

The Green Belt policy in the United Kingdom: A Success or Failure?

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Abstract

This paper reviews how the concept of Green Belt originated and has gained relevance over the years. It examined its functions, objectives, issues around its implementation and evaluation, as well as how it could be improved upon to meet the challenges of the 21st century urban development strategy. This shift is particularly important now that the focus has shifted from traditional Land-use Planning to Spatial Planning framework, which is flexible and proactive in its approach. With a stronger emphasis on sustainable development by balancing economic growth, social equity, and environmental protection, stakeholders are calling for a comprehensive revision of the current system to ensure that they actively promote urban growth rather than becoming an obstacle to it.

1. Introduction

The Green Belt policy has its root in the Garden City concept as put forward by Ebenezer Howard in 1898 in Britain (Batchelor, 1969; Tizot, 2018; Clevenger, 2025). Ebenezer Howard conceived the idea of the Garden City as a means of bridging the gap between humanity and nature in his book, *Tomorrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform*, published in 1898 and later republished as 'The Garden cities of tomorrow' in 1902 (Bravo, 2020; Čulek, 2023). The perceived disconnection between humanity and nature emerged largely from the rapid socio-economic and environmental transformations associated with the Industrial Revolution, particularly between 1851 and 1911. This period witnessed increased urbanization and industrial activity, leading to significant environmental degradation and deteriorating living conditions (Zhang, 2016) (Tizot, 2018; Pandey, 2022; Clevenger, 2025).

Within this context, the Green Belt policy evolved as a practical planning response, primarily aimed at controlling urban expansion, preventing unchecked urban sprawl, and preserving open spaces around cities (Kirby and Scott, 2023). In essence, it reflects an effort to integrate environmental considerations into urban development while maintaining a balance between built-up areas and natural landscapes. The industrial revolution of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century led to the agglomeration of people in industrial cities and the consequent migration of the rural population into Britain's industrial cities (Cullingworth and Nadin, 2006; O'Brien, 2022; Isele, Alabi, and Aderogba, 2025). The cities as a result of industrialisation and its attendant increased urbanisation, witnessed high rate of unemployment, shortage of decent and affordable housing, poor sanitation, and shortage of basic amenities such as clean water as well as wide spread of air and water pollution (Cullingworth and Nadin, 2006; Isele, Alabi, and Aderogba, 2025).

Considering these problems and to proffer solutions to them, Howard (1898) conceived the idea of the Garden City as key to solving the problems of overcrowded and polluted industrial cities in Britain. His conception, in his book 'To-morrow' (1898), he spoke of "how to restore the people to the land- that beautiful land of ours, with its canopy of sky, the air that blows upon it, the sun that warms it, the rain and dew that moisten it" (Howard, 1902: 13). He noted that the country has its own benefits (The beauty of nature, fresh air, sunshine and the fruits of the earth) while the town also has benefits to offer

(Opportunities for employment, prospects of advancement, social enrichment, higher wages and recreation activities) (Howard, 1902; Clark, 2003). He therefore put forward the idea of the marriage of town and country in creating garden cities to create a new way of living, which he argues, is the solution to solving the social and environmental problems prevalent at that time (Howard, 1902) (Figure 1). Howard was of the opinion that in the Garden City, *“town and country must be married, and out of this joyous union will spring a new hope, a new life, a new civilization”* (Howard, 1902:18).

The core principles of the Garden City as conceived by Howard are strong community, ordered devel-

opment as well as environmental quality. He formed the Garden City Movement and successfully put the idea into practice in creating Letchworth and Welwyn. Even with the success of the garden cities, Howard’s concept was not incorporated into urban design elsewhere partly due to its failure to incorporate the market need of the people and partly because it is expensive to run. On the contrary, the Green Belt policy which is almost similar in purpose to the Garden City idea has enjoyed much popularity and relevance (Campbell, 1996)

