Maidstone Borough Council Metropolitan Green Belt Review (January 2016)

Introduction

1.1 The Metropolitan Green Belt (Green Belt) is a statutory Green Belt around London. It includes designated parts of Greater London and the surrounding counties in the South East and East of England regions, including parts of Kent. The purpose of this paper is to examine whether there are any exceptional circumstances to review the Green Belt designated land in Maidstone Borough.

National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)

1.2 The NPPF (Para 14) states:

*At the heart of the National Planning Policy Framework is a presumption in favour of sustainable development, which should be seen as a golden thread running through both plan-making and decision-taking.*

For plan making this means that:

- *Local planning authorities should positively seek opportunities to meet the development needs of their area;*
- *Local Plans should meet objectively assessed needs, with sufficient flexibility to adapt to rapid change, unless:*
  - any adverse impacts of doing so would significantly and demonstrably outweigh the benefits, when assessed against the policies in this Framework taken as a whole; or
  - *specific policies in this Framework indicate development should be restricted (for example, ...land designated as Green Belt...).* [ed: emphasis added]

1.3 Further advice can be found in the NPPG 3-045 which states that the Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment should establish realistic assumptions about the land available and part of that assessment includes the Green Belt constraint.

1.4 Once need has been assessed, the local planning authority should prepare a Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment to establish realistic assumptions about the availability, suitability and the likely economic viability of land to meet the identified need for housing over the plan period, and in so doing take account of any constraints such as Green Belt, which indicate that development should be restricted and which may restrain the ability of an authority to meet its need.

The Green Belt in Maidstone

1.5 The diagram 'Metropolitan Green Belt in Context' illustrates the position of Maidstone Borough at the south eastern extent of the green belt as it extends from London. Within the borough boundary there is a very small area designated, approximately 5.3km$^2$. The total area of the borough is 393.4km$^2$, so the Green Belt accounts for just over 1.3% of the borough.
1.6 The designation is bounded by Tonbridge and Malling Borough in the west, north and south, and the River Medway and Medway Valley railway line in the east. It includes the settlements of Nettlestead and Nettlestead Green which are washed over by the Green Belt. As a result of their size and lack of a range of services and facilities neither settlement is part of the settlement hierarchy aimed at achieving growth and both are considered as part of the countryside for the purposes of the Maidstone Borough Local Plan (Publication, February 2016).

1.7 The village immediately adjacent to the north of the Green Belt is Wateringbury (in Tonbridge and Malling Borough). To the south, but not adjacent, is East Peckham (also in Tonbridge and Malling Borough).

Maidstone Policy Context

1.8 In Maidstone, the spatial strategy set out in the Local Plan (Publication) focuses new residential development at an expanded Maidstone urban area, rural service centres and larger rural settlements, making best use of existing facilities and services. Regeneration is prioritised within an expanded town centre which will continue to be the primary retail and office location in the borough. Priority in the rural area of the borough is given to protecting the individual character of settlements and the surrounding countryside.

1.9 The diagram 'Metropolitan Green Belt in Context (2)' illustrates the Green Belt set against the proposed Maidstone urban area boundary. As the crow flies, the distance between the urban boundary at Barming (in the north west) and the Green Belt at Nettlestead is between 3km and 3.5km, depending where the measurement is taken.

1.10 Rural service centres and larger villages, the rural settlements that have been identified to accommodate housing and mixed use development in the local plan, are also geographically independent from the Green Belt. The diagram 'Metropolitan Green Belt in Context (3)' illustrates the geographical relationship between these settlements and the green belt. As the crow flies, the distance between the settlement boundary of Yalding (the nearest of the larger villages) and the Green Belt at Nettlestead is 0.96km. This is the closest of the rural service centres/larger villages, the next closest being Coxheath, between 4.1km and 4.7km away as the crow flies – again depending on the point of measurement.

