

The Green Belt and Local Communities



Housing development in the West Midlands Green Belt (Author's Own)

'The 'South Bristol Wrong Road' campaign group has welcomed the 'incredible' news'
(The *Bristol Post* covers the Planning Inspectorate's letter on the West of England Joint Spatial Plan:
<https://bit.ly/32JqTgb>).

What an interesting and eventful time to be exploring the views of communities towards the Green Belt! What caught my attention in the above article was not only the different reactions of different groups to Plan but also the strength of community feeling aroused by Green Belt release in South Bristol, notwithstanding the city's severe housing shortage.

Indeed, in advance of my talk on the Geography and Governance of Green Belt at the South West Room@RTPI event in Taunton in November, I thought that it would be a good moment to explore the very controversial topic of the Green Belt and local communities (incidentally this also makes it a fascinating topic to research!). There is clearly a sharp divergence of views. Local communities, or certainly some members of local communities, are (perhaps understandably) fiercely protective of the Green Belt and campaign very vigorously on it. On the other hand, developers and local authority planners are often concerned about meeting housing need and often view campaigners as being unrepresentative NIMBYs who want to protect their own (primarily property) interests. Indeed, the lack of trust in the planning system has been highlighted as a key issue by Grosvenor (2019) and, although some planners have argued that the Grosvenor Report is perhaps a bit too simplistic (for example: Smith, 2019), I have found mutual distrust between developers/ planners and campaigners to be a key issue regarding Green Belt. This is explored below before offering some recommendations.

Why do people support the Green Belt?

The existence of popular support for the Green Belt is apparent but why is this and what motivates people to support the Green Belt? Although this might seem a straightforward question, it is notoriously difficult to establish people's motives! National polling data for CPRE (Ipsos MORI, 2015)

shows that the Green Belt commands significantly greater support from property owners than social or private renters (72% compared to 58% and 57% respectively) but social and private renters also evidently still support the policy. The consensus among most of the planners I interviewed seemed to be that Green Belt is largely supported for emotion reasons because of fear of change and a popular love of the countryside rather than material, economic reasons. Consequently, the *underlying motivation* was argued to be fear of change whilst the Green Belt, as the strongest protection against development, was the most legitimate campaigning *technique or method* used by campaigners¹.

The Green Belt and Planning Knowledge

This leads nicely into the second point- the Green Belt is probably the most well-known planning policy but is also poorly understood among the general public. This highlights a key juxtaposition: it is regularly argued that people getting involved in planning is an inherently 'good' thing yet planners are often frustrated with people campaigning on the Green Belt because they do not understand the policy (the mixing up of greenfield and Green Belt land is a classic example of this)! Planners therefore get understandably frustrated with campaigners and often resort to 'evidence' and dismissing campaigners as misinformed and unrepresentative. Campaigners usually, in turn, feel powerless/ voiceless and resort to direct campaigns and politics whilst accusing/ (seeking to) discredit developers as wanting to 'ruin' the Green Belt to make profit. Things get even more complicated when 'professional' campaigners get introduced (I have so far focused on 'everyday' campaigners). Using 'planning speak', they often produce 'evidence' showing that housing 'need' can (supposedly) be 'easily' accommodated on non-Green Belt, brownfield land and accuse planners of not understanding the strategic purpose of Green Belt through assessing it as 'parcels' of land and releasing Green Belt on a piecemeal, incremental basis!

Maybe your experience of Green Belt as a planner is more positive than this- I would be very interested to hear your views on this- but I believe the above, drawing on my research findings, does accurately reflect the existence of high levels of mutual distrust regarding Green Belt.

