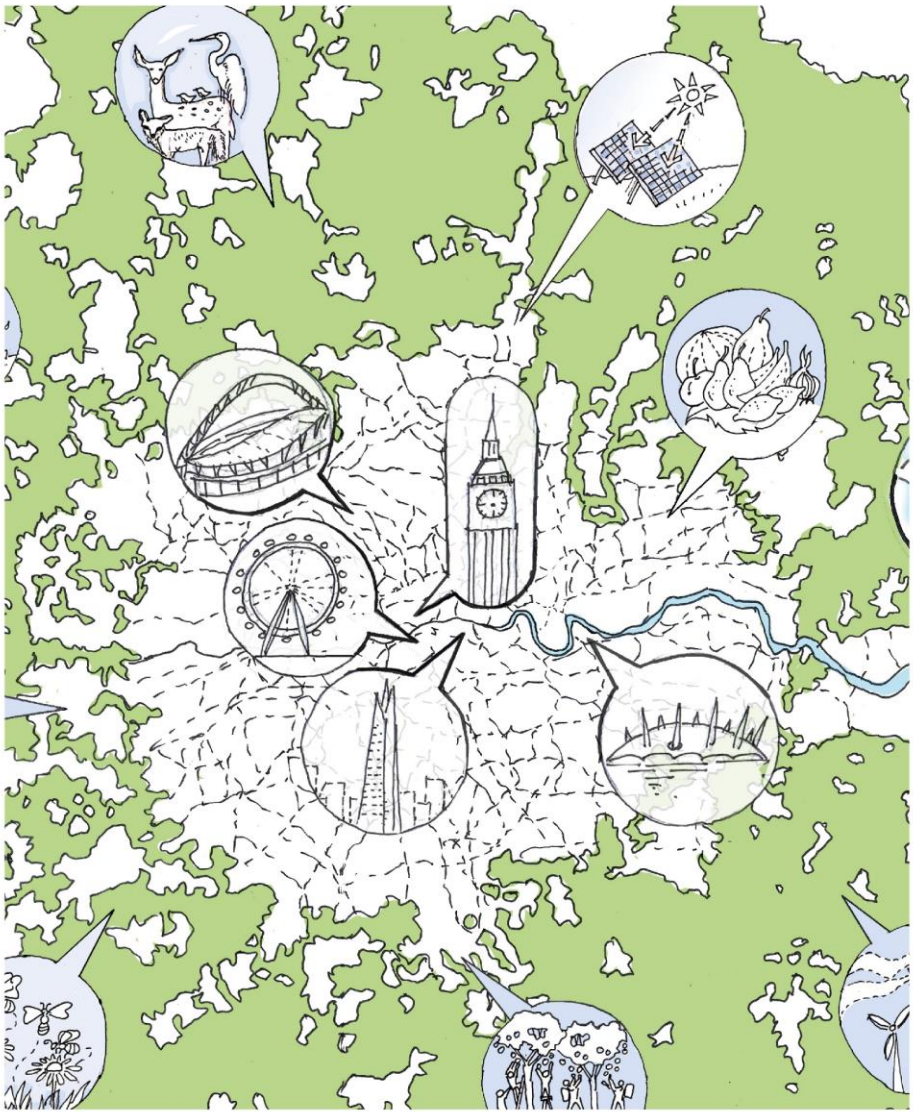
GOLD PLATE OUR GREEN BELT



A briefing by Caroline Russell AM
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INTRODUCTION

The Green Belt is close to many Londoners' hearts. It is our 'city limits'. The physical manifestation of our determination to prevent urban sprawl. And it works hard for us, despite often being taken for granted or neglected.

Even if we don't live near to it or visit it often, we understand why it's important and we want to defend our cherished asset.

Our Green Belt serves many purposes. It forms a protective barrier around London: a home for wildlife, climate change mitigation, leisure and relaxation for stressed Londoners, and even some of our food. But it could do a lot more.

There is huge untapped potential in our Green Belt, especially in the areas which are neglected, underused or unloved.

As London grows the role of the Green Belt is more important than ever and the need to safeguard and enhance it is increasingly urgent.

