



A Quick Guide to ... **The Green Belt**

October 2017



What is the Green Belt?

The modern Green Belt dates back to the Town and Country Planning Act 1947. The Green Belt has evolved significantly since then, and the Government's current policy on protection for the Green Belt is set out in Chapter 9 of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF).

It is often said that the fundamental aim of the Green Belt is to prevent urban sprawl by keeping land open in perpetuity. However, Government policy under the NPPF is broader than the popular view.

The NPPF defines the purposes of Green Belt in the following way:

“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.”

Can the Green Belt Be Re-Designated to Meet Housing or Other Needs?

Yes and No.

The NPPF states that that the construction of new buildings should be regarded as “inappropriate” for the Green Belt and release from Green Belt allocation should be ‘exceptional’. Some examples of the operation of release from Green Belt are explored below.

The NPPF states:

“Local planning authorities with Green Belts in their area should establish Green Belt boundaries in their Local Plans which set the framework for Green Belt and settlement policy. Once established, Green Belt boundaries should only be altered in exceptional circumstances, through the preparation or review of the Local Plan. At that time, authorities should consider the Green Belt boundaries having regard to their intended permanence in the long term, so that they should be capable of enduring beyond the plan period.”

Can development happen in the Green Belt without the Local Plan being altered?

Yes. Importantly, the Court of Appeal has determined that the Local Plan does not itself have to be altered before development can take place, provided that the relevant criteria and all other legalities are satisfied.

When is Green Belt Land required to be reviewed?

There is no specific requirement under the NPPF for a local authority to actively review its Green Belt. However, there is an ability to review it and many councils have done so as part of their housing, employment and growth considerations.

Currently this may be done by the planning authority and through the local plan approach. There are proposals arising from the Government's Housing White Paper that indicate that the neighbourhood planning process may be expanded in order to allow local people to identify Green Belt for release.

Can new Green Belt land be created?

Yes. New Green Belt land can be set up, but only in exceptional circumstances. Some councils have created new Green Belt and some examples are set out below.

The NPPF states:

"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.

If proposing a new Green Belt, local planning authorities should:

- *demonstrate why normal planning and development management policies would not be adequate;*
- *set out whether any major changes in circumstances have made the adoption of this exceptional measure necessary;*
- *show what the consequences of the proposal would be for sustainable development;*
- *demonstrate the necessity for the Green Belt and its consistency with Local Plans for adjoining areas; and*
- *show how the Green Belt would meet the other objectives of the Framework."*

Is there other Protective Legislation for Countryside, Conservation and National Parks?

Yes. The primary purpose of Green Belt policies is not countryside protection. Primary countryside protection is provided through a range of other protective regimes including National Parks, Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB).

There are also Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINCS). This is a locally designated protection for wildlife habitats and access to local nature. These are widely used in urban planning as well as rural settings. For example, in London designated SINCS include burial grounds and cemeteries, church gardens, a railway cutting, primary school playgrounds and a Roman Wall.

Are there other provisions similar to Green Belt?

Yes. In addition to the Green Belt, there are extra local powers to plan that act in similar way to Green Belt. Notably these include (i) Metropolitan Open Land within London, land that is afforded similar status to the Green Belt within London as opposed to outside or around it and (ii) Strategic and Local Gaps, where additional ‘buffer land’ is zoned within a local plan to separate local settlements, such as towns and villages.

How much land is protected status?

In recent years the amount of land contained in the primary countryside and nature protective regimes has grown considerably. According to Defra’s Joint Nature and Conservation Committee protected land and sea habitat has nearly doubled:

“The total extent of land and sea protected in the UK through national and international protected areas, and through wider landscape designations, has increased by 12.9 million hectares, from 14.5 million hectares in December 2012 to 27.4 million hectares at the end of March 2017.

This 12.9 million hectare increase is almost entirely down to the designation of inshore and offshore marine sites under the European Union (EU) Habitats Directive, the designation of Marine Conservation Zones in English, Welsh, and Northern Irish waters, and designation of Nature Conservation Marine Protected Areas in Scottish waters.

The extent of protected areas on land has increased by 11,700 hectares since 2012.”

The chart (figure 1) below shows the increase in protected areas of land (i.e. excluding marine protection) from 1950 to 2016. This does not include all locally protected and designated land. Over time there has been better designation of protected land under these headings. In 1979 there was 3.496 million hectares of protected land, by 2017 this had nearly doubled to 6.741 million hectares of protected land, more than four times the amount of land set aside under Green Belt.

