



The countryside charity
London

The real 'grey belt'

Finding space to build in London and beyond



Mayoral Elections 2024

Protecting London's Green Spaces Part 2

The Campaign to Protect Rural England, London Branch, is a Charitable Incorporated Organisation registered in England number 1200094 and registered charity number 802622

The idea that parts of the Green Belt are 'grey belt' is a myth. The real grey belt is within London where land-hungry car parks and road layouts take up huge amounts of space. These are real opportunities. The new London Mayor should ensure these are targeted for new housing and commercial development and promote a similar approach in commuter towns outside London.

Summary

The term 'grey belt' has recently been used to imply much of the Green Belt is worthless 'scrubland' which should be released for housebuilding. This is not a new argument: those in favour of releasing Green Belt often say this.

In Part 1 of this series, we show why building on Green Belt, in any event, won't solve London's housing crisis.

Here we discuss why the idea that there are bits of Green Belt which are 'grey' is a myth: the reality is planning authorities are required to plan enhancements to any sites which may require it. This is something we need to do to adapt to climate change, among other things. And, far from providing a solution to the housing crisis, this kind of misleading statement in fact hinders progress by driving speculative purchase of Green Belt which pushes prices up further.

We also show there is a real grey belt: land-hungry car parks and road layouts which take up huge amounts of space while underpinning car-centred travel which forces disinvestment in public transport and brings grave social, health and environment impacts.

These are not the only brownfield sites currently available to accommodate development but they are an important part of the mix because building on the REAL grey belt helps us build towns and cities based on public transport, walking and cycling, where people can live close to services and amenities.

Car parks, to simplify, are the REAL grey belt and present a genuine opportunity to accommodate residential and commercial development while also creating better places to live. If you remain unconvinced, take a look at the map of Stevenage's town centre (surface) car parks, overleaf.

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Loose talk: the myth of the 'grey belt'

The idea that parts of the Green Belt are 'grey belt' is a myth

Politicians use the term 'grey belt' implying much of the Green Belt is worthless in green terms. But even where Green Belt is unattractive 'scrub land' (an argument often used to say Green Belt should be developed), there is no reason it can't be restored and made more useful and attractive. In fact, the National Planning Policy Framework says: "Once Green Belts have been defined, local planning authorities should plan positively to enhance their beneficial use." The reality is we need to enhance

Green Belt where appropriate, to make better use of the land to help us adapt to climate change, to secure nature's recovery, and for recreation and food security. And, by the way, 'scrub land' is actually an important habitat.

Speculators and developers who buy protected land have a strong interest in getting protections lifted. Part of the way they do this is by creating a narrative which they feel will gain political traction. The 'grey belt' claim is one such narrative.

Deliberately promoting this myth is counterproductive

Promoting the 'nibbling' of the edges of Green Belt hinders efforts to tackle the housing crisis by distracting attention from real solutions. Part 1 of this series sets out why building on Green Belt cannot solve the housing crisis.

regeneration. it reduces the incentive to use brownfield land despite there being plenty available.

It undermines sustainable development by promoting urban sprawl.

But this kind of loose talk also has other counterproductive impacts.

Ultimately Green Belt does come under threat and is released. Land is lost. Since there's no such thing as 'low value' Green Belt, the sites which are lost are invariably not 'low value'. Enfield Chase, under threat in Enfield, for example, is an important historic landscape. Hatton Fields, under threat in Hounslow, is a much-loved local green space which also mitigates the extreme heat island effect of the Heathrow Airport. These are just two examples in London.

Just talking about releasing Green Belt results in speculative land purchase, buying land for 'hope value'. This has been witnessed in Crews Hill in the London Borough of Enfield, for example, since the council announced it wanted to remove land protections. Land changes hands, is taken out of use, it sits idle, pressure to release it increases and land prices go up.

