

OXFORD GREEN BELT NETWORK

Chairman's Report

November 2009

Our AGM this year is held in Begbroke, an attractive small village north of Oxford which exemplifies particularly well the pressures on settlements in the Oxford Green Belt. Farms, like Hall Farm, go out of business and what used to be the best protection of Green Belt land, a working farm, is lost. Instead we see pressure for development from other landowners, notably from the science park but at some future date from the airport - now London Oxford Airport - from the Detention Centre when that eventually closes and, to the south, from the outward spread of activity from Oxford itself.

The danger in all this is that Begbroke will be joined up with Yarnton and Kidlington in one big mass and the pleasant countryside that presently exists between the villages will be lost. Yet Green Belt policy is meant to check urban sprawl and to prevent neighbouring settlements from merging together in just this way. Why then are we worried? The answer is twofold, firstly because the Green Belt is subject to review whenever the local authorities work on a new plan, and secondly because it is open to a developer to claim that special circumstances exist to overrule Green Belt policy and to allow development to take place.

An example of how the plans process can open up land for development is afforded by the Oxford City Council's Core Strategy, the key document in what is set to replace the old Local Plan. In this Core Strategy the City are proposing a major development for employment purposes either side of the A.44 between the Woodstock Road and Pear Tree roundabouts. It is to be known as the Northern Gateway and some of the land proposed for development is in the Green Belt, so a review of the Green Belt in this area is proposed.

When the Core Strategy was the subject of a public inquiry in July the Oxford Green Belt Network submitted evidence and also appeared at the inquiry and, with other groups, argued against this attempt to erode the Green Belt. At present we are waiting to hear the outcome of the inquiry which has been delayed because of the legal challenge to the proposed development south of Oxford (below). But if the Northern Gateway does eventually go ahead it will be a further intrusion into the narrow gap of open countryside that separates Oxford from Yarnton and Kidlington.

Whilst we are thinking about this gap it is worth mentioning another concern that arose recently, the application (now withdrawn) to create a large boating marina with associated facilities adjacent to the Oxford Canal at King's Bridge where the canal is crossed by the A.44 just south of Yarnton. National policy on Green Belts states that recreational facilities are an acceptable land use in Green Belts but only if they are modest in scale and preserve the openness of the Green Belt. What was proposed at King's Bridge was not modest in scale and, however appealing it might have been to the boating community, we considered it to be inappropriate development and set out

our arguments to the local authority which was considering the application before it was withdrawn. Perhaps it will return in another form.

I will come back to this local area in conclusion but allow me just to give a couple more examples of how official policy fails to protect the Green Belt. These concern waste disposal and renewable energy. The Government has stated that, in order to reduce the amount of waste going to landfill and in order to reduce carbon emissions, waste management facilities and renewable energy developments such as wind farms should not be automatically excluded from a Green Belt. This, of course, makes it easier for someone promoting these forms of development to argue that special circumstances exist to permit them to go ahead and to build them in the Green Belt.

So what is the position of the Oxford Green Belt Network on these matters? As individuals we no doubt support the objectives of recycling and the search for renewables, but this does not mean that an organization dedicated to protecting the openness and amenities of the Green Belt has to give carte blanche to every proposal that comes along, some of which are likely to be speculative. Thus whilst we have been reasonably sympathetic to what has been proposed at Worton Farm between Yarnton and Cassington, we opposed a development at a pig farm south of Oxford because we thought that the circumstances relating to the application were not acceptable. We also opposed the recycling depot at Gosford silo which the County Council has approved. We were not sorry to see a plan to demolish the old grain silo but believed that the type of scheme proposed would be better located on an industrial estate than on this site. Interestingly, this is the site which Chiltern Railways wish to develop for a parkway station in connection with their plans for a new rail route from Oxford to London.

On wind turbines, which rely heavily on public subsidy and only work when the wind blows, we take a strong line. We believe that the Oxford Green Belt is not a suitable location for these structures. We consider them to be intrusive features in the Green Belt landscape and thus, for example, we are very much opposed to the giant wind turbine which the City Council has said it wishes to see erected in the Green Belt close to Horspath. If built it would dwarf its surroundings, be a blot on the views from and towards Shotover, and we shall oppose the application to build it if or when it is put forward. We are equally concerned about the recent announcement that the City Council would like to have another large turbine at Cutteslowe Park.

I do not propose at this point to list all the other matters with which the Oxford Green Belt Network has been concerned over the past year. Members of our Steering Committee scrutinise lists of planning applications, and we comment where appropriate on ones that threaten the Green Belt. We also respond to requests for help from parish councils and parish meetings. We continue to issue occasional Newsletters to keep our friends informed and Heather, our webmaster, keeps our website up-to-date (www.oxfordgreenbelt.net). We are grateful to her for the work she does for us and also to all those parish councils, parish meetings and amenity groups who, through their financial support, enable us to continue the fight to protect the Green Belt.

Let me conclude with a few words about the South East Plan, or Regional Spatial Strategy as we must now call it. As I am sure you are aware, the original draft of this Plan, produced by the Regional Assembly, did not propose any changes to the Oxford Green Belt. But the Inspector who conducted the examination in public into the Plan recommended an urban extension to Oxford in the Green Belt south of the city and this was endorsed by the Secretary of State together with the suggestion that the Green Belt might be reviewed elsewhere, for example at Oxford's Northern Gateway about which I have already spoken.

However the requirement to build a mixed use urban extension of some 4,000 houses south of Grenoble Road was challenged by a number of bodies, including CPRE and South Oxfordshire District Council in whose territory the extension would be built. The grounds of the legal challenge centred on a European Directive which requires alternatives to be fully considered before one particular site is chosen. It was argued that these alternatives had not been properly examined and the Government has accepted this argument, so there will be no hearing of the legal challenge in the High Court. Where does this leave the Green Belt?

We are still waiting to hear what the Government wishes to see happen next, but the City Council is pressing for a review of the Green Belt in the hope that the site for an urban extension south of Oxford will prove to be the best. But if there is to be a wider review of the Green Belt, other sites will come under scrutiny as they did at the examination in public into the South East Plan. One of these is the area of Green Belt between Begbroke, Yarnton and Kidlington where the University of Oxford is keen to see development take place in association with the science park. Significantly, the University was one of the bodies challenging the choice of "south of Grenoble Road" for an urban extension, so the threat to the Green Belt in this area close to Begbroke is a real one.

The position of the Oxford Green Belt Network has been consistent throughout this debate. We believe that Oxford City's needs should be met within Oxford's present boundaries, that the Green Belt should be protected, and that expansion in Central Oxfordshire should take place outside the Green Belt in towns identified for growth such as Bicester and Didcot. We shall continue to argue this case when we know what the Government proposes.

In working to save the Green Belt we are not being nimbies, a pejorative term used most commonly by those of our opponents who wish to develop land holdings in the Green Belt for their own financial gain. The Green Belt protects the setting of our towns and villages and it provides a healthful environment in which we can all enjoy the pleasures of our local countryside. Our aim is to keep it that way.