

## Final Statement

As these proceedings draw to a close, I'd like to take this opportunity to say a few words that represent mine and my family's point of view.

The last 12 months have been a stressful time for us. Along with the flooding issues affecting our property, we faced the prospect of the appellant further eroding the area of natural beauty that surrounds Minster Lovell and inflicting yet another housing development on our village.

The appellant has spared no expense in this endeavour. They have enlisted the services of Catesby Estates, who I think we can all agree have been very effective and well prepared throughout this process. The cost of their services alone must be considerable, never mind the fleet of expert witnesses enlisted to enthusiastically justify every point they wish to make.

Indeed, were you to listen only to this testimony, you would walk away with the firm conclusion that this is the most ideal location for 134 houses that anyone has ever proposed before.

The local shop is too far away? Don't be silly, it's merely a 10 minute walk – as long as you sprint the whole way, laden with shopping bags on the return journey.

The housing development will spoil the area of natural beauty? On the contrary, the development cannot be seen from virtually anywhere you look. It will be practically invisible to the naked eye.

Poor land drainage? Nonsense, dig a metre down below the clay and the water drains away just fine. In fact, according to the appellant's expert, the land drains so well that they could barely perform the soakaway tests at all. Why were literally all of the tests performed on the far eastern side, where the flooding is minimal, with not a single test on the western side? Nobody knows, but I'm sure it wasn't intentional.

Issues with foul water, tankers constantly stacked up at Brize Norton pumping away sewerage? Not a problem, based on Thames Water's failure to handle the existing volume, the appellant's expert is convinced that this will be magically solved. Is there any credible reason to be hopeful? No, of course not, but it doesn't matter, because what does matter is getting planning permission and selling the land. So much so that, even if Thames Water can't solve the problem, the houses can still be built and sit unoccupied, for as long as it takes. Why? Because it's not really about providing affordable housing, it's about turning less profitable agricultural land into a metaphorical gold mine.

The Catesby Estates website talks about turning strategic greenfield land into precisely this. However, it also points out that:

*"Location is the most important factor when determining the suitability of a site. Access to existing services and facilities such as healthcare and education are key."*

This is not just a line from their website, it is their most prominent point. In what way does Minster Lovell's appeal site fulfil this need? With its oversubscribed local school, or with the nearest GP surgeries some 10-15 minutes' drive away, with waiting times numbered in weeks?

We are constantly being told that there's a housing crisis. That's one way to look at it. The other would be to say that we have a population crisis. Ask anyone in Minster Lovell, or indeed in Witney, after years of intensive housing development all over its greenfield sites, whether a higher population is what this area really needs. The housing crisis is a convenient device for Catesby

Estates and the appellant to make the argument for granting unlimited planning permission for all of their agricultural land bordering Minster Lovell. Dovecote Park came first, the appeal site is next, and just wait to see what they have planned for the “wider area”, as they refer to it. Let’s be honest with ourselves, the only limited development here will be when the appellant runs out of land to sell.

I cannot put into words the disappointment I feel at the absolute capitulation of WODC on Tuesday, before the inquiry even had the opportunity to run its course. After the considerable time, effort and dedication the Society for the Protection of Minster Lovell put into this process, along with all other interested parties, to see our star players turn around and kick the ball into our own net was pretty hard to take.

When the appellant’s proposal was unanimously rejected by the council last year, their letter detailed how it didn’t respect the village character, how it would not protect the local landscape, how it was divorced from key services and facilities with residents reliant on private vehicles. In summary, and I quote, how “the adverse impacts identified would significantly and demonstrably outweigh the benefits”.

Fast forward to this Tuesday, and contrast those sentiments with the council’s new position. Everything is fine! The location is sustainable and accessible, there’s no unacceptable impact on the non-designated heritage asset of Minster Lovell. Not unacceptable to whom, I might ask? To the residents of Minster Lovell, were they to have a voice?

The council’s humiliating position is now summarised by the words, “no conflict”, stated and restated numerous times within their unconditional surrender document, also known as their Position Statement. Bewildered residents of Minster Lovell, and I’m sure many sitting behind me in this room, will no doubt be wondering what was proposed that convinced the council to completely reverse their decision in virtually every area of contention.

So, in light of what can only be described as a betrayal, the responsibility falls not to paid professionals, such as those from Catesby Estates, nor to hired experts, nor to barristers experienced in planning policy, to stand up for Minster Lovell, its residents and its heritage. It falls to the individuals who actually live here, who know the village and care about its future. Not just interested parties, but invested parties. Those of us who understand the impact this development will have, and those of us who will have to live with the considerable consequences. The appellant won’t have to. They will simply move onto the next proposal, which they have already begun laying the groundwork for during this inquiry.

I’d genuinely like to thank the inspector for visiting the site yesterday, and I hope you were able to see through some of the hyperbole we’ve heard from the appellant’s team and witnesses. I’m admittedly no planning expert, and I’m sure this can all be decided very easily by studying policies and quoting precedents. But no matter which “comparable” sites have been approved in the past, they are not Minster Lovell. No two places are ever the same, and just because planning permission was granted in one location doesn’t mean it’s right for this one.

I hope that you consider these sentiments as you make your final decision. More houses may need to be built, but they don’t have to be built in Minster Lovell.