

**University of  
Hertfordshire UH**

# Green Belts: Past, Present, Future?

Planning Officers Society

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University of  
Hertfordshire **UH**

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# Section 1

The Past





Source: Hall 2014, p. 14

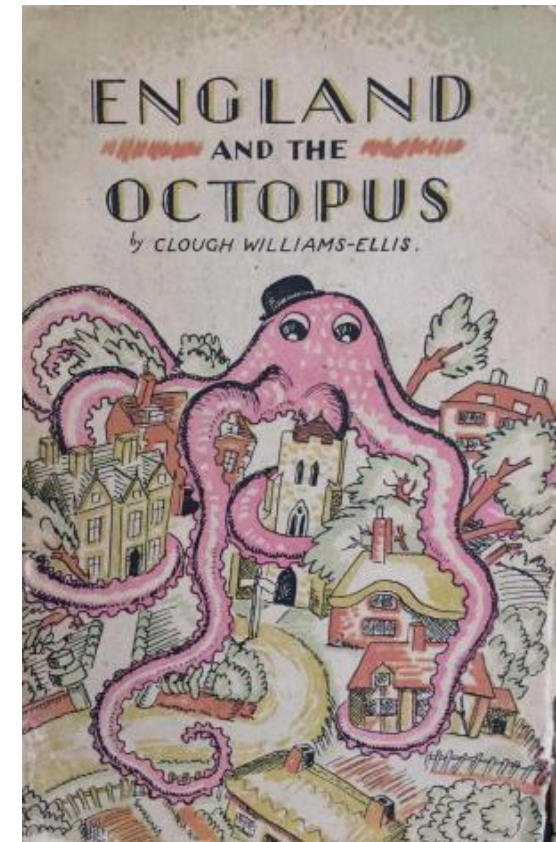
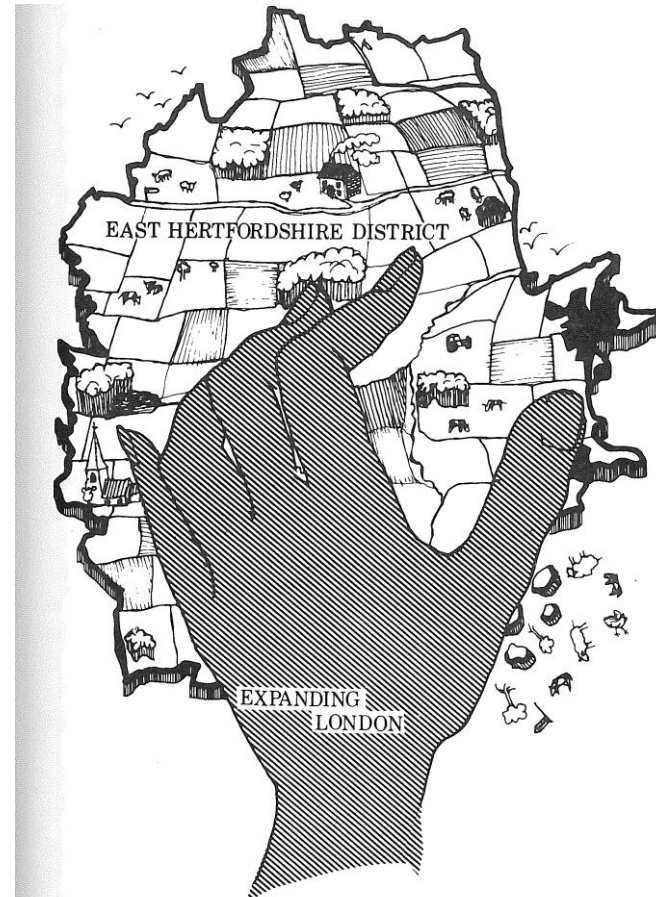