1.11 Two public ‘call for sites’ exercises received information on sites from across the borough that may have potential for housing, retail, employment and Gypsy, Traveller and Travelling Showpeople pitches/plots. No sites located within the Green Belt were submitted. An additional borough wide assessment was undertaken to search for suitable Gypsy and Traveller pitches, but none of the potential sites within the Green Belt that were part of the assessment were suitable for allocation. Consequently, no land within the Green Belt has been identified as being available for development even if the Green Belt boundary were to be reviewed.

Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council Policy

1.12 Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council confirmed that in the 2007 Tonbridge and Malling Core Strategy there was no change made to the Green Belt boundary. Subsequently, sites promoted by developers around Wateringbury
and East Peckham were rejected. Tonbridge and Malling are now in the early stages of preparing their new local plan and will be reviewing their Green Belt as part of this process. The Green Belt is contiguous across the administrative areas of the two local authorities.
Villages within the Green Belt

1.13 There are two small villages within Maidstone Borough’s green belt. These are Nettlestead to the north, which has a conservation area, and Nettlestead Green to the south. The Retreat Caravan Park is located to the north of Nettlestead village, effectively merging Nettlestead village to Wateringbury, which is located to the north of the Green Belt boundary.

1.14 Nettlestead has recreation grounds to the east and south of the village, a village hall and allotment gardens. Maidstone Road connects Nettlestead village with the settlement of Nettlestead Green. Development along this road is sparse: there is a war memorial, cricket ground, St Mary’s Church, Kent Garden’s Compendium at Nettlestead Place and a handful of dwellings. At Green Farm the density of development increases into the village of Nettlestead Green. Nettlestead and Nettlestead Green have not merged and remain distinct villages.

Planning permissions granted since 2000 within the Green Belt boundary

1.15 The Maidstone Borough-wide Local Plan was adopted in 2000, so an analysis of planning permissions granted within the Green Belt since 2000 has been carried out to establish what new development has been permitted. Overall, 103 planning permissions were granted. The pie chart below shows a breakdown of the type of development granted permission and, following this, there is commentary about the key permissions granted.

Number and type of planning permissions granted in the Metropolitan Green Belt since 2000

Figure 1: Number and type of planning permissions granted in the Green Belt since 2000
1.16 Of the 103 permissions granted, nearly half were for householder development such as extensions or similar minor development. The NPPF states the extension or alteration of a building, provided that it does not result in disproportionate additions over and above the size of the original building, is appropriate development for the Green Belt.

1.17 There were three permissions for agricultural buildings and operations which are also considered an appropriate use for the Green Belt.

1.18 Of three 'other developments major', two were related to the continued use of Cronks Holiday Caravan Park (also known as Stately Park), Station Road, Nettlestead and one related to the fishing lakes and associated development at Mousehole Farm. The permission for the formation of a car park for disabled persons use and access track at Mousehole Farm was allowed at appeal. These permissions are in the spirit of the NPPF as they provide opportunities for outdoor sport and recreation.

1.19 Three permissions for dwellings consisted of a barn conversion, demolition of commercial buildings, and replacement of a substandard bungalow with a new bungalow. These three permissions did not extend into undeveloped Green Belt land.

1.20 Ten permissions 'not otherwise included' consisted of minor development, variation of conditions and certificates of lawful development. The 'offices minor' permission relates to a site with existing structures.

1.21 In 2010, the Nettlestead Village Hall gained planning permission for a single storey building to the rear of the existing the hall for use as a pre-school.

1.22 In conclusion, it can be clearly seen that there has been no significant or inappropriate development within the Green Belt since the 2000 Local Plan was adopted. In this respect, there are no changes which result in exceptional circumstances for reviewing the Green Belt boundary.

**Fulfilling Green Belt Purposes**

1.23 The aim of Green Belt policy is to prevent urban sprawl by keeping land permanently open. Paragraph 80 of the NPPF defines the five purposes of Green Belts:

- To check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas.
- To prevent neighbouring towns merging into one another.
- To assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment.
- To preserve the setting and special character of historic towns.
- To assist in urban regeneration, by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land.

