

A modernised green belt

Green Belt has served its post-war purpose well but is failing to meet new standards of sustainable development says Merrick Denton-Thompson

We have to question the future of the Green Belt in its current form for the simple reason it predates the new urgency for sustainable development. The Government itself appears not to be able to make up its mind, one moment declaring that the Green Belt is sacrosanct and the next consulting on building new starter homes and supporting brown field development in the Green Belt. Its reputation is further undermined by periodic planning consents for developments in the Green Belt which attract so much ire and attention.

We can celebrate the achievements of Green Belt legislation as originally conceived in that it has prevented the coalescence of cities and towns, controlled ribbon development and sustained the distinction between town and country. Today these spatial planning objectives are more important than they ever were. Yet the legislation was not adopted evenly or applied consistently across the country. In some parts of the country like Hampshire for example, strong countryside policies combined with strategic gap policies successfully prevented the coalescence of towns in a way that allowed them to 'breathe'. However these strategic planning mechanisms no longer exist. It was the Labour Government that removed county level strategic planning and it was the Conservative Government that removed Regional Spatial Planning. To be consistent, there is a powerful argument in support of a new designated Green Belt country wide.

If the Green Belt is to continue to play a part in spatial planning it has to be modernised, society can no longer accept certain aspects of the way it has been implemented. The first issue prevents making the best use of transport and other infrastructure. The second is the unsustainable 'strangulation' of towns and cities, where once all 'brownfield' has been developed, the only alternative to expansion is to transform the character of places through high rise development!

In a small and densely populated island we cannot afford a single purpose designation of land and today the Green Belt is a negative spatial planning tool, the only positive outcome being that the land remains open. In many parts of the country the Green Belt fails the multi-functional demands society has to make on the remaining undeveloped land. All too often the Green Belt has no positive management plan in place, the excep-

tion is where Green Belt overlaps with Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty for which there is a statutory obligation to prepare Management Plans. By their nature the Green Belt is often on the edge of various local authority administrations and as a consequence, no-one takes responsibility of supporting land owners to get the best out of their land. Farming in the urban fringe is fraught with problems and all too often land in the Green Belt fails to meet society's ambitions for high quality, biodiverse, open countryside that defines our country.

The status quo is difficult to sustain but is there a consensus that a strategic review is required to regain both the trust and credibility of the Green Belt to see us through the next century? Or I ask myself, are we in denial that in its current form it is bound to fail? If on balance we conclude that a strategic review is needed, then we need to decide whether it should be confined to the London Metropolitan Green Belt or be modernised nationally?

The Landscape Institute has already invited an open discussion on the future of the Green Belt with our exhibition at the Building Centre. This followed an internal survey of our membership which concluded that a review is necessary. With a Government that is committed to rebalancing the relationship between wealth generation and public expenditure, at the same time as reducing regulation, it will not be easy to secure a strategic review of the Green Belt. What is not acceptable is for the Green Belt to be weakened by the pursuit of single issues such as the desperate need for new housing. More housing is needed and will be built in all likelihood on the Green Belt, but it has to be planned if it is to meet the new necessity for sustainable development.



