



## BRIEFING PAPER

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# Green Belt

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## Summary

This briefing from the House of Commons Library examines some of the recent concern and controversy about the Green Belt and discusses how the white paper *Planning for the Future* treats it. It applies only to England.

### Current Green Belt planning policy

The fundamental aim of Green Belt policy is to prevent urban sprawl by keeping land permanently open. It is for local authorities to define and maintain Green Belt land in their local areas. The Government expects local planning authorities (LPAs) with Green Belts to establish Green Belt boundaries in their Local Plans, which can be altered as part of the plan review process.

Government policy on protection for the Green Belt is set out in [chapter 13 of the National Planning Policy Framework](#) (NPPF), which opens by stating that the Government attaches great importance to Green Belts. On protecting the Green Belt, the NPPF urges LPAs to maximise the use of suitable brownfield sites before considering changes to Green Belt boundaries. The NPPF demands that there should be “exceptional circumstances” before Green Belt boundaries can be changed and says that inappropriate development is harmful to the Green Belt and should be approved only in “very special circumstances”.

[Planning Practice Guidance on the Green Belt](#) was published in July 2019, addressing questions about the factors that can be taken into account when considering development’s potential impact on the openness of the Green Belt, how plans might set out ways in which the impact of removing land from the Green Belt can be offset by compensatory improvements and how the strategic policy-making authority can ensure that compensatory improvements to the environmental quality and accessibility of the Green Belt will be secured.

### How well is the Green Belt working?

The question of whether the Green Belt is working well, which is often tied up with questions of how to meet the need for housing, can prove contentious. Some commentators argue that the protections afforded by the Green Belt are too weak, and inappropriate development can encroach on the Green Belt, while others argue that the protections are too strong, and get in the way of building sufficient housing and so limit economic growth.

The Select Committee on Communities and Local Government published a [report on the operation of the NPPF](#) in December 2014, concluding that there had been inappropriate development and local authorities should be encouraged to review their Green Belts.

The 2010 report from Natural England and CPRE (formerly the Campaign to Protect Rural England), [Green Belts: A greener future](#), concluded that Green Belt policy was “highly effective” in its principal purpose, but called for “more ambition” to further enhance the Green Belt protection for future generations. Paul Cheshire, Professor Emeritus of Economic Geography, LSE, [has argued](#) that building on the least attractive and lowest amenity parts of Green Belts could solve housing supply and affordability problems. The [Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development](#) (OECD) has also criticised the Green Belt system for being an obstacle to house building.

The Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) has also questioned some aspects of the Government's approach.

## How large is the Green Belt?

The Green Belt in England was estimated to be around 16,158 km<sup>2</sup> at the end of March 2020. The Green Belt has shrunk by around 1% since 2006. Changes in the size of the Green Belt are mostly due to local authorities adopting new plans that alter the size of their Green Belt. In 2019/20, the Green Belt reduced by around 32 km<sup>2</sup> for this reason.

## How much building has there been in the Green Belt?

An estimated 93.2% of the Green Belt was undeveloped land in 2018, and this land was primarily used for agriculture (65.6% of all Green Belt land). 6.7% of Green Belt land was developed, with over half of this developed land accounted for by roads and other transport infrastructure. Residential buildings accounted for 0.3% of Green Belt land.

In 2017/18, 8.9 km<sup>2</sup> of previously undeveloped Green Belt land changed to a developed use, of which 2.9 km<sup>2</sup> turned into residential use.

## What's the future of the Green Belt?

Recent discussion of how the Government will achieve its housebuilding targets has once again brought the Green Belt to the fore. Put simply, some commentators have argued that the demand for housing will only be met if some development takes place in the Green Belt. In the run-up to the planning white paper *Planning for the Future*, questions resurfaced about the status of the Green Belt and how it should be protected.

In a [collection of essays](#) published in July 2019, the think tank the Institute of Economic Affairs argued that, although most Green Belt land should remain, any which did not achieve its purpose should be selectively reclassified. In his essay for that collection, the Leader of the House of Commons, Jacob Rees-Mogg, argued that regulation of land use had fuelled house price rises and "Nimbyism".

A [report for the think tank Centre for Cities](#) in September 2019 argued that there was an "easy solution" to the crisis in housing supply and proposed four actions to achieve it, one of which was (with certain conditions) releasing for development Green Belt or agricultural land within 800 metres of any station with a service of 45 minutes or less to a major city.

In February 2020, the Housing Secretary, [Robert Jenrick, was reported](#) as suggesting that building on Green Belt would be one of the "difficult choices" facing local and central government in building more homes and tackling issues of affordability. Similarly, Sir John Armitt, the chairman of the National Infrastructure Commission, [was quoted in March 2020](#) as suggesting that, to avoid building on flood plains, there might have to be some building on the Green Belt, some of which he described as "scrappy".

CPRE, though, took a different stance. In a [policy paper in February 2020](#), CPRE argued that the Green Belt would remain important in addressing climate and ecological emergencies, preventing urban sprawl and encouraging healthy lifestyles and wellbeing.

## ***Planning for the Future* white paper, August 2020**

The white paper [\*Planning for the Future\*](#) was launched on 6 August 2020. The consultation on its proposed changes closed on 29 October 2020. The Commons Library briefing [\*Planning for the Future: planning policy changes in England in 2020 and future reforms\*](#) examines the white paper's proposals and some of the response to them.

*Planning for the Future* proposes (amongst many other things) to streamline the planning process in England. Simplified Local Plans would place land in three categories – growth areas “suitable for substantial development”, renewal areas “suitable for some development” and protected areas – which would (the white paper says) halve the time to acquire planning permission on larger sites identified in plans. The Green Belt would be part of the protected category.

*Planning for the Future* also says that, within the nationally-determined and binding housing requirement, the Green Belt will be a constraint. In discussing the standard method for calculating housing need, the white paper goes on to say that existing Green Belt protections will remain.

The Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee launched an [\*inquiry into the future of the planning system in England\*](#) and issued a call for evidence on 8 October 2020.

### **Reaction to Planning for the Future's proposals**

In its [\*response to the Planning for the Future consultation\*](#), the RTPI argued that the concept of protected areas “had some value” but clear sub-categories would be essential.

The [\*planning consultancy Lichfields questioned\*](#) how protected areas would be defined and voiced concerns about how exactly the constraints of the Green Belt would be factored in, when calculating local housing need. Lichfields also considered how the provisions for release of land from the Green Belt might work in the reformed planning system, arguing that the Government had not distinguished between environmental and landscape constraints and those deriving from local policy.

Responding to the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee's call for evidence, the [\*Centre for Cities argued\*](#) that the Green Belt must be reformed and that “button development” around railway stations could help ease housing pressures. In its Out-law blog, [\*the law firm Pinsent Masons\*](#) suggested that *Planning for the Future's* proposals for protected areas were a “missed opportunity” to ensure that all Green Belt land continues to perform an effective function.

#### **Other Commons Library briefings**

Briefings on various other matters to do with planning are available on the Library's [topic page for housing and planning](#).

# 1. Current Green Belt planning policy

It is for local planning authorities (LPAs) to define and maintain Green Belt land in their local areas. Local Plans are the plan for the future development of the local area, drawn up by the LPA in consultation with the community. The Government expects LPAs with Green Belts to establish Green Belt boundaries in their Local Plans which set the framework for Green Belt and settlement policy. Green Belt boundaries can be altered as part of the Local Plan review process.

To find out which land in an area is designated as Green Belt, contact the relevant LPA.

## 1.1 Purpose of Green Belt land

[According to the National Planning Policy Framework \(NPPF\) 2019](#), the 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.<sup>1</sup>

## 1.2 What does current policy guidance say about protecting the Green Belt?

### NPPF 2019

Following a consultation, the [updated NPPF](#) was published in July 2018, with some further, minor amendment in February 2019.

