

# Improving Green Belt for nature, climate and people

9 December 2024

This briefing is on behalf of environmental coalition Wildlife and Countryside Link.

## Executive summary

The current debate about the Green Belt focuses more on what it blocks, and is missing an opportunity to look towards what it could deliver, if given the chance. As an existing spatial designation, Green Belt has potential to support nature's recovery, climate mitigation and adaptation, local food systems, and people's health and wellbeing. In this briefing, we set out the opportunities to enhance Green Belt for nature, climate, and people – and what policies need to be in place to create this change.

## Green Belt basics

Green Belt is a spatial designation with five purposes, sitting under a fundamental aim of preventing urban sprawl through permanently maintaining belts of open land. The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) is clear that development on Green Belt land should only happen in 'very special circumstances' and that land should only be taken out of the Green Belt altogether in 'exceptional circumstances.' By steering development away from Green Belt areas, Green Belt can indirectly contribute towards housing being located near places where we work and the amenities we need.

Currently, the purposes of Green Belt, as set out in the NPPF, are:

- (a) to check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas;
- (b) to prevent neighbouring towns merging into one another;
- (c) to assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment;
- (d) to preserve the setting and special character of historic towns; and
- (e) to assist in urban regeneration, by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land.

Land currently designated as Green Belt around towns and cities currently covers a significant portion of England's land (12.6%), clustered around 15 urban cores.<sup>1</sup> In addition to preventing urban sprawl, it has the potential to promote other functions and benefits. Green Belt land has a higher-than-average percentage of deciduous woodland and significant areas of floodplains. The potential for nature-based solutions in the land around towns and cities also could offer climate mitigation and adaptation benefits.

Land in the Green Belt also has the potential to support peri-urban, nature-friendly farming, and more access to green and blue spaces for people, to the benefit of nature, climate and people.

However, the current debate about the Green Belt focuses more on its strict purposes, and less on what it could deliver for the environment and people. The debate fails to capture how, as a spatial designation, the Green Belt could make better use of its open space to play more of a role in securing nature's recovery, climate mitigation and adaptation, robust local food systems, and people's health and wellbeing.

In this briefing, we set out the opportunities to enhance Green Belt for nature, climate, and people – and what policies need to be in place to create this change.

## The context

Green Belt land can be hugely contested, due to current demands, in some cases for different purposes.

As per its original purposes, Green Belt has been protecting the countryside near to many of our towns and cities and reducing urban sprawl. However, due to its proximity (by definition) to large cities and its largely undeveloped nature, it has often been looked to for new housing developments. Despite the policy protection for Green Belt, the rates of development on undeveloped greenfield Green Belt land are between 6,000 and 10,000 dwellings per year. In addition, at least 37,000 homes (or just under 3,000 per year) have been developed on brownfield or previously developed sites within the Green Belt since 2009. However, only 12.5% of houses were delivered at affordable or social rents, consistently less affordable housing overall than what was recommended by local planning policy.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> [Green Belt](#), House of Commons Library, 2023

<sup>2</sup> [State of the Green Belt](#), CPRE, 2023

The Government has a strong mandate for housebuilding. The most recent review of National Planning Policy Framework includes a review of Green Belt policy with a view to releasing some Green Belt land for housing development.

The current discussion about the future of the Green Belt is focused on its role in meeting housing targets. While there is variability in how different land designated as Green Belt currently contributes to biodiversity, there is a potential role for Green Belt to support wider government targets such as the Environment Act 2021 which includes targets to improve air quality, biodiversity, water quality, and access to and engagement with nature. It should also play more of a role in supporting targets in the Climate Change Act 2008 which commits the UK government by law to reach net zero by 2050. Green Belt could also play a key role in achieving other national targets, especially supporting the health and wellbeing of millions of people and supporting more local and nature-friendly food and farming.

While some local planning authorities recognise the multifunctional benefits that Green Belt provides, they represent only a small proportion of English authorities overall.<sup>3</sup> Without a clear and consistent environmental purpose, or a robust national policy to promote the environmental benefits of Green Belt, the full potential of Green Belt will not be fully realised.

