



NEWS RELEASE

EMBARGOED: 00.01, 30 April 2015

‘Three quarters of Oxfordshire residents think the Green Belt should not be built on, but our Councils are not listening’, says CPRE.

Oxfordshire’s local Councils are currently “reviewing” or “studying” their areas of the Green Belt in order to find which bits best serve the purposes of the Green Belt which, in reality, means identifying the ‘less good’ bits in order to build on them. The decision to undertake such a Review has not been taken in any democratic forum (of which CPRE is aware). Nor has there been any public consultation on what form a Review might take, what it should or should not consider, or indeed whether it is necessary at all.

To make up for this lack of consultation, CPRE has commissioned a pan-Oxfordshire survey on current attitudes to the Oxford Green Belt. According to this research, 76% of Oxfordshire’s residents believe the Green Belt should remain open and undeveloped, with new housebuilding seen as far and away the greatest threat.

Polling by Alpha Research on behalf of CPRE Oxfordshire, [1] shows that 76% of us in Oxfordshire believe the Green Belt should remain open and undeveloped, with 66% seeing new housing development as the greatest threat. [2] Respondents were asked to bear in mind that some people say the Green Belt was preventing development in the best places, but still only 12% of respondents felt that development in the Green Belt should be permitted at all. Sixteen times as many people (48%) strongly felt the Green Belt should remain open and undeveloped than strongly felt (3%) that development should be accepted. Opinions were effectively the same by gender as well as by social class, and amongst both home owners and non-home owners.

Helen Marshall, Director of CPRE Oxfordshire said: ‘Put simply this research is a ringing endorsement that the general public are supportive of retaining the Oxford Green Belt and shows that our Councils are acting against the informed wishes of their own electors when they persist in pressing for housing development in the Green Belt, whether it be on the valuable countryside South of Grenoble Road, North of Abingdon, or three new satellite towns near Abingdon, Kidlington and Wheatley.

‘Even the City’s non-home owners, whose interests our Councils claim to be acting on, oppose them. It is time now for our local Councils to accept that the overwhelming majority of us want the Green Belt to remain open, and particularly not used for new housing development.’

The Oxford Green Belt was created in 1958. Like Green Belts nationwide, the key objective was to ring-fence the up to then relentless expansion of cities (urban sprawl), which had begun to blight our environment. Other purposes were to provide open countryside on city-dwellers’ doorsteps (as the Oxford Green Belt so conspicuously does South of Grenoble Road for residents of The Leys); to

protect surrounding towns and villages from being engulfed by the City and losing their individual characters; and to protect the setting of the historic City of Oxford and Abingdon.

By constraining the growth of Oxford it also helps ensure that the benefits of economic growth are widely distributed around the County. From the start it was stressed that the essence of the Green Belt is that it should be permanent. From its inception, the Green Belt has been the most popular of all planning controls because of the benefits to both the City and the rest of the County. It is a key element in making Oxford an attractive place to live and a foundation of Oxford's own economic success. [4]

Helen Marshall continued: 'The fact is, that enough houses are already being built in the City to meet the housing needs of families already here...and if necessary, the City has room for thousands more without using Green Belt land. The huge future "housing need" which the City claims justifies Green Belt development, arises from forecasts by the Oxfordshire Growth Board quango about the creation of 85,000 future new jobs for newcomers to the County who will require to be housed.'

On the basis of these economic aspirations for the County, the Growth Board commissioned the SHMA - the Strategic Housing Market Assessment, which predicted that 100,000 new houses – equivalent to two new cities the size of Oxford – would be required within the next sixteen years.[3]

'This is, of course, vanishingly unlikely' said Helen Marshall. 'Even if there was demand on that scale there would not be the capacity to build.'

'In any case' she added: it does not justify building on the Green Belt. The essence of Green Belts is their permanence; they have strong public support, as our research shows; and the Strategic Housing Market Assessment itself acknowledges that the forecast should not be met if it required use of Green Belt or other designated land.'

Helen Marshall concluded: 'The CPRE Green Belt survey is a wake-up call for all Councils with designs on Green Belt land. It is time for Council Leaders to abandon the Green Belt Review, as well as refuting the overblown Strategic Housing Market Assessment, which would destroy the rural character of our County, and to disown the Growth Board quango that is promoting both.'

