
Green Webs: Reshaping Green Belts as a route to smarter growth

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Abstract This paper calls for using green space to add value to developments rather than limit urban expansion as Green Belts have tried to do. It questions the importance of new towns as a means of providing the housing the UK needs to build and argues for urban extensions and renewal as better methods. Development corporations, as recommended by the New Towns Taskforce, should be used to implement spatial development strategies by assembling land and commissioning local infrastructure. The resulting uplift in land values can then be used to fund infrastructure improvements and new green space. A Common Wealth Fund should complement the National Wealth Fund by supporting local initiatives that conserve and improve the natural environment around town centres and railway stations. This article is also included in **The Business & Management Collection** which can be accessed at <https://hstalks.com/business/>.

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INTRODUCTION

After 14 years out of power, a Labour Government with a large majority is trying to use house building to boost economic growth and productivity, which are the stated missions of Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer. Planning had been seen as a major obstacle and Green Belts regarded as a deliberate constraint on future growth. A New Towns Taskforce under Sir Michael Lyons and Dame Kate Barker has proposed locations for 12 new towns along with associated principles, such as good urban design.¹ They support urban extensions and setting up development corporations to assemble

land and overcome constraints. This paper considers how the sensitive relationship between town and country should be handled in the forthcoming decades.

In particular it explores how a concept put forward by Jonathan Manns and the author for developing a 'green web' that connects open land, water and rail links could produce better outcomes for all. This was published by The London Society as a White Paper in response to the All-Party Parliamentary Group for London's Planning and the Built Environment.² It included proposals for a new green web to replace the Green Belt.

