Rethinking the Green Belt

Summer 2024

Carter Jonas

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Introduction

Introduction

A source of controversy since its introduction, the Green Belt describes multiple rings of land (not necessarily open space) around urban areas that are protected from development. It is a strategic planning tool and a land-use policy aiming principally at preventing ‘urban sprawl’ and safeguarding the countryside. The surrounding debate is complex, with mounting pressure to allow more development on Green Belt land competing with pressures to maintain the status quo.

Meanwhile, the shortage of developable land is a major obstacle to addressing the housing crisis and equally limits commercial development opportunities. We have analysed data on the structure of the Green Belt and looked at examples of places where growth is constrained to understand the cost of the Green Belt and how greater flexibility could increase levels of sustainable development.

What purpose does the Green Belt serve?

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

Source: The National Planning Policy Framework

Structure & expansion

The Green Belt:

1955

was formally adopted in 1955

1.6m

extends to 1.6 million hectares

180

falls across 180 local authorities

12.6%

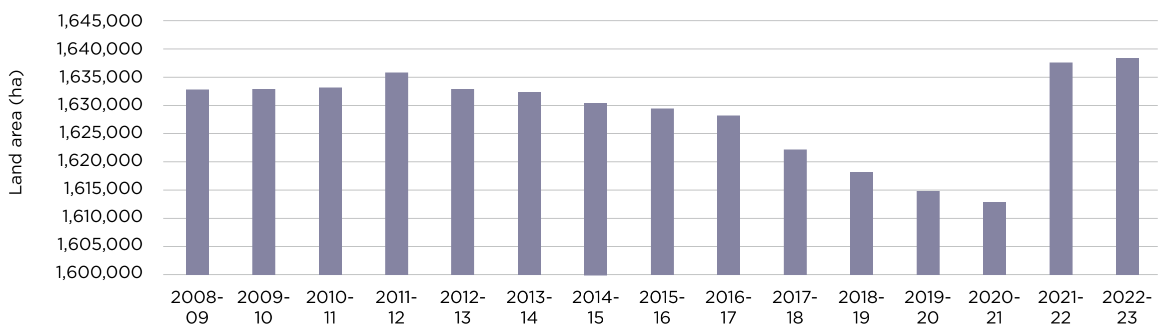
covers 12.6% of land in England

In the two years to April 2023, land designated as Green Belt increased by 25,443 ha, or +1.6% (+1.5% in the first 12 months, then +0.1% in the second 12 months). This follows 10 years of contraction of the Green Belt (see **figure 1**) and puts its coverage at its largest since 2004.

Figure 1

Area of land designated as Green Belt

Source: Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities



April 2021-2023

12↑

12 local authorities increased their Green Belt

30↓

30 local authorities reduced their Green Belt

Local authority expansion

At a LA level, 12 authorities increased their Green Belt in the two years to April 2023 and 30 authorities reduced it. Most of these changes have been minor, with only 3 increasing Green Belt area by 1% or more, and 13 decreasing by at least 1%. Northumberland County Council had the greatest impact as it increased its Green Belt by 26,771 ha (or +61.5%). Meanwhile, Central Bedfordshire released 1,284 ha (-4.6%) of Green Belt land after identifying these areas as being the most sustainable locations for development in the Local Plan review. It is worth noting that if Northumberland was taken out of the analysis, the overall size of the Green Belt would have decreased (albeit by a marginal 0.1%).

Over a 10-year period, only 39 LAs have increased the extent of their Green Belt, while 102 have decreased theirs. Of these, 8 LAs have increased by 1% or more, with Northumberland still coming out on top in both percentage terms and by land area. The second largest change has been in North Hertfordshire, where the Green Belt increased by 3,349 ha (23.5%) in the 12 months to April 2023, otherwise changes have been marginal (York follows at +89 ha). 60 LAs have reduced their Green Belt size by at least 1%, with Coventry seeing the greatest decrease by both percentage and extent (-1,549 ha, or -51.2%).

> “Over a 10-year period, only 39 LAs have increased the extent of their Green Belt, while 102 have decreased theirs.”

Strategy

While the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) guides local policymaking by defining the principles of the Green Belt, it can be flexed to suit local circumstances and needs. Changes to Green Belt boundaries are made through (often lengthy) local plan reviews. As LAs are impacted by a diverse range of pressures and priorities, the review process often leads to varying approaches to the Green Belt.

Image: Cheltenham

Composition of Green Belt land

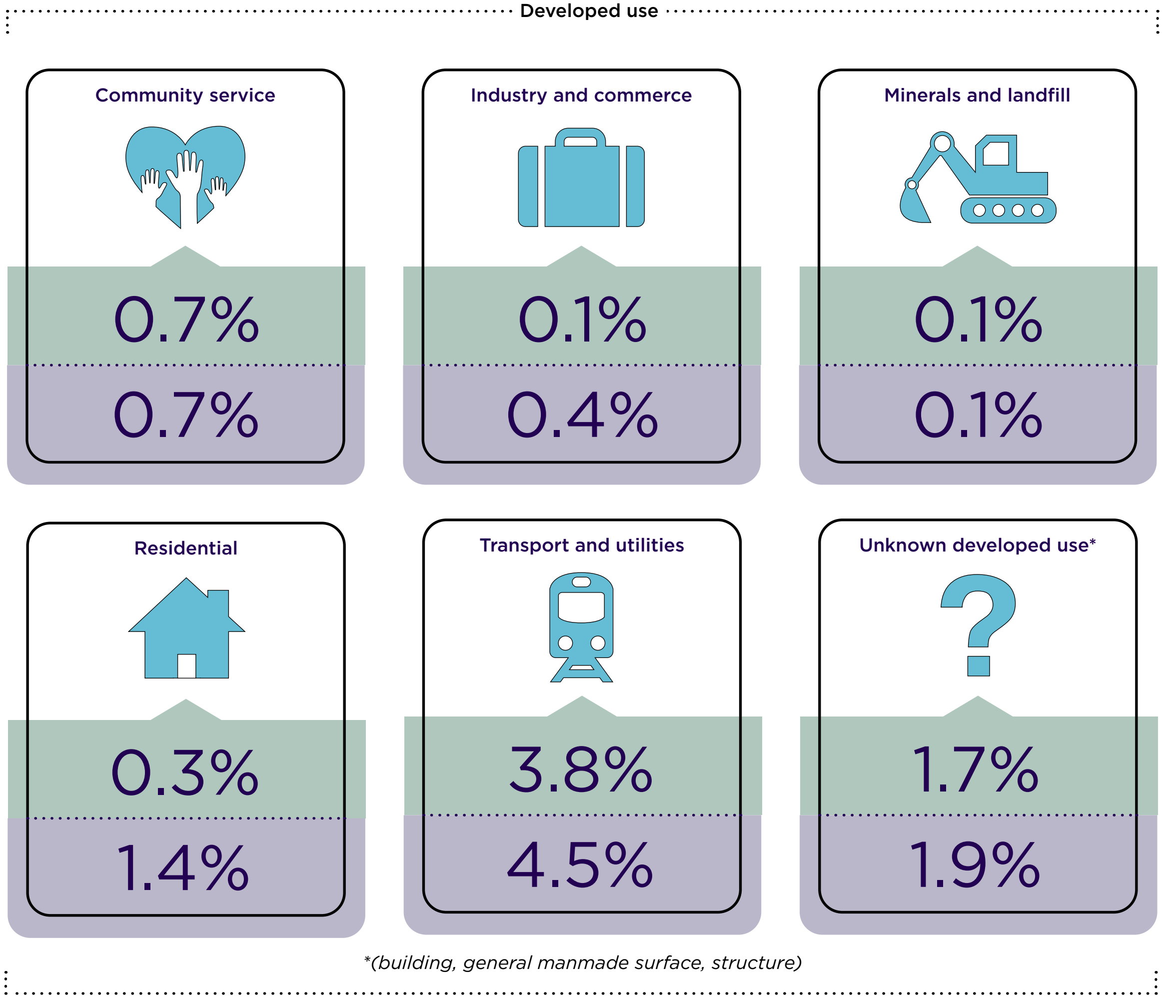
The latest data from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities (DLUHC) shows that agricultural land makes up the greatest proportion of the Green Belt (65.0%), followed by forest, open land and water (18.9%). 6.8% of Green Belt land has been developed, predominantly for transport and hardstanding, such as a car parks, paved or tarmacked area (5.2%). Land developed for buildings accounts for 1.2% (0.7% for community buildings, 0.3% is residential and 0.1% for warehousing).

