

# OXFORD GREEN BELT NETWORK

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## NEWSLETTER August 2009

It is some time since the Oxford Green Belt Network (OGBN) circulated a Newsletter. It is sent – by email where we have addresses – to all parish councils and parish meetings whose territory is wholly or partly in the Oxford Green Belt and to other organizations that share our aims of protecting the Green Belt from inappropriate forms of development. We hope that its contents will be made as widely known as possible. Paper copies can be supplied if required by contacting the Chairman (above). We also have a website, [www.oxfordgreenbelt.net](http://www.oxfordgreenbelt.net) on which you will find this Newsletter and other information (look especially under Current Concerns on the menu bar).

### Urban Extension South of Oxford

In May of this year the Government gave its final approval to the South East Plan (known officially as the Regional Spatial Strategy). The Plan requires an urban extension of at least 4,000 dwellings, together with employment and services, to be built south of Grenoble Road on a site that is wholly within the Green Belt. This urban extension was not in the original plan produced by the South East Regional Assembly and it was also opposed by the County Council and by South Oxfordshire District Council in whose territory the urban extension to Oxford will be built. All these other authorities believed that Oxford's housing and other needs could be met by development on brownfield sites within the City and beyond the Green Belt in expanding towns such as Bicester and Didcot. But they were overruled by the Government.

The situation now is that there have been legal challenges to the urban extension, notably by CPRE Oxfordshire and by South Oxfordshire District Council. The basis of the challenge is that reasonable alternatives to "South of Grenoble Road" were not considered as part of the strategic environmental assessment which is required by European regulations (to which our Government is signed up). The legal challenges will go before the High Court but probably not until quite a bit later in the year. Meanwhile the local authorities are expected to go ahead and plan for the urban extension on the assumption that it will happen.

### Core Strategies

The old-style development plans which District Councils produced have now given way to what are called Local Development Frameworks (LDF). Central to this new system of planning is the so-called Core Strategy. It looks rather like the old development plan but is much more general in what it has to say and it leaves the detail of what will actually happen in the future to the preparation of Area Action Plans. So you have to take quite a lot on trust, not very satisfactory when the Core Strategies now being produced cover the years up to 2026.

The District Councils are all at various stages in the production of their Core Strategies. Once produced, the Core Strategy is the subject of an examination in public (inquiry) conducted by an inspector from the Planning Inspectorate, and organizations like ours, and also individuals, can give evidence. The inspector can make changes to the Strategy and

his/her word is final. Over the last week or two the Oxford Green Belt Network has been taking part in the inquiry into the Oxford Core Strategy. We submitted written statements on a number of topics (see our website) and joined in the round table debate on the subjects of the Green Belt, Employment, land at Summertown, and the urban extension south of Oxford.

The inquiry is now over but will reconvene for two days on 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> September to debate the City's Northern Gateway plans (below). The inspector's report is expected in October.

### The Northern Gateway

In its Core Strategy, Oxford City Council is proposing a major development in the vicinity of the Wolvercote and Pear Tree roundabouts to the north of the city. It is calling the scheme the "Northern Gateway" and the plan is to use the site principally for employment uses but this might include the relocation of emergency services from other parts of Oxford. All of the site used to be part of the Oxford Green Belt but some of it was taken out of the Green Belt in 1997 and came to be known as "Safeguarded Land". The remainder of the site is still in the Green Belt and these areas of Green Belt are alongside the A.40 at Wolvercote and around the old Pear Tree farm beyond the park and ride. OGBN has concerns about the development as a whole which we believe will add to commuting and traffic problems, but we are particularly concerned at the City Council's wish to take more land out of the Green Belt. Encouraged by what the Government has proposed over the urban extension, the Council now feels it can itself propose developments that extend into the Green Belt. So what areas are safe and are other District Councils going to do the same?

### The Cherwell Valley

The Cherwell Valley is a countryside corridor which ensures that the Green Belt extends to the very heart of Oxford, but this too is threatened by future plans. Land on the Summertown side of the valley was taken out of the Green Belt in 1997 and, like that at Pear Tree is now "safeguarded", in this case for future housing development. We wish it to remain in its present playing field and allotment use. What is more, the City's Core Strategy refers to the possibility of taking other land out of the Green Belt on the Marston side of the valley. The sites that the City Council have in mind are not specified in the Core Strategy document so we don't know what the Council has in mind, but there are already warning signs in the fact that some areas of land have come up for sale. We believe that there should be no further chipping away at this narrow Cherwell Valley corridor. It is a very special area, loved by walkers and by those who punt up the river to the Vicky Arms and beyond. At present you can believe yourself to be in the middle of the countryside but any further development will destroy that illusion for ever. It will also be damaging to wildlife including the red kites that have now begun to appear over this part of Oxford.

