

A commons debate involving Nick Boles has centred on the allocation of safeguarded land by a local authority.

Nick Boles stated that the green belt and the protection of green-belt land were of enormous importance to the government and that is why the NPPF has repeated in very clear terms the very high levels of protection that apply to green-belt land. He stated that there had never been a time when the protections of green-belt land had been clearer or more explicit in national policy than now. He added that the NPPF was clear on the importance of those protections, the permanence of green-belt land and its role in preserving the openness of the countryside and in preventing settlements from merging.

In relation to the highest quality agricultural land Nick Boles stated that the NPPF was clear that, to the extent that greenfield land has to be allocated for development less high quality agricultural land should be preferred and that grade 1 agricultural land, which is the highest quality, should be preserved for agriculture where at all possible.

Mr Boles added that local authorities can revise their green-belt boundaries through a local plan process involving intense consultation with local people. He added that "there are a number of communities around the country that are doing just that. It is painful and difficult, and it is right that it happens through an intensely transparent, open and democratic process that takes into account all the opinions expressed by all the different communities affected."

Mr Boles continued by stating that "when it does that exercise, the local authority has to pass a very high test: it has to be able to demonstrate that exceptional circumstances justify taking a particular site out of the green belt or redrawing a green-belt boundary, perhaps to swap land currently in the green belt for land that is not, but is of greater environmental importance. Those are the kinds of arguments that local authorities need to bring forward and the kinds of evidence they need to provide to satisfy a planning inspector that any such proposal is reasonable. I do not criticise any council that is going down that road, because it is right that it, as the duly-elected local authority, should be able to. The local authority must, however, go openly and transparently into that process with evidence and after a great deal of consultation."