



West Lothian Countryside Belt Review

[Sub title]

West Lothian Council

Draft

Prepared by LUC

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 LUC was commissioned to undertake a Review of West Lothian's Countryside belt, which is being undertaken as part of a larger commission covering landscape character assessment, local landscape designations and landscape sensitivity.

1.2 The key objectives of the commission are to:

- Review and update West Lothian's landscape evidence base (LCA and SLA)
- Assess the role, function and integrity of existing countryside belts (Countryside Belt)
- Assess the suitability of countryside belts for designation as Green Belt in line with NPF4 Policy 8
- Support preparation of LDP2 and assist in the assessment of planning applications (all studies)
- Integrate landscape, biodiversity, climate change and natural capital considerations (Countryside Belt and other studies)
- Provide clear, consistent and defensible evidence capable of supporting plan-making and decision-taking (all studies)

1.3 The review evaluates the areas against National Planning Framework 4 Green Belt Policy's second outcome in relation to landscape setting and identity of settlements, to consider the spatial form and integrity of the green belt in each location, to review boundary markers and the role of Landscape Character Areas (LCAs) in terms of protecting, enhancing and providing access to multifunctional blue and green networks and open space.

Adjoining local authorities

1.4 The review is being carried out with reference to the ongoing Green Belt review in City of Edinburgh and NPF4 to ensure consistency with approaches in the neighbouring local authorities. Whilst each authority is at a different stage of their Development Plan Scheme, liaison is being maintained via a working group and data sharing.

Background and context to the West Lothian Countryside Belt

1.5 The Edinburgh Green Belt extends around the western, southern and eastern edge of the city across the three local authorities of City of Edinburgh, Midlothian and East Lothian. It provides a strategic role in directing growth to the most sustainable locations and maintaining the setting and identity of individual settlements. No Green Belt is currently designated in West Lothian, which uses an alternative policy protection of Countryside Belt.

Background to the 2026 West Lothian Countryside Belt Review

1.6 The 2026 West Lothian Countryside Belt Review has been carried out in alignment with NPF4 and the Scottish Government’s Local Development Plan Guidance (LDP Guidance). It sets out the following in relation to Green Belt:

Policy Intent:

To encourage, promote and facilitate compact urban growth and use the land around our towns and cities sustainably.

Policy Outcomes:

- Development is directed to the right locations, urban density is increased and unsustainable growth is prevented.
- The character, landscape, natural setting and identity of settlements is protected and enhanced.
- Nature networks are supported and land is managed to help tackle climate change.

1.7 This is consistent with the approach taken in the review of The Edinburgh Green Belt within the neighbouring City of Edinburgh Council. This report uses the updated 2026 West Lothian Landscape Character Assessment’s (MLCA) landscape character areas as the basis for the green belt evaluation and should be referred to for context.

1.8 The review focuses on areas currently designated as Countryside Belt. While the countryside belts function in practice in a manner similar to Green Belts, there are recognised differences between the existing LDP1 policy framework and NPF4 Policy 8. These differences require review and resolution to ensure policy alignment and robustness.

1.9 The review considers to what extent current areas of Countryside Belt meet green belt criteria. This is set out under the Green Belt Assessment criteria.

Chapter 2

Methodology

2.1 This section describes the methodology applied to the evaluation of the Countryside Belt areas against the green belt review criteria identified. This is informed by NPF4 [See reference 1] and LDP Guidance [See reference 2] and the project brief. It also describes the methodology applied to defining the land parcels of the Countryside Belt into parcels for assessment.

2.2 The assessment covers all areas of currently designated Countryside Belt. All areas outside of the existing Countryside Belt are scoped out of the assessment.

2.3 The process of green belt evaluation builds on the updated LCA and has involved the following key stages:

- Development of an evaluation framework to meet the requirements of NPF4;
- Sub division of Countryside Belt areas into parcels for assessment
- Evaluation of parcels in line with the agreed framework;
- Consideration of landscape and development change in neighbouring authorities;
- Review of the inner and outer strength of the countryside belt boundaries;
- Noting the presence of any alternative boundary markers in relation to settlements, at a high level to reflect areas of pressure.