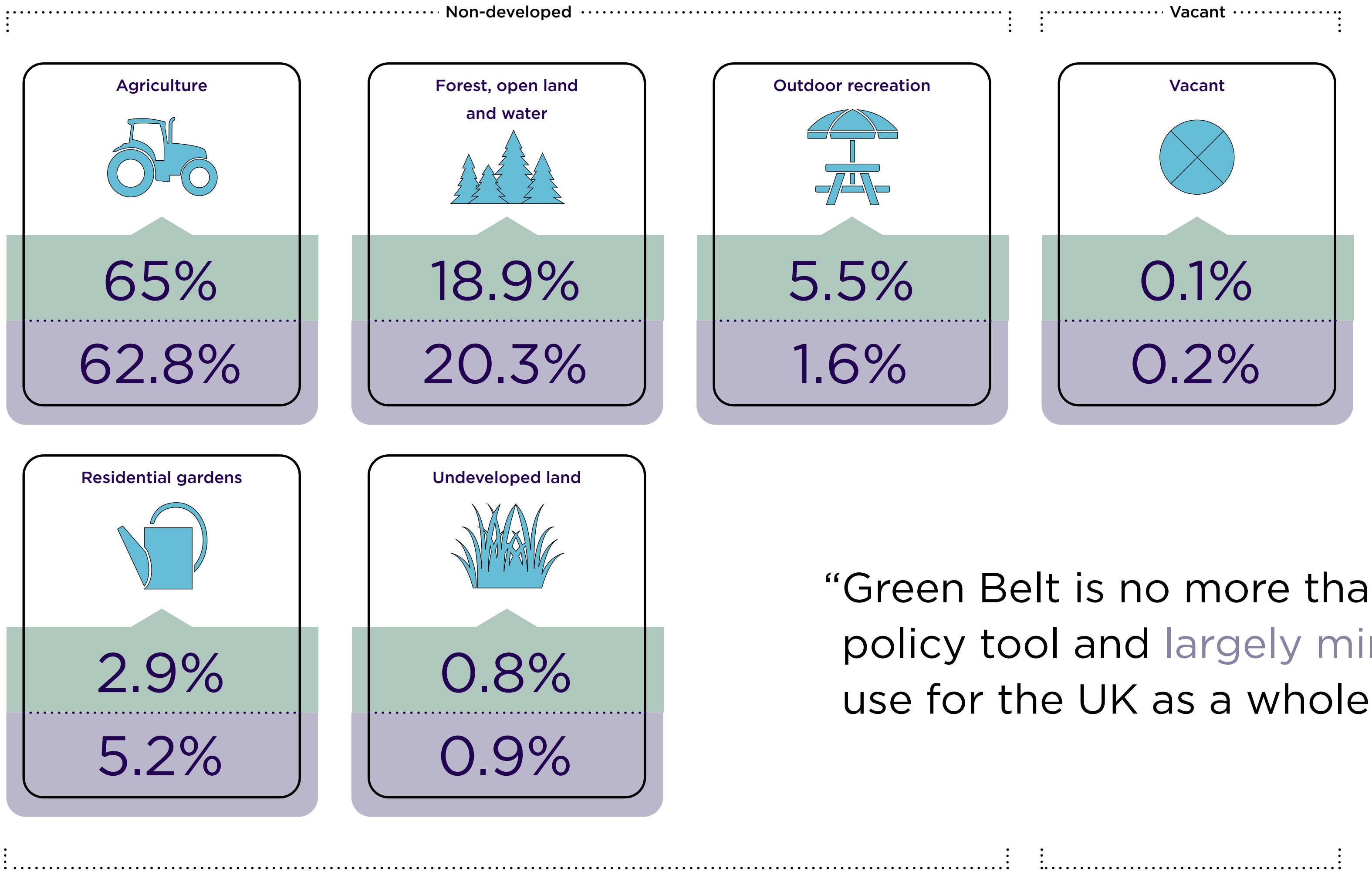
Composition of non-Green Belt land

The data above, and illustrated in **figure 2**, are not vastly different to the rest of England, which may be surprising to some, but it confirms that the Green Belt is not as unique as commonly assumed. Agricultural land accounts for 62.8% of the remaining land (when Green Belt is excluded), just 2.2% lower than in the Green Belt, while forest, open land, and water accounts for 20.3%, 1.4% higher than in the Green Belt. Only 9.0% of non-Green Belt land is developed, 2.2% more than in the Green Belt alone. Of that, 6.1% is used for transport or hardstanding and 2.5% is developed for buildings, 0.9% and 1.3% higher than in the Green Belt, respectively. This highlights that Green Belt is no more than a planning policy tool and largely mirrors land use for the UK as a whole. It is certainly not a landscape or ecological designation as some might imagine.

Figure 2
Composition of Green Belt land vs. Non-Green Belt land
Source: Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities

Green Belt land
Non-Green Belt land





"Green Belt is no more than a planning policy tool and largely mirrors land use for the UK as a whole."

Environment

Protecting the environment?

Green Belt vs. environmental designations

Despite having the word 'green' in its title, the Green Belt is not an environmental designation. Unlike conservation areas such as National Parks, National Landscapes (previously AONBs), Sites of Special Scientific Interests (SSSI) and Ramsar Sites (wetlands of international importance), for instance, the Green Belt was not created with the primary purpose of protecting the environment. While some land in the Green Belt is covered by environmental designations, and is thereby protected through other means, it does not denote high-quality landscape or habitats.

Figure 3
The Green Belt
Source: DLUHC, Natural England, Carter Jonas GIS, Carter Jonas Research

