



The countryside charity
Gloucestershire

Change is inevitable: it should be for the better

POSITION STATEMENT GLOUCESTER AND CHELTENHAM GREEN BELT

Summary

We endorse the five purposes for Green Belts.

The general extent of the current Gloucester and Cheltenham Green Belt should be broadly retained. There is also a case for extension to the north of Bishop's Cleeve to provide further containment to the Cheltenham urban area, and to the south of Gloucester to safeguard the important strategic gap between Gloucester and Stonehouse.

Any proposal to modify the general extent of Green Belt land to accommodate urban extensions or other development would need to be justified by exceptional circumstances and only be considered where this would provide the most sustainable solution.

The Green Belt should be a focus for investment in Green Infrastructure, as an integral part of new development and largely funded by developer contributions. Investment should fund: improved networks of open space; better access into the countryside; enhancement of the landscape and wildlife habitats, and more opportunities for recreation and exercise contributing to improving health.

Background

The Gloucester and Cheltenham Green Belt was designated in 1958. It is the second smallest Green Belt in England, being confined to land separating Gloucester and Cheltenham, and Cheltenham and Bishop's Cleeve.

Section 9 of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) sets out national policy for Green Belts. It says (paragraph 79) that *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.*

Five purposes are defined for including land in Green Belts (paragraph 80), namely:

- to check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas;
- to prevent neighbouring towns from 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.

Landscape quality is not a criterion for Green Belt designation. However, once Green Belts have been defined, paragraph 81 says that *local planning authorities should plan positively to enhance the beneficial use of the Green Belt, such a looking for opportunities to provide access; to provide opportunities for outdoor sport and recreation; to retain and enhance landscapes, visual amenity and biodiversity; or to improve damaged and derelict land.*

Paragraph 83 says that *once established, Green Belt boundaries should only be altered in exceptional circumstances through the preparation or review of the Local Plan; and 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.*

Paragraph 84 says *When drawing up or reviewing Green Belt boundaries local planning authorities should take account of the need to promote sustainable patterns of development. They should consider the consequences for sustainable development of channelling development towards urban areas inside the Green Belt boundary; towards towns and villages inset within the Green Belt or towards locations beyond the outer Green Belt boundary.*

The Government has made it clear its determination to protect green belt land from inappropriate development, but it is for local authorities to determine whether green belt boundaries should be amended in line with paragraph 84.

CPRE warmly welcomed the following statement from the Minister for Local Government in July 2013 - "Having considered recent planning decisions by councils and the Planning Inspectorate, it has become apparent that in some cases, the green belt is not always being given the sufficient protection that was the explicit policy intent of ministers. The Secretary of State wishes to make clear that, in considering planning applications, although each case will depend on its facts, he considers that the single issue of unmet demand, 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'."

CPRE Policy

a. Extent of Green Belt

In CPRE's view, the Gloucester and Cheltenham Green Belt has served its primary purposes well, namely to prevent a risk of Gloucester and Cheltenham, and Cheltenham and Bishop's Cleeve from merging and to define a limit to urban sprawl.

Accordingly, we consider that the general extent of the current Green Belt should be broadly retained, but consideration should also be given to extension to the north of Bishop's Cleeve to provide further containment to the Cheltenham urban area, and to the south of Gloucester to safeguard the important strategic gap between Gloucester and Stonehouse (in Stroud District).

Any proposal to modify the general extent of Green Belt land to accommodate urban extensions or other development would need to be justified by *exceptional circumstances*, in accordance with policy in the NPPF. Removing land from the Green Belt for development should only be contemplated where it is clear that this would provide the most sustainable solution for accommodating future development requirements, for example by avoiding development leaping to settlements beyond the Green Belt leading to less sustainable patterns of development.

Separate detailed statements should be produced to set out the *exceptional circumstances* for *each* of any proposed modifications of the Green Belt boundary (ie for any proposed urban extensions into the Green Belt). Such statements should set out clearly the *relative advantages and disadvantages* of the proposal (including the material disadvantage of loss of the Green Belt land itself) and the assessment that concludes that this would be the most sustainable approach in that area. Any losses to the Green Belt should be kept to the absolute minimum and only land of low environmental quality considered for release.

b. Management of the Green Belt

Opportunities clearly exist to enhance public benefits within the Gloucester and Cheltenham Green Belt. Accordingly, we have pressed for the inclusion of the following Strategic Objective in the Gloucester, Cheltenham and Tewkesbury Joint Core Strategy:

- *To promote the positive management of the Green Belt to enhance its contribution to the landscape, biodiversity and access.*

Better and more co-ordinated land management would help the Green Belt to deliver vital environmental and other services - from attractive landscapes with new woodland, wildlife rich habitats, to places for recreation and for growing local food.

We would wish to see the Green Belt as a focus for investment in Green Infrastructure, as an integral part of new development and largely funded by developer contributions through the Community Infrastructure Levy. Investment should fund: improved networks of open space; better access into the countryside on foot and by cycle; provision and enhancement of landscape features including new areas of woodland; enhanced wildlife habitats and ecological networks helping to tackle the challenges of a changing climate; opportunities for Community Supported Agriculture; and more opportunities for recreation and exercise contributing to improving health.

Green infrastructure can also make a major contribution to achieving the recommendations in the Lawton Report, *Making Space for Nature*, which have been endorsed in the Natural Environment White Paper, 2011, *The Natural Choice: securing the value of nature*.

Gloucester, Cheltenham and Tewkesbury Joint Core Strategy

Gloucester City, Cheltenham Borough and Tewkesbury Borough Councils are preparing a Joint Core Strategy (the JCS) to guide development to 2031. Assessed housing needs and assessed availability of land within existing built up areas has led to the Councils to propose urban extensions to both Gloucester and Cheltenham to meet housing targets and these require Green Belt boundaries to be amended. The Councils consider that their proposals are consistent with paragraphs 83 and 84 of the NPPF. Work on the JCS has reached the stage of Council approval of a Pre-Submission document (April 2014).

Branch input to the JCS process in relation to the Green Belt has followed the CPRE Policy set out above. The Branch is pressing for Green Belt releases to be kept to a minimum and only taken forward when other development opportunities have been exhausted, and argues that the assessed housing need is “too high”. The Branch does accept, however, that the proposed urban extensions do provide the most sustainable pattern of new development and, in the main, would not compromise the essential purpose of the Green Belt in preventing the coalescence of Gloucester and Cheltenham. We have also welcomed the Council’s policies for Green Infrastructure. We are disappointed, however, that our proposals for Green Belt additions have not been accepted at this time.

The Branch policy, set out above, will continue to inform our continued input to the JCS process, including representations at the Examination in Public.

Updated May 2014

CPRE Gloucestershire Position Statements are regularly reviewed and updated as necessary. They should be read as a set