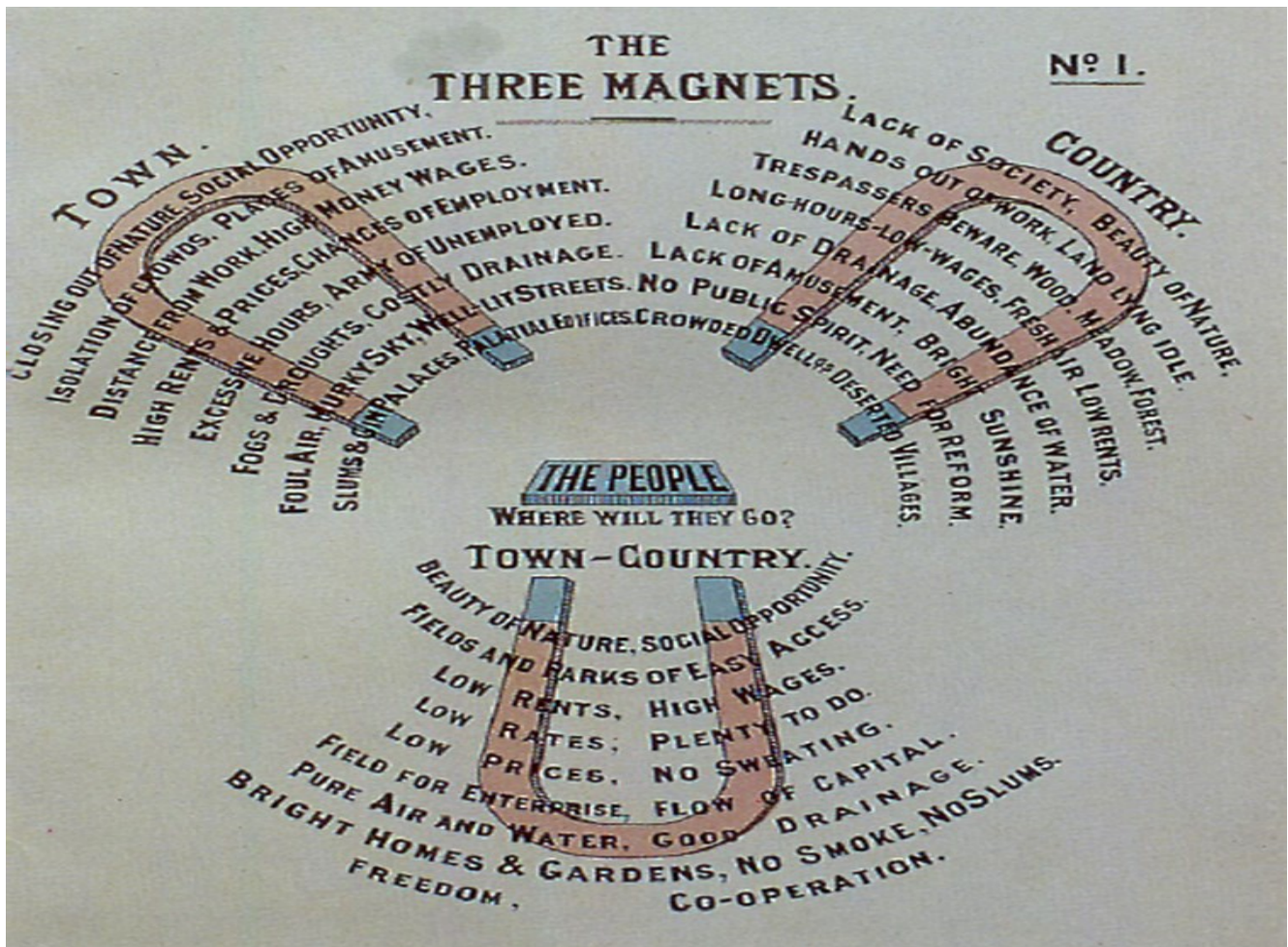


Figure 1: The three magnets

Source: Howard, 1902

the 1593 Royal Proclamation aimed at restricting further expansion of London (Besant, 2021). This proclamation was meant to preserve the agricultural lands around the city to enhance continual availability of foods and other items and to prevent overcrowding by restricting developments beyond the set limit around the city (Besant, 2021). By the late nineteenth century, there was in-

creased awareness about the problem of urban sprawl and the need to put it under check by professionals, academics, social critics as well as pressure groups such as the Town and Country Planning Association (TCPA) and the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE) (Ashworth, 2024).

