The countryside charity

The countryside next door

Why we need to invest in greener, healthier Green Belts

May 2022

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Executive summary

Green Belts and other countryside close to large towns have a major value to society. This land is particularly valuable for health and wellbeing, and includes four of England's top ten most valuable recreation sites as identified in a recent academic study for the government. The countryside around towns has a dense network of public footpaths and a significant number of historic (registered) parks and gardens (many though not all with opportunities for public access), as well as a high and growing number of local nature reserves.

The government is introducing far-reaching changes to farming policy in England following Brexit. These changes will have major consequences for how our countryside is managed. This includes in areas designated as Green Belt in planning policy, of which just under two thirds (65%) is classed as farmland. The 2019 Conservative Manifesto and 2022 Levelling Up White Paper include commitments to enhance Green Belt land as well as protect it from development. However, it is not yet clear how such commitments will be accommodated within the proposed new Environmental Land Management schemes, the centrepiece of farming policy reform.

This report from CPRE, the countryside charity aims to provide evidence on the extent to which, and in what respects, the countryside around our largest towns and cities is being maintained through existing farming policies, specifically through voluntary agreements known as agri-environment schemes. It does so through a combination of geographical analysis of existing scheme take up, and a series of eight detailed case studies from across England.

The proportion of land in England that is farmed is roughly 70%. In turn, the proportion of farmland covered by agri-environment schemes is around 42%. But the countryside around towns is relatively poorly served by management agreements, which are declining from an already low base.

Existing agri-environment funding is supporting the planting and maintenance of trees. It is also helping maintain and restore a wide range of historic features, including hedgerows. While the countryside around towns has been relatively neglected by existing agri-environment schemes, people living in urban areas increasingly value it. Land managers interviewed for our research in the eight case study locations were unanimous in confirming that visits to all the locations increased significantly during lockdown; and that since the end of lockdown, levels of interest in visiting the countryside around towns for walking have remained strong.

Land management funding is helping to encourage and facilitate public access, but more can be done, and more can be done to help encourage access for marginalised social groups, including disabled people and people of colour.

In schemes around towns, there have been tensions between better land management for access and wildlife on the one hand, and addressing climate emergency issues such as increased flooding on the other. However, we also found examples of projects that promise to be examples of good practice in the future, showing how both imperatives can be addressed in an integrated way.

Key findings:

- The overall area of England that is farmed has decreased only slightly between 2007 and 2020, from 9.2 million hectares (ha) to 8.92m ha. (c.3%). The overall area of England considered to be under agri-environment schemes (AES) is just over 3.8m ha or 42% of all recognised farmland.
- The overall area of the countryside around towns covered by AES was already low in 2007 (38% compared to 47% of all of England). Within this, AES schemes covered 570,000 ha of Green Belt land: equating to 35% of all Green Belt land, and 53% (compared to 67% across England) of all Green Belt land classed as usable for agriculture — the 'utilisable agricultural area'.
- Levels of coverage of AES in the Green Belts are relatively poor, compared to England as a whole. Between 2007 and 2020 (and despite a small increase since 2018) coverage in the Green Belts was just under 310,000 ha, compared to just over 3.8m ha for the whole of England. 19% of all Green Belt land is covered as of 2020, compared to 28% of England. We have assumed, based on the 2007 figures where they are the most recent available, that only just over a quarter (28%) of the utilisable agricultural land in the Green Belts is now covered by agri-environment schemes. By contrast 42% of all utilisable agricultural land in England is covered by AES.
- Our Green Belts are getting a relatively low share of environmental improvement funding under AES, relative to their area. Our analysis of agri-environment agreements in force as of 2020 reveal a committed spend of £3.2 billion (this stretches over several years and in 2020 payments totalling £300 million were made); of this, about £510 million (15%) is committed to the countryside around towns. Within this, only £230 million (7.25%) is committed to Green Belt land, despite Green Belts covering 12.5% of England, containing 11% of England's farmland, and being the countryside next door for half of England's population.
- Across areas of Green Belt, AES coverage is evenly split between southern England and northern England but with relatively less spend in the midlands — and the midlands and the north are in danger of falling behind in relation to newer agreements. There are also significant variations between individual areas of Green Belt. In both the southern (East of England, South East and South West government regions) and northern (North East, North West and Yorkshire & Humber), coverage of current agreements covers approximately 20% of all Green Belt land. However, in the East and West Midlands combined, the proportion is only 15%.

Recommendations

In order to meet the government's own commitments to enhance as well as protect the Green Belt, and to level up all regions of England, the government should aim for:

- At least half of all designated Green Belt land (and two-thirds of the utilisable agricultural area within the Green Belts as part of this) to be covered by agreements under its proposed new Environmental Land Management schemes (ELM).
- Agreements to be levelled up so that there is as much coverage (as a proportion of the individual Green Belt area) of ELM-related agreements in the individual Green Belts in the midlands and north of England as there is in the Green Belts in southern England.
- England's hedgerow network to be extended by 40% or just under 100,000 miles, by 2050. At least a fifth, or 20,000 miles, of this extended length of network should be on Green Belt land and other countryside around towns, and current levels of funding for hedgerow management in these areas should be doubled to help achieve this.
- The administration of land management agreements to be improved in a number of respects – particularly relating to availability of advice and information – so that future funding better serves the needs of communities living near where schemes are operating.
- The final design of ELMs should include (i) mechanisms for community involvement in designing, supporting and evaluating schemes; and (ii) support for:
  - educational visits for young people and adults as well as schools.
  - improvements in access to benefit, in particular, socially and economically deprived communities, including people of colour and people with physical disabilities. There should be provision for both additional access and improving existing rights of way.
- ELM payments in all areas of England, including the countryside around towns, should depend upon recipients fulfilling existing legal requirements relating to access (such as maintaining public footpaths), and not result in the loss of existing access rights.

Introduction

1.1 Aim, objectives and rationale

The aim of this project is to investigate the benefits of increased public investment in urban fringe or 'countryside next door' areas[1], specifically in terms of safeguarding and enhancing the historic environment around large or important towns and cities.

A prominent part of both **CPRE's 2026 Vision for the Countryside** and our current strategy is the aspiration for a countryside on our doorstep which is accessible to all; where agriculture is less intensive; and where there is space for nature that people can explore and enjoy. As part of this, we want to see both the retention of existing Green Belts, but also for the land within them to play a crucial role in enhancing the sustainability of our cities. Green Belt land can provide essential ecological functions and recreational benefits which are fundamental to health and wellbeing. This can go hand in hand with sustainable agricultural production and climate change mitigation.

