

London's Millennials: Where Will They Live?

Planning reform and housing delivery are at the top of the agenda following Labour's recent landslide victory. The Government's first significant [public consultation focuses on proposed changes to the National Planning Policy Framework](#) (NPPF). The focus is on changing the system's rules to unlock the economy through the delivery of housing and infrastructure. [Labour's manifesto](#) and the [King's Speech](#) promise 1.5 million homes in the next five years. This pace of housebuilding has not been seen in the UK since the post-WWII boom.

However, Labour's plans offer a subtle but significant change in where this housing could be delivered. Unlike governments before them, Labour has offered the opportunity to unlock the potential of 'grey belt' land, which includes previously developed land and any plots which make only a limited contribution to the [five purposes of the Green Belt](#). To make this change more palatable to the general public, Labour has committed to ensuring that at least 50% of the homes built on grey belt land will be affordable, and many Social Rent homes.

"...We must be honest, we cannot build the homes Britain needs without also releasing some land currently classed as Green Belt... We'll prioritise ugly, disused grey belt land, and set tough new conditions for releasing that land."

Sir Keir Starmer, 19 April 2024.

The focus on housebuilding is not surprising. England, especially the Wider South East and London, is facing a severe housing crisis. The evidence shows that this issue is contributing to Britain's economic decline: for over a decade, [house prices have skyrocketed, while productivity in and around London has dropped](#).

Of all age groups, 25-45 year-olds have been hit most by the current housing crisis the most. Many can't afford to buy a home, and even renting is a struggle. Given millennials' importance to economic productivity and their potential and [eventual importance to Labour's victory in the General Election](#), it is no wonder that Starmer [targeted them by](#)

[proposing to unlock housing delivery on the grey belt](#). Starmer's promise to revive the dream of homeownership on an affordable basis resonated with many in this age group.

But what do millennials think about building the on grey belt? Who do they think should be responsible for delivering so many homes? How do they think the planning system should change? Or maybe they think that there are better solutions?

My colleagues and I at the LSE have been grappling with these questions as part of a [wider Oram Fellowship project](#) exploring a values-based approach to planning. We didn't expect to find answers through a desk-based study alone. Instead, we invited 26 early- and mid-career professionals from planning, policy, urbanism, surveying, and architecture to serve as jurors. They were tasked at crafting their vision for the future of housing delivery policy: what they value when it comes to housing in general, and what solutions they want to see in London and the Wider South East. Before starting their discussions, the jurors listened to several expert presentations. These opinion leaders provided knowledge that broadened the jurors' understanding.

LSE London Director, Tony Travers, highlighted that housing in London has always been in crisis, with the current situation particularly affecting young people. Jon Tabbush (Centre for London) noted that by hitting the most productive age group, this crisis hampers economic growth and productivity due to a lack of housing supply and complex regulatory issues. Despite the widespread blame put on the current planning system, addressed in Labour's manifesto, UCL Professor Ben Clifford argued against deregulating planning as a silver bullet, advocating for a comprehensive review of housing planning and delivery. Joanne Drew (Enfield Council) supported the 1.5 million homes target, but stressed the need for more planning applications in the first year to reach this goal.

Addressing the release of land for housing by changing Green Belt policy, LSE Professor Emeritus Christine Whitehead supported reclassifying some areas as grey belt. However, she argued that this would not automatically speed up the process due to multiple constraints like NIMBYism and the limited capacities of local authorities. Finally, the 50% affordability target for housing delivered on the grey belt is not viable for many housebuilders and many locations. Her colleague, Dr Alan Mace, suggested a strategic approach to repurposing Green Belt land. He emphasized the need to shift public attitudes by discussing the costs of the current policy.

Aman Sahota from Croydon Council believes more community involvement in planning and placemaking could address negative public attitudes towards Green Belt land release. For the strategic review suggested by Dr Mace, Russell Curtis from RCKK showcased a work-in-progress AI tool that might help identify usable Green Belt land in the future.

Architect Paul Hogston from Scott Brownrigg concluded that government intervention is essential to address viability issues preventing large-scale housing projects. He argued that this would make the building industry less reliant on economic cycles. Finally, Neil Talbot from L&Q Homes stressed the importance of preserving existing social housing stock.





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After these presentations, jurors entered breakout rooms moderated by my co-researchers, Liz Williams and Meg Hennessy. The jurors produced elevator pitches on whether they support housing delivery on the Grey Belt and how it should be

implemented. To reach the pitch stage, they discussed several key questions:

- What do they want housing to achieve?
- How can London best deliver housing, and who are the main actors responsible?
- What is the value of the Grey Belt as a housing delivery mechanism?

Here are several key insights from the jurors:

1. **Grey Belt is a promising housing solution**, but we must think beyond just houses. Communities, neighbourhoods, and industries must work together and thrive.
2. **Strategic planning needs a revival**. We should conduct a strategic review of the Green and Grey Belt. This should be done by an independent group and result in an implementable document with action points, rather than just a white paper.
3. **More mixed-development corporations and a Grey Belt authority are needed**. This authority should have the power to set strong conditions for development. The central government should lead this mission strategically.
4. **Investment in local authorities is crucial**. This will ensure balanced expertise in housing development.
5. **Fundamental housing reform is necessary**. It should focus on the needs of future generations and the planet. The goal should be to create sustainable homes that provide everyone with a solid foundation for life.





Permalink: undefined

Date originally posted: undefined

Date PDF generated: 08/10/2024



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The next steps

The workshop data is now being coded. We are specifically interested in distilling the diverse values expressed by participants about housing delivery, planning governance, and the value-added of planning. This will help us identify gaps between the desired planning system and what is currently in place.

There were more shared values among the participants than points of disagreement. Many participants want more choice in how and where to live, as well as in home ownership and renting options. They commonly expressed the importance of having a healthy local community and increased community engagement. Many also voiced a desire for more state intervention and regulation in the housing market. They believe housing should be less of a financial asset and more valued as infrastructure and a social good.

Participants were split on the issue of tall buildings and density. Some had no problem with living in skyscrapers, while others preferred “gentle density” with buildings no taller than 6-7 floors. The concept of beauty also divided opinions. Some argued that beauty is deeply subjective and lies in function rather than just aesthetics. One participant suggested that beauty could be linked to sustainability and affordability.

“Maybe if you build beautifully, it means you build sustainably, which means you build affordably, so it sort of encapsulates all those.”

– **Workshop participant, 12 June 2024.**

Several participants argued for reducing politics in the planning system. They pointed out potential flaws that could be addressed through more progressive planning governance. It was suggested that councillors should have less influence over planning applications, as they often prioritize what pleases their voters, overlooking the broader social and economic benefits of development.

Finally, while discussing the potential of the Grey Belt policy, participants noted the untapped value that could be discovered through a review of the Green Belt.

“I think the true value of the Grey Belt is actually completely unknown at the moment, and we’re still at the very start of that process of totally understanding it.”

– **Workshop participant, 12 June 2024.**

Building on insights from two additional workshops this September and October — focused on land as a resource and community participation — we aim to deliver progressive policy recommendations. Our goal is to understand what we want from a new generation of planning and how we can achieve these aspirations.

Further insights from the workshop will be available in the [Oram Fellowship](#) Report, which will explore a values-based approach to urban planning and policy.

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