

# **COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE**

Wednesday 21 December 2005

Session 2

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## COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE

### 30<sup>th</sup> Meeting 2005, Session 2

#### CONVENER

\*Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)

#### DEPUTY CONVENER

Euan Robson (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (LD)

#### COMMITTEE MEMBERS

\*Scott Barrie (Dunfermline West) (Lab)  
\*Cathie Craigie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)  
\*Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP)  
\*Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green)  
\*Mr John Home Robertson (East Lothian) (Lab)  
\*Tricia Marwick (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)  
\*Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

#### COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTES

Shiona Baird (North East Scotland) (Green)  
Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con)  
Christine May (Central Fife) (Lab)  
Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)  
Ms Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP)

\*attended

#### THE FOLLOWING GAVE EVIDENCE:

Jonathon Hall (Scottish Rural Property and Business Association)  
John Inman (Scottish Society of Directors of Planning)  
Deryck Irving (Greenspace Scotland)  
Michael Levack (Scottish Building)  
Allan Lundmark (Homes for Scotland)  
Dr Alastair Macbeth (Scottish Green Belts Alliance)  
Brian McAuley (Scottish Society of Directors of Planning)  
Douglas Murray (Association of Scottish Community Councils)  
David Rice (Rural Scotland)  
Andrew Robinson (Scottish Planning Consultants Forum)  
John Smith (Scottish Planning Consultants Forum)  
Helen Todd (Ramblers Association)  
Graham U'ren (Royal Town Planning Institute in Scotland)

#### CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Steve Farrell

#### SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Katy Orr

#### ASSISTANT CLERK

Jenny Goldsmith

#### LOCATION

Committee Room 4



## Scottish Parliament Communities Committee

*Wednesday 21 December 2005*

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 09:30*]

### Item in Private

**The Convener (Karen Whitefield):** I open the Communities Committee's 30<sup>th</sup> meeting of 2005 and remind everyone present that mobile phones should be turned off. We have received apologies from Euan Robson, who cannot be here for the start of the meeting.

Agenda item 1 is consideration of whether to take in private item 4, which is the committee's approach to the Planning etc (Scotland) Bill. As no one wishes to comment on that proposition, do we agree to take item 4 in private?

**Members** *indicated agreement.*

## Green Belts (Draft Scottish Planning Policy 21)

09:31

**The Convener:** Item 2 is draft Scottish planning policy 21, which is on green belts. The committee will hear evidence from three panels on the draft policy, which proposes changes in the operation of green-belt policy. During the Scottish Executive's consultation, several key issues were raised. The evidence session will allow the committee to hear views before the Deputy Minister for Communities appears before us on 18 January next year to answer questions on how the Executive intends to respond to the consultation.

I welcome the first panel. We are joined by John Inman, who is the City of Edinburgh Council's planning strategy manager, and Brian McAuley, who is from East Renfrewshire Council's planning and regeneration services. Mr Inman and Mr McAuley represent the Scottish Society of Directors of Planning. We are also joined by Graham U'ren, who is the director of the Royal Town Planning Institute in Scotland; by Andrew Robinson, who is the chairman of the Scottish planning consultants forum; and by John Smith, who is its former chairman. I thank you for joining us.

I will start by asking a general question. What criteria do local authorities use when reviewing green-belt boundaries?

**John Smith (Scottish Planning Consultants Forum):** I suggest that somebody from a local authority should kick off the answers.

**Brian McAuley (Scottish Society of Directors of Planning):** When we in East Renfrewshire produced our local plan, we considered the uses that we felt were appropriate in the green belt and in the urban area. Broadly, those uses follow the designated green belt uses that are outlined in the draft SPP. We examined closely the detailed boundary of the green belt and focused on defining factors—the strong features that help to define the green belt's boundary. That was done through site surveys of the green belt by walking round it and looking at its boundaries.

**The Convener:** Is that process relatively easy? Do communities express concerns and differ on where boundaries are set, or are communities generally happy with the boundaries that local authorities define?

**John Inman (Scottish Society of Directors of Planning):** In my experience, communities have accepted the approaches that we use. Mr McAuley's methodology is applied elsewhere.

The word that we tend to employ is “defensible”. We look for defensible boundaries, which must meet the criteria that are set out in the existing green belt circular 24/1985, which relates to the landscape setting of the city, coalescence and protection of land for recreational and other uses.

In our experience in Edinburgh and the south-east of Scotland, communities have generally accepted how we have gone about defining green-belt boundaries using the methodology that Mr McAuley outlined.

**Andrew Robinson (Scottish Planning Consultants Forum):** Planning consultants see things from a slightly different angle—we see the green belt in its current format, although we are here today to talk about a future format. In its current format, the green belt is potentially, or actually, a defensive mechanism that gives considerable security to communities in—dare one say it?—resisting change. There is a fear of change, and our profession is increasingly facing the challenge of finding the best way to manage that change.

**John Smith:** I have no intention of disagreeing with my colleagues; their processes are totally correct. I do, however, represent a wider spectrum of people that includes clients who wish to take issue with green-belt boundaries. I have been involved with local planning inquiries in reporting on-site to inquiry reporters in industrial areas that have green belt running through the middle, but in which the justification for the position of the green-belt boundary has been entirely unclear. Instances such as that call into question the logical definition of boundaries. I agree entirely with John Inman’s view that, if we define green belts with defensible boundaries that are clear and understood, we will all be in a much better position.

**Graham U’reen (Royal Town Planning Institute in Scotland):** The convener has asked the question that lies at the heart of the practical business of planning for green belts. It is very hard to answer the question without in the first place understanding exactly the purpose of a green belt. One of the big issues is how the public comprehend what we are trying to achieve through green belts. We cannot just go and look at the countryside surrounding a conurbation and, based on its appearance, make a decision on whether or not to make it a green belt, as opposed to where the boundary should go. We need to consider the role of the green belt in the context of how the conurbation functions. From that point, we can develop a notion of what we are trying to do with the green belt.

If we are not only to regard the green belt as a prescription for a piece of land but also to consider its role in juxtaposition with what we are trying to do for the related urban area—in other words,

restraining the urban area’s outward growth in the interests of regeneration, at least until its capacities are reached, whereupon further land might have to be released—we must understand how issues of pressure and land release work, not just in the local area, but within the whole conurbation. It is within that wider context that we then must then apply certain criteria.

**The Convener:** Should the Scottish Executive issue a planning advice note that outlines the procedures that are to be used in reviewing green-belt boundaries? Would that be helpful or necessary?

**John Smith:** To echo what Graham U’reen has just described, it is not just a case of reviewing the procedures for boundaries, but of reviewing the function of the green belt. In my opinion, although the green belt was originally in a logical form for constraining or directing growth to the right locations—which is what I think we are still about—it has grown, so that vast tracts of our countryside are now covered without there being a need for such limitation.

I return to the questions of what the green belt is for and what functions we want it to have. We should ensure that those functions and activities are carried out in the right locations. If draft SPP 21 can provide guidance for a flexible approach that would allow green belts to be maintained in the right format, I will have no difficulty with it.

**Brian McAuley:** There may be advantage in advice being given on how to define green-belt boundaries, but there are not many differences in how different authorities go about the process. The key differences relate to the definition of areas for growth; there are big differences in how authorities approach that process and set criteria for defining areas of growth. We experienced that when we produced our local plan, because as part of our green-belt review we proposed a system for identifying the most suitable areas for growth. Our system was devised in-house. Other authorities use different systems, so I would certainly welcome guidance and advice on the matter so that identification of areas for expansion could be done more consistently throughout Scotland.

**Graham U’reen:** I am slightly reluctant to have more such guidance, although, as Brian McAuley said, there is always some value in it. I am reluctant largely because a lot of Scottish planning policy is about handing the baton on to local authorities, which have considerable discretion as to how to apply national policy locally. Whether or not to have a green belt is still a matter to be tested through the statutory development plan process, if we are to be able to take a wider strategic view in the current structure plan, or in the city region strategic plan in the future.

The point that I am trying to make is that the green-belt issue will probably be at the heart of how effective our plan-led system will be in the future. We want that system to be more effective, so getting green belt right, because it is a long-term concept, is important and will allow us to test how well we can develop a plan-led system. There are benefits in such a system, including long-term stability, being able to trust the system and being able to ensure that we know that we have the land supply for development without constantly eroding established policies. Most important would be the benefit of being able to prepare a plan by consulting the public even better than we do and in such a way as to establish the plan as an authoritative document.

My inclination is that we should put more effort into establishing the process of preparing development plans on the basis of creating more confidence and trust, so that local authorities can use their discretion to apply policy criteria. That said, we should examine issues that require further procedural guidance.

Paragraph 16 of the consultation draft, on boundaries, states:

"The green-belt boundary should be drawn to accommodate planned long-term growth and avoid the cumulative erosion of its integrity through the granting of individual planning permissions. Inner boundaries should not, therefore, be drawn too tightly."

That has raised a question in all our minds. A local plan that makes land-supply provision for only the next five, seven or even 10 years may not allow for development of the boundary beyond that timescale, so we could be left in a vacuum with regard to the inner boundary. We have asked the Executive to be much more explicit about how to handle such situations; if that requires procedural guidance, we should get that.

**Andrew Robinson:** I endorse the point that Graham U'ren has made about the importance of development plans; before we came here today, John Smith and I were talking about that. We are well aware that the Planning etc (Scotland) Bill has just reached the public domain, and we are firmly of the view that a lot of the Government's thinking that is coming through in draft SPP 21 will find its true place and achieve its aspiration only within a new style of development plan that is able to engage communities in the process whereby policy is formulated and expressed. We see green-belt policy being reformed in that context: it needs to be reformed, but the debate that will allow that to be addressed relates to reform of development plans.

09:45

**Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** That conveniently takes us on to my question.

Paragraph 12 of the draft policy states:

"Most settlements do not need green belts",

and continues by saying that

"Ministers do not expect to see many new green belts being designated."

As I read the draft policy last night, I wondered about the future of green belts. I am not entirely sure that I agree with Graham U'ren that the policy will bring long-term stability, although I am sure that he will try to convince me that I have read it wrong. How do the witnesses see the 20-year timeframe for green-belt boundaries tying in with the five-year lifespan of development plans, particularly given paragraph 24, which states that

"Where a proposed use would not normally be consistent with green belt designation"

the green belt can be overruled in exceptional cases? I am not entirely sure that green-belt designations will be worth the paper that they are written on.

The written submission by the Scottish Society of Directors of Planning states:

"the suggestion that inner boundaries should not be drawn too tightly ... will place pressure on the development plan process to ensure the phased release of sites that is co-ordinated with infrastructure delivery."

I do not see the hard and fast green belt that has been talked about. I see something that is totally flexible that will last for five—not 20—years and which will have inner boundaries that are wholly flexible in relation to development need. Is my reading wrong or right?

**Brian McAuley:** Green-belt designation normally comes from the strategic planning perspective of structure plans, which are for the longer term in that they have a 20-year horizon. They provide a framework for growth, expansion and containment in an area and offer long-term stability within which local plans define the details of green-belt boundaries.

A misconception has arisen in the eyes of the public that green belts are permanent features, but the planning profession has never thought that; we have always held the view that scope exists for changing green belts in exceptional circumstances. However, if we do not maintain the long-term stability of green belts, the danger is that the basic strategies for growth and expansion in particular areas will be undermined by incremental growth in areas that have not been identified for expansion. We must ensure that green belts, while not being permanent, look to the longer term.

Structure plans can take that longer-term perspective, but other strategy documents, such as local housing strategies, cannot. The need for affordable housing does not allow that perspective

to be taken in some instances. Therefore, flexibility must be built into the system to allow us to accommodate those needs. That can be managed effectively without undermining the basic concepts, principles and purposes of green belts.

**Mary Scanlon:** I find the issue difficult. Given that flexibility has existed in green-belt designations in the past where there were exceptional needs, and given the proposed flexibility in relation to inner boundaries and the statement in paragraph 24 of the draft policy, what new measures in the policy will protect green belts?