## A new framework for Green Belt

The review of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) is an opportunity to realise the potential that Green Belt land has for nature, climate and people, in addition to its current purposes for open space and preventing urban sprawl.

Green Belt needs a clear and specific environmental purpose and planning policy that promotes that purpose. **The NPPF review should give Green Belt an explicit role in nature's recovery, climate mitigation and adaptation, and people's access to green and blue spaces.** The Government should consider amending the purposes of Green Belt and amending planning policy to promote the enhancement of Green Belt land for nature, climate and people, in a way which avoids the risk of speculative development that undermines the existing purposes of Green Belt. This could include requiring the primary land use and purpose associated with any given development proposal aligns with more than one of the updated Green Belt purposes (e.g., nature's recovery and access to nature).

---

<sup>3</sup> [Multifunctional Green Belts](#), Kirby and Scott, 2023

**The review of the Green Belt purposes should be complemented by a national strategic review of Green Belt to ensure it is delivering the most effective land use, with a specific view to the additional opportunities in Green Belt for nature, climate and people.** This could be through the Land Use Framework, for example. A House of Lords ‘Land use in England’ inquiry recommended that a land use framework has particular potential to encourage better use of the Green Belt delivering “wider benefits including enhanced support for nature, biodiversity, environmental objectives and access to the countryside, particularly for people in neighbouring urban areas who may have limited access to open space.”<sup>4</sup> The same report also recommended local authority ‘Green Belt enablers’ should be tasked with promoting positive Green Belt uses and multifunctional enhancement of the Green Belt within their areas, including join up with local green infrastructure networks.

The national strategic review of Green Belt should inform any strategic releases of Green Belt land, as well as the setting aside of further Green Belt land for the restoration and improvement of habitats and green and blue corridors.

**This modernisation of Green Belt purposes through updates to the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) should be supported by wider policies, guidance, and actions that help realise the potential of Green Belt land to deliver for nature, climate and people.** These further opportunities and specific recommendations to realise these are set out below.

## The opportunities

### Green Belt for nature recovery

Land designated as Green Belt includes a higher-than-average percentage of deciduous woodland (at 19%) and significant areas of floodplains (around 130,000 hectares). The Green Belt is also home to 34% of England’s Community Forests<sup>5</sup> and 39% of Local Nature Reserves, accounting for 60% of the land created in Local Nature Reserves since 2010.

The Green Belt offers vast potential for the enhancement and restoration of habitats, from woodlands, species-rich grasslands, and in some areas, lowland heathland.<sup>6</sup> In 2015, the Natural Capital Committee recommended creating 350,000 ha of new woodland and wetland

---

<sup>4</sup> [Making the most out of England’s land](#), House of Lords Land Use in England Committee, 2022

<sup>5</sup> [Opportunities in the Green Belt](#), ADAS research for CPRE, 2016

<sup>6</sup> [Opportunities in the Green Belt](#), ADAS research for CPRE, 2019

close to urban areas.<sup>7</sup> Green Belt also can help form part of the wider ecological network by providing connections between core patches and buffering and reducing pressures on the network.<sup>8</sup>

The current Environmental Improvement Plan recognises this opportunity, with a commitment to ‘Green the Green Belt as set out in the Levelling Up White Paper by identifying key areas for nature restoration through the roll out of Local Nature Recovery Strategies.’<sup>9</sup>

A national strategic review of Green Belt should identify the most effective land use across Green Belt land around the 15 urban cores. Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRSs), which map important sites for nature and nature recovery areas across a local area, including areas within the Green Belt, should identify key priorities for nature restoration.

Policies and funding should be targeted to help deliver strategic nature restoration priorities identified in LNRSs, including where these areas are in the Green Belt, to deliver the most benefit for nature and people. Environmental Land Management (ELM) schemes and Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) delivery should be targeted towards those areas and actions identified in LNRSs.

