



## Green Belt

Standard Note: SN/SC/934  
Last updated: 26 March 2014  
Author: Louise Smith  
Section: Science and Environment Section

---

Government policy on protection for the green belt is set out in chapter 9 of the [National Planning Policy Framework](#) (NPPF). The Government's fundamental aim of green belt policy is to prevent urban sprawl by keeping land permanently open. The NPPF states that the construction of new buildings should be regarded as "inappropriate" for the green belt, although there are some exceptions, which are listed.

It is for local authorities to define and maintain green belt land in their local areas. The Government expects local planning authorities with green belts to establish green belt boundaries in their Local Plans, which can be altered as part of the plan review process.

In a statement of 6 September 2012, the Government encouraged local councils to use existing laws to review the extent of green belt land in their local areas. As an incentive to use these powers, councils who review green belt land in their local plans will have their local plan examination process prioritised. This policy has been criticised by the CPRE. In January 2014 the Government said it was considering the case for changing planning policy and practice guidance to strengthen green belt protection in regard to traveller sites. Online [Planning Practice Guidance](#) issued by Government in March 2014 aims to make clear that "unmet housing need (including for traveller sites) is unlikely to outweigh the harm to the Green Belt and other harm to constitute the "very special circumstances" justifying inappropriate development on a site within the Green Belt"

Government statistics from March 2014 estimate green belt size of 1,639,090 hectares.

In 2010 Natural England and the CPRE published a report, [Green Belts: A greener future](#) which examined the state of the green belt and how successful the policy had been at protecting land. The report concluded that green belt policy continues to be "highly effective" in its principle purpose, but called for "more ambition" to further enhance the green belt protection for future generations. In 2011 the [Institute of Directors](#) called for land to be released from the green belt to stimulate house building. The [OECD](#) has also criticised the green belt system for being an obstacle to house building.

This note sets out these issues in more detail. It applies to England only.

This information is provided to Members of Parliament in support of their parliamentary duties and is not intended to address the specific circumstances of any particular individual. It should not be relied upon as being up to date; the law or policies may have changed since it was last updated; and it should not be relied upon as legal or professional advice or as a substitute for it. A suitably qualified professional should be consulted if specific advice or information is required.

This information is provided subject to [our general terms and conditions](#) which are available online or may be provided on request in hard copy. Authors are available to discuss the content of this briefing with Members and their staff, but not with the general public.

## Contents

<b>1</b>	<b>Protection of green belt land</b>	<b>2</b>
1.1	Green belt in the National Planning Policy Framework	2
<b>2</b>	<b>Government position on changes to green belt protection</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>Size of the green belt</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>Comment on the green belt</b>	<b>7</b>

## 1 Protection of green belt land

According to government the green belt serves five purposes:

- to check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas;
- to prevent neighbouring towns merging into one another;
- to assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment;
- to preserve the setting and special character of historic towns; and
- to assist in urban regeneration, by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land.<sup>1</sup>

The CPRE describes green belts as a buffer between towns, and town and countryside whereby within their boundaries, damaged and derelict land can be improved and nature conservation encouraged.<sup>2</sup>

It is for local authorities to define and maintain green belt land in their local areas. The Government expects local planning authorities with green belts to establish green belt boundaries in their Local Plans which set the framework for green belt and settlement policy. Green belt boundaries can be altered as part of the Local Plan review process. Local Plans are the plan for the future development of the local area, drawn up by the local planning authority in consultation with the community.<sup>3</sup>

To find out which land in a particular area is designated as green belt, contact the relevant local planning authority.

### 1.1 Green belt in the National Planning Policy Framework

In March 2012 the Government replaced a large amount of the planning guidance, including *Planning Policy Guidance 2: Green Belts*, with the [National Planning Policy Framework](#) (NPPF) published on 27 March 2012. The NPPF sets out the Government's planning policies for England and how it expects these to be applied. It contains a presumption in favour of sustainable development, which it defines as having three dimensions: economic, social and environmental. The NPPF must be taken into account in the preparation of local and neighbourhood plans, and is a material consideration in planning decisions.

