

The Future of Cambridge's Green Belt

(Overhead 1). No review of the spatial strategy for a new Local Plan for the Cambridge area can avoid consideration of the Green Belt. Does the Green Belt still have a positive role to play in restricting urban sprawl, or is it now an anachronism past its sell-by date that merely impedes essential growth?

The Cambridge Green Belt is one of the smallest of the 14 Green Belts established under the 1947 Town & Country Planning Act (Overhead 2). It comprises a rough diamond shape with Cambridge at its centre forming a belt some six to ten miles wide, extending from the villages of Oakington, Cottenham and Waterbeach in the North, to Pampisford, Whittlesford and Fowlmere along the A505 in the South. To the East it stretches halfway to Newmarket at Six Mile Bottom, and to the west to the villages of Foxton, Toft, and Bar Hill.

Its inner side is not, as many believe, the City boundary as fingers of Green Belt extend right into the heart of the City along the green corridors – along the river Cam corridor right into the College Backs, from Clay Farm up Hobson's Conduit, and from the North-East down the Cam through Stourbridge Common on to Jesus Green. All the main Green Open Spaces within the City are Green Belt.

(Overhead 3). It is important to recognise that the Green Belt is **not a statutory protected area** like a Nature Reserve, National Park or SSSI. It is no more than a **planning zone** designated by the local authority under the enabling 1947 legislation.

There is a measure of “**intended permanence**” in the designation, but the boundaries of a Green Belt are not immutable. Indeed, the local authority has a responsibility to review the appropriateness of its boundaries as part of the process of preparing its Local Plan – a process in which both the City and South Cambs authorities are currently engaged.

(Overhead 4). As set out in Planning Policy Guidance Number 2, the five stated purposes of the Green Belt are:

1. To check the **unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas**
2. To prevent **neighbouring towns from merging into one another**
3. To assist in **safeguarding the countryside from encroachment**
4. To preserve the **setting and special character of historic towns**
5. To assist in **urban regeneration**, by encouraging the **recycling of derelict and other urban land**.

(Overhead 5). So **how effective** has the Cambridge Green Belt been in delivering this role? On **the positive** side, it has:

1. effectively **restricted ribbon development and urban sprawl**, keeping Cambridge compact with a sharper boundary between town and countryside
2. protected the **identity of the necklace villages** - the fact that villages like Coton, Grantchester, Girton and Fulbourn have not been assimilated into Cambridge through road-based ribbon development as have Trumpington, Cherry Hinton, and Shelford.
3. protected **the countryside** in and around Cambridge, particularly the green landscapes to the South and East of the city – places like Grantchester Meadows, Madingley Hill, Wandlebury, and the Gog Magogs as well as green open spaces within the City such as Stourbridge Common and Coe Fen.

4. helped protect **the setting of the city**, especially from the South and West
5. encouraged the **infilling within the city and the priority development of brownfield sites** – although this can create competition for land between the needs for housing, community, and commercial use

(Overhead 6). On **the negative** side, it has:

1. **restricted the opportunities for growth and expansion** both of housing and for commercial use adjacent to the city
2. encouraged the **siting of development in the villages and towns beyond the Green Belt boundary**
3. contributed to a significant **increase in car dependency and commuting**, and thus the current congestion problems

In fact a fourth negative point could be added in that the range of **social and environmental benefits** that the Green Belt was envisaged as promoting have in general not materialised. These include improved access to the countryside, opportunities for outdoor sport and recreation, enhancement of the landscape, nature conservation, and so on.

The Green Belt has been seen by Local Authorities more as **a means of containing expansion** than as a mechanism for social and environmental enhancements. The land has remained in private ownership and there has always been, and indeed still is, a lack of funding for improvement schemes.

More recently some more **enlightened land-owners and conservation charities** have started to demonstrate how the benefits of public access, recreation, and natural conservation can be delivered – schemes like the Wandlebury Country Park and the new Country Park that forms part of the Trumpington Meadows development. The Coton Countryside Reserve, to the West of Cambridge and managed by Cambridge Past, Present & Future, was recognised in a recent report by Natural England as a model for enlightened land management in the Green Belt, combining commercial agriculture with public access and nature conservation.

However the success of these schemes is independent of their Green Belt status in that they depend upon other mechanisms for their implementation - like the **Higher Level Environmental Stewardship** run by Natural England, and the local **Green Infrastructure Strategy**. Indeed, the GIS is likely to be the main driving force in the future for delivering the anticipated social and environmental benefits, provided of course that others see these objectives as a priority for scarce resources.

