

OXFORD GREEN BELT NETWORK

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NEWSLETTER - FEBRUARY 2015

In our last Newsletter we drew attention to two County-wide documents, the Strategic Economic Plan (SEP) which predicts growth in employment, and the Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA) which does the same thing for housing. The figures in these reports have been criticized as arbitrary and over-stated. They nevertheless continue to influence planning policy throughout the County which, in turn, has implications for the future of the Green Belt. This is because the District Councils, in working on their Local Plans, have felt it necessary to take account of the figures in the SEP and the SHMA, and to make allowance for the growth predicted in the reports. Since the planning rules (in the National Planning Policy Framework - NPPF) allow the Districts to review the boundaries of the Green Belt when drawing up a new Local Plan, there is an obvious temptation to seek space in the Green Belt to satisfy their projected employment, housing and other needs.

There is worse to come. Under the “duty to cooperate”, the District Councils are represented on a County-wide “Growth Board” and this body has decided to carry out a review of the whole of the Green Belt. We have not been told what the terms of reference of this review are, or who is carrying it out, but it is said that the results of the review will probably be published this coming June. As with the SEP and the SHMA, there is no public consultation involved and no opportunity to question or challenge what is going on. So we urge Parish Councils and supporters of the Green Belt to be aware that this is happening and to use any chance that presents itself to enquire into how it might affect your area.

Cherwell Local Plan

An examination in public into Cherwell’s new Local Plan took place in December. The Oxford Green Belt Network (OGBN) was represented and took part in the discussions held over several days. We now await the conclusions of the presiding Inspector. The principal threat to the Green Belt arises from Cherwell’s wish to carry out what are described as small-scale local reviews of the Green Belt in the vicinity of Langford Lane, on the northern edge of Kidlington, and at Begbroke where the University of Oxford has a science park. These reviews are intended to identify areas of land that can be taken out of the Green Belt in order to provide sites for more employment. Already the prospect of setting aside Green Belt land for employment purposes has resulted in a planning application to create a “technology park” on the former rugby ground off Langford Lane. We regard this move as premature since it is taking place before we know whether or not the Inspector approves of the Green Belt reviews.

The proposed Green Belt review at Begbroke would, if permitted, result in the enlargement of the existing science park. This, in turn, would be likely to lead to a demand for more housing and, ultimately, would result in the loss of the open space that now separates Begbroke from Yarnton and Kidlington.

It is said in Cherwell’s new Local Plan that there is currently no need to take land out of the Green Belt for housing, but we fear that this desire is unlikely to survive if the Council is allowed to go ahead with these proposed employment schemes. It is well known that developers have identified sites where they would like to build, not only at Begbroke, but also north of The Moors in Kidlington, to the south of Kidlington towards Stratfield Brake, and elsewhere. Given that Oxford

City Council wants neighbouring Councils to accommodate some of the City's housing needs, coupled with the demand for more housing that is likely to follow the opening of the new rail station at Water Eaton, it is easy to envisage a Greater Oxford that would engulf Kidlington, Begbroke and Yarnton. Protection of the Green Belt is what stands in the way of this scenario.

Vale of White Horse Local Plan

The new Vale Local Plan has been submitted to the Planning Inspectorate and an examination in public will take place in due course. This submitted version differs somewhat from the earlier draft but still proposes large housing developments in the Green Belt, initially north of Abingdon, at Radley and Kennington and then, at a later stage, in other villages including Appleton, Cumnor and Wootton.

We have expressed our view that this policy is unjustified and unsound since it is based on an uncritical adoption of the figures in the SHMA and because it disregards some of the basic intentions of Green Belt policy. One of these fundamental purposes of the Green Belt is the one which aims to keep free of development the gaps that separate settlements in order, amongst other things, to ensure that they maintain their separate identity. But the Vale's proposals for big housing developments to the north of Abingdon and at Radley would have the opposite effect, narrowing significantly the already small area of open space that prevents these places from merging. It would also allow Abingdon to extend beyond the existing northern perimeter road, the kind of easily identifiable line that is recommended as a boundary for Green Belts.

OGBN recognizes that villages can sometimes benefit from small scale development that satisfies a local housing need and helps to keep village services in place. But the scale of development being proposed at places Cumnor in Part Two of the Vale Plan is out of proportion to such needs and can have the opposite effect, creating pressure over school places for example, and leading to the loss of open spaces and cherished views. Our comments on the proposals in the Vale Local Plan have been forwarded, like those of others, to the Inspector who will conduct the examination into the Plan's soundness. We hope to take part in this examination in public.

South Oxfordshire Local Plan

In July 2014 we responded, as did others, to the various options put forward by South Oxfordshire for their new Local Plan. These responses have been published on SODC's website and are under consideration by the planners. Recently, however, as you will know, the Council offices have been largely destroyed by a devastating fire, and it is too early to say what effect this will have on planning in the District.

West Oxfordshire Local Plan

Responses to the consultation on the Local Plan have similarly been reviewed. It is our understanding that West Oxfordshire did not find it necessary to adopt the figures in the SHMA in the light of its own provision of housing in recent years.

