

# OXFORD GREEN BELT NETWORK

## NEWSLETTER

May 2007

### **Celebrating a Double Birthday**

Next year the Oxford Green Belt will be fifty years old and it will also be ten years since the Oxford Green Belt Network was set up to help protect it. Our Steering Committee feels that we should mark these birthdays in a special way. We are therefore giving all parish councils that are wholly or partly hi the Oxford Green Belt and not presently members of our Network, FREE membership (worth £15) for the year ahead. The same gift applies, of course, to all our current members who have kindly supported us financially in the past, and who are also offered free subscription for the coming year. Behind this offer is the hope that ALL parish councils and meetings will now become members of the Oxford Green Belt Network. This, it seemed to us, is the best way of celebrating the double anniversary and of ensuring that we speak with as comprehensive a voice as possible when defending the Green Belt in the future.

All we ask of new members, and existing ones, is that you complete the slip on the enclosed form to register your membership. This can be done by post to our Hon. Treasurer, or by sending him an email to confirm your council's wish to be associated with OGBN.

We hope that you won't mind our pointing out that we shall be obliged to revert to a request for a modest subscription in a year's time.

### **Planning and the Green Belt**

Changes are taking place to the planning system which have implications for the future of the Green Belt. Up to now Green Belt policy has been set out in the County Council's Structure Plan and hi the Local (or Development) Plans prepared by District Councils. But these kinds of plans are now being phased out and are being replaced by plans drawn up at a regional level and by what are called Local Development Frameworks which remain the responsibility of the Districts.

### **The South East Plan**

For the purposes of regional planning, Oxfordshire is a part of South East England and responsibility for plan making rests with the South East England Regional Assembly (SEERA). Like the Regional Assemblies in other parts of the country, the members of SEERA are not elected directly but are mainly members of other Councils appointed to serve on the Assembly. SEERA's plan, the South East Plan 2006-2026, was published hi draft form hi March 2006 and it was the subject of an Examination hi Public (EIP) which began last November and finished at the end of March 2007. During the course of the EIP a number of days were devoted to Oxfordshire and the Oxford Green Belt Network (OGBN) took part in the debate on 28<sup>th</sup> February when the subject was the future of Oxford and its Green Belt. OGBN is grateful to all those Parish Councils and Parish Meetings who wrote to us before that date, saying that they would like to see the Green Belt remain unchanged. It enabled us to show the Inspector the strength of feeling amongst parishes against inappropriate development in the Green Belt.

The draft South East Plan does not propose any changes to the Oxford Green Belt, stating that housing and other needs can be met by developing brown field sites and by expansion of settlements outside the Green Belt, notably Bicester, Didcot and Wantage-Grove. So OGBN was defending this position. But we were opposed by Oxford City Council who wish to promote one or more "urban extensions" into the Green Belt, (even though they were forced to admit at the EIP that they had more than enough land within the City for all the housing needed), and by a range of landowners and their agents who are anxious to profit from the demand for expensive housing, science parks and other forms of development within the Green Belt. Now that the EIP is over we must wait for the report of the inspectors who carried out the inquiry, probably in late summer, and then the Government will have the final say. The crucial issue so far as the Green Belt is concerned is whether the inspectors, and then the Government, will accept the housing and other figures in the South East Plan or will increase them (as happened in the case of the East of England Plan) and call for a review of the boundaries of the Green Belt in order that more land can be found to accommodate these extra demands. We can only wait and see, but meanwhile OGBN will go on doing all it can to protect the Green Belt within its present boundaries.

### **Local Development Frameworks**

This new form of local plan is intended to be more flexible than the old style Development Plan, responding more quickly to changing circumstances. It is all part of Central Government's wish to overhaul the planning system and make it more responsive to economic demands. The report published last year by a leading official of the Treasury, Kate Barker, makes it clear where Government priorities lie. Significantly she calls in her report for a review of the boundaries of existing Green Belts to make way for development.

As part of the process of producing their Development Framework, District Councils are obliged to consult the public over possible sites for future development and, on the basis of the responses they receive, they draw up a Site Allocations Plan. This shows on a map all the sites which landowners and developers think could be used for future development. The District Councils are all in the process of carrying out this exercise. South Oxfordshire D.C. has already produced a map and Cherwell D.C. is about to publish its map for the southern part of their District which includes a portion of the Oxford Green Belt. It does not follow that the District Councils will decide that development should take place on these sites, but the very fact that the sites have been promoted by their owners is an indication of their vulnerability to development at some time in the future. Parish Councils and Parish Meetings would be well advised to look out for these Site Allocation Plans and make their views on them known. To do this, contact the District Council and ask what stage they have reached in producing the document, or look at it on the Council's website.

### **OGBN Activities**

OGBN continues to monitor planning applications and, where appropriate, to write letters to the Districts and Planning Inspectorate, and occasionally to appear at a public inquiry. We hope that Parish Councils and Parish Meetings will continue to share their concerns over the Green Belt with us and to let us know if there is anything we can do in support of their efforts to save the village's Green Belt setting. Matters with which we have been involved in recent months include over-development of village sites at Sandford and on Boars Hill, the siting and appearance of telecom masts, excessive floodlighting in the countryside, ugly and excessive signage at village pubs, unauthorized vehicle storage, and the spread of polytunnels. We have supported the Forest of Oxford organization in its

efforts to plant trees on sites that would otherwise remain unsightly and attract inappropriate uses.

We take an interest in sites which, whilst not in the actual Green Belt, are on the edge of it and where development would be visually intrusive when viewed from the Green Belt. This has happened in the case of a proposal in the Cherwell Valley and also at Osney Mead on the western side of Oxford where permission was recently obtained to enlarge the already very big and intrusive Newsquest building. We were opposed to this and are very strongly opposed to plans to build a huge book depository for the University of Oxford on a nearby site. This is still undetermined but, if it happened, it would have a serious impact on those famous views of Oxford's historic skyline when seen from the Hinksey hills and meadows.

Finding sites for waste management is an increasingly urgent problem and one which has implications for the Green Belt since local authorities are expected to find sites that minimize transport costs. Central Government has said that Green Belt sites should not be excluded from consideration. The County Council recently published a long list of possible sites that could be used for some form of waste management, around 40 of which were in, or close to, the Green Belt. Some are clearly non-starters but others could well be taken up at some future date. They include the existing Worton recycling centre between Yarnton and Cassington where we have not been opposed to the recycling operations there, simply commenting on landscaping and access issues. But other sites are certain to be required, especially if plans for a waste incinerator or some alternative form of waste disposal or conversion is proposed. We need to be aware therefore of the debate that is currently taking place.

### **Circulation**

This Newsletter and the form about membership of the Oxford Green Belt Network is sent to the Clerks of Parish Councils (or Chairmen of Parish Meetings) whose territory is wholly or partly in the Oxford Green Belt. These are the addresses supplied to us by the County Council. We should be grateful if those receiving the papers would make their contents known to Chairmen and members of the relevant parish councils or meetings, and hopefully respond as we have requested.

OGBN is the only organization concerned solely with protection of, and promotion of the benefits of, the Oxford Green Belt. It's name derives from the fact that it is a network of parishes, exchanging information about the Green Belt, and taking action where appropriate to defend and to enhance it.