(Overhead 7). Concerning its role in planning, we are still awaiting the final version of the **National Planning Policy Framework**, which is promised for the end of March. However, it is clear from the much criticised draft that **the level of protection afforded by the Green Belt is likely to be reduced**. Condensing the 28 pages of **Planning Policy Guidance Number 2** into the 14 paragraphs of the NPPF has inevitably sacrificed much of the detail, which has been replaced by broad generalities open to conflicting interpretation.

The key element of PPG2 is the specific statement of a **presumption against development** in the Green Belt, and this is lost in the NPPF. Instead the NPPF contains the ambiguous statement that **“inappropriate development that is harmful to the Green Belt should not be approved”**, but there is no clarity about what constitutes **“inappropriate development”**, other than development that is not sustainable. Such imprecise and generalised guidance will inevitably make things

difficult for local authorities in developing the policies to support their new Local Plans.

Cambridge today is of course vastly different to the Cambridge that the post-war planners confronted. **The Holford & Wright Report** published in 1950 stressed the need to **contain the growth of Cambridge** against the threat of ribbon development, urban sprawl, and the assimilation of the necklace villages. It sought to maintain Cambridge as “a University Town” by discouraging industry and restricting the growth in the population to not more than 100,000. The experience of Oxford with the dominating impact on the city of the Cowley car works was a future that the Cambridge planners wished to avoid.

However what could never have been foreseen at that time was dramatic rise of **the Cambridge Phenomenon** and the growth of the high-tech sector. This completely changed the ball-park.

Today, driven by the needs of the high-tech sector, Cambridge is one of the **fastest growing cities in the country**. This in turn has thrown up serious problems of land availability – the lack of land that is not in the Green Belt for essential housing, the lack of land for businesses to expand, the crippling traffic congestion, and the overloaded infrastructure.

So faced with these realities, the question has to be asked, **is the Cambridge Green Belt still relevant to today's needs?** Has the problem of urban sprawl gone away or is it still a real threat? Is our planning system now sufficiently robust that it can control such unattractive development?

Let us consider **three very real planning dilemmas**:

1. ARM Holdings is one of **the most successful high-tech companies** spawned by the Cambridge Phenomenon, a real success story, but it must expand its premises if it is to meet the demand of a global market. Such expansion will mean breaching the Green Belt at its premises off the Fulboourn Road. If planning permission is not forthcoming, there is a very real likelihood that the company will relocate elsewhere – and what sort of impact would that have on inward investment? Is this sufficient justification to breach the Green Belt?
2. the proposed **football stadium and sports complex** at Trumpington lies in the Green Belt. There is no doubt that Cambridge needs such a facility which would provide a valuable community service, but again is this sufficient justification to breach the Green Belt?
3. a foresighted farmer who grows vegetables in the Green Belt is creating a large reservoir to secure sufficient water for the irrigation of his crops without the need for abstraction that depletes the local river. It makes eminent sense to create around this lake **a watersports and holiday complex** that will generate significant local employment, but again is this leisure use sufficient justification to breach the Green Belt?

How are we to **judge** these proposals? Are they **appropriate developments** for the Green Belt? The NPPF is too generalised to be of much practical use so it will be up to the Local Authorities to provide the necessary clarity to make a rational judgement.

What is clear is that the days of regarding the Green Belt as **sacrosanct** are over. An **absolutist approach** is impractical but equally planners, developers, and businesses need **clarity about what is and is not “appropriate”**. They need a level playing field for consistency in the way Green Belt applications are assessed.

The recent urban expansion around the fringes of the city, and indeed the plethora of new sites proposed within the Green Belt under the South Cambs Strategic Land Availability Assessment consultation, suggest that the **problem of urban sprawl is still highly relevant**. There is still great pressure to expand yet further the boundaries of the urban area. Clearly the Green Belt still has an important job to do but we need clarity about what constitutes appropriate development within its boundaries.

As part of their Local Plan preparation, it would seem sensible that the three local authorities, South Cambs District Council, Cambridge City Council, and Cambridgeshire County Council, **should collaborate in developing a clear policy statement with guidelines for what constitutes “appropriate development” for siting in the Cambridge Green Belt**.

CambridgePPF has a long history of engagement with the Green Belt around the city, and it would be keen to participate in the preparation of the statement.

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