

Advice Note

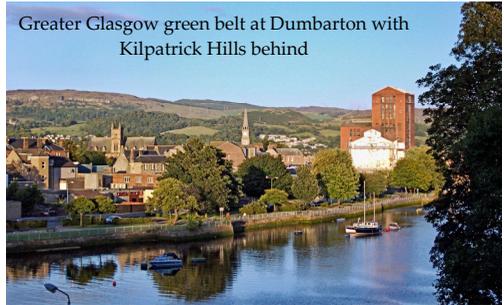
Green Belts

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The Association for the Protection of Rural Scotland

Introduction

A green belt is designated open land which is around, beside or in an urban area and for which there is a presumption against development except for specified, mostly rural, uses. There are currently the following green belts in Scotland : Aberdeen, Ayr and Prestwick, Clackmannanshire, Edinburgh, Falkirk and Grangemouth, Greater Glasgow, Helensburgh and Stirling. A further three green belts have been established in Structure Plans around Dunfermline, Perth and St Andrews although the details of boundaries have yet to be adopted.



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Purpose

Green belts help to protect countryside, but their main functions are to contain urban sprawl and to preserve and enhance landscape settings of towns and cities. The Scottish Planning Policy (SPP) 2010 states :

“The purpose of green belt designation in the development plan as part of the settlement strategy for an area is to :

- direct planned growth to the most appropriate locations and support regeneration,
- protect and enhance the quality, character, landscape setting and identity of towns and cities, and
- protect and give access to open space within and around towns and cities.”

The Association for the Protection of Rural Scotland (APRS)

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Appropriate developments in green belts

Section 163 of the SPP supports diversification and uses of the rural economy and gives examples of uses and developments suitable to green belt land :

- development associated with agriculture, including the re-use of historic agricultural buildings
- woodland and forestry, including community woodlands
- horticulture, including market gardening and directly connected retailing
- recreational uses compatible with an agricultural or natural setting
- essential infrastructure such as electronic communications infrastructure and electricity grid connections

NB Wind farms are not included in the list. Section 189 of the SPP states that green belts require 'significant protection' from wind farms.

Types of green belt

The word 'belt' implies a circle around a settlement, but the term 'green belt' can also refer to :

- some inner-city green spaces
- green networks
- green buffers eg to prevent coalescence of settlements
- green corridors and green wedges into towns
- coastal strips



Volunteers planting trees in a green belt

Those are the officially recognised options (SPP section 160) but others have been used elsewhere such as a :

- 'green halo' - surrounding an inner core of a settlement and separating it from expansion beyond it
- 'satellite village' - separated from the main settlement by protected countryside
- 'tandem suburb' - as for satellite village such as a housing estate but without village infrastructure

Green belts can be large or small and can be applied to settlements of any size.

Green belt boundaries

Green belts are intended to be retained long term, but are not necessarily permanent. The aim is to make boundaries physically clear, so railways, main roads, woodlands or rivers can provide obvious lines of demarcation.



Aberdeen green belt near Craibstone

When boundaries are changed, clarity can be achieved by planting a line of trees or some other physical feature. There is value in having jagged inner green belt boundaries (ie outer town boundaries) because that maximises access to the green belt. SPP section 164 urges links to be made between green belts and open spaces within settlements where possible.

Directing development to suitable locations

Green belts are not intended to prevent development but to ‘direct planned growth to the most appropriate locations.’ That includes redeveloping ‘brownfield’ sites, encouraging an appropriate level of in-town density (while still allowing for open spaces) and other good planning. Expressed differently, green belts help to prevent careless urban sprawl, ribbon development and unnecessary speculative development.

Developers prefer to build on ‘greenfield’ land (any site never built on) rather than face the costs of clearing previously developed brownfield sites. Also, houses in greenfields are more attractive to buyers and may sell more easily. Greenfield land is not the same thing as green belt land, but green belts can help to protect greenfield land.

Crucially, SPP section 163 states : ‘The cumulative erosion of a green belt’s integrity through the granting of individual planning permissions should be avoided.’ Local community organisations may find that a useful statement to quote.

What green belts do NOT do

Green belts are not intended to protect natural or cultural heritage. There are other designations for that purpose, such as Site of Special Scientific Interest, National Nature Reserve, Local Nature Reserve, Conservation Area or Listed Building, some of which are present in Green Belts.



Greater Glasgow green belt
near Old Kilpatrick

Green belts do not prevent pylons or telecommunication masts, though local communities can object to the design or location of the latter. Green belts do not prevent pieces of countryside being purchased by developers in the expectation that one day they will get planning permission and thereby increase in value. Such land is often left untidy in the hope that unsightliness will increase the likelihood of planning permission. Local residents should be vigilant and alert their local Council if this appears to be a problem. Green belts do not prevent implementation of controversial National Developments included by the Scottish Government in the National Planning Framework. These take priority over local designations.

Quality, character, landscape setting and identity of towns and cities

As explained above, a purpose of green belts is to safeguard the best qualities of settlements. Too often in the past, insensitive development has harmed the quality of towns. Examples have been :

- supermarkets on the fringes of small towns which damage town centres and independent retailers by creating rival centres
- coastal sprawl which impedes public access to sea or riversides
- ragged out-of-town developments which harm the landscape settings, approaches and entry points to towns
- prized identity of towns (which may be linked to tourism) being spoilt

Access to open space

The past decade has witnessed a welcome new emphasis on open spaces and access to the countryside. Green belts have a declared function of facilitating such access. Sections 149 - 158 of the SPP deal with open space and physical activity and section 159 states that a purpose of green belts is to 'protect and give access to open space within and around towns and cities.'

