

# Environmental Studies FACT SHEET



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## PLANNING & GREEN BELTS

### Introduction

In 2002 the government began a thorough review of the planning system. They published a consultation paper – a report on how the planning system works with many proposed changes. Any member of the public or any professional had until 31<sup>st</sup> December 2002 to write to the Deputy Prime Minister with their thoughts/criticisms etc. on the proposals. In 2003 the government would then announce what changes they were going to make, having given due consideration to all the comments received.

This Factsheet summarises the current system and the proposed changes.

Planning permissions is needed by anyone who proposes to:

- change the use of a building or area of land
- build on land
- alter existing buildings and houses
- erect advertisements

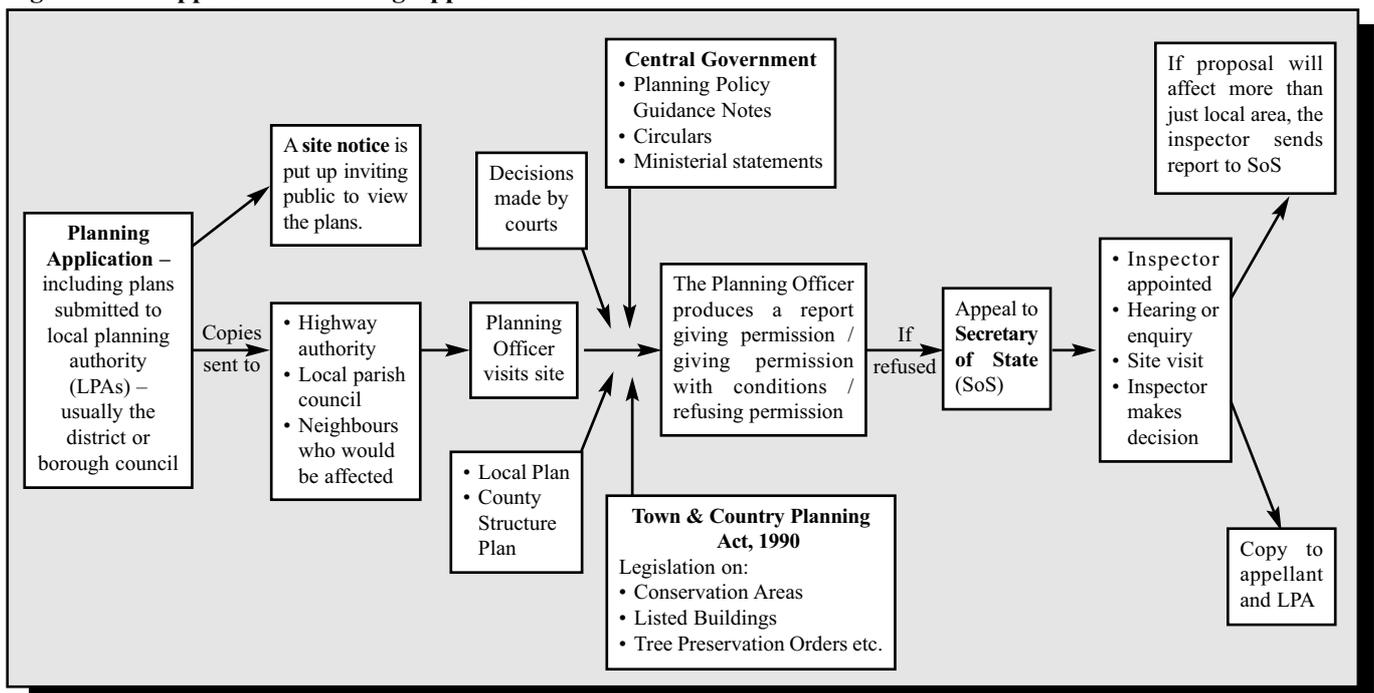
The planning application is summarised in *Fig. 1*. This highlights one of the government's major criticisms of the current process – it is far too complex!

At present planners have to try to reconcile guidance in local plans, county plans, regional plans, as well as Planning Permission Guidance Notes (PPGNs) and circulars from central government. This hierarchy of plans has been criticised as confusing and complex. The government also seems to have been influenced by industry leaders who have complained that getting permission to develop is too difficult, time-consuming and expensive.

