

By Felicia Rankl,
Cassie Barton

7 October 2022

Green Belt



Summary

- 1 Current Green Belt planning policy
- 2 How well is the Green Belt working?
- 3 Green Belt statistics
- 4 What's the future of the Green Belt? Recent discussions
- 5 Earlier proposals for change and previous planning policy
- 6 Selected further reading

Disclaimer

The Commons Library does not intend the information in our research publications and briefings to address the specific circumstances of any particular individual. We have published it to support the work of MPs. You should not rely upon it as legal or professional advice, or as a substitute for it. We do not accept any liability whatsoever for any errors, omissions or misstatements contained herein. You should consult a suitably qualified professional if you require specific advice or information. Read our briefing [‘Legal help: where to go and how to pay’](#) for further information about sources of legal advice and help. This information is provided subject to the conditions of the Open Parliament Licence.

Feedback

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in these publicly available briefings is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware however that briefings are not necessarily updated to reflect subsequent changes.

If you have any comments on our briefings please email papers@parliament.uk. Please note that authors are not always able to engage in discussions with members of the public who express opinions about the content of our research, although we will carefully consider and correct any factual errors.

You can read our feedback and complaints policy and our editorial policy at commonslibrary.parliament.uk. If you have general questions about the work of the House of Commons email hcenquiries@parliament.uk.

Contents

Summary	5
1 Current Green Belt planning policy	8
1.1 Purpose of Green Belt	8
1.2 Development on Green Belt land	8
National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)	8
Planning Practice Guidance 2019	10
1.3 Altering Green Belt boundaries	10
2 How well is the Green Belt working?	12
2.1 Should the Green Belt be strengthened?	12
2.2 Is the Green Belt hampering growth?	13
3 Green Belt statistics	16
3.1 How big is the Green Belt?	16
3.2 Where is the Green Belt?	17
3.3 Development in the Green Belt	20
4 What's the future of the Green Belt? Recent discussions	22
4.1 Planning for the Future White Paper (2020)	23
Select Committee inquiry into the White Paper	24
Reaction to Planning for the Future's proposals	25
4.2 Levelling Up White Paper (2022)	27
4.3 Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill (2022-23)	27
Select Committee response to the Bill	29
Reaction to the Bill's proposals	29
4.4 Recent commentary on the Green Belt	31
5 Earlier proposals for change and previous planning policy	34
5.1 DCLG consultation, December 2015	34
5.2 Housing White Paper, February 2017	34

5.3	Previous Green Belt planning policy	35
	NPPF 2012	35
	Planning Practice Guidance 2014	35
	NPPF 2019	36
6	Selected further reading	38

Summary

This briefing examines Green Belt planning policy and some of the recent discussions around the Green Belt. 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 Local Planning Authorities (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](#) addresses questions about the factors that can be taken into account when considering development’s potential impact on the openness of the Green Belt. It also addresses 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 local authorities 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.

A [2010 report](#) by Natural England and CPRE (formerly the Campaign to Protect Rural England) concluded that Green Belt policy continued to be “highly effective” but called for “more ambition” to protect Green Belt land. In addition to preventing urban sprawl, CPRE pointed to [other benefits of the Green Belt](#), including providing opportunities for fresh air and exercise for

people living in nearby cities. CPRE has [taken the stance](#) that building on the Green Belt could “not solve the crisis in affordable housing”.

Think tanks such as the [Adam Smith Institute](#) and the [Institute of Economic Affairs](#) have argued that the release of (at least some) Green Belt land could help “solve the housing crisis”. The [Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development](#) (OECD) has also criticised the Green Belt system for being an obstacle to house building.

The [Centre for Cities](#) has suggested releasing Green Belt land within a short distance of train stations that serve major cities for development. The property agents [Savills](#) have suggested that losses in Green Belt land in one area could be offset by the designation of land as Green Belt elsewhere.

How large is the Green Belt?

England had around 16,382 km² (or 6,324 square miles) of Green Belt land at the end of March 2022, covering 12.6% of England’s land area.

The Green Belt is clustered around 15 urban cores, the largest of which are London (5,062km²), Merseyside and Greater Manchester (2,489km²), and South and West Yorkshire (including Sheffield, Leeds and Bradford, 2,270km²).

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 km² of previously undeveloped Green Belt land changed to a developed use, of which 2.9 km² turned into residential use.

What’s the future of the Green Belt?

Recent proposals to change the planning system have once again brought the Green Belt to the fore. Put simply, some commentators have argued that the demand for greater housing supply will only be met if some development takes place in the Green Belt. Following the publication of the Government’s [Planning for the Future White Paper](#) in August 2020, questions resurfaced about the status of the Green Belt and how it should be protected.

An [inquiry into the Future of the Planning System](#) by the Housing, Communities and Local Government Select Committee called for a review to “examine the purpose of the Green Belt, including whether it continues to serve that purpose ... and what additional protections might be appropriate”. The Committee noted, however, that commentators were divided on whether Green Belt land should “never be built on” or constituted “an anti-growth mechanism”.

The [Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill](#), which followed the White Paper (and the [Levelling Up White Paper](#) in February 2022) would introduce significant changes to the planning system. Some commentators, including the [CPRE](#) and the property services group [Leaders Roman](#), expressed disappointment that the Bill does not include provisions on the Green Belt.

The Government has [stated](#) that “existing Green Belt protections will remain”. It has also [suggested](#) that National Development Management Policies, which the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill would introduce and which would sit alongside Local Plans, might include protections for Green Belt land.

- Briefings on various other matters to do with planning are available on the Library’s [topic page for housing and planning](#).
- The joint Libraries briefing [Comparison of the planning systems in the four UK countries: 2016 update](#) provides information on planning law and policy in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

1 Current Green Belt planning policy

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

It is for Local Planning Authorities (LPAs) to define and maintain Green Belt land in their local areas. Local Plans set out the plan for the future development of a 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.

1.1 Purpose of Green Belt

According to the [National Planning Policy Framework \(NPPF\)](#), “the fundamental aim” of the Green Belt “is to prevent urban sprawl by keeping land permanently open”.¹ Specifically, 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.²

1.2 Development on Green Belt land

National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)

The NPPF was first published in 2012. Following a consultation, the updated NPPF 2019 was published in July 2018, with some further, minor amendment in February 2019. Following another consultation, the NPPF was revised again in July 2021. The chapter on the Green Belt has remained unchanged since 2019.

¹ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG, now the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, DLUHC), [National Planning Policy Framework](#), July 2021, paragraph 137

² MHCLG, [National Planning Policy Framework](#), July 2021, paragraph 138

The NPPF sets out the Government's planning policy. It provides a framework against which LPAs draw up Local Plans and determine planning applications.

The NPPF 2019 – including its provisions on the Green Belt – is discussed in the Commons Library briefing [What next for planning in England? The National Planning Policy Framework](#).³

With certain exceptions, the NPPF states that development on the Green Belt should be regarded as “inappropriate” and “is, by definition, harmful to the Green Belt”. The NPPF provides examples of exceptions, such as limited affordable housing for local community needs under policies set out in the Local Plan.⁴

The NPPF provides that development on the Green Belt should only be approved in “in very special circumstances”.⁵ These “very special circumstances” exist only when the potential harm to the Green Belt is “clearly outweighed by other considerations”.⁶

A [PQ reply in March 2022](#) sets out why “very special circumstances” are not further defined in the NPPF and how LPAs should interpret them:

Very special circumstances are not defined in national planning policy as it is rightly for the individual local authority to assess each case on its merits, and give relevant circumstances their due weight. However, when considering any planning application affecting Green Belt land, the local authority should ensure that substantial weight is given to any harm to the Green Belt.⁷

In its [response to the consultation on the NPPF 2019](#), the Government said it had no plans to review national Green Belt policy or to completely ban development within the Green Belt. However, it stated that the NPPF made clear that “other options should be considered fully before it is concluded that Green Belt releases are appropriate”.⁸

A [PQ reply in September 2022](#) confirmed that protections afforded to the Green Belt remain in place and that planning permission should not be granted to developments except in “very special circumstances”.