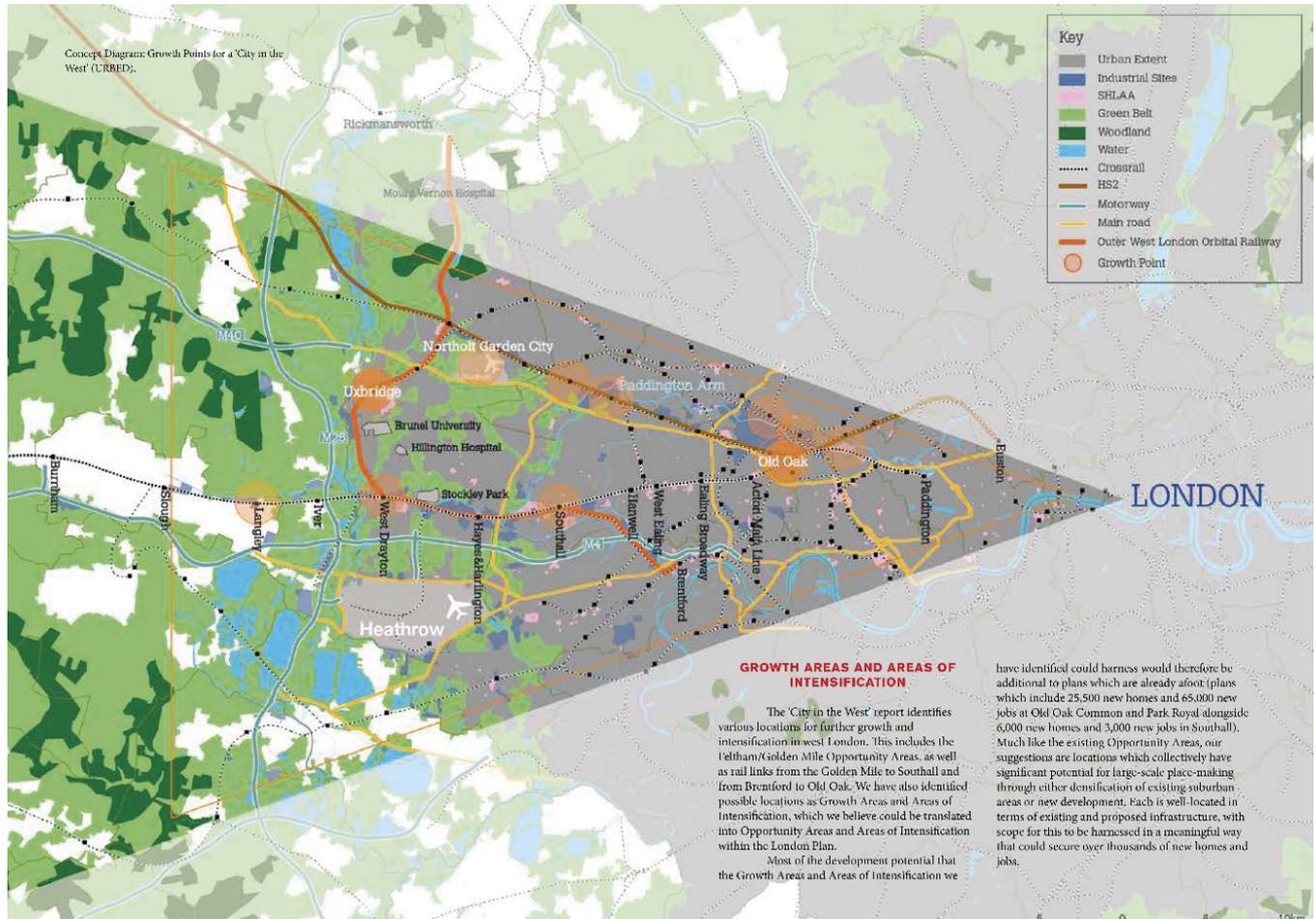


Figure 1: A green web in West London would connect new housing to create a new garden city on an old airfield

Exploring the scope for change in the west of the capital, a West London green web could alone accommodate 100,000 new homes — equivalent to four new towns (see Figure 1). Exciting proposals were put forward for a garden city at Northolt Airport, new suburban railway services and suburban densification, but alas not yet taken up. Instead, reliance was placed on the 'market' to meet London's housing needs and on local planning authorities who saw the Green Belt as sacred.

WHAT LIES BEHIND THE GREEN BELT?

The values given to England's hallowed Green Belts have changed over time, as

Jonathan Manns records in a fascinating paper for the London Society, which covers changing plans and proposals for handling growth in London over at least a century.³ Opening up access to the countryside for health reasons inspired the creation of the National Trust in 1885, for example, and subsequently National Parks in the 1950s. Urban sprawl along arterial roads led to campaigns to preserve open views by those fighting urban sprawl in the 1930s, who were often motorists. It also prompted Ebenezer Howard to come up with proposals for garden cities to combine the best of town and country as an alternative to overcrowded cities.

The idealism that got Letchworth Garden City or Welwyn Garden City underway could not cope with financial downturns. So, an alliance between the leaders of the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE) and the Town and Country Planning Association (TCPA) in the 1930s ‘squared the circle’ through the New Towns Act of 1947. Some 32 government-funded new towns drew people out of war-damaged cities. They were attracted to renting homes that went with jobs in well-located places such as Milton Keynes that had plenty of green space. Green Belts were drawn up around 14 cities. But the investment was at the expense of rebalancing existing towns, especially inner-city areas that had suffered from the decline of traditional industry, although it was very successful in boosting property values and safeguarding many old villages.

The Green Belts are areas of land that are protected from most forms of development and were intended to keep settlements from sprawling. Local planning authorities are responsible for designating land as Green Belt through powers established in the Town and Country Planning Act (1947). Around London, some small areas were designated Green Belt by an earlier statute (1938). The designation is formalised in local plans, which set policies for the local area. Local plans are then used to inform decisions on development, ensuring it is sustainable, meets relevant policies and guidance, and reflects local needs. Unfortunately, most plans are out of date. Over time the boundaries have been eroded, and the reality along the peripheral main roads is far from the green or accessible countryside that bodies like the CPRE have been fighting for.

One of the first acts of the previous Labour Government that took over in 1997 was therefore to commission an Urban Task Force under architect Richard

Rogers; inspired by the ‘renaissance’ of European cities such as Barcelona and Rotterdam, they produced a policy with over 100 recommendations.⁴ The solution was seen as masterplans and good urban design, with housing built to much higher densities than in the past, as in European cities such as Barcelona. Professor Sir Peter Hall, who was a member of the Urban Task Force, produced a dissenting report. As a geographer, he could not visualise finding all the space needed to bring up families in the existing cities. Something different was needed from the towering apartment blocks you now see in central parts of cities such as Manchester and London. The suburbs also had a positive role to play.

