

5. GREEN BELT OBJECTIVES AND ASPIRATIONS

- 5.1. Whilst not questioning the principle and main purposes of Green Belts, the statutory environmental agencies and other organisations have focused attention on achieving the positive objectives for the Green Belt (referred to in section 4). In addition to these positive objectives, this study has revealed a range of 'other aspirations' for Green Belts. The Countryside Agency and Groundwork are currently consulting on a vision and strategy for the urban fringe, which indicates that the potential of the urban fringe far outweighs the challenges and costs²⁵.
- 5.2. This section elaborates on the positive objectives for the Green Belt, in terms of the aspirations of key stakeholders. It also refers to other opportunities in the Green Belt to which the Steering Group and other stakeholders have referred.

GREEN BELT OBJECTIVES

Providing access for informal recreation

- 5.3. With the increasing intensification of urban areas and the loss of open space, including playing fields, the Green Belt can play a very significant role in providing space for informal recreation activities, such as cycling, walking and picnicking. The Countryside Agency's aim is to create networks of new and improved parks, accessible woodlands and other green spaces that are joined up to form continuous green corridors between town and country. The public health benefits of such aims are widely recognised (see below).
- 5.4. Section 3 of this report considers in detail the accessibility of the Green Belt to the urban population. It outlines the spatial distribution of publicly accessible open space throughout the Study Area and the accessibility by public transport. There are extensive areas of publicly accessible open space throughout the study area, although many are not easily accessible by public transport.
- 5.5. The research highlights a number of barriers that may reduce people's use of such spaces. These range from physical barriers, such as severance by busy roads, to cultural barriers, for example ethnic minorities may not feel welcome in some areas. There are also issues surrounding the 'offer' of the Green Belt, which in some cases is perceived to be insufficient to attract people to open spaces within it. This relates to the provision and quality of facilities such as car parks and cafes.

Providing opportunities for outdoor sport and recreation

- 5.6. As with informal recreation, the Green Belt offers significant opportunities for formal sport and recreation. Facilities for outdoor sport and recreation are generally located towards the inner boundary of London's Green Belt, close to the urban population.

²⁵ *Unlocking the potential of the rural urban fringe*, Countryside Agency/Groundwork, 2004

Conserving and enhancing landscapes

- 5.7. As noted in section 2, there is evidence that, between 1949 and 1991, the landscape character of the Green Belt changed significantly and that, with the exception of an increase in woodland, the changes are likely to be perceived as a deterioration in the quality of the landscape.
- 5.8. On the other hand there are notable examples of landscape enhancement initiatives in the Green Belt, for example the Community Forest programme has been particularly successful. Section 7 and **Appendix 2** provide a summary of key strategic existing initiatives.

Improving damaged and derelict land

- 5.9. The focus of many environmental initiatives has been on securing improvement to damaged and derelict land in the Green Belt. The most successful initiatives in this respect, however, have been those resulting from 'enabling development'. Typically, this involves removing a portion of land from the Green Belt in order to generate funds for restoration of a wider area. Bedfont Lakes, near Feltham in west London's Green Belt for example, is a 100 hectare site formerly used for gravel extraction and tipping. It was restored and opened for public access by means of a Section 106 Agreement related to around 20ha of mixed commercial and industrial development.
- 5.10. Several examples of successful improvements of damaged and derelict land have taken place in the Lee Valley Regional Park, using various funding sources. For example, disused filter beds in Leyton are being sensitively redeveloped, with financial assistance from London's Waterway Partnership and Groundwork Hackney, to provide the public with the opportunity to experience the wildlife and industrial archaeology of the site. Similarly a former Royal Ordnance site at Waltham Abbey, which had been derelict and closed for many years, is being redeveloped as a public open space. The site has undergone extensive remedial and soil amelioration work. In addition to providing informal outdoor recreation, it will also be of significant nature conservation value.

Securing nature conservation interest

- 5.11. There is an increasing range of support mechanisms, such as agri-environment schemes (e.g. Countryside Stewardship) and forestry schemes (e.g. Farm Woodland Premium Scheme) that can be used constructively to restore damaged landscapes and habitats and to create new areas of habitats, for example expanding new wilderness areas. These schemes can also bring benefits of increased public access.
- 5.12. There are significant opportunities in the Green Belt to seek compensation for losses of biodiversity that have occurred as a result of development and land use change.

