

OXFORD GREEN BELT NETWORK

(Chairman: Dr Ian Scargill, email: chairman@oxfordgreenbelt.net)

NEWSLETTER May 2008

The Oxford Green Belt Network (OGBN) is grateful to all the Town and Parish Councils and Parish Meetings who have subscribed to our organization. The subscriptions help to maintain our website, pay for postage, stationery and other expenses, and provide a reserve for when we need to organize a campaign. We appreciate your interest in what we do and always welcome suggestions and information about threats to your local area of the Green Belt.

This Newsletter is being sent out by email to all for whom we have email addresses. We would be grateful if it could be circulated as widely as possible, especially to parish and other councillors. We can provide paper copies if this helps.

Ecotowns

In April the government published its shortlist of 15 sites which could be developed as ecotowns. It included an 800 hectare (2,000 acre) site around Weston-on-the-Green which the promoters, Parkridge Holdings, are calling Weston Otmoor. The government has set up a panel of experts to consider the merits of the 15 sites and it is expected that 10 locations will be chosen by the end of the year, the intention being that these 10 ecotowns will then be built.

When the Housing Minister announced the list of 15 sites on 3rd April, she stated in her press release that, "Based on an evaluation of the bids, the government can today announce no new homes would be built on Green Belt land". If this was intended as a description of the 15 sites, it is not true. Around a quarter of the site of Weston Otmoor is in the Oxford Green Belt, and it includes an area of Special Scientific Interest because of the species rich wet grassland there.

It is difficult to find anyone who supports Weston Otmoor apart from the promoters and the landowners willing to sell their land. It conflicts with existing plans at regional, county, district and parish levels and, if built, it could seriously damage plans to expand Bicester and to improve that town's infrastructure and services. OGBN will do what we can to oppose the scheme.

One thing which we shall be doing, and which any other organization or individual can do, is to respond to the consultation on ecotowns which the government has put in hand. Responses have to be received before 30th June. You can do this by email to ecotowns@communities.qsi.gov.uk or by writing to: Eco-Towns Team, Housing and Growth Programmes, Communities and Local Government, 2/H9 Eland House, Bressenden Place, London SW1E 5DU. Thanks to CPRE Oxon for this information.

Wind turbines

In recent weeks the Oxford City Council has been putting forward suggestions for erecting wind turbines. The Council is working with a Carbon Trust enterprise company and the idea is that this company would build, own and operate the turbines, all of which would be on City-owned land, so the City would receive rent from the development. Four sites have been suggested: at Chilswell which is on the slopes of the Hinksey Hills to the west of Oxford, at Cutteslowe Park, on land near Shotover at

Oxford Road Horspath, and at Sandford Brake to the south of the City. All four sites are in the Oxford Green Belt and there would be several very tall turbines at each site. They would need planning permission if the developments were to go ahead and the Vale and south Oxfordshire District Councils would be involved as well as the City.

OGBN is opposed to the erection of wind turbines in the Green Belt. They would not only be damaging to the landscape, spoiling historic views, but we believe that they would be highly inefficient and dependent on government subsidies. We understand the arguments in favour of green energy, but Oxford is not the place for these turbines which would simply add to the clutter of pylons and overhead wires which some people have worked hard over the years to reduce. Oxford has a lot of rivers and streams and the suggestion has been made that water driven turbines at locks and weirs would be a more appropriate way of responding to the demand for green energy.

Book depository

Despite the rejection of its application to build a huge book depository at Osney Mead, the University of Oxford is pressing ahead with an appeal against this refusal by the City Council. The appeal will take the form of a public inquiry, probably at Oxford Town Hall, beginning on 1st July and lasting for at least a week. OGBN has written to the Planning Inspectorate and hopes to give evidence at the inquiry.

The proposed depository is basically an enormous book warehouse and, if it were to be built, we believe it would damage for ever those historic views of the towers and spires of Oxford seen from the west. These are views that have been immortalized in the work of writers and artists and it would be very sad indeed if the depository were to be allowed. Please support the efforts of organizations like the Oxford Preservation Trust which is working extremely hard, and at some considerable cost, to counter the arguments being put forward by the University and to protect our landscape heritage.

Roads and parking

The demands on the part of vehicular traffic for road space and parking continue to pose threats to the Green Belt. Anyone travelling on the A.34 or A.40 will be aware that preliminary work has begun on rebuilding the A.34 flyover south of Pear Tree junction. This involves some loss of Green Belt to storage of machines and materials and we just hope that in a year or two's time this can be fully restored. Meanwhile the long-discussed plan to provide a link from the eastbound A.40 to Pear Tree has been revived. The present idea, for a short connecting road from the A.40 to the A.44 behind the BMW garage, is better than earlier ones for a direct link from the A.40 into the Pear Tree roundabout. The latter would have crossed the Green Belt whereas what is now proposed cuts across the Safeguarded Land.

The need for park-and-ride continues to grow and the County Council has recently carried out a consultation on expansion of the existing facilities. Some loss of land to enlarged car parks seems inevitable but we hope that this can be kept to a minimum. Decking is a solution that some have suggested but this is more expensive and would require careful landscaping to avoid eyesores. OGBN has also suggested that the next generation of park-and-ride facilities should be further out, beyond the Green Belt, in places like Witney which could be connected to Oxford by fast bus services.

South East Plan

We are still waiting for the government to express its views on the Report of the Inspectors who carried out the Examination in Public into the Regional Assembly's South East Plan. It is thought that these views might not be published now until the Autumn, more than a year after the Inspectors' Report, and it is difficult to account for the long delay. So the threat of a major development still hangs over the area south of Grenoble Road and fears that the government might also favour development elsewhere, for example between Kidlington, Yarnton and Begbroke, continue to be expressed.

District Council planning

The District Councils are all engaged in the preparation of the new generation of local plans known as Development Frameworks. As part of this exercise they have been required to consult landowners on possible sites for future development and OGBN has been dismayed at the large number of Green Belt sites that have been put forward. The Districts are not obliged to adopt any of these in their forthcoming plans, but it does illustrate the huge pressure that the Green Belt is under and the desire of many owners of Green Belt land to sell off their holdings for what would be a highly profitable form of development.

A key document in the preparation of the new plans is the so-called Core Strategy in which the District Council sets out its ideas for all forms of future development within its area. We advise close scrutiny of these documents and hope that Parish Councils and Parish Meetings will let their views be known to the Districts. OGBN continues to comment on all these documents as they come out and we value our contacts with the officers of the various District Councils who consult us.

It is not all bad news

Sometimes the news is encouraging. OGBN has been pleased to support the people of Radley over the lakes and gravel issues there. We congratulate them over the well-planned battle to protect the lakes and we hope that the lakes' future can be assured now that the threat from ash tipping has been, if not removed, at least reduced.

OGBN was pleased to support Horspath Parish Council by giving evidence at the recent public hearing into floodlighting at the car park serving the athletics track on Oxford Road. The hearing followed the City Council's appeal against South Oxfordshire District Council's refusal of permission for this unnecessary lighting. In dismissing the appeal, the Inspector made much of the importance of avoiding light pollution in the Green Belt, especially in narrow areas of countryside like that which separates Horspath from Oxford.

Something else to welcome has been the publication of CPRE's "The Oxford Green Belt Way", a description of the 50-mile walk created to celebrate CPRE's 75th anniversary and the establishment of the Green Belt fifty years ago. The booklet is beautifully illustrated with very clear maps and we congratulate CPRE on this initiative. Making the Green Belt known like this is important in maintaining public support for it and in ensuring its future.