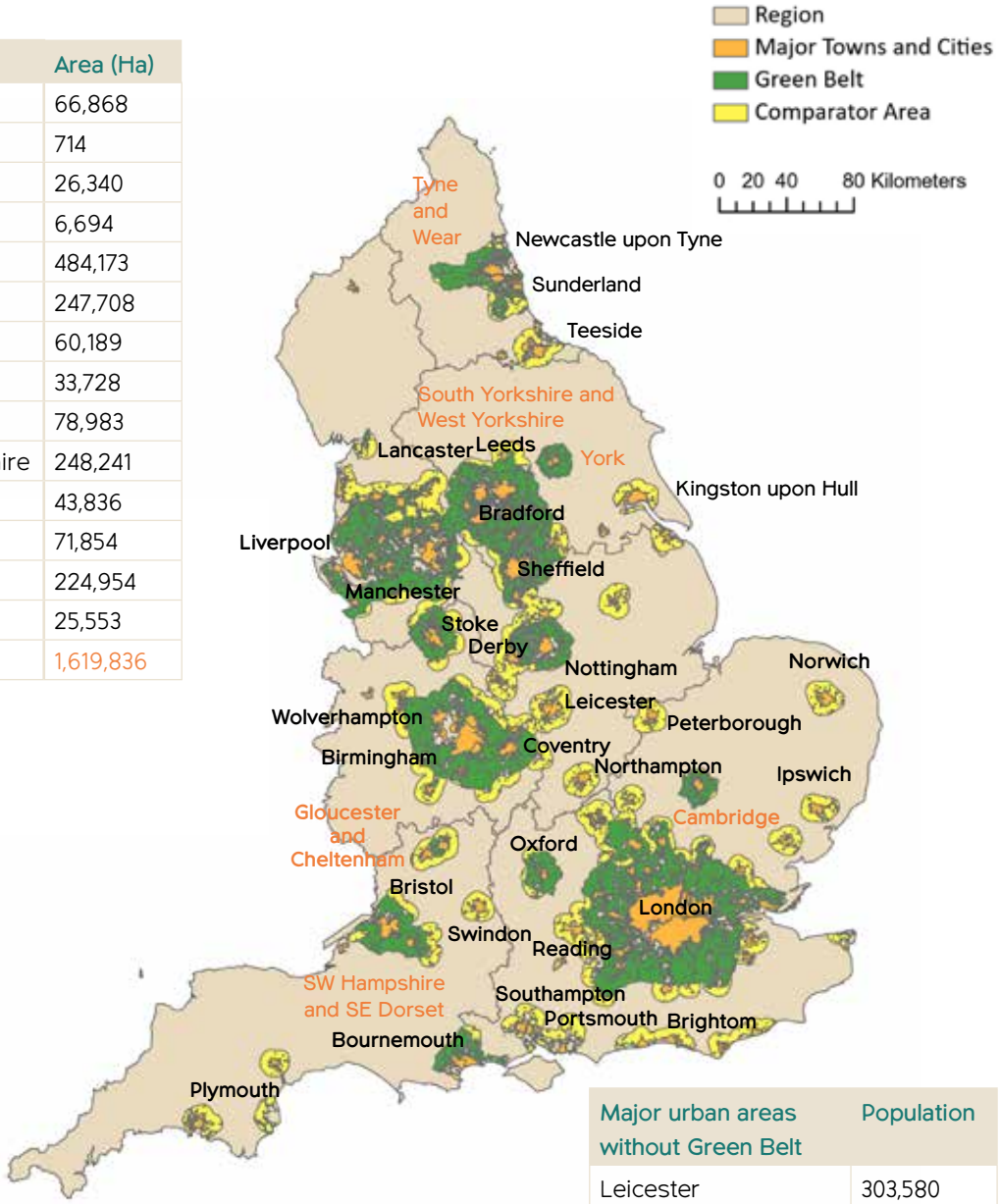
We also believe that our vision should apply to the countryside around other large conurbations, such as Leicester, Norwich, South Hampshire and Teesside, which do not currently benefit from Green Belt designations. In this project we have considered overall levels of public investment in these areas too.

The government has made commitments to improve the environment and people's access to it. The 2019 Conservative election manifesto undertakes to both protect and enhance our Green Belts. The protection pledge essentially means that existing Green Belt planning policy — with aims to prevent urban sprawl by keeping land permanently open[2] supported by strong controls over most forms of development — will be retained. The enhancement pledge is followed up by further commitments in the February 2022 Levelling Up White Paper for 'improved Green Belts around towns and cities' and to 'develop plans for further greening of the Green Belt in England'[3].

In this study, we have looked at areas designated as Green Belt, as well as areas of undesignated and largely undeveloped land around large towns and cities. Together these areas of land make up around 22% of England's land area.

Countryside around towns including:
Green Belt (green); other large towns & cities without Green Belts (yellow)

Green Belt	Area (Ha)
Avon	66,868
Burton and Swadlincote	714
Cambridge	26,340
Gloucester and Cheltenham	6,694
London	484,173
North West	247,708
Nottingham and Derby	60,189
Oxford	33,728
SW Hampshire and SE Dorset	78,983
South Yorkshire and West Yorkshire	248,241
Stoke on Trent	43,836
Tyne and Wear	71,854
West Midlands	224,954
York	25,553
Total	1,619,836



Major urban areas with Green Belt	Population
London	7,215,900
Birmingham	970,900
Liverpool	469,000
Leeds	443,250
Sheffield	439,870
Bristol	420,560
Manchester	394,270
Coventry	303,480
Bradford	293,720
Stoke on Trent	259,250
Wolverhampton	251,430
Nottingham	249,650
Derby	229,400

Major urban areas without Green Belt	Population
Leicester	303,580
Kingston upon Hull	301,420
Plymouth	243,800
Southampton	234,250
Reading	232,660

Most of this land (approximately two-thirds) is classed as farmed land or in agricultural use[4]. CPRE refers to all of this land as 'the countryside next door' to the 30 million people who live in our largest towns and cities. This report has been researched and written at a time of fundamental reform in the system of policy and financial support for farming in England, and in particular the introduction of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) Environmental Land Management schemes (ELM). ELM is currently in the early stages of development.[5] The level to which the historic environment or urban fringe areas will be targeted remains unclear.

The objectives of this report are to:

- Show the overall level of support (in terms of average spend and land area covered) given to the 'countryside next door' from current Government-funded schemes carried out by land managers ('agri-environment schemes', AES, explained further in section 2.2 of this report), compared to the countryside as a whole.
- Highlight case study locations where existing agri-environment schemes have helped maintain and improve areas of nationally important historic parklands and monuments in the 'countryside next door', and also helped support increased public access and enjoyment of these places.
- Make targeted recommendations to Defra, Natural England and Historic England about how the new ELM schemes could maintain and enhance important landscapes around towns and cities, using the maintenance of identified historic assets as part of a wider strategy of promoting better management, public access, and mitigation of / adaptation to climate change.

1.2 Methodology[6]

This report has taken an analytical approach of comparing the qualities of all designated areas of Green Belt with both:
(i) England as a whole
(ii) urban fringe 'comparator areas', covering rural land without Green Belt designation but within 5km of urban areas with populations of 100,000 or more — including 17 towns and cities with no Green Belt. The same comparator areas were used in earlier reports in 2010 and 2016.[7] The total coverage of these comparator areas is 1,325,800 ha.

Data on agri-environment scheme spend and coverage is taken from open data published by Natural England on both current Countryside Stewardship and (where available and comparable) Environmental Stewardship schemes, and this data has been overlaid on maps of current Green Belts and the urban fringe comparator areas. (Annex 1.)

A series of eight site case studies were chosen in areas of countryside around large towns (falling within either Green Belts or the comparator areas) that had received Defra agri-environment funding specifically for historic assets.

A team of three researchers was chosen, with extensive experience of drawing up and working on management schemes for historic parkland: Dr Sarah Rutherford, Janette Ray, Sarah Couch. Each were allocated regions within which to identify relevant sites, contact site managers and obtain scheme documentation. Site visits were made to inspect works and interview key managers/owners.

The aim was to review the effectiveness of works carried out by recipients, to identify benefits and issues relating to two main aspects:
a) conservation of the historic environment
b) access by visitors.

Information was also sought on scheme details and outcomes from relevant Natural England and Historic England staff where these could be identified. Sites surveyed are listed in Annex 2 and the report includes photographs taken by the surveyors on site.

Once the information had been gathered (during the summer and autumn of 2021) and results were analysed, a workshop was held to discuss five key topics that had been identified relating to both historic environment and access aspects of schemes.

Background

The countryside around towns is particularly valuable for heritage as well as wildlife and recreation. A May 2022 government-funded study identified England's top 10 most valuable recreation sites in terms of the welfare value placed on them by users, of these, four (out of seven outside Greater London) are on designated Green Belt land[8]. CPRE looked at woodland, rights of way and nature conservation issues in more detail in 2016[9] and the key findings are summarised below.