Source: Hall 2014, pp. 20-21



# The “Othering” of the Urban

- Cities should be “walled round, so that there may be no **festering and wretched suburb** anywhere... with a belt of beautiful gardens and orchard around the walls” (Ruskin, 1868 (2008), p. 105)
- Land at the edge of towns described as ‘a **hideous and depressing girdle**’ by Raymond Unwin (1909 (1994), p. 154)



# C THE FOUR RINGS

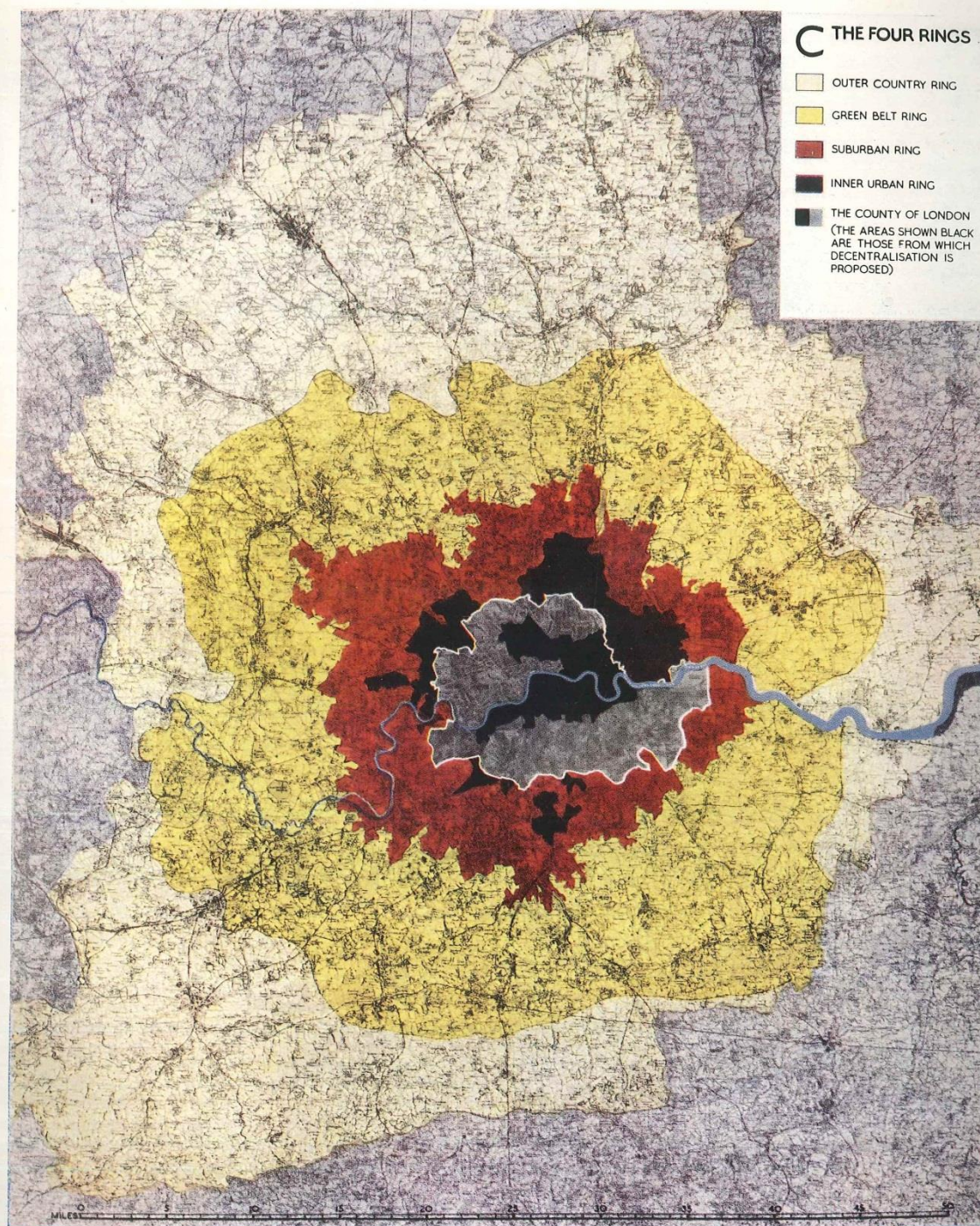
OUTER COUNTRY RING

GREEN BELT RING

SUBURBAN RING

INNER URBAN RING

THE COUNTY OF LONDON  
(THE AREAS SHOWN BLACK  
ARE THOSE FROM WHICH  
DECENTRALISATION IS  
PROPOSED)



# Did it work?

- “A vivid contrast emerges. On the one hand, a single, strong, competent town planner [Abercrombie] was commissioned by the Government to prepare a plan for metropolitan London. On the other, diverse [sic] responsibilities were assigned... [including to] a Ministry... cool to national or strong regional planning... It is little wonder that, in such circumstances, the Greater London Plan proved able, at best, to provide ideas and grand policy but did not become the nucleus of the vital, comprehensive planning many desired” (Foley, 1963, p. 79)

# Green belts became part of national planning policy in 1955...

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“...in order:

- a) to check the further growth of a large built-up area;
- b) to prevent neighbouring towns from merging into one another; or
- c) to preserve the special character of a town”

(Ministry of Housing & Local Government, 1955)

# Section 2

The Present



## ... and is still there now

“Green Belt serves five purposes:

- a) to check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas;
- b) to prevent neighbouring towns merging into one another;
- c) to assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment;
- d) to preserve the setting and special character of historic towns; and
- e) to assist in urban regeneration, by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land”

(MHCLG, 2024, para. 143)

# 21<sup>st</sup> Century Othering

## What do *you* want?

A hedgerow teeming  
with butterflies?

**OR** An out-of-town supermarket  
teeming with cars and shoppers?

A quiet stand of oaks  
casting shade on the path?

**OR** Roaring juggernauts belching  
exhaust on a motorway verge?

Children lying in the grass  
gazing at the starlight?

**OR** Enough electric lights to make  
the night look like day?

A babbling stream winding among  
the bluebells in a wood?

