

OXFORD GREEN BELT NETWORK

NEWSLETTER MAY 2006

The Oxford Green Belt Network (OGBN) is grateful for the support it receives from parish councils and amenity groups. At this time of year we ask if you are prepared to continue that support by paying a subscription of £15, proceeds from which help us to continue our campaign to protect the Green Belt from inappropriate development and to work towards improving and restoring its landscape and making its benefits better known. Please find enclosed a subscription form with the address to which it should be returned.

The major item in this edition of the Newsletter is the South East Plan and we hope that parish councils, amenity groups and individuals will respond to the consultation which is currently taking place. Information on how OGBN is responding is set out below.

THE SOUTH EAST PLAN

This Plan, which covers the years 2006 to 2026, has been prepared by the South East England Regional Assembly (SEERA). It was submitted to the government on 31st March 2006 and the latter is now carrying out a consultation which ends on 23rd June. Responses to this consultation (see below) have to be sent in by that date.

Regional Assemblies have attracted criticism because their members are not directly elected. Nevertheless they exist and have a duty to produce Plans like the one drawn up by SEERA. The Plan covers a wide range of issues including housing, employment, transport and the environment. A special section is devoted to the 10 Planning Sub-Regions of the South East of which Central Oxfordshire is one. This Sub-Region includes the City of Oxford, the Oxford Green Belt and places beyond the Green Belt that include Bicester, Witney, Wantage and Didcot.

On the whole OGBN is supportive of the general policies of the South East Plan, particularly of the one which sees no reason for any review of Green Belts (including that of Oxford) within the region. This is not to say that the Plan is above criticism and we shall be voicing our concern that inadequate attention has been given to water resources and that the Plan is not opposed to locating a waste incinerator in the Green Belt.

So far as the sub-regions are concerned, we shall be confining our comments to Central Oxfordshire. Again we are supportive of the strategy for this sub-region which seeks to protect the Green Belt whilst meeting housing and other needs by focussing growth on brownfield sites and on settlements outside the Green Belt.

We are mindful of the need for affordable housing but we believe that the strategy for Central Oxfordshire addresses this problem whilst recognizing the value of the Green Belt environment. Not everyone agrees with us, of course, and in November there will be an Examination in Public (EIP) into the South East Plan when we can expect the City Council and possibly some other Districts, together with developers and

landowners, to press the case for major incursions into the Green Belt: south of Grenoble Road, between Horspath and Garsington, at Sunningwell and Radley, at Shipton-on-Cherwell, in the Kidlington/Yarnton/Begbroke area, and possibly elsewhere. In other words the EIP will open up again the debate about all these sites and the government could override the recommendations of the South East Plan and impose much more development upon us. This is why we ask all who value the Green Belt to respond to the present consultation and to express your support for those policies that seek to protect the Green Belt.

The address for responding to the consultation (by 23rd June) is: Mrs Sue Morgan, Panel Secretary, Bridge House, 1 Walnut Tree Close, Guildford, Surrey, GU1 4GA. It is not for us to dictate how others should respond, but if you support OGBN you could say:

I/We support Policy CC10a which retains and supports Green Belts within the region

I/We support Policy BE4 which will ensure better management of the urban fringe and Green Belt

I/We support Section E7 and Policy CO3 which seek to share Oxford's economic potential with the country towns of Oxfordshire and protect the Green Belt

If you wish the Oxford Green Belt Network to say that you, or your organization, support these policies, please let OGBN know.

OTHER WORK OF OGBN

The Oxford Green Belt Network writes letters commenting on planning applications, appears at public inquiries, scrutinizes plans produced by the local authorities and central government, and supports initiatives like the Forest of Oxford which improves the visual amenity of the Green Belt. We supported Horspath Parish Council by giving evidence at the public inquiry over the railway bridge and were delighted at the outcome which recognized the importance of local landscape features and also the power of local opinion in seeking to protect them.

We have objected to developments on the edge of Oxford which, whilst not in the actual Green Belt, are on the edge and highly visible from it, and thus contrary to Green Belt policy. Most recently we have expressed our opposition as forcefully as possible to the book depository on Osney Mead industrial estate proposed by the University of Oxford. If built, it will dominate the views from the Hinksey villages and from Boars Hill and the Cumnor Hills, views that are famous for their association with the poems of Matthew Arnold. It will be far worse than the already intrusive Newsquest building and we hope that good sense will prevail.

We have been concerned at the continued break-up of farms and some of the uses proposed for redundant farm buildings. Division of farm holdings, sometimes speculative, can damage the landscape if unsympathetic new fences and access roads are built, whilst the land itself may be neglected and become overgrown. We

recognize that new uses need to be found for unused farm properties but we are suspicious of certain forms of development that may be proposed, for example the housing estate which it is claimed is necessary to finance a barn conversion. Offices in the countryside are unsustainable if they generate more car traffic at a time when office space is available in town centres or suburbs and if they represent the first stage in the development of a business park.

At the time of writing the bluebell woods are at their best, reminding us of the beauty of the Green Belt countryside. But it is a beauty that is easily destroyed by fly-tipping, the proliferation of telecom masts and roadside advertising. We have objected to the use of Begbroke Wood for paintballing and corporate entertainment and to the continued use of Radley Lakes for the tipping of power station ash. We are also opposed to the extraction of gravel from the meadows between North and South Hinksey which, it is claimed by the promoters, could lead to the creation of a rowing lake.

Advertising on roundabouts is a fairly recent phenomenon and one which has caused us concern, particularly in South Oxfordshire where the Council has taken over responsibility for maintenance from the County Council and, in turn, has entered into an agreement with a marketing company. The latter, in return for the right to obtain sponsorship, will maintain the roundabouts. OGBN is glad to see roundabouts planted and well-kept but is worried at the effect which excessive advertising by sponsors will have on visual amenity and road safety. When central government has been making efforts to get rid of unsightly advertising alongside motorways, we do not wish to see this happening at junctions on our country roads.

The Oxford Green Belt Network welcomes contact with parish councils and amenity groups. Please let us know what you think about our work and whether we can be supportive over problems that arise in the Green Belt.