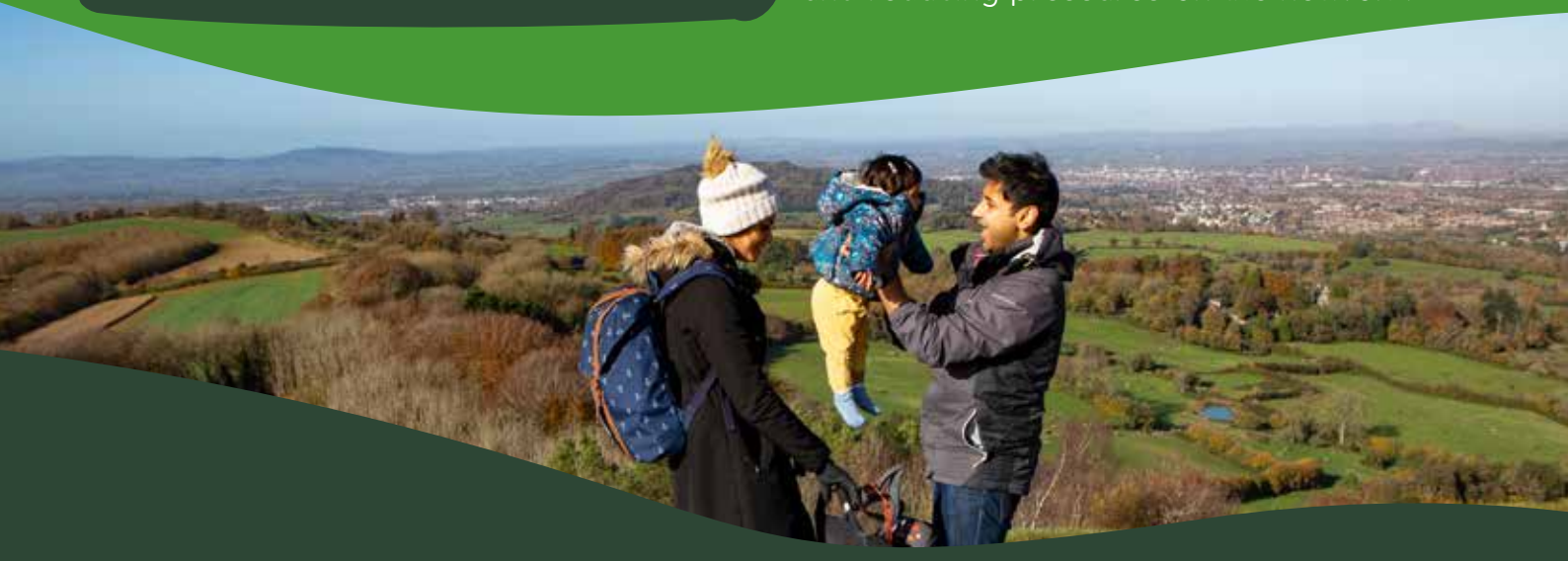
- The countryside around towns covers 22% of England's land area. Within this, 12.5% of England is designated as Green Belt
- 30 million people – more than half of England's population — live in or near our largest towns and cities, the countryside around towns is their – our – countryside next door

The countryside around towns also contains:

- Important assets of public rights of way (51,000 kilometres, or 19 metres per hectare) and deciduous woodland (32% of the overall land area).
- 54% of all England's Local Nature Reserves (LNRs).
- 61% (or 97 sites) of all the new LNRs created between 2009 and 2016.
- 29% of all England's registered historic parks and gardens.

It is also important to remember that the countryside around towns has a critically important cultural heritage role. Whole Green Belts – such as Bath, Cambridge, Oxford and York – are protected in order to safeguard wider aspects of cultural setting such as historic views. As shown by the case studies for this report, the countryside around the big conurbations also contains important areas of designed historic landscapes, and these landscapes have become increasingly valuable for urban residents as places of recreation since the 2020 pandemic.

As Green Belts are designated primarily as a planning policy to manage urban growth, they are not included within the recent (April 2022) analysis of protected areas led by the British Ecological Society. However, the highly influential 2010 review of England's ecological network led by Sir John Lawton identified Green Belt land, along with urban green spaces, allotments and private gardens, as important components of England's ecological network. The contributions made by Green Belts and this other land includes 'providing connections between core patches, as habitats for a large number of species that are not restricted to wildlife sites, and buffering and reducing pressures on the network.'[10]



2.1 Why this report looks at land management policies

England is introducing new Environmental Land Management (ELM) schemes that aim to link public money to the provision of 'public goods'. This is part of a programme of fundamental reform of agricultural policy following the UK's departure from the European Union. The scheme will also be a major means of delivering government priorities as set out in the 25 Year Environment Plan, published in 2018.

ELM will have three schemes. CPRE believes that better management of the countryside around towns is relevant to all of them.

- **The Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI)** is the first of the three new schemes to be rolled out, with pilot schemes having started at the end of 2021, and 2022 schemes to be launched at the end of June. Through this scheme, Defra will pay farmers for actions that produce environmental and other public goods (such as water quality, biodiversity, animal health and welfare and climate change mitigation) alongside food production. Countryside around towns stands to benefit from this because more than two-thirds of the urban fringe is classed as farmland. Given the high concentration of well-used public footpaths and heritage features in Green Belt areas (see p.9), and closeness to large urban populations, it is9 particularly important to:
  (i) maintain and improve public access; and
  (ii) prevent or actively reduce pollution from farming close to urban areas. Reducing pollution from sources such as ammonia can be assisted by the planting of 'shelter belts' of trees to absorb emissions from nearby[11].

- **Landscape Recovery** will begin piloting in 2022 and will support long-term, large-scale, land use change and habitat restoration projects. Large areas of Green Belt are already targeted for major tree planting through the Community Forest programme. More generally, maintaining and improving landscape quality in the urban fringe has been a challenge for a very long time; in 2010 CPRE and Natural England found much more divergence from character than in England as a whole, and much less enhancement[12].

- **Local Nature Recovery** will begin a phased rollout from 2023 and will pay for actions that will achieve government environmental priorities in a locally targeted way, with reference to Local Nature Recovery Networks designated by local authorities in local plans. Major progress has been made by central and local government in the countryside around towns in recent years. Nearly 100 new local nature reserves have been created for wildlife around our largest towns and cities between 2009 and 2016 alone. As mentioned on p.9, the Lawton Review identifies Green Belt land as part of England's ecological network. Including areas of the countryside around towns within Local Nature Recovery targeting would reinforce recent trends of new nature reserve creation.

2.2 ELM will replace agri-environment schemes

Existing payments to farmers are made under the EU Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and fall under two pillars[13]:

Pillar one

Direct payments made up 80% of the UK's 2018 CAP budget. Farmers receive payments based on how much land they farm, although until January 2021 they were required to meet 'greening' requirements and may have had their subsidy cut if they did not comply with environmental regulations. In the UK, direct payments are provided through the Basic Payment Scheme (BPS), administered by the UK government for England and devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Measures to support market prices also fall under pillar one.

Pillar two

Rural development payments made up 20% of the UK's 2018 CAP budget. This provides financial support to farmers and other rural businesses for delivering environmental benefits (such as preserving habitats and managing flood risks), improving farm efficiency (such as helping farmers use less feed and pesticides) and supporting rural development. In the UK, these payments are provided through multi-annual Rural Development Programmes, including agri-environment schemes.

Until the new ELM schemes bed in and are fully operational, agri-environment schemes (AES) are the main means of encouraging farmers and other landowners to protect and enhance the environment on their land through payments for the provision of environmental services. Each scheme offers a range of options to deliver target outcomes for specific features, with the particular focus in this report being on options relating to heritage features such as archaeological sites and traditional farm buildings, as well as hedgerows and traditional orchards.

The schemes referenced in this report are:

- **New Countryside Stewardship (CS)** is the current AES for England. The first agreements started in January 2016. Like ES (see below), the scheme consists of two tiers, a Mid-Tier (MT) and a Higher Tier (HT).
- **Environmental Stewardship (ES)** was open to applications between 2005 and 2014, it consisted of two tiers, Entry Level Stewardship (ELS) aiming for high coverage of basic options, and Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) with more demanding options targeted to features of high environmental value. Far more land was registered under ELS than HLS.
- **The Environmental Stewardship Scheme** closed to new applicants in 2014 but existing agreements continue to be managed until they reach their agreed end date, and it remains the main scheme on which payments are made. In 2020 AES payments in England under both CS and ES schemes totalled £300m[14]. Approximately three quarters of this spend was under ES; the remainder is under new CS.

In addition, some ES schemes initiated before 2010 included substantial levels of payment for providing public access to the countryside on a permissive basis, over and above the existing public rights of way network. It is also a condition of the current Basic Payment Scheme that landowners and managers fulfil legal duties to maintain existing access, in particular public rights of way such as footpaths, on their land. To date it has not been made clear as to whether the condition will be maintained, or whether the new ELM schemes will include continued provision for access improvements[15].

