

The Green Belt:

A Place for Londoners?



Contents

- 1 Summary
- 2 Introduction
- 3 History and Context
- 4 Land Use in London's Green Belt
- 5 Conclusion

Summary

1

The London of today is a very different place to the city that existed sixty years ago when the Green Belt, as we know it, started to take shape. Back then, this girdle, designed to constrain the capital's physical growth, surrounded a city that was only just starting to emerge from the hardships of the Second World War and whose population was falling.

Fast forward 60 years to London in 2015 and we find a global city with a vibrant, diverse and growing economy that attracts more foreign investment than any other. London's population is growing rapidly and is at 8.6 million people today, just above the previous historic peak in the pre-war 1939 census, and set to hit 11 million by 2050.

London is, however, failing to build the number of homes needed to house this growing population and to support its economic potential. Approximately 50,000 new homes a year are needed; yet London has not got close to this figure for a generation. When the historical shortfall is taken into account, it is clear that London needs a step-change in house building. As supply fails to keep pace with demand and house prices continue to rocket, more and more Londoners struggle to find a home to meet their needs. This in turn puts business competitiveness at risk as talented people struggle to afford the high costs that come with living and working in the capital.

A consensus exists within London that more homes must be built though views differ about how. London First has argued that the priority should be re-developing brownfield land by, amongst other measures, getting surplus public land into development, improving incentives on planning authorities, and increasing density. But even with this action, such re-development is often a complex, slow and costly process. It is unrealistic to think that this alone will meet the scale of London's housing need. More land is needed for house building.

Equally, public access to green space plays a vital part in London's success as a global city. As London's population grows, areas of civic value and natural beauty need to be enhanced, not just preserved, so that more Londoners can benefit.

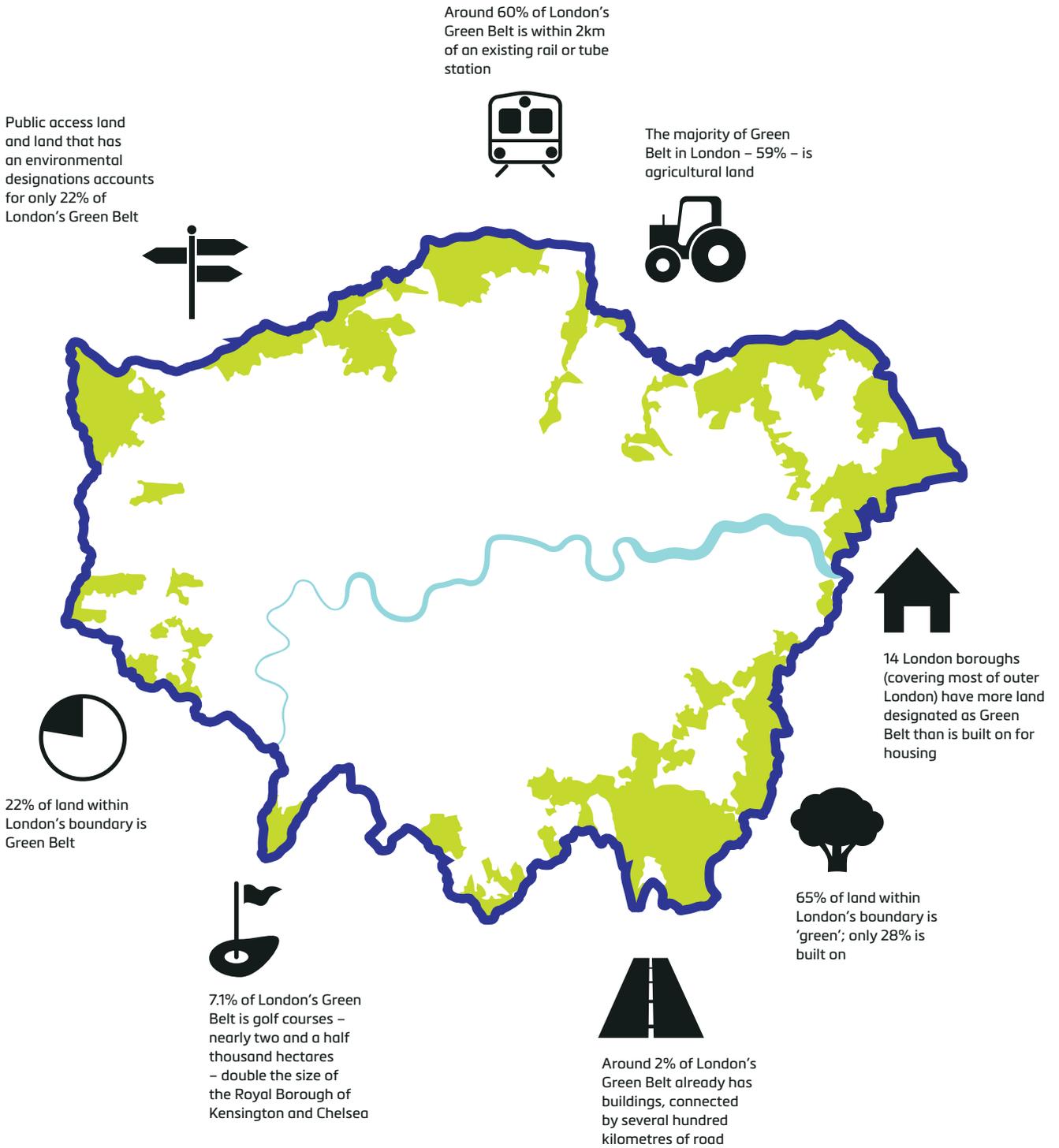
These seemingly competing pressures can be reconciled through a re-examination of the Green Belt. London's Green Belt was

designated because of where it is, not because of the quality or accessibility of the land within it. And it is very big: over 20% of the land in London is designated Green Belt and, at its furthest extent, it brushes Aylesbury and encircles Southend.

Land in the Green Belt covers a range of uses and is of variable quality from beautiful parks to derelict buildings on wasteland. Accordingly, we propose that local planning authorities should be encouraged to review their Green Belt and consider how the land within it that is of poor environmental quality, of little or no public benefit and has good connectivity could be re-designated for high-quality, well-designed residential development that incorporates truly accessible public green space.

Londoners should be able to get greater value from the green space that surrounds them. This can be achieved in a way that also sees a limited amount of Green Belt land used to accommodate more homes. If London does not take action to increase house building then too many Londoners will be forced out of the capital or see too much of their income being spent on housing costs, while London's competitiveness will diminish as cost pressures rise against other global cities.

London's Green Belt: The Facts



Introduction

2

In 2014 London First published *Home Truths*¹, which called for a bold approach to increasing house building in London.

The report made twelve recommendations including:

- the need for London to become a denser city;
- that new transport infrastructure must be used as the catalyst to unlock more housing development;
- that boroughs will need to become more accountable for meeting their housing targets, possibly losing planning powers if they consistently underperform, whilst also being offered a real financial incentive to help them accommodate new homes;
- that a 'Domesday Book' for surplus public land in London should be introduced to coordinate the release of this land for housing; and
- more support should be given to boroughs that want to start building again by abolishing restrictions on local authorities borrowing against the value of their housing stock, where this would be within prudential rules.

