

**Technical Work undertaken on behalf of the South West Regional
Assembly (SWRA).**

This is a freestanding technical background paper to assist understanding of the issues influencing possible development. As development will be dependent upon multiple factors, suggestions within any single paper should not be treated as a development proposal.

**Gloucester/Cheltenham Joint Study Area
Working Group on Green Belt**

**Background Paper
Strategic re-assessment of the Green Belt**

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 The need to re-assess the Gloucester/Cheltenham Green Belt is a requirement of the South West Regional Planning Guidance (RPG10) as part of the process of planning to meet the longer-term growth needs of the area.
- 1.2 Nationally and regionally there is a desire to achieve a greater concentration of development at towns and cities and a more sustainable pattern of development for the future. Cheltenham and Gloucester are identified in RPG10 as Principal Urban Areas (PUAs). Regional guidance recognises that the region's PUAs provide the greatest opportunities for sustainable growth and investment, promoting urban renaissance, a good quality of life, social inclusion and access to a wide range of services and good public transport. RPG10 expects the majority of future development in the region to be focussed on the PUAs.
- 1.3 By concentrating development at these Principal Urban Areas (PUAs) there is the opportunity to achieve better economic growth and facilities accessible to more people with less need to travel, as well as protecting green fields elsewhere from development.
- 1.4 Contrary to popular misconception, Green Belts are not based on an assessment of landscape quality (although areas of high value landscape can be contained within them). Green Belts are a "policy" designation and national guidance sets out five purposes for them. These are:
 - To check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas.
 - To prevent neighbouring towns from merging into one another.
 - To assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment.
 - To preserve the setting and special character of historic towns, and
 - To assist in urban regeneration by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land.

1.5 The current Gloucester/Cheltenham Green Belt was defined in 1968 primarily for the purpose of preventing towns merging. However, in carrying out a strategic review of the Green Belt all five purposes should be considered. This means that although some areas of the existing Green Belt may be removed for necessary development, new areas could be added (so long as they contribute to the purposes for Green Belts) so that the overall area of Green Belt protected for the future could increase. The boundary of the Green Belt can be seen in appendix 1.

2.0 Methodology

2.1 The Green Belt Officer Working Group approached this work in two stages. Firstly, the meaning of the purposes for Green Belt in the Gloucester/Cheltenham context were considered and debated, including taking into account the current planning context. The results of this first stage are summarised in Section 3 below.

2.2 The second stage involved the Group touring around Gloucester and Cheltenham to view the existing Green Belt and the setting of the settlements from all directions, both at the lower level in the Severn Vale and from viewpoints on higher ground. This enabled the Group to form an opinion on the appropriateness for green belt designation of different areas on the edge of the settlements. The results of this assessment are summarised in the table in Section 4 below.

2.3 Please note that the work to date has focussed on a broad assessment of the Green Belt to enable strategic options for future directions for development to be consulted upon. It is not appropriate at this stage to try and define detailed boundaries, and the assessment in Section 4 should not be interpreted in this way. Also, the issue of phasing and safeguarded land for the future has not been addressed. If strategic changes to the Green Belt are taken forward then it will be for the next round of Local Development Documents to establish detailed boundaries and interpret phasing proposals.

3.0 The Purposes of Green Belt

3.1 **To check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas** – the Group considered that, in the current era of plan-led development, the type of unplanned sprawl that this purpose was originally aimed at preventing should not occur. However, in the current context of planning more sustainably it was considered that preventing development in areas that cannot be easily linked to existing town centres by public transport could qualify. For many people the containment of urban areas and the aim of limiting their impact on the surrounding rural areas is an aspect of “sprawl” but the Group considered this aspect was better considered under the third purpose (see 3.3 below).

