

Green Belts

1 Introduction

1.1 Green belt policy has been one of the most notable achievements of the planning system and has had widespread public support. The TCPA has consistently supported that policy since its inception. However, the Association believes that a reappraisal of the roles, purposes, and extent of green belts is now necessary. In some parts of the country they inhibit the appropriate sustainable development of urban areas, and often they constrain the opportunities for reducing social exclusion. This statement sets out the TCPA's position.

2 Current Government Policy

- 2.1 Current central government advice on green belts is contained in Planning Policy Guidance Note 2 (PPG2: *Green Belts*), which sets out five principal aims:
- to check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas;
 - to prevent neighbouring towns from merging into one another;
 - to preserve the setting and special character of historic towns;
 - to assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment; and
 - to assist in urban regeneration, by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land.
- 2.2 Within green belt areas the essence of policy is to permit no new development except for certain specific purposes, such as agriculture and forestry, essential facilities for outdoor sport and recreation, cemeteries, and other uses that preserve the openness of the landscape.
- 2.3 There are 14 green belts approved through county structure plans in England, covering approximately 12 per cent of the country, a total of 1,540,000 hectares. They vary in size from 486,000 hectares around London to 700 hectares at Burton-on-Trent.

3 TCPA Support for Past Policy

- 3.1 Although the TCPA has been a strong supporter and advocate of the green belt concept, it has not always given whole-hearted support to all aspects of the policy. The TCPA was sceptical about the need for the substantial extensions to the Metropolitan Green Belt to the north and south west of London in the 1960s; and it considered the last of the five aims listed above to have been superfluous when introduced into policy in the 1980s, because the link is not proven. Thus the TCPA has always seen the green belt concept not as a policy to be applied in isolation, but as an essential complement to a strategic package of policies aimed at:
- the containment of large urban areas to encourage their regeneration in a way that would create good living and working environments;
 - supporting, in the appropriate location, new towns and town extensions; and
 - conserving countryside in the urban fringe for recreation and agricultural purposes.
- 3.2 In the TCPA's view, any review of green belt policy should retain these strategic objectives.

4 Policy Reappraisal

- 4.1 There are several reasons why there is now a need for a reappraisal of green belt policy:
- In the context of the need to accommodate a proportion of the substantial projected increase in the number of households on greenfield sites as well as on previously developed land, green belt policies restrict the scope for considering forms of urban growth that conform better to sustainable development principles. Accordingly, the TCPA believes that a key option for the future expansion of some urban areas should be the development of planned extensions well related to public transport corridors and accommodating not only housing, but also the necessary mix of related land uses, especially employment. Such extensions can directly conflict with green belts.

- The restrictive nature of green belts, and their large geographical extent around many conurbations, inhibit the scope for encouraging new forms of development in rural areas and for diversification of their local economies and communities. To make settlements more sustainable, green belts should now be conceived as eco-belts, so that land around towns becomes a zone for a range of ecological and sustainable uses, such as smallholdings for organic market gardening, community woodlands, composting projects, wind farms and small-scale biomass power stations to supply heat and power through district heating schemes – as far as possible providing examples of best practice in these uses.
- The alteration of existing green belts has proved time-consuming and costly.
- Progress towards the improvement of the environment in green belts has been slow, given the importance of such areas for recreation by the urban population, and has failed to encourage the production of food for local markets.
- At the local level, green belt policy has been too restrictive in its control of small-scale development.

5 The TCPA's Policy

- 5.1 *Containment policies are still required.* There is a continuing need to control the outward spread of large urban areas. Accordingly, green belt policy should continue to play a positive role in helping to shape the future development of existing large urban areas and patterns of greenfield development in ways that conform to the principles of sustainable development and show regard for the implications for the provision of new infrastructure.
- 5.2 *Adopt a flexible approach.* Such flexibility, however, should not be applied on an *ad hoc* basis. Regional and structure planning policies should make provision for this flexibility on the basis of a better appreciation of what is the appropriate urban form in any particular case, having regard to the environmental or ecological quality of the surrounding countryside, the scope for the development of brownfield land within the urban area itself, the capacity of the existing transport infrastructure, and any local affordable housing and economic development needs.
- 5.3 *Make an unconstrained appraisal of development options.* Changes to present green belt boundaries should be based on local consultation and an appraisal of alternative development options (including new settlements) and on firm land use proposals for the affected land – for example development along transport corridors. This especially applies to any planned extensions of an urban area into an existing green belt.
- 5.4 *Reinforce the positive land use role.* The positive land use role for green belts envisaged in PPG2 (para. 1.6) should be reinforced so that, in return for green belt status, local planning policies should make specific provision for countryside access; sport and outdoor recreation; landscape protection and enhancement; the reparation of damaged and derelict land; nature conservation; and farming, forestry, and related uses. Policies to promote sustainable land management with mixed organic farming and community woodlands should allow, where appropriate, small-scale, low-impact, live-work units for those engaging in local food production, woodland crafts, and other land-based activities.

6 Action by Government

- 6.1 The TCPA therefore calls upon central government to take the following actions without delay:
- Initiate a review of green belt policy to assess how far it is relevant to present and future needs and how it can contribute to the achievement of sustainable development objectives.
 - Encourage the introduction by planning authorities of more limited strategic gap and green wedge policies in substitution for broad swathes of green belt no longer considered to be appropriate.
 - Jointly with the Countryside Agency, make an appraisal of how far development control in green belts hinders the agricultural sector and the strengthening of rural economies, and how far the rules applying to existing development should be revised.
 - Encourage and promote through all the appropriate agencies more effective programmes in green belts to achieve the land use objectives set out in PPG2.

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