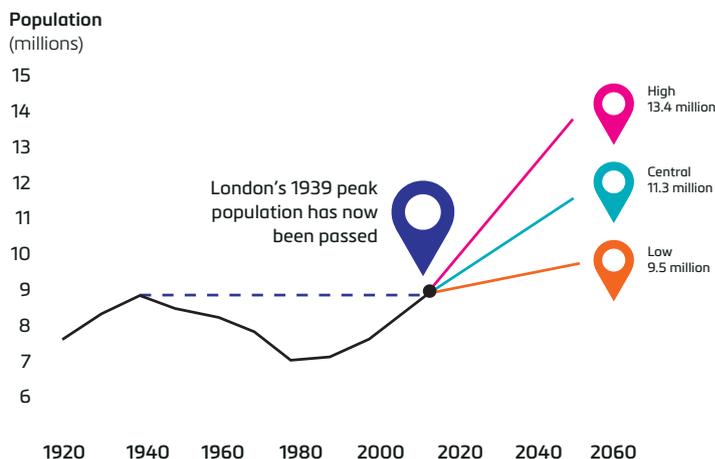
The clear message from *Home Truths* is that there is no panacea to London's lack of house building. The only way to increase supply is to take action on multiple fronts. One of these actions, and the focus of this report, is the role of the Green Belt.

London is growing

At the start of 2015, London's population reached record levels, topping 8.6 million people and exceeding its 1939 peak. The central projection of the Greater London Authority (GLA) is that London's population will grow by 3.1 million people by 2050. This is an increase of 37 per cent on the 2011 population, to 11.27 million in 2050². While such projections are inherently uncertain – Figure 1 below shows the GLA's range – they provide a clear message: London is growing. At the same time, while London faces many challenges, the likelihood is that London will become more prosperous. Higher real incomes translate into stronger demand for housing and for better homes.

Figure 1
London's historic and projected population

Source: GLA 2050 Infrastructure Plan; London First analysis



¹ Home Truths, 12 Steps to Solving London's Housing Crisis, London First: March 2014.

² London Infrastructure Plan 2050: A consultation, Mayor of London: July 2014.

But London is not building enough new homes

London’s population is booming but the city is failing to build enough homes to meet demand. Formal house building targets were only introduced in 1984³ at a time when the end of large-scale council house building had cut development sharply. This was also a time when London’s population was nearing its post-war low.

The first London housing target equated to only 14,330 new homes a year and for the following 20 years house building continued at around the level of this original target. But by the time the newly-formed GLA was setting targets in 2004 and again in 2007, population growth was accelerating and housing demand growing. Ever higher targets have since been established, culminating in the 42,000-a-year target set in the latest revisions to the London Plan. The next set of targets could be higher still as the GLA’s housing market assessment found demand for 49,000 to 62,000 homes a year from 2015-2036⁴.

As shown in Figures 2 and 3 below, housing targets have increased but construction has not kept pace. There has been no trend increase in house building in London over the past 40 years. The post-Second World War peak in construction was in the mid-1960s and the all-time peak – at over 80,000 houses a year – was in the 1930s. The rate of house building from 1875 to 1885 was higher than over the past decade – 130 years later.

Figure 2
London house building and housing targets 1871 to 2015

Source: GLA, DCLG and Quod analysis

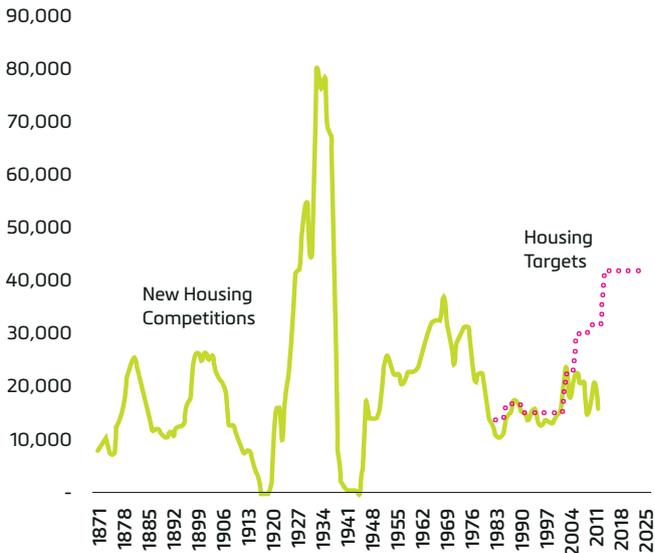
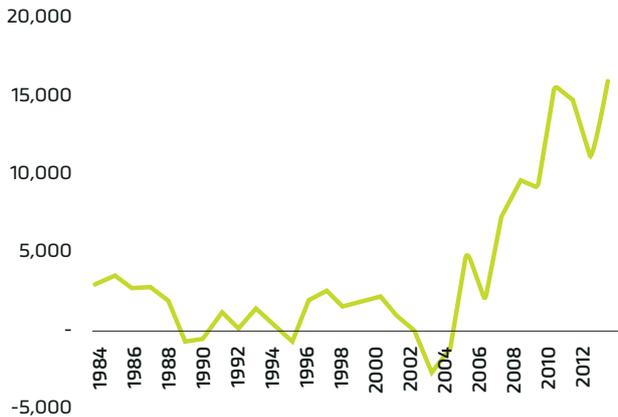


Figure 3
Annual housebuilding shortfall against targets

Source: GLA, DCLG and Quod analysis



³ In the Greater London Development Plan Alterations Policy.
⁴ Draft Further Alterations to the London Plan, Mayor of London: January 2014.

A threat to London’s global competitiveness

In addition to the negative social consequences and increasing inequality caused by a lack of new homes there is growing concern about how this problem could affect London’s global competitiveness⁵. As demand outstrips supply, house prices are rising faster than wages, driving up cost pressures on London’s employers. Measures of affordability such as the ratio of median house prices to median incomes show housing to be at its least affordable ever: worse even than at the height of the economic boom in 2007.

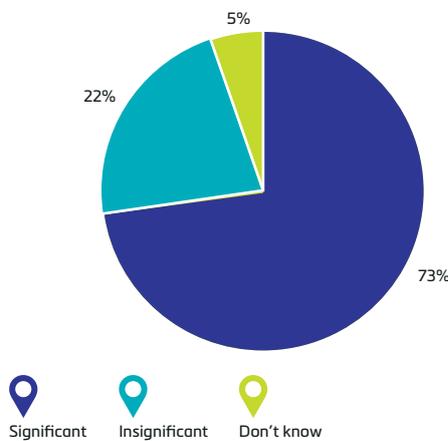
Large businesses in London have already rated housing costs as a key pressure undermining London’s competitiveness. This view was affirmed in the recent London First and Turner & Townsend report, *Moving Out*⁶, which surveyed representative samples of key groups in London, including employers and employees, about housing.