2.4 Table 2.1 below sets out the source of the different criteria used in the assessment method. This includes NPF4, the Local development planning guidance, the project brief, the Countryside Belt policy purposes, and other relevant policies in LDP1.

Table 2.1: Sources of evaluation criteria

Green Belt policy purposes NPF4 Policy 8	Local development planning guidance	Elements referred to in project brief	Countryside Belt policy purposes	Other relevant policies in LDP1	LUC proposed evaluation criteria (see attached Word document)
<p>Policy Intent: To encourage, promote and facilitate compact urban growth and use the land around our towns and cities sustainably.</p> <p>Policy Outcomes: • Development is directed to the right locations, urban density is increased and unsustainable growth is prevented.</p>	<p>development is directed to the right locations, urban density is increased and unsustainable growth is prevented making effective use of land and supporting regeneration (prioritising the re-use or re-development of brownfield, vacant and derelict land and empty buildings first, before new development takes place on greenfield sites), and minimising the need to travel using unsustainable modes;</p>	<p>Compact and sustainable development patterns, higher urban densities and local living, more effective use of public transport</p>	<p>-</p>		<p>1.Pressure for unsustainable development</p>

Green Belt policy purposes NPF4 Policy 8	Local development planning guidance	Elements referred to in project brief	Countryside Belt policy purposes	Other relevant policies in LDP1	LUC proposed evaluation criteria (see attached Word document)
The character, landscape, natural setting and identity of settlements is protected and enhanced.	- the character, landscape, natural setting and identity of settlements is protected and enhanced	landscape	maintain the separate identity and visual separation of settlements; protect the landscape setting of settlements;		2. Setting 3. Identity
-	protecting, enhancing and providing access to multifunctional blue and green networks and open space	-	promote public access to green space for informal recreation;	Policy ENV 21 Protection of Formal and Informal Open Space	4. Recreational use
Nature networks are supported	- nature networks are supported	Nature network Biodiversity enhancement Protection of natural capital	enhance landscape and wildlife habitat.	POLICY ENV 8 Green Network POLICY ENV 9 Woodland, Forestry, Trees and Hedgerows ENV 11 Protection of the Water	5a Nature networks 5b Habitat buffer

Green Belt policy purposes NPF4 Policy 8	Local development planning guidance	Elements referred to in project brief	Countryside Belt policy purposes	Other relevant policies in LDP1	LUC proposed evaluation criteria (see attached Word document)
				Environment / Coastline and Riparian Corridors	
-		Protection of prime agricultural land Protection of natural capital		POLICY ENV 4 Loss of Prime Agricultural Land	6. Land capability for agriculture
land is managed to help tackle climate change	land is managed to help tackle climate change	Climate mitigation Protection of natural capital		POLICY ENV 6 Peatlands and Carbon Rich Soil	7a. Soil carbon
land is managed to help tackle climate change		Protection of natural capital		POLICY ENV 9 Woodland, Forestry, Trees and Hedgerows	7b. Woodland cover
land is managed to help tackle climate change		Climate mitigation		POLICY NRG 1 Climate Change and Sustainability	7c Presence of renewable energy infrastructure

Green Belt policy purposes NPF4 Policy 8	Local development planning guidance	Elements referred to in project brief	Countryside Belt policy purposes	Other relevant policies in LDP1	LUC proposed evaluation criteria (see attached Word document)
land is managed to help tackle climate change		Climate adaptation Protection of natural capital		POLICY EMG 2 Flooding	8a Flood mitigation 8b Future flood risk
-	identifying clearly identifiable visual boundary markers based on landscape features such as rivers, tree belts, railways or main roads			POLICY ENV 7 Countryside Belts and Settlement Setting	9. Boundaries
-	identifying any existing settlements, major educational and research uses, major businesses and industrial operations, airports and Ministry of Defence establishments, and any other significant areas of				10. Non-Green Belt land uses

