

OXFORD GREEN BELT NETWORK

(Chairman: Dr Ian Scargill, Summertown, Oxford)

Email: chairman@oxfordgreenbelt.net

NEWSLETTER February 2012

As usual, this Newsletter is sent to all the Parish Councils and Parish Meetings which are wholly or partly inside the Oxford Green Belt, as well as to other amenity societies that support our aims of protecting the Green Belt for the benefit of all. Please make its contents known to all who might be interested and especially members of local councils.

We greatly value the subscriptions we receive from Parish Councils/Meetings and others, our only source of income. The annual request will be following this Newsletter, by post.

The National Planning Policy Framework

Our last Newsletter was devoted to this government document and, like many others, we were critical of it for going too far in its aim of reducing existing planning guidance to a single short report. We made strong representations on the Draft NPPF to the Dept of Communities & Local Government before the closing date for submissions in October and, like everyone else, we are now waiting for publication of the final version of NPPF which will replace all the present PPGs and PPSs, including PPG.2 on Green Belts which we have found so useful in the past when commenting on planning applications and proposed developments in the Green Belt.

If the reports we hear are correct, it is likely that there will be some changes to the Draft NPPF clarifying, for example, what is meant in the document by overused terms such as “sustainability”. But it seems unlikely that the short section offering advice on Green Belt policy will be changed. So here, for information, is what the Planning Inspectorate has said about Green Belts in its own advice to practising planners and inspectors.

“Core Green Belt protection will remain in place. Four changes to the detail of current policy are proposed:

- (i) Development on previously-developed land is already permissible if the site is identified in the local plan as a major developed site - it is proposed to extend this policy to similar sites not already identified in a local plan;*
- (ii) Park and Ride schemes are already permissible - it is proposed to extend this to a wider range of local transport;*
- (iii) Community Right to Build schemes will be permissible if backed by the local community;*
- (iv) The alteration or replacement of dwellings is already permissible - it is proposed to extend this to include all buildings.*

In all cases the test to preserve openness and purposes of including land in the Green Belt will be maintained.

(v) Local planning authorities with Green Belts in their area should establish Green Belt boundaries in their Local Plans which set the framework for Green Belt and settlement policy. Once established, Green Belt boundaries should only be altered in exceptional circumstances.

(vi) The appropriateness of existing Green Belt boundaries should only be considered when a Local Plan is being prepared or reviewed. At that time, local authorities should consider the Green Belt boundaries having regard to their intended permanence in the long term, so that they should be capable of enduring beyond the plan period.”

It is very regrettable that much of the previous guidance looks likely to be omitted, in particular the point that the quality of the landscape is immaterial looks likely to be left out, thus potentially leaving an open door to landowners minded to degrade their land in the hope of planning permission. If there is any encouragement to be drawn from all of this it is the reference to core Green Belt protection remaining in place and to the test on preserving openness and the purposes of including land in the Green Belt being maintained. Of course, it remains to be seen whether in practice this affords the same protection to the Green Belt as existing guidance. It certainly opens up the possibility of more development by extending what is already permissible. And a big unknown is the effect which Neighbourhood Plans will have, once they are produced. These are the Plans that give rise to the Community Right to Build Schemes referred to above, schemes that, once approved, do not require planning permission for developments within them.

So far as the rest of the NPPF is concerned, we will be interested to learn what, if anything, has happened to the phrase “presumption in favour of sustainable development” which has given rise to so much debate. We, in OGBN, argued that the presumption in favour of development should not apply to Green Belts but we are not hopeful that the point will be taken.

