

Shirley Rodrigues

Deputy Mayor for Environment and Energy

Hello everyone. My name is Shirley Rodrigues, I am Deputy Mayor for Environment and Energy at the GLA. I am going to be introducing this afternoon's session and then I am going to be handing over to Baroness [Barbara] Young, who is going to be chairing the rest of the afternoon and kicking off with her presentation. I have to nip out straight after this presentation but I will be back for the rest of the afternoon to hear the discussion as well.

First of all, welcome to City Hall and thank you to the London Assembly's Planning Committee, and particularly Nicky Gavron, for the invitation to introduce and close this afternoon's session. Apologies I could not join this morning's session when you were talking about the value proposition for the green belt. Protection for the green belt is a very important issue for the Mayor and he made this a manifesto commitment, which I think you heard today from Nicky. He is currently considering the implications of the housing white paper recommendations on the future of green belt policy for the capital as we develop the new London Plan and our new strategies on housing and environment.

In terms of this afternoon's discussion, I am hoping to hear more on why London's green belt is so important over and above its formal planning role to prevent urban sprawl and keep land permanently open. In Greater London our green belt is of huge significance regionally and locally. It covers around one-fifth of the GLA's administrative area, it involves nearly two-thirds of our London's boroughs who have designated land as green belt and the green belt extent varies from borough to borough, with Bromley having around half of its administrative area designated, whereas Greenwich only has one hectare. They obviously have a very, very particular stake in future policy development.

In terms of the benefits of green infrastructure like the green belt brings, obviously, we know that it provides and helps to improve health and wellbeing, improving air and water quality, creating opportunities for walking and cycling, enhancing biodiversity and ecological resilience. Obviously, in the face of climate change it has a very important role in storing carbon, cooling urban areas and reducing flood risk. It also has huge environmental and social value - I think you heard a little bit about that this morning too - with around 46% of the total area of London designated as sites of special scientific interest and 42% as sites of nature conservation importance. 65% is formally designated as either a national nature reserve or a local one and it contains virtually all of London's arable land and two-thirds of London's native broad woodland. It provides access to the countryside, 69% of land in the capital's boundaries are designated as open access under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act and around 60% of the green belt is within 2 kilometres of a rail or tube station, therefore, it is readily accessible by people in London.

However, a significant challenge we have is how do we maintain and improve the quality of these assets. Less than 30% of London's green belt is publicly-owned. Enhancing it requires creating partnerships with a multiplicity of stakeholders, which is always very complicated. It requires creating a workable mechanism that ensure these assets remain productive economically whilst we try to maximise the delivery of the social and environmental offer. However, it can be done. There are some great examples of the management of London's urban fringe, such as the Thames Community Forest, which covers 40 square miles of countryside around the London-Essex borders. Within its boundaries there has been a concerted effort over the last 25 years to regenerate despoiled landscape and enhance the natural environment for the benefit of local people and wildlife. 2+ million trees have been

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planted, new areas of meadowland and ponds have been created as well as cycle routes, bridleways and footpaths, all improving the areas and making them more accessible to the public.

What more can and should be done to improve the quality of our green belt to be more ambitious with regard to the various environmental benefits and ecosystem services it provides? Should we use the green belt for more tree planting, generating renewable energy or tackling food security? What other roles could it or should it play, for example, in social integration? Or, should we leave it as it is just focusing on limiting urban sprawl?

The London Spatial Plan Strategy and the London Environment Strategy are in the early stages of their review and the Mayor is very keen to hear about new practical ideas on how it can be further enhanced and how access to the green belt can be improved. This afternoon's session provides an opportunity to hear about what should be delivered and how this could be done. At the GLA we are very keen to hear all options, nothing is off limits yet, therefore, I look forward to a very good discussion.

As I mentioned before, I have to step out for a little meeting but I will be back quite soon to hear your discussions and to provide closing remarks. Thank you and I would like to hand over now to Baroness [Barbara] Young, who is Chair of the Woodland Trust and, as you all know, former Chief Executive Officer of the Environment Agency. Thank you, Barbara [Young].