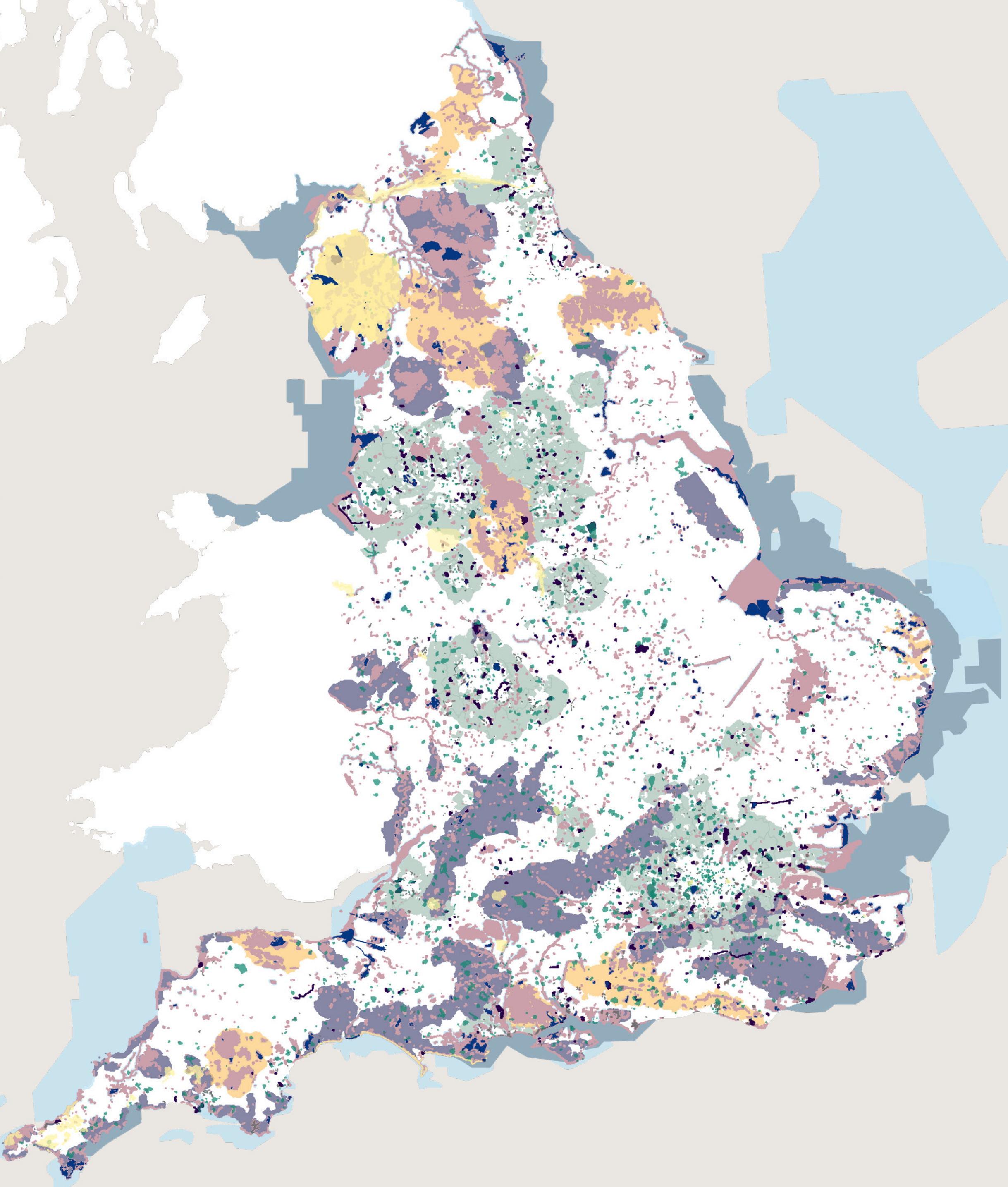
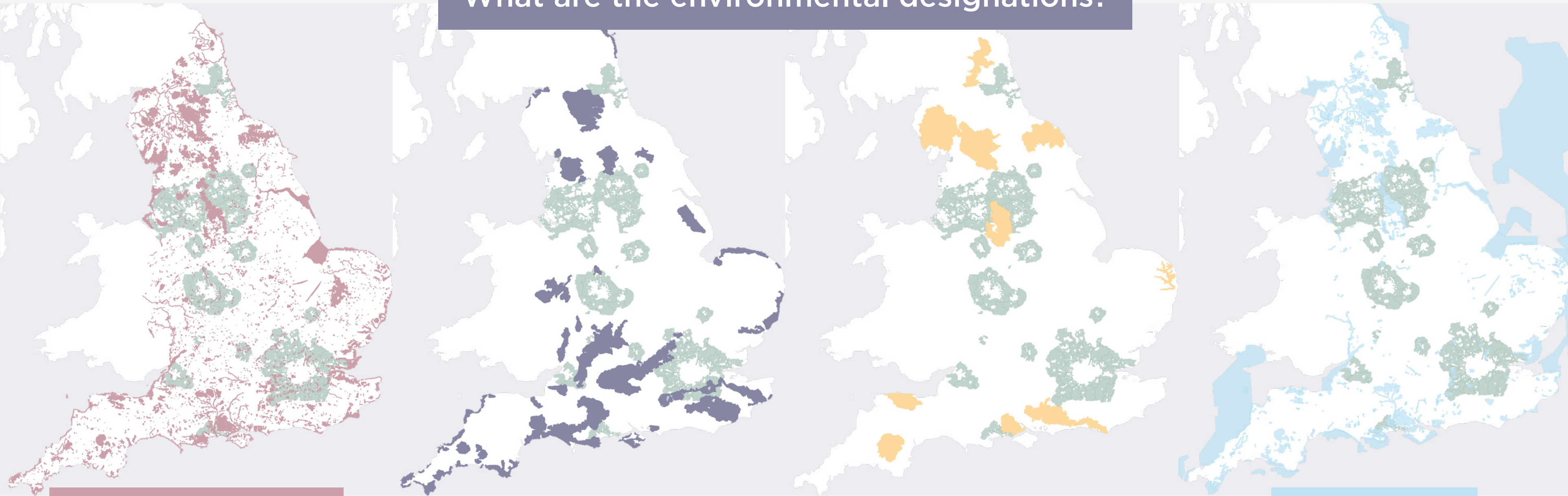


Figure 4
The Green Belt and Environmental Designations
Source: DLUHC, Natural England, Carter Jonas GIS, Carter Jonas Research

Protection for the natural environment

Environmental designations cover 21.0% of the Green Belt (accounting for overlap, and including parks and nature reserves), with the rest of the land having no specified environmental importance. This doesn't necessarily mean that the remainder is of no environmental value as, in many areas, it is perceived to protect the natural environment by account of simply being open. For instance, providing a buffer between urban areas and the countryside can help sustain air and water quality. Yet, much of the Green Belt is ecologically poor grassland, brownfield or roadside verges, for instance, which are not always well maintained. Protecting and improving richly diverse areas of land is better pursued through statutory protections designed for these purposes.

What are the environmental designations?



Sites of Special Scientific Interest

(SSSI). Areas of land or water designated for their high conservation value, often due to unique flora, fauna, geological features, or habitats.

National Landscapes

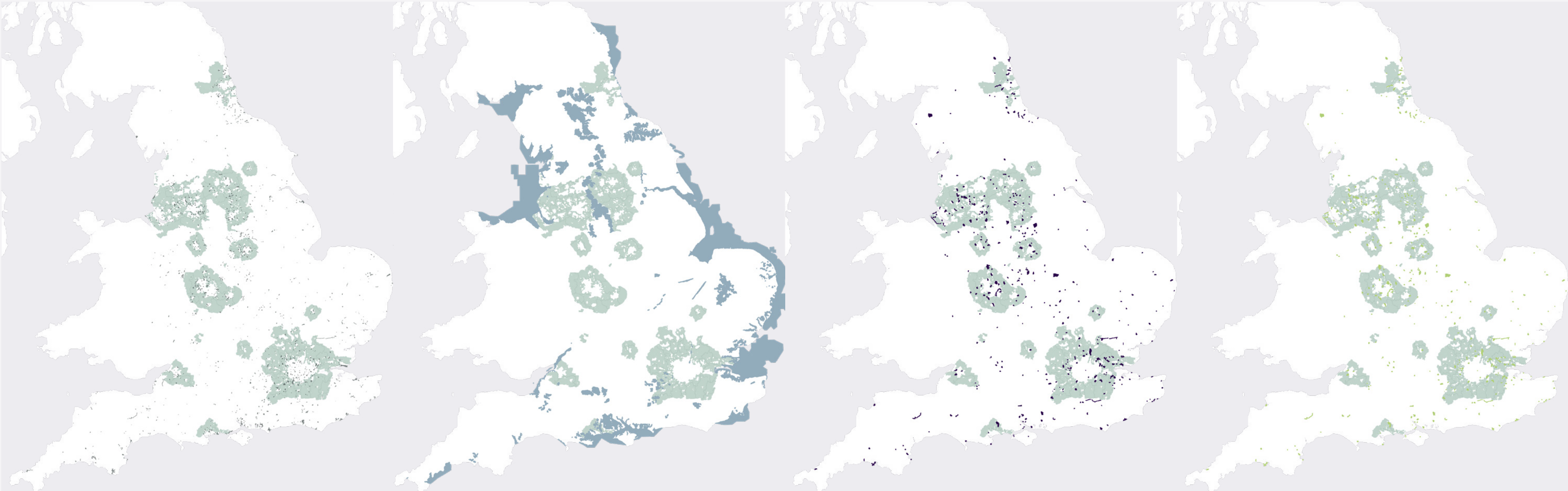
(Previously AONB). Areas recognised for their exceptional natural beauty and protected to conserve and enhance their landscape and biodiversity.

