



## Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill: Reforms to National Planning Policy

### Response of the Colne Valley Park Trust – 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2023

FAO: Planning Policy Consultation Team, Planning Directorate – Planning Policy Division  
Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities

#### About the consultation

“This consultation seeks views on our proposed approach to updating the National Planning Policy Framework. We are also seeking views on our proposed approach to preparing National Development Management Policies, how we might develop policy to support levelling up, and how national planning policy is currently accessed by users.

A fuller review of the Framework will be required in due course, and its content will depend on the implementation of the government’s proposals for wider changes to the planning system, including the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill.”

This response has been sent by email to: [PlanningPolicyConsultation@levellingup.gov.uk](mailto:PlanningPolicyConsultation@levellingup.gov.uk)

#### About the Colne Valley Regional Park (CVRP) and the Colne Valley Park Trust’s (CVPT) work

The Colne Valley Regional Park (CVRP) is the first substantial taste of countryside to the west of London. The Park, founded in 1965, stretches from Rickmansworth in the north to Staines and the Thames in the south, and from Uxbridge and Heathrow in the east, to Slough and Chalfont St Peter in the west.



Broad location of the CVRP

The CVRP occupies a large and strategically important part of London’s Green Belt. It is the first substantial area of countryside on the western edge of London and performs the critical function of

giving those living in London and other urban centres access to the natural environment, with all its attendant benefits for health and well-being.

It performs multi-functional roles supporting:

- green and blue corridors rich in biodiversity and ecological connectivity
- opportunities for nature recovery and re-wilding
- local food production
- combatting climate change
- active lifestyles, physical and mental well-being
- recreational pursuits
- flood management

We believe the CVRP is unique in having an organisation established specifically to protect and improve this area of 'inner' Green Belt on the edge of the capital, working in collaboration with local authorities and other partners. Funding is, however, minimal.

The Colne Valley Park Trust oversees the park and is a registered charity. Day-to-day operations are managed and implemented through a contract with Groundwork South, a not-for-profit company operating in the environmental sector.

Everything we do in the park is guided by its six objectives. These are consistent with national planning policy for the Green Belt and relate to:

1. **Landscape:** To maintain and enhance the landscape, historic environment and waterscape of the park in terms of their scenic and conservation value, and their overall amenity.
2. **Countryside:** To safeguard the countryside of the Park from inappropriate development. Where development is permissible it will encourage the highest possible standards of design.
3. **Biodiversity:** To conserve and enhance biodiversity within the Park through the protection and management of its species, habitats and geological features. We are the home of many areas of nature importance.
4. **Recreation:** To provide opportunities for countryside recreation and ensure that facilities are accessible to all.
5. **Rural Economy:** To achieve a vibrant and sustainable rural economy, including farming and forestry, underpinning the value of the countryside.
6. **Community Participation:** To encourage community participation including volunteering and environmental education. To promote the health and social well-being benefits that access to high quality green space brings.

However, all is not well in this part of the Green Belt. This is largely due to enormous pressure for development (frequently large scale commercial) and steadily increasing urban activity across the area.

Together, they now pose an existential threat to this fragile landscape, and amply demonstrate how the current planning system is no longer working as it should.

We therefore welcome this opportunity to contribute to the reform of national planning policy through this consultation.

## Preamble and Overview of our Response

- We restrict our response to those aspects of planning reform that can have a direct impact on the protection and enhancement of the natural environment across the Colne Valley Regional Park's Green Belt.
- We support many of the changes advanced in the current consultation as they offer better protection for the Green Belt.
- However, based on our recent experience of how the planning system is working across the Park, we see that more policy change and 'tools' are needed to help us realise the significant potential that this large area of countryside has for our communities and the environment.
- Our President, Lord Randall of Uxbridge, wrote to the Secretary of State in November 2021, requesting a meeting and advanced suggested improvements to NPPF policy. We did not receive a full response and the current consultation falls short of what is needed.
- We attach that November 2021 letter and paper for your consideration now as the suggestions can inform the fuller review of the NPPF that is referred to and feature in National Development Management Policies.
- Information on the suggested policy improvements and why they are needed is contained in the 2021 paper. We summarise the seven improvements (all relating to Green Belts) as:
  1. **A sixth purpose for Green Belt** – that recognises, whilst maintaining openness and it being productive for farming and biodiversity, the Green Belt has a key role providing countryside accessible to large urban areas.
  2. **Guidance on what the permanence of the Green Belt means** and how incremental 'sprawl' can undermine its function.
  3. Stronger advice and **guidance for Councils regarding their discharge of the positive role for Green Belt** (as set out in Para 145 of the 2021 NPPF) and that this has relevance to the handling of applications for major development outside of Local Plans.
  4. **Tightening up the 'Very Special Circumstances' clause** to avoid large developments bypassing Local Plans and being approved without proper and strategically significant compensatory improvements.
  5. **Tightening up the 'Exceptional Circumstances' clause** when this would undermine Green Belt land that is fulfilling GB purposes.
  6. Clarifying that **'Compensatory Improvements' (to remaining GB land) applies equally to all proposed large developments** – whether in a plan review or in an 'ad hoc' application.
  7. **A workable strategic planning mechanism is needed to replace the Duty to Co-operate** to direct development pressures away from the Green Belt.
- The policy changes we advocate represent adjustments, rather than radical change, to the current framework. They complement the direction of travel set out in the current consultation. Specifically, they are geared to addressing the challenges facing the vitally important, though uniquely vulnerable, urban fringe countryside in the Green Belt and aim to secure a better future for locations such as the CVRP. They need to apply to a range of proposed development and Green Belt 'management', as opposed to being restricted to housing growth issues (which the currently proposed changes appear to focus on addressing).

