Introduction

“The fundamental aim of Green Belt policy is to prevent urban sprawl by keeping land permanently open; the most important attribute of Green Belts is their openness. Green Belts can shape patterns of urban development at sub-regional and regional scale, and help to ensure that development occurs in locations allocated in development plans. They help to protect the countryside, be it in agricultural, forestry or other use. They can assist in moving towards more sustainable patterns of urban development.”

(para 1.4 of Planning Policy Guidance Note 2 : Green Belts\(^1\))

The area of designated Green Belt land in England at 31st March 2011 was estimated at 1,639,540 hectares - about 13 per cent of the land area of England\(^2\). In Rotherham, some 72% of the Borough area is designated as Green Belt.

A key task in the preparation of Rotherham’s Local Development Framework, and deciding where and when new development should take place, is to consider impact upon Rotherham’s Green Belt.

The integrity of the Green Belt, and public confidence in Green Belt policies, can be seriously compromised where Green Belt boundaries are constantly changing. The purpose of this Report is to set out the need, rationale and broad methodology for undertaking a localised Green Belt Review to underpin preparation of the Local Development Framework. This Review is intended to provide certainty throughout the Core Strategy plan period to 2027 that no further changes will be necessary beyond those required to meet the development growth envisaged in the Core Strategy.

Background

Local government reorganisation in 1974 led to the creation of South Yorkshire County Council as the strategic planning authority which prepared an over-arching South Yorkshire Structure Plan. Approved in 1979, this illustrated the general extent of the Green Belt that would apply across Rotherham, Sheffield, Barnsley and Doncaster boroughs.

\(^1\) http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/planningandbuilding/ppg2
Abolition of the County Council in 1986 saw the transfer of strategic planning to Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council. A specific Green Belt boundary was prepared for Rotherham in its Green Belt Local Plan which was adopted in June 1990. The Green Belt boundary was then “rolled forward” into the Unitary Development Plan (UDP) which was, in turn, adopted in June 1999. The current Green Belt boundary has therefore been in place for 21 years.

**Existing Green Belt Boundary – Unitary Development Plan Strategy**

The boundary of Rotherham’s Green Belt was tightly drawn around the built-up areas of Rotherham to reinforce the regeneration strategy of the Unitary Development Plan and to prevent coalescence of the conurbations of South Yorkshire. The UDP was prepared in the aftermath of extensive steel and colliery closures which resulted in Rotherham having vast tracts of derelict and despoiled land and high unemployment levels.

The regeneration strategy of the Unitary Development Plan directed new development to these derelict areas, to replace jobs lost through restructuring of older manufacturing and energy industries. Another principal aim was to improve the environment, enabling Rotherham to compete both nationally and internationally in attracting inward investment.

This strategy proved so successful that the majority of derelict land has now been reclaimed and is once again in productive use or has been returned to a green after use.

**Localised Review of the Green Belt – Local Development Framework**

The effect of the success of the Unitary Development Plan’s regeneration strategy (of which a tight Green Belt boundary was critical) is that the need for future development land cannot be satisfied within Rotherham’s built-up areas.

In preparation of the Local Development Framework, the Council has surveyed over 600 sites within Rotherham Borough to identify capacity within settlements for new development and to consider how suitable these sites are for different types of uses. We know that there are now no longer many large previously developed sites available.

If we look at all the sites we have surveyed and identified as suitable for housing across Rotherham, it is clear that although we have capacity to meet the Core Strategy target of 12,750 homes by 2027, we have limited numbers of brownfield sites:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of site</th>
<th>Number of homes which could be developed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brownfield (i.e. previously developed)</td>
<td>5,351</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greenfield (including Green Belt sites)</td>
<td>20,208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed brownfield / greenfield</td>
<td>1,114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>26,673</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The housing and employment land targets for Rotherham being proposed in the Core Strategy requires the Council to consider the allocation of development sites on the edge of the main urban areas. In effect this means that Rotherham must undertake a localised Review of its Green Belt.
Green Belt National Planning Guidance

The starting point for any review of Green Belt is national Green Belt policy. Originally introduced in the 1930s in south-east England, the use of Green Belt policy to prevent unsustainable development in locations not consistent with sound planning principles became national policy in the 1950s. At that time strategic planning authorities were instructed to define Green Belts to achieve specific Green Belt purposes around specified towns and cities in accordance with Government Circular 42/55.