---

<sup>1</sup> Department for Communities and Local Government, [National Planning Policy Framework](#), March 2012, p19

<sup>2</sup> CPRE website, [Green Belts: breathing spaces for people and nature](#) [on 9 January 2013]

<sup>3</sup> Department for Communities and Local Government, [National Planning Policy Framework](#), March 2012

The policy on protection for the green belt is contained in section 9 of the NPPF, which sets out the fundamental aim of green belt policy:

79. The Government attaches great importance to Green Belts. The fundamental aim of Green Belt policy is to prevent urban sprawl by keeping land permanently open; the essential characteristics of Green Belts are their openness and their permanence.

The NPPF also states that new green belts should only be established in “exceptional circumstances”:

The general extent of Green Belts across the country is already established. New Green Belts should only be established in exceptional circumstances, for example when planning for larger scale development such as new settlements or major urban extensions.

It also makes clear that the construction of new buildings should be regarded as “inappropriate” for the green belt, although there are exceptions:

89. 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 in the same use and 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 (brownfield land), whether redundant or in continuing use (excluding temporary buildings), 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.

90. 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.

Renewable energy projects are specifically mentioned as being “inappropriate” for green belt development:

91. 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.

In March 2014 the Government published new web-based *Planning Practice Guidance* to accompany and give further detail about the policies in the NPPF. This guidance makes clear that unmet housing need in a particular area is unlikely to meet the “very special circumstances” test to justify green belt development:

Unmet housing need (including for traveller sites) is unlikely to outweigh the harm to the Green Belt and other harm to constitute the “very special circumstances” justifying inappropriate development on a site within the Green Belt.<sup>4</sup>

## **2 Government position on changes to green belt protection**

The Government has not announced any proposals to change the law in relation to protection of the green belt. In a written ministerial statement of 6 September 2012, however, it encouraged local councils to use existing laws to review and tailor the extent of green belt land in their local areas. As an incentive to use these powers, councils who review green belt land in their local plans will have their local plan examination process prioritised:

The Green Belt is an important protection against urban sprawl, providing a 'green lung' around towns and cities. The Coalition Agreement commits the Government to safeguarding Green Belt and other environmental designations, which they have been in the new National Planning Policy Framework. The Localism Act allows for the abolition of Labour's Regional Spatial Strategies which sought to bulldoze the Green Belt around thirty towns and cities across the country, subject to the Strategic Environmental Assessment process, as outlined in my Statement of 3 September 2012, Official Report, Column 5WS.

As has always been the case, councils can review local designations to promote growth. We encourage councils to use the flexibilities set out in the National Planning Policy Framework to tailor the extent of Green Belt land in their areas to reflect local circumstances. Where Green Belt is considered in reviewing or drawing up Local Plans, we will support councils to move quickly through the process by prioritising their Local Plan examinations. There is considerable previously developed land in many Green Belt areas, which could be put to more productive use. We encourage Councils to make best use of this land, whilst protecting the openness of the Green Belt in line with the requirements in the National Planning Policy Framework.<sup>5</sup>

The CPRE has criticised this policy for relaxing protection of green belt land:

Paul Miner, senior planning campaigner for the CPRE, said: “This is going directly against the Government’s assurance that it would maintain protection for the Green Belt.

---

<sup>4</sup> Planning Practice Guidance, *Housing and economic land availability assessment, Methodology – Stage 5: Final evidence base*, 6 March 2014

<sup>5</sup> HC Deb 6 Sep 2012 cc29WS

“Green belt land is not only important to prevent the spread of urban sprawl into the countryside, it is usually very valuable to local communities for recreation and access to green areas. Green belt land has more public footpaths on it than the countryside as a whole.

