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‘Preventing urban sprawl and strengthening the compact city’

Thank you. Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. The green belt is one of the most successful British policies in British town and country planning. Actually, you have to be quite brave to tell people you are a town planner sometimes but it is one of the very few planning policies or concepts that the public understand. It is popular, and it is popular because it is easily understood and it has a very strong visual concept, it is a belt and it has integrity as a belt. That is what I want to talk about.

Why is it so successful? Because over its 60 years the policy has built credibility because it has been enforced. It is a credible policy and it has met its original aims which were to prevent urban sprawl. As a result of that, London is a compact city and, in the interests of everyone who lives in London and beyond London, we need to keep London as a compact city.

Our success is acknowledged and envied actually all over the world. I lecture a lot in many countries and many of these countries I visit are desperately seeking solutions now to contain and resolve their urban sprawl. However, we need to reinforce the integrity of green belt policy in the Greater London Authority (GLA) because we do not have urban sprawl at the moment.

I am going to consider the challenges to green belt policy, then I am going to look at the impact of urban sprawl and then we need to think about what kind of London we want and, of course, the whole day will be discussing the sort of London that we want to create. However, for me the vision is London as a compact city and I believe that the green belt is very much part of that vision.

If green belts are so successful, why do we need to reinforce their importance? The very concept of the green belt itself, as we have heard, is suffering a sustained assault at the moment and this, of course, is largely due to the housing crisis. There are very strong voices calling for the release of green belt land - already alluded to today - and I am sure more, suggesting that this is some kind of last ditch solution to the housing crisis and the perceived lack of land in London for housing. However, those people who are calling to build on the green belt are, at best, unimaginative and ill-informed, for example, suggesting that the green belt is not green and, therefore, we can build on it - Dieter Helm alluded to this, of course - and, at worst, they know that building on flat green land is much easier than tackling difficult brownfield sites and, quite frankly, potentially much more profitable.

We know that local authorities such as your own are under tremendous pressure, not helped by a shortage of town planners at the moment in local government - a campaign that the RTPI is working very hard on to raise the number of town planners - and not least of all from the need to demonstrate a five-year housing supply of land in local plans, but also, under pressure from developers and their agents and consultants, and from landowners who have very high

expectations of selling their land for high prices for housing. Even as we speak there are options being taken out on the green belt right now, as developers wait for a weakening of the policy. This call to build on the green belt from developers is ubiquitous. I have never known anything like this actually in my 40-odd years as a town planner. By the way, the housing white paper did not come up with a weakening of the policy thankfully.

However, more worryingly, a generation of younger people also call to build on the green belt. We have great sympathy with them - well, I certainly do and I am sure many of us do - the young people here, the older people here, your children who cannot afford to buy a house at the moment and they believe that if we could just build on the green belt then the supply of houses would increase and prices would reduce. Would they? No. All the evidence suggests that the housing crisis will not be resolved by merely releasing land. In fact, we are releasing land in England and it is not solving the problem. We know that there are 600,000 planning permissions for housing, which have not been built. We have all seen the graphs of the housing building from 1940s to the present day, which show that for all sorts of reasons the private sector is not filling the gap.

In fact, the housing problem is very complex and I am very pleased to say that the housing white paper acknowledged this. Our housing market is broken, it said. If we have a housing market that is broken we need to fix it. I think we know now, and I think the Government knows and acknowledges, that the housing crisis is a crisis of affordability and it requires a multi-faceted approach, not just release of land. It includes fiscal measures, land value capture, regulatory measures, strong planning and an innovative and imaginative approach.

What do the proponents of building on the green belt really want? I am puzzled by the demand to build on the green belt. Everyone is saying, "Let's build on the green belt. We are building on the green belt and we can build on the green belt." The policy allows for us to release land to change the boundaries of our green belt in special circumstances when we have exhausted all other land in our districts, therefore, it is happening. Therefore, what do people really mean when they say, "Let's build on the green belt"? They mean, "Let's build all over the green belt. It has no value." Many say that the green belt is not green. A lot of it is scrubland and if we just were allowed to build these houses then we would have more money to invest in the green bits. We do not think that would work. Yes, but we should invest in green land, certainly - and we will hear more about that later - because the inner part of the green belt is obviously the most vulnerable to building everywhere in all the cities in Britain, and this is very pertinent to London because only 7% of the green belt lies within the GLA area in 19 boroughs and it makes it even more important for those London boroughs to protect the green belt and work to improve it for the benefit of all Londoners.

The big danger is if we build on the green belt we will have urban sprawl. I want to look at some of the issues around urban sprawl and its impact and look at models of other cities in the world where the developers are telling us should apply to London. What is our vision for London's future? I will end with that. Let us talk about urban sprawl first of all. The original aim was to prevent urban sprawl; we know that. Very shortly we will hear the European

Environment Agency (EEA), whose research states that urban sprawl is the biggest single threat to climate change. They define it as the uncontrolled spread of towns and villages into undeveloped areas.

