

The Future of the Green Belt

By Samuel Hughes & Robert Colville





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About Create Streets

Create Streets is a design practice, town-builder and think tank. Its primary mission is to create beautiful, sustainable places of gentle density that prioritise well-being, social cohesion and economic vitality.

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Executive Summary

- In the early 20th century, England embarked upon one of the most ambitious and successful periods of urban expansion in modern history. As well as expanding the footprint of our cities, developers created new suburbs along the rail lines leading out of them – places that are still some of the most beautiful and desirable in the country.
- In the years before and after the war, planning philosophy shifted. England adopted a system of development control centred on 16 green belts – a deliberate constriction of the cities unmatched in other countries. This system was backed not least by the residents of the new suburbs of Metroland (or Metro-land), who wanted to avoid further development of the kind that had created their communities.
- The idea was that development would instead be concentrated on the far side of the green belt, not least in the New Towns. But only 11 of these were ever built. The result was to protect huge areas of the countryside from development, while freezing the footprint of our major cities.
- After a long period of stasis, the green belts are coming under renewed political pressure. The Government has introduced changes to national policy that will lead to substantial green belt release in the coming years.
- Traditional advocates of green belting often give the impression that all parts of the green belts are vital either aesthetically, environmentally, as amenity space or for food production. Supporters of reform claim that much of the ‘green belt’ is actually ‘grey belt’ of limited environmental and agricultural value.
- To resolve these debates, we need proper data. But there has not been a proper spatial survey of the green belts for many years.
- To remedy that, the Centre for Policy Studies commissioned Create Streets to carry out a full spatial survey of the green belt, involving detailed analysis of the quality, character and value of the land. This involved both analysing existing datasets and aerial surveillance using drone technology.
- As we show in this report, Britain’s green belts do have some previously developed sites that would be intuitively classified as ‘grey’ – industrial sites, disused quarries, brownfield sites and waste dumps. But the overall share of such land is low, and it tends to be in poorly connected places.
- However, all the green belts contain a great deal of land that falls well short of the green belt ideal. We found hundreds of thousands of hectares of green belt land with limited ecological, scientific and agricultural value – much of which was within walking distance of railway stations in areas of acute housing scarcity, or near railway lines to which stations could easily be added.



- The Government has proposed to open up to development green belt land within 800m of train stations that fall within the Top 80 Travel to Work areas by GVA, with building at a minimum density of 35 homes per hectare.
- Our survey shows that there is enough low- or medium-quality agricultural land in these areas, at that minimum density, to provide room for 318,843 homes (if you utilise only 60% of the site area, to preserve green spaces), on top of the gains from redeveloping brownfield land in those areas.
- But there is scope for the Government to be more ambitious. For example, it could expand the radius to 1,200m (roughly a 15-minute walk), restore its original minimum density of 50 homes per hectare, and – crucially – extend the principle to land near train lines rather than just train stations, given that it is always possible to build new connections.
- We found that there is 152,350 hectares of such land, providing room for roughly 4.6 million homes while still protecting the vast majority of the green belt, all conservation sites and all of our high-grade agricultural land.
- In the London green belt alone, there is enough low- or medium-quality agricultural land within 1,200 metres of railway lines (excluding national parks, national landscapes, and all other standard protected or restricted zones) for around 1.1 million homes at low suburban densities.
- The Government could also – in the spirit of devolution – free up councils that want to be more ambitious on green belt release to go beyond its rather artificial restrictions, for example if there are suitable sites at a greater distance from stations, or if they fall outside those Top 80 areas.
- Ministers should also review the viability criteria, which threaten to throttle ‘grey belt’ release by making it unaffordable to build. After all, all new housing provides places for people to live.
- We do not argue that England should build on every square inch of the land we have identified. Rather, we argue that there is plenty of scope – as the Government argues – to expand our most productive cities and communities sensitively and proportionately.
- In particular, we should learn from the past, by focusing development along rail lines to create a 21st century Metroland – beautiful homes, built in a way that helps to tackle the housing crisis without compromising the features of the English countryside that green belting aims to safeguard.



Explaining the Green Belt

Introduction

For the last seven decades, the landscape of England has been shaped by green belts. Because of green belts, many of our key cities have expanded little since 1939, in contrast to comparable cities in continental Europe and the United States, and even, to some extent, in Scotland. Green belting has helped to keep substantial areas of England in agricultural use. But it has come with serious social and economic costs.

The Government has begun reforming the green belt, and is looking to go further – as are individual local leaders, such as Sadiq Khan in London. But where should they build, and how?

In collaboration with Create Streets, the Centre for Policy Studies has run a detailed survey of England's 16 green belts, mapping their environmental, amenity, agricultural and transport characteristics. This is the first such survey that has been carried out, we believe, for at least a decade.¹

‘Green belting has helped to keep substantial areas of England in agricultural use. But it has come with serious social and economic costs’

The survey uses various different definitions of the ‘grey belt’, to match those used by the Government. The first is land that is previously developed. The second is land that, in the Government’s words, ‘makes a limited contribution to the five Green Belt purposes’. We then look at how much of this land fits within the new framework set out by the Government in December – which prioritised green belt land near train stations connecting to the country’s most productive areas – and how this framework could be adjusted to deliver even more housing.

We find that there are plenty of previously developed sites – what we call the ‘intuitive grey belt’, made up of existing buildings as well as car parks and quarries and disused factories and all the rest of it. However, relatively few of these sites are easily developable, and most do not have good transport connections. The idea that large amounts of development can be delivered on literally ‘grey’ sites is thus tenuous.

However, we have also found that there is a great deal of green belt land that has low environmental, amenity and agricultural value, a substantial share of which enjoys good transport links and sits within the geographical areas prioritised by the Government.

¹ The analysis was run against the green belt boundaries as defined in 2020-2021. Green belt boundaries are subject to adjustment, so the figures reflect the point in time (2022) which was the most recent available at the time of analysis. Land use or designations may have been revised since the analysis was completed.

This suggests that green belt reform is possible without fundamentally compromising the values green belts exist to safeguard, provided that the reforms are carefully designed.

To understand those values, we begin this report with a brief history of green belting and urban expansion, before moving on to look at the legal structure of green belts, their impacts, and the Government's current reform plans.

In the second part of the report, we provide a detailed summary of the physical makeup of the green belts, and the nature and quality of the land they contain. We conclude with suggestions about future plans for reform, and in particular with a recommendation to learn from the development successes of the past – especially the creation of Metroland – in order to build a new future.

Early green belts

Although the scale of modern green belting is unprecedented, the practice is not altogether new. Many early modern cities banned construction in a wide esplanade around their fortifications to give the defenders' guns a clear field of fire.

This could generate effects curiously like those of modern urban containment, with a dense urban core, an empty zone, and then a ragged fringe of satellite settlements. In both cases we see what planners call 'leapfrogging', the displacement of development to the far side of the restricted zone.



Vienna in the 1840s and the current development plan for Cambridge. Vienna shows an advanced stage of leapfrogging, when the leapfrog development is actually larger than the original core. The Cambridge plan shows an early stage, with most development displaced to the far side of the green belt. Sources: Wikimedia Commons & Cambridge Councils

Some early modern cities also had more contemporary motives for green belting. In London, the 16th and 17th centuries saw persistent attempts to ban further building beyond the existing urban periphery. Advocates of this seem to have appealed mainly to what would now be called disagglomeration effects: it was believed that the increasing size of the city was leading to disease and disorder.² There was also concern that London's growth was unhealthily depopulating other parts of England. Various laws were passed, but they do not seem to have had much effect, and London continued to expand throughout this period regardless.

² Norman Brett-James, *The Growth of Stuart London* (George Allen & Unwin, 1935) remains the classic treatment.



Nottingham in 1831: note the densely built-up urban area, surrounded by completely empty fields. Source: Wikimedia Commons

Other parts of England saw more effective green belting. In the 18th century, Nottingham was ringed by fields, where some residents enjoyed grazing rights for their cows. These residents controlled the municipal government and repeatedly blocked attempts to build housing on those fields, leading some to describe Nottingham as a ‘cowocracy’. Would-be reformers were burnt in effigy and their supporters ‘wheeled about in muck carts’.

By the early 19th century, Nottingham had become appallingly overcrowded, with some of the worst housing conditions in England. The cowocracy was overthrown only in the 1830s with the partial democratisation of municipal government, after which Nottingham’s urban expansion finally resumed – though you can still see the urban patterns imposed by the cowocracy today.

Stamford offers an even more extreme illustration. This Lincolnshire town was dominated by the aristocratic Cecil family, who manipulated the electoral system so that the town’s two MPs were effectively their appointees. The Cecils successfully blocked the expansion of Stamford for fear that new electors would undermine their control. By the time their grip on the seats was broken by the introduction of the secret ballot in the 1860s, it was too late: the local economic centre of gravity had shifted to Peterborough. Stamford’s remarkable state of preservation today is a result of its economic strangulation in the 18th and 19th centuries.³

³ These stories are told in WG Hoskins, *The Making of the English Landscape*, (2013) [1954].



Stamford preserves the character of a Georgian market town because extremely tight green belting effectively prevented its industrial revolution. Its beauty today came at the cost of centuries of intentional impoverishment. Source: Billy Wilson/Flickr

These and other examples show that our ancestors sometimes pushed for urban containment, for reasons that were not always so different to those that still drive green belting today. However, such efforts seem to have been fitful, and to have succeeded only under quite special circumstances: it was only in the early 20th century that the movement for green belting on a wider scale started building momentum.

The rise of modern green belting

British cities began to grow rapidly after the Industrial Revolution, and the threat emerged that many urban Britons would soon be living without green space in walking distance.

The Victorians took vigorous steps to avert this – but steps quite unlike green belting, illustrating the range of solutions available to policymakers concerned with managing the impacts of development.

Prior to the development of cars, cities tended to develop along railway, tramway and horsebus routes. This resulted in a ‘starfish’ pattern of urban expansion: arms of new development reached out into the countryside, with open space between them that was only gradually infilled.

To preserve access to nature, councils, charities and even the national government bought up tracts of this poorly connected land, landscaped it, and opened it to the public. Some cities, like Cardiff, York or Oxford, retained complete green fingers leading all the way from the town centre to the open countryside. Others, like London, established numerous islands of greenery in the form of the city’s extensive network of parks and commons.



Because these green spaces were dispersed across the city, a very large share of the population remained within walking distance of open spaces, far more than lived within walking distance of the actual urban periphery. These ‘green wedges’ and ‘green islands’ thus ultimately tended to be more useful than green belts in preserving access to green space. To this day, British cities enjoy probably the best access to parks of any in the world. At the same time, however, they did not prevent urban expansion, allowing an enormous improvement in the quantity and quality of housing across the late 19th century.

Despite this success, pressure for green belting grew in the early 20th century. This had a number of sources. One was the reaction against the prevailing urbanism of the time. Modern industrial cities were frequently seen as hopelessly polluted and congested – a view that had at least a measure of justice in a period when homes were heated with coal fires and zebra crossings had not even been invented.

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More dubiously, urban life was often associated with cultural and moral decline. Nationalistic writers across Europe tended to view cities as places in which national character atrophied.

It is hard to understate the breadth and depth of this anti-urban discourse. A striking illustration is given by a speech of Lord Rosebery, then Chairman of the London County Council and thus the closest thing the capital had to a mayor:

There is no thought of pride associated in my mind with the idea of London. I am always haunted by the awfulness of London: by the great appalling fact of these millions cast down, as it would appear by hazard, on the banks of this noble stream, working each other into their own groove and their own cell, without regard or knowledge of each other, without heeding each other, without having the slightest idea how the other lives – the heedless casualty of unnumbered thousands of men. Sixty years ago a great Englishman, Cobbett, called it a wen. If it was a wen then, what is it now? A tumour, an elephantiasis sucking into its gorged system half the life and the blood and the bone of the rural districts.⁴

To imagine Sadiq Khan uttering such words is to appreciate how England has travelled from the anti-urban culture in which the campaign for green belts emerged.

A second source was fear for the loss of rural England, coupled with distaste for the suburban neighbourhoods that were replacing it at the urban periphery – including the area of Epsom, where Rosebery would retire after a stint as Prime Minister. (Fittingly, his mansion’s grounds form the exact edge of the London green belt.)

⁴ Ebenezer Howard quotes this speech in the introduction of *Garden Cities of To-morrow* (Swan Sonnenschein and Co, 1898) as an illustration of a view that he takes to be universally shared.



A famous example of this thinking is Clough William-Ellis's book *England and the Octopus*. William-Ellis, designer of the idiosyncratic village of Portmeirion and a founding member of what is now the Campaign to Protect Rural England, wrote of the 'filching' of the southern countryside, of the 'spate of mean building all over the country that is shrivelling up the old England – mean and perky little houses that surely none but mean and perky little souls should inhabit with satisfaction'.⁵

His work embodies a strand of patrician romanticism that recurs in much early British writing on urban containment. Indeed, it is hard to find a socially elite writer of the 1930s with a good word to say about the suburbs that were springing up around Birmingham, Coventry, London and Oxford, despite the enormous improvement in living standards that they offered to their inhabitants.

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A third factor is the increased priority given to food security. In 1914, Britain was already a highly globalised economy, importing nearly two thirds of its calories from abroad.⁶ This proved perilous during the World Wars, when the German navy threatened British shipping, and postwar governments made sustained efforts to reduce dependence on food imports as a result. (These have been fairly successful, with the share of calories imported standing at around 40%, despite increased consumption and higher food exports.⁷)

One element of Britain's food security programme was the preservation of high-quality farmland in agricultural use. This has been delivered through the Agricultural Land Classification (ALC) system, which grades land for its agricultural importance and protects the more valuable areas. ALCs are theoretically unrelated to green belting, and food security is not one of the stated purposes of green belting in national policy. But a climate of concern about food security was favourable to the development of green belts.

At least some of these trends were found across the world, and all countries saw increased intervention in urban development as a result. But although there are examples of urban containment policies in other countries, Britain's green belts are highly distinctive.⁸ They were imposed earlier than their international equivalents, and they are far more constrictive.

Today, the surface area of Paris, Rome, Toronto or New York is several times greater than it was in 1939, whereas London's is almost unchanged. French, German, Spanish and Scandinavian cities have continued to grow according to something like the starfish pattern of 19th-century London, while English cities have either stagnated

5 Clough William-Ellis, *England and the Octopus* (Geoffrey Bles, 1928).

6 Emmanuelle Cronier, 'Food and Nutrition', *International Encyclopaedia of the First World War*.

7 DEFRA, 'UK Food Security Index', 2024.

8 For discussion of international comparators, see John Sturzaker and Ian Mell, *Green Belts: Past; present; future?* (Routledge, 2017), ch. 5.



or become orbited by leapfrog housing estates. In other words, green belting has fundamentally shaped modern British life in a way that has few parallels elsewhere.



A map of Paris in 1937 overlaid onto a map of Paris today at the same scale: the urban area has grown at least threefold. By contrast, London remains much the same size as it was in 1939. Source: UK Foundations

There is no generally accepted explanation for this divergence. The most credible theory may be that of Peter Hall, who proposed that Britain's proclivity for green belting was a result of its uniquely early industrialisation.⁹

By the early 20th century, major British cities were ringed by affluent suburbs connected to the centres by an exceptionally sophisticated system of commuter railways. This was true especially around London. A considerable part of the English upper-middle class made its home in London's satellite towns, whose names still conjure up a particular sedate vision of England: Chorleywood, Chesham, Epsom, Tunbridge Wells, Amersham, Radlett, Guildford, Bushey, Sevenoaks. These communities were precisely those disdained by the urban reformers – yet today, they are some of the most attractive, valuable and beloved commuter towns in the country.

⁹ Peter Hall, *The Containment of Urban England* (George Allen & Unwin, 1972).



However, along with their success came a new form of resistance to development. The residents of this 'advance guard' of urban expansion became its enemy, fighting to prevent the gaps between the railway suburbs being filled after the development of buses and bicycles had made it possible.

In no other country was this true to the same extent: as Hall says, urban expansion generally came in one go, sweeping over thinly populated agricultural land whose inhabitants largely welcomed rising land values.



Chesham, 1938. The Metropolitan Line offers direct fast trains to the City of London every morning. Why wouldn't its residents want a green belt? Source: Historic England

England was also relatively unusual in that the legislative basis of green belting emerged gradually. In 1935, the Restriction of Ribbon Development Act was passed, stopping the widely lamented practice of straggling development along arterial roads out of towns. In 1938, the Green Belt (London and Home Counties) Act was passed, whereby the national government covered half the cost to local authorities of buying up land to preserve it from development within a green belt area designated by the London County Council. The effectiveness of this was never really tested because of the outbreak of war.

In 1947, the Town and Country Planning Act (TCPA) essentially nationalised development by applying a 100% tax on the value uplift created through building: this briefly made the whole question of green belting moot, since it meant there was little private development for the state to regulate in the first place.

The Conservatives revoked this provision when they returned to power, replacing it in 1955 with green belting in its modern form. The Ministry of Housing and Local Government issued a document called Circular 42/55, which requested that local authorities across the country establish green belts, using powers under the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act to refuse permission for development. All Britain's green belts were designated over the following decade, although more land continued to be added to them for the rest of the 20th century.



A striking feature of this history is that green belting has been driven at least as much by Conservative governments as by Labour ones, in contrast with many other aspects of British development control. Indeed, although the TCPA created some of the powers that were needed for green belting, both the pioneering 1938 Act and the 1955 Circular originated with Conservative-led governments – and it was Thatcher's government that oversaw the green belts' last significant expansion in the 1980s.

Something equivalent probably also tends to be true at the local level, where at least until the 2024 election, green belt areas tended to be Conservative or Liberal/Democrat. In other words, the politics of green belting seem to cut across normal political categories.

Whatever the politics, the effects of this programme have been dramatic, and are vividly apparent at the periphery of any green belted city. Although green belts date mostly from the late 1950s, war and austerity had stymied urban expansion since 1939. This means that the boundaries of Britain's green belted cities are often still those of the late 1930s: even today, London generally stops where the builders laid down their tools when we went to war with Germany. This contrasts sharply with the situation in any of Europe's other great cities.



*Neo-Tudor semis on the periphery of London today. Notice the 'roads to nowhere' in the right-hand image, hinting at the suddenness with which building ceased in 1939.
Source: Google Maps*

How do green belts work?

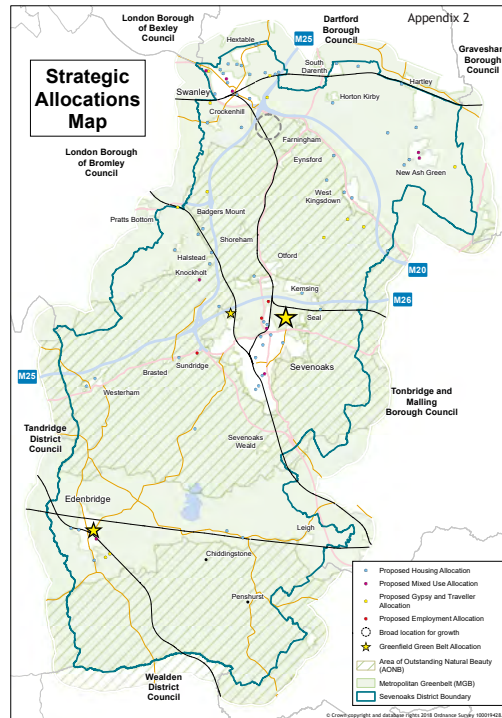
Green belts operate in a complicated and counterintuitive way that is often misunderstood in public debate – not least because green belt designation has nothing to do with the actual quality of the relevant land.

The process of formally designating land as green belt begins with an application by the relevant local authority to the national government. If the national government agrees, the designation becomes part of national policy.

This designation of the land as green belt has two main implications for local authorities. One is that they are not normally allowed to permit development on it. The other is that they are given a partial exemption from normal housing targets, on the understanding that they cannot reasonably be expected to meet those targets when much of their developable land falls under a green belt designation.



Curiously, then, formal green belting involves local authorities *tying their own hands* in order to acquire a justification not to do something that they did not want to do in the first place.



Almost the whole of Sevenoaks district council is designated as green belt.

Source: Sevenoaks Council

In some local authorities, almost the entire undeveloped area has now been designated as green belt. This can have dramatic results. Until December 2024, Sevenoaks had an assessed housing need of 714 homes annually.¹⁰ But its local plan provided for only around 165 homes. Sevenoaks was able to do this because almost its entire undeveloped surface area falls under the Metropolitan Green Belt: Sevenoaks Council argued, and the government accepted, that it simply could not meet its housing need while keeping to national policy.

This effect alone would suffice to make green belts a powerful instrument. But they do even more than this.

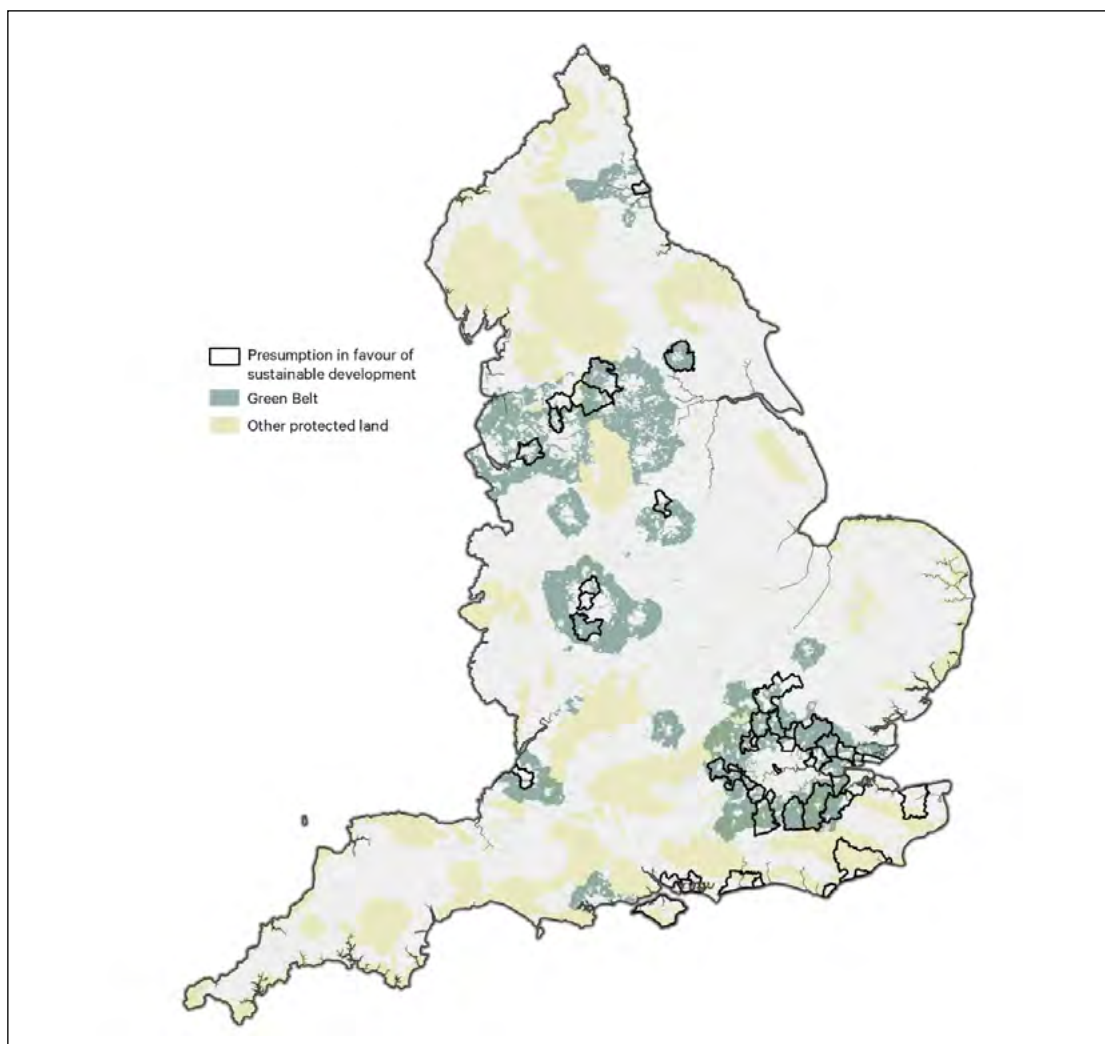
In general, the incentive that English councils have to meet their housing targets is that if they fail to do so, they fall under a ‘presumption in favour of sustainable development’, partly losing control over what development happens in their jurisdiction. But for nearly all of its history, green belt land has been basically exempt from the presumption (recent reforms to this rule are discussed below).¹¹

This means that local authorities whose undeveloped land falls under a green belt designation have little incentive to meet their housing targets, because they suffer few consequences from failing to do so. Unsurprisingly, therefore, green belt districts often miss their targets, in sharp contrast to rural authorities elsewhere in the country.

