

OXFORD GREEN BELT NETWORK

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NEWSLETTER - AUGUST 2016

This Newsletter is addressed to Parish Councils, Parish Meetings and amenity groups with an interest in the Oxford Green Belt. We hope that it will be distributed as widely as possible.

The Annual General Meeting of the Oxford Green Belt Network will take place at Sandford-on-Thames parish hall on Thursday 15th September 2016 at 7 for 7.30pm and each of the above parishes and groups are invited to send one or two representatives to the meeting. This Newsletter will serve as a pre-circulation of the Chairman's annual report so that the formal business of the meeting will be fairly brief, leaving time for presentations by invited speakers on the immediate threats to the Oxford Green Belt, particularly those from urban extensions currently proposed by Oxford City Council, and after these presentations there will be an open Question and Answer Session to help all the villages in the Green Belt decide how they can respond to such threats. A detailed Agenda for this meeting will be sent out later.

How the Green Belt is undermined

There are two ways in which Green Belt land is lost. One is as a result of successful applications to build on it. The other is as a result of the adoption of a new Local Plan in which the local planning authority proposes removing land from the Green Belt. Both are discussed below.

There is nothing to stop a landowner or developer from applying to build in the Green Belt but, in most cases, they have to persuade the relevant local planning authority that there are 'very special circumstances' for doing so. It is easier in some circumstances to obtain permission than in others. The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) lists these circumstances as ones involving mineral extraction, engineering operations, providing local transport infrastructure, and the re-use of existing buildings. Other forms of development are regarded as 'inappropriate' in the Green Belt, but it is still possible to justify them if very special circumstances exist, for example, the need for houses or land for employment. In recent years the Government has relaxed some of the rules further, most obviously in the form of 'permitted development', an example of this being the greater ease that now exists for converting farm buildings into groups of dwellings.

When Green Belt land is built over in this way it remains in the Green Belt until the local authority decides otherwise in its Local Plan, though its appearance is now very different. It is tempting, therefore, for the local authority to remove it from the Green Belt altogether and this can be proposed when a new Local Plan is in preparation. It then becomes 'inset' in the Green Belt, a kind of island of non-Green belt land within the Green Belt.

The Vale of White Horse District Council proposed in its new Local Plan to remove from the Green Belt in this way the village of Farmoor and the Harcourt Hill campus of Oxford Brookes University on the grounds that they were now largely built-up. But in these cases the planning inspector who carried out the examination into the Vale's Plan has said that the two sites should remain in the Green Belt, agreeing with what the Oxford Green Belt Network (OGBN) and others argued at the public examination. In the case of the university campus, our argument was that, keeping the site in the Green Belt, would maintain stricter controls over the proposed redevelopment of the university

buildings and, by doing so, would protect views of Harcourt Hill from Oxford, as part of the important green setting of the city. The moral is that it is worth fighting to keep land in the Green Belt even if it has been built upon.

When a local authority is producing a new Local Plan it is obliged to look up to 20 years ahead and anticipate how much land it will need for housing, employment and other uses. Some of this land might be in the Green Belt and, where it is, the relevant local authority will propose the removal of it from the Green Belt, with the actual choice of sites for removal usually being recommended by some firm of planning consultants appointed by the Council to advise. When proposing to remove land from the Green Belt in this way, a local authority has to prove that 'exceptional circumstances' exist for doing so. Need for housing etc is generally accepted as satisfying this requirement.

But District Councils are not their own masters when it comes to predicting how much land will be needed for future development. Despite what the Government says about localism and Local Plans being all-important, the freedom of local authorities to plan for the future is heavily influenced by housing and employment predictions that are imposed upon them. References to these has been made in earlier OGBN Newsletters, but it is worth reminding readers of the role, in particular, of the County-wide Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA) which follows Government guidelines to produce figures for housing need (in the case of Oxfordshire over 100,000 new dwellings by 2031). This total is broken down by District and although, in theory, a District Council can question its own allocation, in reality it doesn't have this choice.

Another influential body is the County-wide Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) which produces a Strategic Economic Plan (SEP) setting out employment growth targets based on what is said to be independent economic analysis. The Oxfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership (OxLEP) is actually a limited company with a Growth Board on which major landowners are represented, and it is not a formal part of the Planning system, even though its proposals for economic growth have consequences for Planning. The LEP claims that it is not involved directly in Planning, but its purpose is to stimulate economic growth and to seek financial investment, especially for creating 106,000 new jobs in the county. It is currently engaged in producing a revised ('Refreshed') SEP which is likely to be published in November.

A consequence of the pressure on local authorities to find land for development when preparing a new Local Plan is that some large areas of the Oxford Green Belt are going to be removed entirely from the Green Belt in the next few years, and the paragraphs below set out some of the details of what is going to happen.

Loss of Green Belt in Local Plans

The Vale of White Horse Local Plan has not yet been adopted, but the proposals in it have been subject to public examination. The main consequence for the Green Belt, accepted by the inspector, is that a swathe of land around the northern edge of Abingdon, together with land at Radley and to the south of Kennington, will be removed from the Green Belt for housing, a total of 1,510 dwellings altogether. The Vale Council had also proposed taking other sites out of the Green Belt for unspecified uses on the edge of villages such as Appleton, Cumnor and Wootton. The Oxford Green Belt Network, and others, argued strongly against this at the public examination, and the inspector agreed with us. The Vale Council has now deleted this proposal from the Local Plan but the fear is that some of these sites remain vulnerable in the context of 'Oxford's unmet housing need' (below).

