

OXFORD GREEN BELT NETWORK

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NEWSLETTER September 2008

This Newsletter is circulated to Clerks of Parish Councils (Chairs of Parish Meetings) with an interest in the Oxford Green Belt and to interested amenity societies. It is sent by email to all those for whom we have email addresses. Please make its contents known as widely as possible, especially to members of these councils and societies. We can provide paper copies if requested.

Do you want an urban extension built in your parish?

If not, please write to the Government Office for the South East (GOSE) to register your views on the Minister's changes to the South East Plan (more information on how to do it below).

In July the government (in the form of the Department for Communities and Local Government) published its long-awaited views on the South East Plan and the changes it wants to see made to the Plan as drawn up by SEERA (the South East England Regional Assembly). The change which has attracted most attention, and the one which affects the Green Belt most directly, is the government's wish to have an urban extension to Oxford built to the south-east of the City. It is described as a Strategic Development Area of 4,000 dwellings (10,000+ people). It is also described as a sustainable urban extension which presumably means that it will include employment and services as well as houses. Although it is claimed that this extension is needed to "solve" Oxford's housing problems, the City has long ago acknowledged that these could be solved within the City itself. All the land needed for the urban extension will be taken out of the Green Belt, and possibly more to create a reserve for the future.

Nobody knows exactly how much land would be taken out of the Green Belt for the urban extension. The area of search is currently all in South Oxfordshire and that District Council has been carrying out a consultation over an area that includes parts of 4 parishes: Sandford-on-Thames, Nuneham Courtenay, the Baldons, and Garsington. South Oxfordshire D.C. is opposed to the urban extension (like the County Council and SEERA) but is required to do this by the government. The City Council, which wants the urban extension, has recently written to the Boundary Commission asking if the whole of the area of search, three times as much land as would be needed to build the 4,000 houses it claims it needs, can be taken from South Oxfordshire and given to the City so that they alone will control its development. If the request is granted, a big area of land, at present in the above 4 parishes, will thus be taken into the City. It is hard to see why the City would want all this land unless its intention was to develop all of it.

Does this mean that other parts of the Green Belt are now safe from the threat of major development? There are two main reasons why the answer to this question is a very clear NO. Firstly, although the government has so far asked only for a review of the Green Belt south-east of Oxford, they state that if this area proves unsuitable as a result of the present search, a wider review of the Green Belt will take place to identify one or more alternative locations.

Secondly, the government states that over the Plan period (to 2026) “Oxford itself will be allowed to grow physically and economically to accommodate its own needs”. That means, in effect, as much growth as it wants. This cannot happen, of course, without even more land being taken out of the Green Belt and in future years we can expect development proposals to be forthcoming on many sites around Oxford. Some of these will be sites where threats are already known to exist: Begbroke/Yarnton, Sunningwell, Radley, Horspath etc. But there will be others, as landowners and developers are encouraged by the government’s apparent wish to end the longstanding policy of restraining Oxford’s expansion, a policy which sought to spread development more evenly to other parts of the County beyond the Green Belt. Have you noticed that when areas of Green Belt land are up for sale they are usually advertised as having “long-term development potential”? This has happened recently at Boars Hill (Wootton), in the Cherwell Valley (Marston) and at Yarnton.

If any justification for an urban extension can be found, it must lie in the need for affordable housing. But not only has Oxford already confirmed that it can build all the housing it needs within the City boundaries but the government has said that no more than 40% of the housing in the proposed extension on the “southern edge” of the City will be affordable. We ask, why not 100%? The answer lies in the government’s wish to encourage further growth by means of mixed developments, i.e. ones including employment. But this will mean more commuting and more requests for housing, a vicious circle of demand. Our fear, therefore, is that, far from addressing housing need, what the government is proposing will simply see Oxford spreading over more and more Green Belt land whilst present problems persist or get worse.

The government’s proposed changes to the South East Plan can be accessed via <http://gose.limehouse.co.uk/portal> (click on Secretary of State’s Proposed Changes and, for our area, click on 22 Central Oxfordshire). The documents are also available in local libraries. The government is carrying out a consultation on its proposed changes and this runs until 24th October. An electronic consultation form is available at www.gose.gsi.gov.uk/planning/regionalplanning. If you wish to object to the proposed urban extension, you say that you object to Change 22(8) and wish to see the reference to the urban extension and associated review of the Green Belt deleted from the Plan.

(What we are asking to be deleted reads: “A selective review of Green Belt boundaries will take place on the southern edge of Oxford through one or more coordinated development plan documents. It will identify land to be removed from the Green Belt to facilitate a sustainable urban extension to Oxford with minimal impact on village identity and the landscape setting of the city.”)

You can also respond by email to rss@gose.gsi.gov.uk or write to The Regional Spatial Strategy Team, Government Office for the South East, Bridge House, 1 Walnut Tree Close, Guildford GU1 4GA.

Some better news

Planning inspectors have recently turned down two proposed developments that would have affected the Green Belt.

