

Growing food for Londoners in the Green Belt

This project will explore how to promote more sustainable food growing in Green Belt and urban fringe areas of London, including current and future threats and barriers to sustainable farming, and measures that can help support biodiversity, resilience and adaptation to climate change.

Background

About 22 per cent of London's area is designated Green Belt, distributed loosely in a ring around the main built-up area, completed by a much larger area of Green Belt in the surrounding counties. Green Belt land is protected from development under national and London planning rules. Under half of it is actively farmed for food production though; other uses range from golf courses to scrap yards, as well as non-food 'farming' such as keeping horses. There are around 500 registered farm holdings in Greater London, most of which are in the Green Belt, and most of which are very small in area compared to the national average.

Environmental impacts

Green Belt farmland, like other green infrastructure, helps to cool the air, filter out pollution and absorb rainfall. It therefore plays a part in cushioning London from the effects of extreme weather such as heatwave or heavy rain, and from the health effects of toxic emissions. While potentially slowing drainage in upper river catchments, agricultural land can also affect the water quality of its runoff, including with animal waste and agricultural chemicals.

It provides a wide variety of wildlife habitats. Being arranged in a belt around the city, these may act as a reservoir and connector for otherwise more isolated suburban habitats, enabling species to maintain more viable breeding populations, rather than being broken up into vulnerable pockets.

Being visible from adjacent suburbs and from high ground across the city, the Green Belt is an important contributor to the appearance and experience of London as a relatively green large city, set in and connected to its environment. Using land for food growing can maintain a green, open, traditional aspect. The preservation of open land, accessible to urban dwellers for respite from city life, has always been a core part of the Green Belt philosophy. Parts of the Green Belt have rights of access over all the land; many other parts have access along paths, roads and other rights of way.

The choice of food product and production methods can influence these impacts significantly, as well as other farm management decisions such as about trees, hedges, drainage, paving, buildings and so on.

There are also environmental benefits from the availability of local, seasonal food to London. Although London's food growing capacity is marginal in the context of its enormous food demand¹, sourcing food locally may reduce transport emissions, as well as offering Londoners the opportunity to be aware of the sources of their food and the environmental impacts and benefits of production.

Role of the Mayor and the GLA

The Mayor has a significant influence over land uses in the Green Belt through the London Plan and related policies. He is maintaining and even strengthening the protection of the Green Belt against development,

¹ London grows a few tens of thousands of tonnes of food per year, and consumes a few million tonnes: about a hundred times more.

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concentrating the large expansion planned in London homes, workplaces and infrastructure mainly into increasing the density of the existing urban built-up area.

The Mayor's Environment Strategy and draft Food Strategy also have some bearing on the Green Belt, though both currently focus more on green spaces and food growing within the built-up area. The Food Strategy encourages urban food growing and the local availability of fresh and sustainable food, and there are Mayoral and partner programmes including Capital Growth, Food Growing Schools and the Urban Food Awards. The Environment Strategy emphasises the importance of green infrastructure for its many benefits (including those noted above for Green Belt farmland). It also notes that food security is a high risk in the context of global climate change.

The Mayor has established a London Food Board to oversee the food Strategy and related initiatives, bringing together a range of experts and stakeholders.

Non-GLA actors

The farm businesses themselves are privately held and operated; in 2006 there were around 470 registered farm holdings in Greater London. There is also a significant surrounding economy of suppliers and customers.

The relevant boroughs are significant stakeholders, representing residents who participate in the food and farming economy, and having planning powers over the land. Some outer boroughs have large proportions of their areas given to farmland: according to one estimate, Havering 44 per cent, Bromley 35 per cent, Hillingdon 23 per cent and Enfield 22 per cent.

National farming policy is set by the Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra). Its Environment Agency, and its sponsored non-departmental body Natural England, have significant powers in the area. National changes to planning policy have removed requirements to enhance and improve the Green Belt. The influence of the European Union is also very significant, and the effects of leaving the EU are one of the significant sources of uncertainty in the sector. The Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has indicated that he plans to use EU exit to replace the European system of farm subsidies mainly based on land area with one more based on rewarding public benefit, especially environmental enhancement. There could also be changes in international food trade and prices, and in agricultural labour markets, especially seasonal harvesting work.

Previous Assembly work

The Planning Committee in 2010 published a significant and relevant report *Cultivating the Capital*, which addressed issues for farmers and food growing, especially in the Green Belt.² This investigation will build on and seek to update its findings, particularly on environmental impacts and sustainability.

