



# Green Belts: a greener future

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Campaign to Protect  
Rural England



**Front cover:** Towards Birmingham from Frankley Beeches © Peter Langley, CPRE West Midlands

© Henrietta Williams



Brockley Hill, near Stanmore

# Green Belts: a greener future

England's fourteen Green Belts cover nearly 13% of England, significant not only because of their extent, but because they provide a breath of fresh air for 60% of the population – 30 million people – living in the urban areas within Green Belt boundaries.

The purposes of Green Belts in planning policy are clear – to protect the countryside from urban sprawl and to retain the character of towns and cities. To this end they have been effective.

The concept has its roots in Ebenezer Howard's 1898 vision of Garden Cities providing people with space to enjoy the beauty and tranquillity of the countryside nearby. Ideas evolved in the 1920s with campaigns seeking a clear physical distinction between town and country. New surveys for this report show that 95% of people value the beauty of the Green Belt and 58% have visited for leisure in the past 12 months.

In the face of ever increasing pressures on land use, it is vital to safeguard the benefits of the Green Belts that we have. Since 1995 Green Belt policy has also sought to encourage the provision of valuable services for society such

as recreation and attractive landscapes, improving damaged and derelict land, securing nature conservation and retaining farming and forestry.

In the full report *Green Belts: a greener future*<sup>1</sup> we examine to what extent the Green Belts are both fulfilling their purposes and positive land use objectives.

In this summary of the full report we draw together the main findings and ask how Green Belts might better connect urban centres to the wider countryside and to food production; how they can help us to tackle the huge challenges posed by a changing climate; and how they can be valued as part of a nationwide ecological network providing breathing places for people and for nature long into the future.

<sup>1</sup> The full report can be downloaded at: [www.naturalengland.etraderstores.com/NaturalEnglandShop/NE196](http://www.naturalengland.etraderstores.com/NaturalEnglandShop/NE196) and also from the CPRE website at: [www.cpre.org.uk](http://www.cpre.org.uk)

# The purposes and objectives of Green Belts

The Green Belt has five purposes:

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

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

- to provide opportunities for access to the open countryside for the urban population;
- to provide opportunities for outdoor sport and outdoor recreation near urban areas;
- to retain attractive landscapes, and enhance landscapes, near to where people live;
- to improve damaged and derelict land around towns;

- to secure nature conservation interest; and
- to retain land in agricultural, forestry and related uses.

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

Source: PPG2, paragraphs 1.5 - 1.7.

# Green Belt policy

## How successful is Green Belt policy?

Green Belt designations are fulfilling their purposes in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment, preserving the character of historic towns and assisting with urban regeneration:

- the rate of development is a third lower in the Green Belt than in urban fringe comparator areas<sup>2</sup>;
- Green Belts have assisted in directing the vast majority of new residential development in England to brownfield sites within large urban areas;
- Green Belts have played a role in the designation and ongoing management of World Heritage Sites of Bath in Somerset and Saltaire in West Yorkshire, through maintaining the landscape setting of both locations.

