

OXFORD CIVIC SOCIETY DEBATE

Speech by Mike Tyce at the OCS@50 Green Belt debate on April 11, 2019

There can be no question that people in need of housing must be housed, or that if no reasonable alternative is available that Green Belt land should be considered. But actual housing need can be met without touching Green Belt land. Local Councils are planning to dismember the Green Belt in pursuit of a maximum growth strategy, exactly what the Green Belt was designed to prevent, and directly contrary to the public interest.

In the 1930s urban sprawl was clearly eroding the fine balance between town and country essential in our small but increasingly crowded island.

CPRE campaigned then for the creation of Green Belts. In 1955 an Act of Parliament gave Local Authorities the powers to set them up, specifying that they should be several miles wide, in order to

- Check further growth of large built up areas

- Safeguard the countryside from **further** encroachment.

- Prevent neighbouring towns merging

- Preserve the special character of a town.

Then and now the essential characteristics of Green Belts were their openness and their permanence. That is, their enduring purpose is to endure. Patently, if the Green Belt is to prevent urban sprawl, it cannot be let out whenever urban areas feel like sprawling. Urbanising development is harmful by definition.

Ever since their creation Green Belts have been overwhelmingly supported by the public. Our 2015 opinion poll across Oxfordshire showed that 76% of us considered the Green Belt should remain open and undeveloped despite acknowledged pressure for housing and other development, with only 12% saying it should be built on. The public saw housing as by far the greatest threat to it. The support for the Green Belt remaining open was essentially the same in Oxford as in the rural areas and the County towns.

The Oxford Green Belt was set up in 1958. The Green Belt surrounding Oxford does not belong to Oxford itself – it is not even within the City’s boundaries - but to the whole of Oxfordshire, to the nearby countryside, the villages it protects from urban encroachment, and the other County towns it prevents becoming mere dependencies of an ever Greater Oxford. The countryside surrounding the City is uniquely important to preserving its special character. Matthew Arnold’s famous dreaming spires poem is not really about Oxford itself, but is an elegy to the green fields and villages that form its setting. – and which, thanks to the Green Belt, can still be enjoyed today. Ideally perhaps from the circular Green Belt Way walk created by CPRE, of which you can find details on our website

From the very beginning though there was tension between City expansionism – the driver of urban sprawl – and containment of it – the Green Belts purpose.

Stating the obvious the Green Belt Act had required that:

“within the urban areas thus defined every effort should be made to prevent any further building for industrial or commercial purposes, since, if this is allowed, it would lead to a

demand for more labour and in turn a demand for the development of additional land for housing.”

But even as Oxford's signature was drying on the contract it was busily engaged in exactly the course of action the Act sought to prevent.

St Ebbe's, a large area of affordable housing near Paradise Street in the City Centre was being torn down to build car parks. Echoing Joni Mitchells environmental protest song, "they paved over Paradise and put up a parking lot". The offices and shops of the Westgate and now the new Westgate followed. First reducing the supply of houses by pulling them down, then increasing demand for housing with 3,500 new jobs.

This set the pattern. Barton was Green Belt once, as was the Northern Gateway. The Northern Gateway site is being used primarily for new offices, creating new jobs in a City with already overfull employment and therefore again ratcheting up commuting and housing demand. Increasing demand whilst deliberately constraining supply is the classic driver of increasing prices. This is exactly the behaviour the Green Belt Act was intended to prevent.

Although the City twice sought to extend its boundaries over the Green Belt surrounding it, expansionism was constrained because the Green Belt lies within the territory of neighbouring District Councils.

All that changed in 2014 with the advent of the Oxfordshire Growth Board, an unelected body set up by Local Authority Leaders to dictate strategy to their own elected Councils, circumventing the requirement for public consultation.

As the name suggests, handing control to a Growth Board has meant that the balance between safeguarding our environment and growth has lurched almost entirely towards growth.

In current Local Plans Local Councils are right now planning to build 100,000 more houses in just twelve years. That is a 40% increase in our total housing stock, two new cities the size of Oxford by 2031. At the same time, they are hard at work on an even larger scheme to succeed it, another 250,000 houses by 2050. Taken together this is housing equivalent to six new cities the size of Oxford, or a 2.5 times increase in the size of every existing settlement in the County, including Oxford itself.

This is all passed off to the public in Local Plans as "Housing Need". Alice in Wonderland's Humpty Dumpty, himself an Oxford Man, used to say that when he used words they meant what he wanted them to mean, neither more nor less. So is it with Housing Need in Local Plans.

To the public, "Housing Need" can only mean current residents presently in need of houses. Of course, everyone believes such a need must be met.

But what the new Local Plans describe as Housing Need has very little indeed to do with current residents' actual needs.

As the Growth Board admits they are ***placing economic growth at the heart of a drive to provide more housing, significantly in excess of Local Housing Need figures.***

Something of an understatement. Their housing target is five TIMES the official forecast of housing need for Oxfordshire.

