

# Green sprawl

## Our current affection for a preservation myth?

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## THE LONDON SOCIETY

The *London Society* is for all those who love London.

The *Society* was founded in 1912 by a group of eminent Londoners concerned about the lack of vision for the future of the capital. Early members included architects, planners and engineers in addition to politicians and artists.

For over a century the *Society* has played an active part in debating key issues about the future of the city; including housing, roads, railways, the channel tunnel, bridges and airports. All of these remain high on the agenda today.

In the twentieth century the *Society* developed the first *Development Plan of Greater London* (1919) which was far ahead of its time and hugely influential; both framing the way we think about shaping places and the post-war planning put forward in Patrick Abercrombie's *Greater London Plan* (1944). This thought leadership continues today.

A century after its founding, the *London Society* is growing from strength-to-strength with a programme of regular tours and debates in addition to a well-regarded *Journal*. It's also at the forefront of debate around the future shape of London.

London needs a forum in which its people can discover and discuss the hugely important matters which face it over the coming years. The *Society* has been and remains that place.

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## GREEN SPRAWL: OUR CURRENT AFFECTION FOR A PRESERVATION MYTH?

The green belt is arguably the most widely known planning paradigm of the last century, garnering and retaining greater grass-roots support than any other concept. It is also an idea which has been significantly, albeit not entirely, influenced by the early days of the *London Society*.

In London the trend from conception to present day has been towards an unequivocal green sprawl from the centre outwards; with this seeing a marked increase in the second half of the last century. This has resulted partly from Not-In-My-Back-Yard sentiment amongst residents of South-East England, but also from widespread unfamiliarity with the original intents and purposes of the green belt and alarm about the development pressure now facing areas within London's gravitational pull.

The challenges we face today are significant. London's population is growing more quickly than ever before and has reached an all-time high. We have to make important decisions not only about homes but the jobs, schools, hospitals and open space required to build lasting communities. This must happen in tandem with consideration of the rail, road, sea and air infrastructure needed to sustain them. There is an urgent need to address each element and an unparalleled opportunity to shape the future of the city; not only physically, but socially and culturally. Establishing a clear approach to London's green belt is crucial to laying the foundations on which we

take these discussions forward but, as with elsewhere, politically toxic.

This being the case it is perhaps fitting, after the reinvigoration of the *London Society* and upon the seventieth anniversary of Patrick Abercrombie's influential *Greater London Plan*, to revisit the initial aspirations of those who devised the city's green belt in the first half of the twentieth century and provide a spotlight beneath which it can be considered in the context of London today.

Let's not wait until after the next election, or the one after that, and start the discussion now. Let's begin a meaningful debate, grounded by evidence and empathy, and tackle the issue head on.

### — A DESIRE FOR LONDON —

London, at the turn of the nineteenth century, was gripped by an existential crisis. The heart of the largest empire in history was lacking the civic identity and social cohesion which existed in Britain's provincial centres. It was a point lamented by many of the chattering classes. Amongst them was the influential polymath, philanthropist and pioneering town planner Patrick Geddes (1854-1932). In 1907, Geddes expressed concern that 'what should be seen as a ghastly paradox has become mere commonplace'

## A CENTURY OF DEBATE

Dusting off the vellum it's interesting to note that Queen Elizabeth I (1533-1603) established a three-mile wide *cordon sanitaire* around London in 1580. However, whilst this prohibited housing development on any sites where there hadn't been a building in living memory, it was also a proclamation that was widely ignored. Indeed, aside from a brief attempt by the Commonwealth Parliament in 1657, the idea of limiting London's growth received little attention until the late nineteenth century.

From this point things start to get interesting and the evolution of London's green belt is hereafter defined by three characteristic periods; emerging through civic debate at the turn of the twentieth century before being officially sanctioned in the wake of Patrick Abercrombie's *Greater London Plan* (1944) and significantly expanded upon in the *Strategic Plan for the South East* (1970) and subsequent Local Plan revisions.

Today the city is served by 516,000 hectares of green belt land; an area large enough to accommodate some 20-50 million houses. We have capacity on brownfield sites within the city limits and opportunities to densify existing areas but need to critically consider every option if we're to deliver over 1,000,000 new homes alongside jobs and associated infrastructure by 2030.

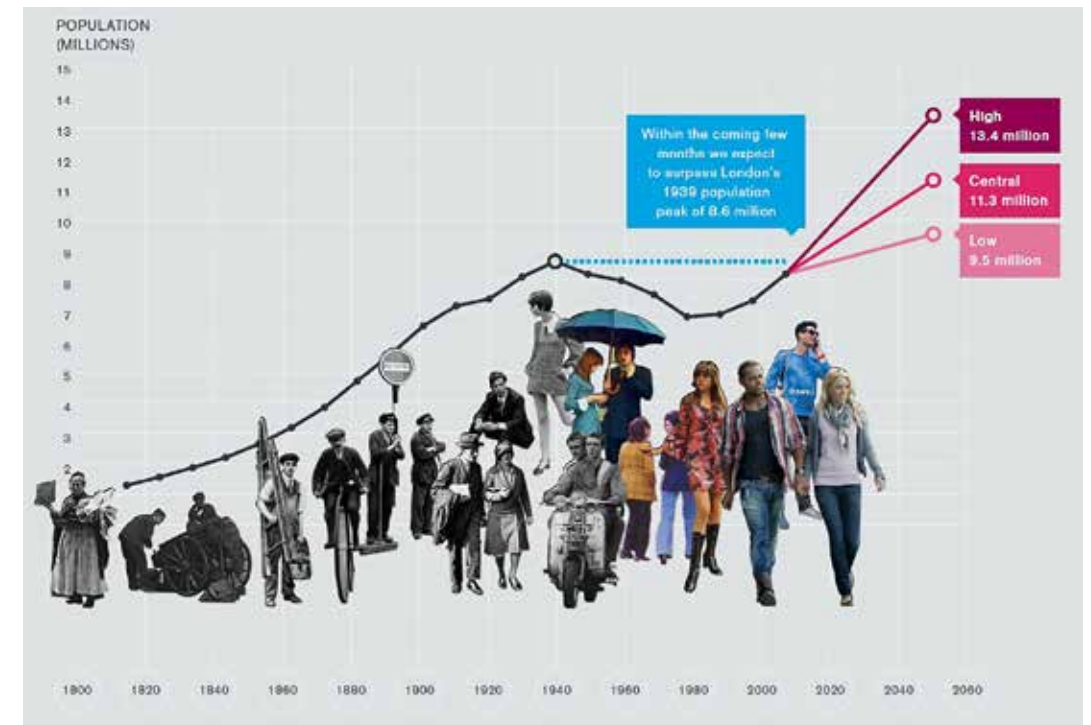


Figure 1: London Infrastructure Plan 2050 – A Consultation (GLA, 2014)



Patrick Geddes (1854-1932)



Joseph Chamberlain (1836-1914)

and 'that this "greatest of cities" is as yet the least developed in citizenship'.

Geddes was right. Whilst London was growing quickly through small and localised plans, these lacked coordination. Cities such as Birmingham had, nearly half a century earlier, begun promoting schemes to improve both quality of life and cement local identity. Birmingham Council had forcibly acquired the Birmingham Corporation Water Department for public benefit, driven a new road (Corporation Street) through the city's central slums, constructed a new Council House and Law Courts, and enlarged the Museum and Art Gallery. The majority of this change was the result of public action and influential civic stewardship, largely overseen in Birmingham by Joseph Chamberlain (1836-1914).

By contrast, the *Local Government Act* (1888) had established *London County Council* but failed to provide any consideration to the rapidly growing metropolis. As in Birmingham, in an age before the planning profession had been established (or even the phrase 'town planning' coined), civil society stepped in to fill the gap. The result was far-reaching discussion about the built environment that attracted not only architects and engineers but philosophers and artists. Debate around social and architectural theory blossomed: it was largely moral, political and radical.

Unlike today, there was a strong 'anti-urban' element to much of this debate, influenced by

the work of the art and architectural critic John Ruskin (1819-1900) and designer-come-activist William Morris (1834-1896); the social and aesthetic principles of which would lead to the Arts and Crafts movement. It prompted the founding of the *London Survey Committee* (1894) by handicraft designer C.R. Ashbee (1863-1942) to register and protect buildings of historic significance. It also influenced urban theorist Ebenezer Howard (1850-1928) who founded the *Garden Cities Association* (1899, now the *Town and Country Planning Association*) to help deliver his vision for society premised on reversing the tide of rapid urbanisation.

It's against this background that the idea of a 'green girdle' first emerged in Britain. The term itself came from continental Europe where broad boulevards were increasingly used from 1860 onwards to separate new development from the centre of historic towns; such as the *Ringstraße* in Vienna. Ideas around parkways were also abound in Australia and the United States of America, with the latter captivated by a City Beautiful movement which promoted beautification of the built environment to enhance moral and civic virtue. It was therefore not without context that the term was used in 1890.

This first mention came from *London County Council* member Lord Meath (1841-1929). Reginald Brabazon, the 12th Earl of Meath, was a Conservative



New York Parkway



The Ringstraße in Vienna



Reginald Brabazon, 12th Earl of Meath (1841-1929)

politician who would become an early member of the *London Society*. The *LCC* had been set up in 1899 and Meath was Chairman of its *Parks and Open Spaces Committee* in addition to being first Chairman of the *Metropolitan Public Gardens Association*. So impressed was he by the broad boulevards around cities such as Boston and Chicago that, returning from a trip to the USA, he recommended a similar approach was taken in London. To his mind, existing parks should be linked to become 'broad sylvan avenues and approaches' around the city.

The idea didn't gain immediate traction but a decade later another *LCC* member, William Bull, reached similar conclusions. Again taking America as a model, in 1901 he proposed a half-mile 'circle of green sward and trees' to be stretched around London. Like Meath he put his ideas to the *LCC* and they attracted similarly little interest. They probably did however impact on Meath, who published his own version a few weeks later. Meath's was less standardised but followed broadly the same lines and was also premised on the idea of providing amenity for London's residents.

Proverbially speaking, one swallow doesn't make a summer, but ask an ornithologist and they'll tell you that two or more start to suggest you're in business. A further decade later Meath and Bull were no longer alone. The idea was developed by George Pepler, later Chief Technical Planning Officer at the

*Local Government Board* from 1914 until the 1940s, in 1911. His plans were different to the extent that they drew more heavily on the European and American ideas of a ringway, largely for the benefit of improved transport and communication, envisaging a belt a quarter of a mile wide. Most importantly however, as with previous concepts, they were focussed on introducing a belt of green into a growing city rather than limiting the city's growth.

Then, as now, London's expansion was nonetheless climbing up the agenda at both a public and administrative level. Although neglected, Meath's *Committee* had been asked in 1891 to investigate ways to control the city's spread. Likewise, in 1901, *The Spectator* announced that 'the masses of London workers are not so entirely passive under the discomforts of life as was supposed' and that the city was 'going to expand to a great distance into the country; and the poorer, not the richer, part of the people will live in this outer ring'. Already, perhaps, a NIMBY tendency was evident.

Aside from Pepler lobbying in 1910 for civic action that would result in the *London Society*, there was another significant change over the period between his work and Meath's; namely the passing of the *Housing, Town Planning, Etc., Act* (1909) which allowed local authorities to prepare town planning schemes. It also meant that, by the time the *London Society* was founded in 1912, there was the potential



Meath's Plan (1901)

for civic action to have real teeth. Communities, in the broadest sense, could bring about the change they hoped to see.

### — AN IDEA TAKES SHAPE —

David Barclay Niven (1864-1942) was a Scottish architect based in London from 1892 onwards. Another original member of the *London Society*, he had also been working on the idea of a green girdle; one which partially bridged the gaps between Meath, Bull and Pepler. Overlooked by many at the time and since, Niven had published an article in 1910 for the newly established *Town Planning and Housing Supplement* of the *Architectural Review* in which he proposed a series of new arterial roads to relieve traffic congestion. This, he suggested, could potentially support an 'outer park system, or continuous garden city right round London, [that] would be a healthful zone of pleasure, civic interest, and enlightenment'.

