

September 2024

# Perspectives on the Urban Edge

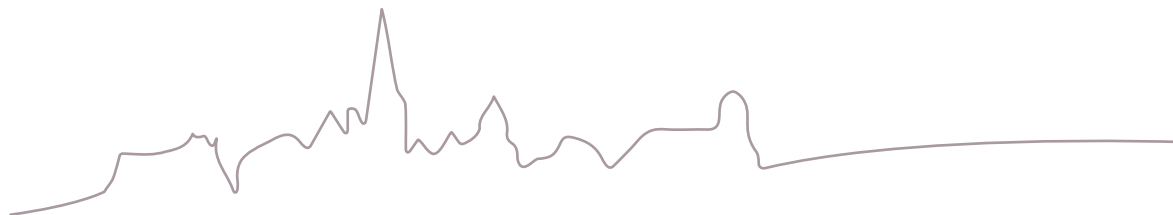


This series of essays is the result of a roundtable organised in Spring 2024 by the King's Foundation and CPRE, the countryside charity. The roundtable discussed the opportunities and challenges in the peri-urban landscape, and these essays reflect the diverse contributions made at the roundtable.

Many thanks to all contributors for sharing their essays. This collection was compiled by Rosella Cottam, CPRE The countryside charity.

# Contents

- 4 Foreword **Fiona Reynolds**
- 6 Life on the Edge **Ben Bolgar**
- 8 The Green Belt revisited **Dieter Helm**
- 10 The Edge of Settlement **Kim Wilkie**
- 12 Peri-urban land use **Barbara Young**
- 14 Improving access to the countryside next door **Alan Carter**
- 16 A model to build resilient, thriving and inclusive communities  
**James Alcock**
- 18 Time to loosen up a bit? **Christopher Boyle, KC**
- 20 The New Commons — How we can grow greener **Gail Mayhew**
- 22 Nature and climate at the urban edge **Vicki Hird**
- 24 Collaborative Models of Community-Led Peri Urban Farming  
**Mark Walton**
- 26 The future of peri urban food systems **Patrick Holden**
- 28 Integrative Planning for Town and Country in the 21st Century  
**Dr Wei Yang**
- 30 Sustainable futures: beyond the rural-urban divide **Maddy Longhurst**
- 32 Falling in love with the countryside next door **Roger Mortlock**



# Foreword

## Fiona Reynolds

Dame Fiona Reynolds is Vice President of CPRE, the countryside charity

The Green Belt is frequently in the news at present, with voices for and against its release for development raging. This is nothing new. Indeed, the urban edge has always been a contested space, and it should not surprise us that today it's more controversial than ever.

This series of essays highlights just why it's such a live issue. We live in a crowded land and pressures for new housing, infrastructure, nature recovery and food production are growing all the time. On a map, the big green blobs around many of our major cities are as enticing to developers as they are reassuring to the millions who value a clear edge to urban development, with access to the countryside beyond. They are criticised for not being beautiful or — even — always green, but to me they are a remarkable example of foresight, and places we need to value and protect for the future.

As Ben Bolgar points out, we have valued the urban edge since at least medieval times; then it was more likely to be a fortified wall — today (but for the Green Belt) it would almost certainly be sprawl. Contemporary accounts from the 1920s onwards, from voices as

diverse as novelist and broadcaster J B Priestley to professional planner Patrick Abercrombie and Prime Minister-to-be Neville Chamberlain (who backed CPRE's foundation) show just how much the uncontrolled, interwar sprawl along trunk roads and spilling out from the edges of towns and cities was abhorred. It also indicates the relief with which the Green Belt — designed to contain sprawl, define an urban edge and separate town from countryside — was greeted.

Our predecessors were very clever, putting those Green Belts in place. You only have to visit any North American city to see what would certainly have happened here without them. But now the appetite for land release is running high again. Should we relax the Green Belt? Declare already developed areas (for there are some) Grey? Or should we adapt this famous policy for new, twenty-first century, goals?

The consensus in this series of essays is certainly in favour of the latter, though this does not mean saying no to all development. James Alcock argues for some more development on urban edges, so long as it is at a scale and design that complements and enhances existing settlements; and Christopher Boyle KC suggests there may be a case for a slight loosening of the belt — so long as it doesn't cause one's trousers to fall down.

But most authors are extremely wary of major incursions, and of losing this incredible resource we have inherited. Kim Wilkie speaks of the need for healthy cities, to which green spaces and green edges, reflecting natural topography and systems, contribute vitally. Alan Carter argues for vastly better public access, especially for disadvantaged communities, and Maddy Longhurst makes an impassioned plea for reimagining green belts to heal broken societal connections and create urban-rural symbiosis. Patrick Holden, Vicki Hurd and Mark Walton make the case for community-led food systems where land close to cities is used for fresh, sustainable local products; and Wei Yang speaks of the opportunities for reciprocity between town and countryside to be captured at the urban edge. Both Gail Mayhew and Dieter Helm argue that accessible green spaces — whether urban commons, city parks or the urban edge — have become more important over time and must be protected. It seems clear that it would be criminal to sacrifice the benefits of a clear urban edge and Green Belts for short term gain.

However, interestingly, no-one is entirely committed to the Green Belt as currently defined, and this is therefore an opportune moment to consider a change of purpose while keeping their extent intact. In the 1940s Green Belts were a tool to control development, and they worked. But we need something more now. Today these are the places — close to people — where nature can flourish, sustainable food can be produced and access for everyone can be encouraged. Beauty on people's doorsteps becomes an achievable goal. But to deliver these benefits, as Ben Bolgar and Wei Yang point out, we need new, collaborative ways of working and better spatial planning tools.

These benefits aren't optional extras. They are vital human needs and becoming more important with every year that passes. The Green Belt is a heaven-sent opportunity to address the nature, natural capital and climate crises in ways that make a meaningful difference to people's lives. And as Dieter Helm reminds us, Green Belts are in exactly the right places to maximise the value of natural capital to people.

We will need positive intervention to achieve this shift, but it's a priceless goal. Lose the urban edge and it's gone for ever. Protect and transform Green Belts and we deliver untold benefits to society, now and in the future.



# Life on the edge



## Ben Bolgar

Ben Bolgar is Executive Director —  
Projects Team at The King's Foundation

Exploring the peri-urban condition, or more simply put the urban-rural interface, is both timely and telling: timely in terms of the current discourse on the original purpose of the Green Belt, and a possible new Grey Belt classification, and telling in that the urban-rural interface brings into sharp focus the role of planning as a creative pursuit based on holistic thinking and debate. Having run many community engagement planning exercises for urban extensions, it has been interesting to see the array of professional silos and self-interested groups and reflect on how challenging it is to bring everyone together under a common language, philosophy and vision to make a successful, mixed-use, mixed-income, walkable place. Not only that, but as the term ‘town and country’ planning implies, you often have experts in urbanism, landscape, and ecology fighting a battle in mutual opposition when in fact they need to be working closely together to find solutions that nourish all aspects of the environment.

Working on the urban edge exposes you to a wide array of specialists; lawyers, planners, ecologists, hydrologists, archaeologists, historians, architects, surveyors, land agents, engineers and so on. In addition, there are local communities and local political interests to consider, as well as stakeholders and service providers in education, health, business, energy, water, waste, transport and distribution. While in medieval times the urban-rural interface might have been a fortified wall,

we now have a different kind of battle in play that involves specialism and the strength of will with each player defending their own territory often at the expense of the others. This complexity in a planning process which is usually ‘sequentially reactive’ mainly leads to poor, inefficient solutions that do anything but nourish the landscape, either visually or ecologically.

When you travel into any town or city in Britain today it is worth reflecting on what you see occupying the urban fringe and how that has changed in the last century. Before the proliferation of the motor car, the edges of towns were typically compact and more clearly defined. Think of the historic British settlement patterns of the village, market town and city, where more rural communities supply more urban communities, and you get an efficient model for scaling settlement patterns based around the principal land uses of food, fibre and fuel. These settlements formed around movement networks of roads and later rail to create a complete organism with each part supporting the whole, with enough within each neighbourhood to support daily needs. The rising car ownership in the early part of the 20th century and the adoption of zonal planning separating out the components of a town, led settlements in Britain and around the world to experience urban sprawl, with the edges hosting lower density housing and space extensive or anti-social land uses less compatible with the urban centres.

