



I am Andrew Wood, Managing Director of Stride Works Ltd, a small planning consultancy based in Sheffield and specialising in working with community and environmental groups. The Rule 6 Party was to have been represented at this Inquiry by an advocate, Mr Paul Powlesland, but unfortunately he has COVID, so in addition to my role as the Rule 6 planning witness, I have now also taken on the advocacy role. I'm sure you'll join me in wishing Mr Powlesland a speedy recovery.

Owlthorpe Fields Action Group is a not-for-profit group, set up in September 2018 to campaign to save the things that they valued, and saw may be threatened, by applications to develop on the three Owlthorpe sites, C, D and E which they knew would be in the offing when the sites were offered for sale.

The things they valued were the many other species who call Owlthorpe Fields home, and who bring them joy. So they set out to record, photograph and celebrate the wildlife of the area, and to use this as the basis of their campaign - a campaign which has sparked the interest of many people in the local area. This is reflected in the level of public interest in this inquiry, because so many people value local wildlife and want to see it thrive.

The approval of the proposals contained in the appeal scheme would be, above all, a failure of imagination, and I shall now explain why.

OAG's starting point in 2018 was that fully protecting the rich wildlife of the site is not compatible with built development, and our Rule 6 evidence indicates that they are right. Having gathered substantial ecological data of their own, OAG approached Sheffield & Rotherham Wildlife Trust, and Wildscapes for their professional expertise.



The Wildscapes investigations show that all three sites meet the criteria to be classified as Local Wildlife Sites. This is primarily due to the ecological quality of the grassland habitat on the site - a type of habitat that is increasingly rare in Sheffield; though it is also evident that the grassland is not working alone. The adjacent grassland and woodland habitats, the Ochre Dyke ancient woodland, and the hedgerows that have arisen from ancient field enclosures, are all working together as an ecosystem. The new woodland that has sprung up on site in the years since farming ceased now benefits from natural processes: the seeding of species from the adjacent ancient woodland, and the high water content of the ground since agricultural drainage ceased.

This all points to the fact that, if Sheffield is to successfully respond to the challenges of the climate and biodiversity emergencies, then it desperately needs sites exactly like Owlthorpe Fields: sites that are already on the road to ecological recovery, and are large enough and connected enough to build functioning, diverse ecosystems relatively quickly. Existing - and new - Local Wildlife Sites can be the engines of that recovery, if we let them.

While the habitats of Owlthorpe Fields have been busy regenerating, the policy rationale for building ecological networks and making space for nature has also grown. Sheffield has declared a Climate Emergency, it has a Tree Strategy, and it has a Grassland Habitat Action Plan to increase the extent, quality and connectivity of the very grassland habitats that the appeal scheme will reduce and fragment. Nationally, NPPF expects planning decisions to contribute to ecological networks and biodiversity net gain - expectations that have been backed up by the Government's 25 Year Environment Plan and will become legislative requirements when the Environment Bill comes into law.



The appeal scheme proposes to respond to ecological issues by way of a woodland buffer to the north, and a compensatory contribution to management of the off-site grassland to the west. But the area *within* the site that has seen most progress in natural woodland regeneration, combined with an ancient, species-rich hedgerow, is proposed to be largely cleared away, on the assumption that these habitats can be recreated off-site. OAG believes this is unacceptable. Even if suitable alternative sites for habitat recovery are available, where is the logic in cancelling out the 20 years' progress we have seen on the site?

I have explained, then, why OAG's overarching position is that the scheme can and should be refused on ecological grounds. Set against this ecological story is the planning history of Owlthorpe, which provides further reasons why this scheme is unacceptable.

In the 22 years since the UDP was adopted, the balance of considerations that should inform the future of the site has shifted dramatically. Over the same period that its ecological potential has been growing significantly, the place-making, community benefits that should derive from building on the site have been seriously eroded.

The Mosborough Townships vision dates back to the 1960s. Looked at from the perspective of this vision, which was for a New Town in all but name, sites C, D and E together are a missing piece of a jigsaw waiting to be completed. The vision comprised a series of walkable neighbourhoods, each about 1km across with a local neighbourhood centre providing shops and other amenities, interspersed with green infrastructure and open space, and well-connected by public transport. It was on this basis the site was allocated in the UDP in 1998.



Now, there is no local centre proposed, meaning that the development of sites C, D and E will place around 250 additional households into an area where they need either a car or a tram journey just to buy a pint of milk. The crucial, local-level building block of the Mosborough Townships - the walkable neighbourhood - has been fatally compromised in Owlthorpe. We must ask, what is the point of having an ambitious, strategic vision for a sustainable community, if standalone applications are permitted which diverge so far from that vision?

This underpinning rationale for developing the site has been lost, at the very point in history when walkability is higher on the placemaking, health and climate agendas than it has been for many years. Consequently, the principle of development for which the site was allocated in 1998 no longer applies.

Nevertheless, OAG recognises that new homes must be developed somewhere, and that the case for development at Owlthorpe must weigh up the ecological opportunity with the opportunity to provide homes. The site has long been earmarked for housing and there are relatively few other sites available for housing in the area. Is there a win-win option? Is it possible to find a solution that harnesses both the development potential and the ecological potential?

If so, then we would have to start with much higher expectations of what a scheme should provide. It should provide much more open space and public realm to serve existing and new residents of the area, especially for informal interaction, and for children. It should have a shop, perhaps with a cafe. It should be a place where not having use of a car is not a problem. It should take seriously the underpinnings of zero-carbon design, such as green roofs, orientation for solar gain, and a preference for more linear layouts and linked



dwellings to use land and materials more efficiently. And nature should permeate the whole place, not be confined to the edges. All of these expectations are expressed within established guidance documents such as the South Yorkshire Residential Design Guide and the Sheffield Climate and Design document. Yet this scheme achieves none of those things.

So a win-win solution *might* be out there, but we are in no doubt that the appeal scheme is not the right solution. In OAG's view, even if the Inspector finds that the ecological potential of the site can be appropriately integrated with the principle of residential development, the appeal scheme should still be refused, because in reality it is a standardised solution to a very non-standard site. For nature and for people, Owlthorpe Fields deserves much better.

Consequently, OAG believes that the Council was entirely correct in refusing the application, and asks the Inspector to dismiss the appeal.

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