The government has proposed the following changes:

1. Replace local plans and unitary development plans with a Local Development Framework (LDF). The LDF will be produced by Regional Planning Bodies (RPB) and will consist of:
  - a. a core strategy – the vision of what is going to happen in the area over the next 15-20 years.
  - b. a proposals section showing existing designations, e.g. green belt and proposed developments.
  - c. detailed action plans for any sites where there is a concentration of proposals for change or conservation.
2. Regional Planning Guidance will be replaced by Regional Spatial Strategies (RSS). The RSS will be expected to cover housing, transport, agriculture, minerals, waste transport and disposal and environmental prediction. Once formulated, they will be reviewed every 15-20 years. RSS will have greater freedom to depart from national, i.e. government, policy.
3. The LDF and the RSS will replace county structure plans.
4. Most appeals against planning decisions will be conducted in writing rather than by face to face inquiries.

**Fig. 1 What happens in a Planning Application?**



### What will these changes mean in practice?

Many environmentalists are very worried about proposed changes they see as a significant weakening of current planning controls:

#### Proposed changes

- Public inquiries will no longer be allowed to challenge the 'principle, need or location' of projects of national interest such as nuclear power stations, chemical plants or opencast mines. There will no longer be an automatic right to object to such a development.
- New business enterprise zones will be established in which there will be no planning restrictions at all.
- Local plans will be scrapped which many see as a huge threat to the ability of local people to be able to object to proposals that may affect their daily lives, e.g. conversion of a playing field for a housing estate.

All of this, according to the government, will speed things up and make life easier for developers, whilst at the same time maintaining protection for the environment.

*If there is a breach of planning control, the local planning authority can issue:*

- A planning contravention notice that requires the developer to inform the local planning authority what it is they are doing / have done / are thinking about doing.
- An enforcement notice that requires the developer to undo the development. Failure to comply carries a maximum penalty of a £20,000 fine.
- A stop notice or an injunction in the High Court or County Court to prohibiting the use of the land.

*Developers can appeal against enforcement notices. Currently, developing without planning consent is not a criminal offence but this is one of the issues that the government are seeking views on.*

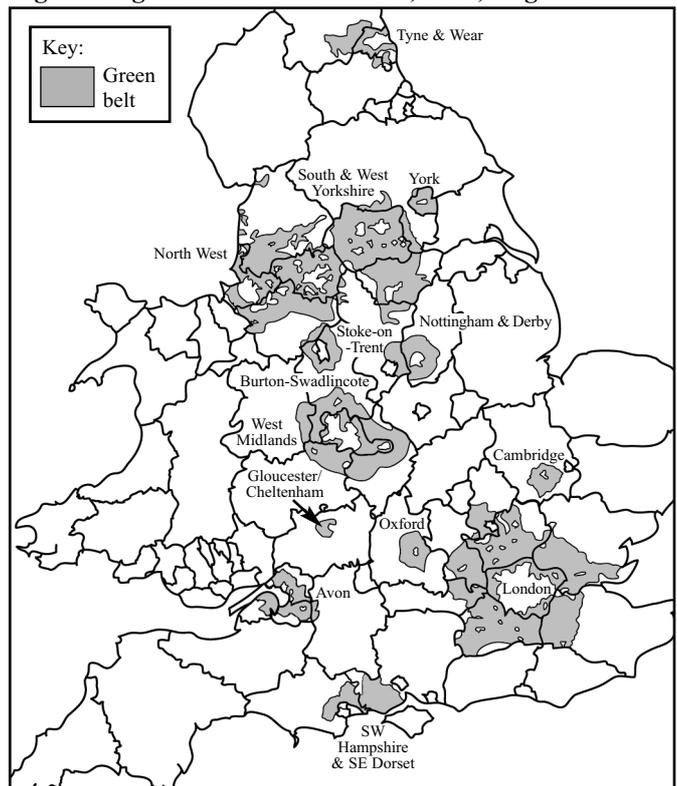
### Green Belts

- The Green Belt designation has five aims:
  1. To prevent urban sprawl,
  2. To prevent adjacent towns merging into one another,
  3. To help safeguard the countryside from encroachment,
  4. To preserve the character of historic towns,
  5. To assist in urban regeneration, by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land.
- Many land uses occur within the Green Belt – it can cover small villages, residential, retail, industrial and recreational areas, as well as fields and forests.