The overall land area covered by Green Belts is huge, some three times the size of Greater London. Tight controls have undoubtedly affected where new homes are built. The unforeseen consequences, however, include a greater escalation in house prices than elsewhere in Europe. Congestion and air quality are getting worse as people live further from their work and use cars to jump over the Green Belt to reach their destinations. Research by the Centre for Cities has shown how travel times in some British provincial cities are twice their European counterparts.⁵ Lower densities make public transport less viable than in, say, France.

London School of Economics (LSE) economist Paul Cheshire calculated that building within 800 metres of stations in the Metropolitan Green Belt could provide a million new homes, which land value capture would pay for.⁶ Although research for the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) fears that prevailing practices would simply generate more car journeys, these ‘grey belts’ are where some smarter thinking is needed.⁷ The arguments have long been in flux because of competing values. The British countryside is a battlefield for lawyers

and campaigners in the fight to protect environmental quality against unwanted development. Those who have moved out of cities want to protect the value of their properties and resist pressures on overloaded infrastructure from estates of executive homes built on green fields. Developers search for where profits are highest, and securing planning permission can raise land values from £14,000 an acre to well over £1m. So are Green Belts friend or foe, and would a different approach yield better results?

Grey Belt was introduced as part of a suite of measures by the new Labour Government to help build 1.5m new homes over the parliamentary period. The National Planning Policy Guidance (NPPG) was updated to provide further guidance on assessing and identifying Grey Belt. Grey Belt is defined in Annex 2 of the NPPG as previously developed land (PDL) or Green Belt land that does 'not strongly' contribute to the purposes of 'checking unrestricted sprawl, preventing merging of towns and preserving historic setting'. A survey by property consultants Marrons reveals that one in three applications to develop Green Belt land in the so-called 'Grey Belt' is now being allowed when the application goes to an inspector.⁸

Politicians often complain that there are no levers to pull or that they no longer work. But when confidence is lacking, targets have little impact. Most of the proposed new towns are unlikely to deliver a fraction of the new homes that are needed. They are located too far from existing towns and so the take-up or 'absorption rate' is likely to be low. There are already well over a million plots for housing with planning permission, as well as many sites where work has stopped, so the problem is not just regulations. Even when money was more readily available, the model used by the volume house builders does not respond to changing

demands such as from the growing numbers of elderly living alone or young people looking for a place they can afford.

The housing market is currently flat, and one reason for the effective lack of demand for new homes is because most people want to live in pleasant neighbourhoods, not in isolated houses without community facilities or in high-rise tower blocks accessed only by lifts. Britain's attitude to housing has been scarred by a coal-based industrial revolution that turned much of the population against urban areas. Unlike France or the Netherlands, the UK middle classes fled to the suburbs, leaving some of the late 20th-century areas depopulated and run-down. With the urgent need to provide new homes and accessible jobs in an age driven by digital power, a different model for urban growth is needed, with neighbourhoods designed to meet future and changing needs and to provide high connectivity without having to depend on the private car.

The Green Belt is therefore a potential resource for higher growth. Much of the Green Belt land is given over to monoculture or golf courses, which occupy more land in Surrey than houses do. Currently there are battles over improving biodiversity and space for wildlife, as Labour wants priority given to house building while environmentalists campaign to save nature. Yet green views are now seen as a remedy for ill-health and depression, and progressive doctors are prescribing walking among trees.⁹ It should be possible to reconcile economic growth with social and environmental capital through effective spatial planning.

THE EVOLUTION OF URBED

Urban and Economic Development (URBED) was set up in 1976 as a not-for-profit company to offer practical solutions to urban regeneration. David

Rudlin and I later used our first-hand experience of regenerating Hulme in Manchester and planning the New England Quarter, former railway land next to Brighton Station, to illustrate what a different model would look like.¹⁰ What we call the Sustainable Urban Neighbourhood (SUN) was designed to attract those with a choice back to live and work in towns and cities. But it requires proactive planning and agencies to secure the public interest over private profit and local authorities no longer have the resources to do much on their own. Furthermore, there is simply not enough space to meet all the foreseeable demand through urban infill or redevelopment alone.