We put forward the CVRP as an ideal case study to amply illustrate why current planning policy is not as effective as it needs to be for this part of the Green Belt and to help understanding as to how further improvements to national policy would provide better protection to Green Belt areas like the CVRP.

It would realistically inform policies that would allow these crucially important areas to realise their full potential for making high quality countryside. Countryside that can be easily accessible to urban communities whilst also being biodiverse and productive for local food and farming.

We are updating our mapping of recent development proposals within the CVRP and can supply this to convey the scale of the pressure across this area, much of which is for commercial development e.g. large scale data centres.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Please contact: Stewart Pomeroy, Colne Valley Park Managing Agent, Groundwork South  
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## Schedule of Colne Valley Regional Park responses

Note: We only answer those consultation questions of particular relevance to the CVRP's role and location.

The full list of questions can be found towards the end of the consultation document:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/levelling-up-and-regeneration-bill-reforms-to-national-planning-policy> This webpage also includes a document with the proposed text amendments in the NPPF set out as track changes.

<b>Consultation questions</b>	<b>Colne Valley Regional Park Response</b>
3. Should an oversupply of homes early in a plan period be taken into consideration when calculating a 5YHLS later on or is there an alternative approach that is preferable?	Yes
5. Do you have any views about the potential changes to paragraph 14 of the existing Framework and increasing the protection given to neighbourhood plans?	<i>We support the changes as they foster planned decisions and reduce 'planning by appeal'</i>
6. Do you agree that the opening chapters of the Framework should be revised to be clearer about the importance of planning for the homes and other development our communities need?	<i>Only if this is complemented by highlighting the importance of protecting and enhancing our Green Belt and Green Infrastructure provision.</i>
9. Do you agree that national policy should make clear that Green Belt does not need to be reviewed or altered when making plans, that building at densities significantly out of character with an existing area may be considered in assessing whether housing need can be met, and that past over-supply may be taken into account?	Yes  <i>However, it is critical that an effective mechanism is put in place to deliver strategic, cross-border, planning, replacing the 'Duty to Co-operate'.</i>
11. Do you agree with removing the explicit requirement for plans to be 'justified', on the basis of delivering a more proportionate approach to examination?	<i>No, the 'justified' requirement should remain. That said, it should be possible to rationalise how the 'justification' requirement is applied, so plan examination is proportionate.</i>
13. Do you agree that we should make a change to the Framework on the application of the urban uplift?	<i>We consider a strategic, cross-border, planning approach (replacing the Duty to Cooperate) will be an essential complement to any change to the Framework regarding the urban uplift, as we set out in answer to Q.14.</i>
14. What, if any, additional policy or guidance could the department provide which could help support authorities plan for more homes in urban areas where the uplift applies?	<i>A strategic spatial planning approach is essential, to embrace adjoining local authorities outside the main urban centres – places that often include Green Belt areas. The strategic planning approach should apply to addressing not only housing 'needs' but also commercial and other development 'needs' so the future picture for the Green Belt is clear.</i>
15. How, if at all, should neighbouring authorities consider the urban uplift applying, where part of those neighbouring authorities also functions as part of the wider economic, transport or housing market for the core town/city?	<i>We consider a strategic, cross-border, planning approach (replacing the Duty to Cooperate) will be an essential complement to any change in the Framework about how the urban uplift would work, as we set out in answer to Q.14.</i>
37. How do you think national policy on small scale nature interventions could be strengthened?	<i>We welcome any discouragement of the use of artificial grass (except for sports) but do not</i>