2.3 Other funding sources are likely to raise less money for improving Green Belts

The overall AES budget currently provides the most significant source of public investment for enhancing the Green Belts and keeping them green. In some cases, historic landscapes close to towns and cities also benefited in recent years from grants under the National Lottery Heritage Fund's Landscape Partnerships Programme. Approximately £144 million (equivalent to less than one year's spending from AES) in total was disbursed to 79 schemes under this programme, and most schemes under it ran over various periods between 2005 and 2018. This programme has now ceased although some individual schemes are still running at the time of writing. It is still possible to obtain NLHF funding for specific heritage assets, which may include historic landscapes, through other programmes. The overall budget for the whole UK (not just England) can vary between £225 million and £375 million per year depending on income from the lottery, and there is significant demand to support heritage projects within urban as well as other rural areas. In any case, support from agri-environment schemes can play a crucial role in providing, in the words of one estate manager interviewed for this project, 'a badge of merit' to help make the case for further public, private or charitable funding.

Increases in woodland and wetland habitat are likely to take place in the countryside around towns in the coming years. CPRE supports the Natural Capital Committee's 2015 recommendation to create 350,000 hectares overall of new woodland and wetland close to urban areas. Significant amounts of money from the Nature for Climate Fund, worth £753 million over the 2019-2024 Parliament, are likely to be used for new tree planting in the countryside around towns. But it is currently expected that after 2024, tree planting activity will be covered by ELMS funding.[16]

Another potential source of funding for better management of the countryside around towns is the proceeds from biodiversity net gain (BNG). This has recently come into force as a result of the Environment Act. As its name suggests, BNG is mandated to apply to nature conservation related improvements and could help with hedgerow or orchard planting, but cannot generally be used towards public access or built or cultural heritage assets. BNG will replace nature conservation income currently received through planning or Section 106 agreements funded by new development. These agreements were estimated to raise £115 million for environmental improvements in 2016-17. BNG is expected to lead to an increase in this level of funding if the expected costs for developers of £199 million per year are taken as a proxy for the level of investment[17]. From CPRE's perspective, however, BNG should only be used as a last resort as per the well established mitigation hierarchy. For example, a line of hedge plant whips would take years to grow and many more to become anything like a removed mature habitat. More widely, there would be grave doubts as to whether BNG either could or should be a significant means of financing management of Green Belt land. As with NLHF funding, there is likely to be particular pressure for BNG to fund improvements within urban areas as well as outside them. Development on current Green Belt land could lead to BNG funding improvements in the areas of undeveloped Green Belt that remain. Relying on such an approach would undermine the purposes of Green Belt policy as well as lead to the loss of large areas of undeveloped Green Belt: in CPRE's view Green Belt land will normally have greater environmental benefit in the long run if is left undeveloped.

Section 3 which follows, looks at AES in relation to the Green Belts and other countryside around towns, specifically the overall land coverage achieved by current schemes, and the proportion of overall AES spend which is going towards these schemes.

Analysis of overall current government land management funding

The methodology for analysing agri-environment scheme (AES) data is set out in Annex 1.

Since the last analysis of AES funding in Green Belt and other countryside around towns was done in 2007, the amount of land farmed in England has fallen from 71% to 68% of overall land area. Under current policies, land managers receive a basic farm payment; they can also volunteer to join support schemes involving financial incentives to manage their land to meet given environmental objectives.

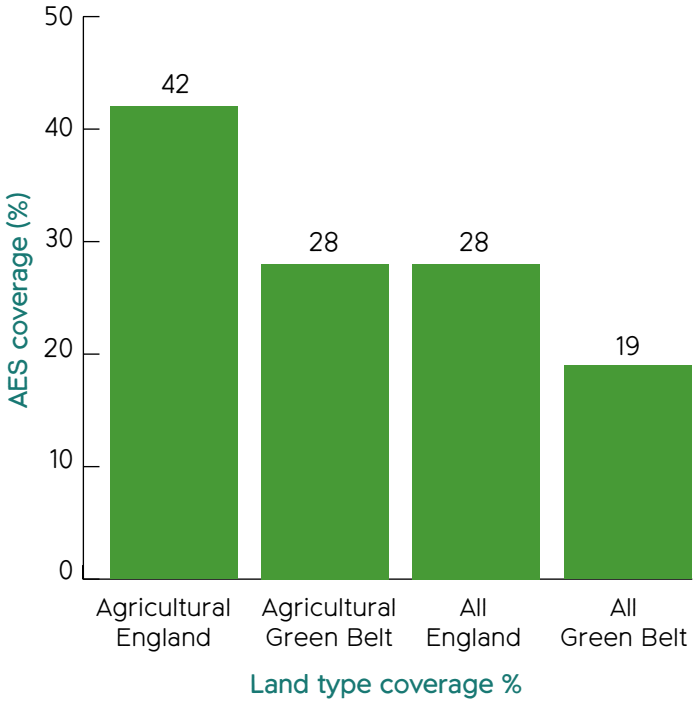
These schemes are known as 'agri-environment schemes' (see Section 2). The amount of this land under management for access and wildlife has fallen substantially since 2007 although it has begun to recover in the past few years. But the countryside around towns has seen a particularly significant fall in management agreements, from an already low base.

- The overall area of England that is farmed has decreased slightly (c.3%) between 2007 and 2020, from 9.2m ha → 8.92m ha; c.3%
- The overall area of England under agri-environment schemes (AES) has decreased significantly 2007-2020 (from 6.1m ha to 3.9m ha — a 35% drop)
- The overall area of the countryside around towns covered by AES was already low in 2007 (38% compared to 47% of all of England). Within this, AES covered 570,000 ha of Green Belt land (35% of all Green Belt land, and equating to 53% of land then classed as usable for agriculture, the 'utilisable agricultural area'. Across England, 67% of the utilisable agricultural area was covered by AES).

• Levels of coverage of AES in the Green Belts are relatively poor, compared to England as a whole.

2020 (and despite a small increase since 2018) coverage in the Green Belts was just under 310,000 ha, compared to just over 3.8m ha for the whole of England. 19% of all Green Belt land is covered as of 2020, compared to 28% of England. More detailed breakdowns for utilisable agricultural land are not available but on an extrapolation of the 2007 figures, it can be estimated that only just over a quarter (we calculate 28%) of the utilisable agricultural land in the Green Belts is now covered by agri environment schemes. By contrast 42% of all utilisable agricultural land in England is covered by AES.

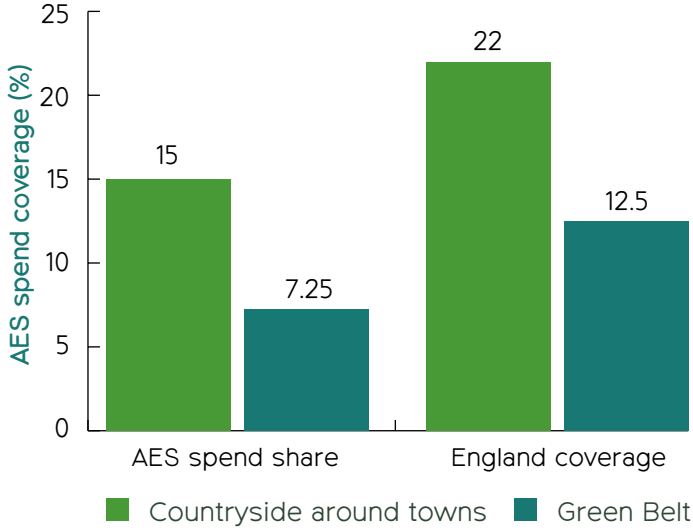
AES Coverage as proportion of all land (%)



• Our Green Belts are getting a relatively low share of environmental improvement funding under AES.