This Government has a manifesto commitment to protect and enhance the Green Belt. ... Within Green Belt, most types of new building are questioned and should be refused planning permission unless there are very special circumstances, as determined by the local authority. These strong protections for Green Belt land are to remain firmly in place.⁹

³ Commons Library briefing, [What's next for planning in England? The National Planning Policy Framework](#) CBP 8260, 10 June 2019

⁴ MHCLG, [National Planning Policy Framework](#), July 2021, paragraph 149f

⁵ As above, paragraph 137

⁶ As above, paragraph 147-149

⁷ [PQ 140431, 15 March 2022](#)

⁸ MCHCLG, [Government response to the draft revised National Planning Policy Framework consultation](#), July 2018, Government response to Question 30

⁹ [PQ 53431, 21 September 2022](#)

Planning Practice Guidance 2019

The Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG, now the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, DLUHC) published Planning Practice Guidance (PPG) [on the Green Belt](#) in July 2019. It addresses which factors can be taken into account when considering the potential impact of development on Green Belt. These include (but are not limited to) the visual impact of a development, whether the land could be returned to its original state, and the degree of activity a development will generate.¹⁰

The PPG [on the Green Belt](#) also addresses how LPAs can ensure that compensatory improvements to the environmental quality and accessibility of the Green Belt will be secured and how Local Plans might set out policies to offset the impact of removing land from the Green Belt.¹¹

1.3

Altering Green Belt boundaries

The NPPF states that “the general extent of Green Belts across the country is already established”.¹² Although Green Belt land should have a degree of permanence, LPAs may conduct a review of Green Belt land and consider redefining boundaries to expand or remove land from the Green Belt to meet local planning needs.¹³

The NPPF provides that “Green Belt boundaries should only be altered” in “exceptional circumstances”. These will need to be “fully evidenced and justified” in Local Plans.¹⁴ The NPPF goes on to say that, prior to changing Green Belt boundaries, the LPA should “demonstrate that it has examined all other reasonable options for meeting its identified need for development”.¹⁵ Specifically, it should examine whether its strategic policies:

- make as much use as possible of brownfield sites and underutilised land;
- optimise the density of development and make effective use of land; and
- have been informed by discussions with neighbouring authorities about whether they could accommodate some of the identified need for development.¹⁶

Where an LPA concludes that releasing Green Belt land for development is necessary, the NPPF provides that land which has been previously developed

¹⁰ DLUHC and MHCLG, [Planning Practice Guidance: Green Belt](#), 22 July 2019, paragraph 001

¹¹ As above, paragraph 002/003

¹² MHCLG, [National Planning Policy Framework](#), July 2021, paragraph 139

¹³ As above, paragraph 140

¹⁴ As above, paragraph 140

¹⁵ As above, paragraph 141

¹⁶ As above, paragraph 141

and/or is well-served by public transport should be released first.¹⁷ It also requires LPAs to set out ways in their Local Plans in which the impact of removing land from the Green Belt can be offset, for example by improving the accessibility of remaining Green Belt land.¹⁸

The Government reaffirmed its stance on altering Green Belt boundaries in a [PQ reply in October 2021](#). It said that “most types of new development” were considered “inappropriate for the Green Belt” and should be refused planning permission unless justified by “very special circumstances”.¹⁹

The Government has also made clear in a [PQ reply in September 2022](#) that LPAs must have explored “every other reasonable option” prior to altering Green Belt boundaries in their Local Plan:

Our National Planning Policy Framework makes clear that a local authority should not propose to alter a Green Belt boundary unless there are exceptional circumstances and it can show at examination of the Local Plan that it has explored every other reasonable option: including using brownfield land or optimising the density of development.²⁰

¹⁷ MHCLG, [National Planning Policy Framework](#), July 2021, paragraph 142

¹⁸ As above, paragraph 142

¹⁹ [PQ 57018, 15 October 2021](#)

²⁰ [PQ 53431, 21 September 2022](#)

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 can get in the way of building sufficient housing and so limit growth.

2.1

Should the Green Belt be strengthened?

A [2010 report on the Green Belt](#) by Natural England and CPRE (formerly the Campaign to Protect Rural England) examined the history of the Green Belt, its legislative and policy protections and their success at protecting the Green Belt, and the state of the Green Belt. The report concluded that Green Belt policy continued to be “highly effective in terms of its principle purposes”. In addition to preventing urban sprawl, it pointed to other benefits of the Green Belt, such as ecosystem services and public access opportunities. The report called for “more ambition” to enhance Green Belt land.²¹

In a [report on the state of the Green Belt](#) published in August 2018, CPRE concluded that building on the Green Belt could “not solve the crisis in affordable housing”. Amongst the report’s key findings were that only 27% of the “homes approved on greenfield land” met the Government’s definition of “affordable” and that local authorities with Green Belt land had “enough brownfield land for over 720,000 homes”.²²

The CPRE published an updated [report on the state of the Green Belt](#) in February 2021. This report reiterated that developments on the Green Belt “are not providing the affordable homes we need to face the housing crisis”. The report argued that the “current and future threat of housing development faced by Green Belt land” was “unprecedented”. It called on the Government to make sure that “previously developed land” is “prioritised”.²³

²¹ Natural England and CPRE, [Green Belts: A Greener Future](#), 27 January 2010, page 90

²² CPRE, [The State of the Green Belt](#), August 2018, Executive Summary, page 2

²³ CPRE, [The State of the Green Belt](#), February 2021, Executive Summary, page 2

CPRE also argued in a [2021 article](#) that “instead of viewing the Green Belts as a limitation to building more homes, we need to focus on restoring and enhancing the Green Belt”.²⁴ The article pointed to the numerous benefits of the Green Belt. In addition to preventing urban sprawl, CPRE highlighted that the Green Belt provided land for “agricultural use” which helped meet “local needs for food” and provided opportunities for “fresh air and exercise” which improved “health and wellbeing”.²⁵

The London Green Belt Council, in its 2022 report [Safe under us? The continued shrinking of London’s local countryside](#), concluded that especially during the Covid-19 pandemic, Green Belts provided “crucially important ... open spaces close to urban borders for public recreation”. In addition to providing opportunities for exercise, it highlighted that Green Belts played a role in “mitigating the effects of climate change” in “big crowded cities”.²⁶

In a [policy paper published in February 2020](#), CPRE also highlighted that the Green Belt played an important role in addressing climate and ecological emergencies.²⁷ A [2021 article](#) reiterated this argument:

[T]hese girdles of green around our built-up areas are rich in nature, too. Over a third of the country’s community forests (forests connected to and nearby urban communities) are in the Green Belt, as well as tens of Local Nature Reserves.

These corridors of nature and green space work brilliantly for wildlife, allowing creatures to move between habitats safely and flourish in a mix of landscapes.²⁸

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 unwarranted obstacles in the way of providing new housing – remains controversial.

The Adam Smith Institute called for a “complete abolition of the Green Belt” in a [2015 report titled “The Green Noose”](#), arguing that this “could solve the housing crisis”. As an alternative in the short term, it proposed “removing restrictions” on Green Belt land within a ten-minute walk of railway stations to allow for the development of one million additional homes.²⁹

²⁴ Philippa Oppenheimer, [What is the Green Belt, and why does it matter?](#), CPRE, 29 July 2021

²⁵ As above

²⁶ London Green Belt Council, [“Safe Under Us?” The continued shrinking of London’s local countryside](#), August 2022, Foreword, page 3

²⁷ CPRE, [A 21st Century Green Belt and Countryside Next Door](#), February 2020, page 2

²⁸ Philippa Oppenheimer, [What is the Green Belt, and why does it matter?](#), CPRE, 29 July 2021

²⁹ Tom Papworth, [The Green Noose: An analysis of Green Belts and proposals for reform](#), Adam Smith Institute, 14 January 2015

The Centre for Cities also argued that the release of Green Belt land within 800 metres of train stations which have a service of less than 45 minutes to major cities was one way of setting “the country on the right tracks for solving the housing crisis”. Its [2019 report](#) put forward the argument that this would unlock “an estimated 47,000 hectares” of land and provide “enough land to increase the housing stock by 7 to 9 percent”.³⁰

In a [2014 article on London’s Green Belt](#), the London Society said that “our towns and cities will each need, at some level to integrate with their green belts”.³¹ With regards to London’s Green Belt, it estimated that building one million new homes would cover less than 5 percent of the Green Belt:

Even if the current requirement for 1 million new homes over the next 15 years was built within it [London’s Green Belt] ... it would require only 25,000 hectares, equivalent to 4.8% of the current area.³²

The Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) also said that “green belt boundaries may well need to change”, albeit subject to safeguards, in a 2016 policy paper dealing with the question of [where new homes should be built](#).³³

A “strategic review of Green Belt across England” and a “loosening of NPPF restriction on development of Green Belt” was also suggested by the property agents Savills. In a [2020 article](#), Savills proposed offsetting the loss of Green Belt in one location by the designation of Green Belt elsewhere, outlining the potential benefits of this approach:

Designating land on the edge of the Green Belt in exchange for developing land near transport hubs within the Green Belt would not just help deliver socially and environmentally sustainable development but would also help fulfil the goals of the Green Belt in protecting areas of countryside.