Green Belt policy purposes NPF4 Policy 8	Local development planning guidance	Elements referred to in project brief	Countryside Belt policy purposes	Other relevant policies in LDP1	LUC proposed evaluation criteria (see attached Word document)
	brownfield, vacant and derelict land, within the current greenbelt boundary				

Figure 2.1: Current Countryside belt extent

Methodology for Identifying parcels for assessment

2.5 The areas of Countryside Belt have been divided into parcels for assessment to facilitate the evaluation. Our proposed approach to identifying parcels of existing Countryside Belt for assessment was based on the following considerations.

- Alignment with LCA boundaries
- Areas of similar landscape character and with clearly defined boundaries
- Areas of similar extent (applying the evaluation criteria to areas of very different size can cause anomalies in the evaluation outcomes).
- Coherent areas associated with individual settlements.

Green Belt Assessment criteria

1. Pressure for unsustainable development

Decision rules:

- Is there pressure for sporadic and dispersed new residential development which would contribute to unsustainable growth in car based commuting (dispersed settlement is assumed to support car-based commuting and travel) or of a style which contributes to suburbanisation of the countryside?

Data source (qualitative evaluation)

- Planning application data for the last 10 years
- Qualitative inputs from West Lothian planners, including known pressure for development

Evaluation guidance:

- High – High level of sporadic residential development, including presence of suburban style or features.
- Medium-high – Moderately high levels of residential development, including presence of suburban style or features.
- Medium – Some new residential development, with suburban style, or associated presence of suburban features for example pavements or street lighting (identified from fieldwork).
- Medium-low – Limited new residential development.
- Low – No or very limited new residential development.

2. The role of the landscape in question in contributing to setting

2.6 The following decision prompts and descriptive statements enable **qualitative** evaluation of the role of the local landscape in contributing to the setting of settlements.

Decision rules:

- Does the landscape play a role in contributing to the physical or functional relationship between the settlement and the surrounding landscape?
- How important is the landscape in relation to area wide or local views from locations, such as landmarks, hills and recreational areas and routes, outward views from the area and its overall pattern of visibility?
- How important is it in views from main transport corridors?
- Does the landscape play an important role in the setting of Listed Buildings, Conservation Areas, Scheduled Monuments, World Heritage Sites, Gardens and Designed Landscapes, Local Landscape Areas, undesignated historic assets or other local landmarks or features?

Evaluation guidance:

- High = The landscape has a strong visual relationship with a settlement or landmark/recreational area and is important in views.
- Medium-high = The landscape has a fairly strong visual relationship with a settlement or landmark/recreational area and has some significance in views.
- Medium = The landscape has some relationship with a settlement or landmark/recreational area and is important in some views.
- Medium-low = The landscape has a low or limited visual relationship with a settlement or landmark/recreational area.
- Low = The landscape has a very low or very limited visual relationship with a settlement or landmark/recreational area.

3. The role of the landscape in question in contributing to the settlement **identity**

2.7 The following decision prompts and descriptive statements enable **qualitative** evaluation of the role of the local landscape in contributing to the identity of settlements.

Decision rules:

- Does the landscape contribute to appreciation of the settlement form or pattern?

- Are elements of the wider landscape important to the settlement identity? (e.g. rivers, hills, trees and woodland which are important to settlement identity)
- Does the landscape include distinctive features which contribute to a sense of place?
- Does the landscape contribute to settlement identity through providing physical, visual or perceptual distinction between settlements?

Evaluation guidance:

- High = The landscape is distinctive and/or has an important relationship with the identity of settlements.
- Medium-high = The landscape is quite distinctive and there is some strength in the relationship with settlement identity.
- Medium = The landscape has some distinctive features and representativeness and/or plays some role in settlement identity.
- Medium-low = The landscape has few distinctive features or representativeness and limited role in settlement identity.
- Low = The landscape is not highly distinctive or representative or does not play a key role in settlement identity.

