


Oxford Core Strategy Examination Statement of Oxford City Council		
C/M2/5	Matter 2 – The Strategy Issue 5 – The Green Belt	

i) Should a more general review of the Green Belt have been undertaken in order to identify potential further areas for growth?

Prior to publication of the Preferred Options document, the City Council conducted an initial review of broad areas of Oxford’s inner Green Belt (Green Belt within Oxford’s administrative boundary) to consider whether there was any potential for development. The outcome of that initial assessment is summarised in the table at page 73 of the Core Strategy Preferred Options document (CD6/4), and in the Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment (SHLAA, CD14/1) at pages 63-64. Appendix 1 of this statement reproduces the table and the accompanying map from the SHLAA for ease of reference.

This initial review found that there was little realistic potential for significant Green Belt releases within Oxford because the majority of Green Belt land is also covered by intrinsic constraints such as flood plain and nature conservation designations (including the Oxford Meadows Special Area of Conservation and a number of Sites of Special Scientific Interest).

The largest areas of Green Belt follow the river corridors of the Thames and Cherwell, which penetrate into the heart of the city (see map at Appendix 1). Protection of the Green Belt therefore helps to retain the distinctive physical form of the city, whereby the river corridors run either side of Oxford’s historic core and provide an essential part of its special character and landscape setting. Other areas of Green Belt are considered to be important in preventing the coalescence of different parts of the city (e.g. the Marston/Summertown gap) or in providing key outdoor sports and leisure facilities (e.g. the land at Marston junction including Oxford City Football Club and OxRad).

It is also relevant to note that the Panel which conducted the South East Plan Examination-in-Public (CD10/3) decided not to recommend a strategic Green Belt review on the basis that this would result in yet more delay and could also cause needless worry to residents that it would be opening a ‘Pandora’s box’ with the risk that the whole Green Belt would become vulnerable¹. The Panel therefore

¹ The South East Plan Examination in Public: Report of the Panel, (August 2007), para 22.65

recommended a highly focused, selective review of the Green Belt on the southern edge of Oxford, and the Secretary of State accepted the Panel's recommendation.

Having regard to the conclusions of the City Council's initial assessment of Green Belt land inside Oxford, and to the Panel's recommendation in relation to the wider Green Belt outside the city's administrative boundary, there was no basis for a more general review of the Green Belt to have been undertaken.

ii) What is meant by "small-scale review" of Green Belt boundaries?

The reference to small-scale review of existing Green Belt boundaries in Core Strategy Policy CS4 follows on from the initial scoping exercise mentioned above. The SHLAA (CD14/1) concludes that the locations shown as GB1, GB2, GB4, GB5 and GB6 in the map at Appendix 1 would be unsuitable for development because of the reasons listed in the table.

With regard to the locations shown as GB3 and GB7 in the map at Appendix 1, the SHLAA indicates that there could be some areas that may be suitable for development. In the case of land at GB7, the scope for development is, however, likely to be very limited because much of GB7 is in the flood plain and designated for nature conservation value. In addition, this land helps to protect the gap between Marston and Summertown.

The SHLAA then assesses the land at Northern Gateway/Pear Tree (GB3) and in the Marston/Summertown gap (GB7) in more detail, and finds only one area of land west of the Oxford Hotel potentially suitable for housing. This area is 7.78 ha in total (0.64% of the total Green Belt inside the city), and not all of this is likely to be suitable having regard to conservation area and noise issues.

However, the SHLAA is not a policy document and merely provides background evidence on the potential availability of land for housing. Core Strategy Policy CS4 indicates that the Northern Gateway Area Action Plan and the Site Allocations DPD will consider the potential for any small-scale review of existing Green Belt boundaries, and provides guidance for those future DPD's by setting out the criteria that would need to be met before any land could be released from the Green Belt. 'Small-scale' is an appropriate terminology because of the limited land area that these reviews will cover.

iii) Why is this necessary?

It is recognised that permanence is a key characteristic of Green Belts, as set out in PPG2: Green Belts (1995). Paragraph 2.7 of PPG2 states that 'where existing local plans are being revised and updated, existing Green Belt boundaries should not be

changed unless alterations to the structure plan have been approved, or other exceptional circumstances exist, which necessitate such revision’.

