

We all know that the providing enough houses in places that are attractive and where there is a chance to work and put down roots requires planning at a strategic scale, says **David Lock**

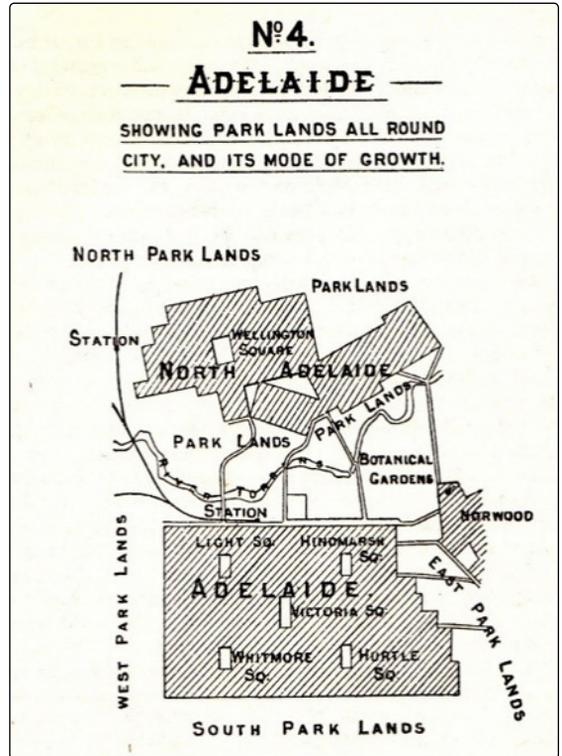
squeezing it in – green belt planning is floundering



It happens to be a September evening in the café in Guildford Cathedral, but it could be any venue in any UK area under housing pressure. Surrey is under acute pressure. The Country Land and Business Association (CLA) has staged a debate under the title 'Housing in Surrey: How can we squeeze it in?'. How have we reached the point that this question needs to be asked, and is so hard to answer? The answer is Green Belt, the Cameron/Clegg coalition, and some out-of-focus policy initiatives.

Green Belt needs safety valves

There are several claims for the invention of the Green Belt, including Ebenezer Howard in *To-Morrow – A Peaceful Path to Real Reform* (republished as *Garden Cities of Tomorrow*), where each of his Garden Cities is surrounded by an agricultural belt. The purpose was to contain the outward spread of the urban area, to provide foodstuff and recreation for the residents, and to accommodate appropriate facilities such as brickworks and (it being 1899) 'homes for inebriates'. As a matter of fact, as with

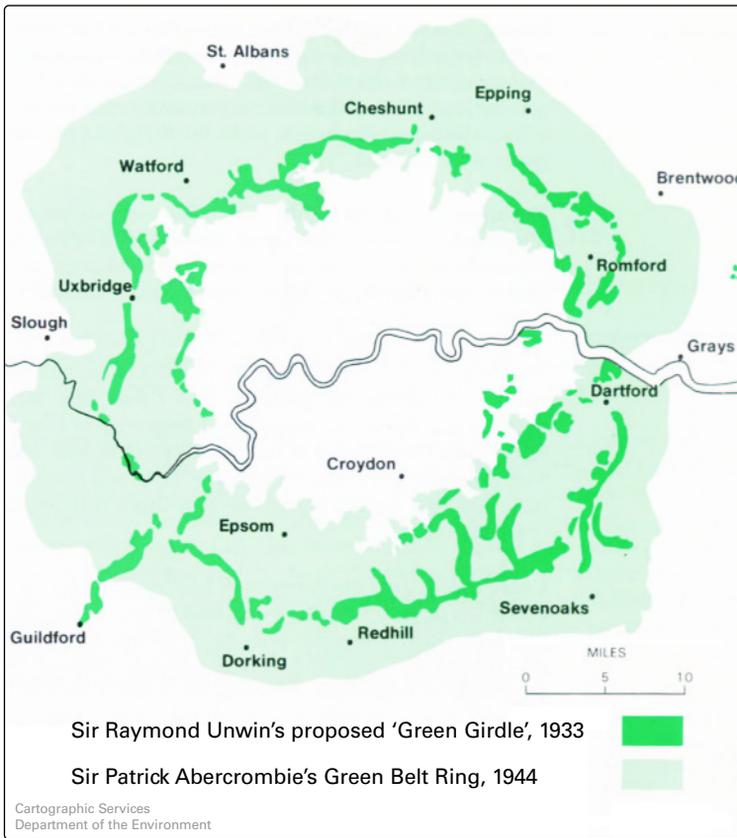


'Adelaide and its lands' - diagram from Ebenezer Howard's *Garden Cities of To-Morrow*



Adelaide 2019 (part) - with the now inner parkland belt clearly in view

Courtesy Google Earth Pro



Unwin and Abercrombie's 'Green Girdle' and 'Green Belt Ring' proposals

most other features of his invention (as he called it), Howard had borrowed the idea. This one was by Colonel Light in his plan for Adelaide in Australia (and still standing true deep inside vast Adelaide today).