At the King's Foundation, much of our work over the last 30 years has involved urban extensions where we have had to deal with the patterns of mid to late 20th century planning. Some of those include:

- Housing tending towards lower density car-dependent sprawl with less connected street patterns
- Post-war mono-cultural housing estates with a disparate range of tower blocks and ground-scrappers set in open wasteland

- Major arterial roads with adjacent big box land uses, such as distribution sheds, industrial estates, commercial zones, factories, service stations, and often hospitals, sports centres, golf courses and secondary schools
- Little or no sense of place or apparent coherent planning as the big boxes and single zone uses sit as blots on the landscape
- Highways engineering seemingly unconstrained in form and so dominating the landscape with confusing and counter-intuitive orientation
- Large facilities and utilities managing the impacts of settlement such as reservoirs, balancing ponds and sewage treatment works
- Energy infrastructure revealing itself in the form of electricity sub-stations and runs of pylons
- Many smaller villages becoming gobbled up by urban sprawl and big box land with no apparent planned relationship between them
- Super-sized signage, needing to be visible from fast moving vehicles.

With this in mind, when planning at the urban edge for urban expansion, densification, or restructuring, a number of interesting design challenges and opportunities arise:

- The big boxes at the current edge of town will no longer be at the edge with a new extension — should a land swap strategy be explored so where possible, new housing goes on the existing shed land and the sheds are replanned in more sympathetic forms as part of the new settlement?
- To connect new and old, where there are suburban housing areas, or mono-cultural council estates, should the urban extension be seen as a catalyst for densification and regeneration?
- If an urban extension hangs off a major arterial route, should that road be de-trunked to change a dual carriageway

**“... you often have experts in urbanism, landscape, and ecology fighting a battle in mutual opposition.”**

into a boulevard i.e. changed from a 60mph road to a 30mph street?

- Where an urban extension is connected to low density sprawl, should high density development be planned to minimise the land take and support wider uses, supplying goods and services for the existing suburb and becoming more walkable?
- Is there an opportunity for new urban extensions to exhibit integrated, rather than zonal, planning to show how larger land uses, such as cleaner factories, schools, offices and leisure uses can be planned together to make a walkable place with high quality spaces?
- To help with water management and healthier ecosystems, should new urban extensions contain linear systems and green networks in parks, bridging old and new communities through creating a communal green space as a connector and destination?
- Can rural elements of wildlife and farming be brought closer into new urban extensions to make a more seamless interface and celebrate the balance between urban and rural?

I would argue that the answer to all of these questions should be yes, but for this to happen it is impossible to continue working in professional silos influenced by the hangover of zonal planning. Instead, every peri-urban project, whether urban extension or replanned regeneration, should become a poster child for harmony between the human-made and natural environments both in terms of process and place. When we find this balance, the urban will complement the rural, enhance the landscape and ecology and bring back the virtue of town and country planning.



# The Green Belt revisited

## Dieter Helm

Professor Dieter Helm is Professor of Economic Policy at the University of Oxford

As the Labour government challenges the Green Belt in its campaign to build lots of new houses, the very concept has come under attack. Parts of the Green Belt, such as “untidy scrubland” or “old petrol stations”, are described as ripe for reclassification as “grey”. The “green” bit is lost in the noise. There is a collective amnesia about why the Green Belt was created and little consideration as to what it could become. Rather, it is now seen as an obstacle to growth, defended by nimbys, not as a great opportunity we have inherited.

Back in the 1940s, the question to which the Green Belt was an answer was how to contain urban sprawl and how to direct new housing and development to the zones that the then Labour government regarded as priorities: new towns and urban areas. Even in the dire economic circumstances after the Second World War, it helped that the priority was affordable council houses, built by the public sector mostly for rent.

The government’s priorities now are to meet a pre-declared target of 300,000 new houses per year (and 1.5 million by 2030), as immigration has increased the population and house prices have risen. Private builders who will no doubt lobby to push back on “affordability”. Housebuilders do not want to maximise the number of houses they build, especially if doing so pushes down prices. They have a strong incentive to go for the greenest of Green

Belt land to build executive houses sold at higher prices. Building low-price affordable housing in urban areas is not so profitable for them, hence their vociferous lobbying to open up the Green Belt land, ignoring their already substantial land banks and those urban options.

The priorities of the 2020s are vastly different to those faced by the politicians in the 1940s. Climate change makes housing density — especially in urban areas — a priority. Nature, nature restoration and biodiversity are now legally enshrined in the Environment Act. Housebuilding is being presented in a silo, almost always a policy mistake.

Natural capital is most valuable when it is near to people. Green infrastructure is every bit as important to economic growth as bricks, mortar and concrete if — and it is a big if — growth is properly measured. With this in mind, the Green Belt and the new Grey Belt are prime candidates to be made greener, not simply pushed aside in the name of housebuilding totals. They are in just the right places to maximise the value of natural capital to people, to provide clean air, space for recreation, and mental and physical health benefits, close by so that people can quickly immerse themselves in nature. The fact that the Green and proposed Grey Belt areas are not currently all that green is an opportunity to make them greener, not to abandon them to more urban sprawl.

Can the government have its cake and eat it? The government claims that it will make sure there is no biodiversity loss; that there will be more nature and more houses. In practice, this is less than it seems. Net biodiversity gain is done on a piecemeal basis, one plot at a time. Natural capital comes in systems. Marginal chipping away at the edges leaves most of the Green Belt intact, but it is death to the Green Belt system by thousands and thousands of discrete marginal cuts. As





singer-songwriter Joni Mitchell put it in her song Big Yellow Taxi: “They paved paradise and put up a parking lot”, and “ you don’t know what you got ‘til it’s gone”. On the incremental argument, you could chop off a small bit of St James’s Park in central London, and still have most of it left.

**“Natural capital is most valuable when it is near to people.”**

The boundaries of the Green Belt were determined in earlier times. There is a good argument to say that the boundaries may not be perfect now. But the potential value of the natural capital opportunities has gone up, not down. What might have seemed sub-optimal boundaries all those years ago take on extra value with the passing of time. St James’s Park was never optimally defined, but it is a great and valuable miracle that it has survived intact, and there is zero case for reducing it now.

What the government should do is develop a proper land-use plan, start planning its new towns and redeveloping in urban areas as the coming of the internet has radically changed the purposes and design of cities. There is already plenty of land for new housebuilding, including affordable housing. Building on the Green Belt is a housebuilder’s dream, but not a solution to the need for affordable housing. It is no accident that much of the great post-war housing boom was driven by the public not the private sector, with affordability a core objective.

What the government should not do is cave in to the demands of the housebuilding lobby, give up potentially very valuable natural capital, and permanently erase the opportunities that natural capital can provide not just the current population but future generations too.

# The Edge of Settlement

## Kim Wilkie

Kim Wilkie is a strategic and conceptual landscape consultant

Ring roads and traffic engineering encourage the idea that settlements develop in concentric circles — like onions. Seashells might be a better analogy. Healthy cities grow organically out from the centre, with the continuously developing edge remaining intimately connected to the core. In the UK, where defence has not been a pressing issue for the last thousand years or so, the surrounding environment determines the speed and direction of growth. Good settlements follow topography, water, and connection to food, fuel and the outside world.

To understand and design settlement edges, it is sensible to start with the underlying topography, overlaid with the historic maps and character of the place. The contours show how the surface water flows and reveals the natural patterns of wind, aspect and microclimate. It is a good indication of how humans and wildlife will choose to move and linger. This is particularly strong in cities built around rivers and their tributaries.

In her books *Hungry City* and *Sitopia*, Carolyn Steel has shown how the size of cities has been determined by access to food and water. Historically perishable food had to be cultivated within a cart ride of the centre. Storable grains could be grown farther afield. The settlement edge was therefore characterized by market gardens, orchards and dairy farms. Frozen, tinned, irradiated, and chemically preserved food has meant that supply can now be

global and the city boundary theoretically limitless, but demand for fresh and organic food is helping market gardens, orchards, allotments and city farms to make a comeback. Food security is also an issue. New York, San Francisco and Detroit have pioneered inner urban market gardens. Being in the midst of people with time on their hands and a hunger for fresh food combines well with labour-intensive salad, vegetable and fruit growing.

Precious open space within cities has to multi-task. It needs to absorb water, filter air, harbour wildlife, and provide places for play, sport, walking, and cycling. Climate change places extra pressure on the management of open space within and beyond the city. Closely mown and brightly planted Victorian gardens served a real social purpose in the nineteenth century, but budget and carbon constraints have moved ideas on. Harassed citizens now expect more natural spaces that support pollinators and sequester rather than squander carbon. Pedestrian and cycle links out to the wider countryside, often along river or valley corridors, are treasured. And the farming at the edge of the settlement often holds the key to the management of these corridors. Grazed water meadows not only absorb critical storm water, but also absorb carbon faster and more permanently than any other habitat. Christchurch and Port Meadows in Oxford, the Backs in Cambridge, and Petersham Meadow in Richmond, are long established ways of managing urban spaces with much loved cattle. They contribute food, revenue, and wildlife rather than being a drain on resources.

