



# 21 GREEN BELTS





SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE  
Development Department

# **Scottish Planning Policy**

## **SPP 21**

# **Green Belts**



## PLANNING SERIES:

- **Scottish Planning Policies (SPPs)** provide statements of Scottish Executive policy on nationally important land use and other planning matters, supported where appropriate by a locational framework.
- **Circulars**, which also provide statements of Scottish Executive policy, contain guidance on policy implementation through legislative or procedural change.
- **Planning Advice Notes (PANs)** provide advice on good practice and other relevant information.

Statements of Scottish Executive policy contained in SPPs and Circulars may be material considerations to be taken into account in development plan preparation and development management.

Existing National Planning Policy Guidelines (NPPGs) have continued relevance to decision making, until such time as they are replaced by a SPP. The term SPP should be interpreted as including NPPGs.

Statements of Scottish Executive location-specific planning policy, for example the West Edinburgh Planning Framework, have the same status in decision making as SPPs.

The National Planning Framework sets out the strategy for Scotland's long-term spatial development. It has the same status as SPPs and provides a national context for development plans and planning decisions and the ongoing programmes of the Scottish Executive, public agencies and local government.

Important note: in the interests of brevity and conciseness, Scottish Planning Policies do not repeat policy across thematic boundaries. Each SPP takes account of the general policy in SPP1 and highlights the other SPPs where links to other related policy will be found. The whole series of SPPs should be taken as an integral policy suite and read together.

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## **SUMMARY**

Scottish Ministers recognise the importance of Scotland's cities and towns to the growth of the Scottish economy and recognise the need to avoid unmanaged, unplanned urban expansion. Green belt policy is one of a range of mechanisms that can help to shape our towns and cities in a sustainable way. This Scottish Planning Policy sets out the objectives of green belt policy and the way in which it should be used and enforced.

Scottish Ministers consider that green belt policy should be used as a long-term land use planning tool to provide clarity and certainty on where development will and will not take place. There should continue to be a strong presumption against inappropriate development in green belts. Where it is considered necessary, the proposed release of green belt land should be taken forward as part of a long-term settlement strategy in the development plan. This will ensure widespread engagement and debate on the future shape of settlements. Development plans prepared by local authorities will define the scale of land use change, identify the developments that are appropriate and indicate the standards of layout, design and other important requirements that should be met.

Land that is designated as green belt in the development plan, in association with wider networks of green space, can provide a number of benefits, including outdoor recreation opportunities for local people, biodiversity and enhanced quality of life. Opportunities should be taken to protect and enhance these benefits. Management plans agreed between local authorities, landowners and other interests, as well as a range of funding schemes, have an important role in maximising the benefits of green belt land in a co-ordinated way.



## INTRODUCTION

1. This policy replaces *Scottish Office Circular 24/1985: Development in the Countryside and Green Belts*. Policy in that Circular on development in the countryside has been superseded by *SPP 3: Planning for Housing* and *SPP 15: Rural Development*.

## MANAGING THE GROWTH OF TOWNS AND CITIES

### THE CHANGING CONTEXT

2. Scotland's population and household patterns are changing. The National Planning Framework highlights that the overall population is declining, although this conceals significant regional and local variations. There has, however, been a sustained increase in the number of households. Population fluctuations, new household formation and economic, social and lifestyle changes affect the way land is used and create pressure for the expansion of some towns and cities.
3. The shift towards a service-based economy has meant that high quality environments and accessible locations have become increasingly important. This can result in pressure for new development at the edges of settlements, while land and buildings in urban areas become and remain vacant. Regeneration of disadvantaged communities and the re-use of vacant urban land are key priorities of Scottish Ministers.
4. In the face of these dynamics, we need robust tools to manage change in our towns and cities.

### SPP OBJECTIVES

5. Our vision is to ensure Scotland has vibrant towns and cities, where change is managed effectively, and the best use is made of the land. Green belt policies can help to achieve this. In some areas, however, existing green belts are not providing long term certainty and have been undermined by individual development management<sup>1</sup> decisions. This SPP aims to strengthen and enhance the role of green belts and encourage greater stability to increase their effectiveness. The effective operation of green belt policy has major benefits to Scotland in improving quality of life for local people and managing land carefully to guide the growth of our settlements.
6. From this, the key objectives of green belt policy are:
  - **To direct planned growth to the most appropriate locations and support regeneration;**
  - **To protect and enhance the character, landscape setting and identity of towns and cities; and**

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<sup>1</sup> The White Paper *Modernising the Planning System* (June 2005) signals the change in terminology from 'development control' to 'development management'. The latter term is used throughout this SPP.