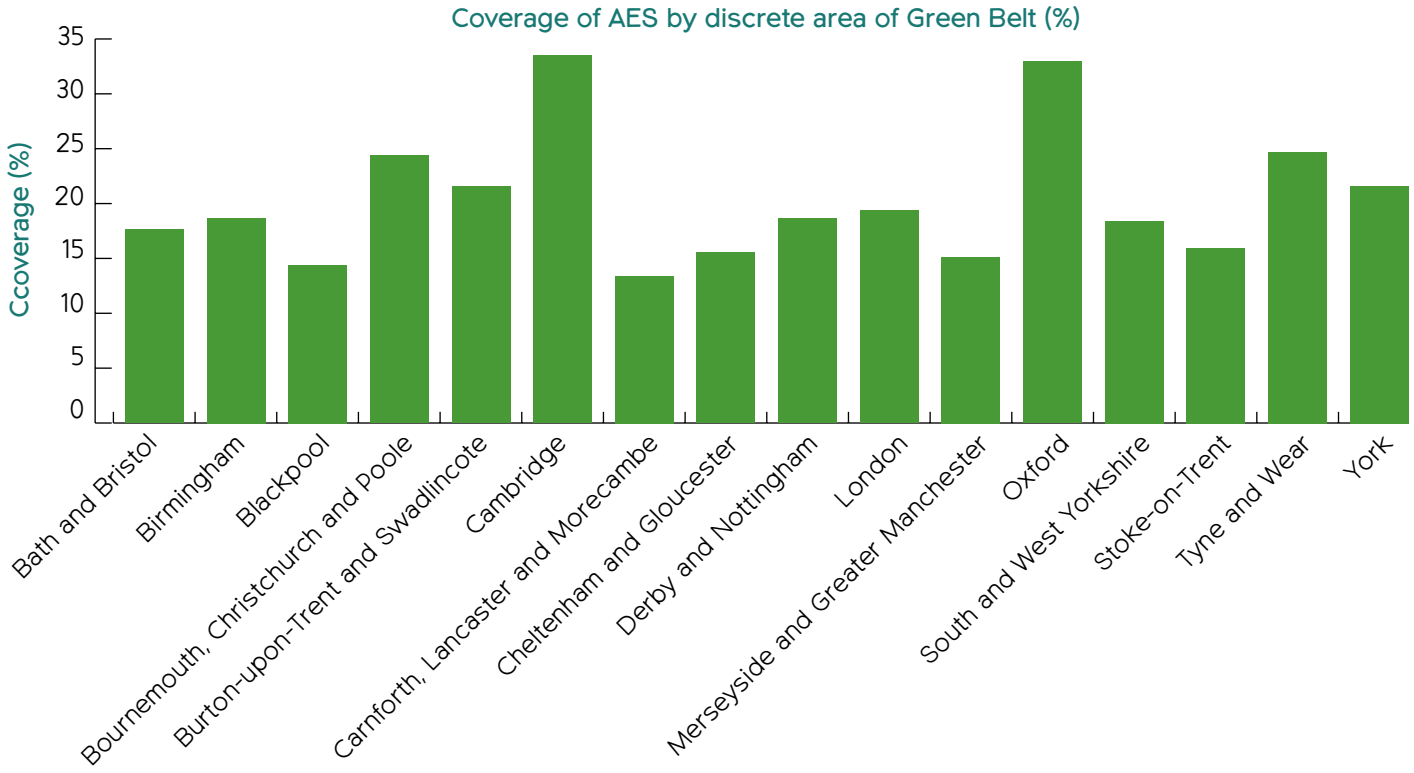
Our analysis of agri-environment agreements in force as of 2020 reveal a committed spend of £3.2 billion (this stretches over several years and in 2020 payments totalling £300 million were made); of this, about £510 million (15%) is committed to the countryside around towns. Within this, only £230 million (7.25%) is committed to Green Belt land, despite Green Belts covering 12.5% of England and being the countryside next door for half of England's population.

AES spend proportion compared to land coverage



- Across areas of Green Belt, coverage is evenly split between southern England and northern England but with relatively less spend in the midlands – and the midlands and the north are in danger of falling behind in relation to newer agreements. There are also significant variations between individual areas of Green Belt.

In both the southern (East of England, South East and South West government regions) and northern (North East, North West and Yorkshire & Humber), coverage of current agreements covers approximately 20% of all Green Belt land. However, in the East and West Midlands combined, agreements only cover 15% of all Green Belt land. There are also significant variations in coverage between individual Green Belts, with over 30% of the Green Belts around both Oxford and Cambridge covered by agreements, compared to just 15 and 16% of the Green Belts around Merseyside / Greater Manchester and Stoke-on-Trent respectively. Also, spend in both the midlands and north derives much more from older agreements, and average spend deriving from newer Countryside Stewardship agreements is significantly higher in the southern regions: £75 per hectare in the southern Green Belts compared to £62 in the northern regions and just £45 in the midlands.



Issues explaining the fall in land area covered by agreements are likely to include:

- the relatively low proportion of actively farmed land in the countryside around towns, even though two-thirds of it is classed as 'agricultural'. Other uses such as 'horsiculture', sports facilities, and utilities are common features of urban fringe areas: they serve urban residents but often need to be kept apart from residential areas.

- Countryside Stewardship is a part farm scheme so only the areas under scheme management are reported, unlike for entry-level stewardship (ELS). Entry-level stewardship agreements were whole farm so the reporting captured covered the whole area of the farm holdings to which they related (even though management actions typically only took place on a tiny proportion of the area). It is possible that a greater proportion of Green Belt and other countryside around towns was under ELS, hence the larger drop in 'coverage' since 2007.

Case studies

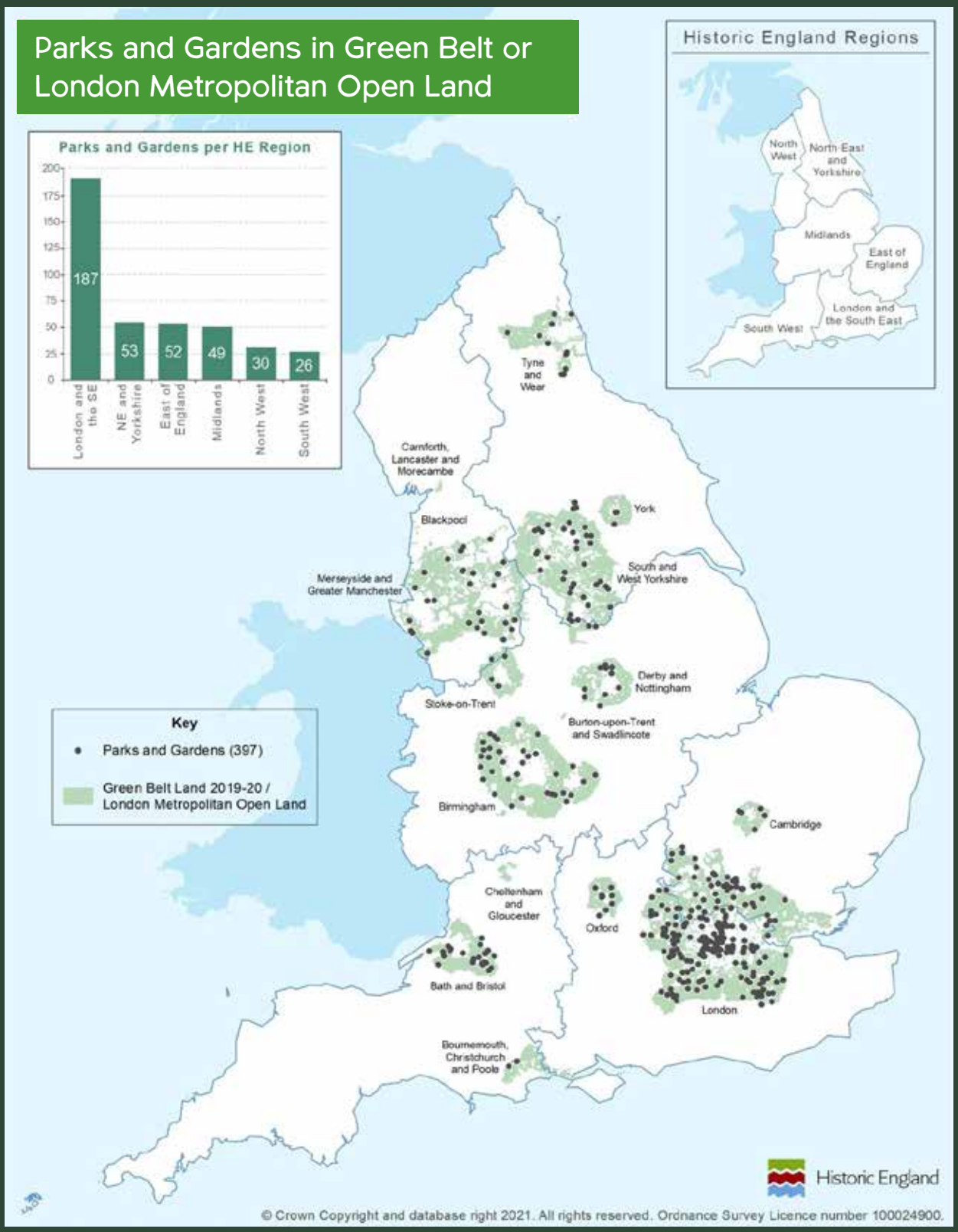
The countryside around towns has been relatively neglected, but the public are increasingly valuing it. More needs to be done to encourage access for a wider range of social and economic groups

Research for this report looked in close detail at work funded by agri-environment schemes in eight 'countryside next door' locations. Of these eight, six are registered parks and gardens.

