



Campaign to Protect
Rural England
OXFORDSHIRE

CPRE Oxfordshire Campaign Briefing Oxfordshire at the Examination in Public (2) 8 March 2007

Last week, the Examination in Public into the South East Plan (SEP) turned its attention to Oxfordshire for three days. Long standing arguments were reiterated but there were a few surprises.

1. Housing and the green belt

Mike Crofton-Briggs is chief planner at the City Council said something very interesting. The SEP sets a target of 7,000 houses for Oxford over the next twenty years. This, he told the inquiry, is no problem, the city can take 7,150 houses with ease and can do a lot better than that. Between 500 and 2,000 additional dwellings can be built on the three safeguarded sites (at Summertown, Barton and Pear Tree). There is also capacity for between 300 and 1,000 houses elsewhere. In all he suggested that up to 3,150 extra dwellings could be built in the city without recourse to development in the green belt. That gives a total of 10,150 houses. The SEP only seeks 7,000 houses, though the City Council is aiming for an additional 5,000 under the New Growth Points scheme.

Despite the City close to achieving its own target without really trying, Crofton-Briggs was still determined to promote a review of the green belt to allow an urban extension south of Grenoble Road. He scornfully told the hearing said it was "helpful to hear from those that are frightened of a green belt review. It shows that they misunderstand, he said. There was no way that we [Oxford City] perceive a review as tearing up the green belt. The review would not damage the environment of Oxford." He added that "it has been very helpful to hear those that think that Oxford should be preserved for historians, academics and tourists." He told the panel that "it is time now to undo the top collar button but we are not suggesting taking off the shirt altogether". Oxford's green belt collar should be loosened, not just for the economy but for the families that live in the city. He said that 98% of the green belt would remain intact and he was not suggesting that Oxford should swallow villages.

If a review of the green belt to accommodate an urban extension is needed, how big might that extension be? David Lock, a planner representing Magdalen College and Thames Water (whose plans also include building on land owned by Oxford City Council), gave one answer. He suggested that 4,000 to 8,000 dwellings was the minimum size for a sustainable urban extension, such as that his clients desired south of Grenoble Road. It must, he believed, be big enough for a high school and larger is better in community planning. He confided that his clients would like him to persuade the Panel to define specific sites for development in the SEP but he accepted that this was inappropriate. The correct process he declared was a review of the green belt.

As the debate rolled on, there was a surprise appearance. Charles Berkeley, a farmer with land south of Grenoble Road, told the inquiry that he had not seen David Lock's plans for development of his land until that day. He was opposed to any development and had "excellent viable farmland that is not for sale."

SODC defended the green belt saying that it is the areas of Oxford adjacent to Oxford that best fulfil the purposes of the green belt. Oxfordshire County Council said that businesses in the city saw the quality of Oxford's environment as a competitive advantage: "A first class economy does not need a faceless sprawl." SEEDA countered that development will not lead to faceless sprawl and it would be a "high risk" not to allow growth close to the city.

Kemp and Kemp representing Oxford Preservation Trust pointed out that no one had previously suggested that Oxford City should grow by around 19,000 houses, which is what Crofton-Briggs and David Lock were together implying. It was clear that the City would get close to its 12,000 target without a green belt review.

Mike Tyce for CPRE said that any review comes presumptive of change and should not to be undertaken lightly. He drew attention to the economic benefits of the green belt and criticised Oxford City for neglecting its "premium brand". Green belt jumping by commuters has been exaggerated, he told the panel. Half those that commute to Oxford live in the green belt.

Ian Scargill for Oxford Green Belt Network said that "Oxford tries to be the best of everything. The consequence is that there is a constant search to expand and a constant problem with employment, traffic, etc." He said that "extra housing on the edge of the city is a naïve solution to commuting imbalance." Increased employment will just trigger a new round of housing pressure. A green belt review, he declared, will open a Pandora's Box, and must be resisted.

Martin Harris for Horspath Parish told the Panel that cottage industries are growing up in the green belt, attracted by the quality of the rural environment, hence the green belt has an unacknowledged economic value for Oxford. There is no need for a review, he said, because development can be permitted in the green belt if there are exceptional circumstances, as has happened with Unipart and BMW. If Oxford's housing needs are so exceptional, a case should be made using the current planning process, not through a green belt review.