Core Strategies

The Oxford Green Belt Network was represented at the Examination in Public into South Oxfordshire District Council’s Core Strategy by our Hon Treasurer, Michael Tyce, who put forward a robust case against taking Berinsfield out of the Green Belt and against extending the area around Wheatley that is already excluded from the Green Belt. Although the inspector who conducted the EIP has not yet produced his final report, he has made it clear that he is with us over Wheatley and does not support the exclusion from the Green Belt of the area around Wheatley Bridge which we argued was very vulnerable to development pressures because of its proximity to the motorway junction. But the inspector believes that there is a case for taking Berinsfield out of the Green Belt to assist regeneration there. If this happens, we shall, however, take a close interest in where the new Green Belt boundary is drawn around the village, opposing it if it looks to extend beyond the borders of the village itself.

Other news

Much of what our Committee does is to scrutinize planning applications, responding to those which threaten the openness and amenities of the Green Belt. We write letters to local authorities and the Planning Inspectorate and, when we think it is the right thing to do we try and support local opinion expressed through parish councils. Below are some examples of what we have been doing over the last few months.

Sand and gravel extraction is big business in the Oxford area and makes a big impact on the landscape of the Green Belt. We responded to the County’s consultation on the Oxfordshire Draft Minerals & Waste Plan, expressing our opposition to the extension of gravel working in the Yarnton/Cassington area to take in land south of the A.40 and to the east of Eynsham. We commented on **waste sites** in the same document, stating that we were opposed to the establishment of yet another centre for processing demolition and excavation waste close to Oxford. We have also written to the County in connection with plans for an aggregate recycling plant at the old Shipton-on-Cherwell cement works. A largely rail-based scheme was approved in 2009 but the latest one is based entirely on the use of road transport which is less good from an environmental point of view.

We do not oppose every big development proposed in the Green Belt. For example, redevelopment of the old poultry farm near Garsington will provide start-up business units and our only comment was over the need for better landscaping. Far less acceptable was the scheme to excavate docks out of the

river bank at Shillingford, happily now turned down by the District Council.

We acknowledge the obligation on local authorities to find **sites for travellers** who need to settle down for reasons of health or education, but that does not create a right to settle on any patch of land which they might happen to have bought, nor to use any land which would not equally be acceptable for use by non-travellers. So we were disappointed with the inspector's decision, following refusal of permission by Cherwell DC, to allow a traveller settlement by the Islip turn off the A.34. The Green Belt case against this development in open countryside was accepted by the inspector who nevertheless decided that personal needs over-ruled this. A similar argument seems to have since persuaded Cherwell DC to grant temporary permission for a traveller settlement off the A.44 in the narrow gap of Green Belt that separates Oxford from Yarnton. Protecting gaps of this kind is one of the five basic purposes of Green Belt policy and we fear that temporary permission too often becomes permanent.

We also recognize the benefits of **farm diversification** in the Green Belt provided that the schemes involved are related to farming. So we have recently expressed concern at a development in the small village of Waterperry which seems to have more to do with storing and servicing heavy vehicles than with agriculture.

Another need is for **cemetery space** when existing burial grounds are full. This is an acceptable use of Green Belt land according to PPG.2, but it does not follow that ancillary buildings are necessarily to be allowed. We did not oppose the modest new burial ground at Gosford which hopefully will blend into the landscape, but we have serious misgivings about Oxford City Council's wish to create a large new cemetery off Oxford Road, Horspath. The land here becomes waterlogged, but it is also on ground below Shotover hill where the City Council agreed that the land should be kept free of buildings for all time when Shotover was given to the City by Oxford Preservation Trust in the 1950s. A covenant was drawn up to that effect, but sadly there are those who attach little importance to such promises.

Hopefully the examples above give a taste of OGBN's involvements. New issues constantly arise and at present these include plans for more gravel extraction at Thrupp Lane, Radley, problems to do with vehicle recovery at a site near Wheatley, the implications for possible future development of the new road now under construction to the science park at Begbroke, plans for the future of the quarry at Woodeaton in the context of waste disposal from the Barton West development, and problems posed by student parking on country roads round Holton. No doubt many others will come to our notice and, as always, we welcome approaches from parish councils who have the local knowledge that is important in guiding our approach to planning applications and the comments we submit.