Oxford Green Belt Study

Summary of Final Report
Prepared by LUC
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**Project Title:** Oxford Green Belt Study

**Client:** Oxfordshire County Council

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Version</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Version Details</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>V1</td>
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<td>Draft Summary</td>
<td>Philip Smith</td>
<td>Sarah Young</td>
<td>Philip Smith</td>
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<tr>
<td>V2</td>
<td>09/11/2015</td>
<td>Final Summary</td>
<td>Sarah Young</td>
<td>Philip Smith</td>
<td>Philip Smith</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Contents

Study objectives 1
National Green Belt policy 1
The Oxford Green Belt 1
Methodology 3
Findings 4
Conclusions and next steps 5

Figures
Figure 1: Oxford Green Belt 2
Study objectives

1.1 LUC was commissioned by Oxfordshire County Council (on behalf of the six Oxfordshire Local Authorities\(^1\)) to assess how the land within the Oxford Green Belt performs against the purposes of Green Belts, as set out in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF).

1.2 The brief emphasised that the Study should not advise on the suitability or potential of land in the Oxford Green Belt for development. It also indicated that the Study should examine the case for including within the Green Belt any additional areas of land that currently lie outside it.

1.3 The outputs of the study, alongside other assessments, will assist local authorities in considering the extent to which some existing Green Belt land could be used to accommodate sustainable forms, patterns and types of new development. Should the local authorities conclude that there are exceptional circumstances for making alterations to the existing Green Belt boundaries, these changes, including any allocations of land for development, will be taken forward through the Local Plan-making process.

National Green Belt policy

1.4 The NPPF states that ‘the fundamental aim of Green Belt policy is to prevent urban sprawl by keeping land permanently open and that the essential characteristics of Green Belts are their openness and their permanence’. It states that Green Belts should serve five purposes:

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

1.5 The NPPF emphasises that Green Belt boundaries should only be altered in exceptional circumstances, through the preparation or review of the Local Plan.

The Oxford Green Belt

1.6 The Green Belt was originally conceived in the 1950s and subsequently confirmed through Structure Plans. The protection of the City’s special character was a key driver of Green Belt policy.

1.7 Currently covering 660 square kilometres, the Green Belt is generally considered to have served the City and County well, providing an open, landscape backdrop to the urban area and preventing coalescence with neighbouring towns and villages. On the other hand, the Green Belt has been regarded in some quarters as a major constraint on the City’s growth and development, alongside other constraints such as floodplain and sensitive ecological and historical areas. Indeed, the County and District Councils have been debating the spatial distribution of development for over 50 years.

1.8 The current extent of the Oxford Green Belt is shown in Figure 1.

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\(^1\) Oxfordshire County Council, Cherwell District Council, Oxford City Council, South Oxfordshire District Council, Vale of White Horse District Council and West Oxfordshire District Council.
Figure 1 – Oxford Green Belt
Methodology

Review of study context and background

1.9 To inform the development of the assessment methodology, most notably the detailed criteria for assessment of the parcels against the Green Belt purposes, a review of relevant contextual information relating to the history and evolution of the Oxford Green Belt was undertaken.

Defining the land parcels for review

1.10 Given the overall size of the Green Belt, it was necessary to divide it into appropriate parcels for assessment. The aim was to define parcels that contain land of the same or very similar land use or character and bounded by recognisable features. These features include natural features (e.g. substantial watercourses and water bodies) and man-made features (e.g. motorways, A and B roads and railway lines etc.).

1.11 Two types of parcels were defined:

- **Smaller parcels** which lie directly adjacent to Oxford City and the settlements ‘inset’ within the Green Belt.
- **Broad areas** which represent the main ‘body’ of the Green Belt, rather than land at the edges of Oxford City and the inset settlements.

1.12 A total of 13 broad areas and 83 smaller parcels of Green Belt land were defined in the Study area. Parcels were defined independently from the previous or other ongoing Green Belt studies in Oxfordshire.

Agreeing the assessment criteria

1.13 A set of assessment criteria was drawn up for purposes 1 to 4 of the Green Belt. These were based on LUC’s experience of undertaking Green Belt reviews, a review of good practice elsewhere and input from the Steering Group. The criteria included definitions of key relevant terms in the NPPF, such as ‘urban sprawl’, ‘neighbouring towns’, ‘encroachment of the countryside’ and the ‘special character of historic towns’. Ratings were used to describe the extent to which the criteria were met in each parcel of land assessed (high; medium, low; and no or a negligible contribution).

1.14 Purpose 5 of Green Belts is ‘to assist in urban regeneration by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land’. Although the Green Belt as a whole may play this role, parcels were not assessed individually against this purpose as it was agreed there was a lack of available evidence to do so.

Assessing the parcels

1.15 Land parcels and broad areas were assessed using maps, aerial images and relevant geographic information to gain a clear understanding of how they performed against the five purposes. Ratings and detailed notes on the judgements for each land parcel and broad area were input into an Access database.

1.16 All parcels and broad areas were visited to check and verify the judgements and conclusions reached in the assessment. Site visits were particularly important in assessing: the perception of settlement gaps; the extent to which parcels exhibit countryside character; and the nature of any relationship with Oxford’s historic character or setting.