On 5 March 2018, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) [launched the consultation](#) on an updated NPPF. The [draft text for consultation](#) set out how MHCLG proposed to amend and update the NPPF; one of the consultation's headings was *protecting Green Belt land*.<sup>2</sup> There was also a [consultation proposals document](#) setting out why and how the NPPF was being changed.<sup>3</sup> The [Government response to the consultation](#) was published with the updated NPPF in July 2018.<sup>4</sup>

The NPPF provides the framework for producing Local Plans, which in turn provide the background against which applications for planning permission are determined.

<sup>1</sup> MHCLG, [National Planning Policy Framework](#), CP 48, February 2019: page 40

<sup>2</sup> MHCLG, [National Planning Policy Framework: Draft text for consultation](#), March 2018

<sup>3</sup> MHCLG, [National Planning Policy Framework: Consultation proposals](#), March 2018

<sup>4</sup> MHCLG, [Government response to the draft revised National Planning Policy Framework consultation](#), July 2018

The [consultation proposals document](#) set out how the Government's earlier proposals for the Green Belt (discussed in section 5) would be broadened and taken forward, referring to the "high bar" to the release of Green Belt land.<sup>5</sup> The [Government response to the consultation](#) highlighted the diversity of views expressed about the proposals relating to the Green Belt and brownfield land in the Green Belt and noted that there had been mixed responses on making greater use of brownfield land in the Green Belt. The Government said it would amend the NPPF to incorporate the suggested changes but would not review national Green Belt policy and would not ban all development in the Green Belt.<sup>6</sup>

The [NPPF 2019](#) thus reiterates Government policy and encourages the use of brownfield land in almost the same terms as the draft revised NPPF. On protecting the Green Belt, it urges LPAs to maximise the use of suitable brownfield sites before considering changes to Green Belt boundaries.<sup>7</sup> The NPPF demands that there should be "exceptional circumstances" before Green Belt boundaries can be changed<sup>8</sup> and says that inappropriate development is harmful to the Green Belt and should be approved only in "very special circumstances".<sup>9</sup>

A [PO reply in the House of Lords in February 2020](#) repeated the commitment to prioritising brownfield land for development:

In our revised National Planning Policy Framework we make clear that local authorities should prioritise brownfield land for development, especially for housing to meet local need. This is especially the case where they may be considering the release of Green Belt land, which should only occur once all other options, including the use of brownfield sites, have been fully explored. The brownfield registers of local authorities identify an estimated 26,000 hectares of brownfield with potential for around a million new homes. The question of whether to refuse an application affecting greenfield land must continue to depend, rightly, on the local authority's planning policies and all other considerations relevant to that particular case, including the protections set out in the National Planning Policy Framework.<sup>10</sup>

A [PO reply in June 2020](#) confirmed how "exceptional circumstances" might be identified:

The Government revised the National Planning Policy Framework in 2018, clarifying the exceptional circumstances test for local authorities who are proposing altering the Green Belt boundary through their local plan. Local authorities need to demonstrate that all other reasonable options for meeting identified development needs have been examined, including those criteria given in paragraph 137, and will need to consider all available evidence and local circumstances in making this assessment.<sup>11</sup>

NPPF 2019 – including its provisions on the Green Belt – is discussed at more length in the Commons Library briefing [What next for planning in England? The National Planning Policy Framework](#) (CBP 08260, 10 June 2019)

<sup>5</sup> MHCLG, [National Planning Policy Framework: Consultation proposals](#), March 2018: page 20

<sup>6</sup> MHCLG, [Government response to the draft revised National Planning Policy Framework consultation](#), July 2018

<sup>7</sup> MHCLG, [National Planning Policy Framework](#), CP 48, February 2019: pages 40-1

<sup>8</sup> As above: paragraph 137

<sup>9</sup> As above: paragraph 143

<sup>10</sup> [PO HL759, 6 February 2020](#)

<sup>11</sup> [PC 53414, 10 June 2020](#)

## Planning Practice Guidance 2019

MHCLG published [Planning Practice Guidance on the Green Belt](#) in July 2019, addressing questions about the factors that can be taken into account when considering development's potential impact on the openness of the Green Belt, how plans might set out ways in which the impact of removing land from the Green Belt can be offset by compensatory improvements and how the strategic policy-making authority can ensure that compensatory improvements to the environmental quality and accessibility of the Green Belt will be secured.<sup>12</sup>

### 1.3 Use of Secretary of State "recovery" powers

In an [August 2015 letter](#) to Chief Planning Officers in England, the then Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG, now MHCLG) set out its intention to have the Planning Inspectorate monitor appeals involving unauthorised development in the Green Belt. It also said that the Secretary of State would consider recovering a proportion of relevant appeals in the Green Belt.<sup>13</sup>

Similarly, in a [Written Ministerial Statement](#) on 17 December 2015, the Government said that it was "particularly concerned about harm that is caused by intentional unauthorised development in the Green Belt" and reiterated its position on monitoring and recovering a proportion of appeals. This policy would apply to all new planning applications and appeals received since 31 August 2015 and the situation would be reviewed after six months to see whether it was delivering the objective of protecting land from intentional unauthorised development.<sup>14</sup>

### 1.4 Traveller site issues

#### Attempt to recover planning appeals relating to Traveller sites on Green Belt land

A [Written Ministerial Statement](#) in July 2013 announced that the then Secretary of State, Eric Pickles, intended to recover planning appeals relating to Traveller sites on Green Belt land for six months, so that he would take the final decision on the appeal, instead of a planning inspector.<sup>15</sup> In a further [Written Ministerial Statement](#) in January 2014, it was confirmed that the Secretary of State would continue to consider recovery of appeals involving Traveller sites in the Green Belt.<sup>16</sup>

The Secretary of State's decision to recover appeals relating to Traveller sites was subsequently challenged in the High Court in the case of [Moore and Coates v SSCLG](#) in January 2015. The issue before the court was the approach taken by the Secretary of State in relation to his use

<sup>12</sup> MHCLG, [Guidance: Green Belt](#), 22 July 2019

<sup>13</sup> Letter from Government to Chief Planning Officers in England, [Green Belt protection and intentional unauthorised development](#), 31 August 2015

<sup>14</sup> [HCWS423, 17 December 2015](#)

<sup>15</sup> [HC Deb 1 July 2013 c24WS](#)

<sup>16</sup> [HC Deb 17 Jan 2014 c35WS](#)



of recovery powers; as the great majority of recovered appeals related to pitches used by particular ethnic communities (Romany gypsies and Irish Travellers), the claimants contended that the Secretary of State had acted in breach of the provisions of the *Equality Act 2010*, in a way which had led to unlawful indirect discrimination contrary to section 19 of the Act, and to a breach of the Public Sector Equality Duty imposed on him by section 149 of the Act. The intervener in this case, the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC), also contended that the Secretary of State had acted in breach of Articles 6 (right to a fair trial) and 8 (right to respect for family and private life) of the European Convention of Human Rights (ECHR).

In his judgement, Mr Justice Gilbart found that the challenges based on breaches of the *Equality Act 2010* and of Article 6 of the European Convention of Human Rights had succeeded, because the Secretary of State had decided to recover all appeals in this area and then an arbitrary percentage of them; it would *not* (he found) be unlawful to continue to recover appeals of “individual cases on their merits”.<sup>17</sup> Mr Justice Gilbart also made clear that it would be unlawful for the Secretary of State to continue to recover appeals not because of their merits but because they were cases of Travellers’ pitches.

In response to the judgement, Brandon Lewis was quoted as saying:

This government makes no apologies for seeking to safeguard green belt protection and trying to bring a sense of fair play to the planning system. The government’s planning policy is clear that both temporary and permanent traveller sites are inappropriate development in the green belt. Today’s judgment does not question that principle.<sup>18</sup>

In response to a [written question](#) in the House of Lords in March 2015, the Government confirmed its intention to “de-recover” appeals for Traveller developments in the Green Belt on which a decision had not yet been reached.<sup>19</sup>

## Green Belt and Traveller sites policy update

In a [Written Ministerial Statement](#) on 17 January 2014, the then planning minister, Brandon Lewis, said that unmet need for Traveller sites and housing was unlikely to justify development in the Green Belt and the Government would consider improvements to planning policy and practice guidance to strengthen Green Belt protection in relation to Traveller sites.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> [Moore and Coates v SSCLG](#) [2015] EWHC 44 (Admin) on 21 January 2015: see in particular paragraphs 173 and 180-1. For more detailed discussion of the case, see the Commons Library briefing [Gypsies and Travellers: planning provisions](#) (SN 7005, 19 December 2019).