So, we went on to apply the same ideas to creating garden cities. David Rudlin and I won the 2014 Wolfson Economics Prize for our proposals for growing the fictional town of Uxcester as a garden city. This was designed to be ‘visionary, viable and popular without requiring public subsidy’.¹¹ As land and infrastructure is a major part of the cost of new homes, it is much more efficient to build on the edges of towns and cities, and there are social and environmental benefits as well. The approach was tested out in York and Oxford to show how well-connected urban areas on the fringes of successful towns and cities could be turned into garden cities through planned growth (see Figure 2). The business plan for Uxcester Garden City demonstrated that there would be enough from the uplift in land values to fund the first line of a new tram system, which would have removed cars from Oxford’s ancient centre and provided substantial other community benefits.

Regrettably the fractured state of governance in cities such as Oxford delayed getting to an agreed plan, despite the availability of affordable housing being the major obstacle to further economic growth. The Conservative Minister at the

time rejected the idea of building on the edge of existing towns as it could upset Conservative voters. Experience suggests balanced incremental development takes at least 20 years and hence requires an organisation dedicated to the tasks to maintain momentum and deal with the inevitable upsets as well as political swings. The British system of local government cannot be expected to deliver the homes that are needed.

LEARNING FROM EUROPE

In 2014 in a book called *Good Cities Better Lives*, prompted by our work together, Peter Hall summarised the five basic challenges for British cities as:

1. Rebalancing our urban economies.
2. Building new homes.
3. Linking people and places.
4. Living with finite resources.
5. Fixing broken machinery.¹²

Our solutions drew on European experience, and the study tours we had both run to new settlements in mid-sized towns and cities. Cities in very different countries had transformed themselves over several decades to overcome the challenges that were holding Britain back. Inspiration could be drawn from France on transport, Germany on the economy, the Netherlands for housing and Scandinavia for the environment. But it was the process of *how*, rather than *what* was done that proved critical. Cities such as Montpellier in France, Dortmund in North Germany’s Emscher Park, a former iron and coal area, Amersfoort or Eindhoven in the Netherlands and Copenhagen in Denmark share a capacity to join things up at a local as well as a strategic level. Outside Copenhagen, for example, where growth developed along a series of ‘five fingers’, the new town of Orestad was created by a public