‘Landscape-led’ is now a favourite planning phrase but the concept is not always understood. It means starting with topography, soil and water, combined with an appreciation of the local patterns of human settlement. In the proposed extensions of Faversham in Kent and Stamford in Lincolnshire, the Duchy of



Cornwall and the Burghley Estate have planned their settlements around the flows of valleys and water. The valleys are kept as natural green corridors that collect and filter surface water, creating a network of paths and cycle routes through grazed meadows, connecting from local centres out into the countryside and back into the heart of town. New houses will border the open valleys, maximizing value and access as well as providing security and supervision. Schools, formal recreation, allotments and orchards are all linked into these primary spaces so that residents can easily walk or ride between them and avoid using cars. Both the Duchy and Burghley own and manage the farmland beyond the settlement, so integration of access and management is part of a long-term holistic plan.

The Thames Landscape Strategy (Hampton to Kew) shows how larger landscapes with more complicated ownership can also work. The strategy covers 18.5 kilometres of river landscape through west London. It is a 100-year landscape-led plan that has already been running for more than quarter of a century. Initiated by the local community and supported by national agencies, the strategy brought the four local authorities together to agree policies, projects and management beyond their political and jurisdictional boundaries. The river, its banks and its flood plains are the key drivers and have united residents and government authorities in a common vision that is broader than any single interest. The strategy has set precedents worldwide.

Buildings come and go but the open spaces, around which buildings develop, are the constant. In a healthy city, the spaces evolve organically, responding to topography, water and soil. They connect through river systems and farming patterns to create a logical, practical and inherently beautiful landscape.

**“Climate change places extra pressure on the management of open space within and beyond the city.”**

# Peri-urban land use

## Barbara Young

Baroness Young is an environmental campaigner and regulator, and a current member of the House of Lords

In England, the Green Belt has worked as planned to fulfil one of its initial purposes — containing urban sprawl. It has been less of a success, however, in two other areas: providing access for local communities' enjoyment, and improving public health. There is much to admire about recent government announcements on planning and housing, but the recent proposed changes to the Green Belt in the National Planning Policy Framework will make the first task more difficult as “grey belt” sites will be forced through to meet housebuilding targets with potential for urban leakage into peri-urban areas.


The House of Lords Select Committee on Land Use put forward as its centrepiece recommendation that a Land Use Framework for England was overdue. This framework should take a multifunctional approach, ensuring that land is not used for one function only, but maximises the public and private benefits of this finite resource by delivering for several functions simultaneously. A range of other reports and bodies have endorsed this approach: the Royal Society, the Food Farming and Countryside Commission and several subsequent select committees. Both the previous Conservative government and the current Labour government committed to preparing a Land Use Framework for England, but the timing and nature of this framework remains unclear.

We currently run the risk of having two strands of government policy impacting

peri-urban areas and the Green Belt: a multifunctional land use approach; and the bipolar approach of using land for either housing or Green Belt. A genuine multifunctional approach would not get in the way of the drive for housing, but instead would enable decisions to reflect the multifunctional context of a land use framework, whilst acknowledging all the pressures on land we need to reconcile. A framework would bring land not just for housing and development, and green space for enjoyment and health, but also land for infrastructure, agriculture and food resilience; energy; carbon and climate mitigation and adaptation; trees; and flood risk and water management. It would also help to maximise delivery of that range of public and private benefits in a multifunctional way.

The recent announcements on changes to the planning system could increase the already existing tensions with local communities. A land use framework could help dialogue about conflicting land uses at national, regional and local levels and enable communities to get involved in shaping the best possible use of local land. It's all too easy to be NIMBY when the only consultation in town is for a mega housing development or solar farm. Debate on how all the land needs of communities locally and nationally can best be met is required, using modern data technology to enhance understanding and the art of the possible, starting with land use needs, giving opportunities for more mature dialogue.

Apart from this multifunctional framework, several other things need to happen to ensure that the peri-urban area becomes an opportunity rather than a battlefield. We need to expand the purposes of the Green Belt, so that it has to also contribute to biodiversity recovery and climate change. We need to find ways, including landowner incentives, to ensure the great proportion of the Green Belt, which is currently under agricultural production, provides



**“It’s all too easy to be NIMBY when the only consultation in town is for a mega housing development or solar farm.”**

opportunities for landowners to take a multifunctional approach for the benefit of their business and for the public good. We need to make sure that green space in the Green Belt is linked through from the wider countryside into the heart of peri-urban developments and the proposed new towns to make it easier for people to access green space close to where they live or work, benefitting physical and mental health, and encouraging greater scale biodiversity.

Above all, we must not let peri-urban areas and the Green Belt become a polarised issue. If I had my way, we would bury the “Be a builder, not a blocker” slogan. Our land is finite and so fundamental to both the government and people’s aspirations that we need a smarter framing of the debate. We can and must build more houses faster and at the same time deliver the full range of benefits that the land enables. It is not an either/or; it is a both/and. Bring on the land use framework!

# Improving access to the countryside next door

## Alan Carter

Alan Carter is Chief Executive at The Land Trust

Access to nature and its myriad benefits is an increasingly prevalent topic of discussion across sectors, but achieving truly equitable access remains a challenge for property and regeneration professionals as they seek to deliver truly sustainable developments.

Better access means improved infrastructure for people in inner cities to reach and use green spaces safely, greater public right of way, and better facilities to allow people of all abilities to enjoy them. However, access is not just spatial and physical; it is also essential to consider mental and emotional connections. Do people feel welcome in and part of the 'countryside next door'? Overcoming these barriers is essential in fostering a sense of ownership, community and belonging, which in turn is vital for the longevity of these spaces. A green space could be on someone's doorstep, but if they feel that it 'isn't for them', then the value goes untapped.

During the COVID lockdowns, more people than ever before explored nearby urban fringes, leading to unprecedented widespread appreciation for our green spaces. However, accessing the outdoors can still feel exclusionary for people who are less familiar with these environments, due to a multitude of reasons that vary widely between communities.

To gain a deep understanding of these reasons and improve emotional access

requires consultation and collaboration: since marginalised groups often face barriers in independently accessing these spaces despite the potential benefits. Working with established, trusted community partners, agencies and authorities to bridge the gap and showcase the value of green spaces through structured engagement programmes is crucial.


Improving access is also mutually beneficial and there are well-documented health and wellbeing benefits for people using green spaces. Fostering a better connection with the 'countryside next door' enhances appreciation for the important role peri-urban land plays in food production, nature recovery, habitat protection and environmental resilience.

Managing land for the long term needs to be entirely underpinned by social value delivery, encompassing benefits to the environment, local economy and communities. As we approach the second quarter of the century, the urban fringe as we know it is in a state of rapid change, facing increasingly competitive land use pressures. This makes comprehensive plans for financially secure and in perpetuity management a vital part of creating and maintaining beautiful places for people and for nature to thrive.

Management plans need to be truly multi-faceted and engaging, not only for experts, but also for the communities who live, work, and operate in these spaces. Too often, well-meaning but misguided management results in things being done 'to' communities, rather than 'with', and valuable funding being misplaced into programmes for which there is no local appetite.

Continual community engagement is fundamental throughout the lifetime of the project and not just during the design and build phase if we are to fully unlock the most value from urban fringe; this means





## “Managing land for the long term needs to be entirely underpinned by social value delivery.”

truly sharing decision-making powers with those who will feel the impact of those decisions, maintaining a regular, visible presence, and understanding and responding to actual needs as they change over time.

Funding high-integrity, ongoing management and engagement requires private sector funding — an approach which is both cost effective and mutually beneficial. The Land Trust’s endowment model and service charge model have proven extremely successful in securing long-term sustainable funding streams for high quality interventions, while also supporting corporate clients to deliver their Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) agendas — a major motivator for the private sector, and a model that is also being applied in emerging natural capital markets, whilst responding to and fulfilling the statutory requirement of Suitable Alternative Natural Green Space (SANG) and Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG).

Community groups and volunteers are a hugely important part of managing land for the long term and are often an underappreciated and under-supported resource. Leveraging private sector funding to provide more formal, structured volunteering arrangements, guided by experts and with adequate resources, is a powerful tool for getting people involved with their local green spaces, whilst concurrently providing benefits to the individual volunteer. The Land Trust has implemented this type of

funding structure on several sites, and 2023/24 saw record numbers of volunteers taking part in the learning and community building opportunities enabled by these funding streams.

Proper use of volunteers and a community workforce also promotes a ‘virtuous circle’ of far-reaching benefits where people and nature can thrive together. The local environment and wildlife benefits through regular, high-integrity care and protection, whilst improving both volunteers’ health and community cohesion and resilience, through regular connection with nature and with each other.

This truly is the key to places being better looked after, forever: helping communities to appreciate the value of, to understand and to be connected to nature and the countryside next door, to feel that their green spaces belong to them, and to feel part of something wider.



