

# **OXFORD GREEN BELT NETWORK**

## **Chairman's Report**

**November 2008**

The Oxford Green Belt Network came into being just over 10 years ago, a joint initiative of CPRE Oxfordshire and the Oxford Preservation Trust. Its aims are simple, to protect the Green Belt from inappropriate forms of development and to publicize the benefits of the Green Belt. It was always the intention that we would work closely with Parish Councils and Parish Meetings in the Green Belt as well as with like-minded amenity societies and local pressure groups. Over the years support for OGBN has grown and we are particularly grateful to those parishes who respond to our request for a modest subscription to help us pay our way.

In the course of a typical year we write a lot of letters; we give evidence at public inquiries; we give talks when invited, and we take a close interest in government legislation and in the preparation of plans at regional and district level as they affect the Green Belt. Our Steering Committee, drawn largely from the parishes, meets regularly; we publish a Newsletter and we have a website ([www.oxfordgreenbelt.net](http://www.oxfordgreenbelt.net)). The latter is maintained by our webmaster, Heather Palmer, and I pay tribute to her skills and commitment which ensure that it is kept up to date.

I do not propose to go through all the issues with which we have been concerned over the past year, but would just like to highlight one or two of them.

Much of the Green Belt is, of course, farmland and well-maintained farms, combined with an appropriate level of public access, represent an ideal situation. But over the past 10 years there has been a steady reduction in the number of farms, especially in the urban fringes of Oxford, and problems have arisen as land is sub-divided and farm buildings are put to new uses. The process continues and in recent months land sale advertisements have appeared in the local press for sites on Boars Hill, in the Cherwell Valley at Marston, at Yarnton and elsewhere. In the sale notice there is usually a reference to the long-term development potential of these holdings.

The vulnerability of these portions of the Green Belt is further highlighted in the site allocations maps published by the District Councils as part of their new Development Frameworks. The maps show land put forward by owners as potential sites for development. The local authorities are not obliged to agree to development, and most sites will not be developed, at least in the short term, but all this serves to underline the very real pressures facing, especially, the inner portions of the Green Belt. OGBN takes a close interest in development proposals as they arise in connection with these former farms and we urge Parish Councils in the Green Belt to keep a close watch on changes in land ownership in their parishes and to monitor sites that are most vulnerable to change.

The quality of the land and landscape does not affect the aims and purposes of the Green Belt but, as we all know, land is neglected in the hope of gaining planning permission and the quality or otherwise of the local landscape is often referred to by those who support development. It is important, therefore, where land is no longer

farmed that suitable alternative uses are found for it, and in this connection we support the schemes of tree planting carried out by Parish Councils and by bodies like the Woodland Trust and Forest of Oxford. Trees benefit the environment, can be used to reduce the impact of unsightly objects such as phone masts, and have educational value when planted by schoolchildren. Tree planting is just one of several forms of land management that can improve the visual quality of the Green Belt when it is degraded and OGBN sees this as an important way forward if we are to maintain public support for the Green Belt.

The concept of visual quality includes views across the Green Belt and this includes both local views as well as those classic views of Oxford's spires seen from the surrounding hills, and also views of the hills themselves when seen from vantage points within the city. OGBN gave evidence at the public inquiry into the scheme for a book depository at Osney Mead which would have damaged the famous view of Oxford from the Hinksey Hills and we were glad that the Inspector dismissed the University's appeal. Landscape views continue to inspire writers and painters as they have done in the past, and it should be one of the objects of Green Belt policy to be aware of and to protect these views.

The erosion of visual amenity takes many forms and is something of which OGBN is only too conscious. We are all aware of the impact of electricity pylons and their overhead wires, and to these have now been added the threat of wind turbines. Permission has been given for a wind monitoring mast at Seacourt on the western edge of Oxford, and the City Council has put forward proposals for wind turbines at Chilswell Farm in South Hinksey, at Cutteslowe Park, Horspath and Sandford Brake, all of them places where the tall turbines proposed would have a seriously adverse effect on the visual amenity of the Green Belt. Whatever the arguments for sustainable energy, it would be quite wrong to erect these objects in the Green Belt.

Light pollution is another intrusive element in the Green Belt. Earlier in the year evidence was given for OGBN at the Horspath inquiry into lighting of the athletics ground car park. The scheme was quite unnecessary and was rightly dismissed by the Inspector who wrote in his report of the urbanising effect of this kind of lighting and of the need to keep rural areas free from it. It was a good ruling but we are still encountering problems with lighting issues in other parts of the Green Belt.

Reference was made to mineral working and waste disposal in our recent Newsletter and I will refer to them only briefly here, though stressing the fact that they continue to pose problems. Mineral working is one of those permitted activities in a Green Belt but that does not mean that attempts to open up new sites have to go unchallenged, and we are aware of what seem to us to be unreasonable pressures being put on parts of the Green Belt, particularly in the southern part of the Green Belt around Dorchester and Berinsfield, and in the west close to Eynsham. It would not be too bad if restoration were carried out properly but too often this is inadequate and what we see are more and more lakes and who knows what impact on the surrounding water table. Whilst on the subject of restoration, we have recently been pleased to support Radley Parish Council who are anxious to see proper restoration take place around the lake that was to have been used for ash disposal and also replacement of the trees which the energy company destroyed.

Waste disposal is a related issue, not least because it also comes under the control of the County Council who, to their credit, have a good record of consulting us on these matters. But this has not prevented the go-ahead being given to a major waste treatment centre at the grain silo site at Gosford near Kidlington, a development of industrial proportions that will add a lot of traffic to local roads. Whilst not opposing the food waste processing plant planned at Worton Farm between Cassington and Yarnton, we have nevertheless expressed a number of reservations about how the enterprise is being planned. Sites proposed for incinerators are outside the Green Belt and are not therefore matters on which we have felt it right to comment.

I turn, finally, to housing, the demand for which drives many of the changes being proposed in the Green Belt. We all recognize the need for more affordable housing but we must also be alert to the motives behind some of the schemes that are being put forward, particularly when they involve mixed use forms of development which, in the longer term, risk creating a further cycle of demand for houses. The Oxford Green Belt was defined in order to check the physical expansion of Oxford; that is why its inner boundary was tightly drawn. To say, as the Government's proposed changes to the South East Plan say, that Oxford must be allowed to expand physically and economically, is to risk undermining all that the Green Belt has achieved over the past half century. The historic city of Oxford and its Green Belt setting should not be treated in this way.

One of the things which I think makes people resentful is the way in which apparently arbitrary housing targets are imposed from above on local communities. This top-down planning flies in the face of local democracy and denies a role to bodies like parish councils which have a long history of identifying local needs and of taking steps to address them. That is why we are opposed to the urban extension proposed south of Grenoble Road and also, incidentally, why we oppose the ecotown at Weston-on-the-Green, a quarter of the site of which is in the Green Belt and the building of which would cancel out efforts to build up Bicester as one of the 'country towns', counter magnets to Oxford.

May I conclude by thanking my colleagues on the Steering Committee for all their contributions over the past year. The Oxford Green Belt Network is not driven by any kind of selfish desire to protect our personal living space. We genuinely believe that the existence of the Green Belt in its present form enriches the lives of the people of Oxford and of those who live in its surrounding village communities. Without this countryside on our doorstep our lives would be the poorer and, with the help of all our supporters, we shall continue to fight for its preservation.