The long standing Country Towns policy came under attack. David Lock accused SEERA of having "dusted off an old strategy, while keeping heads down while housing is dumped on country towns and people drive across the county to work." He accused those that defended the green belt as "scare mongering", saying that "none of us [developers] want a 360° review of the green belt". Any review should be limited to large developments to stop farmers bring forward small sites during the review. Estate Agents Savills argued that the dislocation of residence and workplace is a consequence of the County Towns strategy. The SEP was contradictory in perpetuating people living in Didcot and Bicester when "we know that where they want to get to is Oxford".

GOSE said would it would support more housing in the city and described the City Council proposal for 12,000 dwellings as "modest". South Oxfordshire District Council said that unfocused growth at Oxford would exacerbate existing problems and that the proposals to develop at Grenoble Road would add to problems by creating extra employment. At present jobs and labour supply balance across the county.

2. Central Oxfordshire Subregion

The SEP defines a subregion for central Oxfordshire with a two-fold purpose. It allows the plan to set policies that apply specifically to Oxford and its surrounds, and to limit the area to which these policies apply. This creates the vexed question of the boundary of the subregion. Should it be the arbitrary boundary set out in the SEP, which cuts through the current District areas and excludes Banbury and Thame, or should it embrace Oxfordshire in its totality?

While there was general support for the subregion, many thought its boundary is too narrowly drawn, creating cross-boundary effects. Developers Barton Willmore thought that the subregion should be the whole of Oxfordshire. Ian Scargill for Oxford Green Belt Network agreed that the subregion was too small and said that the prospects for Oxfordshire should be spread more widely. Mike Tyce said that CPRE opposed the subregion as defined, partly because it looks like the "Oxford travel to work area" or the Metropolitan Borough of Oxford. The subregion should be larger and encompass Banbury and other towns as there was a synergy between all places within Oxfordshire.

Oxfordshire County Council pointed out that the subregion will create complexity in the local development plans, as each District Council would have to take account of two different policy zones. Cherwell District Council argued that Banbury was a subregion in its own right that looks to the South Midlands as much as to the South East. Despite calls for flexibility in interpretation of the subregion boundary, SEERA told the panel that the Regional Assembly was firmly of the view that certainty was needed and opposed such flexibility.

3. The Country Towns

Mike Crofton-Briggs launched an attack on development at Didcot. 75% of people who live in Oxford work in the city; only 40% do so at Didcot. Development next to the city would be more sustainable than development at Didcot in community terms, he said. Just 40% of workers in Oxford use cars compared to 64% in Didcot. There is scope for both development in the County Towns and for urban expansion of Oxford. Didcot Town Council countered his argument saying that growth was needed at Oxford. SODC disputed Crofton-Briggs'

arguments and told the inquiry that Didcot cannot be compared to Oxford. The out-commuting data is due to the District Council boundary, people who work in South Oxfordshire often work in the Vale, for example at Harwell, and this distorts the statistics. 60% of work journeys from Didcot are to within 10km.

There was discussion of affordable housing targets, should they be higher in the subregion than outside? The Vale and SODC were very against this, pointing out that rural areas away from Oxford were often the most expensive. Most contributors felt the 50% target for affordable housing to be aspirational but not achievable. The discussion on what levels should be in the SEP was inconclusive.

SSR, who represent developers at Banbury, argued passionately and at great length that the town was neglected in the SEP and there were opportunities for development to the west of the town. Bloxham, Adderbury and Deddington were also in its sights for development.

Cherwell District Council presented new, lower figures, for the number of dwellings that could be accommodated on brownfield sites in its area. The data suggest that the number of houses on greenfield sites would need to rise from 800 to 1,900.

4. Economy and environment

GOSE and others made the point that the economic growth in central Oxfordshire was 0.2% below the regional average and that there was a labour shortfall. GOSE said that lack of housing was constraining the economy; a point echoed by Barton Willmore and others. Mike Crofton-Briggs said that the economy is doing little more than standing still: 40 ha of extra employment land was needed on brownfield and safeguarded land in Oxford.

Oxford University confusingly claimed that the current draft of the SEP degrades the environment. Unless a review of the green belt is undertaken the competitiveness of the university and the nation is under threat. When challenged by BBOWT about whether economy comes before the environment, the university was defensive, saying it "just wanted the economy and environment rebalanced".

BBOWT stressed the importance of the Oxfordshire Meadows and was very concerned about increased recreational access to them. Oxford Architectural and Historical Society said that there had not been enough consideration given to "architectural and historic habitats" and to archaeology.

5. Infrastructure

Thames Water presented a smooth case for the Upper Thames Reservoir urging the inspectors to include this project in the SEP to help their case. The Reservoir Affected Parishes group rejected this argument and asked for any statement about the reservoir in the SEP to be removed. The Environment Agency said it was unconvinced by Thames Water's case for this reservoir.