The popularity and success of Green Belts has resulted in them remaining a fundamental part of national planning policy as stated in Planning Policy Guidance Note (PPG) 2.

PPG 2 states that ‘the fundamental aim of Green Belt policy is to prevent urban sprawl by keeping land permanently open; the most important attribute of Green Belts is their openness. Green Belts can shape patterns of development at a sub-regional and regional scale, and help ensure that development occurs in locations allocated in development plans. They help to protect the countryside, be it in agricultural, forestry or other use and can assist in moving towards more sustainable patterns of urban development’.

PPG2 identifies the five key purposes of Green Belts as to:

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

Once identified, PPG2 provides guidance on the intended objectives of Green Belts, stating that they have a positive role to play in fulfilling the following:

- provide opportunities for access to the open countryside for the urban population;
- provide opportunities for outdoor sport and recreation near urban areas;
- retain attractive landscapes, and enhance landscapes, near to where people live;
- improve damaged and derelict land around towns;
- secure nature conservation interest; and
- retain land in agricultural forestry and related uses.

Once the general extent of a Green Belt has been approved it should be altered only in exceptional circumstances. Similarly, detailed Green Belt boundaries defined in adopted local plans, or earlier approved development plans, should be altered only exceptionally. Detailed boundaries should not be altered or development allowed merely because the land has become derelict.

The Impact of Potential Site Allocations on the Green Belt

The methodology that the Council has used to identify possible site allocations for inclusion in the LDF’s Sites and Policies (Issues and Options) Document is set out in an Appendix to that document. It is available to view at: www.rotherham.gov.uk/forwardplanning.
The Council has thoroughly assessed its current land supply by looking at all potential sites within existing built up areas and at land surrounding existing settlements. In identifying sites care was taken to exclude sites that do not relate well to existing settlements. Furthermore, sites were automatically excluded which were clearly in open countryside at distance from existing settlements.

Due to Rotherham’s tight Green Belt boundary, sites considered for allocation beyond existing settlements are inevitably Green Belt. Sites chosen as preferred for development by the Council are considered to be those that relate particularly well to existing settlements and are the most sustainable. Taken together it is considered they do not result in the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas as the sites are of such a size that they support the growth needs of the community where they are located and are well related to the existing fabric of the settlement and can be supported through existing social and community facilities and infrastructure.

The definition of defensible long term Green Belt boundaries that will be adopted via the Local Development Framework, as expounded in PPG2, will be determined by the proposed boundaries of the site allocations. These boundaries have been established by features including ridge lines, tree belts, woodland, field boundaries and sometimes roads. Exceptionally structural landscaping and planting may be required to function as Green belt boundaries where such features are not present.

Adherence to sustainable development principles ensures that any land proposed for release from Green Belt for potential development can be achieved in a way which:

- does not damage land with identified nature conservation value,
- does not promote the release of land that performs an important floodplain function and does not cause significant travelling costs; and
- is readily accessible from existing or easily extended facilities or services.

This wide ranging approach is reinforced by both Planning Policy Statement 1 (Delivering Sustainable Development) (PPS1) and Planning Policy Statement 3 (Housing) (PPS3), which state the importance of sustainability factors being taken into account.

The Council has prepared a strong evidence base to support its growth strategy and this evidence base has been used to guide the preparation of the Core strategy and to identify the settlements for potential future growth and to promote the sustainability of communities in the long term.

The Impact of Broad Areas for Growth on the Green Belt

The Core Strategy and emerging Sites and Policies Documents do promote three broad areas for growth and extension into the Green Belt from the larger towns and local centres to meet the needs of those communities. These have more potential to cause harm to the purposes of Green Belt and for this reason are considered further below.

Assessment against the purposes of National Green Belt Policy

- Purpose 1: “to check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas”; and
- Purpose 2: “to prevent neighbouring towns from merging into one another”.

