

Green belts need modernizing—a more 'multifunctional' approach can benefit people and planet

August 7 2024, by Matthew Kirby



The intersection of the Calderdale and Rochdale green belts. Credit: Matthew Kirby, [CC BY](#)

Green belts are more than just spaces; for many people, they're places providing [a brief escape from the city](#). Land designated as green belt—and protected from building—can also [store carbon and hold water](#) at times of flooding and drought.

Rolled out across England [in 1955](#), green belt policy has remained largely unchanged for almost 70 years. Today, green belts covering [12.6%](#) of England's land aims to "prevent urban sprawl by keeping land permanently open."

Their simplicity means they have stood the test of time, but they haven't adapted to changing needs or pressures society is experiencing today, such as [climate change](#), [biodiversity loss](#) and the [housing supply and affordability crisis](#). These challenges come into sharp focus in green belts where urban and rural demands on land meet and compete.

For my Ph.D., I have been investigating how the green belt concept can be modernized from a narrowly focused policy to protect land to one that also positively considers what happens within it. My [new research](#) shows that green belts have lots to offer for people and the planet by providing the multifunctional benefits society so desperately needs—if they can be planned and managed for the 21st century.

The current policy assumes a one-size-fits-all approach—this has come [under scrutiny](#) from developers wishing to build more houses in the green belt, while the countryside protection lobby see green belt as an epitaph [for countryside protection](#). Green belt status has [always been contentious](#), [I found little consistency](#) in how [local authorities](#) regard the environmental benefits of this land, and [some unsupported claims](#) paint the green belt as unproductive wasteland, but it's far from barren. Woodland, scrubland, grassland and farmland all provide [many of the benefits](#) our well-being depends on.

The chancellor, [Rachel Reeves](#), announced plans to transform the [planning system](#)—and the government recently [published its proposed changes](#) to the national planning policy framework which includes making it easier to develop within green belts. Central to green belt reform is the new ["gray belt"](#) described as lower-quality sites and

previously developed land currently designated as green belt.

So what qualifies as low-quality land? Quality is not black and white—nor gray and green. The proposed definition is broad, classifying all previously developed land as gray belt. But research shows that some such sites provide important benefits [such as improved air quality](#) and carbon storage that may be lost if developed.

[My new research](#) has, for the first time, objectively established the benefits from nature provided in landscapes covered by green belt. Collectively, this research rejects the idea that green belts provide few environmental or [social benefits](#)—instead, extensive parts of the northeast green belt provide [multifunctional benefits](#), especially close to where people live.

These multifunctional benefits include carbon storage, recreation such as walking, flood mitigation and preventing pollution in rivers. Worryingly, some of these benefits from nature are at risk. My research found that some places providing these multifunctional benefits from nature were [included as sites allocated for development](#) in the green belt.

Using a participatory mapping survey where people answer questions by placing points on maps, I showed that the northeast green belt which surrounds cities such as Newcastle and Durham provides important everyday nature close to [where people live](#). In my survey, more than 60% of points placed in the green belt by the public as "physically used" were within 500 meters of the urban edge. These same areas are often under threat from development.

The government has proposed to safeguard [important green belt](#) sites overlapping with other designations such as [sites of special scientific interest](#). But [my research reveals](#) that this isn't enough and that people extensively visit and value areas without these added protections. The

most used nature is often [that on peoples' doorsteps](#), irrespective of whether the land is a nature reserve or not.

Places physically used in the north-east green belt

Proposed compensation for "gray belt" development includes a set of ["golden rules"](#) required for any new green belt development. These include delivering 50% affordable homes, increased access to green spaces and new infrastructure such as schools. Currently the proposal uses the word "should." [My research highlights](#) the importance of strong policy wording for delivering these benefits, meaning that without words like "must," there's a danger that these golden rules won't be delivered.

This proposed and narrow focus on increased access misses lots of the unseen benefits of nature. Messy, unmanaged nature can still be [functional and beneficial](#) for us and for wildlife. Without explicitly recognizing and promoting the many benefits of green belt land, some green belt landowners might lower the quality of land in the hope of selling their land to developers.

Making green belts multifunctional

[More housing is needed in England](#), and certain areas currently designated as green belt could help enable this. But a more radical, multifunctional and joined-up approach to green belts is needed. Here are four key ingredients which could help.

First, the multifunctional benefits of green belt land must be embedded in [national planning policy](#). Second, empowering [regional authorities](#) with the responsibilities for their built and natural environment to make plans beyond the local scale would make planning outcomes more robust, strategic and joined-up. [New proposals](#) for more strategic

planning are a good start.

Third, green belt planning should involve collaboration to take everything from housing and health to climate and nature into account for a more holistic approach. Finally, green belt policy needs flexibility to deliver the benefits from nature that are most needed by the towns and cities across different regions.

It's time to be ambitious and rethink the meaning and potential of green belts in the 21st century, to not only deliver economic growth but also create resilient, livable and positive spaces at the urban edge.

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