

## Roundtable - Defining Grey Belt

with Annie Gingell, Associate Director - Turley, Matthew Spry, Head of London Office, Lichfields UK and Harry Quartermain, Head of Research & Insight, LandTech

Chaired by Danny Beales MP  
Portcullis House & Online via zoom



Matthew Spry



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## Introduction

The housing crisis in the UK is one of the most pressing challenges of our time, with the nation facing a severe shortfall in the delivery of homes. At our recent roundtable, experts convened to discuss how to address this critical issue, particularly in light of the barriers posed by existing planning policies and the pressing need for reforms.

Discussions centred on the opportunities presented by "grey belt" land, a concept outlined in the draft National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), which offers a potential solution to accelerating housing delivery while preserving the strategic intent of the green belt. However, participants underscored the urgency of creating a clear and actionable framework, backed by robust methodologies, to avoid confusion and ensure practical implementation.

This document summarises the key takeaways from the roundtable, including insights on the social, economic, and environmental dimensions of housing delivery, the need for bold and strategic intervention, and the critical role of public trust and engagement. By exploring the "why," "what," and "how" of reform, these discussions aim to chart a course towards meeting the target of 1.5 million homes while addressing the complex realities of planning in the UK.



## Key Takeaways

- The UK's housing crisis has reached a critical point, with only 221,000 homes built last year. At this rate, the country will fall over 600,000 homes short of its 1.5 million target. This ongoing shortfall exacerbates a growing affordability crisis, worsens living conditions in vulnerable communities, and betrays generational expectations of home ownership. Brownfield land, while a well-intentioned solution, cannot on its own meet the scale of housing demand, particularly in urban areas. Compounding the issue is an opaque and overly complex planning system that lacks resources and fails to deliver the outcomes needed to address the housing deficit.
- Grey belt land—disused, poorly utilised, or degraded land within the green belt—represents a pivotal opportunity to build homes in areas where demand is highest and access to amenities is strongest. However, without clear definitions and robust policies, grey belt initiatives risk legal disputes, political opposition, and public misunderstanding. The draft NPPF introduces the concept of grey belt, but its vague criteria, particularly around what constitutes “limited contribution” to the green belt, needs urgent refinement to enable local councils and developers to unlock suitable sites. Properly utilised, grey belt could help bridge the housing gap while preserving the core objectives of green belt protections.
- Delivering affordable housing on green and grey belt sites remains fraught with challenges. The government's ambitious target of 50% affordable housing is proving unattainable in most cases due to land values, viability concerns, and infrastructure demands. Proposals to lower benchmark land values to encourage development risk backfiring if landowners are discouraged from selling their land. Moreover, the current reliance on grant funding is insufficient to deliver the scale of affordable housing needed. Achieving viable developments requires a more flexible and realistic approach that reflects local economic conditions, especially in areas where the affordability crisis is most acute.
- The inefficiency of the planning process is a major bottleneck to housing delivery. Current plans often take years to complete and are vulnerable to delays caused by inconsistent decision-making, resource shortages, and disagreements over sustainability metrics. A more streamlined and data-driven planning system is essential to address these issues. For example, improving access to transport and sustainability data, alongside clearer methodologies for defining affordability and housing needs, could help reduce disputes and accelerate the approval of viable housing projects. Public trust must also be rebuilt through a more transparent and community-focused planning system.
- Misconceptions surrounding the green belt remain a significant obstacle. Often viewed as an environmental protection policy, the green belt primarily exists to prevent urban sprawl. This misunderstanding fuels opposition to reform and complicates efforts to introduce grey belt developments. Public engagement campaigns must demystify these concepts, highlighting that green belt protections can coexist with the need for sustainable housing growth. Additionally, political resilience will be essential to navigate public resistance and ensure that policies aimed

at tackling the housing crisis are implemented effectively. Strategic communication should emphasise the economic, social, and generational benefits of building more homes, including tackling overcrowding and supporting local communities.

## Issues raised

- Grey belt is often misunderstood, with many equating it to ecologically valuable green belt land. This misperception fuels public resistance to development. Attendees stressed the need for clear communication to educate communities about the differences, emphasising that grey belt is often disused, low-value land well-suited for sustainable housing growth. Building trust and support requires transparency and visible community benefits.
- Large-scale grey belt projects will require a skilled workforce, but the sector is already facing labour shortages. Without targeted initiatives to train and attract workers, grey belt potential could remain untapped, further delaying housing targets.
- Councils responsible for overseeing grey belt development may lack the necessary funding and resources to process complex planning applications efficiently. This could delay approvals, add to administrative burdens, and reduce the effectiveness of grey belt as a solution for rapid housing delivery.

We would like to thank the members of our Advisory Board for their contributions and continuing support.



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