1.24 The table below assesses the Maidstone Borough Green Belt against the five purposes of Green Belt policy, as defined in the NPPF.
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Purpose of the Green Belt as specified in the NPPF</th>
<th>Maidstone Borough Green Belt in relation to the NPPF specified purpose</th>
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| To check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas | The Metropolitan Green Belt is designated to check the unrestricted sprawl of London. This development pressure remains with some of the pressure for new housing having its origin in the capital. 

Maidstone urban area is located between 3km and 3.5km from the Green Belt, but the Green Belt itself is not designated to restrict the development of Maidstone urban area. |
| To prevent neighbouring towns merging into one another | Within Maidstone’s Green Belt, Nettlestead and Nettlestead Green are distinct, if small, villages. The Green Belt performs a role of preventing Nettlestead merging with Wateringbury (in Tonbridge and Malling). |
| To assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment | The character of the countryside at this location remains predominately open arable fields and woodland. 

Aerial photographs taken in 2008 and 2012 (below) establish the land use within the Green Belt. 2008 photos are at a small scale and have been used to view the Green Belt area as a whole along with the surrounding area. 2012 aerial photos examined were more detailed and provided a large scale close up view of smaller areas within the Green Belt. The photographs show the general openness of the countryside within the Green Belt area. 

The footprint of the settlements of Nettlestead and Nettlestead Green are very small in relation to the surrounding open countryside. 

The Green Belt boundary restricts encroachment of development into the countryside in this location. |
| To preserve the setting and special character of historic towns | There are no historic towns within the Maidstone section of Green Belt, although the villages of Nettlestead and Nettlestead Green are historic in their own right. 

The Nettlestead conservation area, together with the Green Belt designation, have helped to maintain the historic character of the village. |
### Purpose of the Green Belt as specified in the NPPF

To assist in urban regeneration, by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land.

### Maidstone Borough Green Belt in relation to the NPPF specified purpose

Planning permissions granted since 2000 have been appropriate for the Green Belt. They have either reused land, or developments have been contained within the curtilage of existing buildings, therefore not encroaching into the countryside.

The Local Plan (Publication, February 2016) is seeking to focus new development at the Maidstone urban area and town centre.

Additionally - local planning authorities should plan positively to enhance the beneficial use of the Green Belt, such as looking for opportunities to provide access; to provide opportunities for outdoor sport and recreation; to retain and enhance landscapes, visual amenity and biodiversity; or to improve damaged and derelict land.

Since 2000 Maidstone Borough Council has granted planning permission for the continued use of Cronks Holiday Caravan Park, Station Road, Nettlestead and developments related to the fishing lakes and associated with Mousehole Farm. These permissions are in the spirit of the NPPF as they to provide opportunities for outdoor sport and recreation.

Little Venice Country Park, in Yalding to the southeast of the Green Belt has gained planning permission for a 200 berth marina. The development is outside of the Green Belt but boats will be able to navigate along the river Medway which flows along the inside of the eastern boundary of the Green Belt. This marina development will therefore increase access to the Green Belt for recreation.
1. Metropolitan Green Belt Review
Conclusions

1.25 The NPPF (Para 83) states: *Once established, Green Belt boundaries should only be altered in exceptional circumstances.*

1.26 An analysis of the Green Belt in Maidstone Borough shows that it has maintained its openness and continues to perform some of the purposes of the Green Belt.

1.27 The settlement hierarchy and the Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment show that the Green Belt land in this location is neither available nor represents a sustainable location for development to meet objectively assessed need.

1.28 The Maidstone Borough Local Plan (Publication, February 2016) does not establish any exceptional circumstances for reviewing the Green Belt boundaries within Maidstone Borough.