“It has to be understood that the Green Belt’s boundaries should only be changed exceptionally and this does not appear to be the case for us.”<sup>6</sup>

An article in the magazine *Planning* gave Cheshire East Council as an example where there are proposals to swap parts of the existing green belt for new settlements and to designate new green belt elsewhere in the area in its place.<sup>7</sup>

In response to a PQ of 29 August 2013 the Government set out policies designed to encourage greater protection of green belt land, including plans for the Secretary of State to recover more appeals relating to traveller sites in green belt land for his own determination for a period of six months:

As outlined in the written statement of 1 July 2013, Official Report, column 24WS, our planning policy on traveller sites states that both temporary and permanent traveller sites are inappropriate development in green belt. In some cases, the green belt is not given sufficient protection in this context. Accordingly the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, my right hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Mr Pickles), will give particular scrutiny to traveller site appeals in green belt, so that he can consider the extent to which this Government’s clear policy intentions are being fulfilled.

In addition, as explained in the written statement of 29 July 2013, Official Report, House of Lords, column 162WS, we are proposing a further strengthening of green belt protection by deleting the current policy requirement to give special consideration to the need for waste management facilities in the green belt.<sup>8</sup>

In a [written ministerial statement](#) to Parliament on 17 January 2014, Communities and Local Government Minister, Brandon Lewis, said that the Secretary of State would continue to consider recovery of appeals involving traveller sites in the green belt. He also set out the Government’s position that unmet need for traveller sites and housing is unlikely to justify development in the green belt:

I also noted the Secretary of State’s policy position that unmet need, whether for traveller sites or for conventional housing, is unlikely to outweigh harm to the green belt and other harm to constitute the “very special circumstances” justifying inappropriate development in the green belt. The Secretary of State wishes to re-emphasise this policy point to both local planning authorities and planning inspectors as a material consideration in their planning decisions.<sup>9</sup>

The Government also said that it would consider improvements to planning policy and practice guidance to strengthen green belt protection:

Moreover, ministers are considering the case for further improvements to both planning policy and practice guidance to strengthen green belt protection in this regard. We also want to consider the case for changes to the planning definition of ‘travellers’ to reflect whether it should only refer to those who actually travel and have a mobile or transitory

---

<sup>6</sup> “Swathes of green belt land sacrificed” [The Telegraph](#), 24 November 2012

<sup>7</sup> “Council proposes green belt land swap” [Planning](#), 11 January 2013

<sup>8</sup> [HC Deb 29 Aug 2013 c1005-6W](#)

<sup>9</sup> [HC Deb 17 Jan 2014 c35WS](#)

lifestyle. We are open to representations on these matters and will be launching a consultation in due course.<sup>10</sup>

In February 2014 there were press reports that a planning inspector has told Reigate and Banstead Borough council that it must release green belt land if it is to be able to adopt its local plan.<sup>11</sup> Following these reports Planning Minister Nick Boles [wrote](#) to Sir Michael Pitt, Chief Executive of the Planning Inspectorate to emphasise that it is for the local authority to choose to review its green belt land as part of its local plan process and should not be for the Planning Inspectorate to recommend at examination stage:

It has always been the case that a local authority could adjust a Green Belt boundary through a review of the Local Plan. It must however always be transparently clear that it is the local authority itself which has chosen that path – and it is important that this is reflected in the drafting of Inspectors’ reports. The Secretary of State will consider exercising his statutory powers of intervention in Local Plans before they are adopted where a planning inspector has recommended a Green Belt review that is not supported by the local planning authority.

I would be grateful if you could circulate a copy of this letter to all Inspectors and ensure that they understand the need to choose their words carefully and reflect government policy very clearly in all future reports.<sup>12</sup>

### **3 Size of the green belt**

In 1979 the total size of the UK green belt was 721,500 hectares.<sup>13</sup> Although this is not directly comparable to more recent figures, there has been an overall increase in green belt area.

In 1997 the figure for green belt in England was 1,649,640 hectares.<sup>14</sup>

The Government’s March 2014 [Local Planning Authority Green Belt: England 2012/13](#) statistics estimated that the extent of the designated Green Belt in England in 2012/13 was 1,639,090 hectares, around 13% of the land area of England, and that:

- Overall there has been a slight decrease of 390 hectares (around 0.02%) in area of Green Belt between 2011/12 and 2012/13. In 2012/13 four authorities adopted new plans which resulted in the decrease in the overall area of Green Belt compared to 2011/12. All figures have been rounded to the nearest 10 hectares.
- The revised 2011/12 Green Belt in England is estimated at 1,639,480 hectares. This is a slight increase of 70 hectares on the estimated 2011/12 Green Belt area of 1,639,410 hectares published in November 2012. This change is due to a correction of the area of one local authority’s Green Belt boundary.
- Since these statistics were first compiled for 1997, there has been an increase in the area of Green Belt after taking account of the redesignation of some Green Belt as part of the New Forest National Park in 2005.