A standout characteristic of the countryside around our largest towns and cities, as shown in Chapter 1, is the significant concentration of historic parklands within it. The Historic England (HE) 'Register of Parks and Gardens of Special Historic Interest in England', established in 1983, currently identifies 1,700 sites assessed to be of particular significance.

HE states that the emphasis of the Register is on gardens, grounds and other planned open spaces, such as town squares. The majority of sites registered are, or started life as, the grounds of private houses, but public parks and cemeteries form important categories too. The emphasis of the Register is on 'designed' landscapes — skilfully-planned surroundings reflecting the landscaping fashions of their day, rather than on planting or botanical importance. In 'countryside next door' areas, registered parks and gardens can often be part of current or former private country house estates, and public institutions such as research establishments and sanatorium hospitals, rather than being public parks. Many of these estates were built by 18th and 19th century industrialists to be close to the major towns and cities where they made their money.

Of the 1,700 registered parks and gardens in England, the map below shows that 397 (just under 25%) are on Green Belt land, and at least a further 100 can be found on the edge of other large towns and cities — meaning that 29% of all such parks are on urban fringe land. The size of these parks is on average approximately 100 ha but individual parks vary considerably, from a just a few hectares to over 500.



Registration does not mean that a site is open to the public. However, it is possible to access a significant number of registered parks and gardens in some way through the public rights of way network, or more extensively where they are owned by bodies such as the National Trust. All of the parks and gardens researched for this report have some form of public access.

The headline findings of the case study research and supporting overall analysis of agri-environment scheme data can be summarised as follows:

4.1 Existing agri-environment funding is helping to conserve and enhance the historic environment in the countryside around towns. As part of this, existing hedgerows are being maintained and new hedgerows planted.

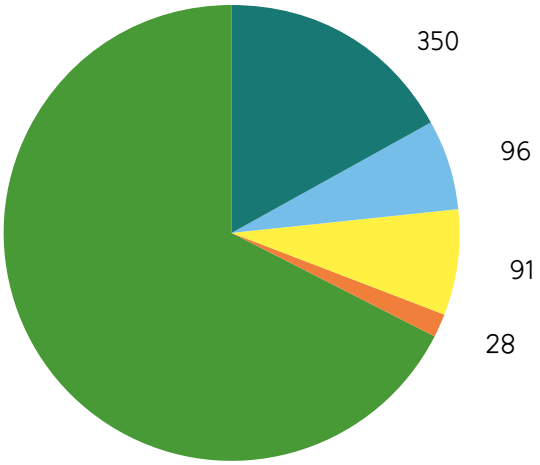
Green Belt and other urban fringe land accounts for 16% (over £4.1 million) of current committed agri-environment spend on heritage-related options under newer Countryside Stewardship agreements. Heritage-related options can include archaeology, and the maintenance of ancient monuments or traditional farm buildings. We found that, particularly against a background of cuts to local government budgets for supporting parks and green spaces, funding from existing agri-environment schemes has played an essential role in maintaining historic parks around our towns and cities. There are important concentrations of heritage-related spend in the Green Belts around Bath / Bristol; Cambridge; Merseyside / Greater Manchester; and Tyne & Wear. Across the eight sites we surveyed, we found that a total of £2.6 million of agri-environment funding (including for aspects other than heritage) had been committed from 2015. This money is helping maintain, to give just a few examples:

- the parkland setting of Bath Spa University College, set out by Capability Brown and perhaps one of the least known parts of the city's Georgian heritage;
- the grounds of Bentley Priory on the edge of London, headquarters of the Royal Air Force in the Battle of Britain; and
- Wandlebury near Cambridge, containing both an Iron Age hillfort as well as historical associations with the beginnings of thoroughbred horseracing.

Overall, 565 historic parks and gardens (nearly a third of the overall total) have at least one live agri-environment agreement in place since 2015, and these agreements cover approximately 20% of the overall land. In turn, of these 565, around a third are in the countryside around towns:

- 112 are on Green Belt land, covering 5,400 ha in total.
- 103 parks and gardens around other large towns and cities, and 4,000 ha within them, are also covered by agri-environment agreements.

Historic parks and gardens - proportions with agreements, including in countryside around towns



- Historic parks and gardens, no agreements
- Historic parks and gardens, with agreements but not within the countryside around towns
- Historic parks and gardens in Green Belt, with agreements
- Historic parks and gardens in comparator areas, with agreements
- Urban fringe parks and gardens with cover SSSIs, with agreements

In many cases, spending that helps the upkeep of historic parks and gardens is also assisting nature conservation. Just under one in eight of the agreements (28 out of 215, of which 16 are on Green Belt) covering historic parks and gardens in the countryside next door also cover land designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), and in England as a whole the overlap is nearly one in five (95 out of 565).

Even where land is not designated SSSI, historic parks are also a good illustration of the work being done more widely through agri-environment schemes for our hedgerow network. As well as their benefits as havens for wildlife and mitigating climate change through absorbing carbon, hedgerows are also an intrinsic part of many of our historic parklands. In the countryside around towns, historic parks and the hedgerows within many of them are particularly valuable in providing city dwellers with the 'cultural services' described in the National Ecosystem Assessment — specifically the sense of wellbeing produced by seeing (in addition to, and apart from visiting) a recognisably open, green farmed landscape[18]. Current committed Countryside Stewardship spend within the countryside around towns on hedgerow-related elements is, however, relatively low: £20 million in the countryside around towns (including just under £10 million in the Green Belts); representing 14% of all the hedgerow-related spend in England as a whole. There are, however, important concentrations of hedgerow-related spend in the Green Belts in South and West Yorkshire, Tyne & Wear and the West Midlands.

In five of the eight sites we surveyed, agri-environment funding was assisting with the management and restoration of hedgerows and planting of new ones. In all cases, funding was also contributing to tree planting and maintenance. At Mount Edgcumbe near Plymouth, funding has enabled

the restoration of eleven ornamental structures as well as the restoration of traditional orchards. Orchards, particularly community and traditional orchards, provide unique spaces for improving wellbeing through access to nature, education and engagement with nature, as well as a key habitat and refuge for biodiversity. They can also store carbon above and below ground so contributing to climate mitigation[19]. Current spend on orchard-related elements is £83,000 in the countryside around towns (including £17,000 in the Green Belts), and is 17% of all orchard- related spend in England as a whole. Nearly half of the Green Belt spend is concentrated in the Bath & Bristol Green Belt.

4.2 Land management funding is helping to encourage and facilitate public access, but more can be done to help encourage access for marginalised social groups.

There is plenty of evidence, including from official government statistics[20], to show that people in urban areas made increasing use of green spaces and public parks near them during the 2020-21 coronavirus epidemic and associated periods of lockdown. Being able to visit green spaces provides all kinds of well being benefits including solace and exercise. Most of the evidence on use relates to specifically urban green spaces. In rural areas, the data suggests that green spaces were initially less used in the 2020 lockdown, although visits for tourism then increased significantly during the summer months. Since the end of lockdown, levels of interest in visiting the countryside around towns for walking have remained strong.

Overall spend on access-related elements within new Countryside Stewardship schemes is currently £2.3 million. Nearly a fifth (about £450,000) of this spend is on Green Belt land, including a particular concentration in the South East Dorset Green Belt around Bournemouth and Poole.

All the case study locations we looked at have some form of public access, though this can vary from being largely confined to public paths in the case of Shotover near Oxford, to almost completely open access at local authority country parks including Mount Edgcumbe.