<sup>18</sup> “[Judge raps Pickles for breaching European Convention on Human Rights over Traveller appeals](#)” *Planning*, 21 January 2015

<sup>19</sup> [HL5936, 23 March 2015](#)

<sup>20</sup> [HC Deb 17 Jan 2014 c35WS](#)

A [consultation on planning and Travellers](#) was launched in September 2014. [The Government response to this consultation](#) was published in August 2015.<sup>21</sup>

In the resultant [Planning Policy for Traveller Sites](#), the Government of the time changed the weight which can be given to any absence of a five year supply of permanent sites when deciding planning applications for temporary sites in land designated as Green Belt, sites protected under the Birds and Habitats Directives, sites designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest, Local Green Space, an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, or within a National Park or the Broads. The consultation explained, “the absence of an up-to-date five-year supply of deliverable sites would therefore no longer be a significant material consideration in favour of the grant of temporary permission for sites in these areas. It would remain a material consideration, but its weight would be a matter for the decision taker.”

The Government also changed planning policy to make clear that (subject to the best interests of the child), unmet need and personal circumstances were unlikely clearly to outweigh harm to the Green Belt, and any other harm so as to establish very special circumstances. This change applied equally to the settled and Traveller communities.

## 1.5 Waste facilities on Green Belt land

In October 2014, the then Secretary of State [announced](#) that he had “strengthened the policy on planning for waste facilities such as recycling plants making clear that companies and councils looking to build these should first look for suitable sites and areas on brownfield land.” The new wording changed the previous policy, to mean that councils could now no longer give special consideration to locational needs, or wider economic benefits the site could bring, over other considerations, as justification for building waste facilities on Green Belt land.

The [National Planning Policy for Waste](#) was published on 16 October 2014.

## 1.6 Green Belt boundary reviews

Although it is intended that Green Belt land should have a degree of permanence, LPAs may conduct a review of Green Belt land and consider redefining boundaries to add or take away Green Belt land to meet local planning requirements.

As noted earlier, the [NPPF 2019](#) sets out the conditions that must be fulfilled for “exceptional circumstances” to exist, to justify such boundary changes:

137. Before concluding that exceptional circumstances exist to justify changes to Green Belt boundaries, the strategic policy-making authority should be able to demonstrate that it has examined fully all other reasonable options for meeting its

For information about other changes made as a result of this consultation see the Commons Library briefing [Gypsies and Travellers: planning provisions](#) (CBP 7005, 19 December 2019)

<sup>21</sup> DCLG, [Planning and Travellers: proposed changes to planning policy and guidance: consultation response](#), August 2015

identified need for development. This will be assessed through the examination of its strategic policies, which will take into account the preceding paragraph, and whether the strategy:

- a) makes as much use as possible of suitable brownfield sites and underutilised land;
- b) optimises the density of development in line with the policies in chapter 11 of this Framework, including whether policies promote a significant uplift in minimum density standards in town and city centres and other locations well served by public transport; and
- c) has been informed by discussions with neighbouring authorities about whether they could accommodate some of the identified need for development, as demonstrated through the statement of common ground.<sup>22</sup>

Previously, the Government had encouraged local councils to use existing laws to review and tailor the extent of Green Belt land in their local areas. As an incentive to use these powers, councils who reviewed Green Belt land in their local plans would (the then Government said in September 2012) have their local plan examination process prioritised.<sup>23</sup> The CPRE criticised this policy for relaxing protection of Green Belt land.<sup>24</sup> An article in *Planning* magazine gave Cheshire East Council as an example where there were proposals to swap parts of the existing Green Belt for new settlements and to designate new Green Belt elsewhere in the area in its place.<sup>25</sup>

In February 2014 there were press reports that a planning inspector had told Reigate and Banstead borough council that it must release Green Belt land if it was to be able to adopt its local plan.<sup>26</sup> Following these reports the [then planning minister, Nick Boles, wrote](#) to the Chief Executive of the Planning Inspectorate to emphasise that it was for the local authority to choose to review its Green Belt land as part of its Local Plan process and it should not be for the Planning Inspectorate to recommend at examination stage.<sup>27</sup>

In the case of *R (on the application of Luton Borough Council) v Central Bedfordshire Council*, the Court of Appeal upheld a decision to grant planning permission for development in the Green Belt.<sup>28</sup> The Court held that that the NPPF did not create a presumption or requirement that Green Belt boundaries had first to be altered via the local plan before development could take place in the Green Belt.

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<sup>22</sup> MHCLG, [National Planning Policy Framework](#), CP 48, February 2019: pages 40-1

<sup>23</sup> [HC Deb 6 Sep 2012 cc29WS](#)

<sup>24</sup> ["Swathes of green belt land sacrificed"](#), *Telegraph* online, 24 November 2012

<sup>25</sup> ["Council proposes green belt land swap"](#), *Planning*, 11 January 2013

<sup>26</sup> ["Inspector advises Surrey council to release green belt sites"](#), *Planning*, 4 February 2014

<sup>27</sup> Letter from Nick Boles, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State (Planning) to Sir Michael Pitt, Chief Executive Planning Inspectorate, [Inspectors' Reports on Local Plans](#), 3 March 2014

<sup>28</sup> [\[2015\] EWCA Civ 537, May 2015](#)

## 2. How well is the Green Belt working?

### In a nutshell

The question of whether the Green Belt is working well, which is often tied up with questions of how to meet the need for housing, can prove contentious. Some commentators argue that the protections afforded by the Green Belt are too weak, and inappropriate development can encroach on the Green Belt, while others argue that the protections are too strong, and get in the way of building sufficient housing and so limit growth.

In 2010, Natural England and CPRE (formerly the Campaign to Protect Rural England) published a report - [Green Belts: A greener future](#) - which examined the history of the Green Belt, its legislative and policy protections, the state of the Green Belt and how successful the policy had been at protecting land. The report concluded that Green Belt policy continued to be “highly effective” in its principal purpose and brought many benefits.<sup>29</sup> The report also called for “more ambition” to further enhance the Green Belt protection for future generations:

Quite separate from the debate about the location of housing growth, this report emphasises the need for multi-functional use of land, particularly in the face of climate change and population growth. ‘Green infrastructure’ within and around towns and cities has an important role to play. Green Belt is already making a contribution which could have even a greater significance in the future if it is managed effectively to maximise the benefits that a natural environment can deliver.

The challenge is to find mechanisms and ways to invest in the land that realise its potential. This will involve working across public and private sectors, and across a range of disciplines. The summary document accompanying this evidence report takes this message forward and identifies opportunities to achieve a greener future for Green Belt.<sup>30</sup>

Also in 2010, the historian and then MP Tristram Hunt argued that countries without a Green Belt had done worse:

In America, they chose a different path – and the relentless anywhere-nowhere sprawl of an Atlanta, Phoenix, or Los Angeles is awful to behold as “boomburbs”, “techno-burbs” and retail parks eat ever deeper into the rural hinterland. On the east Coast a vast megalopolis lurches along the seaboard from New York to Washington, taking in New Jersey and Baltimore with it. (...)