### **Recommendations:**

- Review and consider updating the purposes and policy of Green Belt to include an explicit role in nature’s recovery and delivery of Environment Act 2021 targets, while ensuring that the new purposes are drafted in a way to avoid the risk of speculative development that could undermine the existing purposes of Green Belt.
- Undertake a national strategic review of the Green Belt, potentially as part of the Land Use Framework, to ensure the most effective use of land is being delivered.
- Implement the new duty for local planning authorities to take account of LNRSs in their local development plans, including any release of Green Belt land, and strengthen this duty in the forthcoming Planning and Infrastructure Bill.
- Ensure that any strategic releases of Green Belt land are matched with identifying more Green Belt land for the purpose of habitat enhancement and restoration. Once areas within the Green Belt have been identified, enhanced and/or created for nature, they should be protected from future development. This could be achieved through a

---

<sup>7</sup> [The State of Natural Capital: Protecting and Improving Natural Capital for Prosperity and Wellbeing](#), Natural Capital Committee, 2015

<sup>8</sup> [Making Space for Nature](#), Lawton report, 2010

<sup>9</sup> [Environmental Improvement Plan](#), 2023

new Wildbelt designation – a robust and permanent spatial designation that will protect land in the process of being managed to bring nature back.

- Capture the land value uplift from appropriate development on released Green Belt land and prioritise channelling towards restoring nature in the Green Belt, including by requiring higher mandatory biodiversity net gain for development on land released from the Green Belt.

### Green Belt and 30x30

30x30 is a commitment to protect at least 30% of land and sea in England by 2030. To meet the 30x30 standard, areas must demonstrate 1) a purpose for biodiversity, 2) long-term protection from harm, and 3) good management, with evidence of positive biodiversity outcomes equivalent to those of protected sites. Areas in England can qualify either by being a protected site (such as a Site of Special Scientific Interest) or by being recognised and reported as an Other Effective Area-based Conservation Measure (OECM).

As a spatial designation, the Green Belt is one tool, alongside Local Nature Recovery Strategies, to help identify areas with potential for nature recovery, outside of the protected sites network, and to target action towards these areas.

With support and investment to achieve protection, management and delivery for biodiversity in these areas identified as potential OECMs, they can be supported to meet the 30x30 criteria, be officially recognised and reported as OECMs, and contribute to the 30% target.

### Green Belt for the agricultural transition

Agricultural land and associated buildings occupy 65% of Green Belt land.<sup>10</sup> Green Belt farmland, often in the peri-urban area, has the potential to support food production and ecosystem services.<sup>11</sup> All agricultural land, including within the Green Belt, should be adopting regenerative practices, with benefits to soil and the wider environment.

However, just 19% of all Green Belt land was in an agri-environment scheme as of 2020,

<sup>10</sup> [Green Belt](#), House of Commons Library, 2023

<sup>11</sup> [Ecosystem services and land sparing of urban and peri-urban agriculture: A review](#), Wilhem and Smith, 2017

compared with 28% of England.<sup>12</sup> This historic deficit of agri-environment scheme coverage in the Green Belt should be tackled through providing tailored support and advice for small-scale farmers and growers, including those in the peri-urban area.

As well as enhancing the environment, farmers in the Green Belt could also be supported to promote SME sustainable horticulture and to foster greater connection for local people to food growing and increasing easy access to all communities for public health and wellbeing.

### **Recommendations:**

- Provide tailored support and advice for small-scale farmers and growers to help address the historic deficit in agri-environment scheme coverage in Green Belt and similar peri-urban areas.

### **Green Belt for climate**

The retention, enhancement and creation of habitats, including those in the Green Belt, from woodlands to species-rich permanent grasslands to hedgerows to small ponds, will help sequester carbon and contribute to climate mitigation, as well as benefit biodiversity and provide access to nature. Globally, restoring nature has the potential to provide a third of the cost-effective climate mitigation needed to meet 2030 climate goals.<sup>13</sup>

The Green Belt can also provide significant climate adaptation benefits. Research by the University of Surrey found that belts around cities can reduce urban temperatures by over 0.5°C.<sup>14</sup> Using 20 years of data, researchers showed how nearby rural areas could reduce city temperatures. The biggest cooling effects happen where the rural ring around a city extends for at least half the city's diameter. Urban overheating was mitigated more by joining up patches of rural land, planting more woodland scattered around a city and by having fewer, bigger lakes.