# A model to build resilient, thriving and inclusive communities

## James Alcock

James Alcock is Chief Executive at Plunkett UK

For those familiar with the work of Plunkett UK, it might come as a surprise to see Plunkett having something to say about the role of housing development in peri-urban areas.

Plunkett's vision for 'resilient, thriving and inclusive 'rural' communities' is most commonly associated with its support for community-owned businesses such as village shops and pubs where villagers have campaigned to save existing assets and services that they value or to bring something back which was much missed. Plunkett's work has been celebrated for supporting the creation of over 800 such 'community businesses' and featuring long term survival rates of 92% — well over double the survival rate in the private sector.

However, following a trail-blazing partnership with award-winning house builder, Thakeham, Plunkett's services have been increasingly sought from all manner of 'place-makers' including strategic land promoters, master planners, developers, local authorities and registered housing providers. The shared objectives in these cases, are to build much needed homes which reflect local needs — mostly on peri-urban land — and to embed appropriate community infrastructure which creates strong ties between residents, their homes, local facilities and neighbours.

## The turning point

Until recently, the question of housing and peri-urban land-use had not really been on our agenda. But ironically, the lack of housing — affordable and private — has been part of the driving forces leading to the decline of rural services resulting in the need for communities to step up and take them over in community ownership.

Building on in-fill sites and brownfield land should always be a first consideration, but this approach alone will not always be possible or fully satisfy the demand for housing. Building out from existing towns and villages on peri-urban land will be critical to meeting current and future demands for housing. These communities will need more than just homes, of course, and our proposal is to use the community-owned business model alongside new development as a powerful way of supporting a new generation of rural housing and enhancing community cohesion.

## Woodgate Community Shop and Café in West Sussex — the pioneer!

Built by Thakeham and run for the benefit of residents at Woodgate and nearby Pease Pottage, the shop and café — now at the heart of Thakeham's development of 619 homes — was the final instalment and cornerstone to this new village community which also includes a state-of-the-art primary school, community hub with meeting rooms, a hospice, and a large village green including play areas, trails and cycle routes.

Plunkett's role was to act independently to identify the appetite for a community-owned business both in neighbouring parishes and as new residents moved on site, and to ensure whatever was established would reflect local needs and complement rather than displace existing businesses. As the vision for a shop and café materialised, Plunkett



## “Communities will need more than just homes.”

connected with new residents moving into the development, forming a committee and working with them to establish a legal structure and business plan. As part of this, the committee were introduced by Plunkett to other community shops locally who were embedding best practice into their businesses, leading to the Woodgate shop including energy saving measures, working with local producers and suppliers, creating employment and volunteering opportunities, and taking care to be inclusive ensuring everyone is made to feel welcome.

The business is registered as a ‘Community Benefit Society’ which allows local people to buy a share in the business and have an equal and democratic say on how the business runs. This structure also allows the business to facilitate membership and generated start-up capital through a community share issue. Any profit made in this structure will be invested back into the community to support good causes and community projects.

### What next?

Going forward, Plunkett encourages all rural communities to embrace development on peri-urban land. Not only is development needed to house our growing population, but it also has the potential, with community involvement, to breathe new life into our villages and towns through the establishment of community-owned businesses.

Plunkett’s ongoing role in the ‘place-making’ sector is largely to act independently and undertake meaningful consultation and community engagement. Even at the ‘visioning’ and ‘master planning’ stages of a development, it is critical to

ensure the local social and economic environment is understood, and local people can voice their needs and priorities.

As a development becomes a reality, Plunkett always makes a case for an infrastructure-first approach so that residents adjacent to the development and new ones moving in have joint ownership of the business and the opportunity to shape its development, which is key to integrate both communities. Community engagement should remain an ongoing process and Plunkett is keen to extend its services to ensure such developments continue to embed best practice to ensure their future success.

# Time to loosen up a bit?

## Christopher Boyle, KC.

Christopher Boyle specialises in Town and Country Planning, Compulsory Purchase, Environment and Infrastructure Law at Landmark Chambers

There is a lovely moment in *Blackadder 3* when an outraged northern mill-owner announces: 'I'll tek off me belt and, by thunder, me trousers will fall down!'

One may be forgiven for thinking from the rhetoric of the previous Government that it took a very similar view as to the unappealing consequences of easing the Green Belt buckle. The recent consultation on amendments to the National Planning Policy Framework [‘the NPPF’] show the new administration to be taking a significantly different tack. A number of aspects are worth exploring.

First, no one in power is suggesting the wholesale removal of Green Belt as a planning designation. Indeed, no one is doubting its usefulness — indeed vital importance — as a tool to direct development, protect countryside and prevent the agglomeration of once separate settlements into undifferentiated urban sprawl. In short, Green Belt, as a concept and a designation, is here to stay.

Secondly, however, the new Government has made a pledge that it will deliver the housing that the country needs and casts this in the light of undoing the failings of ‘14 years of Tory misrule’. As such, Sir Keir Starmer’s Government takes as a virtue the achievement of housing development where previously there would have been constraint. Facing this ‘generational challenge’ was a feature of his last pre-election Conference Speech,

was in the Labour Manifesto, and is now in the proposed amendments to the NPPF on housing targets and the revisions to the ‘Standard Method’ used to calculate local housing requirements. When faced with an interviewer after the Labour Conference who asked if this meant building on the countryside, the shortly-to-be Prime Minister responded simply ‘yes’.

Thirdly, the goal of ‘sustainable development’ remains a key principle of national policy, and is defined as ‘meeting today’s needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs’. Of course, the second part of that definition can lead to constraints as to where development might go, but it is critical not to overlook the first part: today’s needs are to be met. Kicking the can down the generational road is not achieving sustainable development; it not only fails the first half of the definition, it actually makes it more difficult for future generations to meet their needs, as they remain burdened by the legacy of unmet need.

Take those first three observations together and you have a public policy incentive to investigate where best the genuine needs of the nation can be delivered. The policy of prioritising ‘brownfield’ — i.e. previously developed — land is part and parcel of that. So too is the emphasis on ‘sustainably located’ land — i.e. those with good non-car transport credentials and/or ready access to services and facilities such that car use is able to be minimised. The avoidance of key ecological interests then comes in as a constraining factor, as does flooding, heritage, and important designated landscapes.

One location to be investigated in all of this is what is called ‘poorly performing’ Green Belt land. Green Belt, after all, is not a landscape designation. Its notation is no indication of landscape quality at all. Similarly, heritage or ecological value or floodplain function, if present, are



purely co-incidental. On the other hand, sites on the 'inner' side of Green Belt – i.e. those adjacent to the existing urban area – are often blessed with locational sustainability in terms of travel and some may, co-incidentally, be brownfield or land otherwise degraded by its land-use, condition, management or the influence of its adjacent surroundings. Much has no public access, even if recognisably 'countryside'.

Current planning policy, however, indicates that even on such land, there is a bar to development unless 'very special circumstances' can be shown, and even through plan-making, 'exceptional circumstances' must be established to release Green Belt sites for development. Pressure for development is then 'exported' to sites and local planning authorities beyond the Green Belt, perhaps with lesser sustainability credentials and developing on what might be called 'real' countryside.

As Sir Keir announced, his planning amendments would seek out the 'Grey Belt'. Grey Belt is defined (or proposed to be defined) as "land in the green belt comprising Previously Developed Land and any other parcels and/or areas of Green Belt land that make a limited contribution to the five Green Belt purposes, but excluding those areas or assets of particular importance (other than land designated as Green Belt)."

It works in two ways: at plan making level, Councils are actively to seek out and identify Grey Belt land that can be released for development, to meet their identified needs; and, most radically of all, provided certain planning goods are delivered, residential or commercial development on Grey Belt land is no longer to be deemed as 'inappropriate development' requiring to be justified by 'very special circumstances.'

This is not the end of Green Belt, and reports to that end are polemical rather than accurate. But it may — if published in the current form — pave the way for a

**“No one in power is suggesting the wholesale removal of Green Belt as a planning designation.”**

rational re-allocation of precious locational resources to meet pressing social and economic needs which successive governments (of all Parties) have left unmet, to the profound disservice of an increasingly large percentage of the population, and to do so in a way that might actually better protect what we might call 'real' countryside elsewhere.

After all, in the real world we all know that one can loosen the buckle a little, without letting one's trousers fall down.

# The New Commons — How we can grow greener

## Gail Mayhew

Gail Mayhew is Director  
of Smart Growth Associates

The historical growth of London as a series of urban villages remains one of the most civilised, sought after, and potentially sustainable models of urban development. Whilst the village green forms the heart of the classic English village, the growth of London (and many other British cities) was often interrupted, and spatially enhanced by areas of common land which. Through their preservation as open spaces created a functional separation and aspatial interface between successive waves of development.

