

Introduction

Good afternoon – I am Roy Webster, a South Warrington resident, and a Warringtonian born and bred. I am also a qualified Planning Officer (eligible for RTPI membership) with 36 years post qualification experience. I was actually employed by WBC between 1972-87, to include a lengthy period as Principal Planner dealing with all applications and planning issues in South Warrington. Now retired.

I am here today – with the agreement of other speakers from the Rethinking South Warrington Group – to address the issue of visual impact. I have also separately – in just one paragraph at the end – summarised the combination of circumstances which I believe now give the public a reasonable expectation that the Secretary of State will reject this application.

I have addressed visual impact in my written submission but wish to emphasise and add the following points.

Locational context

The application site, because of its proximity to the motorway interchange, is obviously an attractive site for logistics development. However, if we had before us a topographical model of Warrington, it would demonstrate that, in terms of environmental and visual impact, this is just about the worst possible site for gigantic logistics sheds; this site being on one of the highest points in Warrington – on top of rising land (actually on the ridge line) and some 250 feet above sea level. In this context, the development on the skyline of such enormous sheds would have a severe harmful impact. And this in existing Green Belt.

Size in perspective

To put the size in perspective, the site area equates to around 140 football pitches - with a built floorspace of some 3 million sq. feet. – and this aside from the vast hardstanding areas. In terms of the buildings themselves, the height parameter for the Plot 4 shed, as an example, is in part equivalent to the height of a 10 storey apartment block, with the remainder equating to a 7 storey block, and its length equivalent to 5 Wembley football pitches. The Plot 2 shed equates to a 6 storey block the length of 4 Wembley pitches.

The impact of such massive sheds cannot reasonably be mitigated by landscape works. There is also the impact of the vast illumination of the night sky.

Future applications

Langtree's initial application had shown even bigger sheds, but a revised application for reduced building heights was thereafter submitted to help gain permission.

At the Committee meeting one of the officers rightly stated that future interested parties could of course submit applications for increased heights and these would be considered on their merits. I would submit that, within reason it would be difficult to refuse such future applications – with the applicant's argument on appeal inevitably being that, if there was a concern about building heights, then permission for logistics development should not have been approved here in the first place because it 'goes with the territory'; and this especially so in what would then be a 'new' planning context. In expressing this view I should mention that, in my planning career, I have dealt with at least 150 planning appeals.

Viewpoints

In terms of different viewpoints – when viewed from the north/north east across the rising open countryside to the south – the adverse impact would be enormous. This impact not only from short distance views but also medium distance (from A50) and also long distance. The impact of the

development mass on the skyline would indeed be apparent viewed from across the Mersey Valley – even as far as the areas below and around Winter Hill.

Committee consideration

I genuinely believe that the Council's Development Management Committee, in approving the Langtree application, have not been able to properly appreciate and visualise the impact of this development on the surrounds.

I watched the Committee meeting online, and although it lasted nearly 3 hours there was little consideration to visual impact – with the meeting dominated by debate on employment numbers and whether those numbers justify a Green Belt policy exception.

I was also told that, at the meeting, there were no large scale visual impact images on display.

It is my genuine belief that, if this development was approved and built, the public would be shocked by the enormity of its impact and it would be viewed as the biggest ever planning mistake in Warrington.

Degree of visual harm

It is for this reason that, in my written submission to the Local Plan Examination, I expressed the view that the degree of harmful impact is so great that, even in its own right (aside from the other constraints), it outweighs the economic argument – and this even with the highest jobs figures discussed. And this especially so given both the importance and 'permanence' of the Green Belt, as referred to in the existing Local Plan (at para 6.20); and also the very long term implications – with such a huge blot on the landscape, totally out of context in its countryside/skyline setting, being there for likely hundreds of years.

I am pleased to see that the two Planning Inspectors who conducted the Local Plan Examination have now (in their December '22 report) concluded – albeit subject to some further consultation – that the land should be retained in Green Belt – and this on grounds including severe visual harm.

Recent events and material planning considerations.

Having addressed visual impact, I now wish to quickly re-emphasise – as bullet points – the following recent events and matters which I am sure will be taken into account in the final determination of this application; these points all material planning considerations and as follows:-

1. The decision of the Secretary of State (in November 2020) to reject the Stobart application on neighbouring Green Belt land.
2. The joint Inspectors' report (in 'December '22) which recommends deletion of the Local Plan's rezoning for employment use and its retention in Green Belt.
3. The Prime Minister's recent pronouncements to protect and toughen up restrictions in the Green Belt and focus on brownfield land (this to include his statement to the House of Commons on 25 January 2023).
4. The issue of precedent – in that the granting of consent for the Langtree application would make it difficult to refuse inevitable future applications for similar major developments on the neighbouring Stobart and Liberty Properties sites; and
5. The huge public opposition to the proposal on grounds including non-compliance with existing Local Plan Green Belt policy.

Given the combination of the above 5 points, it is difficult to see how permission can now reasonably be permitted for the Langtree application. To do so in these circumstances would – from a general public viewpoint – make a mockery of the planning process and its 'plan-led' system.