One of the recommendations from the recent London Plan process was that the Mayor should lead a strategic and comprehensive review of London's Green Belt because of the pressure

development is putting on land use.[1] I believe there should be no erosion of Green Belt protections, because of its huge value and multiple benefits.

Facts and figures – understanding the scale of the Green Belt

- The Green Belt covers some 514,000 hectares (for reference one hectare is approximately the size of Trafalgar Square). London's Green Belt makes up 22 per cent of London's land area.
- It forms part of 68 different districts or boroughs.
- The Green Belt was established as a concept by the Green Belt Act of 1938.
- Its delineation came in the post-war period with the Town and Country Planning Act in 1947 (alongside a huge programme of house-building, acknowledging that access to clean air and nature was of equal importance to human health as good housing).

This report illustrates what the Green Belt could be, how it could help Londoners and our local environment. Our Green Belt is useful, beautiful and deserving of our protection.

Caroline Russell AM
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PUBLIC ACCESS

Many areas of London's Green Belt are publicly accessible country parks or playing fields. Thousands of Londoners use these spaces every day for walking, cycling, sports, relaxation and many other activities. There is great benefit simply from being able to connect with nature. The opportunity to enjoy a natural landscape and rural or semi-rural views within reach of the urban centres of London is very important.

In whatever way people enjoy using the Green Belt, the ability to access it easily is crucial. There are almost 10,000 km of public rights of way in London's Green Belt[2]. However, many of these are fragmented and don't allow the space to be used as well as it might be, either for leisure, or for transport. Although, a running club in Kingston has set up an informal 354 km 'Green Belt Way' for an annual relay race.[3]

Joining up existing footpaths, cycleways and bridle paths in addition to creating new ones, into a 'Green Belt Network' would have multiple benefits for Londoners. Encouraging more people to use the Green Belt on these routes would not only provide Londoners with more opportunities for outdoor recreation and healthy active travel, but also create a greater sense of ownership of these areas by local residents. This in turn would make the future of the Green Belt more secure.

Local planning authorities should plan positively to boost the Green Belt's beneficial use by:

- looking for opportunities to provide access;
- providing opportunities for outdoor sport and recreation;
- retaining and improving landscapes, visual amenity and biodiversity; or
- repairing damaged and derelict land.

WHAT'S NEEDED?
A better network of new and existing paths across and through the Green Belt to enable people to enjoy longer walks and cycle rides, both for leisure and for active travel. This 'Green Belt Network' should be fully accessible by public transport and promoted to those sectors of London's communities currently not enjoying its benefits.

ECOLOGY, BIODIVERSITY AND BIO-ABUNDANCE

London's Green Belt plays a vital role in sustaining a wide range of flora and fauna and has the potential to do much more.

In the current climate emergency, the Green Belt offers an opportunity to help plants and wildlife develop and grow, both in terms of diversity and abundance, by creating and enhancing ecologically rich habitats.

According to the London Wildlife Trust, 44 per cent of the Green Belt is classified as Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation.[4]

Connecting these sites would enable the creation of ecological networks. These are essential to allow wildlife to flourish across larger areas, either by means of green corridors, green bridges or 'green stepping stones'. Mile End Green Bridge[5] is a prime example of infrastructure being utilised to connect both people and wildlife divided by a major trunk road.

Facts on biodiversity

- 15 per cent of UK species are under threat of extinction
- 133 species (2 per cent of total species) have become extinct since 1970)
- 41 per cent of species have fallen in abundance since 1970
- UK mammals have fallen in numbers by 26 per cent since 1970
- The most rapid decline in numbers has been in the last 10 years[6]

Even those sites within the Green Belt that might be considered brownfield land, such as

defunct petrol stations and quarries that developers see as ripe for building on, can still support an extremely rich diversity of wildflowers, insects and animals.

In addition to the government's inspectors call for a review of the Green Belt[1], the London Chamber of Commerce and Industry (LCCI) is lobbying Central Government, the Mayor of London and Assembly Members to carry out a full and thorough review of the Green Belt[7].

These demands must be resisted as the lack of awareness of the ecological value of brownfield land – and a corresponding absence of environmental information – causes its biodiversity to be overlooked, leading to sites of significant wildlife value being lost. Species such as protected bumblebees and butterflies are especially affected[8].

