Landscape

Gaps in the Wellington Town Belt between Brooklyn Hills on the left and Te Ahumairangi Hill on the right

Guiding principles

The Wellington Town Belt will be protected and enhanced by the Council for future generations.

This reflects the Council’s commitment to ensuring that the Town Belt will be protected for Wellingtonians to enjoy.

The physical size and continuity of the Town Belt will be retained and enhanced.

The Town Belt’s landscape character will be protected and enhanced.

The landscape character of the Town Belt has changed and been modified since humans first interacted with it. The Council will protect and enhance the key features of this landscape character (acknowledging that vegetation change will occur over time). These features are:

- the continuous ‘horseshoe’ shape of natural landscape (hills and open space) between the central business district and surrounding suburbs
- the vegetated slopes interspersed with areas of open ground
- the changing patchwork of exotic and native vegetation
- undeveloped skylines (ie Te Ahumairangi and Mt Victoria/Te Ranga a Hiwi etc.)
- the contrast between the patchwork of native and exotic vegetation and the densely developed central business district.
4.1 Objectives

4.1.1 To protect the Town Belt as a predominantly natural environment in contrast to the built environment of the city.

4.1.2 To recognise and protect the unique landscape character of the Town Belt and, in particular, the:

- ridgeline and hilltop landscapes
- diversity of landscape aesthetic and experience
- patchwork of native and exotic vegetation
- maintenance of a tall/large-tree framework.

4.1.3 To manage long-term vegetation change to enhance its ecological function while protecting the variety of functions, activities and experiences the vegetation provides.

4.1.4 To recognise and protect the role of the Town Belt landscape in terms of:

- the contribution the reserves (together and as individual parts) make to the character and identity of Wellington City
- the value of the reserves as a natural setting for a variety of recreation and leisure activities
- providing an unbuilt visual backdrop and skyline to Wellington
- the significant area of land that provides environmental services, such as urban biodiversity, stormwater management and as a carbon sink.

4.2 Policies

The balance of built development and open space in the Town Belt requires careful management. Incremental increases in built development (including for example buildings, hard surfaces and lighting) detracts from the open-space value of the Town Belt. It is the natural landscape environment of the Town Belt that provides the context for recreation activity and enjoyment of open space in the urban environment. It is the open space of the Town Belt that is an essential part of the unique and valued character of Wellington City.

Built environment

4.2.1 Development will only be sited on the Town Belt if it is necessary for public recreation purposes and cannot be located elsewhere, and will be subject to an assessment as outlined in section 9 Rules for use and development. See section 9 for specific policy relating to utilities.

4.2.2 Development for public recreation purposes will be sensitively designed and implemented to protect the landscape and open-space values of the Town Belt.

4.2.3 No new building or structures of any kind will be permitted on the skylines and ridgelines as viewed from the central city or suburban centres or the harbour. In exceptional circumstances, this policy shall not apply where buildings or structures are for essential utilities and cannot practicably be located elsewhere and their public benefits outweigh their adverse visual impacts.

10 ‘Natural’ is not intended to mean ‘pristine’ or a landscape unmodified by humans, as the Town Belt landscape has a long history of human modification. While there are obviously degrees of naturalness, here the term is used to describe the difference between the Town Belt being ‘natural’ and the built environment of the city being not ‘natural’.

11 Development is defined in its broadest sense including, but not limited to, earthworks, new buildings and structures, additions and alterations to existing buildings, car parks and lighting.
4.2.4 Development in prominent locations or development that detracts from landscape values will be avoided. Care shall be taken to minimise visual distraction from the natural environment.

4.2.5 All development will be located and designed to protect existing landscape features and established vegetation with appropriate form, scale, materials and colour scheme used to integrate development into the landscape context.

4.2.6 Colour schemes, planting and site design associated with existing buildings and structures shall be revised as each comes up for attention (either by the Council or a lessee) to ensure that they are well integrated and complementary to their surroundings.

4.2.7 Earthworks and landscape modification will be limited in scale and effect to protect the natural landform.

4.2.8 Soft engineering approaches will be used as a preference, for example swales and planted berms are preferred to piped stormwater and retaining walls.