### Key facts:

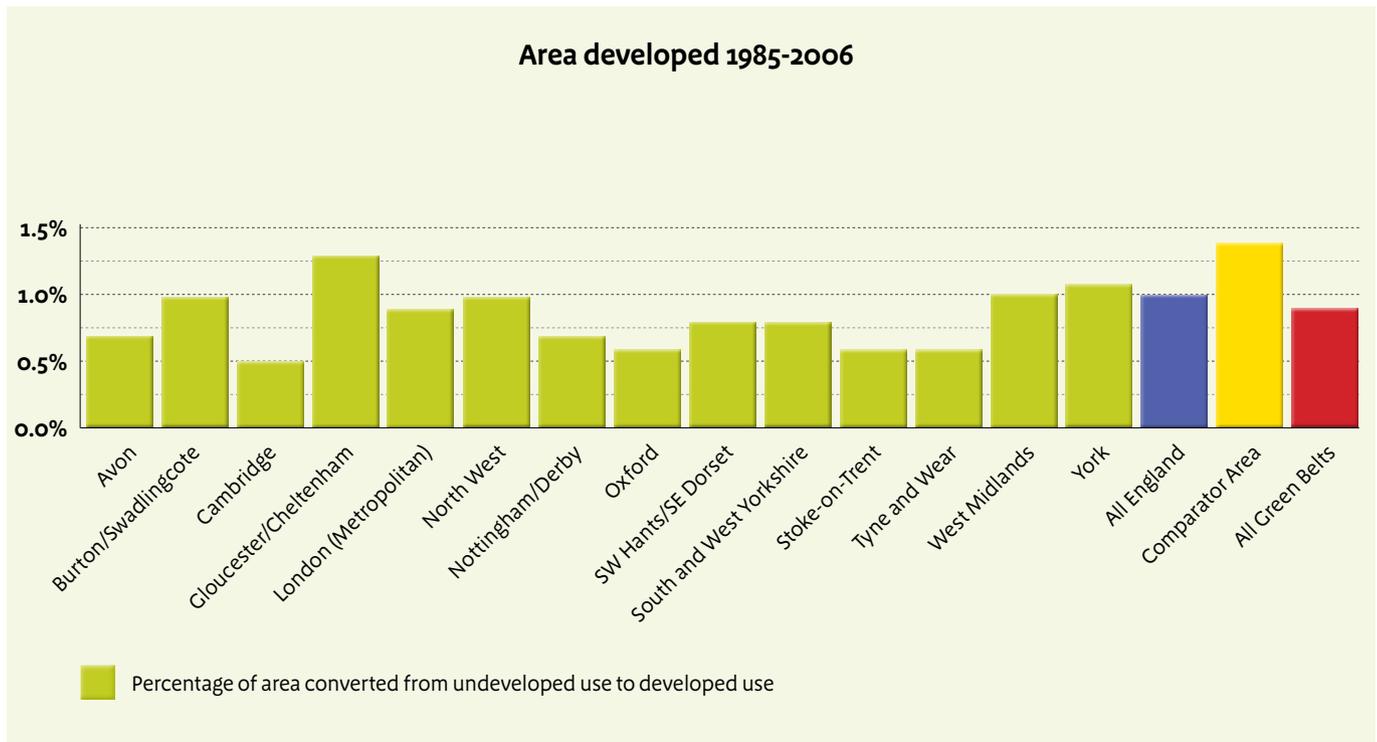
- Mainly rural and undeveloped with only 7% developed.
- Nearly 200 local authorities responsible for Green Belt.
- Development is mainly small scale and widely scattered, reflecting the existing distribution of farmsteads and clusters of cottages.
- Property prices are 20% higher than average in Green Belt areas while land prices are lower due to restricted opportunities for either residential or commercial development.
- 200,000 new dwellings were built in 2007, of which 0.4% were on undeveloped Green Belt. By comparison 14% were built on agricultural land across England.
- The overall area covered by the designated Green Belt has doubled since 1978. In some cases this incorporates expansion of Green Belt intended to offset the loss of areas to new development.

<sup>2</sup> In this summary we use the terms 'developed' and 'undeveloped' as they are defined in planning law, with 'developed' referring to most building or engineering operations, and 'undeveloped' referring to land not in a developed use, or in agricultural, horticultural or forestry use, which is not considered 'development'. Urban fringe comparator areas are explained on p.16.

- In Europe the loss of countryside to new development is greatest around cities with populations of over 500,000, which if they were in England would be protected by Green Belts. Urban sprawl also poses major economic, social and environmental concerns across the world<sup>3</sup>.

## Planning for the future:

The continued application of existing Green Belt policy allows for countryside on the edge of towns and cities to be protected on a permanent basis. In the future the challenge is to ensure that the majority of new housing development takes place on previously developed land in urban areas, alongside green infrastructure planning to ensure the protection and addition of a network of accessible green spaces within urban areas.