WHAT'S NEEDED?

The creation of wildlife 'corridors' to enable ecologically valuable sites to be connected, thereby establishing a network of areas that encourage flora and fauna to flourish.

Turn bus shelters into bee-friendly spaces with the addition of green roofs and/or sides, providing benefits for managing heat, air pollution and drainage[9].

The Mayor, Transport for London and Highways England should build green bridges[10] over motorways and major roads both within the Green Belt and to join it with other wildlife areas. The green bridge crossing the A21 at Scotney Castle in High Weald Area of Natural Beauty, Kent, is an excellent example.

CLIMATE CHANGE MITIGATION AND ADAPTATION

Managing the Green Belt for climate change mitigation and adaptation is possibly its most important role in the coming years.

My previous report on risks the climate emergency pose to Londoners[11] found that:

- Two thirds of London flats could experience overheating (temp over 28°C) by 2030s
- One in five schools are at risk of flooding
- For every 1°C rise over 20°C ambulance call outs increase by one per cent

The land already plays a crucial part in mitigating some of the aspects of climate change that are increasingly causing problems for people in our city and, managed well, could do so much more. Green spaces help to alleviate flooding, acting as a cooling counterbalance to the urban heat island effect and absorbing atmospheric CO2.

It is vital that the government and local authorities support the transition to a low-carbon future, taking full account of changing temperatures, flood risks and coastal erosion.

They should help to:

- shape places in ways that contribute to radical reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, minimise vulnerability and improve resilience;
- encourage the reuse of existing resources, including the retrofitting of existing buildings; and
- support renewable and low-carbon energy and associated infrastructure.

With a properly coordinated management plan these benefits could be extended considerably.

In addition, the Green Belt provides opportunities for adapting to climate change. Good examples are enabling renewable energy projects to power local neighbourhoods or increasing access to locally sourced food by maximising small-scale food growing, horticulture and agriculture projects.

Flooding

Climate change is already resulting in intense and sometimes prolonged periods of rainfall.[12]

This pattern is expected to continue in the coming years, resulting in a sharp increase in homes and buildings at risk of flooding. Good, climate-conscious management of Green Belt land can significantly increase London's resilience to flooding, both from fluvial sources (i.e. rivers and streams) and from surface water (run-off from hard standing surfaces and the overwhelming of drains and sewers).

Green Belt land can act as sink or sponge, either by absorbing water or by providing spaces where large amounts of unexpected water can be held safely, potentially saving thousands of homes from flooding. Measures like the planting of broad-leaved trees on a large scale could help mitigate the effects of very heavy rainfall.

Mayesbrook Park, Dagenham, provides an example of utilising green infrastructure to address flood-water management[13]. They used a community partnership to reintroduce the brook into the park, create wetlands, plant trees, create sustainable urban drainage areas and backwaters. They also landscaped the park to increase natural floodwater storage capacity which means there is now space for flood waters to subside.

Thames Landscape Strategy's 'Rewilding Arcadia' proposal for natural flood management to increase resilience and enhance the natural ecosystem services along the Thames between Weybridge and Kew is another good instance of such practice.[14]

These kinds of methods could be used to manage larger areas of land in the Green Belt to enhance their benefits for flood mitigation helping to protect Londoners' homes from these risks.

WHAT'S NEEDED?

Landscaping of Green Belt land and river catchments for flood resistance, by creating natural flood defences and areas that can act as sinks or reservoirs in the event of sudden downpours.

The Environment Agency, DEFRA, the Mayor of London and local planning authorities, along with special interest groups, should work together to future-proof London against climate-change induced flooding and overheating by protecting and improving the capital's Green Belt.

MAXIMISING THE GREEN BELT'S EFFECTIVENESS

Rewilding and reforesting

Rewilding is large-scale conservation aimed at restoring and protecting natural processes and core wilderness areas. It is one of the most effective and inexpensive ways to combat some of the worst effects of climate change on our city.

Rewilded areas can combat the higher temperatures experienced as our climate warms. Areas of native planting, particularly of deciduous trees, provide shade and serve to cool air temperatures, helping to counteract the urban heat island effect.