4.2.9 Structures, buildings and furniture no longer required shall be removed as soon as practicable, and those that are unsafe or irreparable shall be removed also and replaced only if consistent with the policies in this plan and the Leases Policy for Community and Recreation Groups. An assessment of the historic significance of a building will be undertaken before a decision is made about its removal.

**Natural environment**

4.2.10 Sector plans will identify specific landscape characteristics and values associated with each area to be enhanced, maintained and/or protected.

4.2.11 Areas of exotic forest will be removed over time as trees fall or become hazardous. Hazardous trees will be removed based on risk assessments.

4.2.12 Areas to be replanted in indigenous vegetation are identified in sector plans.

4.2.13 The values of existing trees and vegetation (including heritage trees and large trees generally) will be identified and managed to retain the tall-tree framework within parts of the Town Belt. The sector plans identify important tree groups and individual trees that need to be retained and/or replanted.

4.2.14 The speed of vegetation change, the size of the area undergoing change and the location of the change will be managed to protect Town Belt landscape values as much as possible during times of planned change such as major tree removal (as outlined in the sector plans).

4.2.15 The effects of vegetation removal, maintenance and new planting will be considered on a project-by-project basis to guide management decisions, based on the following values:

- enjoyment and interaction with nature and the outdoors
- views of the Town Belt
- views from the Town Belt
- diversity of landscape aesthetic and pattern
- the patchwork of native and exotic vegetation
- retention of a tall-tree (and large-tree) framework for landscape and ecological reasons
- protecting heritage tree groupings as identified in sector plans
- ecology at a site scale, Town Belt scale and citywide scale

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12 See section 5.5.1
i. land and soil health, and stability
j. supporting outdoor recreation opportunities
k. provision of shade and shelter
l. mitigation of effects of buildings on and around the Town Belt (eg screen them, integrate them into landscape or reduce bulk and scale)
m. natural environment education.

Specific vegetation management issues will be identified in sector plans. Refer also to section 5 dealing with ecology and biodiversity.

### 4.3 The Wellington Town Belt landscape

#### 4.3.1 Wellington’s landscape character

Wellington owes much of its natural character to the expanse and visual dominance of open space within and surrounding urban areas. The most visible open space occupies the tops and steep flanks of the ridges. The Town Belt comprises a significant portion of this. The character is enhanced by pockets of green ‘unmanaged’ land too steep for development. The landform and vegetation cover of the Town Belt and its relationship to the city and suburbs is a significant and unique feature of Wellington.

#### 4.3.2 Town Belt landscape change

The complex story of interaction between people and the Town Belt and the resulting landscape change began long before the Town Belt was planned in 1839.

**Māori settlement:** During the long period of Māori settlement, parts of the land now known as the Town Belt were occupied by pā and buildings and spaces ancillary to the functioning of the pā. But most of the land was heavily wooded with trees, including pukatea, rata, totara, and rewarewa. These woodlands were rich with birds and berries, which were a cultivated food source for Māori. The streams of the Town Belt were home to tuna/eels, kokopu, koaro, and other freshwater fish species. Landscape features, such as the ridgelines, were valued for lookouts, garden sites and other activities.

The land was also used for recreation activities, which were often related to learning skills for later in life. Then, as now, the landscape was modified in response to a range of values specific to that time and social context.

**19th century developments:** The process of European settlement saw rapid change in the landscape that is now the Town Belt. These changes were closely tied to the changing needs and values of the people of the city.

Soon after European settlement in 1840, trees were cleared from the Town Belt for firewood and house building. In the 1870s large areas of the Town Belt were converted to pasture and leased to local farmers to provide milk for the developing city.

This wholesale clearance and occupation had a huge visual impact on the city. By the turn of the 19th century the only native forest remaining on original Town Belt land was in the Botanic Garden.

**Development of facilities and utilities:** From this early exploitative-type activity (firewood, building materials, grazing and quarrying) there was a shift to proactive park development, including a number of sportsfields and Central Park. The development of city roads also had a significant impact on the Town Belt landscape. Much of this work occurred in the 1920s and 1930s using relief workers hired on Council and central government unemployment schemes.
Since the 1950s development in the Town Belt has been predominantly associated with buildings and structures (including large water reservoirs) rather than landform change or resource use. The recreation section of this plan (section 6) details how the buildings and formal sports provision became established in the Town Belt.

