

Farming in London's Green Belt

December 2018

Key findings

- Farming in London brings benefits such as healthy local and seasonal food, and connection to nature. It also contributes to the range of environmental services provided by the Green Belt in general, from absorbing air pollution to providing a habitat for wildlife.
- Farming and farmers depend on access to land, but it can be at risk of loss from building over. Green Belt designation is important as the strongest protection.
- Farmers need sufficiently secure and long term tenure of land, especially if they are to invest in sustainability.
- Brexit may offer both challenges and opportunities. One opportunity may be to reform farm support to encourage more sustainable farming and to help smaller farms.

We welcome your thoughts and comments on how London can support sustainable farming in the Green Belt and maximise its environmental benefits.

You can get in touch with us at
EnvironmentCommittee@london.gov.uk



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Why have farming in the Green Belt?

London's built-up area is surrounded by a Green Belt. The Green Belt is protected from being built on by the London Plan and national planning policy. It covers areas around the fringes of Greater London (about 22 per cent of Greater London's area) and a much greater area of the adjoining counties.¹



A green area around the city brings many benefits. It cools and cleans the air, helping to reduce the urban problems of air pollution and the heat island effect.² It provides a habitat for wildlife, and the belt shape links up populations in otherwise separate suburban pockets. It provides exposure to nature (especially where there is access for the public) and a more attractive environment for urban dwellers, which has significant benefits for health and wellbeing. It absorbs rainwater, helping to reduce London's vulnerability to flooding. It promotes the health of the soil and absorbs carbon dioxide from the air.

Farming is important to preserve the Green Belt. By providing a productive use for the land it helps to counterbalance economic pressures for building. There are over 200 farms in Greater London, covering between them about 11,000 hectares—about a third of Greater London's Green Belt area. London's average farm size is 53 hectares—smaller than the English average of 86 hectares. There are arable, horticulture, grazing and mixed farms.³ Agriculture employs around 3,000 people in London.⁴

'Food is a large part of our environmental impact.'

Sutton Community Farm

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Farming near the city also provides a range of other benefits. Food produced near to its consumers has to travel less, reducing transport emissions and requiring less packaging. It enables the supply of fresher food and more fruit and vegetables, promoting a healthier diet. It also provides employment opportunities, and it contributes to the city's food security and resilience to climate change elsewhere in the world.

'Farming delivers so much more than food.'
Sustain

Engagement with local food and farming produces positive effects of its own. City dwellers who are aware of the local origins of some of their food, the environment in which it is grown and how it gets to their plates learn more about the environmental impacts of their choices.⁵ They may also increase their awareness of how healthy their diet is. City dwellers who engage with farms and farmland, as visitors, volunteers or workers can gain benefits to their physical and mental health through exercise and stress reduction.⁶ They can also understand the effects of their own behaviour on the local environment, as well as the general benefits of employment or voluntary work if applicable. The London Curriculum could be an avenue for increasing engagement and awareness of local food growing.⁷

The committee saw first-hand the additional social benefits that Green Belt farming can bring on our site visit to Forty Hall Farm. By partnering

with a local college, the farm is supporting the up-skilling of Londoners in agriculture and supporting London's economy.

'It is absolutely critical that people understand where their food comes from.'

Surrey County Agricultural Society

Challenges and opportunities: land tenure

Farmers need land, and for many years at a time. Newly-trained growers looking to enter the industry cannot always find land to work.⁸ Those who do have land need long-term assurance that they will retain management of the land, through tenure of at least ten years and preferably longer.⁹ Would-be growers battle to access land, sufficient land and appropriate land, even with the support of a growers' network.¹⁰

Long tenure is vital for investment, especially the most environmentally beneficial. Sustainable farming requires time and money to be put into soil health, and into 'nature breaks' in the growing area such as trees and hedges. Farming also requires investment in things like buildings (which can also themselves be designed for environmental benefit). All of these are fixed on the land and are likely to be lost to the business if land tenure ends.¹¹

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Also, repeatedly renewing tenure takes time and money, and may put investment plans on hold. We heard from one farm that had gone through a two-year process to renew a fifteen-year lease.¹²

'Security of tenure is key to how you manage the land and how you can develop as a business.'