And on the Continent, it is heading in the same direction. Even with declining populations, cities along southern France’s Rhone corridor or on the Spanish coast have started to sprawl at worrying rates. In the absence of any green belts, Marseilles and Valencia as well as northern cities such as Helsinki and Copenhagen have expanded outward and not upward. And according to a recent EU report, “there is no apparent slowing in

<sup>29</sup> Natural England and CPRE, [Green Belts: A greener future](#), 2010: page 90

<sup>30</sup> As above: page 7

these trends” even as the ecological consequences of low-density suburban living are becoming more obvious.<sup>31</sup>

The Select Committee on Communities and Local Government, in its [report on the operation of the NPPF](#) in December 2014, concluded that there had been inappropriate development and local authorities should be encouraged to review their Green Belts.<sup>32</sup>

The Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) argued in its 2016 policy paper [Where should we build new homes?](#) that land within built up areas could not fully meet our housing needs and so the purpose of Green Belts should be revisited; their boundaries might need to change.<sup>33</sup>

### 2.1 Should the Green Belt be strengthened?

CPRE published a [report on the state of the Green Belt](#) in August 2018. Here it argued that building on the Green Belt could not solve the crisis in affordable housing and there should be a genuine “brownfield first” approach. Amongst its key findings were:

- The number of housing units completed on greenfield development in the Green Belt has risen from zero in 2009/10 to 3,387 in 2017/18.
- Huge amounts of greenfield land designated as Green Belt has been released or included in councils’ local plans since 2013, representing enough land for almost 460,000 housing units.
- Of the homes approved on greenfield land, only 27% meet the government’s definition of ‘affordable’. This is below the average target of 31% across local planning documents for development on such sites.
- Local authorities with Green Belt land have enough brownfield land for over 720,000 homes so there is no reason for them not to be prioritising brownfield development.<sup>34</sup>

A September 2016 report by the London Society - [Green sprawl: Our current affection for a preservation myth?](#) - provided a history of the London Green Belt and suggested how the Green Belt should be considered in the future, to encompass “spatial rebalancing”.<sup>35</sup>

### 2.2 Is the Green Belt hampering growth?

Whether this level of protection for the Green Belt remains necessary or appropriate - or whether, conversely, it places obstacles in the way of providing new housing – remains controversial.

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<sup>31</sup> “Southmouth doesn’t exist. Thank the Green Belt”, *Times*, 28 January 2010

<sup>32</sup> Communities and Local Government Committee, [Operation of the National Planning Policy Framework](#), 16 December 2014, HC 190 2014/15: Summary

<sup>33</sup> RTPI, [Where should we build new homes?](#), 2016

<sup>34</sup> CPRE, [State of the Green Belt 2018](#), August 2018: Executive Summary

<sup>35</sup> London Society, [Green sprawl: Our current affection for a preservation myth?](#), September 2016: page 17

In February 2011, the Institute of Directors (for example) proposed a series of measures to stimulate economic growth without cost, including releasing some Green Belt land for development.<sup>36</sup>

The RTPI has also questioned some aspects of the Government's approach. In its [initial analysis of the 2017 housing white paper](#) (discussed again in section 5.2), the RTPI suggested that the role, purposes and social impact of Green Belts should be revisited and Green Belt boundaries "may well" need to change, albeit with safeguards:

A managed approach to urban expansion, whilst avoiding urban sprawl around our major cities, has been successfully achieved through planning policies such as green belts. The planning profession has championed this policy for over 60 years. But it is important to revisit the purposes that green belts need to fulfil over the coming generation. The value of green belts is not simply about what is ugly and what is attractive, as some argue. We need to talk about who green belts are for, and about their social impact, along with their continued role in shaping and managing urban growth.

Green belt boundaries may well need to change, but only through careful reviews over wider areas than single local authorities, and where safeguards are put in place to ensure that development is sustainable, affordable and delivered in a timely manner, and without prejudice to the renewal of brownfield land.<sup>37</sup>

The [Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development](#) (OECD), too, has criticised the Green Belt system for being an obstacle to house building.<sup>38</sup> OECD's 2011 economic survey of the UK (for example) criticised policies that restricted housing development, including Green Belts:

19. The response of housing supply to demand in the United Kingdom has been one of the lowest among OECD countries over the last 20 years. Hence, making the land use planning system more flexible, more predictable and more responsive to market signals, without compromising its social and environmental objectives, is essential. Even though England is a high-density country, especially in the South, there is scope to make more land available for building houses. In particular, Green Belts constitute a major obstacle to development around cities, where housing is often needed. Replacing Green Belts by land-use restrictions that better reflect environmental designations would free up land for housing, while preserving the environment.<sup>39</sup>

In an article in [The Conversation](#) in September 2013, Paul Cheshire, Professor Emeritus of Economic Geography at the LSE, argued that building on the least attractive and lowest amenity parts of Green Belts could solve problems of housing supply and affordability.<sup>40</sup>

See section 6: selected further reading for OECD's survey for 2017 and other articles touching on some of these issues.

<sup>36</sup> Institute of Directors, *Freebie growth plan published by IOD*, 7 February 2011

<sup>37</sup> RTPI, [Housing white paper initial analysis](#), 8 February 2017

<sup>38</sup> OECD, [Economic Surveys: United Kingdom overview](#), March 2011

<sup>39</sup> OECD, [Economic Survey March 2011 United Kingdom Overview](#), 16 March 2011

<sup>40</sup> Paul Cheshire, ["Greenbelt myth is the driving force behind housing crisis"](#) on *The Conversation* website, 9 September 2013

## 3. Green Belt statistics

### In brief

- England has around 16,158 km<sup>2</sup> of Green Belt land, clustered around 15 urban cores.
- The size of the Green Belt has reduced by around 173 km<sup>2</sup> since March 2014 due to local authorities amending the extent of their land designated as Green Belt.
- The majority (65.6%) of Green Belt land is used for agriculture. 6.7% is developed.
- An estimated 8.9 km<sup>2</sup> of previously-undeveloped Green Belt land changed to developed use in 2017/18, of which 2.9 km<sup>2</sup> was changed to residential buildings.

### 3.1 How big is the Green Belt?

The Green Belt in England was estimated to be 1,615,800 hectares at the end of March 2020 – around 12.4% of the land area of England.<sup>41</sup> A hectare is a hundredth of a square kilometre or about the size of a full-size international rugby pitch. The Green Belt in March 2020 was equivalent to 16,158 km<sup>2</sup> or 6,239 square miles, which is about three times the size of Norfolk.

In 1979 the UK-wide Green Belt was 7,215 km<sup>2</sup>.<sup>42</sup> By 1997, the figure for Green Belt in England was 16,523 km<sup>2</sup>.<sup>43</sup> In 2005, 473 km<sup>2</sup> of Green Belt land was re-designated to become the New Forest National Park. Since then, the size of the Green Belt has been relatively consistent: it has fallen by around 1% since 2006.

Changes in the estimated size of the Green Belt are mostly due to local authorities adopting new plans that alter the area of that authority's Green Belt. Since March 2014, the Green Belt has reduced by around 173 km<sup>2</sup> due to these changes. Fifteen local authorities adopted new Green Belt boundaries in 2019/20, resulting in a decrease of around 32 km<sup>2</sup>. Guildford accounted for 46% of this change, reducing its Green Belt by around 15 km<sup>2</sup> (or by 6%).<sup>44</sup>

Around 37% of England is covered by either Green Belt land or other types of protected land (e.g. Sites of Special Scientific Interest, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and National Parks).<sup>45</sup> Statistics on these other protected areas are set out in the [UK Biodiversity Indicators 2020](#), which show that their extent is generally increasing.<sup>46</sup>

### 3.2 Where is the Green Belt?

The Green Belt is clustered around 15 urban cores. The chart overleaf shows the area of Green Belt associated with each urban core, and the map on the following page shows the location of Green Belt land.

<sup>41</sup> MHCLG, [Local authority green belt statistics for England: 2019/20](#), September 2020

<sup>42</sup> HC Deb 28 July 1997 c47W

<sup>43</sup> MHCLG, [Local authority green belt statistics for England: 2019/20](#), Accompanying tables, September 2020

<sup>44</sup> MHCLG, [Local authority green belt statistics for England: 2019/20](#), September 2020

<sup>45</sup> As above

<sup>46</sup> Joint Nature Conservation Committee, [UK Biodiversity indicators 2020](#), October 2020

## Green Belt area by urban core

As at 31 March 2019

Urban core	Area (km <sup>2</sup> )
London	5,091
Merseyside & Greater Manchester	2,493
South and West Yorkshire	2,475
Birmingham	2,271
Tyne & Wear	720
Bath and Bristol	717
Derby & Nottingham	600
Stoke-on-Trent	445
Bournemouth, Christchurch & Poole	348
Oxford	348
York	280
Cambridge	261
Cheltenham & Gloucester	62
Blackpool	25
Carnforth, Lancaster & Morecambe	17
Burton-upon-Trent and Swadlincote	7

Source: MHCLG, [Local authority green belt statistics for England: 2019/20](#), Table 4

Notes: Figures are rounded estimates, which means that urban core figures do not sum to the England total.