.. [D]evelopment provides an opportunity to improve the quality of remaining Green Belt land. Particular focus can be placed on improving environmental value, and improving public access to open space.³⁴

A [2019 collection of essays](#) published by 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

³⁰ Paul Cheshire and Boyana Buyuklieva, [Homes on the right track: Greening the Green Belt to solve the UK housing crisis](#), Centre for Cities, 22 September 2019

³¹ London Society, [London’s Green Belt](#), 19 October 2014

³² As above

³³ RTPI, [Where should we build new homes?](#), 11 March 2016

³⁴ Hamish Simmie, [Is Green Belt being used as effectively as it could be?](#), Savills, 3 June 2022

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.³⁵

In his essay for the collection, Jacob Rees-Mogg, the since appointed Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS), argued regulation of land fuelled “Nimbyism”. He also said Green Belts “have grown far beyond what was planned”.³⁶

The [Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development](#) (OECD), too, has criticised policies that restrict housing development, including the Green Belt. The OECD’s 2011 economic survey advocated a review of Green Belt designation:

[T]here 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.³⁷

See section 6 of this briefing paper: selected further reading, for other articles touching on some of these issues.

³⁵ Jacob Rees-Mogg and Radomir Tylecote, [Raising the roof](#), Institute of Economic Affairs, 22 July 2019

³⁶ As above

³⁷ OECD, [Economic Surveys: United Kingdom](#), March 2011, paragraph 19

3 Green Belt statistics

In brief

England has around 16,382 km² (or 6,324 square miles) of Green Belt land, clustered around 15 urban cores.

The Green Belt grew by 242 km² between March 2021 and March 2022 because of local authorities amending the extent of their land designated as Green Belt. In previous years, the extent of the Green Belt had reduced by an average of 24 km² per year because of this type of change in designation.

The majority (66%) of Green Belt land is used for agriculture. 7% is developed.

An estimated 8.9 km² of previously-undeveloped Green Belt land changed to developed use in 2017/18, of which 2.9 km² was changed to residential buildings.

3.1 How big is the Green Belt?

The Green Belt in England was estimated to be 16,382 km² or 6,324 square miles at the end of March 2022. This is approximately three times the size of Norfolk, and equivalent to 12.6% of the land area of England.³⁸

The extent of the Green Belt has changed over time. In 1979 the UK-wide Green Belt was 7,215 km².³⁹ By 1997, the Green Belt in England had grown to cover 16,523 km².⁴⁰ In 2005, 473 km² 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. In March 2022, it was around 0.4% larger than it was in 2006.⁴¹

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. This typically results in relatively minor decreases in the size of the Green

³⁸ DLUHC, [Local authority green belt: England 2021-22 – statistical release](#), 16 September 2022

³⁹ HC Deb 28 July 1997 c47W

⁴⁰ DLUHC, [Local authority green belt: England 2021-22 – statistical release](#), Accompanying tables, 16 September 2022

⁴¹ As above

Belt. Between March 2013 and March 2021, the Green Belt had a net reduction in size of around 178 km² due to these changes, an average of 24 km² per year.⁴²

However, between March 2021 and March 2022 the Green Belt grew by around 242 km² because of changes in local authority designation policies. 90% of this increase was due to the adoption of a new Local Plan in Northumberland. Northumberland's new Local Plan defines Green Belt boundaries around Morpeth where previously a "general extent" had been identified, but detailed boundaries had not been established or included in data returns.⁴³

A further 26.4% of land in England is designated as either a National Park, an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, or a Site of Special Scientific Interest. This means that 37.4% of land in England (4,876 km²) is designated as either Green Belt land or one of these other designations.⁴⁴

3.2 Where is the Green Belt?

The Green Belt is clustered around 15 urban cores. The table below shows the area of Green Belt associated with each urban core.

Green Belt area by urban core, 2022	
Urban core	Area (km ²)
London	5,062
Merseyside & Greater Manchester	2,489
South and West Yorkshire	2,472
Birmingham	2,270
Tyne & Wear	986
Bath and Bristol	717
Derby & Nottingham	600
Stoke-on-Trent	444
South West Hampshire	347
Oxford	345
York	280
Cambridge	261
Cheltenham & Gloucester	62
Blackpool	25
Carnforth, Lancaster & Morecambe	15
Burton-upon-Trent and Swadlincote	7

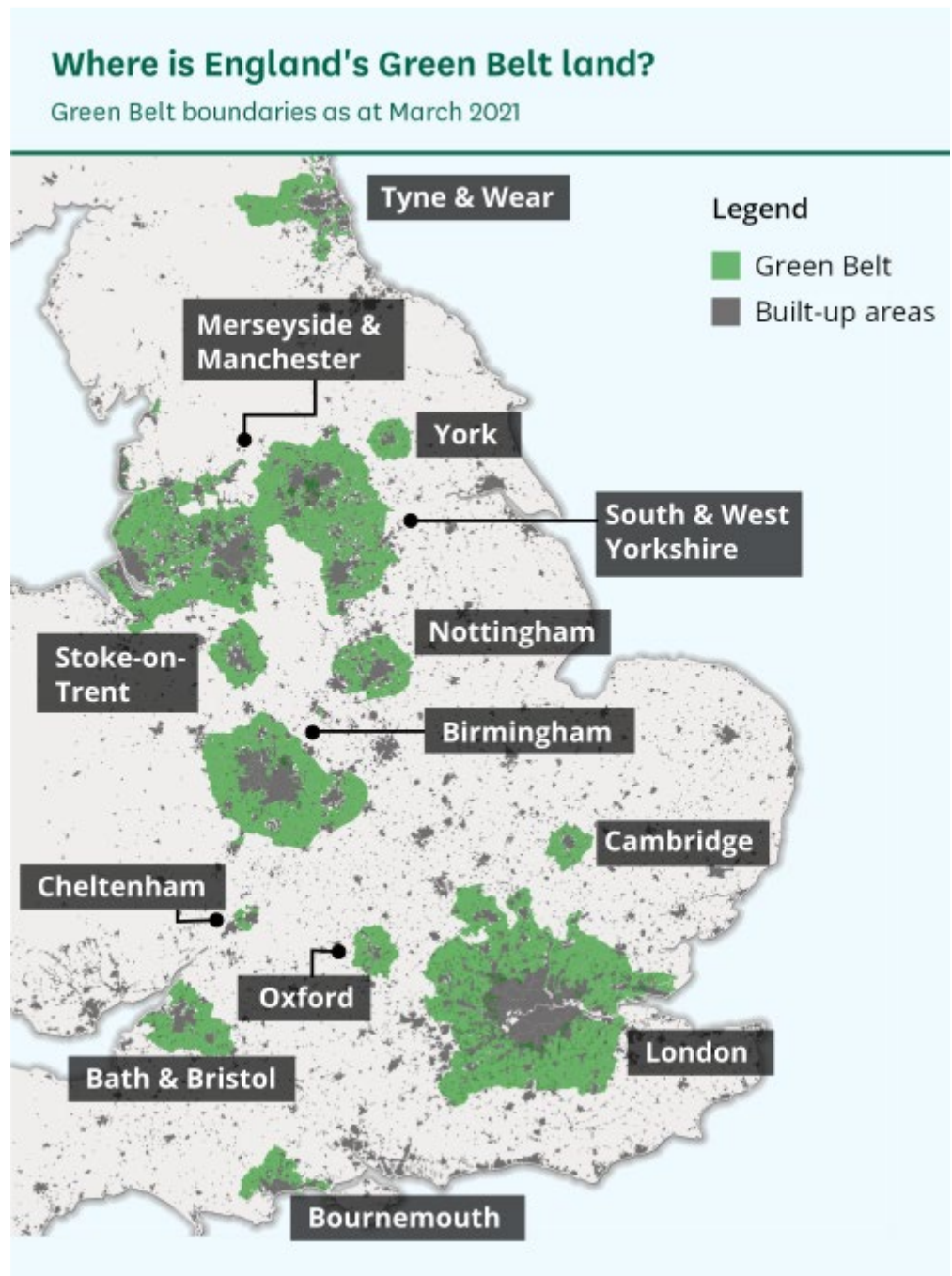
Source: DLUHC, [Local authority green belt statistics for England: 2021-22](#), Table 4

⁴² DLUHC, [Local authority green belt: England 2021-22 – statistical release](#), Table 3, 16 September 2022

⁴³ As above. See Annex A of the release for a more detailed explanation of the impact of the Northumberland Local Plan.