<sup>3</sup> Commission of the European Communities, United Nations Human Settlements Programme

# People and the environment

## Does the Green Belt provide opportunities for access to open countryside and outdoor recreation and sport?



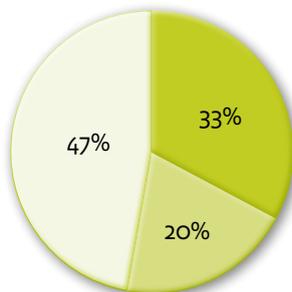
Yes

Green Belt land provides places for recreation and sport near to towns and cities. This could be further encouraged by improving the quality of existing destinations and through marketing them more effectively to local communities.

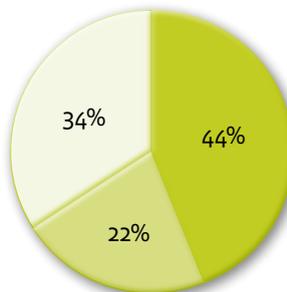
### Key facts:

- 44% of England's Country Parks and 33% of Local Nature Reserves are in Green Belt – covering just under 2% of Green Belt land between them.
- Green Belt has a higher than average density of Public Rights of Way (17% of the total length) and National Cycle Network route mileage (27% of the national total and 33% of the total traffic free route mileage).
- 4% of Green Belt is open access land – just 7% of the total because there is little mountain, moor, heath or downland in the Green Belt.
- 22% of the public walks programmes set up under Natural England's 'Walking the way to Health' Initiative start in or near the Green Belt.
- 14% of educational farm activities supported by green farming scheme funding are in the Green Belt.

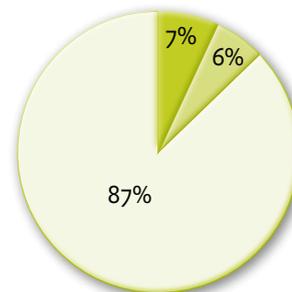
Local Nature Reserves



Country Parks



Open Access Land (CROW)



## Opportunities for the future

Green Belts surround 60% of the population and have potential to provide people with inspiring places to visit near to where they live and work. Places where they can relax, take exercise, appreciate nature and perhaps help to look after the environment. Recreation destinations, such as Country Parks and Local Nature Reserves, need to be well managed to provide quality experiences that people want to use regularly. People also need information about the places they can visit in the countryside around them.

It is important to have easy access available, including public transport, cycling and walking routes.

After being shown a map of England's Green Belt areas (as on Figure 1), 58% of respondents indicated that they had visited the Green Belt during the last 12 months to undertake one or more of the activities listed.

The most frequently undertaken activities were days out with friends or family (31%) and visiting for peace and quiet (24%).

### Visits to Green Belt land in last 12 months



# Valued landscapes

## Is the Green Belt retaining and enhancing attractive landscapes and improving damaged and derelict land?



### Partially

The proportion of Green Belt land categorised as maintained or enhancing is lower than for all England but so is the quantity of land neglected. A higher percentage of the Green Belt is categorised as diverging away from the character seen 20 years ago which could be a positive transformation as former degraded areas are regenerated.

There is a strong positive cultural association attached to the landscapes in the Green Belt and most people value its beauty, as revealed in our new national surveys – 95% of those surveyed around the London, Avon and Liverpool (North West) Green Belts agreed that the countryside in the area was beautiful.

<sup>3</sup> This assessment is based on analysis of 159 character areas covering all England. The areas have similar landscape character. Condition is assessed by looking at 7 landscape attributes: trees and woods, agriculture, boundaries, semi natural land, river and coastal, historic features and settlement and development. [www.countryside-quality-counts.org.uk](http://www.countryside-quality-counts.org.uk)