There are plenty of definitions of sprawl but they hinge on urban sprawl being unchecked growth and incursion into rural areas. Why is it a bad thing? The impacts of sprawl are environmental, economic and social. Environmentally, urban sprawl contributes to climate change, we have heard, particularly from higher greenhouses from increased traffic - and I want to come back to that later - loss of farmland and other green land, loss of habitat and because sprawl is typically low-density. Especially in Britain, it is resource-hungry and very inefficient use of land. The economic costs, I believe, we have heard covered very well from Dieter Helm, but they do include an increase in land values, lack of access to jobs due to the distances that are created by urban sprawl and huge congestion costs. The congestion costs from having urban sprawl are well documented. Of course, higher cost for infrastructure, facilities and services, which includes increased tax burdens especially now when money is short in local authorities in the public sector.

The social impact of sprawl is not mentioned quite so much in things that I read, but very interesting research done on the social costs of isolation on domestic breakdown, domestic violence even, and transport poverty - poverty for people who are spending their money not on housing or life but on commuting. Very often the kind of building that happens in these outer suburbs, sprawling suburbs, is often for house owners and not for social renters. Just on that point, because it is close to my heart, I want to ask: who lives on the edge? In London nurses, teachers, drivers of all kinds - they cannot get the train in unless the driver has got to the train to drive it in the morning - emergency service workers, shop and officer workers; none of these people who are so vital to the economy of London can afford to live near their work. If you are a nurse, say, working in one of London's most famous hospitals, you would typically live in Kent, typically commute for four hours a day, then complete a 13-hour shift and then ask yourself, when you are exhausted at night, is this really a healthy way to live? The city will not survive if we do not provide housing for - well, not just poor people - everybody that keeps the city alive.

Let us have a think about how other countries deal with this. Everywhere I have been countries are devising policies and town planning tools which restrict and direct growth. There are different ways of containing for the city, and for some it is about a green belt. We are not the only country with a green belt. I would say we were one of the most successful, but Portland, Tokyo, Toronto, Adelaide, and Ontario have green belts. In Auckland, where I was last year, there were attempts to densify within the city. In Melbourne and Vancouver the public have been given a chance there to vote for higher taxes for public transport and Beijing is operating an urban containment policy, as is Shanghai, which has an attempt at a green belt. Next week I am going to talk in Hong Kong about the green belt because there there is a big discussion about how to best utilise their very limited land. Last year I was in Singapore where they are working very hard to retain green land and prevent urban sprawl. They also have a kind of green belt.

Now, I put it to you that if London was an island like Singapore then we would have to consider ways of using our land much more efficiently. I think it is an interesting idea. There would not be any green belt to build on. There would be no land to expand into. Town planners all over the world share these ideas and many seek advice from London actually on how we have maintained the integrity of our green belt.

We are hearing a lot from people, developers and consultants, who want to destroy the green belt and their desire to release land is often wrapped up in a kind of false rationale about how we can apply a different model to London. They say that London can have a different structure, therefore, I want to address this. Let us examine it. In summary, there are three different sorts of models, if you like. The first one I am just going to call 'market freedom'. Market freedom results in uncontrolled dispersed development and some right-wing think-tanks - we read about them all the time - call for complete abandonment of restrictive planning policies and certainly including green belt restraint. They argue that the market will provide the right houses in the right places. Has this happened? No. Where can we see this free market option? We can look quite close to home actually because in Ireland there are 260,000 empty houses in unsustainable and inaccessible locations as a result of booming speculation and they are now being demolished at great expense to the state. Actually, we also know from research done by the RTPI that developers like the certainty that strong plans offer, therefore, developers do not necessarily want free market actually.

The second model is one we might call poly-centricity and decentralised regional growth. This is part of a much larger debate about London and beyond. We did start to address this after the war with new towns but now we do not have regional planning, as you know, and nor do we have a very strong national plan. New towns are being put forward again as a solution and, of course, they are beyond the powers of the Mayor of London and the London Plan. However, that solution would still depend on London being a compact city and we do need to think about it.

The third model is the most popular one, if you like, that people are talking about and it is about what I call public transport dependent models. Nearly all of the alternatives put forward in the case of London depend, in some way, on a public transport model and most city models do. Therefore, some people refer as exemplars to models utilised elsewhere such as - and we hear this all the time - urban or green fingers of Copenhagen and Stockholm or the green wedges of Melbourne, which also depend on transport corridors. Even the Randstad [megalopolis in central-western Netherlands consisting primarily of the four largest Dutch cities] is based on a polycentric model of cities around a green heart and it relies too on an intensive network of public transport between the cities.