1898	Garden City movement – Ebenezer Howard proposes Garden Cities surrounded by Green Belts.
1926	Formation of CPRE, one of whose earliest campaigns was against urban sprawl.
1935	First Green Belt proposed in an official planning policy by the Greater London Regional Planning Committee “to provide a reserve supply of public open space and of recreational areas and to establish a Green Belt or girdle of open space.”
1938	Sheffield Green Belt designated by local government.
1938	Green Belt (London and Home Counties) Act.
1947	Town and Country Planning Act, allowed local authorities to control changes in the use of land from undeveloped to developed uses.
1955	Green Belt policy for England was set out in Ministry of Housing and Local Government Circular 42/55 which invited local planning authorities to consider the establishment of Green Belts in their area.
1959	Metropolitan Green Belt fully designated in local plans.
1986	Completion of M25 motorway, running largely through the Metropolitan Green Belt.
1988	Circular 42/55 replaced with Planning Policy Guidance Note 2.
1995	PPG2 amended to add positive objectives for Green Belt land.
2001	Current version of PPG2 issued.

Figure 3: Key dates in Britain’s Green Belt history

Source: Green Belts: a greener future, (undated)

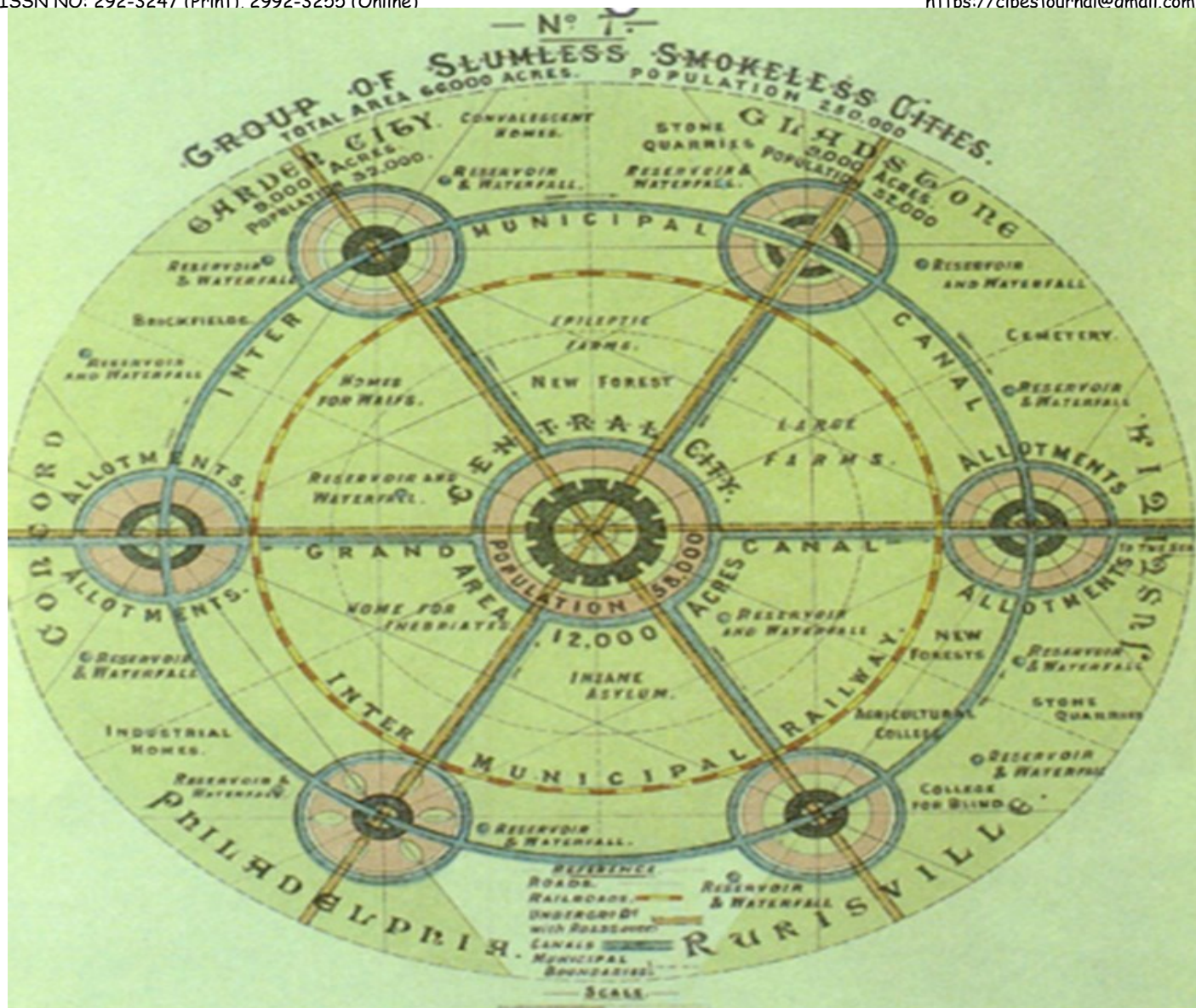


Figure 2- The original Garden City concept by Ebenezer Howard

Source: Howard, 1902

2. Historical Evolution and Functions of the Green Belt Policy

Green belts are areas of absolute development restriction surrounding an urban area. They are majorly meant to place restriction on the expansion of cities but the function varies both in time and space (Amati, 2016). They promote compact urban development by making urban neighbourhood to be self-contained and walkable (Figure 2) (Siedentop, Fina and Krehl, 2016; Dockerill, and Sturzaker, 2020).

In England, there had been records of previous attempts to restrict developments by making provision for green areas around cities as early as late 16th century (Loughran, 2020). The introduction of the earliest known Green Belt was credited to Queen Elizabeth I in 1580 when she requested that a three-mile-wide belt be provided in order to stop the spread of plague in London (Willis, 1982; Loughran, 2020; Khavarian-Garmsir *et al.*, 2023). In 1593, concerned about the high rate of growth in London, Queen Elizabeth I set three miles limit of development restriction around London through