⁴⁴ As above, Accompanying tables

The map below shows the location of Green Belt land, using boundaries accurate at the end of March 2021, published by DLUHC. These boundaries were the most recent available at the time of publication.



Source: DLUHC, English local authority Green Belt dataset, 2020/21 boundaries [Accessed 4 October 2022]

Contains OS data © Crown Copyright 2022

A number of detailed, interactive maps of Green Belt boundaries have been produced using DLUHC data, such as the Government's [National map of planning data](#).

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, and West Lancashire are all 90% Green Belt or more.

Full local authority and constituency data can be downloaded from [the landing page for this briefing paper](#).

Local authorities with the most Green Belt

By percentage of total area, as at 31 March 2022

		Green Belt (km ²)	% of total area
1	Tandridge	233.1	94%
2	Epping Forest	316.8	93%
3	Sevenoaks	344.0	93%
4	West Lancashire	310.3	90%
5	Bromsgrove	193.1	89%
6	Brentwood	133.0	87%
7	Guildford	226.4	84%
8	York	224.1	82%
9	Windsor and Maidenhead	162.7	82%
10	St Albans	131.5	82%

Source: DLUHC, [Local authority green belt statistics for England: 2021-22](#), Accompanying tables

DLUHC has also produced estimates of the extent of the Green Belt in each parliamentary constituency in England. The table below shows the ten constituencies with the highest proportion of Green Belt. Full data can be downloaded from [the landing page for this briefing paper](#).

Brentwood and Ongar, a constituency in Essex, has the highest proportion at 93%, followed by South Staffordshire, Sevenoaks and East Surrey (all 91%).

Parliamentary constituencies with the most Green Belt

By percentage of total area, as at 31 March 2022

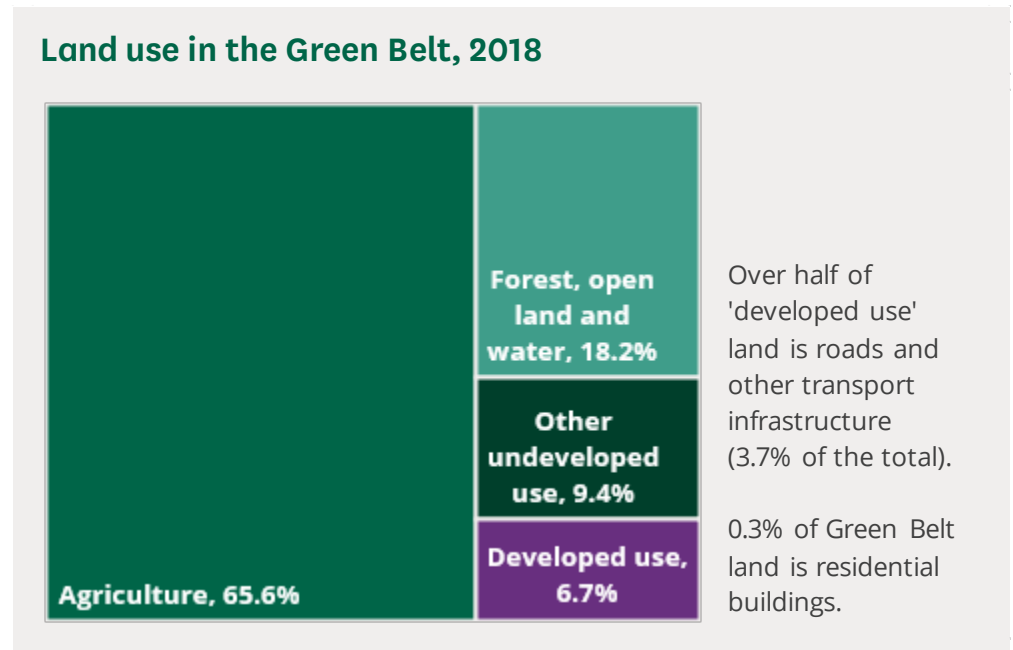
		Green Belt (km ²)	% of total area
1	Brentwood and Ongar	293.8	93%
2	South Staffordshire	250.1	91%
3	Sevenoaks	227.0	91%
4	East Surrey	234.7	91%
5	Tonbridge and Malling	270.5	90%
6	Bromsgrove	193.1	89%
7	Chesham and Amersham	173.9	89%
8	York Outer	219.8	89%
9	West Lancashire	231.3	88%
10	South Ribble	169.7	86%

Source: DLUHC, [Local authority green belt statistics for England: 2021-22](#), Accompanying tables

3.3

Development in the Green Belt

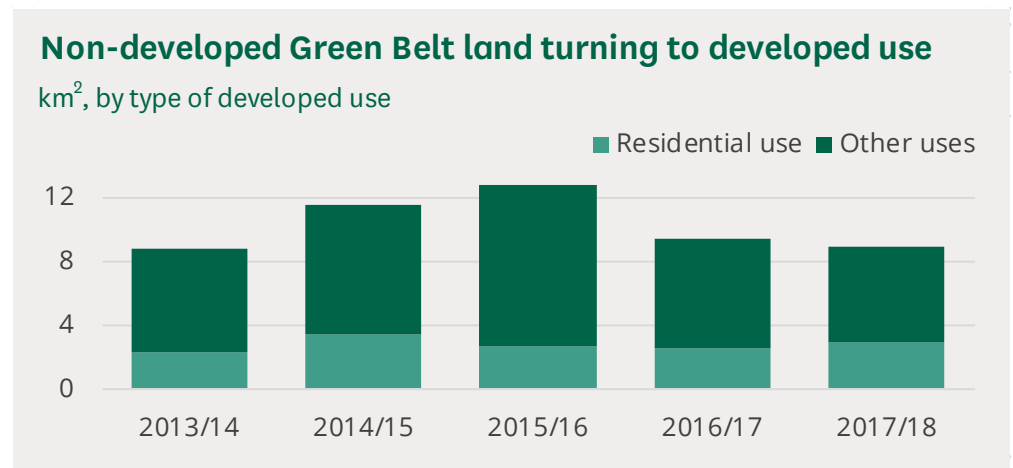
DLUHC has published estimates of how land is used in the Green Belt. In 2018, **6.7%** of Green Belt land was developed and **93.2%** was non-developed uses. The most common non-developed use was agriculture, with agricultural land and buildings accounting for 65.6% of Green Belt land. Forest, open land 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.⁴⁵



Source: DLUHC, [Live tables on land use](#), Land use in England 2018

MHCLG (now DLUHC) has also published statistics on land use change in the Green Belt up to 2017/18. In total, 8.9 km² of previously undeveloped Green Belt land changed to a developed use category in 2017/18. A further 19.2 km² of previously-developed Green Belt land turned into another developed use category (e.g. industrial sites becoming residential).

⁴⁵ DLUHC, [Live tables on land use](#), Land use in England 2018, Table P401a, 16 July 2020



Source: DLUHC, [Live tables on land use change](#), 2017/18 land use change based tables

4.1 km² of Green Belt land changed to residential use in 2017/18. The majority (69%, or 2.9 km²) of this land was not previously developed. The chart above shows the trend in undeveloped Green Belt land changing to developed use in recent years.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ 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

Housing need and supply

The Conservative party's 2019 election manifesto included a commitment to increase the supply of new homes to 300,000 per year by the mid-2020s.⁴⁷ However, the Truss government has signalled an intention to drop this target while continuing to encourage housebuilding.⁴⁸

It is difficult to put a precise number on the amount of new housing needed in England. New household formation creates need for housing, but commentators have also focused on a backlog of existing need amongst people who are living in unsuitable housing.