Three-quarters of business decision makers surveyed warned that London’s housing supply and costs are a significant risk to the capital’s economic growth (Figure 4). The report also found that while London is commonly associated with attracting the best talent from the UK and around the world, it is in danger of losing workers due to rising prices. Over half of employees surveyed said that their rent/mortgage costs made it difficult for them to live and work in London. Of those who found it difficult, 41 per cent would currently consider moving out of London and taking a job in a different city to take advantage of lower housing costs. Looking to the future, this figure rises to 49 per cent if prices continue to rise at their current rate (Figure 4).

Figure 4
Source: *Moving Out, London First and Turner & Townsend*

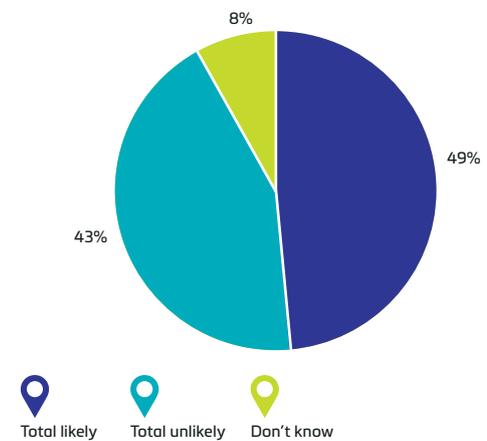
London Business Decision Makers

The risk London’s housing supply and costs pose to the capital’s economic growth



London Employees

Employees who would consider moving out of London if house prices and rents continue to rise



⁵ London Boardroom Barometer, London First and Deloitte: December 2013.

⁶ *Moving Out*, How London’s housing shortage is threatening the capital’s competitiveness, London First and Turner and Townsend: September 2014.

The challenge of building new homes in London

It is clear that London needs to build more homes. As discussed, action needs to be taken on multiple fronts. Most of these options rightly focus on re-using brownfield land and intensifying development in existing built-up areas with good public transport connections. This is the first and best option. The successful and ongoing redevelopments in many parts of London highlight the significant latent opportunities that exist.

However, many of the brownfield sites are complex, poorly connected and costly to develop. There is also a limit to the extent to which densities can be increased. Given the scale of London's housing challenge, it is unrealistic to assume that brownfield land on its own can do the job.

London requires more land to build the homes it needs and, as Section 4 of this report illustrates, some of this land can be found within its boundary. But before this is considered, Section 3 contextualises London's modern day Green Belt, exploring its history and how both its extent and purpose have evolved overtime.

Geographic scope

This report focuses on the Green Belt within London's boundary (the Greater London Authority area). There is of course much more Green Belt land that sits outside of London's boundary – this Green Belt does not form part of our analysis. There is, however, a strong interrelationship between London and its surrounding area as highlighted by the significant commuting flows that exist between the two areas. Crossrail will strengthen this relationship, as will the proposed plans for Crossrail 2. More thought will therefore need to be given as to how London and the wider South East can work together on strategic priorities such as housing, transport and infrastructure to help sustain economic growth and employment.

History and Context

3

The Green Belt is regarded as a central tenet of spatial planning in London but how and why did this happen? This section traces the history of the Green Belt from conception to implementation and considers the rationale for London's modern day Green Belt.

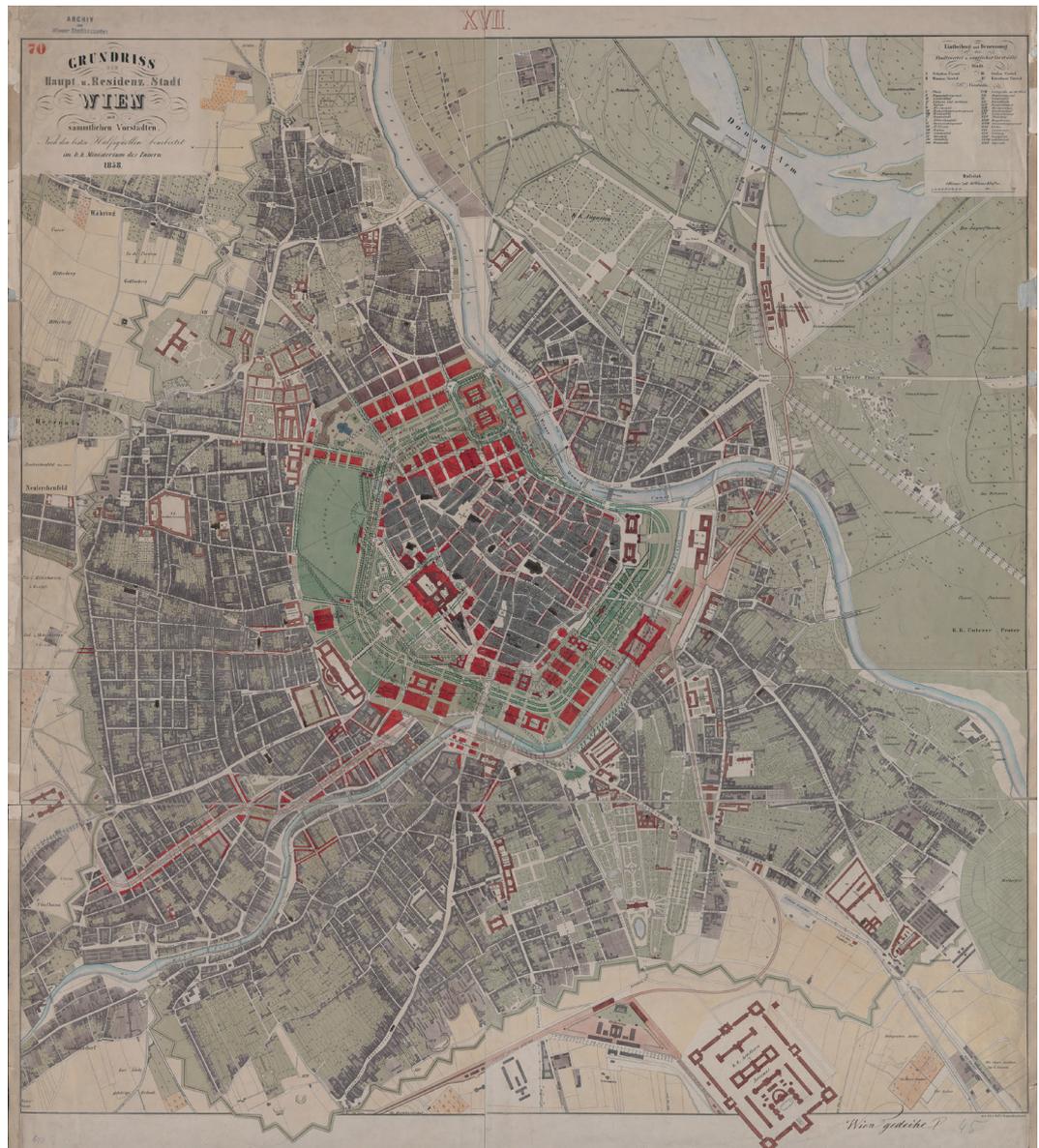
The original vision

In Britain, the idea of Green Belts goes back to Ebenezer Howard's Garden Cities. The vision was of contented Victorian families strolling with their children and dogs in a parkland setting. The dream for these early pioneers was of a park encircling the 'Garden City of Tomorrow' – an idea that had earlier continental roots.