National Parks

Large areas designated for conservation and recreation, often featuring diverse ecosystems, wildlife, and cultural heritage.

Special Areas of Conservation

Protected areas designated under the European Union's Habitats Directive to conserve habitats and species of European importance.



Local Nature Reserves

Small areas managed to conserve local biodiversity, ecosystems, and geological features.

Special Protection Areas

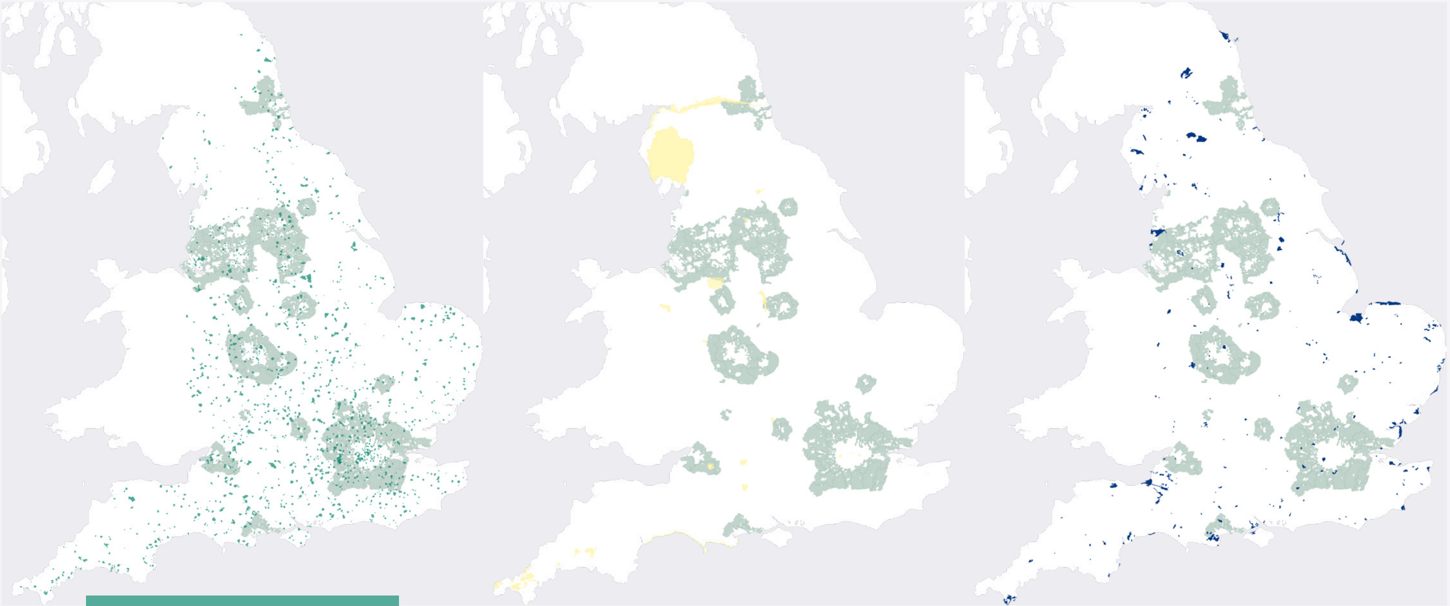
Sites designated under the European Union's Birds Directive to conserve habitats for rare and vulnerable bird species.

Ramsar Sites

Wetlands of international importance designated under the Ramsar Convention, protected for their ecological value and biodiversity.

Country Parks

Publicly accessible areas designated for recreation and conservation, often offering trails, picnic areas, and educational facilities.



Registered Parks and Gardens

Historic parks and gardens recognised for their cultural and horticultural significance.

World Heritage Sites

Areas recognised by UNESCO for exceptional natural or cultural significance.

National Nature Reserves

Protected areas managed by conservation organisations to safeguard important habitats, species, and geological features.

"Environmental designations cover 21.0% of the Green Belt (accounting for overlap, and including parks and nature reserves), with the rest of the land having no specified environmental importance."

Figure 5
Percentage of the Green Belt Covered by Another Environmental Designation by Green Belt Area
Source: DLUHC, Natural England, Carter Jonas GIS, Carter Jonas Research

"Although recreational use isn't a stated purpose of the Green Belt, the NPPF does confirm that LPAs should 'plan positively' to provide public access and opportunities for outdoor sport and recreation."

National variations

Figure 5 shows how varied this is by Green Belt area. Surrounding London, for instance, 38.7% of the Green Belt is covered by an environmental designation or public use. In particular, Surrey Hills, the Kent Downs and the Chilterns National Landscapes overlap extensively with Green Belt land (see **figure 4**). Whereas, at the other end of the scale, York's surrounding Green Belt has only 3.6% of other designations, and Stoke-on-Trent has only 2.8%.

Amenity value

In most areas, the Green Belt also has very little amenity value. Land used for outdoor recreation accounts for 5.5% of Green Belt land, while residential gardens make up 2.9%. There may be additional woodland, nature reserves or open land with public access, but this is not specific to Green Belt land and such land uses also exist on non-Green Belt land.

There is large variation in the amenity value of Green Belt across the regions. For instance, 21.9% of London's Green Belt is classified as outdoor recreation, compared to 4.2% in both the South West and Yorkshire and the Humber and 3.3% in the North East. Although recreational use isn't a stated purpose of the Green Belt, the NPPF does confirm that LPAs should 'plan positively' to provide public access and opportunities for outdoor sport and recreation.

"Increasingly, local policies are reflecting a strong desire to reverse the decline in biodiversity."

A political concern

The rhetoric surrounding the Green Belt can be powerful and politically charged. Take for example the common claim that building on the Green Belt amounts to 'concreting over the countryside'. While some Green Belts contain larger proportions of environmentally protected or publicly accessible land, there is also a significant amount of land with little environmental or amenity value (recently coined the 'grey belt' by the Labour Party'). This raises the question of whether it is necessary to protect so much land, and whether greater flexibility within the Green Belt would allow for better allocation of land. It is possible to use the Green Belt for green purposes, by identifying and preserving amenity and biodiversity rich land, whilst permitting some development on land with lower environmental importance.

Biodiversity

Land releases for development can even present an opportunity for biodiversity improvements. Many LAs are prioritising biodiversity, with some declaring ecological emergencies alongside climate emergencies. Increasingly, local policies are reflecting a strong desire to reverse the decline in biodiversity, particularly by use of biodiversity net gain (BNG) policy. The Environment Act 2021 mandated BNG at a national level, requiring developers to increase the ecological value of a development site by a minimum of 10%. Yet, there are local variations, with some policies (either adopted or in consultation) requiring developers to deliver higher levels of net gain and some prescribing where or how BNG is to be delivered. For instance, Greater Cambridge's emerging Local Plan (covering both Cambridge City Council and South Cambridgeshire District Council) is calling for a minimum of 20% BNG. New development, especially large-scale projects, will then provide even greater environmental benefits, alongside much-needed housing and employment space.