-END-

NOTES TO EDITORS:

1. 'CPRE Oxfordshire Survey on attitudes towards Green Belts', Alpha Research, March 2015.
2. See appended Fact Sheet.
3. See Oxfordshire SHMA:
<https://www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/cms/sites/default/files/folders/documents/communityandliving/ourworkwithcommunities/oxfordshirepartnership/spatialplanninginfrastructure/SHMA%20Key%20Findings%20Summary.pdf>

See 'CPRE Response to Oxfordshire Strategic Housing Market Assessment: Unsound, Unachievable & Unwanted', 11 March 2014: <http://www.cpreoxon.org.uk/news/current-news/item/2358-oxfordshire-shma>

4. See 'In Defence of the Green Belt' by Dieter Helm, 20 April 2015:
<http://www.dieterhelm.co.uk/node/1404>

For more information see appended Q&A.

MEDIA CONTACTS:

Michael Tyce

Chairman, Thame District, Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE) Oxfordshire Branch

T: 01844 339274 / Mob: 07803 989583 / E: tycehouse@gmail.com

Helen Marshall

Director, Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE), Oxfordshire Branch

T: 01865 874780 / Mob: 07791 376365 / E: director@cpreoxon.org.uk

The Campaign to Protect Rural England fights for the Oxfordshire countryside: to protect it from the threats it faces, and to positively shape its future – join us today and stand up for your countryside!

CPRE Oxfordshire, 20 High Street, Watlington, OX49 5PY

www.cpreoxon.org.uk T: 01491 612079 E: administrator@cpreoxon.org.uk

facebook.com/CPREOxfordshire | [Twitter@CPREOxfordshire](https://twitter.com/CPREOxfordshire)

CPRE Oxfordshire is registered as a charity (No. 1093081) and company (No. 4443278) in England. Registered Office: CPRE Oxfordshire, 20 High Street, Watlington, OX49 5PY www.cpreoxon.org.uk

Fact Sheet: CPRE Oxfordshire Survey on attitudes towards Green Belts April 2015.

A survey of Oxfordshire residents was conducted by Alpha Research Ltd on behalf of the Oxfordshire branch of the Campaign for the Protection of Rural England (CPRE) in March 2015.

A sample of 400 Oxfordshire residents took part in the survey; 205 residents were interviewed in person in the centres of Abingdon, Botley, Kidlington, Oxford (Summertown) and Thame, while a further 195 residents from across Oxfordshire responded to the survey online.

The survey asked three questions about residents' knowledge of and attitudes towards Green Belts.

Key findings:

- **More than three quarters of Oxfordshire residents surveyed claimed to know at least 'a little' about Green Belts**, while one in three said that they knew 'a fair amount' or 'a great deal' about them.
- **About three quarters believed that the Green Belt around Oxford should remain open and undeveloped**, and that building should not be allowed on it. Only one in eight respondents disagreed.
- **House building, road building and other types of development such as factories, offices, warehouses and out of town shopping centres were regarded as the most serious threats to Green Belt land today.**

Awareness of Green Belts:

Q1. Thinking about the Oxford Green Belt, how much, if at all, do you know about Green Belts?

93% of respondents throughout the County were aware of the Green Belt. Most (73%) felt that they knew either 'a little' or 'a fair amount' about Green Belts, and 6% claimed to know 'a great deal'.

Older people, especially males, showed the greatest level of knowledge about Green Belts, whilst younger respondents (aged under 35 years) were significantly more likely than those in older age groups to claim to know nothing about Green Belts (43%). Females were also significantly more likely than males to say that they knew nothing about Green Belts (26% and 17% respectively). However in all groups the majority of people were aware of the Oxford Green Belt.

Knowledge of Green Belts was somewhat higher amongst home owners at 96% than non-home owners at 85%, although both groups showed a high level of awareness.

Development on Green Belt land:

Q2. How much, if at all, do you agree or disagree that the green belt around Oxford should remain open and undeveloped, and building on it not allowed?

Respondents were then given the following description of Green Belts:

Green belts are defined areas of countryside surrounding our largest towns and cities including Oxford where building of houses, out-of-town shopping centres, offices, warehouses and other kinds of development is usually not allowed. According to legislation the key reason green belts exist is to

prevent urban areas spreading out across the countryside and eventually joining up. But some would argue that Green Belts are preventing necessary development from happening in the best place.

They were asked if they agreed or disagreed with development on the Oxford Green Belt. Over three quarters (76%) considered that the Green Belt around Oxford should remain open and undeveloped, with only 12% disagreeing.

Whilst males were more likely to disagree than females, in both cases this was only a small percentage, 16% and 8% respectively. Otherwise, there were no significant differences in opinion amongst different demographic groups (social grade, age, area of residence). All subgroups strongly supported the openness of the Green Belt.