They also absorb atmospheric carbon and particulate pollution, cleaning the air that Londoners breathe and helping to reduce the CO2 concentration in the atmosphere that fuels further climate change.

Large areas that have been planted with native species and woodlands are, in particular, a practical and inexpensive solution to tackling increased flood risk. At present some 16 per cent of London's Green Belt is covered by woodland.[15] This is not nearly enough.

Rewilded areas also have obvious significant benefits for improving ecological networks, which in turn can enhance biodiversity and bio-abundance.

A good example of this is the Thames Chase Community Forest in Upminster[16], where more than 1 million trees have been planted over the last 20 years. They aim to increase the amount of woodland cover to 30 per cent by 2030.

WHAT'S NEEDED?
The large-scale planting of native tree species to increase significantly the area of the Green Belt covered by woodland. Support for this could come from the Mayor of London, Forestry Commission, Woodland Trust and local authorities.

Renewable energy

London must be carbon neutral by 2030 to protect people from catastrophic climate breakdown. To achieve this, we must change the way we use and supply energy so that power and heat for our buildings and transport is generated from local clean, low-carbon and renewable sources

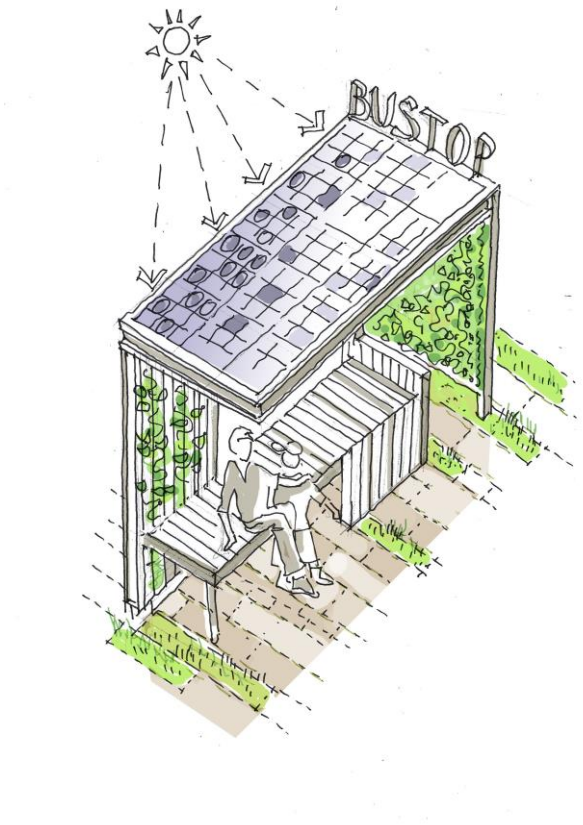
The Green Belt offers opportunities for small to medium-sized renewable energy schemes, including biomass, anaerobic digesters, wood, solar, water or wind generation. Projects like these could increase energy security for areas of London, as well as reducing the city's carbon footprint overall.

As the south-east has some of the UK's highest levels of sunshine, solar generation is likely to be particularly beneficial for the city.

London is part of a national energy system and currently sources approximately 95 per cent of its energy from outside London.

We need to shift from our reliance on using natural gas as our main energy source to a more diverse range of low and zero-carbon sources, including renewable energy and other heat sources. Decentralised energy will become an increasingly important element of London's energy supply and will help London become more self-sufficient and resilient in relation to its energy needs.

