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SPICe Briefing

Green Belt Policy in Scotland

29 November 2010

10/85

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This briefing provides background information on Scotland's Green Belts and outlines current Scottish Government Green Belt policy. It goes on to look at how this national policy is interpreted at a local level, using the Edinburgh Green Belt as a case study



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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INTRODUCTION

This briefing provides background information on Scotland's Green Belts and outlines current Scottish Government Green Belt policy. It goes on to look at how this national policy is interpreted at a local level, using the Edinburgh Green Belt as a case study.

WHAT IS A GREEN BELT?

A Green Belt is an area of land in which development is strictly controlled so as to manage the boundaries of a town or city over the long term. The principle of designating a Green Belt is set out in a Structure Plan (which will be replaced by Strategic Development Plans in the four city regions of Aberdeen, Dundee, Edinburgh and Glasgow under reforms introduced by the Planning etc. (Scotland) Act 2006) along with strategic policies governing its operation and a broad outline of its boundaries. The exact boundary is defined in local plan(s) (which will be replaced by a local development plan). Outwith the city regions, the local development plan should establish the need for a green belt, identify specific boundaries and set out the policy for future development within it including the identification of appropriate uses. The purpose of a Green Belt, as outlined in the Scottish Planning Policy (Scottish Government 2010) is to:

- direct planned growth to the most appropriate locations and support regeneration,
- protect and enhance the quality, character, landscape setting and identity of towns and cities, and
- protect and give access to open space within and around towns and cities.

The purpose of a Green Belt is as a strategic planning tool, not to protect natural or scenic heritage. Other designations are specifically targeted at achieving those aims.

WHERE ARE SCOTLAND'S GREEN BELTS?

Green Belts are currently designated in:

- Aberdeen
- Greater Glasgow
- Ayr and Prestwick
- Clackmannanshire
- Edinburgh, East Lothian and Midlothian
- Falkirk and Grangemouth
- Stirling

A further three Green Belts have been established in Structure Plans, around Perth, St. Andrews and Dunfermline. The local development plans that will set out the detail of their boundaries have yet to be adopted by the relevant planning authorities.

SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT GREEN BELT POLICY

The Scottish Government sets out its policy on Green Belts in the [Scottish Planning Policy](#). This states:

Green belt designation should provide clarity and certainty on where development will and will not take place...Green belt designation should be used to direct development to

suitable locations, not to prevent development from happening. For towns and cities with a distinct character and identity that could be harmed by unplanned growth, the use of green belt designation and relevant policies may help to manage that growth more effectively.

However, the Scottish Planning Policy is clear that certain types of development can be accommodated within a Green Belt, stating:

Certain types and scales of development may be appropriate within a green belt, particularly where it will support diversification of the rural economy. These may include:

- development associated with agriculture, including the re-use of historic agricultural buildings,
- woodland and forestry, including community woodlands,
- horticulture, including market gardening and directly connected retailing,
- recreational uses that are compatible with an agricultural or natural setting, and
- essential infrastructure such as electronic communications infrastructure and electricity grid connections

The Scottish Planning Policy also makes it clear that certain other nationally important or essential developments may also be allowed within a Green Belt, indicating:

Where a proposal would not normally be consistent with green belt policy, it may still be considered appropriate either as a national priority or to meet an established need if no other suitable site is available.

In addition the Scottish Planning Policy states that the intensification of use of an existing development within a Green Belt, e.g. an expansion of Edinburgh Airport which is located within the Edinburgh Green Belt, may be permissible if the proposed development is of suitable scale and form.

CASE STUDY: THE EDINBURGH GREEN BELT

The Edinburgh Green Belt is Scotland's oldest, having been officially designated in 1957 by the local authorities with jurisdiction over the Lothian area. There was no formal structure in place for designating a Green Belt, so each local authority had to agree to incorporate the Green Belt's boundaries and appropriate policies within their respective development plans. After Local Government reorganisation in 1975, responsibility for the Green Belt fell within the jurisdictions of Edinburgh, East Lothian and Midlothian District Councils and the new Lothian Regional Council. Following the most recent round of local government reorganisation in 1996, responsibility for the Edinburgh Green Belt fell to the City of Edinburgh, East Lothian and Midlothian Councils. Co-ordinated action on the Green Belt is now agreed through the [Strategic Development Planning Authority for Edinburgh and South East Scotland](#) (SESplan).