The table below shows the local authorities which have the highest proportion of Green Belt within their boundaries. Tandridge in Surrey has the highest proportion: 94% of its land is Green Belt. Epping Forest, Sevenoaks, Brentwood and West Lancashire are all 90% Green Belt or more.

## Local authorities with the most Green Belt

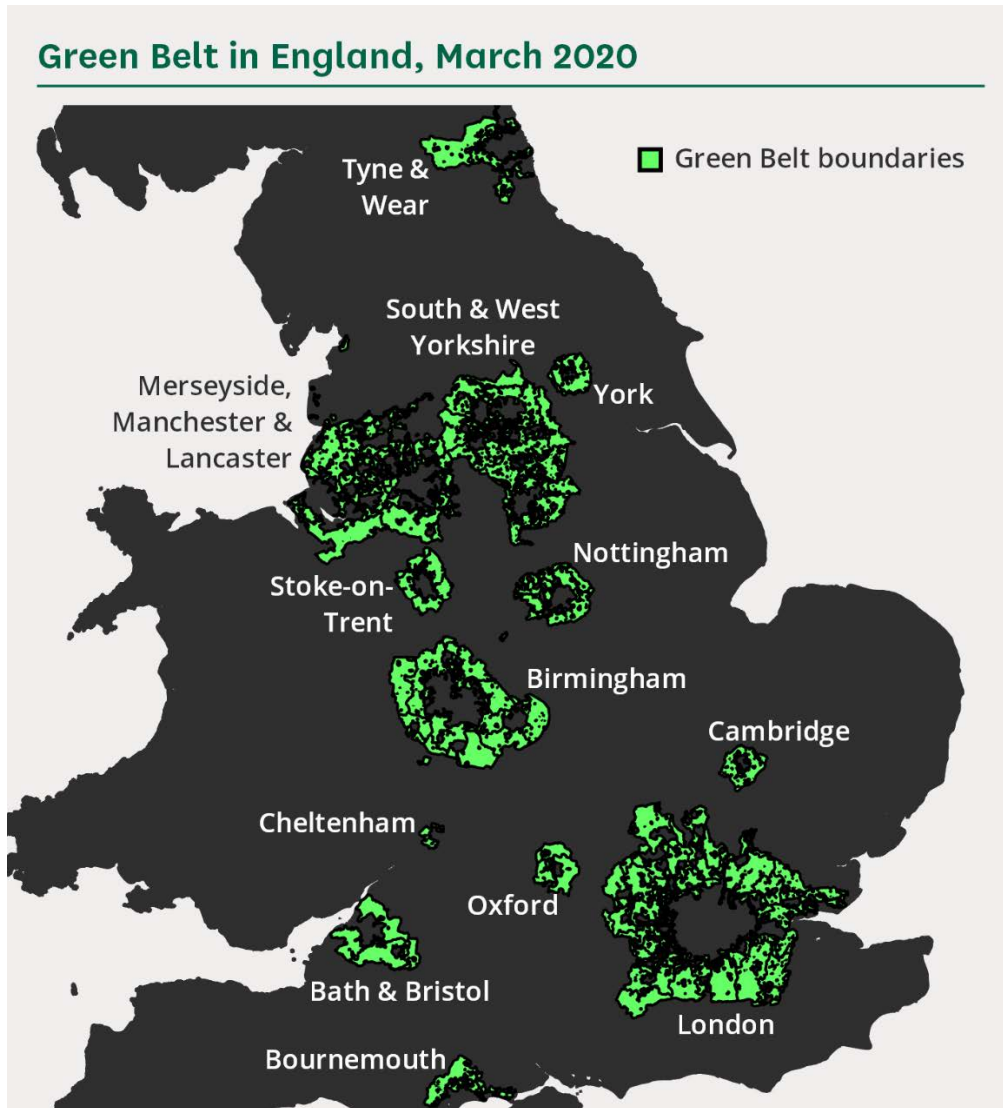
By percentage of total area, as at 31 March 2019

	Green Belt (km <sup>2</sup> )	% of total area
<b>1</b> Tandridge	233.1	94%
<b>2</b> Epping Forest	316.8	94%
<b>3</b> Sevenoaks	344.0	93%
<b>4</b> Brentwood	137.3	90%
<b>5</b> West Lancashire	310.3	90%
<b>6</b> Bromsgrove	193.1	89%
<b>7</b> Chiltern	173.8	89%
<b>8</b> South Bucks	123.4	87%
<b>9</b> Guildford	226.4	84%
<b>10</b> Windsor and Maidenhead	164.8	83%

Source: MHCLG, [Local authority green belt statistics for England: 2019/20](#)



A number of detailed, interactive maps of Green Belt boundaries have been produced: for example, by [Troy Planning](#) (a planning consultancy, last updated in 2020).



Source: MHCLG, [English local authority Green Belt dataset](#), 2019/20 boundaries  
[Accessed 5 November 2020]

Contains OS data © Crown Copyright 2020

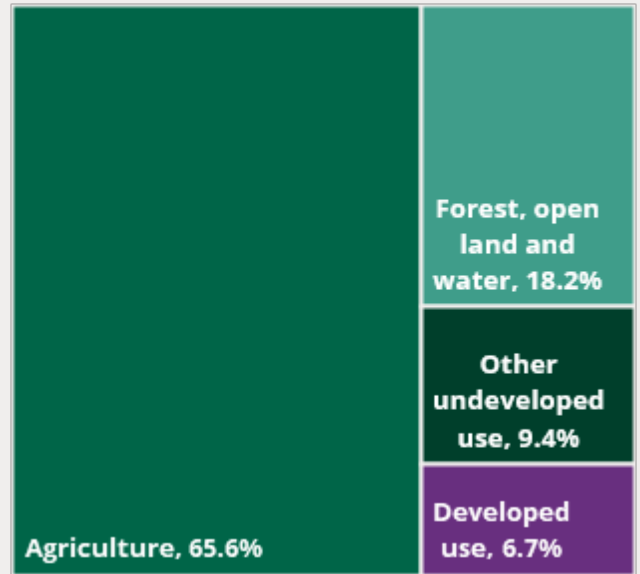
### 3.3 Development in the Green Belt

MHCLG has published estimates of how land is used in the Green Belt. In 2018, **6.7%** of Green Belt land was developed and **93.2%** was non-developed uses. The most common non-developed use was agriculture, with agricultural land and buildings accounting for 65.6% of Green Belt land. Forest, open land and water accounted for 18.2%. Roads and other transport accounted for over half of all developed uses (3.7% of the Green Belt). Residential buildings accounted for 0.3% of Green Belt land.<sup>47</sup>

MHCLG has also published statistics on land use change in the Green Belt up to 2017/18. In total, 8.9 km<sup>2</sup> of previously undeveloped Green Belt land changed to a developed use category in 2017/18. A further 19.2 km<sup>2</sup> of previously-developed Green Belt land turned into another developed use category (e.g. industrial sites becoming residential).

4.1 km<sup>2</sup> of Green Belt land changed to residential use in 2017/18. The majority (69%, or 2.9 km<sup>2</sup>) of this land was not previously developed. The chart on the right shows the trend in undeveloped Green Belt land changing to developed use in recent years.<sup>48</sup>

Land use in the Green Belt, 2018



Source: MHCLG, Live tables on land use

Non-developed Green Belt land turning to developed use

km<sup>2</sup>, by type of developed use



Source: MHCLG, Live tables on land use change

<sup>47</sup> MHCLG, [Live tables on land use](#), Land use in England 2018, Table P401a, 16 July 2020

<sup>48</sup> MHCLG, [Live tables on land use change](#), 2017/18 land use change based tables P380, P382, P383

## 4. What's the future of the Green Belt? Recent discussions

### Box 1: Housing need and supply

The Government's stated target is for there to be an annual supply of **300,000 new homes by the mid-2020s**, and for one million homes to be supplied by the end of the current parliament.

