor outlines how the Agriculture and Environment Acts legislated in 2020 and 2021 can deliver better public access and improved biodiversity in the Metropolitan Green Belt

First established by Parliament in 1938, the Metropolitan Green Belt covers an enormous area of some 514,060 hectares, much of which is farmed. Around 35,000 hectares (just under 7% of the total) are located in the Greater London area. Even here around a third of the designated land is either farmed, used for horticulture or equestrian activities. For the foreseeable future farming will remain an important land use in the Green Belt and its viability crucial to the aims of the Green Belt. Peter Barbalov in his article Field Grain- a mixed use vision for the countryside in this issue of PIL advocates a need to escape from our old ways of thinking about the Green Belt and the way land is used. His suggestions are radical and stimulating but experience suggests that rethinking the Green Belt can have unintended consequences. Once there is the prospect of future development, owners of Green Belt land may show little interest in responsibly managing the use of the land. A limited amount of development, when permitted, can compromise the sense of openness and further development applications soon follow. The use of Green Belt as a policy device is admittedly very crude, but it has worked to protect the separate identity of cities and towns in Britain and avoid urban sprawl when compared with much of the USA or Southern Europe. What has been lacking is a real incentive for the town dweller to enjoy this precious space. The inclusion of land in a Green Belt does not give the public any right of access which they would not otherwise enjoy. This could change given the new post-Brexit policy for farming now legislated.

The landscape is part of our inheritance

Since the Romantic movement more than two hundred years ago, the landscape has been seen as part of our inheritance. Regardless of where we live or work, the British people share this affection and jealously guard any attempt to change or damage its character. This landscape has been shaped by farming, through the grazing of livestock, the growing of crops and the management of field boundaries. Around 70 percent of the land is managed by farmers, and a third of our forestry and woodland are on farmland.

The EU's Common Agricultural Policy

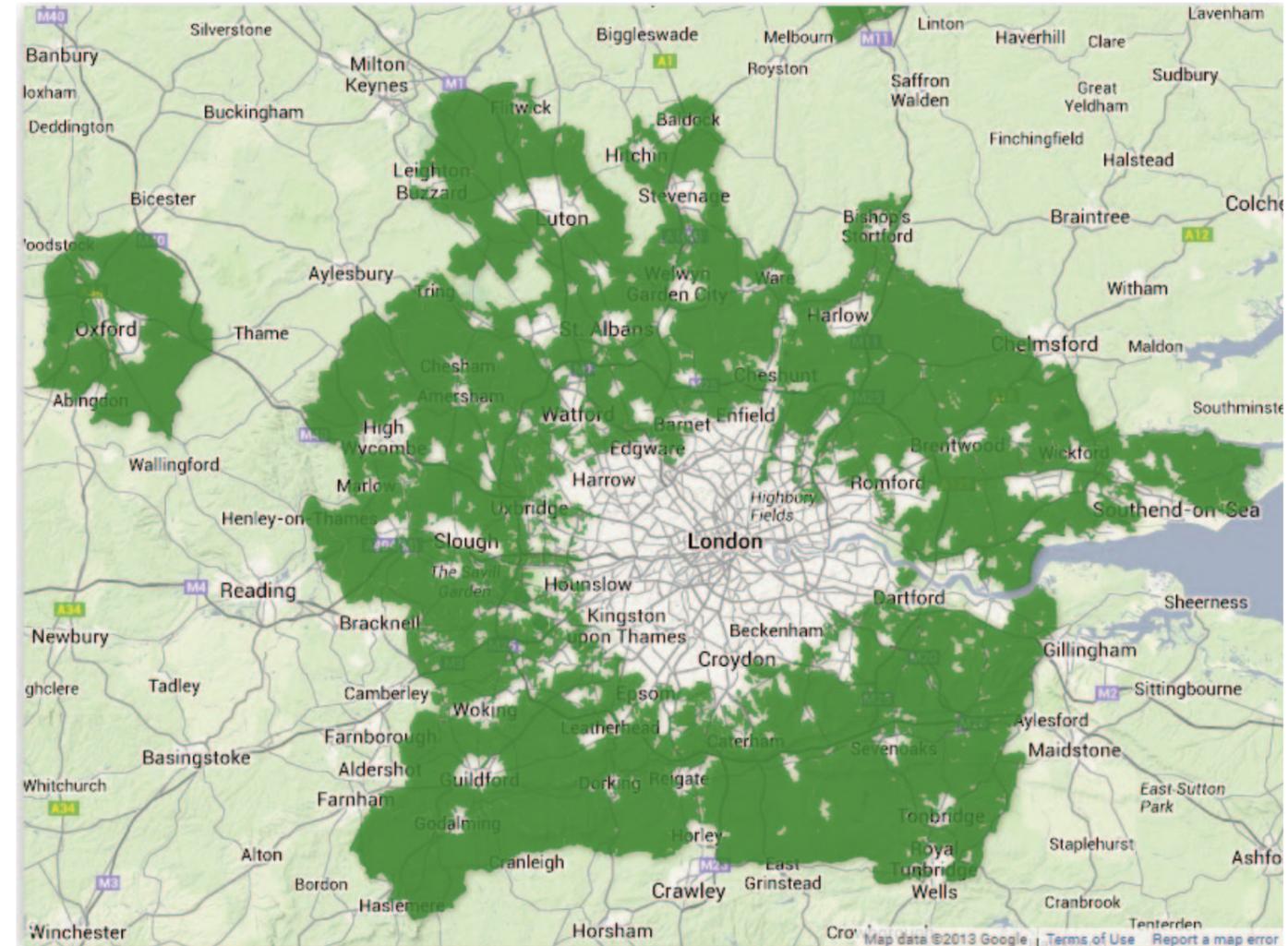
The EU's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) calculated subsidies by acreage which was exploited by big agribusiness who held large landholdings, but did not help the small farmers who live and work on the land. For the last 40 years farmers have been encouraged to chase maximum yield at the expense of everything else. Leaving the EU together with an acceptance that farming must play its part in combating climate change,



