

# Review of Special Types of Rural Land 2: Greenbelt

## 1. Introduction

- 1.1 This paper is intended to review Supplementary Guidance *Special Types of Rural Land 2: Greenbelt (STRL2)* to assess how it meets national policy requirements in view of changes and local context. In addition, it will consider whether STRL2 is continuing to provide an effective policy and suitable basis for delivering development within Aberdeenshire's Greenbelt.
- 1.2 The main aim of STRL2 is to allow limited development – such as that associated with recreation, agriculture, nature conservation etc - that is compatible with the Greenbelt setting. The Greenbelt is a highly desirable location to live in and visit due to its proximity to Aberdeen. This has meant there are greater pressures for development in the green belt creating the need for a more stringent policy approach.

## 2. Policy Approach

- 2.1 The Greenbelt plays an important role as the landscape setting of Aberdeen and should be protected against large scale and inappropriate development. The aim of STRL2 is to conserve Aberdeen's natural landscape setting and promote development that will enhance the Greenbelt whilst protecting its special characteristics. This has meant a stricter policy approach is required to that of the wider countryside.
- 2.2 The current Local Development Plan has revised the previous Local Plan (2006) green belt boundaries as well as amending the policy to make greater allowance for development in the green belt. Changes brought in under STRL2 now include permitting extensions to dwellings as well as converting existing vernacular buildings.
- 2.3 STRL2 is the supplementary guidance/policy that stipulates what development is permissible in Aberdeen's green belt. The green belt policy forms part of the hierarchical approach to development in the countryside in conjunction with SG Rural Development 1 (SGRD1) and applies throughout Aberdeenshire. SGRD1 permits a more flexible approach to development within the other rural areas but is not applicable in the green belt.
- 2.4 Under STRL2, development will only be permitted where it is necessary for the purposes of agriculture, forestry, horticulture, nature conservation, essential infrastructure or to provide accommodation for an essential worker associated with one of these primary industries. However, in the case of the later, it must be demonstrated that permanent presence is required on the premises.
- 2.5 In addition, development may be permitted where it is for the sensitive restoration or conversion of an existing vernacular building or is for the extension of an existing building, subject to other policies.
- 2.6 Aberdeenshire's green belt also adjoins green belt that is under the authority of Aberdeen city. This means that under the direction of the Strategic Development Plan, there may be a need to co-ordinate with the City Council. Currently separate green belt policies have been prepared by each authority.
- 2.7 Maps of Aberdeenshire's greenbelt boundaries are provided in the main Local Development Plan under the proposals maps.

### 3. Policy Background

#### National context

- 3.1 Scottish Planning Policy (2010) provides the main national policy direction for Green belts. It acknowledges that designating Green belt is an important means of directing development to the most appropriate locations in order to manage growth more effectively, and reduce the negative impacts of unplanned expansion. It also identifies the Green belt as an accessible means of recreation and gateway to the countryside.
- 3.2 SPP identifies that following types of development are appropriate in the Green belt, particularly where they support the local rural economy;
- development that is associated with agricultural use and the re-use of historic agricultural buildings,
  - woodland and forestry
  - horticultural use such as market gardening and associated retail,
  - recreation that is consistent with the Green belts agricultural and natural setting, and;
  - essential infrastructure
- 3.3 SPP states that green belt policies should provide '*clarity and certainty*' particularly where a co-ordinated approach between Authorities is required such as in the case of Aberdeen Shire and City.
- 3.4 It also emphasises that green belt designations should not be used as a means of safeguarding land for particular development, or for the protection of the natural environment. The green belt should function solely for the purposes of landscape setting, recreation and rural based uses.

#### Strategic/regional context

- 3.5 The Aberdeen City and Shire proposed Strategic Development plan (2013) - which will supersede the Structure Plan (2009) when it is adopted – will provide the direction for planning at the regional level, and addresses strategic issues that require a joint approach from both Aberdeenshire and Aberdeen City Councils. The green belt is one such issue which runs along the geographical boundary of both authorities.
- 3.6 The proposed plan states that '*The green belt around Aberdeen will continue to play a vital role in protecting the character and landscape setting of the City*' as well as acknowledging the important role that the green belt plays in providing an accessible '*high quality environment*'. However, it adds that the green belt '*will need to change to meet the growth this plan seeks to achieve*'.
- 3.7 The Structure plan which is still in place, specified that green belt land would be required to be released in order to achieve the anticipated levels of development required for the future growth of Aberdeen. As a result, it instructed green belt boundary and policy reviews to be undertaken by both authorities, which were carried out in 2010. Through the boundary review, Aberdeenshire's green belt was amended based on how each part of the existing green belt met the objectives set out by SPP. The review identified some areas outwith the green belt that were deemed to be of significant natural heritage value which were included in the designated green belt. In addition, some areas which were not considered to meet the purposes of the green belt and could contribute to meeting the growth objectives identified by the structure plan have been removed.

#### **4. Drivers of change**

- 4.1 The current Local Development Plan introduced a revision to the previous green belt boundaries following the review in 2010. On this basis, it is considered that the current boundaries are appropriate and consistent with the Structure Plan and Strategic Development Plan so should not be subject to change or review.
- 4.2 The implementation of the new Local Development Plan has introduced a slight amendment of the type of development permitted in the green belt. To date there have been no major issues identified with the application or interpretation of the policy, however, one potential amendment has been highlighted.
- 4.3 A number of houses in the green belt were built in the 50s/60s and are now considered to be of poor design and quality. Under STRL2, there is currently no provision for the replacement of these houses. It may therefore be beneficial to permit the replacement of non-vernacular houses that demonstrate an improvement in design and quality. This could contribute to improving the overall layout, siting, and design of developments in the green belt that would support and enhance its character.
- 4.4 In addition, two separate LDP policies exist for Aberdeen's green belt and whilst they are generally consistent, as a long term objective it might be sensible to consider a better practice approach that sees one co-ordinated policy covering both the City and Shire's sides of the green belt and published in the Aberdeen City and Shire Strategic Development Plan.

#### **5. Recommendations**

- 5.1 On the basis of this information it is recommended the following minor amendments are made;
  - STRL2 is amended to permit the replacement of non vernacular dwellings in the green belt. This would only be on the basis that the replacement dwelling is of a scale consistent with the existing house and is no more intrusive than the previous. In addition, the new dwelling must demonstrate a significant improvement in design to that of the existing house.

This would be intended to create a mechanism to allow the improvement of some of the existing houses in the green belt that are of poorer design and quality.

  - For the purposes of consistency, that green belt boundary maps should be provided in the Supplementary guidance as is the case with the Coastal zone.

#### **6. Summary of main points**

- 6.1 STRL2 is currently a robust policy that protects the special character of the green belt and permits development that is compatible with its natural surroundings. In addition, it allows for the conversion of vernacular buildings which are not to the detriment of the green belt setting. The policy continues to use the green belt as a mechanism for directing development to more suitable places as well as promoting it for recreational use. It is suggested that the policy could be amended to allow the replacement of existing non-vernacular dwellings which could contribute to the improvement of the green belts character and setting/place.

## **References**

Aberdeen City and Shire Strategic Development Plan Authority (2009) *Aberdeen City and Shire Structure Plan*

Aberdeenshire Council (2012) *Aberdeenshire Local Development Plan 2012*

*Aberdeenshire Council (2006) Aberdeenshire Local Plan 2006*

Aberdeenshire Council (2010) Proposed Greenbelt boundaries

Scottish Government (2010) *Scottish Planning Policy*