Clapham Common is an archetype of this spatial form, where, over time, the common land became a public park with larger homes and flat blocks fronting the common with mixed and civic uses interspersed. The many homes within walking distance of the common enjoy the quality-of-life benefits of the landscape, with sporting and communal experience enabled by its 220 acres. Large enough to sustain forest-scale trees, the London Commons further provide a bio-diverse ecological reserve for the city and contribute to urban cooling, as well as carbon and pollution mitigation.


Wandsworth Common (171 acres), The Tooting Commons (218 acres), Hampstead Heath (780 acres), Finsbury Park (115 acres) and Wimbledon & Putney Commons (1,140 acres) follow a similar pattern, with formal parades of homes or terraces fronting onto generous well-managed areas of landscape that both enhance quality of life and secure biodiversity and landscape benefit. These green lungs make London one of the most liveable cities globally and bring significant

value benefit to homes within close proximity, whilst securing social benefit for the millions of residents that access them daily. A similar role is played by parks that formed the gardens of great houses, once on the city edge: Holland Park (54 acres), West Ham Park (77 acres), Ravenscourt Park (21 acres) and Clissold Park (55 acres). Whilst smaller in scale than the commons, their popularity and role in forming a green heart to neighbourhood activity contributes enormously to the quality of life of Londoners.

The Meadows (58 acres) in Edinburgh forms a similarly disjunctive spatial element between the university quarter. A more extreme example is the former Norloch which became Princes Street Gardens. Lying between the crowded, intricate medieval Edinburgh Old Town and the wide gridiron of Georgian New Town (one of the world's first healthy new town projects), it enabled town planning of an entirely different ambition and scale to take place, mediated by the striking landscape of the base of the castle rock and hollow formal garden space created by the drained loch juxtaposed with the artificial ramp between the old and new towns created by The Mound. The 37-acre parkland accommodates the main east-west railway line, multiple cultural and civic spaces, and a cherished landscape planting.

In many cases these parks and commons accommodate arterial traffic routes through heavily planted corridors as well as access routes to surrounding streets supporting the city's movement network. West Common (247 acres), which accommodates the main approach road into Lincoln, frames view of the Cathedral, and the grandeur of the planting of Saxilby Road is integral to the experience of approaching and entering the historic city. This has parallels in The Stray (200 acres) parks and garden grounds that form the setting of central Harrogate, gracefully accommodating the A61 and A661 as landscape boulevards.





## “We need to carefully analyse what works; what is popular and what adds greatest environmental, human, functional and financial benefit.”

As we consider the future of peri-urban and green belt areas that may come forward for development, these precedents could form part of a new approach to seeking value and optimal use of land on the urban periphery.

If our development ambition were to ‘start with the park’ we might first consider how a significant common or parkland might be established as the ordering device for a new wave of growth. All development within the vicinity might then be designed to enable the parkland to provide the optimum biodiversity, landscape enhancement, sporting and cultural amenity that the traditional commons and parks referenced above bring to their respective towns and cities. Equally, development might be conceived to financially enable these ‘New Commons’.

This raises an interesting challenge for planning — which regime identifies optimal land for maintenance as common land and the development of parkland? Could we build Clapham under present building regulations and requirements? Or the Edinburgh New Town? What survey data would enhance our understanding of the capacity of land to operate optimally as parkland and support biodiversity? What rationale might we adopt to equalise land values such that owners of land that becomes the green amenity are compensated fairly against owners of

land that becomes developable? How might significant parklands and commons interact with the provision of circular water, waste and energy infrastructure and sustainable urban drainage? And with the road network? How might such areas integrate with small scale growing and local food markets? What is their contribution to public health, and can that benefit in some way be monetised? Could peri-urban commons and parklands become part of a structured natural capital investment approach that enables strategic offsetting to support carbon mitigation and water neutrality measures? Might the Environmental Land Management (ELMS) regime more fully recognise public access a benefit to be paid for?

In terms of regulation, master planning often looks for multiple green infrastructure incidents such as ‘pocket parks’, ‘green corridors’, ‘green wedges’, ‘buffer zones’. While all have a well-considered logic, their impact on a land budget can be considerable, with foreclosing on the delivery of a major park or common such as the historical precedents highlighted. Instead, we need to carefully analyse what works; what is popular and what adds greatest environmental, human, functional and financial benefit. It is salutary that some of the most well-used and popular commons and parks, whilst generous in acreage, are relatively simple in structure.

This article is a plea for concentrating our efforts. If we look to establish new commons and parks of scale and ambition as part of the future growth planning for our cities, we may just create a new urbanism (and rural edge) that parallels the legacy of our forebears.

# Nature and climate at the urban edge

## Vicki Hird

Vicki Hird is Strategic Lead on Agriculture at The Wildlife Trusts

### Delivering great food growing in the peri-urban fringe to help people and Planet

Peri-urban spaces are being recognised as critical places in need of far greater care, recognition and sensitive development. Surrounding cities and towns, these spaces are close to large markets (and potential labour and community support), while being made up of larger expanses of un- or underdeveloped land in comparison to urban areas. They house millions of families, are often neglected, but could be an important new interface blending rural and urban communities, both natural and human. It is where exciting stuff could happen.

One of these exciting new activities should be to rebuild the market gardens that used to surround major urban areas, but creating these food growing spaces in ways that benefit wildlife and communities. Such agroecologically designed market gardens can help to deliver five key things in the peri-urban space. These are:

- more fresh, culturally appropriate, and diverse foods close to major urban markets;
- natural systems and assets like trees, fertile soil and plants, to sequester carbon and cool cities, hold water, and cut air pollution, plus recycling or green and food waste;
- increased wildlife recovery and management;
- urban wellbeing through access to green space and outdoor learning at the edge of built-up cities; and
- nurturing new enterprises, jobs and skills.

To illustrate these, we can look at both great examples already delivering and new research which identifies the benefits and the barriers to a peri-urban growing renaissance. A recent report, ‘HomeGrown: A roadmap to resilient fruit and vegetable production in England’<sup>1</sup>, by The Wildlife Trusts and Sustain and Soil association, outlined why we need to double the amount of fresh produce grown in the UK as currently we import 85% of fruit and 43% of vegetables and that makes us hugely vulnerable. In addition, nearly half of UK growers fear for the survival of their businesses, and fruit and veg consumption in the UK is at the lowest level in half a century. Yet urban and peri-urban areas could be a key route where high quality, high intensity nature-based production could deliver some of this supply and much more.

Historically, market gardening played a key role in supplying major cities with fresh fruit and vegetables — in London, for example, Deptford Park was primarily made up of market gardens until the late 19th century, reportedly famous for their celery, onions and asparagus.

There are wonderful examples of this happening now, such as Organic Lea<sup>2</sup> in North London and Regather in Sheffield — both delivering critical new supplies of fresh fruit and vegetables to urban communities but also creating community hubs as well as natural spaces for wildlife in and around the growing spaces. Tiny Eve’s Hill Veg Co in Norfolk covers less than half a hectare, yet they supplied fresh produce to eight shops and restaurants and fed around 50 local families in 2023. Such projects, growing in number, are delivering on most of the five goals.

### Wider benefits

How about the wider benefits for climate adaptation in towns and cities and creating wildlife rich areas and corridors for wildlife? We know nature’s recovery is vital and agroecological growing, from orchards to





spuds, can nurture and utilise wildlife for growing including pollinators, pest predator insects, and for nutrient management.

We already know the value of trees and other natural assets for cooling cities (for instance heat maps released show that across five or English cities, areas with more trees and green spaces are up to five degrees cooler<sup>3</sup>), but they can provide green vital spaces for local communities. The Wildlife Trusts' work<sup>4</sup> shows access to green spaces can have huge benefits to people and even the NHS budget.

Trees, bushes and well managed soil use play a crucial role in managing water around and in urban areas — storage and management are critical as rainfall grows but droughts are also a problem. Plant roots and soil help increase soil permeability, allowing water to be absorbed into the ground rather than running off the surface. Peri-urban, soil-based farming can be considered a critical rain management asset. There is also the potential to compost urban food waste and tackle air pollution flows both ways from cities to the countryside and from the countryside into urban areas. Reducing such pollution and its distribution, which negatively impacts human health as well as wildlife, would be a vital outcome of more green growing spaces.

### How much could we grow on peri-urban land?

A rough calculation by Sustain<sup>5</sup>, based on data from Organic Lea, a 'model' fringe farm on the edge of London in Chingford, suggests that converting just 1% of peri-urban land to agroecological market gardening could lead to over 73,000 tonnes of fruit and vegetables, or £0.4 billion 22,000 full time equivalent jobs. The Landworkers Alliance in their excellent report<sup>6</sup> on growing market gardens details research which suggests that for every £1 spent locally, £3.70's worth of benefits — including environmental — are generated locally.