Oxford City

Oxford City Council has an adopted Core Strategy, but since the publication of the SHMA the Council is seeking to find space outside the City for more housing, something of the order of 20,000 dwellings. Meanwhile, within the City itself, proposals have been put forward for developing Green Belt land to the north on a part of Frideswide Farm and, to the south, on land opposite Redbridge park and ride.

Northern Gateway

The City Council produced an Area Action Plan (AAP) for this site on the northern edge of Oxford, a site that includes some small fields in the Green Belt south of the A40. Back in the 1990s, a planning inspector approved the City's wish to take most of the Northern Gateway site out of the Green Belt, but at the time she stated her opinion that these fields south of the A40 were part of the setting of Oxford and should therefore remain in the Green Belt. The City Council agreed at the time, but now wishes to go back on that decision and to build on them as part of the Area Action Plan. OGBN has expressed its opposition to this intention, believing that the fields in question are still a part of the setting of Oxford, as well as of the village of Wolvercote. We shall continue to argue the case for retention of their Green Belt status at the public examination into the Northern Gateway AAP when it takes place in March.

Development at the Northern Gateway was approved in principle when the City's Core Strategy was formally adopted, but the matter of the Green Belt was left open at the time. When first approved, the Northern Gateway was to accommodate 5,000 jobs and 200 homes. This has now grown to 9,000 jobs and 500 dwellings. Little wonder then that the Green Belt is under threat here. Even five hundred new homes would not contribute much to a housing situation which, planning for 9,000 more employees in this locality, can only make worse. We think that housing should have priority over all this new employment being planned at the Northern Gateway and that the present balance is wrong.

Castle Mill Flats

The university flats on the edge of Port Meadow have attracted much criticism because of their impact on views from this historic open space. Mistakes were clearly made over these ugly blocks and OGBN has responded to the City Council's invitation to comment on the options put forward in the recent Environmental Impact Study for mitigating the damage. We believe that only Option 3, which removes the top storey from the flats, will do anything worthwhile towards improving the situation.

Woodstock and ROAR

The major development that has been proposed by the Blenheim Palace estate for land to the south of Woodstock is just beyond the Green Belt, the outer boundary of which runs along Upper Campsfield Road, the A4095. OGBN has nevertheless expressed its objection to the plans for some 1,500 dwellings, a care village and other forms of development. Not only are they totally disproportionate to the present size of Woodstock, doubling its population, but the project would have serious implications for the Green Belt. One such would arise if, as has been suggested, there was new access made into the airport on the other side of Upper Campsfield Road. The effect of a new road, if one were to be built, would be to open up airport land in the Green Belt for further development.

The perceived threats from the above plans have led to the setting up of a group known as the Rural Oxfordshire Action Rally (ROAR) which, in collaboration with CPRE Oxfordshire, organized the rally held in Witney on 24th January. OGBN was represented there and also gave modest financial support to the expenses involved. It is anticipated that ROAR will continue to campaign against unsustainable levels of development being promoted in rural Oxfordshire.

Park and Ride

The five existing park and ride facilities on the edge of Oxford were all established on what was once Green Belt land. Few would deny, however, that they perform a valuable service to commuters, shoppers and others who can catch a bus to the city centre and, in the case of Thornhill, to London. It is now impossible to envisage a situation without them. But the County Council has recently

proposed, in a report on transport, “Connecting Oxfordshire”, that most of the present facilities be replaced by new ones, further out, all of which would be in the Green Belt.

The suggested sites for these new facilities, which would be bigger than the existing ones, are at Lodge Hill north of Abingdon, Cumnor, Sandford-on-Thames, to the east of Kidlington, Langford Lane north of Kidlington, and also at Eynsham. In OGBN we have still to discuss these plans, but we have always argued that the next generation of park and ride provision should be further out still, in the country towns such as Witney, Bicester and Didcot, in order to reduce commuter traffic on roads like the A40, A44 or A34. An initial reaction, therefore, is that the County’s suggested sites would not achieve this aim, continuing to bring commuter traffic to the edge of Oxford’s built-up area whilst, at the same time, consuming substantial pieces of the Green Belt. Another issue is what might happen to the present park and ride sites. It is difficult to see them being returned to open space and it is more likely that they would simply invite other forms of urban land use.

Other Matters

Responding to these major plans outlined above is only a part of what OGBN does. We continue to scrutinize lists of planning applications and respond as we think appropriate to those affecting the Green Belt. We have expressed concerns over the extension of gravel working for example, and are keeping a close eye on what has been proposed near Clifton Hampden on fields that go down to the Thames. We continue to oppose ground-based solar arrays in the Green Belt and regret that one or two have been allowed despite their visual impact and the fact that they neutralize potential farmland for a generation or more

Other Green Belt matters on which we have expressed our views include the plan for holiday lodges at Cothill, the expansion of Campsfield immigration removal centre, the haul road to Woodeaton quarry, caravans at Stanton St John and Bayworth, car boot sales at Waterstock, and several unsuitable housing proposals. As ever, we welcome information and suggestions on Green Belt issues, especially from Parish Councils that include Green Belt land in their territory. We also value your support, financial and in other ways.

You will find this, and earlier Newsletters, on our website (www.oxfordgreenbelt.net), together with up-to-date information on what OGBN is doing, on the Home Page. The website also has a link to a useful set of maps relating to the Green Belt.