



CPRE Oxfordshire  
20 High Street  
Watlington  
Oxfordshire OX49 5PY

Telephone 01491 612079  
campaign@cprexon.org.uk

[www.cprexon.org.uk](http://www.cprexon.org.uk)

working locally and nationally to  
protect and enhance a beautiful,  
thriving countryside for everyone to  
value and enjoy

The Rt Hon Robert Jenrick MP,  
Secretary of State for Housing, Communities  
and Local Government  
Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government  
2 Marsham Street  
London  
SW1P 4DF

1 May 2020

### **An Open Letter to the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities & Local Government**

Dear Mr Jenrick,

#### **The Oxford Green Belt - the gap between ambition and reality**

We are writing to raise our deep concerns about the disconnect between the Government's stated commitment to protect Green Belts and the reality of what is happening on the ground in Oxfordshire.

The Conservative election manifesto 2019 promised 'to protect and enhance the Green Belt'. This has also been the consistent message from Ministers (including Prime Ministers) over a number of years.

However, the Oxford Green Belt is now facing multiple large-scale incursions:

- Vale of White Horse - 2,710 houses across 5 sites
- Oxford City - 724 houses across 8 sites
- Cherwell - 4,400 houses across 6 sites
- South Oxfordshire - 11,400 houses across 6 sites

**This totals almost 20,000 new houses supposedly to meet Oxford's need but in fact equivalent to a new development one third of the existing size of Oxford.** This cannot conceivably be seen as representing the City's need, under any accepted definition. Indeed, such expansion would be as fast as that of a New Town and therefore wholly inappropriate for Oxford where the Green Belt exists to protect the historic city and its setting. We fail to understand how these massive growth proposals can conceivably be used to justify exceptional circumstances for taking land from the Green Belt.

These incursions are entirely at odds with the wishes of local people who have consistently expressed a strong desire to see the Green Belt kept open and permanent, as National Planning Policy indicates.<sup>1</sup>

There is also little indication that the proposed developments will meet the real local need, for genuinely affordable housing available in perpetuity.

In addition to Oxford's need being exaggerated, the City Council itself has a poor record on housing delivery. It has failed the housing delivery test with falling housing starts, has worsening affordability and yet protects sites for employment thereby failing to take advantage of opportunities to develop more housing. These are precisely the issues which led you to intervene recently in the London Plan.

The Cherwell proposals are particularly concerning since they will destroy the Green Belt at its narrowest point, effectively merging north Oxford with Kidlington. All of the sites, bar one, meet at least four of the purposes of the Green Belt with an assessment of moderate-high/high harm. We also note that the proposed density of development is absurdly low; only 16 houses for every hectare of land taken out of the Green Belt. This goes against both the National Planning Policy Framework's call for increased housing densities, and the Building Better Building Beautiful Commission's urge to stop wastefully low residential densities of 31 dwellings per hectare or below (still unambitious, in our opinion, especially for Green Belt land) and move towards a 'gentle density' approach.

As the current pandemic has shown, urban dwellers now more than ever need easy access to green space (where social distancing is more straightforward) for healthy exercise. **Local councils and planning inspectors cannot be left with the possibility of removing Green Belt land, using so-called 'exceptional' local reasons, to contradict the promises of vital protection made by Government and its Ministers.**

Oxfordshire residents are losing the countryside on their doorstep, just at the point when we are starting to realise how vital such areas are for health and well-being, food production, and the climate emergency.

**Please can you intervene to help reconcile the current situation with stated Government policy and ensure that the Oxford Green Belt is protected for future generations?**

Yours sincerely



Dr Peter Collins  
Chairman, CPRE Oxfordshire

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<sup>1</sup> See Alpha Research public opinion survey 2015, commissioned by CPRE Oxfordshire - <https://tinyurl.com/vlqcvc9>