¹⁰ Lichfields, ‘Standard Method for Local Housing Need’, 2022.

¹¹ MHCLG, *National Planning Policy Framework*, 2024.

In fact, *most* London green belt authorities are technically under the presumption. This is especially striking since the targets they are failing to miss have already been depressed through the mechanism described above: green belt councils frequently don't bother to deliver even the modest share of their assessed housing need that the Planning Inspectorate requires of them.



Local authorities facing the presumption in favour of sustainable development in 2022.
Source: CBRE

Nor are formal green belt designations the only way in which urban expansion is curtailed by the planning system. To understand why, imagine what would happen if the national government formally removed all green belt designations from the planning system (which it could do at any time, without legislation of any kind).

Local authorities around formerly green-belted cities would lose their exemption from meeting their assessed housing need. It might be assumed that urban expansion would swiftly resume, on the model of the great cities of the continent, or of our own cities until the 1940s.

In fact, however, the effect would be relatively modest. The reason for this is that our system for assessing housing need has green belting baked into it.



The Government normally assesses housing need through an algorithm called the standard method.¹² The latest version, introduced by Labour in 2024, replaces a population-based calculation with a formula built around expanding the existing housing stock by a fixed percentage, with some adjustment for affordability.

Since housing supply has historically been suppressed in green belt areas, the standard method would find that they have very little housing need – the opposite of the truth.

It is worth working this through with an example. As we saw above, Sevenoaks had an assessed housing need of 714 units annually until 2024. At the end of 2024, this went up to 1,149 because of changes in the method of calculation. The comparable figures in Wigan were 803 under the old system and 1,572 under the new one. This is despite the fact that floorspace prices are around three times higher in Sevenoaks than they are in Wigan: Wigan needs to build little or nothing in order for house prices to fall to match build costs (the equilibrium the market would reach if supply were not artificially constrained), whereas Sevenoaks would have to build untold thousands of homes.

This shows how explicit green belt designation is only part of England's green belting system: there is also a deeper implicit system of under-building that is probably much more potent, which has largely endured through the government's recent round of reforms.

For current homeowners in Sevenoaks, this is clearly a very congenial system: acres of countryside are preserved by the British state for their use and enjoyment. The question is what impact this has on the rest of the country.

‘ Since housing supply has historically been suppressed in green belt areas, the standard method would find that they have very little housing need – the opposite of the truth ’

The impact of green belts

Green belting arose at a time when anti-urban discourse was widespread, and it is plausible that these narratives played a role in its emergence.

However, the intent behind Britain's green belts was not straightforwardly anti-urban. The original intention was that urban development would continue on the far side of the green belts in satellite towns with good transport links into the metropolitan cores. Although it was intended that most inhabitants of these settlements would work in them rather than commuting into the cities, the satellite towns were certainly supposed to benefit economically and culturally from proximity to the metropolis, while avoiding the supposed negative effects of further urban sprawl.¹³

¹² Authorities are sometimes allowed to calculate their housing need in other ways, but these alternatives tend to generate *lower* figures than the standard method would.

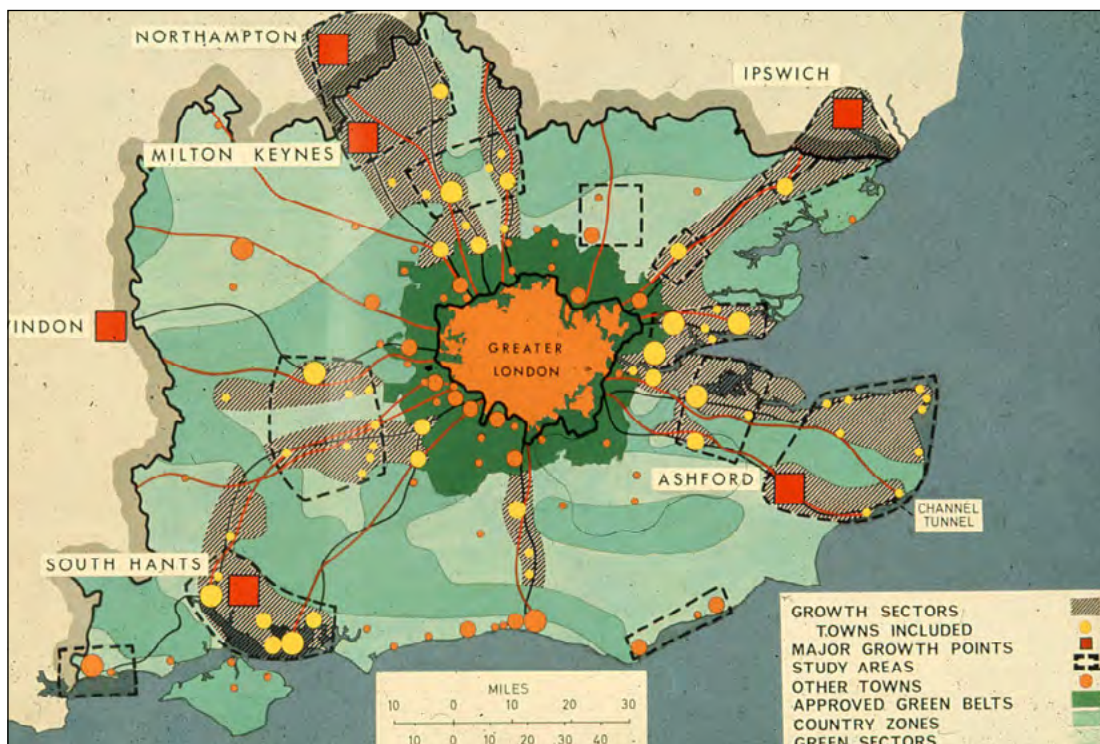
¹³ This is richly apparent in the four 'wartime reports' that formed the intellectual context for green belting, the Barlow, Scott, Uthwatt and Reith Reports, as well as in the advisory reports prepared by Patrick Abercrombie. For discussion, see Sturzaker and Mell, pp. 24-28.



In other words, 'leapfrog development' was an integral part of the plan for green belting, not an accidental byproduct.

The most famous examples of this were the New Towns. New Towns were built on land taken out of local authority jurisdiction and placed under development corporations with a mandate from the central government. Of the original 11 New Towns, most were clearly intended to deliver leapfrog development for London, the city where the green belt had restricted growth to the greatest extent. These were Welwyn, Stevenage, Basildon, Harlow, Hatfield, Hemel Hempstead, Bracknell and Crawley.

If we had kept designating New Towns at the original 1940s rate, the London Green Belt would now be ringed by 118 of them, with a total population of perhaps 10 million. This would give the overall London metropolitan area something like the growth rate of postwar Paris, New York or Tokyo. Its urban form would resemble the 'inverted doughnut' of 19th-century Vienna, with an urban core, a belt of open space, and then a vast orbital ring of leapfrog developments.

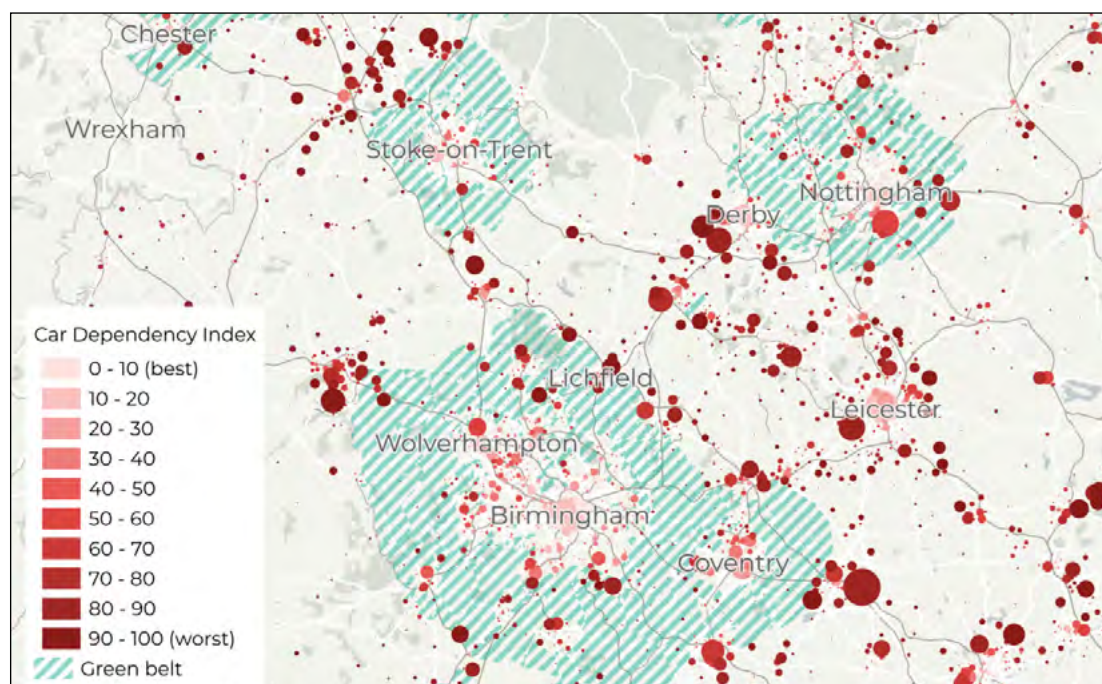


New Towns ringing the London Green Belt. Source: JR James Archive/Pexels

New Towns are not the only way in which leapfrogging operates. Where local authorities are required to meet housing targets, the designation of green belt means that the targets must be met elsewhere, either in the same local authority (if there is land available), or in a neighbouring one (if there is not). This is done through a system of displaced targets known as the 'duty to cooperate'.

As a result, the green-belted cities of England are now generally surrounded by a ring of commuter estates, clustered around the far side of their green belts so they can be as close to the employment centre as the British state allows. These sites unsurprisingly tend to have more limited transport options, a point that was brought

out in a recent study by the New Economics Foundation on the car dependence of different types of housing development.¹⁴



Car dependence of recent developments in the Midlands. The way in which green belts heighten car dependence is clearly visible here. Source: NEF

To the extent that leapfrogging has taken place, green belting has displaced development rather than reduced it. However, this has not been the primary effect: there has clearly been a very great overall reduction in development since the green belts were introduced.

One reason for this is that, even if leapfrogging had been pursued with all possible vigour, some deadweight loss would have been almost inevitable. There is simply less demand for homes in Northstowe (a leapfrog housing development) than for homes in Cambridge: on average, people are just not willing to pay as much to live there, because of increased commuting time, less access to amenities, and so on. So if all development in the Cambridge economic area were displaced to leapfrog towns like Northstowe, there would be less development overall, even if there were no planning constraints on development in the leapfrog area.

In reality, however, the situation is far worse, because the mechanisms to allow development through leapfrogging are either inadequate or completely broken.

This is most obviously true of the New Towns. We noted above that sustaining the New Town programme at 1940s levels would have yielded 107 additional New Towns since 1950, giving the London Metropolitan Area a growth rate similar to that of comparable metropolises internationally. In fact, however, only one New Town was been designated around the London green belt between 1950 and 2024, namely Milton Keynes in 1967.

¹⁴ Emmet Kiberd and Benedict Staňák, [Trapped Behind the Wheel](#) (New Economics Foundation, 2024).



The existing New Towns were gradually completed: the last of their development corporations were dissolved in the 1990s, returning them to local authority control and correspondingly leisurely rates of development. But nothing replaced them. So, for several decades, the main mechanism which the designers of green belting envisioned for delivering development has been completely absent.

The Government is now proposing a number of further new towns, of which two, Crews Hill and Tempsford, are in some sense extensions of London's economic agglomeration.¹⁵ But they are likely to be small, probably around 10,000 homes. For comparison, Milton Keynes has more than 120,000 homes.

Sadly, England's other systems for mandating leapfrog development are also weak. Because of the way that English local government has evolved, all of the green-belted cities are now controlled by different local authorities to the areas beyond their green belts in which leapfrog development would take place. This means that those councils inside the belt are not accountable for delivering the development elsewhere that is supposed to compensate for the development prevented by the green belt.

‘ For several decades, the main mechanism which the designers of green belting envisioned for delivering development has been completely absent ’

This housing is theoretically supposed to be delivered by the unfortunate districts on the far side of the green belt under the duty to cooperate. But in practice this is dubiously effective. In recent years, many of the authorities immediately outside the London belt (such as Wealden, Mid Sussex, Horsham or Uttlesford) have not even met their own assessed need, let alone meeting additional need displaced from green belt authorities.¹⁶

The overall quantity of housing lost to green belting is difficult to calculate, and depends partly on how ‘green belting’ is defined and partly on which counterfactuals are applied.

For example, if the green belt designation were removed from national policy, green belt authorities would be obliged to allocate enough sites to meet their assessed housing need. This would often mean doubling housing output, or in some cases tripling or even quadrupling it. It is impossible to know exactly how much this would increase housing output overall, but it would clearly be in the order of several tens of thousands annually.

However, as noted above, the Government's method for calculating housing need perpetuates the effect of historic green belting. If we ask instead how much more housing would have been built if English cities had been allowed to continue expanding outwards in the way they did in the 19th century or the interwar period, the figure is clearly enormous.

¹⁵ The Government also proposes brownfield projects at Milton Keynes and Thamesmead as part of the ‘new towns’ programme, which will also tie into London.

¹⁶ MHCLG, [New Standard Method](#), 2024.



As mentioned above, if planning obstacles were removed entirely, building would continue until the price of a house was equal to the value of its plot in agricultural use plus the costs of developing it (construction costs, capital costs etc.). On conservative estimates of the price elasticity of demand for housing, that would mean that over six million homes were built, and prices would fall by a national average of nearly half.¹⁷

Permitting urban expansion would not completely achieve this, because there are other regulatory constraints on supply, notably those on the densification of existing urban areas. But even assuming (extremely conservatively) that unrestricted outward expansion could only fill half of the supply gap, it would result in 3.25 million homes. If it could fill two thirds of the supply gap (a more realistic estimate), that rises to 4.3 million.

‘ This paper does not support abolishing all restrictions on urban expansion. But it is important to be clear-eyed about the cost of green belting ’

The effects of expanding housing supply to this extent would be immense. There would be huge falls in homelessness and household suppression. Millions of people currently living with their parents or in flatshares would acquire homes of their own. Millions of families currently living in cramped conditions would move to more spacious ones. Increased agglomeration would drive greater productivity, economic growth, and increased tax receipts, with which crises in the NHS and the social care system could be relieved.

In other words, building on the green belt may sound ruthless and materialistic. But there are precious human values that could be safeguarded thereby.

All that being said, this paper does not support abolishing all restrictions on urban expansion. But it is important to be clear-eyed about the cost of green belting. Green belting is very expensive: these are opportunity costs rather than actual expenditures, which makes them less visible, but not less great.

This does not mean that we should revoke all of England's green belts. But it does mean that we should scrutinise them, and consider whether they might be restructured in a way that conserves most of what they aim to conserve, while reducing the harms that they unintentionally create.

¹⁷ The Redfern Review estimated the price elasticity of demand for housing at 1.8. Britain has a stock of 24.4m homes, an average house price of £300,000, with an average floorspace of 85sqm and therefore an average floorspace value of £3500 psqm. Development costs are highly variable but RICS suggests around £1800 psqm as a ballpark figure; development costs are thus around half (52%) of sales values. For sales values to fall to development costs given an elasticity of 1.8, a 27% increase in the build stock is thus required, of 6.5m homes. See [The Redfern Review into the Decline in Home Ownership](#), 2016.



Labour's green belt reforms

In December 2024, the Government introduced a round of reforms to the green belt system, which it then updated with further changes in December 2025 and August 2026. These reforms are complex and their effects are only beginning to become clear. Nonetheless, they are clearly significant. It is worth studying them in some detail.

In terms of the 2024 reforms, one key change is in Paragraph 146 of the NPPF. Until 2024, the circumstances under which green belt was released were exceptionally narrow: in cases where housing need could not be met without green belt release, authorities were generally exempted from meeting it. As we have seen, this often meant that they were excused from meeting as much as three quarters of their assessed need by the Planning Inspectorate.

The new text, however, required that local authorities revise green belt boundaries where housing need could not be met in other ways, unless doing so would 'fundamentally undermine the purposes (taken together) of the remaining Green Belt, when considered across the area of the plan'.¹⁸

‘If Sevenoaks released a parcel of undeveloped green belt, would that ‘fundamentally undermine the purpose of assisting in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment’?’

According to the NPPF, green belt has five purposes:

- 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

Of these, the two most relevant for the Government's reforms were 'checking the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas' and 'assisting in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment'.

This opened up a range of questions. For example, if Sevenoaks released a parcel of undeveloped green belt for housebuilding, would that 'fundamentally undermine the purpose of assisting in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment'? It certainly undermines it in some sense, but does it *fundamentally* undermine it? If not, how many parcels of green belt does Sevenoaks have to release before the undermining becomes 'fundamental'?

The next big reform from the 2024 proposals came via the modifications made to Paragraph 155.

¹⁸ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, [National Planning Policy Framework](#), 2024.



As discussed above, green belt authorities have historically had weak incentives to meet even the low targets that the planning system generates, because green belt land is exempted from the presumption in favour of sustainable development by Footnote 7. But in Paragraph 155, the NPPF now said that local authorities that do not meet targets would be required to release ‘grey belt’ land subject to the same condition as above, namely that doing so did not fundamentally undermine the purposes of the green belt.

In the draft NPPF released in July 2024, ‘grey belt’ was defined as previously developed green belt land or green belt land that ‘makes a limited contribution to the five green belt purposes’. In the version released in December 2024, however, this definition had been strengthened: grey belt land covered any land that ‘does not strongly contribute to any of purposes a), b), or d)’. These were, as above, ‘checking unrestricted sprawl’, ‘preventing neighbouring towns from merging’ and preserving the setting of historic towns. (Land that falls under another protected designation was also excluded.)

This was thus a change of great importance. Although we do not yet have quantitative evidence, there were widespread reports of developers preparing planning applications for green belt development, hoping to pass them on appeal in areas that are already under the presumption in favour of sustainable development.

And then the Government went even further.

**‘ Labour’s proposals are
likely to be by far the largest
pro-development reform to
the green belts in their history ’**

In the latest versions of the NPPF, ministers made a series of changes to their own reforms.¹⁹ First of all, the role of the spatial development strategy (SDS) was clarified. There will now be a duty on every strategic planning authority – encompassing ‘combined authorities, combined county authorities, upper-tier county councils and unitary authorities’, as well as the Mayor of London – to prepare a 25-year strategy for local development. Crucially, this will include ‘identifying the general extent of areas established as green belt and broad locations where changes to green belt boundaries may need to be considered through local plan preparation, if necessary to meet the development needs of the strategy area’. In other words, the green belt boundaries will no longer be considered sacrosanct.

Alongside this, the new draft also set out an updated definition of grey belt land, and when and where it is permissible to build on it.

The definition of the grey belt was streamlined to remove a reference to Footnote 7: grey belt will now be defined purely in terms of whether it has been previously developed or meets the three purposes above, rather than being restricted by the presumption in favour of sustainable development.

The new rules reiterated that ‘development in the green belt is inappropriate unless it falls within one of the categories in policy GB7’ and that ‘inappropriate development is, by definition, harmful to the green belt and should not be approved except in very

¹⁹ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, *National Planning Policy Framework*, 2025 & 2026.



special circumstances', with 'substantial weight' given to the harm to the green belt under such circumstances.

Some of the scenarios in which development would be allowed were fairly simple: development for agriculture, horticulture and forestry; the replacement, alteration or extension of existing buildings; mineral extraction; engineering operations; transport, electricity network and water infrastructure; the creation of recreation grounds or cemeteries.

Of most interest for our purposes, however, were permissions around 'limited infilling in villages'; 'limited affordable housing for local community needs'; 'the redevelopment of previously developed land... which would not cause substantial harm to the openness of the green belt'; and development on grey belt land, where there is 'an evidenced unmet need' and it 'would not fundamentally undermine the purposes (taken together) of the remaining green belt across the area of the plan'.

**‘ Many stations within the
green belt have undeveloped land
within easy walking distance ’**

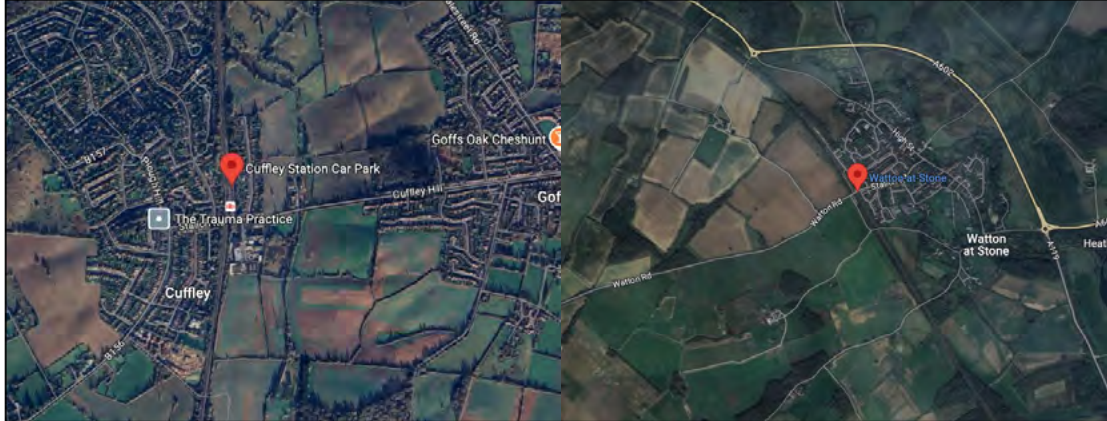
Finally, there came the policy most strongly touted by ministers. Green belt rules will also be relaxed for 'development for housing and mixed-use development which would be within reasonable walking distance of a railway station capable of providing a high level of connectivity to services and employment'. This was defined as 'rail stations and underground, tram and light rail stops... in a top 80 Travel to Work Area located partially or fully within England by Gross Value Added (GVA) and which, in the normal weekday timetable, are served (or have a reasonable prospect of being served due to planned upgrades or through agreement with the rail operator) throughout the daytime by four trains or trams per hour overall, or two trains per hour in any one direction'.

Separately, the Government has indicated that it views 'reasonable walking distance' as 800m, and that the minimum density for such developments will be 35 homes per hectare, rising to 45 for the areas with the most frequent rail services. This is a dilution of the original density target of 50 homes.

The new draft also confirmed that 'major developments' on green belt land (ie those of 10 or more houses) would have to comply with the new 'Golden Rules', which insisted that the new developments should be accompanied by infrastructure; support nature recovery, green space and landscape; and include substantial amounts of affordable housing. This should be set as part of the development plan, but until such policies are in place it should be '15 percentage points above the highest existing affordable housing requirement which would otherwise apply to the development, subject to a cap of a 50%'. If there is no set requirement for affordable housing, 'a 50% affordable housing contribution should apply by default'.

Collectively, these are a substantial package of reforms to the green belts of England. Most green belt local authorities have seen assessed need go up, often by 50% or more. The Planning Inspectorate and the new strategic plans will generally now require that they actually meet that need in their local planning. And they will be punished through a version of the presumption if they fail to do so.

The net effect of this – even with all of the provisos above, in particular the highly restrictive affordable housing criteria – is likely to be by far the largest pro-development reform to the green belts in their history. Especially since many stations within the green belt have undeveloped land within easy walking distance, reflecting a historical tendency for developers to begin building on just one side of a railway station, leaving untouched land on the other.²⁰



Two of the many stations in the London green belt adjacent to undeveloped land.
Source: Google Maps

Green belting has been a central part of Britain's social settlement for seven decades. It has brought considerable benefits, but also heavy costs. For the first time, it is beginning to be seriously challenged.

However, green belt reform needs to be informed by a good understanding of green belts' make-up. We need to understand how much green belt land is ecologically important or vital for the country's food security. We need to know how much is previously developed, and how much is accessible from railway stations – and how much of that land falls within the Government's new definition.

It is for this reason that we at the Centre for Policy Studies, working with Create Streets, have commissioned a full spatial survey of the green belt. Our belief is that it provides the richest and most complete data ever published on this subject.

In the second part of this paper, we will outline the make-up of both the green belt as a whole and the individual green belts of England, and show where we can build the greatest number of houses for the least ecological and agricultural impact.

²⁰ This phenomenon was noted in Britain Remade and Create Streets, *Creating New Towns Fast and Well* (2024).