This marked a small but important step because it emphasised the importance of public access to open space and linked this benefit with potential responses to one of the most pressing issues of the day; traffic congestion. It also implied that proposals which change the functional dynamic of the city

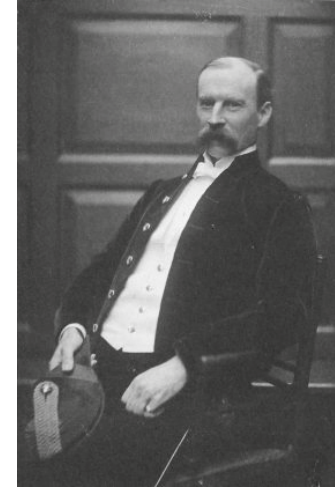
should be considered holistically.

Niven's idea gave clear purpose to the idea of a green belt and, by 1918, the (later *Royal*) *Town Planning Institute* and *London Society* had appointed a joint committee to prepare a scheme for a *Traffic and Development Board for London and the Home Counties*. The work was led by Rees Jeffreys (1872-1954), a member of both organisations and later described by David Lloyd George (1863-1945) as 'the greatest authority on roads in the United Kingdom and one of the greatest in the whole world'. The Committee was founded on the assumption that 'London and the Home Counties possess certain common interests, particularly those relating to communication and development, and that no authority at present exists with sufficient powers and resources to deal adequately with these common interests'.

That London, which at this point had a population of approximately 7.25 million (1 million less than today), should be considered in the context of its relationship to the Home Counties was widely agreed. The *Garden Cities and Town Planning Association*, for example, made clear at the Greater London Housing Conference of 1918 that 'the enormous number of houses that is required is sufficient by itself to make clear that the problem must be treated as a whole; for it is not merely a matter of satisfying a chance demand that springs up locally...the housing schemes for London should not



Fig 2: The Development Plan of Greater London (London Society, 1919)



Aston Webb (1849-1930)



Robert Windsor-Clive, Lord Plymouth (1857-1923)

be left to individual authorities to prepare on their own'.

Each organisation agreed on the principle of a *Commission* to oversee the traffic and housing schemes but the *Town Planning Institute* and *London Society* stopped short of supporting the *Garden Cities and Town Planning Association's* assertion that any future *Commission* should assist with plan preparation. Their view was, instead, that it 'should be not to restrain and control but stimulate and assist the existing authorities and co-ordinate their efforts'. The role of regional planning was to set a vision and not impose the detail.

In any event, it was clear that an organisation should be established. Originally termed the *Greater London Authority*, the name proposed was subsequently revised to reflect the functional scale at which it was envisaged necessary to plan; becoming the *London and Home Counties Authority* by the time that the draft Bill was presented in 1919. Crucially, even at this point there was explicit recognition that London's functional area extended well beyond its administrative boundaries and it was at this level that the city should be managed. It remains a key consideration to this day, when 2011 census data indicates that more than half of all residents in Local Authorities adjoining the Greater London area work in the city, totalling more than 1.3 million people.

### — AN OPPORTUNITY TO PLAN —

The *London Society* published its own *Development Plan of Greater London* in 1919. The first plan of its kind, it had ostensibly been prepared during the First World War from 1914-1918 but much of the work had actually begun very shortly after the *Society* was formed. The notion of what would become the green belt was one such idea which had been largely agreed in advance of any pen being put to paper. Indeed, speaking to the *Society* in January 1914 Aston Webb (1849-1930), architect of the Victoria & Albert Museum and the front façade of Buckingham Palace, made clear reference to William Morris' *News from Nowhere* (1890) and latched onto the idea of a protagonist finding himself on a journey around London of the future.

Morris' central character was William Guest but Webb made the discussion more vivid by putting himself in this position. Recalling how he had fallen asleep through boredom whilst a friend complained about London's smoke and dirt, Webb claimed to have woken not only with a more enlightened companion but in the year 2014. Here, from a high vantage point, he could see a 'belt of green all round London' of which his guide 'explained that the town planning schemes had to set aside a certain amount of open spaces, pleasure grounds' which resulted in parkways

around the city. These in turn created 'a beautiful sylvan line practically all round London'. It was a direct reference to Meath and Niven, and also a statement of intent.

The *Society's* Chairman at the time work began on the *Plan* was Robert Windsor-Clive, Lord Plymouth (1857-1923). A Conservative politician, he had been the first President of the *Concrete Institute* (now the *Institution of Structural Engineers*) from 1908-1910 and had, in 1913, been responsible for purchasing The Crystal Palace for the nation. Writing in the *Society's* Journal in October 1914, Plymouth heralded the start of work on the *Plan* by directly referring to the fact that 'the Open Spaces Committee of the *London Society* have already prepared a plan showing most of the Open Spaces'.

The efforts of those involved in the *Society's* work were translating into tangible action. This was unexpectedly helped by the 'time of war and enforced leisure for many who are unable to take part in the struggle': those who had been engaging in discussion before 1914 now had the opportunity to collate their proposals. For Plymouth, the need for a *Plan* was paramount as until such a scheme was in place 'the eighty and more local authorities who control our monster community of seven and a half million people in 700 square miles will go on each making its own changes without any sort of relation to the whole'.

To this extent the war energised rather than diminished the *Society's* activity. For the architectural illustrator and journalist Raffles Davison (1853-1937) the chief issue of the *Society* at the time was 'the good of London, its orderly and beautiful development, its general amenity as a place for business or pleasure'. In 1919 he'd been working alongside Niven in preparing a proposal for the architectural improvement of Charing Cross, also the subject of much discussion at the time the *Plan* was launched by Aston Webb. It was typically collaborative.

The *Plan's* key feature was perhaps unsurprisingly considered to be 'the proposals for improving the greater arterial roads of London, suggested by the Traffic Branch of the Board of Trade' but it also picked-up and further formalised previous suggestions that these might facilitate improvements at London's fringe. In doing so it made clear that 'the map also shows the new parks, parkways, and waterside reservations suggested by the *London Society*' alongside 'proposals for connecting them, where possible, with belts of green parkways'.

The *London Society's* scheme would secure a belt of green around the city in perpetuity. In doing so it would link existing green areas such as Richmond Park, Banstead Down, Epping Forest and Hampstead Heath and take in waterways such as the Wandle, Brent, Lea and Roding. These areas would be joined with new land to be acquired by local authorities.

As the plan was not binding upon authorities and development rights had not been nationalised the proposal was ambitious to say the least.

Meath and Niven undoubtedly influenced the final form of the proposed green belt but the mantle was increasingly carried by Raymond Unwin (1863–1940), the preeminent planner of his age who alongside his partner Barry Parker (1867–1947) had been responsible for designing Howard's first garden city at Letchworth in Hertfordshire. Unwin was a socialist in the tradition of Morris and an early involvement with the 'Sheffield Group', begun by philosopher and *Fabian Society* founder Edward Carpenter (1844–1929), heavily influenced his efforts to secure better quality housing for working people.

There was doubt as to whether the *Society's* proposals were deliverable and the *Plan* itself concluded that 'though it is now too late to attempt a green parkway or belt right around London, as there should be, much might be done to save the existing open spaces to preserve the amenities of each district which as so essential to the future well-being of London'. This may in part have contributed to the girdle's evolution as hereafter emphasis slowly began to shift away from a green roadway and towards the benefits of green space more generally.

Yet some members of the *Society* remained optimistic when, in 1921, it published its first book; *London of the Future*. Both Niven and Unwin made the case for a green belt. At the same time, not unhelpfully, the Unhealthy Areas Committee of the newly formed *Ministry of Health* had also begun advocating a regional plan and state-assisted construction of self-contained garden cities. Consistently, however, talk of preservation went hand-in-hand with recognition of the need for development.

Unwin saw two key reasons for a green belt, in keeping with the principles of Ebenezer Howard. This was both to stop the city growing and 'to protect its inhabitants from disease, by providing fresh air, fresh fruit and vegetables, space for recreation and contact with and knowledge of nature'. For Niven, the paramount need was to improve the health and well-being of London's residents. It's a case he made in the strongest terms, emphasising it as a matter of national significance given that when recruiting soldiers for the front '540 men from a potential battalion had to fall out before a gun was shouldered or a shot fired,

and that only 460 were found to be fit for military service out of an average 1,000 men'.

By this point, therefore, the perceived amenity benefits of public access to open space had been expanded and so to had ideas of scale. Whilst generally sticking to the established width of a quarter mile, the *Society* envisaged an area that 'could extend not only along valleys, but spread out to embrace hill ridges in parts as much as two miles or more into open country'. In so doing, the green belt would provide more than a typical park and mark a transition from town to country through which London's residents could 'pass from the formality of the town to the simple freedom of meadows, and finally to tilled fields'. Perhaps most importantly though, this area would have permanence and become 'sterilised' – from the possibility of encroachment – a great communal estate – secure for all time to the use and enjoyment of the people of London'.

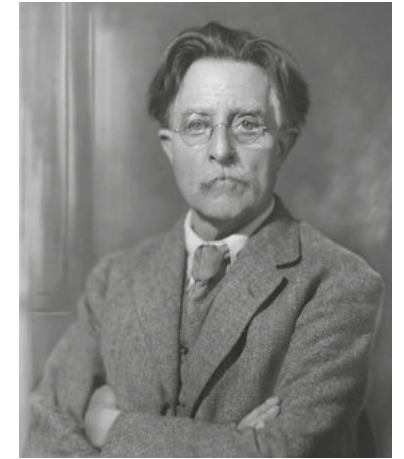
#### — A WORKEABLE SOLUTION —

The idea of a permanent boundary had made ground but what, then, of the people looking to leave London? Then, as now, there was significant pressure for new housing; a desire exaggerated following the end of the war. Indeed, Unwin recognised that 'London would continue to require as many additional buildings each year as it would have required apart from the provision [of a green belt]'. These homes should be built, but in garden cities outside the city. To this end, speaking to the *Society* in January 1920, he likened the city's growth to 'a crowd at a booking office that has not learned how to form a queue' and stressed that, in the wake of the *Plan*, it was possible to alter, guide and regulate such change. A clear strategy was intended as the premise for action.

Manufacturing and then housebuilding enabled London's economic boom. Rapid suburbanisation was supported by improvements to transport infrastructure. Tram, bus and trolleybus routes grew, as did the London Underground network; not least through extension of the Piccadilly Line. The population expanded by 16.6% between 1921 and 1939 with approximately 900,000 homes being built and housing completions of roughly 1,500 per week in 1934. Ribbon growth led the charge with



Patrick Abercrombie (1879-1957)



Raymond Unwin (1863-1940)

development extending a single house deep outwards along arterial routes.

The clamour for a limit to London's growth became louder in tandem. The architect Clough Williams-Ellis (1883–1978) published *England and the Octopus* (1928), which rallied readers to the countryside's defence to prevent urbanisation and coalescence. At the same time Frank Pick (1878–1941), transport administrator and pioneer of London's public transport expansion during the 1920s and 1930s, made clear his view that London should not grow beyond the 12–15 mile range set by the economics of the London Underground. To this end, in 1938, he argued to the Barlow Commission (*Royal Commission on the Geographical Distribution of the Industrial Population*) that London should be contained by rings of towns beyond its boundaries, separated by a green belt of at least 1 mile wide.

At the same time, British agriculture was in desperate need of support. The *Agriculture Act* (1920) had attempted to guarantee minimum wages and produce prices after the war but was unpopular with other industrial sectors and the urban electorate, for which reason it was repealed in 1921. This and other measures removed support which had previously existed for farming communities. There was rapid wage reduction for agricultural workers and increasing debt for farmers which, combined with competition from Canada, had catastrophic

effects. Productivity fell, rural poverty increased and land became fallow as workers moved to the cities. The challenges of war were still fresh in the mind of Government and this downturn, with its associated loss of skills and land, increased the perceived importance of protecting rural areas.