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The Core Strategy and emerging Sites and Policies Documents promote three broad areas for growth and extensions into the Green Belt from the larger towns and local centres to meet the needs of those communities.

The first at Waverley involves redevelopment of land outside of the Green Belt that has been previously used by open cast coal mining. Planning permission for a new community for around 4,000 new homes has been granted on this site.

The remaining two broad areas for growth are at Bassingthorpe Farm, on the edge of Rotherham Urban Area, and at Dinnington / North Anston. Both are significant urban extensions into the Green Belt and both have been assessed for their sustainability credentials via an independent Sustainability Appraisal.

Neither are considered to represent unrestrictive sprawl of large built-up areas once the need for these sites has been accepted as fundamental to achieving the objectives of the Core Strategy. Both would inevitably lead to loss of the Green Belt but once the boundary is redefined the future protection of the remaining Green Belt would be prevented from unrestricted sprawl for the plan period.

Bassingthorpe Farm has the most potential to cause merging of neighbouring towns. At the scale of the wider South Yorkshire Green Belt this is not significant – coalescence with Sheffield or Barnsley settlements would not occur. Of more significance is the potential to cause coalescence of areas such as Greasbrough and Wingfield within areas such as Thornhill and Masbrough. There is no dispute that harm to the Green Belt would occur in this location. However, this harm needs to be considered in light of the fact that this urban extension would be tied closely into Rotherham urban area and will support the continuing renaissance of Rotherham Town Centre.

Furthermore, a linear Green Belt “wedge” would remain from the south-eastern edge of the urban extension at Thornhill to prevent the physical coalescence of the Wingfield, Greasbrough neighbourhoods with the urbanised industrial area of inner Rotherham and the existing residential areas at Thornhill and Masbrough. The retained Green Belt “wedge”, whilst much less than the existing would still be significant and be capable of performing as a meaningful green corridor from the wider countryside towards Rotherham Town Centre. This significant retained area of Green Belt will prevent Rotherham’s neighbourhoods from merging into one another.

The Borough-wide search for suitable sites in sustainable locations has revealed that there are few opportunities that will support the inner urban area of Rotherham in the same way that development at Bassingthorpe Farm will.

Bassingthorpe Farm has the ability of a potential new community to support the wider Rotherham Urban Area and Rotherham town centre, that will take advantage of existing community and social infrastructure in the first instance and will support the development of new social infrastructure where this is identified to be delivered in the future.

The Regional Strategy recognised that Rotherham Urban Area should meet the majority of the Borough’s growth needs. However, given the success of the regeneration strategy deployed in the Unitary Development Plan, and a subsequent
‘greenfield moratorium’ that introduced the requirement to build new houses on previously developed land in the first instance (introduced under PPG 3 and in operation in Rotherham between 7th June 2006 and 27th February 2008), there is little previously developed land within the built area remaining to be developed.

The Dinnington Anston urban extension promotes the development of around 700 new homes to the east of Dinnington. This locality provides the greatest accessibility links to the existing Dinnington town centre. It is closely related in topographical terms to existing development and does not promote the coalescence of Dinnington/Anston with any other settlement. Whilst the Sustainability Appraisal recognises that there are concerns relating to agricultural land quality in this area when compared to the alternative urban extension to the west of Dinnington/North Anston the extension to the east is preferred given the closer relationship of any potential future development with the existing settlement.

It is considered the Dinnington East urban area would not cause significant overwhelming harm to purposes 1 and 2 of national Green Belt policy. Like Bassingthorpe Farm there would be some significant harm to the Green Belt. However, the extension would not lead to the merging of neighbouring towns. It is also considered that the extension would not lead to unacceptable unrestricted sprawl because the extension can be well related to the existing settlement form and represent an acceptable rounding-off of the settlement.

- **Purpose 3**: “to assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment”.

The third purpose of Green Belts in national green belt policy is to assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment. Many of the points made above in respect of the first two purposes also apply to this purpose. Sites have been selected to be as close to existing settlements as possible and as discussed above all sites within open countryside were automatically excluded from further consideration.