**Brian McAuley:** A new feature is the emphasis on green belts being used more proactively in defining settlement strategies, which is mentioned at the beginning of the draft policy. Another new feature is that the policy tries to encourage a more proactive approach to enhancing and improving green belts and to using them positively to serve the communities that they surround. Those important aspects of the draft SPP will add strength to the system.

An issue arises about the proposal not to draw boundaries too tightly, which gives me cause for concern, because it could undermine some basic principles of green belts. Once the strategy and long-term areas for expansion and containment have been defined, it will be important that the green-belt boundary be clearly drawn and strictly adhered to as far as possible, to ensure that it endures for the period of the plan. However, circumstances can change, so the system must have a degree of flexibility built into it to allow changing needs to be taken into account.

**John Inman:** I would not want the comments in the SSDP's submission to obscure the fact that we welcome the Executive's approach and its genuine attempts to give green belts a degree of permanence. The Executive supports that principle and has gone quite a long way in its attempts.

I do not regard the issue of the inner boundary as being about flexibility. The problem is the uncertainty over land that is released but is not yet ready for development—land that has been de-zoned from the green belt but is given a status of "not yet ready". The land will be used in the future once other things have happened; for example, after brownfield land has been used or when infrastructure is ready.

Planning authorities may, however, find it difficult to get the phasing right. Challenges will undoubtedly be made by the development industry, which will suggest that the land, because it has been de-zoned, is in principle available for development. The developers will say that it is just a matter of timing; they will give us reasons for

using the land now and we will give them reasons for leaving it until later. We could end up in a long string of appeals. Appeals are, of course, where the planning system breaks down. We have to try to avoid that.

The Scottish Society of Directors of Planning would like the Executive to take a firmer line on de-zoned land, or white land or whatever you want to call it. We are looking for comfort; we hope that the Executive will support us in its policy statements and documents, and that it will support reporters at planning appeals. The planning authority has to be able to say, "This is a question of phasing, and the phasing is set out in the development plan. All the statutory processes have been gone through, and others have offered input to that. It's now a statutory phasing plan and must be supported." That is the comfort that the society is looking for. The concept of having a firmer and longer-term green belt is one that we support.

**Graham U'ren:** I entirely agree with John Inman's concern about handling long-term release of land. As soon as land is identified for long-term release, there will be pressure to bring the release date forward. If we develop a good plan-led system, we should be able to cope with such pressure. We hope that planning reform will make that leap and allow us to handle the long-term release of land much better. If it does not make that leap, the green belt may be eroded.

A settlement strategy that wraps up the business of green belt is about more than how much land is needed and when, and what market needs have to be taken into account. A strategy is about how places work, particularly in the context of sustainable development. Sustainable communities are not just communities that have enough land released to provide for all needs; we have also to consider access, how far people have to travel and where the jobs and services are. Such criteria determine not only how much land is released, but the shape of communities and, for example, the relationship of communities within a communication system. We should consider such criteria when we consider where to release land in the future. If green-belt land is to be released, that sort of logic should be applied. We should not simply say, "We need a bit more land. Where can we find it?"

The other big question is whether we should bring co-ordination of infrastructure into the system more, so that we can control when land is released. We should not just identify what land we need, but should release it where and when we need it, to help to support a sustainable communities strategy.

**Mary Scanlon:** You will understand my confusion when I read in paragraph 31 of draft SPP 21 that



"Green belts ... once in place, should be robustly protected",

but then I read in paragraph 16 that, to allow for phased release,

"Inner boundaries should not ... be drawn too tightly."

I am sure you appreciate that that is slightly confusing.

Do the witnesses on the panel have any views on the use of green belt to prevent urban coalescence?

**John Smith:** Do you mind if I link the two issues together and try to resolve them?

**Mary Scanlon:** Please do—I would appreciate that.

**John Smith:** Within a number of authorities, the green-belt policy and the definition of green belt are seen as constraints to encourage urban regeneration. I have no difficulty with that. When we seek to accommodate growth, my preference is to ensure that green belts are, as you say, robust, defensible and long term. I find, however, that certain authorities just identify the urban edge and say that everything beyond it is green belt, whether it merits it or not. I was involved recently in a case that went all the way through a local plan inquiry, in which the local authority identified vacant urban derelict land as green belt because it saw it as the end of the urban area, without thinking about the benefits that development could bring and which would enhance the area.

I want draft SPP 21 to allow flexibility in the system, but also to ensure that the green belts that are defined are long term and robust. We will, thereby, know where to stop and how to address the concern about coalescence. We will know where communities potentially can grow to. Because of the intrinsic value of the land on the periphery, we will know where we want the communities to stop. We will, taking everybody's comments into account, ensure that we have flexibility to develop in the right places to create sustainable communities.

**Andrew Robinson:** You will be aware from our written response that the Scottish Executive commissioned a research project in advance of preparing the draft SPP. Within the research team, which was headed by Professor Bramley, there was a lengthy debate about whether the phrase "green belt" was a misnomer when we are talking about proactivity. A belt implies a corset. As John Smith said, it implies a constraining mechanism, which might bear little relationship to the natural organic requirements of a city or town to change with time on the basis of sustainability principles to do with public transport and ease of access. You might end up with a situation in which the very policy that is being presented runs against the

natural forces for change that require to be managed and accommodated.

As a research team, we proposed a two-tier arrangement for green belt, but that has found no place in draft SPP 21, although in my view—maybe I would say this—there is considerable merit in considering that possibility further. If we get the right sort of development plan mechanism within which our view of a reformed green belt can find a more comfortable home, we will be unlikely to end up with a corset. I suggest that the corset has outlived its usefulness. It has been useful, and it has been with us for a long time, but it needs to be rethought.

**Mary Scanlon:** I will leave it at that, but if you are thinking about a corset to protect something robustly, you cannot have bulges here, there and everywhere. That is basically what we have in the draft policy, which states that

"Green belts ... should be robustly protected"

but which on the other hand also says that we have the "phased release" of sites, and bulges here, there and everywhere. From a female point of view, I can tell you that you cannot have a corset and bulges at the same time.

**John Smith:** Just to add to the analogy—

**Tricia Marwick (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP):** No, stop now.

**Cathie Craigie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab):** How can I follow that? It is difficult to link to Mary Scanlon's bulges.

I will move on to rural areas. Paragraph 20 of the draft policy states:

"There is a strong presumption against new development in the green belt."

It also recognises that there has to be room for diversification within rural communities, perhaps where there is less farming than before. Has the right balance been struck between protecting the green belt and allowing rural development?

10:00

**John Smith:** No, but if we were to head to the right advice in draft SPP 21, the answer would be yes.

At the moment, certain authorities look on the green belt as the fallback or safeguarded position and have tight criteria in which development can be allowed. Those development criteria usually still hinge on agricultural or forestry use.

I echo the sentiment that we should encourage flexibility, but I have on numerous occasions come across planning authorities translating the letter rather than the spirit of the law. Individuals have wanted to reconstruct their properties in the

countryside to house their businesses, but green-belt policy has not technically allowed that, so they have had to win planning permission at appeal. That cannot be right. We must get the green-belt policy right in order to provide the flexibility that will allow rural communities to grow as correctly and appropriately as possible.

**John Inman:** I agree that the current green-belt circular is difficult for planning authorities to implement when they are considering small-scale, incremental and minor developments in the green belt. The strict interpretation of the circular could rule out an attic extension and a range of other very small developments that would not impact on the green belt in a way that the policy is intended to control. For that reason, we have in my area developed a policy that allows a de minimis amount of development.

Draft SPP 21 is a move in the right direction because it says that it is for authorities to identify in their development plans appropriate uses of the green belt. That is the right position because it gives planning authorities the opportunity to consider to what extent they wish to permit minor development, farm diversification or other small-scale activities that it would be unreasonable to prevent.

Planning authorities should be allowed to get the balance right in their areas. There might be a case for being more restrictive in areas that are under intense development pressure than in areas where the pressure is not quite so intense and a slightly more relaxed policy would be appropriate.

**Graham U'ren:** The principle of having some positive prescription about how the green belt should be managed is an essential part of the package, but we have—because of changes in agriculture—to move forward in our decisions about what uses for the green belt are regarded as appropriate. It is important to have notions of what is appropriate for the green belt.

Some of the more successful exercises, such as green-space management, tend to be forgotten about in all of this. I know of a major green-space management initiative in the Glasgow and west of Scotland conurbation that has been in place in various shapes or forms for nearly 20 years. It is based on river valleys, and provides a superb configuration for a way in which green belt can be managed. That initiative takes a green-wedge approach. The river valleys are a specific kind of asset that lend themselves not only to the concept of green belt but to positive use.

Whether it is for agriculture, informal recreation or other uses, we need to take a more proactive view of how we manage green belt. That has to be connected to the planning process. The matter goes to the heart of planning reform to bring

planning back to the centre—rather than keeping it at the top—to hold things together better. It must be resourced better so that planners are not just responsible for preparing a plan but have—through the action programmes that the Executive proposes in the bill—a responsibility to work with partners on proactive programmes. They have to make proposals in the plans and ensure that management mechanisms of different kinds are in place. If other people are not doing that, planners should be resourced and empowered to do it. There are some good examples from the past, but nowhere near enough. There is an opportunity.

**Brian McAuley:** It is recognised by authorities that green belts are living things, that communities live in them and that they need to change and to cope with the pressures of new development. Green belts are not cast in stone. Sufficient guidance is available to authorities to allow them to develop their own policies to allow for change to take place in their green belts. Most authorities have a green-belt policy that contains a designation within which there is a suite of policies that allow for new development to take place. That development should maintain the life of the green belt for the uses that have been set out for it.

**Cathie Craigie:** Draft SPP 21 lists appropriate uses for green-belt land, which seem to be like the previous uses. Is the list right and useful, given the comments that Graham U'ren made? Might it constrain local authorities?

**Brian McAuley:** The list is appropriate as far as it goes, but other uses for green belt need to be on that list, such as mineral workings, for example. There is scope for accommodating such development. The list is not exclusive, but it enshrines the key objectives of the green belt, which are to provide opportunities for outdoor recreation, agriculture, forestry and for the protection of the landscape. Such activities are fundamental to the preservation of the green belt. However, other uses need to be accommodated in certain circumstances.

**Cathie Craigie:** Draft SPP 21 seems to say that we have to look to rural communities and the uses there. However, the list of appropriate uses does not seem to allow for such rural uses—it would not allow extraction of sand and gravel, for example, so a local authority might refuse permission for such an activity if it consulted draft SPP 21. Are we being realistic? Is the Scottish Executive really allowing farming communities to examine other ways of making a living while protecting the environment?

**John Smith:** Guidance on what is allowed without the right caveats for flexibility tends to limit the opportunities for innovative change. I have already notified the Scottish Executive of two examples that I believe are missing. First, there is

no reference to improved road or rail connections. Road improvements are being promoted by the Scottish Executive all the time, and it is more than likely that some of them will run through the green belt, but the list contains no allowance for such improvements.

That is not the only issue. There is nothing about moving towards sustainable energy on a community basis, and a range of renewable energy policies could be ignored if the regime is too tight. I want flexibility to accommodate the innovation and changes that are coming from other parts of the Scottish Executive. Wording that would allow such flexibility could, however, in turn create problems in trying to run a regime that protects the green belt.

**John Inman:** Perhaps all that is needed is more cross-referencing. There is Scottish Executive guidance on major developments such as in transport, minerals and renewable energy, so maybe we need clearer guidance that would allow the reader to see how policies on those issues relate to one another and how they join up.

**Mr John Home Robertson (East Lothian) (Lab):** From the perspective of areas outwith the cities, it can sometimes appear that green belts offer protection, privileges and rights to cities while imposing duties and burdens on neighbouring areas. Then again, perhaps I would say that.

Does the policy on the redevelopment of existing developments or brownfield sites in the green belt strike the correct balance between development and protection of the green belt?

Some years ago, there was a proposal in my part of the world for a low-density, high-amenity science park, which would have created valuable jobs in a depressed area that happens also to be in the Edinburgh green belt. The proposal provoked howls of protest from the Edinburgh establishment and was bombed out because of the green-belt regulations. Many of us from outside Edinburgh thought that it would have been appropriate to take a more flexible and pragmatic approach. What do you think about that? Is there any prospect of a more pragmatic approach under the current proposals?