In planning policy terms, the modern Green Belt story started in 1929, with Sir Raymond Unwin's proposal to the London County Council for a 'Green Girdle' – narrow strips of green space one or two miles wide to stop London's sprawl. The Green Belt Act 1938 gave powers for green separation to be planned for, but it was Sir Patrick Abercrombie's 'Green Belt Ring' averaging about 9.7 kilometres (6 miles) wide in his advisory Greater London Plan of 1944 that gave us the first strategic expression of the idea at a scale that Surrey would recognise.

It is essential to grasp that Unwin's girdle idea was to contain large tracts of land which might one day be developed. Abercrombie's plan identified sites for eight New Towns, which subsequently were built, and also what we call today the M25. Both Unwin and Abercrombie's approaches balanced policies of containment with provision for planned growth.

Wikipedia tells us that after 1955 town planning policy enabled the Metropolitan Green Belt to

grow to around 35 miles in width, covering an area roughly three times the size of London. The much overlooked Town Development Act 1952 enabled strategic agreements between London and market towns in the region for strategic growth – beyond the Green Belt – to take place.

After local government reorganisation in 1973, when county-wide Structure Plans were prepared, Green Belt designation was consolidated as an explicitly defensive measure against the spread of the great cities into the counties' territory. Even so, there were various regional strategies which identified growth points to accommodate urban pressures. In the South East, Milton Keynes and Peterborough New Towns had this role, and much later the East Thames Corridor. Without planned 'safety valves', the policies of containment were unsustainable. The medium for strategic plans became regularised as Regional Planning Guidance (RPG), and later Regional Spatial Strategies (RSSs).

Be careful of what you wish for

The scale of housing need, the geography of work, and the subsidies needed to recycle damaged

land (even assuming that the locals were willing to lose their possible parks, allotments and wildlife areas), overwhelmed the under-resourced and over-politicised RSS system. The RSSs had tried to confront the need for development land for housing and employment, and in so doing had upset the existing 'host' populations of towns and villages in the carefully chosen locations where necessary development might best be accommodated. 'Not in my back yard', they shouted, pointing at disused land in London and (being Southerners) in the North, airily demanding that those in need of a home and work – not them, or their families, it seems – should go there instead.

The NIMBY prescription was soon exposed to be only part of the answer, so the campaign moved on from the geography of development to the need for it. An argument developed against the scale of in-migration into the UK and the South East region, even though the role of the planning system is to accommodate human beings and their doings. Please go elsewhere to argue if there are too many human beings, or human beings of an unwanted type, if you must. There was the argument, too, that the houses we build are too big, or at a density that is too low, or that they are too expensive, or too ugly, and so on.

Those in need of a home and of work being geographically spread out and at that time not particularly engaged, politically, it was no surprise when on 6 July 2010 the new Cameron/Clegg coalition government proudly announced the revocation of RSSs under Section 79(6) of the Local Democracy Economic Development and Construction Act 2009. The NIMBYs cheered; there were summer parties and fireworks in celebration, especially in the Green Belt towns and villages.

But there was a huge sting in the tail which the party-goers had not spotted: with regard to housing numbers to be planned for 'Local planning authorities will be responsible for establishing the right level of local housing provision in their area, and identifying a long term supply of housing land'. From now on, each local authority area had to agree the housing quantum and where to accommodate it *within their own administrative boundary*. Gone were the strategic safety valves of Milton Keynes, Peterborough, and the East Thames Corridor. Each town and village now had to be assessed for possible local expansion, and government policy soon provided that if an 'objectively assessed housing need (OAN)' was not established and provided for in an up-to-date adopted Local Plan, then there would be a presumption in favour of speculative sustainable development proposals brought forward by developers.

This at last provoked (most) local planning authorities to get on with local planning, but in

popular areas with employment opportunities, and with local young people wanting to stay local, it can be seen why the CLA can still ask how a county like Surrey might 'squeeze it in'.

Displacement therapy

In March 2011, the House of Commons Communities and Local Government Committee published its report on the implications of the abolition of the RSS system.¹ The Committee warned that:

'The intended abolition ... leaves a vacuum at the heart of the English planning system which could have profound social, economic and environmental consequences set to last for many years.'