Surveying the Green Belt

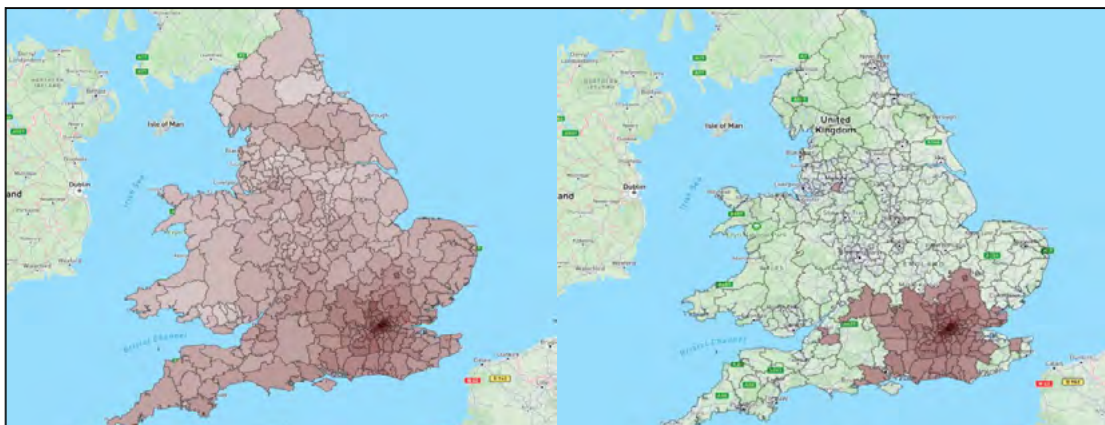
Britain is one of the world's most heavily surveyed and mapped countries. Since the early 20th century, planners have minutely analysed the environmental and agricultural values of its landscapes, and immense quantities of information on these now exist in authoritative national databases.

We have collated this data on Britain's green belts with a view to better understanding the purposes they serve, what the impacts of the Government's existing reforms will be, and where the best opportunities for further reform might lie.

In this section, we set out our key findings. We begin with an overall review of the composition of Britain's green belts. We then move on to two more detailed questions, one looking at the availability of 'grey belt' land, and one at the use of land within walking distance of railway stations and railway lines. We find that 'grey belt' land in the sense of previously developed land is relatively scarce – but that land of modest environmental, amenity or agricultural value is common, and that much of it is within commutable distance of Britain's major centres.

While reviewing these figures, it is worth bearing in mind where England's housing shortage is concentrated. Pricing data show that it is overwhelmingly an issue in the South East. This means that the green belts that are doing most work as binding constraints on development are those around London, Oxford and Cambridge, and to a lesser extent Bath and Bristol and South and West Hampshire.

Plenty of development would be viable on low-quality land in the green belts in the Midlands and the North, so understanding their structure remains important. But the total value of development derivable from reforming, say, the Newcastle green belt would be only a tiny fraction of that derivable from reforming the London one.



Price per square metre by local authority. The chart on the right shows those areas where prices are above £4,000 per square metre, roughly corresponding to areas with an acute housing shortage. Source: YIMBY Alliance



The overall picture

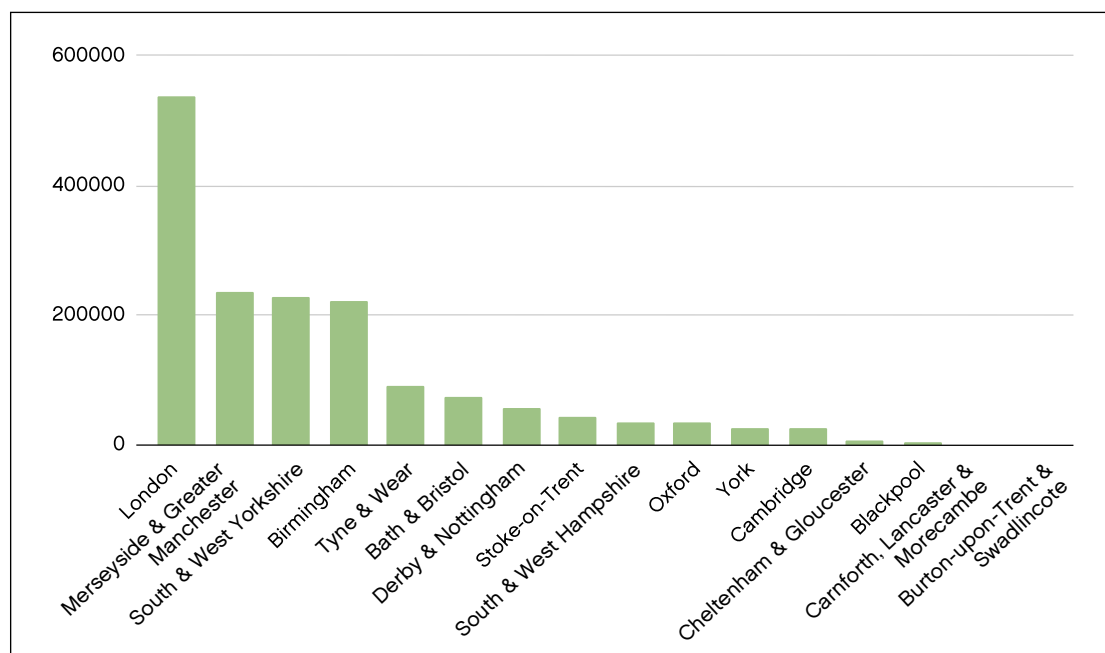
Officially, England has 16 green belts, but they vary enormously in size. The largest, London's, is almost 7,000 times larger by surface area than the smallest, which separates Burton-upon-Trent and Swadlincote.

By far the largest green belts are London, Manchester-Liverpool, South and West Yorkshire and Birmingham, making up around three quarters of the total green belted area. There follow eight green belts of intermediate size: Tyne and Wear, Bath and Bristol, Derby and Nottingham, South and West Hampshire, Oxford, York and Cambridge.

‘ Officially, England has 16 green belts, but they vary enormously in size. The largest, London's, is almost 7,000 times larger by surface area than the smallest, which separates Burton-upon-Trent and Swadlincote ’

Finally there are four minor green belts: Cheltenham and Gloucester, Blackpool, Carnforth, Lancaster and Morecambe, and Burton-upon-Trent and Swadlincote. The minor green belts do not completely encircle the settlements in question: their function is chiefly to prevent towns merging into each other rather than to contain their overall growth.

Area of green belts (ha)



Source: CPS/Create Streets analysis



We have grouped green belt uses into the following categories:

- ‘Protected or restricted’ land, covering national parks, national landscapes (formerly AONBs), sites of special scientific interest, Ramsar sites (wetlands of international importance), national nature reserves, local nature reserves, registered parks and gardens, flood risk zones, and ancient woodlands.

Protected land will normally also be agricultural, previously developed or a natural area: to avoid double-counting, we have included such land only under the protected heading. Since protected land is the least likely to be suitable for development, there is little risk that we will thereby overlook developable agricultural or previously developed sites. It should however be borne in mind that strictly speaking the remaining labels should be ‘Previously developed land without a protected designation’, ‘Agricultural land without a protected designation’, and so on.²¹

- Previously developed land, covering urban fabric as well as industrial sites, roads, transport infrastructure, quarries, power stations and so forth. In the next section, we look at this category in more detail, breaking out the portion that is intuitively categorisable as ‘grey belt’ from roads and existing urban fabric.

As noted, we have excluded some previously developed land that also falls under protected designations, which would be unlikely to be developable in any case.

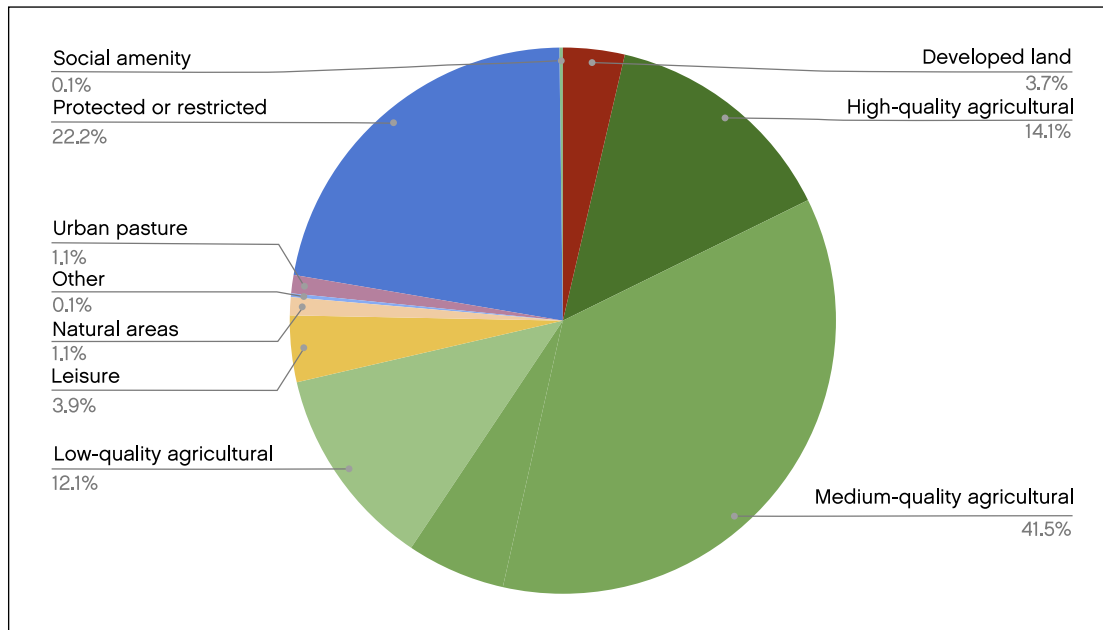
- Agricultural land, separated into high-quality, medium-quality and low-quality. High-quality agricultural land is made up of the two highest Agricultural Land Classification classes; medium-quality is made up of the third class; low-quality is made up of the lowest two classes. Low-grade agricultural land has minimal value for food security, being generally suitable for pasture only. It is prioritised for development in normal planning contexts. Medium-grade land has some value for food security, but it is not unusual for it to be developed in non-green belt areas. High-grade agricultural land has very good yields, and is more likely to be preserved from development.
- Leisure and recreation land. A large share of this is golf courses, the remainder comprising other kinds of sport and recreation spaces.
- Natural areas, chiefly woodlands and wetlands.
- Minor remaining uses have been grouped together under ‘Other’.

Collapsing all the green belts together, we arrive at the following breakdown.

²¹ This is why our totals sometimes differ from corresponding figures in e.g. the [House of Commons Library Report](#), which do not separate out protected land in the same way.



All green belts (1,620,000ha)



Source: CPS/Create Streets

It is immediately clear that the bulk of the green belts is made up of agricultural land. As noted above, the true share is even higher than the chart shows, since much protected land is also in agricultural use.

Unprotected agricultural land makes up 67.7% of the green belts. Of this, the bulk (41.5%) is medium-grade, while smaller shares are low- and high-grade (12.1% and 14.1% respectively). All other land uses have far lower shares: the two most significant are developed and leisure areas (most often golf courses), at 3.7% and 3.9% respectively.

Are the green belts grey?

As discussed above, the Government has launched reforms to unlock land in what it calls 'grey belt'. As we have seen, two kinds of green belt land are classed as grey belt in both versions of the new NPPF: otherwise unprotected, previously developed land, and otherwise unprotected land that does not 'strongly contribute' to purposes a), b) or d) of the green belt, that is, preventing unrestricted sprawl, preventing towns from merging, and preserving historic settings.

A key question, therefore, is how much otherwise unprotected previously developed land there is. If there is a lot, local authorities will probably mainly release that to meet their targets. If there isn't, then the second component of the 'grey belt' definition will come into play, and they will be compelled to release agricultural land that does not strongly contribute to objectives a), b) and d).

A different way of putting this is: how much of the 'grey belt' as defined by the government is really plausibly grey? How far does the legal grey belt – the land so defined in the NPPF – map onto the intuitive grey belt – brownfield sites, industrial land, dumps, quarries and so on? Once the councils start releasing grey belt, will people be shocked to discover that it is, after all, mainly physically green?

The chart above shows that 3.7% of the green belts is previously developed with no other protected designation. However, this figure gives a somewhat misleading impression of developable potential, because it covers the urban fabric of various villages and suburbs. In theory, of course, local authorities could release existing urban fabric for densification, but in practice this is unlikely: densification of existing urban fabric rarely happens even in London, because both local authorities and the Planning Inspectorate see densification as invasive and disruptive.

So the previously developed land that could plausibly be released under the grey belt paragraph is made up of:

- Registered brownfield sites²²
- Industrial and commercial sites
- Disused quarries
- Waste dumps
- Construction sites

This is land, in other words, of the type that generates disbelief that it is actually in the green belt. And certainly, our survey found eye-catching examples: the pictures below are from as far afield as Manchester, Gloucester, Birmingham and Walsall.



Car park in green belt near Wolverhampton. Source: CPS/Create Streets

²² i.e. sites that local authorities have marked on their brownfield registers, not all previously developed land.



National Highways depot on green belt near Bristol. Source: CPS/Create Streets



Brickworks and quarry on green belt near Walsall. Source: CPS/Create Streets



*Crosland Moor airfield and quarry on green belt near Huddersfield.
Source: CPS/Create Streets*



Loxley Works, on green belt near Sheffield. Source: CPS/Create Streets



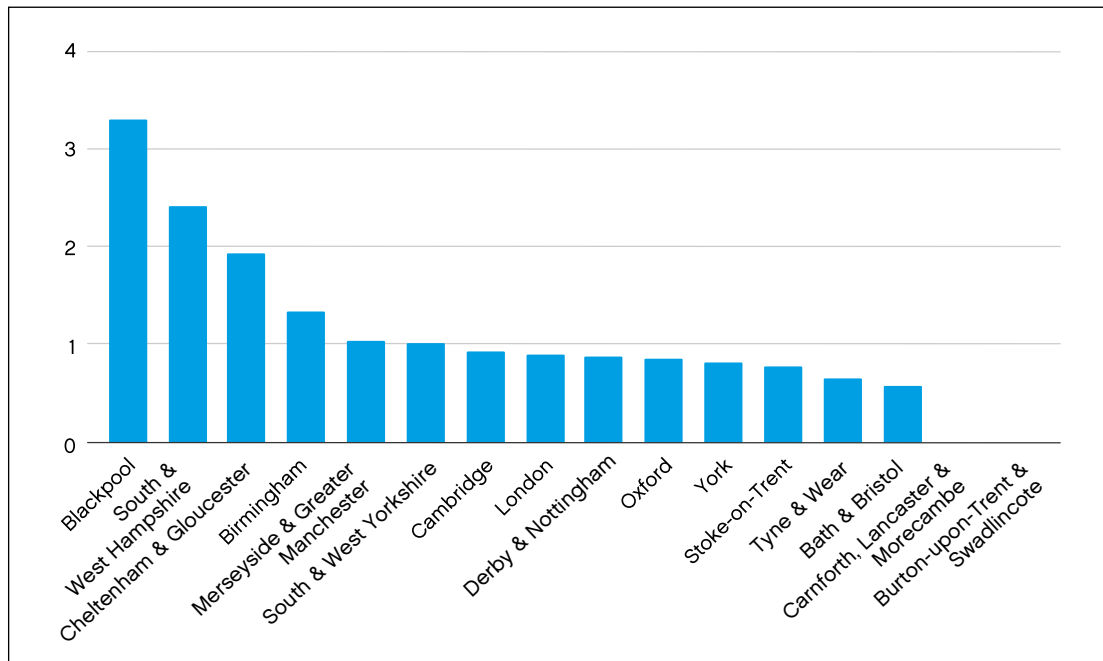
Green belt land near Gloucestershire Airport. Source: CPS/Create Streets

Land of this kind makes up just over a quarter of all otherwise unprotected previously developed land in the green belt. This means that it makes up only about 1% of green belts overall. In what follows, we call this the ‘intuitive grey belt’, because we think it corresponds roughly to what laypeople think of when they hear references to grey belt – though, as explained, it constitutes only a modest subset of what the Government’s definition of ‘grey belt’ will actually net.

The share of ‘intuitive grey belt’ varies significantly from authority to authority. The highest share is in Blackpool’s small green belt, at 3.3%. South and West Yorkshire’s share is also relatively high. The Staffordshire and Lancashire green belts have essentially none. The Liverpool and Manchester belt has 1.04% and Birmingham has 1.33%. London has 0.89%.



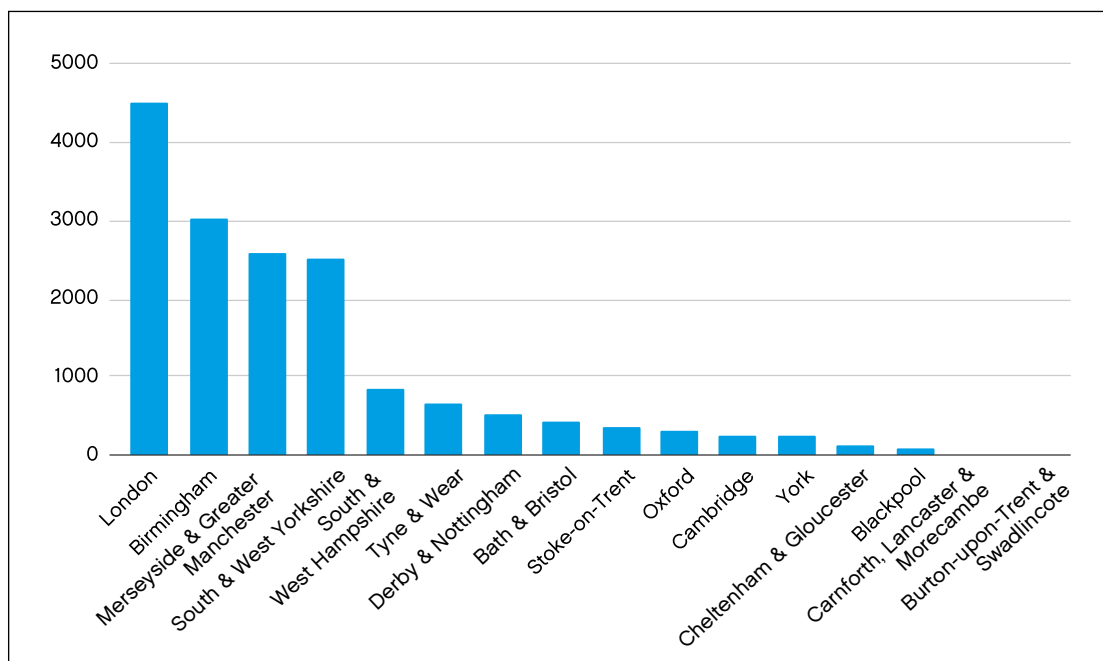
'Intuitive grey belt' share (%)



Source: CPS/Create Streets analysis

Of course, given the green belts' size, even a small proportion of their land amounts to a large area in absolute terms. The London green belt, for example, has some 4,500 hectares of grey belt. At normal suburban densities, that could mean 135,000 homes – or more, with 'gentle density' best practice. Birmingham and Manchester also have significant quantities. Though not huge numbers compared to the scale of the English housing crisis, such land could make an appreciable contribution to the Government's target of building 1.5 million homes by the end of the parliament.

'Intuitive grey belt' area (ha)

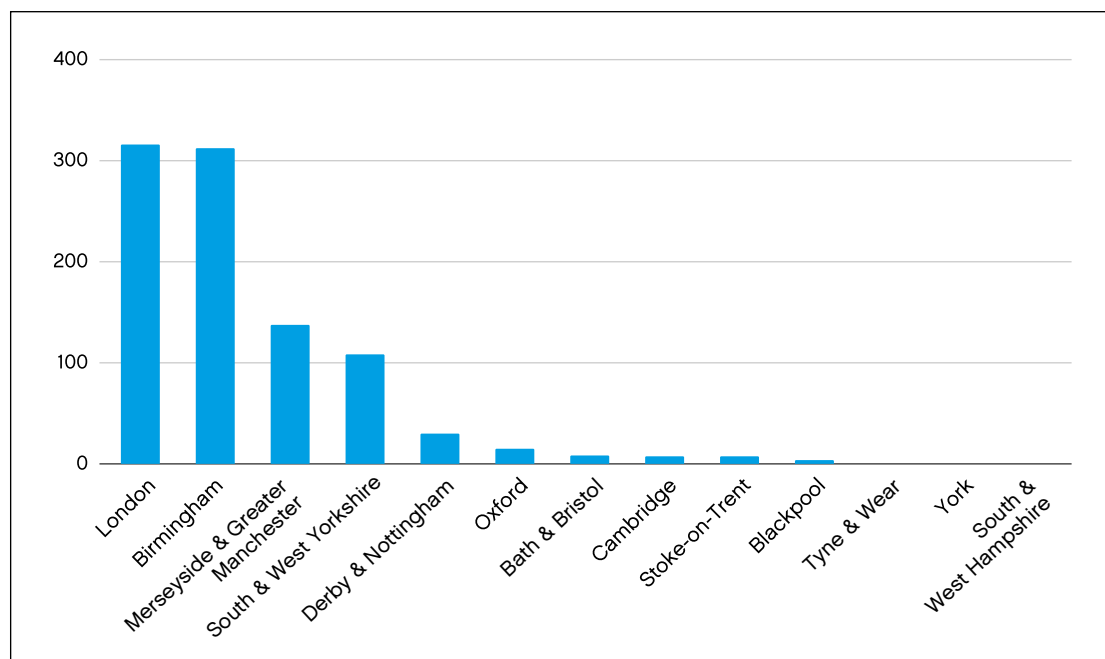


Source: CPS/Create Streets analysis

There are a number of qualifications, however. Not all of this land will be developable in practice. Outside the South East, there will often be viability problems due to low land values and high remediation costs. Even within the South East, some of the land used for e.g. commercial or industrial purposes may be more valuable in its current use than as a housing development.

There are also issues with connectedness. Small sites with no transport connections at all may be impractical. In particular, the most important form of public transport from a green belt location into employment hubs is often rail, allowing commuters to pass smoothly through suburbs into city centres. We therefore examined the quantity of grey belt within 1,200 metres of a railway station. Not all of this land would be well connected in practice. But applying this filter gives us a reasonable maximum figure for grey belt land connected to the existing rail network.

'Intuitive grey belt' within 1,200m of a railway station (ha)



Source: CPS/Create Streets analysis

If all this land were developable, that would mean some 15,000 dwellings at normal suburban densities or perhaps 30,000 with 'gentle density'. This is not a contemptible opportunity and it is right that the Government should investigate it. But it can make at best a modest contribution to the 1.5 million target.

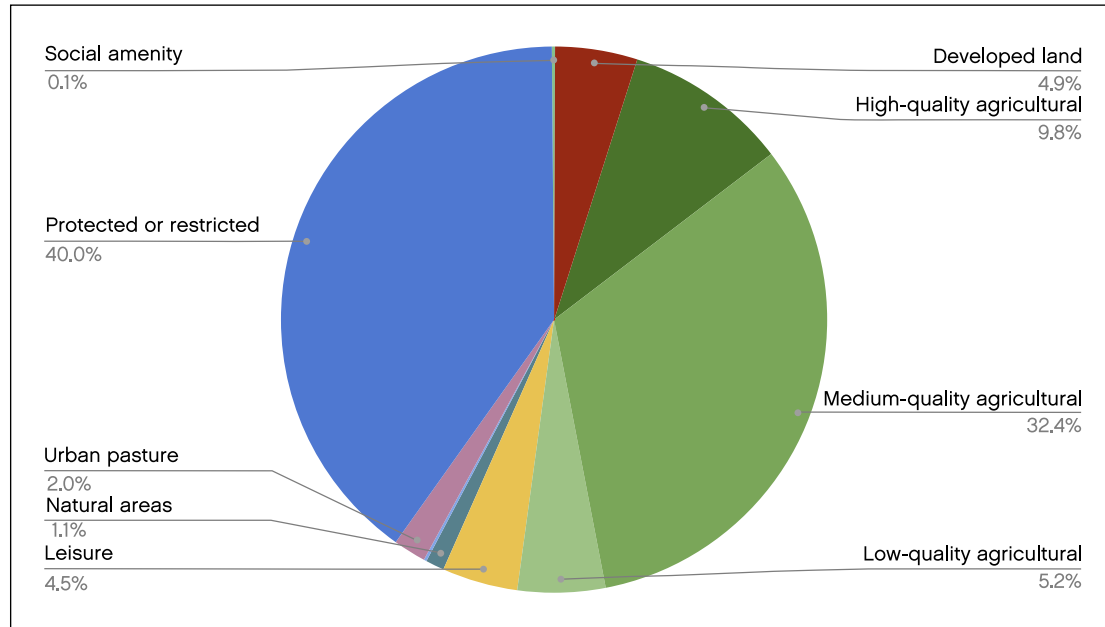
The upshot of this is that councils will almost certainly end up leaning on the second part of the grey belt definition: land which does not 'strongly contribute' to the green belt's five purposes. In the next section, therefore, we broaden our focus to look at the kinds of land uses that take up the bulk of England's green belt.