**John Inman:** Perhaps I can answer that from the Edinburgh perspective. A good example of a pragmatic approach is the approach that was taken to the new Royal Bank of Scotland headquarters, which was developed on a brownfield site in the green belt. The planning guidance at the time did not support that type of development, but the City of Edinburgh Council took a pragmatic approach, considered all the angles and decided that it was in the city's interests—and indeed, in the national interest—for that development to proceed.

The Scottish Society of Directors of Planning makes the general observation that, notwithstanding the pragmatic approach that was taken in those exceptional circumstances, the guidance could be clearer—the wording seems to be rather open-ended. There should perhaps be a presumption in favour of the redevelopment of existing institutions in the green belt that are no longer needed, although the society's concern is that those developments might not always be in the right places. There might be sustainability issues and a conflict with SPP 17, which requires development to be well located in terms of public transport and sustainable access. The guidance should not contain an open-ended statement that such development will automatically be regarded favourably. There are cases in which it should be regarded favourably—the Royal Bank of Scotland headquarters is one—but from some of our members' perspectives, the wording is too open-ended.

**Mr Home Robertson:** Do the other witnesses have any thoughts on appropriate development within green belts?

**Graham U'Ren:** Whether or not we use the word "pragmatic", we must not leave the impression of hypocrisy. I do not read the guidance in draft SPP 21 to mean that major proposals—such as a technology park or an organisation's headquarters—should be considered only when the planning application comes in. My reading of draft SPP 21 is that we should provide for such projects in the review of the development plan so that there can be a full public debate about the principles rather than the public being faced with a fait accompli or a gauntlet being thrown on the table.

The case for or against proposed developments should be thrashed out in the context of making a plan for a whole area. There are plenty of redundant sites whose future is to be discussed, so innovative ideas will emerge. A proposal will be innovative in the eyes of the applicant, but we need to know the views of the community and the wider public. We should discuss the matter dispassionately and we should determine whether the case can be made before the planning application comes along.

**John Smith:** I agree. We have a plan-led system and if we get the plan right, we will identify the right locations for sustainable development and get the green belt right. At the moment, the green belt has blanket coverage and there is no accurate description of its boundaries and purpose. If there are brownfield sites within a well-defined green belt, the local plan should indicate the appropriate uses for those locations.

**Mr Home Robertson:** To return to the theme of pragmatic decision making, surprises can happen

that nobody thought about when the plan was written or the green-belt boundaries were drawn. We need to enable local authority planners and the Scottish Executive to make appropriate decisions. If something closes down and a site becomes available for redevelopment, it is helpful to be able to apply common sense. Will the proposals make it possible to do that?

**Andrew Robinson:** I recognise some familiar themes behind that question. My view is that we should go back to the review of development plans that is taking place.

Unfortunately we have got into a bad habit. Green-belt policy as it has been applied brings with it a culture, or way of approaching issues, that often substitutes a knee-jerk reaction—"Thou shalt not develop"—for what should be a thought-through assessment of what is possible and achievable without the world ending tomorrow.

10:15

**Brian McAuley:** I was a bit concerned about draft SPP 21 giving undue encouragement to the establishment of non-conforming uses on what is described as "institution grounds". The difficulty with that is that some such grounds are quite remote from existing communities, which can lead to unsustainable development. I agree entirely with my colleagues that the plan-led approach is best for securing long-term sustainable development.

There are other uses for the green belt that are not related to institutions. For example, industrial areas fall out of use and need to be reused for other purposes, but it is important that those are the right purposes and that redevelopment of such sites does not lead to an unsustainable situation in which a housing development is suddenly located in a remote area with no access to schools, shops or other community facilities.

**Mr Home Robertson:** Do any of the panellists have thoughts about the proposal for more green belts around towns that do not have them at the moment?

**John Smith:** I do not know of any that are being considered at the moment. Some authorities are thinking about removing their green belts, but I say again that it is about the local plan and the development plan process. They take the community and its requirements into account and if a green belt is required, that will be considered through the plan process.

**Graham U'ren:** Sometimes when we are looking at protecting areas around towns other than the big conurbations, we are not looking at a prima facie case for a green belt; we are simply looking at the right prescription for that area,

whether it is landscape protection or better use through recreation. If the land is valued as an asset, it should be designated in a way that reflects the value of that asset. Too often, green belt has been used as some sort of blanket approach.

There is something in the draft SPP that suggests that even within existing green belts we should identify areas that perform certain functions or are valued for certain reasons. I also suggest that where the core value of a landscaped setting is established in one part of the green belt—the edge of the Pentlands, for example—or where one aspect is valued for informal recreation, such as river valleys, they should form the permanent parts of the green belt.

The more that can be done to attach value to the asset, the more confident we can be about the long-term value of the green belt. If a blanket prescription on restraint of development is planned, that does not explain to people what the green belt is all about. It is difficult for people to make the connection between green belt and urban regeneration. The green belt is not a panacea for protecting a bit of countryside.

**Mr Home Robertson:** Are there any other major issues that have not been covered in this session? Speak now, or forever hold your peace.

**Brian McAuley:** There is one point that we have not touched on in any real detail. One of the green-belt policy's key objectives is to protect and enhance the character and landscape setting of towns. It is important that authorities have a clear understanding of the landscape qualities and character of their green belts.

In East Renfrewshire, we recently carried out a detailed study of the green belt that looked at its landscape character, quality, visual qualities, and its functionality in terms of the green belt's purpose. The Executive's guidance should encourage other authorities to adopt that approach so that when they designate green belts and consider the landscape perspective, they have a clear understanding of the landscape and townscape value of the green belt.

**Tricia Marwick:** I want to pick up on some of John Home Robertson's points, and I want to be controversial. What is the point of having a green belt, particularly around the cities, when the Edinburgh green belt, for example, has led to increased pressure for housebuilding in Fife?

**Scott Barrie (Dunfermline West) (Lab):** Indeed.

**Mr Home Robertson:** And everywhere else.

**Tricia Marwick:** Exactly—and elsewhere. I accept that.

Paragraph 12 of draft SPP 21 says clearly that most settlements do not need green belts—the witnesses have touched on that—and that ministers do not expect many new green belts to be designated. If new green belts are not designated and if local authorities can, through other measures, protect green spaces, what is the point of having green belt to protect some areas of Scotland from development, but not others?

**Brian McAuley:** I agree—it is horses for courses in many respects. I can speak only from my point of view, which has a west of Scotland perspective. The green belt has been an essential planning tool in supporting the Government's objectives of securing brownfield renewal and the regeneration of existing communities. It has been an important tool in ensuring that peripheral urban expansion has not taken place in the Glasgow and Clyde valley area and that the problems of dereliction and vacant land in communities have been tackled more directly. Also, the targets for brownfield renewal have been more readily achieved because we have had a strong green-belt policy to bolster and support the efforts to regenerate existing communities.

Tricia Marwick is right that there are areas in which the green-belt policy is not appropriate, but even in a suburban area such as East Renfrewshire, where there are limited opportunities for brownfield renewal, the policy is supportive of the opportunities that arise, which means that urban areas can be targeted much more effectively for renewal or regeneration.

**Andrew Robinson:** I agree that there is no scope for any more green belts of the type that we have at the moment in Scotland. There is, however, scope for a new way of addressing how towns and cities should cope with the inevitable pressures for change. We will have a stagnant and backwards-moving economy if we do not accommodate change and we need a new way of accommodating change. Our hope is that over the next few years as we see a new development-plan regime coming in—which will be more sensitive to places and issues and which will have a vision for the future such as our current plans do not—we will make the case for taking away the green belts that we have now because we will have a more sensitive, relevant and contemporary way of dealing with pressures and change.

**Graham U'ren:** The question was put as a controversial one, and I will try to rise to the challenge without adding unnecessary controversy. Brian McAuley's experience in the west of Scotland is not necessarily a paragon of virtue, but it demonstrates a number of important principles. There are planning tools that can be used effectively to promote urban regeneration, which is a major issue. We in the planning

profession in Scotland were very proud when, a few years ago, John Prescott announced the target of 60 per cent brownfield development to meet housing needs. In the west of Scotland, at least, we have been achieving that—and more—for over 20 years, which is down to using those planning tools.

I would not put such a mechanism on a pedestal, but we in the east of Scotland have the problem of not having had a dedicated structure-plan mechanism such as the west of Scotland has had; therefore, we have been slightly late in responding to the challenges that planning faces in the boom time that we are experiencing in this part of the world. The root of the difficulties that we are in is that, even now, many years into the boom, we have not resolved issues around the boundary of a strategic planning area, the dedicated responsibility of a strategic planning committee, the dedicated team of strategic planners for the area or the relationship with the transport planning mechanism for the area.

We should be careful about blowing away the concept of green belt. I accept the scepticism to some extent because we have to consider the issue as a whole and green belt might not be sacrosanct once we have done so. Nevertheless, the mechanism has to be grasped much more firmly so that we can get sensible planning prescriptions in the east of Scotland.

**John Inman:** May I add an east-of-Scotland perspective?

**Tricia Marwick:** Please do.

**John Inman:** I would not argue for the complete abandonment of green belts. Tricia Marwick identified some of the negative aspects of green belts, which we as planning authorities have also recognised. They include unsustainable travel patterns; people have been forced to live further from the urban area than they want. Green belts have also put pressure on the housing land supply, which has fed through into house prices. The effect is spreading beyond the city—none of us would deny that. The majority of planning authorities accept that and recognise the difficulties.

The benefits of a green belt include regeneration, as Brian McAuley has outlined. That has applied in Edinburgh. A large number of brownfield sites have been developed over the past 20 or 25 years and it is arguable that they would not all have been developed had there been no green belt and we were unable to focus the development interests and pressure on those brownfield areas. We have not finished in Edinburgh; we still have very large brownfield resources to come forward and we want to continue the work.

Another benefit is the effect that the green belt has had on Edinburgh's image, character and quality of life. One must not underestimate the effect that it has on preserving what is a truly compact city. Just under half a million people live in a relatively compact area, with easy access to rural areas, countryside and recreational facilities. That is a tremendous attraction to people and businesses coming to locate here and it has an impact on economic development. There is a range of reasons why a small compact city is attractive in terms of its quality of life. The green belt has been part of that.

That said, it is time to take a fresh look; draft SPP 21 does that and we agree with and accept most of what it says. We need a different type of green belt for the future. Draft SPP 21 says quite rightly, as did my consultant colleagues, that we should not necessarily think of the green belt areas as belts. In some cases they might be, but in other cases they could be wedges or other shapes. They are areas of strategic development control and management and the aim will be to meet the long-term objectives that the green belt has met until now. We must not throw the baby out with the bath water. Green belts can be used in the future, but we must take a modern approach.

**Tricia Marwick:** I am sure that Scott Barrie is desperate to get in here, but I ask him to bear with me. I did say that I wanted to be controversial. We have brought the debate to life. Although I am pleased that there is a wonderful quality of life in Edinburgh because of the green belt, there is not such quality of life for those who simply cannot afford to live in Edinburgh because they cannot get access to housing and are forced across the bridge to housing developments right along the M90. We now have ribbon development from Dalgety Bay. The quality of life of people living there who have to travel back and forward to get the wonderful jobs that are located in Edinburgh—

**Mr Home Robertson:** John Inman said that there was easy access.

**Scott Barrie:** That is certainly not true.

**Tricia Marwick:** Yes—I heard that. We will leave aside the problems of the Forth bridge.

It seems to me that the quality of life in Edinburgh has been preserved in aspic, whereas the quality of life for people outwith the green belt, such as in Fife and East Lothian, has been reduced simply because there is a green belt that protects Edinburgh to the detriment of the communities that surround it.

Given that we are looking to have city regions under the Planning etc (Scotland) Bill, if a city region includes Edinburgh with a green belt but south Fife has no green belt protection, it is not rocket science to conclude that most development

will take place in south Fife so that Edinburgh's green belt is preserved. Do you have any comments to make about that?