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.⁴⁹

New supply of housing has not yet reached 300,000 per year. 216,000 new homes were supplied in 2020/21 – lower than the 243,000 new homes supplied in 2019/20, in part because of disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. However, delivery in 2019/20 was 95% higher than a low point of 125,000 in 2012/13.⁵⁰

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.⁵¹

Recent proposals to change the planning system have once again brought the Green Belt to the fore. Put simply, some commentators have argued that the demand for greater housing supply will only be met if some development takes place in the Green Belt. Following the publication of the Government's

⁴⁷ [The Conservative and Unionist Party Manifesto 2019](#)

⁴⁸ [PM committed to scrapping 300,000 homes a year national target, housing minister claims](#), Planning Resource [online], 6 October 2022

⁴⁹ Bramley, G. for Crisis, [Housing supply requirements across Great Britain: for low-income households and homeless people](#), December 2018, page 10

⁵⁰ MHCLG, [Live tables on housing supply: net additional dwellings](#), Table 120

⁵¹ Commons Library briefing, [Tackling the under-supply of housing in England](#) CBP 7671, February 2022

[Planning for the Future White Paper](#) in August 2020, questions resurfaced about the status of the Green Belt and how it should be protected.

The Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill, which followed the White Paper (and the [Levelling Up White Paper](#) in February 2022) would introduce significant changes to the planning system. Some commentators have expressed disappointment that the Bill does not include provisions on the Green Belt. The Government has stated that “existing Green Belt protections will remain”.

The Commons Library briefing [Planning for the Future: planning policy changes in 2020 and future reforms](#) provides further information on the proposals in the Planning for the Future White Paper and some of the response to them.⁵² It also examines the Levelling Up White Paper.

The Commons Library briefing [Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill 2022-23](#) provides further information on the provisions in the Bill.⁵³

4.1 Planning for the Future White Paper (2020)

The [Planning for the Future White Paper](#) was published in August 2020, with an [accompanying press release](#).⁵⁴ A [consultation](#) on the changes proposed in the White Paper opened on 6 August and closed on 29 October 2020.⁵⁵

The White Paper proposed streamlining the planning process by placing land in three categories: growth areas “suitable for substantial development”, renewable areas “suitable for some development” and protected areas. It also suggested introducing “general development management policies” for national policies and giving Local Plans “a more focused role”.⁵⁶

The Government said the proposed reforms would “transform” the planning system to make it simpler and improve its transparency.⁵⁷

The Conservative party’s 2019 election manifesto included a commitment to deliver 300,000 homes per year by the mid-2020s.⁵⁸ In an evidence session with the Housing, Communities and Local Government (HCLG) Select Committee in 2018, the Government had argued that supplying 300,000 homes per year would reduce affordability pressures.⁵⁹ The White Paper

⁵² Commons Library briefing, [Planning for the Future: planning policy changes in England in 2020 and future reforms](#) CBP 8981, February 2020

⁵³ Commons Library briefing, [Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill 2022-23](#) CBP 9558, June 2022

⁵⁴ MHCLG, [White paper: Planning for the Future](#), August 2020; MHCLG, [Launch of Planning for the future consultation to reform the planning system](#), Press release, 6 August 2020

⁵⁵ DLUHC and MHCLG, [Closed consultation: Planning for the future](#), last updated February 2021

⁵⁶ MHCLG, [White paper: Planning for the Future](#), August 2020, paragraph 1.16

⁵⁷ MHCLG, [Launch of Planning for the future consultation to reform the planning system](#), Press release, 6 August 2020

⁵⁸ [The Conservative and Unionist Party Manifesto 2019](#)

⁵⁹ HCLG Committee, [Oral Evidence: Housing Prices](#), HC 830, 12 March 2018, Q3

reiterated the target of “delivering 300,000 homes annually, and one million homes” by the end of the current parliamentary term.⁶⁰

Within the three planning categories outlined in the White Paper, the Green Belt would have been placed in the “protected” category.⁶¹

The White Paper also state that the “new nationally-determined, binding housing requirement” which LPAs would have to deliver through their Local Plans, “would factor in land constraints, including the Green Belt”.⁶² In discussing the method for calculating housing need and allocating land to meet that requirement, the White Paper again stated that “the existing policy for protecting the Green Belt would remain”.⁶³

The [press release accompanying the White Paper](#) confirmed that the “Green Belt will continue to be protected for future generations”, with reforms concentrating on more building on brownfield land. It also confirmed that “decisions on the Green Belt will stay with local authorities”.⁶⁴

Select Committee inquiry into the White Paper

The Housing, Communities and Local Government (HCLG) Select Committee held an inquiry into the [future of the planning system in England](#) which examined the proposals set out in the Planning for the Future White Paper.

In its subsequent [report](#), the Select Committee called for a review to “examine the purpose of the Green Belt, including whether it continues to serve that purpose ... and what additional protections might be appropriate”. The report said the creation of new Local Plans provided an opportunity to review the Green Belt locally and said the Government should identify in which areas such reviews were particularly urgent.⁶⁵

The Select Committee also called on the Government to “publish the evidential base for its 300,000 housing units a year target” and called for “greater clarity on how the Government will deliver its ambition”.⁶⁶

In an [evidence session with the HCLG Select Committee](#), the then Housing Minister, Christopher Pincher, highlighted the Government’s “manifesto commitment to maintain the green belt” and reiterated that “existing green belt policy will remain”. He pointed to brownfield regeneration as a way to

⁶⁰ MHCLG, [White paper: Planning for the Future](#), August 2020, paragraph 1.20

⁶¹ As above, paragraph 2.8

⁶² As above, paragraph 1.20

⁶³ As above, paragraph 2.26

⁶⁴ MHCLG, [Launch of Planning for the future consultation to reform the planning system](#), Press release, 6 August 2020

⁶⁵ Housing, Communities, and Local Government (HCLG) Committee, [The future of the planning system in England](#), HC 38 2021-22, June 2021, paragraph 210

⁶⁶ As above, paragraph 116

“achieve our building ambitions without encroaching on important green spaces that we know communities ... feel very strongly about”.⁶⁷

In its [response to the inquiry](#), published in May 2022, the Government again reiterated that it had “no plans for a national review of the Green Belt” and remained “committed to protecting and enhancing the Green Belt”. It also pointed to its commitment in the Levelling Up White Paper to make “further improvements” to the Green Belt and to “make green space and natural beauty accessible to all”.⁶⁸

The Government also reiterated its ambition to building 300,000 homes per year on average in its response to the inquiry. It said that there seemed to be “consensus” that achieving this target would “deliver price and demand stability”.⁶⁹

Reaction to Planning for the Future’s proposals

The HCLG Select Committee reported that responses to its call for evidence criticised the “perceived neglect of the Green Belt” in the White Paper.⁷⁰ It noted, however, that respondents were divided on whether Green Belt land should “never be built on”⁷¹ or constituted “an anti-growth mechanism”.⁷² While some urged the Government to protect, promote, and even extend the Green Belt, others expressed a wish to develop Green Belt land to build affordable housing and facilitate shorter commutes.⁷³

CPRE called for “stronger planning policies to support enhancement of the Green Belt”.⁷⁴ It expressed concern that a zonal planning system could pose risks to the permanence of Green Belt boundaries:

[S]ince the Local Plan is to be renewed every five years to allow for updates to the housing requirement, this may result in quite frequent changes to the boundary between a Growth zone and a Protected zone (possibly more quickly than the time it takes to resolve previous conflicts), so there is a risk that Green Belt boundaries will lose the permanence that is essential to their function.⁷⁵

In an [evidence session with the HCLG Select Committee](#), Lisa Fairmaner, the Head of London Plan and Growth Strategies, rejected a review of the Green Belt. She said there was no “reason to encroach on the green belt”. She also

⁶⁷ HCLG Committee, [Oral evidence: The future of the planning system in England](#), HC 858, 7 December 2020, Q156

⁶⁸ DLUHC, [Government response to the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Select Committee report on The Future of the Planning System in England](#), CP 673, May 2022, paragraph 59/60