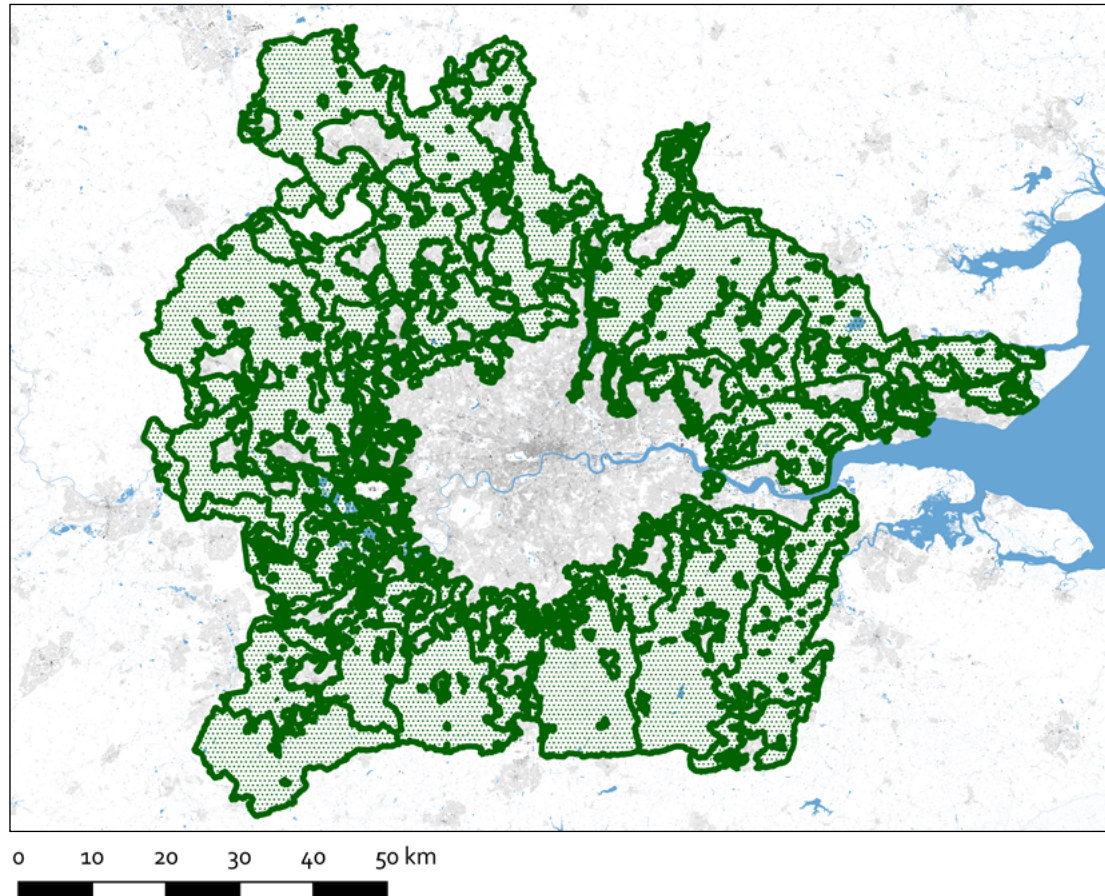
The individual green belts

The largest green belt is London's; as noted above, London's green belt is also particularly important because the housing shortage is concentrated in and around London.

London (539,000ha)



Source: CPS/Create Streets analysis



Source: CPS/Create Streets analysis



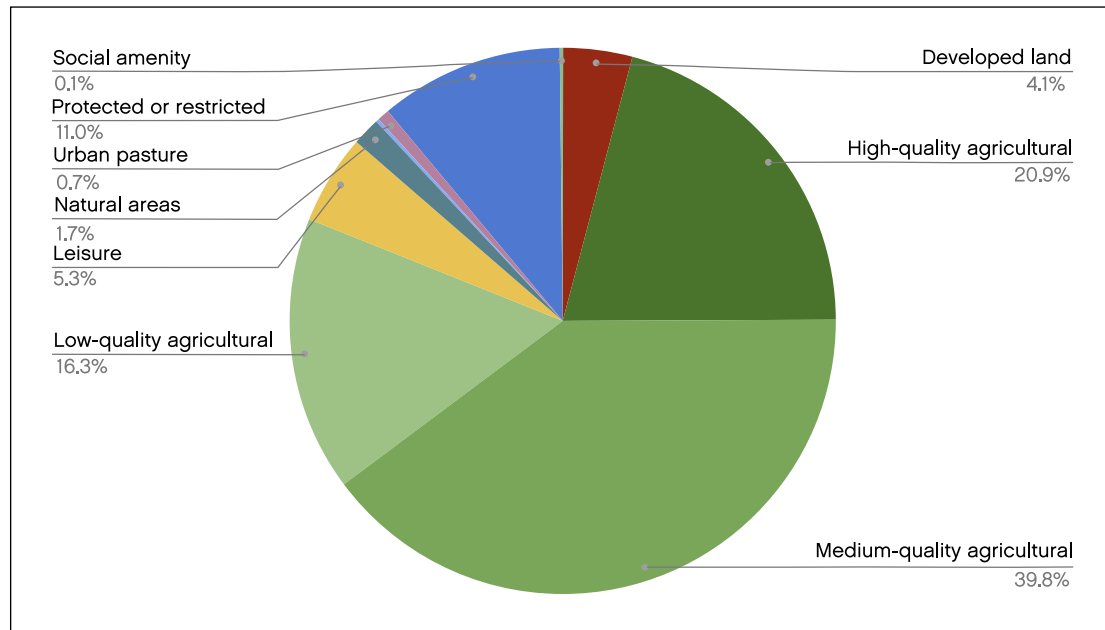
The London green belt is marked by an unusually large share of protected areas (40%), notably the Chilterns and the Downs. This marks London's as a relatively 'high quality' green belt, much of which is made up of environmentally significant landscapes. London's green belt is also notable for above-average shares of leisure areas, urban pasture and developed land, reflecting the longstanding diffusion of commuter communities across the belt and its use for their amenity.

‘ London’s green belt covers some 513,000 hectares, meaning that even its share of low-quality unprotected agricultural land comes to around 28,000 hectares, enough for 980,000 homes at standard suburban densities. If medium-quality land is included, this rises to over seven million additional homes, more than doubling the capital’s housing stock ’

Nonetheless, in absolute terms, the quantity of land that does not fall under any such designation remains enormous. London's green belt covers some 513,000 hectares, meaning that even its share of low-quality unprotected agricultural land comes to around 28,000 hectares, enough for 980,000 houses at the official minimum density of 35 homes per hectare. London has some 3.8m dwellings overall, so this would expand its housing stock by more than a quarter.

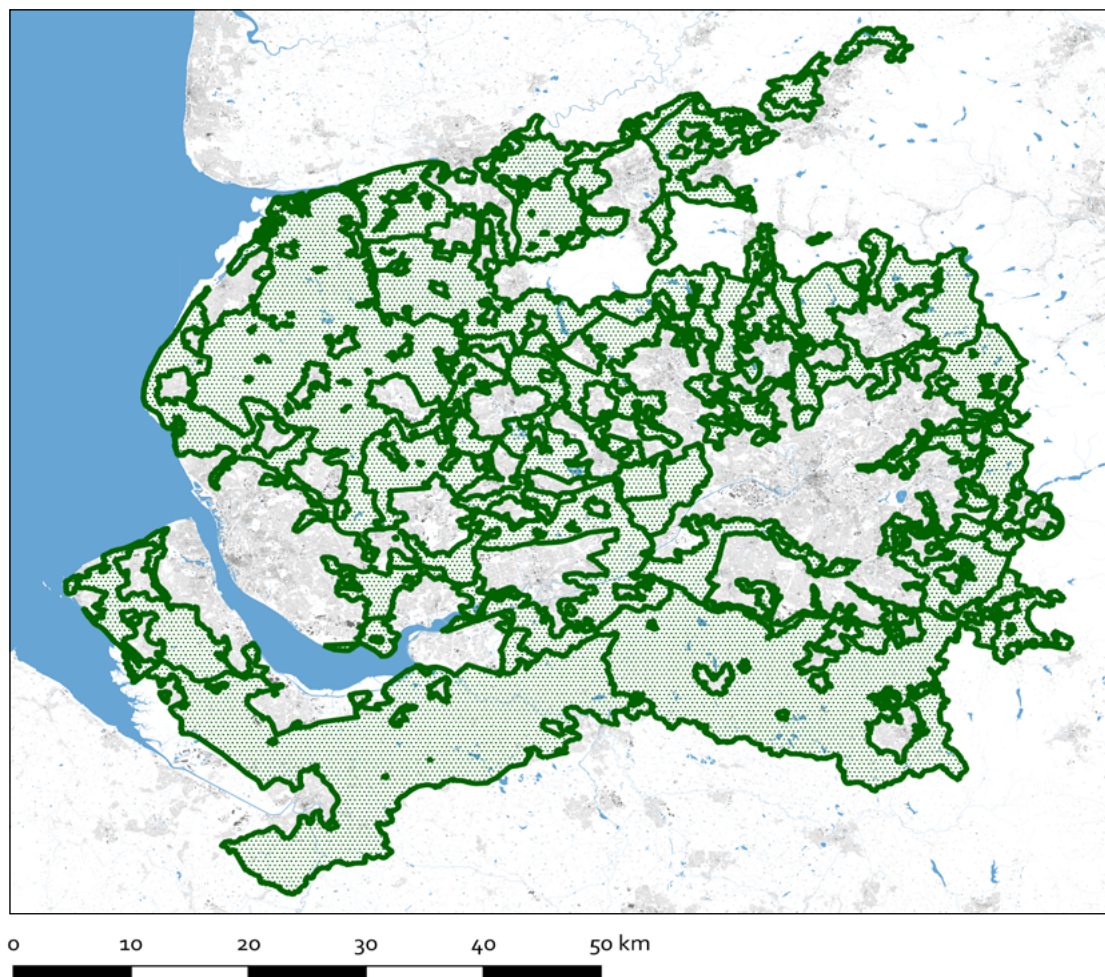
If unprotected medium-quality agricultural land is included (an additional 174,000 hectares), this rises to over 7 million additional homes, more than doubling the capital's housing stock without touching any high-grade agricultural land or any protected designations. Even if you assume, as we have, that you would only build on 60% of the land to preserve green spaces within the new developments, this would still be enough for 588,000 and 4.2 million homes respectively.

Merseyside and Manchester (235,000ha)



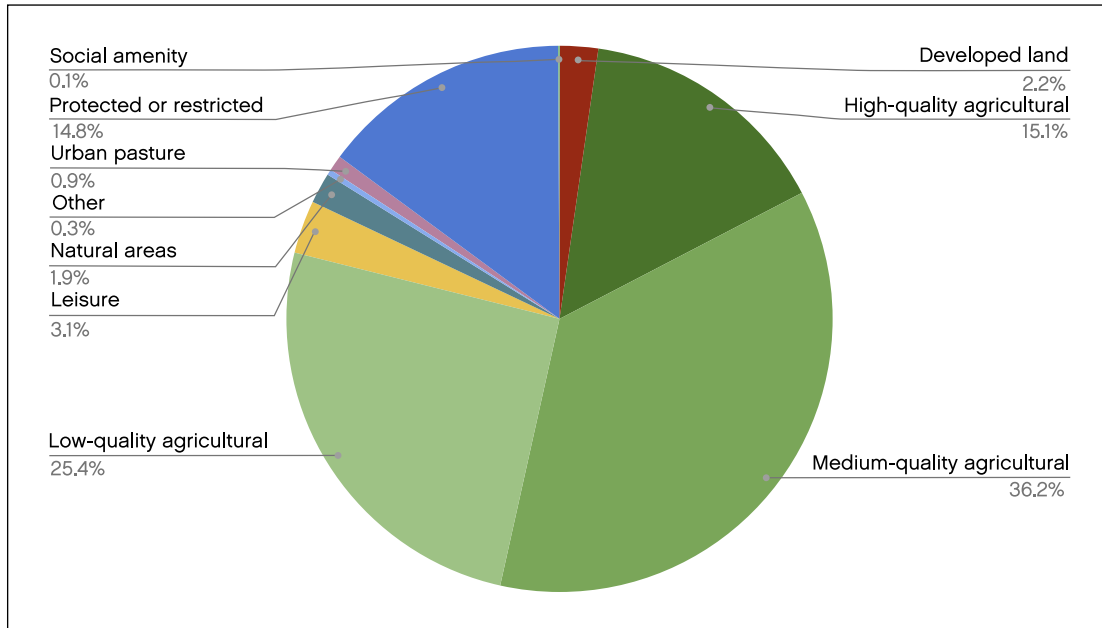
Source: CPS/Create Streets analysis

The Merseyside and Manchester green belt offers a contrasting picture. It has a higher share of unprotected agricultural land (77%), most of it of unremarkable quality. The protected share is far lower, less than a third of London's. This is a pattern we shall see in several of the Northern green belts.



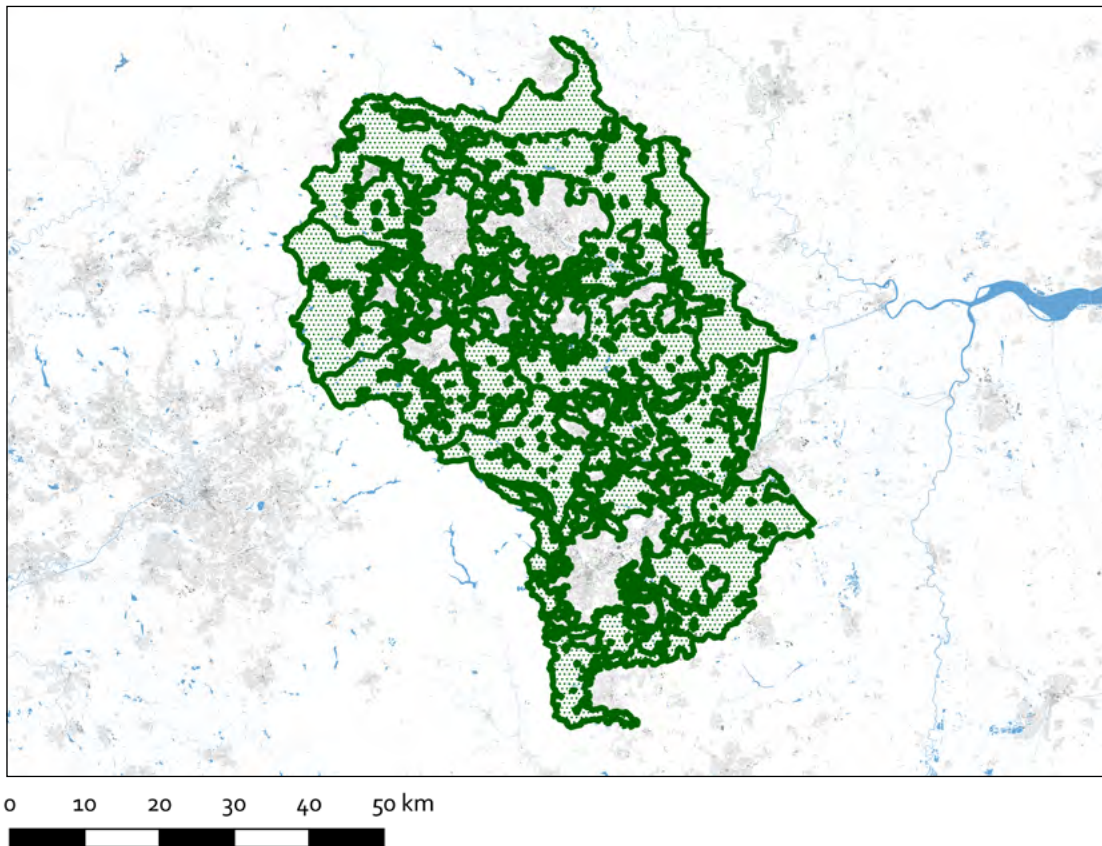
Source: CPS/Create Streets analysis

South and West Yorkshire (228,000ha)



Source: CPS/Create Streets analysis

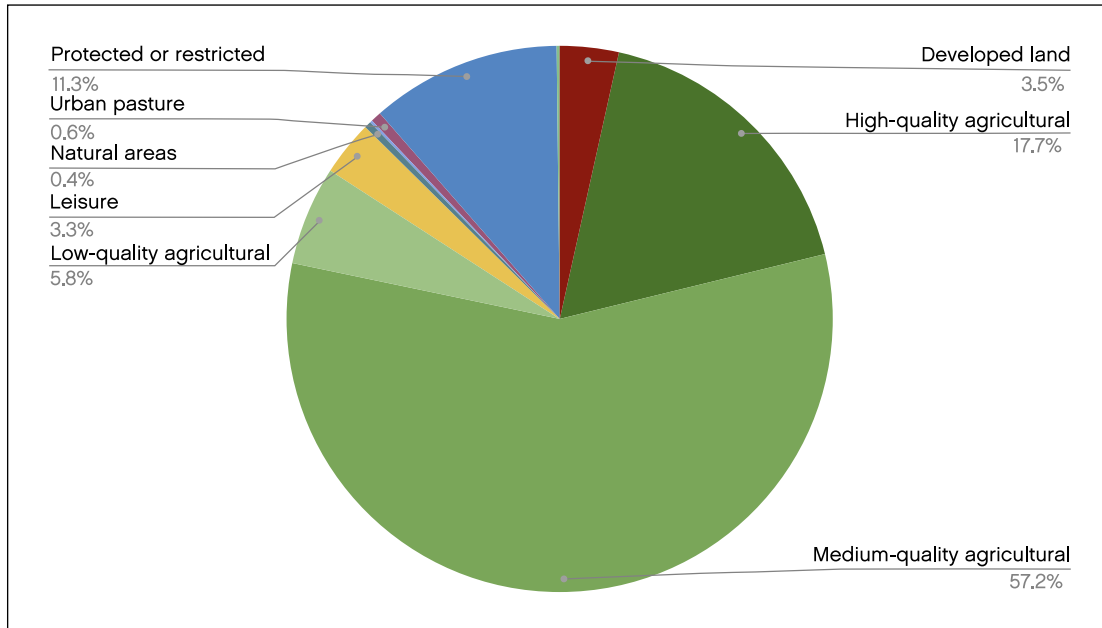
South and West Yorkshire's green belt falls relatively close to the national averages in its composition. As with most Northern and Midland green belts, its protected share is relatively low, though this is less true of Yorkshire than it is of many of its counterparts.



Source: CPS/Create Streets analysis

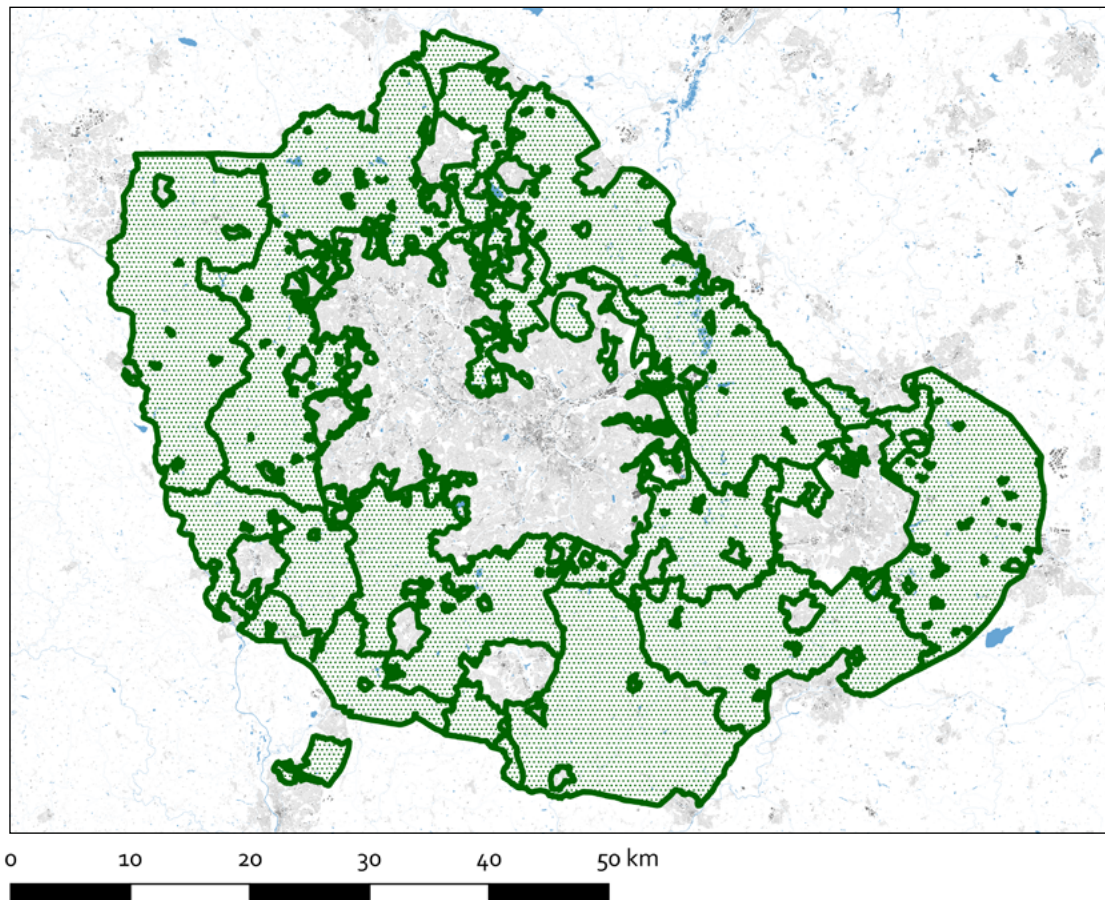


Birmingham (221,000ha)



Source: CPS/Create Streets analysis

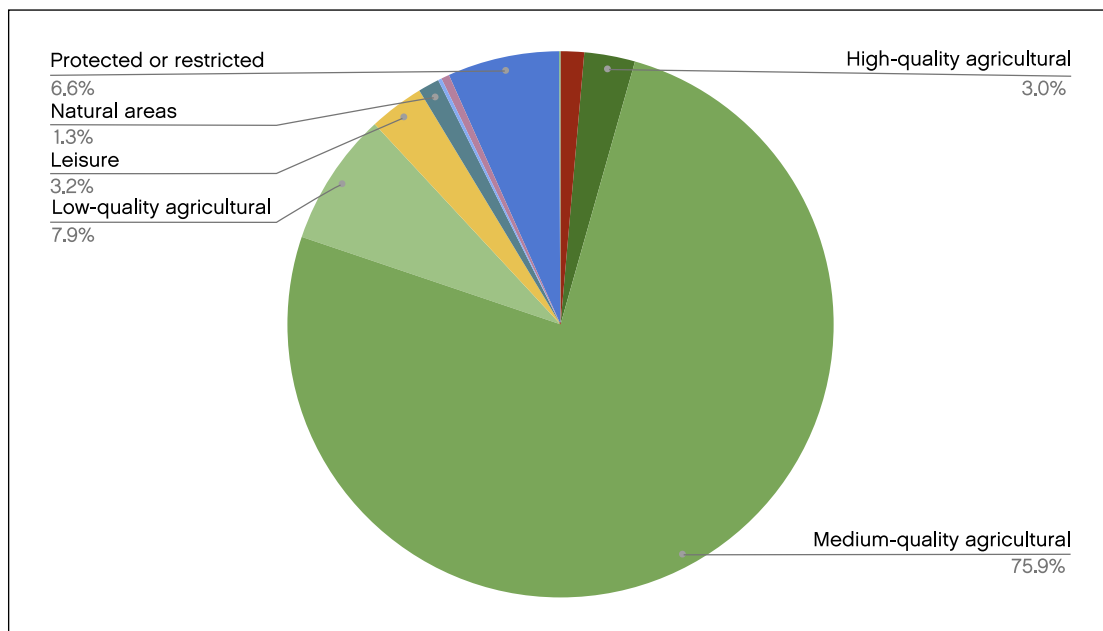
Birmingham has a low share of protected areas (11.3%), in common with many of the major Midland and Northern belts. The bulk of the belt is medium-quality agricultural land.



