

## Planning and the Green Belt Talk : Steven Sensecall- Thames Voco Hotel 6 December 2023

### Q&A session

Q: Seeks SS view on “other uses” in the GB – and specifically solar farm development? West Oxfordshire currently faces a massive farm, with some 2k hectares of panels, 500 in the GB, taking up one third of the Green Belt in West Oxfordshire.

SS response: There is no prescriptive, definitive list of what is an acceptable development, however in NPPF para 151 there is specific mention “When located in the Green Belt, elements of many renewable energy projects will comprise inappropriate development. In such cases developers will need to demonstrate very special circumstances if projects are to proceed. Such very special circumstances (VSC) may include the wider environmental benefits associated with increased production of energy from renewable sources.” This is the one and only hint from government as to what might be considered VSC. It is likely that developers will aim to use this para to their benefit, and it will become a judgment call by the decision maker. SS feels that it is wrong that this should have been singled out and a more balanced approach should be adopted. Given nature of solar panels, close to ground – does this impact. It’s tricky and not an easy answer. We do need sustainable sources of power and it will come down to the decision maker making a call.

Q: Can we discuss exceptional circumstances when we go back a stage? When we have Oxford putting employment in front of homes on brownfield sites this is increasing housing need which they know is likely to impact the GB, so shouldn’t they be considering exceptional circumstances at this point? How does this impact South Oxfordshire’s need to co-operate?

SS: This time around Oxford is not planning any additional encroachment into GB over and above what is already planned. Exceptional circumstances in the GB applies to any development - be this homes or employment. (Levelling up was mentioned in a follow up comment – that these jobs would be better in the north) - but SS’s view is that market forces bring these jobs to Oxfordshire – and unless we become way more interventionist - which is not going to happen, they will remain in the South – with Oxford being a world leading Science and Technology location – and that these jobs serve a wider benefit. It is a case of balance again and nearly all the employment land coming forward currently is the redevelopment of existing employment land. It is a difficult balancing act.

Q: What view does SS have on the argument that a solar farm is a “temporary” development – which can be demolished after 40 years and would then become brownfield sites?

SS: He personally would not buy the argument that it is temporary – it is not an argument that I would deploy if I was acting on a scheme like that.

Q: Been through a bruising Local Plan process. Accepted the need for giving up some GB removal for development but would have liked to have seen more on replacement/extension of GB to balance this. Widely accepted that current outer boundary is a bit random, having been based on which landowners were able to get their oar in at the time it was set. What are SS’s views?

SS: Can see an argument for it. NPPF doesn't support explicitly but does talk about the exceptional circumstances needed for creating GB so it would come back to that.

Q: I would like to ask a question about GB boundaries and who is going to set them? We used to consider that they would be a set physical and permanent boundary (such as a stream or a bridlepath) – now they seem to be a fence in the middle of the field set by a developer – any thoughts?

SS: The developer is the decision maker or the plan maker. It will be down to developers to propose –and the decision makers to decide. There is guidance around making boundaries logical which can be made permanent and that would be the sensible approach – but I'd reiterate it is for the authority to decide if it is the right boundary line or not.

Do you envisage a future where Didcot, Abingdon and Bicester just become suburbs of Oxford, at the rate at which development is proceeding?

SS: No, I don't – this is because other policies such as landscape and countryside policies which will come into play and will prevent this from happening.

Q: Generally, the public will see the GB as something they want to remain sacrosanct, yet it appears that there is nothing sacrosanct about it and it just depends on how good your developers and lawyers are. I would value your comments on the proposal for a Megavoir in the VofWH and the impact of that. How would you advise the public on what they can do or expect for the GB for the future?

SS: SS is not involved with this, but as he understands it the reservoir is not in the GB. (Further comment from questioner : no - but will we see more development and an erosion of the countryside as we know it) . It is not GB – but there will be countryside policies which need to be considered. The reservoir is like any infrastructure project - if there a proven need being the first consideration. If this need is proven, then there are a host of further considerations – is this the best place for it? Are there alternatives? What are landscape, environmental, visual impacts etc? These are the considerations.

Q: Is the GB just an historic want and something that is just slowly fading although we are fighting for it hard? Should our attention now be better placed on Strategic Green places? Like Stockholm, should we be looking at adaptive approaches. Is there a case for review?