10:30

**John Inman:** Yes, I do. Draft SPP 21 gives us a firm basis for reviewing the long-term role of the Edinburgh green belt in that context, and for reviewing how we might move towards a different type of strategic plan that attempts to address the points that Tricia Marwick has made.

**John Smith:** I agree. John Inman has said that situations change over time, which is what has happened. It was right to introduce green belts when they were introduced, but they are at the end of their lives. There is probably greater awareness of the systems that we can use in the development plan system that would protect the features that we want to be protected and that are currently protected by green belts.

Green belts have gone from being positive tools for encouraging regeneration to negative tools that stop development in the right places for the future of the communities that they are intended to serve. The time is right to review the green-belt policy, or to rebrand or retitle it in some way. It is a long time since a green belt was a belt—it is not even a corset; it is growing into an overcoat. The blanket coverage that is involved, which prohibits development in more sustainable locations, is giving the policy a bad name. If we get the development plan right, we will get the allocations right, and green belts might end up being green wedges or green focal points rather than constrictive belts or corsets that stop development in the right locations.

**Scott Barrie:** I apologise for having to leave to attend an Education Committee meeting, but I must move an amendment to a bill in that meeting.

I absolutely endorse everything that Tricia Marwick said about Edinburgh's green belt—she is absolutely right that its green belt has had a negative effect on surrounding areas in the east of Scotland.

I also totally endorse what John Smith has just said. We should do anything we can to improve the situation, move forward and protect all our communities rather than only one community. As Tricia Marwick said, perhaps the green belt gives a greater quality of life to people who are fortunate enough to live in Edinburgh, but there must be a move forward for those of us who do not live in Edinburgh and who must suffer all the difficulties that have been caused by Edinburgh's policies in at least the past two decades.

**Brian McAuley:** I return to the point that Tricia Marwick made about the need for affordable

housing. That issue is acknowledged as being important in the west of Scotland. Its importance has been particularly acknowledged in pressured areas such as East Renfrewshire. There may be scope to allow land to be reserved for affordable housing, particularly on the edge of pressured areas, without necessarily compromising the green-belt policy, which I contend remains a valuable planning tool. There is scope for allowing affordable housing within the green belt, if that is the only place it can go.

**The Convener:** That concludes our questions. I thank the witnesses for attending and for their written evidence in advance of the meeting.

There will now be a suspension for a few minutes to allow a change of witnesses.

10:34

*Meeting suspended.*

10:37

*On resuming—*

**The Convener:** I welcome our second panel of witnesses. We are joined by: Allan Lundmark, the director of planning and communications for Homes for Scotland; Michael Levack, the chief executive of Scottish Building; and Jonathon Hall, the head of rural policy for the Scottish Rural Property and Business Association.

Gentlemen, what impact do you think draft SPP 21 will have on your ability to develop in and around green-belt areas?

**Michael Levack (Scottish Building):** Some of Scottish Building's members undertake developments, from large scale to small scale, but I will answer your question from the point of view of a builder rather than from that of a developer.

I am unclear about what will be the impact of draft SPP 21, although I found it useful to listen to what the first panel had to say. The document is extremely unclear, so it was useful to hear descriptions of how the policy should be proactive, pragmatic, sustainable and so on. However, I question what all of those words mean.

When I viewed the document, I was hoping, as someone who is not a planner—I am a builder and a member of the public—that it would make clear what would and would not be permitted, but the document is not as clear as it could be. Everybody wants clarity and clear definitions, and we heard earlier about flexibility. I wonder how both those demands can be dealt with.

**Allan Lundmark (Homes for Scotland):** From the point of view of the housebuilding industry, I can say that clarity and certainty are important.

We welcomed draft SPP 21 in the context of other planning advice—particularly SPP 3—about long-term settlement strategies.

From the raft of advice, we are looking for a planning system that drives out a land supply with absolute certainty, but at the moment that is not the case. Too often, green belt has been placed around a settlement and the planning authority has then tried to shoehorn developments into that constrained settlement but has been unable to do that adequately, which has placed pressure on the green belt. In Scotland, about a third of the land supply for housing in development plans cannot be developed within the lifetime of the plans because it is impossible to remove constraints.

Market pressures still exist. One must recognise the tensions that are created when the market, in trying to meet the demand for housing, comes up against inadequate land supply. Those tensions will seek release in areas where there is least resistance. The trouble with the green belts, which have been designated in too many parts of the country, is that they are not robust enough. They have been thrown around areas in ways that make them difficult to defend, and they cover areas where there is a lack of investment because there is no sustainable use for the land, which puts the green belt under pressure. That seems to us to be a totally inadequate way to go about things.

I agree entirely with the comments that were made towards the end of the previous question-and-answer session. There is ample market evidence that we are building in parts of Fife, West Lothian and the northern Borders because it is impossible to release sufficient land for all market segments within the Edinburgh housing market area.

**Jonathon Hall (Scottish Rural Property and Business Association):** I suspect that I come from a slightly different perspective from the previous panel and the other members of this panel in that my organisation represents rural land-based businesses such as farming, forestry and all sorts of estate interests.

Our primary concern about existing green-belt areas is that development is viewed predominantly as being to do with new housebuilding and so on. I acknowledge that housing is a key issue, but we must also consider what other appropriate developments might take place in a green belt that would utilise that land resource most appropriately for the communities and businesses there.

Draft SPP 21 refers to “appropriate use”, which is slightly misleading because it should talk about appropriate development. The previous panel answered a question on that. The document is drafted in such a way as to give an extremely narrow definition of what could be deemed to be

appropriate use or appropriate development. It does not extend into the wider rural context, so the green-belt approach is much more limiting than what is being promoted by the Scottish Executive in terms of diversifying agricultural businesses and so on. The approach that is taken in draft SPP 21 would limit appropriate development or appropriate use to diversifying an agricultural business and would prevent the conversion of redundant agricultural buildings into residential properties. That is contrary to Executive policies, which drive such things as the farm business development scheme, which operates across Scotland and encourages such development opportunities through grant assistance as a way of addressing affordable housing issues.

**The Convener:** Mr Lundmark said that developers seek certainty. Can the planning process be an exact science? Is not there a need for some flexibility, and how can that flexibility be balanced with the certainty that you seek?

10:45

**Allan Lundmark:** The planning process cannot be an exact science—it has to be able to respond to various pressures, particularly changing economic circumstances. However, we have the tools to enable us to do that.

I was interested to listen to the previous discussion on the relaxed approach to defining the inner boundary of a green belt and the problems that that might create; I do not share the pessimism of my local government planning colleagues on that. The creation of what used to be referred to as white land actually presents an opportunity. It allows planning authorities to say that land will be released in phases over a certain period, be it 10 years, 20 years or whatever. Master planning techniques will be used to control not only the phasing of development releases, but the infrastructural investment to support that development.

It is about putting planning at the heart of infrastructural investment. Graham U'ren stressed that planning should be at the heart of how communities are developed and how developments are implemented. That also involves co-ordination of investment in infrastructure; master planning should be at the heart of that. When areas are released, they will be referred to as white land, but they are not there to be cherry picked: their purpose is to indicate to the development industry how a settlement, town or city will grow, according to a master plan. When developments will proceed and when the supporting infrastructure can be expected will be specified.

That has been done before—it was the approach that was taken with the new towns.

When they were built, infrastructure was put in place. When a developer went into a new town, they knew when they were to go in, where they were supposed to go and what the phasing was going to be. The infrastructure existed to support that development, so it was not possible to cherry pick or to leap ahead. Developers cannot start working 2 miles further down a road if the drainage is not there.

I totally accept what John Inman said about the difficulties that are associated with master planning. Part of the problem is that we do not resource our planning authorities. Planners have techniques that we should be embracing, and we should be resourcing planning authorities to take on long-term master planning. Through such master planning, we could phase land release and give clear signals to the development industry on which locations may be developed and when. Within such a system, it is possible to shift programming when development pressures change. Our Scandinavian colleagues do precisely that—the techniques exist.

**The Convener:** Does the 20-year timescale for green belts give you any concern? Could it form part of your model for master planning, as you have just outlined it?

**Allan Lundmark:** The 20-year time horizon brings certainty despite the fact that circumstances will change. I return to the idea that the issue should be about how we master plan the development of our communities. If we couple long-term phased releases with proper master planning, we send clear signals to the development industry about where development should take place.

**Michael Levack:** I hope that the 20-year period will provide greater certainty. We are talking about flexibility; development that is acceptable to one person might not be acceptable to another. We have been talking specifically about housing, but taking the point that Jonathon Hall made earlier, we are not just talking about homes; other uses need to be included, including transport, leisure and business.

I was interested to hear what the previous witnesses said about this, because I am not a professional planner. A suggestion was made that there could be grading. If we look out of this committee room, we see Arthur's Seat. Nobody in their right mind would ever consider developing there, but every area is different. Perhaps it is possible to use clearer guidance that includes grading, rather than our using guidance simply as a negative tool to stop development. Places such as Arthur's Seat will never be developed, but other areas might be affected by a need for development and changes in demographics, whether in 20 years or further in the future.



**Mary Scanlon:** On the point about inner green-belt boundaries not being drawn too tightly, I note that paragraph 24 of draft SPP 21 states:

"These exceptions to the policy should be highlighted in the development plan to allow for wide publicity and engagement."

Are we saying that, where there is a national priority or an established need, there will be exceptions, that that is included in the planning system and that it will be part of the development plan Planning etc (Scotland) Bill? Do not draft SPP 21 and the fact that the inner boundaries are very flexible fulfil the grading that Michael Levack was talking about, and provide certainty for the longer-term future that was mentioned, rather than for 20 years?

**Allan Lundmark:** I agree with the earlier panel that the matter raises questions about the whole development plan system. We need a more robust system; we need a development plan that addresses such issues and sets clear policy objectives from the beginning. The fact that certain circumstances cannot be anticipated does not necessarily mean that we do not have a robust planning system; we just need procedures and processes in the system to cope with that. Paragraph 24 of draft SPP 21 sits alongside my ambition to have a planning system that sends out robust policy signals about where development can and cannot take place.

**Mary Scanlon:** There is a contradiction in that green belts should be, as it says in paragraph 31, "robustly protected". I have difficulty with there being a flexible inner boundary and robust protection. Can those two concepts sit comfortably together in one document?

**Allan Lundmark:** I do not take the phrase "robustly protected" as meaning robustly protecting lines on maps. The green-belt policy is set up to achieve certain wider objectives; it is not an objective in itself. If it is intended that the line of the green belt should be moved to accommodate other pressures, and wider environmental policy objectives must also be accommodated, the robustness will be in the policy mechanism that allows growth while protecting the wider environmental objectives. It is not necessarily—although in many cases it will be the case—about drawing hard lines on maps. That is not the sole way of defining a robust policy position.

**Jonathon Hall:** From the rural perspective, some of the flexibility that we might require or desire is not written clearly enough—or at all in some senses—in draft SPP 21. Draft SPP 21 needs to take full cognisance of SPP 15 on planning for rural development. I would like a far greater overlap. Cross-referencing of draft SPP 21 with other policy directions through tools from the Executive or other appropriate means was

referred to by the first panel. There are many good things in SPP 15 that allow appropriate development in the right place for rural development's sake; there is not simply protection for protection's sake. SPP 15 is not about preserving things in aspic—it is about allowing rural communities and businesses to develop and evolve, while recognising the importance of landscape quality, recreational space and so on.

My plea is that draft SPP 21 should have a close relationship with SPP 15. That might result in important attitudinal changes that might have to take place in—dare I say it?—urban-centric planning authorities that are involved with the green-belt issues that we are considering. The familiarity of such authorities with the needs of rural development, and particularly the detail of SPP 15, might occasionally be overlooked.

**Mary Scanlon:** What is your opinion of the requirement in paragraph 19 to replace open land that is developed in the green belt with open land elsewhere? If we take Tricia Marwick's point about Edinburgh, is not it the case that if we have so much land that is designated for green belt, in order to develop on part of it we have got to designate green belt elsewhere? Is that reasonable and compatible with the need for development flexibility and the coalescence of our towns and cities?