The DCLG statistics also provide tables of:

---

<sup>10</sup> [HC Deb 17 Jan 2014 c35WS](#)

<sup>11</sup> “Inspector advises Surrey council to release green belt sites” [Planning](#) 4 February 2014

<sup>12</sup> Letter from Nick Boles MP Parliamentary Under Secretary of State (Planning) to Sir Michael Pitt, Chief Executive Planning Inspectorate, [Inspectors’ Reports on Local Plans](#), 3 March 2014

<sup>13</sup> HC Deb 28 July 1997 c47W

<sup>14</sup> HC Deb 10 December 2008 c138W

- [Annex 1: area of designated green belt land by local planning authority as at 31 March 2013](#);
- [Annex 2: reasons for revisions to green belt estimates in 2011 to 2012](#); and
- [Annex 3: trend in the area of green belt land since 1997](#)

The Telegraph website has an “[interactive map](#)” of green belt in England dated November 2012.

#### **4 Comment on the green belt**

The 2011 the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (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.<sup>15</sup>

In February 2011, the Institute of Directors proposed a series of measures to stimulate economic growth without cost, including releasing some green belt land for development:

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 improving urban congestion in the long term. Greater land release could also lead to lower land and house prices and greater affordability.<sup>16</sup>

In 2010, Natural England and the CPRE published a report, [Green Belts: A greener future](#) which examined the history of the green belt, its legislative and policy protections, the state of the green belt and how successful the policy had been at protecting land. The report concluded that green belt policy continues to be “highly effective” in its principle purpose:

This report shows that Green Belt policy continues to be highly effective in terms of its principle purposes of preventing urban sprawl and maintaining a clear physical distinction between town and country. Alongside this, fresh evidence has been presented on the benefits which Green Belt land is delivering and how these relate to the ecosystem services they provide. For example, it reveals that Green Belt land has a greater proportion of woodland and a more concentrated range of public access opportunities than other parts of England.<sup>17</sup>

The report also called for “more ambition” to further enhance the green belt protection for future generations:

---

<sup>15</sup> OECD, [Economic Survey March 2011 United Kingdom Overview](#), 16 March 2011

<sup>16</sup> Institute of Directors, [Freebie growth plan published by IOD](#), 7 February 2011

<sup>17</sup> Natural England and CPRE, [Green Belts: A greener future](#), 2010,p90

Quite separate from the debate about the location of housing growth, this report emphasises the need for multi-functional use of land, particularly in the face of climate change and population growth. 'Green infrastructure' within and around towns and cities has an important role to play. Green Belt is already making a contribution which could have even a greater significance in the future if it is managed effectively to maximise the benefits that a natural environment can deliver.

The challenge is to find mechanisms and ways to invest in the land that realise its potential. This will involve working across public and private sectors, and across a range of disciplines. The summary document accompanying this evidence report takes this message forward and identifies opportunities to achieve a greener future for Green Belt.<sup>18</sup>

The historian Tristram Hunt – now a Labour MP – has 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.<sup>19</sup>

The Commons South East Regional Committee reported on housing in the South East in 2010. It concluded 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.**<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> Natural England and CPRE, *Green Belts: A greener future*, 2010,p7

<sup>19</sup> “Southmouth doesn’t exist. Thank the Green Belt”, *Times*, 28 January 2010

<sup>20</sup> South East Regional Committee, *Housing in the South East*, 7 April 2010 HC 403 2009-10



A CPRE briefing paper from August 2012 sets out areas in the country where planning applications have been submitted for green belt development: [\*Green Belt: under renewed threat?\*](#)