



The London Green Belt Council

Regional Planning and Regional Development Authorities

The recently revised planning structure which created regional planning and development authorities but reduced the powers of county councils is taking form in the sense that plans with wider scope are beginning to grind their way through the process, but it is far too early to say whether the system will ever come fully into operation, let alone whether we will be better or worse off in consequence. For instance, in November, Planning noted 'Judicial processes have torn up plans to delete the green belt in the East of England and South-East plans. The final version of the Southwest Strategic Survey has been held back far into next year'. (This is from an article by a politician and I do not think it is quite accurate. I think that the judgement confirmed that it has always been possible to revise green belt boundaries at the proper stage for long-term plans but not by shoving in ill-considered arguments at any stage of the planning process).

Part of the fault is that too much power was given to Regional Development Authorities whose interests are primarily commercial and whose members are unelected. The new system has its merits and defects and the need to have a wider ranging perspective than that of counties is obvious in some respects, but giving that power to unelected bodies with primarily financial interests is surely wrong.

Natural England and the green belt

We expect at this stage in an election cycle to have arguments by organisations with development interests anxious to develop green belt, but we expect better from Natural England than we have been getting over the last two or three years. Improving the quality of some green belt scenery is fair enough, but they have been ignoring our repeated reminders that PPG2 says quite clearly that the quality of the scenery is irrelevant both in designating land as green belt or in its continued protection afterwards. Some wildlife prefers rougher, less organised surroundings (see item 3 of Planning Decisions below).

The issue rose again recently when the Chief Executive of Natural England, Helen Phillips, published an article which, while supporting green belt in principle, implied that some bits, that were green only in name, might be released so as to enable other parts to be improved. This ignored the fundamental irrelevance of the quality of the scenery, so our Secretary wrote reminding them of that. A reply from Natural England's 'Director, Environmental Advice and Analysis' confirmed their support for 'the valuable urban containment role played by green belts' but thought that they 'should do more to deliver the positive objectives set for them in PPG2'. It evaded the question of scenic relevance, so Cedric Hoptroff wrote again reminding them that 'It is important to avoid the suggestion that green belt is in some some way second class if it is not ecologically rich or of attractive appearance.

Another letter from Helen Phillips in The Times of 4th February challenges a letter from a reader to the effect that green belt 'produces little to anyone other than passing motorists'. She points out that, though covering only 13% of England, they contain 44% of its country parks, 33% of its local nature reserves, 17% of its public rights of way, and 27% of the national cycle network. She concludes 'The green belt is not

perfect - indeed we see opportunities to enhance the environmental outcomes that it delivers - but in terms of promoting access its track record is actually a pretty strong one.' This is a more encouraging attitude to green belt. It avoids mentioning scenery, but it did not need to, given the letter to which it was replying.

All this rang bells with me so I looked back to Notes 150 - 152 (November 2007, March and June 2008). This is what I found:

a) Notes 150. In October 2007 Natural England produced a paper outlining its policy on 'housing growth and green infrastructure'. This contained statements about green belt which we considered outrageous, and I wrote to the chairman of its board making a number of points, abbreviated below:

1) Its call for a review of green belt policy 'not in a way that will provoke accusations of dismantling or concreting over the countryside but in a mature examination of green belt principles to see if and how they can evolve to fit twenty first century circumstances' may sound fine but the actual proposals that follow fall far short of that aspiration, e.g.

- Para 4.2 says 'we have to consider the option of permitting development on the green belt in order to minimise impacts on natural environment elsewhere'. The green belt is not for trading off against other land and Natural England emphatically does not have to consider that option.

- The same paragraph acknowledges, with regret 'of course, some green belt land will not be suitable for development.' Apparently Natural England will graciously permit such land to remain green belt - except it will no longer be a belt.

- We object to the inclusion of the argument favoured by the development profession that green belt is exacerbating global warming by encouraging people to live beyond it.

- The paper's favoured solution of 'green gaps, green wedges and buffers would be a reversion to ribbon development, which green belt was invented to end.

- The paper failed to mention that it is an explicit and fundamental aspect of green belt policy that green belt status is not related to the quality of the scenery. Moreover our experience is that people whose green belt is of poor quality value it as much as do those in more affluent areas with fine green belt, and do so because, though poor, their green belt is what saves them from being swamped by yet more development.

2) Notes 151. The Chairman of Natural England, Sir Martin Doughty, replied on 25th January 2008, saying that Natural England was still developing its policy and would publish a paper shortly. It would confirm support for green belt, particularly in containing urban development and supporting urban renaissance. 'We will, however, make the case for a strategic review of green belt as part of the Regional Spatial Strategy process with the objective of finding the most environmentally sustainable locations for necessary future development'.

3) Notes 152. We thought that we should bring our concern at Natural England's attitude to the notice of Ministers and our President wrote on 3rd March 2008. A reply from the responsible Minister dated 21st April noted that 'The correspondence appears to have been triggered by Natural England....[and it] ... may have been mistaken for Government Policy'. [It certainly wasn't, but we wanted to ram home that it should not become Government policy!]. The letter went on to say 'There are no plans to alter the fundamental basis of green belt protection set out in PPG2. This position was confirmed by Ministers in the context of the planning white paper published in May 2007'.