When its walls were demolished in 1857, a great circular ring of land became available around the old city of Vienna. A new style Ringstraße park circling the city was proposed, as illustrated in Figure 5, creating one of the earliest examples of a Green Belt.

Figure 5
Plans for the Vienna
Ringstraße circa 1860

Source: AT-Wiener
Stadt- und Landesarchiv,
Kartographische Sammlung,
Pläne der Plan- und
Schriftenkammer, P15.22:
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Howard's Garden City vision inspired The London Society's proposed Development Plan for London (1919), which called for green spaces in what were then the outer suburbs. In 1935, the London County Council (LCC) took the first steps towards implementing this vision with a formal proposal to create London's Green Belt 'to provide a reserve supply of public open spaces and of recreational areas and to establish a Green Belt or girdle of open space' around the densely packed capital city.

Implementation started in 1938 with the passing of the Green Belt (London and Home Counties) Act. This enabled the LCC to start buying land for the proposed encircling park. It was not intended to be a continuous circular area but rather a series of green spaces around London, publically owned and accessible to Londoners. Some 8,000 hectares had been bought by 1939 with another 12,150 immediately after the Second World War⁷. This land was safeguarded absolutely from development⁸.

Implementation and expansion

The vision for the Green Belt continued to be for a comparatively narrow belt of essentially parkland perhaps a mile – later – up to 10 miles wide. Labour's 1947 Town and Country Planning Act made provision for Green Belts but it was a Conservative Minister of Housing, Duncan Sandys, who finally implemented them in 1955. This was not as a relatively narrow band of park land around London to provide public open space and recreation, as per the original vision, but rather as a barrier to London's expansion. The Minister 'indicated that even if...neither green nor particularly attractive scenically, the major function of the Greenbelt was...to stop further urban development'⁹.

So the Green Belt, as implemented, became a British form of deliberate zoning to prevent Londoners from spilling out into the Home Counties. The original purpose of the Green Belt was, in effect, turned on its head. Of course with the advent of cars – still a rarity in 1955 – and long distance rail commuting, Londoners in due course simply spilled across the extensive Green Belt.

Over the 1950s and 1960s London's Green Belt expanded so that it now extends to well over three times the area of the GLA boundary, covering most of Surrey and Hertfordshire, brushing Aylesbury to the west and encircling Southend to the east.

London's Green Belt in the 21 century

Since 1951, England's population has increased by 40%. That is, however, nothing compared to the economic changes which really determine the demand for housing, where houses are and for housing space. Since 1955, car ownership has increased almost 14-fold and real incomes more than three-fold. The demand for car ownership – which is strongly related to income – interacts with housing demand in terms of a desire to have off street parking and/or a garage which, of course, places further demand on land for housing. So compared to 1955, when the basic pattern of Green Belts was established, we live in a different world where more people with higher incomes (in real terms) want more space to accommodate their modern lifestyle which includes a car.

⁷ Rowley, T. (2006) *The English Landscape in the Twentieth Century*, New York; Hambledon Continuum.
⁸⁶⁹ Hall, P.G. (1974) *Urban and Regional Planning*, Harmondsworth; Penguin.

London's Green Belt has restricted the supply of land for housing for more than two generations. The supply of land, in an economic sense, is the quantity of land that is available at the going price on which to develop. But our planning system allocates land without regard to price. Furthermore, there is no guarantee that land which has planning permission will in fact be developed. Given that expanding Green Belt boundaries froze land supply from the mid-1950s, it is no wonder land prices have risen and risen extravagantly. The last data available (publication of land price data stopped in 2010)¹⁰ show the real price of housing land, averaged across the whole of England, increased by a factor of about 14 from 1955.

Green Belt policy

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)¹¹ gives five purposes of the Green Belt. These are to:

1. Check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas;
2. Prevent neighbouring towns merging into one another;
3. Assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment;
4. Preserve the setting and special character of historic towns; and
5. Assist in urban regeneration, by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land.

Clearly the modern purposes of the Green Belt, as set out in the NPPF, bear very little relation to the original vision of the Green Belt as the green lungs of the city where town dwellers could find tranquillity and recreational space. They do, however, still closely reflect the justification given by Duncan Sandys when he implemented the Green Belt in 1955. Nonetheless, the NPPF does recognise that Green Belt boundaries can, and should, be reviewed over time to ensure that, amongst other things, the boundaries take account of the need for sustainable development (including economic sustainability)¹².

Preserving publically accessible open space of high environmental and amenity value around cities provides a treasured public good and can be justified in terms of the benefits produced for the general population. It is, however, much more difficult to construe how the current official purposes of the Green Belt confer significant public benefit to the population who live in our large cities.

Research demonstrates that there are substantial benefits from local parks, school playing fields and back gardens. The same applies to publically accessible areas of real beauty such as Hampstead Heath or Epping Forest. But research also shows such benefits are relatively localised. They decrease with distance and seem to disappear at about one kilometre (outstanding spaces such as Hampstead Heath or Epping Forest may have a longer reach). The value of privately owned Green Belt land does not extend beyond the residents who actually live within it, according to the most up to date research¹³. Certainly there is no value for residents of Hackney in protected farmland five kilometres away in Havering.

¹⁰ See <http://spatial-economics.blogspot.co.uk/search?updated-min=2013-01-01T00:00:00Z&updated-max=2014-01-01T00:00:00Z&max-results=48>.

¹¹ See section 9, The National Planning Policy Framework, Department for Communities and Local Government: March 2012.

¹² See paragraphs 84 and 85, NPPF.

¹³ Gibbons, S., Mourato, S. and G.M. Resende (2014) 'The amenity value of English nature: A hedonic price approach', *Environment and Resource Economics*, 57 (2) 175-196.

The main theme of the other purposes in the NPPF used to justify the fixity of Green Belt boundaries is to prevent sprawl and stop neighbouring towns merging with one another. It is difficult, however, to see exactly what benefit this generates except for those lucky enough already to be living surrounded by Green Belt land.

One of the most celebrated features of London is that it is a 'collection of villages'. That is how London developed. Existing settlements of different sizes became absorbed into the fabric of the city. Such settlements retained a distinct feel and character and added to the vibrant variety of London. Hence Putney joined Fulham, while Hackney joined Islington, and so on. The last freestanding settlement absorbed by London was Enfield.

Then came the Second World War followed by the imposition of London's post war Green Belt. So now Potters Bar is to be forever protected from joining up with Barnet. The question has to be asked: would London be a better city in which to live and work if Notting Hill was separated from Kensington by a mile of open fields with variable rights of public access?