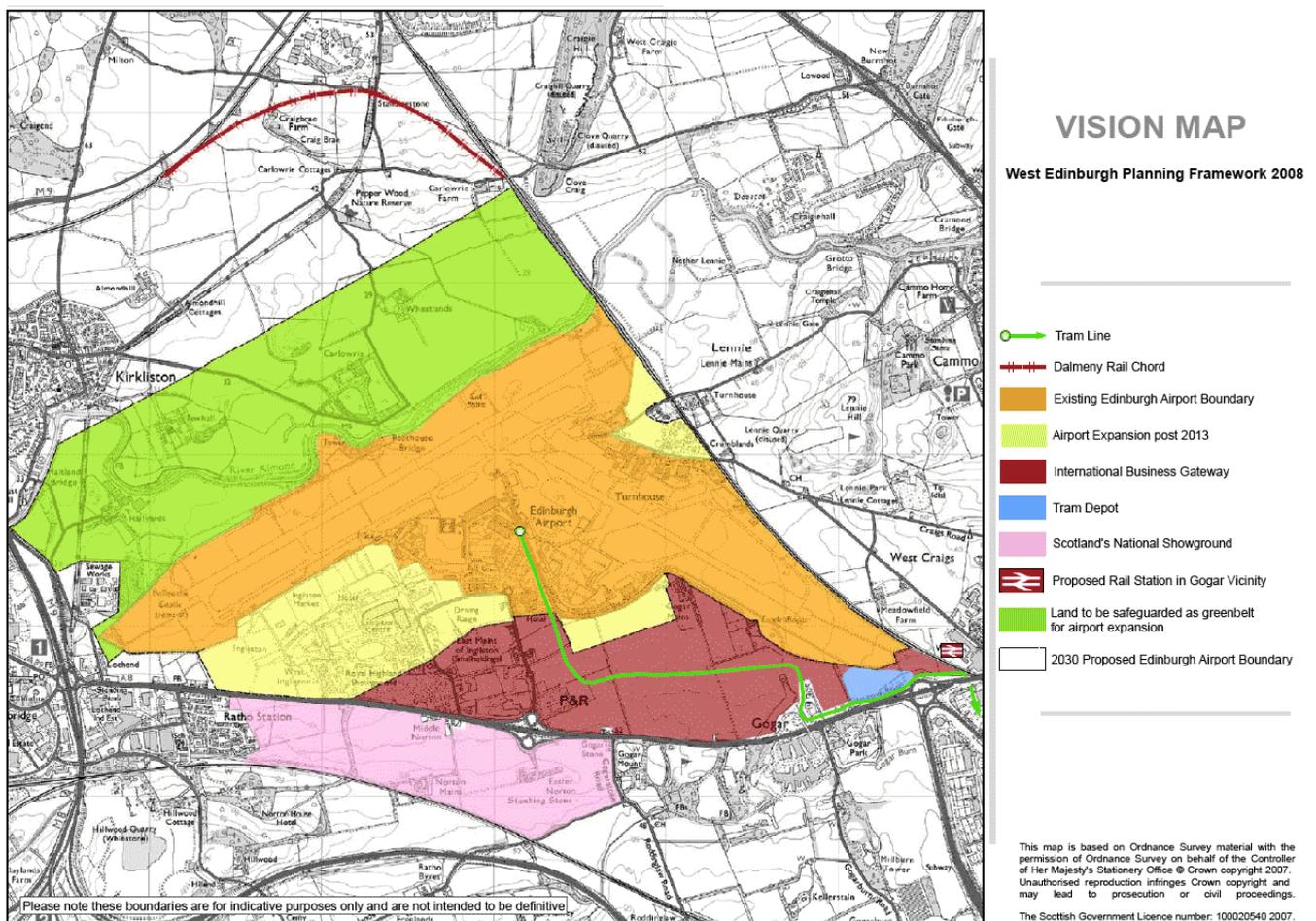
Strategic Green Belt Policies: National Planning Framework for Scotland 2 and the West Edinburgh Planning Framework

