

Policy Statement

Author(s): Mathew Frith/Emily Brennan

Date: 18:07:2008

Owner: Conservation

Review Date: 01:08:2010

Ground Floor

Skyline House

200 Union Street

London SE1 0LX

Tel: 020 7261 0447

Fax: 020 7633 0811

Email: enquiries@wildlondon.org.uk

Web: www.wildlondon.org.uk



LONDON'S GREEN BELT

London's Green Belt is integral to the vision of London as a sustainable, green World City based on the concept of a strategic network of open spaces. It provides both a buffer and a link between suburban London and the wider countryside, helping to prevent further urban sprawl. It also serves to support ecological networks and significant green corridors for wildlife, offering people the chance to enjoy the countryside on London's doorstep. Nevertheless, the quality of land within the Green Belt is variable, and demands for development continue to place pressure upon it. A new vision for the Green Belt is required to make it fit for purpose in the 21st century.

I. Policy

- London Wildlife Trust supports the principles, purposes and objectives of the Green Belt and values the benefits it brings to Londoners through its contribution to the conservation of London's biodiversity, landscape, geology and heritage,
- We value and will vigorously defend the role of London's Green Belt in sustaining biodiversity and providing access to nature.
- We will oppose inappropriate use, development, damage or loss of Green Belt and (where there will be adverse impact on biodiversity or access to nature), development or uses that are consistent with Green Belt land status,
- Where appropriate and where there is no conflict with LWT's position in relation to use or development of Green Belt land we will support proposals aimed solely at enhancing access.
- We will encourage local authorities to use their existing powers and to be proactive in protecting and conserving biodiversity and the green spaces of London's Green Belt.
- The Trust will implement best practice in the conservation of biodiversity and provision of access to nature through the management of its Green Belt landholdings.
- We will seek to identify opportunities (including the promotion of grants and other incentives) to encourage other land managers to incorporate enhancements and to adopt best practice for biodiversity conservation and access to nature within the management of their Green Belt land.
- We will support local, regional or UK government policies and legislation where these serve to protect the Green Belt and the strategic role it plays in conserving London's natural heritage.
- We will oppose legislation and local, regional and national government policies where these will serve to weaken the support provided to biodiversity conservation or access to nature in the Green Belt.
- We will work with the Mayor, local authorities, and other stakeholders to identify opportunities to enhance and promote the sustainable use of the Green Belt, and strengthen its role in protecting biodiversity and ecosystem services.
- We support new strategic open space initiatives such as the Wildlife Trusts' Living Landscapes vision, the Green Grid, Green Arc and Green Chain extensions, that may further conserve London's biodiversity, and strengthen the Green Belt network.

Protecting **London's wildlife** for the future

The London Wildlife Trust is a company limited by guarantee registered in England and Wales no. 1600379 and registered charity no. 283895.

- We will contribute towards any strategic review of the Green Belt's future, in order to protect and secure benefits for wildlife and Londoners' access to nature.

The Trust will review this policy and amend it following any changes to legislation or planning guidance, as appropriate.

2. Context

Purpose

Covering 485,600 hectares, London's Green Belt encircles and extends beyond the Capital with a mixture of farmland, woodland, country parks, golf-courses, nature reserves, reservoirs, and landfill sites, in all the outer London boroughs. Of these, Bromley and Hillingdon contain the largest area of Green Belt, at more than 7,770 and 5,700 hectares respectively.

First established in 1947, the Green Belt's key character is its 'open-ness' and any new development within it should reflect this 'open character'. Although most of London's Green Belt has never been built on (and is, by definition, greenfield) some **brownfield** land is found within it; this is primarily landfill and land used for mineral extraction.

As future land use intensifies and residential densities increase, the contribution of the Green Belt (and other green spaces) to biodiversity, amenity, quality of life, and the open character of London - on which London's sustained development depends - will become ever more important.

Protection

Only limited forms of development within Green Belt are permitted. National planning policy guidance for Green Belts is set out in PPG2, PPS9, PPG17, and the London Plan, are also directly relevant.

A network of wildlife sites is fundamental to the conservation of London's biodiversity. The Green Belt covers 34804 ha, of which 12935 ha is designated as SINC (37.16%, 2008). A site that is a SINC may also be a LWT reserve, SSSI, SPA, etc. Examples of important London wildlife sites within the Green Belt include Hainault Forest, Crayford Marshes, Sixty Acre Wood, and Totteridge Fields. Green Belt status provides these sites with an added level of protection.

The Green Belt also offers opportunities for landscape scale conservation, by providing buffer zones around and links between individual sites set within a wider green matrix. Additionally, these can provide the foci of strategic regional initiatives such as 'Darwin at Downe' (Bromley), the Green Arc (Waltham Forest/Redbridge), and the Colne Valley Project (Hillingdon) which all have great significance for biodiversity conservation in the Green Belt.

Nevertheless, not all land within London's Green Belt is of high quality – for wildlife, landscape, or amenity. There are opportunities to enhance these elements of the Green Belt, or to re-designate parts that no longer meet its objectives - so long as there is no net loss of biodiversity.