Retaining land in agricultural, forestry and related use

- 5.13. Although a location on the edge of a major town or city can bring many problems, there are also a number of advantages and opportunities, particularly if

urban fringe farmers can adapt their business and diversify into other areas. Key opportunities are described below.

- 5.14. **Local and speciality markets.** The close proximity of urban fringe areas to customers can guarantee fresher produce and keep 'food miles' to a minimum. Urban areas offer a good potential market, with increased options of direct selling to shops, restaurants and the public. Farmers markets are increasing in numbers throughout London and provide benefits through face-to-face contact with producers. There is also a range of ethnic and speciality markets to provide links with ethnic origins and traditions and to engender appreciation of global biodiversity.
- 5.15. Farms in the urban fringe could capitalise on market opportunities for organic produce by 'going organic', which is supported by Defra's Organic Farming Scheme.
- 5.16. **Non-food diversification.** It has been recognised that successful diversification can only be achieved alongside a distinctive 'market led' approach to business development on the urban fringe²⁶. Support is needed in identifying these markets and to help farmers diversify their working.
- 5.17. Non-farming activities within the rural economy have become increasingly common - 80% of people working in rural areas are employed in public services, manufacturing and business and financial services²⁷. There are opportunities for farms close to urban centres with redundant buildings to use these spaces for non-farming activities to support farm incomes.
- 5.18. **Public access.** Public access is one area of diversification with great potential to take advantage of the high demand for rural recreation and tourism activities from city dwellers and can be marketed in terms of educational and health benefits. Incomes may be derived from a range of facilities and activities, including refreshment provision, shops, crafts, shooting, quad biking and horse riding. Through 'open farms' and 'model farms' farmers can use their land and traditional farm practices as attractions. The education opportunities associated with this can help to raise awareness of countryside management issues. Other diversification opportunities include bed and breakfast accommodation and working holidays.
- 5.19. **Local workforce.** A location near a large centre of population not only increases potential consumers, but also access to a large workforce. As family members are decreasingly likely to take over a farm and as a great deal of work is seasonal, access to a flexible workforce is important. There is also potential for 'pick your own' farms - especially relevant to the horticultural industry - which allows customers to harvest crops on behalf of the farmer as a recreational activity.
- 5.20. **Allotments and weekend gardens.** Weekend huts, gardens and allotments could compensate for the lack of space and possibilities in London. East's ideas brochure²⁸ suggests that twinning scenarios linking inner city areas directly to the Green belt, if supported by direct transport links, would benefit both areas.

²⁶ Farm Diversification Benchmark Study, Defra/University of Exeter, 2002

²⁷ Quality of Life in Tomorrow's Countryside, Countryside Agency, 2003

²⁸ Picnics in the Green Belt, East, 2002

- 5.21. The strategic approach to forestry, as demonstrated in the Community Forests, lends itself to further application in Green Belts, and could be closely associated with enhancing the environmental quality. (RTPI)

OTHER OPPORTUNITIES

Contributing to urban renaissance

- 5.22. Urban renaissance is a key objective of the Mayor's London Plan. The interplay and co-dependence of urban and rural areas is widely recognised. As with planning and management of towns and cities, the surrounding countryside should not be seen as a passive, recipient place, but the subject of positive planning and management.
- 5.23. Pro-active planning and management of open space can help to shape new development, create a strong urban edge, and provide a sense of place.

Enhancing peoples' understanding of place

- 5.24. Stronger 'branding' of the Green Belt would create opportunities to improve peoples understanding of place, as the Green Belt is currently not widely recognised or understood as a place with potential for outdoor recreation. A clearer image would also increase the possibility for the Green Belt in playing a positive role in terms of providing accessible open space for recreation.

Providing an education resource

- 5.25. With its great diversity and proximity to such a large centre of population, the Green Belt provides an invaluable educational resource. There is potential for organised events and school visits as well as individual exploration.

Helping to improve public health

- 5.26. There are tangible health benefits to be gained from exercising and relaxing in a natural open space. Some relevant research has already been undertaken showing that benefits may be particularly significant for elderly people, children and people with mental and social problems²⁹. A number of pilot initiatives have begun to promote this aspect of open space, for example BTCV's Green Gym Project and the Walking the Way to Health initiative of the British Heart Foundation and Countryside Agency.