The area to the west of Edinburgh is covered by a unique planning document called [The West Edinburgh Planning Framework 2008](#) (Scottish Government, Scottish Enterprise, the City of Edinburgh Council and West Lothian Council 2008). Produced by the Scottish Government, Scottish Enterprise, the City of Edinburgh Council and West Lothian Council, the Framework

has the same status as the Scottish Planning Policy and its policies are a material consideration in development management decisions and a driver of policy in the forthcoming strategic and local development plans covering this area. The Scottish Government co-ordinated the development of the Framework to set out “a long-term strategic vision for West Edinburgh as an area considered to be nationally important in terms of economic development, global connectivity, transport and the environment” (Scottish Government 2008).

The Framework calls for the removal of sites from the Green Belt to the south of Edinburgh Airport to allow for its expansion to 2020 and also a site between the airport and the A8 for the development an International Business Gateway of “high quality, high value international business development” which could include hotels, conference facilities and business headquarters. The proposals set out in the Framework are illustrated in Map 1 below.

Map 1: West Edinburgh Planning Framework 2008 Vision Map



The [National Planning Framework for Scotland 2](#) (Scottish Government 2009) also highlights the Scottish Government’s support for the development of the International Business Gateway.

Strategic Green Belt Policies: The Edinburgh and Lothians Structure Plan

As explained above, the policies governing the operation of a Green Belt, and its broad boundaries are set out in the appropriate Structure Plan. In the case of Edinburgh this is [The Edinburgh and Lothians Structure Plan 2015](#) (East Lothian, Edinburgh, Midlothian and West Lothian Councils 2007). The broad boundaries of the Edinburgh Green Belt are set out in the [Key Diagram](#) which forms part of the Structure Plan. A key diagram is not a map and does not establish formal boundaries for any Structure Plan policy.

The policies governing the operation of the Edinburgh Green Belt are set out in the Structure Plan [Written Statement](#), which makes it clear that one of the plan's objectives is to "maintain a continuous Green Belt around the City". The Written Statement contains many references to the Edinburgh Green Belt within its descriptive text, as well as specific policies in the housing, economic development and environment chapters. However, the key policy is ENV2 in the environment chapter, which states:

ENV 2: Green Belt

- A) A continuous Green Belt will be maintained around Edinburgh for the following main purposes:
- a. to maintain the identity of the City by clearly establishing its physical boundaries and preventing coalescence;
 - b. to provide countryside for recreation; and
 - c. to maintain the landscape setting of the City.

Local plans should define Green Belt boundaries to conform to these purposes and, where appropriate, to protect the setting of neighbouring towns.

B) There is a presumption against development or changes of use in the Green Belt unless necessary for the purposes of agriculture, horticulture, forestry, countryside recreation, other uses appropriate to the rural character of the area, or operations covered by paragraph 4.13 and policies ECON3 and ECON4. Local plans may specify and justify any exceptions to national planning policy.

Policies ECON3 and ECON4 and paragraph 4.13 referred to in policy ENV2 relate to the established developments at Edinburgh Airport, Heriot-Watt University and the Royal Highland Showground plus proposed developments of a bio-medical research park at the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary and a biotechnology development at Roslin/Bush Estate.

Local Green Belt Policies: Local Plans

The broad policies establishing the Edinburgh Green belt set out in the Edinburgh and Lothians Structure Plan 2015 are refined in the relevant local plans produced by the City of Edinburgh, East Lothian and Midlothian Councils. The exact boundary of the Green Belt is set out on an Ordnance Survey map based on the local plan proposals map, which is an integral part of each local plan.