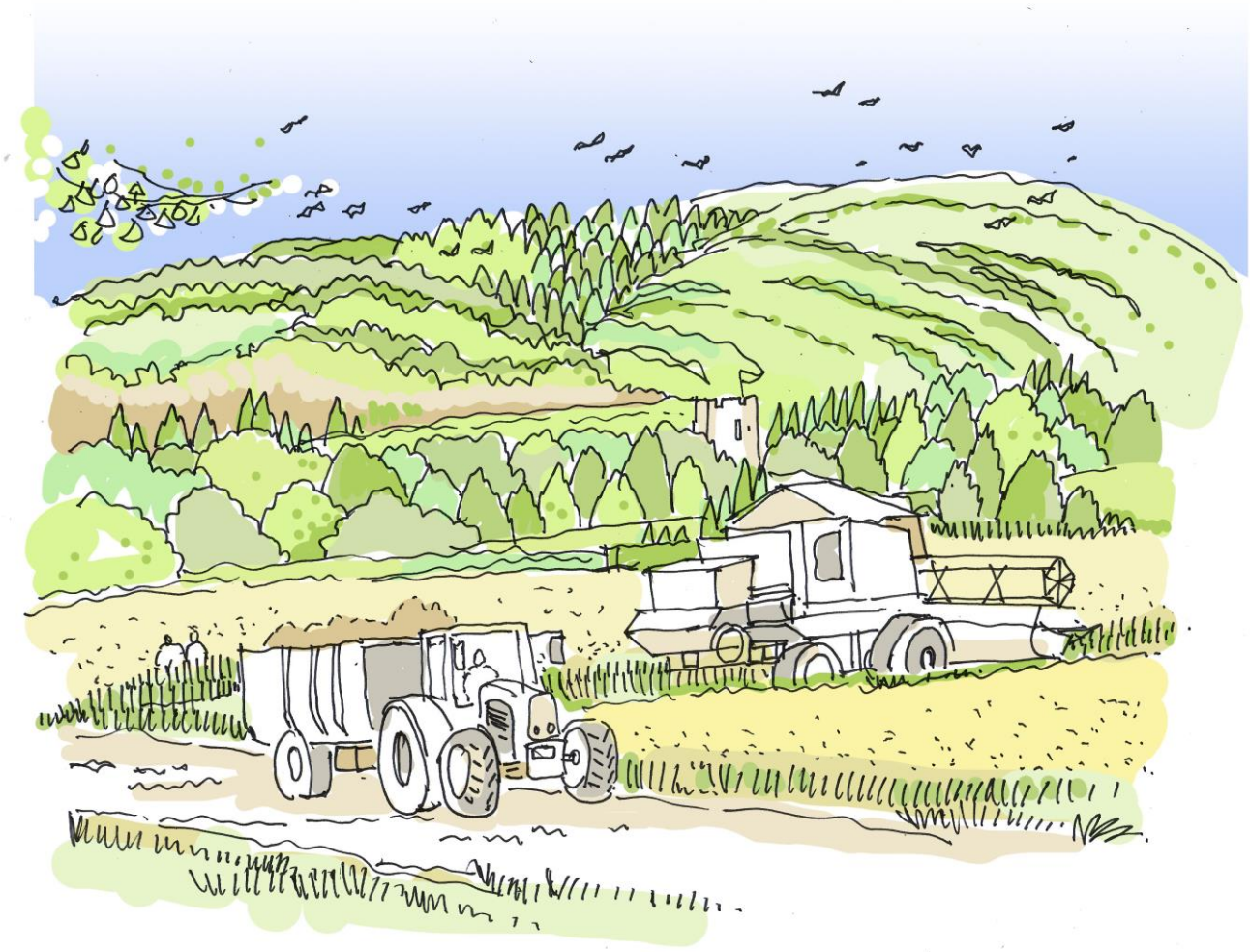
Land will be required for energy supply infrastructure including energy centres that can efficiently capture and store energy as well as generate it. The ability to do this will reduce overall energy consumption, decrease peak demand and integrate greater levels of renewable energy into the energy system.



WHAT'S NEEDED?
The establishment of suitably located renewables projects, especially solar, in the Green Belt. The London Assembly's 2018 report 'Farming in London's Green Belt' suggested that sustainable energy might be an important opportunity for farm diversification.[17]

The GLA could support farms wishing to diversify into energy – on lower grade farmland and marginal land – as it does homes, businesses and community buildings. It could help farmers understand renewable energy technologies and ways into energy markets.

FOOD AND FARMING



Food security is likely to be another problem associated with the climate emergency.

The Green Belt offers the possibility to increase food production for London improving the city's food security and its access to local fresh food. Providing food closer to source helps to create a sustainable food network for the city, supports the local economy, and reduces the need to transport food, thereby reducing carbon emissions.