Green Belt protection is presently subject to cyclical review by local planning authorities as part of their development plan (Local Development Framework) process. Such protection has been withdrawn from some areas following neglect of and targeting by fly-tippers, or as a result of deliberate action by landowners who hope to be able to develop areas within the Green Belt (in conflict with the chief purpose for which it was designated).

The future

Recent changes to planning policy and legislation, together with comprehensive housing and planning reviews by the Treasury, have highlighted some of the strengths and weaknesses of the Green Belt some 60 years since its inception. They also give some indication of current Government thinking in respect of its future; whatever this may be, the concept of the Green Belt has become strongly rooted in the

public's heart and any major threats to it will undoubtedly be vigorously fought over. The greater danger in the short term are the incremental losses and damage here and there.

The Green Belt will become more important as London's climate is affected by the consequences of global warming; mitigating temperature extremes, helping to reduce flood risk and renew groundwater, and limiting the local extinction of isolated populations of wild plants and animals. The extension and strengthening of the network inwards towards London's centre will be essential to meet this challenge; the development of 'green infrastructure' can be underpinned in the suburbs by a strongly protected and well-managed Green Belt.

Nevertheless, London Wildlife Trust considers that a comprehensive review of the Green Belt in London is required if its problems and threats are to be addressed. With the challenges and opportunities posed by climate change, sustainable urban regeneration and concerns over people's quality of life, there is, more than ever, a need to return to the original principles, purposes and objectives for which the Green Belt was created.

3. Related Policies

London Wildlife Trust: Brownfield Land

London: Mayor of London (2006), *Further Alterations to the London Plan: Policy 3D8 – Green Belt*

4. Background

The idea of a green belt for London was first proposed in the 17th Century by Sir William Petty. His proposal for a Green Belt two miles from the centre of London was succeeded in 1910 by Dame Henrietta Barnett's suggested belt five miles out of London (such had been the subsequent growth of London). Neither proposal gained the necessary support but the first official scheme "to provide a reserve supply of public open spaces and of recreational areas and to establish a green belt or girdle of open space" in 1935 by the Greater London Regional Planning Committee led to the Green Belt Act of 1938, which envisaged a 'green ribbon' around the Capital.

Sir Patrick Abercrombie's Greater London Plan of 1944 enlarged on this with the concept of four concentric green belt rings, with the green ribbon forming the Green Belt Ring around the Inner Urban and Suburban Rings, and reaching out to an Outer Country Ring. London's Green Belt was established by the Town and Country Planning Act of 1947 - and made more secure by the 1968 Amendment.

In 1955 a national Green Belt policy was established with the Ministry of Housing and Local Government urging all local authorities to protect any land acquired around their towns "by the formal designation of clearly defined Green Belts". Green Belt Circular 42/55 set out the aims of the new policy as "checking the unrestricted sprawl of the built-up areas, and of safeguarding the surrounding countryside against further encroachment", rather than to provide land for the nutritional and recreational needs of cities.

As set out in current government guidance (PPG2, 1995), Green Belt exists for five purposes:

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

These should additionally serve to fulfil six objectives

1. to provide opportunities for access to the open countryside for the urban population;
2. to provide opportunities for outdoor sport and outdoor recreation near urban areas;
3. to retain attractive landscapes, and enhance landscapes, near to where people live;
4. to improve damaged and derelict land around towns;
5. to secure nature conservation interest; and
6. to retain land in agricultural, forestry and related uses.

London's Green Belt is the most extensive (485,600 ha) and the oldest of the 14 individual Green Belt areas which cover some 13% of the country.

Although central government has consistently given support to the Green Belt concept, Government actions in relation to development within the Green Belt has all too frequently been contrary to its designation and Government proposals for greatly increased numbers of new dwellings in the South East and East of England in particular has increased pressures on Green Belt land, including in London.

The Barker Report

The 2006 Barker Report on planning called for Green Belt boundaries to be reviewed across England. It noted that *"The success of green belts and other policies has been notable, and has produced a number of important benefits, including maintaining valued open space for recreation and preserving the intrinsic character of the English countryside."* and stated that over the last two decades it has been instrumental in driving environmental regeneration. One of the key findings of the report is that steps should be taken to improve the quality of Green Belt land, and to ensure that valued green space in urban areas is protected and enhanced.

However, with the statement that steps be taken to ensure that: *"new development beyond towns and cities occurs in the most sustainable way, by encouraging planning bodies to review their green belt boundaries and take a more positive approach to applications that will enhance the quality of their green belts"* Barker proposes that parts of existing Green Belt areas be sacrificed in order to bring improvements to others.

