

Speech by Bob Price at the OCS@50 Green Belt debate on April 11, 2019

Oxford has grown within its boundaries over the past century to a city of 160,000 people. The establishment of Morris Motors and the Pressed Steel factory brought an influx of workers from all over the British Isles during the inter-war period .

Florence Park was developed at that time, and there was a lot of Council house building in Headington, Cutteslowe, Morrell Avenue and Weirs Lane and Donnington. After World War 2, governments of both parties made huge efforts to provide decent homes for everyone and to get rid of the many Victorian slums. In Oxford, new estates were created at Barton, Blackbird Leys, Rose Hill, Cowley Airfield, Wood Farm, Northway, Marston, and Littlemore, and there were major new private developments in Cowley and Headington.

More recently, the developments in Greater Leys, Barton Park, the Wolvercote Paper Mill, and along the Oxford Canal from Jericho to St Edward's School, have further added to the city's housing stock.

This growth of housing was directly linked to a steady growth in jobs and in the population of the city . If we just take the period since the outbreak of WW2, there was a 50,000 increase in the city's population between 1940 and 1970, and a further 60,000 increase between 1970 and 2020. There are over 90,000 jobs in the city today which is well in excess of the number of economically active residents. Between 1997 and 2017, Oxford had the 6th fastest employment growth in the country, and the second fastest growth of private sector jobs.

But here's the rub! This growth in jobs and the number of residents has not been accompanied by a similar growth in the number of homes. With demand outstripping supply, the result is that Oxford is now one of the most expensive places to buy or rent in Europe. The mean house price in Oxford has topped half a million pounds, and the ratio of average house price to average earnings at 17.3 is the highest in the UK. Rental costs are equally excessive – 30% of our residents live in rented accommodation and the average rent is 58% of average earnings – again the highest in the country. Only 47% of families own their own home in Oxford compared to the national average of 63%.

The consequences of the very high cost of housing in the city are threefold;

First, there is a massive social cost. For young people growing up in the city, there is little prospect of being able to establish their own family within the city. The government's help to buy scheme has supported less than 20 purchases in Oxford as against nearly 3000 in for example Milton Keynes and Swindon. Many young couples live in overcrowded conditions in their parents' homes and the Council's family homelessness unit deals every week with cases of young families who have to leave a parental home because of strains and conflicts. The high cost of housing is affecting the quality of life and wellbeing of many thousands of our fellow citizens. Nearly 30% of Oxford's children are growing up in households that are below the poverty line after taking housing costs into account – largely because their rents are so high.

Second, employers in every sector face massive recruitment and retention difficulties because of the high cost of housing. Companies as different as Carter Jonas, Centrica and Oxford Biomedica all have staff whose journeys to work take 90 minutes each way ; Oxford Bus Company pays the highest salaries for bus drivers in the UK and still experiences difficulties; recruitment and retention of teachers and medical staff at every level is a constant struggle; the Universities frequently offer posts to academic and research staff who turn them down because of unacceptably high housing costs, and the hospitality sector relies massively on workers coming from other countries - particularly from other EU countries.

Third, since the number of jobs in the city substantially outstrips the number of economically active residents, about half of Oxford's workers, that's 50,000 people, commute into the city every day. This creates the familiar beginning and end of day traffic problems with queues for buses and trains, and queues of cars on the main roads in and out of the city.

This picture has been a familiar one for most of the present century and has been getting steadily worse. The six Oxfordshire local authorities came together in 2008 to jointly tackle the urgent need for new homes across the county. In 2012 they commissioned a joint Strategic Housing Market Assessment as required by the Coalition Government's National Planning Policy Framework. This independent analysis concluded that around 100,000 new homes would be required across the county by 2031. Oxford city itself would require between 23,000 and 28,000 new homes to tackle the pent-up backlog as well as the expected future growth. Further work has shown that there is space within the city for another 8000 homes on the remaining brownfield sites and some limited intensification, but a further 15,000 are needed to meet the city's total unmet need.

So, the question facing us this evening is what contribution to that unmet need can and should be made by developments outside the city boundary in Green Belt locations.

The Oxford Green Belt is not a 'belt' as you might normally define it – a slim band to help hold up your sagging trousers -it's more like a double sized cummerbund on a dress suit. It covers 66,000 hectares (170,000 acres) around the city – pretty much the whole of central Oxfordshire from Benson in the south to Bletchington in the north, and Fyfield in the west to Warmington in the east.

It is not a designation which denotes any special landscape value or quality of biodiversity – the area I've just described includes a wide variety of different types of landscape and of natural and man-made environments. Areas of significant landscape and biodiversity significance are protected through a number of other special designations.

A Green Belt designation has three primary aims: to prevent an unplanned sprawl of built up areas, to prevent neighbouring towns from coalescing, and to preserve the setting and special character of historic towns.

They have been part of the national planning framework since the 1950s, but Green Belts were not intended to prevent development but to ensure that any development that is proposed is critically examined against these three stringent tests. There have to be some exceptional circumstances.

So, following the Housing Needs Assessment, the six local authorities employed consultants to undertake detailed evaluations of a large number of potential development sites within the Oxford Green Belt to see how they performed against these statutory criteria, and also against the important urban planning criteria of having good links to transport networks and to existing communities. It makes sense from a community, family wellbeing and environmental impact perspective to limit the time and distance of commuting. Homes for people working in Oxford should be well connected by public transport routes to their places of employment or within an easy cycling distance.

The majority of sites considered were rejected and a small number retained for consideration by the respective District Councils for inclusion in their new Local Plans. These Plans are currently going through the planning process and will be considered by Planning Inspectors during the next 12-15 months.

They include land around Kidlington, Yarnton and Begbroke in the Cherwell District; land at Marston and Redbridge within the city; urban extensions south of Blackbird Leys and north of Barton and Northway in South Oxfordshire; and land around Abingdon and Wootton in the Vale of White Horse area.

There are arguments to be made both for and against each of these sites, applying the criteria which I have described, and these will be made at length in the public inquiries. But some of them must be developed if we are to tackle the housing crisis and to keep faith with future generations of our fellow citizens as well as supporting the new generation of businesses in central Oxfordshire which are creating the future wealth of the nation. It will be impossible to achieve these vital social and economic outcomes unless there are some new housing developments in the Oxford Green Belt.

The real debate, I think, is not whether this is necessary but on what scale, and in which locations. Those issues are now in the hands of the Planning Inspectorate. But the Oxfordshire local authorities agree that it makes sense to build new communities on the edge of the city and existing urban areas so that they can be integrated with them and planned to create attractive, healthy communities with a light environmental footprint and limited reliance on the private motor car. The alternative of onion ring developments on the outskirts of every village and small town across the county would substantially damage the environmental quality of Oxfordshire and create more homes dependent on the motor car .

Even if all the sites that are being promoted are developed, they would add up to less than 2% of the total Green Belt area, and that could be replaced by designating new areas. (eg Woodstock)

Referring back to the question that the Civic Society set for this debate, I hope that you will agree that we owe it to the future citizens of our city and our county, and the common

good, to give due weight to, both the need for new homes within well planned new developments, as well as the functions that Green Belts were designed to perform.

We all want to maintain the county's many beautiful and accessible areas of countryside, and its rural character and I put it you that these are best secured by well planned new communities on the edge of the city, rather than piecemeal suburban growths around rural towns and villages. In this way, we can create a city which works well for all its communities, and which is set within a natural environment that is attractive and a source of pleasure for everyone.