

‘Fixing our broken housing market’
 Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG)
 Housing White Paper – Feb 2017

**Comment on the Green Belt issues contained within the recent
Housing White Paper**

In the run-up to the publication of the DCLG Housing White Paper last month, there was speculation that it would signal a weakening of Green Belt protection and/or support major releases from the Green Belt. That has turned out not to be the case.

The Housing White Paper does not remove any of the Green Belt’s protections which has contributed to the Housing White Paper being broadly welcomed by a number of environmental campaigners.

However, the paper does propose changes to NPPF Green Belt policy. The current NPPF states at paragraph 83 that Green Belt boundaries should only be altered in ‘exceptional circumstances’ through the preparation or review of the Local Plan, but the NPPF does not specify what might constitute such circumstances. In an attempt to be more transparent about what this means in practice (at para 1.37 – 1.40 and A.59-A.64 of the housing white paper), the Government proposes to amend the NPPF to make clear the following:

- that authorities should amend Green Belt boundaries only when they can demonstrate that they have examined fully all other reasonable options for meeting their identified development requirements;
- that where land is removed from the Green Belt, local policies should require the impact to be offset by compensatory improvements to the environmental quality or accessibility of remaining Green Belt land;
- that when carrying out a Green Belt review, local planning authorities should look first at using any Green Belt land which has been previously developed and/or which surrounds transport hubs;
- that appropriate facilities for existing cemeteries are not to be regarded as ‘inappropriate development’ in the Green Belt;
- that development brought forward under a Neighbourhood Development Order should also not be regarded as inappropriate in the Green Belt, provided it preserves openness and does not conflict with the purposes of the Green Belt; and
- that where a local or strategic plan has demonstrated the need for Green Belt boundaries to be amended, the detailed boundary may be determined through a neighbourhood plan (or plans) for the area in question.

The Housing White Paper also indicates the Government’s intention to explore whether higher contributions can be collected from development as a consequence of land being released from the Green Belt.

Therefore, the Government is proposing significant changes to Green Belt policy. It is not clear whether this will lead to it becoming more or less strict. But the requirement on authorities to examine fully all other reasonable options before amending Green Belt boundaries may prove burdensome, and so make them less likely. It is also not clear whether or how the scale of compensatory improvements to offset releases will be set so as to take account of the quality of the Green Belt released.

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The decision broadly to preserve the Green Belt would inevitably mean that housing land will have to be found elsewhere. The Housing White Paper proposes a range of measures to maximise the use of suitable land. These include proposals to free up public sector land, to increase the support for windfall sites, to support a new wave of garden towns and villages (including legislating to allow locally accountable New Town Development Corporations), and to encourage higher housing density (including reviewing the Nationally Described Space Standard).

Importantly, among the measures to maximise suitable land use is an increased emphasis on the use of brownfield land, and the Government is proposing to amend the NPPF to indicate that 'great weight' should be attached to the value of using suitable brownfield land within settlements for homes. They are also proposing to change the NPPF specifically to allow more brownfield land to be released for developments with a higher proportion of starter homes (including in the Green Belt, but only where there is no 'substantial harm' to the openness of the Green Belt). And they confirm that the £1.2 billion Starter Home Land Fund will be invested to support the preparation of brownfield sites to support these developments.

So there appears to be a range of measures seeking to address the fundamental difficulty of finding sufficient suitable and available land for housing. It remains to be seen whether these measures will be sufficient, without a greater input from Green Belt sites.

Consultation on the white paper (and supporting documents) closes on 2 May 2017.

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30.03.17