**Allan Lundmark:** We have to ask why we have green-belt designations. Clearly, we should not designate land as a green belt simply for the sake of it; it should be designated for a purpose, such as to define the limits or setting of a town. In some circumstances, an incursion into the land may be appropriate, because economic or social benefits may flow from it, although we should seek to mitigate any environmental impacts that that may have. The idea that the loss of a piece of green belt should necessarily result in the designation of another area of the exact same size to compensate does not seem to me to be a robust approach, given the aims.

**Mary Scanlon:** So you think that a quid pro quo is not necessary and you disagree with the point in paragraph 19 that

"consideration should be given to the potential for expanding that green belt at another location."

Is that because it would mean that local authorities would be reluctant to give land green-belt status in future if, in order to release any of that land, they had to designate land elsewhere? Do you think that that restricting factor should not be in the guidance?

**Allan Lundmark:** I am certainly not entirely comfortable with paragraph 19, although I do not want to speculate on how local planning authorities might respond to it.

**Jonathon Hall:** I envisage the provision acting as something of a constraint, although I am slightly reassured by the fact that it is not overly prescriptive, because it states that consideration “should be given”. The consideration might be that the comparison is not like for like. The quid pro quo that Mary Scanlon mentioned would not be appropriate in many situations. Each parcel of land in Scotland is unique, if only because of its location. Therefore, if we develop in one location, we cannot simply say that we must designate green belt in another location. The matter is not as simple as that. To return to Allan Lundmark’s point, if that was the case, we would have to question the purpose and function of green-belt designation in the first place. One question that has emerged from this panel and the previous panel is whether the green-belt system is now fit for purpose.

**Mary Scanlon:** Draft SPP 21 may imply that it would be easier to release green-belt land if land elsewhere was designated.

I now come to Jonathon Hall’s big moment: a discussion of the list of appropriate uses for green-belt land. We have read your written submission, which states strongly that

“Green belt policy should not be wholly prescriptive”.

You think that the list would limit the diversification of agricultural businesses and you say that it

“is arguably more restrictive than current Scottish Executive initiatives.”

Another point, about which I had not thought previously, is that the list excludes the provision of new housing by landowners in green belts while they are waiting for developers to come along. It is a concern that the draft policy is more limiting for landowners in green belts than the existing policy is. You raised that issue in your opening statement, but do you have anything to add?

**Jonathon Hall:** Not really. Perhaps I was jumping the gun, but that is the issue that I was driving at. At present, if an agricultural business or landowner is within a green belt, they are more constrained than a similar agricultural business or landowner who is beyond the green belt in what one might describe as a truly rural context. As I said, grant assistance is available in all sorts of guises, but particularly through the farm business development scheme, which allows agricultural holdings to be converted for residential letting. That is not simply about diversification of the agricultural business; it is about diversification of the rural economy. Those two issues clearly overlap, but they are different. Some communities that are in a green belt at the conurbation or urban fringe might not be able to adapt, evolve and progress because of their circumstances, but will find themselves in something of a no man’s land

between the urban context and the rural context, which offer regeneration and other opportunities. In the so-called green belt that lies in the middle, fossilisation of some of the business interests could easily take place.

At present, I would say that green-belt designation is not viewed as an accolade. People do not tend to think about managing such land in the interests of their urban-dwelling neighbours so that they could use it for all sorts of recreational purposes and for whom it would have amenity and landscape value and so on. Rather, in some quarters, the green-belt designation is viewed very much as a constraint on business development.

11:00

**Mary Scanlon:** It might be helpful if you could put in writing how you wish the list of appropriate uses that is given in paragraph 20 to be expanded so that green-belt land could be used not just for agriculture, woodland, horticulture or recreational purposes. That would help us to ensure that the planning policy will be more in line with the existing guidance and will allow for greater diversification by landowners and farmers in the future.

**Jonathon Hall:** I would be happy to do that.

**Mr Home Robertson:** I have another question for Mr Hall. The term “green belt” conveys an image of an attractive landscape that people like to look at and to have around cities. Is there any risk that the combined effects of lower prices for agricultural produce and the reduction in common agricultural policy subsidies could lead to a situation in which conventional farming in urban-fringe areas may not be entirely viable? Are you aware that there is a possibility that land might be abandoned in such areas, which would create a thistle belt instead of a green belt?

**Jonathon Hall:** That is a distinct possibility. I am not sure that agricultural activity is viable in any part of Scotland at the moment.

**Mr Home Robertson:** That is a separate story.

**Jonathon Hall:** You are right—there has been a change in the use of green-belt land in some locations, which has been driven by market forces. Arguably, some of that is the result of the development of rural businesses in the green belt. As one drives around Edinburgh city bypass, one sees that many livery businesses have been set up—there are more horses and stable yards around Edinburgh city bypass than there are cattle, sheep or fields of barley. That trend is simply the result of businesses utilising their locational advantage to the best of their ability. Although that is all well and good, as in all forms of agricultural diversification, there is probably a point at which market saturation will be reached.

In some ways, changing land use offers all sorts of opportunities, but it also poses a number of threats. That goes back to my earlier point, which was that we might need to broaden the list of appropriate uses for green-belt land. It is too early to say whether the current agricultural situation will force an abandonment of active land management. Changes such as common agricultural policy reform may accelerate that to a degree, but I like to think that given their proximity to markets, agricultural businesses that lie around the urban fringe will be able to capitalise on their locations in some way, rather than abandon the assets that they have at their disposal.

**Mr Home Robertson:** The list in draft SPP 21 includes

"Agricultural uses ... Woodland and forestry, including community woodlands".

That sounds very nice, but is there a risk that green-belt land might not be used for such purposes? I am aware of fields or parts of fields in my constituency—I do not know or care by whom they are owned—which have, in effect, been abandoned and over which thistle seeds have been spread. That is happening already. Is there is risk that we will see more of that?

**Jonathon Hall:** I imagine that there is such a risk. As well as thistles, there is a lot of ragwort and other plants that none of us particularly cares for spread about the place. If there is an appropriate use for such areas, it should be taken advantage of.

As for some of the other appropriate uses, I am concerned that community woodlands and so on will inevitably rely on grant assistance from some quarter. Although such uses of land are valid, we must be careful that we do not end up relying on community involvement to continue what once were thriving businesses that served a community function in their own right.

**Cathie Craigie:** For me, the most important part of draft SPP 21 is the section on development management and appropriate uses in green belts. I am sorry to stay with Jonathon Hall with my question, but I want to tease out what he thinks would be appropriate in that respect. My question is also directed at Michael Levack, who in response to the first question said that we should be clear about what should and should not be permitted. I am not looking for a prescriptive list, but I would value witnesses' input on the matter; after all, we want to find out how the Scottish Executive could make draft SPP 21 clearer.

Secondly, what do you think of the document's treatment of the economic viability of developing brownfield sites in the green belt? Again, I apologise for keeping on at you, Jonathon.

**Jonathon Hall:** I am in danger of repeating myself more than anything else. I will go away and give more thought to what we would consider to be appropriate uses in the green belt. We still want to retain the green qualities that were referred to earlier with regard to landscape and amenity value, but not in such a way that we limit business opportunities that should be made available in green belts. I do not think that I can add much more at this stage.

**Cathie Craigie:** In your response to the consultation document, you seem to say that draft SPP 21 would not allow farm buildings to be used for residential lettings.

**Jonathon Hall:** That is certainly how I read the document. The list in paragraph 20 does not appear to allow for farm steadings, for example, to be converted into residential lettings. That is not the case in the wider rural context; in fact, the farm business development scheme and other sources provide grant assistance for farm businesses to do exactly that. That contradiction will lead to conurbations being surrounded by a penumbra where the opportunities are much more limited than are those in the sphere beyond it.

**Michael Levack:** The question of how to clarify what might or might not be permissible is certainly difficult and it will not help to take a too-prescriptive approach. For example, John Home Robertson said that the term "green belt" conjures up a certain image. Perhaps that is one of the problems. Do we—or, indeed, members of the public—understand what the green belt is? The perception is that if the land has grass on it, it is green belt, but that is not necessarily the case.

We can all question developments that have taken place in our towns and cities in recent years and conclude that, although a certain development was built on designated green belt, it was correct to allow it for various good reasons that could not have been foreseen when the land was designated as green belt. Someone mentioned Gogarburn near Edinburgh as an example. Twenty years ago, I got to know almost every blade of grass in that area when I worked on the construction of part of the city bypass. When I compare the constraints at that time with the current more relaxed regime, I wonder whether any of that could have been foreseen.

According to last night's news, cities such as Aberdeen will lose almost 25 per cent of their population in future years, so we need to ensure that we take the correct decisions in that context. That brings us back to the need for a sensible and robust development plan in which the green belt—we have not yet touched on this issue—is simply one tool in the local authority planner's toolbox. It is important that we ensure that the green belt fits in with those other tools; that is what will make green-belt policy a success in years to come.

**Cathie Craigie:** Do we need to focus on what is and what is not allowed when development plans are being drawn up? In your opinion, is that where we need clarity?

**Michael Levack:** Yes. In that way, developers, employers and others who potentially need to build homes, leisure facilities and so on will know what will be allowed. They need a strong guide rather than one that is loose and flexible. Obviously, if they see the development plan being breached, that will set a precedent, but the problem is that we cannot make local authorities scared to make decisions.

**Cathie Craigie:** People might feel that if the plan is too loose and does not set enough prescription down in black and white, developers will just attack the green-belt areas rather than build on brownfield sites.

**Michael Levack:** People might feel that, but it is, for example, arguable that a golf course is not a blight on the landscape, but that does not mean that the guy whose wee hoose is next door to such a proposed development will want a golf course to be built on what he considers to be green-belt land.

**Allan Lundmark:** Cathie Craigie referred to developers who “attack the green belt”. I do not take issue with that phrase, but we need to consider the nature of that attack. In my experience, attacks on the green belt are rarely attacks on areas of high landscape value. Normally, the pressure comes on areas that are in some way degraded or derelict.

We also need to consider the value that people place on green spaces. In an interesting piece of research that was done for the Barker review on housing, people were asked about the relative value that they placed on playing fields and other green space within urban areas in comparison with the edge-of-settlement green space that is the green belt. The research suggested that people place a higher value on public open spaces within the urban area, such as playing fields and other recreation spaces, than they do on edge-of-settlement green space.

I would not encourage the committee to make decisions on the basis of anecdotal evidence, but I will mention what happened when I spoke at a recent conference for people in the leisure industry. After showing photographs of two sites—a derelict industrial area in degraded agricultural land and a set of perfectly functioning playing fields—I asked the delegates which site a housing developer would find it easier to receive planning consent for. Although I had not given them any further information, they replied that it would be easier to build on the playing fields, which the local authority was promoting and selling for residential

development. As the derelict industrial buildings on degraded industrial land was a part of Edinburgh’s green belt, it would be almost impossible to receive planning consent for the site, despite its location next to a major transport route. The issue is that, despite pressure for development, such development opportunities on land that is crying out for investment are resisted. That is not because anything is wrong with the development proposal but because the land has been wrapped in a green-belt designation, which makes it increasingly difficult to develop. Clearly, planning decisions on what is the best decision for the community are being taken by default. The green-belt designation is at the heart of that policy conflict.

**Tricia Marwick:** Allan Lundmark mentioned the green-belt designation. However, as has been mentioned already, very few areas in Scotland have been designated as green belts. We need to be careful not to confuse green-belt land with the green space that surrounds developments.

11:15

I return to my original point. If there are green belts in some areas but not in others, the pressures on the areas that are not designated as green belts will be huge. We have discussed that before. Is there anything inherent in green belts that could not be achieved through development plans? Why is development protection not given to all the areas involved, regardless of whether they are in Edinburgh, Fife or wherever? Why cannot all resources that communities need to protect, wherever they are, be protected under development plans? That would surely equalise the green-belt situation.

**Allan Lundmark:** I agree entirely. We have argued elsewhere that there are more robust mechanisms for protecting environmentally sensitive areas that should be protected for positive environmental reasons, or areas that should be protected to safeguard the settings of towns. We tried to encourage the Executive not to approve the green belt that is thrown around Perth in the Perth and Kinross structure plan. Our argument was based on the point that more robust mechanisms are available to the planning system to protect areas that we all agree should be protected.