### Key facts:

- Less than 0.2% of the Green Belt is recorded as vacant or derelict previously developed land.
- Regeneration schemes such as Community Forests have enhanced extensive areas of neglected land within both Green Belt and other urban fringe areas. 41% of Community Forests are in Green Belt and 18% within 5 km of other urban fringe areas.
- 9% of Green Belt land is designated as Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) compared to 16% of England. 24% of the London (Metropolitan) Green Belt, the largest Green Belt, also carries the AONB designation.
- There is some concern about damaged land, litter and fly-tipping in the Green Belt but this relates to a small proportion of land and at specific locations, particularly near to main roads.
- National Character Area assessment<sup>3</sup> shows that established landscape character in 39% of the Green Belt area is being maintained or enhanced. 36% is diverging towards a new character and the proportion of neglected landscape, at approximately 18%, is lower than the average proportion of neglected landscape in England.

## Opportunities for the future

To ensure the character of areas is enhanced and maintained it is important to ensure land use is in keeping with local character and that planning and management is at a landscape scale. Community Forests are an excellent

example of how a landscape approach has transformed areas of degraded land. More detailed investigation of landscape quality in Green Belt and urban fringe areas is needed through use of landscape character assessment and tranquillity mapping, to understand which locations need improvement.

## A character assessment for Green Belt



	Consistent with character in 1990s	Inconsistent with character in 1990s
Stable	<b>Maintained</b> Character is strong and intact. Changes observed serve to sustain it. Lack of change means qualities likely to be retained.	<b>Neglected</b> Character of area weakened or eroded by past change or changes observed were not sufficient to restore qualities that made area distinct.
Changing	<b>Enhancing</b> Changes have restored or strengthened character of area.	<b>Diverging</b> Change is transforming character so that distinctive qualities are being lost or new patterns are emerging.

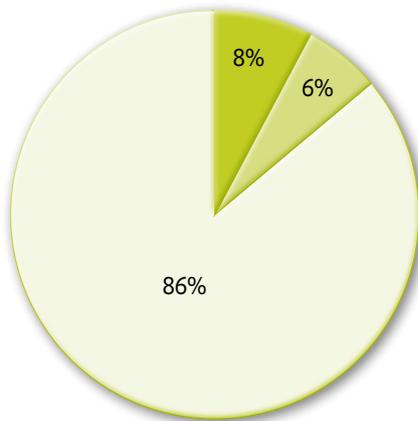
# Healthy natural systems

## Is the Green Belt conserving nature?

### Partially

The Green Belt contains a lower proportion of nationally protected sites than areas of more extensive countryside but a significantly higher proportion of locally protected sites and ancient woodland than England as a whole.