Land managers interviewed for our research in the eight case study locations were unanimous in confirming that visits to all the locations increased significantly during lockdown.

With visitor levels to the sites already being significant, this shows that the countryside next door is making an important contribution to public health and wellbeing alongside urban public parks and is increasingly valued by the public for this reason.

In some cases, such as Mount Edgcumbe, historic park management funded by agri-environment schemes has directly helped public access through, for example, the restoration of historic pathways and views, and of features such as grottoes and seats. Agri-environment money cannot be used to maintain existing formal public footpaths as landowners already need to do this as a condition of receiving money under the Basic Payment Scheme. In the cases we surveyed, land managers stated that funding had indirectly benefited access by freeing up other resources to be put into path improvements.

In many cases, access for disabled people and hard to reach groups was not considered at all. Access for hard to reach groups is likely to be a particular issue in much of the countryside around towns, compared to more urban parks, due to major obstacles such as busy roads and less regular bus services, as well as stiles and uneven surfaces on many public footpaths which may make them impassable. Similarly, agri-environment educational payments are limited to school visits or care farming attendees, and thus don't provide support for people in further or continuing education.

One shining example of good practice on accessibility is Temple Newsam near Leeds, owned by the City Council, where areas of a former golf course have been turned over to open public parkland. The park is also a member of the Visitor Attraction Quality Assurance Scheme (VAQAS). The VAQAS, run by Visit Britain, is a scheme which ensures high quality experiences at tourist attractions, including a commitment to respect the requirements of the Equality Act 2010 by making reasonable adjustments to improve service for disabled people. The park has an active Friends group which provides mobility scooters for visitors who need them.

4.3 There needs to be a more integration between safeguarding and improving the historic environment, and tackling the climate and nature emergencies

Tackling the climate emergency will become centrally important to how we use land in future. It will also be critically important to reconcile this with the recovery of nature, the safeguarding of our historic environment, sustainable food production and increasing demands for public access to the countryside. There will be increasing pressure on how we use the countryside around towns, with particular demands for more housing and other built development to support economic growth.

Our research raised questions as to whether these tensions are being sufficiently addressed in schemes around towns. In recent years substantial work has been done, with agri-environment funding, to restore meadows and improve public use of Rawcliffe Meadows on the edge of York, part of the city's historic Strays network of open spaces and now also designated as Green Belt. Much of this work has now effectively been destroyed as the result of a flood prevention scheme on the River Ouse led by the Environment Agency.

There is scope for historic parklands to play a particularly significant role in climate change adaptation and nature recovery through the greater scope for holistic management of a wider area. This can include the re-creation of meadows, the re-creation of meadows alongside hedgerow and orchard management. In Wandlebury near Cambridge, the size of the country park is expanding by 20%.

25 acres of arable farmland are being restored to wildlife-rich chalk grassland by the charity Cambridge Past, Present and Future[21]. In addition to the case studies, in Enfield Chase, north London, a large scale landscape restoration project[22] will lead to more tree planting and increased flood allevation, as well as assisting in the management of the historic Trent Park.

4.4 There are a number of detailed policy and administration lessons that can help inform the delivery of the new Environmental Land Management schemes

The case study researchers sought to discover and highlight the benefits of work being done through agri-environment schemes in the countryside around towns. However, obtaining relevant information such as scheme agreements proved to be particularly challenging in practice.

Accordingly, CPRE recommends that a number of improvements can be made to the administration of land management schemes, as follows:

- Improve the quality and consistency of advice to land managers.
- Scheme information should be more widely available and easier to use, subject to General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) requirements on personal information.
- Allow for more flexibility with derogations from agreements where justified, again providing that this is fully transparent.

Conclusions and recommendations

This report has found that land management funding through existing agri-environment schemes (AES) plays a crucial role in maintaining our Green Belts as the countryside next door. A key element of this is the funding given to support heritage assets around our largest towns and cities, and this report has looked in particular at historic parks and gardens, where support has also benefited public access, nature conservation and hedgerow and tree planting, as well as maintaining the historic design of these landscapes.

In recent years there has been a substantial drop in both the amount of funding in AES as well as the area of land covered. This is reflective of a national trend, and in the past couple of years has gradually reversed with an increased number of new agreements concluded. But the reductions have particularly affected our Green Belts and countryside around other large towns and cities. Much more needs to be done to realise the benefits of historic landscapes in our Green Belts for education and for groups not benefiting now — including hard-to-reach groups, people of colour and people with disabilities. The introduction of ELM is a major opportunity to arrest and reverse this trend and take forward the welcome pledges made by ministers to improve the countryside next door for the benefit of current and future generations.

In order to meet the government's political commitments to enhance as well as protect the Green Belt, and to level up all regions of England:

- At least half of all designated Green Belt land (and two-thirds of the utilisable agricultural area within the Green Belts as part of this) should be covered by agreements under one or more ELM schemes.
- Agreements should be levelled up so that there is as much coverage (as a proportion of the individual Green Belt area) of ELM related agreements in the individual Green Belts in the midlands and north of England as there is in the Green Belts in southern England.
- CPRE wants to see England's hedgerow network extended by 40% (or just under 100,000 miles) by 2050, as recommended by the Climate Change Committee; this equates to just over 3,400 miles of new and restored hedgerows (5,500 km) per year. A significant proportion (20,000 miles, or 680 miles per year) of this total should be on Green Belt and other countryside around towns, and current levels of funding for hedgerow management in these areas should be doubled to help achieve this. Much new hedgerow planting could also include replacing lost historic hedges in historic parks and gardens, where it fits with landscape character.
- ELM schemes should provide additional support to aid conservation of heritage assets in both Green Belts and other countryside around large towns, acknowledging the pressure they are under due to higher levels of public access and use than other locations.
- The administration of land management agreements should be improved in a number of respects – particularly relating to availability of advice and information – so that future funding better serves the needs of communities living near where schemes are operating.
- The Government's final design of ELMs should include
  (i) mechanisms for community involvement in designing, supporting and evaluating schemes; and
  (ii) support for:
  - educational visits for young people and adults as well as schools.
  - improvements in access to benefit a wider range of social groups, in particular socially and economically deprived communities and people with physical disabilities. This should include provision for both additional access and improving existing rights of way.
- ELM payments in all areas of England, including the countryside around towns, should depend upon recipients fulfilling existing legal requirements relating to access (such as maintaining public footpaths), and not result in the loss of existing access rights.

ANNEX 1:
Countryside stewardship options analysis methodogy.

Data output reports are available from www.cpre.org.uk for coverage of AES and those AES options analysed in detail for individual areas of Green Belt and the urban fringe comparator areas.

Datasets

The following sources were used to generate data for this study:

- Countryside Stewardship Scheme 2016 Management Options (England) – updated approx. quarterly
- Countryside Stewardship Scheme 2016 Management Areas (England) – updated approx. quarterly
- Environmental Stewardship Scheme Options (England) – updated approx. quarterly and contains only live agreements
- Environmental Stewardship Scheme Agreements (England) – updated approx. quarterly and contains only live agreements
- English Local Authority Green belt dataset - downloaded and transformed into British National Grid for use alongside other datasets
- Urban fringe comparator area dataset - compiled by CPRE based on earlier work for CPRE / Natural England 2010

Method for analysing spend per option

1. Load datasets into ArcGIS.
2. Run join operation between green belt and CS management options data. This attributes each CS option data point with the green belt it falls within (or not). Repeat for green belt comparator data.
3. Export the joined CS Options attribute table and load into MS Access, where a CS payment rates look up table was created using the payment rates published on CS grantfinder https://www.gov.uk/countryside-stewardship-grants as follows:

CS payment rates

Code	Option	payment	unit	category
AB1	AB1 - Nectar Flower Mix	511	ha	
AB10	AB10 - Unharvested cereal headland	640	ha	
AB11	AB11 - Cultivated areas for arable plants	532	ha	
AB12	AB12 - Supplementary winter feeding for farmland birds	632	tonne	
AB13	AB13 - Brassica fodder crop	100	ha	
AB14	AB14 - Harvested low input cereal	266	ha	
AB15	AB15 - Two year sown legume fallow	522	ha	
AB16	AB16 - Autumn Sown BumbleBird Mix	550	ha	
AB2	AB2 - Basic Overwinter stubble	84	ha	
AB3	AB3 - Beetle banks	573	ha	
AB4	AB4 - Skylark Plots	18	unit	
AB5	AB5 - Nesting Plots for Lapwing	524	ha	
AB6	AB6 - Enhanced overwinter stubble	436	ha	
AB7	AB7 - Wholecrop cereals	495	ha	

4. Run a query to calculate the spend for each option line (linking the CS options export to the CS payment rates look up table) following rules:
   - For capital items the total option spend = quantity x payment e.g. FG12 highlighted below - 8 units @ £390 per unit = £3120
   - Some capital items are one-off costs e.g. HE2 below = £130,690
   - For revenue items the total option spend = duration x quantity x payment e.g. SP3 below 10 years of 6.8ha @ £153 per hectare = £10,404
   - NB PA 3 - Woodland management plans have a complex funding structure so are calculated separately outside of Access.