Source: CPS/Create Streets analysis

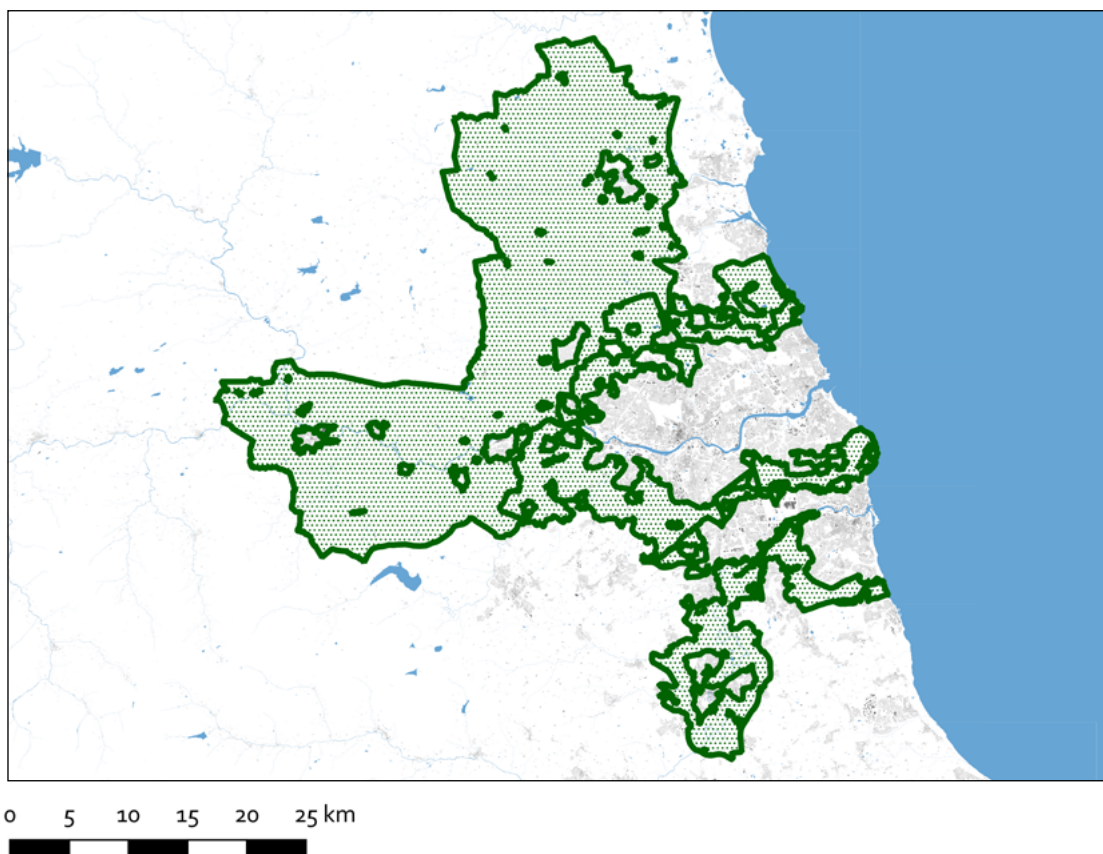


Tyne and Wear (90,000ha)



Source: CPS/Create Streets analysis

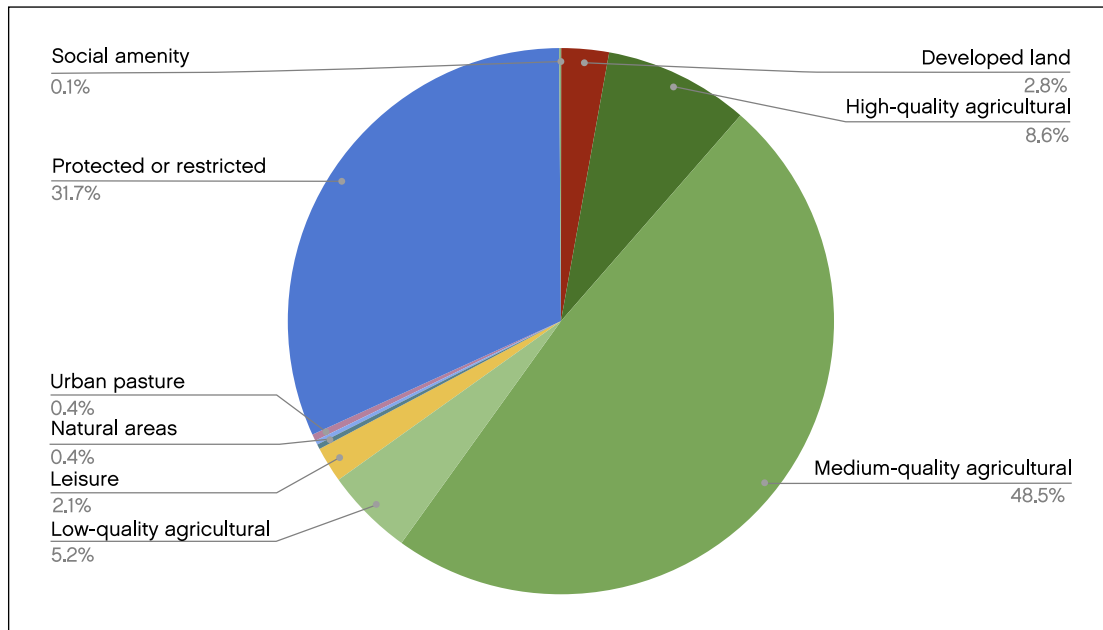
Tyne and Wear is again highly agricultural, largely of medium quality. It has low shares of previously developed and protected land.



Source: CPS/Create Streets analysis

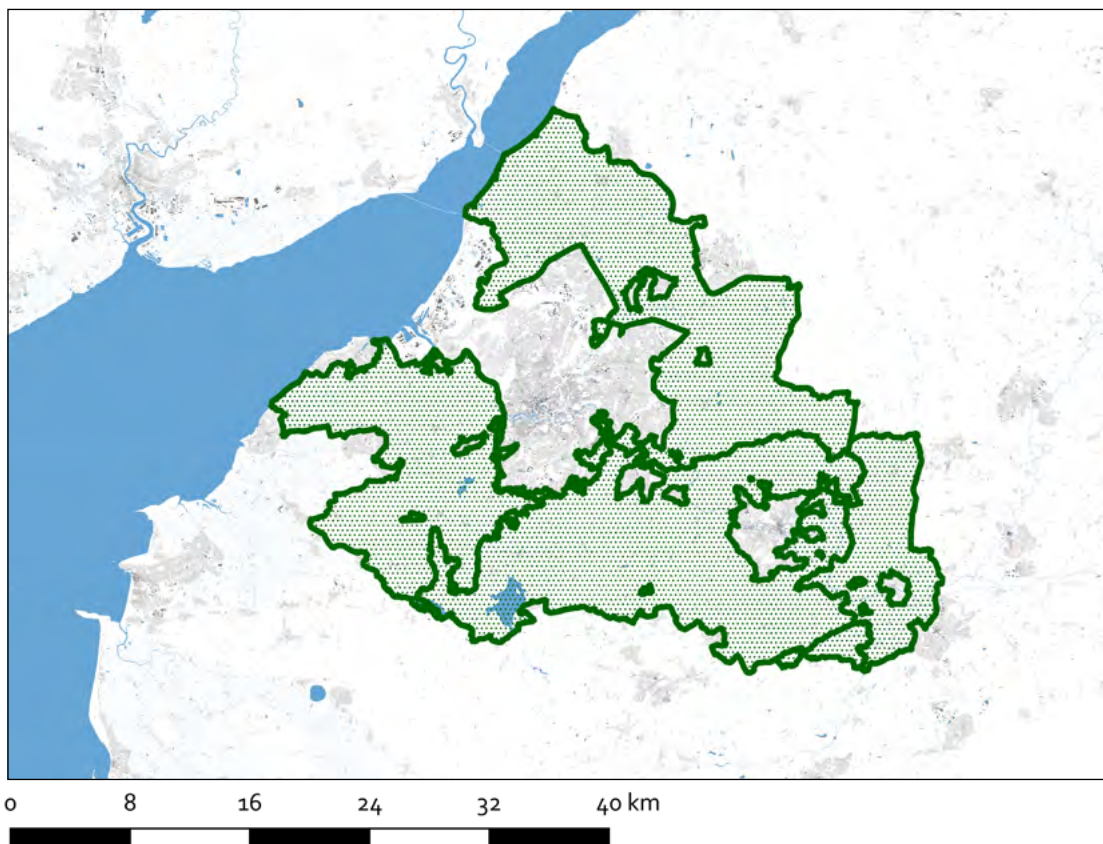


Bath and Bristol (74,000ha)



Source: CPS/Create Streets analysis

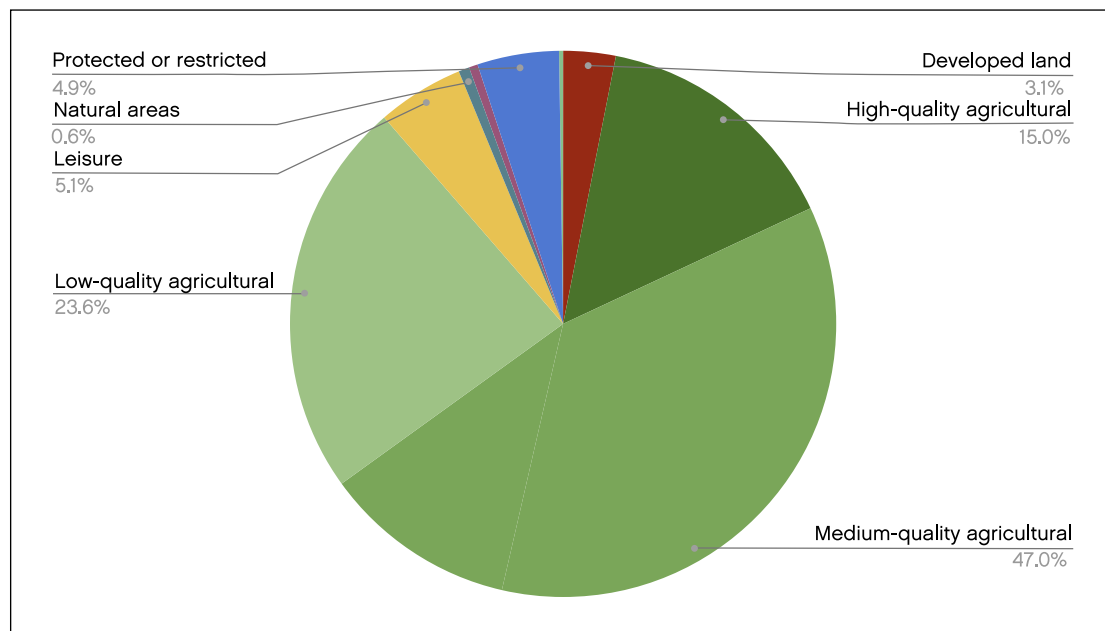
The Bath and Bristol green belt, by contrast, shows a more characteristically Southern pattern, with a high share of protected land (31.7%). Bath and Bristol has one of the lowest shares of unprotected agricultural land though even here it makes up a majority of the surface area.



Source: CPS/Create Streets analysis

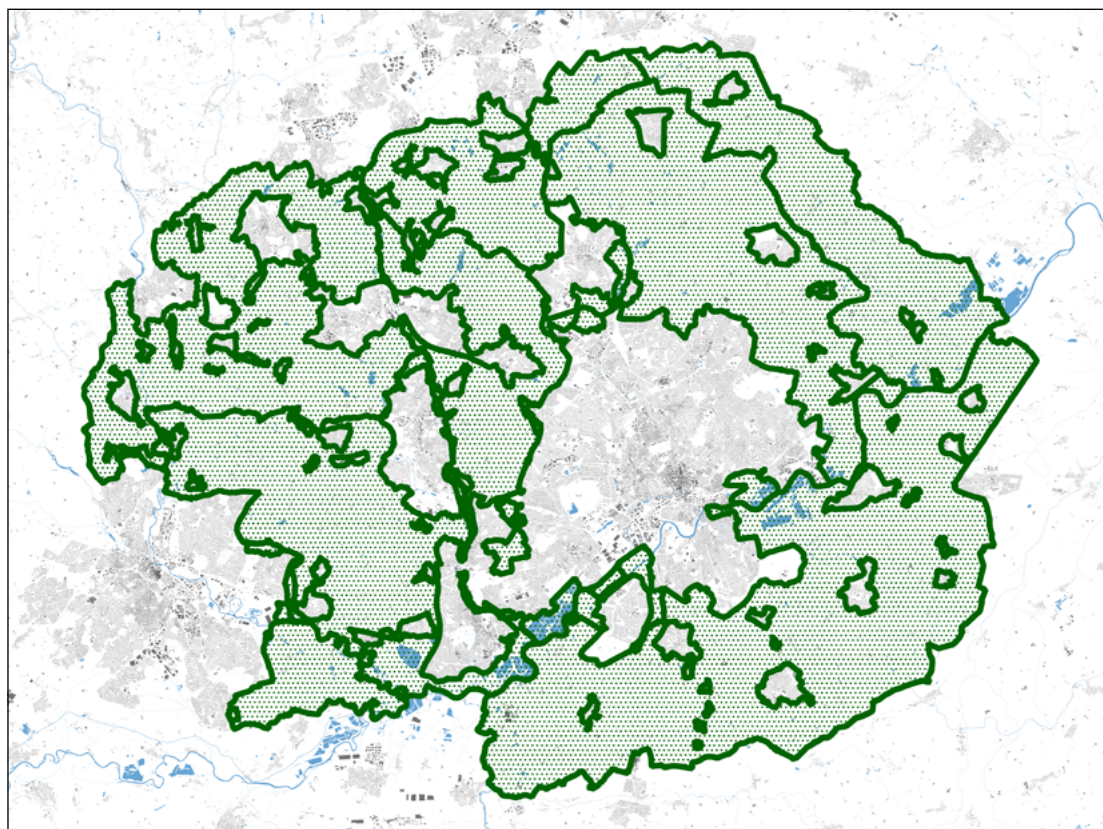


Derby and Nottingham (56,000ha)



Source: CPS/Create Streets analysis

With Derby and Nottingham we return to the Midland and Northern pattern of high agricultural shares (85.6%). It has one of the highest shares for leisure activities, chiefly golf courses and other sports fields.

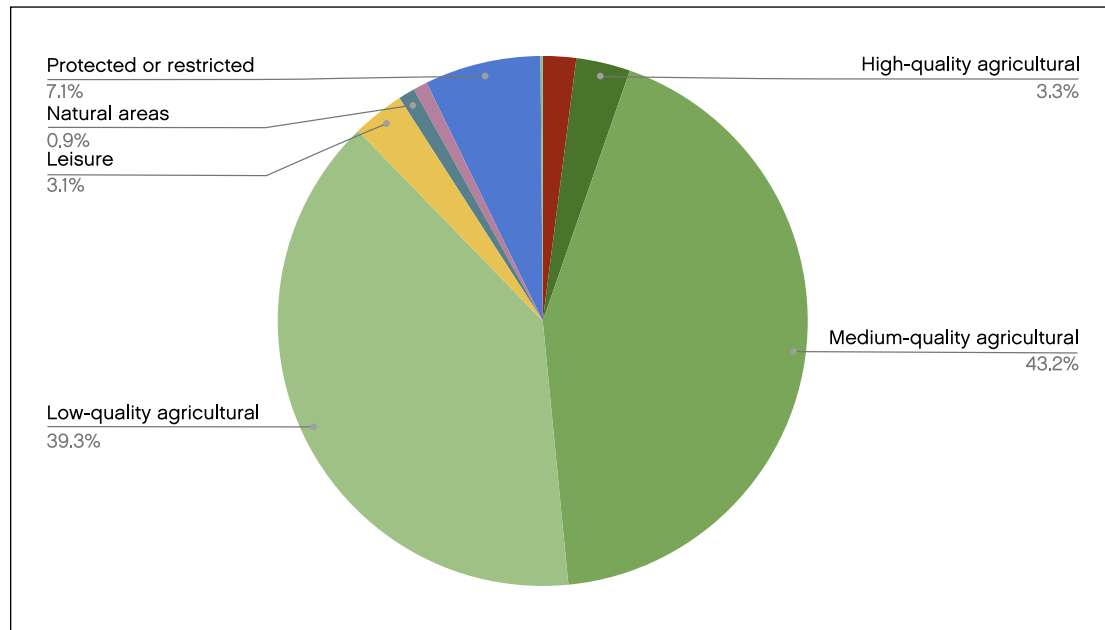


0 1 2 3 4 5 km



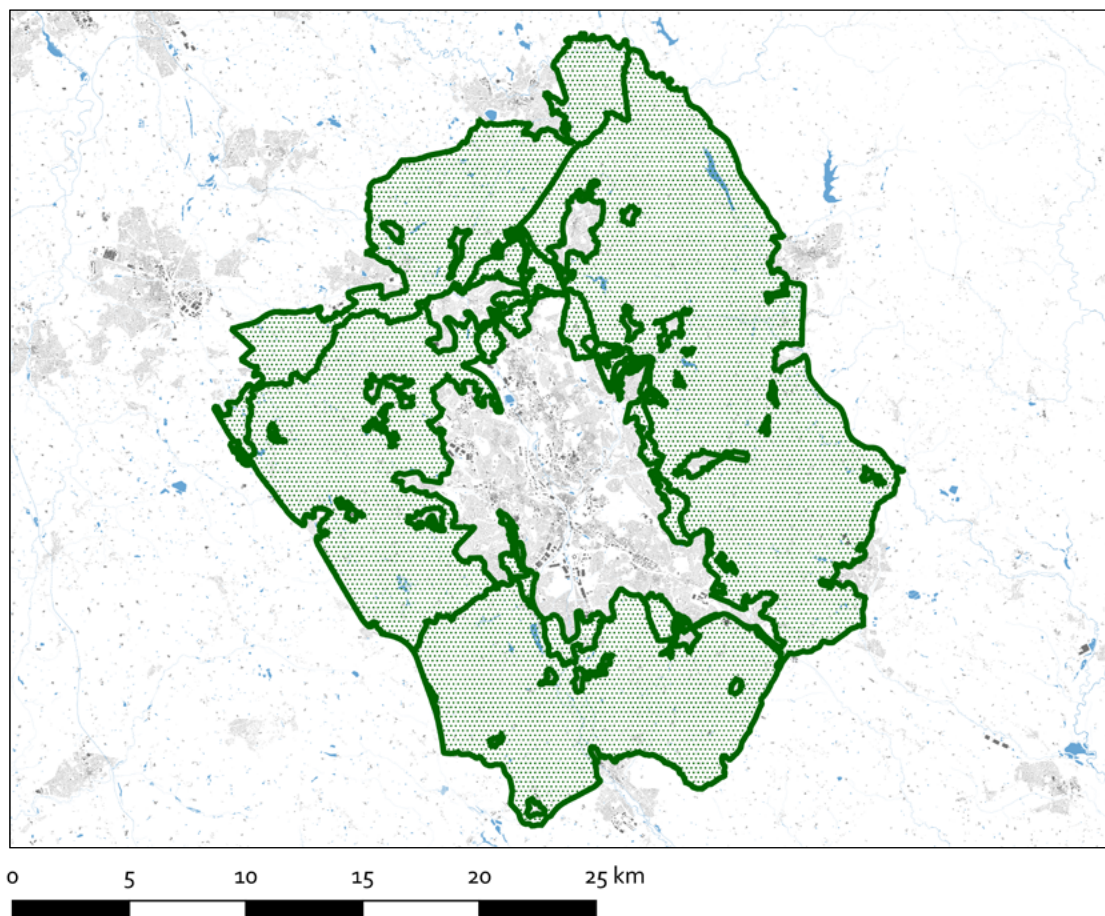
Source: CPS/Create Streets analysis

Stoke-on-Trent (42,000ha)



Source: CPS/Create Streets analysis

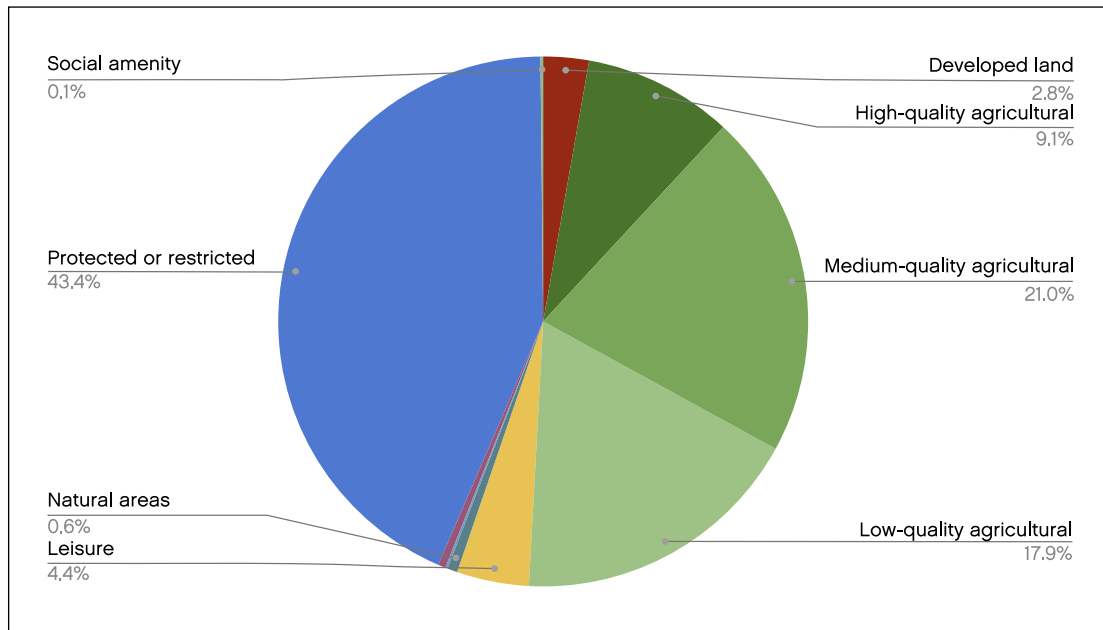
Stoke has one of the most agricultural green belts, and the highest share of low-quality agricultural land (39.3%). Its protected share is low. If Stoke were an area with high land values, it would be a prime candidate for development, though regrettably this is not the case.