Threats to Green Belts:

Q3. Here are some things which may threaten Green Belt land. Which, if any, are the one or two most serious threats facing Green Belts today?

Respondents were shown a list of possible threats to Green Belt land and asked to select up to two which they regarded as the most serious threats facing Green Belts today.

House building on Green Belt land was the most commonly recognised threat, with two thirds of respondents (66%) identifying this. Road building and 'other types of development' (prompted as '...e.g. factories, offices, warehouses and out of town centres') were the next most commonly identified threats. The latter was particularly in evidence amongst those in the north east of the county (41%).

Those who were more open to development on Green Belt land were more likely to believe that Green Belts were threatened by neglect (16%) or fly-tipping (23%).

Methodology:

Classification data was gathered on age, sex, social grade, urban versus rural habitation, postcode and home ownership.

205 face to face interviews were conducted in March 2015 in and around Oxford. 40 or more interviews were conducted on a single day in each of five locations: Abingdon (40), Botley (40), Kidlington (45), Oxford (Summertown) (40) and Thame (40).

The online survey was completed by panel members in March 2015.

Sample:

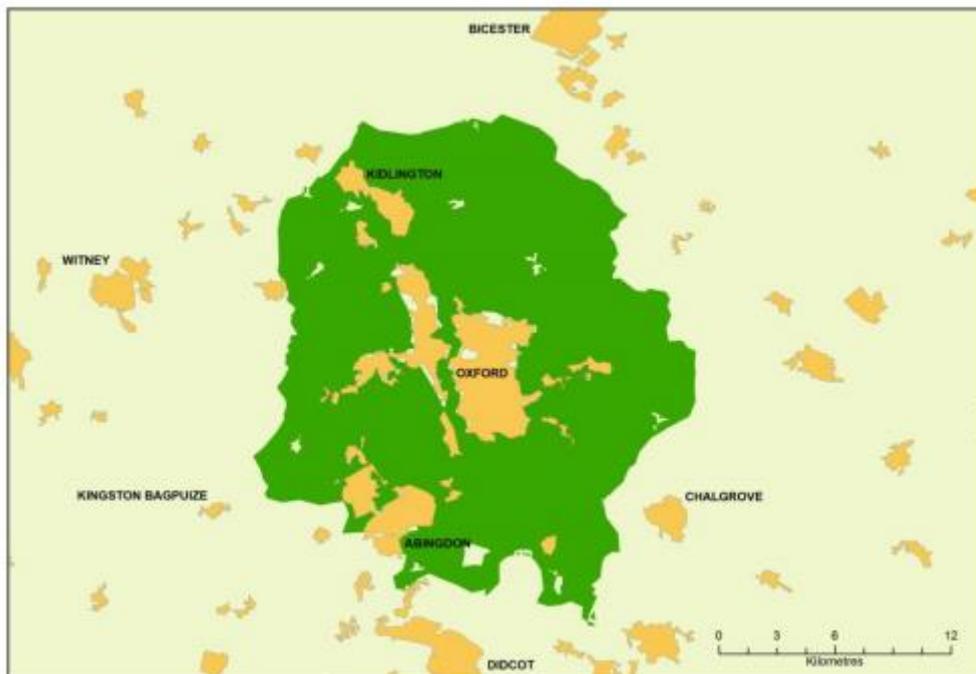
There were 400 responses to the survey: 195 from the online panel and 205 from the face to face survey. The profile of the achieved sample was broadly in line with Oxfordshire population profiles on dimensions such as age, sex and social grade. See Table below.

	Percentage in final sample
Male	45%
Female	55%
Aged 16-34y.	29%
Aged 35-54y.	36%
Aged 55y. +	34%
Lives in an urban area [self-defined]	16%
Lives in a suburban area [self-defined]	20%
Lives in a town [self-defined]	31%
Lives in a village or predominantly rural area [self-defined]	34%
Owns own home	59%
ABC1	68%
C2DE	32%
Lives in Oxford (OX1-4)	30%
Lives in postcodes adjacent to Oxford (OX5,13,14, 29, 33,44)	30%
Lives further out (other OX postcodes, RG9, SN7)	41%

Analysis:

All the data was fully verified and analysed in the statistical program SNAP.

Key Facts about the Oxford Green Belt



The concept of having a ‘Green Belt’ around London to restrain appalling urban sprawl was promoted by CPRE and others from about 1930. Proposals for the Oxford Green Belt were submitted in 1958.

