

# ST ANDREWS: THE CAMPAIGN FOR A GREEN BELT

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Residents of the historic burgh of St Andrews, Fife, have been arguing for a Green Belt around the town since 1995. They believe that the character of St Andrews is threatened by continued development and they feel that a Green Belt is needed to protect the town's landscape setting. This case study examines the Green Belt concept and considers the issues raised by the residents' campaign

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## The Origin of the Green Belt Concept

Most commentators suggest that the origin of the Green Belt in the UK can be traced back to the ideas of Ebenezer Howard at the beginning of the twentieth century. Ebenezer Howard proposed the creation of garden cities, towns of approximately 30,000 people which would combine the best features of city and country life. The garden cities would be surrounded by a 'green backcloth' of agricultural land providing local employment opportunities as well as open space for recreation.

However, the concept was to be developed to tackle the problems associated with the growth and sprawl of existing cities in the 1930s and 1940s. A Green Belt for London was first accepted as a policy in 1935 although at that time the powers needed to implement it were not in place. It was only after the second world war that the concept was implemented with Green Belts established around most of the major cities in the country.



St Andrews

There are six Green Belts in Scotland today around Edinburgh, Glasgow, Falkirk, Ayr and Prestwick, Aberdeen and Clackmannan. There was a Green Belt around Dundee until the 1980s when it was abandoned and replaced by countryside policies.

## What a Green Belt seeks to achieve

Government policy in Scotland tries to find a balance between the expansion of towns and cities on the one hand and protection of the countryside on the other. Current national policy identifies three main purposes for Green Belts:

- ❑ To maintain the identity of towns by establishing a clear definition of their physical boundaries and preventing coalescence;
- ❑ To provide countryside recreation or institutional purposes of various kinds; and
- ❑ To maintain the landscape setting of towns.

The situation in England differs slightly from Scotland. In England there are five main purposes for establishing a Green Belt:

- ❑ To check the unrestricted sprawl of large built up areas;
- ❑ To prevent neighbouring towns from merging one with 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.

The need for a Green Belt in any locality is established at a strategic level as part of the process of preparing a structure plan, while the detailed boundaries are identified through the local plan process.

## **St Andrews: the home of golf**

The town of St Andrews, which is located on the east coast of Fife, is best known as the home of golf although it is also the home of Scotland's oldest university which was founded in 1412. St

Andrews has a resident population of approximately 15,000 but this number is swelled by students and tourists attracted not only by the town's six golf courses but by its mediaeval town centre and attractive beaches.



*The famous Old Course*

## **The Green Belt Campaign: the story so far**

When the Fife Structure Plan was approved in 1994, it required Fife Council to examine the options for the long term development of St Andrews. The Council embarked on a process to consider whether or not St Andrews should expand, the ability

of the town to absorb growth and the impact of further development on local people, the environment and the surrounding countryside.

In 1995, in response to an Issues Report, the St Andrews Preservation Trust and the Community Council suggested establishing a Green Belt to protect the town from inappropriate development. These bodies later joined with others, including the Links Trust, Friends of St Andrews Botanic Garden and St Andrews Council of Churches, to form the St Andrews Green Belt Forum, which is dedicated to preserving the environment of the town.

The possibility of establishing a Green Belt was raised as an option by the Council in the St Andrews Strategic Study in 1997 but it was presented in largely negative terms, with suggestions that it could turn development pressure inwards to undeveloped sites in the town, increasing competition for a limited amount of land and so raise land prices. Over 1000 comments were submitted in response to the Study and many of these argued against expansion of the town and in favour of a Green Belt. Independent consultants were commissioned by the Preservation Trust to look at the case for a Green Belt and they recommended a continuous belt around St Andrews. When the Strategic Study was finalised in 1998 one of its conclusions was that 'there is a need to contain the spread of the town and a Green Belt must be seriously considered as a way of achieving this'.