### How to deliver a market garden renaissance

A growth in agroecological market gardens won't happen without an ambition and action in local, regional and national government. Sustain has outlined these in its policy report on Fringe Farming<sup>7</sup>. Key policies will be needed for:

- Finding and preparing land, as contaminated or sealed soil will need recovering;
- Financing the purchase or rent of land, as well as tools and marketing — the new ELMs schemes could really help here supporting smaller farms in delivering public goods like healthy soil, low chemical systems, and fruit and trees;
- Training, demonstration and skills — from growing to marketing — to ensure a flow of capable growers — this also needs funding and coordination;
- Building infrastructure to manage the goods from the farms; and
- Markets including in new food public procurement for schools, hospitals etc.

The Government will need to ensure the non-profits and community food growing communities are not hammered by unnecessary regulations, barriers to finance or lack of land, but nurtured and seen as a key part of every town and city plan.

This is the challenge, to all bodies, including private landowners and estate managers, who could help deliver a peri-urban market garden renaissance everywhere. Put it in your plans, across all the relevant departments — from land asset management to public health — and, more critically, make it happen.

1 <https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/blog/vicki-hird/peats-sake-and-our-health-we-need-better-horticulture-strategy>  
2 <https://www.organiclea.org.uk/>  
3 <https://www.treesforcities.org/stories/how-urban-trees-turn-down-the-heat>  
4 <https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/nature-health-and-wild-wellbeing>  
5 [https://www.sustainweb.org/blogs/oct22-quantify\\_benefits\\_fringe\\_farming/](https://www.sustainweb.org/blogs/oct22-quantify_benefits_fringe_farming/)  
6 <https://landworkersalliance.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/LWA-Horticulture-Across-Four-Nations-2023.pdf>  
7 <https://www.sustainweb.org/reports/feb22-fringe-farming/>

# Collaborative Models of Community-Led Peri Urban Farming

## Mark Walton

Mark Walton is Director of Shared Assets

### Community led farms

Community led farms are social enterprises that offer sustainable, healthy food through short supply chains that create benefits for both producers and customers. They create good livelihoods, help local citizens improve their skills and wellbeing, train the next generation of farmers, attract local investment, and improve biodiversity and tackle climate change.

Community led farms usually practise agroecology which is more than just the application of ecological principles to agricultural systems. Agroecology is place-based, and produces culturally-appropriate food, fibre, timber and medicines through systems that address injustices, and work with their local landscapes and ecosystems. They often adopt democratic cooperative legal structures that create opportunities for workers, customers, and local people to own, invest in, and get involved in the governance of the organisation.

The peri-urban city fringes provide a sweet spot for these community led models. They combine access to urban markets with proximity to populations that can benefit from the engagement, training and employment opportunities. They can take disused assets like local authority glasshouses and turn them into productive spaces, and they use farming techniques that increase biodiversity, improve soils, sequester carbon and increase the water retention of soils.

### Examples of successful peri urban farms include:

- Organiclea, is based on a 12-acre site on the edge of London leased from the London Borough of Waltham Forest. The site includes extensive glasshouses, open fields and woodland edge, and produces a wide range of fruit, vegetables and herbs whilst providing employment, training and volunteering opportunities.
- Regather Farm, a 15-acre site in the Moss Valley on the edge of Sheffield, have developed a market garden, four large poly-tunnels, an orchard, one kilometre of new hedgerow, beehives, a new pond and an agroforestry project.
- Kindling Farm, a 77-acre farm between Manchester and Liverpool with a vision to grow vegetables, arable crops and establish orchards on site as well as developing a social enterprise hub and a FarmStart incubator, and establishing a Centre for Social Change to provide support and training for change makers.

### Opportunities

Community led peri-urban farms have a key role to play in balancing urban and rural land use. They are close to urban centres where many people gain their first experience of food growing and first qualifications as growers. They act as a critical link in the development of a young and more diverse generation of new entrant farmers who will go on to own, manage, or work on rural farms, reviving an industry that is both ageing and one of our least diverse.

They also contribute to the development of more just and resilient local food systems and local economies, and act as sites where people can develop an understanding of farming, landwork and the food system, and connect with nature.

## Challenges

Key issues facing the expansion of community led peri-urban farms include access to land, access to affordable housing, and the ability to develop the infrastructure that is needed for these multipurpose farm sites including glasshouses, polytunnels, packing sheds and classrooms.

The failure to protect farmland from development or unproductive uses means competition for land, leading to high purchase or rental prices, whilst planning policy makes securing planning permission for housing and infrastructure difficult.

It is exceedingly rare to find housing that is genuinely affordable for people working in land-based occupations and located close enough for efficient management of their business. Whilst the National Planning Policy Framework allows for isolated homes in the countryside where **“there is an essential need for a rural worker, including those taking majority control of a farm business, to live permanently at or near their place of work in the countryside”** local authorities in practice rarely grant such permissions for small horticultural farms. Whilst permission may be granted on appeal this is a time-consuming and stressful process for people who are simultaneously trying to establish a new business.

Similarly, farms under five hectares do not benefit from permitted development rights that provide the right for development for agricultural purposes.

### Enabling new community led peri-urban farms

There is a wide range of policy changes that could support the development of agroecological farms on the urban fringe but current changes to planning policy in relation to the greenbelt and peri urban land provide some immediate opportunities to make positive changes.

A sixth purpose should be added to the existing five purposes of the Green Belt, namely to **“protect agricultural land for food and fibre production around centres of population”**, to enable people to engage with local farms and market gardens through visits, volunteering or purchasing food directly from the farm. Furthermore, planning policy should include guidance that: **“The sustainable growth and expansion of agroecological enterprises in rural areas should be enabled where they contribute to sustainable development goals”**.

**“We have the opportunity to ensure that our peri-urban land and green belt are once again productive spaces.”**

We also need to enable agroecological businesses to gain permission to erect energy efficient, low impact and affordable dwellings on smaller farm sites, and to extend permitted rights to land holdings of less than five hectares.

Historically our cities were fed by peri-urban farms and market gardens, and we have the opportunity to ensure that our peri urban land and green belt are once again productive spaces that connect the urban and rural, creating new opportunities and shared benefits for people and planet.

# The future of peri-urban food systems

## Patrick Holden

Patrick is the Founder and Chief Executive of the Sustainable Food Trust

More and more people are convinced that peri urban food systems need to play a more significant role in the agriculture and food systems of the future. But if we are really honest, there are very few shining examples which could be scaled while ensuring that significant quantities of the staple foods that urban dwellers eat could be produced in and around city centres, not only in sustainable ways but also distributed in reliable and organised systems which enable access to the homes where the food is consumed.

This major gulf between what we all think would be a good idea and what we are currently achieving in practice is something which has preoccupied me for a number of years. To give one case study, when I first started growing vegetables on my farm in west Wales in 1979, I quickly realised that there were few, if any, reliable routes to urban markets, so I ended up developing my own. Initially this was a rather un-carbon friendly model, which consisted of driving carrots up to London in the back of a Citroen 2CV and delivering them to whole food shops and restaurants.


Later, a group of us set up a company designed to connect periurban growers with London markets, a project which failed to reach its potential due to the UK supermarkets determination to centralise their supply chains and packing stations. The result today? Centralised anonymous foods from industrial farming produced by someone you don't know, will never

meet and may well live the other side of the world!

So, the degree to which periurban food producers are actually supplying significant volumes of food to city consumers is dire, to put it mildly! If you look round a supermarket today and tried to identify foods which are sustainably grown and produced relatively nearby, you will probably go away with an empty shopping basket. This is because the economics of scale favour vast monocultures of staple food production, be it vegetables, fruits, dairy products and meat, all processed and distributed through highly centralised operations in a way through which their identity is lost. Some would say this is deliberate, in order to obscure the true story behind the food that most of us are eating which if we know it, we wouldn't want to eat!

I would be reluctant to apportion this degree of blame. After all, our insatiable demand for ever cheaper food has created a price war which has driven the supermarkets and the big food companies to reduce the price of the food we eat to below the cost of production, levels which are making it impossible for small scale peri urban growers to be part of the system. So, in other words we are all to blame!

There are potential solutions, however, foremost amongst which would be to ensure that all food producers are financially accountable for any damaging climate, nature and social impacts arising from their farming systems. As I write this, agriculture has largely escaped scot-free from the Paris agreement, as has the aviation industry! Farmers are not accountable for their emissions, for the destructive effects of their monoculture systems on biodiversity or the devastating social impacts of large-scale centralised food systems, not to mention the downstream impact of ultra processing on public health!



## “Millions of us are now uneasy about the footprint of the food we eat.”

If all food producers were accountable for these so-called negative externalities, that would shift the balance of financial advantage towards peri urban food producers, especially if the food chains can be shortened by eliminating the middle players.

