

OXFORD GREEN BELT NETWORK

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NEWSLETTER - MARCH 2016

We hope that this Newsletter might be distributed as widely as possible, especially amongst members of Parish Councils and Parish Meetings with an interest in the Oxford Green Belt. We continue to value the support of parishes and are always glad to hear of their concerns.

The present Newsletter is largely concerned with the background to what is happening in the Oxford Green Belt and, as such, is devoted to planning in the broad sense rather than to day-to-day planning applications. But that does not mean that the Oxford Green Belt Network ignores the latter and we keep an eye on all the applications that affect the Green Belt and respond to those which we think threaten its aims and purposes.

It is our intention later this year to revert to our practice of holding an open AGM to which all the Oxford Green Belt parishes will be invited to send a representative should they wish to do so. It is likely to be held in a village hall, most probably at Sandford-on-Thames, and details will be circulated in due course. We also welcome nominations from parishes for people who might serve on our Committee.

Purposes of the Green Belt

We are sometimes asked what the officially recognized purposes of a Green Belt are. Here they are, from the Green Belt section of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) which is the Government document that determines the nature of planning:

- To check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas;
- To prevent neighbouring towns merging into one another;
- To assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment;
- To preserve the setting and special character of historic towns;
- To assist in urban regeneration by encouraging the recycling of derelict land and other urban land.

Vale of White Horse

In early February OGBN took part in the second stage of the Examination in Public into the Vale's Local Plan. Our principal interest was in Matter 5 which dealt with the Green Belt and the Council's proposals to take land out of the Green Belt. In their Local Plan, the Vale District Council wants to release land for just over 1,500 dwellings in the Green Belt to the north of Abingdon, at Radley and to the south of Kennington. These are described as Strategic Housing Allocations. In addition, the Vale suggest the removal of up to 18 other areas of land from the Green Belt without specifying the use to which these will be put. They are all on the edges of villages that include Appleton, Cumnor, Radley, Wootton, Kennington and Botley, whilst the village of Farmoor is to join these by being removed from the Green Belt altogether. Many, though not all, of these sites for removal from the Green Belt were recommended to the Vale for removal by a firm of planning consultants who carried out a review of the Vale portion of the Green Belt for the local authority. Not all of the 18 are likely to be built over because they are currently in uses such as playing fields, but most of them could be developed, and together they represent a real threat to the Green Belt.

In our evidence to the Examination, OGBN challenged the Vale's contention that the 'exceptional circumstances' required in law do exist to support the removal of all these areas of land from the Green Belt. Building on such a scale as this, on the edges of the Vale's Green Belt villages, will have a huge and disproportionate impact on the life of the parishes concerned and we argued, in any case, that it is wrong to propose the removal of land from the Green Belt without having a specified use for it. The matter is now in the hands of the planning inspector who conducted the hearings and his report will be published later in the year.

Cherwell

Following the adoption of their Local Plan, Cherwell District Council has been consulting on how it might contribute to Oxford City's 'unmet housing need' (see below). In OGBN we have responded to this consultation, pointing out the pressures that already exist to develop land in the 'Kidlington Gap' between Oxford and Kidlington, and in the area between Kidlington, Yarnton and Begbroke where expansion of the science park is planned and where the Council has already decided to take land out of the Green Belt to facilitate this expansion. Land is also to be removed from the Green Belt for employment purposes off Langford Lane to the north of Kidlington where the Council recently gave permission in this part of the Green Belt for what is described as a technology park.

Oxford's unmet housing need

A large housing development in Oxford is currently getting under way off the A.40 at Barton on land which used to be in the Green Belt. The City Council has also identified two sites, still in the Green Belt, which it thinks could be developed for housing, one at Frideswide Farm to the north of the City and the other opposite Redbridge park-and-ride to the south of Oxford. Despite this, and other schemes planned on non-Green Belt sites, the City Council says that it has a shortage of land on which to meet its projected housing needs. The District Councils that surround Oxford have an obligation under the Government's 'duty to cooperate' to help the City meet these needs by providing sites in their Council areas, this in addition of course to meeting their own housing needs.

The various Councils have agreed on a 'working assumption' that 15,000 dwellings will have to be built by 2031 in order to satisfy the City's unmet need. This could mean building 12,000 in the four Districts outside the City, 3,000 in each of them, provided that the City itself could actually find room for the other 3,000. This problem is exercising all the Districts at the present time, with Cherwell (above) already consulting on how to address it. Whatever is eventually decided, the prospect of development spilling out from the City into the surrounding Districts has obvious implications for the future of the Green Belt.

