

Mr. Boris Johnson
Prime Minister
10 Downing Street
London
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17 March 2020

Dear Mr. Johnson,

‘Open Season’ on the Green Belt

I write as Chair of the Cherwell Development Watch Alliance, an association of five local resident groups in north Oxfordshire.

There is a lot on your plate right now but the business of government rolls on and new houses are still being built, many of them in Oxfordshire. What concerns me and our associations of local residents is that your new government seems to be adopting a policy of ‘open season’ on the Green Belt.

Yet your party explicitly undertook in its December Manifesto to *‘protect and enhance the Green Belt’*; and Esther McVeigh promised as Housing Minister last September to look at *‘every blade of grass ...and it is only in the most exceptional of circumstances we turn there.’*

Indeed, the Conservatives have made many, long-standing pledges to preserve the Green Belt. Extraordinarily, it is the Lib Dem/Green alliance which recently overturned the Conservative majority on South Oxfordshire District Council that has been doing its level best to re-think the Council’s housing Plan and *inter alia* save its Green Belt from the developers. Robert Jenrick has made the unusual decision to use his centralised powers to override the Council and impose his *diktat* on their Local Plan.

Another District Council in Oxfordshire, Cherwell, still has a Conservative majority. The latest Partial Review iteration of its Local Plan proposes no less than 4,400 new houses in close proximity to Oxford, *all* of them on the Green Belt. This is despite some of these houses, in the Council’s own assessment, causing *‘High Harm’* to what remains of it. And this is on strategically sensitive Green Belt in relation to Oxford’s setting. The Green Belt has been Cherwell’s first resort for development, not the last as required by national guidance on planning. The Labour minority on the Council is opposing the location of all these houses. There has also been *‘unprecedented opposition’* - Cherwell’s own words - from local residents, from the four local parish councils, from all six local District Councillors, from the area’s Lib Dem MP, Layla Moran, and from the Campaign to Protect Rural England, all of it effectively ignored.

While this opposition was being expressed, Alok Sharma, then Minister of Housing & Planning, said in parliament (on 30 October 2017), *‘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 Plans for building on the Green Belt in both these Districts in Oxfordshire stem from a requirement to consider how they might help meet Oxford City's 'unmet housing need'. Ironically, Oxford City Council is Labour-led, meaning that Cherwell's Conservative majority and your own Secretary of State are pushing hard to build on Oxfordshire's Green Belt in response to a Labour City Council's requirements – despite Conservative Manifesto pledges.

What is more, the Conservative Manifesto also pledged to 'prioritise brownfield development', something Oxford's City Council has failed to do in its own Local Plan, leaving empty industrial sites unused, prioritising the sites it does develop for offices, and leaving its neighbouring councils to pick up the pieces on housing. Mr. Jenrick has, possibly to his eventual credit but too late in the day for Cherwell, just announced a review of the use of brown field land.

I believe Conservatives are supposed to conserve. It is one of your party's perceived core values. Arguably, the regime change on South Oxfordshire's District Council came from normally conservative-leaning residents objecting to what they saw as excessive housing plans. These plans were driven by Oxford's so-called Growth Board, an un-elected body then chaired by the Conservative Leader of Cherwell District Council!

Residents in that area of Cherwell District which will lose its Green Belt also rebelled on housing issues last year, returning Lib Dems and a Green instead of Conservatives but not enough to sway the political lean of the whole Council, which was energetically whipped behind the Plan. Last year, too, Lib Dem MP Layla Moran was returned to Parliament for Oxford West and Abingdon with a greatly increased majority in what used to be a marginal seat. This would normally have been a close fight with your PPC James Fredrickson, with whom we held positive, helpful but ultimately unsuccessful discussions on this issue.

Saving a legal stop, the battle with Mr. Jenrick and the party now known there as the 'concreting conservatives' seems to have been lost in South Oxfordshire. As an alliance of five local groups, we have been trying hard to resist the building of too many houses in the wrong places, unaffordable houses at that, despite initial promises to the contrary by developers. But our detailed, often technical, arguments made through the plan examination system have been completely ignored by national Inspectors.

There is still time for Mr. Jenrick to intervene at Cherwell, this time to re-examine what is about to happen in the 'Kidlington gap'. This is the establishment of a huge urban extension just to the north of Oxford, swamping two ancient villages and carrying away a richly arboreal golf course, with half the new houses reserved for the University and the other half destined to sell at high prices to London commuters and foreign investors. There's less than nothing in this for local residents. Is the Secretary of State so thoroughly invested in Oxfordshire's growth that he will override local democracy to ensure the Growth Board and the University gets its houses?

I think the outcome of the current local planning wars in Oxfordshire will have wide significance for the Conservatives. Your impressive national mandate could quickly be eroded through inconsistencies that strike at the root of your rural support. The left hand of your manifesto does not appear to know what your executive right hand is doing. Oxford is an area that has national significance.

It will not be forgiven. We will lose our Green Belt, our open countryside, our wildlife, our historic village identities, and our communities. These are quintessentially of value to conservatives, especially in our climate emergency.

Over 75% of Oxfordshire residents support protection of the Green Belt and believe it should remain open and undeveloped. Only this month the head of the National Infrastructure Commission reinforced this view. And as Andy Street, the Conservative mayor of West Midlands and a man admired by Mr. Jenrick, said in his article in *The Daily Telegraph* earlier this month, "*Any Green Belt sites allocated in the Local Plan should be held in reserve until there is no alternative*".

May we seek your kind intervention through your Housing Minister to halt the Cherwell Local Review Plan, and to re-evaluate other suitable sites which are not on the Green Belt and which were given inadequate attention in the initial appraisal of potential sites. In the current circumstances, this action alone will go some way towards vindicating the undertakings repeatedly given by your party.

I would be delighted to provide further justification of our request, in person if necessary.

Thank you for your attention, and may I wish you the best with the current, challenging health crisis.

Yours sincerely,

Giles Lewis.

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