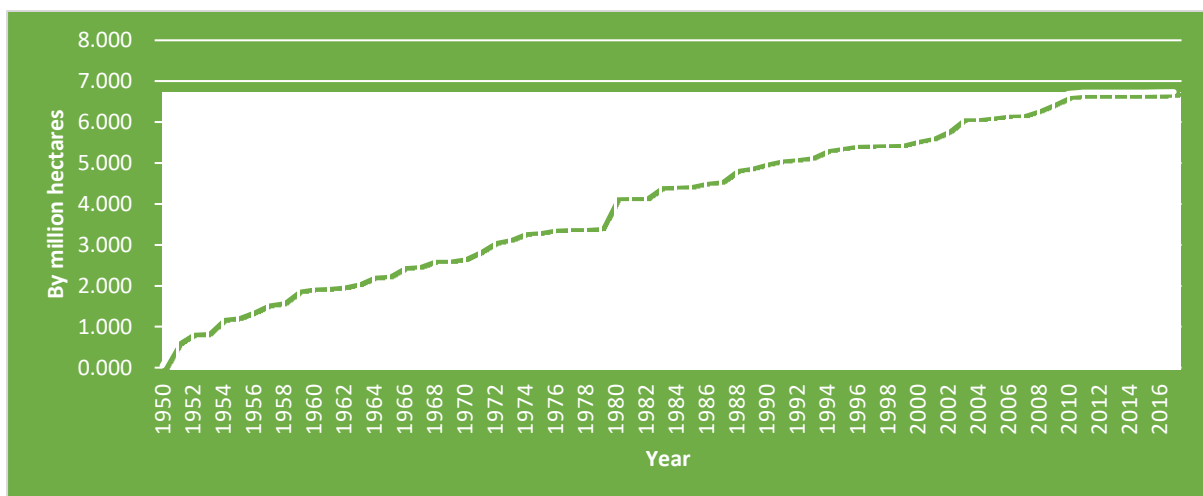


Figure 1: Protected land - trend over time by million hectares, DEFRA/HFi

How much Green Belt Land is there and where is it?

Between 1979 and 1997 the size of the designated Green Belt more than doubled, from 721,500 hectares in 1979 to over 1.6 million hectares in 1997. Since then there have been some year by year variations but over the last two decades the amount of Green Belt has remained above 1.6 million hectares.

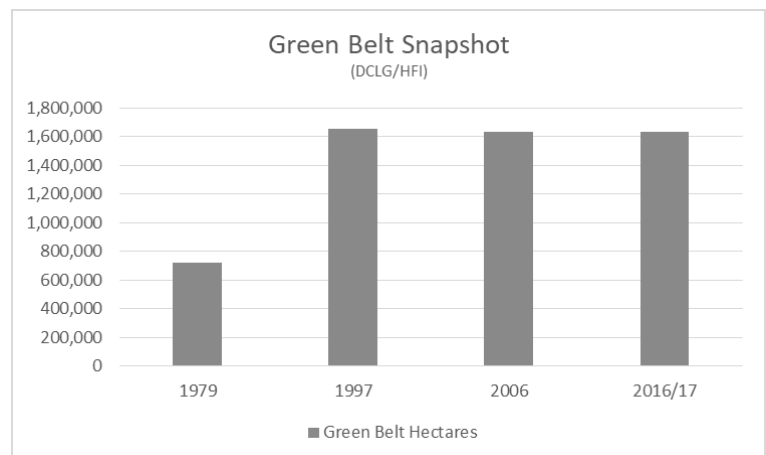


Figure 2: Green Belt long term trend snapshot (DCLG/HFI)

Where is the Green Belt land – is it only around London?

It is often thought that the Green Belt is a ring around London. That is not the case. Figure 2 shows which planning authorities have the most Green Belt. Only two of the top ten are in Home Counties immediately adjacent to London (Sevenoaks and Epping Forest).