Oxfordshire Growth Board

The Growth Board is a Committee made up of representatives from the District Councils together with ones from business and related interests. It does its work on behalf of the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP), a business-orientated body that is primarily concerned with promoting economic growth in the County and with seeking Government funds to do this. The LEP also produces a plan, the Strategic Economic Plan (SEP) which sets out its hopes and intentions, and a revised SEP is currently in preparation and is due to go out for public consultation later this year.

The present SEP is based on the assumption that there will be a growth in employment in Oxfordshire by 2031 amounting to a total of 86,000 jobs. This is a level of growth that is said to require the provision of 106,000 new dwellings over the same period. A Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA) has determined how these dwellings should be apportioned amongst the Districts and provision for these sub-totals has to be incorporated into the Districts' Local Plans. All of this helps to explain why the Districts are under pressure to find more land for employment and housing as they prepare their Local Plan.

Returning to Oxford's unmet housing need, the Growth Board is currently working on what are described as 'spatial options', i.e. on ideas as to where the 12,000 or more dwellings required outside the City to meet the latter's needs might actually be built. Cherwell, as we have noted, is already working on this issue itself and that authority, as well as the other Districts, will be receiving further input from the Growth Board when the Board comes up with its County-wide ideas on the spatial options later in the year.

A concern that OGBN has had, and one that is shared with other amenity groups, is that the work of the LEP and the Growth Board has been largely secretive and lacking in public consultation. This situation is getting a little better and the public can attend meetings of the Growth Board, whilst the revised SEP will be subject to a measure of consultation. We shall seek to be involved as much as we can and have joined with over twenty community organizations from across Oxfordshire in the "Need not Greed Oxon" campaign which is co-ordinated by CPRE (see www.neednotgreedoxon.org.uk). This is pressing for much more public participation in the LEP's activities and for reductions in what we see as its unrealistic and damaging growth targets. We will endeavour to keep our parish council friends informed.

Oxfordshire Green Belt Study

In its work on spatial options, the Growth Board is able to make use of the Oxfordshire Green Belt Study that was prepared for it by consultants and published in November 2015. This Study does not itself recommend sites for development within the Green Belt but, instead, looks at 'parcels' of Green Belt land to see how well they meet the five basic purposes of a Green Belt. To remind you of these, they are:

- To check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas
- To prevent neighbouring towns merging into one another
- To assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment
- To preserve the setting and special character of historic towns
- To assist in urban regeneration, by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land

The Green Belt Study finds that all the parcels of land into which they divide the Green Belt satisfy at least one of these purposes, whilst most of them satisfy more than one. In every case the Study rates the extent to which a parcel satisfies a particular purpose as High, Medium or Low. In connection with this exercise, which will help to inform the Growth Board, it is important to point out that any piece of Green Belt land does not have to satisfy all five of the purposes or to rate highly in order to justify its inclusion as part of the Oxford Green Belt. Since all

the parcels of land satisfy at least one purpose of including land in the Green Belt, as stated above, it means that any attempt to remove land from the Green Belt for development is, in effect, an infringement of the reasons why the Oxford Green Belt was established in the first place. Unfortunately that does not stop Councils from finding ‘exceptional circumstances’ for removing land from the Green Belt when preparing their Local Plans, or from finding ‘very special circumstances’ for doing so at any time in response to a planning application.

There seems little doubt that in 2016, as the Growth Board and the LEP do their work, and as District Councils are obliged to incorporate the projected need for jobs and houses into their Local Plans, the Oxford Green Belt will be under great pressure. We will continue to argue the case for the Green Belt but we think that Parish Councils and Parish Meetings should be aware of the pressures and, in particular, take a close interest in what is being proposed by their District Councils, both in the latter’s Local Plans, and in other ways.

Oxford Flood Alleviation Scheme

The Environment Agency has recently held exhibitions of their plans for a flood alleviation channel to run across the Hinksey Meadows. OGBN continues to have reservations about what is being proposed because of its likely impact on this unspoilt meadow landscape, immortalised in the work of Matthew Arnold and others. One of our concerns is that the speeding up of flood water by means of the new channel might increase the risk of flooding downstream where the water re-enters the Thames. This is of particular concern to villages like Sandford-on-Thames and Kennington. A similar scheme, lower down the Thames, did cause problems of this kind.

Another concern is over the disposal of all the soil and gravel that will excavated to create the channel. If it is left on site it could be used to create un-natural features such as bunds or mounds. If it is all removed we can look forward to three years of disruption to traffic on local roads. Yet another concern is over the huge cost of the scheme and the possibility that, in order to meet some of the cost of establishing and maintaining the channel, the Agency will be tempted to look for sources of funding from watersports and other organizations that might wish to make use of the channel for their own purposes. We have nothing against watersports in the right place but we do not think that the Hinksey Meadows are that place.

We have written to the Environment Agency expressing our views and suggesting that the emphasis first should be on reducing run-off into the Thames from its upstream tributaries and from their surrounding land.