It would not be difficult to persuade me that, sometimes, green belts are thrown around settlements as a way to avoid taking some of the tough decisions that must be made to release development pressures, balanced against environmental considerations.

**Tricia Marwick:** I do not oppose the protection of green space; I just want equal treatment for all

communities, which the Executive says it wants, too. The summary of draft SPP 21 says:

"Scottish Ministers recognise the importance of Scotland's cities and towns to the growth of the Scottish economy and recognise the need to avoid urban sprawl and unmanaged, unplanned growth"

and they suggest that green-belt policy provides one way to achieve that. I argue that if we genuinely want cities and towns to

"avoid urban sprawl and unmanaged, unplanned growth",

we must ensure that all our towns and cities have protected green space.

**Allan Lundmark:** I could not agree more that it is important to focus on that. There are environmental objectives that we should all try to hit. We should have environmental concerns and we should protect such areas because it is in our industries' interests that the environmental quality of our towns and cities be protected so that we can provide developments in quality settings. My concern about green belts is not an argument against strong and robust environmental policies.

The important point to focus on from Tricia Marwick's question is the prevention of unplanned growth, which takes me back to a point that I made earlier. We do not want such growth, either. We want a robust planning system that makes it clear where development should go and which does that not in broad strategic terms of numbers or general land releases but in specific terms about where land releases will be and what is expected for the environment. A robust planning system that has proper master planning at its heart is the correct way to go.

It is not in our industries' interests to compete where unplanned development takes place. Not only is that detrimental to the environment, but it creates all kinds of problems in providing the supporting infrastructure, whether it is the physical infrastructure of roads or sewers, or community infrastructure such as schools and community centres. We need to be far better at ensuring that we have a proper master plan in our approach to accommodating development pressures.

**Tricia Marwick:** Allan Lundmark talked about the growth of the new towns. I lived in a new town; I well remember the master plan in Glenrothes.

I return to the summary of draft SPP 21. Ministers say that

"There should ... be a strong presumption against development in green belts"

and that they

"recognise the need to avoid urban sprawl and unmanaged, unplanned growth."

Do you agree that those have occurred in areas such as Fife and the Lothians because of the

present presumption against development in green belts, and that our towns and communities are not protected from that? For example, there has been massive housebuilding in some areas, but schools have not been built until much later and health service provision follows on far down the line. Because of the presumption against development in the green belt, there is "unmanaged, unplanned growth" in the towns and villages in Fife that surround it. Do you agree?

**Allan Lundmark:** I agree up to a point, but I am not sure that I agree 100 per cent that all such growth is unplanned and unmanaged. I concede absolutely that there has been growth in parts of the Lothians and Fife that has been a consequence of the inability to release sufficient development land in Edinburgh and that much of that has to do with issues relating to the green belt. I agree that problems relating to the designation of green belt in Edinburgh have resulted in development in other parts of Scotland that would otherwise not have taken place. For example, many of the planned releases north of the Forth bridgehead were originally designated to plan for growth in Fife's population on a household formation basis. However, the homes have actually been taken up by people from the Edinburgh labour market who cannot afford house prices in Edinburgh and who therefore commute. Undoubtedly, Fife is taking the pressure of the overspill from Edinburgh as well the pressure of its own internal growth. There is also very strong evidence that that is happening in the northern Borders, and it is most certainly happening in East Lothian.

**Scott Barrie:** The final sentence of paragraph 12 of draft SPP 21 says:

"Ministers do not expect to see many new green belts being designated."

I would like to follow on from the themes that Tricia Marwick was exploring. Do you have any views on the designation of new green belts in Scotland? How would such new green belts be beneficial?

**Michael Levack:** If we pick the example of Fife—

**Scott Barrie:** Why not?

**Tricia Marwick:** Please do.

**Michael Levack:** The discussions have been steering towards housebuilding and unchecked housing development. However, there are several situations in Fife in which the allowance of retail parks—on land that may not be designated as green belt but perhaps as green space—has been to the detriment of several town centres. It is a question of striking a balance between employment and housing. There is a presumption against development on existing green belts and it

is suggested that there may not be significant new green belts, so we return to the master plan of ensuring that there is balance between the housing that local people need and the areas for employment.

**Scott Barrie:** Since we are sticking to discussing Fife, particularly the area north of the Forth bridgehead, I should say that it is not just a question of housebuilding; there is also insufficient infrastructure to get people to where they need to be, which is causing some of the greatest pressures in southern Fife. Expansion of housebuilding is not the only issue. Housebuilding in itself would not have been bad if employment was also located north of the river, but as employment is located south of the river, the main problem is creating a sustainable infrastructure. I know that that has nothing to do with the green belt, but it is the major problem.

**Michael Levack:** Does not that tell us that more is at issue than planning policy on the green belt? Infrastructure has to be taken into account in the master plan. There is an inference that existing green-belt land would be released if other land were designated as green belt, but we could flip that over and say that if green-belt land is maintained, we have to allocate sufficient land for housing needs.

**Scott Barrie:** There is a problem with releasing sufficient development land for housing need. The inability to open up Edinburgh's green belt for housing need has a direct effect on the quality of life of people in Fife who have to make that dreadful trudge across the river every day.

**Michael Levack:** On that specific example, it could be asked why there is not housing round about the bypass at Gogarburn.

**Scott Barrie:** That is because Edinburgh will not offer up its green belt.

**The Convener:** We are returning to a theme—

**Mr Home Robertson:** A consensus is developing here.

**The Convener:** Yes—it is on a subject with which some members have an obsession.

**Mary Scanlon:** One of the many roles of the green belt is to safeguard visual and natural amenity. How will that be achieved? Will the safeguarding of visual and natural amenity mean a restriction on the building of wind farms, pylons—*[Interruption.]* It would not be a meeting of the Communities Committee if I did not mention—

**Mr Home Robertson:** Beauty?

**Mary Scanlon:** I have to mention the Beauty to Denny power line at some point in every meeting.

I also add to my list landfill sites and phone masts. Should the safeguarding measure be more

or less restrictive? There is no doubt that phone masts, pylons and wind farms have huge visual impacts.

**Jonathon Hall:** My view, which is a personal one, is that green-belt policy should not have anything to do with addressing such major landscape visual impacts.

**Mary Scanlon:** Thank you.

**Jonathon Hall:** The checks and balances in other planning provisions ensure that such developments are considered properly to see whether they are in the public interest.

It is not only people who live in or around green-belt areas who are affected by such developments. Given that the vast majority of developments such as those to which Mary Scanlon referred lie outwith green-belt areas, it is the people who live outwith green-belt areas who face the dilemmas and decisions. Clearly, such developments are not only polarising debate and argument but are causing a lot of concern for communities. However, in many cases, the issue is not about the green belt.

**Mary Scanlon:** But it is just looking at—

**The Convener:** You have had your opportunity to raise your constituency interest today, Mary. I call Patrick Harvie.

**Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green):** I want to pick up on something that Allan Lundmark said a few moments ago. I think that he agreed with Tricia Marwick that there is no reason why the development plan system cannot achieve the objective of protecting green and open spaces. I accept the need to protect those spaces and I accept some of the objectives of draft SPP 21, but am I right in assuming that its provisions will be contingent on the reforms in the Planning etc (Scotland) Bill? I assume that you believe that the new legislation will ensure not only that the development plan system works effectively but that plans will be kept up to date, which is an objective that we all share. Is it your view that we should not abandon or weaken existing tools before the system is working properly?

**Allan Lundmark:** Yes, absolutely. Mike Levack referred to the fact that designations have to be clear. I hope that none of us would disagree with the statement that no one should build on Arthur's Seat. I said earlier that we need a planning system that identifies land that can be developed to meet development pressures not only for housing but across the board. We do not have such a system at the moment.

I hope that the new planning system will identify where development can be accommodated and will set that in the context of robust environmental policies. That would encourage investment in the

right locations, but it should not threaten the important environmental concerns that the planning system must address.

**Patrick Harvie:** The position that you are sketching out is that we should look again at such issues some time down the line, when we know whether we have got the planning system right. Is that correct?

**Allan Lundmark:** Yes. We have to do that, but it is early days. From my initial reading of the Planning etc (Scotland) Bill and of the discussions that took place on the white paper, the Executive seems to be saying that the planning system should have at its heart how the places in which we live and work look—it is about designing the places of tomorrow. That is about setting clear environmental, social and economic policy objectives. I am reasonably optimistic that many of the issues that are addressed in draft SPP 21 can be addressed more effectively under the new approach to planning that seems to be emerging through the Planning etc (Scotland) Bill.

**The Convener:** Gentlemen, we have strayed into a number of areas that do not relate directly to draft SPP 21. If there is anything that we did not cover this morning, this is your chance to tell us about it. We have probably covered everything—and more—that you anticipated.

**Allan Lundmark:** I hope that we have managed to assist the committee this morning. If there is anything else we can do, we will be more than happy to assist.

**The Convener:** Thank you very much.

11:31

*Meeting suspended.*

11:33

*On resuming—*

**The Convener:** I welcome our third and final panel this morning. We have been joined by Deryck Irving, who is the senior development officer of Greenspace Scotland; Dr Alastair Macbeth, who is the chairman of Helensburgh green belt group and is representing the Scottish green belts alliance; Douglas Murray, the secretary of the Association of Scottish Community Councils; Helen Todd, the access campaign officer for the Ramblers Association; and David Rice, who is the chairman of Rural Scotland. Thank you all for joining us this morning.

I will start. Would it be helpful if the Scottish Executive published a planning advice note relating to the procedures that it will use in reviewing green-belt boundaries? Would that assist your organisations or would it be superfluous?

**Dr Alastair Macbeth (Scottish Green Belts Alliance):** We think that it would be helpful for the Scottish Executive to lay down procedures for reviewing boundaries. As the previous two panels said, draft SPP 21 makes a strong presumption against development in green belts and seeks the avoidance of urban sprawl, the regeneration of towns and cities and long-term certainty. However, one of the problems that emerged during the evidence from the previous panels is that some elements in the draft SPP are not clear and precise, which means that there might be loopholes in how it is implemented. As a result, we think that it would be helpful for the Executive to give clear advice on the review and, in particular, on the 20-year period, which the Scottish green belts alliance thinks should be 30 years. That would show that the Executive is serious about the 20-year period and that it will not be dumped every five years when a development plan is drawn up.

We also think that the Executive should make it clear that the phrase

“a strong presumption against new development in the green belt”

does not refer merely to planning applications but will apply across the board to the review process. There should not be a free-for-all when the 20-year review starts up. The presumption against development should be there from the start. The 20-year period must be applied rigorously, so we suggest that local authorities must consider certain elements early on. For example, there should be thorough audits of brownfield sites and of land banks that are held by developers or by local authorities. There should also be an audit of optimal non-green-belt locations.

A point that has not been discussed is that there are villages within green belts. In some cases, those villages are losing facilities and services such as post offices and schools due to lack of population. There may be an argument for analysis of such villages to determine whether there ought to be a change in population size. There should be advice on the long-term population and housing projections and a thorough assessment of need as distinct from stimulated demand. That is important at the boundaries between local authorities, where there is a temptation for authorities to steal people from the other side of the boundary to increase revenue.

There needs to be consideration of the strategic environmental assessment and an environmental capacity study. There should also be an assessment of especially prized areas to consider the aspects of their landscape and biodiversity that are valuable for tourism. All that needs to be taken into account during the review period.

We think that there should be guidance on the review because, otherwise, there is a danger that it will not be thorough enough.

**The Convener:** How can we ensure that community councils and representative bodies and organisations are effectively involved in the green-belt boundary review? How should we engage with communities to ensure that they are involved?

**Douglas Murray (Association of Scottish Community Councils):** Some time ago, I suggested to the Scottish Executive that community councils and other community groups should be given training, help and encouragement to make up their own draft plans for their areas. Those plans could feed into a local authority's planning set-up. Rather than a local authority telling people what it was proposing for their area, local community groups or community councils could come forward first and say what they would prefer to happen; they could try to get the local authorities to get on board or, failing that, give valid reasons why their suggestions were not coherent or applicable—possibly because of infrastructure concerns.

