

Oxford's Green Belt

Oxford was one of the first cities to respond to the Minister's prompting in 1955, and the local planning authorities at that time - Oxford City Council, Oxfordshire County Council and Berkshire County Council - set about defining an Oxford Green Belt with advice received from amenity groups that included the Oxford Preservation Trust. Its inner boundary was drawn fairly tightly around the built-up area of the city, and the Green Belt extended outwards for some five to six miles in every direction. Within it were a number of villages, most of which were "washed over", that is the Green Belt constraints on development applied equally within the village as outside it. Some of the largest villages, one of which was Kidlington, were excluded from the Green Belt, although contained within it, and are known as "inset villages". This was to allow for predicted necessary development to take place within these places. By the late 1950s the Green Belt was being employed as a policy tool in planning decisions although its boundaries remained for many years "interim", pending the preparation and adoption of local development plans.

When changes to local government took place in the mid-1970s the Green Belt became the responsibility of Oxfordshire County Council, which included it in its Structure Plan, and of the five District Councils that made up the newly enlarged County. Each of the five Districts had a share of the Green Belt in their territory and Green Belt policy was included in their Local Plans. Whereas the outer boundary of the Oxford Green Belt, being less controversial, was quickly "fixed", division of responsibility between all these authorities made it difficult to reach final agreement on the detail of the inner boundaries of the Green Belt until 1997. This long period of uncertainty while the inner edges had only interim status, made the Green Belt more vulnerable to development pressures than might otherwise have been the case. Examples of these pressures are to be seen in the planning applications made for edge-of-town superstores and science parks in the 1980s. The Oxford Green Belt Network was formed in 1997, to promote and protect the public interest in the Green Belt, and to oppose further incursions into it by inappropriate development.

The Oxford Green Belt serves all the five purposes of Green Belt policy. By having a tight inner boundary, an "urban fence" as some have called it, the Green Belt not only prevents outward urban sprawl, but it also supports policies which, over the years, have sought to restrict Oxford's geographical expansion and to share the benefits of the city's economic attractions more equably with the other Oxfordshire towns, where the development of new opportunities for employment and housing may be very positively welcomed. The Green Belt effectively preserves the setting and historic character of the city by protecting the famous views of the university core from the surrounding hills (Matthew Arnold's "dreaming spires"), as well as the attractive river valleys and meadows that penetrate deep into the urban area. The Green Belt prevents Oxford City from absorbing nearby villages by maintaining very important gaps between them and the city, thus allowing these villages to remain separate, sustainable, and autonomous. By reducing development pressures within the whole of its area, the Green Belt not only protects the surrounding countryside, but also the distinctive character of the settlements within those sixty or so parishes within this Green Belt. Finally, by checking the outward sprawl of Oxford's built-up area, the Green Belt assists the City Council's policy of regenerating its existing older housing estates.

The Green Belt does not stand in the way of economic development, as 'expansionists' often claim. By protecting the historic city of Oxford and the countryside and villages around it, and by making the area an attractive one to live and work in, it acts very

positively as a strong magnet to attract high value businesses to the area, as is acknowledged, for example, in South Oxfordshire's Local Plan.

Over the years the Oxford Green Belt has been significantly reduced in size as a result of the local authorities being allowed to review its boundary when drawing up new local plans. The biggest losses occurred in the mid-1990s when, following the outward extension of its administrative boundary, the City Council took a number of areas out of the Green Belt for future development. These were known as "safeguarded areas" or "white land". Some, like Barton West, are now being developed for housing, whilst land at the "Northern Gateway" is destined primarily for business and employment use. The Oxford Green Belt Network was formed at this time, and since then, incursions have been only small. A sports field near Horspath has been taken out of the Green Belt by the City Council to permit further expansion of the BMW MINI production plant. The other District Councils have been more protective of the Green Belt, but South Oxfordshire DC has recently changed the status of Berinsfield from being 'washed over' to becoming 'inset' (although it was thwarted by opposition from the OGBN and others in an attempt to take land out of the Green Belt at Wheatley), and Cherwell DC plans to remove land from the Green Belt at Kidlington for employment purposes, which we shall also oppose.

Some claim that land lost to the inner portion of the Green Belt can be made up by expanding the Green Belt outwards. This would satisfy those politicians who claim that the amount of land under Green Belt protection goes on increasing. But it defeats the fundamental object of the Green Belt to keep Oxford in scale with its historic centre and preserve the heritage of its historic setting, by condoning the loss of land to development in those most sensitive inner portions where it most obviously serves the purposes of Green Belt policy. The substitution of 'green wedges' for a continuous Oxford Green Belt encircling the city, as has been attempted in Cambridge, would also have a similar negative effect, and this would trigger the very ribbon development which the Green Belts were formed to prevent.