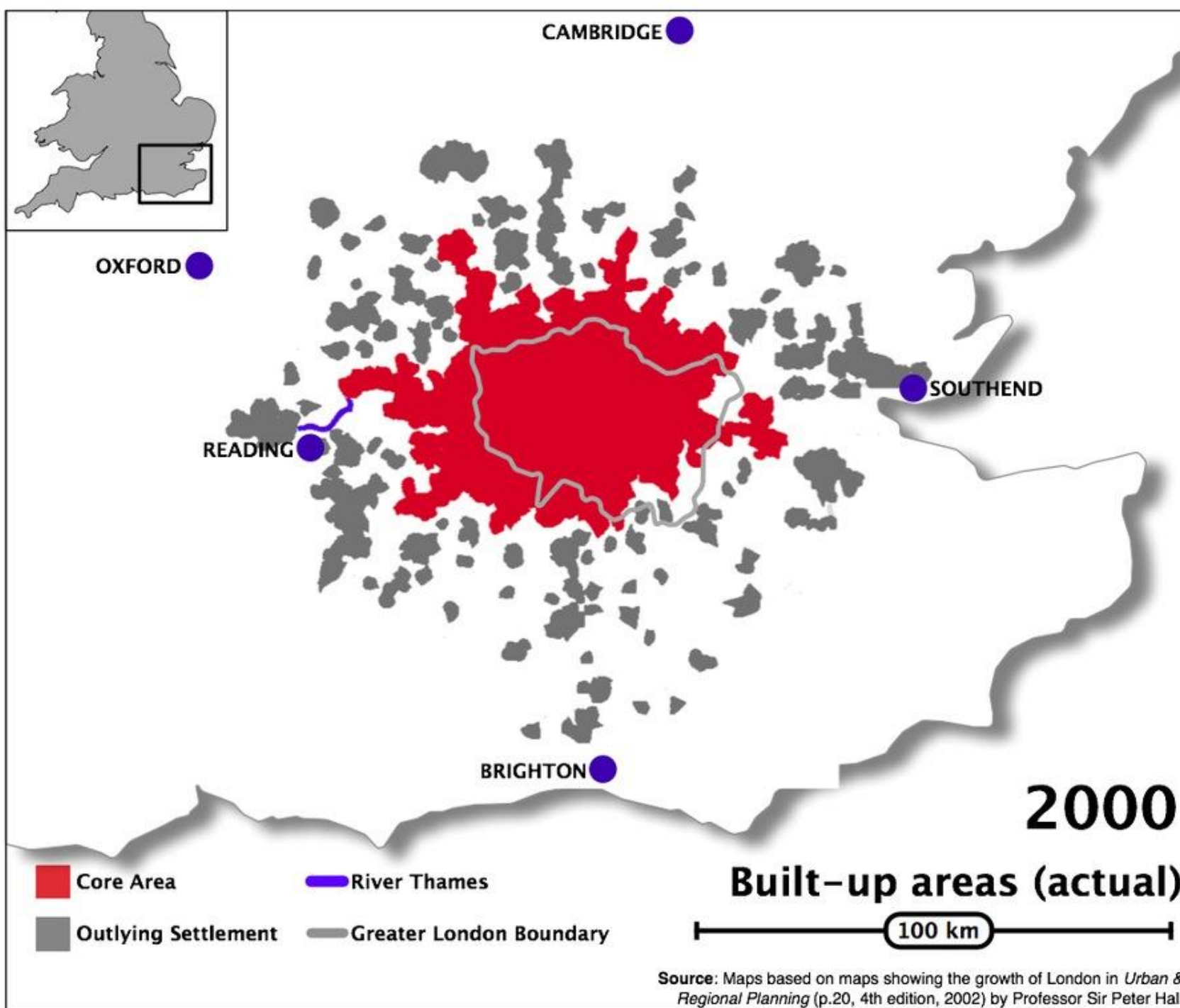
**OR** A stream of cars to new  
executive homes half a mile away?