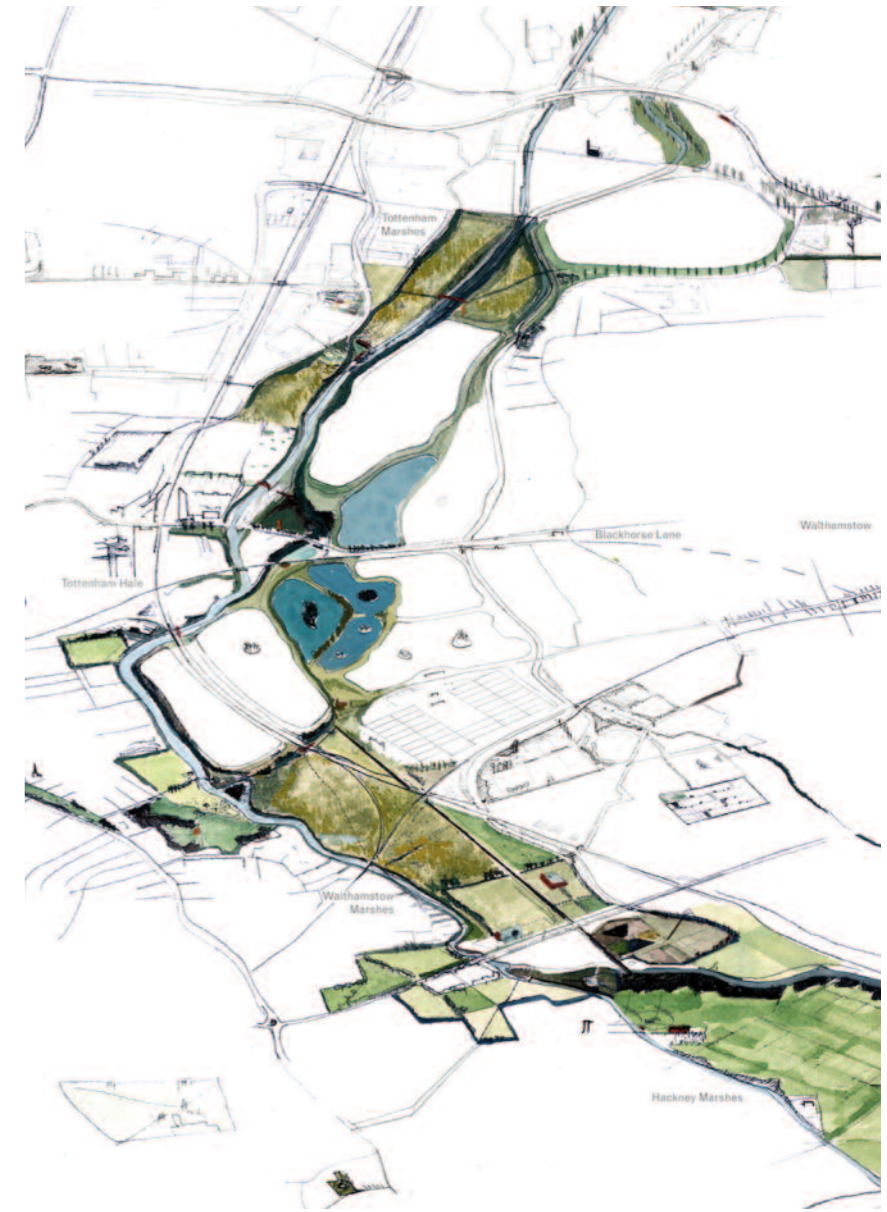
Is there support for a strategic review of the Green Belt driven by a new vision emphasising a positive transformation to meet the needs of multi-functional landscapes? This might be achieved by requiring Management Plans for each Green Belt. I suggest that a step by step approach, starting by reconfirming the objectives of preventing coalescence and ribbon development and the designation of new Green Belt might be considered. Opportunities for extensive new developments of high density might emerge from such a positive landscape planning approach to ensure the best use of transport and other infrastructure and that towns and cities are allowed to 'breathe'. Integral to such plans might be the spatial layout that develops 'green fingers' to connect town and city centres to the open countryside of the Green Belt.

To support a new vision for the modernised Green Belt we should work collaboratively with land owners to achieve some or all of the following functions:-

- Successful farming businesses focussed on sustainable food production for local consumption.
- Reconnecting urban based populations with food production, in particular for the young and old.
- Restoring landscape quality based on the National Landscape Character Map framework published by Natural England.
- Transforming the biological health of the Green Belt for species and habitats.
- Improved access for health and wellbeing.
- Building resilience to climate change, including sustainable drainage, water storage and slow release, carbon sequestration, rewilding and micro-climate control.
- Renewable energy production including coppiced woodland for biomass.

So how might society administer and fund a new vision for the Green Belt? One option might make use of existing primary legislation modernised to meet today's needs – Joint Committees under the Local Government Act that can bring the public, voluntary and private sectors together. Such a framework is best suited to a spatial area that sits at the interface between a number of local authorities, is in the ownership of the private sector and has a range of voluntary organisations actively participating in the management and use of the land.

To transform and sustain the management of land in the Green Belt, it will require new resources. One option explored in a recent Landscape Institute policy debate was to establish a Green Belt Levy to be administered by the Joint Committee. The Levy being should levelled on any development in the Green Belt such as new housing or roads. At the same time the Levy might draw resources from rural based revenue funding streams. For example Natural England might consider a Countryside Stewardship programme for the Green Belt along



with connecting the Management Plan objectives with the Greening of Agriculture under the Common Agricultural Policy. These programmes might include funding from the Forestry Commission, the Environment Agency and other Government agencies. There is also a clause in the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act which enables the Government to devolve administration and expenditure to Joint Committees, this would meet the Government's objectives for devolving public intervention and support to local delivery.

In conclusion, the Green Belt has served its post-war purpose well but is being devalued as a direct result of failing to meet the new standards of sustainable development. Its objectives are, if anything, more important today. If the Government fails to undertake a strategic review of the Green Belt, including how it has been applied, public confidence in the Green Belt will disappear. However without a consortia approach from a number of relevant organisations it is unlikely that the Government will undertake any form of strategic review. The Landscape Institute invites debate and a consortia approach to the Government in support of a call for a strategic review to secure a credible Green Belt for future generations. ■

IMAGES:
Walthamstow Wetlands
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Architects



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