

# **OXFORD GREEN BELT NETWORK**

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## **NEWSLETTER      February 2011**

As usual, this Newsletter is sent to all parish councils/meetings with an interest in the Oxford Green Belt, and to other amenity groups sharing our aims. Our Steering Committee would be grateful if the Newsletter could be circulated to all who might be interested.

### Core Strategies

In December we received the report of the inspector who conducted the long-running Examination in Public into Oxford City's Core Strategy. He, and a colleague who was involved at the earlier stages, have found the Plan "sound" and given broad approval to the policies in it. It is likely to be formally adopted by the City Council in April. The good news, so far as the Green Belt is concerned, is that the inspector has concluded that "the policy allowing for small-scale review of the Green Belt across the city is contrary to national guidance and not justified". This is good because, in particular, it protects the Cherwell Valley between Marston and Summertown where the City Council had identified a portion of this important arm of the Green Belt as potentially available for development.

The bad news is that support has been given for the "Northern Gateway" development between the Wolvercote and Pear Tree roundabouts and this includes two small areas of Green Belt. The inspector's report continues, "However, I consider that different circumstances apply to the potential for very small-scale release of Green Belt land at Northern Gateway". What will happen next is that the Council will work on an Area Action Plan (AAP) for the Northern Gateway. If this involves release of Green Belt land, as expected, we shall continue to object on the grounds that the two pieces of land still fulfil a Green Belt purpose and should remain undeveloped.

Other District Councils have also been working on their Core Strategies and we have commented recently on the Submission Document of South Oxfordshire's Plan. This calls for localised reviews of the Green Belt at Wheatley and Berinsfield. We are opposed to this policy and will renew our opposition when the Core Strategy is subject to Examination in Public later in the year. We believe that removing Green Belt status from the area around Wheatley Bridge will give rise to unwanted development pressures in this locality close to the motorway and service station. At Berinsfield, where the Green Belt "washes over" the village, the principal danger is to the green heart of the village, a precious asset, the protection of which was the main reason for not excluding Berinsfield from the Green Belt in the first place. We would in any case oppose any removal of land from the Green Belt beyond the present perimeter of the village. We recognize the need for some regeneration of older properties in Berinsfield but believe that this should take place within the existing built-up area.

### Chiltern Railways

At the end of January the lengthy public inquiry into the plans of Chiltern Railways finally came to an end. These plans involve upgrading the existing Oxford to Bicester line and creating a link at Bicester that would enable trains to run from Oxford to London Marylebone. There will be a new parkway station at Water Eaton where the disused grain silo stands and numerous smaller works involving, amongst other things, the replacement of existing level crossings with bridges.

The Oxford Green Belt Network is not opposed to the scheme, which we believe will be popular and well-used, but we are concerned about some of the knock-on effects on the openness of the Green Belt. Working closely with friends in CPRE and Gosford and Water Eaton Parish Council, we gave evidence at the inquiry, concentrating on the areas around the proposed new station and its car park. A particular concern is the plan to re-locate the existing stone depot to a new greenfield site and to allow for increased handling and storage of aggregates there. Another issue was over what might happen to the waste recovery facility, permission for which exists on the same site as that of the station. We shall await the inspector's report with interest.

#### Thornhill park and ride

Oxford is well-served by park and ride but, as many people will have experienced, the facility at Thornhill, on the London Road, is often full from early morning. The problem has arisen because about half the parking is now taken up, not by people travelling by bus into Oxford, which has always been the purpose of park and ride, but by travellers on the coaches to London and the airports. It is our understanding that travellers on the coaches can leave their cars at Thornhill for up to 72 hours, which doesn't help to free up spaces for local users.

A consequence of all this has been that the County Council has submitted a plan to extend the existing car park by just over 500 places, the extension being wholly in the Green Belt. Our Committee studied the plans and decided that we could not realistically oppose them, but we have made suggestions about landscaping and lighting which we hope will soften the visual impact of the enlarged car parks, especially when viewed from the slopes of Shotover. We have also urged the County to get on with a management plan that would restrict long stay parking and achieve a better balance between parking for access to Oxford and the other users.

A particular worry has been the possibility of commercial activities creeping in to the site as it expands and caters for more motorists. We are assured by the County that it is not a part of the plan to allow this to happen, but we are nevertheless concerned at the setting aside of land next to the A.40 for a possible future hotel. We do not wish to see the Green Belt at this point turned into an edge-of-town shopping and motel complex of the kind that that has been allowed to grow up, for example, at Pear Tree alongside the A.34.