- **To protect and give access to open space within and around towns and cities, as part of the wider structure of green space.**

As a result, there will be a strong presumption against inappropriate development in the green belt.

### **RELATED MECHANISMS**

7. Green belts are one of a range of mechanisms that help shape our towns and cities. Others include policies on:
  - Re-use of previously developed land;
  - Regeneration;
  - Housing;
  - Sustainable transport;
  - Retailing, in particular the sequential approach to development;
  - Urban design, including density;
  - Landscape, countryside and nature conservation; and
  - Open space, green networks and access.

## **THE ROLE AND FUNCTION OF GREEN BELTS**

### **WHAT IS A GREEN BELT FOR?**

8. A green belt is an area of land designated for the purposes of managing the growth of a town or city in the long term. It should be used to direct development to suitable locations, not to prevent development from happening in general. It is a key part of a long-term settlement strategy to achieve the three objectives listed in paragraph 6.
9. Green belt policy is not a designation to protect natural heritage or to safeguard land for major uses such as housing or airports: there are other policies to carry out these functions. These other policies, for example, local landscape designations or airport safeguarding zones can overlap green belt designations. Not all greenfield land will be covered by green belt policy. Only areas of land that help to deliver the objectives in paragraph 6 should be covered by green belt policy. Green belts can encircle settlements but can take a variety of other forms including buffers, corridors, coastal strips or wedges, to take account of local circumstances. In many instances, green belt policy can be used effectively to prevent the coalescence of settlements. There may, however, be circumstances where coalescence should be considered, where this would allow for the development of the most sustainable settlement pattern.

10. Designated green belts should be managed effectively to enhance the quality of life for local people. Effective management can include:
  - Providing a range of opportunities for outdoor recreation, outdoor education and tourism;
  - Providing access to the countryside;
  - Protecting and enhancing biodiversity and the landscape resource; and
  - Conserving the historic environment.
11. *NPPG14: Natural Heritage* and *SPP17: Planning for Transport* recognise and promote green networks for their role in enhancing both biodiversity and access for people, for example, through walking and cycling. Where green networks extend into green belt areas, policies supporting the development of green networks can be a focus for positive management measures to achieve the benefits set out above. Management issues are discussed further in paragraphs 31-33.

#### **WHERE SHOULD GREEN BELTS BE DESIGNATED?**

12. Green belts have a particular benefit in the planning of towns and cities where there is demand for development and where co-ordination is required across local authority boundaries. For towns and cities with a distinct character and identity that could be harmed by unplanned growth, the use of green belt policy may help to manage that growth more effectively. Other policies, however, may also achieve these aims, for example, the effective use of countryside policies. Most settlements do not need green belts. Other policies can achieve the aims of green belt just as successfully, for example, a policy designed to protect the setting of an historic town or to rigorously manage development in a landscape of high environmental quality.

## **DEVELOPMENT PLANNING**

### **ESTABLISHING AND REVIEWING GREEN BELTS**

13. Development plans identify the demographic, economic, environmental and social needs of the area and set out a long-term settlement strategy to address them. The establishment and review of green belts forms part of this process. Strategic Environmental Assessment of development plans will ensure that the environmental consequences of the development strategy are rigorously examined.
14. Under the present two-tier system, structure plans consider the need for and review of green belts and local plans define the precise boundaries. In future, local development plans will establish both the need for and detailed boundaries of green belts, except in the four largest city regions, where strategic development plans will consider the issue of need. Outwith these city regions,

proposals for any new green belts or the removal of existing green belts will require specific approval from Scottish Ministers. This change will be introduced through secondary legislation.

