

OXFORD GREEN BELT NETWORK

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NEWSLETTER August 2011

This Newsletter is sent to all parish councils/meetings (via the Clerk or Chairman) with an interest in the Oxford Green Belt and we would be grateful if it could be circulated as widely as possible. Copies are also sent to our contacts in other amenity groups. Paper versions can be provided if required. Copies of this and past Newsletters are also on our website: www.oxfordgreenbelt.net.

National Planning Policy Guidance (NPPF)

The above, rather grand title, is that of a document which the government hopes will replace all the existing guidance notes for planners (Planning Policy Guidance and Planning Policy Statements). For years we have relied on Planning Policy Guidance No.2 (PPG.2) which deals with Green Belts and we often quote from it when writing to local authorities or the planning inspectorate about planning applications. The Green Belt section in the draft NPPF is much shorter and we are examining it carefully to see whether it offers the same commitment to protection of the Green Belt that PPG.2 did and our Committee will be discussing it at our next meeting on 8th September. We intend to make a full and considered response to the consultation on it, indicating ways in which we believe the present draft might be improved. We shall be looking for loopholes in the wording that might weaken defence of the Green Belt, and will highlight any other concerns. A weakness, for example, is the failure to stress that the appearance of the Green Belt is not relevant when considering the purpose of the Green Belt. A concern that we have already identified is the new policy that states that development brought forward under a Community Right to Build Order is “not inappropriate” in the Green Belt, i.e is permissible. Whatever view you may take on the merits of localism, this strikes us as providing a blank cheque for developers that could lead to serious erosion of the Green Belt.

The draft NPPF is out for consultation until 17th October. Anyone can comment on it and we urge our readers to do so. It can be accessed via:

www.communities.gov.uk/publications/planningandbuilding/draftframework.

Core Strategies

The Oxford Core Strategy, having been found sound, has been formally adopted by the City Council and is now the approved plan which guides planning decisions. The Core Strategy of South Oxfordshire District Council (SODC) is currently subject to examination in public and a hearing took place on 20th July into the proposals concerning the Green Belt. The Oxford Green Belt Network (OGBN) joined forces with CPRE Oxfordshire at this hearing and we were represented by Michael Tyce, our Hon Treasurer. Another member of our Steering Committee, Martin Harris, spoke on behalf of Horspath Parish Council.

The main issue so far as the Green Belt is concerned is the proposal in SODC's Core Strategy to take land out of the Green Belt at Wheatley and to remove Berinsfield altogether from the Green Belt. Most of the built up area of Wheatley is already outside the Green Belt and the South

Oxfordshire Council wish to extend the “inset” (i.e. non-Green Belt) area to Wheatley Bridge. We are opposed to this because we believe that it will just encourage more development in the vicinity of the motorway service station and that it is not the best approach to dealing with any future demand for affordable housing. The latter can be built at any time in a Green Belt if special circumstances exist and we think that the Core Strategy approach risks opening up the land for other purposes. At Berinsfield there is an accepted need for some regeneration of older housing there but we do not accept the need to take the village out of the Green Belt in order to achieve this.

Sites and Housing Allocations

Once a Core Strategy has been found sound, a local authority produces a Sites Allocations document which identifies actual sites where development might possibly take place. Oxford City Council has currently identified over 100 such sites in its Sites and Housing Development Plan Document - Preferred Options. Eight of these are in the Green Belt and we have commented on those during the consultation period which ended on 22nd July.

Three of the 8 sites are in the Cherwell Valley, that narrow corridor of Green Belt which brings the countryside into the heart of Oxford. We are pleased that there are no proposals in the City’s Options to alter the status of the fields on either side of Marston Ferry Road, but we are opposed to the option of a cemetery on land close to nearby Hill View Farm. A cemetery here, with all the structures that accompany it, would be wholly out of keeping with the unspoilt rural character of the Cherwell Valley.

A cemetery has also been suggested as a possible use of the land at Oxford Road, close to Horspath, although the preferred option is for sports field use. We support the latter, not least because of the likelihood that the nearby Rover sports field will be developed by BMW as part of their motor works expansion, and there will be need for a replacement sports ground. Readers of our Newsletters might recall that the field at Oxford Road, Horspath was where the City Council wished to see a giant wind turbine erected. We were strongly opposed to this scheme which would have produced a huge eyesore dominating the village of Horspath just beyond the city boundary and spoiling views from Shotover Hill. Fortunately the Ministry of Defence has vetoed the idea on the grounds of interference with the Primary Surveillance Radar used by Air Traffic Control to help aircraft flying at safe distances from one another.

