



Campaign to Protect
Rural England
Standing up for your countryside

Our Green Belt: worth investing in



CPRE's vision for Green Belt

In CPRE's vision for our centenary year, 2026, we described our hope for the Green Belt: that it is 'more attractive and more accessible, providing an invaluable breathing space for town and city dwellers and supplying them with food'.

We remain convinced that Green Belts play a crucial role in enhancing the sustainability of our cities by providing essential ecological functions and recreational benefits that are fundamental to people's health and wellbeing. At the same time, CPRE's Our Green Belt campaign has shown us the many ways that people use the Green Belt for recreation and to connect with nature.¹

The Government has made commitments to improve the environment and people's access to it; measures to achieve this will be consulted on for inclusion in the 25-year plan for the environment, with the final plan expected in 2017. Green Belts cover 12.5% of England and can make a substantial contribution to these commitments. A total of 30 million people live in cities surrounded by Green Belt, and these areas of countryside could be managed much more actively to serve these urban dwellers to a much greater extent. In relation to biodiversity, Green Belts offer a unique opportunity to create and restore natural habitats at a sufficient scale to re-establish ecological networks threatened by development or intensive agriculture – and to help meet the Government's target of planting 11,000 trees by 2020.

Green Belts must continue to fulfil what has always been their primary aim: 'to prevent urban sprawl by keeping land permanently open'.² However, we should also expect the land within them to deliver much more than that. CPRE's vision for Green Belts is that they should provide recreational opportunities and

contact with nature where people need it most – close to where they live. This can go hand in hand with sustainable agricultural production and climate change mitigation. In preventing urban sprawl and providing a sense of openness, Green Belts create a place that has huge amenity and natural capital potential. Combined with the fact that Green Belts are set up to be a permanent designation, allowing long-term management, we have a significant area of land that is well worth investing in to make the most of that potential.

Indeed, this theme was picked up in the latest Heritage Lottery Fund announcement that awarded £25 million for landscape improvements closest to three of England's cities specifically for the benefit of those living within them.³ In other areas of the country, there has already been significant and sustained investment to improve the quality of the Green Belt over time. This experience could be very beneficial for other areas.

Environmental consultants ADAS have now produced a report for CPRE, *Nature Conservation and Recreational Opportunities in the Green Belt* (summarised in this document), demonstrating that as well as having important natural capital, our Green Belts also have valuable recreational opportunities – and the potential to provide more. The report's case studies show that there are already examples of how we can take advantage of that potential and make Green Belts work even harder for those living within them and in the towns and cities they surround.⁴



¹ Our Green Belt: www.cpre.org.uk/ourgreenbelt

² NPPF para 79

³ £25m of Heritage Lottery Fund cash will help open up countryside to city dwellers

<https://www.hlf.org.uk/about-us/media-centre/press-releases/%C2%A325m-heritage-lottery-fund-cash-will-help-open-countryside-city>

⁴ ADAS Nature Conservation and Recreational Opportunities in the Green Belt. CPRE, 2016. Available at www.cpre.org.uk/ValuingGreenBelt

Summary of research

The aim of *Nature Conservation and Recreational Opportunities in the Green Belt* is to explore the potential of land designated as Green Belt in England and consider examples of areas that have been successfully improved.

The study builds on the report *Green Belts: a greener future*, published jointly by Campaign to Protect Rural England and Natural England in 2010. We wanted to identify both the overall extent and distribution of nature conservation and recreational opportunities, in order to highlight their importance and identify opportunities to invest in further improvements in each Green Belt.

For analytical purposes, the qualities of Green Belts were compared with England as a whole plus 'comparator areas'; these cover rural land on the urban fringe that don't have Green Belt designation. The same comparator areas were also used in the 2010 report.