⁶⁹ As above, paragraph 35

⁷⁰ Housing, Communities, and Local Government (HCLG) Committee, [The future of the planning system in England](#), HC 38 2021-22, June 2021, paragraph 204

⁷¹ As above, paragraph 205

⁷² As above, paragraph 207

⁷³ As above, paragraph 208

⁷⁴ HCLG Committee, [Written evidence: the future of the planning system](#), HC 38 2021-22, FPS 165

⁷⁵ CPRE, [Consultation response to Planning for the Future White Paper](#), 27 October 2020, page 13

pointed to the numerous benefits of the Green Belt for London, which included reducing “the urban-heat-island effect” and providing space for “recreation and food production.”⁷⁶

However, Brian Berry, the Chief Executive of Masters Builders, said the Green Belt was “not all lush, green land”. Rather, “it is some scrubland which could actually be quite helpful in terms of development”.⁷⁷ Kate Henderson, Chief Executive of the National Housing Federation, called for a review of the Green Belt on a “bigger strategic scale”. She said just releasing land in “exceptional circumstances” meant reviewing Green Belt land was “very difficult”.⁷⁸

The Royal Town and Planning Institute (RTPI) argued that “at least as much effort and resources should go into the creation of new communities as in defending the green belt”. Instead of “blanket green belts”, the RTPI suggested establishing Green Growth Boards to support “broad growth strategies across whole city regions”.⁷⁹ These could provide housing figures for their constituent LPAs and carry out strategic reviews of the Green Belt.⁸⁰

The Centre for Cities also argued that “the green belt must be reformed” to ease housing pressures and allow for growth:

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.⁸¹

Referring to previous [proposals](#), the Centre for Cities suggested releasing Green Belt land within 800 metres of stations that are within 45 minutes of the city centres of London, Greater Manchester, Bristol, Birmingham, and Newcastle. It said this could deliver “between 1.6 million to 2.1 million homes”.⁸²

⁷⁶ HCLG Committee, [Oral evidence: The future of the planning system in England](#), HC 858, 9 November 2020, Q156

⁷⁷ As above, Q27,

⁷⁸ As above, Q25,

⁷⁹ HCLG Committee, [Written evidence: the future of the planning system](#), HC 38 2021-22, FPS 113

⁸⁰ As above

⁸¹ HCLG Committee, [Written evidence: the future of the planning system](#), HC 38 2021-22, FPS 144

⁸² As above

4.2

Levelling Up White Paper (2022)

The [Levelling Up White Paper](#) was published in February 2022.⁸³ It set out the Government’s proposals for its “levelling up” policy, which is intended to reduce geographic economic, social and health inequalities.

Among other things, the White Paper said the Government would reform the planning system “ensure that planning becomes a tool for levelling up across England”.⁸⁴ It said the Government’s “levelling up” proposals would “reduce pressure on housing and on greenfield and Green Belt sites in overheated areas of London and the South East”.⁸⁵

The White Paper set out an intention to make “improvements to the planning system” to deliver “more housing in England, including more genuinely affordable social housing”.⁸⁶ It reiterated the Government’s target to build 300,000 new homes per year by the mid-2020s. The White Paper argued investment in brownfield and infrastructure projects as well as the Affordable Homes Programme would help deliver that goal.⁸⁷

Under the heading of “restoring a sense of community, local pride and belonging”, the White Paper set out proposals aimed at “enhancing and maintaining” the Green Belt. These included furthering the “greening” of the Green Belt, improving public access to the Green Belt while delivering nature recovery, and securing further environmental improvements.⁸⁸

In its [response to the Select Committee’s inquiry](#) into the 2020 Planning for the Future White Paper in May 2022, the Government confirmed that it would not initiate a national review of the Green Belt, but remained committed to protecting and enhancing it. It pointed to the Levelling Up White Paper which made a commitment to further “greening” the Green Belt.⁸⁹

4.3

Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill (2022-23)

The [Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill 2022-23](#) had its Second Reading in the House of Commons on 8 June 2022. The Bill, and its [Explanatory Notes](#), can be found on the [Parliamentary website](#).⁹⁰ A [press release](#) and a [policy paper](#)

⁸³ DLUHC, [Policy Paper: Levelling Up the United Kingdom](#), February 2022

⁸⁴ DLUHC, [Policy Paper: Levelling Up](#), February 2022, page 227

⁸⁵ As above, page 225

⁸⁶ As above, page 223; As above, Executive Summary

⁸⁷ As above, page 223/224

⁸⁸ As above, page 211

⁸⁹ DLUHC, [Government response to the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Select Committee report on The Future of the Planning System in England](#), CP 673, May 2022, paragraph 59/60

⁹⁰ [Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill, Bill 006 of 2022-23](#) [as introduced]; DLUHC, [Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill: Explanatory Notes \(PDF\)](#)

published in May 2022 set out the Government’s aims for the Bill and changes it intends to introduce alongside the Bill.⁹¹

The Bill follows the Planning for the Future White Paper (August 2020) and the Levelling Up White Paper (February 2022). The Government has said that the planning measures set out in the Bill were informed by the responses it received to the consultation on the Planning for the Future White Paper and by the inquiry by the HCLG Select Committee.⁹²

The Bill would make a range of changes associated with the Government’s “levelling up” agenda, intended to reduce geographical, economic, social and health inequalities.⁹³ The Bill would also deliver reforms to the planning system to create a “genuinely plan-led system” and deliver “the right homes in the right places”.⁹⁴

The Bill would require each LPA to prepare a Local Plan⁹⁵; regulations would then require Local Plans to be updated “at least every five years”.⁹⁶ The Bill would limit the content of Local Plans to “locally specific matters”. National Development Management Policies (NDMPs) would deal with “general policies on issues that apply in most areas”.⁹⁷ The Government has said that NDMPs would make Local Plans “faster to produce and easier to navigate”.⁹⁸

The Bill would give Local Plans greater weight in planning decisions than they are currently given; NDMPs would be given the same weight as Local Plans. Any conflict between a Local Plan and an NDMP would have to be resolved in favour of the NDMP.⁹⁹

In the [policy paper accompanying the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill](#), the Government again reiterated its commitment to continue to safeguard the Green Belt. It said “existing Green Belt protections will remain”, and said it would “pursue options to make the Green Belt even greener”.¹⁰⁰

⁹¹ DLUHC, [New Bill to level up the nation](#), Press release, 11 May 2022; DLUHC, [Policy paper: Levelling Up and Regeneration: Further information](#), May 2022

⁹² DLUHC, [New Bill to level up the nation](#), Press release, 11 May 2022

⁹³ DLUHC, [Policy paper: Levelling Up and Regeneration: Further information](#), May 2022

⁹⁴ As above, Our programme for making better places

⁹⁵ Subsection 15C to Schedule 7 of the [Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill, Bill 006 of 2022-23](#) [as introduced]; DLUHC, [Policy paper: Levelling Up and Regeneration: Further information](#), May 2022, Our programme for making better places

⁹⁶ DLUHC, [Policy paper: Levelling Up and Regeneration: Further information](#), May 2022, Our programme for making better places

⁹⁷ DLUHC, [Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill: Explanatory Notes \(PDF\)](#), paragraph 51

⁹⁸ DLUHC, [Policy paper: Levelling Up and Regeneration: Further information](#), May 2022, Our programme for making better places

⁹⁹ Clause 83 of the [Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill, Bill 006 of 2022-23](#) [as introduced]

¹⁰⁰ DLUHC, [Policy paper: Levelling Up and Regeneration: Further information](#), May 2022, Creating beautiful places and improving environmental outcomes

Select Committee response to the Bill

The Bill did not take forward proposals to place land in three categories. It also did not include provisions on housing targets. In a [debate](#) in May 2022, Clive Betts, the Chair of the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (LUHC) Committee, asked whether the Government still had a target of building 300,000 homes per year by the end of its parliamentary term.¹⁰¹

The then Minister for Levelling Up Communities, Kemi Badenoch, responded that “we have not changed anything about our targets, but we are looking ... at other things beyond targets, not just a statistic or number”.¹⁰²

In [letter to the Secretary of State](#) in August 2022, the Chair of the LUHC Select Committee expressed concern that NDMPs would “impose a radical centralising change upon the current system”. The letter asked for further clarification about areas NMDPs would cover and what they would look like.¹⁰³ The Government has not yet responded to the letter, however, it has provided some indication of which issues NDMPs might address.

