



Green Belt

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Author: Christopher Barclay

Science and Environment Section

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- This note describes the Green Belt policy, which forms an important part of British planning policy. The issue of selling green belt land in the countryside in very small plots is covered in [Green belt - sales of small plots](#) (SN/SC/717).
 - The Government is changing planning policy considerably, including abolishing regional planning. The Coalition Agreement undertakes to ensure that the protection of green belt by local planning authorities is maintained.
 - In July 2011, the Government published the draft National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). The NPPF is to replace all existing planning guidance in April 2012. Green belt protection is retained, but simplified. In determining planning applications, planning authorities should give substantial weight to any harm to the Green Belt.
 - The area of the Green Belt has not been reduced in recent years. Reductions in some areas have been offset by increases elsewhere.
 - In 2011 the Institute of Directors called for land to be released from the Green Belt to stimulate house building.
 - In 2011 the OECD criticised the green belt system for being an obstacle to house building.

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1 The Green Belt under the Current Government

The Government intends to replace all planning guidance with a new National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) in April 2012. DCLG published the [draft National Planning Policy Framework](#) on 25 July 2011. Planning applications have to be determined in accordance with the development plan “unless material considerations indicate otherwise”.¹ Courts have decided that Government guidance, even in draft, can be a material consideration. Thus the July 2011 draft is important already.

The draft NPPF states that it should not be necessary to propose new Green Belts except in exceptional circumstances (para 136). Equally, “Once established, Green Belt boundaries should only be altered in exceptional circumstances” (para 137).

142. Inappropriate development is, by definition, harmful to the Green Belt and should not be approved except in very special circumstances.

143. When considering any planning application, local planning authorities should ensure that substantial weight is given to any harm to the Green Belt. ‘Very special circumstances’ will not exist unless the potential harm to the Green Belt by reason of inappropriateness, and any other harm, is clearly outweighed by other considerations.

144. A local planning authority should regard the construction of new buildings as inappropriate in Green Belt. Exceptions to this are:

- buildings for agriculture and forestry
- provision of appropriate facilities for outdoor sport, outdoor recreation and for cemeteries, as long as it preserves the openness of the Green Belt and does not conflict with the purposes of including land within it
- the extension or alteration of a building provided that it does not result in disproportionate additions over and above the size of the original building
- the replacement of a building, provided the new building is not materially larger than the one it replaces
- limited infilling in villages, and limited affordable housing for local community needs under policies set out in the Local Plan; or
- limited infilling or the partial or complete redevelopment of previously developed sites (excluding temporary buildings), whether redundant or in continuing use, which would not have a greater impact on the openness of the Green Belt and the purpose of including land within it than the existing development.

¹ *Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 s.38(6)*

145. Certain other forms of development are also not inappropriate in Green Belt provided they preserve the openness of the Green Belt and do not conflict with the purposes of including land in Green Belt. These are:

- mineral extraction
- engineering operations
- local transport infrastructure which can demonstrate a requirement for a Green Belt location
- the re-use of buildings provided that the buildings are of permanent and substantial construction; and
- development brought forward under a Community Right to Build Order.

146. When located in the Green Belt, elements of many renewable energy projects will comprise inappropriate development. In such cases developers will need to demonstrate very special circumstances if projects are to proceed. Such very special circumstances may include the wider environmental benefits associated with increased production of energy from renewable sources.

DCLG has reaffirmed its commitment to the Green Belt:

Myth: The Green Belt will be concreted over Fact: Not true. The new framework reaffirms the Government's commitment to maintaining Green Belt protections that prevent urban sprawl. Inappropriate development, harmful to the Green Belt, should not be approved. Legislation will also remove the top down pressure on councils to build on the Green Belt.²

2 Some comments on the Green Belt in 2010 and 2011

The 2011 OECD economic survey of the UK criticised policies that restricted housing development, including green belts:

19. The response of housing supply to demand in the United Kingdom has been one of the lowest among OECD countries over the last 20 years. Hence, making the land use planning system more flexible, more predictable and more responsive to market signals, without compromising its social and environmental objectives, is essential. Even though England is a high-density country, especially in the South, there is scope to make more land available for building houses. In particular, Green Belts constitute a major obstacle to development around cities, where housing is often needed. Replacing Green Belts by land-use restrictions that better reflect environmental designations would free up land for housing, while preserving the environment.³

In February 2011, the Institute of Directors proposed a series of measures to stimulate economic growth without cost, including:

Approximately 90 per cent of the population live on 9 per cent of the land in the UK. Expected population growth means ever increasing pressure for higher urban densities, especially in the South East of England. Surely there is an opportunity here to release a substantial portion of green belt land for development. This could help boost the construction sector and economic recovery in the short term, whilst

² DCLG, [National Planning Policy Framework: Myth-Buster](#).

³ OECD, [Economic Survey March 2011 United Kingdom Overview](#), 16 March 2011

improving urban congestion in the long term. Greater land release could also lead to lower land and house prices and greater affordability.⁴

In 2010, Natural England and the CPRE published a report, [Green Belts: A greener future](#).

How successful is green belt policy?

Green Belt designations are fulfilling their purposes in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment, preserving the character of historic towns and assisting with urban regeneration:

- the rate of development is a third lower in the Green Belt than in urban fringe comparator areas;
- Green Belts have assisted in directing the vast majority of new residential development in England to brownfield sites within large urban areas;
- Green Belts have played a role in the designation and ongoing management of World Heritage Sites of Bath in Somerset and Saltaire in West Yorkshire, through maintaining the landscape setting of both locations.

Is the Green Belt retaining and enhancing attractive landscapes and improving damaged and derelict land? - Partially

The proportion of Green Belt land categorised as maintained or enhancing is lower than for all England but so is the quantity of land neglected. A higher percentage of the Green Belt is categorised as diverging away from the character seen 20 years ago which could be a positive transformation as former degraded areas are regenerated.

There is a strong positive cultural association attached to the landscapes in the Green Belt and most people value its beauty, as revealed in our new national surveys – 95% of those surveyed around the London, Avon and Liverpool (North West) Green Belts agreed that the countryside in the area was beautiful.

Is the Green Belt conserving nature? – Partially

The Green Belt contains a lower proportion of nationally protected sites than areas of more extensive countryside but a significantly higher proportion of locally protected sites and ancient woodland than England as a whole.

Is the Green Belt achieving the land use objectives for agriculture and forestry? – Partially

The extent of agricultural and forestry land remains high in Green Belt and 93% of the land remains undeveloped. Almost a quarter, 23% of undeveloped land in the Green Belt is neither registered for agricultural use nor is it woodland. This compares to 14% of England. This land is made up of such uses as paddocks, small holdings and extensive gardens.

Can the Green Belt contribute to meeting the new challenge of climate change? – Yes

Undeveloped land, both in the Green Belt and the wider countryside, plays a vital role in helping to tackle the impacts of climate change. This role should be explicitly acknowledged in planning policy.

⁴ Institute of Directors, [Freebie growth plan published by IOD](#), 7 February 2011

The historian Tristram Hunt – now a Labour MP - argued that countries without a green belt had done worse:

In America, they chose a different path – and the relentless anywhere-nowhere sprawl of an Atlanta, Phoenix, or Los Angeles is awful to behold as “boomburbs”, “techno-burbs” and retail parks eat ever deeper into the rural hinterland. On the east Coast a vast megalopolis lurches along the seaboard from New York to Washington, taking in New Jersey and Baltimore with it. (...)