Sutton Community Farm

Farms and farmers in Greater London are diverse. Although some farms cover hundreds of hectares, others hold less than five and the average is smaller than in other areas of the country.¹³ Some are entirely commercial; some are community enterprises run in whole or in part by volunteers.¹⁴

The private land market can be difficult for small farmers and especially start-ups. The price of land can be high, especially if there is a perception that the land may have potential for development. It can also be challenging for small operators to negotiate the technicalities of land tenure and business structure. There may be opportunities with forms of partnership such as contract farming, in which the landowner and the owner of the farm equipment share profits.¹⁵

Local authority land may provide the best opportunities, and local authorities should bear in mind the community and environmental

benefits of facilitating farming on their land. Forty Hall Farm, which we visited for our investigation, provides a good example. Capel Manor College has the land on a 99-year lease from Enfield Council, and the farm it runs there grows food, trains young people, provides employment, offers volunteering opportunities, hosts community events, and sustainably and organically manages 170 acres of Green Belt adjacent to the homes and streets of north London.¹⁶

Would-be farmers sometimes find it hard to know what land is or may be available—where a database has been provided it has been found to be useful.¹⁷

Plots with on-site housing can be the best for farming, because of the hours of work and need to deal with issues at any time.¹⁸

Recommendation: The Mayor should explore, with London Councils, outer London local authorities or other collaborators, the potential to operate an accessible database of agricultural land ownership and availability. This work could also promote model leases or other tools to help farmers get and retain land tenure without excessive costs.



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Challenges and opportunities: development pressure

Good farm land is at risk of permanent loss from building over.

Land varies in suitability for farming. There is a classification of land on a six-point scale from Excellent to Very Poor. The top three grades have some protection under national planning rules, but there is no specific provision in the London Plan. Good farm land, once built over, is unlikely to return to agricultural use.

'We are losing parts of our Green Belt that are viable agricultural land to development.'

Forty Hall Farm

Protection is required because London has a great demand for housing and other development. Even if not developed immediately, land purchased with a view to potential future development ('land-banked') may be lost to farming, or let out only on short or insecure tenancies.¹⁹

Green Belt farm sites do have strong protection provided by Green Belt designation—as long as this designation remains. Following review by the local authority and approval by the Secretary of State, land can be de-designated and removed from Green Belt protection. A perception

that a site would be a candidate for de-designation may fuel land banking and/or raise the price or rental of the land.²⁰

Recommendation: The Mayor should lobby government to issue guidance that a high rating for agricultural quality should be an additional factor against de-designating Green Belt sites.

Recommendation: In the London Plan, the Green Belt and Food Growing policies should include a requirement for boroughs to give added weight in local development plans to food growing as one of the most productive activities in the Green Belt.



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Challenges and opportunities: marketing produce

As farms are important for the maintenance and quality of green space around the city, so the challenges and opportunities of farm viability are critical. Some of these challenges and opportunities are common to many farms across the UK. Others are related to the specific situation of the urban fringe, or to the generally smaller size of Green Belt farms.

Farms face a competitive market for food and other products.

Consumers seek to pay less for their food, and the power of giant retailers and wholesalers enables them to pass much of this cost pressure through to the farm gate. Small farmers may find it particularly difficult to participate in this large-scale supply chain.

Very low prices tend to encourage short-termism in farming and discourage investment in future productivity or environmental sustainability. Price volatility is also an issue, again especially for smaller growers.

Local routes to market provide an opportunity for local growers. Such local routes include farm shops, farmers' markets, independent shops, local co-ops, schools, local authorities and other public bodies. With fewer steps in the chain between farm and final consumer, more of the price can go to the farm. Some customers will pay a premium for local (and sustainable) food, and local outlets offer an opportunity to assure customers of local origins and so sell at a higher price.

