

## The Oxford Green Belt: Q&As

### 1. Q. What is the purpose of the Oxford Green Belt?

A. Green Belts were created as planning tools to keep a band of land around Cities open, primarily to prevent further expansion of Cities and to stop them sprawling out over open countryside and engulfing neighbouring villages and towns; to prevent settlements merging together; to protect the historic setting of Oxford and Abingdon; to provide open countryside on City dwellers doorsteps; and to encourage the re-use of brownfield sites, especially within the City. (The five purposes of Green Belts are set out in section 1.5 of [Planning Policy Guidance 2: Green Belts](#))

The purpose was not to be pretty or attractive, although – being protected from development – almost all of the Green Belt is. This is obvious for instance where the Green Belt to the South of Grenoble Road provides open fields, footpaths and distant landscape views to the residents of the Leys just the other side of the road. However, lack of attractiveness does not justify removing land from the Green Belt. If it did unscrupulous landowners would immediately set about making it unattractive to reap financial gain from development.

### 2. Q. Isn't it essential to build in the Green Belt to meet Oxford's housing need?

A. No, because the housing needs of people actually living in Oxford are being more than met with the 8,000 houses being built in the City. The rest of the forecast "housing need" is for newcomers who would take new jobs forecast to be created in the City, over the next fifteen years. Instead the City should use any land it has available for housing, and if necessary the new jobs and houses should be created elsewhere, outside the Green Belt. In any case our research clearly shows that even people without houses do not want new houses built in the Green Belt.

### 3. Q. Is this in line with Government Policy?

A. Yes. The Government stated to Parliament in December 2014 that: *'the National Planning Policy Framework should be read as a whole: need alone is not the only factor to be considered when drawing up a Local Plan.*

*The Framework is clear that local planning authorities should, through their Local Plans, meet objectively assessed needs unless any adverse impacts of doing so would significantly and demonstrably outweigh the benefits, when assessed against the policies in the Framework taken as a whole, or specific policies in the Framework indicate development should be restricted. Such policies include those relating to sites protected under the Birds and Habitats Directives, and/or designated as sites of special scientific interest; **land designated as green belt**, local green space, an area of outstanding natural beauty, heritage coast or within a national park or the Broads; designated heritage assets; and locations at risk of flooding or coastal erosion'.*

Source: [Green Belt, Briefing Paper](#), January 2016, House of Commons Library.

### 4. Q. Isn't a massive increase in housebuilding needed to bring house prices down?

A. Kate Barker recognised in her Government commissioned 2004 paper '[Review of Housing Supply](#)' that no conceivable level of new housebuilding would bring down prices, or even the increase in prices to the rate of inflation. She said this was because in any year only 1% of the houses for sale would be new build. Existing houses would set the prices, and developers are not likely to sell houses cheaper, unless heavily subsidised to do so. Building more houses than there is demand for might bring house prices down, but developers are not going to do this and nobody could afford to subsidise them. The best result from a wave of new housebuilding might be that future house prices would not rise as much above inflation as they have in the past. Whilst there is a need for more affordable housing, we will have to look at alternative solutions to meeting this requirement. In any case our research clearly shows that even people without houses do not want new houses built in the Green Belt.

**5. Q. Surely there have been releases of Green Belt land before, so why not again?**

A. There have, at Barton West for instance. This is a failed policy. Each time this was going to be the last territorial demand and each time it has just led to more. Obviously if the Green Belt is released bit by bit there will soon be none left. There is no reason to release Green Belt land, which cannot be replaced, when houses could be built anywhere. In any case our research clearly shows that even people without houses do not want new houses built in the Green Belt.

**6. Q. Why is the City always pushing to expand over the Green Belt?**

A. It is in the nature of all Cities – or perhaps it would be fairer to say City Councils – to want to expand and engulf neighbouring towns and villages, as well as countryside. Birmingham is a model of where that leads. This is what would happen to Oxford without the Green Belt which was specifically created to stop it. The City would certainly not voluntarily restrain itself and has tried in the past to extend its boundaries to Kidlington and Abingdon, over almost all of the Green Belt.