4. Role for recreational use

2.8 The following decision prompts and descriptive statements enable **qualitative** evaluation of the role of the local landscape in contributing to recreational opportunities.

Decision rules:

- Is the area a recognised green space, country or regional park or otherwise identified recreation area with a network of access routes?
- Does the area provide an important role in the connectivity between open spaces within and around settlements?
- Is the area connected to core paths and other access routes?

Data sources

- Core paths

- Aerial imagery
- Local plan open space or recreational designations
- Fieldwork

Evaluation guidance:

- High = recognised recreation area e.g. country park or regional park or area with a dense network of access routes and open access.
- Medium-high = good network of formal paths/locally important recreational area, park or green space/important link between areas.
- Medium = network of formal paths/extensive network of informal paths/golf course.
- Medium-low = limited formal or informal path provision or recreational use.
- Low = very limited formal or informal path provision or poor connectivity for recreation.

2.9 The following criteria relate to quantitative analysis and once this is complete a review of the thresholds will be undertaken to ensure that they are appropriate.

5. Role in providing nature networks

5a Decision rule:

- Does the land parcel include habitat networks for key habitat types?

Evaluation guidance (GIS analysis):

- High = more than 80% covered by habitat network.
- Medium-high = between 61% and 80% covered by habitat network.
- Medium = between 41% and 60% covered by habitat networks.
- Medium-low = between 20% and 40% covered by habitat network.
- Low = less than 20% covered by habitat network.

5b Decision rule

- Does the parcel include nature networks which would provide opportunities for increasing **habitat connectivity** as an area of habitat buffer (including all habitat types)?

Evaluation guidance

- High = more than 80% covered by habitat buffer.
- Medium-high = between 61% and 80% covered by habitat buffer.
- Medium = between 41% and 60% covered by habitat buffer.
- Medium-low = between 20% and 40% covered by habitat buffer.
- Low = less than 20% covered by habitat buffer.

West Lothian criterion: Land capability for agriculture

Decision rule

- Does the land parcel include land of class 3.1 or above of the land capability for agriculture ?

Data source

- Land capability classification for Scotland

Evaluation criteria (GIS analysis):

- High = more than 80% covered by class 3.1 or above.
- Medium-high = between 61% and 80% covered by class 3.1 or above.
- Medium = between 41% and 60% covered by class 3.1 or above.
- Medium-low = between 20% and 40% covered by class 3.1 or above.
- Low = less than 20% covered by class 3.1 or above.

7. Role in contributing to climate mitigation

7a Decision rule

2.10 Does the land parcel include soil with a high carbon value?

Data source

- Scotland's Soils (2017) Map of topsoil organic carbon concentration. Scoring based on proportion of site including higher soil carbon value (>35% topsoil organic carbon concentration)

Evaluation criteria (GIS analysis):

- High = more than 80% covered by high carbon soil.
- Medium-high = between 61% and 80% covered by high carbon soil.
- Medium = between 41% and 60% covered by high carbon soil.
- Medium-low = between 20% and 40% covered by high carbon soil.
- Low = less than 20% covered by high carbon soil.

7b. Decision rule:

- Does the land parcel include land cover with a high carbon sequestration value, for example does it contain woodland?

Data source

- Ancient Woodland Inventory
- National Forest Inventory

Evaluation criteria (GIS analysis):

- High = more than 80% covered by woodland
- Medium-high = between 61% and 80% covered by woodland
- Medium = between 41% and 60% covered by woodland
- Medium-low = between 20% and 40% covered by woodland

- Low = less than 20% covered by woodland

7c. Decision rule

- Does the land parcel include renewable energy generation infrastructure (operational or under construction wind or photovoltaics)?

Data source

- Renewable Energy Planning Database (REPD)

Evaluation criteria

- Presence (yes or no and description)

8. Climate adaptation

Decision rule

- Does the land parcel contribute to flood mitigation, for example is it an area of flood risk?