Estimates of housing need are based on projections of growth in the number of households, but it is understood that other factors also affect housing need. The Government has stated that supplying 300,000 new homes per year will reduce affordability pressures,<sup>49</sup> although other commentators have questioned the extent to which new supply can directly affect house prices.<sup>50</sup>

Other commentators have focused on the backlog of existing need amongst people who are homeless or living in unsuitable accommodation. Research commissioned by the National Housing Federation (NHF) and Crisis identified a need for 340,000 new homes each year over a 15-year period, including a need for 145,000 affordable homes.<sup>51</sup>

New supply of housing has been increasing in recent years, but has not yet reached the Government's target level. A total of 241,000 new homes were supplied in 2018/19, an increase of 9% on the year before and 93% on a low point of 125,000 in 2012-13.<sup>52</sup>

The Library briefing [Tackling the under-supply of housing \(England\)](#) has a more detailed summary of housing need and supply in its first two chapters.<sup>53</sup>

Recent discussion of how the Government will achieve its housebuilding targets has once again brought the Green Belt to the fore. Put simply, some commentators have argued that the demand for housing will only be met if some development takes place in the Green Belt. In the run-up to the Government's long-awaited planning white paper *Planning for the Future* (published in August 2020 and discussed in section 4.1), questions resurfaced about the status of the Green Belt and how it should be protected.

A [report for the think tank Centre for Cities](#) in September 2019 argued that there was an "easy solution" to the crisis in housing supply and proposed four actions to achieve it:

- releasing Green Belt or agricultural land for development where it is within 800 metres of any station with a service of 45 minutes or less to a major city (but only if that land has no marker of amenity or environmental value)
- introducing a Land Development Charge of 20 per cent of the market value of all new development when sold, with proceeds

<sup>49</sup> [Oral Evidence: MHCLG Housing Priorities, HC 830 Q3](#), 12 March 2018

<sup>50</sup> E.g. Wilcox, Perry and Williams, [2017 UK Housing Review Briefing Paper](#), page 8

<sup>51</sup> Bramley, G. for Crisis, [Housing supply requirements across Great Britain: for low-income households and homeless people](#), December 2018, page 10

<sup>52</sup> MHCLG, [Live tables on housing supply: net additional dwellings](#), Table 120

<sup>53</sup> CBP 7671, 9 March 2020

- used exclusively for identified purposes for improving local facilities and infrastructure
- giving the newly-created development rights to the companies owning the infrastructure and stations (but not franchise operators)
- setting up a Green Development Corporation for each city region, with full planning powers over the land released for development.<sup>54</sup>

In a [collection of essays](#) published in July 2019, the think tank the Institute of Economic Affairs argued that - although most Green Belt land should remain – any which did not achieve its purpose should be selectively reclassified:

Where green belt land achieves none of its official purposes, it can be selectively re-classified, with a presumed right to development. Most green belt land should remain, however. This proposal should apply in particular to derelict or already-developed sites. Green belt land near transport hubs should be a declassification priority, including Metropolitan Green Belt land within realistic walking distance of a railway station. The amount of green belt land needed is very small: just 3.9 per cent of London's green belt is needed for one million homes.<sup>55</sup>

In his essay for that collection, the Leader of the House of Commons, Jacob Rees-Mogg, argued that Green Belts had grown far beyond what was envisaged at the time they were introduced and regulation of land use had fuelled house price rises and “Nimbyism”.<sup>56</sup>

In February 2020, the Housing Secretary, [Robert Jenrick, was reported](#) as suggesting that building on Green Belt would be one of the “difficult choices” facing local and central government in building more homes and tackling issues of affordability:

He said: “You’ll need to reimagine high streets and town centres, you will need to build on green belt land, restoring heritage buildings and where you do build in the open countryside you will want to be doing it in a way which we will be proud of in years to come.”<sup>57</sup>

Similarly, Sir John Armitt, the chairman of the National Infrastructure Commission, was quoted in March 2020 as suggesting that, to avoid building on flood plains, there might have to be some building on the Green Belt, some of which he described as “scrappy”.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Paul Cheshire and Boyana Buyuklieva, [Homes on the right tracks: Greening the Green Belt to solve the housing crisis](#), Centre for Cities, September 2019: Executive Summary. For commentary on the report, see (for example) [“Think tank calls for development corporations to oversee green belt release around railway stations”](#), *Planning*, 24 September 2019.

<sup>55</sup> Institute of Economic Affairs, [Raising the roof](#), 22 July 2019

<sup>56</sup> Jacob Rees-Mogg and Radomir Tylecote, [Raising the roof](#) in Institute of Economic Affairs, [Raising the roof: How to solve the UK's housing crisis](#), 22 July 2019. For commentary on the essays, see (for example) [“Rees-Mogg calls for green belt land to be ‘selectively declassified’”](#), *Planning*, 22 July 2019.

<sup>57</sup> [“Building on green belt among ‘difficult choices’ facing councils and communities in drive to boost housebuilding, Jenrick warns”](#), *Planning*, 28 February 2020

<sup>58</sup> [“Government ‘must consider more housing on green belt’, says infrastructure advisor”](#), *Planning*, 4 March 2020

CPRE, though, took a different stance. In a [policy paper in February 2020](#), CPRE argued that the Green Belt would remain important in addressing climate and ecological emergencies, preventing urban sprawl and encouraging healthy lifestyles and wellbeing:

The climate and ecological emergencies put increased pressure on how we use land and addressing them is the overarching priority. They will make the countryside around towns more valuable than ever. International comparisons suggest that Green Belt policy is vital to prevent urban sprawl and the loss of wildlife habitat and productive farmland, some of the most pressing land use challenges facing the world today. (...)

(...)

The countryside around towns has a particular role to play in encouraging healthy lifestyles and wellbeing. Green Belts provide a breath of fresh air for at least 30 million people who live in urban areas surrounded by the Green Belts. The particularly strong planning controls provided by Green Belt policy provide a clear visual distinction between town and country on the edge of England's largest and most historic cities, and contribute to a good quality of life within them. Just being able to see an open green landscape is in itself a health benefit.<sup>59</sup>

## 4.1 *Planning for the Future* white paper, August 2020

A planning white paper had been expected for some time. For some earlier discussion of the history and background to this white paper, see Section 5 of the March 2020 Commons Library [debate pack on housing and planning in England](#).<sup>60</sup>

In his [speech to accompany the Spring statement 2019](#), the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, Philip Hammond, said there would be "planning reform to release land in areas where the pressure is greatest".<sup>61</sup> An [announcement the next day from the then Housing Secretary](#), James Brokenshire, added some detail, with the promise of an "accelerated planning green paper".<sup>62</sup> It was reported in October 2019 that the accelerated planning document would now be a white paper.<sup>63</sup> The Prime Minister's *build, build, build* announcement promised a planning policy paper in July 2020.<sup>64</sup>

The long-awaited [white paper \*Planning for the Future\*](#) was launched on 6 August 2020, with an [accompanying press release](#).<sup>65</sup> Launching the white paper, Robert Jenrick set out how the reforms would simplify the

<sup>59</sup> CPRE, [A 21st century green belt and countryside next door: CPRE policy position statement](#), February 2020: pages 2 - 3

<sup>60</sup> CDP 2020-041

<sup>61</sup> HM Treasury, [Spring statement 2019: Philip Hammond's speech](#), 13 March 2019

<sup>62</sup> MHCLG, [Press release: Brokenshire hails package to build homes and opportunities in communities](#), 14 March 2019. For commentary see, for example, "[Spring Statement: Green paper aiming to speed up planning decisions promised later this year](#)", *Planning*, 13 March 2019

<sup>63</sup> "[Accelerated planning document upgraded to white paper, says Jenrick](#)", *Planning*, 25 October 2019

<sup>64</sup> PM's Office and 10 Downing Street, [Press release: PM: Build, build, build](#), 30 June 2020

<sup>65</sup> MHCLG, [White paper: Planning for the Future](#), August 2020

system, while giving more emphasis to quality, design and the environment, and would support recovery from the pandemic.<sup>66</sup> The consultation on *Planning for the Future's* proposed changes opened on 6 August and closed on 29 October 2020.