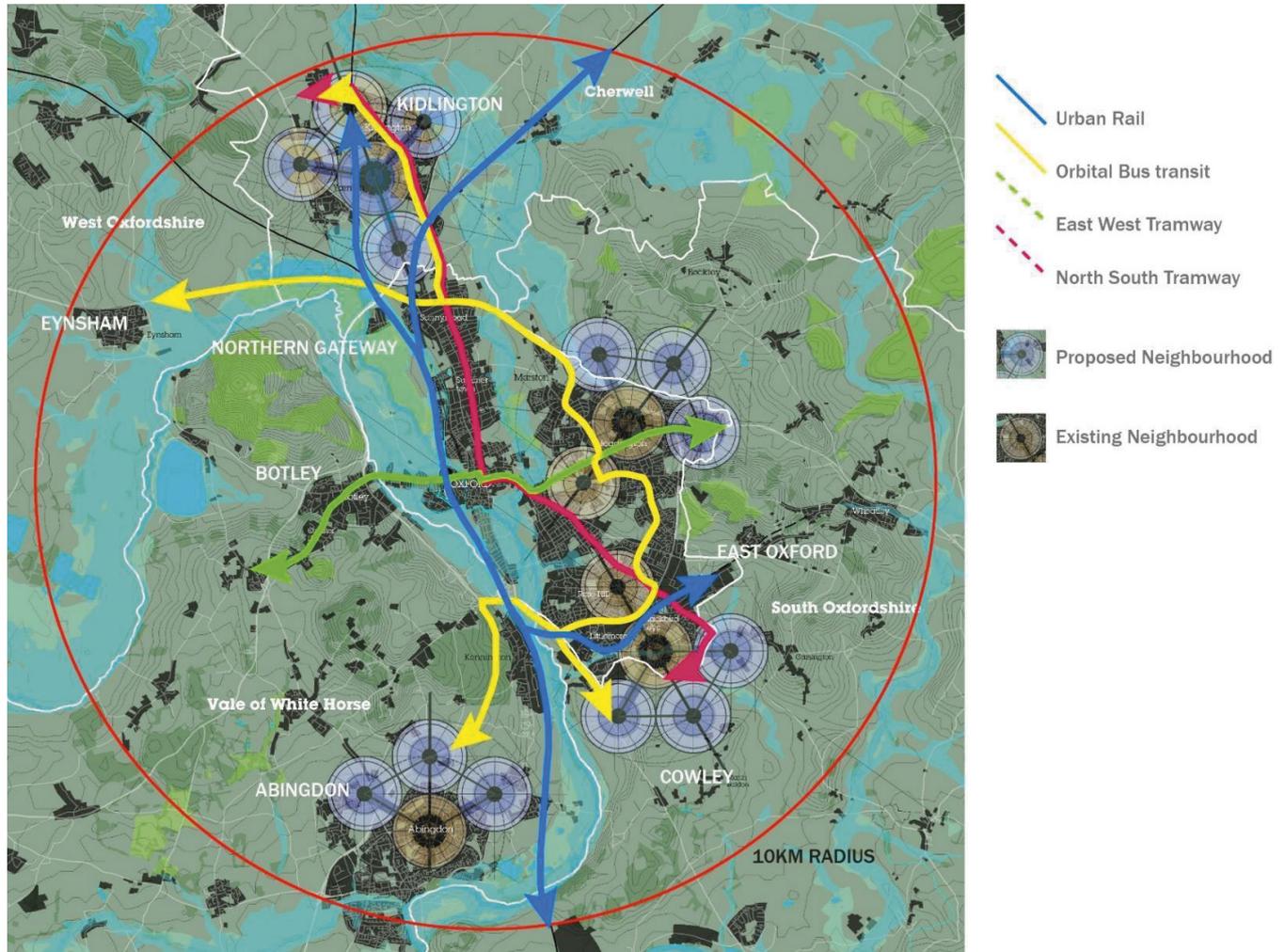


Figure 2: Urban extensions in Oxford could double the population by taking 5 per cent of the Green Belt

corporation bringing together land owned by the City and the Government. The uplift in land values was sufficient to fund the first line of the City's new Metro.

All the success stories used public finance from state investment banks to acquire land and fund advance infrastructure before selling off serviced sites to a variety of developers. This ensured the homes were both affordable and sustainable. Rather than expecting the state to do everything or leaving it to the private sector, decentralisation of power enabled mid-sized cities such as Freiburg or Montpellier to find their own solutions. The subtitle of our book was '*How Europe*

Discovered the Lost Art of Urbanism', as there is an important role for good design and for local initiatives that deliver urban greening. Urbanists are needed who can 'broker' agreements between the different interests. The Conservative Government declined to learn from Europe, however, as Brexit was on the agenda. It is only now with a Labour Government willing to reform local government and planning that a switch of direction may be possible. But efforts will need to be concentrated where they can yield tangible results.

While substantial development has taken place in the hearts of many of our cities thanks to public funding, as in

Ancoats in Manchester, for example, it is the areas at the edges and centres of mid-sized towns and cities that now face the greatest challenges. Shopping on the Internet is displacing the out-of-town stores developed on the sites of former factories and mills, which was the first wave of urban regeneration. Services have replaced manufacturing industry. There is a mass of under-used land and property on the edge of town centres and often around railway stations that could form the basis for sustainable urban renewal, provided land in different ownerships could be assembled and there was a mechanism to bring the different interests together.