Sites of Special Scientific Interest



 Green Belt  Comparator Area  England

## Key facts:

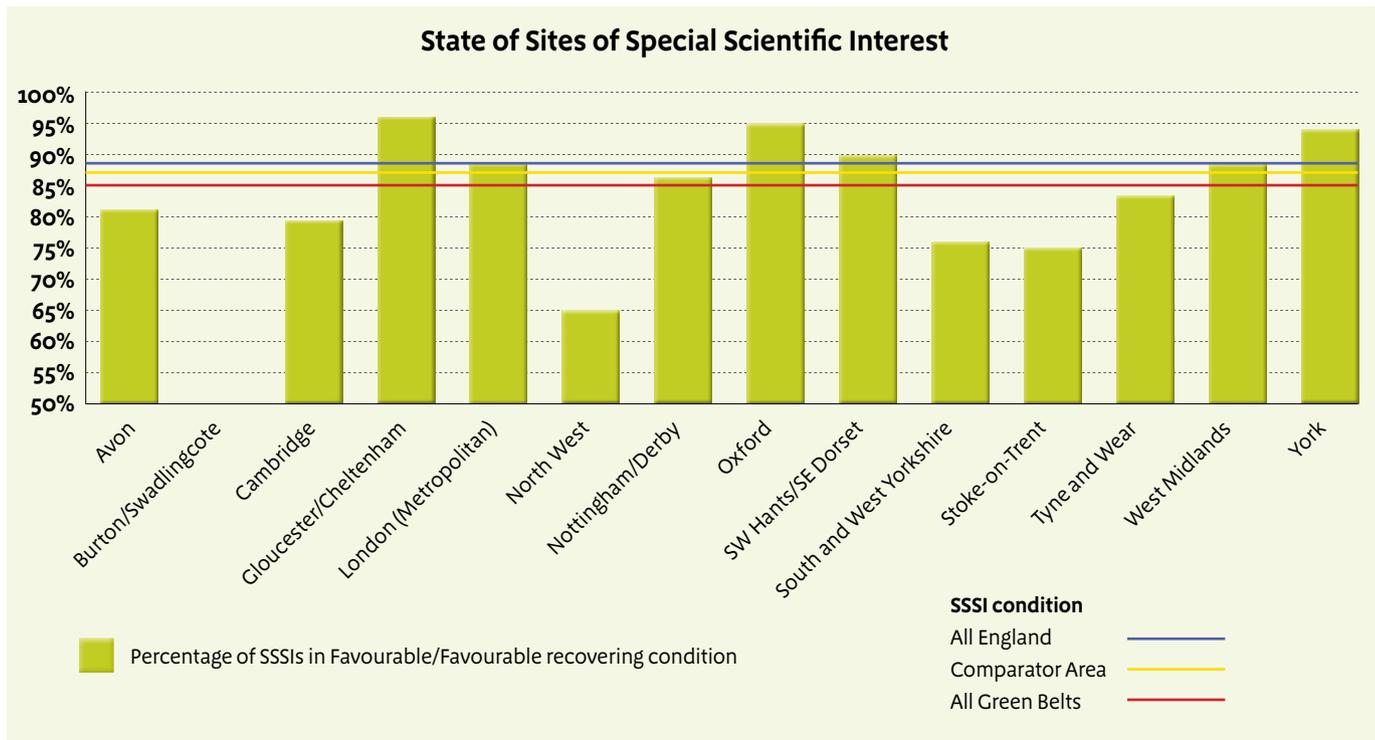
- 13% of the most important habitat areas identified in the UK Biodiversity Action Plan occur in the Green Belt.
- Only 8% of nationally and internationally important conservation sites – Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) – are found in the Green Belt.
- The proportion of SSSIs in good or recovering condition is slightly lower than for all England – 85% compared to 88% nationally. This varies between Green Belt areas [see chart on page 10].
- SSSIs in the Green Belt are more likely to be threatened by under-grazing and inappropriate scrub control, and less likely to be damaged by water pollution from agricultural run-off.
- 33% of all England's Local Nature Reserves (locally protected sites) are in Green Belt.
- 19% of England's ancient woodland is in the Green Belt.
- Some species such as the mistle thrush, song thrush, and starling, and the dark green fritillary butterfly are doing better in the Green Belt than across other parts of England. Green Belt areas are also showing more positive trends in recorded numbers

and population trends of bird and butterfly species than the urban fringe comparator areas.

## Opportunities for the future

The Green Belt is important for wildlife by providing a link between premier wildlife sites in the countryside and parks, greens and gardens in urban centres. The Green Belt should be recognised as an integral component

of England’s ecological network. There needs to be a concerted effort to get all of the sites protected for nature in favourable condition. Better advice on encouraging and supporting wildlife should be provided to the managers of small holdings and paddocks, which make up a high proportion of Green Belt land.



# Thriving farming and forestry

## Is the Green Belt achieving the land use objectives for agriculture and forestry?

### Partially

The extent of agricultural and forestry land remains high in Green Belt and 93% of the land remains undeveloped. Almost a quarter, 23% of undeveloped land in the Green Belt is neither registered for agricultural use nor is it woodland. This compares to 14% of England. This land is made up of such uses as paddocks, small holdings and extensive gardens.

