

**OXFORD GREEN BELT NETWORK**  
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**NEWSLETTER - JUNE 2014**

The Oxford Green Belt Network (OGBN) continues to be grateful to parish councils, parish meetings and the other amenity groups who help to finance what we do. We now have a small war chest and we have recently spent some of this money contributing to the cost of the Wenban-Smith study which has cast doubt on the figures relating to housing need in the Strategic Housing Market Assessment (see below).

We hope that the notes below will be of interest and we would be grateful if they could be circulated, especially to your councils.

Overall threats to the Green Belt

It is not our wish to cry wolf, but it is probably the case that the Oxford Green Belt is currently facing the greatest threats to its future in its 60-year history. This arises from a huge growth agenda represented in a series of reports that have been published recently, reports that advocate a massive expansion in the Oxford area of population, employment and all the related needs for housing, transport and other forms of infrastructure that go with such growth.

OGBN is not anti-growth and we recognize the importance of expansion, especially in the new high-tech and knowledge-related industries. And we are not anti-housing, recognizing the need for new homes for local families. But it is important also to consider where exactly that growth will take place and to recognize that the Green Belt countryside enhances the quality of life, both of those who live in the city and of those in its surrounding villages, and that this benefit should not be lost to urban sprawl.

The notes below are intended to provide some information on the sources of the current threat to the Green Belt.

The Strategic Economic Plan

The County-wide Strategic Economic Plan (SEP), which is in its final draft form at the time of writing, has been produced by the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP), an unelected body which, though including Council representatives, is dominated by business interests. The contents of the Plan have not been subject to public consultation and the forecasting methods on which its conclusions are based have not been subject to rigorous outside scrutiny.

The SEP sets a target of 80,000 new jobs in Oxfordshire by the year 2031. Since unemployment in the County is low, this means that the jobs will need to be filled largely by newcomers and their families and, to accommodate them, the SEP says that Oxfordshire will need 85,000 new homes over roughly the same period. Note that this house building is not aimed at meeting existing needs or affordability.

The Plan identifies three key areas (“innovation hubs”) where the growth will take place. Oxford is one of these, the other two being Bicester to the north of the County and “Science Vale”

(Harwell/Milton/Culham) to the south. Uniting the three areas is what is described as a “knowledge spine” where public transport services will be provided to link the areas concerned. Just how this will work remains to be seen.

### City Deal

City Deal is a government-backed programme that provides funding for the sort of development outlined above and there is a close link between the Oxford and Oxfordshire City Deal and the aims of the Local Enterprise Partnership. The Executive Summary of City Deal, for example, begins with the statement that, “The Oxford and Oxfordshire City Deal aims to unleash a new wave of innovation-led growth by maximising the area’s world-class assets...” The Green Belt setting of Oxford is not referred to as one of these assets.

So far as Oxford itself is concerned, City Deal is intended to help fund employment-related programmes like that at the Northern Gateway (below), amongst others.

### The Strategic Housing Market Assessment

Periodically local authorities are required to carry out an exercise to assess their future housing needs. Those in Oxfordshire, the County and the five Districts, commissioned consultants (principally G.L.Hearn) to do this for them, and in March of this year (2014) their Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA) was published. This document sets totals for house building up to 2031 and the figures that the consultants have come up with have caused both astonishment and concern, some saying that it gives builders carte blanche to carry out development on sites almost anywhere, including ones in the Green Belt.

The SHMA has come up with a figure of just over 100,000 new dwellings required for the period up to the year 2031, adding greatly to the existing housing targets which the various Districts had pre-SHMA. All the five Districts in the County are expected to take a share of this increase, the highest being in the City of Oxford itself. Here the anticipated target is 28,000 dwellings by 2031, and yet it is only a year or two ago that the City’s Local Plan was adopted on the agreed grounds that just 8,000 new homes needed to be built by 2026. Where will these extra dwellings go? The big fear, of course, is that development will spill out into the Green Belt, adding to the pressures that the other Districts around Oxford are facing from their own inflated totals.

So great has been the alarm raised by the SHMA that the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE) commissioned a critique of the SHMA’s research methods and assumptions by a distinguished planning consultant, Alan Wenban-Smith. His conclusions, just published, are highly critical of the SHMA, describing its figures on housing need as “grossly overstated”. He picks out weaknesses in the methodology employed in the SHMA and to its link with other questionable totals, like those projected for employment growth in the SEP.

### The threat

The reports referred to above might well be flawed but the big danger is that local authorities will be obliged to use their target figures in their new or amended Local Plans, and that developers will seize on the totals as an opportunity to persuade the authorities to release more and more land for development, including that in the Green Belt where the greatest pressures arise because of proximity to Oxford. . An example of what is already happening is to be found in the latest Local Plans being drawn up by the District Councils.