The Government has said NDMPs would be derived from policies currently set out in the NPPF.¹⁰⁴ During the [Second Reading of the Bill](#) in June 2022, the then Housing Minister, Stuart Andrew, named Green Belt protection as one of the issues that NDMPs might address.¹⁰⁵ During a [sitting of the Public Bill Committee](#) in July 2022, the then Housing Minister, Marcus Jones, also said development on the Green Belt might be covered in NDMPs:

The sort of things that we envisage them covering are standard policies—for example, avoiding inappropriate development in a green belt and areas at significant risk of flooding or coastal erosion; protecting nationally important habitats and heritage, and assets such as listed buildings; and ensuring that access for pedestrians, cyclists and people with disabilities or reduced mobility is taken into account when assessing development proposals.¹⁰⁶

Reaction to the Bill’s proposals

CPRE welcomed that “mandatory top-down housing targets” and “the zonal approach” were not taken forward in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill.¹⁰⁷ However, the organisation expressed concern that, despite several mentions of “the importance of maintaining the Green Belt”, the Bill contained “no specific proposals”. CPRE argued that this would result in

¹⁰¹ [HC Deb 12 May 2022, c313](#)

¹⁰² [HC Deb 12 May 2022, c372](#)

¹⁰³ Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (LUHC) Committee, [Levelling Up Bill lacks clarity and funding commitments needed to transform local communities](#), 24 August 2022, paragraph 15

¹⁰⁴ DLUHC, [Policy paper: Levelling Up and Regeneration: Further information](#), May 2022, Our programme for making better places

¹⁰⁵ [HC Deb 8 June 2022, c911-912](#)

¹⁰⁶ PBC Deb, Fourteenth sitting, 14 July 2022, [c454](#)

¹⁰⁷ Vicky Marr, [Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill - an update July 2022](#), CPRE, 14 July 2022

“continuing uncertainty for local communities and authorities threatened with inappropriate development”.¹⁰⁸

[W]e believe the LURB [Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill] misses a huge opportunity to consider national or regional land use strategies in the face of competing demands. These demands include uses of open land for agriculture, leisure, recreation, renewable energy generation, economic and social development, and addressing climate change and loss of biodiversity. These are critical topics with a direct correlation to the aims of levelling up and yet they are largely ignored by the Bill.¹⁰⁹

CPRE also expressed concern that the Bill would give NDMPs “primacy” over Local Plans which, it said, “could seriously undermine local democratic scrutiny of planning policy”.¹¹⁰

In an [evidence session with the LUHC Select Committee](#) in June 2022, Dr Hugh Ellis, the Director of Policy at the Town and Country Planning Association, expressed concern that the measures to digitise the planning system that the Bill would introduce would affect people’s right to be heard on Local Plans, including on the Green Belt.¹¹¹

In the same evidence session, Christopher Young KC said there were tensions between the demands placed on local authorities by the NPPF “to meet the development needs of an area” and requirements to protect certain areas, such as the Green Belt.¹¹² He argued that not releasing Green Belt land constituted a barrier to development. In London, he said, “rolling out the greenbelt, even a few hundred yards, would deliver millions of new homes”.¹¹³

In an [article published in Property Reporter](#), the property services group Leaders Romans has called for “a review of the Green Belt as part of a national spatial plan”.¹¹⁴ It criticised that the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill “failed to mention it [the Green Belt] once” because, it argued, the Green Belt formed part of the “north/south divide” and thus “levelling up”:

It is clear that the Government views Green Belt reform as separate from levelling up. This is ironic because Green Belt has, to some extent, driven the north-south divide, which itself brought about the need for levelling up agenda. The Green Belt constraints growth around cities such as Oxford, Cambridge and London, inflating house prices beyond the means of many, especially the young. Arguably, the presence of a green ‘halo’ around these and other locations

¹⁰⁸ CPRE, [Our concerns about the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill](#), 18 June 2022

¹⁰⁹ CPRE, [Our concerns about the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill](#), 18 June 2022

¹¹⁰ Vicky Marr, [Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill - an update July 2022](#), CPRE, 14 July 2022

¹¹¹ HCLG Committee, [Oral evidence: Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill](#), HC 309, 20 June 2022, Q120

¹¹² As above, Q147

¹¹³ As above, Q125

¹¹⁴ Property Reporter, [Fresh calls for a review as government announce latest Green Belt statistics](#), 20 September 2022

(notable towns in the southeast ...), in which valuable urban brownfield sites have already been utilised, results in very limited opportunities for growth, and therefore a perception of exclusivity.¹¹⁵

Leaders Romans concluded that “levelling up” would remain “a distant dream” without reforms to the Green Belt to address housing affordability. In the same article, the planning consultancy Boyer also called for Green Belt reform “to deliver homes, including affordable homes, up and down the country, and in doing so, to genuinely level up the UK”.¹¹⁶

4.4 Recent commentary on the Green Belt

In a [paper](#) published in September 2018, the since appointed Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, Simon Clarke, called for the release of Green Belt land “within a half-mile radius of stations, where no special environmental protection exists”.¹¹⁷

He argued that the release of that land would create “enough land supply for at least 1.5 million new homes ... while leaving 98 percent of all existing Green Belt land entirely untouched”.¹¹⁸ He went on to set out how the Green Belt held back growth and development:

As it stands, the green belt is an arbitrary and increasingly damaging holdover from seventy years ago. It is currently preventing a generation from owning their own homes, pushing up the cost of living, increasing the tax burden, and damaging the environment. As demand for housing steadily rises, the green belt ensures that supply will never catch up, and that much of the additional housing that is being built is not in the places where it is most needed.¹¹⁹

Simon Clarke concluded that “releasing green belt land is the single most important change we could make”.¹²⁰ An article published in City AM at the time reported that, in response to Simon Clarke’s paper, Liz Truss (then Chief Secretary to the Treasury) said “it’s good we are talking about this issue”:

By making sure that there is enough housing, which the government is committed to, we can help improve productivity and the economy as a whole.¹²¹

¹¹⁵ Property Reporter, [Fresh calls for a review as government announce latest Green Belt statistics](#), 20 September 2022

¹¹⁶ As above

¹¹⁷ Simon Clarke, [Housing Addressed: Freeing up land, while protecting the environment](#), Freer, September 2018, page 34

¹¹⁸ As above, page 34

¹¹⁹ As above, page 40

¹²⁰ As above, page 40

¹²¹ Sebastian McCarthy, [Look to the green belt: Paper calls for radical changes to land near train stations in bid to solve housing crisis](#), City AM, 10 September 2018

In its [Growth Plan](#), published in September 2022, the Government proposed the creation of “Investment Zones”¹²² where, it said, “the planning system will not stand in the way of investment and development”.¹²³ It said planning rules would be “liberalised” in Investment Zones “to support employment, investment and home ownership”.¹²⁴ How has not yet been set out in detail.