Land Use in London's Green Belt

4

There is a mismatch between reality and popular perception when it comes to land use in England – and in London in particular. This section of the report shows how London's land is actually used and, through a series of maps¹⁴, the land use in London's Green Belt. It highlights that some parts of the Green Belt are neither of environmental nor civic value and could, if in an accessible location, make a sustainable place for more homes.

Land use in England, South East and London

In total, urbanised areas cover only 9.9% of England and their actual built area covers 4.2% of the total area. Green Belts on the other hand, cover 12.4% of the total area of England.

Much of the UK population lives surrounded by buildings, while the roads we often drive along are also lined by buildings. Given this pattern of experience it is perhaps natural to think that buildings are everywhere. They are not.

As Table 1 shows, even in London, buildings together with roads and railways, cover only just over a quarter of the total area. Only 4.7% of the total area of the South East is built on – not much more than for England as a whole.

Table 1
Land Use percentages in London, the South East and England

Source: Generalised Land Use Data 2005 and DCLG, Local Planning Authority Green Belt: England 2012/13

	Domestic buildings	Other buildings	Roads and Paths	Rail	All Built	Domestic gardens	Green space	Water	All 'Green'	Other & Unclassified	Green Belt
London	8.7	4.7	13.1	1.1	27.6	23.8	38.2	2.8	64.9	7.5	22.1
South East	1.3	0.7	2.6	0.1	4.7	6.2	84.8	2.7	93.7	1.6	16.6
England	1.1	0.7	2.3	0.1	4.2	4.3	87.5	2.6	94.4	1.4	12.4

NB: 'All Built' combines the categories: Domestic Buildings, Other Buildings, Roads and Paths and Rail. 'All Green' combines the categories: Domestic Gardens, Green Space and Water. All Built, All Green and Other and Unclassified provides for the total land use. Green Belt is a separate designation that covers a variety of land uses.

Land use in London and its Green Belt

The vast majority of the Metropolitan Green Belt (94%) is outside London, extending more than 40 miles from the City (Figure 6). The small fraction of Green Belt that is actually within London’s boundary, shown in Figure 7, accounts for 22% of all the land in the capital. This compares to 27.6% of London covered by buildings, roads and railways.

Figure 6
The Metropolitan Green Belt and buildings in London

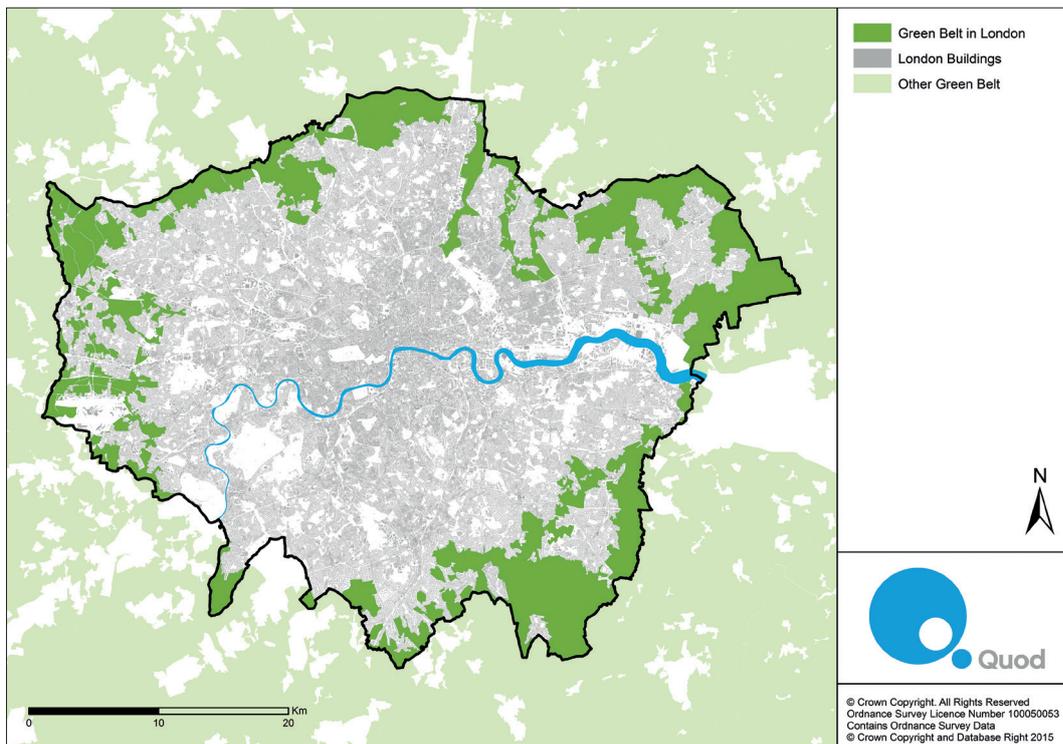
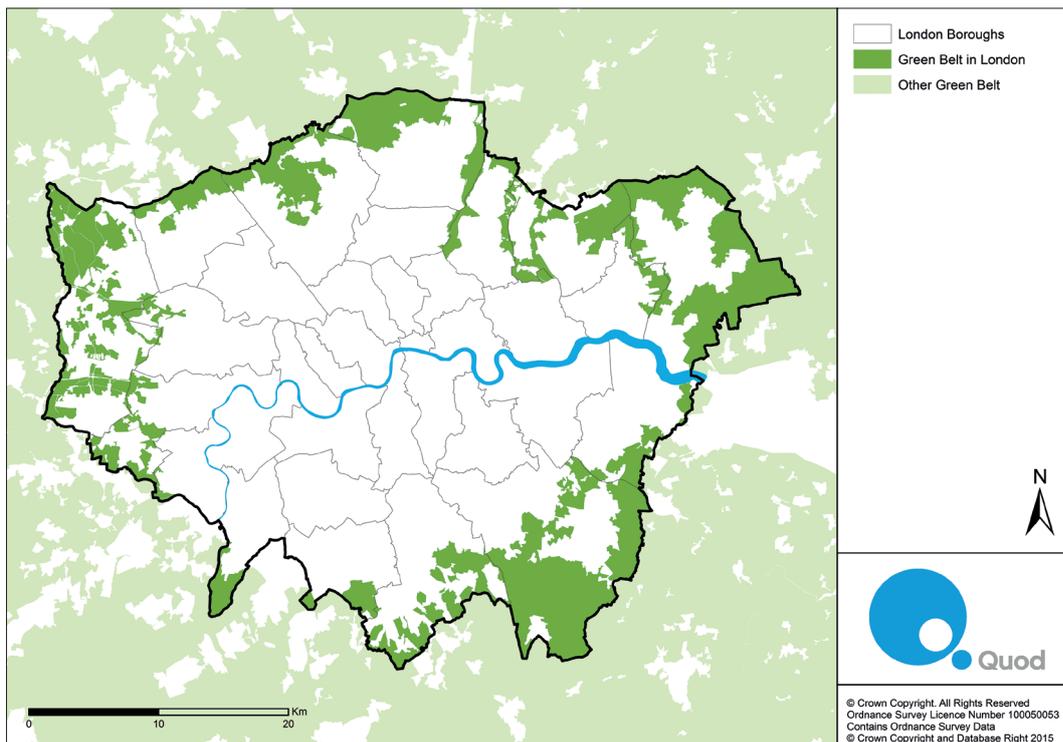