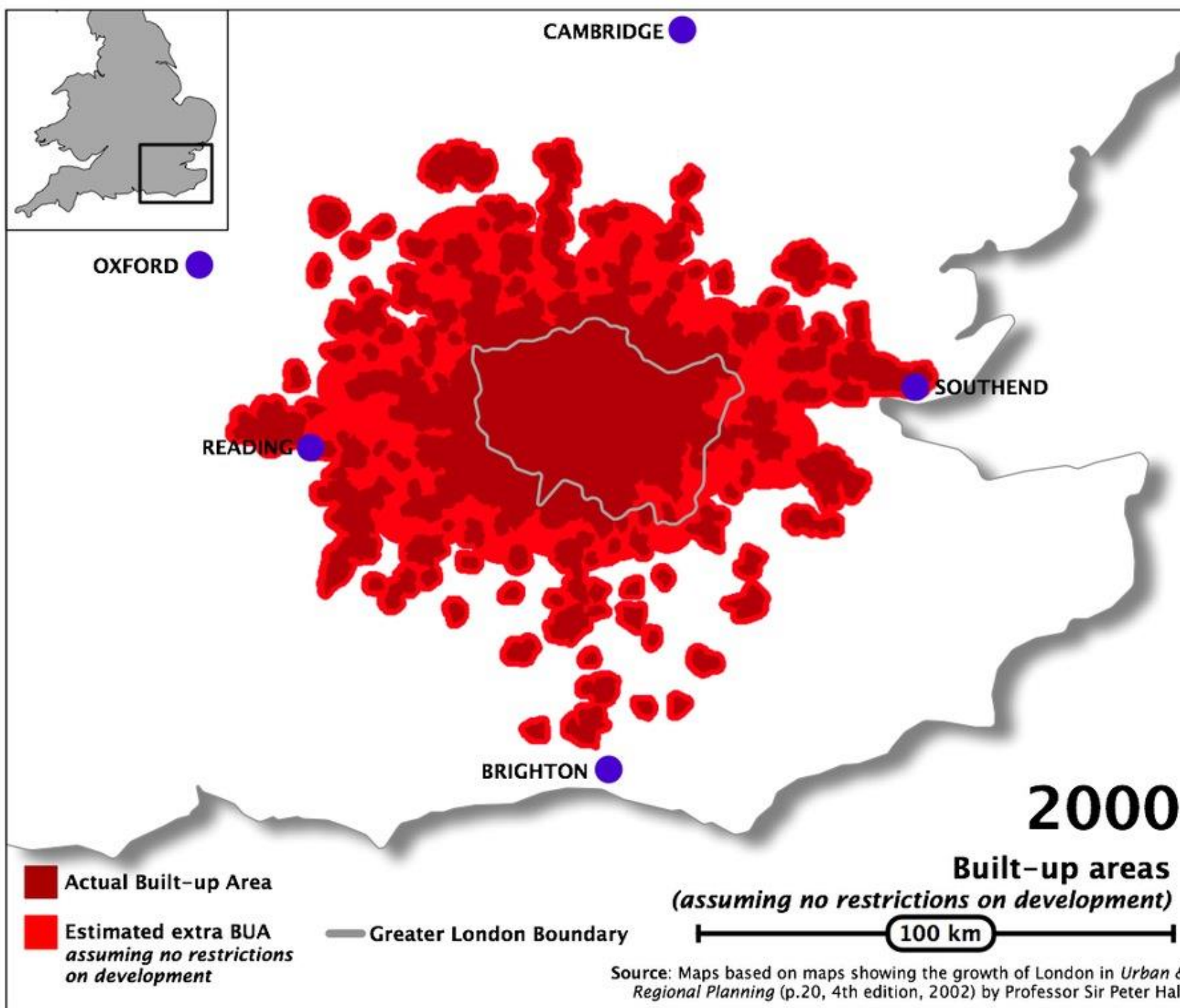
## What are *you* going to do?

YES, I'll help CPRE act locally by  
sending a gift of £2 a month.

**OR** Do nothing. Our disappearing  
countryside can look after itself.

**My countryside, my voice. I'm making a stand**





Source: Nick Green



Source: Sturzaker & Mell, 2016, p. 69 (courtesy A Schulze Baing)

Map based on Corine land cover data © European Environment Agency (EEA)  
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# Other impacts

1. Urban sprawl has negative social consequences for cities, such as on health; so limiting urban sprawl through green belts may address such issues, but there is evidence that green belts are not well used for exercise
2. Opinions differ as to whether green belts have contributed to housing shortage, higher price, lower size of housing in England
3. They have certainly led to “leapfrogging”, where development takes place *beyond* the green belt – which in turn leads to higher costs of commuting
4. And they have led to densification, “garden grabbing”, loss of urban green space
5. Hard to judge the aggregate costs/benefits in environmental, social and economic terms

(Sturzaker & Mell, 2016)

# A critique in 1973

The costs and benefits of “the containment of urban England” through green belts have not been equally spread.

Four groups have paid the **costs** of the containment of urban England: Aspirant rural/suburban dwellers; Public housing tenants in the big cities, living in high-rise developments; Lower income families living in private rented housing in the big cities; The “new suburbanites”, with separation from jobs and services.