**7. Q. Surely there is no harm in building on the unattractive bits?**

A. The Oxford Green Belt is intended to contain Oxford, and attractiveness is not an issue. Obviously if landowners could multiply the value of their land 100 times by making it unattractive and getting it out of the Green Belt, many if not all would do so straightaway. That said, though, the Green Belt is attractive. The City's key target area South of Grenoble Road for instance is full of fields and footpaths, with distant views across to the Oxford Heights, and what is more is a place for exercise and dog-walking for the residents of the Leys just across Grenoble Road. In any case our research clearly shows that even people without houses do not want new houses built in the Green Belt.

**8. Q. What harm would it do if Oxford expanded?**

A. Apart from the loss of the Green Belt, Oxford is basically unsuitable to be the heart of a larger conurbation. The street pattern dictated by the historic buildings, the medieval road layout and the rivers and floodplain makes it barely possible for the City to support its present size. Furthermore, Oxford's economy is crucially dependent on the City and the surrounding areas remaining attractive places to live, and the Green Belt plays a key role in preserving this. In any case our research clearly shows that even people without houses do not want new houses built in the Green Belt.

**9. Q. How much reliance can we place on CPRE Oxfordshire's public survey on the Green Belt?**

A. [CPRE Oxfordshire's public survey on attitudes to the Green Belt](#), undertaken in March 2015, which showed that three-quarters of residents in the county wanted the Green Belt to remain open and undeveloped, was done by Alpha Research, an established Oxfordshire polling company. It had a relatively large sample size and the results should be representative of the views of the whole population with a margin of error of up to 5% either way. On more detailed splits, e.g. opinions within the sub-category homeowners, the sample size is necessarily smaller and the accuracy would be reduced to within +/- 10%. Even on the widest variation, the response in favour of keeping the Green Belt undeveloped, and particularly concern about housebuilding, is overwhelming.

**10. Q. Why are CPRE so committed to the Green Belt?**

A. We were instrumental in the formulation of the concept of 'Green Belts' as long ago as the 1930s, and in the creation of the Oxford Green Belt in 1958, so we naturally have a great deal of pride. However we would not support it if it was not as relevant today as it was then. In fact it is even more relevant. The more crowded our island becomes, the more important it is to preserve our open green spaces and keep settlements separate, and in the case of Oxford to protect its historic setting. No wonder the Green Belt is easily the most popular feature of the planning system. In any case our research clearly shows that even people without houses do not want new houses built in the Green Belt.

**11. Q. Surely we must build the houses forecast in the Strategic Housing Market Assessment and this will force us to use Green Belt land?**

A. The Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA) is based around a forecast creation of 85,000 jobs, to be filled by workers from outside the County who will require housing. It requires 100,000 houses – two Oxfords – to be built in the next fifteen years. It would be catastrophic for our County's rural character if this occurred. In fact it is wildly unlikely that these jobs will be created and there is no chance at all developers will build all the houses unless they are. But even then, the Strategic Housing Market Assessment makes it explicitly clear that if there is no option but using Green Belt land then to that extent the forecast can be cut back. For whatever reason, all of our Councils are choosing to ignore this provision, but the bottom line is that in fact there is no compulsion from Government to use Green Belt land at all. In any case our research clearly shows that even people without houses do not want new houses built in the Green Belt.

**12. Q. I can see your point when you say building two more Oxfords worth of houses would be catastrophic for the County, so why are all the Councils pressing ahead?**

A. Our local councils inexcusably signed us up to meet the Strategic Housing Market Assessment blind, without knowing what would be in it, and also signed up for the Growth Board quango that is pushing it forward. Another big issue though is that Council grants have been cut back by the Government and replaced with the New Homes Bonus, an allowance based on how many homes they build. To give an idea of scale, just in this past year our Councils have collected £12.6 million (DCLG), and the big build has hardly started yet. In the case of South Oxfordshire for instance, this will soon be 30% to 40% of its income. Without it, projects would have to be cut back or Council Tax increased. The Government's bribe should not override Green Belt protection though, and is no excuse for doing so. In any case our research clearly shows that even people without houses do not want new houses built in the Green Belt.

**13. Q. Has the public been consulted on any of this?**

A. No, neither signing up to the Growth Board quango, nor building on anything remotely like the scale now envisaged, was in any manifesto when the Councils were elected, and there has been no attempt to consult the public since. It is a colossal breach of democracy and Localism that our Councils are promoting or contemplating Green Belt development, when as our research shows yet again the general public are so totally opposed to it.

**END**

July 2016