On the other hand, some people have difficulty affording, or even finding, fresh, healthy food. Food prices in London tend to be higher than elsewhere and, despite London being one of the wealthiest cities in the world, many Londoners live in 'food deserts'—areas without access to affordable and healthy fresh food.²¹ There may be scope for partnerships between Green Belt farms and community organisations or food banks to bring affordable healthy food where it is needed.

People want to buy most of their food at convenient outlets. Sales at destination or occasional outlets, such as farm shops and farmers' markets, are only likely to represent a minority of the food trade. There is therefore a need to communicate local origins in more mainstream retail. Sellers' co-operatives and other collaborations may offer opportunities to develop local brands. Restaurants and the catering trade may offer another opportunity to promote a regional food identity. Local authorities may also be able to support local food with their own recognised local identities.

Local authorities and other public bodies such as schools may also be in a position to support local growers by using local produce in their catering. This is also an opportunity to support other goals such as healthy eating, and awareness of where food is from.

Recommendation: The Mayor should explore the potential to support a 'grown in London' food brand to enable London consumers to recognise local food. The Mayor should also seek to increase the proportion of London-grown food served in GLA Group facilities.

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Challenges and opportunities: exiting the EU

Brexit may bring both challenges and opportunities for farmers. New trading arrangements after Brexit could be a challenge for London's farmers. Currently London's farmers face barrier and tariff-free access to the EU single market and over half of British exported food goes to Europe.²² British produce could become less competitive if farmers face new tariffs to export produce to Europe. Additionally, as the committee noted in our response to the Mayor's food strategy, any restrictions on the movement of labour included in a Brexit deal, or no-deal, could lead to difficulty for farmers meeting seasonal needs for fruit and vegetable harvesting.²³ There may be related opportunities, such as to negotiate reduced tariffs or easier movement of labour with non-EU countries, but these could come later than the initial exit from the EU.²⁴

There will be an opportunity to reform agricultural support payments. Currently, under the EU Common Agricultural Policy, these are largely based on farm acreage. Larger farmers get more subsidy, and very small operators may not find it worth applying.²⁵ As part of the EU exit process, the Government has published an Agriculture Bill, which seeks to shift payments to promote public goods, including environmental protection. This is broadly welcome, but some commentators have identified gaps.²⁶ The legislative process now offers an opportunity to engage with the detail of the Bill and promote improvements.

Recommendation: The Government should make, and the Mayor should seek, improvements to the Agriculture Bill and measures brought forward under it. These could include measures to increase the focus on outcomes that work for London and Londoners, such as environmental goods and sustainable farming methods, the production of healthy food, and a sustainable food economy. Specifically, the Bill should include a duty, rather than just a power, for the Secretary of State to promote the benefits in Clause 1 of the Bill (such as protecting the environment and public access to the countryside) and also a duty to promote public health, and a duty to deliver a Fair Dealing code of practice under Clause 25.



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Other challenges and opportunities

There are many other challenges and some opportunities for London's Green Belt farmers. Some came through in our investigation.

London's farms need a skilled workforce. There is a thriving farm and environmental sector in London's further education, and indeed more people wishing to get into farming than there are farms for.²⁷ But (in addition to the labour implications of EU exit outlined above) there are also shortages of certain skills and of the opportunities to acquire them. Tractors and other mobile machinery was one area mentioned, as London farms often lack large open fields to learn in.²⁸ Produce picking is a skill with seasonal demand that can rely on non-London workers.

London's climate is changing. Projections indicate that London can expect in future decades hotter, probably drier, summers and milder, probably wetter, winters. This will pose challenges for some traditional crops, but may open up opportunities to supply produce normally associated with warmer climates. It may also require adjustments to farming methods, for example to conserve water in hot and dry periods and yet also to protect the soil from heavy rain.

As the impacts of climate change are felt by the city, environmental services provided by London's farm land, such as storm water absorption and cooling the air, will become ever more important.

Farmers will need to pay for water. Farmers are to become subject to commercial charges for water supply, which will add to their costs. It will also provide an incentive to manage water use more carefully, and capture rainwater for the farm. This may have environmental benefits if runoff of storm water and water carrying farming effluent is reduced.