The housing numbers Local Plans contain are not actual housing need, but the Growth Board's target for housebuilding to attract enough new people to move to Oxford and Oxfordshire from somewhere else, to man the maximum rate of industrial and commercial expansion the Growth Board considers Oxfordshire could achieve.

For Oxford itself 28,000 houses are assessed to be required to support just the first smaller phase of the Growth Plan up to 2031, a 50% increase in current housing stock, and an even greater increase than Oxfordshire as a whole.

Under Growth Board direction, the Districts that once protected the Green Belt are now opening it up to Oxford's long-term strategy of urban sprawl, with plans to build on Green Belt land right round the City's edge; at Elsfield, Sandford, Horspath, and Kidlington. This is 15000 houses for Oxford, not to accommodate Oxford's actual need, which can be met in the City itself, but to support Oxford's continuing growth strategy - exactly the urban sprawl the Green Belt was set up to prevent and for the purposes the 1955 Act condemned.

Meanwhile the neighbouring Councils are seizing chunks of the Green Belt for their own growth allocations with a large new town on green riverbank near Culham, and major incursions at Berinsfield, Radley, Abingdon and elsewhere.

Just for the first smaller tranche of the Growth Strategy, that is 1600 hectares of Green Belt land lost – an area six times the size of the town of Thame.

Each local plan is full of protestations that what remains of the Green Belt will be defended to the death of course, but that actually means only until the much larger phase 2 of the Growth Plan. Pro rata that would be at least 15 Thames or the equivalent of another Oxford and a half.

The Councils all say that only the least sensitive bits of the Green Belt will be taken initially (exactly the way the Death of a Thousand Cuts was administered in China in order to prolong the agony).

But even that is not true. All of the Green Belt serves the Green Belt's purposes and what could be more sensitive than building over swathes of Green Belt right at the City's edge – the very epitome of the urban sprawl the Green Belt was set up to prevent.

Government Policy requires all other options to be dismissed first. Only a quarter of Oxfordshire is Green Belt. All the Councils have alternative options. Oxford's own plan shows it can accommodate all of its actual need within the City itself, the most sustainable place to do so; and if the City stopped ringfencing land for yet more employment, stopped preventing conversion of commercial premises to housing, and built at the higher densities CPRE has urged it to do for years, and as Government policy now requires it to do – it could accommodate far more.

Tonight's proposition is that *release of Green Belt to meet housing need benefits the common good without undermining the enduring purpose of the Green Belt.* (“Release” of Green Belt land is another phrase Humpty Dumpty would have been proud of, meaning, as it does, building on it). But the common good as understood by 75% of the Oxfordshire public is to leave the Green Belt open and untouched; building on it by definition undermines the enduring purpose of the Green Belt, which is to endure; the claimed “housing need” is almost entirely a mask for a strategy of accelerated population

increase to fuel exponential commercial growth, the very thing the 1955 Act created the Green Belt to prevent.

Even if there were a “housing need” on anything approaching the scale Councils misleadingly allege, there is no shortage of alternative locations without touching Green Belt land. Nor would building on the Green Belt be a mechanism to address house prices. The Kate Barker report showed why no conceivable amount of house building could bring prices down. In Oxford’s case prices are being stoked up by the City’s demand creation, and the core purpose of the Growth Strategy is more of the same, attracting more people to move here and providing housing to support economic growth.

In the short term all of the Councils current plans to build on the Green Belt, purportedly for housing need but actually in pursuit of the Growth Strategy, are unjustifiable and should be scrapped. In the longer term, the inescapable fact is that if Oxford’s physical growth is not checked it will be the existential threat to the Green Belt the 1955 Act foresaw. Remorseless urban sprawl; and the loss of the careful balance between Oxford and its setting, and with the wider County beyond, that has made Oxfordshire such an attractive place to live and work.

The Growth Strategy, which is set to sprawl out over the Green Belt could easily be transferred elsewhere with positive rather than harmful effects. Maybe to the North of England, maybe to nearby Swindon where jobs are needed for people already there, and houses are half the price of Oxford.

But the Green Belt which protects the County from Oxford urban sprawl, preserves the City’s incomparable setting, and safeguards the City whose historic assets and layout in any case make it unsuitable as a growth hub; the Green Belt that 75% of us believe should be left open and not built on; that precious Green Belt cannot be moved.

Overwhelmingly the public wish the Green Belt to be left open and undeveloped to serve the purposes for which it was intended; but Councils are planning to erode it away under false pretences.

Before irrevocable steps are taken behind closed doors, we are all entitled to an open and honest consultation about the future of our County; and particularly on such a defining issue as the deliberate dismantling of the Green Belt we treasure to enable the very growth strategy it was designed to prevent.

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Note: the “actual” official housing need figures are taken from the Government’s published Household Projections although these only go up to 2039 and so have been extrapolated at the same rate to 2050. The Government projections are based on current household formation rates and therefore reflect current growth rates - but not the hugely accelerated growth in the Oxfordshire Growth Deal and upcoming Oxfordshire Plan.