Notable among the new urban reformers at that time was Ebenezer Howard, Patrick Abercrombie, F.J Osborne and Sir Raymond Unwin who became the chief planner of the Greater London Regional Committee and proposed a Green Girdle around London to compensate for the deficiency of open spaces in the city and differentiate between Urban and Rural areas (Amati and Taylor, 2010). The London and Home County Act of 1938 empowered Local Authorities to buy land and keep as Green Belt (Goode, 2022). The Act stipulated that Local Authorities cannot sell off such land designated as Green Belt except with the permission of the Secretary of State (Dockerill, and Sturzaker, 2020; Kirby, and Scott, 2023). This was to discourage inappropriate development and to ensure the permanence of the land such designated (Goode, 2022). However, the Green Belt policy could not be effectively implemented until the promulgation of the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act which nationalised the development right of landowners (Morrison, 2010; Alem, 2021). In 1955, the Green Belt act was approved by the then Ministry of Housing and Local Government which issued a circular to all Local Authorities asking them to establish Green Belts in their development plan wherever appropriate (Cullingworth and Nadin, 2006; Amati and Yokohari, 2007; Dockerill, and Sturzaker, 2020). In 1988, the Green Belt Policy was incorporated into the Planning Policy Guidance Note 2 (PPG 2) (Airey, and Doughty, 2020). With this inclusion, the policy was reviewed and the functions include (Amati and Yokohari, 2006):

- 1, To check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas;
2. To prevent neighbouring towns from merging into one another;
3. To assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment;
4. To preserve the setting of special character of historic towns; and
5. To assist in urban regeneration, by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land.