### **Sustainable settlement patterns**

15. Development plans must consider the most sustainable pattern of urban growth for an area, taking into account the scale and type of development pressure and the need for growth or regeneration. The most effective way to plan for change will depend on the differences of geography, environmental sensitivities, landscape character and infrastructure capacity. Careful consideration should be given to the impact of a green belt on settlements beyond the designated land. Importantly, the impact on private car travel must be taken into account. *SPP17: Planning for Transport* seeks to reduce dependence on car travel and encourage more sustainable modes of transport. *SPP3: Planning for Housing* provides further guidance on sustainable settlement strategies, particularly in relation to new housing.

### **Timeframes and boundaries**

16. As a green belt is intended to achieve long-term certainty, it should have a timeframe of at least 20 years<sup>2</sup>. The green belt boundary should be drawn to reflect a long-term settlement strategy, and ensure that settlements are able to accommodate planned long-term growth. This is necessary to avoid the cumulative erosion of a green belt's integrity through the granting of individual planning permissions. Inner boundaries should not, therefore, be drawn too tightly around the urban edge. They should create an area between the current settlement boundary and the green belt, suitable to accommodate planned growth over the 20 year period without the need to encroach on green belt land. As well as considering the impact on settlements beyond the green belt, the settlement strategy should also address the need for development in smaller settlements within the green belt, and consider leaving room for expansion, where appropriate. The area of land between the current settlement edge and the green belt should be identified in development plans as the broad extent of future growth.
17. Where land is identified in the development plan as the broad extent of future growth, and is therefore suitable to meet the area's long-term development needs, a wide range of stakeholders including landowners, developers, infrastructure providers, public agencies and surrounding communities can be closely engaged in the planning process at an early stage.
18. Local authorities should work with the range of stakeholders to agree a master plan. A master plan can be adopted by the planning authority as supplementary planning guidance, and will then be a material consideration in determining applications and appeals, as set out in *SPP1: The Planning System*. This is an effective way to ensure that development can be phased and co-ordinated appropriately.

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<sup>2</sup> This timeframe is consistent with the timeframe for housing land supply in *SPP3: Planning and Housing* and the long-term perspective of the proposed development plans under the White Paper *Modernising the Planning System* (June 2005).

19. The regular review of local plans (and in future local development plans and their related action programmes) should be undertaken with reference to the master plan, considering the extent to which the assumptions on development demand and supply are still up to date, and managing the development of the area identified as the broad extent of future growth. Phased release of land for development makes it possible for transport facilities, utilities, structural landscaping, path networks and links to the countryside, education, healthcare and other key facilities to be planned in advance, to ensure the creation of high quality living and working environments, integrated into the fabric of the settlement and the surrounding landscape.
20. The continuing relevance of the green belt boundary should only be reconsidered after 20 years.
21. Green belt boundaries must be clearly identifiable on the ground, using strong visual or physical features. These may include rivers, tree belts, railways or main roads and landscape features that form the horizon, depending on their location and the settlements to which they relate. Hedges and field enclosures will rarely provide a sufficiently robust long-term boundary. Enduring green belt boundaries are those that combine a number of these features, creating an easily read physical relationship between the developed settlement and the countryside. When it is proposed to release land from a green belt, consideration should be given to moving outer as well as inner boundaries.

## DEVELOPMENT MANAGEMENT

### APPROPRIATE USES IN GREEN BELTS

22. A strong presumption against inappropriate development in the green belt is an established part of green belt policy. Development plans will define the uses that are appropriate in individual green belts. These may include:
  - Agricultural uses, including the re-use of historic agricultural buildings in keeping with their surroundings;
  - Woodland and forestry, including community woodlands;
  - Horticulture, including market gardening (but not retailing unconnected with or out-of-scale with this purpose); and
  - Recreational uses that are compatible with an agricultural or natural setting.
23. New development in the green belt must be of suitable scale and form for the location. Many uses will only be appropriate when the intensity is low and any built elements are ancillary to the main use, small-scale and of high quality design. The reuse of buildings of architectural or historic merit should be viewed positively. *Designing Places* and the related Planning Advice Note series are particularly relevant. Public transport and access by walking and cycling will be required for uses that will attract a significant number of visitors.