Unwin had envisaged a mile wide green belt that would act in the same way as a city wall; with the potential to build up to it but any additional development beyond provided 'by means of detached suburbs outside that range'. Development could and indeed should occur in the countryside, only subject to control. It wasn't radical: he and other members of the *Society* were heavily imbued with the ethos of the garden cities model where new satellite towns would be developed around a central settlement.

Acceptance of this approach also went more widely. The influential town planner, Patrick Abercrombie (1879–1957), founded the *Council for the Preservation of Rural England* (now the *Campaign to Protect Rural England*) in 1926. Abercrombie had been citing the work of the *London Society* since the early 1920s and had once claimed the first *Plan* to have been so successful that he understood work to be beginning on a second. Like many contemporaries he was also seriously concerned by ribbon growth.

Thus for many, like Abercrombie and Unwin, the evidence all pointed to what would become the prevailing logic: London needed a radial model with

growth outwards from the centre. The model was based on new development arriving as satellite towns around a central nucleus. Abercrombie had ‘no doubt but that the satellite principle is that upon which the whole of London should proceed for its future residential spreading and increase’, with the new settlement at Welwyn (founded 1920) showing how ‘in competent architectural hands and well-planned, a new centre may become an additional feature of interest in a country of famed old towns and villages’.

He premised his book *The Preservation of Rural England* (1926) with a quote from Voltaire; *Le pays était cultivé pour le plaisir comme pour le besoin; partout l’utile était agréable* (‘the land was cultivated both for pleasure and to supply needs; everywhere the useful was at the same time agreeable’). This embodies his principles and, in addition to his reverence for *feng shui* (風水), typifies an approach which seeks to balance human requirements with a protection of natural beauty. There must, he reasoned, ‘be no attempt to make new things imitate the old, or to aim at bogus naturalism’.

As such, ‘when dealing with old towns and villages their existing picturesqueness must be respected; but if an entirely new community is to be planned for, then a frank formality is appropriate, tempered of course by any innate unevenness which the site may possess’. His view was quite evidently that new growth should not be prevented but managed appropriately. The potential for green belts is therefore clear, but the general intention was not to restrict growth on the wider level: the issue was facilitating new growth outside London in the most appropriate locations.

It’s fair to say that this received wide support during the 1920s, but there were practical problems which needed to be addressed first. In 1924, for example, the *LCC* resolved that its Town Planning Committee should consider potential for a green belt or unbuilt-zone around London to contain growth. However, whilst the Committee felt that a belt of half a mile would be a reasonable distance, the challenge of land acquisition was considered too great. The merits were clear, but the method was lacking.

It took until the end of that decade before change could be smelt in the air when the *Greater London Planning Committee’s* First Report was published in 1929. Comprised largely of local authorities it was formed in 1926 by Neville

Chamberlain (1869–1940) in his capacity as Minister for Health, with Raymond Unwin as its Technical Advisor. Taking forward discussions already echoing along the corridors of the Ministry, Chamberlain asked it to consider whether there should be an agricultural belt around London to separate it from new development. The *Committee* responded by identifying a green belt that extended the *London Society’s* proposal into a near continuous area of up to six miles in width, ‘reserved on a background of unlimited Potential Building Land’ and twinned with a proposal for Areas of Building Development.

The area in question had extended to reflect the demands of and for agriculture, but Unwin was at odds with Chamberlain’s initial brief. For him, in keeping with the early emphasis of the *London Society*, the urgent need for a green girdle ‘as near to the completely urbanised area of London as practicable’ was not to meet food growing requirements but ‘to provide a reserve supply of playing fields and other recreation areas and of public open spaces, together with, wherever possible, other lands not available for public use’. In any event, delivery was the paramount hurdle, for which reason he urged that ‘the acquisition of the green belt, and of many other open spaces, cannot be regarded as a local responsibility, but concerns the Region as a whole’.

### — AN AGREED OUTCOME —

Some momentum gathered behind Unwin, who oversaw publication of a Second Report of the *Committee* in 1933 which set out his proposals in further detail. However, whilst his calls didn’t fall on deaf ears, they were made against a backdrop of financial cuts. The *Committee’s* budget was reduced in 1931 and, following the publication of its Second Report, the *Committee* ceased to exist. Nor did the *London Society* itself commit much resource to the matter, instead directing a team of around forty people to address the issue of slum clearance. Unwin’s recommendations were accepted but, for now, not taken any further.

A new political makeup at the *LCC* in 1934 bought a renewed energy to the discussion around London’s growth and it initiated a green belt scheme in 1935. Emerging from local rather than national

Government this bore striking similarities to the *London Society’s* earlier *Plan* and the subsequent work of Unwin’s *Committee*. Consequently, it sought ‘to provide a reserve supply of public open spaces and of recreational areas and to establish a green belt or girdle of open space lands not necessarily continuous, but as readily accessible from the completely urbanised area of London as practicable’.

The *LCC* agreed to fund up to half the cost of land acquisition and a wave of almost immediate support prompted a Bill to be put before parliament to enable this to happen. By 1938 the *Green Belt (London and Home Counties) Act* had become law. Local authorities were now able to purchase land to be protected as open space and there was a statutory basis from which the green belt concept could evolve. It also triggered a wave of large-scale purchases of important tracts of open land around London by the counties surrounding London with a view to making them accessible to everybody; including those in central areas starved of green infrastructure.

Not only would Meath, Niven and Unwin have been pleased by this but the *London Society’s* work remained one of the few documents upon which potential acquisitions could be considered at the regional level. It’s perhaps unsurprising therefore that, when Patrick Abercrombie was appointed to prepare a London Plan in 1941 he wrote to its then Chair, the architect and conservationist Lord Esher (1881–1963), to discuss the matter. This correspondence, almost deferential in tone, serves to indicate the esteem with which the *Society’s* work was held.

Abercrombie wished to make clear that he would only undertake the work on condition that he followed the course taken by the *London Society* by tacking the Greater London Region as a whole. To this end he wrote that ‘the point on which I shall want to consult *The London Society* is a Plan for London which I have been asked (although not yet confirmed) by the *LCC* to prepare’ and was keen to ‘assure *The London Society* that though it will only be a sketch plan, it will be based on a consideration of the whole London Region’.

However, planning was at this point under the control of the Ministry of Health which had always held an interest in the green belt’s agricultural potential. Abercrombie had also admired this in Howard’s ideas for garden cities. Perhaps inevitably therefore (not least because the country was

embroiled in the second total war of that century) his *County of London Plan* (1943) shifted the emphasis on open space and amenity to a green belt primarily reserved ‘for no further building other than that ancillary to farming’. It would be unfair to suggest that he lacked a wider vision, but in being restricted to the *London County Council* area the *Plan* could really make only limited recommendations for the land beyond.

This position would change the following year when he was appointed to prepare his *Greater London Plan*. Here he discerned four concentric rings around London, measured in terms of density. These were (1) a central, overcrowded, inner ring, (2) a fully developed suburban ring, (3) a zone with sufficient openness for communities to retain their individuality, termed a green belt ring, and (4) a zone wherein communities were set in an agricultural background, being a country ring. It was a new approach, but the *Plan* itself stressed the extent to which the *London Society’s* own *Plan* of 25 years previously had proven ‘full of guidance for the future’.

Yet the *Society* did not consider the proposals fully resolved. Abercrombie had accepted Unwin’s advice to the *Greater London Regional Planning Committee* which implied a larger green belt than proposed by the *Society* would be needed to provide a suitable rural backdrop. However, he had also accepted the approach put forward by the recent Scott Report (*Report of the Committee on Land Utilisation in Rural Areas*, 1942).

The Scott Report had set out an idealised vision of the English countryside of which the ‘chief characteristic’ was ‘its attractive patchwork appearance...The villages with their churches, their inns, their cottages and probably a garage, perhaps grouped around a green’. The report went further than simply supporting agriculture and concluded that it represented the only means of preserving the countryside. The setting of the land remained important but now any area to be protected should also be large enough for agriculture to remain viable. It consequently justified both the designation of a larger area and formalised an idyllic image which filtered into the 1947 *Town and Country Planning Act* and its successors.

Abercrombie presented his *Plan* to the *Society* on 21st June 1945 and, less than two months after the formal surrender in Europe (8th May 1945) and



sought to reconcile their preference with others who wished for a more agricultural focus. In doing so he stressed balanced content of the *Plan* and the need to 'preserve a large amount of country as near to the town as possible not only for the sake of recreation but for the purpose of obtaining fresh food rapidly'.

Despite some initial reservations the *Society* considered Abercrombie's inclusion of a green belt in his *Plan* as a positive step forward and by 1946 had determined 'to do all it can to prevent any action departing from the essential recommendations of the *Greater London Plan*', which aligned with the Government's acceptance of the proposals in the same year. The *Society's* focus therefore became promotion of the work on the basis that 'it would seem of great importance that the public should make known their belief in the importance of the Green Belt and the need of its preservation'.

This continued, or at least renewed, ambiguity between the recreational and agricultural purposes of the green belt resulted in a lasting tension which has often obscured the historically accepted recognition of needing land for both new development and urban containment. It would also later be compounded when the *Ministry of Housing and Local Government* set out the first official reasons for designating green belt as (1) to check the further growth of a large built-up area, (2) to prevent neighbouring towns from merging into one another, and (3) to preserve the special character of a town. They picked up on some important ideas, but another layer was added.

Even at this relatively early stage such conflicts were noted by those in the *London Society*. Writing on the 'problems of the green belt' in 1947 the *Journal* stressed the 'acute shortage of houses in every single locality'. It therefore argued, with support of the *Town and Country Planning Association* and *Council for the Preservation of Rural England*, for the *Ministry of Town and Country Planning* (established in 1943) to act as a central authority to designate green belt and deliver new development. Government leadership was necessary then, as now, to balance the competing requirements for land.

London had finally secured the regulatory framework for which the *Society* had campaigned. The *1947 Act* now required local authorities to survey their administrative areas and devise a land development plan for them, enabling them to designate areas outside their ownership as green belt. Importantly,

however, this went hand-in-hand with the *1946 New Towns Act*, which also enabled the government to designate areas of land for new town development. Stevenage was the first new town created under the Act and ten others followed by 1955.

Thus, by 1950 the *Ministry of Town and Country Planning* had prepared an indicative London-wide green belt map, based on Abercrombie's *Plan*, and by 1955 the then Minister of Housing and Local Government Duncan Sandys (1908-1987) was encouraging local authorities to consider protecting land around their towns and cities by the formal designation of clearly defined green belts. In keeping with Abercrombie's ideas, he believed these should be 'some 7 to 10 miles deep', but the ball had begun to roll.

### — A NEW CENTURY BEGUN —

Early members of the *Society* may not have imagined that today, a century later, London's population would be increasing at a rate equivalent to adding the UK's second biggest city, Birmingham, every ten years. Likewise, the *London Society* need not have worried about whether it could promote the benefits of the green belt to communities as its popularity was quickly clear.

Whilst the visual attractiveness of land was never a primary factor for its designation, many of the Green Belt areas to be designated after the War and acquired by the Counties were deliberately chosen for their environmental quality and some later awarded special status. The appeal for designation was equally spurred on by those such as Sandys amidst a wave of satellite construction. To this end the *Royal Commission on Local Government in Greater London* had, under the recently knighted Edwin Herbert, already recognised the idea's appeal to NIMBYs by 1960. Referring to proposed changes to the Surrey Development Plan the Herbert Commission concluded that 'the main object of these revisions is to bring the greater part of Surrey into the green belt with the object of ensuring that if London's population overleaps the green belt, as it's clearly doing, the emigrants shall alight, say, in Hampshire or Sussex, rather than in Surrey'.