SS: Felt this point had been very well phrased and agreed, there is a case for review and for looking at other ways in which land which is important to be kept open can be kept open. The GB is a blunt instrument and a political weapon that has been used by governments over the years to a greater or lesser extent. There is a need for a balanced approach and after all these years there is a need for a review.

Q: Why has CPRE not made more mention of "Right to roam" being extended into the GB in their State of the Green Belt 2023 report?

Question answered by Richard Harding ( CPRE Oxfordshire , Chair) at close of SS Questions: Right to Roam does not currently form one of the main purposes of the GB, but he would agree it is vital – and this is something we should look into at any review of these purposes.

Q: Going back to Botley West - the scale of this development is beyond massive in terms of what it is taking. This is a land grab of 37% in my parish. Our right to roam and walk in the countryside will be obliterated and this is so important to people. Does the quality of land have an impact? The developer itself in recent documentation report 35% of the land as being "best and most versatile"? Does this make a difference?

SS: Yes – from a planning perspective the quality of land is a consideration - not necessarily a GB consideration, but from a planning consideration it absolutely is.

Comment: Strategic Green areas – and the Green Belt are all very well - but wildlife will go where it wants to go. This was generally agreed.

Q: I don't understand why these are called solar "farms". Can they go anywhere – like near our water meadows which are needed to save Oxford? I consider it totally appropriate that it should go near our rivers. Why should good agricultural land be given over to solar? Is it temporary? . Will this revert to brownfield at the end of the temporary time? This is everyone's main worry - particularly in the GB.

SS: The starting point is para 151 NPPF – developments such as this are inappropriate in the GB. Therefore, can the developer reach the " high bar" point and prove that there are VSC? There is then a need to consider additional factors - like impact on flood plain, visual impacts, landscape etc. These are separate considerations. It is for the decision maker to decide where the balance lies. Does the need for renewable energy outweigh all other considerations? He can say that we do need more renewable energy - but whether this is the right site he doesn't know, can't comment and isn't involved in it. Reverting to brownfield site after 40 odd years (especially industrial elements of the site), is an interesting debate, where a view will need to be reached.

Q: I've heard that much of the land due to be developed in and around Oxford is owned by Oxford University. Is this the case and do we know the % of University/college ownership?

SS: That is correct - a great amount of land is owned by the University and Colleges and they have been looking to develop some of that land in Local Plans and will presumably continue to do so. However, it doesn't really matter who the landowner is, the onus is on the developer to prove the case for the scheme in the same way.

Q: Why don't CPRE do much more to promote landscape? Urban renewals seem to be a much better way to use our land, and brownfield sites for homes and not jobs. Development should be landscape not housing number led.

SS: I would say the city is doing what it can in terms of urban renewal. It's a question of what use they put the land to. I'm dealing with a site, the former Cowley site now Arc Oxford, going through its third generation of renewal. They have chosen to use for employment not houses and the GB does not distinguish between these.

Further Q: Looking at Bayswater Brook, why does this suburban plan involve no landscape development? CPRE should insist on a landscape lead - rather than a profit led development.

SS: Good developers should consider good landscape - and this is actually a market factor - as good landscape designs will make homes more attractive to purchase. On policy position, it is down to the local authorities to make sure there are landscape policies and to follow through on these policies.

Post Q&A Richard Harding response: CPRE is one of the only organisations who do campaign for landscapes. I would ask "Where would Oxfordshire be without the Green Belt?"

I was able to question a District councillor for VofWH, and he assured me that land will revert to GB at the end of the solar farm term. It is not a way of converting GB into brownfield site.

Comment from the audience:

Just to respond on this – I'm afraid it's not right to say that it won't convert to GB - it is always optional. They can and most probably will replace panels after 25 years and seek to extend permissions, meaning land is unlikely to revert back to open countryside/ GB.

SS: We must remember unless there is a GB review - the land remains in the Green Belt, even if there is permissive use and development - so it does not 'revert back', it always remains GB. The developer may well seek to extend the term of solar farm- and this will have to follow the same process as in the first instance – that the case must be proved, and a balanced view of all factors considered.

Closing Comment from Q& A facilitator : Let us remember it is down to our councillors – everyone here - to ensure we have the right policies in place.