How could all this move in a positive direction? The answer is only government can apply the polluter pays principle, yet none of the political parties believe that food, farming, and the re-localisation of food systems is a political issue. They are probably right, but — and this is significant — millions of us are now uneasy about the footprint of the food we eat and if we were offered a viable alternative within reasonable price reach of the staple foods that we are currently depending upon, we would probably embrace this opportunity with enthusiasm.

The best way to break the cycle would be a combination of polluter pays taxes, rewards for farmers and growers delivering so-called public goods (remember Michael Gove at DEFRA and his public money for public goods initiative) and government commitments to obtain a significant percentage of food that is served on the public plate (schools, hospitals, care homes, prisons and the Armed Forces to name some players) from sustainable and local production.

Will this actually happen? Yes, I believe it will but in the meantime those of us that have any influence on backing pilot projects such as ‘Growing Communities’, an initiative based in Stoke Newington, London, which is entirely committed to

sourcing local food from regenerative farming, for which a personal interest declared — my daughter, Alice Holden is a grower, then that would create inspiring models for others to build upon.

What forms could re-localised peri urban food systems take? The answer will be many, from community orchards to community supported agriculture initiatives, farmers markets, to box schemes — the list is growing longer as more and more disruptive innovators, particularly amongst young people, are exploring ways in which small grower, micro dairies, meat box schemes and more can reconnect with the consuming public. Let us all support these initiatives with our food buying preferences — we must be the change we want to see!



# Integrative Planning for Town and Country in the 21st Century

## Dr Wei Yang

Dr Wei Yang is Chair of Wei Yang & Partners, and CEO of Digital Task Force for Planning

### The Necessity of Rural-Urban Symbiosis in the 21st Century

The relationship between rural and urban areas has long been imbalanced, with cities extracting resources from rural regions without fostering reciprocal relationships. This dynamic has led to environmental degradation and socio-economic inequities. The rising demand for housing places immense pressure on rural resources such as soil, land, food and water. Concurrently, rural areas often face issues such as an ageing population, inadequate infrastructure, economic difficulties and ecological depletion. As environmental challenges and socio-economic disparities continue to grow, adopting a holistic and sustainable approach to urban and rural planning is now critical before it becomes too late.

The quality of our living environment significantly influences our health and well-being. However, the health of the broader ecosystem that supports our countryside often lacks the strategic consideration it deserves, despite its critical importance to our survival. Ebenezer Howard's Garden City concept emphasised strong environmental and economic ties between urban centres and their rural surroundings, yet in practice, rural and urban areas are compartmentalised, leading to fragmentation and missed opportunities for synergy. There is an urgent need for policies and practices that foster rural-urban symbiosis, creating mutually beneficial relationships that harness the strengths of both areas for the betterment of the entire region, nation, and ultimately, the planet.

### The Possibility of Achieving Rural-Urban Symbiosis through Digitally Enabled Spatial Planning

Achieving rural-urban symbiosis in the UK requires balancing the growing population's needs for housing, infrastructure and resources, while protecting the nation's natural capital and enhancing climate resilience. One of the primary challenges is the high demand for land, which can only be addressed through multifunctional land use. This is where spatial planning can play a vital strategic role in developing a long-term vision and framework for communities by considering multiple scales, balancing competing demands, and guiding land use and resource allocation decisions.

As an applied social, environmental and behavioural science discipline, spatial planning can adopt a place-based systems approach, serving as the glue that integrates built and natural environment expertise to create a better future for everyone. This integration is crucial, as no single discipline can tackle the complex modern challenges alone, whereas digital technologies and scientific innovation offer transformative possibilities for spatial planning to serve this purpose.

Digitally enabled spatial planning allows us to collect, analyse and visualise data, yielding deeper insights into urban-rural interactions, land use patterns and resource flows. This understanding enables us to view urban and rural areas as integrated ecosystems. Advanced modelling and simulation tools facilitate further scenario testing and outcome prediction, supporting land optimisation strategies that balance agricultural productivity with biodiversity conservation and sustainable urban growth. By leveraging these digital tools, we can make scientifically informed decisions that harmonise urban and rural needs, fostering resilient and sustainable regional ecosystems.

Furthermore, the effective utilisation of digital technologies can enhance communication and collaboration among stakeholders, bridging urban and rural perspectives.



Gaining insights into community requirements through big data and engaging communities via both digital platforms and traditional methods ensures that planning decisions reflect their needs and values, leading to more successful outcomes. Simultaneously, smart infrastructure planning, precision agriculture, and e-governance solutions can reduce disparities between urban and rural areas by promoting balanced development. To support these efforts, real-time monitoring enables continuous assessment of strategy effectiveness, ensuring that rural-urban symbiosis remains a guiding principle.

### Strengthening Urban Edges as Key Urban-Rural Reciprocal Mechanisms

To achieve rural-urban symbiosis, urban edges should be proactively utilised to coordinate the transition between densely populated urban areas and sparsely populated rural regions. This requires strategic planning that balances growth with environmental preservation and promotes sustainable, compact development patterns.

Green Belts, established in Great Britain after World War II, represent significant planning innovations designed to prevent urban sprawl by keeping land permanently open at the urban edge. They define clear urban boundaries, prevent urban coalescence, and preserve the local character and openness of the countryside. At the same time, they offer opportunities to reserve land for agriculture and natural conservation, and to keep fresh produce close to urban markets.

Nearly 200 local authorities oversee Green Belts in England. To address the multifaceted challenges of the 21st century, we need to reinforce the purpose of the Green Belt in the National Planning Policy Framework, with a focus on multifunctional land use that prioritises protecting and strengthening strategic ecological corridors to boost biodiversity and mitigate climate impacts. This approach contrasts with the selection of dispersed areas for housing without considering the broader context, where Green Belts can function as active urban edges, enhancing

urban resilience to climate change, supporting biodiversity, and serving both current and future communities within and around these areas.

As a starting point, this approach requires a comprehensive baseline assessment of the current socio-economic and environmental conditions of the Green Belts. This assessment is crucial for unlocking the potential of Green Belts and for shaping regional and local policies that maximise long-term socio-economic and environmental benefits. Additionally, public preferences should be proactively assessed, especially given the growing interest in locally produced food and accessible green spaces.

More broadly, adopting an integrative approach to urban edges is essential for fostering a reciprocal relationship between urban and rural areas by facilitating the flow of goods, services and people. It can support local economies through peri-urban agriculture and provide recreational and tourism opportunities. Effective strategic planning at the urban edge can improve infrastructure and connectivity, enhancing rural access to urban amenities. By strengthening collaboration among stakeholders, we can transform urban edges into dynamic spaces that align with development goals while nurturing the natural environment.

### Concluding Remarks

Rural-urban symbiosis, as a principle and method for strategic planning, rebalances the needs of both urban and rural areas. It has the potential to address contemporary challenges and envision a future where both environments coexist and thrive harmoniously. Central to this vision is the quest for innovation in the public good, moving beyond self-interest. We must regain civic support for the belief that broader societal and environmental interests benefit us all. By challenging the status quo and inspiring creative solutions, we can harness innovation to enhance societal, environmental and communal outcomes, ultimately achieving rural-urban symbiosis in the future.



# Sustainable futures: beyond the rural-urban divide

## Maddy Longhurst

Maddy Longhurst is a community coordinator, campaigner and facilitator, working with Urban Agriculture Consortium, Constructivist, and Tiny House Community Bristol

We in the UK consume resources extracted from diverse bioregions around the world through an entrenched system of economic colonisation that depletes us as a country; our cultural identity and skills as producers, makers and crafters has all but disappeared leaving our sovereignty and resilience hanging by a thread. This system profoundly depletes countries around the world in the same ways, meaning our ability, globally, to live within planetary boundaries is out of reach without radical change, particularly in the way we make decisions about land.

There are only a few remnants here and there reminding us that we were once a country of producers and makers exchanging with each other between bioregions and settlements, circulating value and sharing rewards. The long history and current continuation of enclosure and commodification of UK land by global property investors is accelerating, fuelling proliferation of social, ecological and economic problems, and yet we are allowing ourselves to squander our means to solve them (e.g. in 2023, half of agricultural land sold by Savilles in the Lincolnshire Fens went to non-agricultural investors and there were 3.6 million hours of raw sewage flow into UK waterways by privatised water companies).

The way we think about urban and rural can be confused and generalised; urban as high-consumption, rural as low consumption, yet it is high inequality


defines them both: it is high-consumers (the 'haves') who, urban or rural, consume more than their fair share and overshoot planetary boundaries in a routine way.

That's not to say that the poor don't pollute, or participate in this capitalist machine - ultra processed foods for example, that are over-packaged, mal-nourishing, toxic, cheap and addictive, may be, due to the systematic diminishment of our own farming cultures, the only food options available to the many people who live on low incomes in food deserts.