At **Hurst Lane, Cumnor**, the company building housing on the old timber yard, wanted to have a playing field, car parking and other forms of development on an

adjacent field which is part of the backdrop to Cumnor Hurst, a beauty spot and area of special scientific interest. In rejecting this scheme on appeal, the inspector found no obvious justification for the playing field and expressed concern that the car parking would simply be used by residents of the new housing. The Oxford Green Belt Network supported Cumnor Parish Council and local residents in their opposition to this unreasonable attempt at a land grab and we are delighted that the Inspector threw it out.

The University of Oxford has also lost its appeal against the City Council's refusal of planning permission for a huge **book depository at Osney Mead** just outside the Green Belt. The very large building that was planned – bigger than the height permitted in the City's Local Plan – would have been highly visible from the Hinksey hills and meadows to the west. It would have ruined for ever the remarkable views of the “dreaming spires” made famous by Matthew Arnold and painted by artists such as Turner. In dismissing the appeal, the Inspector recognized the University's need for more book storage (as we all do) but observed that the views across the Green Belt were too valuable to be lost. We are delighted with this decision which underlines the fact that the Green Belt is important, not only in its own right, but as the setting of Oxford, the green backdrop to Oxford's historic buildings.

We also congratulate the people of Church Hanborough and Long Hanborough on saving Pinsley Wood from those who wanted to turn it into an activities centre. Woodlands are for plants and wildlife, not for assault courses and the like.

Recycling and its impact on the Green Belt

Recycling of domestic and other waste is obviously something to be encouraged but the treatment and disposal of waste has implications for the Green Belt. The County Council is the authority responsible for deciding what should happen to the waste that is collected and OGBN appreciates the way the Council consults us over their plans, although we do not always agree with the County's decisions.

We were unhappy, for example, over the County's recent decision to grant permission for a big waste recovery plant at the old grain silo site in the parish of Gosford and Water Eaton near Kidlington. The whole of this area is Green Belt, part of the narrow gap that separates Oxford from Kidlington, and we supported local councils in opposing the development. But the project will go ahead, separating and treating unsorted waste, and it is estimated that 180 lorries a day will visit the site.

Another kind of plant is planned for the treatment of food waste. This is likely to be at Worton Farm in the Green Belt between Cassington and Yarnton. After consulting the parishes concerned, we have not objected to the proposed food waste digester because it is an enclosed system that should be an improvement on the system for which there is already planning permission. But we have expressed reservations over certain details of the plan, notably over lighting, overhead wires and run-off from the hard surface areas.

In addition to the above, a waste incinerator is proposed at either Sutton Courtenay or Ardley where there are landfill sites. Since neither one is in the Green Belt we have not expressed views on these sites.

The ecotown

The government has yet to make a decision over the proposal for an “ecotown” at Weston-on-the-Green to which, like many others, we objected. The company promoting the development, a quarter of the site of which is in the Green Belt, has recently submitted revised plans in an attempt to make it appear more attractive. A lot of emphasis is put on sustainability but we have discovered that the company concerned is best known for building, not affordable housing, but “big sheds”, i.e. warehouses and lorry parks. For them, this would be an ideal location, next to Junction 9 on the M.40. Let us hope the government rejects the scheme.

Should the Green Belt be expanded?

The government likes to claim that it defends the Green Belt and that the amount of land nationally in Green Belt has grown. But figures are deceptive and expansion in acreage is usually brought about by adding land to the outer edge of a Green Belt to “compensate” for that taken out of the inner Green Belt for development purposes. We do not support this pushing outwards of the Green Belt since it is often the innermost parts that are of greatest importance in achieving Green Belt objectives, e.g. in protecting the setting of Oxford or in preserving the narrow gaps between Oxford and nearby villages.

Nevertheless there might be a case for looking at the existing outer boundary of the Green Belt and for considering whether any adjustments should be made. The present outer boundary of the Oxford Green Belt, formally approved in 1975, tends to follow definable features, especially roads. This means that quite a number of parishes are part in and part outside the Green Belt. Where the boundary runs along the village street, one side may be in the Green Belt whilst the other side is outside it. There are several examples, including Bladon, Bletchington, Weston-on-the-Green, Little Milton, Stadhampton and Warborough. We would like to know whether this affects planning in the parish concerned and whether there is a case for expanding the Green Belt to take in, if not necessarily the whole of the parish, at least the main built-up part of the village on both sides of the road. If you have views we would be pleased to hear them.

We should also like you to keep us informed of threats to the Green Belt locally.

For more information about the Oxford Green Belt Network please see our website www.oxfordgreenbelt.net/

Advance notice

The Annual General Meeting of the Oxford Green Belt Network will be on Monday 17th November 2008, at Sandford-on-Thames village hall, at 7.30pm. All Parish Councils/Meetings and amenity groups receiving this Newsletter are welcome to send a representative (or more than one). An agenda will be sent out nearer the time.