

OXFORD GREEN BELT NETWORK

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NEWSLETTER June 2010

This Newsletter is sent, by email where possible, to all the parish councils and parish meetings which are wholly or partly within the Oxford Green Belt, and also to amenity groups which share our aim to protect, enhance and make better known the benefits of the Oxford Green Belt. The Committee of the Oxford Green Belt Network (OGBN) would be grateful if the Newsletter could be circulated as widely as possible, especially to parish councillors and other interested persons. Please note also our website: www.oxfordgreenbelt.net.

Oxford's urban extension

Readers of our occasional Newsletters will be aware of the saga of Oxford City Council's wish to expand the City in the form of a 4,000-dwelling, mixed land use, urban extension to the south of Grenoble Road. This urban extension, which would have been outside the city boundary in the territory of South Oxfordshire District Council (SODC) was included in the overall plan for South East England at the insistence of the government which saw Oxford as a "diamond for growth". It was, however, successfully challenged, amongst others by SODC and the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE), on the grounds that alternative sites had not been considered as required by planning legislation. That was the position until recently and there was always the prospect that at some stage, after court hearings, the government would be able to reinstate the urban extension, either south of Oxford or elsewhere in the Green Belt.

Under the new government there has been a change in planning policy with the emphasis on local decision-making, and the South East Plan (or Regional Spatial Strategy), which included Oxford's urban extension, is about to be abolished. We are waiting to learn more about the new government's intentions but, for now at least, the saga of "South of Grenoble Road" is over and that part of the Green Belt to the south of Oxford free of the threat that has been hanging over it in recent years. OGBN invested a lot of time in writing letters and submissions, in appearing at the inquiry and giving evidence, and we are glad that these efforts, like those of other groups, have been successful and that this unnecessary scheme of city aggrandizement has been defeated.

Local Development Frameworks (LDF)

All the District Councils in Oxfordshire are currently engaged in producing their LDF, a collection of planning documents which set out their intentions for the period up to 2026. The key document in this package is the Core Strategy and OGBN has been involved in the consultations and inquiries that are required before the Core Strategy is finally approved. None have so far reached this end stage.

All 5 Districts in the County have a portion of the Oxford Green Belt in their territory so it is important for OGBN to scrutinise the plans carefully for any possible threats to the Green Belt. We have been most involved with Oxford City Council's Core Strategy. All references to an urban extension south of Grenoble Road have now been dropped from this document but the Core Strategy envisages taking two pieces of land out of the Green Belt in the Wolvercote area as part of what is called the "Northern Gateway" development.

The Northern Gateway plans cover an area of land between the Woodstock Road and Pear Tree roundabouts, either side of the A.44, and also take in land alongside the A.40 Witney Road. All of this used to be Green Belt but in the 1990s much of it became "Safeguarded Land", i.e. protected in plans

for future development, but not the land alongside the A.40 and a small area beyond the motel which remained Green Belt. The City Council intends the Northern Gateway to be devoted mainly to employment uses and the plans will be debated at the resumed inquiry into the City's Core Strategy, possibly as soon as next month (July) but an actual date is at present uncertain. OGBN thinks the plans are unrealistic, not least because of traffic problems, and would like to see the whole of this area, not just the Green Belt parts, retained as part of the green setting of Oxford and Wolvercote. Developing more employment will bring yet more people into the City and exacerbate the very housing problem which the City Council claims to have at the forefront of its priorities. We shall put forward our views at the inquiry when it resumes.

What else has OGBN been doing?

On a day to day basis we look at planning applications, receive requests for advice and support, write letters, speak to parish meetings, and take part in public inquiries. We are always glad to hear from parish councils and amenity groups, and we appreciate the financial support we receive for our work in protecting the Green Belt and promoting interest in it. Below are some examples of recent involvements.

Telecom masts

The grounds for opposing telecom masts are limited. The latest ones are perhaps a little less visually intrusive than earlier versions with their ugly dish-like antennas, but can still be offensive. An example is the mast at Walton Well Road on the edge of Port Meadow, which was refused by the City Council but erected after a successful appeal. Now the plan is to replace it with an even bigger mast, despite its location in the Green Belt and within a view cone of Oxford's spires. The application has again been refused by the Council, but is likely to go once more to appeal.

Travellers

Local authorities are under an obligation to provide a certain number of sites for gypsies/travellers and it is much better that the needs of the travelling community are addressed through proper planning applications than by the unauthorized settlements that one hears about from time to time. That said, not all applications for new pitches are suitable and OGBN opposed the one that was proposed alongside the A.34 in Hampton Gay and Poyle parish which was in open countryside and outside any existing settlement. That application has now been withdrawn. We also commented on the plans for extending the existing Redbridge Hollow site at South Hinksey, particularly about landscaping and the need to avoid the illegal tipping of waste that has disfigured this area in the past.

