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The Metropolitan Green Belt, changing an institution



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ABSTRACT

The Metropolitan Green Belt (MGB) was established in the 1930s and has expanded enormously since. Accompanying policies, including New Towns, have since been abandoned, leaving the MGB as an 'orphaned' policy which constrains land supply. Prioritising the reuse of Brownfield land and densification are now the counter to land constraint. However, it is argued that these are not sufficient to meet the housing crisis in London and the Wider South East. Moreover, academics have pointed out for decades that strong land constraint has led to chronic housing problems, including poor internal space standards and the high cost of housing in the 'mega-region'. However, despite decades of academic discussion concerning the chronic housing problems it contributes to, and the more immediate crisis, the MGB remains a bluntly applied planning tool and carries with it no serious political discussion of reform. Piecemeal change has taken and still takes place, but this has led to a series of battles that have not achieved the core task of signalling the intention to make a sustained and substantial change to policies of land constraint. In order to chart a possible path to reform the starting point is to approach the MGB as an institution, and this includes tracing the significance of how it developed historically, and in particular the confusion over the full extent of its purposes and, thus, the real range of its benefits. A second strand is a consideration of the different reasons why people commit to institutions, and how this differentially impacts the way in which they respond and/or seek to drive institutional change. Using these insights, existing proposals for change are critiqued and then an alternative is proposed that seeks to respond to the 'rational' and 'normative' drivers of support for the MGB.

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1. Introduction

For its supporters, England's¹ Green Belt² policy represents the last stand for a small nation under threat of being concreted over. In the South East of England, one of the most urbanised parts of Europe, it restrains the behemoth of London. For others, Green Belt represents everything that is wrong with the English planning system. It is patrician, big state and woefully and/or willfully ignorant of basic economics. Although several cities in England have Green Belts, the concern here is with the Metropolitan Green Belt (hereafter, MGB³), which is the original Green Belt in England and which surrounds and runs into London. The reason for looking

at the MGB is the present crisis of housing supply in London and the Wider South East (WSE),⁴ but also chronic housing problems; for example, compared across Europe, England's housing provides among the least amount of internal space (Gallent, Madeddu, & Mace, 2010). Given these housing supply challenges, especially focused on London and the WSE, it might seem reasonable to assume that the blunt application of MGB policy would be challenged and a more flexible approach would prevail. For decades it has been the subject of academic criticism (Cheshire, 2009; Hall, 1973; Herington, 1990), and political challenges (Elson, 1986: 234–243), but it has survived.

The MGB raises questions that are familiar internationally, including: planning's longstanding priority of seeking a clear town & country distinction; regionalism versus localism; and of managing the mega-city region. Specifically, it raises the perennial

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¹ Planning is devolved to the constituent parts of the UK. As there are, consequently, differences in Green Belt policy, this article focuses on England.

² Following Government documents, Green Belt is capitalised throughout except where referring directly to a non-capitalised use.

³ Throughout Green Belt is used when referring to the broader national policy and MGB when referencing the Metropolitan Green Belt.

⁴ Named the Greater South East by Peter Hall, the WSE is now in more common usage and refers to areas within the former government office regions of the East, South East and London. A broader definition of the Greater South East also includes Dorset, Northamptonshire and Wiltshire.

challenge of planning across jurisdictions as the MGB touches on 68 different planning authorities (including 18 separate London Boroughs). Reflecting these concerns, it is all too easy for calls to revisit the MGB to be depicted as a 'land grab' by London. However, in practice it is not possible neatly to separate housing demand in London from the WSE. Put simply, people do not stop at internal political borders when looking for housing. While this has long been the case (Jackson, 1973), significant changes in the national economy have led some to ask whether the MGB '[is] fit for purpose in a post-Fordist landscape' (Prior & Raemaekers, 2007: 579). Part of the politics of MGB reform, therefore, is establishing a sense of 'fair play' between London and the WSE. While it is simply not reasonable or accurate to regard London's housing needs and market to be discrete from the WSE, it is understandable that other authorities would call upon London to rethink that part of the MGB within its borders before or alongside changes beyond London.

Overlaying this is the centralised nature of the English planning system and its policy-based character. The purposes of Green Belt are set by government, which has also determined that the extent of Green Belts is now substantially fixed. These and other government signals about the significance to be given to Green Belt are important in the English planning system, which is a 'case-by-case' system that rests heavily on the weighing of material considerations to arrive at a decision. In this system Green Belt has become a 'first amongst equals' policy as it is accorded great weight by government, leaving considerably less flexibility of interpretation than is the case for most other policies. This begs the question why governments for decades have so staunchly defended Green Belts when, particularly in the case of the MGB, there is so evidently great pressure for development close to London with its burgeoning economy and where so many struggle to afford housing.

