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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
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26 January 2020

Dear Secretary of State

Government commitment to protecting Oxford's Green Belt

Local plan proposals in and around Oxford are currently proposing the release of large areas of Green Belt around the city. In particular, Cherwell District Council is progressing the allocation of sites for 4,400 houses within the Green Belt, ostensibly to cater for unmet housing need within Oxford.

The Cherwell Local Plan proposals are based on a "working assumption" of the amount of Oxford's housing need that cannot be met within the city. The Inspectors considering the Oxford Local Plan raised a series of searching questions about the housing assumptions and the figures contained within it. There were also concerns that the capacity for housing development within Oxford itself has been significantly underestimated. However, the Inspectors' interim conclusions suggest that they will accept the need, and though they have expressed the view that more housing inside Oxford is possible, have not sought to alter the resulting 'overspill' figures.

We are nonetheless left with the position that the very high building rates in Oxford's 2014 strategic market housing assessment (SHMA) appear to have been used as a basis for local plans around Oxford without being seriously tested. Analysis by leading specialist independent consultants has concluded that they are not credible, and that the SHMA represents an 'outlier' with building rates around Oxford similar to those of Milton Keynes at its peak. Indeed Oxford City Council is no longer defending the results of the 2014 SHMA. The 2018 update for Oxford showed an annual need of just over half that identified in the 2014 study. So in practice these discredited earlier figures are still being used as the basis of local plans for the districts around Oxford to cater for the needs of the city that the city council considers it cannot accommodate within its boundaries. The housing allocations in these plans – **all** of them in Oxford's Green Belt in Cherwell's case - cannot sensibly be defended on the grounds of meeting the needs of Oxford.

The Oxford Green Belt has been a key feature of planning in Oxfordshire for well over 50 years. It has been staunchly defended by your predecessors, both Conservative and Labour. For instance, in 1987 the Secretary of State stated that there was only very limited scope for further development around Oxford, and that once the Green Belt boundaries had been defined they should be strictly observed [letter approving the Oxfordshire Structure Plan 15 April 1987]. The boundaries were subsequently defined through statutory local plans. The NPPF continues to stress the importance and permanence of Green Belts, and that only exceptional circumstances can justify changing their boundaries.

As things stand there is the prospect that Cherwell will proceed to adopt a local plan which results in the development of large areas of land currently within the Green Belt.

Crucially, given the climate emergency that both central and local government now recognise, there is a stronger than ever case for conserving green space that can provide biodiversity and other benefits. Indeed, as Professor Dieter Helm has argued, using the Oxford Green Belt as an example, Green Belts perform a vital economic as well as environmental function [“In defence of the Green Belt’, April 2015 <http://www.dieterhelm.co.uk/assets/secure/documents/Green-Belt-Paper-.pdf>].

Finally, there is an issue of trust. Government statements indicate a continuing commitment to Green Belt protection. In the light of that and in the interests of the proper planning of the wider Oxford area I would ask you to intervene, and to use your powers to prevent Cherwell District Council proceeding with their local plan proposals as they stand.

If you do not, and particularly given your intervention in the case of South Oxfordshire’s local plan over an arguably less significant issue, people are likely to infer that the Government’s stated commitment to the concept and protection of the Green Belt cannot be relied upon.

As the Cherwell local plan proposals are currently at an advanced stage I look forward to your response as a matter of urgency.

Yours sincerely,

Chris Cousins
on behalf of POETS

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