The Natural Capital Committee's latest *State of Natural Capital* report places a strong emphasis on the need for measuring and monitoring changes in natural capital.⁵ So in this new research ADAS analysed the current levels of particularly endangered areas of important

wildlife habitat in need of conservation (identified as 'priority habitat' by the Government), giving a measure of natural capital; and recreational opportunities and Public Rights of Way, to provide a measure of accessibility. Overall, the researchers found that the Green Belt is a particularly valuable part of the wider countryside in terms of a dense public footpath network, broadleaf and mixed woodland, and Local Nature Reserves.

This work used the most recent datasets available and provides a benchmark against which future developments can be compared. The ability to monitor progress or decline in natural capital and access within Green Belt land is fundamental in securing CPRE's long-term vision for the Green Belt.

ADAS also looked at specific examples of where areas of Green Belt had been improved and the management and funding mechanisms involved.

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⁵ Natural Capital Committee. The state of natural capital: protecting and improving natural capital for prosperity and wellbeing. NCC, 2015. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/natural-capital-committees-third-state-of-natural-capital-report>

Summary of statistical findings

ADAS used the most recent datasets to give a benchmark against which we can measure further developments.

Priority Habitat

ADAS found that 13% of all Green Belt land, covering 207,453 ha (over five and half times the size of the Isle of Wight) is Priority Habitat. This is comparable with England as a whole given that Priority Habitats cover 14% of the country, and 10% of the comparator areas. This demonstrates that Green Belt land contains significant resources of natural capital, easily comparable with areas well away from towns and cities.

In particular, a high proportion (19%) of all England's deciduous woodland is located in Green Belts. Other Priority Habitat types that have a high presence in Green Belts are lowland heathland (15% of the overall England total), lowland meadow (15%), lowland fen (14%) and good quality semi-improved grassland (12%).

Recreational opportunities

A total of 13% of Green Belt land is specifically given over to recreational opportunities, compared with 10% in comparator areas and 16% in England as a whole. There is a high proportion of a number of types of recreational land in Green Belts: 47% of Country Parks in England are found in Green Belts; 35% of Woodland Trust Land; 34% of Local Nature Reserves; and 23% of Registered Parks and Gardens.

Since 1990, Community Forests have been created in England and 34% of Community Forest land is within the Green Belt. Besides the forests, 48 new Local Nature Reserves – nearly a third of all the reserves created in England since 2009 – have been created in the Green Belt. These show that Green Belts provide an increasingly important recreational and cultural resource for the people who live in the towns and cities they surround.

Public Rights of Way (PRoW) and National Cycle Network

17% of England's PRoW are within Green Belts compared with 13% in comparator areas. The average PRoW density is 20 metres per hectare (m/ha) in Green Belts and 19 m/ha in Comparator Areas, significantly higher than for England as a whole (8 m/ha). The reason for this is that there are generally more PRoW near settlements, and fewer in more remote areas. This often provides additional opportunities for recreation on top of the various forms of 'recreational land' mentioned above, and shows that the countryside in Green Belts is already highly accessible with a good PRoW network.

12% of the National Cycle Network is within Green Belts, the same as comparator areas. The provision of on-road cycle routes is relatively low at 9%, but the provision of motor traffic free routes is relatively high compared with England as a whole, at 19% (19% also in comparator areas). Provision of cycle routes varies substantially in the different Green Belts, with Avon having the highest density (3 m/ha).



19%

of all England's deciduous woodland is located in Green Belts



34%

of Community Forest land is within Green Belts



12%

of the National Cycle Network is within Green Belts

Valuing the Green Belts for recreation and wildlife: what the public think

During the past 18 months CPRE has been asking people to tell us why they value their local piece of Green Belt on the *Our Green Belt* website.⁶

Many had strong feeling about ‘their’ bit of Green Belt but broad themes came out. Sometimes it’s the specific resource, related to the ecology, economy or amenity:

‘Much wildlife depends on Green Belt for its habitat, including pollinating insects necessary to much of our food production.’
Dilys Twigg

‘Farming is a way of life round our homes and it’s great to see it up close thanks to our Green Belt.’
Lesley Bryan

‘The Green Belt is a great place for free recreation. We enjoy walking here, and there’s always more sporty types jogging or playing rugby!’
Emma Smith