### Key facts:

- 66% of the Green Belt is registered as agricultural land (compared to 71% of England).
- 11% is woodland (compared to 8% of England). 16% of the London (Metropolitan) Green Belt is woodland.
- Farm holdings within Green Belt have continued to decline, reflecting the overall national trend.
- Farm type is similar to much of England, with a tendency towards smaller holdings and less mainstream activities, such as keeping horses, deer or even llamas.
- Green Belt has an equivalent amount of Grade 1 and Grade 2 agricultural land to the rest of England.
- The proportion of Green Belt land managed under government funded green farming schemes is lower than for all England (35% compared to 47%) but with major differences between Green Belt areas. The funds invested throughout Green Belt land are similar to the rest of England demonstrating that some Green Belt areas are receiving higher payments in return for more complex and specific environmental benefits.
- Green Belt planning controls have not restricted the ability of landowners and managers to diversify economic activity generally, but this is an issue of significant concern for some landowners.
- 64% of landowners and land professionals surveyed in London agreed with the statement that farmland around major cities in their area is under-used, but 64% disagreed in Merseyside.



Lambourne End Outdoor Centre

## Opportunities for the future

With its close proximity to major urban areas, Green Belt land could provide more local produce to reduce unnecessary food miles, improve self sufficiency, food security and healthier diets. Funding through Rural Development Programme for England (RDPE) and the Environmental Stewardship scheme could support productive activities in the Green Belt to serve local markets, increase domestic food production and woodlands. Community Forests should continue to play an important role in regenerating neglected Green Belt landscapes. There is also scope to use land in the Green Belt for community farming, orchards and allotments and to encourage school farm partnerships.

New national and local surveys undertaken for this research reveal that:

- 80% of the public are interested in buying food produced locally in the Green Belt.
- 79% of the public would like to see more trees planted and more locally grown food in the areas around towns and cities.
- Over 60% would also like to be more involved with their local Community Forest or Country Park.

# Climate change mitigation and adaptation

## Can the Green Belt contribute to meeting the new challenge of climate change?



Yes

Undeveloped land, both in the Green Belt and the wider countryside, plays a vital role in helping to tackle the impacts of climate change. This role should be explicitly acknowledged in planning policy.

## Meeting the challenge of climate change

### Cooling

Green Belt, like green infrastructure in urban areas, reduces the heat island effect of major cities and can provide a cooling function across much wider areas.

### Flood protection and water catchment

Green Belt areas can provide absorbent buffers around our towns and cities. Natural landscapes allow rain water to reach the water table slowly and stop storm drains and rivers becoming overwhelmed, reducing the risk of flooding.

### Local food production

Locally produced food can cut greenhouse emissions by reducing unnecessary food miles, at the same time as boosting local economies.

### Carbon storage

Plants absorb carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, locking it away and helping to combat climate change. The longer the plants live, the greater the amount of carbon is stored. Particularly valuable for carbon storage are mature woodland, standing grassland (such as meadows, green verges and lawns with well-developed root systems), areas densely planted with perennial plants and undisturbed peat. 14% of the Green Belt area is semi-natural grass and 23% is improved grassland, making it a potentially vital resource for carbon storage.

## What should the Green Belts look like in future?

**More trees** – Productive woodlands and orchards would improve urban fringe landscapes and provide forest products, renewable energy sources, new wildlife habitats and recreational space.

**More wetland** – from tiny ponds and small bog gardens, to seasonal or permanent streams, balancing ponds in existing settlements, and ornamental lakes in our rejuvenated parks – these would all help us adapt to and relax in a changing climate as well as restoring the functions of natural flood plains to protect homes and businesses.

**More local food** – Growing seasonal, nutritious food closer to towns and cities for the local market would reduce unnecessary food miles and to help promote healthier diets.

**More well managed places for recreation** – Local opportunities for healthy outdoor recreation within closer range of homes and businesses.

**Renewable energy production** – Space for a variety of renewable fuel: wood, biomass, anaerobic digesters, micro-generation, wind and solar energy. Much of this could be small scale, permitted development.

**Ecological networks** – By using wildlife corridors to join up green spaces in Green Belt, urban areas and the wider countryside, wildlife will be better able to move and adapt to climate change, and healthy ecosystems will be maintained.



