

OXFORD GREEN BELT NETWORK

Chairman: Dr D.I.Scargill

Website: www.oxfordgreenbelt.net

NEWSLETTER - DECEMBER 2016

The purpose of this short Newsletter is to alert Parish Councils and Parish Meetings with an interest in the Oxford Green Belt to what is currently going on over the Green Belt and to urge them to respond directly to any planning consultations offered them by the District Councils and to write reasoned objections to any planning application which proposes inappropriate building development on the Green Belt. In particular, we want to draw attention to how a requirement to address Oxford's claimed 'unmet housing need', as assessed by the Oxfordshire Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA), might adversely affect the Green Belt, and what can be done about it.

Oxford's unmet housing need

Oxford City Council claims that it does not have enough land available to meet all its housing needs as assessed by the SHMA, having preferred, some would say, to use land within Oxford for employment generating purposes rather than for its present housing needs. The consequence is an expectation that, under a 'duty to cooperate', Councils outside the City will help by accommodating some of this need within their own Districts. In September, the Oxfordshire Growth Board, on which all the five Oxfordshire District Councils are represented, published figures setting out how much of this overspill from the City each District might take. The intention is that each District will add Oxford's unmet need, currently claimed to amount to a total of 15,000 houses, to its own housing targets in its Local Plan.

Cherwell

Cherwell District Council already has an adopted Local Plan and the latter did not propose taking any Green Belt land to satisfy the District's own housing need. However, because of the SHMA, it has already been forced to plan for a much higher level of housing than it originally wished. Now the Growth Board is asking Cherwell to find sites for 4,400 further dwellings as its contribution to meeting Oxford's unmet need, again in response to the assessment in the SHMA. This requires a Partial Review of the Local Plan and Cherwell is currently consulting on where this housing for Oxford might be built. The documents relating to the consultation can be viewed online at www.cherwell.gov.uk/planningpolicyconsultation. Hard copies can be seen in a number of places including Exeter Hall, Kidlington.

The consultation identifies a wide range of possible sites for accommodating this

housing need, but Cherwell will be under a lot of pressure from the City to select sites closest to Oxford. This means, in effect, those sites in the Green Belt around Kidlington, Yarnton and Begbroke which the Growth Board has also identified as its favoured sites. Indeed Cherwell itself has already shown its preference by undertaking a more detailed assessment of those sites closest to Oxford, ones which are almost all in the Green Belt.

Building 4,400 dwellings to the north of Oxford will involve a huge loss of Green Belt land and will more or less join the above villages to Oxford. But it does not need to be so. We believe that the Oxfordshire authorities should continue with their previous approach of diverting further employment and housing growth away from Oxford. The Oxford Green Belt Network considers that planning for ever-increasing employment and travel to the city will be highly damaging and will end up destroying the very things that make Oxford an attractive location in the first place. Cherwell's own Local Plan, adopted in 2015, states that "the Oxford Green Belt was designated to restrain development pressures which could damage the character of Oxford City and its heritage through increased activity, traffic and the outward sprawl of the urban area". We fully support this statement and Cherwell's policy ESD14 to protect the Green Belt. It is surprising to say the least, that Cherwell now appears to want to overturn its only recently adopted Local Plan by favouring a massive level of development in the Green Belt.

Furthermore, we have argued consistently over the last three years, that the housing requirements assessed for the Oxfordshire authorities in the SHMA are hugely exaggerated. They are based on very high estimates of jobs growth put forward by the Oxfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) to support its bids for external funding. It is unlikely that anything like these numbers of jobs will be created in practice and, therefore, the housing requirement for the putative new employees is also much too high. As noted above, Cherwell has already been forced to increase the housing numbers in its adopted Plan and thus we do not believe that at the present time there is a need to allocate land for 4,400 more houses within the District. Cherwell should at least wait to see if the forecast economic growth materialises before irretrievably destroying Green Belt or other areas of countryside.