Data source

- SEPA flood risk

Evaluation criteria (GIS analysis):

- High – More than 80% covered by flood risk.
- Medium-high – Between 61% and 80% covered by flood risk.
- Medium – Between 41% and 60% covered by flood risk.
- Medium-low – Between 20% and 40% covered by flood risk.
- Low – Less than 20% covered by flood risk.

Decision rule

- Is the land parcel an area of future flood risk?

Data source:

- SEPA future flood risk

Evaluation criteria (GIS analysis):

- High – More than 80% covered by flood risk.
- Medium-high – Between 61% and 80% covered by flood risk.
- Medium – Between 41% and 60% covered by flood risk.
- Medium-low – Between 20% and 40% covered by flood risk.
- Low – Less than 20% covered by flood risk.

2.11 Note that SEPA's flood data for 2080 high-emission scenarios at the 95th percentile provides projections of flood risk based on the worst-case climate change models, reflecting potential high-impact outcomes. It is a tool in preparing for significant flood risks under extreme climate scenarios. In this assessment, it is used alongside other flood risk data, based on less extreme scenarios and shorter time horizons.

9. Presence of strong and clearly identifiable boundaries

Decision rule:

- What is the strength of the existing Green Belt boundary?

Data source

- OS base mapping and aerial imagery

Evaluation guidance:

- Strong – Boundary features include rivers, main roads (A and B roads) and motorways, railways and significant changes in topography, woodland belts or blocks, and combinations of these features.
- Moderate to strong – Moderate boundary feature in combination with another feature, or strong boundary feature which is compromised for example of a degraded woodland belt.

- Moderate – Boundary features include minor roads, walls, treelines, hedgerows, minor water course, change in topography (steepness of slope or aspect).
- Weak to moderate – Garden boundary or degraded field boundary feature which also includes some element which adds to robustness for example boundary trees, or subtle slope change.
- Weak – Boundary features include residential gardens, degraded field boundaries and unrelated to landform.

10. Non-Green Belt land uses

Decision rule:

- Are land uses which influence the role of the area as green belt land uses present? (categories defined in the Local Government Guidance include Ministry of Defence, airfields, industrial development, significant areas of brownfield land), and our definition includes other types of large scale development which influence the perception of the undeveloped character such as large substations, waste sites, large agricultural or industrial sheds, caravan or chalet accommodation, covered sports facilities.

Data source (qualitative review):

- OS base mapping and aerial imagery
- Planning Applications
- Planning Applications – 10 Year
- Fieldwork

Evaluation guidance:

- Qualitative description.

Outputs

2.12 The evaluation findings will inform the report recommendations which will relate to:

- The current role of the Countryside Belt areas in terms of spatial form, function and integrity

- The role of the areas of Countryside Belt against NPF4 policy 8 and other relevant national guidance, as described in our methodology.
 - Areas of existing Countryside Belt which fulfil Green Belt purposes;
 - Areas of existing Countryside Belt which do not fulfil Green Belt purposes (but which may fulfil a strategic function alongside other more strongly performing areas and form part of a coherent proposed Green Belt)
- Recommendations in terms of strengths, weaknesses and other considerations. Other considerations are anticipated to include extending or refining the current Countryside Belt or any proposed Green Belt and the role of other designations and the relationship with the Green Belt in neighbouring authorities, alongside the overall coherence within West Lothian.

2.13 The study will also make recommendations for any further work to include additional areas for green belt evaluation or to define a future green belt, if appropriate.

References

- 1 Scottish Government (2023) National Planning Framework 4. Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/national-planning-framework-4/documents/>
- 2 Scottish Government (2023) Local Development Planning Guidance. Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/advice-and-guidance/2023/05/local-development-planning-guidance/documents/local-development-planning-guidance/local-development-planning-guidance/govscot%3Adocument/local-development-planning-guidance.pdf>

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