This ostensibly remains the case today, with the Mayor's own draft *London Infrastructure Plan 2050* (2014) analysing spatial patterns of growth associated

### CURRENT GREEN BELT POLICY

The National Planning Policy Framework (2012) sets out the Government's approach to protecting Green Belt land. It states that 'the fundamental aim of Green Belt policy is to prevent urban sprawl by keeping land permanently open; the essential characteristics of Green Belts are their openness and their permanence.'

To this end the NPPF makes clear that the Green Belt serves five purposes, being:

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



Fig 3: The extent of London's green belt in 2011.



Fig 4: National Parks, Regional Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty in 2014.

with only two options, being (1) 'the potential for increased densities in urban areas' and (2) 'the role that new towns and urban extensions can play in areas beyond the Green Belt'. This consequently identifies 'major growth potential' as existing on land north of London, skipping immediately beyond the green belt's current boundary.

Separated by half a century which spans the significant extension of the green belt an important difference is that immediately following the Second World War there was an explicit and statutory link between stopping the outward spread of London and a proposed reduction of its population by one million people. The intention was to reduce Inner London densities and create opportunities for environmental improvements at the same time as creating high quality environments elsewhere. There was a coordinated response linked to the New Towns programme alongside the Greater London Council's Expanded Towns initiative and supported by the *Location of Offices Bureau (LOB)* which helped to export jobs to the new and expanded settlements.

Now, slightly over a century after the *London Society* was founded, the green belt receives overwhelming public support and extends in places to some 35 miles from London. It has proven to be a remarkably popular policy. In 2013, England had more designated green belt land (1.6 million hectares) than the total amount of 'Built-up Areas and Gardens'

in the entire United Kingdom (1.3 million hectares). London's green belt alone extended to 516,000 hectares, equivalent to 3.9% of England's entire land area.

Yet the city's green belt it is widely perceived as under threat, emphasised not least by media reports including *The Telegraph's* 'Hands Off Our Land' campaign, begun in response to concerns that the Coalition Government's planning reforms 'pose the greatest threat to the countryside since the Second World War'. It's a debate which is bound to intensify. London's green belt is under increasing pressure and, as confronted the *Society* in 1946, we are in the midst of an undeniable housing crisis.

As with others in the first half of the last century, from Howard to Abercrombie, the *London Society* failed to fully consider population growth. Instead it anticipated a static position with London's depopulation resulting in a gradual relocation of residents to new satellite towns in the South-East of England. The *1946* and *1947 Acts* created 28 New Towns over the following half-century and, although a long way short of the 100 which 'New Townsmen' like Ebenezer Howard and Frederic Osborn (1885–1978) had been promoting at the end of the First World War, these have played an important part in meeting housing need since then.

The principles which underpinned the development of these settlements remain equally



Proposal for the fictional Uxcelter Garden City (URBED, 2014).

important today. The 2014 Wolfson Economics Prize, for example, sought answers to the question 'how would you deliver a new garden city which is visionary, economically viable, and popular?'; selecting British urban design consultancy URBED as the winner. Their proposal, based on the imaginary city of Uxcelter, sought to demonstrate the way in which places with populations nearing 200,000 may be extended to create a garden city of almost 400,000 without expanding too significantly into the green belt.

However, unlike in the first part of the twentieth century, discussion around the applicability of their ideas quickly attracted Government condemnation. The URBED submission identified forty cities in England which could be extended; including Oxford, Reading, Ipswich, Northampton and Norwich. Research also showed that 68% of Britons felt garden cities would protect more countryside than alternative means of delivering housing. Yet the idea was immediately trashed by Housing Minister Brandon Lewis. The Government, he asserted, is 'committed to protecting the green belt from development as an important protection against urban sprawl' for which reason the 'proposal from Lord Wolfson's competition is not government policy and will not be taken up'.

It's a statement that would have been far easier to make a generation earlier, when the green belt was expanding rapidly and housing pressures were

far less acute. London's population had, until the mid-1980s, been steadily falling to just over 6 million people. Since then, however, this has not been the case. England's population is rising steadily and the majority of this growth is anticipated to be in London and the wider South-East of England. London today has reached an all-time high of 8.3 million residents and this is anticipated to climb beyond 10 million by 2030. The city's population is growing more quickly than at any other point in its history.

The context in which this growth is occurring is particularly disturbing. Housebuilding levels are the lowest for a generation and we are now building fewer houses per year than in 1914. Prices are rapidly inflating despite there being little real wage growth: mortgage payments in London comprised 26% of take home pay in 1993 53% in 2013. At the same time, house prices increased in the capital by an average of 25% in 2013 alone. It's left millions of families in the private-rented sector and there are, arguably, deep structural problems impacting upon the way that housing is delivered.

What, therefore, might we take from the *London Society's* work in the first half of the twentieth century when looking forward? Two themes seem particularly resonant when setting the strategic direction:

(1) **Scale:** There is a clear need to reconsider the area at which we plan. Whether through a new framework which reflects London's functional area or an expanded administrative area of the *Greater London Authority* (over which the Mayor of London has control), a larger scale would have benefits. It would better reflect the existing catchment and enable the type of planning required to consider infrastructure, growth and green belt requirements at the appropriate level. If cross-party support and a Royal Commission are required, as they may well be to secure buy-in, let's acknowledge that and take the idea forward.

(2) **Approach:** We must explore a joined-up approach to growth which once again twins discussion about the green belt with recognition of the need for development. In doing so, we must dispel the preservation myth that has emerged and recognise that unless actively pursuing a strategy of national spatial rebalancing which directs growth elsewhere in the country, new development will be required in London, including in some parts of the present green

belt. Meeting this challenge will require strong, central leadership.

Central to success will be the way in which new housing is integrated with the green belt; whether through the release of parcels on the city fringe, expansion of existing satellite towns or development of new settlements elsewhere. The permanence of certain areas, which ensure access to recreational space and preserve the character of historic towns, should remain an established principle at the centre of discussion. There will inevitably be other areas, with distinct characteristics, where development is more acceptable. The first step is to move away from the simplistic and naïve idea that that countryside is a sacrosanct patchwork of medieval hedgerows and towards an empirically informed position which once more recognises housing as a need to be met in locations with appropriate environmental capacity.

In doing so, we need to look yet further into the history books. Redefining the green belt is an important part of the equation, but so also is the extent to which we deliver sites. Howard, Unwin and Abercrombie were each acutely aware of the way in which proactive planning impacted upon land value. We need to look again at the ways in which infrastructure can be financed and the uplift arising from development can be captured to support the investment required, potentially even to fund the purchases of land for permanent protection as begun in the 1930s. In this regard Green Grids, Tax Increment Financing and Land Value Tax offer but a few of the various opportunities which could be explored.

### — A CHANCE TO LOOK AGAIN? —

Let's start that discussion now. KPMG's *HS2 Regional Economic Impact Report* (2013) identifies that upgrades in rail connectivity will 'improve the functioning of the labour market, increasing the effective size', but how sustainable would it be for London's workforce to commute regularly from Birmingham and potentially beyond? Do the evils of early-twentieth century sprawl remain as pernicious today or would mixed-use, high-density urban extensions be more sustainable? Should we consider refining our approach

to the green belt in a way that addresses its clear, historic shortcomings?

Whilst green belt policy can't be seen in isolation from far greater issues than purely London's current requirement for 1 million new homes, such development over the next 15 years is deliverable without impacting too significantly upon the overall size of the city's green belt. If anything, airport expansion and Crossrails 1, 2 and 3 create a real opportunity for this growth to be plan-led and sustainable. Even assuming that no development occurred on brownfield land, which is correctly recognised as a preference of policy, the land required would tally only 25,000 hectares if constructed at the low density of 40dph. Whilst new settlements built sustainably would undoubtedly not require this much space it represents a maximum equivalent to only 4.8% of London's current green belt (1.5% of England's). Development at 100dph would require only 10,000 hectares (1.9% of London's green belt and 0.6% of England's). Infrastructure such as 'Crossrail' can facilitate and support this growth.

Context will be key. It may be that green wedges are preferable to green belts, or that urban extensions are more appropriate than transport-oriented satellite settlements. It is nonetheless imperative that we give thorough and immediate consideration to each. The *London Society* informed many early conversations and is doing so again. Indeed, there may well be merit in many of the thoughts and aspirations of its original members today. Might it be, for example, that the approach taken by the *Greater London Planning Committee* could provide a valid framework for analysis? Should we return to thinking in terms of narrower green belts which act as 'green ripples' radiating from London's centre to connect areas of existing landscape value whilst enabling development in-between?

As Technical Advisor to the Greater London Planning Committee's First Report (1929) Raymond Unwin included a 'Diagram of Open Space' which identified green rings extending beyond a larger central belt and on a background of potential development land. It was undeniably simplistic in the uniformity of its radial rings and fails to reflect areas of agreed landscape value but could provide an interesting metric for discussion. Conversations around today's green belt hinge on the balance between permanence and adaptability, but the

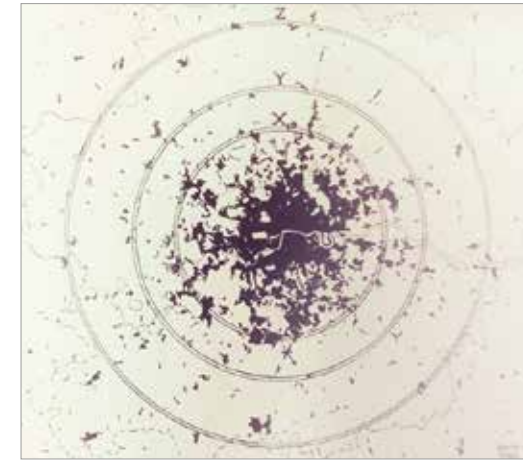


Fig:5 Three Imaginary Belts of Open Space.  
Each One Half Mile Wide. (GLPC, 1929)

early notion of introducing belts of green into corresponding areas of development is a principle which could secure amenity without requiring much land. Moreover, even applying concentric rings in a simple diagrammatic way can challenge us to think in new ways about the city's growth.

Figures Six to Nine (overleaf) show this further. London is already bounded by significant areas of open space that received no protection when the *London Society* began promoting a 'green girdle' but now serve a similar purpose. Close to the city's edge there's Epping Forest, Colne Valley and Lea Valley Regional Parks, Surrey Hills and Kent Downs Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs). Each could be proactively linked by acquisition and/or designation. Further out there are larger tranches still; the South Downs National Park bridges the gap between Kent Downs and High Weald AONBs and those of North Wessex and the Chilterns AONBs. These are again both linkable and accessible from London. Two clear bands of countryside would then exist between and beyond which sit well-connected towns with the potential to expand; Reading, Milton Keynes, Luton, Stevenage, Chelmsford and Ashford to name but a few. On a green background, the essential character of new growth corridors begin to emerge; Hammersmith to Newbury, Barnet to Milton Keynes, Romford to Colchester and Greenwich to Ashford. Once the mind is focussed upon areas that should be protected

and expanded, of permanence and adaptability, new futures begin to emerge.

Irrespective of how we ultimately chose to proceed, the essential position remains the same. Whilst the preservation of certain areas of land has always been part of the green belt narrative, that story has been shaped by both aspiration and circumstance. Previous chapters reveal a flexible concept which has evolved and responded to the opportunities and challenges of history. Turning the page, we now have our own chance to undertake a rational analysis and chart a clear direction.