The Geography of Green Belt Campaigns

Finally, another interesting question is whether opposition to Green Belt development varies in different areas across the country. It is often argued that the abolition of regional planning and the attendant 'localism agenda' has led to less strategic vision in planning, especially among campaigners. For example, a planner I interviewed said:

'Every single one of the responses on our consultation, well most of them, will be on the Green Belt, and every single one of them will use the phrase, 'we don't want our Green Belt to be plundered. I don't mind the next Borough's Green Belt, fine for them, it doesn't matter, but our Green Belt will always remain untouchable'. Well it is not our Green Belt, really ... it is the Metropolitan Green Belt and so it is a regional issue. But that is not how it works in people's minds at the moment'.

However, whilst not disputing the ownership of the Green Belt that campaigners lay claim to, a planning academic Quintin Bradley (2019) has recently argued, based on research on the Greater Manchester Spatial Framework, that most campaigners take a much more strategic and comprehensive view of Green Belt as something that joins them together geographically- I suppose a bit like the M5 or Great Western Mainline! Indeed, he situates this within the historical context access to the countryside movements in the North West. In my research with professional

¹ It is important to stress that this was view expressed by *planners* on campaigners.

campaigners in the West Midlands, I also found a lot of concern for the strategic whole of Green Belt but I wonder how much this is the case with 'everyday' campaigners? I suppose this is an area for further research: do you tend to find campaigners taking a parochial view in how they view 'their' Green Belt or is there wider strategic concern?

Moving Forwards on Green Belt- Debate, Governance and Education

Having problematised the issue as we academics love to do (!), how should planning policy and we as planners best respond? I offer 3 initial recommendations but I would be very interested in your thoughts.

The need for a great Green Belt debate

I fear that the debate on the Green Belt often gets confrontational and caught up on the specifics of sites and the intricacies of policy. However, there needs to be broader, honest public debate on the existence, purpose and function on the Green Belt in the 21st century, particularly the trade-offs involved. As a planning academic said to me:

'So I think what is lacking is a conversation, a well-informed conversation, about the trade-offs of the Green Belt. So, in principle actually, I am very happy for the Green Belt to remain entirely untouched if there is a very public open debate about the price we pay for having a Green Belt ... (we would) need to build very high densities on land available and, if we are happy with all of that, in principle I have got no problem with that, and if everyone has a voice in that, but we have never had that conversation.'

Governance

I would also argue that the problem of governance is also causing lots of problems and mutual distrust, in particular around Duty to Cooperate. A number of retired planners have stressed the importance of historical networks and forums, like the West Midlands Forum and Regional Assembly, to make planning decisions in a transparent and deliberative way. However, the current system creates unpredictability for developers and undermines uncertainty for campaigners regarding the Green Belt. If the Green Belt was managed at the regional level for the long(er) term, it would help foster mutual trust in the planning system. As a private sector planner put it to me:

'Strategic planning is something that the system needs...because inevitably when you are making big controversial decisions, if as members going back to the politics you are all in that district, you are all going to be affected to a greater or lesser extent by that decision and you are going to be lobbied by people who live in the district, it is very difficult to make difficult decisions.'

However, although regional or sub-regional planning is essential, my secondary case study is the West of England and I suppose that its Joint Spatial Plan highlights some of the challenges of sub-regional planning and the fact that it is not 'easy'.

Education

Although it creates all sorts of issues, the fact that people know about and are interested in the Green Belt is probably overall a good thing in terms of engaging people in planning. However, I would argue that, alongside planners trying to explain the system to people 'on the ground' (like many of us already try to do), there perhaps needs to be more planning education. Ideally, this would be included in the National Curriculum for Geography to increase public awareness of planning from a young age. Nevertheless, as a minimum, both local and national politicians should

receive planning training. Another brilliant idea is the 'Planning School' lecture series for the public which is supported by the London Society.

To conclude, I have tried to cover this very controversial topic in a balanced and objective way because I think that it exemplifies some of the issues covered in the Planning with Communities Seminar and I enjoy disseminating my research on Green Belts. Indeed, I have sought not only to outline the problem but also tried to offer some positive solutions and would really appreciate your thoughts, especially potential solutions!

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References

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