

Minutes of an open meeting convened by FEDORA at the Community Hub Oxshott at 7pm on Tuesday, 10th December 2024 to discuss with the Oxshott Community the threat of development on the Green Belt around Oxshott.

Present

Anthony Wolfe: Director (AW); Mike Wheeler: Director (MW); Ian Dilks: Director (ID); Simon Harker: Director; Nick Shannon: Management Committee Member.

Alan Parker: Elmbridge Councillor (Oxshott and Stoke D'Abernon)
Corinne Sterry: Elmbridge Councillor (Oxshott and Stoke D'Abernon)
Alistair Mann: Elmbridge Councillor (Cobham and Downside)

Plus 92 members, supporters (and 3 property developers)

INTRODUCTION

AW welcomed everyone to the meeting. He thanked all our local councillors for their hard work and expressed our gratitude for the productive relationship built up between them and FEDORA over the past few years.

The purpose of this meeting was to:

- Offer a better understanding of the challenges to Oxshott's Green Belt
- Reflect on the reality of central government policy in this respect
- Offer clarification of any issues
- Give everyone attending a chance to express their views

Why now?

- The Elmbridge Local Plan has been rejected
- An application has been made for a SANG at Clouds Hill Farm along with the threat of a significant housing development adjacent to that SANG.
- The threat of a housing development at Polyapes, off Blundell Lane - a site that has already been identified as suitable for housing.
- Recent announcements about housing and planning by the Government

AW explained that this is the beginning of what is likely to be a long and protracted campaign. Local residents must lead on objecting to individual planning applications with guidance from FEDORA, but one aim tonight was to establish a "base camp" from which to determine some key principles for Oxshott's response to the challenges of Elmbridge's housing needs, as defined by the new Government – and, in particular, any proposed development of the Green Belt. If you would look to get involved, send AW an email at chair@fedora.org.uk

AW also urged those Oxshott residents who were not already members to join FEDORA. The more members we have, the better we can represent Oxshott. *[Details of how to join are at the end of these minutes]*

MW then spoke about the challenges ahead. He reminded us that we are lucky to be almost completely surrounded by Green Belt of around 230ha (= 570 acres) spread across 7 parcels in Oxshott plus one more properly in Cobham. [See *slide 5 of MW's presentation on the FEDORA website*]. However, this Green Belt is now under threat as a result of the rejection of Elmbridge Borough Council's (Elmbridge's) Local Plan and a change in government with major increases in housing targets.

What is happening now?

Two applications in October/November from Fairmile Homes have been made in respect of land that formed Clouds Hill Farm. On part of the site (10 ha) they are seeking an exemption from an environmental impact assessment prior to an application for up to 300 new homes [*shown in blue on the plan at slide 4 of MW's presentation on the FEDORA website*]. On another part of the site (13ha) [*shown in red on the plan at slide 4 of MW's presentation on the FEDORA website*] they wish to create a SANG. This is a "Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace" which is needed in order that development within 7km of Thames Basin Protection Area may take place. A SANG of this size would permit the construction of some 670 new houses and there is another application in the pipeline for 300 new homes on open land either side of the approach track to the Scout Camp at Polyapes.

Why is it happening now?

Elmbridge's Local plan was out of date and work on the new Local Plan has been going on for about 6 years. A key determinant is the annual housing target set by central government. The target has increased over time and Elmbridge has consistently failed to meet it. At one time the target was only 220 dwellings pa, then it was 630 pa, and then 780. However, following their defeat at the Amersham by-election the then Conservative Government decided that targets were no longer mandatory but merely advisory. Elmbridge prepared a new local plan with target of only 450 new houses and argued that special circumstances did not exist to warrant amending Green Belt boundaries to accommodate a higher figure. The new Local Plan went to a Government Inspector about a year ago but the process did not go well. The Inspector gave a clear steer that some Green Belt land was likely to have to be given up [See *slide 8 of MW's presentation on the FEDORA website*]. The outcome is almost certainly going to be the withdrawal of the Local Plan and a restart. However, in the interim the new government has increased Elmbridge's housing target. It is no longer 780 but rather 1,730 new homes pa, roughly equal to a community the size of Oxshott every year for 15 years. [See *slide 9 of MW's presentation on the FEDORA website*]. [Following a Government announcement on 12 December we now know that this figure has been further increased to 1,874 new houses pa].

Furthermore, a new plan will take time to produce and, in the interim, our Green Belt is vulnerable to the operation of the so called "tilted balance". Planning law provides that in the absence of a Local Plan and in the presence of an insufficient supply of building land, the presumption will be to allow building on the Green Belt unless the

adverse impacts significantly and demonstrably outweigh the benefits of the new dwellings. This therefore leaves Elmbridge very vulnerable to opportunistic planning applications.

What can be done?

We are unlikely to persuade either central government or developers simply to give up or go away. We can fight but it will not be an easy task. In doing so we would need to focus on whether sites are “sustainable” ie persuade Elmbridge that they have no public transport links, would overwhelm local infrastructure etc. No doubt we can enlist support of local councillors but Elmbridge BC will also want the housing numbers. Furthermore, if applications are rejected, developers will go to appeal in an environment where government determination to boost housing numbers is clear. So fighting any application will involve time, commitment and money.

We also need to consider how to avoid a worse outcome. Is it preferable to work with a local developer which may, but not necessarily, achieve lower density, better screening, commitment to infrastructure etc as opposed to a national housebuilder that might build a high-density estate with minimal contribution to infrastructure and little concern for the local community?