presents agriculture with a challenge and opportunity not seen since the end of the Second World War. The NFU the largest farmers' organisation in the country has set an ambitious goal of reaching net zero greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions across the whole of agriculture in England and Wales by 2040. The NFU estimate that emissions from farms amount to about one tenth of GHG emissions. While other sectors have been able to claim emissions reductions due in part to decarbonising the electricity supply, agricultural emissions have remained roughly constant since 2008

Three measures singled out by the NFU

Three measures are singled out by the NFU to achieve this aim. The first is improving farmers productive efficiency, secondly to improve land management including better public access, and changing land use to capture more carbon, and thirdly boosting renewable energy and the wider bioeconomy. One of the features of the Government's Environment Plan is that developers are required to demonstrate a 10 percent biodiversity gain when seeking planning permission. This could create a new market for farmers and landowners to offer an opportunity to



secure this gain on their land. Both the Agriculture and Environment Acts provide a framework for farmers to pursue new markets for their produce and their custody of our landscape. This becomes even more important if government adopts the National Food Strategy published in July 2021 for consultation.

The National Food Strategy

This follows on from the initial report chaired by Henry Dimbleby, a food writer and restaurateur, who carried out a wide-ranging survey of food production and consumption. The strategy recommends a fundamental change to the national diet by 2031 to meet health, climate and nature commitments. These would include a 30 percent reduction in meat consumption and an increase in fruit and vegetables of 30 percent and a 50 percent increase in the consumption of fibre. To ensure that British agriculture has a significant share of this reduced market for meat, customers will need to be persuaded that price cannot be the only criterion for purchase but that animal health and safety standards and environmental gains are as important.

New environmental schemes

The response of government has been to pass into law in November 2020 the Agriculture Act. This replaces the Basic

Payments Scheme (BPS) funded under CAP with instead a system that will reward farmers and land managers with public money for "public goods". These include measures to support public access to and enjoyment of the countryside, farmland or woodland and better understanding of the environment. They also include improving air and water quality, enhancing wildlife and soil health, reducing flooding and tackling climate change. Key to this transformational change are three new schemes that will reward environmental land management (ELM). These are:

- The Sustainable Farming Incentive
- Local Nature Recovery
- Landscape Recovery

The schemes are intended to support the rural economy and achieve the goals of the 25- year Environment Plan introduced by Michal Gove when at the helm of DEFRA as well as the commitment to net zero emissions by 2050. Government began piloting the schemes in 2021 before they are launched in 2024. The Sustainable Farming scheme encourages farmers to specify standards for improving features such as hedgerows or grassland and payment is linked to their success un achieving these aims. The Local Nature Recovery scheme will encourage collaboration between farmers helping them work together to agree standards for improving their local environment. Including public access.

The Landscape Recovery scheme will support long-term pro-

ABOVE:
The Metropolitan Green Belt. Picture source CPRE

RIGHT:
The NFU is committed to agriculture becoming net zero by 2040



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>>> jects such as restoring wilder landscapes, large – scale tree planting and peatland and salt marsh restoration. In order to give time for farmers and land managers to adapt to the new approach and consider which components of the new ELM scheme work best for their farms, direct payments will be phased out over an agricultural transition period which started in 2021 and will run until the end of 2027.

A Utopian Dream?

Is this all a utopian dream? I don't think so. I have been privileged to live in a part of the Cotswolds, where long established estates have already adopted many of these practices. Working with the help of the Cotswolds volunteer wardens who look after the footpaths, landowners have created a landscape where public access is cherished and encouraged. This was hugely important during the pandemic when many discovered for the first time the pleasure of a country walk. I

TOP:

Farm shops provide a direct contact between producer and consumer. Photograph by the author.



believe The Agriculture and Environment Acts are a huge opportunity, that will change how the public views farming, and promote a respect for the rural landscape which defines so much the look of England. Land owners in the Metropolitan Green Belt, with convenient access to adjoining neighbourhoods, are well placed to benefit from supporting public access. ■

- References:
- Case, P. (2001) Landmark moment as Agriculture Bill passed into law - Farmers Weekly 21st May.
 - Gov.uk (2021) Environmental Land Management Schemes 15 March.
 - National Farmers Union (2018) United by our environment, our food, our future.
 - National Farmers Union (2019) Achieving Net Zero Farming's 2040 goal

RIGHT:

Some 65% of farmland is only suitable for grazing grass and grazing livestock. It cannot be used for other types of food. Photograph by the author.



BELOW:

Big agribusiness benefited from CAP and invested heavily in new machinery. Photograph by the author.



Dr Nigel Moor began his career in London with the Covent Garden Planning Team, and since been active in local politics having been a town, district and county councillor. This is an extract from his new book soon to be published: England's Future – The impact of politics on shaping the environment – past, present and future.