I would certainly like there to be more input from local bodies, which could feed into the planning system. As we are to have a new planning act, I think that we need more of that input, rather than simply going along with what we have had for the past 20 or 50 years: we are presented with suggestions for what is going to happen and are asked for our opinion, which we give, but we then end up back at phase 1, having to accept whatever the local authority says.

**The Convener:** Is there a slightly different approach to the issue? Greenspace might have something to say on this. It is not just a matter of asking people for their opinions—people are often asked for their opinions. Sometimes, those opinions will be taken very seriously and will be reflected in the decisions that are taken, but sometimes they will not. Does Greenspace have any examples of how things could be done differently in order to engage with communities?

**Deryck Irving (Greenspace Scotland):** That is a difficult question in some ways. Your initial question was about the boundary review. It would be difficult to do it differently. It is a large-scale concept, which covers a fairly wide area if we take the whole of a green belt into account. In such cases, it will probably be community councils and other well-established groups that represent the starting point. For smaller-scale decisions on individual changes, it is possible to start with a different perspective and to work with people in identifying the important issues.

Our organisation's focus lies inside the green belt and at its inner edges. We are working in a

number of areas to try to find out what people's aspirations are for the green spaces around them and to identify what is valued and what needs should be addressed and how those can be addressed better in a more bottom-up way. There is an audit process going on in Inverclyde that starts from that perspective. It is determining what is valued and what could be done better in the five settlements concerned.

Development pressures might be present in some areas without appearing on people's radars at all. Those areas might be the places where we should be starting to look. It is easier when we get down to a local scale. There are some good examples from our network of where it has not been easy to address the big picture through the more innovative approaches. For instance, if we ask people living in the central Scotland forest what the impact of the forest is, we find that they cannot answer that question. If, on the other hand, we ask them about what the impact of changes in their local area has been, there will be an honest and open debate and it could be a lot more interesting. A combination of factors is involved.

If the draft SPP is suggesting that the green belt should be viewed as something that offers community benefit, with the opportunity for health, recreation and other benefits that might form part of the wider Greenspace agenda, we must focus on the decisions that need to be taken once the green-belt concept is set out with respect to how things change and what the priorities are.

**David Rice (Rural Scotland):** I whole-heartedly endorse Deryck Irving's remarks. He addressed the question specifically in relation to the green belt and illustrated the difficulty of trying to engage effectively with the community on a whole range of planning matters. In my experience, it is much easier for the community to identify with an individual issue that might emerge as a result of a particular planning application. It has been much harder to engage the community effectively with respect to the broader concepts of developing things over a longer period. One of the challenges facing the committee is how to develop the proposed planning legislation in such a way as to involve the community effectively in what are difficult issues.

11:45

**Dr Macbeth:** I do not know whether your officials have circulated to you a document that I provided—it is a buff-coloured document with a cartoon on the front.

**The Convener:** No, they have not. You provided it to the clerks only this morning. It is not realistic for papers to be passed to the committee while we are sitting. Perhaps we can reflect on it after today's session.



**Dr Macbeth:** I fully understand. The clerks encouraged me to bring it along and I would encourage you to have a look at it later. It deals specifically with community involvement and has been produced by a study group that has been examining that issue. Pages 4 to 9 might be of interest to you. I will not weary you with the details at the moment, but I will say that it suggests that there could be some kind of a central body that could assist local communities more than the present one does and that people in those communities need time, expertise and money if they are to be effective. The suggestion is that having local champions who would assist in that regard would be a way forward.

**Mary Scanlon:** Dr Macbeth and Mr Murray, you have both mentioned the proposed 20-year period for green-belt boundary designation. I wondered how you feel about that time period, particularly given that SPP 21 states:

"Inner boundaries should not ... be drawn too tightly."

Paragraph 16 talks about a timeframe of at least 20 years and paragraph 24 allows for development to meet exceptional needs and so on. I am wondering about the time period and the fact that, within that time period, quite significant development can take place, should the need occur. What are your views on that?

**Dr Macbeth:** We in the Scottish green belts alliance feel that there is a need for some feeling of certainty and continuity. The literature on green-belt areas is clear that, without that, there is a tendency for developers to assume that land is always up for grabs, which means that it is always under threat. There can be a greater sense of stability if there is a confidence in a longish period of time.

We are a little bit worried about the extent to which that 20-year period will be the master plan or whether, as was hinted at earlier, that will be undermined by the five-year spans of the development plans. Our view is that that is why the review is important. There is a need to get the situation solid at the start and ensure that the 20-year period really means something and is not just a gesture that is constantly undermined.

**Mary Scanlon:** So you would disagree with the idea that the inner boundaries should be flexible and with the idea in paragraph 24, which says that development should take place if there is an exceptional need. Is that the case?

**Dr Macbeth:** We think that the statement about not drawing the boundaries too tightly is open to abuse. It is not clear enough. We would agree with the comments that were made earlier by some of the builders, who said that they want to know where they stand. Therefore, we think that that statement should be removed or altered substantially.

**Mary Scanlon:** Do you not agree that the system must be flexible? Bearing in mind the example of the Royal Bank of Scotland development at Gogarburn, do you agree that planning authorities have to be flexible within the green-belt designation in order to meet needs and demands that cannot be foreseen over a 20-year period?

**Dr Macbeth:** You are talking about the non-conforming uses element of SPP 21. Certainly, there needs to be clarification. In that section, it has to be made absolutely clear that, where there is a non-conforming use based on existing buildings, that should not be an excuse to go wandering out beyond that area. Doubtless, some of my colleagues, such as David Rice, would have additional comments to make in that regard.

**David Rice:** Convener, perhaps I might contribute at this point. There are two points that have just been raised, helpfully, by the member. The first addresses the issue of boundaries. It is perhaps regrettable that the Executive chose the words that it did towards the end of paragraph 16, which states:

"boundaries should not ... be drawn too tightly."

I suggest that boundaries should be drawn correctly. In determining what is correct, it is necessary to go through a full and rigorous appraisal of development needs and land opportunities to meet those development needs. I do not need to rehearse any further the point that has been made effectively this morning about the place of the development plan in determining boundaries. It is important for a green belt to have boundaries that are determined and expected to be in existence for a long time.

The Royal Bank of Scotland development within the green belt is not so much a challenge to the green-belt boundary as a challenge to the green-belt policy. It is about how effectively individual proposals are dealt with in the context of the policy that is being applied to control development within green belts.

There are two separate issues there. The first is how to identify the boundaries correctly; the second is the policies that are put in place, once the boundaries are identified, to manage the pressures for development within green belts.

**Mary Scanlon:** Does any of the panel members have views on the use of green belts to prevent the coalescence of urban areas?

**Douglas Murray:** That ties in with your previous question. I refer members to the Jackton and Thorntonhall community council submission to the green-belt consultation. It refers to the designation, in 1997, of an area as

"most sensitive Green Belt, sustainable for 10 years"

and the fact that, in a plan of January 2004, the same land is referred to as "least sensitive Greenfield". The benefit of a 20-year period has been lost through movement in a local plan and the community council has lost any input that it had in the 1997 designation.

On the question of coalescence, the submission from Jackton and Thorntonhall community council also shows a descriptive under which South Lanarkshire merges into East Renfrewshire. Two villages are being completely enclosed. They are two isolated villages with their own identities, but the planning that has been submitted appears to lose them entirely between East Kilbride and other parts of South Lanarkshire. That is an example of the coalescence of two local authority areas rather than the coalescence of two major areas of residences.

Coalescence means the loss of identity for individual areas. The one thing that community councils always consider is the geographic stability of an area, which is necessary to encourage a community to work together. If a community is lost within a major urban area, it loses its sense of identity. That is shown up in many of the larger urban areas, where community councils have difficulty in being maintained.

**Mary Scanlon:** The document states:

"Ministers do not expect to see many new greenfield sites being designated."

A member of our first panel, a planning consultant, said that green belts are at the end of their life. Given your commitment to green belts and your experience of green-belt designation, do you really see a future for the status of green belts for preserving our visual and natural landscape around towns, cities and villages?

**Douglas Murray:** I see green belts as having a serious role to play in the system. I disagree with ministers when they say that they do not see a need for any additional green belts, or any major green belts.

**Mary Scanlon:** The document states:

"Ministers do not expect to see many new greenfield sites being designated."

**Douglas Murray:** That is what the Executive suggests. Many other areas would like to see the designation of green belts. Whether we are talking about green belt or greenfield goes back to the convener's point. There has to be clarification for the general public of what green belt and greenfield are. As previous witnesses said, the general public identify something with green grass on it as green belt. We need clarity.

**The Convener:** How did you reach the view that most communities would want to have designated green belts around them? I am not necessarily

sure that that is the case. In many communities, particularly some of our urban communities, green space that has been allowed to go to ruin is often the bane of people's lives. We have to do something with that green space and allow people to use it. There is no point having a piece of land with some trees on it if it does not achieve anything and is not an amenity that people can use. I am not sure that it is accurate to say that most communities in Scotland would want to have green field sites next to them just for the sake of it; they might want other amenities that they can access.

**Douglas Murray:** Certainly. I am involved in the green spaces issue. I agree that there are many areas in cities where derelict, brownfield land is just going to waste. There are a number of examples of areas where local authorities are pushing for schemes to use up green spaces, while brownfield sites are sitting derelict and are complete eyesores. In urban areas, people need areas to walk their dog or let their cat out. The green spaces initiatives will help that, but a lot more needs to be built into the system to get the local authorities thinking about their whole strategic approach to the brownfield and green spaces issue. Some local authorities are asking about having an audit of green spaces, which is to be commended, but—

**The Convener:** The point is that all that can happen without there being green-belt designation.

**Patrick Harvie:** It has been suggested that the exclusion of existing major developments inside the green belt could undermine the integrity of the green belt and mean that the controls on expansion are less rigorous. Do any of the witnesses have a view on that?

12:00

**David Rice:** Where there is an established existing use, such as an airport, there is clearly a danger that any expansion might be thought to undermine the credibility of the continuance of the green belt and to set a precedent for other development, and it might indeed lead to associated development pressures. Those are potentially important national considerations that the Executive would have to take on board in determining its national planning framework. However, in a sense, they should be seen as national exceptions rather than as setting a precedent for subsequent housing or retail development. The need for housing and retail development should properly be met within the context of the development plan system. We should see whether appropriate sites can be identified in existing urban areas or, if that is not possible, at carefully selected sites rather than ride

on the back of the opportunism that might be created by a national decision that requires, for example, the expansion of an airport.

**Dr Macbeth:** I agree that such projects must be regarded as exceptions and must be fully justified. Justification is the nub of much of this discussion. If developers just want to develop something, they should put a thorough case for it with involvement from the public, as distinct from consultation. That goes back to the community issue. Involvement is early and proactive, whereas consultation is late and reactive. There is an important distinction. That ties in with some of the points that we brushed over earlier, such as the avoidance of coalescence. There is a strong feeling that coalescence should be avoided for the sake of community character.

There is also the question of new green belts, which touches on the point that was just raised. The same issues would arise with the creation of additional new green belts. Some of the earlier observations indicated that not many new green belts are being considered. I understand that Perth, St Andrews and Stirling are all considering green belts or are in the process of introducing them. I was very interested to see the Dundee consultation response because, in 1980, Dundee took away its green belt, but it is now considering reinstating it.

Green belts are also growing up internationally. One of the most exciting ones is in the province of Alberta in Canada. I will not go into detail, but the system there is very thorough indeed.

The issue of new green belts is important. Tricia Marwick—who is not here just now—was pressing the question of whether any area should be allowed to have a green belt—

**Patrick Harvie:** I think other members will want to move on to that issue.

**Dr Macbeth:** I am sorry.

**Patrick Harvie:** I also wanted to ask about the list of appropriate uses. You will have heard from the witnesses on earlier panels the suggestion that there is a lack of clarity or an ambiguity in the list and that some uses have not been listed that perhaps should have been. Do any of the panellists have views on the list?