And on the Continent, it is heading in the same direction. Even with declining populations, cities along southern France’s Rhone corridor or on the Spanish coast have started to sprawl at worrying rates. In the absence of any green belts, Marseilles and Valencia as well as northern cities such as Helsinki and Copenhagen have expanded outward and not upward. And according to a recent EU report, “there is no apparent slowing in these trends” even as the ecological consequences of low-density suburban living are becoming more obvious.⁵

The Conservative Party document, [Open Source Planning Green Paper](#), February 2010, states explicitly:

we will maintain national Green Belt protection (3c)

The Commons South East Regional Committee reported on housing in the South East in 2010, concluding in favour of selective review of green belt boundaries:

59. We heard polarised evidence from CPRE [Campaign to Protect Rural England] and HBF [House Builders Federation] on development of green belt—CPRE strongly promoting retention of current boundaries whilst HBF vigorously promotes relaxation of green belt policy. Most other evidence we received generally supported the approach adopted in the South East Plan—that the present boundaries should generally be retained, but with some limited reviews in areas of greatest pressure such as to the south of the City of Oxford. **There are advantages to the green belt policy and it is undeniable that it has helped to retain the rural character of large areas of the region which otherwise would have become overwhelmed by urban sprawl in the last 50 years. However, it was designed for a different time, and it is now working against the ideal of sustainable communities which hope to encourage people to work, rest and play in the same local area. As a result, there are areas of the region where the green belt is adding stress to the immediate transport network and inadvertently placing pressure for development on valuable areas of greenspace within urban areas. We recommend continuing support for this policy of selective review of green belt in the South East Plan.**⁶

3 Has the Green Belt been reduced in size?

Many people seem to believe that the Green Belt has been reduced in size under the Conservative Government before 1997 and then further by the Labour Government. Neither proposition is correct.

In 1979 the total size of the UK Green Belt was 721,500 hectares.⁷ Although this is not directly comparable to more recent figures, there has been an overall increase in green belt area. A PQ in December 2008 gave the 1997 figure for green belt in England as 1,649,640

⁵ “Southmouth doesn’t exist. Thank the Green Belt”, *Times*, 28 January 2010

⁶ South East Regional Committee, [Housing in the South East](#), 7 April 2010 HC 403 2009-10

⁷ HC Deb 28 July 1997 c47W

hectares and that for 2007 as 1,635,670. The latter figure excludes some green belt land that was included in the New Forest National Park and the Test Valley DC (47,300 ha).⁸

April 2011 Green Belt statistics show very little change:

- The area of designated Green Belt land in England at 31st March 2011 was estimated at 1,639,540 hectares, about 13 per cent of the land area of England.
- Between March 2010 and March 2011, boundary changes in three authorities - Enfield, Slough and Vale of White Horse - resulted in a small increase (less than 5 hectares) in the total area of Green Belt.
- Over the longer term, since these statistics were first compiled for 1997, there has been an increase in the area of Green Belt after taking account of the re-designation of some Green Belt as part of the New Forest National Park in 2005.⁹

In October 2008, the Labour Government explained the development that had taken place on the Green Belt:

Mr. Iain Wright: Decisions about the use of land which is designated as green belt, or whether land should be designated as green belt, must be taken in accordance with the policy in Planning Policy Guidance Note 2 on green belts. This policy has performed an important role in preventing urban sprawl and protecting the countryside for 50 years. There is a presumption against inappropriate development in green belt but the policy allows for some development there, such as to support agriculture or forestry or as limited infill in existing villages. Development that is inappropriate may be permitted only where the benefits clearly outweigh any harm to the green belt and where very special circumstances are also demonstrated. The Government remain committed to current green belt policy and have no intention of making fundamental changes to it.

In the period 1997-2006, an estimated 39,800 dwellings were built in the green belt (as designated in 2007). This accounts for less than 3 per cent. of all dwellings built in that period. In the period 1997-2004, which are the most recent robust figures available for the amount of land developed, around 1,750 hectares of the 2007 designated green belt were developed for residential use. This is around 5 per cent. of all land that changed to residential use in the same period.

The total area of green belt land in England in 2007 is 1,636,000 hectares. Taking into account the 47,300 hectares of green belt land which was designated as New Forest National Park in 2005 but which has equally strong policy protection, the total area of green belt in 2007 would show a net national increase of 33,000 hectares since 1997.¹⁰

⁸ HC Deb 10 December 2008 c138W

⁹ DCLG, [Local Planning Authority Green Belt Statistics: England 2010-11](#), 15 April 2011

¹⁰ HC Deb 6 October 2008 c359W