The objectives of the Green Belt Policy were to:

- a provide opportunities for access to the open countryside for the urban population;
- b provide opportunities for outdoor sports and outdoor recreation near urban areas;
- c. retain attractive landscapes and to enhance landscapes near where the people live;
- d improve damaged and derelict lands around town;
- e. secure nature conservation interest; and
- f. retain land in agricultural, forestry and related uses.

The Planning Policy Guidance Note 2 has now been superseded by the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) in March 2012 (Chan *et al.*, 2022). The importance attached to Green Belt by the Government is fundamentally due to its capacity to check urban sprawl and keep land permanently open, hence their essential characteristics of the British Green Belt is their openness and permanence (Department of Communities and Local Government, 2012; Kirby, and Scott, 2023)

3. Implementation and Evaluation of the Policy

Even though the concept of Green Belt has been in place for a while, its implementation however means different things in different places. In the UK in particular, strong concern over rapid and uncontrolled urban expansion, especially in London about the 2nd world war was a significant factor that inspired and shaped the development of the policy (Greenhalgh, 2020; Gupta, 2025). At the time, it was conceived as a permanently designated belt of green space encircling a city or town, maintained as a distinct separation from urban development (Whitehand, 2019). This concept has since been preserved in the UK, though with some minor variations (Amati and Yokohari, 2006).

Outside the UK, Green Belt concept has been rather more flexible, especially in places where it has been successful (Amati and Taylor, 2010). The greater flexibility observed in other contexts can be attributed

in part to evolving planning systems, which have broadened the conceptual scope of the policy while simultaneously prompting calls for its reform.

In Germany, the Green Belt policies are incorporated into regional plans with the Federal government delegating responsibility for Urban Planning to Regional Planning Authorities (Siedentop, Fina and Krehl, 2016). The success or otherwise vary between regions depending on the degree of strictness of the policies. In general, Siedentop *et al.* (2016) argue that while the policy has been effective in safeguarding valuable natural resources, it has not been entirely successful in curbing urban spillover effects.

Green Belt policy has had mixed success. The success or failure however has been linked to implementation and monitoring issues (Amati and Taylor, 2010; Tang *et al.*, 2007; Yang and Jinxing 2007). In Japan and Korea, for instance, implementation was executed via executive fiat. This unilateral approach fostered a perception of arbitrariness, ultimately undermining the policy's legitimacy and provoking resistance among landowners (Amati and Taylor, 2010). In Hong Kong, Tang *et al.* (2007) found that the administrators lack the capacity to monitor and enforce the scheme. On the other hand, the success of the policy in Toronto is owed to the provincial protective intervention as well as its green infrastructure approach, amidst other policies (Johns, 2019). Amati and Taylor, 2010 concluded that "the future of the Green Belt lies in the localised priorities where the political gesture of creating a Green Belt to guide the public imagination may be as important as the physical need to ensure long-term protection of valued landscapes and resources", emphasising the two concepts of implementation and monitoring.

4. Financial/Administrative Assessment

It has been established that the Green Belt policy has often been criticised for its arbitrariness (Thomas, and Littlewood, 2010; Han, and Go, 2019; Kirby, Scott, and Walsh, 2025). In the UK in particular, the policy is

understood to promote 'openness' and viewed as a form of amenity. From sustainability point of view, this goal is not always optimal. Issues of economic, ecological and social values that are fundamental in sustainability theme do outweigh amenity rationale. There are usually some goals of land management that may be more important. For example, Kim (2012) shows that while Green Belt is intended to contain urban growth, they affect the market for residential land and housing in numerous ways (Kim, 2012). He was equally of the opinion that they reduce the supply of developable land, indirectly increase housing prices, make housing supply less responsive to price, and consequently make housing prices volatile (Kim, 2012). These have financial and administrative implications and may be partly responsible for the reasons why there are increasing calls for the reform of the policy.