**Helen Todd (Ramblers Association):** I have a comment about golf courses. Someone mentioned earlier that they are green and look like they are part of the green belt, but in fact they are developments. They can be fine and can add to biodiversity levels. Instead of having monocultural agricultural land, golf courses can be sensitively designed and path networks can be put into them. On the other hand, they can be a huge block to access and can generate many more car journeys

in green-belt areas. I would like to see a qualification of that provision in the list.

**David Rice:** On the face of it, paragraph 20 of the draft SPP would appear to suggest that the legitimate housing needs of those who are engaged in agriculture and land management might not now be included in the thinking. In the previous 1985 circular, housing on the basis of operational need was accepted as a legitimate development in green belts, and that is fair. This morning, the committee heard evidence about deficiencies in respect of insufficient cross-referencing between the draft policy and other policy documents. There are, of course, questions of farm diversification. My organisation does not wish to be seen as inhibiting farmers and other landowners from legitimately utilising their land resource within the context of its existing condition. We are not saying that Farmer Brown should be able to come along and put in a planning application for 1,200 houses, but we support farmers' management of their holdings of agricultural or woodland properties and their attempts to diversify into other activities, which are being encouraged by the Executive.

**Cathie Craigie:** I have a question for Helen Todd. Should green-belt land be subject to additional land management requirements?

**Helen Todd:** I am not sure that I am qualified to answer that. The problem with green space that has gone to ruin has been mentioned, and there are many opportunities for farmers to apply for funding under the new agricultural funding system. Certainly, green space brings huge benefits and green belts, by their nature, are near to where people live. Diversification is a new opportunity for farmers. I do not know too much about the common agricultural policy beyond that, I am afraid.

**Cathie Craigie:** Neither do I.

**Deryck Irving:** What is needed is not more land management but positive management. Draft SPP 21 mentions the need for management for public benefit if the green belt is to be something other than a planning tool to prevent urban spread. If it is to provide benefits to communities on the urban fringes and urban dwellers further in, that will require positive management. Mr Home Robertson's point about creating derelict agricultural landscapes within green belts is a real danger. There are confusions in the draft policy about the purpose of the green belt, and that needs to be clarified. Stopping the coalescing of settlements is a valid objective, but it is not listed as an objective of the draft policy, although it is implied in a couple of statements. Paragraph 6 states that two of the key objectives of the green belt policy are

"To protect and give access to open space within and around towns and cities as part of the wider structure of green space"

and

"To protect and enhance the character, landscape setting and identity of towns".

However, a robust, inflexible green belt could be detrimental to some of those things. With my ex-ecologist hat on, I could argue that brownfield sites are better for biodiversity than much of the green belt. To my mind, there is confusion about what the draft policy is trying to achieve. We need to consider not just the designation of land to prevent development but how land can be managed positively to provide a benefit.

**Cathie Craigie:** Do you agree with the comments that we heard this morning from other witnesses? They said that the important issue for communities is getting development plans right and that the draft policy is just one piece of the jigsaw.

**Deryck Irving:** I agree. One of the views of Greenspace Scotland as an organisation—I perhaps hold it more strongly than my colleagues—is that there is a mismatch between the available tools. Paragraph 7 of draft SPP 21 recognises that the green belt is one of a series of tools, but it has different timescales from some of the other tools and it is applied more rigorously, particularly in Edinburgh.

There is a danger that these mismatches will end up with development plans trying to do one thing, green belt preventing that and development being pushed into other sites. Allan Lundmark commented this morning on what communities in urban areas value. It is rarely the green belt; often much smaller, inconsequential spaces mean things to people. Different timescales and levels of protection will not lead to a sensible solution. The development plan must be the main driver.

The other problem is that we are talking about draft SPP 21 at the same time as the Planning etc (Scotland) Bill is being considered and six months ahead of the review of the SPP on open space. We may well end up with things that look applicable to green belt now but which, a year down the line, may not be the right things in relation to the rest of the open-space resource, which has to be considered in the same way.

**Cathie Craigie:** Thank you very much. That was good evidence, Deryck.

**Scott Barrie:** I return to the issue that Mary Scanlon touched on. The final sentence of paragraph 12 of SPP 21 says:

"Ministers do not expect to see many new green belts being designated".

However, we have heard that there are proposals for green belts in some parts of the east of Scotland, which is the area that I want to talk about.

Paragraph 4 of the submission that we received from the Scottish Green Belts Alliance says:

"Scotland's population is falling but there is imbalance. Broadly, there is pressurised growth in parts of the east and harmful shrinkage in much of the west. Green belts can assist by helping to contain unnecessary growth in the east and encouraging businesses and repopulation in degraded areas of the west."

Is that not slightly naive? The committee has heard from Tricia Marwick and me that, because of the fierce protection of the green belt that exists around Edinburgh, development has been pushed into East Lothian, West Lothian, the north Borders and Fife, bringing associated difficulties. Development will not be pushed to the west, as the Edinburgh economy is driving the Scottish economy at the moment. Is there not an argument that, in fiercely protecting green belt, we endanger sustainable development elsewhere?

**Dr Macbeth:** An important point was made once or twice in the earlier panels. The nature of a given green belt must suit the circumstances. There seems to be a danger of generalising about Scotland and all its green belts on the basis of the problems that face Edinburgh. Scotland has about 200,000 hectares of green belt, the majority of which is in the west—especially in the eight authorities in the Glasgow and Clyde valley joint structure plan area, as well as in Ayr and in Argyll and Bute. The falling population in those areas and the considerable areas of dereliction mean that the way in which the green belt operates and is valued can be different from the way in which it operates and is valued in a place such as Edinburgh, where there are specific pressures.

The danger is to generalise about Scotland because of the pressures in one place. As John Inman said, there is a need to consider the circumstances of Edinburgh as specific circumstances. I know that you want to raise the issue of new green belts. The possibility of creating new green belts elsewhere could be part of the solution. Coming from the west, I do not pretend to have an answer to the problems of Edinburgh.

**Scott Barrie:** Okay. One of the areas that you have suggested is seeking to create a green belt is St Andrews. I do not represent that area, but I know it because it is in Fife. There are huge problems to do with the shortage of affordable housing in St Andrews and people wanting to live much closer to it. If an effective green belt was created, that would produce the same problems that Edinburgh currently faces, such as people who wish to live there being displaced further

away and transport infrastructure problems. Is there not an argument that if we adhere too stringently to restrictions on green-belt development, all we do is to displace problems, particularly with transport infrastructure?

12:15

**Dr Macbeth:** I do not pretend to be able to answer points of detail about the circumstances in St Andrews. One of the points that we made in our report "The Future of Green Belts in Scotland" is that it is wrong to think of green belts as having one shape only—that point has been made before. St Andrews might well require a green belt of a particular type and shape, but I cannot comment on that. I do not know enough about St Andrews or the golf courses that surround it.

In general, rather like democracy, green belts might not be perfect, but they are basically a sound way of progressing. It is a question of refining green belts to ensure that the best solution for particular circumstances is found.

**David Rice:** We have got to the nub of the matter. Regardless of whether green belts are still thought to have a function and to be desirable to take forward into the future, we must try to secure the effective planning and management of our urban areas.

As far as St Andrews is concerned, there are all sorts of pressures. St Andrews is an example of a fine medieval, historical town, and that is fundamental to its attraction to visitors. It is also the home of golf, which is undeniably important to many visitors to Scotland. It has a large and growing, prosperous and successful university, which is important to the local economy. The landscape setting of the town contributes greatly to the amenity both for residents and visitors to the area. How do we balance the many legitimate needs, which include affordable housing, the opportunity for university expansion and facilities to receive the many visitors from America who want to play golf there? We must have in place a mechanism to manage urban growth and its relationship with the landscape and surroundings. Green belt might be imperfect for achieving that objective, but we do not yet have a successful replacement available.

Part of the task that the committee faces in considering the Planning etc (Scotland) Bill is to consider how to deploy the new, effective plan-led system to ensure that the legitimate voice of those who say that they cannot afford to live in their home town can be answered and balance that with all the other legitimate concerns.

Please do not depend on the green belt to provide the answer to all that. It is one mechanism, which, rather like me, is beginning to

creak at the joints. However, until such time as we see an effective way of replacing the green belt, please run with draft SPP 21, but acknowledge that it might need to be revised a little earlier than the Executive anticipates.

**Scott Barrie:** That was useful.

**The Convener:** That concludes our questions. If there are any issues that you had hoped would be raised but have not been covered this morning, this is your opportunity to put them on the record.

**David Rice:** For the committee's information, the current draft local plan for Perth includes a proposed green belt, but it has also made a land allocation to meet anticipated housing and industrial requirements for the next 20 years, which is not included in the proposed boundary of the green belt. It is possible to work the two together.

When drafting national guidance, it is difficult to anticipate all the situations that might arise across the country. However, it is important to allow for the fact that one size will not always fit all and that there must be scope for the individual planning authorities to meet their needs in the context of sound national advice, which can meet a number of objectives in the way that I explained in answer to the fair point about green belts in Fife, particularly St Andrews.

**Dr Macbeth:** A point that has not been adequately discussed, although it has been touched on, is that paragraph 6, on the objectives of the green belt policy, should be expanded to include more of the purposes of green belts. One of the strengths of green belts is that they are multifunctional—they fulfil a range of different objectives in a simple way.

SPP 21 suggests that the two places to expand a green belt are at the fringes and along transport corridors. We question that, because salami-slicing bits off the fringes constitutes urban sprawl and there are other, more sustainable options, including village expansion, which I mentioned, and the other options that we included in our submission. We think that they are more appropriate than ribbon development and urban sprawl. There is an assumption that green belts apply only to metropolitan areas and large towns, but we argue that they are equally applicable to small and medium-sized towns as defined in the planning advice note on small towns.

Finally, there have been several suggestions that there is a need for more cross-referencing in the document. That is a fair observation. In particular, a cross-reference could be built in as SPP 8, on town centres, goes through the processes. In a sense, the draft SPP 8 and the draft SPP 21 are two sides of the same coin. The draft SPP 8 suggests that the main emphasis of

development should be the revival of town centres, so the two go hand in hand.

**The Convener:** Thank you for your attendance at the committee today. Your evidence has been helpful and it will help to inform our lines of questioning when the minister comes before the committee on 18 January.

12:23

*Meeting suspended.*

12:24

*On resuming—*

## **Subordinate Legislation**

### **Scottish Homes (Dissolution) Order 2005 (SSI 2005/609)**

### **Town and Country Planning (Limit of Annual Value) (Scotland) Order 2005 (SSI 2005/594)**

**The Convener:** Agenda item 3 is subordinate legislation. The committee will consider two Scottish statutory instruments: the Scottish Homes (Dissolution) Order 2005 and the Town and Country Planning (Limit of Annual Value) (Scotland) Order 2005. Both orders were laid on 25 November 2005 and are subject to the negative procedure. Copies of the instruments have been circulated to members. The Subordinate Legislation Committee considered them at its meeting on 6 December and had no points to raise.

The Scottish Homes (Dissolution) Order 2005 specifies the date of the dissolution of Scottish Homes as 31 December 2005. The Communities Committee and its predecessor committee considered previous instruments on the winding up of Scottish Homes and had no comments to make. Do members have any comments on SSI 2005/609?

**Members:** No.

**The Convener:** In that case, is the committee content with the order?

**Members** *indicated agreement.*

**The Convener:** The committee will therefore make no recommendation in its report to the Parliament.

The Town and Country Planning (Limit of Annual Value) (Scotland) Order 2005 increases the limit of annual value from £24,725 to £28,000 for the purposes of section 100(3)(a) of the Town and Country Planning (Scotland) Act 1997. The act allows owner-occupiers of land blighted by a planning authority to require the appropriate authority to acquire their property in certain circumstances. That is subject to the provision, in the case of a non-resident owner-occupier, that the annual value of the non-domestic property does not exceed the prescribed limit, which will be increased by the order.

Do members have any comments on SSI 2005/594?

**Members:** No.

**The Convener:** Is the committee content with the order?

12:27

*Meeting continued in private until 12:48.*

**Members** *indicated agreement.*

**The Convener:** In that case, the committee will make no recommendation on the order in its report to the Parliament.

I ask members to agree that we should report to the Parliament our decisions on the two orders. Are we agreed?

**Members** *indicated agreement.*





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