*Planning for the Future* sets out (amongst many other things) proposals for streamlining the planning process in England. Simplified Local Plans would place land in three categories – growth areas “suitable for substantial development”, renewal areas “suitable for some development” and protected areas – which would (the white paper says) halve the time to acquire planning permission on larger sites identified in plans. General development management policies would be set nationally, with Local Plans containing “clear rules” with design codes and site- and area-specific requirements.<sup>67</sup>

Within the three categories outlined in *Planning for the Future*, the Green Belt would be part of the protected category.<sup>68</sup> *Planning for the Future* also says that, within the nationally-determined and binding housing requirement, the Green Belt will be a constraint:

1.20. Fifth, to ensure more land is available for the homes and development people and communities need, and to support renewal of our town and city centres, we propose:

- A new nationally-determined, binding housing requirement that local planning authorities would have to deliver through their Local Plans. This would be focused on areas where affordability pressure is highest to stop land supply being a barrier to enough homes being built. We propose that this would factor in land constraints, including the Green Belt, and would be consistent with our aspirations of creating a housing market that is capable of delivering 300,000 homes annually, and one million homes over this Parliament.<sup>69</sup>

In discussing the standard method for calculating housing need, the white paper goes on to say that existing Green Belt protections will remain:

2.26. The standard method would make it the responsibility of individual authorities to allocate land suitable for housing to meet the requirement, and they would continue to have choices about how to do so: for example through more effective use of existing residential land, greater densification, infilling and brownfield redevelopment, extensions to existing urban areas, or new settlements. The existing policy for protecting the Green Belt would remain. We also propose that it would be possible for authorities to agree an alternative distribution of their requirement in the context of joint planning arrangements. In particular, it may be appropriate for Mayors of combined authorities to oversee the strategic distribution of the requirement in a way that alters the distribution of numbers, and this would be allowed for.<sup>70</sup>

The Commons Library briefing [\*Planning for the Future: planning policy changes in England in 2020 and future reforms\*](#) examines the white paper's proposals and some of the response to them (CBP 8981, 8 October 2020)

<sup>66</sup> MHCLG, [\*Press release: Launch of Planning for the Future consultation to reform the planning system\*](#), 6 August 2020

<sup>67</sup> MHCLG, [\*White paper: Planning for the Future\*](#), August 2020: page 15

<sup>68</sup> As above: page 24

<sup>69</sup> As above: page 19

<sup>70</sup> As above: page 28

The white paper confirms that there will be legislation to implement the reforms<sup>71</sup> and that the NPPF will be updated in line with legislation<sup>72</sup> and would be the primary source for policies for development management.<sup>73</sup>

Government policy on release of land from the Green Belt was reiterated in a [PQ response in October 2020](#), when the planning minister, Christopher Pincher, said that *Planning for the Future's* proposals would not affect the “strong protections” for the Green Belt:

In line with our manifesto commitment, the reform proposals in *Planning for the Future*, currently out for consultation, do not affect the Framework's strong protections for Green Belt land.<sup>74</sup>

## 4.2 Select Committee inquiry into the future of England's planning system

The Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee launched an [inquiry into the future of the planning system in England](#) and issued a call for evidence on 8 October 2020. [The Committee says that the inquiry](#) “will examine how well the proposed reforms would support the Government's wider building strategy, including its target to build 300,000 new homes a year, as well as ensuring high quality construction that is fit for purpose” and will also “examine how well the new proposals protect existing buildings or localities, and provide mechanisms for local engagement in the planning system”.<sup>75</sup>

## 4.3 Reaction to the proposals

Responding to the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee's call for evidence, the [Centre for Cities argued](#) that the Green Belt must be reformed and that “button development” around railway stations could help ease housing pressures:

### **What changes, if any, are needed to the green belt?**

- The green belt must be reformed. It is essentially untouched from its designation in the 1990s, despite major changes in the national and local economies since then and the emergence of a crippling housing shortage. Ending the housing crisis requires more homes in and around the most expensive cities and large towns. Like any other belt, it must be loosened when growth occurs, or it becomes painful and restrictive.
- [Centre for Cities has previously proposed that “button development” in the green belt around train stations be legalised.](#) These sites already have the infrastructure to provide for more homes in a low-carbon way, but the green belt makes new homes essentially unlawful.

<sup>71</sup> MHCLG, [White paper: Planning for the Future](#), August 2020: paragraph 6.2

<sup>72</sup> As above: paragraph 6.4

<sup>73</sup> As above: paragraph 2.13

<sup>74</sup> [PQ 98893, 13 October 2020](#)

<sup>75</sup> Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, [The future of the planning system in England: Inquiry](#) (undated)

- Centre for Cities has calculated that, if all green belt land within 800 metres of stations that are 45 minutes from the city centres of London, Greater Manchester, Bristol, Birmingham, and Newcastle, was released for development, with other designations protected and some land set aside for parkland, between 1.6 million to 2.1 million homes could be built. England's total housing stock would increase by between 6-7 per cent, on less than 2 per cent of the existing green belt.<sup>76</sup>

In its Out-law blog, [the law firm Pinsent Masons](#) suggested that *Planning for the Future's* proposals for protected areas were a "missed opportunity" to ensure that all Green Belt land continued to perform an effective function.<sup>77</sup>

In its [response to the \*Planning for the Future\* consultation](#), the RTPI argued that the concept of protected areas had "some value as a blanket approach" but clear sub-categories would be essential, to maintain distinctions:

[As] with Growth areas, clear sub-categories will be essential to maintain the distinction between different designations, most obviously to communicate the difference between land with physical and/or environmental constraints, such as ancient woodland or areas of high flood risk, from those with policy constraints such as green belt. The terminology used should also clearly communicate that these are not 'static' areas exempt from change, but rather require active management of different sorts. For example, degraded peatlands require environmental restoration, conservation areas require management of heritage assets, and rural areas depend on sensitive development to maintain economic and social sustainability.<sup>78</sup>

Green Growth Boards, the RTPI suggested, could provide housing figures for their constituent LPAs, including strategic reviews of the Green Belt.<sup>79</sup>

The [planning consultancy Lichfields also questioned](#) how protected areas would be defined and voiced concerns about how exactly the constraints of the Green Belt would be factored in, when calculating local housing need:

This [proposal] sounds logical, but there are practical issues to grapple with. Precisely how will the constraints be factored in? Are they an absolute constraint (the way the National Park balance is described would suggest not) and what will be the evidential basis for balancing need vs the constraint in each area? A number of LPAs have extremely limited non-Green Belt land (Sevenoaks and Tandridge are 90+% Green Belt, for example). Under the current plan making system, they balance need against the relative value of individual parcels of Green Belt land, consider sustainable patterns of development, and use planning judgement to decide whether or not they can meet that need (para 2.26 of the document says current Green Belt policy would remain, e.g.

<sup>76</sup> Centre for Cities, [The future of the planning system in England: White Paper Select Committee Consultation](#), 4 November 2020

<sup>77</sup> Robbie Owen, [Planning white paper: what it means for delivery of 'large scale' developments](#), Pinsent Masons Out-law blog, 13 August 2020

<sup>78</sup> RTPI, [RTPI response to the Planning White Paper](#), 29 October 2020

<sup>79</sup> As above



exceptional circumstances for LPAs to release Green Belt). But the responsibility for setting the housing numbers that would demand Green Belt release would now pass to the Government.<sup>80</sup>

Lichfields also considered how the provisions for release of land from the Green Belt might work in the reformed planning system, arguing that the Government had not distinguished between environmental and landscape constraints and those deriving from local policy.<sup>81</sup>

## 4.4 Further commentary

The following articles offer more commentary on the *Planning for the Future* proposals for the Green Belt:

- ["Johnson 'set to ease green belt rules in new year planning changes'"](#), *Planning*, 23 December 2019
- ["We must build homes on the green belt, insists Rees-Mogg"](#), *The Times*, 22 July 2019
- RTPI, [RTPI sets out pros and cons of zonal planning in new report](#), 11 September 2020 (with link to their report [Planning through Zoning](#))
- ["The likely risks and rewards of the proposed zonal plan system"](#), *Planning*, 14 August 2020

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<sup>80</sup> Lichfields, [The white paper](#) (undated)

<sup>81</sup> As above

## 5. Background: Earlier proposals for change and previous planning policy

The consultations and proposals discussed here informed and were taken forward in the revision to the NPPF in 2018/9.

