

# **OXFORD GREEN BELT NETWORK**

(Chairman: Dr Ian Scargill, Oxford)

## **NEWSLETTER**

September 2007

This Newsletter is addressed to Town and Parish Councils and Parish Meetings which are wholly or partly in the Oxford Green Belt.

Its purpose is to draw attention to the recently published (29 August) Report of the Panel of Inspectors who conducted the Examination in Public (EIP) into the Draft South East Plan and to let you have the observations of the Oxford Green Belt Network (OGBN). Please make its contents known as widely as possible.

### **The Facts**

The Draft South East Plan (2006-2026), produced by the South East England Regional Assembly (SEERA), was the subject of an EIP over several months in late 2006 and early 2007. OGBN submitted written evidence and was also invited to take part in the discussion on Oxford and its Green Belt on 28 February.

The Report of the Panel deals with the whole of the South East Region and the observations below are confined to the section on the Central Oxfordshire sub-region (COSR), one of a number of sub-regions i.e. areas which were designated for special planning on the basis of their growth potential. The COSR covers Oxford and its Green Belt but also extends beyond to take in Bicester, Witney, Wantage and Didcot.

The Plan, backed by the County Council and some of the Districts, did not envisage any changes to the Oxford Green Belt. Anticipated growth of population and employment was to be accommodated on brownfield sites or beyond the Green Belt, notably in Bicester, Wantage/Grove and Didcot.

The Panel have rejected this fundamental need to protect the Green Belt. They have suggested that the housing provision for Central Oxfordshire should be raised by 6,100 dwellings, from a total of 34,000 to be built between 2006 and 2026, to a total of 40,100. To fit in this extra housing and associated services they recommend that the Green Belt boundary be reviewed and an urban extension, for some 4,000 dwellings, be built on the southern edge of Oxford, south of Grenoble Road. They state that exceptional circumstances exist to justify such a review.

### **OGBN's Reaction**

OGBN is opposed to any such urban extension and the associated breach in the Green Belt. We continue to support SEERA's view that the legitimate housing and other needs of the sub-region can be met elsewhere. The Green Belt was defined 50 years ago to limit the growth of Oxford, to prevent the City swallowing up nearby villages, and to protect Oxford's unique character and setting. These purposes have not changed. The Green Belt also satisfies increasingly important recreational needs.

The principal justification for increasing the amount of housing is to make more of it affordable. The South East Plan recommends that at least 50% of new housing be affordable (rented from housing associations, shared equity etc), but the Panel say that the target should be 40%. This reduced percentage, even of the higher total of housing suggested, means that the amount of affordable housing is reduced, so it is difficult to

justify the loss of Green Belt on the basis of housing need. More housing will just go to people who want to move into Oxford from outside.

An apparent crumb of comfort, though not to the villages closest to Grenoble Road, is that the Panel reject the idea of a general review of the Green Belt. OGBN is quoted in the Panel's Report as having said that such a review would open up the Green Belt, like Pandora's Box, to building on many Green Belt sites, making the whole of it vulnerable to development. The Panel accept this view and state that the Green Belt review should be focussed and selective, i.e. concentrate on the area south of Oxford. Does this mean then that all the other parts of the Green Belt where development was being promoted at the EIP are now safe? We believe not, for reasons given below.

### **What Happens Next?**

The Panel Report now goes to the Government in the form of the Government Office for the South East (GOSE) and the Secretary of State responsible for these Plans (currently Hazel Blears MP). The Government will set out its comments on the Report later in the year and may increase still further the amount of development which the Panel propose – as it did in the case of the East of England Plan. This is one of the reasons why other locations in the Green Belt are not safe.

The Government will publish its views, probably towards the end of the year, after which there will be a 12-week consultation period when we can all express our opinions. No doubt developers will find an opportunity to repeat their wish to see more sites in the Green Belt opened up and it was significant that the owners of Shipton Quarry put forward new plans for that area on the very day the Panel Report was published. In any case, the Government may then have decided that yet more housing is needed as it says in its White Paper, or Grenoble Road may in the end be rejected and another site preferred. So this further opportunity for consultation and for developers to promote other schemes is another reason why no site in the Green Belt can be considered safe.

### **What OGBN Will be Doing**

We are not invited to comment on the Panel Report but must wait until the consultation on the Government's revisions takes place. Meanwhile the Committee of OGBN is meeting very soon to discuss the Report and our future strategy. We shall keep parishes informed of anything we decide and would be glad to hear any views you may have.

It is clear that the City Council is very much behind this scheme for an urban extension ( they have mentioned the possibility of more than one), and they appear to have backing in Central Government. So if we want to save the Green Belt we must galvanize all the opinion we can muster and be prepared to fight for it. In this we will have the support of most of our local authorities, including the County Council. At the end of the day it will only be public opinion and letters to Ministers that will convince the Government and save the whole of the Green Belt. It would be wrong for anyone to feel that because Grenoble Road has been singled out the rest is spared.

Please note our website ([www.oxfordgreenbelt.net](http://www.oxfordgreenbelt.net)) for our position on the Panel Report, our evidence to the EIP, and this Newsletter.