Additionally, we believe that Oxford City Council could itself make a contribution to the strategy we favour by discouraging further employment generating development in Oxford unless it is absolutely essential. Coupled with this, the City Council could use some of the land it has currently allocated for employment, together with other previously developed land, for well planned high density housing

If you wish to preserve the Green Belt, please respond to the consultation, which

closes on 9th January 2017. The email address for responses is PlanningPolicyConsultation@cherwell-dc.gov.uk. Written responses can also be posted to the Cherwell District Council offices at Bodicote, Banbury, Oxon OX15 4AA. Kindly direct these written responses to Planning Policy Consultation at the above address.

Vale of White Horse

At the beginning of this month (December) the Vale of White Horse District Council was given the go-ahead by the Planning Inspectorate to formally adopt Part 1 of its Local Plan. This follows a public examination into the Plan earlier in the year at which Oxford Green Belt Network (OGBN) was represented. The above Part 1 of the Local Plan is concerned with the Vale's own needs and not, at this stage, Oxford's. But to meet these Vale needs for housing, the Planning Inspector has now agreed to the building of some 1,500 dwellings on four Green Belt sites to the north of Abingdon (2), at Radley and at Kennington. Despite the arguments in favour of protecting the Green Belt put forward by OGBN and other groups, this will, sadly, now happen.

The one good thing to come out of the examination of Part 1 of the Vale's Plan was the Inspector's refusal to remove from the Green Belt another 15 sites on the edge of Green Belt villages including Cumnor, Wootton and more at Radley, which the local authority had sought to have removed for unspecified reasons. However, and this is where the danger now lies, the Vale is working on Part 2 of its Local Plan which will identify sites where the Vale's share of Oxford's claimed unmet housing need, for 2,200 dwellings, might be met. Clearly, some of these 15 sites on the edges of Green Belt villages might now be brought back into consideration to satisfy Oxford.

The Vale expects to publish its suggestions for meeting Oxford's unmet needs in February (2017). Please look out for the consultation on these options and respond. The village sites do not have to be the ones finally selected for development. The Inspector, himself, said that the areas now approved for development north of Abingdon could take some at least of the housing for Oxford.

South Oxfordshire

The Growth Board suggested that South Oxfordshire District Council should find space for 4,950 dwellings as its contribution to meeting Oxford's claimed unmet need, the largest allocation to any of the Districts. The representative of South Oxfordshire did not sign up to this figure at the Growth Board but, unfortunately, SODC is in the weak position of not yet having adopted its new emerging Local Plan. This leaves the local authority vulnerable to speculative planning applications from landowners and developers who exploit the lack of a five-year supply of building land which should be set out in a Local Plan.

In its report, the Growth Board drew attention to sites that might be used to satisfy Oxford's unmet housing need within South Oxfordshire. These include land to the south and east of Grenoble Road, below Elsfield and over to Wick Farm off the A.40, and adjacent to Thornhill Park and Ride, all of it in the Green Belt. What is likely to happen now is that developers will submit planning applications to build on parts or the whole of these sites. Several College landowners have already indicated their willingness to do so, and the first of such applications may come as early as the New Year.

Please look out for them and put in comments and objections to the local authority. And, even if SODC refuses permission for development, the likelihood is that the landowners will appeal and the Planning Inspectorate will have to take note of the fact that there is not yet an adopted new South Oxfordshire Local Plan to set out the District's planning policies for the period to 2033.

West Oxfordshire

West Oxfordshire District Council is at the stage of considering modifications to its, as yet, unadopted Local Plan. These were suggested to it by the Planning Inspector and there is a consultation running on them until 23rd December. It is not being suggested that West Oxfordshire sets aside land to meet its share of Oxford's unmet housing need (2,200 dwellings) in the Green Belt, but there are proposals for extensive house building to the north and west of Eynsham which is just outside the Green Belt.

We hope that the above notes are helpful in keeping our readers informed about a rapidly changing situation. The Oxford Green Belt Network will be responding to all these consultations and major planning applications as they affect the Green Belt, but we urge Parish Councils and Parish Meetings to respond also if at all possible, bearing in mind the cumulative threat to the Green Belt represented by Oxford City's claimed unmet housing needs.