

OXFORD GREEN BELT NETWORK

NEWSLETTER - October 2013

It is some time since a Newsletter from the Oxford Green Belt Network (OGBN) was circulated but we have not been inactive. As always we appreciate the support of parish councils, parish meetings and amenity groups who share our aims, and we would be grateful if this Newsletter could be circulated to members for information. Feedback is always welcome (via info@oxfordgreenbelt.net).

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)

When we have commented on changes to planning legislation and on planning applications we have had to get used to much briefer guidance in the NPPF compared with the now abandoned PPG and PPS notes. The NPPF has only 14 short paragraphs on Green Belts compared with something like 14 pages of advice in the old PPG.2. So it is important to pick out phrases such as very special circumstances, openness, potential harm, and inappropriateness which are likely to carry weight with decision-makers. But the brevity of the NPPF guidance means that some phrases are open to interpretation which is unhelpful and a potential source of confusion. An example is infill (below). This problem has been recognized by the Government who, this summer, has been carrying out a consultation on planning guidance, the aim being to set out in detail what the various sections of the NPPF actually mean. You may be wondering why therefore it was necessary to scrap the PPGs and PPSs in the first place.

Permitted Development Rights (PDR)

Politicians are fond of saying that planning rules are an obstacle to development, especially to house-building, and the purpose of permitted development rights is to allow some kinds of development to take place without needing planning permission. In May of this year these existing rights were extended and one of the changes relates to farm buildings. If these are under 500 square metres in size they can now be converted to a variety of new uses under PDR. But the Government has gone even further, and this summer has been consulting on plans to extend PDR to allow certain kinds of building, including farm buildings, to be replaced by housing. Could this lead to a rash of new farm structures being put up with a view to their being replaced with housing after a convenient interval?

We recognize that farm buildings can become redundant and there are many examples of old barns that have been tastefully converted to workshops, providing local employment. But this trend, guided in the past by planning rules, risks now being undermined by the extension of PDR, particularly if the latest ideas are adopted. Struggling village shops are more likely to be lost to dwellings, and barns which could be used by local crafts people are more likely to give way to modern houses, eroding village character and accelerating their evolution into dormitory settlements for nearby towns.

The Green Belt is not exempt from these changes and OGBN has been greatly concerned this year over an application for change of use of farm buildings at Hill View Farm, Marston, from agricultural to assembly and leisure use. The site is in the Cherwell Valley, that narrow strip of Green Belt between Summertown and Marston which is very vulnerable to development pressures and we feared that this change of use would, as is so often the case, lead to other changes damaging to the local environment. Fortunately the City Council turned down the application. But PDR continues to pose risks elsewhere as parish councils will be increasingly aware.

Infill

The attractiveness of many villages, in the Green Belt as elsewhere, owes a lot to their open character to the gaps between buildings which provide valuable open spaces and which afford views of the countryside beyond. This is recognized in paragraph 86 of the NPPF which refers to the contribution which the open character of a village can make to the overall openness of the Green Belt. That is fine, but paragraph 89 of the NPPF goes on to talk about limited infilling in Green Belt villages and the circumstances in which this would be appropriate. What are we to make of that? We acknowledge that there might be possibilities for infill that would not be damaging to the openness of a village, but who is to decide what is meant by “limited infilling” and how far is it to go? All of this seems to be a case where the parish councils should have ideas of their own and should make them known to the local planning authority in order that the latter can, in turn, draw up guidance in its Local Plan.

Solar Farms

The term solar farm is a misnomer since the rows of solar panels mounted on frames leaves little room in the fields involved except perhaps for one or two sheep brave enough to graze whatever is left to grow there. But the big subsidies to be earned from converting agricultural land to solar farms have brought about a significant increase in applications for this kind of development in the last year or two and the Green Belt has not been spared. In OGBN we believe that the place for solar panels is on roofs, especially those of large buildings like warehouses, not in open countryside where solar farms amount to what in effect are industrial enterprises. They are visually intrusive in the local landscape and reduce the amenity value of the surrounding countryside.

To the best of our knowledge the small array of solar panels near to Noke was the first (2011) one to be permitted in the Oxford Green Belt. Since then an application for a solar farm on the south facing slopes near Beckley was withdrawn, and one at Rowles Farm in the parish of Weston on the Green has recently been refused permission. The latest threat is at Besselsleigh near Cumnor where an application is expected soon. OGBN will continue to oppose these unsightly developments and give support to parish councils that are concerned about them.

Other Involvements

Other matters with which OGBN has been involved in recent months include the application to replace Foxcombe Lodge Hotel on Boars Hill with an unsuitable row of dwellings; the scheme to replace the garage at Rockley near Cumnor with an unsustainable housing development; the long-running saga involving attempts to create a docking facility off the Thames near Shillingford Bridge; a proposed housing development on protected Green Belt land off Radley Road, Abingdon; a large recycling centre in the Green Belt gap between Oxford and Yarnton, an unsuitable development in the pub garden at Charlton on Otmoor; and what would be a very prominent white dome over a tennis court in the countryside between Beckley and Noke. We continue to scrutinize lists of planning applications to pick out what we consider to be inappropriate developments in the Green Belt, and we welcome information from local sources about any such issues.

The Future

Pressure on the Oxford Green Belt does not lessen. Typical of the present situation is the report published last month (October 2013) entitled “The Oxfordshire Innovation Engine: Realising the Growth Potential”. The report highlights the need to create space in the Oxford area for new

science-related developments and states that accommodating these “will require changes to Green Belt boundaries”. The area around the existing science park at Begbroke is singled out for special mention but the report also refers to a “knowledge economy spine” that would take in other parts of the Green Belt including that beyond Grenoble Road to the south of Oxford which has long been under threat from Oxford City Council’s wish to expand in this direction.

OGBN recognizes the potential of scientific research to create new employment possibilities but believes that, so far as possible, these should be directed to the country towns of Oxfordshire that are expanding beyond the Green Belt. The area of Green Belt between Yarnton, Begbroke and Kidlington seems to be particularly at risk and Cherwell District Council has already accepted the case for reviewing the Green Belt at both Begbroke and Langford Lane in its new Local Plan, though admittedly not on the scale that the above report envisages.

Oxford’s Green Belt countryside is, of course, one of the reasons why the area is so attractive to both businesses and to potential residents alike. Protecting this precious asset, whilst not resisting all development, is clearly a major challenge for the coming years. OGBN will continue to put forward the arguments in support of the Green Belt.