Scan the QR code to view our latest research on BNG

Housing

Potential housing need

Housing demand

According to official statistics, the number of households in England is expected to grow by 5.4% by 2030 (from 2022), adding further strain to the already tight housing market. The expansion of the Green Belt coupled with population growth in urban centres has given rise to 'leapfrog' development. Developers have been forced to build further away from urban areas which often means developing areas with worse access to services and jobs and creating longer commutes.

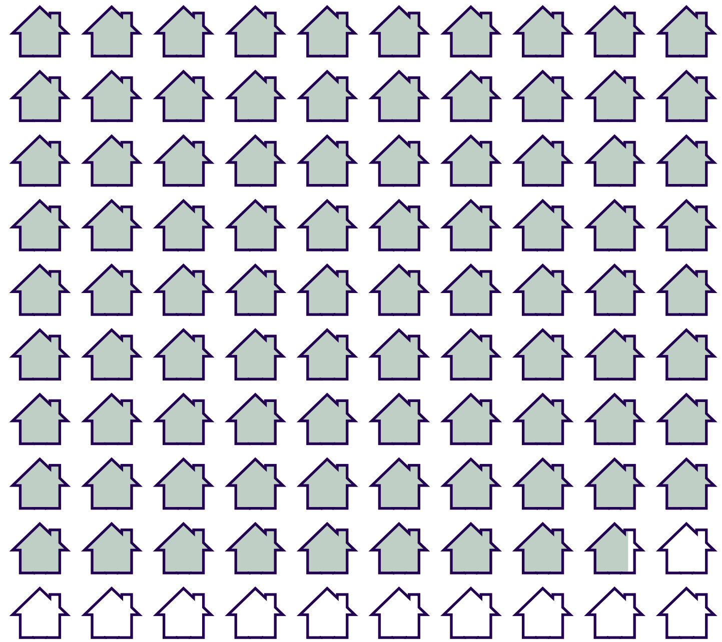
The impact of 'leapfrogging'

The above has impacted the quality of life for those forced to live further away from urban areas and, in many cases, has increased individual carbon footprints. In contrast, those already living in the Green Belt (and thereby benefitting from closer proximity to urban areas) potentially benefit from a perceived better quality of life (as well-thought-out development in the Green Belt accompanied by proportionate increases in local services should not adversely impact existing residents). It also affects the ability of businesses to hire labour, as the average commuting distance is increased, and house prices are higher than would be the case if more housing development occurred in the Green Belt, close to urban areas. As the population (and number of households) grows, this trend will only intensify.

> "According to official statistics, the number of households in England is expected to grow by 5.4% by 2030 (from 2022)."

Insufficient housing completions

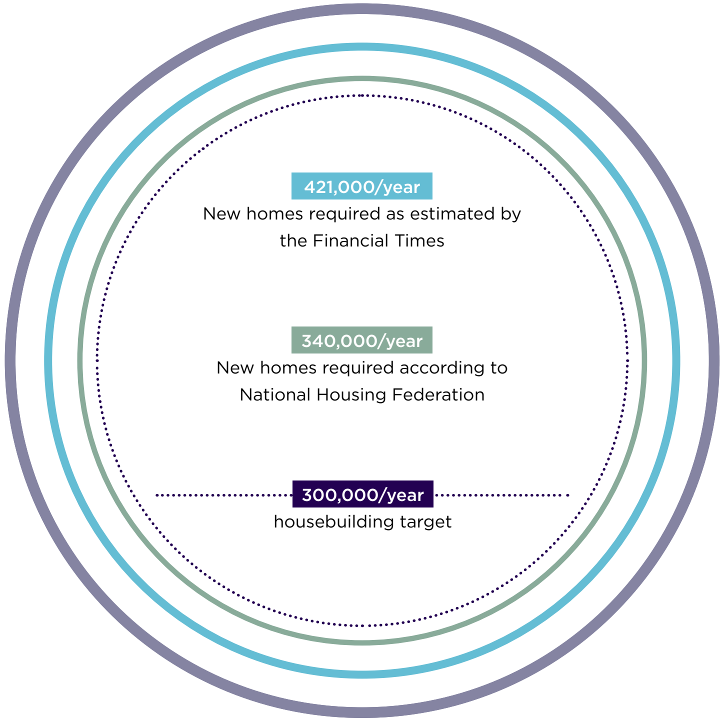
Opinions vary on how many houses the UK needs to build to cope with the projected population growth and account for existing backlogs. In the 10 years to March 2023, housing completions in the UK averaged 184,317/year. This is 11.8% below the 50-year average (206,016/year). However, the UK has been building an insufficient number of houses for decades, with the last year exceeding 250,000 completions being 1979-1980.



Housing completions average March 2013 - March 2023	184,317/year
Housing completions 50-year average	206,016/year

Estimated housing requirements

Analysis from the Financial Times estimated that England needs 421,000 new homes per year, but this number could be as high as 529,000 if current net migration levels persist, while the National Housing Federation says we need to build 340,000 homes per year. The Labour manifesto has committed to a mandatory housebuilding target of 300,000 per year over the next five years (in line with the previous Government's target).



Increasing housing stock by 300,000/year

Increasing the UK's housing stock by 300,000 per annum over the next five years (or 1.5 million in total) would increase the total housing stock by 6.0%. Assuming an average plot size of 0.033 hectares (Carter Jonas research), the land required would equate to only 3.0% of the Green Belt. While this scenario assumes Green Belt land is the sole option for new housing, which is clearly unrealistic, it highlights its potential for development.

Figure 6 shows how much land could be required if housing stock was increased by 6.0% in each region. It is important to note that the actual housing needs are likely to vary across regions. ONS forecasts vary from 6.7% household growth by 2030 in the South West to a more modest 3.1% increase in the North East. However, these projections could change if the government implements effective regional investment strategies or if net migration into the UK changes. And, ultimately, housing development needs to not only cater for future growth, but also address the current backlog.