- 3.2 **To prevent neighbouring towns from merging into one another -** the Group considered that this purpose is not so much about the issue of loss of character, which is difficult to demonstrate, but more about the issue of visual separation. The Group considered this is easily understood in the Gloucester/Cheltenham context and in respect of Cheltenham and Bishop's Cleeve.
- 3.3 **To assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment –** the Group considered that a properly plan-led approach to development, respecting smaller scale ridges and adding to landscape features, should minimise the spread of development and minimise the intrusion of the urban form on the rural areas around the PUAs. However, although “landscape quality” is not a relevant consideration in the designation of Green Belts, the Group considered that certain key landscape features could be considered for inclusion as they provide a backcloth to views across the Severn Vale that are fundamental to the appreciation of the open countryside.
- 3.4 **To preserve the setting and special character of historic towns -** the Group considered that this purpose was clear and easily understood and is particularly relevant where there are cherished views of historic areas/features set beyond a rural foreground.
- 3.5 **To assist in urban regeneration by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land –** The Group considered this purpose was relevant insofar as, within a long term plan, there needs to be robust phasing and priorities set to ensure that the recycling of land within the PUAs is fully exploited. In the event that Green Belt land is released for development careful consideration needs to be given to the issue of “safeguarded land” and phasing to ensure recycling of previously developed land is encouraged. Once a long-term development pattern is established then this purpose could be applied to support regeneration and guide development to the most sustainable locations, but it is considered that all locations would have a similar value for this purpose.

4.0 The Steering Group's Assessment

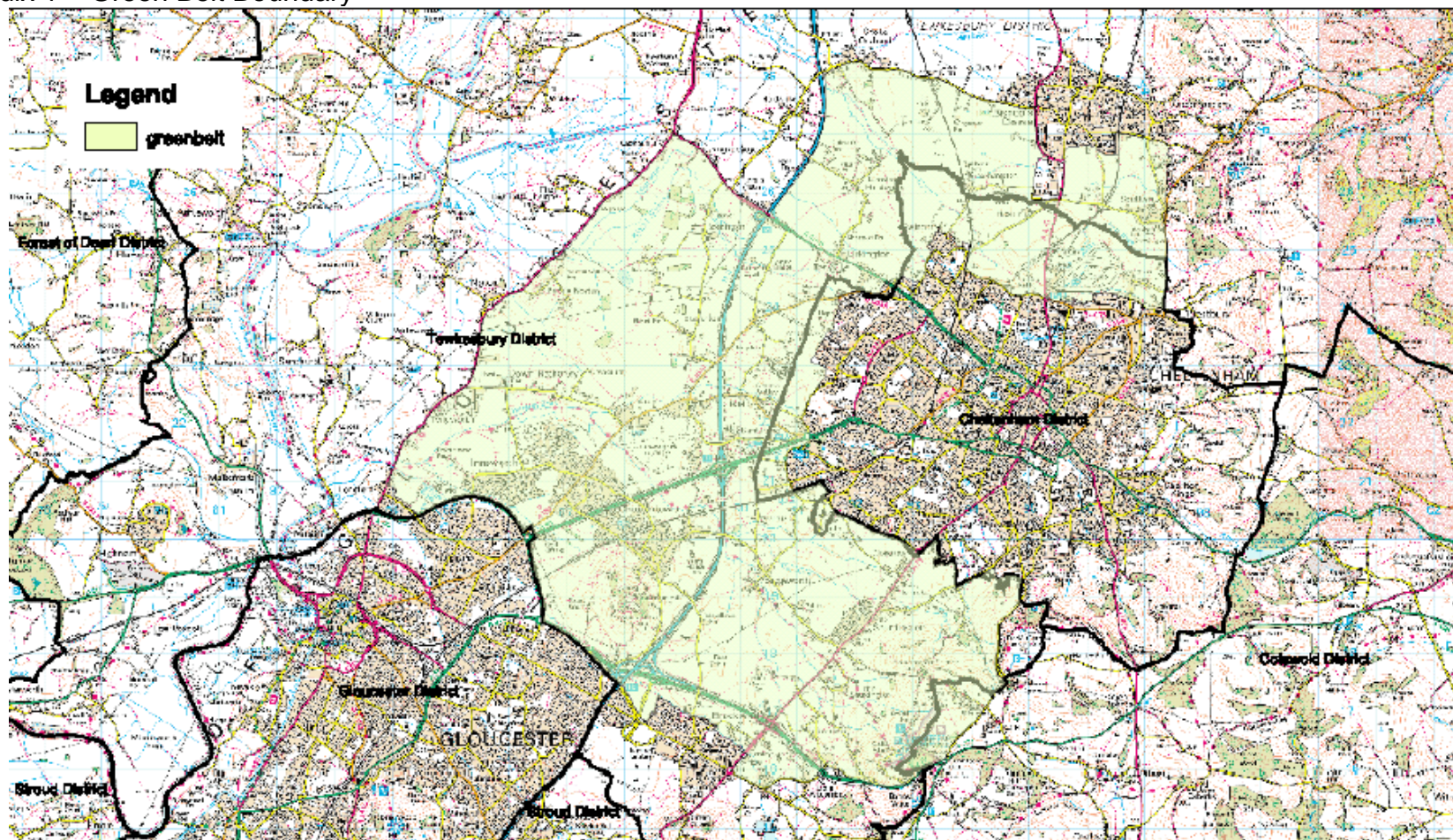
- 4.1 The Table below sets out the Officer Working Group's broad assessment of different sectors of the Gloucester and Cheltenham urban edge in terms of its value in respect of the 5 purposes for Green Belt. A “0” implies little or no importance, a “1” implies some importance, and “2” implies high importance.