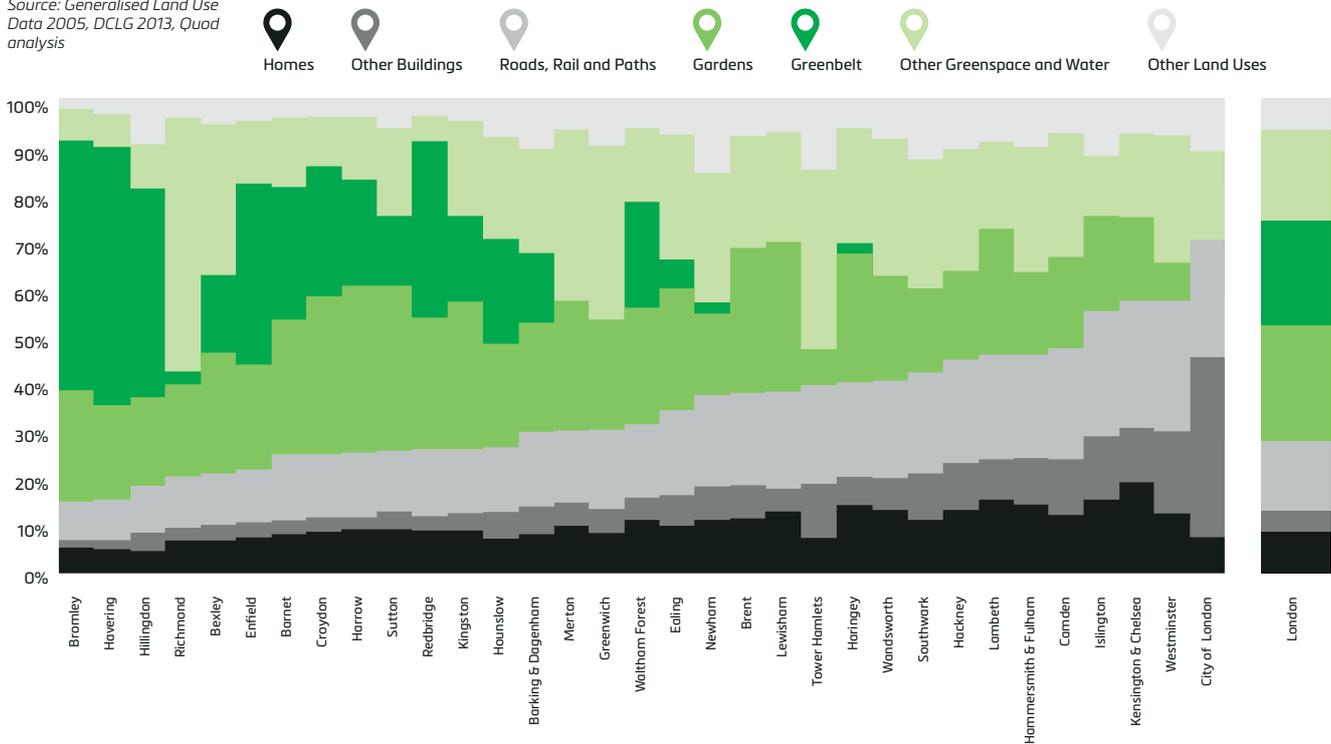
Figure 7
The Green Belt in London by borough



Land use in London, broken down by borough, is shown in Figure 8 and shows that two thirds of London is “green” or open land – split fairly equally between gardens, Green Belt and other open space. 14 London boroughs (covering most of outer London) have more land designated as Green Belt than is built on for housing. More than half the total area of two London boroughs (Havering and Bromley) is designated as Green Belt.

Figure 8
Land use in London boroughs

Source: Generalised Land Use Data 2005, DCLG 2013, Quod analysis



Not all of the Green Belt is green. Table 2 shows the breakdown of land use in London’s Green Belt.

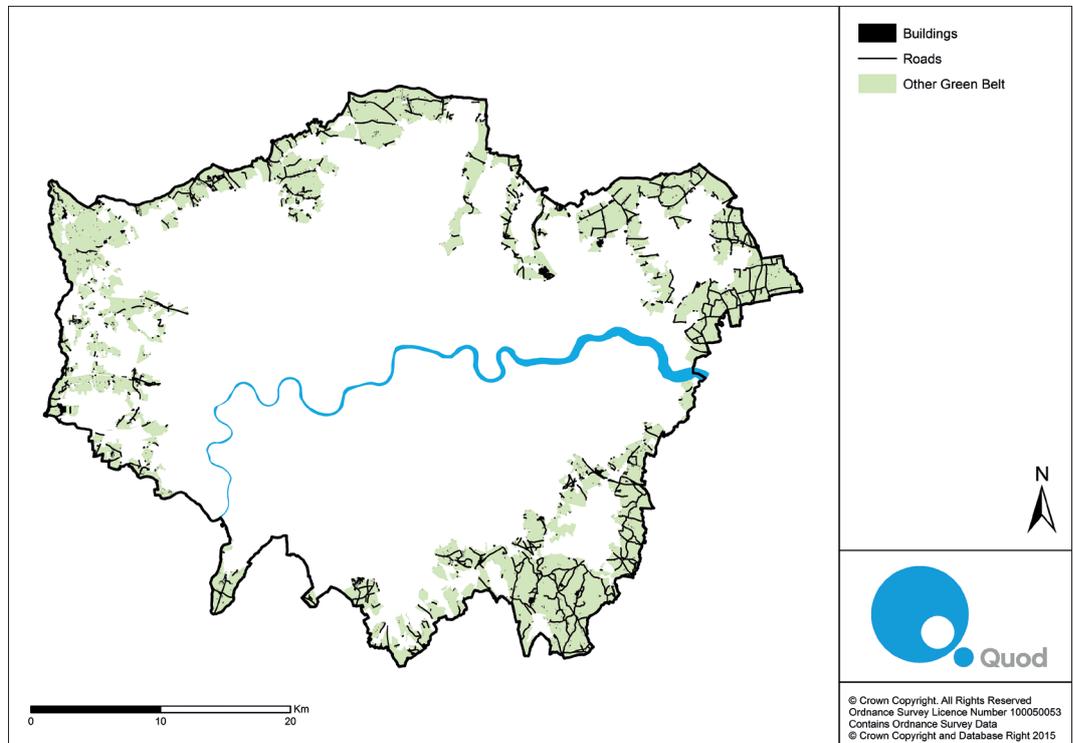
Table 2
Land use in London’s Green Belt*

	Hectares	% of London’s Green Belt
Buildings	722	2%
Environmentally protected Land	4,515	13%
Parks and public access land	4,658	13%
Other (agriculture, plus other uses such as golf, utilities, historic hospitals, etc)	26,639	76%

* NB figures do not total 100% because around 4% of Green Belt in London falls in both the environmentally protected and parks/public access categories.