There will inevitably be encroachment into existing countryside and Green Belt from the sites identified but as discussed above review of the Green Belt is considered unavoidable in Rotherham.

All local wildlife sites, Regionally Important Geological Sites, Sites of Special Scientific Interest and Ancient Woodland have received a high degree of protection in the site allocations identification exercise. The Council has undertaken considerable work on the identification of Green Infrastructure Corridors and a suitably worded policy is included within the Core Strategy to promote the identification of Green Infrastructure Corridors that will be an essential requirement of new development proposals. These corridors will provide opportunities for access to open countryside and they could also potentially provide opportunities for outdoor sport and outdoor recreation near urban areas. Green Infrastructure Corridors will fulfil a number of functions and this is clearly explained in the Core Strategy, Natural England’s Yorkshire & Humber Green Infrastructure Mapping Project and the South Yorkshire Green Infrastructure Study.

- **Purpose 4**: “to preserve the setting and special character of historic towns”.

The Green Belt will continue to preserve the setting and special character of villages within the Green belt by directing growth to the main urban areas. Only limited
development is envisaged in the larger villages outside of the Green Belt and particular care has been taken to avoid harm to the setting of historic areas of the Borough, be they designated or not as conservation areas, historic parks and gardens or listed buildings, etc.

The topography of the potential urban extension at Bassingthorpe Farm means that any new development will not impact on the historic conservation area within Rotherham Town Centre. The setting and special character of the Rotherham conservation area will be preserved and any significant impact upon the parkland setting of Wentworth Woodhouse will be avoided.

The Dinnington East urban extension is not considered to have impact upon historic areas or features.

- Purpose 5: “to assist in urban regeneration, by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land”.

The fifth purpose for including land in Green Belt, in respect of national policy, is to assist in urban regeneration, by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land. The Council is firmly of the opinion that its earlier Unitary Development Plan aided the regeneration of the Borough following the demise of the deep mine and steel industry. Significant tracts of vacant and derelict land have been reclaimed and brought back into a hard after-use to the extent that little remains. Nevertheless, the Council is keen to support ongoing urban regeneration of the Borough via the local application of Green Belt Policy.

The regeneration function of Green Belt will also be maintained by the promotion of the sequential release of sites and the use of phasing criteria relative to the supply of land for housing and employment. This will ensure the sequential release of previously developed land within existing settlements followed by sites that are sequentially preferable within communities before the release of sites on the edge of settlements. An appropriate policy (Policy CS5) has been included within the Core Strategy to promote the sequential release of sites and the development of previously developed land in the first instance where these are feasible and deliverable.

There are few significant sites remaining that have been previously used and are currently vacant and awaiting reclamation. There is also a need to ensure that sufficient employment land is identified to meet future economic requirements of the Borough and an up to date Employment Land Review was completed in 2010 to ensure that every potential site for either employment or housing uses has been identified.

**Green Belt Regional Planning Guidance**

The role of regional and strategic planning guidance is to set the framework for Green Belt policy and settlement policy, including the direction of long-term development. Once the general extent of a Green Belt has been approved, it is then the role of local development plans to identify the detailed boundaries.

Policy YH9 of the Regional Strategy for Yorkshire and the Humber (adopted May 2008) indicates that the general extent of the Green Belt within the Region should not be
changed. However, it does recognise that localised reviews may be necessary to deliver the Strategy's Core Approach.

The Government has announced its intention to abolish Regional Strategies and the housing requirements that these documents contain. It intends to do this through the Decentralisation and Localism Bill. It is anticipated that the Localism Bill will be enacted towards the end of 2011 or early 2012 and that the Regional Strategy target will not in future form part of the Borough's Development Plan. In anticipation of this, Rotherham's Core Strategy is proposing a locally determined target. However, although this is considerably lower than the centrally imposed target there is still a fundamental requirement to identify sufficient land to meet the growth strategy needs of the Borough by using land in existing Green Belt.

Whilst the Council must plan for future growth, it also needs to protect sensitive areas from development and ensure that the pattern of development promoted does not have a detrimental impact on sustainability and should not cause material harm to the fundamental aims of national Green Belt policy.