Practical solutions were set out in URBED's report on land assembly for the Greater London Authority (GLA), which drew on expert advice from lawyers and surveyors and case studies of what worked. For example, in France, Zones d'aménagement concertés (ZACs) are used to join up public and private investment, and the legal firm of Dentons used their experience to propose designating 'land assembly zones'.¹³ The National Wealth Fund, which was set up to support economic growth and clean energy, could now play a similar role to European state banks such as the Caisse des Depots. But efforts need to be focused on places with real growth potential, which requires spatial planning at the regional level. The slow progress in developing Ebbsfleet in Kent or Northstowe in Cambridge and other new settlements that were to serve as 'ecotowns' or Millennium communities should be a warning that policies and targets are not enough. So how could development be accelerated to meet changing priorities, and spatial planning used to transform an area's prospects?

GREEN WEBS AND SOCIAL CITIES

The overwhelming challenges for spatial planning and building housing at scale

in the future will be addressing climate change and the social disparities that are causing communities to break up and wildlife to die. In the UK we urgently need to reduce the impact of the private car, and to promote alternatives such as public transport and active travel. We also have to make much better use of our existing housing stock, and to use 'green wedges' or 'fingers', as in parts of Scotland or Copenhagen, to change behaviour. Where land in the Green Belt is required for development, as Labour is proposing, not only should part of the uplift in value be used to fund local infrastructure but it should also be used to improve access for leisure, starting with making walking easier and safer. So instead of treating the Green Belt as a sterile corset or girdle, the best of town and country could be combined in new development.

What Ebenezer Howard called the *social city* in his original pamphlet 'Tomorrow: A peaceful path to real reform' in 1898 still offers a useful model. A compilation of my articles published in *Town and Country Planning* on building social cities over a decade brings his ideas up to date.¹⁴ The basic idea still is to link a cluster of settlements with high-quality public transport, and to maintain the spaces in between so that more people look out to green space or water, and can access them on foot or by bike. Instead of separating town from country, they should be woven together to form a green web. Existing streets can be transformed by using trees and landscaping, such as parklets, as a cost-effective way of securing public support for new housing.¹⁵

Speedy delivery and ongoing maintenance will be key. The best mechanism to achieve the government's objectives and reconcile the different interests is the Mayoral Development Corporation. Examples are the Milton Keynes Parks Trust, which was funded from the rentals paid by small shops, and

the park between Stratford and Hackney Wick, which was created from land used for the London Olympics by the London Legacy Development Corporation. A body such as the National Infrastructure Commission needs to identify the best places for growth or renewal, using digital intelligence to bring the data together and hence sidestep vested interests. The proposed Spatial Development Strategies (SDS) should show where new homes and other development are best concentrated, and how these link up with future sources of employment. The complex and time-consuming process of assembling the land and upgrading the local infrastructure can then proceed with the prospect of outline planning permission for homes that meet certain standards, using the back-up of compulsory purchase powers to avoid land speculation.

Generating confidence, and even the hope that things can be improved, will be difficult in the current financial climate. So, it is important to come up first with a programme for conserving and improving the natural environment that will yield early results and engage the interest and support of local communities who might otherwise be opposed. The success of developments such as the New England Quarter in Brighton or the former railway lands in King's Cross, London show how an incremental approach can work when you start next to a railway station. A green web would revive hope and development trusts could put waste space to better or 'meanwhile' uses with a mass of social and environmental benefits.¹⁶ A study by planning and development consultants Lichfields has revealed the many well-connected stations where housing development is viable, and in total these could well meet most of the UK's immediate housing needs (see Figure 3).

Furthermore, instead of having to wait for the facilities needed to create a community, the process will add value to

what might formerly have been written off as wasteland. This was the model used to develop London's Metroland in the interwar period.¹⁷ The Board of the Metropolitan Railway promoted new housing on surplus land bought for new stations in some eight locations in north-west London, which became some of the most attractive places to live. A similar recent story can be told of the area around King's Cross or on the London Overground that runs through East End neighbourhoods such as Dalston and Rotherhithe. Frequent modern trains and upgraded or new stations are now bordered by distinctive apartment blocks in areas once notorious for criminality and vice. New green spaces such as Dalston's Eastern Curve have used 'wilding' to create great places to relax in former wastelands.