Responding to climate change

- 5.27. Like the rest of the UK, the Study Area will experience the effects of climate change over the coming decades. In November 2002 the London Climate Change Partnership published 'London's warming: the impacts of climate change on London'. Hotter drier summers and milder wetter winters, more frequent extreme high temperatures and more frequent extreme winter precipitation are predicted. The London Green Belt offers the potential to contribute to limiting the effects of climate change, for example through vegetated areas acting as carbon sinks and through

²⁹ Mayor's Biodiversity Strategy

opportunities for accommodating renewable energy resources such as biomass energy crops.

- 5.28. The Green Belt also offers many opportunities for responding and adapting to climate change. For example, climate change is likely to exacerbate problems of water supply in London with lower summer flows in rivers and increased domestic water demand, and the Green Belt could provide space for water storage to adapt to drier summers. Flooding is already a significant issue in many parts of London. London is at risk from the inundation of floodplains by river water, local flooding when the drainage network is overwhelmed by intense rainfall, and by tidal surges in the Thames. The Green Belt has a potential role to play in retaining floodwaters through floodwater storage, and other flood limitation measures, such as use of contour ploughing on agricultural land, which will help to minimise floods caused by inundation of drainage systems in particular.
- 5.29. Other environmental impacts identified in London's warming include changes in the distribution of species and the places they inhabit, and a reduction in air quality. Again, the Green Belt could help to address the former by creating the space required to allow migration of habitats and species. In terms of air quality, as noted above, trees can help to act as carbon sinks.
- 5.30. In terms of social and economic impacts, there are potential benefits in terms of increased demand for leisure and tourism as a result of warmer temperatures. The Green Belt could play a key role in providing a recreational resource on the urban fringe for outdoor activities. However, the Green Belt will also be subject to some negative impacts from climate change, for example, increased pressures on green spaces as a result of water shortages and increased visitor pressure.

A venue for holidays and tourism

- 5.31. Open spaces around London are potentially attractive to tourists and visitors. Notable examples within or close to the Green Belt include Epping Forest, the Wildfowl and Wetland Centre, the Lee Valley Regional Park, and the major new nature reserve currently being developed at Rainham Marshes.
- 5.32. There is also considerable opportunity to revive the longstanding British tradition of holiday chalets, which were particularly popular during the interwar period. There are many remaining examples along the upper reaches of the River Thames, but also deep in the countryside in Essex and Hertfordshire. This idea has many attractions, not least in reducing regular travel to far-flung holiday destinations, which contributes significantly to national emissions of CO². It is recognised, however, that new holiday chalets may not be regarded as acceptable development in Green Belt, in terms of Green Belt policy.

Opportunities for renewable energy development

- 5.33. Energy crops for biomass energy production provide a form of agricultural diversification, which Defra is supporting through the Energy Crop Scheme. Grants can be obtained to help establish short rotation coppice of willow and poplar or miscanthus grass and establish producer groups. Biomass production could also

make use of existing woodlands in the Green Belt, through appropriate management. BioRegional supply wood fuel from Croydon's woodlands for the BedZed development in Beddington³⁰. To be cost effective and efficient from an environmental viewpoint, the electricity generating plant needs to be close to the source of biomass. This may have implications for Green Belt policy.

- 5.34. There may also be opportunities in the Green Belt for wind power development, although this clearly poses potential planning issues as wind turbines may not be regarded as acceptable forms of development in the Green Belt. Hydropower is likely to be less controversial, although the opportunities are likely to be more limited. The Mayor of London has produced an Energy Strategy to help lead London towards a future where the way energy is sourced and used is better for health and the environment. The strategy sets out a need to reduce the amount of energy used in London and to move away from power supplied by fossil fuels, towards a greater use of renewable energy, such as solar energy, wind power and power from organic materials, like wood.

Providing burial space

- 5.35. London is running short of burial space. In response to this, the London Plan seeks to ensure that boroughs provide for London's burial needs, including the special needs of certain religious or cultural groups for whom burial is the only option. The Green Belt offers considerable potential for burial space. There is current demand for 'green' or 'woodland' burials, which could provide an attractive place for mourners and others to visit.

³⁰ Further details of this are given in the Mayor's Municipal Waste Management Strategy