

## **Dr Jiayi Jin et al – Written evidence (TGB0034)**

### **Grey Belt in England: Insights from a multi-lens analysis**

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### **What is your assessment of the Government's definition of "Grey Belt"?**

#### **a) What is your understanding of what makes a "limited contribution" to achieving the purposes of the Green Belt?**

According to government pledges, Grey Belt land will be prioritised for development after brownfield sites, with both categories receiving precedence over other Green Belt areas, which are expected to accommodate at least 50% affordable housing. However, the precise definition of Grey Belt land remains ambiguous until formal designations are made. Redeveloping these areas presents challenges, such as contamination risks from old fuel tanks, but also offers opportunities to advance sustainable urban growth. By focusing on Grey Belt redevelopment, urban planners can mitigate the need for greenfield development, preserving natural landscapes and curbing urban sprawl.

In our research project, *Participatory Neighbourhood Planning for the 'Brown to Green' Transition in Tyneside*, we explored green infrastructure, heritage coast, brownfield and greyfield sites in South Tyneside and North Tyneside. Greyfield in our research was defined as occupied areas that are economically and technologically outdated, underperforming, and under-capitalised.

Unlike brownfield or greenfield sites, greyfields often remain occupied, which often leads to community resistance against "overdevelopment" and perceived "changes to neighbourhood character." Such opposition presents a significant challenge to the push for more consolidated urban redevelopment.

Grey Belt sites, in particular, encompass elements of nature, landscape, heritage and urban environments. Despite this, they often exist in a state of dysfunction. Regeneration initiatives in these areas have elevated landscape architecture as a crucial, long-overdue contributor to societal discourse, especially pertinent in our current geological epoch. On a practical level, these projects were praised for revitalising neighbourhoods environmentally, socially, and economically, highlighting a new functionality for sustained and inclusive spaces in shaping future cities.

We acknowledge that many low-quality or visually unappealing areas exist within the Green Belt of Tyne and Wear, which no longer effectively serve their original purposes. These areas often fail to prevent urban sprawl, protect the countryside from encroachment, or preserve the character of historic towns.

Additionally, they may offer little environmental, recreational, or aesthetic value, contributing minimally to the broader objectives of the Green Belt. Developing these underutilised spaces could strike a balance between safeguarding more ecologically or socially valuable Green Belt land and supporting sustainable urban growth. This emerging definition warrants greater attention and exploration.

**Do the current proposals for identifying Grey Belt land provide local planning authorities with sufficient scope to meet their housing targets and the needs of local communities?**

**a) Are there any strategic considerations concerning the designation and development of Grey Belt land that may require an unusual degree of collaboration between neighbouring local authorities and, if so, what are they and how is that collaboration to be achieved?**

The suitability of Grey Belt lands for development can vary widely due to factors such as environmental constraints, infrastructure capacity, and existing land use, etc. To effectively meet housing targets, local planning authorities need to evaluate each Grey Belt site individually, considering its potential to address specific local needs, and the assessment should be handled on a case-by-case basis. From a planning perspective, we recommend a collaborative site investigation through four distinct lenses—ecological, social, morphological, and material—by neighbouring local authorities. We believe that incorporating local knowledge will be crucial in guiding both the designation and development process.

- 1. The ecological lens** includes 1) Understanding the impact of housing proposals and site redevelopment on ecological habitat, particularly its wild vegetation. This analysis aims to grasp the spontaneous ecological processes present and compare them with the conditions after design implementation; 2) Mapping the new habitat conditions established by the design and development, especially the physical, non-living components that affect living organisms. The chosen factors are light intensity, moisture, humidity, wind barrier, and substance. The comparison between the ecological condition before and after the design examines the effect of the design on the ongoing ecological process: whether the design removes wild ecology, or facilitates it, or establishes other different ecologies; 3) Reviewing how nature develops based on the habitat condition laid out to bring forward the discussion on the value of artificial intervention in the context of ruderal ecology, of the Grey Belt site is in forms of wasteland; and 4) Examining whether and how biotope conditions are maintained or enhanced with the housing target through artificial management and how such management influences the development of ecological conditions on site.
- 2. The social lens** includes 1) Understanding the context by mapping the local demographic structure and urban, suburban, or rural program,

