

OXFORD GREEN BELT NETWORK

(Chairman: Dr D.I.Scargill Email: chairman@oxfordgreenbelt.net)

Website: www.oxfordgreenbelt.net

NEWSLETTER - SEPTEMBER 2015

The Oxford Green Belt Network continues to value the support of Parish Councils, Parish Meetings and like-minded amenity groups. We welcome feedback from our periodic Newsletters and are always ready to hear of local threats to the Green Belt. There is more information about what we do on our website (above).

A Philosophy of Growth

The time was when inspectors at planning inquiries were not afraid to say that further growth would be damaging to the historic core of Oxford and the city's landscape setting. That sort of thing is rarely heard these days and, instead, the emphasis seems to be on encouraging more and more development and on discussing where it might take place. Attend a Local Plan Examination nowadays and you are faced across the table with rank upon rank of property companies, developers, house builders and landowners, all promoting expansion, whilst the local authority representatives appear to be less and less able, or willing, to stem the tide. As a recent correspondent to the Oxford Times put it, planning has become a tool of business interests, not the people. This is in spite of all that we have been told about the importance of localism.

The growth agenda is best illustrated in the work of the Oxfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP), unelected and dominated by business interests, which promotes development in order to tap into sources of Government and European funding. The Oxford Green Belt Network (OGBN) is not anti-growth, but many of the LEP's ideas are speculative and are promoted without any widespread public consultation and with little or no concern expressed for their impact on the environment. Their figures for anticipated growth in jobs are very likely grossly exaggerated and therefore dangerous because they lead, in turn, to inflated figures for housing need, as seen in the County-wide Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA). Planning then gets caught up in a vicious circle of more jobs/more housing/more jobs/more housing whilst traffic grinds to a halt and Oxford appears to be a city under siege.

OGBN intends to work with other organizations in challenging the growth figures that are set out in the LEP's Strategic Economic Plan. "Strategic" is one of those modern buzz words which, when used by the military, is associated with undermining the opposition's morale. We shall not be deterred.

Local Plans

The dilemmas facing planners are brought to light in the discussions that take place over the District Councils' Local Plans. There is no consistent approach to these. Cherwell and the Vale, for example, accepted the housing figures for their District as set out in the SHMA, whilst South Oxfordshire and West Oxfordshire have contested them. The City Council say that they haven't room for all their housing needs within their own boundary and want the other Districts to make space for around 22,000 dwellings for Oxford outside the city in these other territories. Meanwhile the Oxfordshire Growth Board - a significant title - on which all five Districts are meant to be represented, is working

on a review of the Green Belt that is expected to suggest locations where more development could take place by removing these locations from the Green Belt in any review of Local Plans.

Cherwell District's Local Plan was found to be sound by the inspector who conducted the Examination in Public last December. It has now been adopted by the Council and we wait to see how much Green Belt land the local authority proposes to take up for business growth to the north of Kidlington and at Begbroke. The Plan does not identify new sites in the Green Belt for housing but there is bound to be pressure on sites around Kidlington once the new rail service from Water Eaton gets under way. Oxford City Council would like some of its overspill housing to take the form of an urban extension to the north of the city, and so it will become increasingly difficult to protect the narrow Green Belt gap that separates Oxford from Gosford, Kidlington and Yarnton.

The Examination in Public into the Vale of White Horse's Local Plan opens on 22nd September, and that into West Oxfordshire's Local Plan on 6th October. Both inquiries take place in two stages, the first being devoted to consideration of broader issues like those of employment and housing, the second looking at particular sites recommended for development. OGBN has submitted a written Statement for Stage 1 of the Vale Plan Examination and intends to appear at the Examination for Stage 2 when we shall be contesting the need to develop sites proposed for housing in the Green Belt north of Abingdon, at Radley and at Kennington. If the intention is also to offer sites to satisfy Oxford's unmet housing needs, other sites are vulnerable to development at Cumnor, Wootton and elsewhere.

Meanwhile South Oxfordshire is continuing to work on its Local Plan and has carried out its own study of the Green Belt in an attempt to head off the pressure from Oxford City Council and the Growth Board to expand over the Green Belt in Sandford parish to the south of Grenoble Road. The City Council is said to be spending almost £400,000 on studies aimed at promoting a major urban extension in this area of the South Oxfordshire Green Belt beyond Grenoble Road.