PPG2 of course predates the development planning system brought in by the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004. Reference therefore needs to be made to the Regional Spatial Strategy and the Core Strategy, rather than to the Structure Plan. As well as making provision for a selective review of the Oxford Green Belt to the south of the city, South East Plan Policy SP5 (Green Belts) (CD10/1) also indicates that small-scale local reviews of the Green Belt should be pursued through the local development framework process.

Paragraph 22.18 of the South East Plan sets out the exceptional circumstances that exist to justify a selective review of Green Belt boundaries taking place on the southern edge of the city. Those exceptional circumstances are:

- “the regional imperative to deliver higher housing numbers and economic growth;
- persisting jobs-housing imbalances;
- poor housing affordability and a backlog of need;
- worsening traffic congestion and staff recruitment and retention problems;
- a lack of realistic alternatives to focusing growth at Oxford, combined with a lack of capacity within Oxford.”

In the City Council’s view, the circumstances that exist to justify a selective review of the Green Belt to the south of the city could equally apply to any reviews of Green Belt boundaries within the city, albeit that those reviews would be on a much smaller scale. In the context of the intense development pressures faced in Oxford and the scarcity of available land, it makes sense to at least investigate the possibility of accommodating some development on Green Belt land.

With regard specifically to the Green Belt land at Northern Gateway/Pear Tree, paragraph 22.9 of the South East Plan indicates that “options regarding the location, level and form of employment or other development, including the possible use of land at and in the immediate vicinity of the currently safeguarded land at Peartree, will be a matter for local determination”. By referring to the possible use of land “in the immediate vicinity” of the safeguarded land at Peartree, it is arguable that the South East Plan provides exceptional circumstances to justify a Green Belt review as part of the Northern Gateway AAP. Further clarification on this point is being sought from GOSE.

In any event, it is considered prudent to investigate the role of all adjoining pieces of land when proposing development in the Northern Gateway area. This will help

enable the AAP to plan for future development in a coordinated and integrated manner, drawing the different land parcels together to create an overall vision for the area. The Green Belt land in the immediate vicinity of the Safeguarded Lnad (within the city boundary) will be considered as part of the Northern Gateway AAP, applying the criteria set out in Core Strategy Policy CS4.

iv) Would this create unnecessary uncertainty?

The City Council intends to make speedy progress with the Northern Gateway Area Action Plan and the Site Allocations DPD, thereby ensuring that there will not be an extended period of uncertainty. Initial work on the Northern Gateway Area Action Plan has already started and it will be submitted to the Secretary of State during 2010. Work on the Site Allocations DPD is programmed to commence in July 2009 with the DPD being submitted to the Secretary of State in 2011.

In light of the reasons for carrying out the review of Green Belt boundaries, together with the fact that they will be progressed in a timely fashion, the Council does not believe that this proposal will create unnecessary uncertainty.