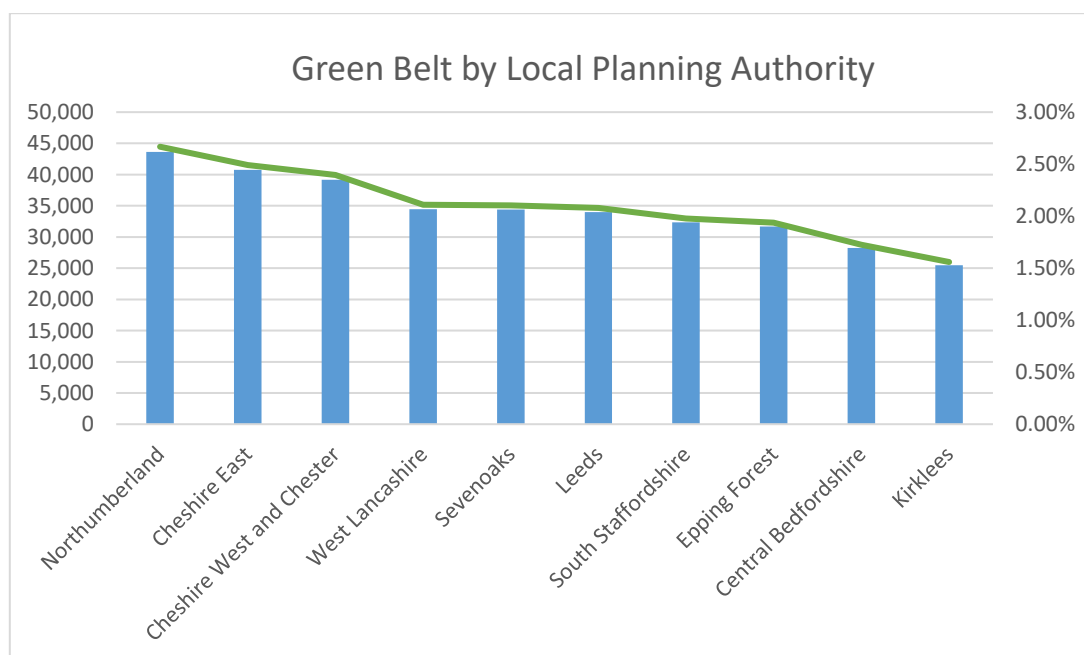


Figure 3: Green Belt, planning authority by size of holdings (hectares and % to total) (DCLG/HFI)

Can Green Belt Become Redundant?

Yes. This can be for a variety of reasons, for instance, if there is no longer a need for the Green Belt to demarcate one village from another, as this is now provided by another feature, such as a major road.

Are there any examples of the re-designation of Green Belt?

There are many examples of Green Belt being re-designated. Where Green Belt is re-designated, the relevant government department (DCLG) requires that the reason for re-designation is described in the official statistical return. The re-designation explanations are published alongside the statistical releases.

These publications act as a useful source of information about where, how and why councils are re-designating parts of the Green Belt.

For example, some councils have taken a purposive approach, removing parts of land which have historically been used to demarcate one settlement from another but where that purpose is no longer relevant. Such an example where green belt has been made redundant is recorded by South Derbyshire. In that instance, the presence of a major road acted as an effective physical barrier so that parts of retained Green Belt land around the major road no longer served that purpose nor contributed to an open Green Belt:

South Derbyshire

“In 2012 a technical assessment of the South East Derbyshire Green Belt was undertaken by South Derbyshire District Council, Amber Valley Borough Council, Derby City Council, Derbyshire County Council and Erewash Borough Council. It concluded that the A50 and A6 spur, completed since the Green Belt was first designated, formed a physical feature in the landscape. Consequently an area bounded by London Road and the A6, measuring 11.5ha, no longer contributed to the openness of the Green Belt and an area of land south west of Thulston, measuring 12.5ha, now appeared to perform a Green Belt role. The Green Belt boundary has therefore been amended by deleting the area bounded by London Road and the A6 and adding the land to the south west of Thulston, resulting in a net increase in the Green Belt area. The change to the boundary has been made through the adoption of the South Derbyshire Local Plan Part 1, Policy S8.”

Meeting Housing and Employment needs

A number of local authorities have re-designated land in order to meet housing need. This can be linked to 5 year land supply but sometimes is a feature of longer term strategic planning. A significant number cite combined employment and housing. Some land has been re-designated for employment alone:

Rochford

“The Council adopted its Core Strategy on 13 December 2011, which established that a small amount of Green Belt land would need to be reallocated to meet the housing and employment land requirements for the District. Following this, the Council progressed its pre-submission Allocations Plan to identify sites in the Green Belt to meet the identified housing and employment land needs. The Council adopted its Allocations Plan on 25 February 2014.”

South Gloucestershire

“This figure accounts for the planned release of Green Belt at land east of Harry Stoke (EoHS), and at land west of the A4018 as part of the Council's commitment to supporting sustainable development over the next 15 years. In total these areas represent a net loss of 205.47 ha and split between 144.35ha at EoHS and 61.12ha west of the A4018.”

West Lancashire

“Once the Council had established its objectively assessed housing needs during the preparation of the new Local Plan and identified all available land within the existing settlements, it was apparent that due to the amount of Green Belt land within the Borough, there would be a requirement to amend the Green Belt boundaries and release some of this land.