The alteration of the landform has been less widespread than vegetation change, but each incident has arguably had a more permanent and sometimes detrimental effect on the values of the Town Belt. For example, the cutting of the road to Mt Victoria has left a prominent and irreparable mark in the natural landform, as has the development of sport and recreation parks, such as Hataitai Park, formed using fill from the Mt Victoria Tunnel.

Several facilities have been removed during the tenure of the previous plan, including custodial houses on Berhampore Golf Course, Macalister Park and Goldies Brae, the dog pound at the golf course, Telecom houses on Te Ahumairangi Hill and the scout hall on Grant Road.

**Amenity plantings:** The denuded nature of the Town Belt prompted city councillors and citizens of Wellington to plant areas to improve its visual appearance. Planting of exotic conifers and eucalypts started in 1880 with most planting occurring between 1920 and 1940, and much of this using ‘Great Depression’ labour. The tree stands were rarely managed or thinned. Over time, as the planting has naturally thinned out, native understorey has appeared in places. In addition, other exotic plants and weeds have moved in.

A significant factor for landscape change in the Town Belt today is that many of these early amenity plantings are now at an age where they are prone to storm damage and have the potential to cause harm to people and property.

**Pine planting on Mt Victoria in 1884**
(Alexandra Turnbull Library GB2237 1/1 detail)
A storm in 2004 resulted in a large area of Te Ahumairangi Hill being cleared of pines (both naturally by the storm and by removal to prevent more trees falling). A long-term restoration programme was established to return the hill to native forest. The initial storm and clearance of the pines has had a huge impact on the character of that part of the Town Belt and the developing native forest continues to alter the way the landscape looks and functions today.

**Supporting biodiversity:** Over the past 20 years the value of biodiversity and urban biodiversity in particular has become better understood. Just as there has been a shift from valuing open space as pasture for food production to valuing open space for aesthetic reasons as the city grew, there is now a shift in valuing a certain type of vegetation cover. This is not to say that there is no value in the earlier layers of landscape character; these layers are the very attribute that gives landscape so much meaning and makes it so important to people. However any change needs to be very carefully considered.

**Growing recreation demands:** Built development in the Town Belt, alongside alienation of land, vegetation changes and landform changes, has altered the character of the landscape. The balance of built development and natural landscape is a significant issue in preserving the open-space values of the Town Belt.

Since the last Wellington Town Belt Management Plan was prepared there has been further change associated with intensification of use, in particular for formal sports activity. Examples of development since 1995 include: development of function rooms at Newtown Park, an extension to the Rugby League Park grandstand and artificial turf at Te Whaea and Wakefield Park. Alongside development of this kind there is often earthworks, vegetation clearance, lighting, fencing, roads, parking and other hard surfaces, which can all result in significant landscape change in their own right and incrementally change the character of the Town Belt. All this intensification has occurred on existing sportsfields and car parks.

Almost 90 percent of residents surveyed in 2009 said they used the Town Belt for informal recreation at least once every six months. This includes walking, running and mountain biking, picnicking and family outings or casual sport. Over two-thirds said they used formal recreation facilities in the Town Belt at least once every six months. These included playgrounds, sporting facilities, the Berhampore Golf Course, Renouf Tennis Centre and the National Hockey Stadium.

Some areas of the Town Belt are more popular. The Mt Victoria sector was the most regularly used by residents with 68 percent having used it at least every six months. Te Ahumairangi was the least visited (32 percent).

Use of the Town Belt by inner city residents has increased, putting pressure on existing facilities, such as tracks, and increasing the chance of conflict between users.

The population of the Wellington central business district\(^3\) has increased substantially over the past 20 years in part due to high density apartment developments. In 1996 there were 4455 people living in the central city. In 2006 there were 11,526. The 2013 Census was expected to show a further increase.

The Town Belt plays a vital role in the quality of life of inner city residents who may otherwise have limited access to open space and the natural environment.

In 2008, central city apartment dwellers were surveyed to obtain a greater understanding of this population. It found:

- The second most disliked aspect of living in the central city was the lack of outdoor space (two-thirds of those surveyed did not have communal open space in their apartment complex).
- Almost half visited a park at least once a week.
- For most, their nearest public park was less than five minutes away.