Fig 6: Inner London Belt and Open Space

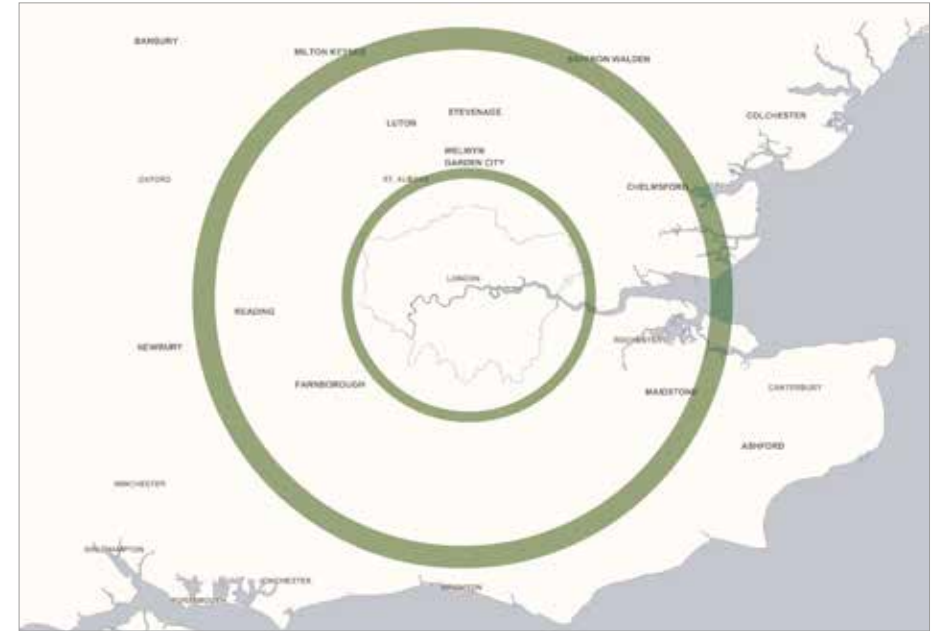


Fig 8: Inner and Outer London Belts

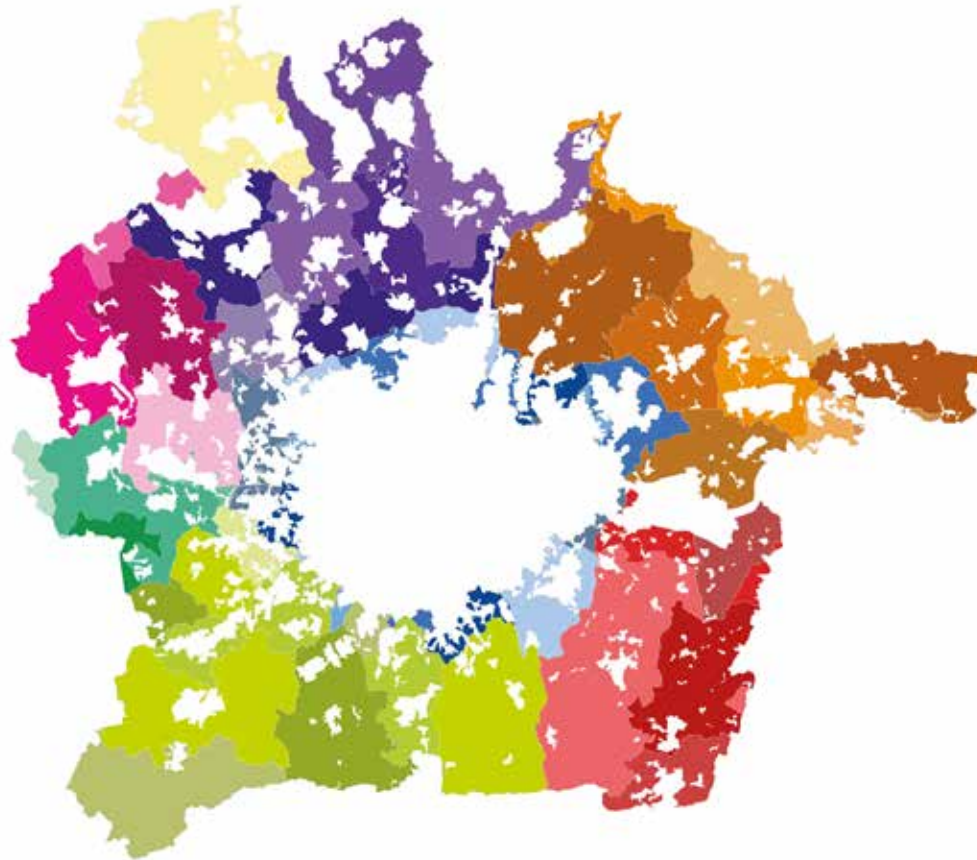


Fig 7: Outer London Belt and Open Space in context



Fig 9: Inner and Outer London Belts, Open Space and Growth Locations

Local Authorities: Local Authority Boundaries by County



- |   |   |  |  |
|---|---|--|--|
| <p><b>Bedfordshire</b><br/>Central Bedfordshire<br/>South Bedfordshire<br/>Luton</p> <p><b>Berkshire</b><br/>Bracknell Forest<br/>Slough<br/>Windsor and Maidenhead<br/>Wokingham</p> <p><b>Buckinghamshire</b><br/>Aylesbury Vale<br/>Chiltern<br/>South Bucks<br/>Wycombe</p> | <p><b>Essex</b><br/>Brentwood<br/>Chelmsford<br/>Epping Forest<br/>Rochford<br/>Uttlesford<br/>Thurrock<br/>Basildon<br/>Castle Point<br/>Harlow<br/>Southend on Sea</p> <p><b>Kent</b><br/>Sevenoaks<br/>Tonbridge and Malling<br/>Tunbridge Wells<br/>Maidstone<br/>Dartford<br/>Gravesham<br/>Medway</p> | <p><b>Hertfordshire</b><br/>East Hertfordshire<br/>North Hertfordshire<br/>Stevenage<br/>Dacorum<br/>St Albans<br/>Three Rivers<br/>Hertsmere<br/>Welwyn Hatfield<br/>Broxbourne<br/>Watford</p> <p><b>Surrey</b><br/>Mole Valley<br/>Tandridge<br/>Waverley<br/>Guildford<br/>Surrey Heath<br/>Elmbridge<br/>Reigate and Banstead<br/>Runnymede<br/>Woking<br/>Epsom and Ewell<br/>Spelthorne</p> | <p><b>Greater London</b><br/>Bromley<br/>Havering<br/>Hillingdon<br/>Richmond upon Thames<br/>Bexley<br/>Enfield<br/>Barnet<br/>Croydon<br/>Kingston upon Thames<br/>Sutton<br/>Harrow<br/>Hounslow<br/>Redbridge<br/>Barking and Dagenham<br/>Greenwich<br/>Ealing<br/>Waltham Forest<br/>Haringey<br/>Newham</p> |
|---|---|--|--|

**THE GREEN BELT ATLAS**

This atlas was made by graduating students of ADS2 at the Royal College of Art School of Architecture, taught by Charles Holland, David Knight and Finn Williams.

Our atlas is the first qualitative mapping of the Metropolitan Green Belt since it was established. It documents a space that defines not only London's form and growth, but also how the city and its surroundings are perceived, used and imagined; a legislative space defined by what it prevents rather than what it contains.

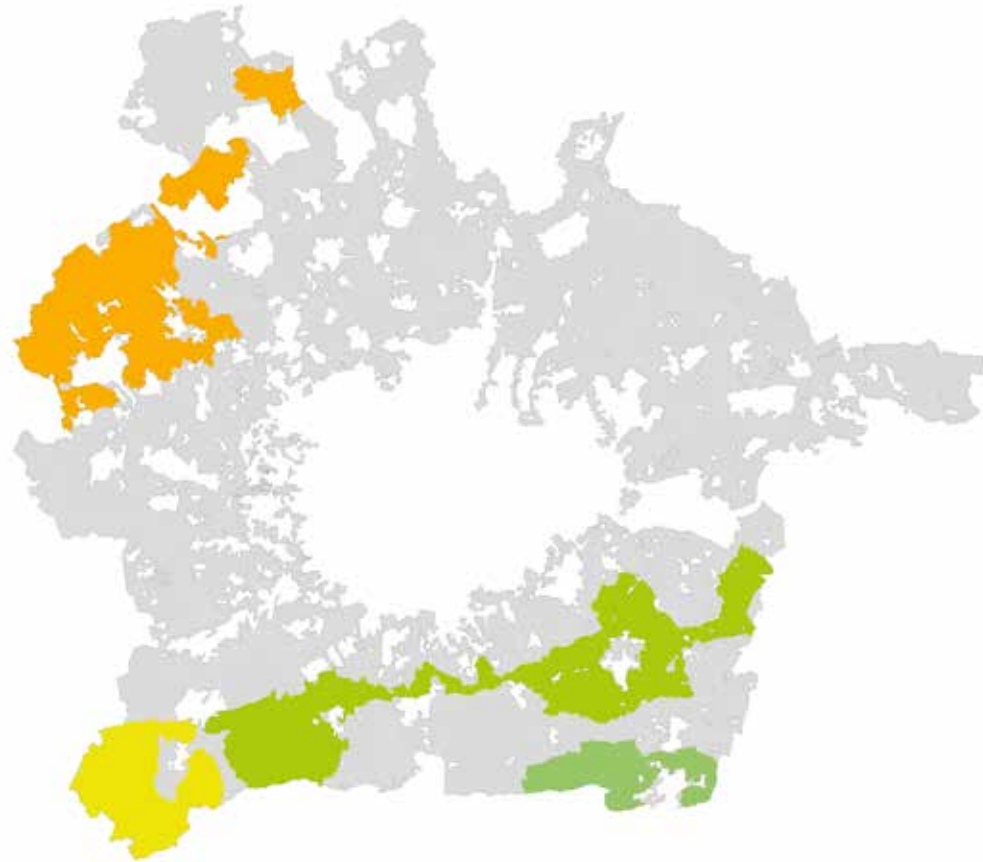
But as the MGB comes under increasing pressure from development, it is vital that we understand its qualities as much as we understand its constraints. Although the MGB has been scrupulously researched in relation to rhetorical debates concerning growth and preservation, it has never been scrutinised as a territory in its own right. We know next to

nothing about its economy, its spatial character, or its value(s). Few Londoners could tell you where it begins or ends. But the territory demarcated by the green belt is not empty; indeed it frequently functions as a social twilight zone for opportunistic, illegal, or otherwise off-grid activity, as well as being a home to essential city infrastructure. It is far from untouched or unspoilt.

ADS2's 2013 mappings of the MGB went on to inform design projects that challenged, critiqued and speculated upon its future. This year the studio has moved on to another pillar of post-war planning: New Towns, proposing new models for planned settlement amidst a crisis not only of housing but also ambition.