Much of the Green Belt is valued because it is part of their everyday quality of life:

‘I walk every day in my area ... through fields and lanes to Leeds/Bradford Airport, returning through lanes over the railway bridge back to Cookridge. ... Without these wonderful paths which are free to walk and engage with nature the restriction/loss of these amenities would be horrendous. Plus, of course, the healthy walks are available to everyone able to walk.’
Grace Clark

‘I use the Green Belt in the West Midlands near where I live to walk my dog, it is my way of exercising and relaxing. It fills me with joy to breathe fresh air and see and hear the birds, animals and wild flowers I encounter.’
Linda Cordwell

‘With nearly 50% of London households not having access to a car, being able to access open space by bicycle or on foot will be increasingly important. For me, stopping after 90 minutes on the bicycle and hearing only birds and animals, seeing trees and hedges and open land, and the wind, is a tonic.’
Matthew Hardy

All through the website, the comments echo the connection of enjoying that connection with nature while walking, exploring and learning about their environment:

‘We need to ensure that the Green Belt is protected from the threat of development because it is vital that we have a chance to breathe clean air, to remember what it feels like to be free from the confines of bricks and roads, and to be able to listen to natural sounds that soothe.’
Joanne Davenport

Connecting with nature is a theme reflected by recent polling for CPRE that found this dominated when people were offered a range of 12 options on what they’d like to do in the Green Belt in future, based on the assumption that the Green Belt will remain largely open and free of built development.⁷ A total of 40%

of respondents chose more woodland walks and 32% wanted more nature reserves. Education was the other favourite option, with 27% wanting more educational visits such as to farms.

⁶ See www.cpre.org.uk/ourgreenbelt

⁷ TNS Omnibus Survey, fieldwork carried out between 24 and 29 September 2016, 883 adults aged over 16

Case studies

So how can we make sure we're making best use of Green Belt for all the amenity and natural capital value it has? ADAS looked at ways this has been achieved in terms of partnerships and funding to enable this potential to be fully realised.



Lee Valley Regional Park

With 82% of the park in Green Belt and set up by a parliamentary bill in 1967, the Lee Valley Regional Park was and is a pioneer in Green Belt landscape improvement. Once home to a range of industries, including munitions factories, waterworks and former gravel pits, much of it had become neglected by the early 1960s.

Now a mix of Country Parks, nature reserves, lake and riverside trails and sports facilities, it covers 40,000 hectares and stretches for 42km along the River Lee. Its habitats include eight Sites of

Special Scientific Interest, restored gravel pits and water reservoirs that make up the Lea Valley Special Protection Area and 'Ramsar' site (a wetland site of international importance) and 31 Local Wildlife Sites.

Managed by a board that sets the strategy for the park authority, members are nominated by local authorities and appointed by London councils plus co-opted members. Half of its £25 million annual budget is self-generated from facilities in the park and the rest from levies from local authorities.

Birmingham and Black Country Nature Improvement Area (NIA)

Surrounded by Green Belt and with a fifth forming part of the Green Belt, the Birmingham and Black Country NIA aims for long-term environmental gains for wildlife and people in the area by delivering targeted biodiversity projects at a landscape scale.

Over three years the NIA received £800,000 from central Government as seed funding for improvements to 102 sites. Currently, Esmée Fairbairn Foundation funding, via The Wildlife Trust for Birmingham and Black Country,

is helping improve further sites. It is managed by a partnership of more than 50 organisations.

One project, with the local charity The Community Environmental Trust and University of Wolverhampton NIA staff, created Castle Vale Meadows (pictured right). This involved improving 4.8 hectares to deliver two new meadows that are rich in species. Community events and supportive local media encouraged lots of volunteers to join in. Long-term management has now been secured.



Mersey Forest

Half the Mersey Forest area is Green Belt around Liverpool, Warrington, Chester, Formby and Northwich, covering 1,370,000 hectares; it is the largest of the Community Forest areas.