Source: CPS/Create Streets analysis

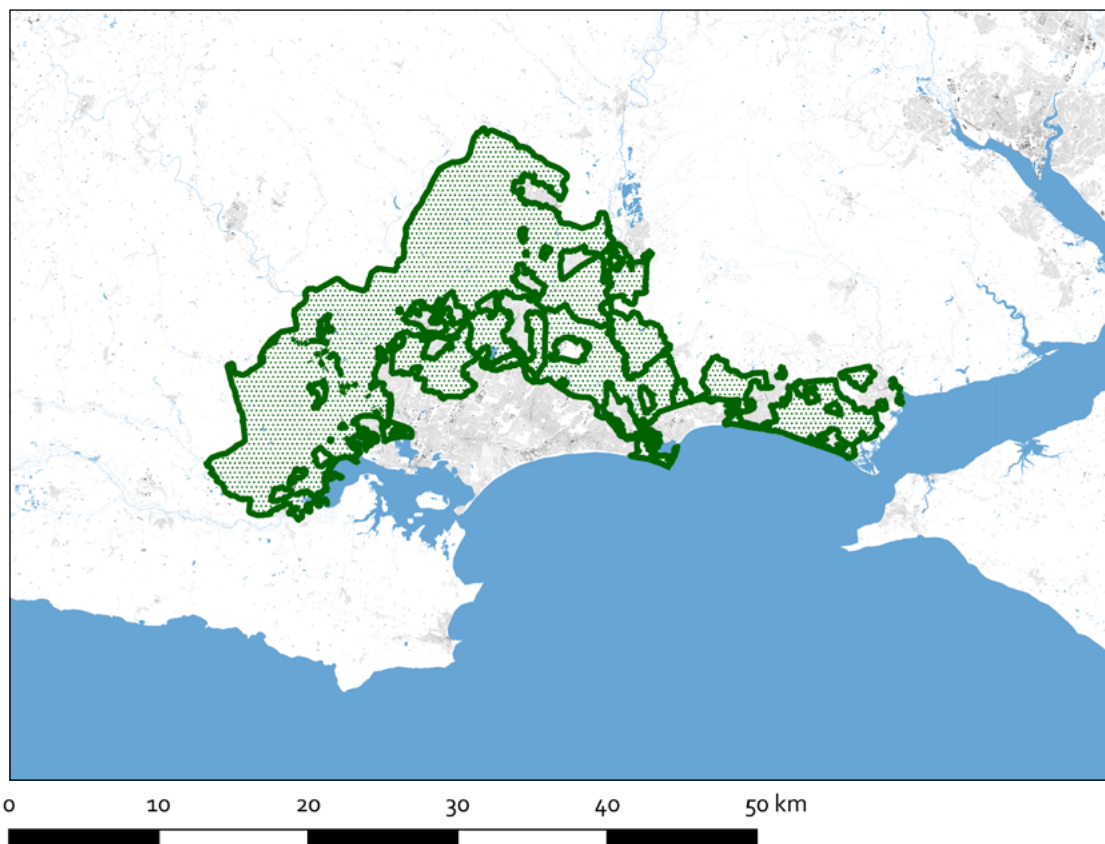


South and West Hampshire (35,000ha)



Source: CPS/Create Streets analysis

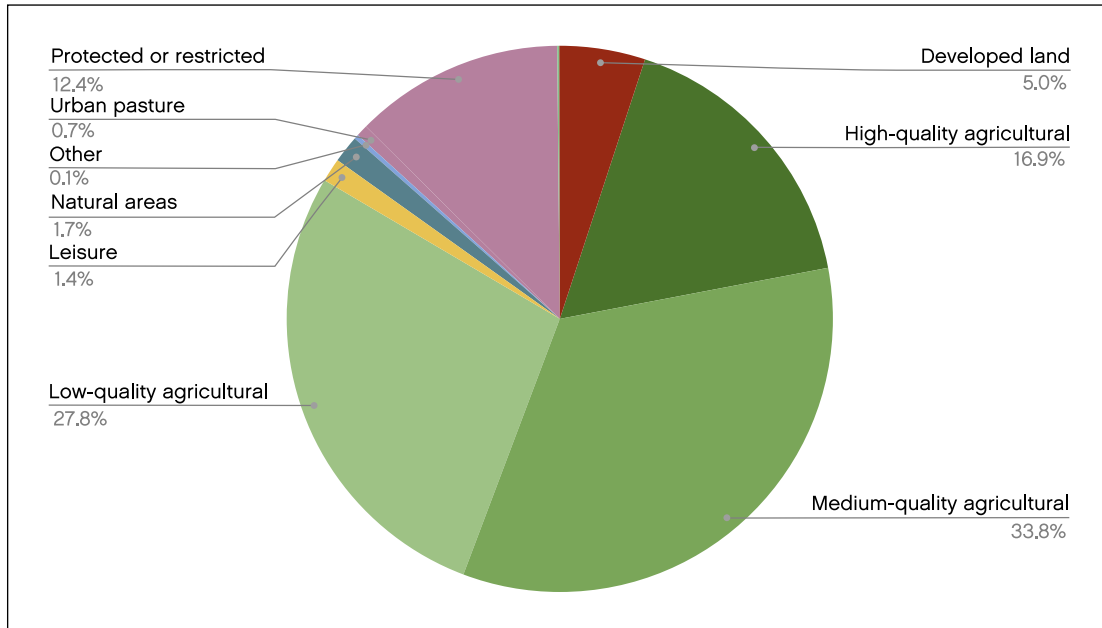
South and West Hampshire has a large share of protected land, overlapping with two National Landscapes and one National Park. The quality of the remaining agricultural land is unremarkable, with only 9.1% of land falling into the higher ALC brackets.



Source: CPS/Create Streets analysis

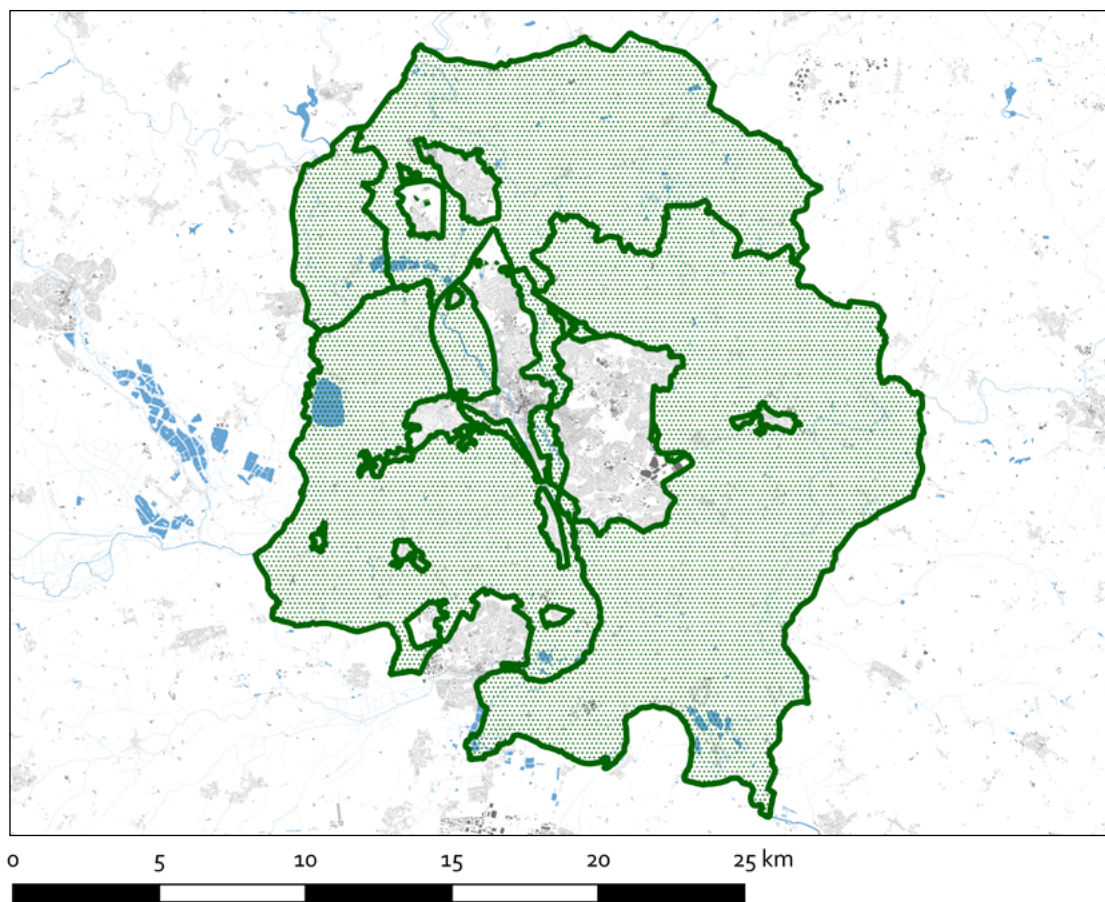


Oxford (33,000ha)



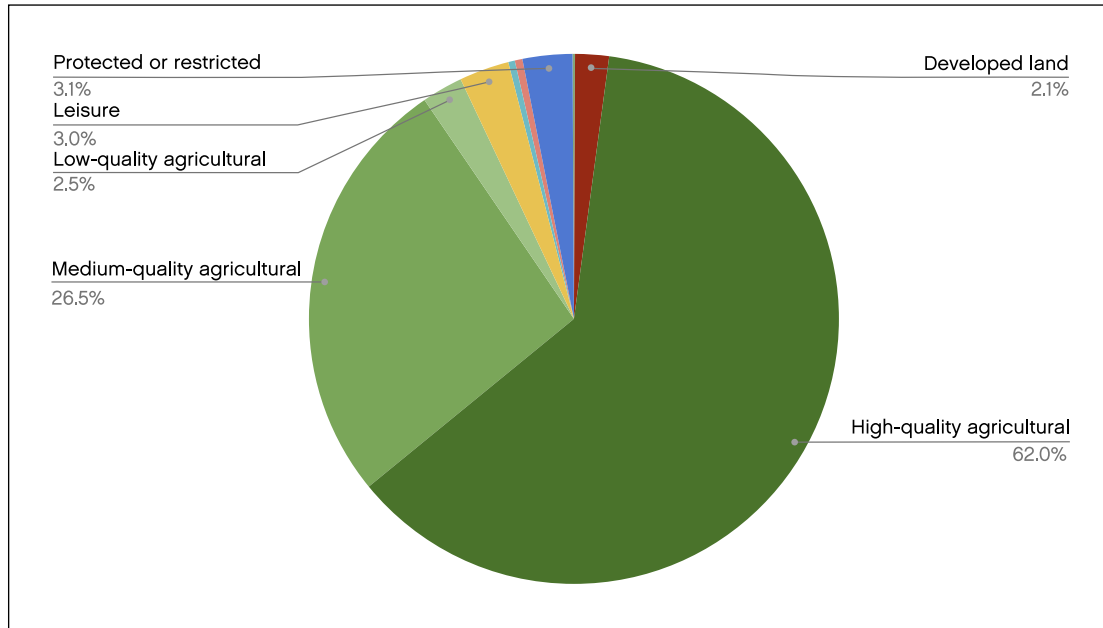
Source: CPS/Create Streets analysis

Oxford's green belt has an unusually large share of low-quality agricultural land, one of the highest in the country (27.8%). The share of protected land is relatively low, and much of what we have listed as protected here is a flood risk zone rather than possessing special environmental value.



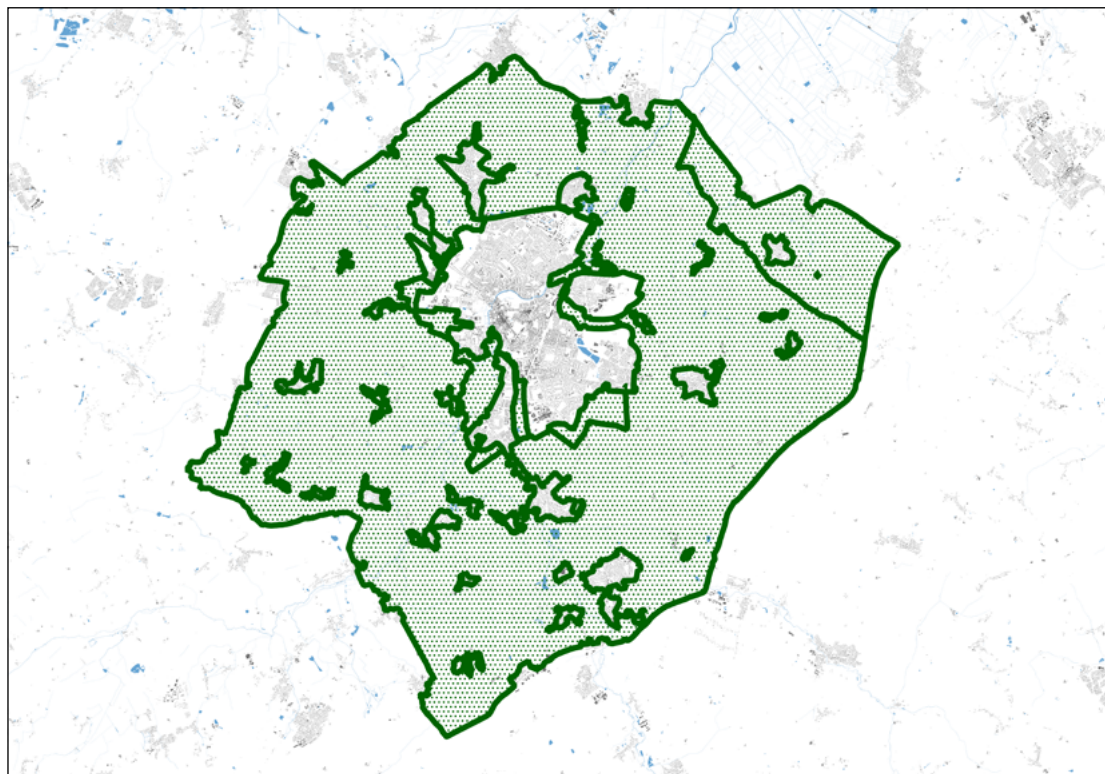
Source: CPS/Create Streets analysis

Cambridge (25,000ha)



Source: CPS/Create Streets analysis

Cambridge's green belt is overwhelmingly agricultural (91%), most of which is of good quality (62%). This is characteristic of East Anglia, the most intensively farmed area of England. It is also anomalous in its low share of protected areas, especially for a Southern green belt. Cambridge thus stands as something of an outlier, relatively low in environmental and amenity values but high in agricultural importance.



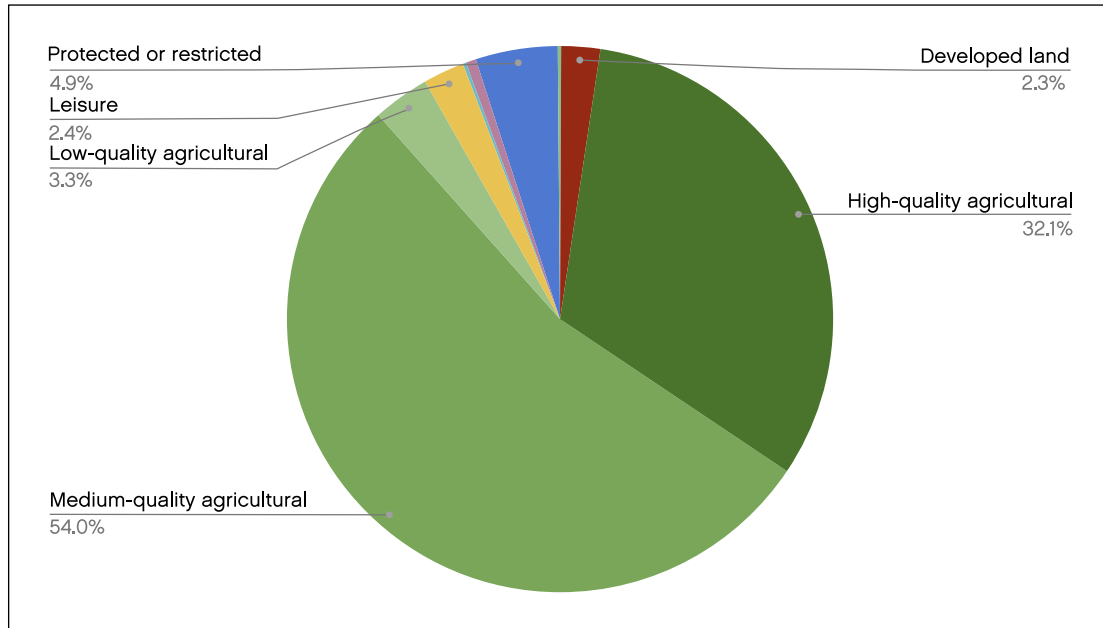
0 1 2 3 4 5 km



Source: CPS/Create Streets analysis



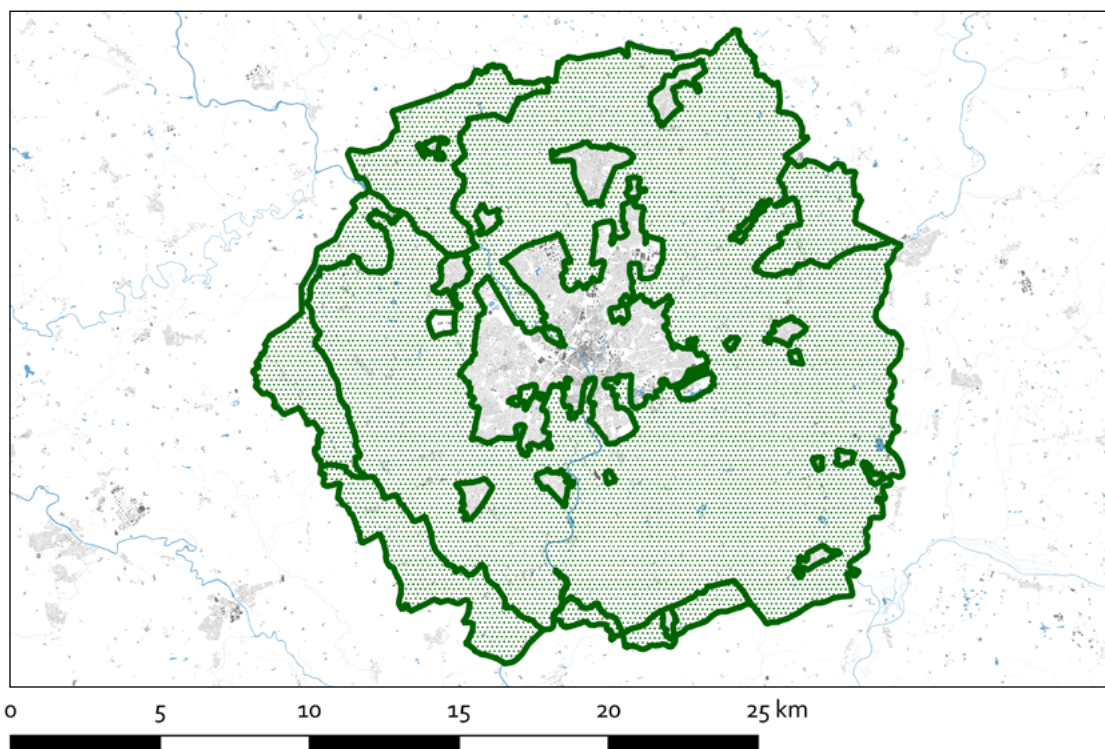
York (27,000ha)



Source: CPS/Create Streets analysis

York's green belt is famous for its planning role: York had no local plan between 1956 and 2025, being shielded from the normal planning effects of this by the green belt's exemption from the presumption in favour of sustainable development. The council has finally approved a plan and York will see several parcels of green belt released in the coming years.

York's green belt is largely agricultural (89.4%) and predominantly of medium quality (54%). It has some of the highest land values in the North, which could sustain development of very good quality.



Source: CPS/Create Streets analysis

The minor green belts

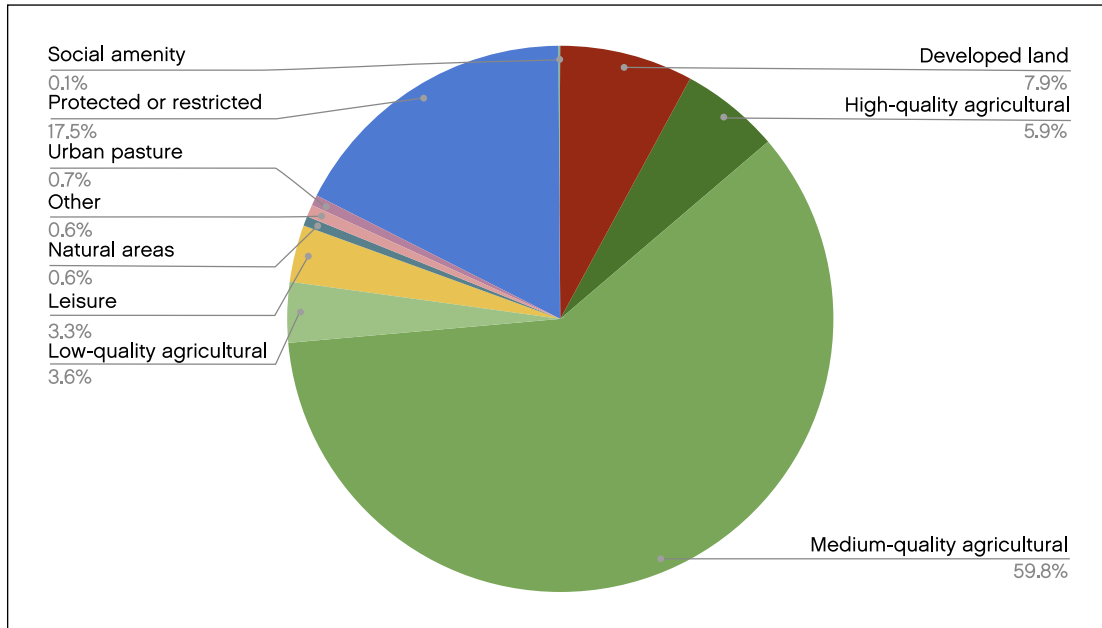
The remaining four green belts are much smaller. They also have a somewhat different function, being aimed mostly at preserving the distinctness of neighbouring settlements rather than as true urban containment boundaries. Indeed, none fully encircles the town in question, so they are not really 'belts'. We include them here for the sake of completeness, but it is unlikely that any will be the site of substantial development, especially since (with the exception of Cheltenham and Gloucester) they are in areas with relatively low land values.

**‘ The remaining four green belts are much smaller.
They also have a somewhat different function,
being aimed mostly at preserving the distinctness
of neighbouring settlements rather than as
true urban containment boundaries ’**

The extremely small size of these belts also leads to eccentricities in their percentage share figures, into which we should not read too much. For example, Blackpool has a high share of previously developed land (13.7%), but this is partly because the green belt happens to cover its small airfield.

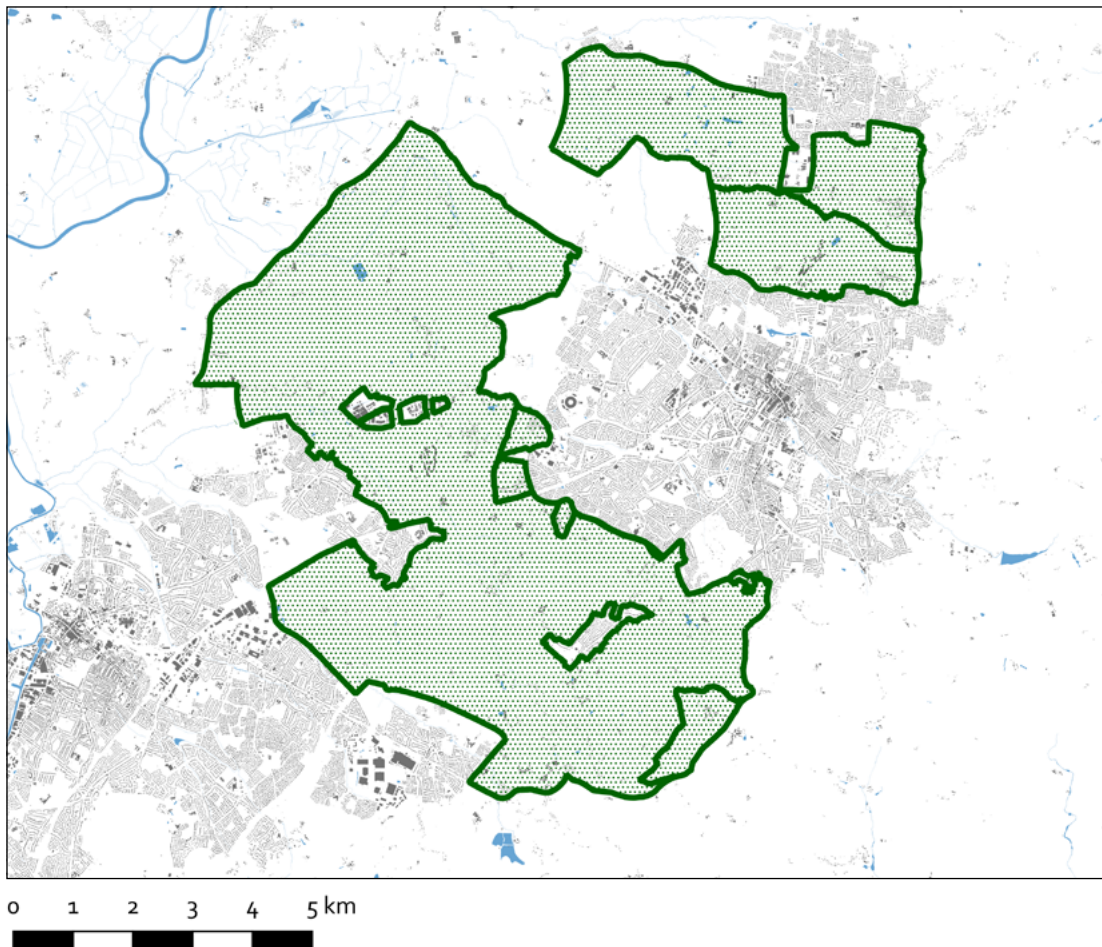


Cheltenham and Gloucester (6,000ha)



Source: CPS/Create Streets analysis

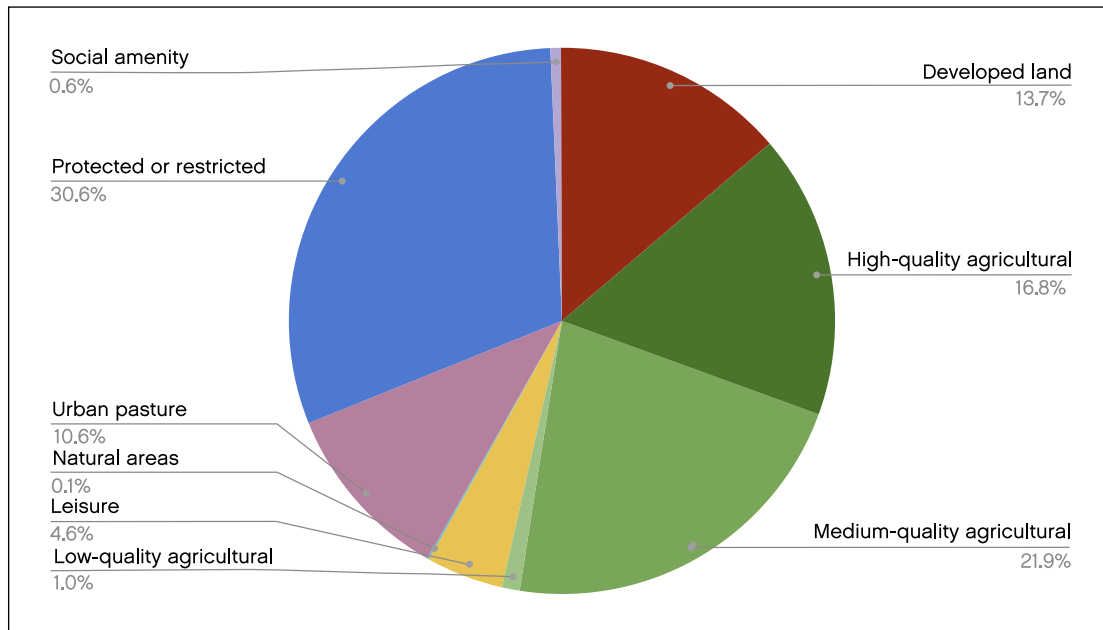
This green belt separates Cheltenham and Gloucester. It overlaps with the Cotswolds National Landscape, resulting in a substantial share of protected land. Like Blackpool, it covers a small airfield, resulting in a high share of developed area.



