

The Oxford Green Belt's Future

Despite the presumption in adopted planning policies against allowing development in the Green Belt, there have been some losses of its openness as a result of planning applications relying on “very special circumstances” for development being permitted by the local authorities, and also by being won on appeal, and by the grant of retrospective planning permission after inappropriate development has existed unopposed for more than four years. However, very few applications for development have been successful in the Green Belt, compared with those parts of the five Districts outside the Green Belt, because of the strong presumption against it which the Green Belt designation carries. Nevertheless some of them succeed, and the Green Belt will continue to be under threat unless its appropriateness as a valuable tool for planning sustainable development continues to be recognised as clearly today as when the need for an Oxford Green Belt was first recognized more than 50 years ago.

Threats occur partly because some of the land in the Green Belt, especially that closest to Oxford, is not of premium value for agriculture but would be enormously valuable for building development if planning permission can be secured. It becomes more vulnerable when farms go out of business, as has happened to dairy farms in recent years. Much of the land in the Oxford Green Belt is also in institutional, rather than in family ownership, and this increases the motivation to maximize the profits from the institutions' investment in it. Large tracts are owned by such charitable institutions as Oxford colleges, which must necessarily by statute maximize the value of their assets, and by the University itself, as well as by Oxford City Council, and these landowners are particularly strident in seeking development, and the consequential enormous increase in their land values that it would bring. The 'south of Grenoble Road site', for example, is largely owned by the City Council and Magdalen College.

The Green Belt is also under increased threat in a period of economic recession when encouragement is more likely to be given to growth initiatives such as the City Deal and other schemes that benefit from government funding. This, in turn, increases the already high demand for more housing. The resulting traffic problems likewise give rise to demands for new roads which, in turn, break up the Green Belt when they are built, dividing the Green Belt into smaller plots that are more vulnerable to further development. The so-called “Tin Hat” project for a road around the north of Oxford was withdrawn some years ago on the grounds that it would cut up the Green Belt and open the way for inappropriate development, but other comparable examples are the new road serving the Begbroke Science Park and the proposed link between the A40 and the A44 at the Northern Gateway. Oxford's five park-and-ride facilities were also established on Green Belt sites, and some of these are now being extended, and may effectively become out-of-town transport hubs which will nibble away at the openness of the Green Belt.

Increased threats make it even more urgent to protect the Oxford Green Belt. Without continued protection, the purposes of the Green Belt will be undermined. If the City Council should ever succeed in its plans to build an urban extension on the fields in South Oxfordshire located to the south of Grenoble Road, this would add very significantly to the urban sprawl on the south side of Oxford. Furthermore, this would almost certainly not be the last territorial demand of an expansionist City Council, and would make further incursions into the Green Belt more, rather than less, likely.

The University's scheme for a large book depository at Osney Mead would have spoilt the view of the dreaming spires when viewed from the Hinksey hills, but fortunately this was

located elsewhere following opposition by our organisation and others. Gaps like that between Oxford and Kidlington are being continually squeezed, in this case by development associated with the already planned new rail station at Water Eaton. Village communities are affected by mineral extraction, and by the replacement of their farms by executive housing or vehicle depots. Applications for wind turbines and solar farms not only potentially harm the visual amenity of their surrounding countryside, but also effectively industrialise the landscape. For these kinds of reasons the Green Belt will only continue to fulfill its beneficial purposes if the policies of restraint on the expansion of Oxford City which have been so successful in the past are maintained in future.

The benefits of having a Green Belt, for city and country dwellers alike, are well established, but they do need to be guarded and maintained, both thoughtfully and continuously. While the pressure to develop the Green Belt coming from the City Council and other landowners within it is strong, public support for protecting the Green Belt is stronger. In research conducted nationally by the CPRE, the Green Belt had the support of 85% of respondents whereas the Government's recent attempt to downgrade the Green Belt's protection in the draft National Planning Policy Framework was received with public outrage.

The role of the Oxford Green Belt Network is to be the public's voice in Oxfordshire.