Interestingly, in America, Canada and Australia where sprawl is ubiquitous, transit-oriented development (TOD) - or we might call it transport-oriented development - is gaining ground. However, their cities need to be retrofitted to minimise the impact of existing sprawl. This is mainly about providing public transport to reduce car use because the cities already cover vast

areas with low-density, car-borne communities. This is key. This is absolutely key to London because it is interesting that in London we are very lucky, we do not need to retrofit our city. This city is a compact city already. We do not need to think about how we are retrofitted. We need to densify the existing city so that we can contain it further, so that we can retain the compact city that we have so successfully made. We need public transport within the city to enable that to happen more.

It is very important to say here that any attempt to lay one model on top of an existing model is virtually impossible because it will result in a different model. Many of the cities I referred to with these models that we read about were planned more than 50 years ago, therefore, they are well established in their models. In London we cannot have green fingers, urban wedges and green belt; that would just be urban sprawl. It would be a different model and this would massively undermine the credibility of the green belt policy and open the door to many challenges. We cannot make, as Dieter Helm so brilliantly said, incremental changes to the green belt without destroying the concept of the green belt. As I said at the beginning, it is a belt, it has integrity as a belt. It simply will not survive if we chop holes through it.

I want to illustrate this briefly with the example of the proposal to build an urban corridor from London to Cambridge. At first there would have to be cooperation between a huge number of local authorities to release the green belt land and other. As we know from the duty to cooperate, that is very difficult to achieve. We would also need huge investment in new railways and stations, including platform capacity in London. We also know that our railways are under huge and immense pressure. As one man said on the radio a couple of days ago, "I don't see many people on Southern Rail saying, 'Come on, bring on more people on to this train, we've got capacity,'" at the moment there is not. Therefore, the idea to build houses around stations, which in this proposal would be housing in rural areas, a considerable investment would be needed to create much more than housing estates. That is our big fear that when we build housing or when we densify round stations we are building housing estates, we are not building proper towns. Would they be proper towns? The evidence suggests not, at the moment. Developers are depending upon increased land values too, but research carried out in other countries shows that the relationship between land values and transport routes is not as highly profitable as originally thought.

Recent studies - and I think this is another interesting bit of research that I have just read - show that building on the edge of cities can actually become more expensive because of the amount of facilities and infrastructure that the developer is now being asked to put in to pay for the cost of infrastructure. That might be more expensive than remediating brownfield land. However, one of the most convincing arguments against this kind of development is that it will increase car traffic. Various studies and, again, some work done by the RTPI on existing towns in the green belt show that very few people commute to work by train. The vast majority, 72% in one town, drove by private car. Even if the breadwinner goes to work by train, the rest of the family are going across the green belt to the doctor, the dentist, the school and the shops. A huge number of car traffic and that exponential rise in car traffic has been shown in America as well.

Finally, all the models that are being proposed put forward proposed retention of green land of one kind or another. However, as I said, I feel that this is a false rationale because green land can only be protected by having strong planning policies. Evidence from all over the world now is that developers are challenging planning policies and eroding and destroying these cities' models. What we once could see in an aerial shot as a model, like you still can of London, is being eroded by incursion by development into the green areas beside. This is happening around London as well and that is really why we are here today. The demand, as well, to build on just 2% of the green belt, frankly, will result in a huge incursion into the green belt which will undermine the foundations of the policy and it will collapse.

I started off by saying that calls to build on the green belt show a lack of imagination. I think they do. The point of today is to discuss alternatives, which we will carry on doing today. What should we do with London? My conclusions. Firstly, if the housing market is broken then we must repair it. This means resolving the problems of affordability as well as housing supply. That must involve more public intervention in the markets to provide social housing. It is not just about the release of land. Second, we need to densify our cities and this includes developing around stations within the city boundary, already an ambition of the GLA, as with Crossrail opportunities. As a nation we need to consider other alternatives, not least of all real new towns beyond London; a bigger debate, I know.

The third thing is we need to work together - the GLA with all the London boroughs and the local authorities around the edge - to maintain this strong city model. The fragmentation of the local authorities or the decision makers, if you like, about the green belt is not helping us retain our strategic ideas. All the research shows - and the European research particularly - that there has to be a strategic approach to this. Quite frankly, we need to ignore these calls for different models because they are disingenuous and they just will result in urban sprawl.

As a town planner, I believe that the early far-sighted planners, who first suggested the idea of a green belt, left a legacy, which is now severely threatened, and which we would be very foolish to abandon. We have to find ways of making this work for the future generations. Let us please, if nothing else, leave this room today knowing that London's green belt has been so influential all around the world as a means of defining the compact city. It is a sustainable policy, it is a policy for climate change and it works. Thank you