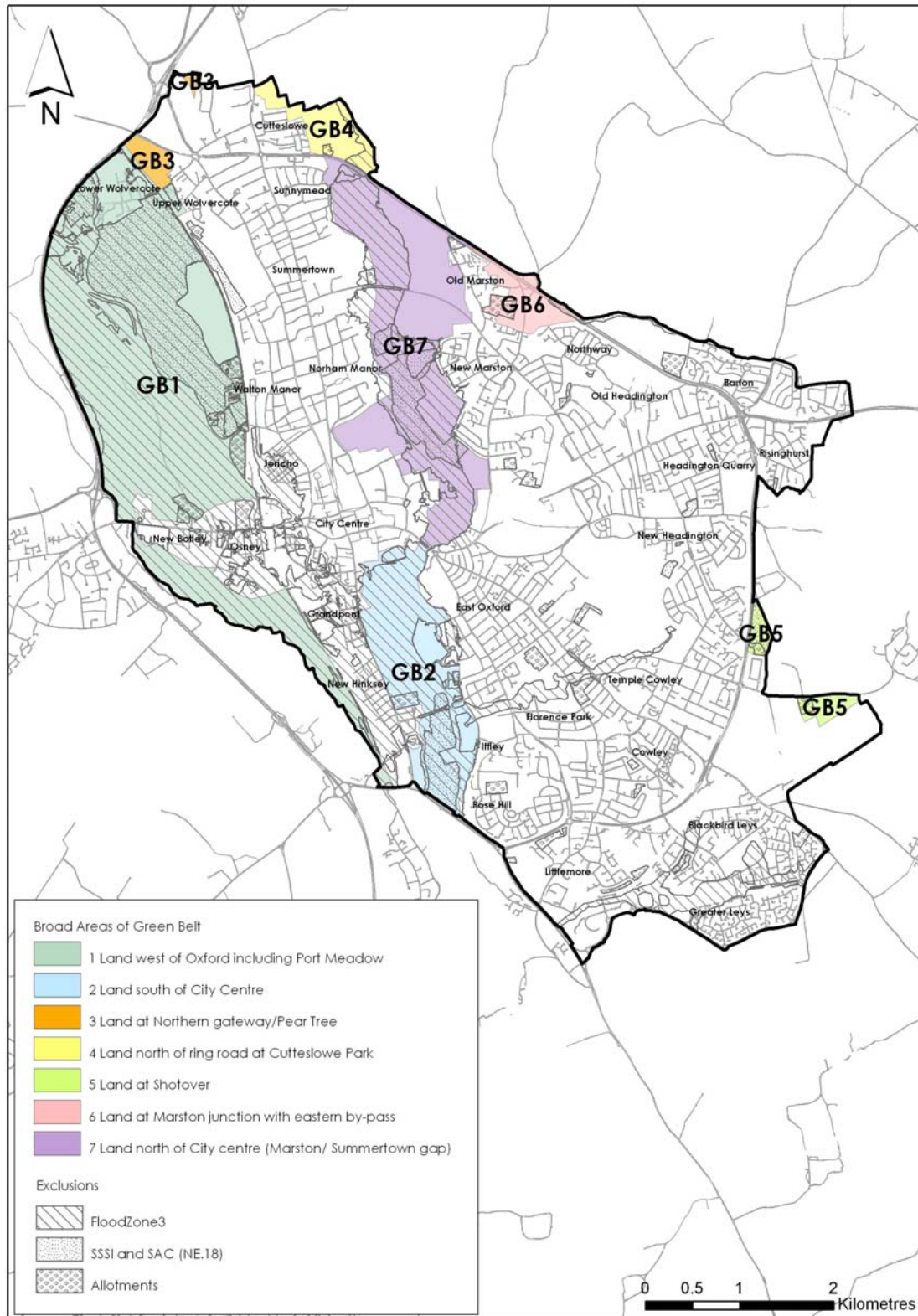
Appendix 1 – Extracts from the Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment relating to the Green Belt

Table 1: Broad review of Oxford's inner Green Belt

Map ref	Broad area	Potential for development
GB1	Land west of Oxford including Port Meadow	Unsuitable. Nearly all the land is in the flood plain and Oxford Meadows SAC except a piece of open space segregated from Oxford by a railway line. Area not suitable for development.
GB2	Land south of City centre	Unsuitable. Nearly all is in the flood plain except for a non-strategic piece of land also designated for nature conservation value. Area not suitable for development.
GB3	Land at Northern Gateway/Pear Tree	May be some suitable in some locations.
GB4	Land north of ring road at Cutteslowe Park	Unsuitable. In the flood plain, and an important publicly accessible open space. Area not suitable for development. Policy SR.6 in the Local Plan seeks to extend the park.
GB5	Land at Shotover	Unsuitable. Designated for nature conservation value. Land at Horspath is an open air sports facility which currently fulfils the purpose of the Green Belt. Area not suitable for development.
GB6	Land at Marston junction with eastern by-pass	Unsuitable. Core outdoor sports facility including Oxford City Football Club and OxRad. Important publicly accessible open space. Area not suitable for development.
GB7	Land north of City centre (Marston/Summertown gap)	May be some suitable locations but majority of area not suitable for development. Much is in the flood plain and designated for nature conservation value. Area important in fulfilling the function of the Green Belt (PPG2) by protecting the gap between Marston and Summertown. May be minor areas that could be considered in Site Allocations DPD.

Source: Oxford Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment (Oxford City Council, Aug 2008)

Figure 3: Broad areas of Green Belt within Oxford's administrative boundary



Source: Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment, (Oxford City Council, August 2008), page 64