### Ecotown

It was recently announced that the Government is not giving the go-ahead to the proposed ecotown at Weston-on-the-Green ("Weston Otmoor"). Like many others, we were opposed to this scheme which would have been built almost entirely on greenfield land, a quarter of which was in the Oxford Green Belt. Cherwell District Council have come up with a much better alternative which will be part of the plan to expand Bicester. Increasing the population of that town will enable it to acquire a better level of employment opportunities

and services and so hopefully take some of the pressure off Oxford and its Green Belt surroundings.

### Chiltern Railways

Chiltern Railways have recently put forward for consultation their plans to upgrade the existing railway line from Oxford to Bicester and to link it into the main line that runs through Bicester to London. If this happens it will provide an alternative rail route to London from Oxford. A part of the plan involves an out-of-town station at Gosford where the disused grain silo presently stands and this would be likely to prove popular in view of the problems of getting to Oxford station. But the grain silo site and the land around it is in the Oxford Green Belt, so the scheme has implications for the future of the Green Belt in that area. Some time ago the County Council gave permission for a waste treatment facility on the site of the silo, so the matter is complicated by that existing permission, and we shall be watching developments closely.

### The Oxford Canal

We have recently commented on a planning application to develop a large marina and associated facilities alongside the Oxford Canal where the latter is crossed by the road from Oxford to Woodstock at Yarnton. We believe that what is proposed is much too big and has implications not only for the Green Belt here in the "Kidlington Gap", but also raises issues to do with flooding, traffic, and the environmentally sensitive areas of meadowland nearby. Our concern also extends to the canal itself and its capacity to cope with developments on this scale. As well as being used for leisure purposes, the canal is becoming home to a growing number of houseboats and in places the canal banks are now lined with these dwellings.

### Oxford Flood Risk

The Environment Agency has recently carried out a consultation into its plans to reduce the flood risk, especially to parts of west Oxford that have been badly affected in the past. Of course we support this aim in principle, but we are not happy about some of the ideas which could just transfer the problem from one area to another. In particular we are worried about the idea of creating an entirely new river channel across the meadowland between North and South Hinksey. This is an important Green Belt area which is crossed by footpaths and which people have fought hard to keep free of development in the past. A new channel would involve excavation and could well attract the kind of speculative riverside uses that have been put forward in this area in connection with gravel extraction proposals.

### Minerals and Waste

Applications continue to come forward for mineral extraction (mainly gravel) and for waste processing plants and we appreciate the fact that the County Council, which is the minerals and waste authority, consults us about these plans. We understand the need for gravel, but very large areas of the Green Belt are affected by gravel extraction and processing and flooded gravel pits are a feature of the local landscape. We think that development within the Green Belt has gone far enough and have opposed schemes like that involving the opening up of a new area just to the east of Eynsham. We are worried not only by the disruption that gravel working causes to local communities but also about its impact on the

landscape and on the water table. There are important areas of flower-rich meadows in the Green Belt and it is difficult to predict how these could be affected over the longer term by changes to the water table that further mineral extraction is likely to bring about.

The recycling of waste as an alternative to sending it to landfill is a welcome development but it raises issues to do with the sites chosen for waste processing. The Government has said that waste processing plants should not be automatically excluded from Green Belts, which ties our hands somewhat, although it does not mean that the County Council is obliged to give consent to every application that comes up. Some may be speculative, and in the wrong place, and we are prepared to say this as we did recently over a proposal at Warborough.

#### Other Involvements

The Oxford Green Belt Network values the support it receives from parish councils and meetings and, in return, is anxious to help by supporting parishes over Green Belt issues with which they have a concern. Please contact us. We write letters to the relevant local authority, to the planning inspectorate and to Government. We appear and give evidence at public inquiries and we are happy to come and talk about our work at parish meetings.

Recent involvements include opposition to excessive floodlighting at sports grounds, efforts to reduce unnecessary advertising on roundabouts, and comments on proposed developments at Boars Hill, Forest Hill, Horton-cum-Studley, Radley, Marston, North Hinksey, Wheatley and Waterstock. Members of our Steering Committee look at lists of planning applications published by the local authorities, but it is likely that we miss some that we should be commenting upon. So please do let us know if we can help.