At a more macro scale, providing land for food growing helps to support farming and agriculture. There are also longer-term biodiversity benefits, and farmers adopting agri-environmental stewardship schemes are more likely to deliver good environmental practice. For all food growing, consideration should be given to the historic use of the land and any potential contamination.

There is a specific need for increased production of fruit and vegetables, as the country has large trade deficits in both these categories.

Community orchards offer a good opportunity to produce a variety of fruits. They also increase public access to and enjoyment of the Green Belt while improving local ecology and biodiversity.

Soil health is of variable quality across the Green Belt, and in some areas has been significantly degraded, which impacts on the productivity of the land.

Alternatives to traditional farming methods like agroecology provide sustainable approaches to food growing that involves planting a diversity of crops[18].

Currently, around one third of Green Belt land is in agricultural use (according to the London Green Belt Council) and employs some 3,000 people. There are more than 200 farms across the area covering a total of around 11,000 hectares.

The land that is currently used for farming has about 25 per cent cereal crops, 20 per cent grazing and around 10 per cent horticulture However, much of this land is subject to increasing pressure from developers, primarily for housing.

It is therefore vital that this land is protected as food production is likely to become more, not less, important in the future.

To enable food security, existing farmers need long-term assurances that they will retain management of the land, through tenure of at least ten years and preferably longer. Long tenure is vital for investment. 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.[19]

WHAT'S NEEDED?

Action to improve soil health, protection for land currently used for horticulture and other farming and the establishment of new food-growing areas, focusing on agroecology and orchard planting.

The Mayor should stand firm against any reduction in Green Belt protections and lobby government to issue guidance that a high rating for agricultural quality should be an additional factor against de-designating Green Belt sites.[20]

Food growing is one of the most beneficial and productive land uses in the Green Belt. Boroughs should be required to give added weight to this when preparing Local Plans.

The Mayor should explore, with relevant bodies, model leases or other tools to help farmers get long land tenure without excessive costs or administration.

THREATS TO THE GREEN BELT

Green Belt land is low-hanging fruit for developers, offering a blank canvas for construction projects, unlike trickier brownfield sites in urban areas which may have challenges around access, location and space.

Five out of every six local authorities are currently planning to build on protected Green Belt land, despite warnings from researchers that this will do 'virtually nothing' to address the affordable housing shortage (new homes on Green Belt tend to be larger 'executive' homes for those already on the housing ladder).[21]

In July 2018 there were 519 Green Belt sites under threat of development, compared with 203 in July 2016. This translates as 203,000 proposed new homes in the Green Belt (in July 2018), up from 123,000 (in July 2016).[22]

By mid-2019 some 218,000 homes in London had planning permission for construction in the Green Belt.[23]

Meanwhile, the proposed third runway at Heathrow, includes using Green Belt land for an Airport Business Park.[24]

This report is even more pressing due to the Inspectors Report of the Examination in Public on the London Plan[25] which states: "*There have been a number of calls for a review of the Green Belt in London to be carried out. […] We take a review to mean examining all land within the Green Belt to ascertain whether and to what extent it meets the Green Belt purposes defined in the NPPF […] This, in turn, might identify possible locations for growth and so lead to an assessment of whether exceptional circumstances might exist to justify the release of Green Belt land.*"

It is imperative that land is protected as much as possible. Allowing development in 'exceptional circumstances' leaves the land open to challenges. We need stronger protections, not loopholes. It's not good for the Green Belt and it is not good for London.

Yet, as people's awareness of the climate emergency increases along with greater understanding of the importance of supporting biodiversity the public demand to protect the Green Belt needs to grow louder.

> *"The National Policy Planning Framework needs to be reviewed and amended to ensure that the gradual erosion of the Green Belt does not reach epidemic and terminal proportions […]. Once Green Belt has been developed, it is impossible to get it back again."*
>
> **All-Party Parliamentary Group for London's Green Belt[26]**

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

I would like to hear more from Londoners about how the Mayor and the GLA can help protect and enhance the Green Belt.

Please get in touch with me if you have any comments or suggestions.

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This report sets out my views as an individual Assembly Member and not the agreed view of the entire Assembly.

Thanks to Chris Medland and the team at One World Design for the art and illustrations used in this brochure.

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