

Press Release, Monday 18 May 2020.

CHERWELL DEVELOPMENT WATCH ALLIANCE

OXFORD TO GET HALF AS BIG AGAIN WITH ITS DEVELOPMENT PLAN

Oxford is planning to grow by fifty percent over the next twenty years if the city council signs off on its Local Plan at a virtual full council meeting on 8 June. This would be equivalent to adding a new town like Bracknell onto the historic city.

Under the Plan, most of the City's massive housing growth will be passed on to its neighbouring districts to fulfil, with the majority planned for the Green Belt surrounding Oxford. Four and a half thousand of the houses will be built just to the north of the city, filling the 'Kidlington Gap', destroying the North Oxford Golf Course, and effectively joining the city to the villages of Begbroke, Kidlington and Yarnton in one urban sprawl.

Councillors from the County Council, Cherwell District Council, and all the local parishes together with five planning professionals, nine community groups, and the local MP for Oxford West and Abingdon, Layla Moran, have signed a four page letter to Robert Jenrick, Minister for Housing, Communities and Local Government asking him to intervene in the Oxford and Cherwell Plans. The letter challenges Oxford's calculation of need and asks Mr Jenrick to honour the Government's manifesto commitment to protect the Green Belt.

Alan Lodwick, author of the letter and committee member of the Cherwell Development Watch Alliance (CDWA), states: *"Oxford's claimed numbers cannot conceivably represent the City's need, under any accepted definition. The rates of expansion envisaged would be as great as those of the New Towns during their fastest periods of growth. Such growth is wholly inappropriate to the city of Oxford whose centre is already suffering congestion and pollution"*.

Mr. Lodwick goes on to say that a leading consultancy in housing need assessment, acting for CDWA, showed at the public examinations of both the Cherwell and Oxford Plans that this need has been exaggerated by a factor of around two. The letter states that *"This was also confirmed in a late draft of Oxford's own evidence, provided to us in response to a Freedom of Information request, which shows how the final version was altered very late in the day to conceal its conclusion on an objective assessment of Oxford's housing need which was about half the level put forward in the plan"*. It also points to the projection by the Office for National Statistics (published in March) of a **decline** in Oxford City's population over the plan period as reinforcing CDWA's evidence.

Many of the Plans' provisions are to build houses for the exclusive use of the University rather than for local residents. Giles Lewis, Chair of CDWA, acknowledged that the county as a whole should help to ensure that Oxford's world class university continues to thrive. *"But we believe that this can be achieved without destroying what makes Oxford such a special place and which the Green Belt protects. This was acknowledged in a Times leader on March 4th that the Green Belt has 'largely worked, by ensuring that historic cities such as Oxford and York can be enjoyed without approaching them through a desert of urban sprawl'"*.

People living in the Green Belt settlements to the North of Oxford have been almost unanimously opposed to these plans. Cherwell Council received an **unprecedented** level of objections and acknowledged in its Statement of Consultation that *"the vast majority of the representations raised objections to the Plan."* Most of the twenty five signatories of the letter to Mr. Jenrick have been fiercely opposed to Cherwell's Plan since the council launched its first consultation in 2017.

The letter reminds Mr. Jenrick that the then housing minister, Alok Sharma, responding to a question on the Plan from local MP, Layla Moran in the House of Commons in 2017, said: *‘We are committed to retaining the current Green Belt protections. There may be exceptional circumstances in which a local authority chooses to amend its Green Belt, but it has to take its local community with it.’*

“The government’s election manifesto stated that the green belt would be protected and enhanced. Were these just hollow and meaningless words?” asked Mr Lewis. *“We are dismayed that the government is allowing this to happen. Recent local elections have seen voters look to other parties in an attempt to protect the Green Belt and Oxfordshire’s rural character.”*

In the letter, Mr. Lodwick points out that the effects of the current public health emergency will undoubtedly disrupt the economy, the housing market and house building for a considerable time. *“Any urgency that could have been claimed for the adoption of these plans has now disappeared. As things stand, the widespread release of Green Belt land is likely to lead to ‘cherry picking’ of sites by developers and undesirable, uncoordinated development. The emergency, while tragic in its consequences, does give an opportunity to rethink the plans, to make them more sustainable and to avoid the Green Belt development that is contrary to Government policy and commitments.”*

END