In these essays we're talking about peri-urban land (aka greenbelts and urban fringes) and exploring their unique potential as places of concentrated socio-ecological-economic change which can have profound impacts on both urban and rural settings. I believe that these dynamic, contested landscapes are the new frontier in collective, sensible forms of liberation from our various traps.

I have been pondering the questions: what do we want the impacts of decisions about the urban rural interface to be? And who decides? The impacts will vary wildly according to who decides. Common good or us and them? Open or closed? Symbiotic or antagonistic?

According to our community-led research on reimagining greenbelts, the peri-urban really can be the ground zero of solutions to rural depletion, over-commodification and poverty, as well as to urban health crises, designed-in inequalities, profiteering and precarity. When urban and rural people came together around the question of the future of greenbelts, it emerged as an ideal place to create prototype low-impact, resilient communities designed around collective sufficiency, the healing and rebuilding of human and ecological interconnections, urban-rural symbiosis, circular and carbon-sequestering resource systems, and the meaningful livelihoods and reduction in inequalities



## “A mistake in the creation of greenbelts was to equate conservation with private ownership — perpetuating enclosure”

all this would generate. What happens in the peri-urban fringes will send ripples deep into the wellbeing and resilience of urban and rural communities alike and weave them together.

Urban and rural have been so divided in our minds and our policies, and therefore in our cultural habits and assumptions that we have lost sight of how beautifully one can nourish and sustain the other. Around only 70 years ago, Greenbelts were invented to create equal access to green space to support the mental and physical health of the urban poor, and before that our market towns were fed with fresh, organic produce grown in the peri-urban spaces around them, by skilled small farmers and market gardeners stewarding living landscapes. A mistake in the creation of greenbelts was to equate conservation with private ownership — perpetuating enclosure.

With a new government comes the opportunity to upgrade our response to the question ‘where and how do we create homes (not just houses)?’ However, if new national planning policies fail to provide a framework for holistic, regenerative settlements and remain stuck on economic growth through a narrowly focussed housing boom, we’ve lost before we’ve begun.

Deliberating such a profound question should not be left to specialists or politicians. An improved policy and decision-making process must be inclusive, challenging power structures that no longer serve, harvesting the best of our collective intelligence. Recently, the media has called Britain a ‘tinderbox’. Violence and fear escalate in a narrative of poverty-fuelled nationalism and ‘othering’, and the ‘keep out’ mantra of the privatised and commodified is echoed in the nationalist consciousness, to the detriment of all. What if we used planning to actually meet human and planetary needs? Imagine that.

So I advocate for two things: new agreements and policies supporting localised governance of peri-urban land use frameworks, and significant investment in holistic solutions based on human and planetary healing.

At the heart of a peaceful society lies ethical, collective decisions about how we live together in our landscapes, who benefits from what, and how we create safety and solidarity in these times of change.

# Falling in love with the countryside next door

## Roger Mortlock

Roger Mortlock is the Chief Executive of CPRE, the countryside charity


In 1939, the ticket hall in Charing Cross station celebrated London's Green Belt in an exhibition of posters championing the countryside easily accessible by public transport from the capital. The 'country joys' of Edgware, Morden and Uxbridge may be harder to summon almost a century later, but other posters urging visitors to Box Hill, Wormley, Godstone and Epping Forest are testament to the power of the Green Belt, introduced shortly after. These are places still recognisable as countryside, remarkably close to London. Train companies today reproduce similar nostalgic posters from the same era urging people to visit our National Parks and coastline, but there is something perhaps even more powerful about a celebration of the countryside on your doorstep that is accessible to all. These evocations of the countryside next door were aspirational, beautiful, and perhaps most importantly, open to any Londoners for the price of a bus, tube or train ticket.

Around the same time, Sheffield Council and the local transport operators urged people in the city to 'spend a day in the country' and enjoy the new Green Belt which had designated farms, woods and moorland around the city thanks to the determination of countryside pioneer Ethel Haythornthwaite. Today Sheffield still celebrates its relationship with the countryside next door, dubbing itself 'the outdoor city' — a sustainable, compact, liveable city that recognises the value of its hinterland and the wildness beyond.

Yet the current debate about the future of the Green Belt focuses entirely on what it prevents rather than what it delivers. There is no doubt that today there are different drivers — not least the climate and nature emergencies crises, and indeed the need for affordable housing — that should inform how we think about the future of the Green Belt. But it's a designation that many other countries envy and could have a vital role to play in addressing 21st century challenges. Land protected by the Green Belt covers 12.6% of England, often a figure used to undermine its value, but this spatial designation could be the key to unlocking new solutions. If we didn't already have Green Belt protections for many of the green spaces around our towns and cities, faced with a climate and nature emergencies, we would want to invent it.

Let's start with nature's recovery. If we are serious about 30% of land delivering for nature by 2030, then a spatial designation like the Green Belt could play a critical role. In 2015 the Natural Capital Committee recommended creating 350,000 hectares of new woodland and wetland on the Green Belt and on other land around our towns and cities. The Green Belt already has a higher-than-average percentage of deciduous woodland (at 19%) and is home to 34% of England's Community Forests, 39% of Local Nature Reserves, accounting for 60% of the land created in Local Nature Reserves since 2010. Undoubtedly more could be done. Take up of agri-environment schemes is significantly lower in the Green Belt, but projects like CPRE London's call for a new M25 of trees to circle the capital demonstrate what can be possible with some vision.

On climate, the University of Surrey found that rural belts around cities can reduce urban temperatures by over 0.5°C. Using 20 years of data, researchers showed how nearby rural areas could bring a city's temperature down. The biggest cooling effects happen where the rural ring around a city extends for at least half the city's



**“The urban edge is the most contested of all the land in our country and where speculation and profit from inflated land prices are most worrying.”**

diameter. Urban over-heating was mitigated further by joining up patches of rural land, planting more woodland and by creating large wetlands.

Next up, let's consider the potential of the Green Belt to deliver for health and wellbeing. We know that 39% of people feel visiting green spaces is important to their wellbeing, and the Green Belt provides important access to nature for more than 30 million people. The Green Belt has a higher-than-average density of public rights of way, with 30,000km of footpaths, bridleways and byways. For many, the 'ordinary' countryside around our villages, towns and cities is not only the place they access routinely, but the land that provide a sense of place and belonging.

And finally in this too brief paeon to the Green Belt, to farming, which still accounts for 65% of land in the Green Belt. The case for rethinking how we farm in the Green Belt is made powerfully elsewhere in this collection, but the basic truth that we need to produce more food (especially perishables) close to where people live, deserves repetition. Faced with the challenges of food security and reducing food miles, the Green Belt could be our secret weapon. There are already many inspiring examples of towns and cities transforming the relationship between the urban and rural through the lens of a more sustainable approach to food and farming.

The current debate about the Green Belt is entirely about housing, or rather entirely about large developers who love the profitability of Green Belt schemes. Since 2009, between 6,000 and 10,000 homes a year are built on greenfield Green Belt land — too many of them through speculative applications creating car dependent communities desperately short of infrastructure.

The urban edge is the most contested of all the land in our country and where speculation and profit from inflated land prices are most worrying. Viewing it through a housing lens alone is short sighted and ignores the huge contribution that peri-urban land could make to nature, climate mitigation, wellbeing and landscapes. We need a land use framework that genuinely works across government to make sure that land is used in the right way, cognisant of all its potential. Perhaps then we could celebrate the Green Belt for what it delivers, rather than demonise it for what it 'blocks'.



CPRE is the countryside charity that campaigns to promote, enhance and protect the countryside for everyone's benefit, wherever they live; today and for generations to come.

We work with communities, businesses and government to find positive and lasting ways to help the countryside thrive.

#### What we do

- We connect people with the countryside so that everyone can benefit from and value it.
- We promote rural life to ensure the countryside and its communities can thrive.
- We empower communities to improve and protect their local environment.
- Through all our work we look at the role of our countryside in tackling the climate emergency, including seeking ways to increase resilience and reduce impact.

The King's Foundation, headquartered at Dumfries House in Ayrshire, Scotland, serves as a custodian of historic Royal sites, including Highgrove Gardens in Gloucestershire and the Castle of Mey in Caithness, Scotland. The Foundation's work extends beyond these locations, with educational and cultural hubs in London, such as The King's Foundation School of Traditional Arts in Shoreditch, Trinity Buoy Wharf along the River Thames, and The Garrison Chapel in Chelsea.

Internationally, the Foundation is active across over a dozen sites, striving to deliver positive change and improve lives and communities. The Foundation's mission is deeply rooted in His Majesty King Charles III's philosophy of harmony, emphasizing the importance of understanding the balance, order, and relationships between humanity and the natural world to foster a more sustainable future.