Source: CPS/Create Streets analysis

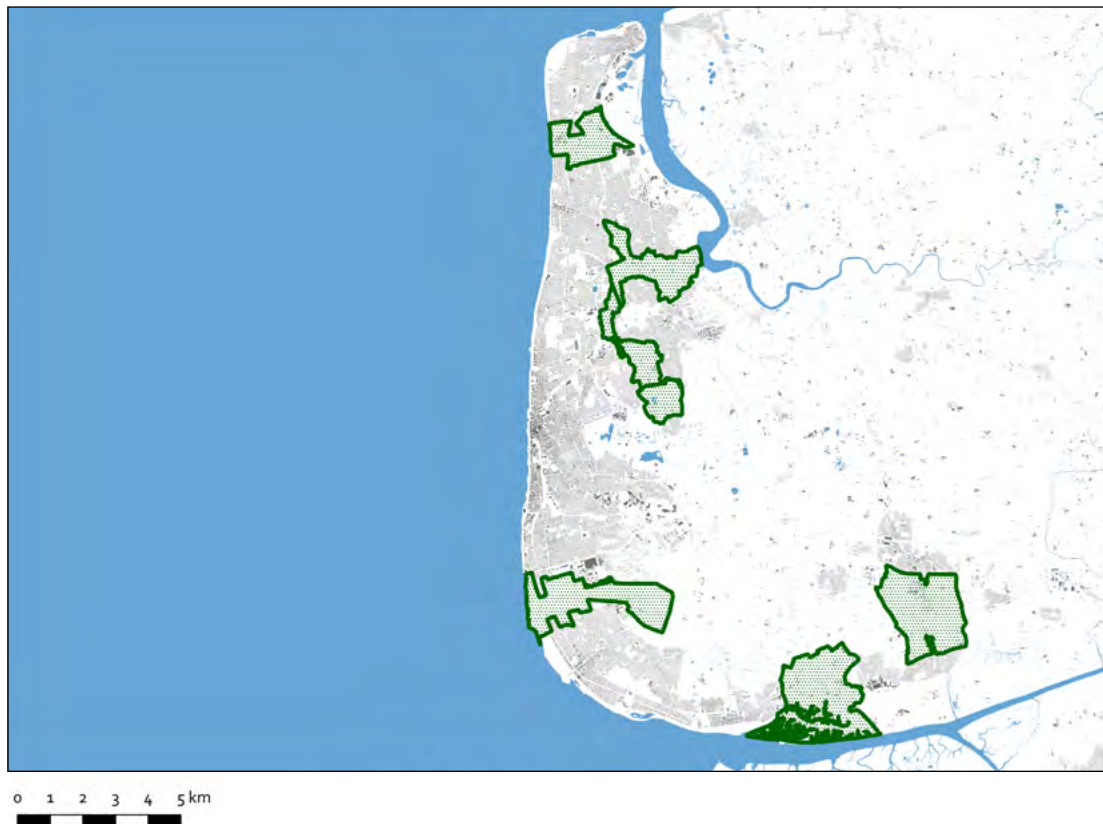


Blackpool (3,100ha)



Source: CPS/Create Streets analysis

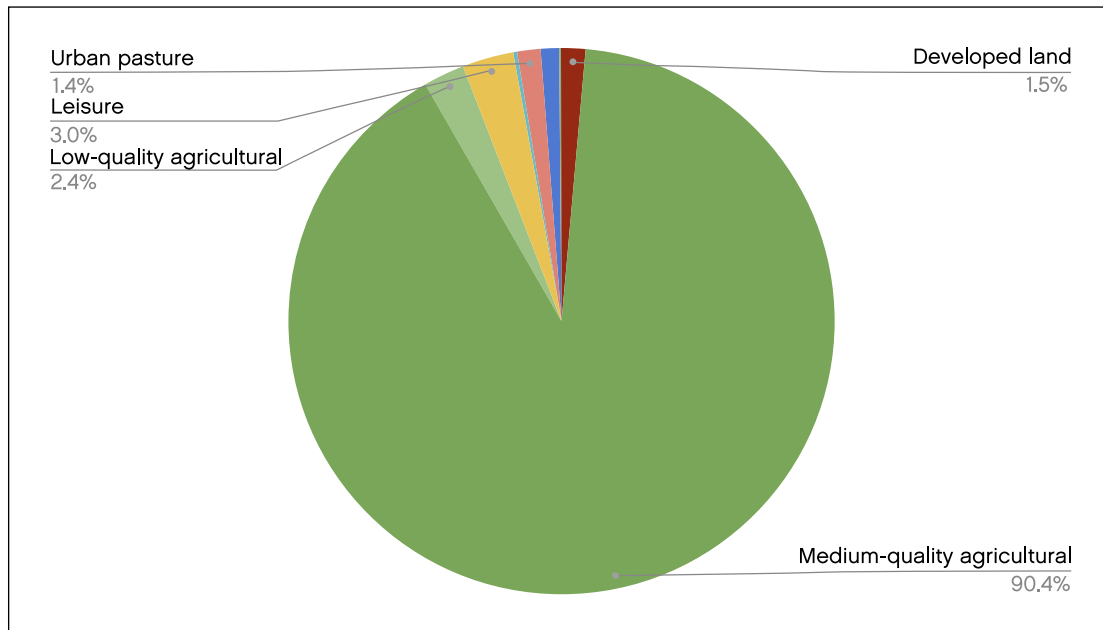
The Blackpool 'green belt' is in reality several separate areas reserved from development by the local authority in order to preserve the distinctness of historic settlements. As noted, Blackpool green belt has an anomalously large share of brownfield land, partly because it covers the site of Blackpool Airport.



Source: CPS/Create Streets analysis

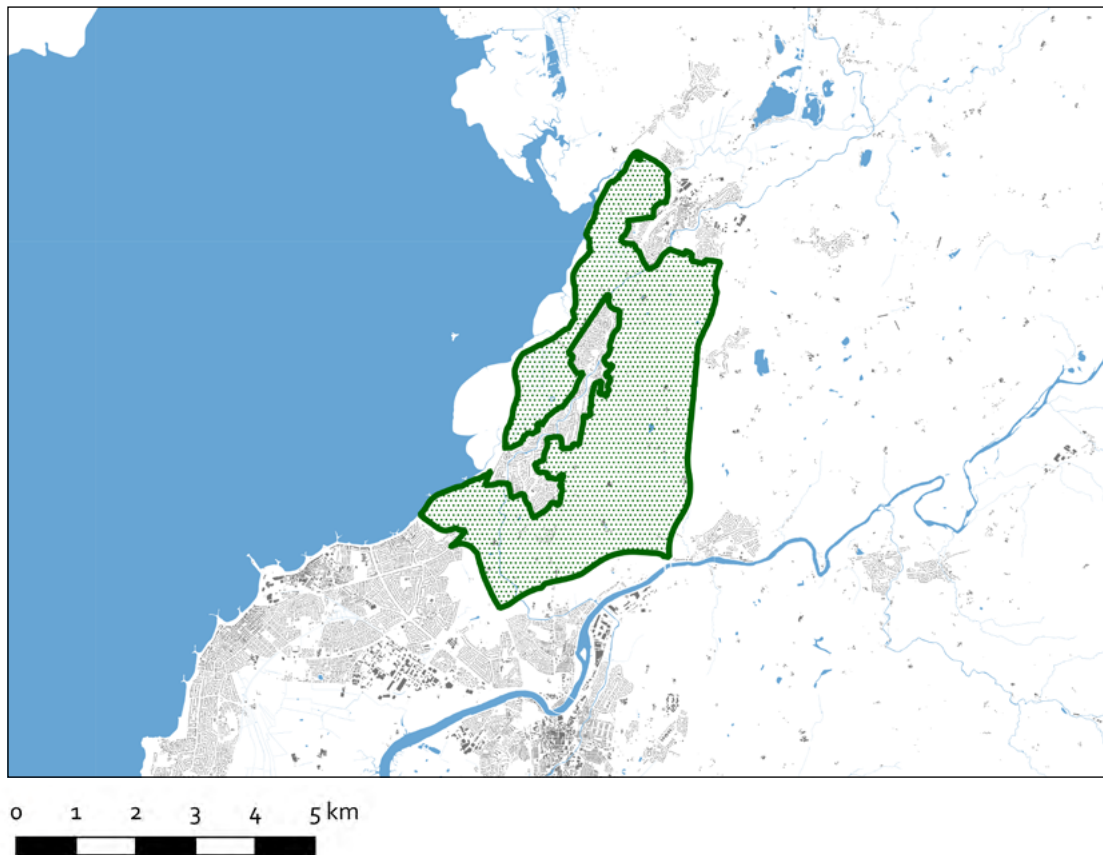


Carnforth, Lancaster and Morecambe (1,500ha)



Source: CPS/Create Streets analysis

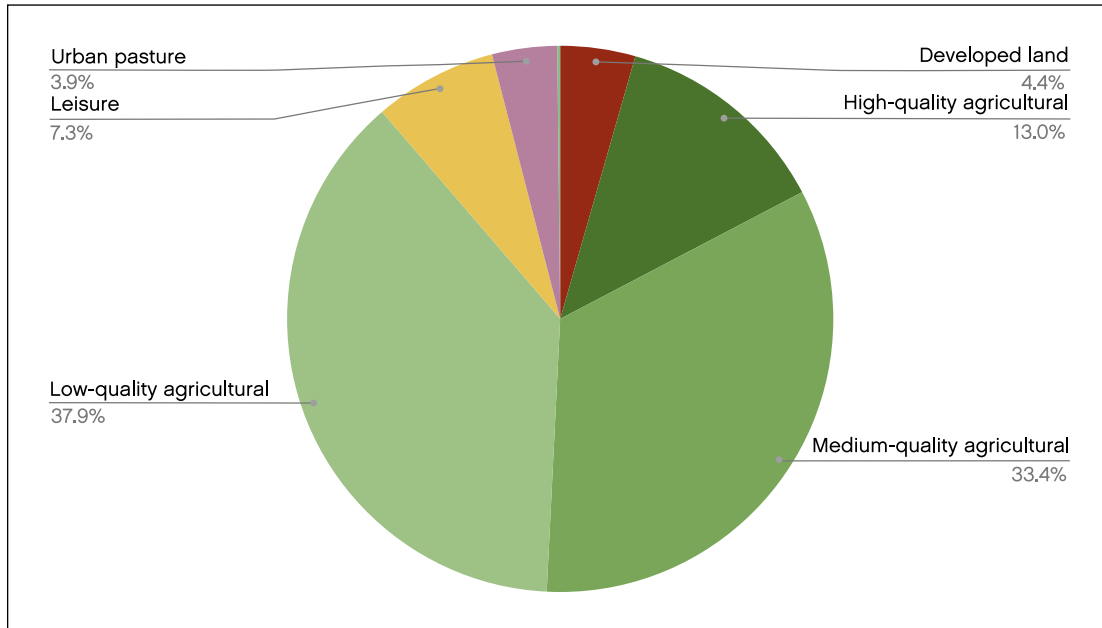
This green belt separates Lancaster from the smaller towns of Carnforth and Morecambe. It is the most homogeneous of all the green belts given our classifications, being largely (90.4%) medium-quality agricultural land.



Source: CPS/Create Streets analysis

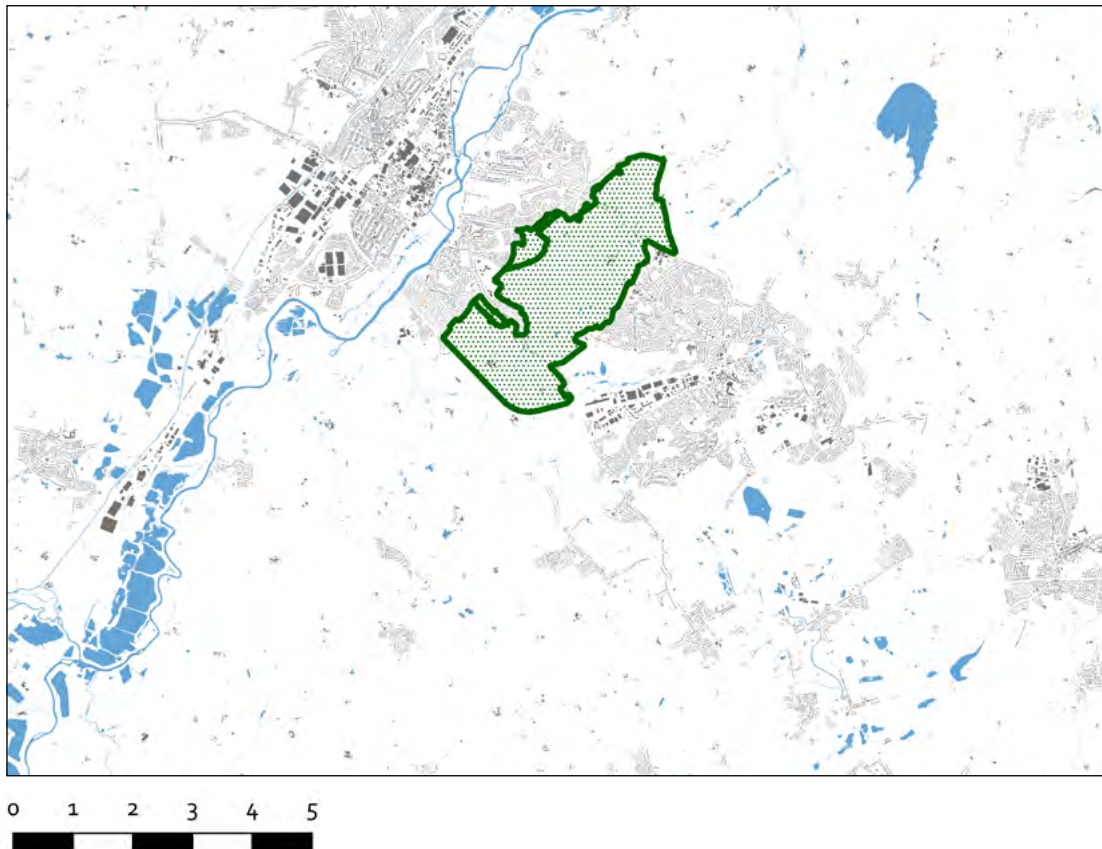


Burton-upon-Trent and Swadlincote (700ha)



Source: CPS/Create Streets analysis

This small green belt separates the towns of Burton-upon-Trent and Swadlincote. It consists largely of low- or medium-quality agricultural land.



Source: CPS/Create Streets analysis

The New Metroland

In the previous chapter, we showed that there is a very significant amount of low-quality agricultural land within the green belt that might be suitable for development, and an even larger quantity of medium-grade. Indeed, taken together the two represent more than half of all green belt land.

But of course, no one is proposing a pure free-for-all in terms of development. Rather, the Government has proposed to relax green belt rules above all for land near railway stations.

There is an obvious case for this. Rail transport is more environmentally friendly than travel by car. For commuting, it is often also more efficient. Railways bring commuters frictionlessly into the city centre, where jobs are concentrated. So railway towns are not just the environmentally virtuous option: where they are possible, they are the most important economically. Indeed, it was the previous expansion of London and other cities along the railways that created some of our most prized communities.

‘ It takes 15 minutes to walk 1,200m. Is that not also a reasonable walking distance? ’

As set out above, the Government is set to apply two key criteria to the creation of new green belt housing. It should be within 800m of a railway station. And those stations should be within the 80 most productive parts of the country, with a certain frequency of service.

However, these are fairly arbitrary definitions. It takes roughly 10 minutes to walk 800m. It takes 15 minutes to walk 1,200m. Is that not, also, a ‘reasonable walking distance’? It is certainly one many commuters, even within Central London, would find more than acceptable – indeed, highly desirable. Likewise, what if there is a perfect site 20 minutes away? Or a council that is outside the top 80 areas wants to release some green belt too?

Similarly, why focus on railway stations, rather than railway lines? Adding a station to an Underground line is phenomenally expensive, and adding a station in any urban area is complicated and difficult. But adding stations to rural railways is not costly in itself, provided the line has capacity to deal with additional stops and additional passengers.

Commuter lines into Britain’s key economic centres tend to be at or near capacity, so development will often need to be tied in with capacity improvement to the railway network. But this is by no means impossible. The opening of HS2 will greatly relieve pressure on the West Coast Main Line, opening up the possibility of a string of new railway towns along its length. The metro-isation of the Overground network produced substantial capacity improvements in the 2010s at low cost: some or all of

the suburban lines running out of London could be similarly transformed. There have recently been suggestions that this might happen to the Northern City Line, running from Hertfordshire into Moorgate.²³

In the longer term, further Crossrail-style schemes in London could hugely increase capacity on lines like Southeastern, Southwestern, Chiltern Rail and Great Northern Rail, generating immense opportunities for development – on precisely the same lines as the creation of the original Metroland (or Metro-land) and its siblings. In an ideal world, the government would capture some of the value created by green belt release and use it to pay for improved railway capacity, generating a powerful mechanism for sustainably growing major British cities.



Rickmansworth, 1949. The Metropolitan Line extension was funded with receipts from the sale of housing built around stations like this one. Could Britain build further 'Metro-Lands' now? Source: Historic England

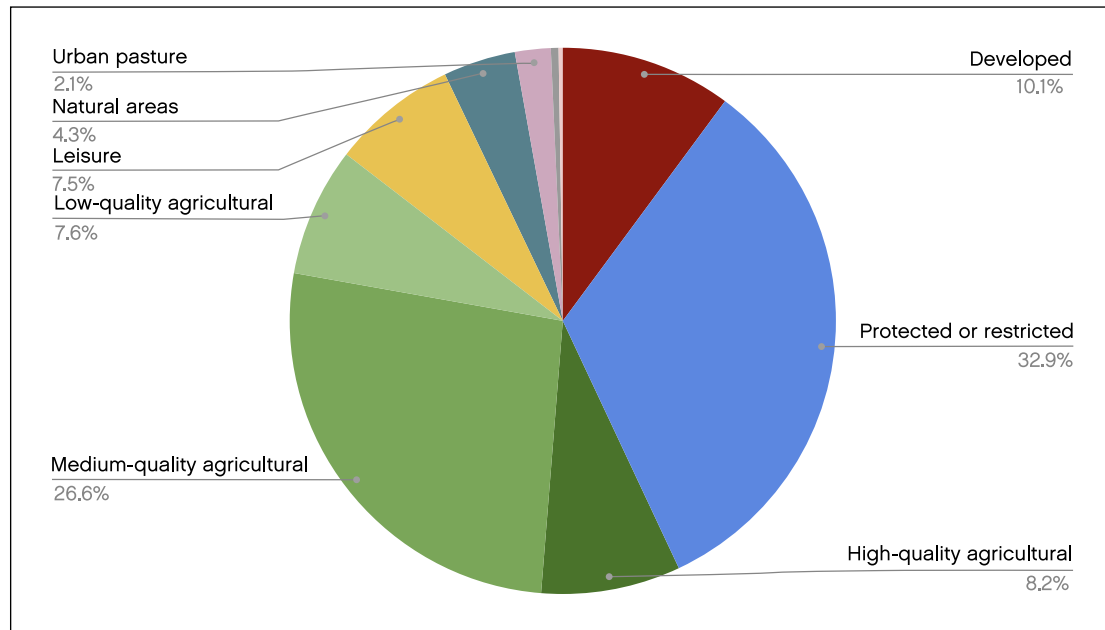
Indeed, according to Create Streets' work for this report, the most noticeable feature of land use near railways in the green belt is how similar it is to land use elsewhere in the green belt. The share of protected land is somewhat higher (32.9% versus 22.2%). The share of developed land is higher, but still low (10.1% versus 3.7%). The bulk of the land is agricultural, with medium-quality land predominating.

This suggests the existence of a surprisingly large quantity of undeveloped land, with low environmental and amenity value, in proximity to railway lines and current or potential stations.

²³ *Passenger Transport*, 'TfL makes bid to take control of GTR route', 20 October 2025.



All green belts, 1,200m from railway (433,000ha)

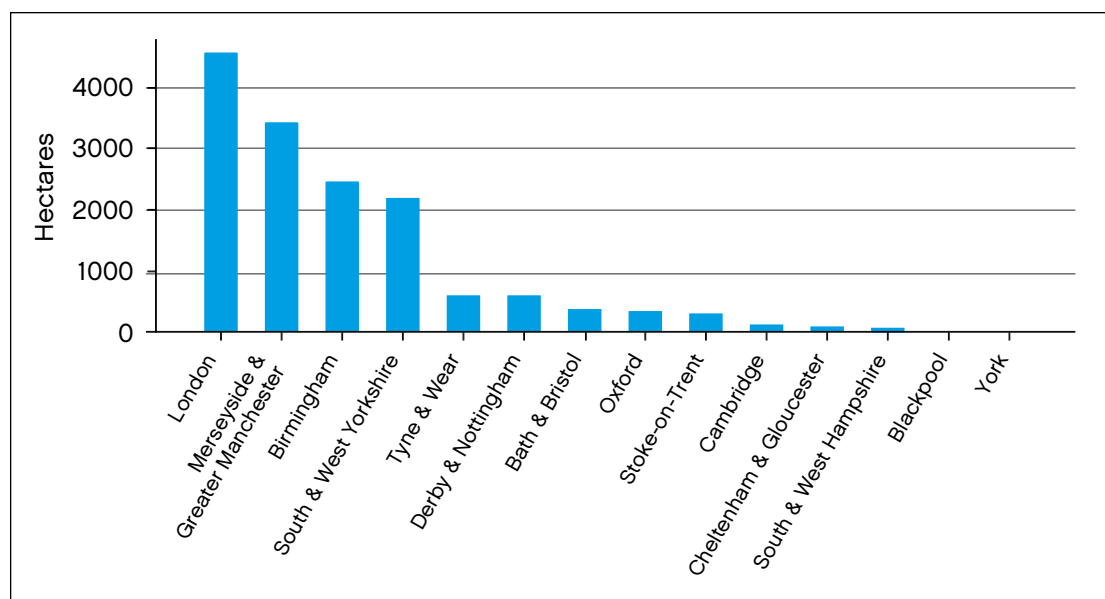


Source: CPS/Create Streets analysis

However, it is also clear that the restrictions set by the Government will open up only a fraction of this land for development.

Applying the Government's criteria for green belt development, and the filters above, we found that there were 14,553 hectares of low- or medium-quality agricultural land within the new 'grey belt' boundaries. Assuming a density of 35 homes per hectare, and the use of 60% of each site, this would provide enough space for 305,613 homes. This would obviously be welcome – but our national shortfall, compared to our European neighbours, is approaching seven million.²⁴

Area of agricultural land suitable for development (Top 80 areas, 800m of railway station)



Source: CPS/Create Streets analysis

²⁴ Ben Hopkinson, *How Many Homes Does the UK Need?*, Centre for Policy Studies, 2024

So what else could the Government do?

