

Baroness Barbara Young

Chair, Woodland Trust and former CEO, Environment Agency

Thank you, Shirley [Rodrigues]. I hope this afternoon is going to focus on some solutions. We have heard quite a lot today about our options for building within London and for increasing density. I think this afternoon focuses more on what is it we can do with the green belt that will enhance its value and provide better value for the people of London.

I always think that if the green belt was a member of your family you would say, "The boy done good." It really has fulfilled the primary objective on which it was based, which was a simple proposition of urban containment. Urban containment is a good thing for those of you who have ever driven anywhere in the United States (US), urban development one hamburger joint deep for 500 miles is really quite dispiriting and on a lesser and closer basis we have already heard about Ireland where, of course, there is only one green belt and where sporadic development all over the place means that it is in danger of becoming a very suburbanised country.

There has been some focus on improving the amenity value of green belt, but as Shirley [Rodrigues] has already said, a lot of the green belt, and increasingly so as you move out of the GLA area into the wider green belt for London, is owned by a multitude of owners, some by local authorities but mostly individual private owners and a lot of farmers. Therefore, there is a lot of scope for taking green belt on to be a much greater contributor to the wellbeing, the health, the environmental soundness and the sense of place of London and Londoners for the future.

I want to really focus on some of the things that the green could deliver in a new vision for green belt for the 21st and, indeed, for the 22nd century. That would mean a much more fundamental review of what green belt is for. Because though in the housing white paper there is talk about localised reviews of green belt, that tends to mean a bit of straightening up the kinks on the border and a few totemic inappropriate sometimes development. I am always slightly nervous when Government lays out a set of criteria for reviews like that because that seems to imply that they think that that is going to happen more frequently, therefore, it needs some systematisation rather than being something that should only be exceptional.

Let us look at some of the opportunities, and more than opportunities, that the green belt for London provides for the future because I do not think it is a just nice option, I think it is an absolutely necessary condition for a healthy London that we do use this almost fortuitous benefit that we have of a green belt to really counteract some of the massive threats that we see coming at London and other cities for the future. Clearly, one of the most fundamental ones is climate change, but the growth in population is absolutely that and the short-term dash for housing where we could so easily take the wrong turning rather than really capitalising on what opportunity and, indeed, need there is within the green belt for London. We really want a vision of a green belt that is multifunctional for the future and not just this one single policy of urban containment.

Green belt is pretty good for a whole load of things. If we think about air quality issues we know that air pollution, particularly germane here in London, it reduces life expectancy, increases the risk of cardiovascular and respiratory diseases. I make no excuses for being a complete exponent of plant more trees - we are what you see on the tin, the Woodland Trust. Trees have a huge benefit in removing pollutants like ozone and nitrogen dioxide and particulates in the air, therefore, I think we need to think in a strategic way about what is the tree cover that is needed in order to help counteract air quality issues both within the capital and in the green belt.

Secondly, biodiversity benefits. Now, biodiversity is not just cuddly squirrels, it is about ecosystem resilience and we are part of the ecosystem. If the ecosystem is bugged - technical term - that will not be good for human health, life and habitations. Now, in the broader sense of the London green belt, about 60% is under agriculture. My most favourite study is one that was done on the comparative biodiversity of Finsbury Park, an inner London park, and a similar piece of London green belt agricultural land and there are four times more species in Finsbury Park than there are in the average bit of agricultural land in the London green belt. I rest my case. Agriculture in the green belt is not delivering very much other than food production and, therefore, we need that agricultural land to work harder for all of these other functions that we need the green belt to deliver. That is developing mixed habitats, including more woodland, getting more environmentally friendly agriculture and really gripping that opportunity that Brexit - one of the few opportunities, may I say, of Brexit - that the collapse of the Common Agricultural Policy's (CAP) disastrous policy will represent and a chance to really shape an agriculture policy of our own of multifunctional outcomes.

Third issue is carbon sequestration. If you were to think about inventing some really great gizmo for reducing carbon in the atmosphere on a semi-permanent basis, you know what it is? It is a tree. Therefore, we need new economic instruments to encourage the use of green belt and particularly tree planting to encourage and meet the commitment to carbon offset and to link that with the concept of zero carbon construction and zero carbon homes.

The heat effect. Urban heat island effects are well known. Buildings, concretes and other hard surfaces absorb heat during the day and pump it out at night, and there can be as much as 10° centigrade between city centres and surrounding areas. That has an impact on health. High temperatures increase ground-level ozone, temperatures exacerbate diseases and chronic lung conditions and higher temperatures can have an impact on heart disease and respiratory failure. That is particularly so among the young, the chronically ill and folk like me, the elderly.

Now, having us old dears peg out when the heat rises might well be a very good policy for reducing the cost of social care for the future, but it is a pretty drastic one, therefore, I am not advocating it, you will be glad to hear. Instead, what we need is to really not just foster urban green space but to look at the effects on a landscape scale of much greater and more ecologically dynamic green belt and to really assess what the contribution of the green belt can be to creating a different climatic future for London. Because I believe on a sufficiently large scale there are real potentials for that.