*St Andrews*

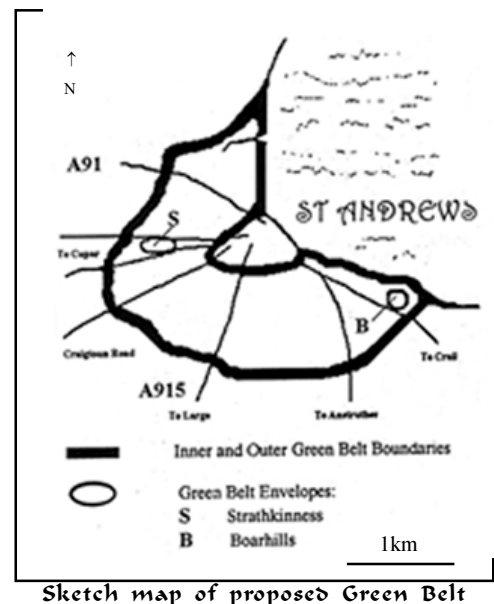
The issue re-emerged with the preparation of a new draft Structure Plan early in 2000. This stated that the need for a Green Belt had been considered but it was felt to be unnecessary as existing policies had been successful in stopping inappropriate development. Once again the Green Belt Forum rejected the Council's conclusions. A public meeting was organised and 10,000 leaflets were

distributed inviting local people to petition the Council. When the Finalised Structure Plan was issued early in 2001 it appeared that the Council had listened to local people. A Green Belt was proposed to west, south and southeast of the town in order to preserve views in and out of the historic core of the town. However, it will not be continuous, leaving a gap to the southwest. The Green Belt Forum is continuing to press for a continuous belt.

### The Case for the Green Belt

In 1997 the Green Belt Forum put forward the following reasons for supporting a Green Belt for St Andrews:

- ❑ To maintain the identity of St Andrews by defining physical boundaries;
- ❑ To preserve the landscape setting of the town;
- ❑ To maintain the sense of community in the town by restraining its physical size;
- ❑ To preserve its historic character of which the landscape setting is a major part; this character is unique and once lost is irreplaceable;
- ❑ To maintain the town's attractiveness, which is its main asset economically as well as culturally.



The Forum is not satisfied with the partial Green Belt proposed in the Finalised Structure Plan. It is argued that:

- ❑ The areas to be protected should not be limited to critical views to and from the historic core. A test of inter-visibility should be applied. It is essential to preserve the whole landscape setting, its general quality and character;
- ❑ It would be most imprudent to allow a gap in the protection afforded by the Green Belt in the south west;
- ❑ The Green Belt should be continuous because of the topography of St Andrews which is set in a basin formed by upland and flanked by the sea;
- ❑ The Green Belt should be of sufficient depth to discourage leapfrogging of development;
- ❑ The proposals are unnecessarily complicated and open to interpretation. They are likely to cause unnecessary contention between the Council, developers and the public.

### Discussion

The Campaign for a Green Belt around St Andrews raises a number of issues about the planning process and the way in which local government seeks to control the development of land.

- ❑ Central to the planning process is finding a balance between the needs and demands of different interests. Thus, for example, people's desire for new homes, offices and recreational facilities must be set against concerns to protect farmland and the rural landscape.
- ❑ The Green Belt was a tool developed in the middle of the last century in order to try and achieve that balance. It has been used mainly in the context of large cities and conurbations. Is it still relevant today and should it be used to prevent the growth of small towns such as St Andrews?
- ❑ The residents of St Andrews are committed to the idea of a Green Belt but are there other policy approaches that could achieve the same outcome but provide greater flexibility? Dundee is one example of a city that has abandoned its Green Belt in favour of an alternative approach. Inverness has adopted the idea of green wedges to help fit new housing development into the landscape and provide areas of open space for recreation.

- Town and country planning is a political process but it is a process that allows the public to influence the outcome. The public has a statutory right to be consulted about the content of planning policies in structure plans and local plans. In this case, the overwhelming support for measures to protect the landscape setting of St Andrews led to a rethink of the Council's approach. The Council must take account of the views of other interests as well, such as landowners and house builders.

### **Further Information**

Regional Studies Association (1989) *Beyond Green Belts*, London, Jessica Kingsley.

Fife Council (1997) *St Andrews Strategic Study Consultation Report*, Glenrothes, Fife Council.

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