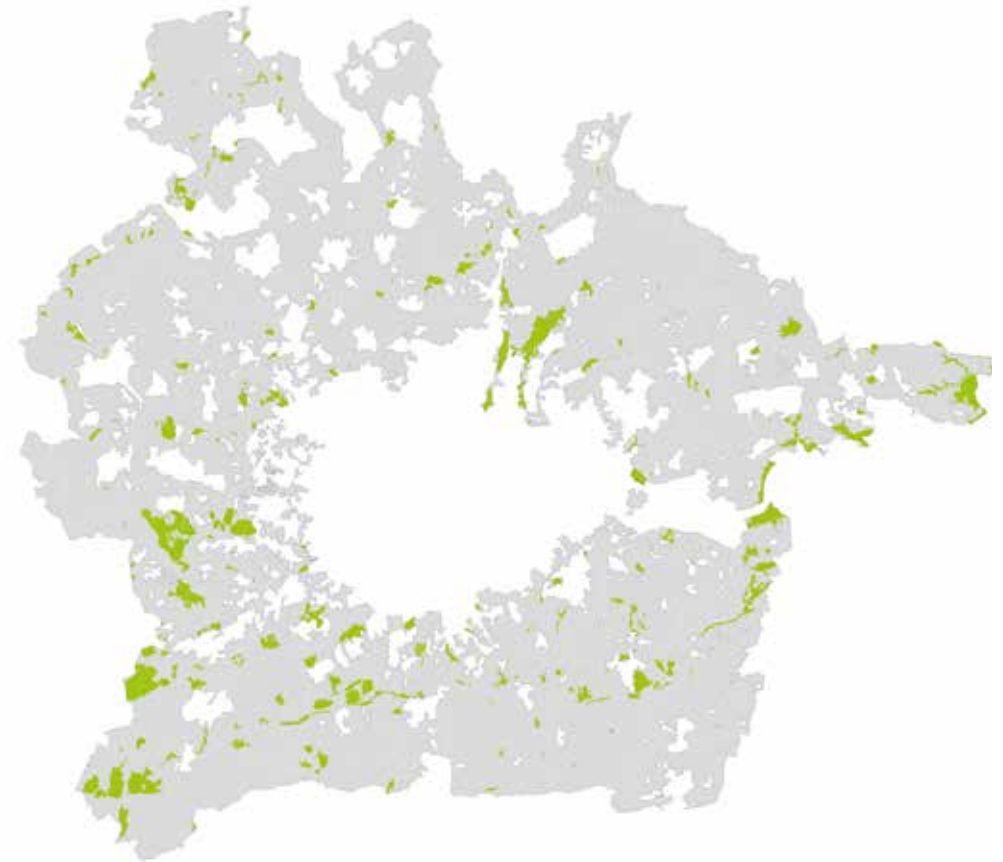
[ads2rca.wordpress.com](http://ads2rca.wordpress.com)  
[@ads2rca](https://twitter.com/ads2rca)

Areas of Outstanding natural Beauty: **A.O.N.B**



- CHILTERNS ▶
- SOUTH DOWNS ▶
- SURREY HILLS ▶
- HIGH WEALD ▶

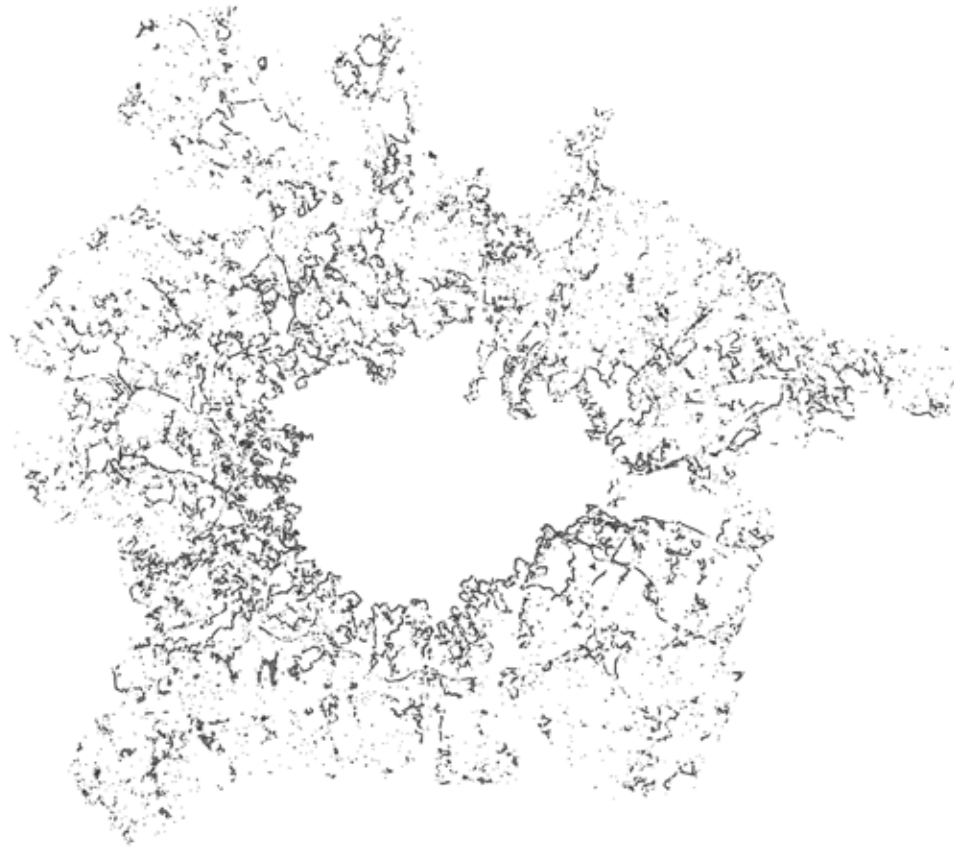
Sites of Specific Scientific Interest: **S.S.S.I**