The Green Belt was released in the following locations:

Yew Tree Farm, Burscough (Key Service Centre) – Mixed use strategic site to deliver 500 homes and 10ha of employment with land safeguarded for further development beyond the plan period. See Policy SP3 for further details.

Grove Farm, Ormskirk (Key Service Centre) – Housing development for 300 dwellings. See Policy RS1 for further details. Fine Janes Farm, Halsall (Rural Sustainable Village) – Housing development for 60 dwellings. See Policy RS1 for further details. Land at New Cut Lane, Halsall (Rural Sustainable Village) – Housing development for 150 dwellings. See Policy RS1 for further details. Edge Hill University, Ormskirk – 10ha for new university buildings, car parking and new access road. See Policy EC4 for further details.

In addition, Green Belt land was released and safeguarded as “Plan B” for further housing development at the below locations in the event there is a need for additional housing land supply and subject to policy triggers. See Policies RS6 and GN2 for further details. Land at Parris Lane, Aughton – 400 dwellings, Land at Ruff Lane, Ormskirk – 10 dwellings, Land at Red Cat Lane, Burscough – 60 dwellings, Land at Mill Lane, Up Holland – 120 dwellings”

Bolton

“The reason for the boundary change is due to the adoption of Bolton’s Allocations Plan in December 2014. The Plan allocated the Cutacre site, now known as Logistics North, as a strategic employment site with a net developable area of 80 hectares to meet Bolton’s employment land requirements to 2026. Much of the site had been subject to open casting for coal and contained the sizeable Cutacre tip. While there has been a net loss of Green Belt some land was also added back into the Green Belt. Following restoration and clearance of the tip development of significant distribution and manufacturing facilities surrounded by a managed country park is now underway.”

Christchurch & East Dorset (Joint authority plan)

“The boundary changes are related to the adoption of the Christchurch and East Dorset Local Plan Part 1. The Green Belt boundaries have primarily changed to allow for new residential and employment development, and the operational part of the airport has also been removed from the Green Belt. In addition to these, smaller areas have been removed to allow for improved education facilities, or placed in to the Green Belt in response to sites previously safeguarded for development in earlier local plans no longer being suitable.”

Blackburn with Darwen

“The Council completed a review of its Green Belt boundary in September 2013 as part of the technical work carried out to inform the preparation of a new Local Plan; Local Plan Part 2: Site Allocations and Development Management Policies. The purpose of the review was to explore the scope for releasing land from the Green Belt and to make recommendations for potential boundary changes. This was the first review of Green Belt in Blackburn with Darwen (BwD) following the adoption of the Lancashire Green Belt in 1982. The 2013 review was not a strategic review of Green Belt boundaries within the borough; it covered the inner Green Belt boundary around the towns of Blackburn and Darwen. The Council’s growth strategy as set out in the Core Strategy acknowledges that over the local plan period, 2011-2026, there may be a need, triggered by a shortfall in suitable and available land for development within the existing urban area, for a limited number of small scale urban extensions into the adjoining Green Belt. The Core Strategy noted this would be determined during the preparation and examination of the Local Plan Part 2. Housing market conditions within the borough and across the wider East Lancashire area are particularly challenging. This has created a situation where many of the available sites within the BwD urban area, principally brownfield sites, are not viable and are not deliverable in the short to medium term. Additionally many of the available sites within the urban area are not suitable for delivering the type of housing required by the Core Strategy to diversify the housing market and achieve economic growth. Altogether this was considered to present exceptional circumstances sufficient to justify a review of the Green Belt in order to ensure an adequate, appropriate and deliverable housing land supply to meet needs up to 2026. The review concluded that a number of land parcels in the Green Belt could be released without affecting the integrity of the Green Belt. Some of these land parcels have been allocated for housing development within the Local Plan alongside sites within the established urban area and other non-Green Belt land on the edge of existing built up areas. Land released from the Green Belt and not needed for development in the period up to 2026 has been designated as safeguarded land to meet development needs beyond 2026.”

Knowsley

“The Green Belt boundary in Knowsley was changed following adoption of the Knowsley Local Plan Core Strategy in January 2016. The Plan allocated 374 hectares of Green Belt land as “Sustainable Urban Extensions” for residential and employment development. A further 58 hectares of Green Belt land is allocated as “Safeguarded Land” to meet development after 2028.”