² <https://www.london.gov.uk/about-us/london-assembly/london-assembly-publications/cultivating-capital-food-growing-and-planning>

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The Economy Committee in 2015 published *Weathering the Storm: The Impact of Climate Change on London's economy*.³ It drew attention to the vulnerability of London's major domestic and import supply chains to the risks of climate change.

There have been a number of pieces of work emphasising the potential benefits of maximising the range and value of environmental services provided by each area of green space in London. These include reports by this committee in 2016 (*Growing Growing Gone*⁴) and 2017 (*Park Life*⁵) and a seminar on the Green Belt of the future held by the Planning Committee in 2017.⁶ The Planning Committee is expected to return to this topic in future.

Equalities issues

There are inequalities in access to green space across different demographics, including ethnicities and different socioeconomic groups. To the extent that this investigation finds ways to promote access to green space as an environmental benefit of Green Belt farming, it should seek to address these inequalities. There are also inequalities in access to fresh, healthy and affordable food. The investigation should consider equality of access in any findings or recommendations on marketing or producing food for Londoners.

The ethnic make-up and age distribution of the outer London population differs from inner London. The investigation should consider the impact of issues, and any recommendations, on local residents, and particularly any equalities issues that may arise.

³

https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/gla_migrate_files_destination/Economy%20Committee%20Weathering%20the%20Storm_0.pdf

⁴ <https://www.london.gov.uk/about-us/london-assembly/london-assembly-publications/growing-growing-gone-long-term-sustainable>

⁵ <https://www.london.gov.uk/about-us/london-assembly/london-assembly-publications/park-life-ensuring-green-spaces-remain-hit>

⁶ <https://www.london.gov.uk/about-us/london-assembly/london-assembly-publications/green-belt-future-seminar>

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Scope

London's Green Belt farmland forms a sizeable fraction of its area, and potentially one with particularly significant environmental benefits. These environmental benefits are of primary concern to the Environment Committee.

Realising the environmental benefits of sustainable farming will involve the committee in looking at some other issues around farming in London, including the economics of producing and selling food, and skills challenges for the farm workforce. Although these are not a core part of the Environment Committee remit, excluding them from the investigation scope could risk limiting the potential to identify solutions and ways forward. Therefore they will be included where necessary.

Some other important issues around London's food system, including access to healthy food and maintaining and potentially increasing food supply resilience, are largely outside the remit of the Environment Committee and will not form the primary focus for this investigation.

Some aspects of London's food system would be within the remit of the Environment Committee, such as the environmental footprint of London's global food supply chain. However, to keep the scope of the review manageable it is proposed that the investigation focus on activities within Greater London's boundary.

Because of significant differences in the challenges and impacts of food growing within urban and suburban areas compared to the Green Belt, and the current focus of mayoral policy on urban growing, the investigation will focus on Green Belt and urban fringe food growing, rather than London-wide.

Environmental impacts

Mayoral strategy, and past Environment Committee work, have identified the many benefits of green infrastructure across London, and the importance of bringing multiple benefits from each space. However, the thinking has often been either London-wide or focused on smaller green spaces interwoven with urban development; there is scope to extend the multiple benefits approach to the urban fringe and Green Belt. An evidence base could be built up by seeking to bring together information about the benefits contributed by specific areas, particularly those in the Green Belt and growing food.

The investigation could seek to bring together known and new information about the effects of Green Belt farmland (and/or other Green Belt land uses) on:

- Wildlife habitat, biodiversity and pollinators
- The Urban Heat Island effect
- Drainage volume and speed
- Soil health and resilience to climate change
- Water quality
- Air pollution
- Carbon emissions
- Access to nature
- Visual amenity
- The environmental footprint of London's food supply chain

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Factors affecting the environmental impacts of food growing

Not all farmland is equivalent in its environmental impacts. The investigation will seek evidence on whether environmental benefits can be maximised and harms minimised by low-impact farming methods that also benefit the wider environment and soil health. Methods to consider could include:

- Work on the land such as drainage, tree and hedge management, ploughing
- Choice and suitability of crops or stock for conditions
- Mowing, harvesting, use of fertilisers and chemicals, leaving fallow and other crop management
- Where and how animals are kept and looked after
- Management of waste
- Farm buildings and structures, and choice of materials
- Farm machinery