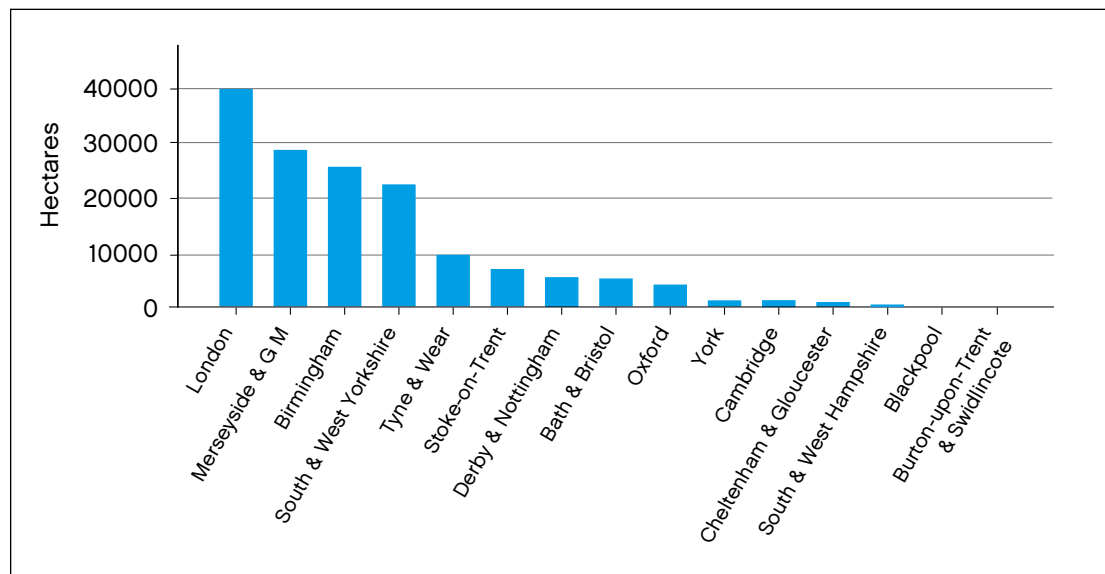
First, as mentioned above, the selection of the 60 most productive areas in the country, and then the top 80, was fairly arbitrary. It also did not make a significant difference to the amount of available land, primarily because the areas near London – the largest green belt – were generally already in the top economic tier. There were a few more council districts included in certain parts of the North – Blackburn, Barnsley, Burton-on-Trent and Harrogate, for example, as well as Huntingdon near Cambridge – but the overall area of suitable land remained relatively unchanged.

Expanding the radius from 800m to 1,200m, however, would have a far more dramatic effect. Sticking to the top 80 areas, the available land would almost exactly treble, to 45,394 hectares – enough for 953,274 homes on the criteria above.

But the real uplift comes if we assume that it is possible – indeed, desirable – to build new railway stations. Retaining the 1,200m filter, and switching from railway stations to railway lines as a whole, the amount of available land more than trebles again – to 152,347 hectares.

Obviously, we would not argue that every scrap of this land should be built on. Rather, this exercise shows that there is ample scope for sensitive development that protects the fundamental purposes of the green belt, while also tackling Britain's housing crisis.

Area of agricultural land suitable for development (1,200m of railway line)

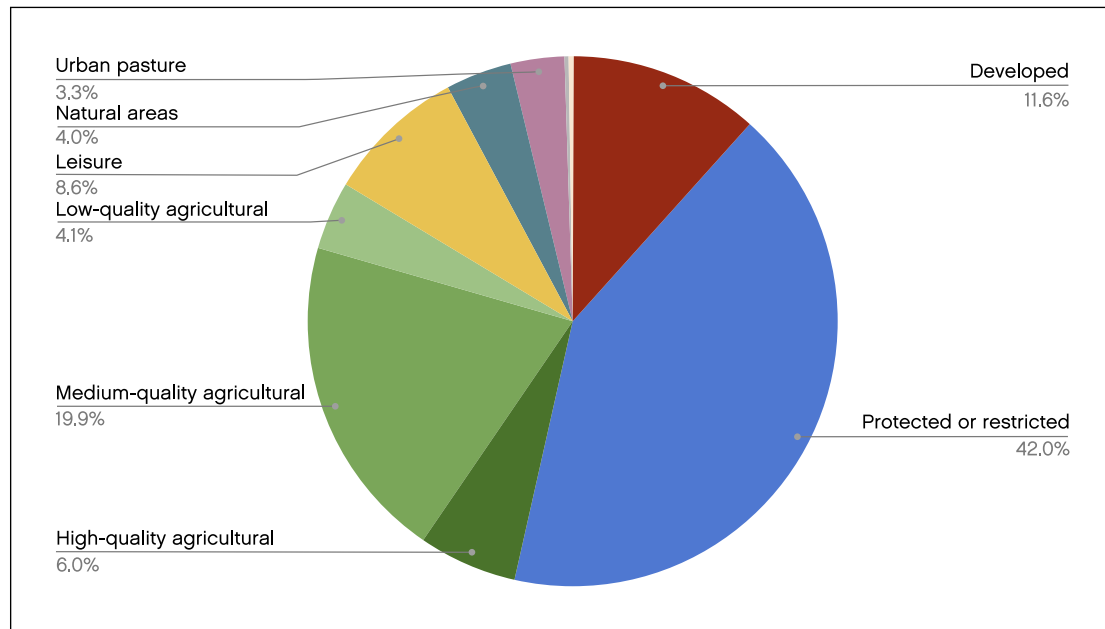


Source: CPS/Create Streets analysis

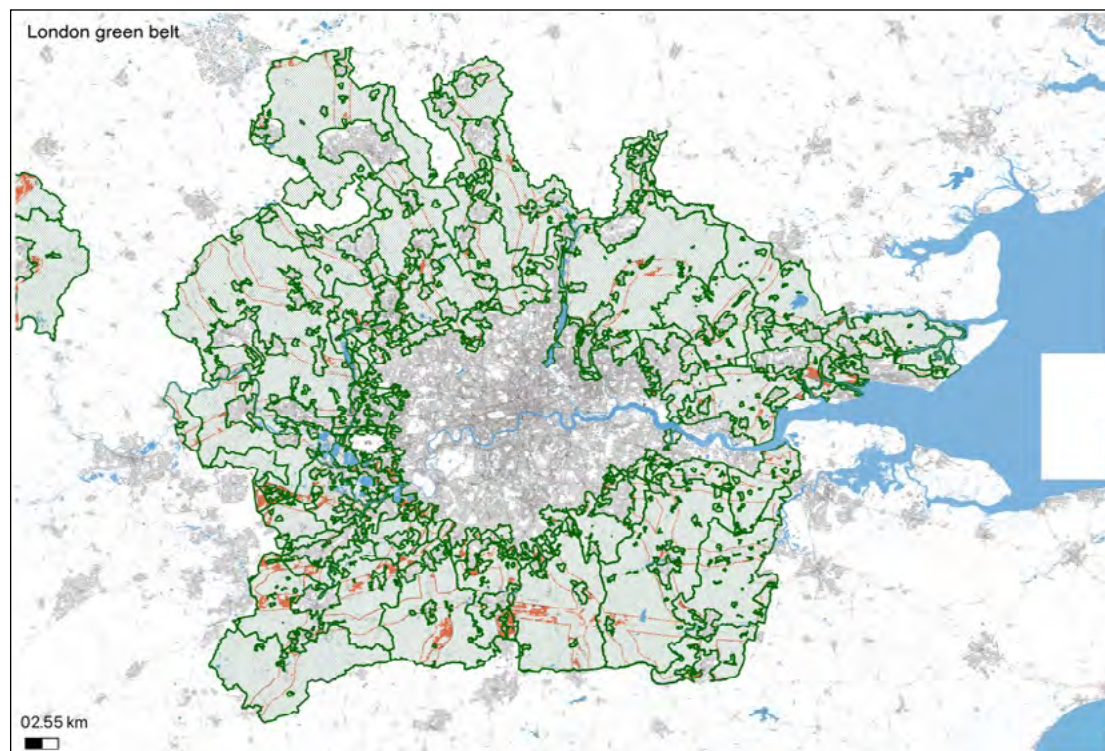


In London, for example, there is slightly more protected land near railways than elsewhere (42% versus 40%), and more developed land (11.6% versus 4.9%). However, there is also an abundance of unprotected agricultural land, mostly of mediocre quality, particularly towards the east and south-west of the green belt. Given the concentration of the housing shortage in this area, this land should be an obvious focus of attention for green belt reformers.

London, 1,200m from railway (137,000ha)



Source: CPS/Create Streets analysis

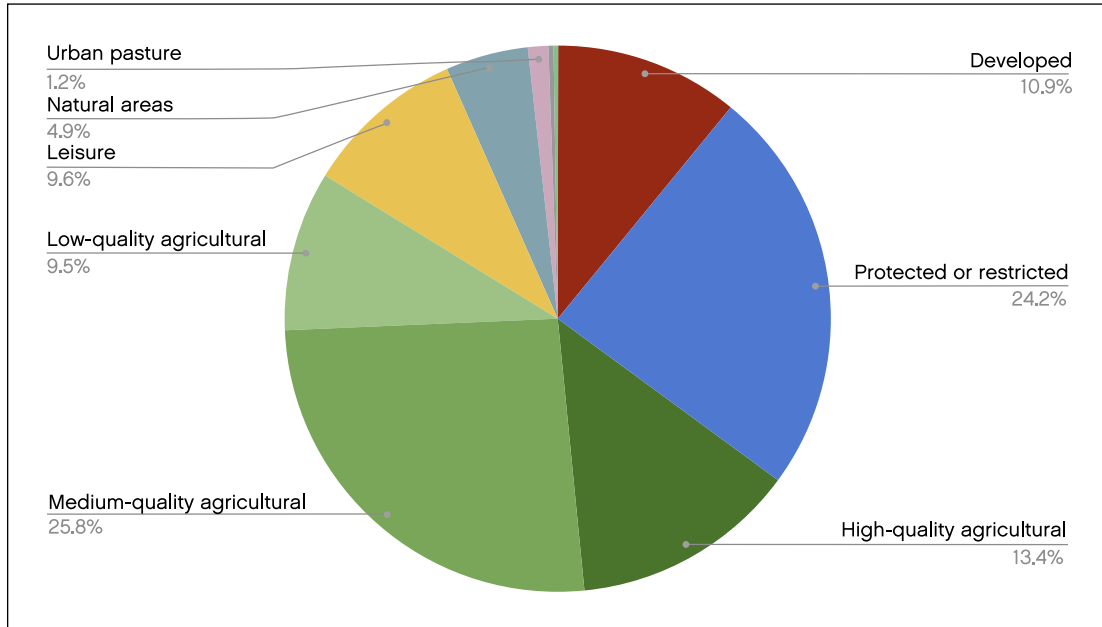


Source: CPS/Create Streets analysis

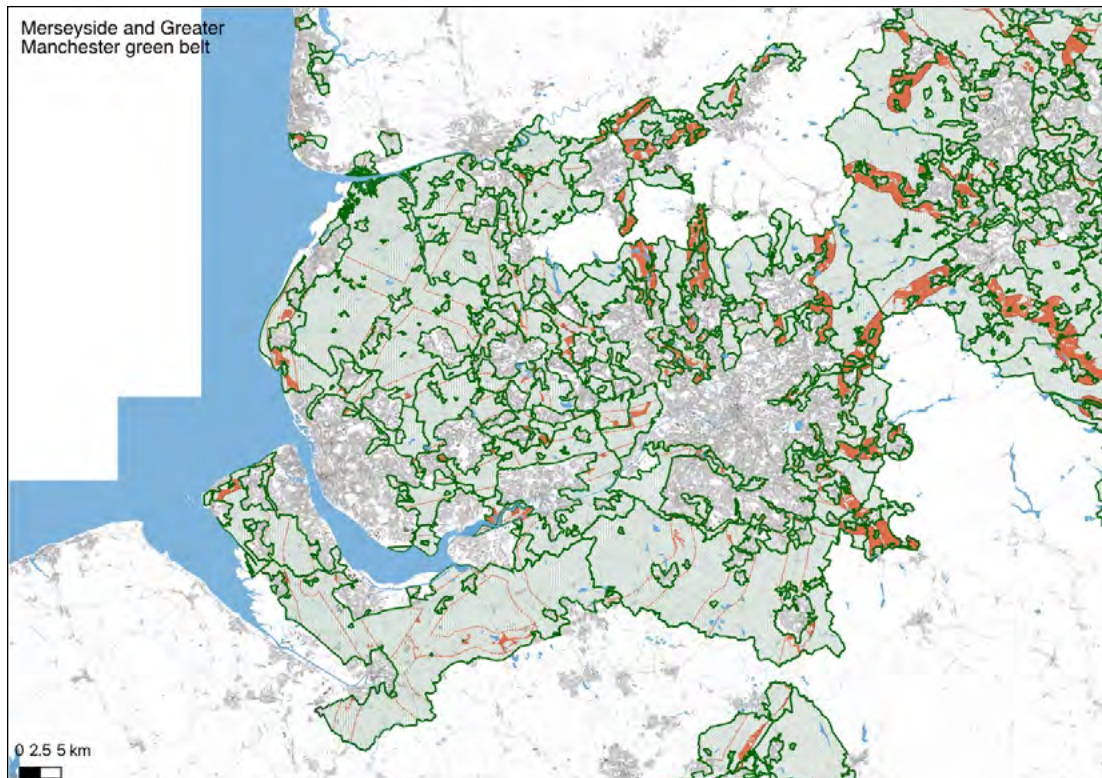


Merseyside and Manchester has one of the sharpest contrasts between all green belt land and the relatively low share (68,000ha out of 235,000ha) that is near a railway line. The share of protected land jumps from 11% to 24.2%, leisure from 5.3% to 9.6% and developed from 4.1% to 10.9%. Even here, however, the overall share of agricultural land remains high, and there is a large volume of land that meets the 'grey belt' criteria.

Merseyside and Manchester, 1,200m from railway (68,000ha)



Source: CPS/Create Streets analysis

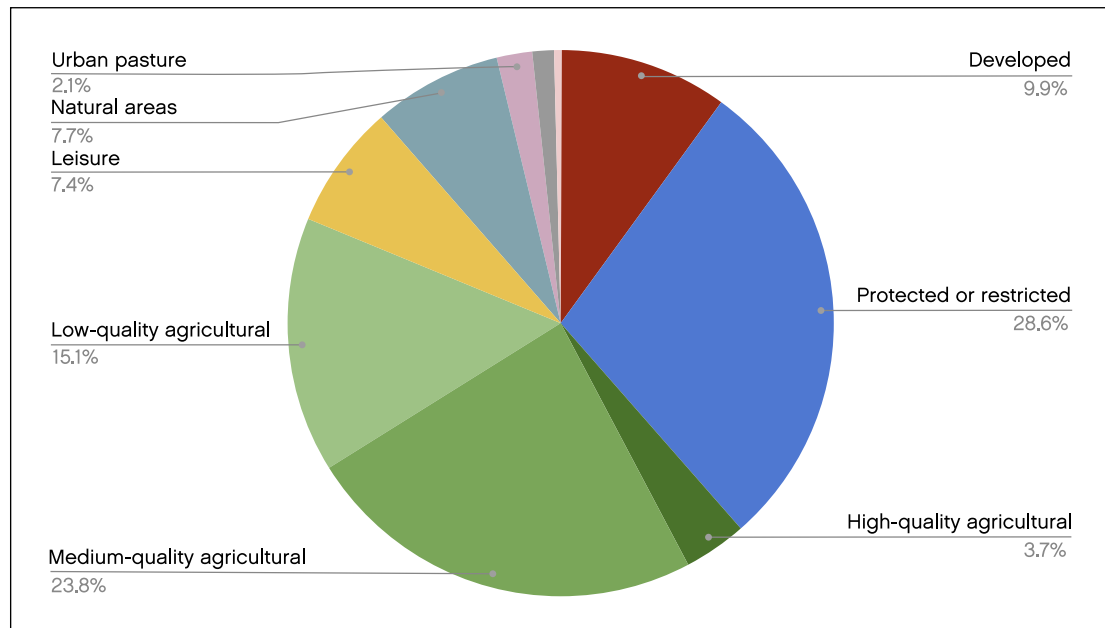


Source: CPS/Create Streets analysis

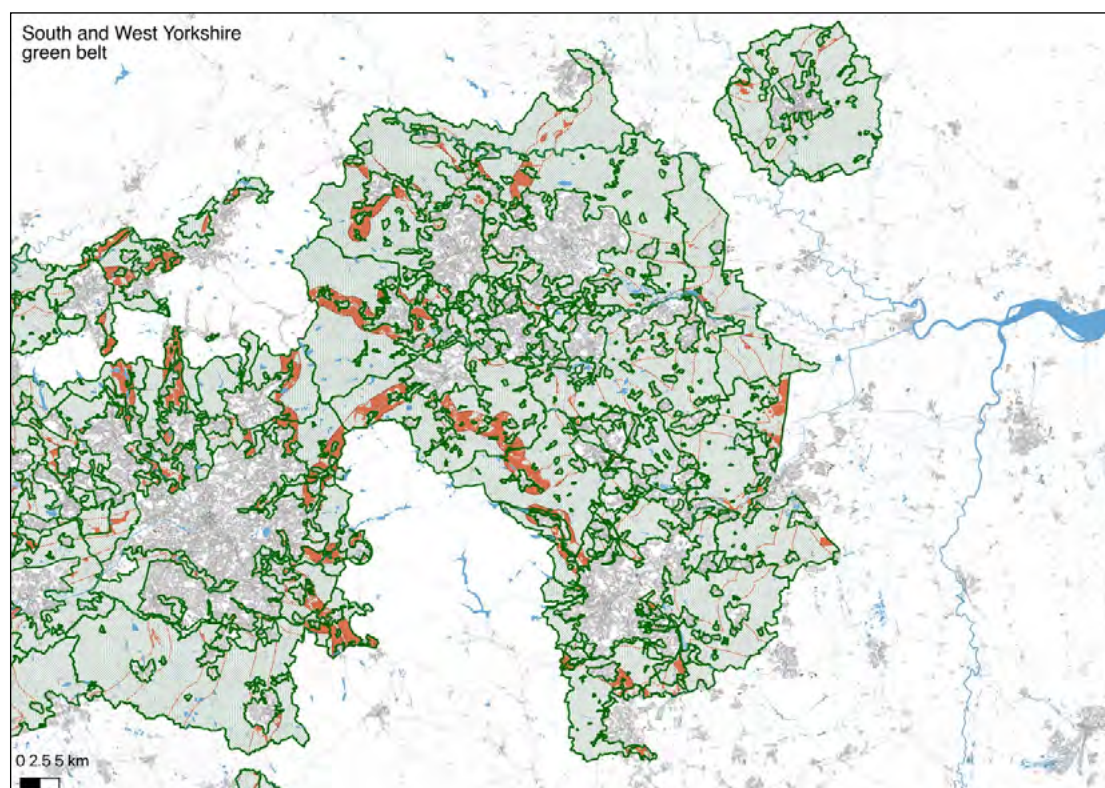


In South-West Yorkshire, only around half of the land within 1,200m of railway lines is agricultural, vs more than three quarters of the green belt as a whole. Nonetheless, the overall share of agricultural land remains high, and again there are plenty of sites that fall within the criteria.

S&W Yorkshire, 1,200m from railway (48,000ha)



Source: CPS/Create Streets analysis



Source: CPS/Create Streets analysis



In general, applying the 1,200 metre filter reveals that large quantities of land remain near railways with relatively high developable potential. This includes 33,000 hectares of unprotected low-quality agricultural land and 115,000 hectares of unprotected medium-quality land, enough for almost 693,000 homes and 2,415,000 homes respectively at the Government's specified minimum density (again assuming 60% of the site is used, and sticking to the 35 homes per hectare standard rather than the 45 for developments with more frequent rail connections, as it is not yet clear which lines this will apply to). The figures for London are 6,300 and 30,400 hectares, equating to 132,000 and 638,400 homes at the 35 home per hectare standard, although more of this area is likely to be connected to faster trains, so built out at 45 homes per hectare.

Needless to say, these are very imprecise figures: we are not proposing that all of this land would be well suited to development. But it suggests that the potential for development around London green belt stations and rail lines is considerable.

Besides agricultural land, there are some other questionable uses that are quantitatively significant. Some 5,065 hectares of the London green belt within 1,200m of a railway is currently in use for golf courses. At low suburban densities that corresponds to 150,000 homes. The suppression of competing uses is an implicit subsidy for the privileged use, so the protection of golf courses through green belt designations amounts to a public subsidy for golf worth tens of billions of pounds, one of the strangest 'industrial policies' in modern economic history.

‘ The protection of golf courses through green belt designations amounts to a public subsidy for golf worth tens of billions of pounds ’

The key constraint on these proposals is railway capacity. Many of the railway lines leading into growing British cities are at or near capacity at peak times already, notwithstanding some exceptions highlighted in a recent report by Create Streets and Britain Remade.²⁵ This will tend to make it expensive to add additional stations, or even to add more commuters to existing stations. This means it may be necessary to use green belt to fund capacity improvements on suburban rail – but there are thought to be many opportunities for this.

It is also worth highlighting the significance of the Government's 'Golden Rules', and in particular the quotas for affordable housing.

The justification for such high quotas is that green belt land is, like all greenfield land, cheaper to develop than brownfield. The idea is that affordable quotas will not only deliver low-cost or social housing, but ensure that developers and landowners are not making an excessive profit from green belt development.

Yet by their very nature, affordable quotas reduce the viability of housing development and result in fewer homes being built – especially at a time when the costs of housebuilding, in terms of labour, goods and regulatory compliance, have been rising and rising. This will especially be the case if newbuild housing is accompanied by significant infrastructure investment, for example in building new stations or expanding existing ones – and when the affordability quota is set a full 15 percentage points higher than for other developments.

25 Create Streets and Britain Remade, *Creating new towns fast and well*, 2024.



It must be remembered that the only real way to solve the housing crisis – and ultimately to make housing more affordable overall – is to build more houses. We would therefore urge the Government, alongside the other changes to the NPPF definitions suggested here, to think very carefully about whether a 50% affordable quota will do more harm than good.

Likewise, it seems distinctly odd that a Government committed to localism and devolution is being so intensely prescriptive about where in the green belt homes can be built. It is perfectly possible to envisage local communities having preferred sites which are a slightly greater distance away from existing stations, or those outside the top 80 most productive areas who might favour limited green belt release as an alternative to building elsewhere. We therefore advocate for a general principle that planning authorities can choose to go beyond these limitations if they so wish, as long as it results in more rather than less land being released for development – subject, of course, to all the protections and provisos outlined above.

**‘ The only real way to solve the housing crisis –
and ultimately to make housing more affordable
overall – is to build more houses ’**

Ultimately it is clear from our work that the ‘grey belt’ reforms could deliver many hundreds of thousands of homes, in high-demand locations, with excellent public transport access – and that there is substantial land that could be released from the green belt without impinging on its fundamental purposes.

Conclusion

Green belting is one of the most emotive themes in English housing policy. It is clear that there is no public appetite for English cities to develop vast outer suburbs in the way that American ones have. Indeed, the English countryside is one of the most beautiful settled landscapes in the world, bearing comparison with the Moselle Valley or the Tuscan hills. Some kind of urban containment enjoys broad support, and it is here to stay.

But this does not mean we should not look at the green belts critically. Our survey has shown that only a small share of England's green belts is really 'grey' in the sense that industrial sites, quarries or landfills are. But much of it has limited agricultural or environmental value.

‘ There are ways of preserving what matters about the English countryside while allowing more English people a chance to settle in it ’

Such land contributes little to food security, is not biodiverse, is not accessible for leisure and amenity uses, and has no special scientific or ecological significance. This does not mean it is worthless in its current use. But it does mean we should look seriously at the trade-offs, especially given the scale of the housing crisis and our virtually unique failure to let our cities grow.

In the 19th century, the railways made it possible for a fortunate minority of English people to enjoy a happy mixture of rural amenity and urban employment. That fortunate minority is still enjoying its situation today. But we have secured this outcome for a few hundred thousand English people, in lovely places like Sevenoaks, at a great cost to tens of millions of their compatriots.

There are ways of preserving what matters about the English countryside while allowing more English people a chance to settle in it – and in particular, of copying the development strategies that strung out a series of beautiful communities along the rail lines leading out of our great cities. It is time we pursued them.



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