24. Much of the land within green belts is rural in nature. *SPP15: Planning for Rural Development* recognises that the need for agricultural land is decreasing and there is a need for diversification of the rural economy. It is acknowledged that this may lead to additional development in urban fringe land covered by green belt policy. Development proposals, however, must still meet the requirements set out in paragraph 22.

#### **TREATMENT OF ESTABLISHED USES**

25. Existing settlements should be explicitly excluded from green belt designations, as should major educational and research uses, major business and industrial operations and airports, to allow for growth and change. All other uses should be covered by the green belt designation to afford a greater level of control over new development. Intensification of established uses may be appropriate, subject to the criteria in paragraph 23.

#### **PROPOSALS FOR NON-CONFORMING USES**

26. Where a proposed use would not normally be consistent with green belt designation, exceptionally it may still be considered appropriate, either as a national priority or to meet an established need, and only if no other suitable site is available. These exceptions to the policy should be highlighted in the development plan to allow for wide publicity and engagement.
27. Existing institutions in large grounds may be redeveloped where they are no longer needed for their original purpose. Ideally, proposals should be identified in the development plan. In all cases, every effort should be made to redevelop within the existing built envelope (generally the buildings, outbuildings and associated hardstanding). In exceptional circumstances, new development may be acceptable as part of a comprehensive redevelopment scheme, where it enables the successful conversion of existing listed buildings. *NPPG18: Planning and the Historic Environment* sets out policy on enabling development.
28. Proposals for non-conforming uses will also need to be sympathetic in scale and form and to link with walking, cycling and public transport provision, as noted in paragraph 23.

#### **DEPARTURES FROM THE DEVELOPMENT PLAN**

29. Applications for development in the green belt which do not conform to the development plan shall be subject to the notification arrangements set out in *Scottish Office Circular 4/1997: Notification of Planning Applications*.
30. The Planning etc. (Scotland) Bill introduced to Parliament on 20 December 2005, proposes enhanced scrutiny for developments that are significantly contrary to the development plan, including pre-application consultation with local people and local authority hearings before the decision is taken on the application.

## MANAGING THE GREEN BELT RESOURCE

31. As with the countryside in general, land designated as green belt can be positively managed for the benefit of the surrounding communities and beyond. New rights and responsibilities for outdoor access have now come into force through the *Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003*. Greenspace trusts and partnerships can be a focus for action to enhance access and the quality and use of green belt land and, looking more widely, the green network. Other initiatives such as the work of the Farming & Wildlife Advisory Group and Forestry Commission Scotland's *Woods in and Around Towns* initiative provides mechanisms for the enhancement of urban fringe land, the latter supported by the Scottish Forestry Grants Scheme.
32. Other funding, for example, through the Community Environmental Renewal Scheme (or any successor to that scheme) and the Landfill Tax Credit Scheme, may help to support projects on environmental improvement or access. Given that many run-down and deprived areas are located adjacent to green belt land on the edge of cities, Community Planning Partnerships should also consider the potential to improve access from these areas to the countryside.
33. Management arrangements and agreements, where possible highlighted in development plans, can be a valuable way to ensure that green belts fulfil their purpose. Local communities, landowners and voluntary organisations should be involved where possible in helping to put these arrangements in place and keeping them under review.

## CONCLUSIONS

34. Green belts will continue to play a key role in managing change in Scotland's towns and cities and, once in place, should be robustly protected. It is important that the evolution of our towns and cities is planned on a realistic forward view of 20 years, taking into account the need to protect important characteristics of settlements and improve quality of life. Long-term growth should be planned to ensure that better quality development is delivered on the ground and communities and other stakeholders have greater confidence that the policy framework will be stable and effective.



## ENQUIRIES

35. Enquiries about the content of this SPP should be addressed to Rosie Leven, SEDD Planning, Area 2-H, Victoria Quay, Edinburgh, EH6 6QQ (0131 244 7553) or by e-mail to [rosie.leven@scotland.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:rosie.leven@scotland.gsi.gov.uk) . Further copies can be obtained by telephoning 0131 244 7543. This SPP, other SPPs, Planning Advice Notes and a list of Circulars can be viewed on the Scottish Executive website: [www.scotland.gov.uk/planning](http://www.scotland.gov.uk/planning) .

ISBN 0-7559-6031-9



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