Bristol Bath railway path

# A fresh approach to the Green Belt

Natural England and the Campaign to Protect Rural England believe it is time for a new national conversation on what England needs from a 21st century Green Belt – a Green Belt that safeguards the countryside around our major towns and cities, is cared for by local communities, and provides a range of benefits for people and for nature.

To realise this, we need more ambition to enhance Green Belt land so that we can be proud to pass it on to the next generation. If everyone planning and managing the land works together, then the Green Belt will be capable of meeting the challenges of the future.

By safeguarding land from development, the Green Belt is already making an important contribution to tackling climate change. With the need to adopt low carbon lifestyles, and pressure for new housing, it is vitally important to recognise this. In the future, Green Belts and other land surrounding towns and cities should take an even greater role in providing environmental benefits for England's people.

## Towards a greener future for the Green Belt

- 1. Recognise and protect the Green Belt.** It's much more than a planning designation. While continuing to enforce existing Green Belt planning policy a renewed focus on active management of the land is vitally important. Well managed, undeveloped land around our towns and cities provides a wide range of vital services that we can't do without. Benefits to society include attractive landscapes, wildlife habitats, places for recreation, healthy soils, fresh water, woodland and improved air quality.
- 2. Invest in and improve the Green Belt.** Recreational resources, production of local food, fuel and fibre, environmentally sensitive land management and renewable energy production can all be increased, while protecting the Green Belt's open, rural character. The Green Belt is a valuable national resource with a vital role to play in the nation's future.
- 3. Connect and network the Green Belt.** Linking the land designated as Green Belt to areas designated for their environmental importance, urban green spaces and the wider countryside can help form ecological networks and green recreation networks – helping to tackle the challenges of a changing climate and improving our health.

## Methodology

This report considers the current environmental condition of Green Belt land in relation to the PPG2 land use objectives set out above. It has been based on three stages of research:

- A literature review and interviews with key experts in the field;
- Public attitude surveys during summer 2009 across England with additional work in three areas of Green Belt in the North West, South East and South West regions. In the national survey, 1754 interviews were undertaken. In the local surveys, 1026 responses were received, with 967 being from members of the public and 59 from land professionals; and
- Data collection on aspects of land use in the Green Belt such as changes from undeveloped to developed uses; the type of businesses located in the Green Belt; environmentally sensitive farming schemes; and nature conservation sites.

An analysis of current environmental condition has been produced using data on various aspects of land use to generate comparisons between Green Belt areas, 'comparator areas' on the fringe of towns and cities without a Green Belt designation, and England as a whole except where otherwise indicated.

Green Belt	Area (ha)
Avon	66,868
Burton upon Trent and Swadlincote	714
Cambridge	26,340
Gloucester and Cheltenham	6,694
London (Metropolitan)	484,173
North West	247,708
Nottingham and Derby	60,189
Oxford	33,728
SW Hampshire and SE Dorset	78,983
South Yorkshire and West Yorkshire	248,241
Stoke-on-Trent	43,836
Tyne and Wear	71,854
West Midlands	224,954
York	25,553
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,619,835</b>

Major urban areas with Green Belt	Population
London	7,215,900
Birmingham	970,900
Liverpool	469,000
Leeds	443,250
Sheffield	439,870
Bristol	420,560
Manchester	394,270
Coventry	303,480
Bradford	293,720
Stoke-on-Trent	259,250
Wolverhampton	251,450
Nottingham	249,850
Derby	229,400

Major urban areas without Green Belt	Population
Leicester	303,580
Kingston upon Hull	301,420
Plymouth	243,800
Southampton	234,250
Reading	232,660

# Green Belt and major urban areas in England

Green belt areas are based on 2006 data and digitised to a hectare square grid.