We are increasingly likely to see more unpredictable rainfall as a result of climate change. Green Belt land can help intercept, retain and absorb heavy rainfall and help protect against

---

<sup>12</sup> [The countryside next door: why we need to invest in greener, healthier Green Belts](#), CPRE, 2022

<sup>13</sup> <https://nature4climate.org/natures-solutions/>

<sup>14</sup> [Rural belts around cities can reduce urban temperatures by over 0.5°C](#), University of Surrey, 2024

flooding where new woodland and wetland is created, which in turn will protect urban populations by increasing climate change resilience.<sup>15</sup>

### **Recommendations:**

- Review and consider updating the purposes and policy of the Green Belt to include explicit reference to contributing to climate mitigation and adaptation, including building resilience to climate change in surrounding urban areas, while ensuring that the new purposes are drafted in a way to avoid the risk of speculative development that could undermine the existing purposes of Green Belt.
- Empower landowners and communities to boost the Green Belt's climate mitigation and adaptation powers through incentivising the delivery of nature-based solutions in these areas, such as tree planting, wetlands creation, and natural flood management schemes.

### **Accessible Green Belt for people's health and wellbeing**

The Green Belt is the countryside next door for almost 30 million people, or over half of England's population, living in our large towns and cities, providing important access to nature and green space. The most recent People and Nature Survey by Natural England noted that 39% of people felt that visiting local green and natural spaces was even more important than ever to their wellbeing.<sup>16</sup> The evidence is also clear that access to nature benefits people's physical health, with life expectancies higher in areas with greenspace.<sup>17</sup>

The Green Belt offers significant opportunities for people to access green space. For example, in 2016, 17% of England's Public Rights of Way (PRoW) were located within Green Belt. On average in the Green Belt, PRoW density is 20 metres per hectare (m/ha) compared to the average for England as a whole, which is 8 m/ha.<sup>18</sup> Green Belt land also contains 47% of country parks in England, which remain key places for people to visit and connect with nature. The Green Belt and urban wedges linking urban communities to their rural hinterland should be a focus for additional country and regional parks.

---

<sup>15</sup> [UK and Global extreme events – Heavy rainfall and floods](#), Met Office, accessed September 2024

<sup>16</sup> [Adults' Year 3 Annual Report \(April 2022 - March 2023\)](#), Government official statistics, 2024

<sup>17</sup> [Improving access to greenspace](#), Public Health England, 2024

<sup>18</sup> [Opportunities in the Green Belt](#), ADAS research for CPRE, 2016



Access to the countryside around towns, and from new developments arising from any Green Belt releases should be protected and improved through greater use of quiet lanes schemes on rural roads, and of ‘green bridges’ over any motorways that can be barriers for people and wildlife to access the wider countryside.

**Recommendations:**

- Increase access to the countryside for people, by creating new green multi-use pathways to open up countryside around towns and encourage access and engagement for marginalised groups. Programmes which support individuals through educational or health visits to the Green Belt and nearby green spaces should also be supported, such as green social prescribing.
- Incentives should be increased for farmers and landowners who expand rights of way around urban areas.<sup>19</sup>

---

Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) is the largest nature coalition in England, bringing together 86 organisations to campaign for nature, climate, animal welfare and a healthy environment for everyone. Wildlife and Countryside Link is a registered charity number 1107460 and a company limited by guarantee registered in England and Wales number 3889519.

**For questions or further information please contact:**

Emma Clarke, Policy and Advocacy Lead, Wildlife and Countryside Link

E: [emma.clarke@wcl.org.uk](mailto:emma.clarke@wcl.org.uk)

Wildlife & Countryside Link, Vox Studios, 1 – 45 Durham Street, Vauxhall, London, SE11 5JH

[www.wcl.org.uk](http://www.wcl.org.uk)

**The following organisations support this briefing:**

Amphibian and Reptile Conservation

Bat Conservation Trust

Butterfly Conservation

Campaign for National Parks

Chartered Institute for Ecology and Environmental Management (CIEEM)

---

<sup>19</sup> [Public Access in ELM](#), Wildlife and Countryside Link, 2024

CPRE – The countryside charity  
Earthwatch  
Friends of the Earth  
Froglife  
People’s Trust for Endangered Species (PTES)  
National Trust  
Open Spaces Society  
Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB)  
The Wildlife Trusts  
Woodland Trust