The UK has a unique opportunity to make the most of its rich heritage of urban green spaces, which include canals and cemeteries and the front gardens that border tree-lined suburban streets. It also has an abundance of under-used suburban railway lines, with plenty of scope for promoting integrated transport in provincial cities to match their European counterparts.¹⁸ Reducing the amount of traffic in urban areas would release space for walking and cycling, as progressive cities such as Copenhagen or Freiburg have done through planned urban extensions combined with upgraded light rail systems (see Figure 4).

The results are evident in longer active lives and greater feelings of well-being, which should lead in turn to reduced pressures on the NHS and lower health insurance claims.

IMPLEMENTING A GREEN TRANSITION

Green webs need champions. Local trusts serve as a valuable third force

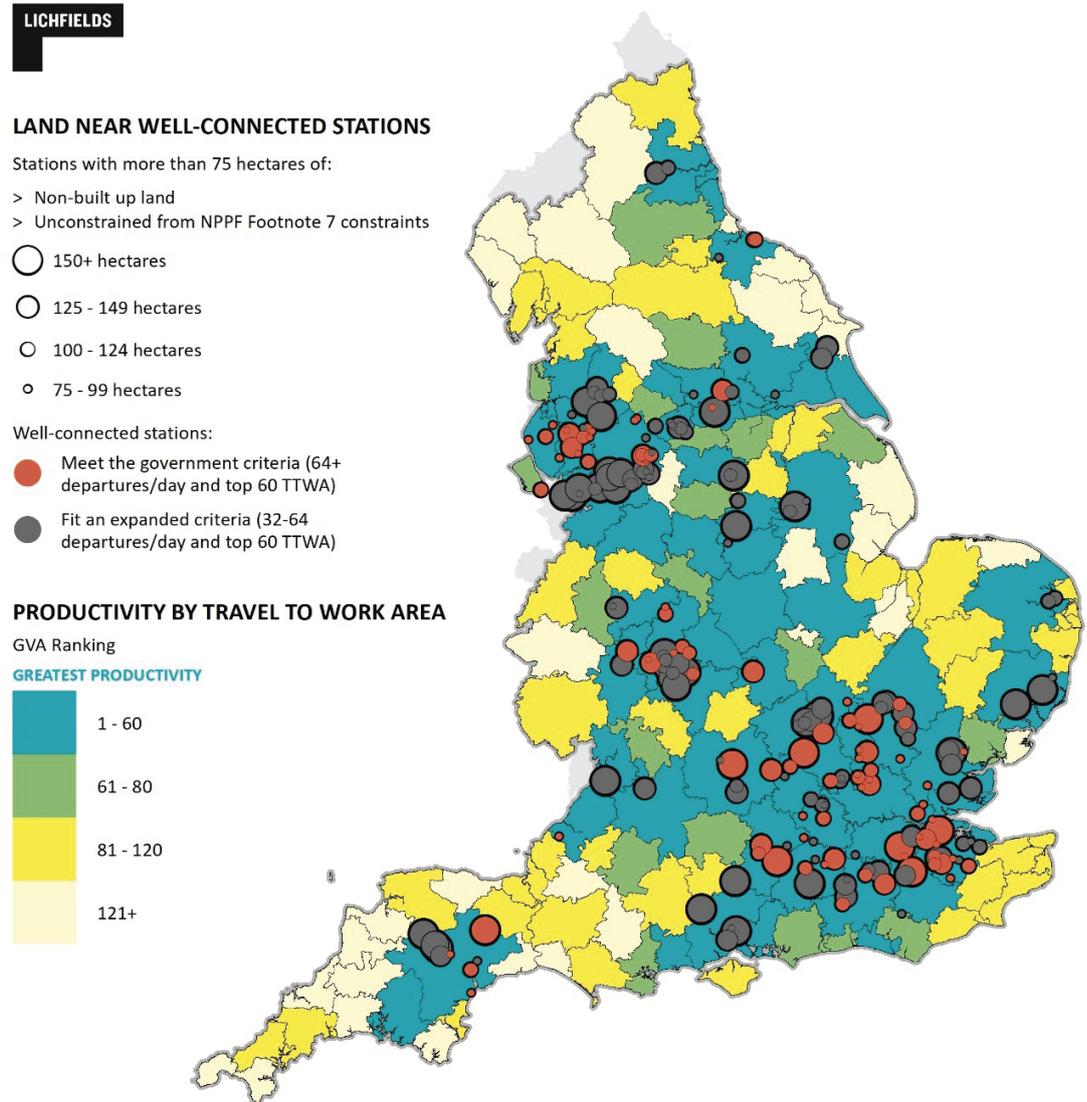


Figure 3: Space around suburban stations could meet most of the UK's housing needs

