

Inspector blocks Green Belt shift over risks of an 'urban sprawl'

REG LITTLE reports on how a council's bid to allow new housing targets to be met has been thwarted

A BID to redraw the boundaries of Oxford's Green Belt has been rejected by a planning inspector because of the risk of "urban sprawl" from Wheatley to Cowley.

South Oxfordshire District Council wants Berinsfield and Wheatley removed from the Green Belt to help the council meet its house building targets.

But an inspector has delivered a major blow to the controversial strategy, warning it would lead to "urban encroachment" into the countryside around Oxford, threatening the whole purpose of the Belt.

However, while rejecting the plan to extend Wheatley into green land, the inspector cleared the way for the redrawing of the boundary at Berinsfield in the face of strong local opposition. The council's bid for a redrawing of the Green Belt south of Oxford caused bitter divisions between those wanting to see large villages

taking a share of new housing and those who warn it clears the way for unchecked development.

It has seen SODC accused of double standards, having fought the building of 8,000 homes south of Grenoble Road.

In his preliminary conclusions, planning inspector Roy Foster warns the council: "Particular caution would need to be exercised in any proposed relaxation of Green Belt controls on the eastern edge.

"The implication of the (SODC) Core Strategy is that Wheatley would be extended eastwards to Wheatley Bridge. This would emphasise Oxford sprawl and urban encroachment into the countryside... offending two of the Green Belt's five main purposes."

Wheatley Conservative councillor Janet Carr said: "People in the village are going to be happy. There was real concern it would open up a whole side of the

village for development."

But Wheatley's Lib Dem councillor, Roger Bell, dismissed the inspector's findings. "It is rubbish. We need more housing. It's only right Wheatley should have its share."

Dr Helena Whall of CPRE Oxfordshire, said: "The inspector accepted our case that the extension of Wheatley would cause a string of development from Horspath to the M40."

Last year, SODC set out where 10,000 district homes should be built. It was forced to revise after a planning inspector said it could no longer rely on "windfall" sites to meet housing needs. Hearings into South Oxfordshire's Core Strategy are set to resume in November.

Angie Paterson, SODC member for planning, said: "It would be wrong for us to make any premature decision."

See CPRE milestone, page 10