- S.S.S.I ▶

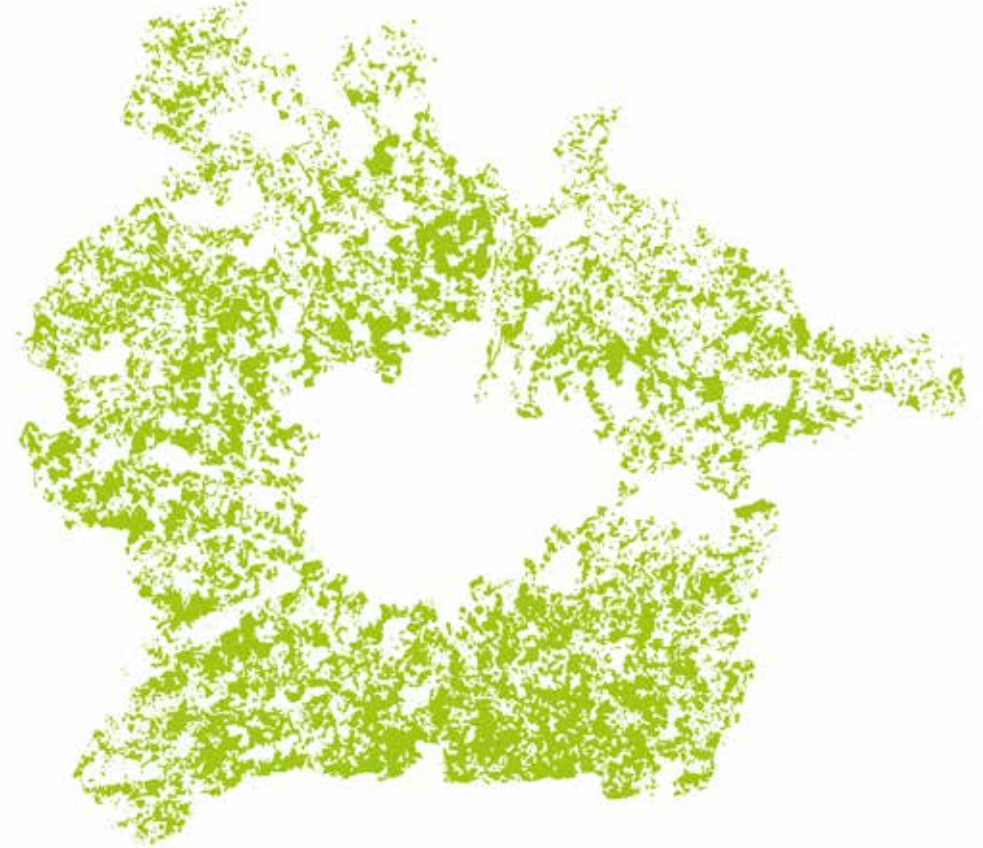
Source: google.com/maps

Land Use: **Development**



Source: Land Cover Map 2007

Land Use: **Grassland**



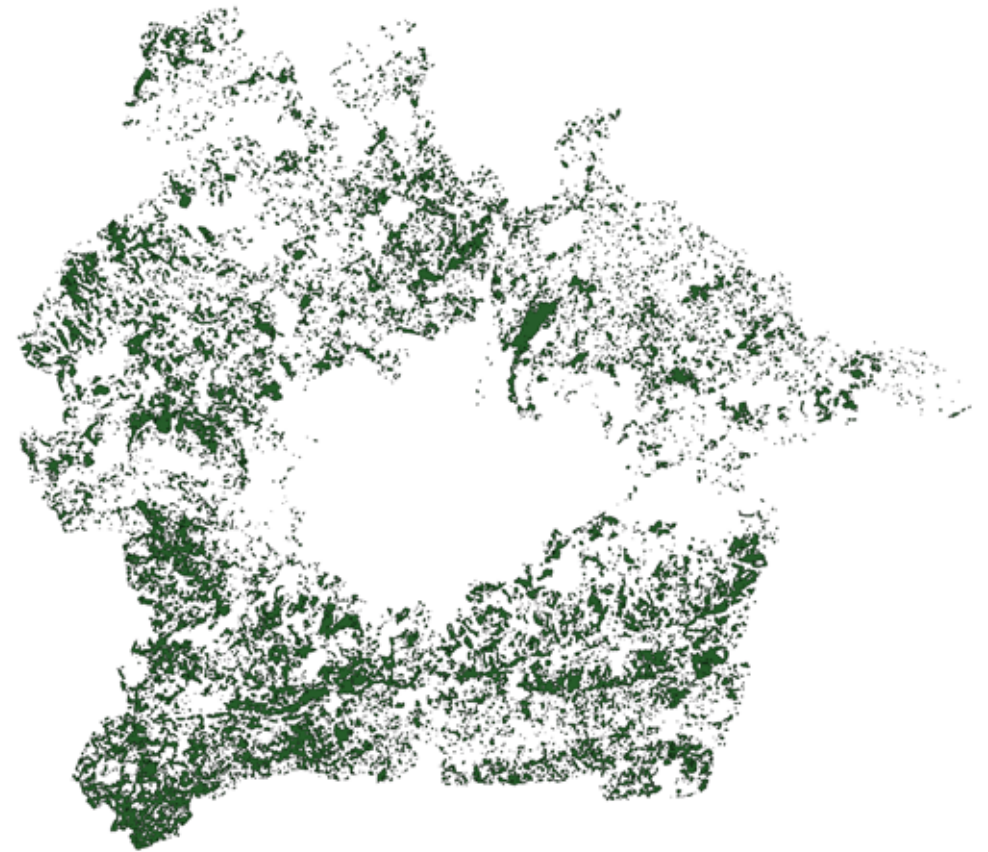
Source: Land Cover Map 2007

Land Use: **Arable & Horticulture**



Source: Land Cover Map 2007

Land Use: **Woodland**



Source: Land Cover Map 2007

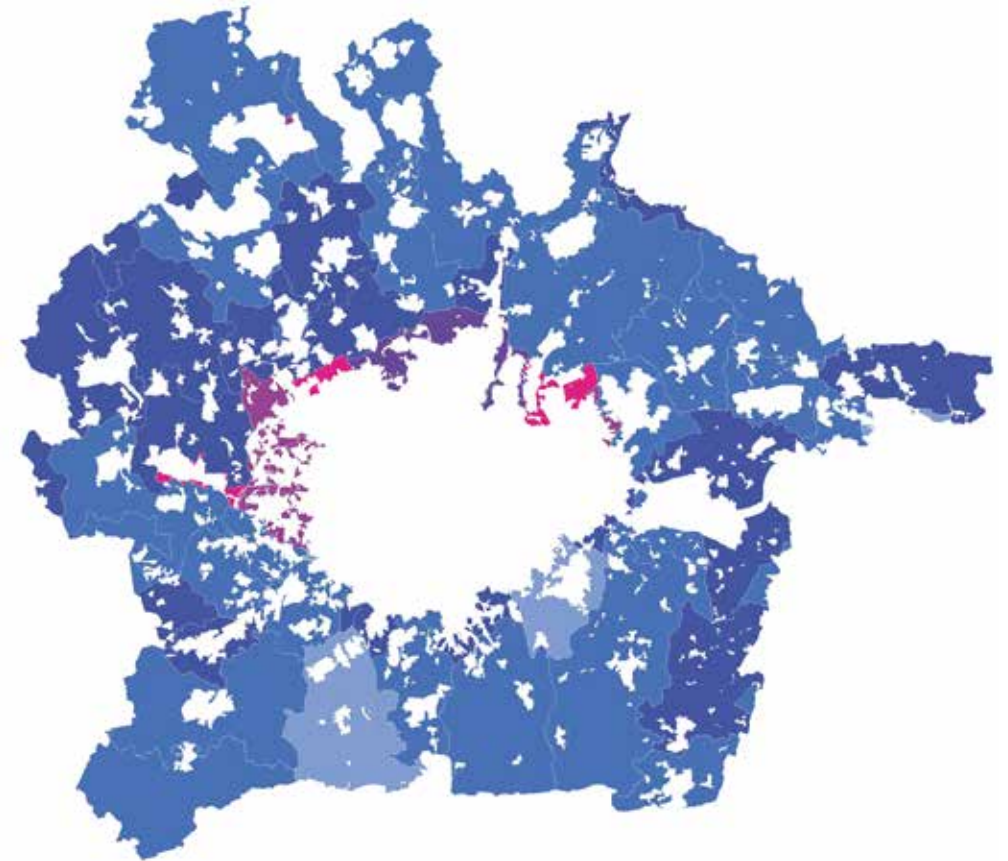


Dwelling Stock: **Average House Price by Local Authority**



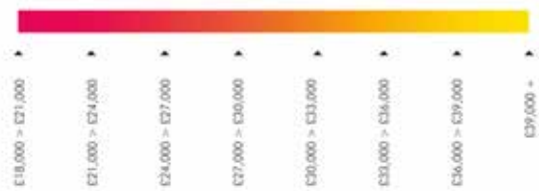
Source: data.gov.uk

Dwelling Stock: **Average Household Size by person by Local Authority**



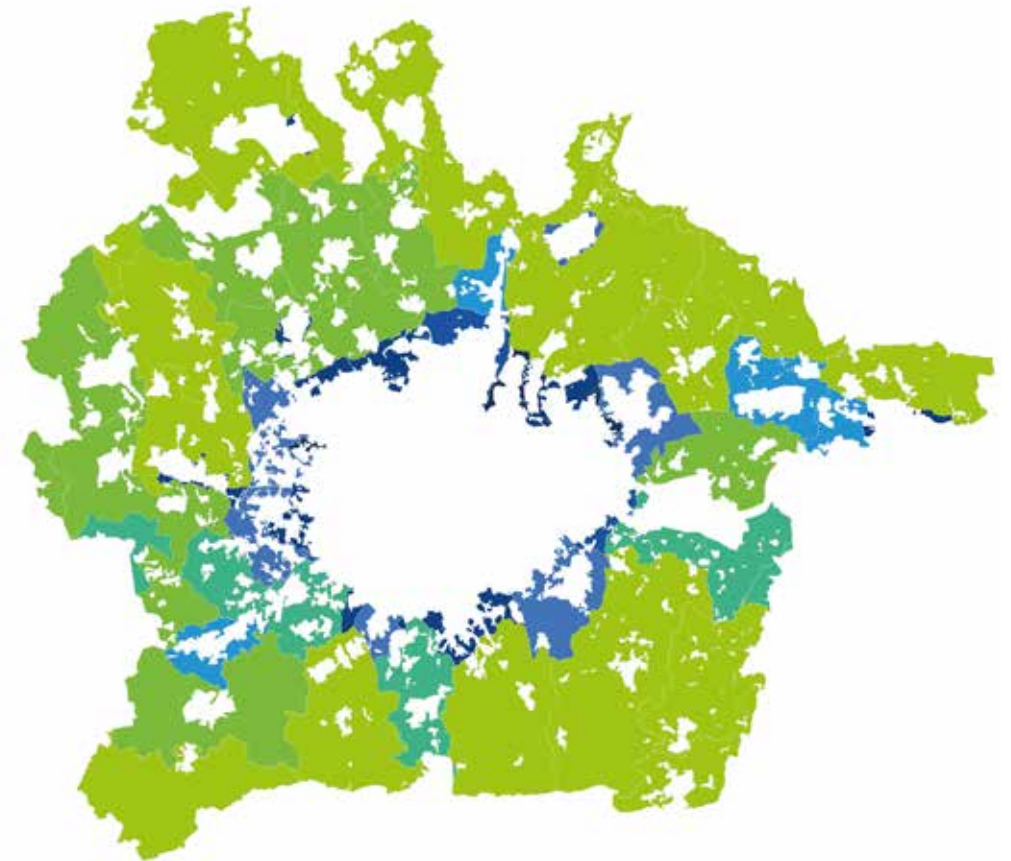
Source: data.gov.uk

Social Demographic: **Gross Annual Pay by Local Authority**



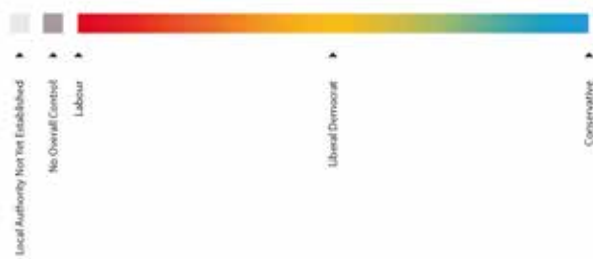
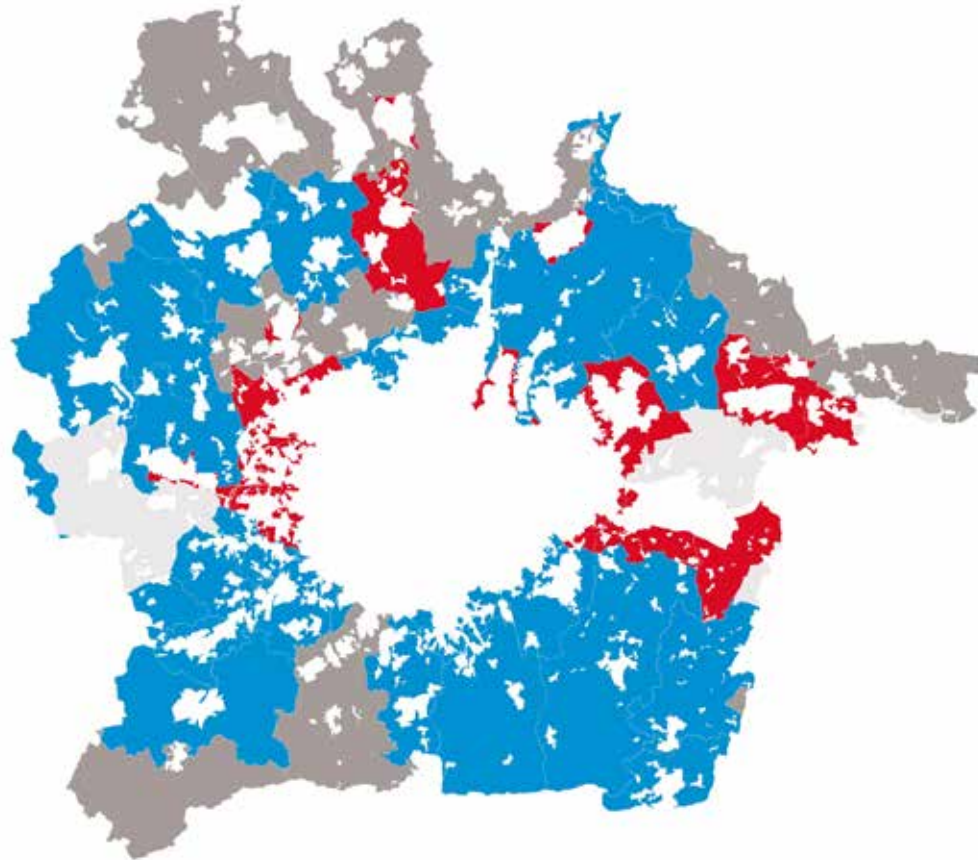
Source: data.gov.uk

Population Density: **People per Hectare by Local Authority**



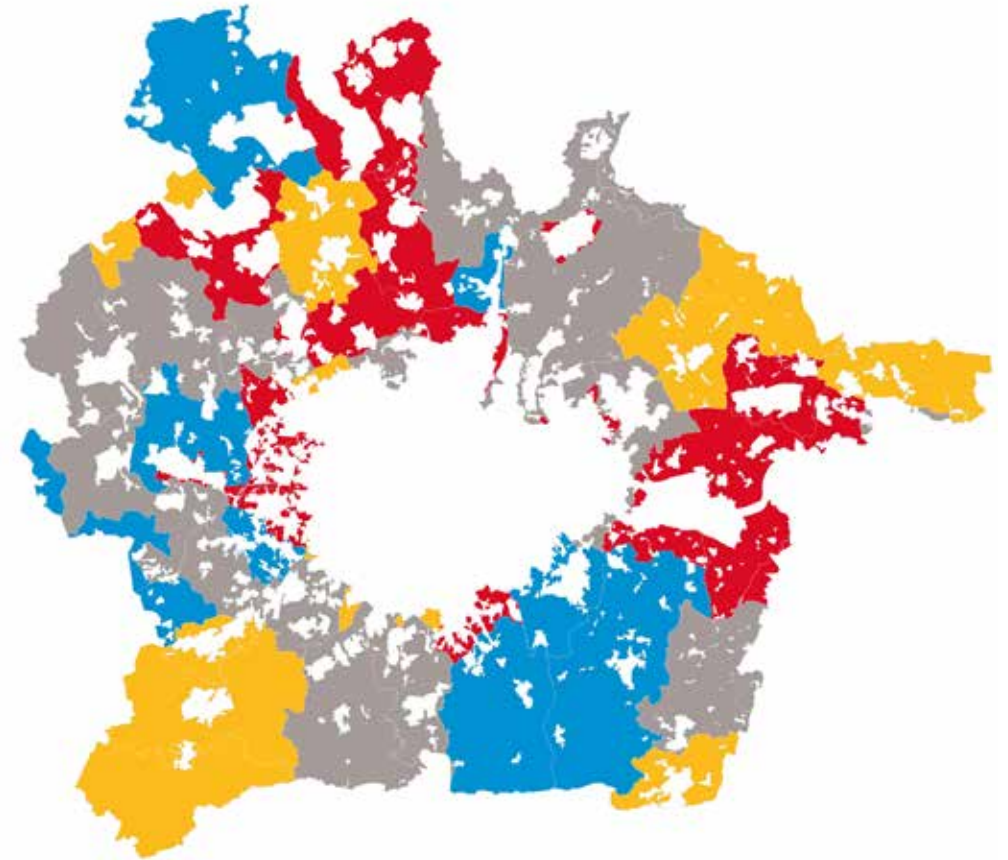
Source: data.gov.uk

Political Control (1973): Dominant Party by Local Authority



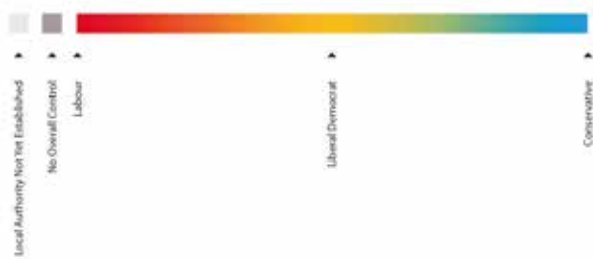
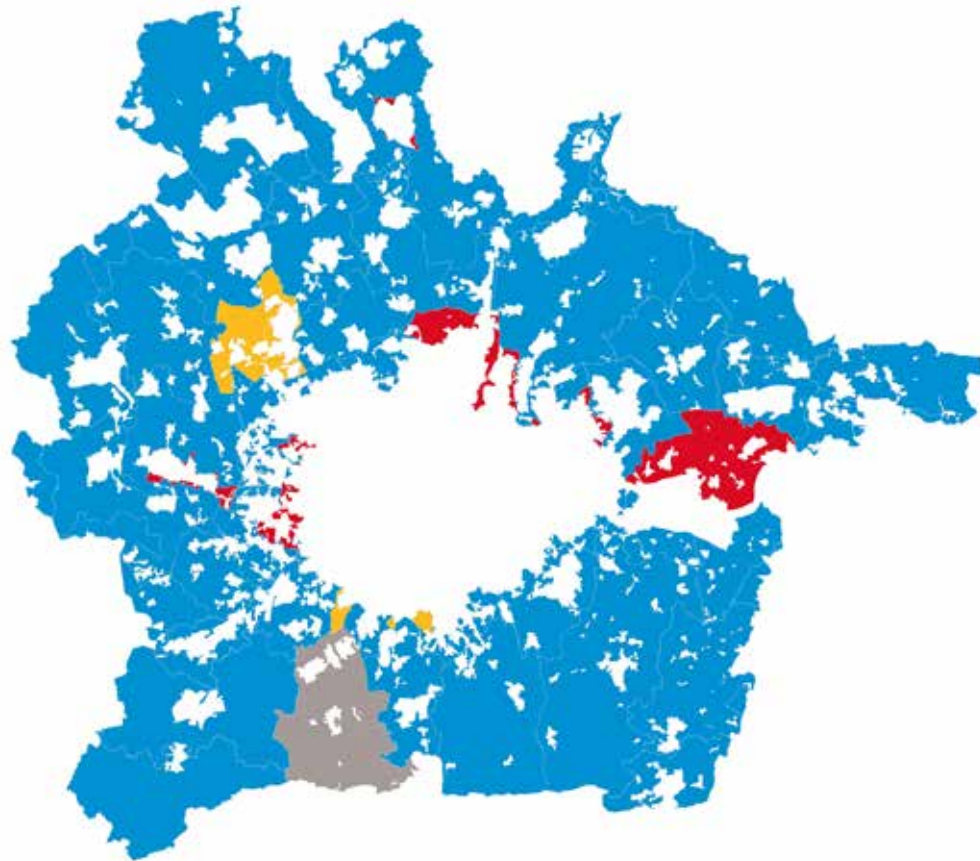
Source: boundaryassistant.org

