

Statement on the consistency of the Green Wedge designation with the National Planning Policy Framework

Introduction

Officers within Leicester and Leicestershire have worked jointly to prepare a statement on the consistency of the green wedge designation within the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) (March 2012). The purpose of this Statement is to set out the continued support for the green wedge designation within Leicester and Leicestershire as a result of the publication of the NPPF.

Green Wedge policies were introduced in the Leicestershire Structure Plan in 1987, since their introduction green wedges have continued to be identified in subsequent Structure Plans in 1994 and 2005. The East Midlands Regional Plan (2009) does not contain a policy on green wedges, however it does identify four functions of a green wedge which includes preventing the merging of settlements, guiding development form, providing a green lung into urban areas and acting as a recreational resource. The Regional Plan emphasises that green wedges are a local planning designation by stipulating that a review of existing green wedges or the creation of new ones in association with development will be carried out through the Local Development Framework process. Although the NPPF does not contain a specific reference to green wedges, paragraph 1 of the NPPF makes it clear that the Framework 'sets out the Government's requirements for the planning system only to the extent it is relevant, proportionate and necessary to do so. It provides a framework within which local people and their accountable councils can produce their own distinctive local and neighbourhood plans, which reflect the needs and priorities of their communities'. Green wedges are a useful local planning tool used within Leicestershire which is consistent with the NPPF for the reasons set out below.

Core Planning Principles

Paragraph 17 of the NPPF sets out a number of core planning principles that should underpin plan making. One of these principles is that planning should be plan led which empowers local people to shape their surroundings. In 2011 Leicestershire County Council undertook a public consultation exercise to understand the value of local green spaces in Leicestershire. The green wedge areas were shown to be of high value and as such important to the local community. Green wedges are therefore important to local people and they help shape the communities surroundings.

Another Core Planning Principle states that [planning should] 'take account of the different roles and character of different areas, promoting the vitality of our main urban areas, protecting the Green Belts around them, recognising the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside and supporting thriving rural communities within it'. The different roles of the green wedge are defined in the Regional Plan and are reviewed locally to ensure that the green wedge maintains its function and role.

A further Core Planning Principle in the NPPF states that [planning should] 'contribute to conserving and enhancing the natural environment and reducing pollution. Allocations of land for development should prefer land of lesser environmental value, where consistent

policies with other policies within this framework'. One of the functions of the green wedge is to provide a green lung into urban areas; this relates to environmental value such as green infrastructure, wildlife sites, air quality and flood alleviation measures. The presence of green wedges enables a sequential approach to be taken when allocating land with green wedges being identified as having higher environmental value than non-green wedge areas. Green wedges therefore are a useful tool to enable this assessment to take place.

Conserving and Enhancing the Natural Environment

The Natural Environment section of the NPPF re-emphasises the Core Planning Principle identified above and states 'in preparing plans to meet development needs the aims should be to minimise pollution and other adverse effects on the local and natural environment. Plans should allocate land with the least environmental or amenity value'. The NPPF highlights that a strategic approach should be taken in Local Plans which plan 'positively for the creation, protection and management of networks of biodiversity and green infrastructure'. The green wedge designation is important locally with green wedges providing multifunctional green space in terms of maintaining settlement identity, providing a green lung into urban areas and providing a recreational resource; the role of green wedges therefore being of higher environmental and amenity value than other areas of countryside.

Green Infrastructure

The NPPF defines green infrastructure as 'a network of multifunctional green space, urban and rural, which is capable of delivering a wide range of environmental and quality of life benefits for local communities' (NPPF; page 52). The green wedge designation reflects this as they are a multifunctional allocation recognising the importance these areas have by providing a green lung into urban areas and creating access to green infrastructure.

Plan Making

The NPPF recognises the importance of the countryside and green spaces with the introduction of the Local Green Space designation and the protection of the Green Belt. The Local Green Space designation provides the same level of protection as Green Belt but cannot be extensive tracts of land, therefore they are not an appropriate designation for areas currently designated as green wedges. There is no Green Belt land within Leicester and Leicestershire and green wedges do not perform the same role as a Green Belt. Green wedges do not seek to restrict the amount of development, but aim to ensure that as urban development extends, open land is incorporated within it preserving and enhancing links between urban areas and the countryside. Bullet points 7 and 8 of paragraph 157 states that Local Plans should 'identify land where development would be inappropriate, for instance because of its environmental significance; and contain a clear strategy for enhancing the natural, built and historic environment'. Green wedges are a tool which helps to achieve this in Leicestershire by facilitating the positive management of land by helping to shape growth and improve the quality of life of residents.

Duty to Cooperate

Leicestershire Authorities have continued to work together after the removal of the overarching Structure Plan policies to ensure that the green wedge designation retains its strategic cross-border function through review of its boundaries. This included working together to produce the Leicester and Leicestershire Green Wedge Review Joint Methodology. This joint working demonstrates that Leicester and Leicestershire Authorities are committed to the continuation of green wedges subject to their review through the preparation of individual Local Plans. The NPPF reaffirms the duty to cooperate; paragraph 178 states that ‘Public bodies have a duty to cooperate on planning issues that cross local boundaries’ and paragraph 180 states that ‘Local planning authorities should work collaboratively on strategic planning priorities to enable delivery of sustainable development in consultation with Local Enterprise Partnerships and Local Nature Partnerships’.

Conclusion

Green Wedges have considerable local support across Leicester and Leicestershire. For many years they have successfully managed development in Leicester and Leicestershire and have guided development form, ensured green spaces penetrate into urban areas, provided a green lung, protected environmental assets and provided a recreational resource. They represent a unique and bespoke local solution to managing growth, which could not be addressed by other national designations.

For the reasons outlined in this statement the green wedge designation is consistent with the NPPF and it is the intention of Leicester and Leicestershire Authorities to continue to support the green wedge as a strategic planning tool which are to be reviewed through the preparation of Local Plans.