Flood risk management. Water can be a good thing and a bad thing. I used to be the Chief Executive of the Environment Agency. Every raindrop had our logo on it. Surface-water flooding, of course, represents the most significant flooding and risk to UK households. As much as two-thirds of all flooding comes from surface water runoff and it has a huge impact on people, on their sense of wellbeing, on their perception of risk, on property and the economy. We are going to see a lot more of that in the future as climate change really drives much more storminess and if we have more hard surfaces and we lose trees and green space that makes it worse. Hard defences. The Environment Agency building bloody great walls will not be enough. We need really a much more natural approach to flood risk management. That is, again, where trees are particularly valuable. Increasing the volume of water that infiltrates into the soil, slowing down the speed at which rainwater reaches drains and rivers. There is a study being done that shows that tree belts can help hold back water at a rate of 60 times higher than ordinary adjoining farmland, therefore, trees are really a pretty crucial part of that.

Therefore, creating some strategically-placed woodland on the basis of good research evidence could help alleviate major floods downstream in London and reduce pressure on drainage systems and surface water flooding. Local flood authorities need to really join with the non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the Environment Agency in looking at natural solutions across the boundaries of local authorities, including using the published flood opportunity maps for woodland creation to manage flood risk.

Water quality, climate change and its increased storminess and increased winter rainfall means that we can have major water quality issues with heavy downpours as urban crud - to put not a too finer point on it - enters lakes and rivers. When you can slow down that infiltration soil, plants and microbes can filter and break down many of the common pollutants. Indeed, with water quantity we need to also take catchment-based approaches in which the green belt will play a key part working with the water companies to make sure that we have sustainable water management. All of that has an impact on health and wellbeing.

I used to be the Chief Executive of Diabetes UK. Diabetes now accounts for 10% of the National Health Service (NHS) budget and yet simple statistics say if you lose a tenth of your body weight and walk 20 minutes every day you can reduce your risk of diabetes by three-quarters. Therefore, it is going to be really important in terms of the health of the people of London and of the green belt populations more widely that we really use the opportunity that green belt provides for improving physical and, indeed, mental health for the future. There is a statistic that has come out of a study recently that says if you are walking in a green environment for 13-and-a-half minutes every day you halve your risk of depression. 13-and-a-half minutes is not too much to ask, but it does mean it has got to be close and accessible, therefore, let us see more access to the wider green belt round London so that we can reduce obesity, heart disease, cancer, stress, attention deficit disorder (ADD), aggression and criminal activities. What is there not to love about the green belt and trees?

People love trees. That is the one thing that I have been taken with since I joined the Woodland Trust a year ago. People love trees and people love to engage with trees. If we publicise a tree-planting day we get more people than we can deal with coming forward to deal

with it. Therefore, if we really want to get engagement for a new vision of the green belt, trees can help engage local populations with what it is about, with really experiencing it and with understanding some of the concepts that they are personally helping to create by digging holes and stuffing trees in them.

However, there are some issues. There are many, many landowners. We need to work at ways in which they, led by groups of local authorities, can really embrace and develop this vision. We need incentives for private owners to do the right thing rather than the wrong thing, and that is particularly true of farmers. We need to make sure that the planning system is not just a reactive process but is a really proactive process in devising a strategy for a new vision, a new economic order of the green belt and we do need community involvement and people engagement. I think also, on the basis of what Dieter Helm said this morning, we need new economic instruments. We need to find a way of creating the value chain that the natural capital represents to bring it into the creation of enhanced capital and the sorts of issues that Dieter [Helm] was talking about.

Therefore, one last plug for Woodland before I stop. First of all, we have a captive audience of planners and leaders of local authorities and chairmen of planning committees. I cannot leave you without saying please do not touch ancient woodland. They are the cathedrals of our natural world. Chopping down or building on an ancient woodland is the equivalent of saying, "It won't matter if York Minster loses its close. We need it for housing." Secondly, let us have a New Mayor's Wood. Not a New Mayor's Wood but a new wood for the Mayor perhaps we should call it. Woods do not need to be continuous tree cover but a new push to really enhance the level of tree cover within the Mayor's area based on the creation of a notional woodland would be a very charismatic thing in the way that the national forest has been very charismatic and economically beneficial to the Midlands. Let us use the Mayor's commitment under the climate change adaptation strategy to make sure that the tree canopy cover increases within the capital. Trees, at the end of the day, are cheaper to run than amenity grassland. They look after themselves pretty well. Last, but not least, let us get the benefit that the Natural Capital Committee outlined when they said that 250,000 hectares of new woodland planted close to towns can generate net societal benefits in excess of £500 million per annum. This is big money.

Therefore, a new vision for the green belt, a healthy whack of trees within it, lots of people engagement and local authority leadership. It makes sense. Thank you.