\(^3\) The Central Area as defined in the Wellington City Council District Plan.
The landscape of the Town Belt has been most affected by changing management approaches in response to need for open space and recreation land in Wellington. Changes in land area (the loss of land), changes in land use and changes in vegetation cover (generally linked to land use) have altered the Town Belt landscape over time.

The history of landscape management and vegetation cover on the Town Belt also illustrates how values associated with parks, and open space in general, continuously evolve and change. Today the Town Belt contains a rich mix of land and vegetation unique to Wellington. The landscape of the Town Belt is an essential part of Wellington’s urban character.

No landscape is ever static, being the result of the relationship between people and place. However the notion of green open space – or a natural environment in the context of an urban environment – has been protected over time through the concept of a Town Belt. The protection and management of the land becomes increasingly complex and increasingly important as the city grows and the pressure on open space increases to meet the needs of the people.

4.3.3 The Wellington Town Belt Landscape today

The landscape values of the Town Belt contribute to making it an iconic and distinct city resource. While the Town Belt as a whole and its relationship to the city has obvious value, there is also value in the various parts of the Town Belt and in the elements within these parts.

The patchwork of vegetation and the prominent natural features of the ridgelines, hilltops and slopes have citywide significance. They provide a natural green backdrop to the central city and contribute to the city’s identity and sense of place.

The Town Belt is appreciated both as a part of the wider city landscape and as an open-space network in its own right. Views from the Town Belt demonstrate its importance on this citywide scale just as much as views of the Town Belt from other parts of the city and harbour.

While it is essential to consider the Town Belt as a whole, its size and geographic spread means its different parts will have specific values associated with them. When change occurs in a particular area it is necessary to consider the potential effects locally as well as citywide.

The Town Belt provides continuous open space through the city, clearly separating and defining urban localities and providing a natural backdrop to the developed land on each side. Its distinctive pattern can be broken into three main areas:

1. The inner curve of its horseshoe configuration around the Kelburn and Brooklyn Hills, across the low saddle between Berhampore and Island Bay and along the Mt Albert Ridge.

   The topography is flatter and more undulating than other parts of the Town Belt. Land use is mixed with pockets of vegetation and extensive areas of open space maintained for formal sport and recreation use. This area appears more fragmented than other parts, largely due to the low-lying and less uniform topography and the historic loss of land for Victoria University.

2. The north-western end of the horseshoe is formed by Te Ahumairangi Hill.

   Te Ahumairangi Hill is the highest part of the Town Belt comprising steep vegetated slopes with an open ridgeline. The tree cover, which predominates, gives the area a distinctive character when seen from a distance.

   This area is comparatively less developed, more informal and more natural or ‘wild’ with very few buildings and little formal sport development.
The hill is relatively close to the sea with only a narrow strip of urban landscape between, contributing to the dominance of the landform over the urban landscape. There are no houses on the lower slopes and the hill is seen from the city as a steep mass rising from the flats. The hill is a highly visible and recognisable feature of the Wellington city landscape, particularly from the harbour and other vantage points.

3. The eastern side of the horseshoe is formed by Mt Victoria/Matairangi.

This prominent high point comprises an open ridgeline with areas of steep vegetated slope. The ridgeline character is less uniform in shape with mixed vegetation cover and a greater variety of use and activity, creating a more complex landscape pattern than Te Ahumairangi Hill.

This area also has a different character to the western end due to urban development extending part way up the slopes and the edges of the open space not being as clearly defined. The area is visibly prominent from more places around the city and appears to have a more direct relationship or connection to the sea.

At the local scale the landscape confers identity and provides coherence, contributing to the amenities of individual communities and providing the setting for day-to-day experiences. Parts of
the Town Belt can provide space for a playground, a kick-about space, a picnic spot, a shortcut route to work, a backdrop to a suburb or view from someone’s window.

At the finest scale the Town Belt provides individual elements or spaces that are important to a variety of different people. For example, a particular tree may have heritage value due to its age or location, cultural value associated with use, ecological value as habitat, aesthetic value, practical value as shade, or even value associated with a memory of an event in someone’s life.

The Town Belt provides a significant open-space framework for the city and the differences in its three broad areas – the inner curve, the north-western end and the eastern side – are a large part of its overall value. The visual diversity and diversity of open-space values and experience (across all scales of space from Te Ahumairangi Hill down to an individual tree) is important in its protection.