A [guidance page](#) on Investment Zones published by DLUHC, however, states that they would offer “faster and more streamlined consent to grant planning permission”.¹²⁵ The Secretary of State, Simon Clarke, has said these zones would “help deliver many of the homes we need”.¹²⁶ The [guidance page](#) noted that national Green Belt policy would continue to apply in Investment Zones.¹²⁷

In October 2022, the Government published an [expression of interest form and guidance document](#) for LPAs interested in hosting an Investment Zone.¹²⁸ In the guidance document, the Government said it “will look to introduce primary legislation in order to enable the offer on tax and simplified regulations”.¹²⁹

Some commentators have suggested that the Government could revive some of the proposals for planning zones which were not taken forward in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill in Investment Zones.¹³⁰ Reacting to the proposals for Investment Zones, the Chief Executive of Wildlife and Countryside Link expressed concern that Investment Zones would result in “environmental protections being removed and downgraded”.¹³¹

In response to concerns that Investment Zones could affect designated land, including the Green Belt, a Government spokesperson told [The Guardian](#) that the Government had been “clear investment zones will keep national green belt protections”.¹³²

On 6 October 2022, the Planning Resource Magazine reported that the Government would “abolish top-down housing targets” and that it was “in the process of working through the policy changes”. The article stated that a

¹²² HM Treasury, [Policy paper: Growth Plan 2022](#), September 2022, page 17

¹²³ DLUHC and HM Treasury, [Guidance: Investment Zones in England](#), 24 September 2022

¹²⁴ As above, page 5

¹²⁵ DLUHC and HM Treasury, [Guidance: Investment Zones in England](#), 24 September 2022

¹²⁶ Toby Porter, [Government housebuilding will focus on brownfield sites and “building beautifully”, stresses Levelling-Up Secretary](#), Planning Resource [subscription required], 4 October 2022

¹²⁷ DLUHC, [Guidance: Investment Zones: Expression of interest guidance](#), 2 October 2022, paragraph 3.4

¹²⁸ DLUHC, [Guidance: Investment Zones: Expression of interest guidance](#), 2 October 2022

¹²⁹ DLUHC and HM Treasury, [Guidance: Investment Zones in England](#), 24 September 2022

¹³⁰ Ben Kochen, [What planners can expect from the Government’s new investment zones](#), Planning Resource [subscription required], 29 September 2022

¹³¹ Sandra Laville and Helena Horton, [Investment zones could be allowed in England’s national parks](#), The Guardian, 3 October 2022

¹³² As above

Government spokesperson confirmed these comments were accurate and referred to the Government's housing target of 300,000 homes annually.¹³³

¹³³ Toby Porter, [PM committed to scrapping 300,000 homes a year national target, housing minister claims](#), Planning Resource [subscription required], 6 October 2022

5 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 (now DLUHC) [consulted on a proposal](#) to amend Green Belt policy to allow starter homes to be built in the Green Belt on sites identified in a neighbourhood plan and 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, provided this contributed to the delivery of starter homes, and subject to local consultation.¹³⁴

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.¹³⁵ The [Housing White Paper](#), published in February 2017, contained some proposals relating to planning.¹³⁶ 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.¹³⁷

The White Paper also emphasised that authorities should amend Green Belt boundaries only when they could demonstrate that they had examined fully

¹³⁴ DCLG, [Consultation on proposed changes to national planning policy](#), December 2015

¹³⁵ [HC Deb 14 September 2017 c1023](#)

¹³⁶ DCLG, [Fixing our broken housing market](#), Cm 9352, February 2017

¹³⁷ CBP 7896, 8 February 2017

all other reasonable options for meeting their identified development requirements. On planning for the right homes in the right places, the White Paper said that the existing strong protections for the Green Belt would remain.¹³⁸

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.¹³⁹ Thus, national policy would (the White Paper said) be amended, to specify when 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.¹⁴⁰

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](#).¹⁴¹ Similarly, in a statement in September 2017 on local housing need, [Sajid Javid reiterated the Government's stance](#) on the Green Belt.¹⁴²

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 with the [NPPF 2012](#). The NPPF set out the Government's planning policies for England and how it expected them to be applied.

Planning Practice Guidance 2014

In March 2014, the Government at the time published new Planning Practice Guidance (PPG) to accompany the NPPF and provide greater detail on the policies in it. The PPG stated that unmet housing need in an area was unlikely to meet the "very special circumstances" test to justify development on the Green Belt.¹⁴³

The PPG was updated in October 2014. It reaffirmed the LPAs' ability to "safeguard their local area against urban sprawl and protect the green lungs around towns and cities". It also reaffirmed that housing need (including for Traveller sites) did not justify the harm done to the Green Belt by inappropriate development.¹⁴⁴

¹³⁸ DCLG, [Fixing our broken housing market](#), Cm 9352, February 2017, pages 18-22

¹³⁹ As above, page 28

¹⁴⁰ DCLG, [Fixing our broken housing market](#), Cm 9352, February 2017, page 28

¹⁴¹ [PQ 107174, 16 October 2017](#)

¹⁴² [HC Deb 14 September 2017 c1023](#)

¹⁴³ DCLG, Planning Practice Guidance, Housing and economic land availability assessment, Methodology – Stage 5: Final evidence base, 6 March 2014 (no longer available online)

¹⁴⁴ DCLG press release, [Councils must protect our precious green belt land](#), 4 October 2014

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.¹⁴⁵

There was some disagreement, however, in the planning press about this letter's compatibility with the NPPF.¹⁴⁶ Some commentators suggested that it would allow some LPAs to resist meeting requirements 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 the courts to determine.

NPPF 2019

In March 2018, the then Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) launched a [consultation on updating the 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". Among other things, the proposals sought to encourage greater use of brownfield land in the Green Belt.¹⁴⁷ The [Government response to the consultation](#) was published alongside the updated NPPF in July 2018.¹⁴⁸

The [consultation proposals document](#) set out how the Government's earlier proposals for the Green Belt would be broadened and taken forward, referring to the "high bar" to the release of Green Belt land.¹⁴⁹

The [Government response to the consultation](#) highlighted that there had been mixed responses to making greater use of brownfield land in the Green Belt. The Government said it would amend the NPPF to incorporate the suggested changes, but it would not review national Green Belt policy or ban all development on the Green Belt.

The NPPF 2019 thus reiterated Government policy and encouraged the use of brownfield land in almost the same terms as the draft revised NPPF. On protecting the Green Belt, it urged LPAs to maximise the use of suitable brownfield sites before considering changes to Green Belt boundaries.¹⁵⁰ The NPPF demanded that there should be "exceptional circumstances" before Green Belt boundaries can be changed¹⁵¹ and said that inappropriate

¹⁴⁵ Letter from Brandon Lewis to the Chief Executive at the Planning Inspectorate about [Strategic Housing Market Assessments](#), 19 December 2014

¹⁴⁶ John Geoghegan, [Lewis letter 'may slow plans'](#), Planning Resource [subscription required], 9 January 2015

¹⁴⁷ MHCLG, [National Planning Policy Framework: Draft text for consultation](#), March 2018

¹⁴⁸ MHCLG, [Government response to the draft revised National Planning Policy Framework consultation](#), July 2018

¹⁴⁹ MHCLG, [National Planning Policy Framework: Consultation proposals](#), March 2018, page 20

¹⁵⁰ MHCLG, [National Planning Policy Framework](#), CP 48, February 2019, pages 40-1

¹⁵¹ MHCLG, [National Planning Policy Framework](#), CP 48, February 2019, paragraph 137

development is harmful to the Green Belt and should be approved only in “very special circumstances”.¹⁵²

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](#).¹⁵³

¹⁵² MHCLG, [National Planning Policy Framework](#), CP 48, February 2019, paragraph 143

¹⁵³ Commons Library briefing, [What’s next for planning in England? The National Planning Policy Framework](#) CBP 08260, June 2019

6 Selected further reading

- [Green Belt grows for the first time in nearly a decade](#), Housing Today, 16 September 2022
- [London: Is it time to build on the green belt to meet housing demand?](#), BBC News, 31 August 2021
- [Government urged to identify the types of Green Belt land that could be built on](#), Property Reporter, 29 April 2021
- CPRE, [Countryside next door: State of the Green Belt 2021](#), February 2021
- [When is building on the green belt the most sustainable option?](#), PBC [planning, building information modelling 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
- Centre for Cities, [More people are calling for Green Belt reform – and the Government is listening](#), March 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
- [CPRE warning as 460,000 homes to be built on green belt land](#), Planning Resource 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](#)
- [Housebuilding 'corridors' proposed on London greenbelt - Test new approach for development around cities to address shortages, academics urge](#), Financial Times (subscription), 1 August 2016¹⁵⁴

¹⁵⁴ Members and their staff may obtain copies of articles from publications requiring a subscription from the Commons Library on x3666.

- [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](#), The Guardian, 25 April 2016
- Local Government Association and Planning Advisory Service, [Planning on the doorstep: the big issues – Green Belt](#), February 2015

The House of Commons Library is a research and information service based in the UK Parliament. Our impartial analysis, statistical research and resources help MPs and their staff scrutinise legislation, develop policy, and support constituents.

Our published material is available to everyone on commonslibrary.parliament.uk.

Get our latest research delivered straight to your inbox. Subscribe at commonslibrary.parliament.uk/subscribe or scan the code below:



 commonslibrary.parliament.uk

 [@commonslibrary](https://twitter.com/commonslibrary)