### 5.1 DCLG consultation, December 2015

In December 2015, [DCLG consulted on a proposal](#) to amend Green Belt policy to allow starter homes to be built in the Green Belt when a site has been identified in a neighbourhood plan and to allow for starter homes to be built on some brownfield sites in the Green Belt. The consultation also proposed to change policy to support the regeneration of previously developed brownfield sites in the Green Belt by allowing them to be developed in the same way as other brownfield land, providing this contributed to the delivery of starter homes, and subject to local consultation.<sup>82</sup>

The consultation estimated that, based on data from the 2010 National Land Use Database, across England there were 500 to 600 hectares of brownfield land in the Green Belt viable for starter homes development and not on open land.

### 5.2 Housing white paper, February 2017

In a statement in September 2017 on local housing need, the then Housing Secretary, [Sajid Javid, reiterated the Government's stance](#) on the Green Belt.<sup>83</sup> The [housing white paper](#), published in February 2017, contained some proposals relating to planning.<sup>84</sup> As the Commons Library briefing on the [planning reforms within the white paper](#) explains, the white paper said that the Government's commitment to the Green Belt remained unchanged.<sup>85</sup>

The housing white paper also emphasised that authorities should amend Green Belt boundaries only when they could demonstrate that they had examined fully all other reasonable options for meeting their identified development requirements. On *planning for the right homes in the right places*, the housing white paper said that the existing strong protections for the Green Belt would remain.<sup>86</sup>

The housing white paper referred to the Government's manifesto commitment to protect and enhance the natural environment and mentioned the "high bar" protecting the Green Belt.<sup>87</sup> Thus, national policy would (the white paper said) be amended, to specify when

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<sup>82</sup> DCLG, [Consultation on proposed changes to national planning policy](#), December 2015

<sup>83</sup> [HC Deb 14 September 2017 c1023](#)

<sup>84</sup> DCLG, [Fixing our broken housing market](#), Cm 9352, February 2017

<sup>85</sup> CBP 07896, 8 February 2017

<sup>86</sup> DCLG, [Fixing our broken housing market](#), Cm 9352, February 2017: pages 18-22

<sup>87</sup> As above: page 28

authorities may amend Green Belt boundaries and to require that, when land is removed from the Green Belt, the impact is offset by compensatory improvements.<sup>88</sup>

The circumstances in which, under the terms of the housing white paper, changes to Green Belt boundaries to enable development in the Green Belt might be considered were set out in a [PQ reply in October 2017](#).<sup>89</sup> Similarly, in a statement in September 2017 on local housing need, Sajid Javid [reiterated the Government's stance](#) on the Green Belt.<sup>90</sup>

## 5.3 Previous Green Belt planning policy

### NPPF 2012

In March 2012, the Government of the time replaced a large amount of the planning guidance (including *Planning Policy Guidance 2: Green Belts*) with the [NPPF 2012](#). This set out the Government's planning policies for England and how it expected them to be applied; section 9 dealt with Green Belt policy.

### Planning Practice Guidance 2014

In March 2014, the Government at the time published new Planning Practice Guidance to accompany the NPPF and give further detail about the policies in it. This guidance stated that unmet housing need in an area was unlikely to meet the "very special circumstances" test to justify Green Belt development.<sup>91</sup>

The PPG was updated in October 2014. The aim was to reaffirm LPAs' ability to "safeguard their local area against urban sprawl and protect the green lungs around towns and cities" and that housing need (including for Traveller sites) did not justify the harm done to the Green Belt by inappropriate development.<sup>92</sup>

In December 2014, Brandon Lewis [wrote to the Chief Executive of the Planning Inspectorate](#) about Strategic Housing Market Assessments (SHMAs). This letter set out the relationship between housing figures produced as part of a SHMA and those in a Local Plan and how to consider constraints such as Green Belt land.<sup>93</sup>

There was some disagreement however, in the planning press about this letter's compatibility with the NPPF. An article in the specialist publication *Planning* set out the scope of differing specialist opinion and what this meant for Green Belt reviews.<sup>94</sup> Some commentators suggested that it would allow some LPAs to resist meeting requirements

<sup>88</sup> DCLG, [Fixing our broken housing market](#), Cm 9352, February 2017: page 28

<sup>89</sup> [PQ 107174, 16 October 2017](#)

<sup>90</sup> [HC Deb 14 September 2017 c1023](#)

<sup>91</sup> DCLG, *Planning Practice Guidance, Housing and economic land availability assessment, Methodology – Stage 5: Final evidence base*, 6 March 2014 (no longer available online)

<sup>92</sup> DCLG press release, [Councils must protect our precious green belt land](#), 4 October 2014

<sup>93</sup> Letter from Brandon Lewis to the Chief Executive at the Planning Inspectorate about [Strategic Housing Market Assessments](#), 19 December 2014

<sup>94</sup> "[Lewis letter 'may slow plans'](#)", *Planning*, 9 January 2015

for housing in their area, whereas others suggested that LPAs would still have to demonstrate how they fully met objectively assessed housing need. Ultimately, any disagreement about the letter's compatibility with the NPPF and Green Belt boundaries would be a legal question for a court to determine in the case of dispute.

## 6. Selected further reading

- [“When is building on the green belt the most sustainable option?”](#), *PBC [planning, BIM and construction] Today*, 14 September 2020
- [“The exceptional houses being built in idyllic countryside spots, thanks to the foresight of Paragraph 79”](#), *Country Life*, 25 May 2020
- Friends of the Earth, [Let's put the green into the green belt - now there's an idea](#), 8 October 2019
- [“Legal landscape: New green belt guidance – short but sweet?”](#), *The Planner*, 19 August 2019
- Glenigan, [Reclassification and development of Greenbelt Land: prepared for CPRE](#), July 2019
- [“What's being built on the green belt near you? Chunks of the countryside may be disappearing but it's not always houses and flats to blame, new figures suggest”](#), *This is Money*, 5 July 2019
- Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors, [What if we readjusted the green belt?](#), 29 May 2019
- [“England's Green Belt suffers biggest reduction in eight years as councils remove protections to build houses”](#), *Telegraph* online, 4 October 2018
- [“CPRE warning as 460,000 homes to be built on green belt land”](#), *24 Housing*, 6 August 2018
- Landscape Institute, [Landscape briefing: Green Belt policy](#), April 2018
- OECD, [Economic survey of the UK 2017 and OECD, Economic surveys: UK October 2017](#)
- [“Campaigners accuse Conservatives of failing to protect England's green belt”](#), *Guardian* online, 3 July 2017
- [“White Paper gives too much green belt protection, say sector bodies”](#), *Inside Housing*, 10 May 2017
- [“Housebuilding ‘corridors’ proposed on London greenbelt - Test new approach for development around cities to address shortages, academics urge”](#), *Financial Times* (subscription), 1 August 2016<sup>95</sup>
- [“New homes eroding green belt 'at fastest rate for 20 years': Campaign to Protect Rural England accuses councils of altering boundaries and the government of facilitating the process”](#), *Guardian* online, 25 April 2016
- Mayor of London and London Assembly, [London's living spaces and places: Policy 7.16: Green Belt](#) in the [London Plan 2016](#)
- Local Government Association and Planning Advisory Service, [Planning on the doorstep: the big issues – Green Belt](#), February 2015

<sup>95</sup> Members and their staff may obtain copies of articles from publications requiring a subscription from the Commons Library on x3666.

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