

How Green Belt Policy Could be Adapted to Promote Sustainability

This short paper, written for the Labour Party's internal policy review process, illustrates one of the key problems described in my earlier paper for the same process.¹ It shows how current planning policy, including greenbelt policy in particular, is causing perverse outcomes, and how planning policy could be reformed to prevent this.

As described in the earlier paper, larger cities have more sustainable travel patterns than small towns and villages. People in cities are more favourable to housing expansion than people who live in small towns and villages. And yet, since 2011, the planning system has

- severely constrained the expansion of most cities and is
- pushed housing expansion onto small towns and villages.
- promoted highly damaging road schemes through green belts.

This paper illustrates the problem and explains how green belt policy could be adapted, to

- protect the countryside around small towns and villages
- allow cities (with the possible exception of London) to selectively expand, and
- promote higher density public transport-oriented development

How Planning Became Less Sustainable Under the Coalition: the Example of the West of England

Figure 1 below is taken from the Regional Spatial Strategy for Southwest England, which was awaiting an Examination in Public in 2011, when the Coalition Government scrapped regional planning. Its strategy for housing growth was concentrated around the cities of Bristol and Bath, both of which had been growing rapidly in population and GDP. All of the main growth areas are shown within the greenbelt, whose boundaries would need to be moved outwards to accommodate them. The diagram shows no interurban road building schemes. As all of the growth was proposed within, or contiguous with, the urban areas, the transport pressures created by the growth could have been addressed through improvements to the urban transport networks.

The scale of the proposed housing development caused considerable opposition, some of which was presented as opposition to "building on the greenbelt"; the Southwest RSS was cited in a parliamentary report as an illustration of this.²

In scrapping Regional Spatial Strategies, Communities Secretary Eric Pickles attacked them for forcing local authorities to:

"redraw Green Belt boundaries and designate large areas of countryside for new development."

The political appeal of the new system was to better protect the greenbelt and the countryside.