To move back to the present a report has just been issued jointly by CPRE and Natural England entitled Green Belts: A Greener Future. The summary booklet starts by quoting the relevant paragraphs of PPG2 (see below). It goes on to analyse green belt in various contexts, e.g. the statistics in the letter in the The Times quoted above, the proportion of nationally or locally protected sites and how farming and forestry fare compared with the rest of England, etc. This is useful material, simply and clearly presented. It does not contain any overt mention of Natural England's desire to develop some poor quality green belt land

in order to help other land elsewhere. No doubt it is the CPRE that we have to thank for bringing Natural England down to earth - if that is the correct expression. We must nevertheless keep our eyes open for what Natural England proposes in practice.

The full report, summary and a useful paper bringing the statistics together are available on the CPRE website www.cpre.org.uk/campaigns/planning/green-belts/green-belts-campaign-update

PPG2

PPG 2 has been such an important exposee of national guidance on green belt policy since it was published in its present form in 1995 that it seems sensible to quote the four key paragraphs again here, so that members can quote them if need be. PPG2 has in general terms been very successful, and I shudder to think where we would be without it.

1.4 The fundamental aim of Green Belt policy is to prevent urban sprawl by keeping land permanently open; the most important attribute of Green Belts is their openness. Green Belts can shape patterns of urban development at sub-regional and regional scale, and help to ensure that development occurs in locations allocated in development plans. They help to protect the countryside, be it in agricultural, forestry or other use. They can assist in moving towards more sustainable patterns of urban development (see paragraph 2.10).

1.5 There are five purposes of including land in Green Belts:

- *to check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas;*
- *to prevent neighbouring towns from 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.*

1.6 Once Green Belts have been defined, the use of land in them has a positive role to play in fulfilling the following objectives:

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

1.7 The extent to which the use of land fulfils these objectives is however not itself a material factor in the inclusion of land within a Green Belt, or in its continued protection. For example, although Green Belts often contain areas of attractive landscape, the quality of the landscape is not relevant to the inclusion of land within a Green Belt or to its continued protection. The purposes of including land in Green Belts are of paramount importance to their continued protection, and should take precedence over the land use objectives.

The above is the full text of paragraphs 1.4 - 1.7. The text in the Natural England/CPRE summary referred to in the previous section of these Notes was slightly abbreviated, but that did not affect the very clear message conveyed.

Planning Decisions

1. An example of what green belt status may save us from is illustrated by a decision relating to Metropolitan Open Land, not green belt, in South London. The proposal was to have two temporary emergency teaching blocks for up to 200 students and staff on a sports ground as reserve accommodation in case of an emergency making other accommodation unusable. An emergency might involve fire, flood, criminal or terrorist action. If nothing happened, the permission would not be implemented. If it did, the temporary accommodation would be used for only six months, pending reconstruction. The inspector held that the development was inappropriate in Metropolitan Open Land, but in all the circumstances, including the status of the institution concerned and the temporary nature of any usage, he gave his consent.
2. In Staffordshire green belt the planning authority insisted on the removal of a wooden shed and parking area, used in connection with the hire of narrow boats, to store equipment and encourage people to use a tea and farm shop. The inspector held that the development had an urban ring. Concerns that its removal might send the company out of business did not outweigh the harm to the green belt.
3. There was a gravel quarry in Essex green belt about 5 - 6 metres below ground level. The proposal was to clear the land below ground level and use the site for dumping waste. In that situation, it was claimed, it would not harm the openness of the green belt. It was saved, ironically, because, as part of a local wildlife reserve, its main interest arose from wildlife preferring the disturbed habitat of the quarry's sides and floor. This (to the wildlife) attractive effect had come about because of the activities of 'bikers and off-roaders'. The application was rejected. ?Vive les off-roaders.
4. In upholding an enforcement notice against a commercial storage building in Manchester Green Belt, an inspector stressed that the fact that the area was not visually attractive was not a relevant consideration when applying Green Belt policy. Nor was the fact that there had been a building on the site previously sufficient justification for inappropriate development. The need for extra storage space could have been met by renting a building on the open market.
5. Finally, an encouraging non-green belt story from Ealing. The proposal was for the mixed-use regeneration of a huge site near Ealing Broadway station - 17,000 square metres of retail use plus cafes, restaurants, and leisure space; and 567 flats with three towers, one of them 25 storeys high (and that was a reduction from an original proposal of 40 storeys). Despite many objections by residents the proposal was approved by Ealing Council; and the Mayor of London refused to exercise his right to object.

But in the face of all the odds a small band of local residents continued to fight, and raised enough money to employ counsel. At the inquiry they faced two of the biggest heavyweights of the planning fraternity backed by many expert witnesses. (This description is not mine - it is in an item in Planning.)

And they won. The inspector overwhelmingly supported the objectors' case that a development of this size was out of scale with historic Victorian Ealing and, in particular with the ancient piece of mediaeval common at its core. My personal interest in this arises from the ancient common rather than the built-up area. Ealing common has an atmosphere about it despite its being so swamped by building all around, and it is good to know that the inspector took account of that among other things.

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