Three groups have **benefited** from the containment: Inhabitants of new and expanding towns; Those who possess property rights in land, including those who own land for development, especially owner occupiers; Existing rural inhabitants

(Hall et al., 1973)

“None of this was in the minds of the founding fathers of the planning system. They cared very much for the preservation and the conservation of rural England, to be sure. But that was only part of a total package of policies, to be enforced in the interests of all by beneficent central planning. It certainly was not the intention of the founders that people should live cramped jobs in homes destined for premature slumdom, far from urban services or jobs; or that city dwellers should live in blank cliffs of flats, far from the ground, without access to playspace for their children. Somewhere along the way, a great deal was lost, a system distorted and the great mass of the people betrayed”

(Hall et al., 1973, p. 433)

# Section 3

The Future?



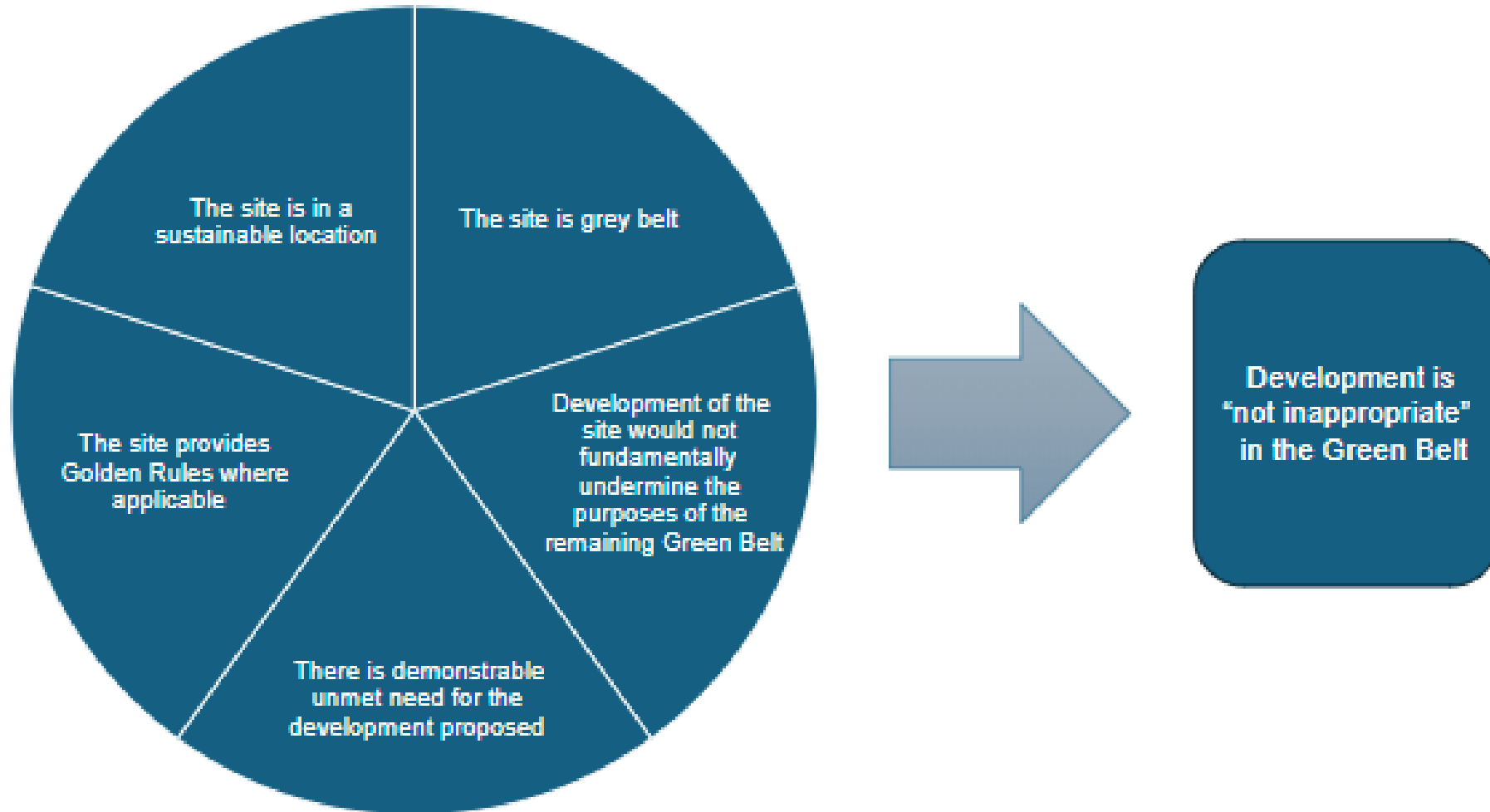
# Current Green Belt policy

- “Once established, Green Belt boundaries should only be altered where exceptional circumstances are fully evidenced and justified through the preparation or updating of plans” (MHCLG, 2024, para 145).
- “Exceptional circumstances in this context include, but are not limited to, **instances where an authority cannot meet its identified need for homes, commercial or other development through other means.** If that is the case, authorities should review Green Belt boundaries in accordance with the policies in this Framework and propose alterations to meet these needs in full, unless the review provides clear evidence that doing so would fundamentally undermine the purposes (taken together) of the remaining Green Belt, when considered across the area of the plan.” (ibid, para 145)

# The Grey Belt

- “In order to identify grey belt land, authorities should produce a Green Belt assessment... [which should, *inter alia*]... evaluate the contribution each assessment area makes to Green Belt purposes (a), (b), and (d)” (MHCLG, 2025, para. 3)
- “Green Belt serves five purposes:
  - a) to check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas;
  - b) to prevent neighbouring towns merging into one another;
  - c) to assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment;
  - d) to preserve the setting and special character of historic towns; and
  - e) to assist in urban regeneration, by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land” (MHCLG, 2024, para. 143)

# The Grey Belt II



Source: MHCLG, 2025, para. 10