Purpose	1) Preventing Sprawl	2) Preventing Towns Merging	3) Safeguard Countryside	4) Historic Setting	5) Encourage Recycling
Location					
West of Gloucester	0	0	1	2	1
North of Gloucester city centre	0	0	0	0	1
North-east of Gloucester	0	2	2 (Chosen Hill)	0	1
North of Brockworth	1	2	1	0	1
South-East of Gloucester	1	0	2 (Cotswold Edge, Robinswood Hill)	0	1
South of Gloucester	2	0	1 (Hunt's Grove ridge)	0	1
Purpose	1) Preventing Sprawl	2) Preventing Towns Merging	3) Safeguard Countryside	4) Historic Setting	5) Encourage Recycling
Location					
South-west of Cheltenham	0	1	1	0	1
West of Cheltenham (Golden Valley area)	0	2	1	0	1
North-west of Cheltenham	0	0	0	0	1
North of Cheltenham (Bishop's Cleeve Gap)	0	1	1 (Hunting Butt's Ridge)	0	1
North of Bishop's Cleeve	2	0	0	0	1
East of Cheltenham	0	0	2	1	1
South of Cheltenham	0	0	2	1	1

5.0 Conclusions

- 5.1 The current Green Belt has been effective in controlling development in the areas designated but the Officer Working Group considers that it includes far more land than is necessary to prevent Gloucester and Cheltenham from merging.
- 5.2 The Officer Working Group considers there is scope to remove land north of Gloucester and north-west of Cheltenham without affecting, in any meaningful way, the sense of visual separation between Gloucester and Cheltenham, or between Cheltenham and Bishop's Cleeve. In coming to this conclusion the importance of visual separation in views from the Cotswold escarpment has been considered as well as how the sense of separation is experienced in the lower areas between the towns.
- 5.3 These potential directions of future development do not affect the higher quality landscape identified in the area and would allow urban extensions within which the transport implications of the new development needed can be managed most effectively.
- 5.4 The Officer Working Group's assessment also suggests that some additional areas could be added to the Green Belt. These could include:
- The Cotswold escarpment along the eastern edge of Cheltenham and Gloucester, including the Robinswood Hill outlier, to give extra protection to their open countryside character and recognise their contribution to the setting of the two towns.
 - Along the western edge of Gloucester to safeguard the historic setting of central Gloucester.
 - To the south of Gloucester and to the north of Bishop's Cleeve to prevent development sprawling into countryside areas that are poorly related to the centres of the PUAs.
- 5.5 Assessing the purposes of Green Belt is not a straightforward exercise and the Steering Group will need to consider carefully the comments they receive through public consultation on the results of this broad strategic study:
- the suggestions for releases from the Green Belt to enable a more sustainable pattern of future development for our two major settlements and,
 - the idea that a new Green Belt could be established, after allowing for necessary development, that surrounds both towns and ensures development occurs where it is intended.

Appendix 1 – Green Belt Boundary



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