

OXFORD GREEN BELT NETWORK

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

NEWSLETTER December 2007

This Newsletter is addressed to all Parish Councils and Parish Meetings that are wholly or partly in the Oxford Green Belt, together with supporting amenity groups.

It's purpose is primarily to draw attention to points raised at our Annual General Meeting on 19th November and, arising from that meeting, to suggest that Parish Councils/Meetings might consider writing to the Prime Minister about his commitment to Green Belts ahead of the expected government comments on the South East Plan.

Information and guidance was also put on our website on 30th November (www.oxfordgreenbelt.net) and we invite you to look at this.

Annual General Meeting

The AGM was held on 19th November in an almost-full Marsh Baldon village hall. We extend our thanks to the Baldons Parish Council for providing the venue and hospitality, and to all those who turned out on a very wet night, particularly the representatives of Parish, District and County Councils.

After the formal business, Martin Harris, until recently Chairman of Horspath Parish Council, gave a presentation setting out the current position over the proposed urban extension south of Oxford. This arises out of the Inspectors' report following the Examination in Public into the draft South East Plan but it is, as yet, only a recommendation. Martin looked at the implications of the urban extension if it were to go ahead, implications both for the City of Oxford and for its Green Belt surroundings. Whether or not the development does go ahead depends on the government whose views are expected in the New Year. There is every prospect that the government will support it, and may wish to see additional housing developments in other parts of the Green Belt, as has happened in the case of other regional plans. Martin Harris concluded by suggesting that letters be sent to the Prime Minister and other political figures as part of a pre-emptive campaign of objection to the proposed urban extension and to the likely threats to other parts of the Green Belt.

In the course of the lively discussion that followed it was emphasized that the Green Belt should be seen as a whole and that a threat to one part of it was a threat to all parts. Although the Inspectors' report recommended a "selective" review of the Green Belt, no one knows how extensive this review will be until after the government have reported. Meanwhile it is evident that schemes for development are being drawn up in various portions of the Green Belt by big landowners acting quite independently of what is in the South East Plan or District Plans.

What we can be doing now

A principal point to emerge from the meeting was that we should act now rather than wait for the government to state its case and make all the running. The Government Office for the South East (GOSE) has made it clear that it will not accept comments on the Inspectors' report published in August. But this does not stop us writing to the

Prime Minister about his commitment to Green Belt policy as a whole. He is recorded as having stated on 11th July that, “we will continue robustly to protect land designated as Green Belt”, and we are justified in seeking his re-assurance that this is the government’s policy.

Many present at the AGM expressed a wish to write to the Prime Minister but guidance was sought on the content of such a letter. Hence our website which contains as a guideline an almost exact copy of the letter which the Oxford Green Belt Network has itself sent, together with additional notes and ideas that can be drawn upon. It is hoped that individuals and, if they feel able to do so, representatives of Parish Councils and Meetings will send their own letters to the Prime Minister, and as soon as possible (10 Downing Street, London SW1A 2AA).

What then is the next stage?

The next stage is the publication of the government’s own views on the draft South East Plan. As we pointed out above, the fear is that they will not only support the recommended urban extension south of Oxford, but they will suggest even further incursions into the Green Belt. We shall have a 12-week period in which to comment on whatever the government suggests and the Oxford Green Belt Network undertakes to keep Parish Councils and Meetings fully informed of what is proposed. The Committee of OGBN will meet as soon as we know what is being suggested and we shall discuss what then needs to be done. We will pass on all the ideas that we have just as soon as we know what the situation demands. It will be vital for as many letters as possible to be sent to the government during the 12-week consultation period.

Other news

We were pleased that the application from the University of Oxford to build a book depository at Osney Mead was rejected by the full City Council on 19th November. It would have been highly damaging to those views of the historic city from across the Green Belt, views made famous by writers and artists. We hope the University will not appeal against the decision but will find an alternative site.

The plan for a tall mast to monitor wind speed at Seacourt (Botley) has been withdrawn by the Co-op. It could have led to the erection of a huge wind turbine in the Green Belt west of Oxford. OGBN supports the principle of “green” energy, but is committed to opposing any plan for a wind turbine in the Green Belt in order to protect the openness and visual amenity of the Green Belt.

A telecom mast has been allowed on appeal on the edge of Port Meadow. We are disappointed with this decision, as are many local people. Not only is Port Meadow part of the Green Belt, but it is a landscape of special importance, and it is unacceptable to allow clutter of this kind to be installed in such a sensitive area. Sadly it is proving very difficult to get changes to the proposed sites of these installations, but we shall keep trying.

We have recently been involved over major planning applications at Hurst Lane, Cumnor; at the site of the grain silo at Gosford; at Shipton quarry; at Eynsham where a big new gravel working is proposed; and at Horspath where unnecessary floodlighting of a car park is planned. Please keep us informed as other threats arise.