To explain the durability of the MGB, and in order to seek change the article draws on core concepts from New Institutionalism that, among other things, facilitate a focus on the qualities of the policy itself. The MGB is characterised as a 'policy institution', which, because it is bolstered by a powerful cultural institution – the English countryside – is highly resistant to change. It is argued here that to challenge the power of the MGB as an institution it is necessary to understand that it encompasses both a myth of what it is and what it does – that Green Belts are 'full of nature' and accessible and that they limit all development to the cities and protect all Greenfield sites. Although others have done this before it remains an important starting point. Next it is also necessary to distinguish between the different drivers of those who support the institution. There are both 'rational' and 'normative' reasons for supporting the MGB and, across different interest groups, in combination, these motivators for maintaining the MGB are powerful. Seeking change to Green Belt policy therefore speaks to other settings where policies have generated interest groups and shaped actors' behaviours and responses to change.

A proposal for change is offered that seeks to work with the institutional character of Green Belt. The government is key as it alone can permit substantial changes in the policy. One response to this would be to seek to expose the costs of the policy to government. However, as noted at the outset, this simply produces two entrenched camps; pro change and pro the status quo. Here, an approach is set out that seeks to minimise opposition to change on the part of those who are committed to the policy for rational reasons in order to increase pressure on government to allow greater flexibility for the MGB. It is recognised that those who have normative ('belief') reasons for maintaining the Green Belt are unlikely to shift their position substantially. However, it is argued here that it is not necessary to 'convert' the normative group in order to move government to change. A set of conditions is proposed with the purpose of making change more acceptable to

the 'rational' group and which might soften, at the margins, those with a normative commitment to Green Belt. The overall purpose of the conditions is to maintain support for sustainable development patterns, including the focusing development on cities, while signalling an increase in land supply. To give one example, the MGB has had the unintended consequence of extending commuter patterns as people travel across it to live in developments beyond its outer borders (Barker, 2006). This justifies green field development close to and within London but this should not undermine policies that seek to focus new build on urban Brownfield sites. Therefore, while advocating for release of tracts of MGB land, the conditions seek to ensure an 'even playing field' between this and Brownfield sites in cities.

1.1. *Methods & structure*

This article is primarily a desk-based study of the MGB with the purpose of understanding better the politics of reform, how we might go beyond the polarised, broad-brush character of the debate, which is particularly unhelpful at a time when the region faces a crisis of housing supply and where realistic estimates of provision fall well behind need. The politics of reform includes the question of cross-jurisdictional work. To achieve this the article seeks to address two broad questions:

- 1) the purpose and future form of the MGB (inside and outside Greater London) in the context of contemporary housing provision and urban development planning in the region; and
- 2) how collaboration can effectively be pursued to develop an understanding of the wider planning/housing market concerns, and promote forms of development, including a modernisation of the MGB, to meet the collective needs of the region's residents.

To start, a number of practice-based and academic articles were appraised. As the project commenced (starting December 2015 and ending in November 2016) it joined a series of practice-based reports that sought to focus attention on the need to review Green Belt policy and, in particular, the MGB (London First/Quod, 2015; Manns, 2014; Papworth, 2015; Papworth, 2016; Quod/Shelter, 2016). These provided a useful summation of the key arguments for change, although as noted, primarily by seeking to set out the costs of the MGB to government. Throughout the project regular web searches were employed to scan for news stories on the Green Belt/MGB. In addition membership of 'Planning Resource' provided updates of Green Belt policy, case law etc. The selected academic texts provided historical background to the development of the Green Belt in London (e.g. Elson, 1986). From here snowball referencing was employed alongside online database sampling. A number of databases were interrogated (e.g. GEOBASE, JSTOR, ScienceDirect and Web of Science). Keywords included 'green belt' in combination with spatial references; e.g. 'metropolitan'; 'London'; 'UK' and 'England'. And thematic cross references; 'housing'; 'reform' 'region'; 'Garden City'; 'Green Wedge'. An initial scan of article abstracts and of book introductions/contents allowed for the filtering of material – in particular to focus on the Metropolitan Green Belt rather than Green Belt in general. A total of 43 books; academic papers and practice reports were selected which directly referenced Green Belt in England and which were exclusively or partially concerned with the MGB.

The project was focused towards a practice based report (Mace, Blanc, Gordon, & Scanlon, 2016a) and supporting short film (Mace, Blanc, & Rattee, 2016b), which were informed by a series of one to one meetings and workshops organised around a set of themes and attended by invited practitioners and academics who contributed to each of these – a full list of participants in supplied in the report (

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