### The Vale of White Horse Local Plan

It is only a couple of years or so since the Vale of White Horse District Council published a draft Local Plan which stated that there was no need to review the boundaries of the Vale's portion of the Green Belt in order to find room for more housing. Then came the publication of the SHMA and the Vale have adopted, uncritically it seems to us, the housing targets in that report and have produced a replacement Local Plan that identifies 21 new development sites for housing, seven of which are in the Green Belt. These are on the edges of Abingdon, Cumnor, Wootton, Kennington and Radley and collectively they involve building a total of 1,720 dwellings here in the Green Belt by 2031. It is a complete change of intention on the part of the Vale and, understandably, it has given rise to considerable concern in the local communities likely to be affected. It has also created additional uncertainty because, as well as the sites identified for development in the Plan, more have been recognized that could be built over towards the end of the Plan period or even beyond it.

We regard the situation that has been created in the Green Belt portion of the Vale as quite unreasonable and this is why, amongst other considerations, that we have contributed to the funding of the Wenban-Smith critique of the SHMA.

### Cherwell Local Plan

Cherwell District Council is more advanced than the Vale with its Local Plan and the version that they would like to see adopted will be the subject of an Examination in Public (EIP) beginning on 3<sup>rd</sup> June. OGBN has commented at the various stages in the preparation of the Plan and has also sent a Statement to the inspector who will be conducting the EIP setting out our position over the Green Belt. A copy can be viewed on our website. We shall also be appearing at the EIP on 16<sup>th</sup> June when the subject under discussion is Kidlington and the Green Belt.

The Cherwell Plan, unlike that of the Vale, does not recommend taking land out of the Green Belt for residential development, But that policy predates the SHMA and we shall be arguing that Cherwell should stand firm and not now make changes to that part of the Plan.

But the Plan does impact on the Green Belt because it recommends carrying out reviews of the Green Belt to increase the amount of land set aside for employment purposes at Langford Lane/Oxford Airport to the north of Kidlington and around Begbroke science park to the south. We dispute the need to do this and will continue to argue the case against taking land from the Green Belt to create jobs that will only add to the growth of housing need.

### Where the greatest threats lie

Some areas for development in the Green Belt have already been identified like those in the Vale and Cherwell noted above. Others are likely to follow as the other Districts respond to the SEP, the SHMA and other reports based on the all-pervasive philosophy of growth.

It is clear, for example, that Oxford City Council has never given up on their wish to see a major development take place south of Grenoble Road, a scheme that was debated at length when we had the, now abolished, South East Plan. The pressure on this area of Green Belt to the south of Oxford has never gone away and we shall be hearing more about it. Another very pressured area is that portion of the Green Belt that lies between Begbroke, Yarnton and Kidlington, all around the science park. Land there is owned by the University of Oxford or its constituent colleges and their wish to carry out large scale development is no secret. Already a new access road has been built, cutting

across the Green Belt from the A44. OGBN will resist attempts to fill in this area of the Green Belt that helps to preserve the separate identity of the villages concerned and is much valued and used as open space by local residents. In addition to these two areas, south and north of Oxford, there are those villages identified for growth in the vale Plan and others that could now be chosen for expansion in the other Districts as a result of the SEP and the SHMA.

### Meanwhile

OGBN continues its defence of the Green Belt on a regular basis, responding to planning applications that undermine its purposes of checking sprawl, preventing the encroachment of one settlement on another, and protecting the countryside. We have opposed the City Council's wish to take two areas of Green Belt land as part of their major development at the "Northern Gateway" (once all of it was in the Green Belt). We opposed the solar farm near Bletchingdon, turned down by Cherwell District Council, but allowed on appeal. The inspector concerned rehearsed all the arguments for refusing it on Green Belt grounds but still allowed it because it would produce renewable energy, and this despite new government advice which puts more emphasis on the need to protect Green Belts. Now we are face with an even bigger scheme for a very big solar farm to the south of Yarnton. It would effectively industrialise this part of the "Kidlington Gap" not far from the new rail station at Water Eaton which, for all its agreed benefits, is likely to add to the pressures for development in that vicinity.

We hope that our reference at the beginning of this Newsletter to crying wolf is not exaggerated. The last year or so, following the publication of the various reports referred to above, has brought about a huge change so far as pressure on the Oxford Green Belt is concerned. In OGBN we will do all we can, notwithstanding all of this, to protect the Green Belt in the interests of everyone, continuing to publicize the many benefits that we gain from having a Green Belt. In doing so we wish to make it clear that OGBN is, and will remain, an independent voice, in no way party-political. It is inevitable, particularly in the run-up to a general election, that issues can become politicised, but we do not take sides when the argument becomes a political one. The Green Belt is there for the benefit of everybody and that is what we shall go on trying to ensure.