

**Dame Fiona Reynolds**

*Former Director General, National Trust*

‘Why the green belt is central to our future’

Thank you, Nicky [Gavron AM, Deputy Chair of the Planning Committee]. Nicky is a tour de force, as you all know and has enticed all of you and all of us here today for, what I know, is an incredibly timely and important moment for green belt.

At one level we had the confirmation last week of the housing white paper that the Government’s commitment to protecting the green belt is very clear and secure, joining, as we have heard, the Mayor of London among those many people who champion the green belt and want to protect it. However, all of us here know that that does not mean the debate is over because many people are still arguing about the green belt and its future, maybe some even here today who are worried about the nation’s need for housing, where on earth and how on earth we are going to meet it, and the green belt is, therefore, still very much in that debate.

What I want to say today, and just a very few brief remarks at the beginning, is just to remind us why green belts were so central to our planning past and why, I believe, they are still absolutely central to our future. They are part of a much bigger story than simply a planning tool about containing development and I think should be treasured, should be valued even more today than when they were first created. I suppose the real point is they are not just a planning tool.

Green belts came from deeply philanthropic motives about the need for people to have access to green space and fresh air and, in fact, going right back to Octavia Hill [English social reformer whose main concern was the welfare of the inhabitants of cities], one of my great heroines, she was the first to coin the phrase in 1875 when she was trying to save Swiss Cottage Fields. That was a philanthropic case and by the time that green belts were introduced from the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s onwards, very much around people’s need for green space for farmland close to cities as well as the need, of course, to contain and manage the process of development.

Green belts, therefore, are a public good and they were one of many public goods introduced in that post-war period designed to sit within a framework of policies specifically focused on securing a better society and a better quality of life for people as well as material change. I do not think anyone could doubt that they delivered for us if you look particularly at the sprawl of the east and west coast of America, you can see the benefit that our green belt has delivered for us.

I think today the issue is that some of those positive philanthropic purposes risk being lost in this prevalingly negative narrative about the green belt. Too often a green belt is quoted as being sometimes the barrier to society getting the houses we need. I am going to remind you very briefly of some of the evidence as to why they are not that barrier, there is a clear sense of housing land supply and of housing availability still. First of all, there are an estimated 400,000

houses nationally for which planning permission has been granted but building not started. In London that figure is 130,000 with a further 130,000 in the planning pipeline. That is about eight years' supply. At national level there is estimated to be about 600,000 empty homes, of which 200,000 are long-term vacant and around 21,000 recently identified in London not being utilised. Plus, there is a steady and indeed constant supply of brownfield land and we know that the green belt may not be the right location for new development, simply adding to problems of long-distance commuting and unsustainable development.

Therefore, I think it is time to remind us about what those arguments are, indeed, what our future priorities need to be. At heart I would like to suggest that I think probably we all agree that creating sustainable cities is absolutely critical for the future of our society. After all, cities are where the majority of us live and work and can access the services we need, if done well in a sustainable way. London, of course, is a hugely successful, vibrant city but, of course, we all know that there are problems of poverty, of inequality, where quality of life is diminished or the environment is impoverished. Therefore, there is a real challenge to create sustainable cities and where better to start than London.

I would like to suggest four ways in which the green belt can help us with that challenge of sustainable London and why the Metropolitan Green Belt should be treasured as part of that mission. First of all, it is very clear from all the work that is done about sustainable cities is that they need edges and, of course, the green belt is the simplest, clearest and most effective way of creating those edges. Without an edge we simply quickly create sprawl, which is one of the most unsustainable patterns of land use.

Second, green spaces around cities, the green belt, as well as green spaces within cities, offer vital natural services, clean air, access to nature, beauty, woods, forest, farms, footpaths, cycle ways. As a society we appreciate those things even more as time goes on and one of the recent debates about the proposed London national park city I think shows how those debates are becoming more important to society and not less.

Third, that the arguments about if you restrict growth at the edge of the cities then development just bounces beyond. I would argue that it is not that. Development can bounce back in and the edge of the city is a way of positively encouraging more investment in sustainable solutions within the city edge and, particularly, of course, in that context, the use of brownfield land.

Fourth, within contained cities we have the best chance of delivering better quality of life for everyone, planning in an integrated way for their needs both material, natural, spiritual and, indeed, non-calculable.

Therefore, those four things are the things which I hope will help frame the debate and who better to take up that challenge than Dieter Helm [Professor of Energy Policy, University of Oxford; and Chair, Natural Capital Committee] who is going, I am sure, to give us a new language and a new way of looking at the green belt to help us appreciate its value to

contemporary society even more. Therefore, for Octavia Hill's green lungs read Dieter Helm's natural capital.

Moreover, I hope it is clear that, from my perspective at least, the issue before us is not whether we keep or sacrifice the green belt, but whether we can use it better to help us create a more sustainable future. The green belt could be front and centre stage in our search for more sustainable solutions. The policy of choice for every far-sighted city and a policy for which our successors will be grateful. Thank you very much.