Development plans

Scotland has four city regions—Edinburgh, Glasgow, Aberdeen and Dundee. For each of these the strategic development plan (which covers several planning authorities) should establish the need for a green belt and identify its broad area (section 161 of SPP) and the local development plans within the city region should then establish the detailed boundaries. For planning authorities outwith the city regions, local development plans deal with green belts for settlements.

Any proposed release of green belt land for development should be agreed through consultation over the preparation of these plans, as should any **increase** in the size of Green Belts, reflecting the long term settlement strategy. Because this is long term planning, the SPP advice is not to draw the inner boundaries of green belts too close to existing town boundaries.

Local communities – what YOU can do

Local community involvement in planning is a key principle lying behind the reform of the planning system brought in by the 2006 Planning Act. SPP section 8 calls for early engagement of all interests ‘as fully as possible’ and sections 31 - 32 reinforce the message of ‘effective engagement of the public’. There are two ways in which this can be done within the planning system :

1. **In the creation of development plans.** These plans are important. The government wants most development decisions to be ‘plan-led’. So getting yourself organised early is crucial. The first step is the ‘Main Issues Report’ in which the planning authority offers options. Try to get your preferred options about green belts worked out early in advance so that you can respond in an organised way, being proactive rather than reactive. In advance of the Main Issues Report, the authority may commission an outside consultant to carry out a survey to review the quality of the green belt.
2. **When planning applications arise affecting the green belt.** Developers may seek to build in the green belt. Big money can be at stake and applications may not be straightforward. Planning applications will be announced in the local press, online or on lists available through your planning office. Scrutinise the list every week and look at the details if green belt appears to be affected. This can be done either online or wherever hard copies are available to the public, perhaps in the planning office or in your local library or post office. Get ready to respond, in writing and always based on planning criteria, within the specified time scale, though some planning departments are flexible about allowing late responses.

Councillors (often in a special planning committee) will usually make the final decisions, having been advised by council officials who, among other things, will summarise the objections received.

Community Councils should be especially alert, but others in the local community should not assume that the interests of green belts are being safeguarded by official bodies. It's a good idea to establish a local Green Belt Group (either as part of the community council or separate from it) which will focus on green belt issues in your area to ensure that green belts are both protected and enhanced – eg with footpaths or community woodlands. Several such groups already exist in Scotland; APRS can put you in touch with one if you want further advice.

A little bit of history

Most developed countries have systems for controlling urban boundaries, ensuring environmental quality, aiming for 'compact cities' and integrating urban planning with rural planning. Several use the term 'green belt'. One of the most recent and largest green belts is the result of the Ontario Green Belt Act of 2005 in Canada which has included a million acres of environmentally sensitive land around urban areas in one huge green belt.

In Britain, the origin of green belts is generally ascribed to London in the late 1940s. In the post-war period the green belt concept gradually spread. Scotland now has about 200,000 hectares of green belt and England has about 1,500,000 hectares.

In Scotland, official government guidance on green belts was expressed for many years in Circular 24/1985. This was useful but limited. Several reports assessing green belts then emerged. In England the Department of the Environment report of 1993 entitled 'The Effectiveness of Green Belts', with research headed by Professor Martin Elson, was thorough and influential. In Scotland in 1998, APRS published a study of the Edinburgh green belt entitled 'Green Belts : Frames or Fragments?' which raised many key points. This followed another useful paper on Edinburgh's green belt by Terry Levinthal of the Cockburn Association in 1996. The Royal Town Planning Institute Scotland published a discussion paper in 2002 and a case study of four green belts by Heriot- Watt University, commissioned by the Scottish Executive and entitled 'Review of Green Belt Policy in Scotland', was published in 2004. The Scottish Green Belts Alliance, comprising eleven local community groups with special interest in green belts, released its report 'The Future of Green Belts in Scotland' in 2005.

Out of all this came a diversity of ideas and arguments both for and against green belts in the form that they took at the time. In addition to the recognised purposes in favour of green belts, worries were expressed about the changing nature of agriculture, pressure for housing land in some places, public misconceptions about green belts and the need to be able to alter green belt boundaries occasionally to meet long term policies. What they generally had in common was a conclusion that green belts are valuable but could benefit from some adjustment and enhancement. The upshot was the Scottish Executive's SPP21 'Green Belts' to replace Circular 24/1985. The very fact that it was a Scottish Planning Policy and not just a circular indicated a recognition of the importance of green belts.

However, just four years later the composite SPP was released in 2010. Its sections 159 - 164 have replaced SPP21, with minor amendments.

Other useful sources

Clydebelt	www.clydebelt.org.uk
Helensburgh Green Belt Group	www.hgbg.org.uk
Lothians and Fife Green Network Partnership	www.elfhnp.org.uk
Scottish Green Belts Alliance	www.greenbelts.ukos.com
Scottish Planning Policy	www.scotland.gov.uk (search 'Scottish Planning Policy')
St Andrews Preservation Trust	www.sapt.demon.co.uk

This is the third in a series of Advice Notes for APRS members :

The Planning System
Wind Farms
Green Belts

These are available from the office on request

APRS

Scotland's Countryside Champion

APRS is the charity which promotes the care of **all** of Scotland's rural landscapes

Aims

- protect and enhance Scotland's rural landscapes for future generations
- promote effective planning and landscape protection systems in Scotland
- encourage genuinely sustainable development in rural Scotland
- raise awareness of the importance of Scotland's landscapes to its people and economy
- support the activity of land managers who care for Scotland's landscapes

What we do

- work in partnership with individuals, other charities, local authority, government and public bodies
- take an active part in national policy development and advocacy
- advise members of the public on how to respond to proposals which affect their local landscapes
- publicise our work to our members and beyond through our website, quarterly newsletter *Rural Scotland* and regular email bulletins

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