A core partnership of seven local authorities with Natural England, the Forestry Commission and the Environment Agency, makes strategic decisions, while the local authorities involved contribute funding and work with partners, such as the Community Forest Trust, on particular projects and to generate extra funding.

The forest operates on funding of £1.4 million a year, so has considerably less budget than the smaller Lee Valley.

Within the forest area Northwich Woodlands has been transformed from derelict industrial wasteland into a thriving community woodland that is rich in wildlife habitat and local heritage. The woodland has nine sites with 323 hectares that are linked to provide a popular recreational area for Northwich with 28 km of off-road walking, cycling and riding.

How can we invest in the Green Belt?

The analysis of Green Belt and comparator areas plus the case studies detailed in *Nature Conservation and Recreational Opportunities in the Green Belt* give a clear direction to how we should invest in our Green Belts.

In particular, there is an urgent need to do more in the Green Belts outside London, none of which have seen anything like the investment in recreational opportunities and nature conservation that has been achieved in the Lee Valley.



The Government should:

- **Prioritise investment in natural capital in the Green Belts in the 25-year plan for the environment, particularly woodland and wetland creation joined by wildlife corridors to form a stronger ecological network.** Professor Dieter Helm, Chair of the Government's Natural Capital Committee, has issued a personal call for a Green Belt with 'lots of natural capital' including 'much greater public access' and 'woodlands located next to people'. Similarly, the third *State of Natural Capital* report⁸ describes investments in natural capital that offer the greatest economic returns.

Those that are particularly relevant in the Green Belts include woodland planting, wetland creation, expanding urban greenspace, improving the environmental performance of farming and managing flood catchments. Improvements could be financed through targeted incentives similar to the current Countryside Stewardship Scheme.

Combined authorities, Local Enterprise Partnerships and local government in and around large towns and cities should:

- **Use regional park funding models more widely.** The lack of sustainable funding is a major barrier to implementing change. The ADAS research investigated a variety of funding models including a Regional Park, a Community Forest, a Local Nature Partnership and two Nature Improvement Areas. Of these, the Lee Valley Regional Park Authority to date has the most sustainable funding model. This model, or elements of it, should be taken up more widely in Green Belts.
- **Introduce long-term Green Belt management plans in order to deliver enhancements to natural capital and recreational opportunities.** Long-term management plans are already produced for National Parks and AONBs. Much of the work could be based around existing local authority green infrastructure strategies that cover a number of Green Belt areas.

- **Market the Green Belt as a visitor destination in its own right.** This is already being done by the Friends of the Ontario Greenbelt around Toronto, Canada. In England, initiatives like the Oxford Green Belt Way led by CPRE Oxfordshire have helped to provide a sense of identity and make the Green Belt feel more accessible. The Lee Valley Regional Park promotes local walks and places of interest within the Green Belt areas that it covers.
- **Create new Green Belts in areas where they can be particularly justified.** CPRE believes that exceptional new designations can be particularly justified around Norwich and Southampton. Green Belts are particularly valuable resources for nature conservation and recreation. The long-term protection offered by Green Belt designation would give more confidence to Government departments, local authorities and landowners to invest in better land management.

⁸ See D Helm, *In Defence of the Green Belt*, April 2015. See footnote 5 for State of Natural Capital detail

CPRE fights for a better future for England's unique, essential and precious countryside.

From giving parish councils expert advice on planning issues to influencing national and European policies, we work to protect and enhance the countryside.

Our objectives

We campaign for a sustainable future for the English countryside, a vital but undervalued environmental, economic and social asset to the nation. We highlight threats and promote positive solutions. Our in-depth research supports active campaigning, and we seek to influence public opinion and decision-makers at every level.

Our values

- We believe that a beautiful, tranquil, diverse and productive countryside is fundamental to people's quality of life, wherever they live
- We believe the countryside should be valued for its own sake
- We believe the planning system should protect and enhance the countryside in the public interest



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Maps of Green Belts with ADAS analysis
can be obtained from info@cpre.org.uk

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