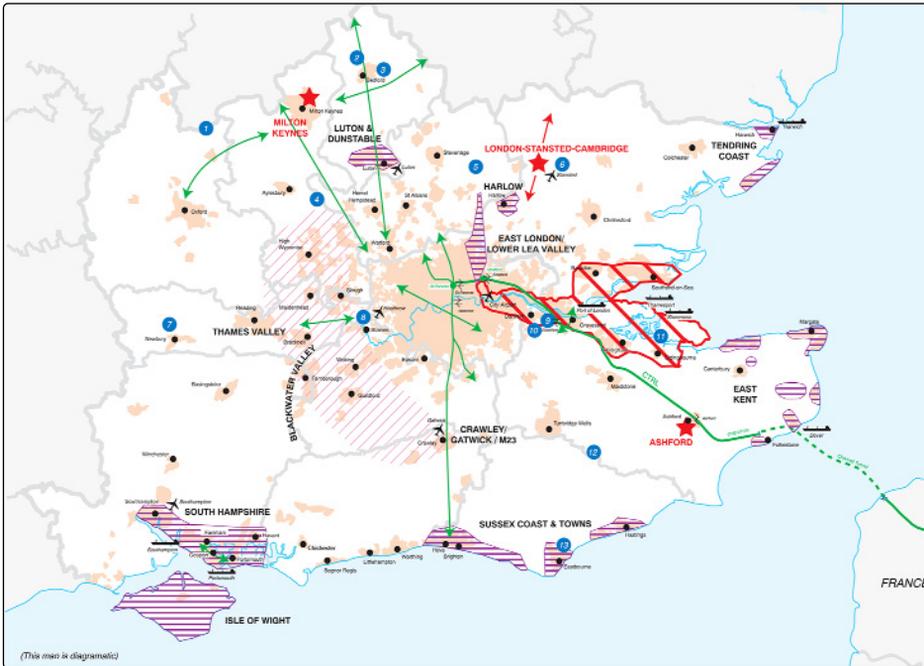
Committee Chair Clive Betts said:²

*'Regional Spatial Strategies bridged the gap between those planning issues determined by local policy or concern, and those subject to policy goals defined at a national level – such as those for housing or renewable energy. We ... are concerned about the hiatus created by their intended abolition. This is giving rise to an inertia that is likely to hinder development – making it much harder to deliver necessary but controversial or emotive 'larger than local' facilities – such as waste disposal sites, mineral workings or sites for gypsies and travellers. It will also make it more difficult to ensure that our national need for new housing is met.'*²

The Committee warned that the abolition of RSSs would hamper the UK's economic recovery and delay new housebuilding. How right they were.

Heroic efforts are being made to bring forward Local Plan strategies, which look only a few years ahead, but the pool of possible places to grow in the Green Belt is being exhausted. First, the 'exceptional' case has to be made to allocate the land. Second, as it is obvious that a few big initiatives are less impactful than many small ones, lead times for allocated sites are long, and protection against speculative developers in the meantime is weak. Not everywhere can continue to consume its smoke in terms of housing and employment activity and, even if suitable parcels of land could be found, the dispersed infrastructure cost of that kind of sprawl would be unaffordable as capital and unsustainable as a revenue burden. The planning system in Green Belt areas is floundering. Housing supply does not rise fast enough, and prices rise. Planning for employment planning seems to have atrophied.

Frustrated Ministers try pulling other levers of policy to try to numb the pain of spatial planning



The strategic growth points in RP9: Regional Planning Guidance for the South East, 2001

at the local level. Mrs Thatcher's 'Right to Buy' continues, by which tenants of social housing can buy the freehold at a discount. The stock of social housing thereby continues to decline, limiting its availability to those in most dire need, and accelerating homelessness and rough sleeping. The story that each sale would lead to a new house being built was never believable, and so it has proved to be.

The Help to Buy scheme launched in 2013 enabled first-time buyers of a new home to take out a bigger debt than they would otherwise be able to carry. This greater buying power has enabled housebuilders to raise their sale prices, and to focus on building small homes to fit first-time buyers rather than creating mixed communities.

And a scheme was announced which allows offices and commercial buildings to be converted to homes without planning permission, some of which are windowless, many without even a balcony, maybe with the car park as playground for the children. Shame on those who removed planning controls to make this happen. Shame on those developers who create appalling homes through this freedom to exploit those in housing need.

All these types of initiative are displacement therapy. We all know that there are not enough houses in places that are attractive and where there is a chance to work and put down roots. And we know that to do the right thing requires planning at

the strategic scale, and delivery by the proven method of New Town Development Corporations of serious size and longevity, using a fair share of the uplift in land value to help cover the cost. Anything else is buying a bit of time, titheing each neighbourhood for small areas for yet another bleak block of flats or massed-produced identical housing units somewhere near a bus stop. It is deferring the inevitable, and in political terms it is pointless – this period is upsetting *everyone*, not just the NIMBYs.

● **David Lock CBE** is Strategic Planning Adviser at David Lock Associates, where colleagues are consultants to Guildford Borough Council and some other Green Belt authorities, and elsewhere to promoters of large schemes in Green Belt areas. He is a Vice-President and former Chair of the TCPA. This article is based on the author's contribution to the CLA debate in Guildford Cathedral held on 18 September 2019. The views expressed are personal.

Notes

- 1 *Abolition of Regional Spatial Strategies: A Planning Vacuum*. HC 517. Second Report of Session 2010-11. Communities and Local Government Committee. House of Commons, Mar. 2011. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmselect/cmcomloc/517/517.pdf>
- 2 'MPs warn that England needs more than a vacuum for strategic planning'. News Release. Communities and Local Government Committee. House of Commons, Mar. 2011. www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/communities-and-local-government-committee/news/report---rss---pn/