

The Purpose of Green Belts

The main purpose for which Green Belts were created was to prevent urban sprawl, especially the ribbon development along roads, which destroyed so much of the countryside and so many of the villages within it during the 1930s, and which is still creating vast, unstructured conurbations in the USA and elsewhere. Additionally many Green Belts, and especially Oxford's, were established to protect the heritage and setting of an irreplaceable historic City.

Although much of the countryside within Green Belts may be attractive, Green Belts were not set up to protect outstanding landscape, unlike National Parks or Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Green Belts are planning policy tools with clearly-defined aims; Green Belts are more vulnerable and more prone to development pressures than National Parks or Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

There are 14 Green Belts in England and Wales, covering roughly 13% of the total land area. London had the first Green Belt, initially proposed in 1935. The Town and Country Planning Act of 1947 made provision for more Green Belts, but it was not until 1955, following the intervention of the Minister of Housing, Duncan Sandys, that other cities recognised the merits of Green Belts and introduced them into their development plans.

The purposes of Green Belts have been set out in government guidance documents, the most important of which, Planning Policy Guidance: Green Belts (PPG2) survived until 2012 when it was superseded by the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). Guidance on planning in Green Belts is now set out in paragraphs 79 to 92 of the NPPF, and all Local Plans are required to conform to this guidance.

The 5 basic purposes of Green Belts have remained unchanged. They are:

- 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.

In addition to these original purposes of including land in Green Belts, PPG2 recognised that Green Belts had a role to play in achieving certain other objectives. These are now widely accepted, and can be said to include the following:

- providing individuals with opportunities for recreation and engaging in outdoor sport close to urban areas (i.e. not including large developments like football stadia);
- giving protection to farmland;
- assisting nature conservation by defending habitats and wildlife corridors;
- protecting the individual and unique character of villages by saving them from absorption into cities; and
- improving the health of urban populations by safeguarding air quality (as the Green Belt is often referred to as a City's "green lungs") and by providing for healthy physical exercise in the countryside.

Although Green Belts often contain areas of attractive landscape, and enhancing the quality of landscape within them is frequently stated as a planning aim, the inclusion of

land within Green Belts does not depend on the attractiveness of the landscape, and nor does the fact that its quality might have been degraded, even perhaps deliberately, count as a reason to remove such land from the Green Belt.

The essential characteristic of the Green Belts is their permanence, and their value for good town and country planning practice stems from it, but this does not mean that their boundaries, once defined, cannot be changed in detail. Local authorities are entitled to review Green Belt boundaries whenever they produce a new Local Plan (see paragraphs 83 to 85 of the NPPF). The City of Oxford, and South Oxfordshire District Council, have both recently confirmed the Green Belt boundaries to 2026 in their new Core Strategies, and the Local Plans of the other Districts contain similar confirmations.

The openness of Green Belts can also be compromised when planning applications for controversial development are permitted. Circumstances under which development might be allowed within Green Belts are to be found in paragraphs 89 to 92 of the NPPF. In general, minimal development for agriculture, forestry and sport is acceptable. The key to whether or not other developments are “not inappropriate” in Green Belts is the “very special circumstances” test. This test is needed since the NPPF’s “presumption in favour of sustainable development” is restricted within Green Belts. What constitutes the “very special circumstances” for permitting development is frequently a matter for debate when planning applications for development within Green Belts are submitted or when appeals against the refusal of planning permission are heard at planning inquiries conducted under the chairmanship of an independent Inspector appointed by the Planning Inspectorate. For the Planning Inspector, the tests aim to determine whether or not there is **both** a vital need for the specific development proposed, **and** that it could not be carried out equally successfully somewhere else, outside the Green Belt.

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Useful links:

National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)

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

Planning Policy Guidance 2: Green Belts

<http://www.alternativesjournal.ca/sites/default/files/article/UK%20Planning%20Policy%20Guidance%202.pdf>