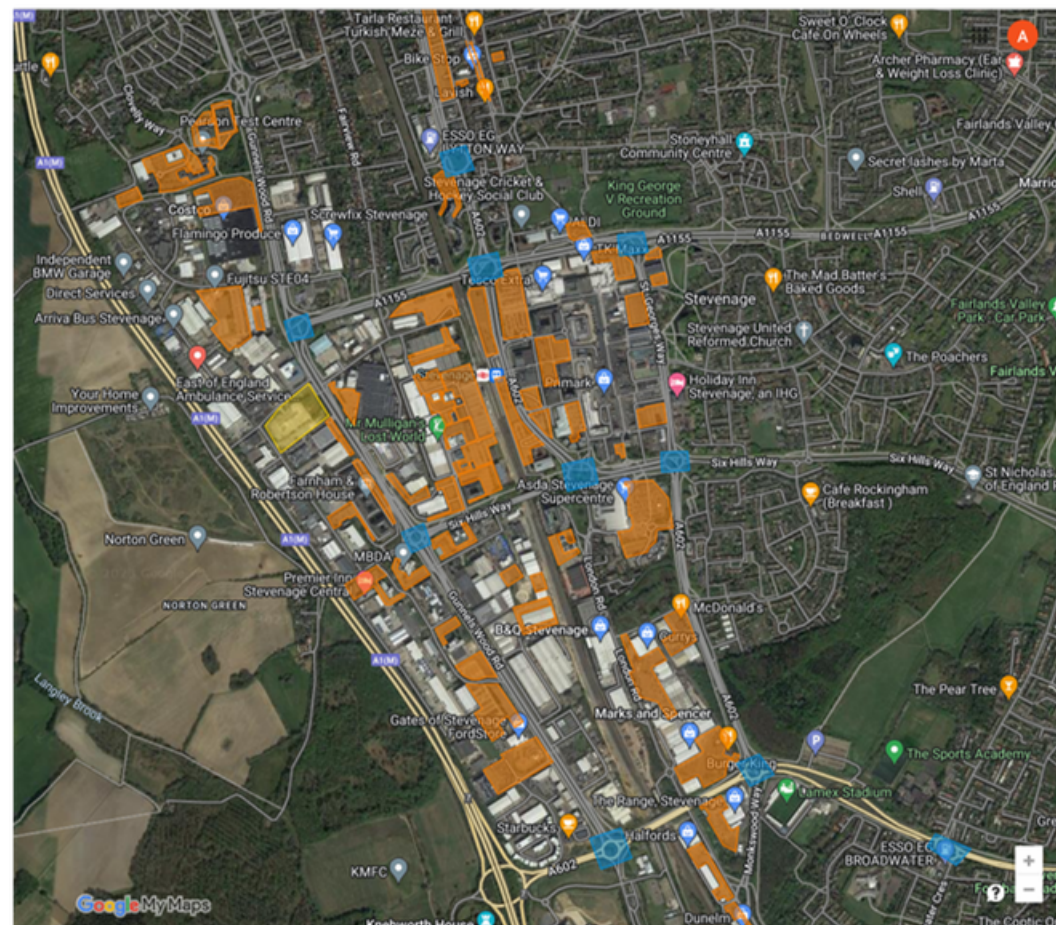
Promoting Green Belt release also undermines the importance of Green Belt policy in promoting urban

Stevenage town centre: surface car parks (orange) and roundabouts (blue) take up a huge amount of town centre space. [Image: Google MyMaps]

The real grey belt: space to build in London and beyond

Town centres are ideal spaces for development, for homes or mixed commercial and residential development, enabling people to live close to shops and services, particularly for people who don't drive (more likely to be people on low incomes, and older and young people).

Many parts of London, and most commuter town centres in London's Green Belt have large surface car parks, taking up valuable space while also encouraging car use. In many cases, car-centred travel means buses have all but disappeared or are expensive and infrequent. Stevenage, shown below, is an extreme example of how car parking has taken over the town centre.



Space to Build - London's real 'grey belt'

There remains much wasted grey space in London which can accommodate housing and commercial development while also promoting more sustainable travel.

Meanwhile, [according to TfL](#), in outer London 74% of all Londoners' car trips and 93% of car trips under 2km could feasibly be made by an alternative mode (by public transport, walking or cycling).

Grey space in Hounslow and Enfield, two London boroughs where Green Belt is currently under threat

In Enfield, the council proposes releasing historic Enfield Chase for housing, when there is a vast retail park on the A10 with single-storey retail and surface car parks, and when it has failed to bring forward the 10,000 home brownfield development at Meridian Water.

In Hounslow, the council proposes releasing Green Belt land for logistics businesses linked to Heathrow Airport. But the airport is surrounded by huge areas – over 80 hectares – of surface car parks which make very poor use of space and could be used to accommodate these needs.



Above: the A10 retail park in Enfield, a huge space largely taken up with surface car parking.

Left: just one part of over 80 hectares of surface car parking at Heathrow Airport.

Images: Google Maps

By switching away from car trips and making better use of the grey space no longer needed, we can create sustainable housing while also enabling investment in better public transport since fare income will increase.



The Green Belt: our 'climate safety belt'

Building out into Green Belt is the worst possible option for London. It is a lose-lose scenario. We lose our countryside and we create a high-carbon, car-dependent, unhealthy city. We advocate instead for 'compact cities' with strong Green Belt protections, which are low-carbon, where people get around by public transport, walking and cycling and can live close to jobs and amenities, and where parks

and green spaces are protected for health, recreation, sport and nature. We create compact cities by using land efficiently, recycling sites in need of regeneration, using space better and moving away from car-use which is space-inefficient and has other unwelcome impacts like air pollution, high carbon emissions and noise.

We have previously written about why London's Green Belt is our [climate safety belt](#), why we need to build '[compact cities](#)' with plenty of parks and green spaces, [10 reasons why higher density living is good for communities](#); and more on [why building on Green Belt won't solve the housing crisis](#).

CPRE London works to save and promote green spaces in Greater London, and to make our capital city a better, greener and healthier place for everyone to live in, work in, and enjoy.

We are part of the national network of CPRE, the countryside charity, which campaigns to promote, enhance and protect the countryside for everyone's benefit, wherever they live.

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