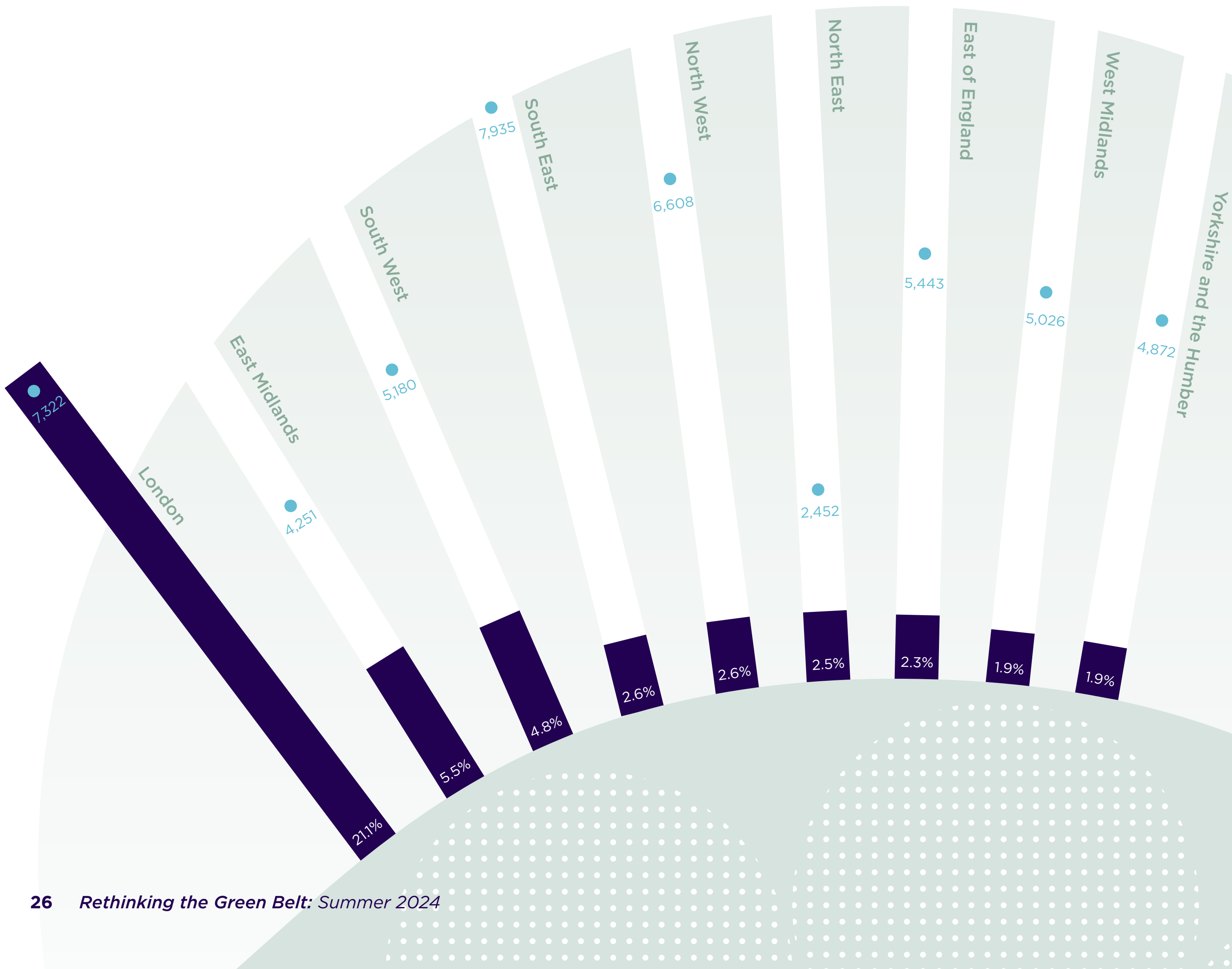
London faces the greatest pressure in this scenario, with a 6.0% increase in housing stock potentially requiring a larger land area, representing 21.1% of Green Belt land if new housing is built entirely on it. However, a more likely scenario would involve denser development, reducing the overall land requirement. In six regions (South East, North West, North East, East of England, West Midlands, and Yorkshire and the Humber), a 6.0% increase in housing would equate to less than 3% of Green Belt land **(see figure 6)**.

"Housing development needs to not only address the current backlog but also prepare for future demand."

Figure 6

Percentage of Green Belt Land Required for a Housing Increase of 6%

Source: DLUHC, Carter Jonas Research



London
21.1% Percentage of Green Belt
7,322 ha Additional land required

East Midlands
5.5% Percentage of Green Belt
4,251 ha Additional land required

South West
4.8% Percentage of Green Belt
5,180 ha Additional land required

South East
2.6% Percentage of Green Belt
7,935 ha Additional land required

North West
2.6% Percentage of Green Belt
6,608 ha Additional land required

North East
2.5% Percentage of Green Belt
2,452 ha Additional land required

East of England
2.3% Percentage of Green Belt
5,443 ha Additional land required

West Midlands
1.9% Percentage of Green Belt
5,026 ha Additional land required

Yorkshire and the Humber
1.9% Percentage of Green Belt
4,872 ha Additional land required

Addressing housing needs

There are several options to address the urgent need for housing, each with their own benefits. The modest release of land from the Green Belt forms part of the solution, either for edge-of-town development or along major transport arteries (as discussed in the next section). By selecting sites of lower environmental value and those not designated for conservation, the impact on nature can be minimised. Considering a low percentage of land across almost all regions (see **figure 5**) is designated for environmental purposes, there is greater scope to release Green Belt land. And, despite higher percentages of crossover of Green Belt and other designations in London, there is still a significant proportion of land without an environmental designation that could be used strategically.

This could be used in combination with densification in some towns and cities, allowing for greater accessibility to services and transportation. This often means building upwards, which typically involves demolishing existing buildings and can be time-consuming and costly. The Centre for Cities report, 'City Space Race', argues that building out (expanding) enables faster development and, in most cases, this means releasing some Green Belt land. Additionally, as proposed by the Labour party, the UK could revisit the approach of new town development, leveraging post-WWII successes to significantly increase housing supply. This option, however, requires long-term planning and substantial upfront investment in infrastructure.

> "By selecting sites of lower environmental value and those not designated for conservation, the impact on nature can be minimised."

Travel

Maximising travel routes

Housing demand

Due to Green Belts typically being in the form of rings around urban centres, major transport routes often pass through them to connect one urban area to another, or rural areas to city centres. There are numerous existing transport corridors and interchanges that present potential for development, saving both the time and money needed to build new ones. Flexible use of Green Belt land in areas served by existing motorway junctions or railway stations, for instance, would allow for more sustainable patterns of development than ‘leapfrog’ development, without creating urban sprawl.

We have listed examples of where development along transport corridors could help ease pressure on housing in city centres.

M1 between Sheffield and Leeds

This major transport route connects two of the largest cities in Yorkshire. It is used by millions of people each year, commuting to work, travelling for leisure and transporting goods. It is a vital part of the region's transport infrastructure. Stretching approximately 27 miles, 74.4% of the route is in Green Belt land. It also has numerous major intersections in the Green Belt in sparsely populated areas. Releasing land around these for development could reduce travel distances for those living outside of the City centre.

"Stretching approximately 27 miles, 74.4% of the route is in Green Belt land."

Figure 7
M1 between Sheffield and Leeds
Source: DLUHC, Carter Jonas GIS, Carter Jonas Research

Rail route between Birmingham and Stratford-upon-Avon

The commute between Birmingham and Stratford-upon-Avon is popular with those who prefer to live outside of a large city whilst retaining access for work and leisure. There are two main routes, both of which are approximately 25 miles in length and almost entirely located in the Green Belt. We have identified ten train stations that are either partially or wholly contained by the Green Belt, three of which are encircled by Green Belt land spanning at least two miles. Facilitating development around these stations would optimise the utilisation of existing infrastructure and minimise the need for extensive travel to access a train station. This simultaneously addresses the pressing need for housing and fosters a shift towards greener transportation.

"Facilitating development around these stations would optimise the utilisation of existing infrastructure."

Figure 8
Rail routes between Birmingham and Stratford-upon-Avon
Source: DLUHC, Carter Jonas GIS, Carter Jonas Research

A40/M40 between London and Oxford

This critical motorway connects two of the UK's most significant cities, serving as a vital transport artery for both passenger and freight movement. It facilitates access to employment opportunities, educational institutions and tourism and recreation hotspots. 60% of its junctions fall within the Green Belt, including major interchanges at Gerrards Cross, Beaconsfield and at the M40's junction with the A40 outside Oxford. Greater leniency in developing in the Green Belt, particularly around these interchanges, would pave the way for much-needed residential and commercial development, whilst helping to shorten journey times and reduce congestion.

"60% of its junctions fall within the Green Belt."