**Exam Hint:** Many students appear to think Green Belt just equals the last two. Factories, power stations, military establishments etc. often pre-date the town and country planning system and the Green Belt designation and all of these can therefore be found inside the Green Belt.

- There are 14 separate Green Belts covering 1.65 million ha = 13% of the country (Fig. 2).

**Fig. 2 Designated Green Belt Land, 1997, England.**



- The most important attribute of Green Belts is their **openness** as this provides opportunities for sport and outdoor recreation near urban areas and enhances landscapes near where people live.

However, the extent to which the use of land fulfils these objectives is not itself an important factor in the inclusion of land within a Green Belt. Although Green Belts often contain areas of attractive landscape, the quality of the landscape is not relevant to the inclusion of land within the Green Belt.

Despite the fact that Green Belts have been around for decades, in some areas, detailed boundaries have not yet been identified but it is expected that this will be remedied before the introduction of LDFs. Once Green Belt boundaries are decided, it is assumed that they will only be changed in exceptional circumstances and the current government have made it clear that they will continue to be against inappropriate development in any Green Belt. However, this does not mean that all building is prohibited inside the Green Belt. Any of the following may be allowed:

- Buildings for agriculture and forestry
- Essential facilities for outdoor sport and recreation, e.g. small stables or a changing room
- Cemeteries
- Limited extension, alteration or replacement of existing houses
- Limited infilling in existing villages
- Limited affordable housing
- Furthermore, provided environmental standards are being maintained, mineral extraction may not be considered to be an inappropriate development in the Green Belt.
- Similarly, Park and Ride developments may be allowed provided that alternative non-Green Belt sites have been thoroughly assessed first. If permission is granted then the layout, design and landscaping of the sites must preserve, as far as possible, the openness and visual amenity of the Green Belt.