<p>For example, in relation to the use of artificial grass by developers in new development?</p>	<p><i>see this as a significant issue for planning in the countryside.</i></p>
<p>38. Do you agree that this is the right approach making sure that the food production value of high value farm land is adequately weighted in the planning process, in addition to current references in the Framework on best most versatile agricultural land?</p>	<p><i>We support adding greater weight to farming and farmland in the planning process. But the proposals need to go further and reflect the important functions that farmland in the Green Belt close to large urban centres, like the CVRP, can perform.</i>  <i>All farmland is of high value.</i> The value is not just its measure for local food production but it is an invaluable resource as part of biodiversity, climate mitigation, flood management, countryside access as well as the landscape value of a vista over farmed countryside.  <i>We advocate that <b>full value be attributed to all green belt farmland</b> (not just high value or best and most versatile) in the planning process – after all, with innovative government support, farmers are a very cost-effective way of managing land in the Green Belt for the multi-function community benefits that the Green Belt was originally designated for. Consideration should be given to the recent agricultural and environmental acts which together provide for holistic farmland management. Targeted support for green belt farmland should be promoted. Here the imperative to produce local food underpins a rich and diverse suite of green countryside uses.</i>  <i>In the CVRP we experience deliberate dereliction by landowners of agricultural and other open land to enhance their chances of future development. The Framework needs to incorporate wording to prevent this.</i></p>
<p>40. Do you have any views on how planning policy could support climate change adaptation further, specifically through the use of nature-based solutions that provide multi-functional benefits?</p>	<p><i>This has great relevance to the role that Green Belt on the edge of large urban areas can perform in combatting climate change. Such urban areas are becoming increasingly densified, so the ‘green lungs’ on their doorstep become even more important. The statement made in Chapter 7, paragraph 19 (“...it can provide a pleasant environment, have a positive impact on people’s health and well-being, enhance biodiversity, assist with water management...” etc) applies to places like the Colne Valley Regional Park but this aspect needs to be referred to in NPPF Green Belt policy to ensure it is given due weight in decision making.</i></p>
<p>48. Do you agree with the proposed transitional arrangements for supplementary planning</p>	<p><i>No</i>  <i>We consider that supplementary planning documents prepared under the ‘old’ regime,</i></p>

documents? If no, what alternative arrangements would you propose?	<i>but which remain in line with an up-to-date planning policy framework should be able to remain in force. This will retain useful policy and be less demanding on scarce resources.</i>
49. Do you agree with the suggested scope and principles for guiding National Development Management Policies?	<i>Broadly. But, alongside NPPF Green Belt policy refinements, the scope for NDMPs should include using them to clarify how proposals in the Green Belt should be handled, including how harm to the Green Belt from major development should be assessed and issues of proportionate mitigation and compensatory improvements considered. We set out some suggestions in the preamble to this response.</i>
51. Do you agree that selective additions should be considered for proposals to complement existing national policies for guiding decisions?	Yes
52. Are there other issues which apply across all or most of England that you think should be considered as possible options for National Development Management Policies?	<i>Alongside NPPF Green Belt policy refinements the scope for NDMPs should include using them to clarify how proposals in the Green Belt should be handled, including how harm to the Green Belt from major development should be assessed and issues of proportionate mitigation and compensatory improvements considered. We set out some suggestions in the preamble to this response.</i>
53. What, if any, planning policies do you think could be included in a new framework to help achieve the 12 levelling up missions in the Levelling Up White Paper?	<i>In our preamble we explain that, from our experience of working to maintain and improve a large area of the inner Green Belt on the edge of London, it is clear that existing planning policy has loopholes. Developers see it as soft target as a direct result. Development pressures (both residential and commercial) need to be deflected more towards areas needing 'levelling up'. The changes to NPPF Green Belt policy currently being advanced, whilst welcome, do not go far enough.</i>
54. How do you think that the framework could better support development that will drive economic growth and productivity in every part of the country, in support of the Levelling Up agenda?	<i>Development pressures (both residential and commercial) need to be deflected more towards areas needing 'levelling up'. The changes to NPPF Green Belt policy currently being advanced, and the further changes we put forward will all assist. But the key measure will be a strong form of strategic planning that directs strategic growth to appropriate locations.</i>
55. Do you think that the government could go further in national policy, to increase development on brownfield land within city and town centres, with a view to facilitating gentle densification of our urban cores?	<i>Yes, it should improve the mechanisms for Local Authorities to take a proactive role in acquiring and bringing forward brownfield land for development – and improve the resourcing available to them. The Government should give more recognition to the fact that good planning is not just about ensuring enough land is available for housing,</i>

	<p><i>but also for the right commercial development. We observe that the pressures for development in the Green Belt are significantly associated with large scale commercial development.</i></p>
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