Water Eaton parkway station

The plans of Chiltern Railways to upgrade the Oxford to Bicester line as part of a new rail service to London involve a parkway station at Water Eaton in Gosford and Water Eaton parish. We are not opposed to this project on the site of the old wartime grain silo but we are concerned at the prospect of development extending beyond the present brownfield area into the surrounding Green Belt countryside. In particular we are opposed to the relocation of the existing aggregates depot into the Green Belt as proposed in the plans, and we are anxious also about what will happen to the waste sorting centre that was given permission to be built on the silo site some time ago. We have expressed our fears about this portion of the Green Belt, part of the narrow gap between Oxford and Kidlington that needs to be protected, and also about an area of Port Meadow which might be affected by plans relating to access to the Aristotle Lane allotments. We have asked to appear at the inquiry into Chiltern Railways' plans that is likely to be held in the Autumn.

Wind turbines

OGBN recognizes the value of renewable sources of energy but we are opposed to the two giant wind turbines (over 400 feet high) that Oxford City Council has said it wishes to see built in Cutteslowe Park and at Horspath, both on Green Belt sites close to the edge of the City. They would be visible not only

from almost every part of the City but for 15 kilometres or more outside it. We are opposed to them on grounds of visual amenity, but also on the grounds that projects like these, at inland sites like Oxford, where there is little wind, will be very inefficient producers of electricity, relying entirely on public subsidy and in any case have to have back-up sources of energy because what wind there is, is erratic. We have attended exhibitions, written letters, and are now waiting to see whether the company that would build the turbines is going to apply to erect test masts or not.

Gravel extraction

OGBN was alarmed to discover recently that the last government had proposed increasing the amount of sand and gravel it wants to see extracted from Oxfordshire by nearly 20 per cent, this despite a reduction nationally in what is required. Large areas of the Oxford Green Belt have already been affected by gravel extraction and the opening up of further areas would have serious implications for parishes to the south of Oxford such as Dorchester, Warborough, Berinsfield, Culham and Radley, as well as ones to the north such as Eynsham, Cassington and Yarnton. We support the opposition being expressed by groups such as PAGE (Parishes Against Gravel Extraction) and are pleased that the County Council is seeking to get the government's demands reduced.

Park and ride

All of Oxford's park and ride sites were once in the Green Belt but several have lost this status, something that tends to follow development. It is difficult to imagine traffic conditions in Oxford if there were no park and ride facilities, but to a certain extent they can be described as victims of their own success, attracting some car-borne traffic that might otherwise use public transport. Thornhill, on the London Road, and still in the Green Belt, is one of these and about half the outgoing passenger movements are now coach travellers to London and the airports. A consequence is that the car park is full from early morning and there is now a consultation taking place over a plan to extend the parking area further into the Green Belt. OGBN will respond to the consultation with suggestions over landscaping, floodlighting, and the avoidance of any kind of commercial development at the site which would attract non-park and ride users, adding to pressure on parking spaces.

New and extended buildings

Many of the planning applications that are submitted in the Green Belt are for small scale alterations to existing buildings, changes that conform to the guidelines set out by the government in PPG.2 (Planning Policy Guidance on Green Belts). But some are inappropriate by virtue of their size, design or location, and these are ones that we seek to discover and comment upon, either objecting to what is proposed or making suggestions for improvements. Schemes on which we have commented recently include: the housing development at Dove House Farm, a disused dairy farm at Cuddesdon; the plan to build a new house within the ruins of the Elizabethan manor house at Hampton Gay; residential development at the Piggeries, Mill Lane in Elsfield parish; new building related to vehicle sales in Sandford-on-Thames; a replacement clubhouse at North Hinksey rugby ground; new pitch and lighting at Oxford North sports ground; a hotel expansion plan at Milton Common in Tiddington parish; and several plans for new school buildings.

We oppose where we think necessary but also try to be constructive and support schemes that deserve approval. Recent examples of the latter include the creation of amenity space on the site of an old builder's yard in West Oxford; the new bridge at Fiddlers Island Stream which improves access to Green Belt walks; and the restoration scheme for the Folly at Woodeaton Manor School.

In trying to keep up-to-date with proposed developments we greatly value the information and advice we receive, especially from parish councils and meetings, but also from individuals. Please keep in touch.