Conclusions

1. Green Belt is now in play with several local applications
2. Elmbridge currently has no Local Plan and needs to start again on a probable basis of significantly higher housing number
3. Lack of a plan means the operation of “tilted balance” and vulnerability to opportunistic applications
4. Prospects of defeating every application are not encouraging
5. The Community needs to assess how to manage the downside

The floor was then opened to the attendees

There were questions and comments from Alan Bleach, Philip Davies, Judith Earnshaw, Nicola Evans, Lindy Wheeler and Bob Yerbury about local infrastructure such as roads, schools and doctors and their ability (or inability) to cope with additional dwellings and whether any shortcomings would then provide a basis of objection to proposals to build on Green Belt. MW said that these were indeed legitimate grounds for objection. The issue would be how much weight would be given to them by Elmbridge’s Planning Committee and by the Planning Inspector in any subsequent appeal. MW went on to explain that to date the approach from Elmbridge seemed to be that new houses would come first and any additional infrastructure, if needed, would then follow at some future point. ID added that the position was complicated by the fact that whereas Elmbridge was responsible for granting planning permission, the provision of much of the infrastructure fell to Surrey County Council (“Surrey”). A lesson learned from the recent Merrileas/Treetops development was that it was imperative to engage early with

Surrey to ensure that when they are consulted by Elmbridge on matters such as access, provision of footpaths and drainage that they address them in a proper fashion. ID thought that it was unlikely at least in the short term that previous proposals to build a bypass to reduce traffic on the A244 travelling through Oxshott would be resurrected.

There were questions and comments about central government policy from John Bishop, Claire Blackwell and Nicola Evans. MW said that government policy would be clearer when the new National Planning Policy Framework document was issued later in December. However, it seemed clear that the Government wanted planning authorities to identify land to be built upon, if necessary by redrawing Green Belt boundaries, and then to streamline the process for granting the necessary planning permissions. Recently the Government has been prepared to “call in” major planning applications and decide them itself, irrespective of the views of local councils and residents

There were questions about the level of development in Oxshott when compared to other parts of Elmbridge from Alan Bleach and about what would happen about a new local plan from Dorothy Ford. MW thought that Oxshott had fared no better or worse than other parts of Elmbridge in this respect. As regards the local plan, MW thought that the Government would want Elmbridge to produce a new local plan within 2 years. This is a much shorter period than had been taken to prepare the one that had been put before the Inspector. It was also possible that given possible Government proposals for Unitary Authorities that Elmbridge Borough Council would cease to exist and responsibility for a new local plan would pass to Surrey or a new unitary authority.

There were concerns about environmental issues from Nichola Evans, Mrs Harris and Sharon Yates including about the destruction of natural habitats, drainage issues and the risk of Oxshott turning from a village into a small town. AW said that these were all valid.

There were questions and comments from Alan Carruthers, Philip Davies, Bob Yerbury and Alistair Mann (Elmbridge councillor for Cobham and Downside) about how best to protect Oxshott's Green Belt. Given that the concept of Green Belt was not being abolished, then if it met the necessary criteria, it ought to be retained. Furthermore, even if it was to be reclassified to enable development then that development still had to be “sustainable”. I.e the infrastructure needed to be there. It may well be possible to argue in favour of retaining particular sites on those grounds but, given the new housing targets, it might be difficult to use “sustainability” arguments in order to defend every piece of Green Belt in and around Oxshott.

It seemed likely that, if and when a developer sought to build on what is currently Green Belt, they will have hired various experts to give evidence that such development presented no problems and that what problems there were could be easily overcome. Objectors to such proposals might well need to engage similar, paid experts or suitably qualified volunteers to put the other view.

Councillor Mann said that in his view the starting point was that one should not build on the Green Belt. However, it may be necessary to choose one's fights carefully

and try to shape any inevitable development. In this respect Elmbridge's Design Codes would be important to secure appropriate new houses that fitted in to their surroundings.

In Conclusion

AW began by acknowledging the great job that MW has done on all our behalf. He added that all good things must come to an end and that MW will be stepping back from FEDORA at the end of December. This will leave a large gap which made it all the more important to set up the working group, referred to earlier, to look at the challenges facing our Green Belt. Accordingly, if you want to get involved send AW an email at chair@fedora.org.uk.

AW ended the meeting by saying that this campaign will be complicated and protracted but FEDORA will:

- Keep you informed of how plans develop and evolve
- Keep an eye on developments in adjacent areas - for example, Wisley Airfield and Mole Valley
- Support local groups to minimise the impact of any proposed developments
- Work with Elmbridge and Surrey to ensure, as far as it is possible, improvements in the infrastructure are integral to any major developments.
- Encourage a clear focus on developments on the "Grey" Belt and adjacent to existing urban areas.
- Circulate a note of this meeting via email to our members and supporters as well as placing them on the FEDORA website.

AW concluded by urging all Oxshott residents to join FEDORA ie to become a "member" rather than just being a "supporter". The more members we have, the more we can justify our name as being "The Voice for Oxshott" in our dealings with our local councils, Surrey CC and Elmbridge and other relevant authorities.

It only costs £10 pa to be a member and you can join by:

- Completing the details at the back of our 6 monthly magazine
- Going to the landing page of the FEDORA website, www.fedora.org.uk