If farms need to get through hotter, drier summers, their demand for piped water or water from the environment may become increasingly significant, and water companies will need to take account of this in their long-term water resource planning.

Recommendation: When reviewing water companies' water resources management plans, the Mayor should examine how well they address the expected water needs of farms.

Farms buy their inputs in a competitive market too. Producers may benefit from working together to increase their buying power, but small farmers are currently less likely to do so.²⁹ Farming groups, local authorities and others looking support the local farming economy could encourage buying co-operatives or other forms of collaboration.



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Sustainable forms of farming

There are many ways in which the detail of farming methods can improve or damage its environmental benefits.

Reducing chemical use tends to improve biodiversity, soil health and water quality. Insecticides and herbicides for pest control can kill off harmless and manageable species and severely reduce the biodiversity of farmland. Excess use of chemical fertiliser also tends to increase immediate yields at the expense of the underlying fertility of the soil, and again of biodiversity. Farming chemicals in water run-off from the land can deplete oxygen levels and leave toxic residues in nearby watercourses, harming wildlife there. Organic farming has a role to play, but many other farms could make smarter use of chemicals plus alternative pest controls and soil improvers to keep costs down, improve yields long-term, and increase their environmental benefit.

'Most small growers do not get subsidies... they do not qualify because of the size of their land... we get a subsidy through Natural England to maintain our fields and hedgerows to a high level... the subsidies make it viable for us to hand-pull weeds and stay organic.'

Forty Hall Farm

Green infrastructure can benefit farms and the environment. As well as crops for harvest, yards, buildings and so on, hedges, trees, verges, ditches and other green infrastructure can be important elements. By providing habitat for plants and wildlife, they increase biodiversity and support natural pest control. By providing shade and wind breaks they shelter tender crops and reduce water demand. And by absorbing air pollution and improving the appearance of the urban fringe, they improve the environment for city dwellers as well as the immediate locals.

Similar benefits can come from a smart choice of a range of crops. Rotating crops between different plots of land can improve soil fertility and help control pests.

Sustainable energy may be an important opportunity for farm diversification. Farms generate significant quantities of organic waste, which can feed anaerobic digesters for biogas. Farms may be able to supply their waste to generators, or could set up their own generation and take in waste from elsewhere (potentially contributing to London's waste management). Farms may also have roof space or ground that can be given to solar panels; solar panel costs continue to come down and a sizeable installation may be profitable, reducing the farm's electricity bill and generating for sale to the grid.

Facilitating access to farm land greatly increases its social and environmental value. Londoners need access to nature and being able to walk in farming land is a good way to achieve this. Permanent open

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access or rights of way across fields may in some cases conflict with farming activities, but there are other ways to promote access. Around half of farm land in the London Green Belt is covered by access agreements with Natural England.

Having a sufficiently long-term and secure tenure on land is a key factor in enabling and incentivising farmers to pursue many of these sustainable practices. Sustainable farming practices show their benefits most in the longer term.



'If you are restoring a hedgerow, it is going to take you at least ten years to do that well. These are not things that you can do in the landscape quickly.'

Forty Hall Farm

Recommendation: In his food policy, London Plan and other work, the Mayor should look for opportunities, such as those outlined in this report, to support and promote farming methods that maximise environmental and social benefits and support his other policy goals.

For example, the GLA could support farms wishing to diversify into energy, as it does with homes, businesses and community buildings. It could help farmers understand renewable energy technologies and ways into energy markets. It could also cover farms in its mapping of energy demand and supply opportunities, and potentially approach farmers to make them aware of these.

Where farms may be eligible for grants or support for biodiversity-friendly land management, the GLA could support these applications by providing information on the biodiversity importance, or potential, of pieces of Green Belt land.

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The Environment Committee examines all aspects of the capital's environment by reviewing the Mayor's strategies on air quality, water, waste, climate change and energy.