These policies, and the Edinburgh Green Belt boundary, are set out in the following adopted local plans:

- [Edinburgh City Local Plan](#) (City of Edinburgh Council 2010a), adopted 28 January 2010
- [Rural West Edinburgh Local Plan](#) (City of Edinburgh Council 2006), adopted 1 June 2006 (City of Edinburgh Council submitted a [Rural West Edinburgh Local Plan Alteration](#) (City of Edinburgh Council 2010b) to Scottish Ministers on 1 September 2010 for examination)
- [Midlothian Local Plan](#) (Midlothian Council 2008), adopted 23 December 2008
- [East Lothian Local Plan 2008](#) (East Lothian Council 2008), adopted 28 October 2008

The Edinburgh Green Belt does not extend to the West Lothian Council area.

Future Green Belt Policies: Strategic Development Plan

As part of its preparatory work on the first south-east Scotland Strategic Development Plan, which will supersede the Edinburgh and Lothians Structure Plan 2015, SESplan commissioned consultants to carry out a landscape review of the Edinburgh Green Belt. This review aimed to establish which parts of the Green Belt contribute most to preserving and enhancing the natural and built environment and the protection and provision of access to open space. The results of the [Edinburgh Green Belt Study](#) (Land Use Consultants and Carol Anderson 2008) were published during December 2008. SESplan summarises the result of this study in its [Main Issues Report](#) (SESplan 2010) as follows:

Overall, the Study shows that in the context of national planning policy, the general extent of the Green Belt surrounding Edinburgh is appropriate

The Main Issues Report is a consultation document produced by SESplan, which explains the context and key challenges facing the south-east of Scotland around the key areas of economy, population and households, transport and infrastructure, environment, resources and climate change and suggests how these challenges might be met. To assist the consultation process a series of questions were posed around preferred and alternative approaches to these issues. The consultation closed on 27 August 2010.

SESplan's preferred approach to Green Belt policy, set out in the Main Issues Report, was for "only limited Green Belt release" if required during the duration of the plan. The alternative approach, which is not supported by SESplan was "...for larger scale releases of land from the designation to accommodate further urban extensions and/or new settlements".

The next step in the plan-making process is the preparation of a Proposed Plan, due to be published for consultation in spring 2011.

Impact of the Edinburgh Green Belt on the Development of the City

The most comprehensive review of the effect of the Edinburgh Green Belt on the development of the city is set out in the Scottish Government's [Review of Green Belt Policy in Scotland](#) (Glen Bramley, Cliff Hague, Karryn Kirk, Alan Prior, Jeremy Raemaekers and Harry Smith (School of the Built Environment, Heriot-Watt University) with Andrew Robinson and Rosie Bushnell (Robinson Associates)2004). This concludes that:

The Edinburgh Green Belt has been in existence for nearly 50 years, over which its general belt-shape and area have remained in essence little altered, though there has been some 'outward migration' of inner and outer boundaries, as well as the addition of green wedges into the city. It has been under constant review, as well as subject to changes in its administration due to local government reorganisations. However, it has come to be perceived by the public as a stable statutory designation that in theory prevents all development, albeit under constant threat from 'erosion' through development.

During the period of increased growth in Edinburgh in the 1990s, the Green Belt is seen to have taken on an added function of encouraging sustainable development through forcing developments onto brownfield sites and thus strengthening Edinburgh's 'compact city' character. However, development pressure continues, and questions around future Green Belt policy are emerging as brownfield sites are used up. Pressure on the actual Green Belt is evident in the planning applications that are submitted, as well as in objections to recent local plans. The interviewed local authorities involved are aware that new options need to be considered, in order to allow development to continue in a

sustainable way, but have different views on what these could be. Other stakeholders also have different views on preferred options. At one end of the range of options is continuing current policy, which may preserve the setting and identity of current settlements, but may lead to development leapfrogging the Green Belt and increasing commuting. At the other end is developing an approach based on green wedges and transport corridors, which may allow the outlying authorities to benefit from the economic development generated by Edinburgh, but would lead to coalescence. There is no unanimous view on these and intermediate options among the different local stakeholders, and any proposed way forward should aim to maximise acceptability to all parties involved.

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