

OXFORD GREEN BELT NETWORK

Chairman's Report

November 2011

It is customary on these occasions to have a Chairman's Report. I shall keep it short because recent months seem to have been dominated by discussion about the government's proposed changes to the planning system and we shall be hearing more about this very shortly.

Without anticipating what we are to talk about, I will just say that my fundamental criticism of the proposed changes is their failure to distinguish clearly between the Green Belt and the rest of the countryside. Green Belts are unique in several respects and policy needs to recognize this and respond to it. One of their distinctive characteristics lies in land ownership. In Oxford's case a lot of the Green Belt is owned by institutions, especially the colleges of Oxford University who readily hide behind charity law when it comes to maximising their assets. Interspersed with these big owners are the little chaps who run small, and sometimes rather dubious, businesses, the latter taking advantage of their proximity to the city and operating on small, usually untidy sites. Enforcement action against these is slow and difficult.

Green Belts are also different in the extent to which the natural custodians of the land, the farmers, experience problems. These range from the usual issues of vandalism, to economic pressures of the kind that have put many dairy farms out of business. This leads to fragmentation of holdings and the redevelopment of the old farmyards into clusters of executive dwellings or small business parks.

Green Belt policy needs to recognize, not only the purposes for which Green Belts are intended, stopping sprawl etc, but also these unique characteristics which call for strong controls on development of the kind which they have hitherto enjoyed but which the government's proposed changes will significantly weaken. More of that soon.

Existing rules on Green Belts, set out in Planning Policy Document 2 (PPG.2) have always recognized that certain types of building are acceptable in Green Belts subject to a number of limitations. These are buildings in connection with agriculture and forestry, facilities for outdoor sport and recreation, together with cemeteries and mineral working. To this list have been added over recent years, park and ride facilities, traveller sites, waste recycling and the means of generating

renewable energy. The point I make is that the list of what might be allowed has been growing and under the government's plans it will grow still further.

Here in the Oxford Green Belt these planning rules governing what might, under appropriate circumstances, be allowed, are very important as I hope a few examples might demonstrate. First mineral working, a major industry around Oxford because of the wealth of gravel, sand and rock deposits. The Oxford Green Belt Network has opposed further extensions of gravel working, for example at Eynsham, and has also been involved in what might happen to several sites where mineral working has ceased but where the site is being used for other purposes rather than being restored to farmland. Issues at Radley, Yarnton and Shipton-on-Cherwell come readily to mind.

Waste recycling is one of the uses that has colonised some of these former mineral workings, notably between Cassington and Yarnton where the storage of digestate, byproduct of processing food waste, in a slurry lagoon was the issue. Like dealing with food waste, the crushing of building waste for aggregate is another growing industry and there is a big scheme planned, though not yet determined, at Shipton Quarry. More domestic waste is being recycled and this has resulted in the proposed new centre to the north of Kidlington, now approved. We suggested that this kind of facility should be on an industrial estate but instead it is to be built on farmland in the Green Belt. As an organization we have recently sent in our response to the County's consultation on its Minerals and Waste Plan. This anticipates a need for a further aggregates recycling plant close to Oxford. Where might that be?

Finding sites for travellers is almost invariably controversial. It was certainly so alongside the A.34 by the turn-off to Islip where Cherwell District Council refused permission but where the refusal was overturned on appeal. In her judgment, the inspector made it clear that the Green Belt argument against allowing the settlement in open countryside was fully made out but she allowed the appeal on the grounds of personal need. Following that we have had a further application, from another extended family, who want to settle alongside the A.44 south of Yarnton in Gosford parish. Will this be refused and go to appeal with the same outcome? And I should add that caravan sites of a more conventional kind are not without their problems as recent cases at Bayworth and South Hinksey in the Vale District have shown.

The biggest battle so far as renewables are concerned was over the giant wind turbine that was proposed for a City-owned site close to Horspath village. It would have dominated the village and views from Shotover, but the scheme, which got as far as an application for a test mast, was eventually withdrawn because of possible radar interference. Now the turbine promoters are working to overcome this

obstacle, so we may not have heard the last of wind turbines. Meanwhile we have had our first applications approved for siting banks of solar panels on paddocks in the Green Belt. We believe the place for solar panels is on roofs, not on greenfield sites. Unfortunately, like wind turbines, they generate cash for landowners as well as power.

Finally on this list of what can be allowed, park and ride. Oxford is served by 5 park and rides, all of them built on Green Belt sites although some have since been taken out of the Green Belt. The most controversial this year has been Thornhill where permission has been given for a further extension into the Green Belt, largely because of the growth of the London coach traffic at the expense of the original role of serving Oxford commuters. We await the promised management plan to achieve a better balance between the two.

Park and ride is, of course, good in principle, like all the other land uses I have been mentioning, but they are for the most part at the expense of the Green Belt and, as I said earlier, the number of them is growing. If the government has its way, the list of what can be allowed will include development under a Community Right to Build Order.

A couple, of other matters on which to conclude. Potentially the most far-reaching scheme to affect the Green Belt this year has been the plan by Chiltern Railways to create a new service to London by completely revamping the old line from Oxford to Bicester. The scheme was subject to a public inquiry at which we gave evidence earlier in the year and the outcome, though in little doubt, is still awaited. The biggest single element in the scheme is the proposed new parkway station where the old grain silo stands between Kidlington and Oxford. The Oxford Green Belt Network did not oppose the project, seeing benefits that it is likely to bring, but we did do our best at the inquiry, together with our friends at CPRE, to limit the ancillary activities that are likely to be drawn to the vicinity of the new station complex.

Secondly, we continue to be involved with plans in the form of Core Strategies published by the District Councils. Last year it was the Oxford plan; this year the turn of South Oxfordshire, and we are grateful to our Treasurer, Michael Tyce, for battling on behalf of the Green Belt at the still ongoing inquiry. Thanks to his efforts, and to those of other members of our Committee speaking for other groups, the inspector has rejected the idea of taking more of the Wheatley area out of the Green Belt, although it does look as though Berinsfield, currently washed over by the Green Belt, will be taken out of it.

In conclusion I extend my thanks to the other members of our Steering Committee for their work over the year, and pay special tribute to Dr Clive Briffett whose recent sudden death I referred to earlier. Clive served on our Committee for 7 years and we shall miss his knowledge and wise counsel especially in his own field of ecology and natural history. Thanks, too, to Heather Palmer, our committed and efficient webmaster. As a Committee we hold regular meetings and keep in touch in between by email and phone. We always welcome approaches from parish councils, other groups and individuals who are worried about threats to their particular parts of the Green Belt. And now is an opportunity, before we talk about the government's plans, to raise with us any matters of concern.