The starting point for identifying land outside existing settlements was Policy YH4 of the Regional Strategy. This policy set out the settlement hierarchy and indicated where new housing should be focussed. However, it is apparent from survey work undertaken in Rotherham that it will not be possible to accommodate even the reduced local growth strategy without urban extensions into the Green Belt.

**Thorpe Hesley**

Policy HG4.1 of the Unitary Development Plan allocated land at Thorpe Hesley for housing (Ref H6 - 600 dwellings). However, the present Sites and Policies DPD has significantly reduced the area of housing allocation to a site capable of providing 245 dwellings. In order to avoid future alterations to the Green Belt boundary, it is considered necessary to retain this area of undeveloped land as potentially meeting longer term development needs.

This area of "safeguarded land" will be subject to technical assessment and public consultation when the Core Strategy and Sites & Policies DPD are next reviewed, if consideration of development needs at that time indicate that additional land is needed in the area. In the intervening period, development would be restricted to that necessary for the operation of existing uses. This area of countryside will be protected for its own sake in accordance with Government guidance on the control of development in the countryside given in Planning Policy Statement 7 (2004) 'Sustainable Development in Rural Areas.

**Minor Green Belt boundary changes to correct drafting errors**

The difficulties and inconsistencies caused by the tightly drawn boundaries of the Green Belt around some parts of the Borough are recognised. The Green Belt in some locations follows irrational, arbitrary lines, or features on the Ordnance Survey mapping, which bears no relationship to circumstances locally or features on the ground.

Therefore, as part of the ongoing preparation of the Sites and Policies DPD, and specifically in the definition of a revised Green Belt boundary on the Proposals Map, it is also considered appropriate to make minor alterations to the Green Belt boundary during the review process, in order to remove irregularities and to take account of circumstances
on the ground. It should be noted that any changes will not be introduced to facilitate development or meet housing needs but to provide a realistic and pragmatic approach to the boundary of the Green Belt throughout the Borough.

Conclusion

The Council has identified the best and most sustainable sites to meet the Core Strategy’s housing and employment growth targets to 2027 and the recently completed Integrated Impact Assessment (including Sustainability Appraisal) supports the approach to new development adopted in the Local Development Framework (LDF). As part of LDF preparation, the Council is undertaking a localised Green Belt review using the methodology set out in the Sites and Policies (Issues and Options) Development Plan Document and to inform development of the Core Strategy.

The Council recognises that the identification of the Bassingthorpe Farm urban extension as a broad area for growth in the Core Strategy closes the gap between neighbourhoods within the wider Rotherham Urban Area. However, a Green Belt corridor has been retained that prevents the coalescence of the proposed urban extension with Thornhill and Masbrough.

Similarly whilst harm to Green Belt would occur via the Dinnington East urban extension the level of proposed development is considered necessary to achieve the Core Strategy’s growth strategy and on balance the minimal harm to the purposes of Green Belt is considered acceptable.

The potential for Green Belt release in Rotherham can be seen to relate to the Green Belt purposes established in national Planning Policy Guidance Note 2 (Green Belts) by:

- not promoting ribbon development to check the unrestricted sprawl of large built up areas (Purpose 1),
- applying proximity measures to ensure neighbouring areas are prevented from merging (Purpose 2),
- analysing nature and geological conservation interests to assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment (Purpose 3),
- seeking to minimise, and wherever possible, negate, visual intrusiveness upon the setting and character of historic areas looking particularly at designated conservation areas (Purpose 4).
- maintaining the Green Belt contributes to assisting in regeneration by encouraging development within the urban area (Purpose 5)

The Council believes that exceptional circumstances exist which support a localised review of the Rotherham Green Belt to help meet the growth strategy for the Borough. This review will continue and be informed by the 2011 consultation on the Draft Core Strategy and Sites and Policies Issues and Options DPD. As such Draft Core Strategy Policy CS7 states that “Detailed boundaries for the Green Belt will be shown on the Proposals Map which will accompany the Sites & Policies DPD.”