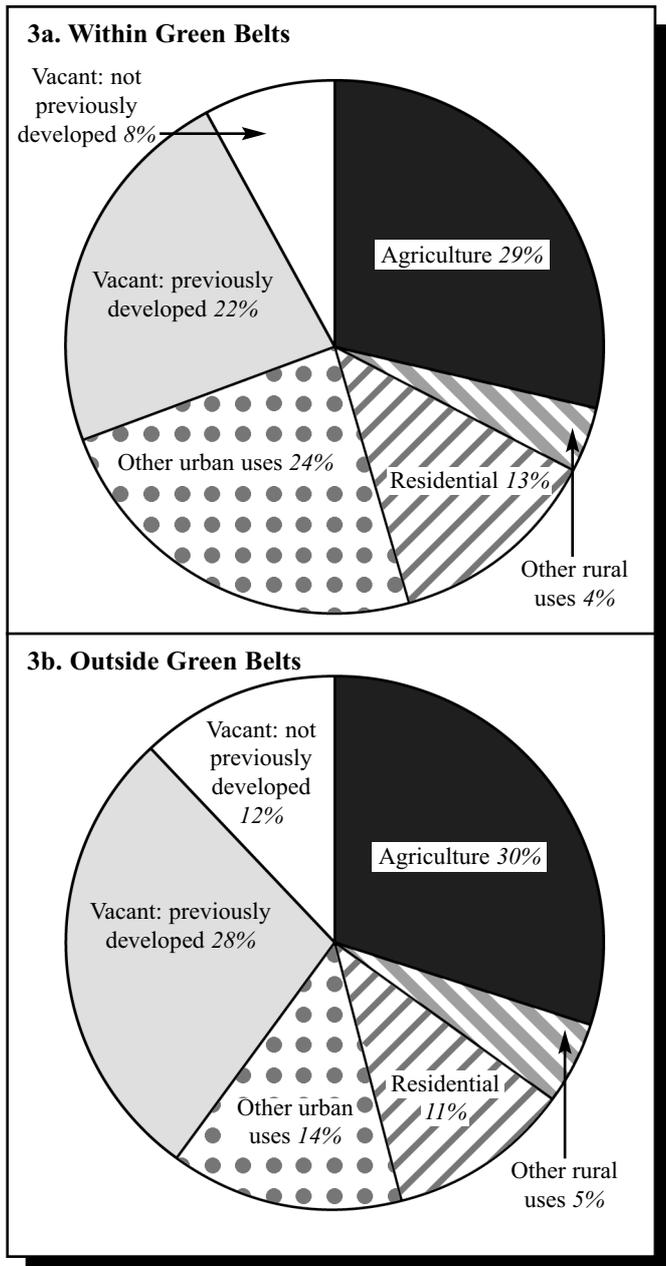
**Is the Green Belt working?**

The last detailed assessment took place in 1997. In that year:

- 2% of all new houses built were in Green Belts.
- 59% of these houses were built on land in the Green Belt that had been previously developed or was already residential or had other urban uses.
- The density of housing built in the Green Belt averaged 14 dwellings per hectare. This compares with 24 dwellings per hectare outside the Green Belt.

So, in terms of limiting and influencing housing development, the Green Belt appears to be working. However, Fig. 3a shows that the single greatest source of land for house building in the Green Belt (and outside of it - Fig. 3b) was agriculture.

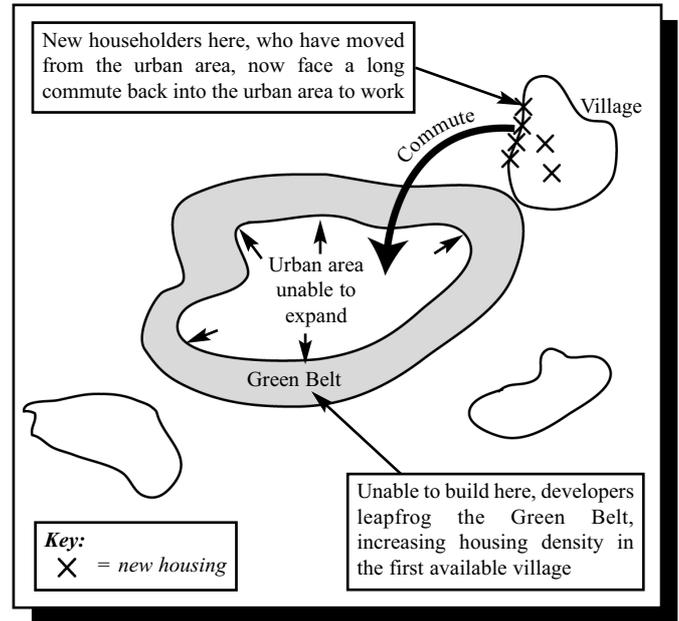
**Fig. 3 Percentage of new dwellings built by previous use, 1997, England.**



In May 2002, the influential Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) called for a relaxation of the Green Belt policy. More land had to be released for building in the Green Belt otherwise, as demand was greater than supply, house prices would continue to rocket.

The RTPI also worried that developers would leapfrog the Green Belt, and expand into the next nearest villages and market towns (Fig. 4).

**Fig. 4 Why developers leapfrog the Green Belt.**



The Council for the Preservation of Rural England (CPRE) and even some house-builders, such as Berkeley Homes, disagree, arguing that if all brownfield land could be developed and if the 800,000 empty homes in England were used, there would be no need to develop Green Belt land at all.

**Typical exam question**

1. What is the purpose of the Green Belt? (4)
2. Comment on whether the Green Belt designation has been successful. (6)

**Useful Sources of Information**

- The Guardian online website [www.guardian.co.uk](http://www.guardian.co.uk)
- CPRE [www.cpre.org.uk](http://www.cpre.org.uk)
- Royal Town Planning Institute [www.rtpi.org.uk](http://www.rtpi.org.uk)
- Office of the Deputy Prime Minister – [www.planning.odpm.gov.uk](http://www.planning.odpm.gov.uk)

**Acknowledgements**

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