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Endnotes

¹ *The London (Metropolitan) Green Belt*, CPRE and Natural England fact sheet, 2010. Available online at <https://www.cpre.org.uk/resources/housing-and-planning/green-belts/item/download/467> accessed 21 September 2018

² The urban heat island is an effect caused by several factors. Cities have a high density of heat sources such as domestic heating, motor transport and electrical and industrial equipment. The countryside cools itself by evaporation from vegetation, soil and water, whereas urban areas do so much less. Built and paved urban surfaces absorb and later release solar heat, making the heat island effect greatest on summer nights. See this committee's 2015 report *Come Rain or Shine*, pages 11-17.

<https://www.london.gov.uk/about-us/about-us/london-assembly/london-assembly-publications/come-rain-or-shine>

³ EU Farm Structure Survey, English County Breakdowns 2016. Available online at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/636552/structure_june_eng_county_09aug17.xls accessed 27 September 2018

⁴ Seasonally adjusted figure for June 2018, for sector A: Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing. Source: nomis official labour market statistics, from the Office for National Statistics. Available online at <https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/reports/lmp/por/2013265927/report.aspx> accessed 12 October 2018.

⁵ Mayor's Food Strategy 2006, pages 8, 38, 87-9. Available online at <https://www.london.gov.uk/what-we-do/business-and-economy/food/mayors-food-strategy> accessed 9 November 2018

⁶ Sutton Community Farm at the Forty Hall round table p4-5

⁷ For the London Curriculum, see <https://www.london.gov.uk/what-we-do/education-and-youth/london-curriculum> accessed 27 September 2018

⁸ OrganicLea, reported at the Forty Hall round table, 12 July 2018

⁹ Community Food Growers Network and Sutton Community Farm at Forty Hall round table, 12 July 2018

¹⁰ Community Food Growers Network at Forty Hall round table 12 July 2018

¹¹ Sutton Community Farm at Forty Hall round table 12 July 2018

¹² Sutton Community Farm at Forty Hall round table 12 July 2018

¹³ EU Farm Structure Survey, English County Breakdowns 2016. Available online at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/636552/structure_june_eng_county_09aug17.xls accessed 27 September 2018

¹⁴ Sutton Community Farm, Community Food Growing Network and Forty Hall Farm at the Forty Hall round table 12 July 2018

¹⁵ Sutton Community Farm and Agricultural Association, at the Forty Hall round table, 12 July 2018

¹⁶ Forty Hall Farm at Forty Hall Farm round table, 12 July 2018

¹⁷ OrganicLea, reported at the Forty Hall round table, 12 July 2018; see also Forty Hall Farm view on ownership database at the same meeting

¹⁸ Sustain and Forty Hall Farm at Forty Hall Farm round table 12 July 2018

¹⁹ Forty Hall Farm round table, 12 July 2018

²⁰ Forty Hall Farm and Sutton Community Farm, at the Forty Hall round table, 12 July 2018

²¹ Social Market Foundation, What are the barriers to eating healthily in the UK?, October 2018. Available online at: <http://www.smf.co.uk/publications/barriers-eating-healthily-uk/> accessed 15 November 2018

²² <https://brodies.com/news/brexit-what-happens-next/brexit-the-key-agricultural-issues>

²³ https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/food_strategy_response_-_final.pdf

²⁴ Note that the GLA Conservatives and UKIP do not consider that Brexit poses a risk to product markets or to the supply of skills and labour for London's farmers

²⁵ Lea Valley Growers' Association at Forty Hall Farm round table 12 July 2018

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²⁶ For example:

Sustain comments on Agriculture Bill details, 12 September 2018. Available online at https://www.sustainweb.org/news/sep18_agriculturebill_first_reactions/ accessed 24 September 2018

'Massive error': farmers say post-Brexit funding plan risks food scares, The Guardian, 12 September 2018. Available online at

<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/sep/12/massive-error-farmers-say-post-brexit-funding-plan-risks-food-scares> accessed 24 September 2018

²⁷ OrganicLea, reported at the Forty Hall round table, 12 July 2018

²⁸ Forty Hall Farm, during farm visit, 12 July 2018

²⁹ Written contribution from London Green Belt Council