The Highways Agency said that it was not possible to cope with predicted levels of traffic by 2026, especially between Didcot on the A34 and J10 of the M40. But it offered no solutions. Terence O'Rourke said that all development was focused on the A34 international route, and told a sympathetic audience of the agony he faced when stuck there for six hours recently. Criticising the distribution of housing in the SEP, he declared "it was almost as though we are seeking to fail. I just wonder if in some machiavellian way there is something in that." The SEP, he argued, would be stronger if development was away from the A34, especially on the M40 at Stone Bassett, a site he is promoting on behalf of the East of Oxford Consortium.

Cherwell District Council claimed that is difficult for Banbury to expand due to flood constraints and lack of infrastructure; if there is an expansion a southern bypass may be needed. The Environment Agency said that the flood relief scheme at Banbury was on hold indefinitely. Cherwell District Council, however, announced that Oxfordshire County Council had voted £2 million for the scheme, Defra was promising £5 million, so "only" £7 million will be needed from developers.

6. Demographics

Demography proved something of a challenge, and several times the Panel said or heard that demographic studies had not been commissioned. Despite the advanced stage of the inquiry, the Panel complained that it not been given satisfactory demographic projections for Oxfordshire. They particularly wanted to unpack the migration element and the local needs element—how many people would result from growth of the existing

population and how many would migrate inward for jobs or as commuters to London and elsewhere? Mike Crofton-Briggs admitted that the City "has not done its own demographics". Oxfordshire County Council passed the buck and said it understood that SEERA would do the demographics so that they were consistent across the region. It questioned the forecasts of population growth provided at earlier panel meetings. SEERA had attempted to clarify the forecasts in an email sent overnight to the Panel, but that was dismissed by the Panel Chairman as "tenuous".

Mike Tyce said that the economic and population projections were too fragile a base for a step change in growth. He told the panel that there are fundamental infrastructure problems nagging away at even the housing and employment figures in the SEP. It would be a mistake to kill the "golden goose" in Oxfordshire by engaging in unsustainable levels of building.

7. Sketch

Mike Crofton-Briggs from Oxford City provided the "high drama" for Oxfordshire's sessions. Amid his taunting that groups like CPRE were "frightened" of a green belt review, he quietly admitted that Oxford could accommodate nearly all the housing it desires without intruding into the green belt. His statement left the City Council's case for urban extensions to Oxford in tatters. Perhaps at last we are witnessing the end of the City's obsession with growing outwards at the expense of its character, quality of life and environment.

If Mike Crofton-Briggs provided a few minutes of quiet drama, Martin Tugwell, Planning Implementation Director for SEERA gave more amusement. He was a master of facial expression, his eyebrows rising in perfect synchronisation with his mouth. When the debate got tough, his quiet smile turned to a leery grin, but when he lost interest he frowned, and quietly returned typing texts on his mobile phone and waggling his feet under the table. Tugwell's animation contrasted with the serenity of the Inspectors. Corinne Swain, who chaired two of the three days, maintained a look of distraction, occasionally of disdain, as she inanimately probed the would-be developers and representatives of this and that. On the third day, Mary Travers took the chair and gazed at speakers with studied sympathy and a discreet smile, trying to show interest but not quite succeeding.

The developers were lined up along one side of the table opposite the Inspectors, their grey suited backs presenting an impenetrable wall of greyness to the audience. Many of the grey had been present at the earlier examination in public into the Oxfordshire Structure Plan and simply dusted off the arguments they made then. David Lock told us why that hearing mattered now: "it wasn't long ago, it remains coherent in strategic planning terms, and the planners are still alive." Alive? This is perhaps more than can be said for the phalanx of grey backs from which the only sign of life was sometimes the low drone of recycled arguments. The perfect cure for insomniacs. Zzzz...

8. EiP Diary

30 March. EiP examination sessions end.

End of July: EiP inspectors report recommends any changes they think may be needed for the South East Plan.

21 September: The government publishes any proposed changes it wants to make to the South East Plan.

21 September to 14 December: Government consultation on any proposed changes to the South East Plan.

December to February 2008: Government considers consultation responses

29 February 2008: Final South East Plan is published by Government and becomes a legal document.

Abbreviations and Links

DCLG: [Department of Communities and Local Government](#). EiP: [Examination in Public](#). GOSE: [Government Office of the South East](#). SEEDA: [South East England Development Agency](#). SEERA: [South East England Regional Assembly](#).

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