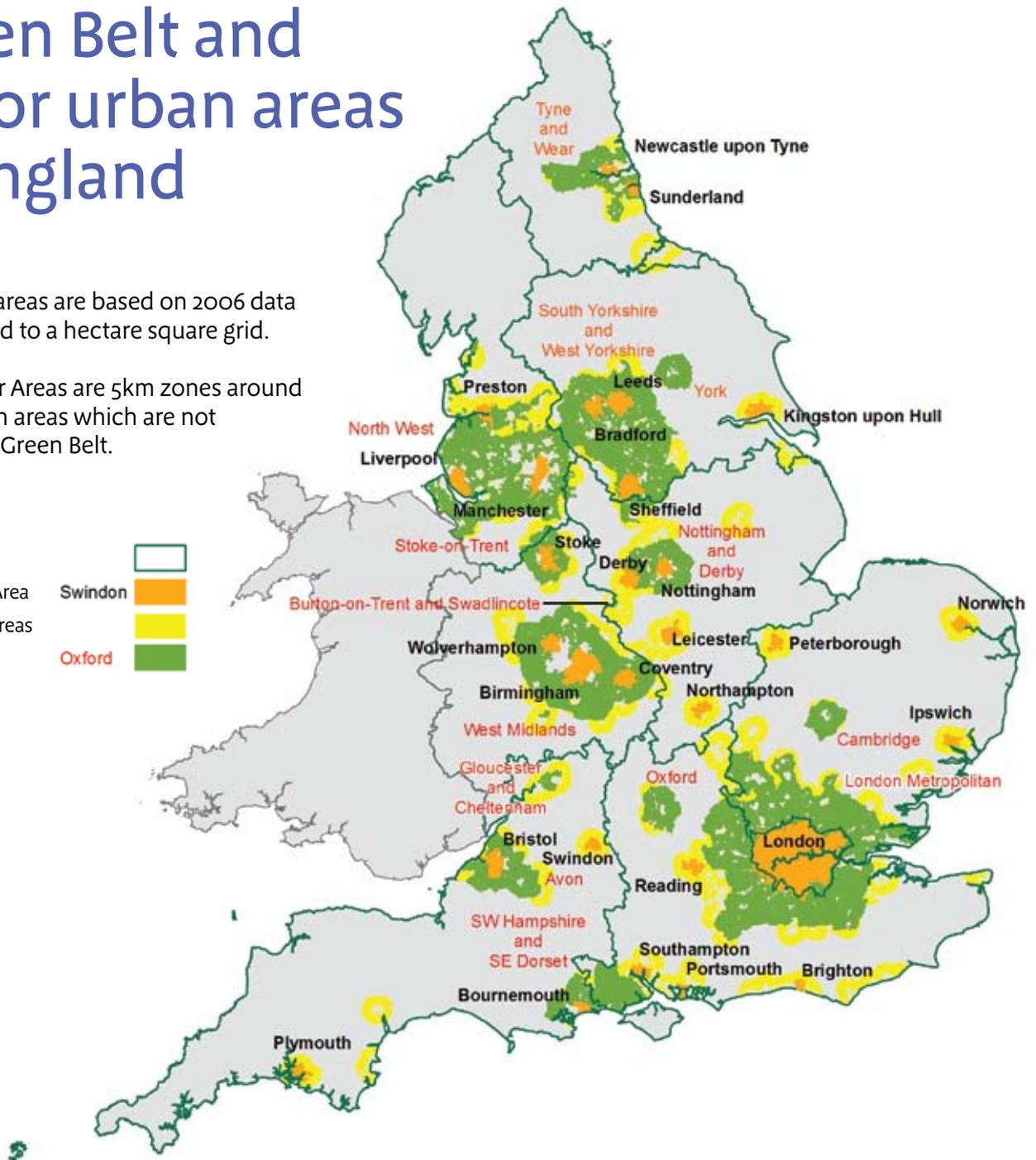
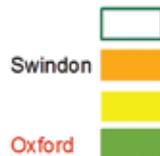
Comparator Areas are 5km zones around major urban areas which are not designated Green Belt.

Region

Major Urban Area

Comparator Areas

Green Belt





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