Political Control (1997): Dominant Party by Local Authority



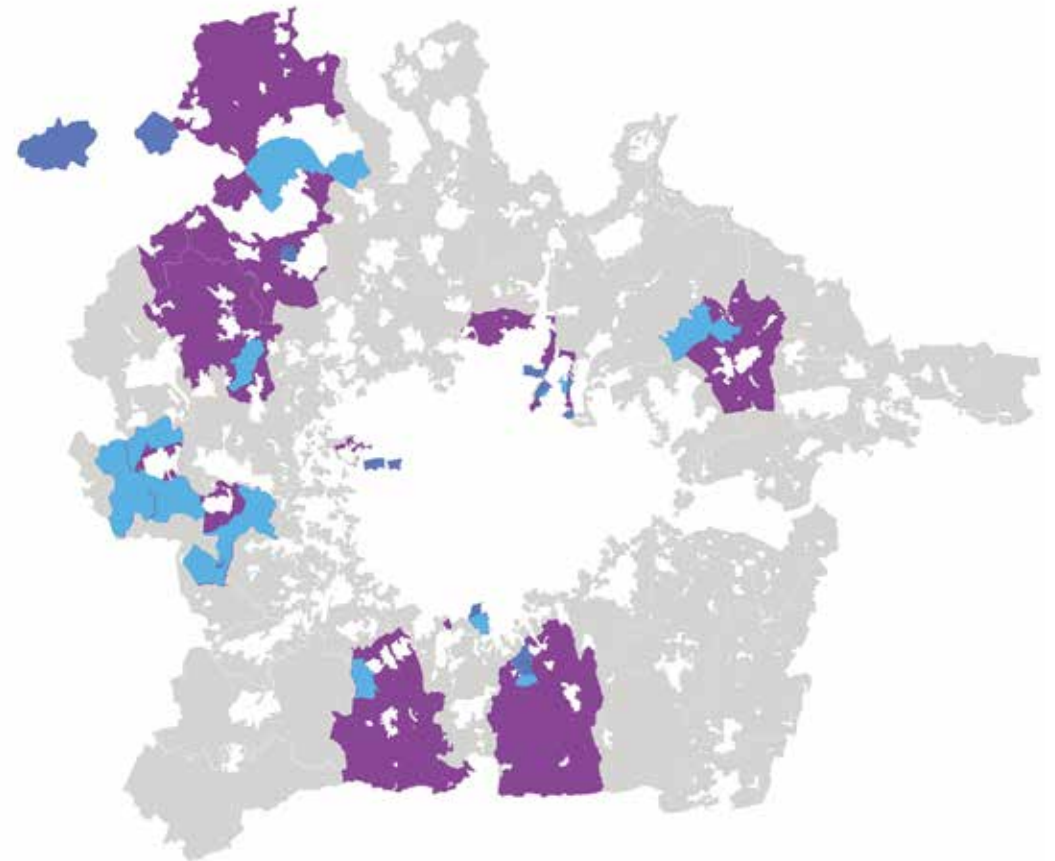
Source: boundaryassistant.org

Political Control (2012): **Dominant Party by Local Authority**



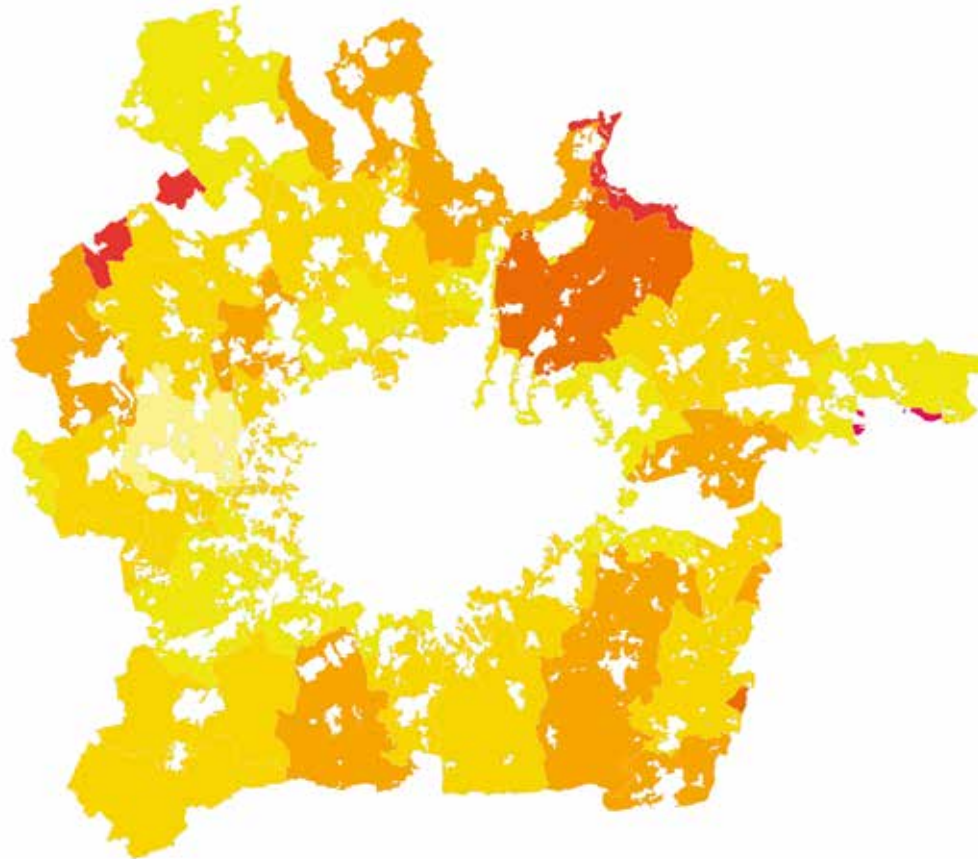
Source: boundaryassistant.org

Localism: **Neighbourhood Plan by Local Authority**



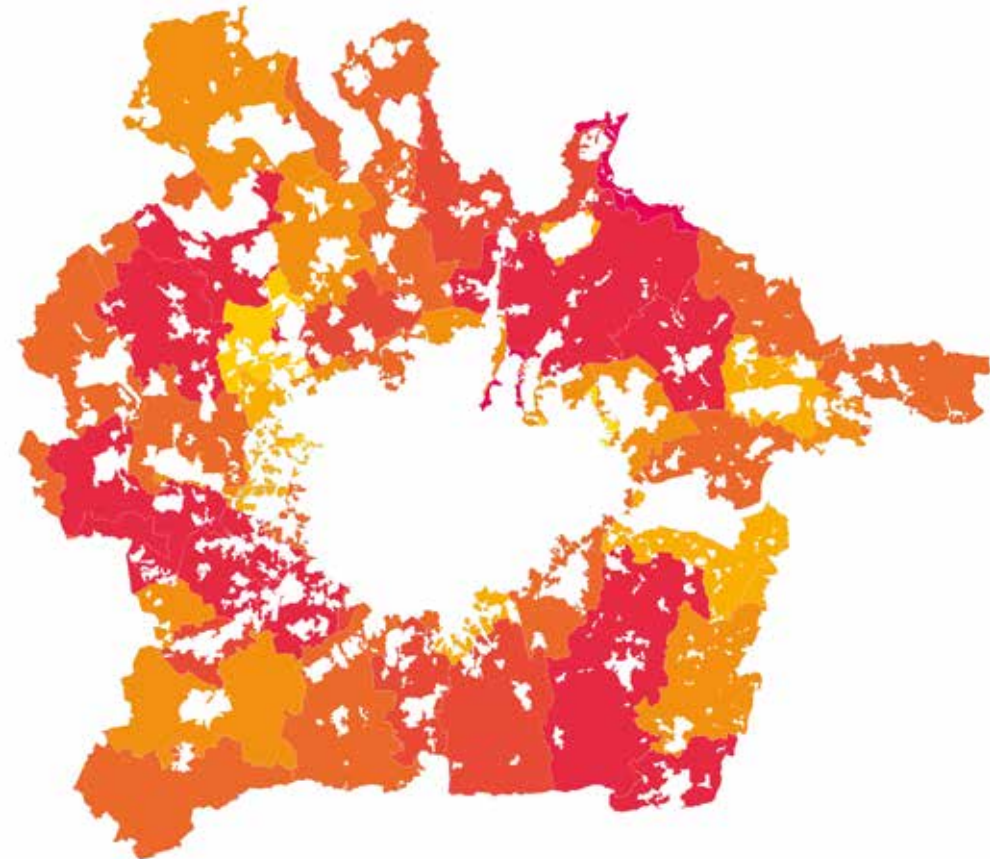
Source: data.gov.uk

### Crime: Violence Rate by Local Authority



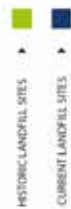
Source: data.gov.uk

### Employment: Percentage by Local Authority



Source: nomisweb.co.uk

Landfill Sites: **Current and Historic**



**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Jonathan Manns is Associate Director of Planning at Colliers International and jointly leads the London Planning team. A Chartered Planner and Surveyor, he advises various public and private sector clients across the country. This includes various major development proposals in London, with experience of tall buildings, large-scale regeneration and strategic housing schemes.

Variously referred to as “a recognised thought leader” by *Estates Gazette*, “a prominent British urbanist” by the *Architects Datafile* and “the preeminent British planner of his generation” by *Atlantis*, he is an acknowledged expert well-versed in all areas of planning; specifically issues affecting London. He sits on several professional committees and has represented the RTPI at the London Planning and Development Forum since 2008, in addition to the former RIBA London Urbanism & Planning Group. He sits on the Editorial Board of the

*Journal of Urban Regeneration & Renewal* and is a peer-reviewer for Routledge. He also edited the RTPI London’s acclaimed centenary book *Kaleidoscope City: Reflections on Planning & London* (2014).

Jonathan actively engages both public and professional audiences on planning matters in the UK, Europe, Asia and the USA. This includes as Expert Advisor at Grand Designs Live, Judge of the London Planning Awards and Chair of Working Groups reporting to the European Union’s Committee of the Regions. He is a Trustee of the *London Society*, a forum for built environment debate in London since 1912. Most recently, he has featured on *BBC News* and been quoted in the *Wall Street Journal*, *Financial Times*, *Observer*, *Guardian* and *Sunday Times*.

Source: [www.geostore.com/environment-agency/](http://www.geostore.com/environment-agency/)