in restoring run-down areas to life. Organisations such as Groundwork or the Wildlife Trusts have transformed isolated neglected areas with the help of nature, voluntary efforts and public pump-priming. Community Land Trusts¹⁹ are helping people to house themselves when they get support from local land owners. Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) with a stake in property can provide neighbourhoods with the extra income needed to maintain an extended public

realm. The Green Corridor initiative in the north-east is a promising £3m project with a range of partners and funded by a research body, which needs to be replicated in every region.²⁰

There should be no need to wait for consultancy studies, as students in local colleges with built environment programmes could carry out the assessments and prepare plans for improvements with local inputs. Design codes and charters will help raise standards and engage communities in



Figure 4: Rieselfeld in Freiburg shows how to extend historic cities with housing around a green web

a positive way. The Cambridgeshire Charter for Quality Growth, published in 2010, offers a model that has endured, and the mixed use developments around Cambridge station show how to combine high-density new housing with publicly accessible green spaces.²¹ Similarly the former railway lands at King's Cross offer an even greater example of the transformation that can follow from an initial investment in landscaping and improving public access. But a fresh source of seed capital is needed to address the parlous state of most local authorities, the long times it takes to get projects agreed, and the reluctance of private developers to invest unless they can literally see improvements are underway.

So, to boost confidence in the government's plans, how about some kind of Common Wealth Fund to complement the National Wealth Fund and to support 'transformational projects' or environmental 'beacons'? The fund might be managed by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) as a practical means of engaging communities in creating better futures. Community Land Trusts could ensure that where new homes are built at scale there is also the funding to enhance nature and build a sense of community from the start.²² The fund would avoid the situation where streets are left barren because there is no funding to maintain trees, or where shops stand empty and properties decay in areas earmarked for regeneration. The funding

could come from a slice of the uplift in land values from areas that benefit from renewal, or form part of wider property tax reforms. At a city region level, some form of Local Infrastructure Financing Trusts (LIFT) could bring public and private resources together and be the vehicle for corporate investment in projects that serve as beacons for a green transition.²³

Because resources and the capacity for change are limited, the priority should be to transform areas that are easiest to access and are highly visible. This includes making the most of under-used land around railway stations and along existing railway lines, a task that should be easier now that the railways have been taken back into public ownership. The green spaces can form the start of a green web that will connect transport hubs with their hinterland. By mapping land that is publicly owned and close to railway stations and town centres, areas for intensification can be systematically identified and vested interests overcome. The potential rate yield from bringing under-used land and properties into beneficial use makes the economic arguments for urban intensification overwhelming. Brightening up the most visible areas will provide immediate signs that improvements are underway and that Labour cares.

Guidance and examples are set out by Prachi Rampuria and colleagues in a recent book titled *Eco-Responsive Environments*.²⁴ By combining the powers of a New Town Development Corporation to assemble land with community-based trusts to act as stewards, and using Quality Charters to guide design, as in Cambridge, new housing can win widespread acceptance. Digital intelligence should be used to bring together different sets of data so the opportunities and constraints can be systematically assessed.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, profitable developments around stations in much of London already prove the viability of a mix of people living at higher densities. Well-designed and managed neighbourhoods in areas close to railway stations with access to open spaces will transform the image and appeal of run-down areas in the country at large. Mid-rise residential development around courtyard gardens can also cater for a range of ages and incomes. The key is first assembling the land, and then using a development framework as a trellis, not a blueprint. Like a garden, the results look best when there is rich mix of uses with a variety of people living and working together to provide the necessary stewardship. A green and blue web will use the power of nature to boost economic and social development.

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