

Saltford Green Belt Inquiry (13-16 August 2013): BBC Bristol radio interview of Phil Harding by Geoff Twentyman on Friday afternoon, 16 August 2013

01. **GT: It's been the final day of the public inquiry into a potential new housing development in Saltford. Crest Nicholson wants to build 99 new homes on the south side of the village because Bath and North East Somerset Council didn't make a decision in time. The Government will now have the final say on this one. Phil Harding is from the Saltford Environment Group and has been at the Inquiry today and joins me on the programme. Good evening to you Phil.**

02. PH: Good evening.

03. **GT: How did it go today?**

04. PH: Very well. I have to be careful because this is a legal process and I mustn't say things I shouldn't, I don't want to jeopardise our chances but I feel "reasonably confident", let's just say that.

05. **GT: Okay, just tell me a little bit more as to what was said today.**

06. PH: Well, we have spent the week processing something like 8 inches high in paperwork of evidence that was issued to us before the Inquiry and about another couple of inches were added during the proceedings so we had a lot to read and a lot went on.

07. We had 100 people, roughly in round numbers, turn up on the first day to protest outside and actually attend the opening of the Inquiry. We had all age groups from my 6 month old grandson Jacob, to people who are probably in their 70s and 80s. This was a fight to protect our countryside for our future generations. It is great to see people there young and old, all together. I think if you ever want to pull a community together, do something outrageous like apply to build on their green belt land and they come together and they fight it.

08. We have had a fantastic campaign, people have been wonderful in Saltford in supporting us and I have been the advocate all week, and to lock horns with a QC is not an easy task. But I feel confident that I have done well because he continually tried to undermine my evidence throughout the week and I think that shows that we had them rattled.

09. **GT: Okay, I mean Ben Miller, Development Director of Crest Nicholson, has sent to us, we have a statement from him. It says there is a severe shortage of housing within Bath and North East Somerset and Manor Road has been identified as the most appropriate location for development. Development at Manor Road will help to maintain the health and vitality of existing village services and facilities as well as contribute towards improvements. That's what they are saying as the developer.**

10. PH: Well I accept that. We want to protect the vitality and health of our local environment, it is so important. We may need to grow food on those fields in the future, we just don't know. If you think of what happened last year, that wet year, and how our food production went down drastically in the UK. We can't just go building on our farmland.

11. But quite apart from that, I must say, of course, we accept the need for new housing. The population is rising. That issue isn't being managed.

12. You have to be careful where you build housing, you need to consult the community, not just try and jump through the system and beat it. A very strong point we were making is that with planning applications like this, you really do need to do a proper [sustainability] appraisal beforehand to inform the decision-making process, reduce the risk of giving consent to unsustainable development - which is what we maintain this was - and to reduce the anxiety, stress and concern placed onto the community. It is a place-making plan that decides where housing goes, not for a developer.

13. The strength of feeling in Saltford was huge and the stress people have gone through. There has been a housing blight on house sales. People have been actually ill; they couldn't attend the inquiry because they felt so ill about the whole thing. Stress was huge so we really must get this right in this country. To build new houses is great, put new housing on brownfield sites, but don't wreck the countryside, don't wreck our farmland. Put them in the right place and consult people before you decide where you put them.

14. My theme was that "*destroying greenbelt agricultural land for immediate economic gain is like burning your children's inheritance to cook a single meal*". It is the wrong thing to do, building on our agricultural land.

15. **GT: Okay, but what you miss there in your three lines there is that you are not going to alleviate the housing shortage crisis, are you?**

16. PH: I didn't dispute there is a housing shortage, but there is land available. There is plenty of brownfield land in Bath, in parts of Bath, and in other areas that have been identified in the core strategy that Bath and North East Somerset are pushing through now.

17. I must pay tribute to Bath and North East Somerset. I thought they did an excellent job at the inquiry. I know people always criticise their officials but I thought they were excellent. They worked really hard on this and they proved what needed to be proved, that you should not build on green belt land.

18. GT: So they were with you on this one?

19. PH: Oh, they definitely were; we are on the same side as them.

20. GT: Okay, when will the decision be announced?

21. PH: Within 3 to 6 weeks from today and by the 17th of September at the very latest because the core strategy consultation process restarts then, so it has to be before then.

22. GT: Okay, then I guess whatever the decision is now will be subject to an appeal from the other side.

23. PH: No.

24. GT: Or is it final?

25. PH: This is an appeal hearing so they can only appeal if the Inspector, how can I say this, makes a legal error in his judgements. So that is why he has to be so careful in sticking to the rules in how he handles the Inquiry. I have to be careful what I say; I don't want to undermine the process. But no, they can only appeal if in their view he makes a legal mistake; that's the best way I can put it.

26. GT: So we are expecting to be almost at a final decision. Good to chat with you Phil, thanks for your time.

27. PH: Thank you very much.

28. GT: That was Phil Harding from Saltford. Time now: thirteen minutes after five...

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Transcribed for Saltford Environment Group by Elizabeth Cooksey, 17 August 2013.