For its part, the City Council adopted its Core Strategy in 2011 and suggestions have been made that this ought now to be reviewed in order to ascertain whether it really is necessary for Oxford to seek sites outside its own boundary for housing. But the Council is refusing to do this.

Northern Gateway

The proposed development at Oxford's Northern Gateway exemplifies well the issue of growth referred to above. The Northern Gateway Area Action Plan, which has been approved, including the contentious scheme to build in the area of Green Belt south of the A40, involves mainly provision for more employment. Thousands of new jobs are to be created here, but only a few hundred homes. Where, therefore, will those employed in the workshops and offices live? A sensible solution, if the City Council needs land for homes, would have been to use the whole of the Northern Gateway site for housing. Instead, the planned development can only lead to more pressure on local roads like the A40, the A34 and the A44, whilst the City Council will go on pressing for more housing to be built in the Green Belt. In these circumstances it is difficult to be sympathetic to the City's claims over its unmet housing need.

Park and Ride

The County Council's transport plan, "Connecting Oxfordshire", has recently been approved by that authority's Cabinet, albeit fairly narrowly. The plan includes an intention to build a new generation of so-called "remote" park and ride facilities to serve Oxford, all except possibly one of these being in the Green Belt. The chosen sites are at Lodge Hill on the A34 to the north of Abingdon, at Cumnor, Eynsham, to the north and east of Kidlington, and at Sandford-on-Thames. Together they

would take up large pieces of Green Belt land, and this is particularly the case at Lodge Hill where the proposed park and ride facility would be combined with a big lorry park for vehicles and their drivers using the A34.

Those behind the plan for new park and ride sites argue that they will intercept travellers before they reach the edge of Oxford. In OGBN we believe that they will bring no real benefit since commuters will still have to use their cars to reach the proposed sites. We have long argued that the best way of reducing the need for car travel is to have sites closer to where people actually live, in the Witney/Carterton area, in Bicester, and amongst the towns south of Oxford. There they would be served by improved public transport links to Oxford, freeing up space on the approach roads to the city. The County's plan also throws doubt on what would happen to the existing park and ride sites.

Solar Farms

A few years ago there were no solar farms in the Oxford Green Belt. Now there are a number of them, including that off the A44 just to the south of Yarnton, and another off the A34 to the north of Islip. There are also some applications in the pipeline, notably on a site between Beckley and Elsfield, and another at Clifton Hampden., whilst sites have been investigated east of Wheatley.

OGBN believes that the place for solar panels is on the roofs of buildings, not on greenfield sites in the Green Belt. Together with their security fencing and related infrastructure, these arrays of solar panels create an industrialised landscape that is alien to our countryside. The companies and landowners promoting them argue that sheep may safely graze amongst the panels, and that landscaping helps to hide them from view. But the openness of the Green Belt is reduced whatever form of hedge planting is involved and visual amenity is lost. Indeed the attempts made to hide the solar "farms" from view are, in themselves, an admission that they are inappropriate in the Green Belt and harmful to its aims and purposes. Hopefully the reduction in government subsidies for these schemes, due to take effect in the New Year, will reduce the pressure for more of them.

Other Matters

The day-to-day activities of OGBN involve scrutinising lists of planning applications and responding to those that are considered to impose serious threats to the Green Belt. Issues with which we have recently been involved include, in addition to the solar farms above, such diverse matters as a concrete batching plant at Yarnton, a fishing lake at Kidlington, the sand quarry at Besselsleigh, car boot sales at Waterstock, and a large care home on the edge of the Green Belt, but visible from it, at Cumnor Hill. As we said at the beginning of this Newsletter, we would welcome information about plans being put forward for developments that are inconsistent with the objects of the Oxford Green Belt.

And Some Late News

In July the government said that it would "bring forward proposals to significantly streamline the length and process of local plans, helping to speed up the process of implementing or amending a plan". On 16th September the Minister responsible for planning named a panel of eight persons who will look into ways of doing this. At the same time, the Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) said in a statement that this eight-strong panel will consider how the local plan-making process can be simplified "with the aim of slashing the amount of time it takes for local authorities to get them in place". The panel expects to report in the New Year.

Does all of this amount to the public having even less opportunity than at present to influence local planning? Please let the Oxford Green Belt Network know about any concerns in your area.