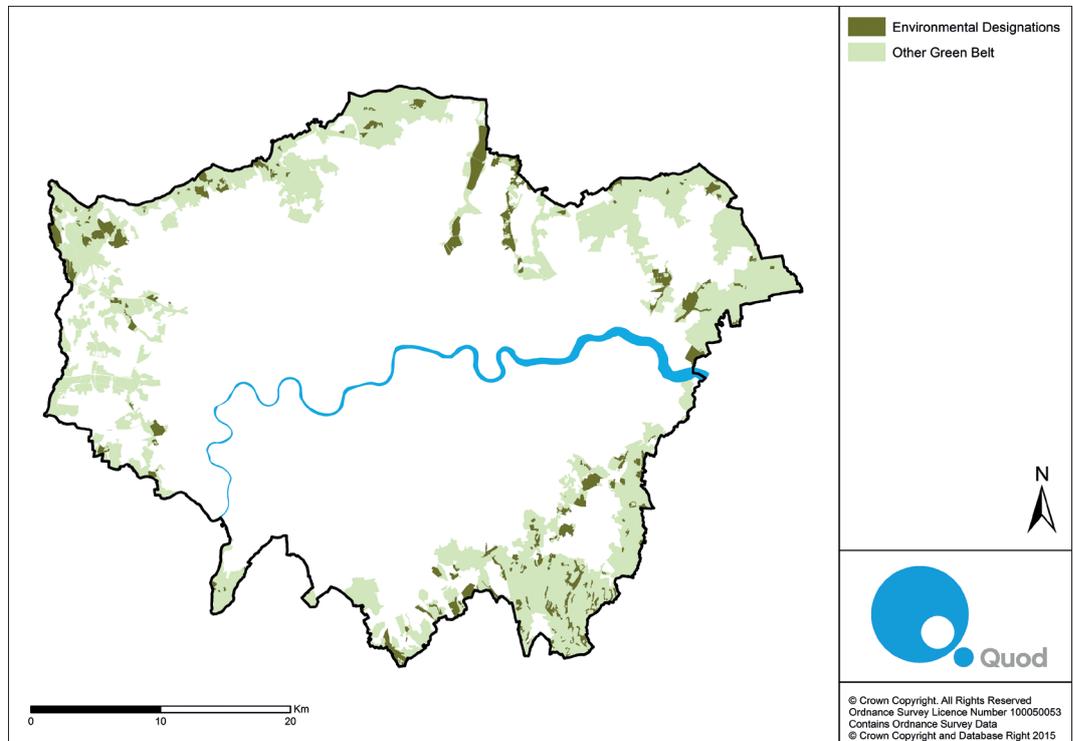
As shown in Figure 9, around 2% of the Green Belt has buildings on it and there are also several hundred kilometres of road. This is not because of creeping development of protected land but because when Green Belt land was designated it washed over existing areas, including isolated homes and farmhouses, and in some cases even whole villages.

Figure 9
Existing buildings and roads within London's Green Belt



The Green Belt includes some very valuable wildlife spaces. The dark green areas highlighted in Figure 10 below all have important environmental designations such as Sites of Special Scientific Interest, designated local nature reserves or ancient woodland. These are not the only areas that are environmentally attractive, but they do represent the land identified as the most important to preserve. Together these make up 13% of London's Green Belt. These areas would have a strong degree of protection under the planning system even if they were not also designated as Green Belt.

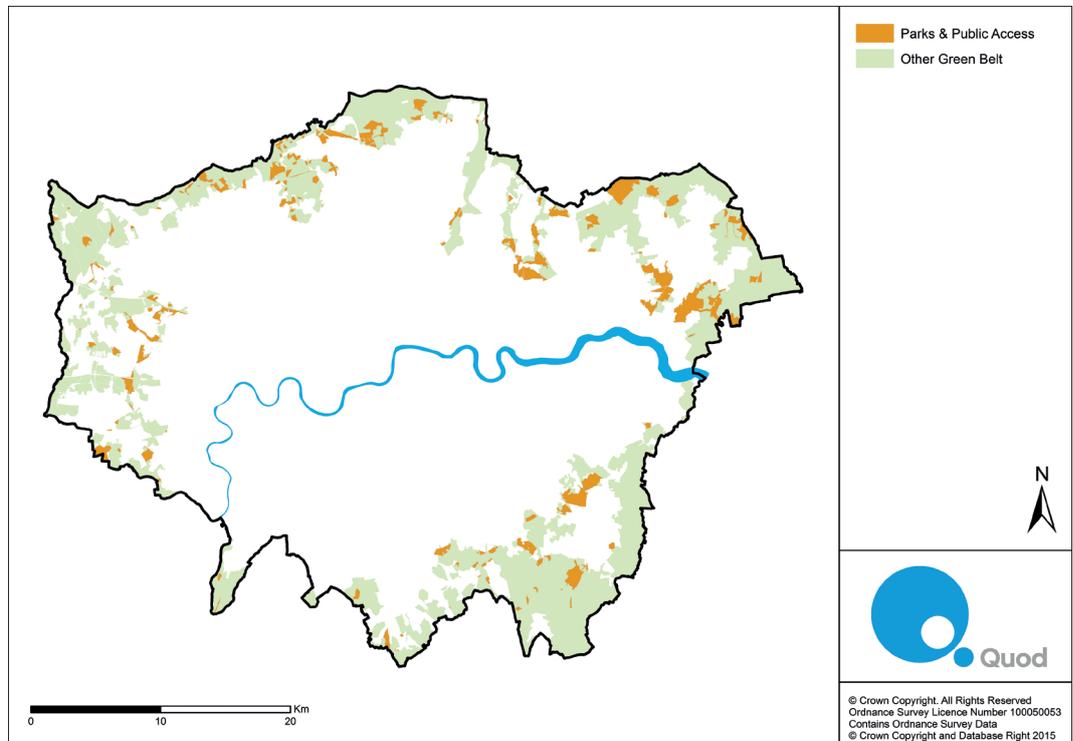
Figure 10
Environmentally
protected land in
London's Green Belt



Another important use of open space is for amenity, recreation and access. This type of land is hard to definitively map as it ranges from major urban parks, to farmland with informal access. Figure 11 below combines designated country parks, a range of other parks defined by Open Street Map¹⁵ and areas designated as public access land under the Countryside Rights of Way (CROW) Act.

This public access land accounts for 13% of London's Green Belt, about the same as that covered by the environmental designations. However, some land falls under both categories, so together the two add up to a total of approximately 22% London's Green Belt.