#### A slurry lagoon

The recycling of waste is something else that is good in principle but can give rise to problems affecting the Green Belt. A particular issue has arisen recently at the recycling centre between Cassington and Yarnton. Last year an anaerobic digester facility was opened there to deal with the County's food waste. We acknowledged the value of this facility and did not oppose it, limiting our comments to matters such as lighting, overhead wires and hard standing. However, the process of anaerobic digestion creates a byproduct, which is useful since it can be spread on fields as a fertiliser, and the company involved now wishes to create a slurry lagoon in which to store the digestate prior to its removal. The lagoon would be large, some 1.5 hectares in size, being surrounded by an artificial bank rising to some 4 metres, and would occupy a site which is currently being restored to agricultural use following gravel extraction.

We have opposed the plan on the grounds that it amounts to inappropriate development in the Green Belt and reduces the openness of the Green Belt. We have also expressed misgivings about the potential environmental effect of the slurry lagoon, especially the danger of smells which could be offensive to people living not far away. We would prefer to see a system in place that did not require

such large-scale open-air storage and that would keep anything that had to be stored for a short time in contained vessels.

#### Civic amenity site at Kidlington

We have commented recently on the County's plan to set up a new civic amenity site for disposal of household waste off Langford Lane at Kidlington. The idea of having such a facility to the north of Oxford is attractive but the site chosen is in the Green Belt and we would have preferred to see the facility put on an industrial estate rather than on a greenfield site. We have also expressed our worries about its possible effect on the adjoining Langford Meadows, a site of local wildlife importance, and on the Rushy Meadows SSSI to the south.

#### Wind turbine at Horspath

The company wishing to build giant wind turbines at Cutteslowe and Horspath has decided to put the former on hold, having received advice about possible interference with aircraft radar. But the Horspath turbine remains a live issue, despite it being in the Green Belt, and a planning application for a trial mast to test wind speed is expected at any time now.

Although the trial mast has not yet been applied for, the application for the turbine itself is expected within the next few weeks. The site of the proposed turbine is just within the City of Oxford boundary, on city-owned land, but it is very close to the village of Horspath off Oxford Road. It would be huge, 130 metres (425 feet) high which means that the top of the rotating blades would be some 40 metres higher than the highest point of nearby Shotover. It would dominate the village of Horspath and be wholly out of scale with the surrounding landscape. Local residents would find it intrusive and overbearing as well as possibly suffering the inconvenience of noise and shadow flicker. If built, the effect of this enormous structure would be to make it much harder to protect from other forms of development the narrow gap of Green Belt that separates Horspath from Oxford. It would also interfere with games of cricket on the nearby field because of the distraction caused by the moving blades. And the turbine is so big that it would even be visible on the skyline when viewed from the other side of Oxford, constituting a visual "stop" in those iconic views of the spires of Oxford seen against a backdrop of green hills.

There are other arguments against the wind turbine related to efficiency and the need for financial subsidy. There are also worries related to possible bird and bat strike and there could be light pollution depending on the need to light the mast as a warning to aircraft. As a Green Belt organization, our big concern is with its adverse effects on the Green Belt environment and on the local community, and for those reasons we are strongly opposed to it.

#### Solar panels

We recognize the contribution that solar panels can make towards renewable energy targets, but believe that the place for these is on the roofs of buildings and not on fields in the Green Belt. We have recently come across what we think is the first application of its kind for solar panels fixed to frames on such a Green Belt site and we hope that this will not be followed by others.

#### Views across the Green Belt

Government advice on Green Belts (in PPG.2) states that, "The visual amenities of the Green Belt should not be injured by proposals for development within or conspicuous from the Green Belt which, although they would not prejudice the purposes of including land in Green Belt, might be visually detrimental by reason of their siting, materials or design." This is the main reason why the

plan to build a large book depository at Osney Mead was refused since the building would have been highly conspicuous from the Green Belt to the west of Oxford and damaging to the views of historic Oxford. A similar argument applies in the case of the Horspath wind turbine.

In the Oxford Green Belt Network we often find ourselves asked to comment on plans for buildings which, although just outside the Green Belt, are nevertheless highly visible from it. A recent example involves a scheme to build a physics laboratory off Parks Road in Oxford. It is next to the University Parks, which are a part of the Green Belt, and we believe that the proposed building would be visually detrimental by virtue of its siting to views of the Grade 1 listed Keble College Chapel.

#### Other matters

The above represent just a number of the matters with which OGBN has been involved in recent months. Since the last Newsletter was circulated our records show that we were involved in Green Belt issues in parishes that include Berinsfield, Cumnor, Fyfield and Tubney, Gosford and Water Eaton, Great Milton, Hampton Gay and Poyle, Kidlington, Sunningwell, Waterperry, Wootton (Abingdon) and Yarnton, as well as over several matters in the City of Oxford. Please keep in contact with us and let us know if we can offer support when threats to the Green Belt arise.