5. Evidence- Based Implementation and Performance

Illustrative examples of the implementation of the Green Belt Policy and how well they have performed in selected countries are presented below:

Tang *et al.*, (2007) evaluated the case of Hong Kong. In their own view, the size of the Green Belt area was found to be over 25% of the planning areas and 13% of its territory. The policy was found to be similar to the UK concept which has bias against development. It was however found that the planning authority does not have the "resources and determination" to sustain and manage the Green Belt for conservation and recreational purposes (Tang *et al.*, 2007). In comparison, a similar land-use mechanism of the country's parks had practically frozen development and better fulfilled the purposes of conservation and recreation than Green Belt (Zhao *et al.*, 2021). This failure of the Green Belt was shown to be as a result of the ambiguity and flexibility of the policy towards development (Kirby, Scott, and Walsh, 2025), particularly the inconsistency in the planning objectives across the territory. They therefore conclude that the Green Belt functions more as a transition (buffer) zone separating and managing the edge between urban and rural land uses

rather than as a strict conservation zone. (Tang *et al.*, 2007).

Another example was Beijing City Green Belt where a second attempt to develop a Green Belt was made. Yang and Jinxing, (2007) found that the first attempt failed to contain the expansion of the city and the fate of the second under construction may not be different. They adduced two reasons for this: the first is the underestimation of urban growth while the second was the exclusion of key stakeholders in the planning process. Notwithstanding, the 'failed' Green Belt still provides some benefits of green space which is able to enhance the environment. They therefore recommended that the Green Belt, on its own, is not sufficient to effectively curb urban sprawl and should be applied alongside complementary planning policies (Pourtaherian, and Jaeger, 2022). Nevertheless, when farmland protection and public recreation are treated as core objectives, Green Belt policy can play a valuable role by safeguarding agricultural land and providing accessible recreational resources (Kirby, and Scott, 2023).

In the UK however, Green Belt policy has recorded many achievements such as assisting in diverting most residential development to the brown fields (Thomas and Littlewood, 2010; Goode, 2022; 2025), its role in the management of world heritage sites such as in Bath in Somerset and Saltaire in West Yorkshire are well documented (CPRE, 2010). However, it was contested in high growth areas with views that alternative concepts such as Green Infrastructure rival Green Belt (Amati and Taylor, 2010; Thomas and Littlewood, 2010)

6. Proper Evaluation Guide

That the Green Belt has international recognition in Urban Planning cannot be contested as it has been implemented in Asia, Europe, and North America (Amati and Yokohari, 2006; Kim, 2012; Xie *et al.*, 2020). Green Belt's manner of implementation varied.

In the first instance, the idea of a permanent encircling space named as Green Belt does not seem to qualify for the 21st century planning objectives (Bishop *et al.*,

2020). For instance, the Green Belt's intended objectives such as preserving agricultural land within urban regions, providing recreational spaces, and containing urban expansion have, in various ways, been only partially achieved or undermined (Dockerill, and Sturzaker, 2020; Kirby, Scott, and Walsh, 2025). Globalised food importation and improvements in transportation have eliminated the need for agricultural farm land near a city. Similarly, the lack of proximity by the majority of urban dwellers to Green Belt zone weakens its recreation objective and instances of leapfrogging development in cities thwarts its purpose as a tool for urban containment (Kirby, Scott, and Walsh, 2025). These point to the need for paradigm shift. In doing so, the following two guiding principles are presented:

- The process leading to the policy should be participatory: Amati and Taylor (2010) observed that the establishment of Green Belt in the 21st century will be different from the top-down approach that succeeded in some places in the past. It will require popular support to be successful.
- The Green Belt should be more broadly defined to incorporate sustainability considerations. Rather than being treated as a standalone policy, its long-term effectiveness depends on prioritizing the underlying principles and values that support it, rather than focusing solely on the policy framework itself. (Amati and Yokohari, 2006; Kirby, and Scott, 2023). Thus, Green Belt needs to be more purposeful rather than arbitrary. "Having a planned role for the lands that are seen to support the goals of the region broadly is much different stance than a Green Belt conceived in opposition to its adjacent urban neighbours" (Amati and Taylor, 2010 :148). For example, it can provide a variety of functions including river management and climatic amelioration, healthy forest preserve, commercially viable agricultural belt, area providing food, clean air and flood protection.