# The Golden Rules

- “Where major development involving the provision of housing is proposed on land released from the Green Belt through plan preparation or review, or on sites in the Green Belt subject to a planning application, the following contributions (‘Golden Rules’) should be made:
  - a) affordable housing which reflects either: (i) development plan policies produced in accordance with paragraphs 67-68 of this Framework; or (ii) until such policies are in place, the policy set out in paragraph 157 below;
  - b) necessary improvements to local or national infrastructure; and
  - c) the provision of new, or improvements to existing, green spaces that are accessible to the public. New residents should be able to access good quality green spaces within a short walk of their home, whether through onsite provision or through access to offsite spaces” (MHCLG, 2024, para. 156).
- **“the government wants to see 50 per cent affordable housing provided in all grey and very special circumstances green belt grants of permission” (King, 2025)**

# How new planning guidance turns the dial

Gregory Jones KC of law firm Francis Taylor Buildings Chambers said the case reinforced the fact that the definition of inappropriate development is not a heritage or landscape designation. “Fundamentally, the purposes of green belt are about preserving openness, not about whether the land is beautiful or historic,” he added.

However, conservation bodies have raised concerns about the two decisions. In response, Lizzie Bundred Woodward, planning policy manager at countryside charity CPRE, said that “far from speeding up development, the government’s so-called grey belt” was “creating confusion and delay while putting green spaces at risk”,

She warned that “without a clear definition of what grey belt actually means”, planning inspectors would “continue to deliver conflicting judgements that could have lasting consequences for protected landscapes and people’s access to nature”.



# Conclusion

- The history (and present) of green belts is hard to separate from an “othering” of the urban
- Green belts have indisputably had positive impacts in terms of urban sprawl
- Other impacts are perhaps more mixed
- They retain a huge hold on the popular imagination, and perhaps on that of planners
- Whether, and how, they endure is now up for debate – again!
- This will not be an easy conversation to have – is strategic planning the best (or least worst?!) place to have that conversation?

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# Thank you

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