Figure 9
A40/M40 between London and Oxford
Source: DLUHC, Carter Jonas GIS, Carter Jonas Research


M40
S

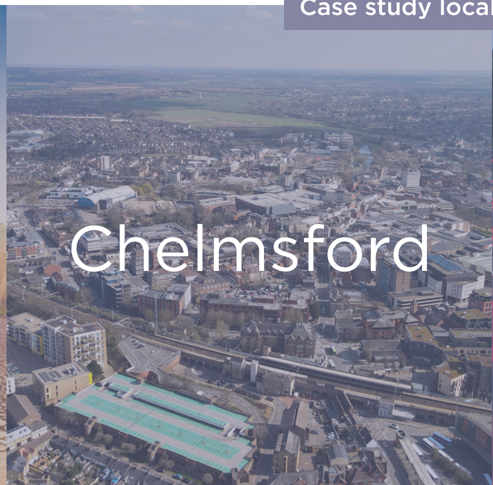
Case studies

Case studies

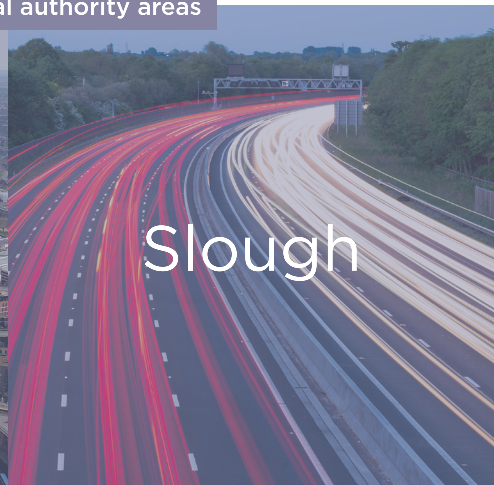
We have identified LAs with higher percentages of Green Belt land and where data indicates substantial pressure on housing, both at present and in future years. To delve deeper, we have chosen four case studies, and examine these in turn. We have also compared these LAs against national figures to understand the extent of these pressures.

Case study local authority areas

“Oxford remains one of the **least affordable** places to live in the UK.”



“Chelmsford, a popular commuter hub, has been undergoing a **significant housing development boom.**”



“Slough has a **very small geographical area** (3,250 ha), 26.6% of which is designated as Green Belt.”

“Despite its recent reduction, **a very high percentage** of Warrington is covered by Green Belt land.”

Figure 10

Case Study Data

Sources: DLUHC, Carter Jonas GIS, REalyse; ONS; Carter Jonas Live Local Plan Monitor; Carter Jonas Research

	England benchmark	Oxfordshire	Chelmsford
% covered by the Green Belt	12.6%	13.2% ↑ than England benchmark	37.5% ↑ than England benchmark
% of Green Belt not covered by other designations	79%	75.7% ↓ than England benchmark	87.2% ↑ than England benchmark
% of Green Belt that is developed	6.8%	6.6% ↓ than England benchmark	6% ↓ than England benchmark
Population density inside Green Belt boundaries (i.e. city centre; people per ha)	4	36 ↑ than England benchmark	43 ↑ than England benchmark
10 year house price growth	51.5%	54.3% ↑ than England benchmark	71.1% ↑ than England benchmark
Affordability ratio (median income to average house price; 2022)	8.3	10.5 ↑ than England benchmark	10.8 ↑ than England benchmark
10 year forecasted household growth	6.5%	6.5% – than England benchmark	7.9% ↑ than England benchmark
How much of the Green Belt could be required with 10% household growth	5%	2.9% ↓ than England benchmark	2.0% ↓ than England benchmark

	Slough			Warrington		
Structure of the Green Belt	26.6% ↑ than England benchmark	91.5% ↑ than England benchmark	21.1% ↑ than England benchmark	60.8% ↑ than England benchmark	96.8% ↑ than England benchmark	9.4% ↑ than England benchmark
Current housing market	61 ↑ than England benchmark	81.8% ↑ than England benchmark	10 ↑ than England benchmark	30 ↑ than England benchmark	55.4% ↑ than England benchmark	7.1 ↓ than England benchmark
Future need	4.2% ↓ than England benchmark	21.2% ↑ than England benchmark		4.1% ↓ than England benchmark	2.8% ↓ than England benchmark	

Oxford

Historically, Oxfordshire's Green Belt has acted as a major constraint on Oxford's growth and development. Then, in 2017, the Oxfordshire District and County Councils signed up to a Housing and Growth Deal, which saw a collective commitment to plan for 100,000 new homes between 2011 and 2031 in return for major infrastructure funding. That deal, alongside recognition that Oxford City had an unmet need for housing, which it could not meet on land within its administrative boundary, saw the last round of local plans in South Oxfordshire, Cherwell and the Vale of White Horse Councils (adopted in 2019 and 2020) allocate land in the Green Belt for some 15,000 new homes.

It is only now, some four years on, that these Green Belt releases are finally producing new homes, but not at the rate required to bridge the availability and affordability gap. As is often the way with large, strategic sites, they have been held up by problems with infrastructure provision and complex deliverability issues. This means that Oxford remains one of the least affordable places to live in the UK, with employees paying, on average, 12.2 times their annual salary on a home (10.5 in wider Oxfordshire).

A projected 6.5% growth in households over the next 10 years coupled with approximately 3,000 households awaiting social housing (Oxford City Council), illustrates an urgent need for further development, with the City's current review of its local plan concluding that it has 'built up to the edge of its boundaries' and 'has run out of large development sites to build new homes'.

In and around Oxford, there is also the added problem that housing has to compete with other uses, including land for science and technology-related development. As a key business and knowledge hub, it is crucial that the LAs can ensure a healthy pipeline of employment-generating commercial development in and around Oxford. Again, this was addressed to an extent through the last round of Local Plan reviews, when land in the Green Belt was released at Begbroke and at Culham. However, demand remains high and with land in the City at a premium, there is a case for further Green Belt releases this time around.

Oxford's emerging local plan acknowledges that it cannot meet all the City's housing need within its own LA area. Instead, it needs to work with neighbouring districts to identify edge-of-town development sites as a means to address the housing shortage. However, an attempt at Oxfordshire-wide planning policy through the 'Oxfordshire Plan 2050' proved unsuccessful, highlighting the complexities of achieving genuine collaboration among LAs. Additionally, the process of revising local plans – often spanning years – impedes timely alterations to Green Belt boundaries. Promoting more leniency with approving development on Green Belt land at a national level would go some way to addressing this issue.

Figure 11
Green Belt in Oxfordshire
Sources: DLUHC, Carter Jonas GIS, Carter Jonas Research

Chelmsford

Chelmsford, a popular commuter hub, has been undergoing a significant housing development boom, with its total number of dwellings increasing by 11.3% in the 10 years to 2022 (DLUHC). Yet, demand has still been outpacing supply, and Chelmsford's affordability ratio has been worsening at a faster rate than both London and the national average (from 6.9 to 10.8 from 2012 to 2022, or +57.0%, compared to +40.6% in London and +11.9% across England). With a significant 7.9% household growth expected over the next 10 years (ONS), further housebuilding is vital.

The City's Green Belt, making up a sizable 37.5% of the LAD, restricts development to the south and west of its urban area. Its current local plan review (Integrated Impact Assessment Report) acknowledges that this 'may be a constraint to future growth'.