7.1 Green Belt and Sustainable Development.

Sustainable development is a concept that was first brought to the fore by the Club of Rome in 1972 in her report on 'The predicament of mankind'. In 1987, the concept was popularised by the publication of 'Our Common future' by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) and it has since been applied to almost all fields of human endeavours, including the field of Urban Planning. Sustainable development according to WCED, is a '*development that meets the need of the present without compromising the ability of the future generation to meet their own needs*' (WCED, 1987: 43). For any development to be considered sustainable, such development must support economic growth, environmental protection and social equity (WCED, 1987; Elliot, 2014).

7.2 Green Belt and Environmental Protection-As the rate of urbanisation increases, there is increased demand on land to meet the needs of the ever-increasing population. Green Belts are known to be effective tools for the containment of urban growth by keeping lands permanently open (Han, Ji and Li, 2017) There are several benefits that could accrue to cities from the implementation of Green Belt policy such as lowering of air temperature, increase in relative humidity and general improvement in air quality in urban areas.

By placing restriction on development of Green Belt lands, developers are made to recycle derelict urban lands which would have been left undeveloped and make the environment unsightly. In another development, the policy helps in protecting the natural resources around urban areas: the flora and fauna, assists in maintaining a balance in the ecosystem and also helps in pollution control (Siedentop, Fina and Krehl, 2016)

7.3 Green Belt and Economic Growth- Generally, the effect of the Green Belt policy on the economic growth has been proven to be rather negative (Morrison, 2010). Green Belt preservation is not without its consequenc-

es, specifically the displacement or restriction of necessary housing and industrial development (Willis and Whitby, 1985). For example, it is believed that an average of about 200,000 new homes annually are required in the UK to keep up with demand (Langengen, Myers, and Emerson, 2024), but the Green Belt policy has been found to be reducing the land available to development of new homes (Clarke, Nohrova and Thomas, 2014; Koster and Zabihidan, 2017). Clarke, Nohrova and Thomas (2014) argue that to be able to provide the needed number of housing units, there is the need to free more lands, most of which are locked up in Green Belts. In highlighting the negative impact of the Green Belt Policy's restrictive influence on housing supply, Kate Barker's report advocated for a review of Green Belt boundaries by Planning Authorities to enable development that aligns with sustainability objectives (Barker, 2006).

7.4 Green Belt and Social Equity-The Green Belt policy is believed to promote housing shortage in urban areas. The tendency is that it causes increase in housing price in urban areas. It encourages social inequality (The Guardian, 2014) as it is believed to have more adverse effect on the poor as it makes it increasingly difficult for them to be able to afford their desired housing units (Sturzaker and Mell, 2016).

In another vein, the Green Belt policy has been found to have many social benefits. One of the benefits of the policy is that it affords urban dwellers the opportunity to have access to the countryside by providing the country side scene within a reasonable distance from the city centre. It equally provides recreational opportunities such as camping, biking and walking for city dwellers which has a positive effect on their health (Natural England and CPRE, Undated).

8.1 Conclusion

Although the Green Belt policy has been a long-standing planning tool that has been applied in many places to tackle urban challenges and especially in the

United Kingdom where it has almost become emblematic of the planning landscape, there has been an increased call for its review (Morrison, 2010; Gunn, 2007; Barker, 2006).

In recent time, in view of the realisation of the acute shortage of housing and the need to step up housing provision in the UK, the call to release some Green Belt lands for housing delivery has gained popularity by people who considered the policy to have constituted a hindrance to sustainable urban development rather than enabling it. This in turn has been greeted with resistance by those who are considered as ardent supporters of the policy.

There is the need for people on both side of the divide to work together to reach a common ground on the best option to achieve sustainability in urban development rather than sticking to a principle which is considered as an emblem of the English planning system.

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