Land Area: 66,868 hectares (13% of the total area of the county). This is 0.5% of the total land area of England (13,050,388 ha).

The total area of all Green Belts in England: 1.6 million hectares (13% of England's total land area).

What kind of place is the Oxford Green Belt?

In common with all other Green Belts, the primary planning purpose of the Oxford Green Belt is to prevent urban sprawl into the countryside and the coalescence of settlements. It is also intended to protect the setting of the historic City and to encourage the re-use of derelict land (brownfield sites) within it. It also serves as an opportunity for City dwellers to have ready access to the countryside, particularly obviously where the Green Belt to the South of Grenoble Road benefits residents of The Leys to the North.

In planning terms the quality and nature of the land within a Green Belt is irrelevant. However the Oxford Green Belt is almost entirely of high environmental value.

- Agriculture is an important aspect of this Green Belt, with a relatively high proportion being 'Best and Most Versatile' (Grade 1 or 2) quality land. The proportions of land registered as being in agricultural use, and taken up by Agri-Environment schemes aimed at promoting more environmentally sustainable land management, are also higher than the national average.
- Landscape quality is being 'maintained' in virtually all (99%) of this Green Belt.
- There are important resources in terms of a dense public rights of way network, and a high proportion of broadleaf and ancient woodland.
- This Green Belt has proportionally more land at risk of flooding than any other Green Belt (6920 hectares or 20% of the land area).

Agriculture

19% (compared with 17% of land nationally) is Grade 1 or Grade 2, or the 'best and most versatile' agricultural land.

76% (compared with 71% of land nationally), or 24,253 ha, is currently in agricultural use.

70% (17,810 ha) of the total agricultural land is subject to Natural England funding supporting environmentally sensitive farming ('agri-environment schemes'. 67% of agricultural land nationally, and 53% of all Green Belt agricultural land, is subject to agri-environment schemes).

Landscape Quality

99% of the Oxford Green Belt is being 'maintained' in terms of landscape character. This is largely due to the maintenance of patterns of agriculture as well as land management for wildlife. Only 1 hectare of the Oxford Green Belt coincides with land designated as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB).

Nature Conservation

1,754 ha are registered as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). This represents 5% of the Oxford Green Belt, and 0.5% of the national total of SSSI land.

Public Access and Recreation

There are 17 metres of public rights of way for every hectare of land (nationally there are 14 metres per ha) and 241 ha of open access land. The Oxford Green Belt Way, set up by a local CPRE volunteer, provides a 50 mile circular route well linked to public transport:

<http://www.cpreoxon.org.uk/campaigns/oxford-green-belt/walk-the-green-belt-way/item/2191-walk-the-green-belt-way>

113 ha of Country Parks (0.3% of overall Oxford Green Belt area. 0.3%, or 42,135 ha of land nationally is Country Park).

639 ha is Registered (historic) Park and Garden (1.9% of overall Oxford Green Belt area; the national total is 170,734 ha or 1.3% of the total land area).

Broad-Leaf and Mixed Woodland

13% (compared to 8% of land nationally), or 4,304 hectares of the land area is broadleaf and mixed woodland. 5% (compared with 3% of land nationally) or 1,520 hectares is in the national inventory of ancient woodland.

Public Aspirations

Asked what Green Belt activities they would like to undertake in the next twelve month, the public in the wider South East region (of which Oxford is part) most commonly chose:

- Visiting Green Belt land on a day out with friends/family
- Visiting Green Belt land to get peace and quiet
- Buying food grown or produced in the Green Belt

When asked what they would like to see more of in the Green Belt, the public in the South East were keen to see:

- Nature reserves
- Woodland walks
- New Parks

88% of the public in the South East agreed that they would buy food known to have been grown or produced by farmers in the Green Belt local to them rather than buy food produced elsewhere.

Source: 'Green Belts in England: Key Facts', Campaign to Protect Rural England, January 2010:

<http://www.cpre.org.uk/resources/housing-and-planning/green-belts/item/1957-green-belts-in-england-key-facts>

Question & Answer: CPRE Oxfordshire Green Belt Survey

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 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 sixteen 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:

<http://www.google.co.uk/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=2&ved=0CCgQFjAB&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.parliament.uk%2Fbriefing-papers%2Fsn00934.pdf&ei=qy4yVe-9NMjeasqngEA&usg=AFQjCNGTA7XdC4Ggj6E7AxflIBRO9pUZtA&bvm=bv.91071109,d.d2s>

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's research?

A. It was done by Alpha Research, an established Oxfordshire polling company. It has 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 sixteen 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