

Bicester Advertiser

Oxfordshire's Green Belt 'may have to change'

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A PLANNING inspector has said a complete review of Oxfordshire's Green Belt may be needed. His comments came as he temporarily halted an inquiry hearing into Cherwell District Council's development strategy yesterday.

Nigel Payne, who has been appointed by the Government to examine the district council's local plan, said the authority's housing target may be too low and told its officers to look again.

In the plan, the council is proposing to build 16,750 homes by 2031 but this is significantly lower than the 22,800 homes which a recent study – commissioned by all of Oxfordshire's councils – said it should build by that year. The study, or strategic housing market assessment (SHMA), has been criticised by those who fear Oxfordshire's green spaces will be paved over.

Ian Kemp, the programme officer for the inquiry, said: "The inspector has suggested Cherwell could accommodate a higher figure in line with the SHMA. The inspector said it would be helpful if there was a review of the Oxfordshire Green Belt, and everyone would know where they stand, but it is not something he can control and he doesn't have the powers to say it has to happen."

It was announced in March the SHMA recommended more than 100,000 homes would need to be built across Oxfordshire by 2031 – including 28,000 in Oxford.

The Oxfordshire Green Belt stretches from Bletchingdon in the north to Warborough in the south. City council leader Bob Price said: "It is such a large part of the county that I cannot see how you can possibly seek to absorb those housing numbers without a review of the Green Belt. What the inspector said broadly reflects the view of the city council."

But John Broad, of the Bicester branch of the Campaign to Protect Rural England, criticised the city council for not supporting the district council. He said: "Oxford has done a spoiling operation on the local plan. The city should be supporting Cherwell rather than throwing spanners."

After the planning inspector voiced his concerns, the hearing was halted while Cherwell's planning officers discussed what to do. The planning inspector suspended the hearings yesterday to allow the district council to make changes to its local plan. These will have to go out for public consultation before a new hearing can start – probably in December.

Sir Tony Baldry, the MP for Banbury, said: "I don't see what possible benefit there is for anyone in the inquiry bringing the examination in public of Cherwell District Council's local plan to a halt. "Clearly everyone recognises that one of the crucial decisions the planning inspector is going to have to make is what is the appropriate level of housing need in Cherwell between now and 2031 and that is likely also to have an impact on other district councils such as South Oxfordshire, which already have an agreed local plan."