In a survey for the report, members of the public were asked to comment on which classes of land, ranging from those valuable for nature, landscape, high value farmland, or land at the edge of cities and towns should be protected. Unsurprisingly, only 14% thought it was important to protect the latter. The report contrasts these findings with the 2005 MORI poll on behalf of the Council for the Protection of Rural England - in which 60% were in favour of Green Belt - suggesting that the difference reflects the a widespread misconception that Green Belt is a conservation designation. However, a truer picture of the public's views might well have been gained by asking what value respondents placed on the five purposes and the six objectives for which Green Belt was established. The fact that 73% of indicated that land designated as Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, National Parks or Sites of Special Scientific Interest are most worthy of protection, indicates the high value placed on wildlife. Considerable areas have been lost over the last half century despite this 'protection', and SSSIs within the Green Belt, despite being closer to a far greater number of people, have probably been better protected than those in more rural areas.

The report goes on to comment on the on pressures for new housing and office space, problems with commuters 'jumping the green belt' and the alternatives offered by open space initiatives such as Green Wedges developed in other countries. Whereas - subsequent to the publication of the Barker Review - Ruth Kelly, Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government at the time, commented that *"...existing Green Belt policy has served us well, and I am yet to be convinced that substantial policy changes are needed."*

London Wildlife Trust considers that a comprehensive review of London's Green Belt is urgently required if the identified problems within the Green Belt itself are to be addressed. With the challenges posed by climate change, sustainable urban regeneration and concerns over people's quality of life, there is, more than ever, a need to return to the original principles, purposes and objectives for which the Green Belt was created.

5. References

DoE (1995), *Planning Policy Guidance 2 - Green Belts* (Revised).
<http://www.communities.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1143928>

Green Arc Steering Group (2004), *Improving the countryside around London: The Green Arc Approach*. Land Use Consultants
<http://www.greenarc.org/luc-report.html>

HM Treasury (2006), *Barker Review of Land Use Planning - Final Report*.
http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/media/4EB/AF/barker_finalreport051206.pdf

Mayor of London (2006), *Further Alterations to the London Plan*.
<http://www.london.gov.uk/mayor/strategies/sds/further-alt/sdocs.jsp>

ODPM (2005), *The Town and Country Planning (Green Belt) Direction 2005*. ODPM Circular 11/2005.
http://www.communities.gov.uk/pub/32/Circular1105TheTownandCountryPlanningGreenBeltDirection2005_id1162032.pdf

Town & Country Planning Association (2002), *TCPA Policy Statement - Green Belts*.
http://www.tcpa.org.uk/policy_files/g-beltsPS.pdf

Groundwork and Countryside Agency (2005), *The countryside in and around towns*.
http://www.countryside.gov.uk/Images/CAT_tcm2-22089.pdf

6. Links

London Wildlife Trust, planning guidance:

London Greenbelt Council: <http://www.londongreenbeltcouncil.org.uk/>

London Landscape Web: <http://www.londonlandscape.gre.ac.uk/>

Landscape Information Hub: <http://www.lih.gre.ac.uk/>

Barker Review: http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/media/4EB/AF/barker_finalreport051206.pdf

CPRE Greenbelt Information: <http://www.cpre.org.uk/campaigns/planning/green-belts>

Town and Country Planning Association: <http://tcpa.org.uk>

7. FAQ

What is London's Green Belt for?

- London's Green Belt prevents uncontrolled suburban sprawl to safeguard the countryside.
- Whilst originally also to provide land for public amenity and conservation of landscape and natural heritage, London's Green Belt has become an important resource for biodiversity, publicly accessible countryside, as well as a place for recreational activities (e.g. golf, equestrian sports), and specialist agriculture (e.g. pick-your-own).

What are the threats to Green Belt land and its biodiversity?

- Inappropriate management that can lead to damage to biodiversity and amenity, and in extreme cases, blight;
- Development proposals in accordance with Green Belt policy but where these can conflict with other objectives, for example conservation of biodiversity and natural heritage (e.g. intensively managed cemetery, equestrian and sports facilities, mineral extraction, forestry, landfill);
- Hope value – land held on by owners (land-banking) in the hope that they may eventually develop it; this is often under-managed, closed to access, and can be deliberately blighted;
- Pressure from developers, leading to land taken out of the Green Belt in planning reviews.

Does the Trust oppose all development within the Green Belt?

- The Trust does not support any inappropriate development within London's Green Belt; if any demonstrate significant adverse impacts on biodiversity and natural environment, the Trust shall oppose them as resources permit.

- We may oppose developments in accordance with Green Belt policy if they are shown to have significant adverse impacts upon biodiversity and the natural environment. Each case will be addressed on an individual basis.

There are development proposals for Green Belt land in my borough – what can I do about these?

- Contact your local planning department, the Green Belt Council, London Wildlife Trust, and Planning Aid for London. We may be able to provide support if the proposals have significant impacts upon biodiversity.

Some brownfield sites are more important for wildlife than land in the Green Belt. What is the Trust's position?

- The Trust endeavours to oppose any development on any site of high biodiversity value no matter where it is located, its history, or designation, wherever that value will be damaged or destroyed. Each site will be addressed on an individual basis, although its strategic role will always be a consideration.
- See the London Wildlife Trust's Brownfield policy [web-link to be inserted]