Pendle

“The Green Belt boundary in Pendle has been changed to facilitate the allocation of a Strategic Employment site in the borough. Approximately 305 hectares of land has been removed from the Green Belt. The site was selected following a robust assessment process which justified the exceptional circumstances required by the National Planning Policy Framework for the alteration of Green Belt boundaries. The change to the boundary has been made through the adoption of the Pendle Local Plan Part 1: Core Strategy after it was found sound at the Examination in Public.”

South Ribble

“The Chancellor announced in 2011 that a bid for the designation of an Enterprise Zone at Samlesbury Aerodrome had been approved. A large part of the Aerodrome area was, in the Local Plan (adopted 2000), designated as Greenbelt. Through the production of the new Local

Plan, it was proposed to alter the Greenbelt boundary at Samlesbury Aerodrome to facilitate the delivery of the Enterprise Zone. The new Local Plan was formally adopted in July 2015.”

Wychavon

“The land has been removed from the Green Belt for three reasons. First there was a clear error in its inclusion in the previous Local Plan. Second, the land does not perform any of the necessary Green Belt functions. Third, the land forms part of a larger site, with the remainder lying within Wyre Forest District and is also not in the West Midlands Green Belt.” South Worcestershire Development Plan Examination Inspector’s Report, February 2016).

Birmingham

“We have revised the greenbelt area following the adoption of our Birmingham Development plan in January 2017, which has policy to build on the greenbelt.”

Bromsgrove

“The Green Belt in Bromsgrove was changed following adoption of the Bromsgrove District Plan 2011-2030 in January 2017. The Plan allocates two sites in Bromsgrove on the boundary with Redditch Borough Council for the housing needs of Redditch up to 2030.”

Stratford-on-Avon

“The area of Green Belt in Stratford-on-Avon District has changed to accommodate two sites for Employment uses. Approximately 20 hectares of land have been removed from the Green Belt. One site on the edge of the District has been allocated through co-operation with Redditch and Bromsgrove Councils to help meet the employment land needs of Redditch. The change to the designation has been made after the Core Strategy Examination Inspector found the Plan’s approach to the Green Belt to be consistent with national policy and through the adoption of Stratford-on-Avon District Core Strategy by the Council on 11 July 2016.”

High Peak

“The Green Belt Boundary in Furness Vale was changed following the adoption of the High Peak Local Plan (LP) in April 2016. Studies concluded that this site did not meet Green Belt purposes. It is allocated for residential development with a capacity of around 39 dwellings. The following is quoted from the Inspector’s report: The LP proposes a single change, at Furness Vale where land on the edge of the village adjacent to the A6 would be removed from the Green Belt and allocated for 39 dwellings. The site is enclosed by a road, canal and existing built development. The Council’s Landscape Impact Assess- 9 Local Planning Authority (January 2014 with updates in July and August 2014) (LIA) undertaken by Wardell Armstrong has demonstrated to my satisfaction that it does not contribute to the purposes of including land within the Green Belt. Furness Vale is identified as a larger village in the LP settlement hierarchy where a moderate scale of development is acceptable. Taking these factors together the exceptional circumstances test has been met and the exclusion of the land from the Green Belt has been justified. (Report into the Examination into High Peak Local Plan March 2016)”

Extending Green Belt

In addition to the significant increase in other protected land, there are examples of land being put back into the Green Belt. A number of the examples where Green Belt was released also contain designation of new Green Belt. For example, South Derbyshire and Bolton above. One more curious example of this was through the use of Village Green designation:

Hertsmere

“Approximately 4ha of land safeguarded for housing in the 2003 Local Plan has been returned to the Green Belt through the SADM Plan 2016 following its designation as a Village Green in the intervening period.”

Where is Green Belt being released?

In recent years there has been very little change to land around London and the South East. The largest re-designation has happened in the Midlands. Birmingham and Bromsgrove account for around 75% of all Green Belt re-designations between 2015/16 and 2016/17.

Further Information

Official Statistics on the Green Belt

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/green-belt-statistics>

Defra’s Joint Nature Conservation Committee on protected land/sea

<http://jncc.defra.gov.uk/page-4241>

Department for Communities and Local Government, National Planning Policy Framework

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/6077/2116950.pdf

House of Commons Library, Green Belt paper

<http://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/SN00934>

Department for Communities and Local Government, Housing White Paper, 2017

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/housing-white-paper>

Example of a Green Belt Review report: <https://m.runnymede.gov.uk/article/11311/Green-Belt-Review>

Example of a Local Gaps Review report: <https://www.eastleigh.gov.uk/media/283528/Countryside-gaps-June-Cabinet-report-15-June.pdf>

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