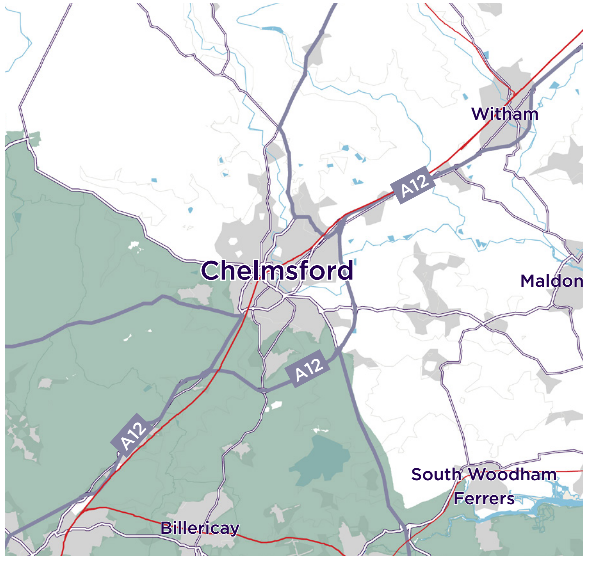
New development, particularly housing, is taking place predominantly to the north and north eastern areas of the City, further from Chelmsford's amenities and increasing travel times to London. In the 5 years to Q1 2024, planning approvals for new housing

> "With a significant 7.9% household growth expected over the next 10 years (ONS), further housebuilding is vital."

in a 2-mile radius from the centre of Chelmsford (the distance from the centre to the western edge of the Green Belt is approximately 0.9 miles, and 1.5 miles to the south) provided a total of 662 units (Glenigan). In the next 2 miles, there has been approval for 1,819 units (178.8% greater), almost entirely to the north and north east. The new mixed-use Chelmsford Garden Community will also significantly expand the City in this direction.

Considering that only 12.8% of Chelmsford's Green Belt is covered by environmental land designations, increased flexibility in its use could unlock opportunities for strategic development.

Figure 12
Green Belt in Chelmsford
Sources: DLUHC, Carter Jonas GIS, Carter Jonas Research



Slough

Slough is facing a major shortfall of housing, particularly for affordable housing. Slough's Annual Monitoring Report (2022-2023) acknowledges that there is inadequate supply of developable land and expects at least a 5,000 housing gap over the next 18 years. This deficit has served to push up house prices exponentially (81.8% 10-year growth, ONS).

Slough has a very small geographical area (3,250 hectares), 26.6% of which is designated as Green Belt. The density of the population inside the Green Belt boundary (within the urban centre) stands in stark contrast to the surrounding Green Belt land, with 61 people per hectare compared to 4 people per hectare inside the Green Belt (REalyse). Considering that a large percentage of the Green Belt (91.5%) in Slough has no environmental designation, there is potential to create development opportunities that prevent excessive densification and do not compromise the natural environment.

Slough Borough Council consulted on releasing ten sites in the Green Belt for family housing in 2021 as part of its Local Plan review. However, no response to the consultation has been published and financial problems have stalled the review (after starting in 2016). A more adaptable approach to using Green Belt land would not only streamline the local plan review process but could accelerate housebuilding.

> "There is potential to create development opportunities that prevent excessive densification and do not compromise the natural environment."

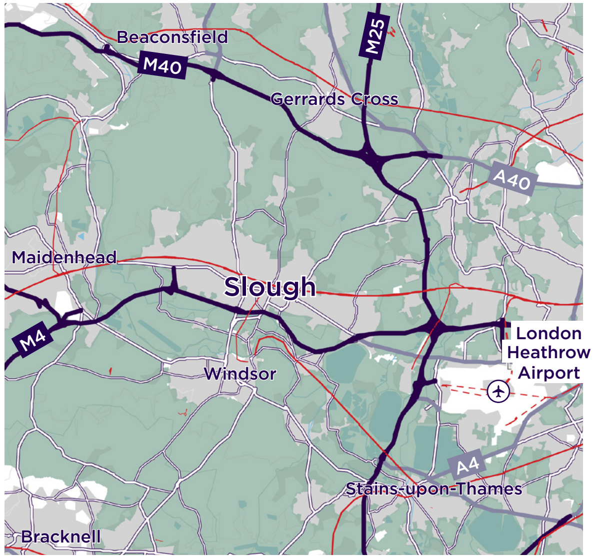


Figure 13
Green Belt in Slough
Sources: DLUHC, Carter Jonas GIS, Carter Jonas Research

Warrington

The adoption of Warrington's new Local Plan in December 2023 decreased the LAD's Green Belt size by 3.4%. The review accepted that needs for market and affordable housing cannot be fully met within the current urban area. Although the amount of land proposed to be removed was reduced twice during the process, it facilitates the development of around 4,000 homes, an increase of 4.6% on its number of dwellings (ONS, 2022). The most significant development area is the 'South East Warrington Urban Extension', which allows for around 2,400 new homes up to the years 2038/39.

At 7.1, the affordability ratio is below the national average (ONS). However, it has increased at a faster rate than both the national average (+27.5%, compared to +11.9% for England) and the average for the North West (+13.8%), illustrating that the LA has been coming under pressure.

Despite its recent reduction, a very high percentage of Warrington is covered by Green Belt land (60.8%). Large blocks of Green Belt to the south in Cheshire East, Cheshire West and Chester, to the north and west in St. Helens also act as a significant constraint on any expansion. Yet, 96.0% of Warrington's Green Belt is not covered by an environmental designation, offering further opportunity for development without impinging on biodiversity rich land, particularly considering a 10% increase in housing stock (averaging 0.033 hectares a plot) could require only 2.8% of its Green Belt land.

> "Large blocks of Green Belt to the south in Cheshire East, Cheshire West and Chester, to the north and west in St. Helens act as a significant constraint on any expansion."

Figure 14
Green Belt in Warrington
Sources: DLUHC, Carter Jonas GIS, Carter Jonas Research

Looking forward

Looking forward

Opportunities for development

At a time when there is an acute housing shortage and a need for high-quality commercial space, it is vital that we look to measures to unlock opportunities for development. Many urban centres have very little developable land, which is acting as a major constraint on affordability and growth. Green Belt land offers the opportunity for valuable edge-of-town development within close proximity to transport connections and amenities.

A pragmatic approach

While it is important that we preserve high-quality, biodiverse, and environmentally sensitive land, the Green Belt does not necessarily fit into these categories. Many of the perceptions of the Green Belt are myths and are impinging on the ability of the LPAs to bring forward managed and sustainable development. A more pragmatic approach to releasing Green Belt land that is not productive or covered by an environmental designation would not only streamline the local plan review process but could accelerate in-demand development.

> “A more pragmatic approach to releasing Green Belt land that is not productive or covered by an environmental designation would not only streamline the local plan review process but could accelerate in-demand development.”

Solutions

The use of Green Belt land (at the edge of cities or along major transport arteries) only forms part of the solution, with other potential approaches including densification, and the development of entirely new towns. The former was an assumed priority for the Conservative government, with Michael Gove (the previous Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities) discussing plans to allow shops and offices to be converted into homes. This has been criticised (notably by the Local Government Association) as offices and shops are not always suitable for housing, and it may create 'poor quality residential environments'.

The future

Housing and economic growth were key policy areas in the general election, going hand-in-hand with housebuilding and commercial development (with specific commitments to datacentres and the life sciences sector). While the Labour party have advocated a 'brownfield first approach', they have acknowledged that development on brownfield alone is not sufficient, with important implications for the future of the Green Belt. They have committed to a strategic approach to the use of the Green Belt, suggesting a shift in approach may be round the corner.

"Housing and economic growth were key policy areas in the general election, going hand-in-hand with housebuilding and commercial development"

Contact us

David Churchill
Partner
020 7518 3348 | 07866 794560
david.churchill@carterjonas.co.uk

Colin Brown
Head of Planning & Development
01223 326826 | 07771 924426
colin.brown@carterjonas.co.uk

Sophie Davidson
Research Associate
020 7493 0685 | 07917 233948
sophie.davidson@carterjonas.co.uk

Carter Jonas