Inset Diagram 4.1 West of England

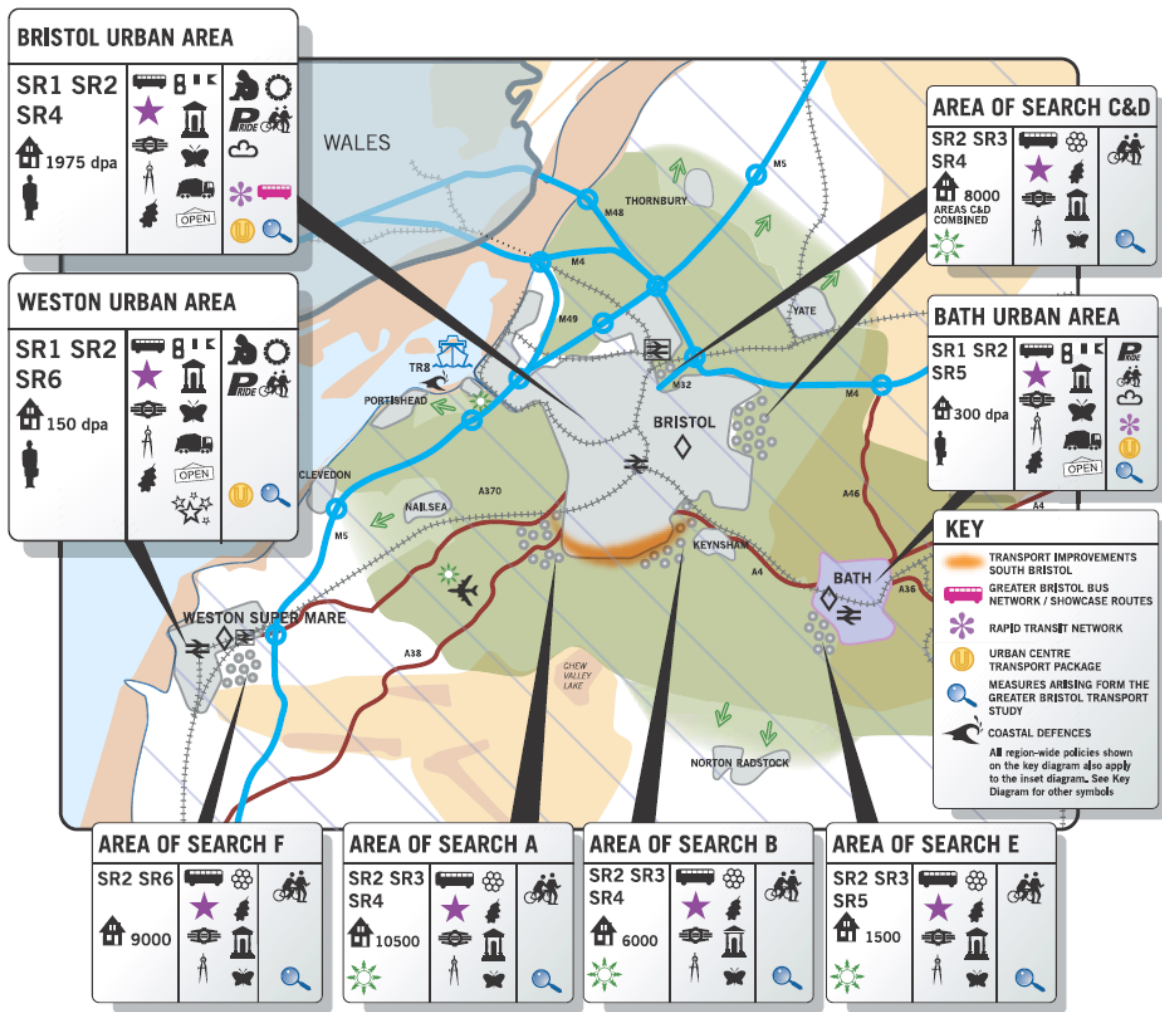


Figure 1 Key Diagram from the Southwest of England Regional Spatial Strategy

What Happened in Practice?

Figure 2 below is taken from the deposit version of the West of England Joint Spatial Strategy, submitted for examination in 2019. The diagram shows 12 strategic development locations – in very different locations from Figure 1. Of the 12, only two are contiguous with the Bristol conurbation. The other 10 are extensions to small towns or villages; three of them infill gaps in the greenbelt; the remaining seven, comprising most of the planned new housing, are ‘leapfrogging’ developments beyond the greenbelt. In those locations, all the new housing will be relatively low in density, so the total loss of countryside will be greater than would have occurred under Figure 1. Greenbelt policy was cited as the main reason for this choice of development locations.³

Although the presumption against new housing in the greenbelt has strengthened in recent years, there is no equivalent presumption against road building. In order to support housing expansion in the remote locations shown above four entirely new roads are planned – through the greenbelt!

The WoE Joint Transport Study describes the impact of one of these roads (the one which passes between Nailsea and Backwell) as follows:

“based on preliminary screening of environmental designations: Scheme falls within: Greenbelt, SSSI, Ancient Woodland, Priority Habitats, SAM and Flood Zone 3. Scheme is also adjacent to (within 500m) of Listed Buildings and Registered Park and Garden.”

Thus, a policy which was supposed to protect the countryside and the greenbelt will cause extensive and unnecessary damage to both. Similar problems are afflicting sub-regional plans around several other cities with greenbelts, particularly Oxford and Cambridge.