1.17 If as part of the detailed assessment process it was observed that a parcel of land has very distinct attributes within different sections of the parcel, this was recorded in the assessment database. Where this was the case, ratings were applied, to reflect the assessment relevant to the larger part of a parcel.
Reporting and review

1.18 Three drafts of the final report were prepared, each responding to the Steering Group’s comments received on the previous draft. The third draft was the subject of a ‘check and challenge’ workshop, attended by the Steering Group, together with other senior officers from the local authorities. LUC presented the report at the workshop and the local authority representatives raised any outstanding issues. These issues were discussed and it was agreed that, subject the final changes to the report, the authorities would accept the report as an important piece of evidence for the Growth Board’s Strategic Options work and for Local Plans.

Findings

1.19 The main aim of the study was to provide a robust, transparent and clear understanding of how the land in the Oxford Green Belt performs against the national purposes of the Green Belt.

1.20 A series of maps are presented in the main report setting out the overall results of the assessment for the broad areas and parcels for each of the assessed Green Belt purposes. Assessment sheets in the appendix to the main report contain the detailed judgements behind the ratings against each Green Belt purpose, including any variations in the performance of a land parcel.

1.21 The NPPF does not require all the purposes of Green Belt to be met simultaneously and a high rating against any Green Belt purpose could be sufficient, on its own, to indicate an important contribution. Equally, even if an area of Green Belt scores highly against one or more purposes, the NPPF does not suggest that a review of its boundaries would not be appropriate, if exceptional circumstances were demonstrated.

1.22 Table 1 summarises the assessment findings, drawing attention to the spatial pattern of the performance of the parcels against the Green Belt purposes.

Table 1: Summary of Assessment Findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Green Belt Purposes</th>
<th>Summary of Findings</th>
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</thead>
</table>
| 1 To check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas. | • Only the smaller parcels immediately adjacent to the ‘large built up area’ (comprising Oxford, Botley, Kennington and Wolvercote) were assessed against this purpose.  
• Higher rated parcels include those within the ‘green wedges’, including Port Meadow, within and very close to the urban area. These areas are subject to other protective designations and constraints (such as SSSI or floodplain) and remain open and unaffected by urban sprawl.  
• Lower rated parcels are generally found to the south and south west of the built up area, where urban sprawl has already occurred to some degree. This does not imply that these areas are less valuable as Green Belt as the remaining open land in a parcel significantly affected by urban sprawl could be considered more valuable in preventing further development. |
| 2 To prevent neighbouring towns merging into one another | • Higher rated parcels are found, not surprisingly, between the large built up area and surrounding relevant settlements (The study considered Oxford City and the inset settlements as the key ‘towns’ for Purpose 2).  
• Higher ratings are also given in relation to gaps associated with smaller settlements between Oxford and Wheatley where these gaps, although not situated directly between settlements defined as towns, are considered to make an important contribution to the overall perception of the Oxford-Wheatley gap. |
**Green Belt Purposes** | **Summary of Findings**
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|  | • Most of the broad areas are rated as making a limited contribution, or no contribution, to this purpose, apart from those that form part of the gap between settlements.
|  | • Parcels on the ‘outer side’ of the neighbouring towns tend to have a lower rating.
| 3 To assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment | • All parcels contribute to this purpose to a greater or lesser extent.
|  | • Higher rated parcels and broad areas are generally further away from the larger settlements, where there is a stronger sense of openness and countryside character.
| 4 To preserve the setting and special character of Oxford | • Smaller parcels close to the urban area, from which there are views into and out of the City are generally rated highly.
|  | • Smaller parcels on the ‘outer side’ of the surrounding towns and which tend to have weaker physical or visual links to the historic core of Oxford tend to rate lower.
|  | • Similarly, broad areas that are within the ‘zone of theoretical visibility’ and/or form part of the physical setting of the City are generally rated highly. Broad areas further away from the City, where the physical or visual connection is more limited, achieve lower ratings.

1.23 As well as these ‘purpose and parcel specific’ findings, it was noted that the Oxford Green Belt has helped to maintain the sense of openness and rural character of the ‘washed over’ rural settlements. This is broadly related to, and supports, Purpose 3 ‘To assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment’.

1.24 In terms of the outer boundary of the Green Belt, the assessment revealed that the outer broad areas generally perform well, although not as well as the inner broad areas which contribute more to the setting of the City. Otherwise, the study did not produce evidence that would justify any changes to the outer boundary. It was observed, however, that Green Belt areas on the eastern side of the M40 are ‘cut off’ by the motorway, which itself could be regarded as a more defensible boundary.

### Conclusions and next steps

1.25 The report draws overall conclusions from the Study and suggests some next steps, in terms of how the Oxfordshire Growth Board and the Local Authorities might use the findings.

1.26 The NPPF requires any changes to the Green Belt to be made through the Local Plan process. The report recommends that any spatial strategy proposals considered by the Growth Board should include:

i. demonstration of exceptional circumstances, such as unmet housing or employment land needs, that cannot be met elsewhere; and

ii. consideration of the need to promote sustainable patterns of development, considering a range of local, regional and national issues such as economic growth, health and wellbeing, accessibility and biodiversity, cultural heritage and climate change resilience, as well as an assessment against Green Belt purposes.

1.27 If decisions are made to remove land from the Green Belt, the local authorities should seek to minimise any harm to the remainder of the Green Belt. This should include careful master planning of development to ensure that harm is minimised, enduring Green Belt boundaries are defined, and that positive uses for the wider Green Belt are secured.
1.28 Although the positive use of Green Belt land is not directly related to the purposes of Green Belt, the NPPF encourages local planning authorities to secure positive use of land in Green Belts, once defined. The report recommends that, as part of the overall Green Belt review, following an agreed spatial strategy, the Councils should cooperate on a strategy for securing greater positive use of the Green Belt.