highlighting the characteristics of neighbourhoods and existing social-cultural activities. If the site holds particular socio-cultural significance for the local community, this becomes even more crucial; 2) Mapping spatial interventions that establish conditions for public use, forming the basis for discussing design and implementation tools that facilitate diverse social activities on Grey Belt sites; 3) Examining and drawing new users and visitors and how they perform in the new setting introduced on site, this helps further reflect how the design may develop certain new uses while allowing certain flexibilities; and 4) Speculating on how users might appropriate the site, exploring how the design creates opportunities for people to adapt and modify the spatial setting, create a development that respects the past while accommodating future growth and evolving social practices.

3. **The morphological lens** includes 1) Identifying the landscape structure, and the location of the Grey Belt site at a large scale, looking into geographical properties of the site as the fundamental elements for understanding the site's characteristics; 2) Mapping the spatial environment to illustrate the volume of surrounding buildings and the structure of surrounding open spaces. These mapping practices further clarify the way in which the site is embedded in the spatial environment; 3) Analysing the morphological transformation of the site and its surroundings through spatial composition in times to reveal the relationship between the Grey Belt site and the broader Green Belt context, further helping to trace the reasons behind the site's dysfunction and marginalisation; 4) Mapping the site's geometric and spatial features informs an analysis of how these elements were addressed in the redevelopment composition and how the composition evolved after construction, Additionally, examining how the design has been appropriated helps assess whether it provides a framework for guiding future adaptations.
4. **The material lens** 1) Identifying the distinctive physical properties of the site. This process of collecting and reorganising data will enable an interpretation of the site's material characteristics, highlighting its uniqueness and distinguishing it from typical urban spaces; and 2) Exploring meaning and narrative from the local communities to uncover how the redevelopment design contributes to a sense of place by retaining meaning and narrative through its material elements.

In summary, the local authorities should work together to develop a cohesive plan that considers all the above lenses, the regional growth patterns and infrastructure requirements, this may involve joint planning initiatives, shared data, and aligned policies. Key strategies for effective Grey Belt development include utilising regional planning bodies to ensure comprehensive and consistent plans, establishing joint committees or forums for collaboration, engaging the public to address community concerns and garner support, and sharing data on land use, population growth, and infrastructure capacity to create accurate and effective plans.

**What infrastructure and local amenities are necessary to ensure that a Grey Belt housing development is a good place to live?**

**a) Should the identification of Grey Belt land be influenced by the proximity of public transport amenities or other services, or is this better handled through individual planning applications?**

**b) How can identified Grey Belt sites be connected with social infrastructure such as schools and health facilities?**

It is essential that developments taking place on grey belt land recognise and do not go against the intentions of the green belt. In particular, key purposes of the green belt are to “check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas”, “assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment” and “assist in urban regeneration”, all of which indicate that developments must take cognisance of the need to avoid car-dominated travel, and to learn from key theories and practice within urban planning and design.

Therefore, “proximity” to transport amenities should be directed towards low-emission forms of transport and should support the uptake of active travel such as cycling and other forms of micro-mobility. We can learn lessons from Denmark and Sweden, where the installation and maintenance of high-quality cycle paths, often extending many km, enable low-cost, low-emission and healthy travel. Connected with this, efforts should be made to reduce the need for longer journeys (commuting, shopping, schools), thus avoiding large housing developments lacking any amenities or character of their own.

In response to (b), it is vital that schools, health facilities, retail, postal services, digital connectivity and low-emission transport are treated as core requirements of any grey belt developments. There is an obvious danger in regarding any of these as ‘planning gain’, as they would become relegated to the status of being options, rather than at the core. Grey belt legislation must reframe the challenge and the question, to ensure that the provision of housing takes place in a socially, environmentally and economically sustainable context. Otherwise, housing developments led by developers will be guided by the desire for short-term economic gains, with obvious medium- and long-term dangers (including fuel, transport and educational poverty).