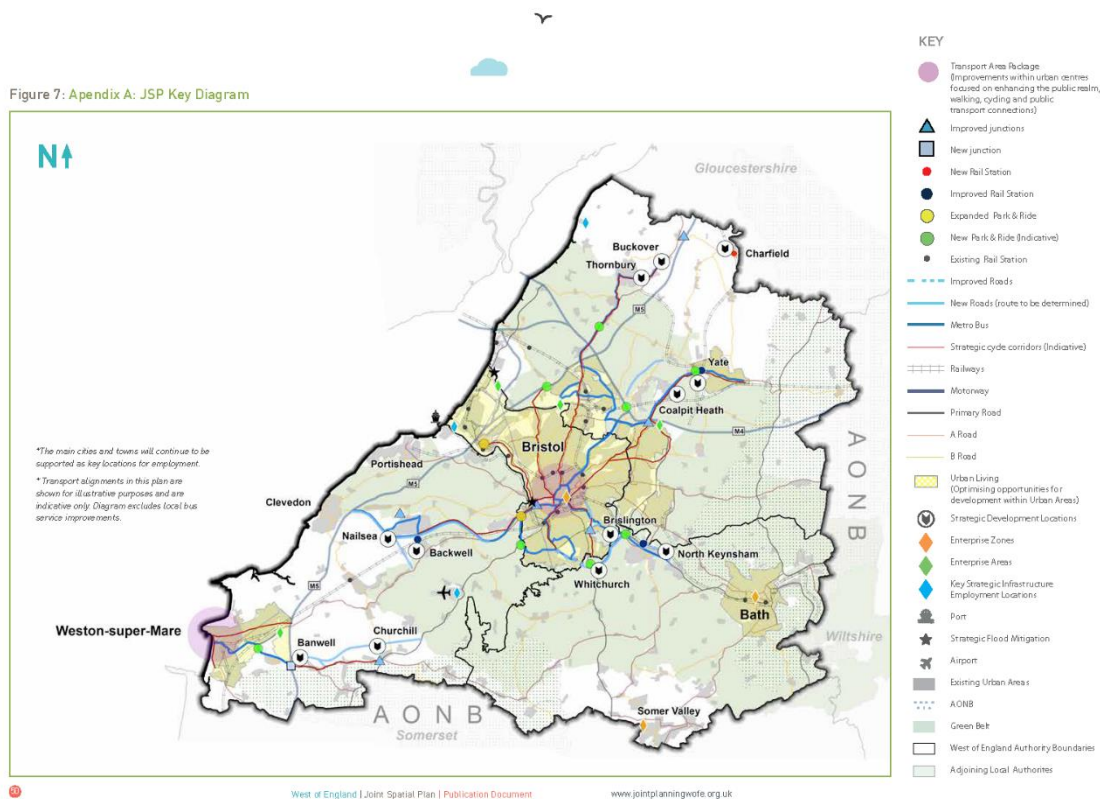


Figure 2 – Key Diagram from West of England Joint Spatial Strategy⁴

Public Opinion on House Building

According to the British Social Attitudes Survey, opposition to housebuilding varies strongly according to the size of settlement. It is strongest amongst rural dwellers and inhabitants of villages, and weakest amongst city-dwellers.⁵ This would suggest that the balance of political advantage lies in expanding cities and protecting villages and small towns. As explained in my earlier paper¹ the pattern of movement within cities is much more sustainable than in small towns and villages. There are many other reasons why sustainable development can be more easily accommodated within larger settlements. This offers the possibility of a win-win scenario for any political party willing to challenge the status quo.

A Better Approach?

The default position of planning policy ought to constrain development around small towns and villages, and facilitate high density public-transport-oriented urban extensions to major cities. It would not be necessary, nor would it be desirable, to entirely remove existing greenbelts.

The **Metropolitan greenbelt** around London is a special case, requiring solutions beyond the scope of this paper. The discussion and recommendations below refer to the greenbelts around **other cities**.

Current policy could be reformed, mainly through changes to the NPPF, as follows:

- 1) Introduce a presumption against leapfrogging development i.e. development planned outside a greenbelt, which is designed to satisfy the housing needs of the conurbation within the greenbelt.
- 2) Introduce a requirement for planners of city-regions to plan for high density public transport-oriented urban extensions
- 3) Greenbelt boundaries should be reviewed where necessary to prevent 1) and facilitate 2) above.
- 4) Create new greenbelts around small towns and villages, with exceptions for affordable 'local needs' housing. These greenbelts would be reviewable in the same way as the urban greenbelts, subject to a hierarchy starting with the larger settlements

How to Present the New Policy

The new policy should be presented as strengthening green belt policy to respond to modern pressures. The total area of green belt would increase under this policy, which would appeal to two groups of voters:

- City-residents frustrated at lack of housing opportunities
- Residents of villages and small towns threatened with inappropriate development

Labour should point out the illogicality of a system which prevents cities from growing (against the wishes of their residents) but allows developers to build endless housing estates around small towns and villages (against the wishes of their residents). It could point to the perverse unintended consequences of the current system, which purports to protect the countryside and ends up destroying it.

¹ Melia, S. (2019) *Transport and Urban Housing Growth – Unfinished Business for Labour*. Available on: <http://eprints.uwe.ac.uk/41593>

² See: House of Commons Communities and Local Government Committee (2010) [Abolition of Regional Spatial Strategies: a planning vacuum](#). Page 7.

³ Ibid. paragraph 11.

⁴ West of England Authorities (2018) [Joint Spatial Strategy](#). Deposit Version

⁵ MHCLG (2018) [Public attitudes to house building Findings from the 2017 British Social Attitudes survey](#). See page 9.