Cherwell District Council's Local Plan has been adopted. It proposed reviewing the boundaries of the Green Belt to accommodate employment growth in two locations, around Begbroke Science Park, and in the area of Langford Lane and Oxford Airport. Details of these changes to the Green Belt have not yet been published at the time of writing this. Cherwell's Local Plan does not propose taking land out of the Green Belt for housing, but a recently published Masterplan for Kidlington revives the idea of developing Green Belt sites for housing north of The Moors, at Gosford, and at Stratfield Farm. We have to wait and see how this idea is progressed.

South Oxfordshire District Council is still working on its new Local Plan and a document setting out the Council's 'Preferred Options' has recently been out for consultation. Some of the anticipated housing need is to be met by expansion of 'larger villages', two of which are in the Green Belt, Wheatley and Berinsfield, although most of the former is already 'inset', i.e. excluded from the Green Belt. Oxford Brookes University's Wheatley campus is within the Green Belt, however, and this is earmarked for housing development when the University moves out, together with removal of the site from the Green Belt. OGBN is unlikely to oppose some housing development in place of the actual university buildings, but will object to removal of the site from the Green Belt on the grounds that only a part of it is built upon and the rest should remain as open space. It is a similar argument to that employed on Harcourt Hill; Green Belt status affords stronger control over what the developers may want to do. Berinsfield's expansion is the subject of a feasibility study, so it is difficult to express any views at present although we accept the case for some regeneration here.

Apart from the above, the big idea in South Oxfordshire's proposed Preferred Options is the decision to opt for a single major development as the principal solution to the local authority's housing needs. Seven potential sites for such a scheme were investigated, five of them in the Green Belt, but all of the latter have been rejected in favour of a large development at Chalgrove airfield, which is outside the Green Belt. OGBN is pleased that the choice of site is not in the Green Belt but we recognize that any large project of this kind is controversial and arouses strong feelings. We shall wait with interest to see whether the idea is progressed after the consultation responses have been analysed and subsequently when the Local Plan Submission Document is sent to the Government Planning Inspectorate for public examination.

Oxford City Council has recently begun work on a new Local Plan that will cover the years to 2036. Ideas for inclusion in the Plan have been sought in a consultation that ended on 5th August. In the consultation there is reference to the possibility of building urban extensions to Oxford, and it is, of course, well known that the City Council would like to build such extensions on the southern edge of the City beyond Grenoble Road and to the north of the City in the Kidlington 'Gap'. But these two areas are in South Oxfordshire and Cherwell Districts respectively, and building here would result in substantial extensions of the built-up area of the City into the Green Belt. OGBN is strongly opposed to this idea of urban extensions to Oxford, not least because of the impact that they would have on the Green Belt, but also because of the extra pressure that they would bring to bear on the historic core of Oxford, something which the Green Belt is intended to protect.

In our response to the City's consultation we have said that the Council should seek to achieve a balance between job creation and the provision of housing for those to be employed in these jobs. As it is, the Council has been promoting employment uses for land at the Northern Gateway, Osney Mead and elsewhere, with minimal attention to supplying the related housing needed. The consequence of this policy lies in the demand for urban extensions of the kind described above and, as well as this, in the export of the City's claimed housing need to neighbouring authorities, resulting in further losses of Green Belt land. Oxford's 'unmet housing need' is said to amount to 15,000 dwellings and the current intention is that provision for this total will be made outside the City's own

boundary. The Oxfordshire Growth Board , on which all the Oxfordshire District Councils are represented, is working on the apportionment of this unmet housing need between the Districts outside the City, and it is expected to come up with suggestions as to where this housing will go when it reports in October.

Park and Ride

A further consequence of the City Council's policy of employment promotion is the need to make provision for more and more employees who have to travel into the City for work. The County Council has recently set out its ideas for the A40, and a study for the Council, 'Oxford Park and Ride - Future Strategy Development', published in May, has suggested the idea of developing new park and ride sites at Eynsham and at other approaches to Oxford at Cumnor, Lodge Hill Abingdon, Sandford-on-Thames, and Oxford Airport. With the likely exception of the Eynsham site, all of them would be in the Green Belt, and that at Lodge Hill on the A.34 would be particularly massive on account of its inclusion of lorry services. OGBN supports the principle of park and ride but believes that new sites should be further from Oxford, outside the Green Belt, and nearer to where commuters actually live. As it is, we believe that the present choice of sites will do little to reduce overall car travel or to encourage the use of public transport from the country towns of Oxfordshire.

The future

We hope that we have demonstrated that in the next few years the Oxford Green Belt will be under pressure on a scale never previously experienced, and that substantial areas of it are likely to be lost to development. OGBN will continue to campaign for solutions that minimise the harm to the Green Belt, believing that citizens of Oxford and of its surrounding villages benefit immeasurably from retaining this invaluable open space that surrounds the city. We will work with friends in amenity groups that share our aims, notably with CPRE Oxfordshire, both in its coalition of some 30 member organizations that make up its *Need not Greed Campaign* and as part of its *Save The Green Belt Campaign*. Above all we value the support and encouragement of the sixty or so Parish Councils and Parish Meetings that are wholly or partly in the Green Belt.