**In order to facilitate Grey Belt development, what flexibility in the process could be introduced without compromising the Government’s overall housebuilding objectives?**

1. It is crucial to introduce flexibility that fosters innovative solutions tailored to residents’ unique needs, particularly regarding the broader impact on the Green Belt. In our study, participants offered specific suggestions on preserving ecological corridors and enhancing access to high-quality green spaces. **We recommend adopting the case-by-case approach to flexibility determination.**

2. Local insights provide strong evidence for spaces which serve as cultural

and social anchors. Their revitalisation not only addresses issues of vacancy and disinvestment but also strengthens the neighbourhoods' fabric. **Engaging the community in decision-making ensures that the flexibility adopted tackles local challenges.**

**Our recommendations include:**

- a. Focusing on places that resonate with local residents,
- b. Prioritising the revitalisation of existing architecture, parks, and plazas that are deeply connected to the community.
- c. Creatively repurposing under-utilised industrial infrastructure, public venues, and outdoor recreational areas.

These recommendations allow for adaptive solutions that balance preservation with innovation, fostering a sense of ownership, promoting long-term sustainability and reinforcing the connection between residents and the revitalised environment. Abandoned industrial sites in Grey Belt areas— such as warehouses, disused service stations, and former manufacturing plants— can be repurposed into vibrant initiatives like pop-up shops, skill centres, and co-working spaces, fostering entrepreneurship and innovation. This approach not only rejuvenates vacant properties but also bolsters the local economy and enriches cultural landscapes.

3. Substantial funding is needed for land acquisition, demolition, site preparation, engineering, and public realm enhancements for development in Grey Belt. **Prioritising flexibility in the investment model is essential in cultivating collaborative approaches to meet the community's needs.**

**Our recommendations include:**

- a. Encouraging public-private partnerships by providing the government with the flexibility to offer incentives that attract developers, investors, and other key stakeholders.
- b. Emphasising the long-term value of town redevelopment.
- c. Adopting phases in development to ensure that all essential infrastructure and local amenities are integrated into the planning.

These recommendations appeal to financiers who seek sustainable and socially responsible investment opportunities. They are vital for securing the financial support necessary to realise the vision of a revitalised community, exemplified by initiatives like the Newcastle and North Tyneside Local Improvement Finance Trust Company Limited (NNT LIFTCo).

**About us**

Dr Jiayi Jin is an Assistant Professor of Architecture and Urban Studies at Northumbria University. She has led multiple research projects funded by the British Academy and the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC),

focusing on creative participation in urban transitions. Her work emphasises bottom-up approaches that empower local communities to shape their environments, advocating for inclusive spatial practices that address the diverse needs and voices within urban spaces. Dr Jin served as the Principal Investigator on the AHRC-funded project, *Participatory Neighbourhood Planning for the 'Brown to Green' Transition in Tyneside* (Grant Ref: AH/Y000250/1), in collaboration with Professor Richard Laing and Mingyu Zhu, which forms the foundation of this written evidence report. More information about this project can be found in our Github repository, <https://github.com/mingyuzhuu/DEPcoMapping>

Professor Richard Laing, Professor of Urban Collaboration at Northumbria University, has particular expertise in the areas of collaboration (between parties, groups and individuals) and participation (of stakeholders and the wide community) in research, and in the manner in which these can be applied in practice. This has drawn on his knowledge of emerging digital technologies, often in the context of built heritage, where the associated research methods are driven by a desire to identify and make use of innovative ways to communicate with target groups.

Mingyu Zhu is a researcher at the Urban Big Data Centre, University of Glasgow. His major research field is urban sustainability study. He is specialised in using data-driving methods, particular causal model and multi-scale simulation to provide effective decision-support insights to the stakeholders. His research portfolio includes projects on housing decarbonisation, urban environmental analytics, and infrastructure sustainability and resilience.

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