Figure 11
Parks and public access
land in London's Green
Belt

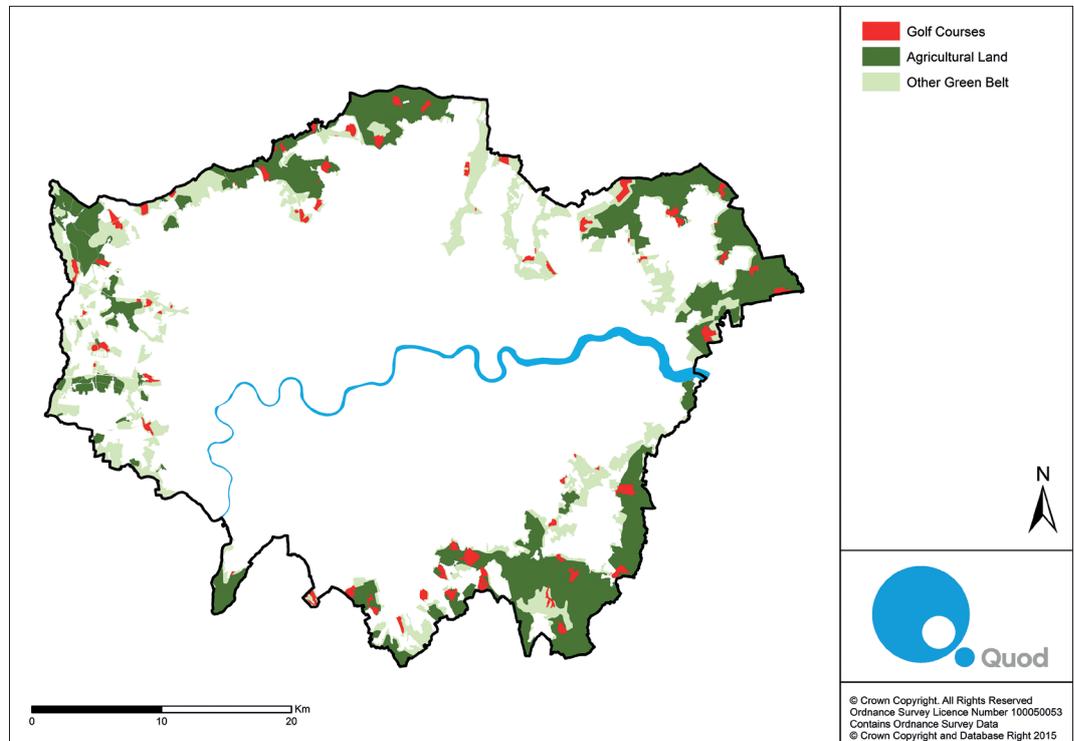


¹⁵ Open Street map is an internet based map created and maintained by the general public. See //www.openstreetmap.org/#map=5/51.500/-0.100.

Figure 12 maps out other uses in London's Green Belt. The majority of Green Belt land in London – 59% – is agricultural land. The farmland is mainly arable, although a significant amount is used for keeping horses.

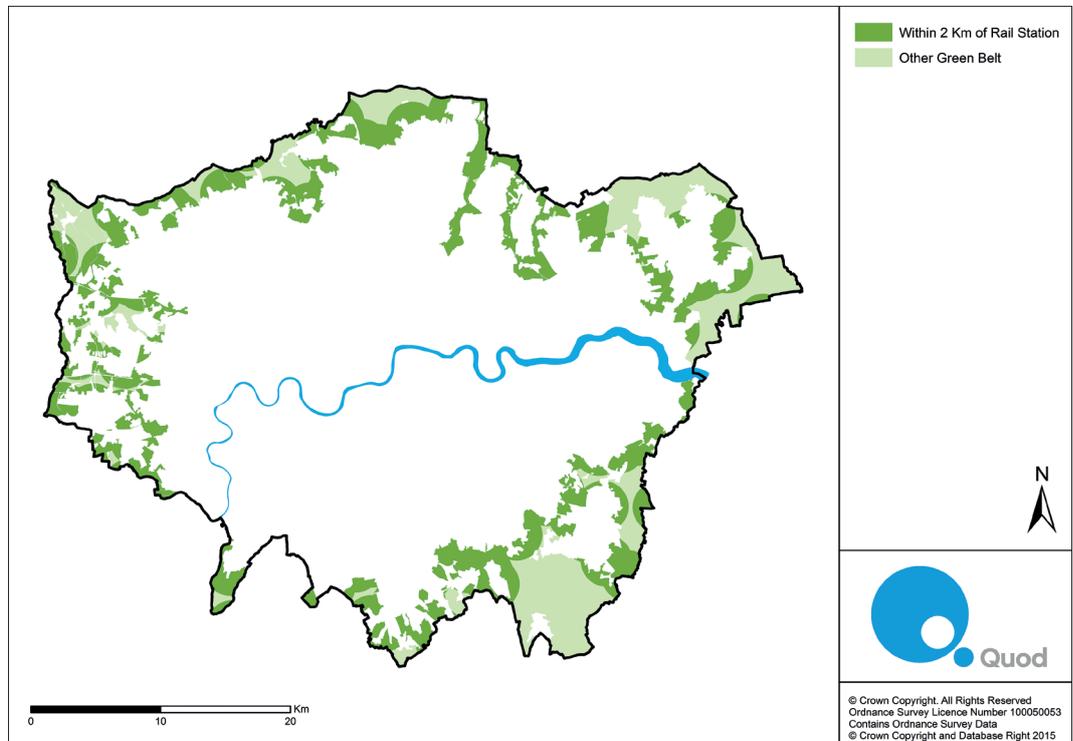
The remainder is in a wide variety of uses, including airfields, water treatment works and old hospitals. The single biggest remaining use is golf. A total of 7.1% of London's Green Belt is golf courses – nearly two and a half thousand hectares – double the size of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea.

Figure 12
Other Green Belt land uses



As well as being close to the built-up areas of London, much of the Green Belt is also very accessible. Around 60% of it is within 2km of an existing rail or tube station – as shown by the darker areas highlighted on Figure 13 below. If we exclude environmentally protected land, parks and public access land, then there is still 42% of the Green Belt in other uses lying within 2km of an existing station.

Figure 13
Accessible Green Belt in
London



Conclusion

5

London must continue to protect its valuable green spaces and beautiful open countryside but this is wholly compatible with seeing how the Green Belt can play a small part in helping to accommodate the new homes that London needs.

London's boroughs should be encouraged to review their Green Belt and consider how the land within it can be most effectively used and what the options are for re-designating a small fraction for new homes.

This review would be in line with existing planning policy and echoes a recent recommendation by the Communities and Local Government Committee report looking at the NPPF, which stated:

We encourage all councils, as part of the local planning process, to review the size and boundaries of their green belts. They should then make any necessary adjustments in their local plan¹⁶.

We argue that the starting point for any Green Belt review in London should be to only consider areas that are close to existing or future transport nodes, that are of poor environmental or civic value and could better serve London's needs by supporting sustainable, high-quality, well-designed residential development that incorporates truly accessible green space.

London needs to build at least double the amount of new homes it is currently providing. This will only happen if action is taken on multiple fronts. The alternative is house prices will continue to soar, cost pressures on London's residents and employers will rise, and London's global competitiveness will suffer.

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