Challenges, threats and opportunities for Green Belt farming

To help understand the implications of these choices and formulate recommendations, the investigation should consider the challenges faced by farmers, and the threats and opportunities inherent in current and future changes. These may include:

- Climate change, particularly the effect of possible:
 - hotter summers with more frequent and intense heatwaves
 - changes in rainfall patterns, water shortages and/or heavier storms
 - shifts in patterns of pests and diseases.
- Housing and development pressures
- Economic pressures
- Exiting the EU

Ways to optimise these factors

These factors are chosen by farmers on a business basis within a context of many constraints and influences, including the cost of options, their availability from suppliers, whether farmers know of the options and farm workers can implement them, regulations, incentives and policies. The review could therefore seek to look for means by which to encourage greater environmental benefits, potentially including:

- Planning policy including the Mayor's London Plan, currently under review
- Mayoral or other initiatives to promote sustainable farming, including the Mayor's London Food Strategy and his advisory body on food matters, London Food
- Raising awareness of sustainable options and their benefits
- Promoting the necessary skills for the farm workforce
- Incentives to use environmentally-friendly methods
- Changes to agricultural policy and its governance that may come with leaving the European Union

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Terms of reference

1. To investigate the environmental impacts of food growing in London's Green Belt and urban fringe
2. How farming in London's Green Belt has changed in recent years.
3. To investigate current and future threats to, and opportunities for, food growing in London's Green Belt and urban fringe
4. To consider how the environmental impacts can be improved and what can be done to address identified challenges
5. To seek ways to promote and increase sustainable and environmentally-friendly food production in London's Green Belt, and measures to improve soil fertility, biodiversity, resilience and adaptation to climate change (particularly ways that can be for Mayoral action, or that may arise from changes to agricultural policy linked to leaving the EU)

Impact

Category	Evidence of impact
Challenging	Evaluating whether existing policies adequately address the environmental impacts of Green Belt food growing. Highlighting GLA (or other) strategies and programmes that require improvement.
Influencing	Identifying potential improvements to Mayoral strategies and programmes for sustainable food growing in the Green Belt. Encouraging other actors to support these goals and actions.
Engaging	Ensuring the committee's overall focus covers all of London Going far from City Hall to take evidence in the urban fringe Providing additional channels for stakeholders to contribute to City Hall policy making in this area.

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Stages of the investigation

- 1. Further research** (June onwards).
By Greater London Authority staff and potentially externally commissioned. To update and build on the existing evidence base.
- 2. A call for views and information in writing** (June). We are especially keen to hear from:
 - Farmers, farm workers and others involved in food growing, and bodies representing them
 - Wholesalers, retailers, market organisers, agricultural suppliers and others involved in the wider agricultural and food economy
 - Academics and other independent experts
 - Outer London boroughs, Defra, and other public and third-sector bodies involved in promoting farming, food growing, green infrastructure and their environmental benefitsQuestions on which views and information are sought are set out below. More general contributions are also welcomed.
- 3. Meeting** (June 2018). The primary business for this meeting is to examine the draft London Food Strategy, but this may generate material that feeds into the investigation. Potential guests include:
 - GLA officers and the Mayor's London Food Board
 - Independent experts on food
- 4. Site visit/s or other off-site evidence gathering** (July 2018). The subject matter would lend itself to evidence gathering in the field, by site visit to farm/s and potentially other relevant sites, and/or informal discussion with contributors outside City Hall. The committee has a date in July when all members should be available, and other dates are being explored.
- 5. Informal discussion and evidence gathering** (July 2018). Additional views and information could be taken at informal meetings in City Hall. Contributors could be identified from written submissions or targeted contacts within the call for evidence list.
- 6. Report** (October 2018). The Committee plans to publish a report setting out the findings and recommendations from the investigation.

Questions seeking written views and information

1. What are the challenges faced by food growers in London's Green Belt? What threats and opportunities are emerging from recent, current and potential future events?
2. What are the environmental effects (benefits and/or otherwise) of food growing and associated activity or other farm activity on Green Belt land in London? Comparing, where appropriate, with the environmental effects of alternative land uses.
3. How could these effects be optimised, for example through choice of farming practices?
4. How can environmentally-friendly farming practices be helped and encouraged? What barriers or disincentives exist to the adoption of these practices? What could the Mayor or other public bodies do to help?