CAP_REV	DURATION	OPT_CODE	OPT_DESC	QUANTITY	UOM
Capital	2	BN12	BN12 - Stone Wall Restoration	190	Metres
Capital	2	BN12	BN12 - Stone Wall Restoration	210	Metres
Capital	2	HE2	HE2 - Historic building restoration	130690.12	Pounds
Capital	10	FG12	FG12 - Wooden Field Gate	1	Units
Revenue	10	GS15	GS15 - Haymaking supplement	2.32	HA
Revenue	10	GS7	GS7 - Restoration towards species-rich grassland	2.32	HA
Capital	10	LV3	LV3 - Hard bases for livestock drinkers	1	Units
Capital	10	LV7	LV7 - Livestock troughs	1	Units
Capital	10	LV8	LV8 - Pipework for livestock troughs	610	Metres
Capital	10	FG1	FG1 - Fencing	830	Metres
Capital	10	FG12	FG12 - Wooden Field Gate	8	Units
Capital	10	FG15	FG15 - Water Gates	8	Units
Capital	10	FG5	FG5 - Fencing supplement - difficult sites	270	Metres
Revenue	10	GS7	GS7 - Restoration towards species-rich grassland	8.46	HA
Capital	10	RP3	RP3 - Watercourse crossing/unit	2	Units
Capital	10	SB2	SB2 - Scrub control - difficult sites	532	Pounds
Revenue	10	SP3	SP3 - Bracken control supplement	6.8	HA
Revenue	10	SP6	SP6 - Cattle grazing supplement	8.46	HA

5. Export the resulting spend per option data into spreadsheet format, and analyse with pivot tables e.g. total spend per green belt, or break down of options per green belt (version supplied to CPRE already).

Method for analysing % of green belt under CS

1. Run intersect operation between CS management areas and green belt, and CS management and green belt comparator areas.
2. Repeat for ES management areas and green belt, and ES management areas and green belt comparator areas.
3. Calculate areas for the intersections, and for the total green belt and comparator areas.
4. Export to Excel, and do calculations to work out:
   - CS land area per green belt / total green belt land area
   - CS land area in comparator areas / total comparator land area
   - ES land area per green belt / total green belt land area
   - ES land area in comparator areas / total comparator land area
   - CS area in England / total land area in England
   - ES area in England / total land area in England

ANNEX 2:
List of case studies

Region	Urban Area Served	Site and ownership type	Historic Site Type	Area of estate (ha)	Agri-environment funding and period	Notes
Yorkshire	York Green Belt	Rawcliffe Meadows	Commons/ grazed open space	c.11	£63,000 over 10 years	Owned Environment Agency; leased to Sustrans
Yorkshire	Leeds Green Belt	Temple Newsam (Council)	Registered Park & Garden (RPG)	c.400	£138,000 over 11 years (£31,000 capital; remainder revenue)	
Midlands	Leicester	Bradgate (Charity/Council)	RPG/ medieval deer park, Scheduled Monuments	330	£922,000 over 10 years	Current agreement ends 2024.
London	Harrow/ London Green Belt	Bentley Priory (Council)	RPG; public park	c.33	£160,000 (£43,300 capital works; remainder revenue) over 10 years from 2013	Current agreement ends 2022. The Registered Park and Garden is on the Historic England At Risk Register
South East	Oxford: Green Belt	Shotover (Private estate)	RPG	513	£750,000 over 10 years	
South West	Plymouth	Mount Edgcumbe (Council)	RPG & Country Park	205	£437,000 over 8 years	Current agreement ends 2023. At Risk heritage asset, bowl barrow
South West	Bath Green Belt	Newton Park (University tenant; Duchy of Cornwall owner)	RPG	20	£91,000 capital (and possibly more revenue) over 10 years	Current agreement ends '21
East	Cambridge Green Belt	Wandlebury Country Park (Charitable body)	Country Park, designed (but not registered) landscape, Scheduled Monument	70	£63,000 over 8 years from 2015	Run by Cambridge Past Present and Future; current agreement ends 2023. At Risk scheduled monument, ring fort

Endnotes:

1 For the purposes of this project the 'countryside around towns', 'countryside next door' or 'urban fringe' refers to both the green (Green Belt) and yellow ('comparator areas') highlighted areas on the map on page 7, following the lead of earlier work done by the former Countryside Agency in the 1990s and 2000s. See also Methodology section.

2 https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-planning-policy-framework--2

3 UK Government, Levelling Up the United Kingdom, February 2022. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1052708/Levelling_up_the_UK_white_paper.pdf.

4 CPRE / Natural England, Green Belts a greener future, January 2010, table 20a.

5 See DEFRA ELMS overview at gov.uk (accessed 11 Nov. 21); and Get ready for our 3 new environmental land management schemes - Future Farming (blog.gov.uk)

6 More details of the aim, methodology, site selection criteria and application of the methodology to the selected sites are set out in Annex 2 and in the supporting report by Sarah Rutherford Historic Environment Ltd (SRHEL), available from CPRE on request.

7 CPRE / Natural England 2010; also CPRE / ADAS, Nature Conservation and Recreation Opportunities in the Green Belt, December 2016.

8 https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2022/may/02/top-10-green-spaces-in-england-and-wales-for-welfare-value-named-in-study. The four sites are Sutton Park, Windsor Great Park, Croxteth Hall and Ashton Court.

9 https://www.cpre.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Our_Green_Belt_-_worth_investing_in.pdf

10 See British Ecological Society (various authors): Protected Areas and Nature Recovery. https://www.britishecologicalsociety.org//wp-content/uploads/2022/04/BES_Protected_Areas_Report.pdf. Lawton Review: https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20170305123119/http://assets.kew.org/files/Making%20Space%20For%20Nature%20-%20The%20Lawton%20Report.pdf, p.26.

11 Air Quality Expert Group: Air Pollution from Agriculture, Defra 2018, p. 19 and 20/1.

12 CPRE / Natural England 2010, p.50.

13 This introductory text is taken from an Institute for Government Explainer, Agriculture Subsidies after Brexit, updated February 2022.

14 Figures taken from https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/agriculture-in-the-united-kingdom-2020, published July 2021. CS now has moved to being Treasury funded for all new schemes/ contracts, but older contracts as far as CPRE understands, are still funded by the Rural Development Programme for England under CAP regulations.

15 Ramblers et al, Environmental Land Management – improving our connections with the natural world

November 2021. https://www.thebmc.co.uk/media/files/Environmental%20Land%20Management%20and%20public%20access_20211129.pdf

16 https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Tree-planting-in-England-Summary.pdf, report dated 4 March 2022.

17 Defra / Natural England: Biodiversity net gain and local nature recovery strategies Impact Assessment, October 2019.

18 UK National Ecosystem Assessment, The UK National Ecosystem Assessment: Synthesis of the Key

Findings. UNEP-WCMC, June 2011, pages 18, 23 and 25.

19 https://www.theorchardproject.org.uk/guides_and_advice/10-amazing-orchards-species/

20 https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/environmentalaccounts/articles/howhaslockdownchangedourrelationshipwithnature/2021-04-26

21 https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/feb/25/natural-england-chair-tony-juniper-backs-biodiversity-net-gain-plan-boost-wild-areas?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other, article dated 25 February 2022.

22 https://www.enfield.gov.uk/news-and-events/enfields-woodland-restoration-project-receives-679, news release dated 10 December 2020.

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