Other option sites in the Green Belt included disused allotments which we are pleased the Council are not allocating for an alternative land use. The demand for allotments is increasing and it is sensible to retain these sites for possible re-use as allotments.

Planning Applications

New road at Begbroke - OGBN objected to the plan, now approved, to build a new road from Begbroke science park to the A.44, cutting through the Green Belt. It will divide up the land into smaller plots, inviting development in this small area of countryside with its high amenity value between Begbroke, Yarnton and Kidlington. We understand the problems caused by heavy lorries in Sandy Lane, Yarnton, but these serve the garden centre and not the science park. It will be recalled that the University of Oxford, who own the science park, advocated further development here rather than to the south of Oxford when the idea of an extension to Oxford was debated at the inquiry into the South East Plan, and we are afraid that this new road will revive these plans for growth north of Oxford.

Gravel at Eynsham - We were pleased to read in the local press that Hanson have decided not to go ahead, at least for the time being, with their plans to extract gravel from an unspoilt area of Green Belt to the east of Eynsham. We objected to this plan which would have seen gravel transported across the A.40 to the processing plant near Cassington which has permission to operate until 2015. Meanwhile, an application was put in to take building waste from the BMW development at Cowley in Oxford to Cassington for processing and re-export.

Langford Lane recycling centre - The County Council have put forward plans for a new civic amenity waste site at Langford Lane, Kidlington, where the public will be able to take domestic waste. We have no objection to this amenity north of Oxford which will complement that at Redbridge to the south of the city but, when invited to comment, we expressed a preference for a brownfield site, ideally on an industrial estate, rather than on the County's chosen site which is on Green Belt land close to Kidlington airport. The relevant County committee will be deciding on the matter in September.

Oxfordshire food waste is now taken to the anaerobic digester plant at Worton Farm between Yarnton and Cassington. We did not object to the facility which serves a useful purpose, but we did object to the digging out of a large slurry lagoon to store the digestate by-product before it goes to farms as a fertiliser. We thought that the plant should have been so designed as not to need this extra storage scheme and we regret the decision to grant it planning permission.

Telecom masts - Telecom masts are a consequence of our love of mobile phones and they seem to get higher and more in number, adding to countryside clutter. We objected to the phone mast erected in the Green Belt at Walton Well Road on the edge of Port Meadow. This was subsequently allowed on appeal and we have since objected once more to the plan to replace it with an even taller mast which, at 17.5 metres, will be higher than nearby trees. This latest application, again refused by the City Council, has also gone to appeal. If views across Port Meadow are not to be protected, what is? But the phone companies do not readily give up.

Another form of mast is that used for floodlighting at sports grounds. A recent application, on which we commented, involved four very high, 18 metre, floodlighting columns at the Iffley Road sports ground. It would appear from the application as though these floodlights would only be used in connection with five football matches a year to be played inside the running track, and so we objected to them despite an assurance that they would be telescopic and could be reduced to 10 metres in height when not in use.

Barton Area Action Plan - The area of land west of the present Barton estate, where the City Council are proposing a major development, used to be in the Green Belt but was taken out of it, against the advice of a planning inspector, in the 1990s. It has since had the status of "safeguarded land", i.e is safeguarded for future development. OGBN acknowledges the need for affordable housing in the city and does not object to the principle of development at West Barton, but we have expressed views about the importance of preserving the ecology of the Bayswater Valley and about protecting the adjoining Green Belt by not adding to the existing number of access points into the open countryside beyond.

The Ruskin Fields at Old Headington across the bypass from Barton were also in the Green Belt until the 1990s and, like West Barton, were taken out of it against a planning inspector's advice. They are now in the Conservation Area but are threatened by development proposed by their owner, Ruskin College. We support the Friends of Old Headington in wishing to protect these fields which form an important part of the setting of Old Headington village.

Other matters - One of OGBN's main tasks is to scrutinise lists of planning applications published by the County or District Councils and to comment on them as we think appropriate. Some of the other matters with which we have been involved recently include: unauthorized development in connection with vehicle recovery near Wheatley motorway service station; views of the planned new buildings on St Clement's car park in Oxford when seen from Greyhound Meadow; solar panels erected in Green Belt fields rather than being confined to the roofs of buildings; the redevelopment of old buildings on a number of farm sites in Garsington, Stanton St John, Waterperry and Old Marston parishes; and the overdevelopment of some village houses by taking excessive advantage of the General Permitted Development Order (at the Baldons, Horspath and Sunningwell).

In conclusion, the Oxford Green Belt Network is grateful for the support received from Parish Councils, Parish Meetings and other amenity groups, and we offer our thanks to all who have subscribed to help our work. Please keep in contact with us, especially if you think that we can help in any way over those threats to our Green Belt.