

Statement of case

Sarah Blackford, Chair of the School Farm and Country Trust, Upper Wilting Farm, Crowhurst Rd, St Leonards on sea, East Sussex TN38 8EG

My husband and I have lived and worked at Upper Wilting Farm since 1987. We have raised our two children on the farm and they are now young adults. Our son, who is 21, is now also farming with us. at Upper Wilting Farm. He could be considered a 'rare species' as there are very few young people now joining the farming profession.

We arrived on the farm in 1987 and in 1988; we were issued with consultation documents for a proposed dual carriageway to come straight through the farm. It took until 2001, following a very protracted period of consultations, planning and a Public Inquiry, before it was turned down by the Secretary of State. The statement released when the dual carriageway was turned down, stated that the road would be too environmentally damaging and that other alternative transport solutions had not been fully explored. Within three months of this announcement, we were told of the proposal for a 'relief road' following a very similar route. We then entered this second period of blight and uncertainty about our future, not only our home but our livelihood and our children's future opportunities. There has been little regard for our human rights with either road proposal. It is assumed by many that we must be receiving huge amounts of compensation. For the dual carriageway proposal, we received less than £3,000 worth of compensation and this was for physical damage to the crops and not a penny for the stress and anxiety that we experienced for the 13 years of process. We have yet to receive a penny for the intrusion, interruption of business and physical damage to our fields for work to date for the proposed relief road. We have been left to deal with the stress and anxiety of all this and have even had to make the initial contact with staff at ESCC, as no one even came to explain to us what was happening, before they started the consultation process in Hastings and St Leonards.

I know well, that our human rights come second to the rights of all those that will apparently benefit from the building of such a road scheme and that the taking of the land and destroying our livelihoods and our home, are allegedly outweighed by the benefits to the local population. I wonder how many people are aware that the predicted time saved by using this new proposed road will only amount to a matter of seconds. How many of them are aware of the traffic chaos that the proposed road will cause at either end, as the additional traffic is fed into already overloaded junctions and roundabouts. I would also like to know how long it will be before the traffic numbers on the A259 will return to the existing numbers, if not higher, than they currently are.

There is much written about the road being key to improving the local economy and providing an infrastructure for houses and business premises to create jobs. There has been little change in the terminology as ESCC case has been put together despite catastrophic changes in the economy and a more urgent awareness of the need for a global approach to reducing carbon emissions.

It is no big secret that fuel prices are set to continue to rise as we approach 'peak oil' – the point when the demand for oil outstrips supply. This will lead to price increases for all our commodities, especially food. Hastings and Rother desperately need to create jobs and we need affordable and healthy food to feed the population. With Hastings and St Leonards having some of the most deprived wards in the country, 2000 jobs (if they materialise) and a road to nowhere, is not going to fix it.

At Upper Wilting Farm, we run The School Farm and Country Trust. This is all about opportunities for all age groups to learn about food and farming and enjoy the countryside. We

have regular groups of school children, scout groups and brownies visiting the farm throughout the year for all sorts of activities. We also have groups of university students carrying out studies and research on the Combe Haven marshes. We have recently set up a community gardening group, which has come about through a direct need and requests from the people of Hastings and St Leonards. We have given over 2 acres of the farm to form a group known as Crowhurst Community Agriculture. We like to refer to ourselves as 'The Growhursts'. We grow a large range of fruit and vegetables as a group. We have a membership of 20 family groups, representing 80 mouths to feed. They pay £12 a year and commit to give at least 4 hours labour on the farm per month. In return for this, they receive a share of the harvest. We deliberately grow a surplus amount of crop which we then sell through the farm shop. This generates the income to buy our seeds and equipment for the following year making it self sustaining. This also makes a business case for the group, as it links the local community with the farm and our shop and increases the footfall. The 'Growhursts' group is about learning new skills; about community (if we don't pull together and the crops fail, we all go without) and it has health and therapeutic benefits. It is well known that being outside and taking exercise releases hormones that make us happier and feel more positive. Our group consists of people from all walks of life. We are close enough to Hastings and Bexhill to allow members to catch the bus to Churchwood Drive and walk to the farm. We do not discriminate against anyone from joining our group. We have former drug addicts, long term unemployed, some semi retired member, someone who works answers the very stressful 999 calls at night (generated from a very deprived area with drug and alcohol problems) and many more. The demand for places to join us come in daily. I currently have a waiting list of over 60 people. There is also a lot of interest in setting up a community flock of hens to provide training so that people can keep their own hens and also produce economically priced free range eggs.

If ESCC, Hastings and Rother, all had a policy to source their food locally, this alone would generate a whole raft of business opportunities and create local employment. Research carried out by the Sustainable Development Commission, shows that for every £10 spent in a conventional retailer, it will generate £14 of benefit to the local economy. For that same £10 spent on locally produced food, generates £25 to the local economy. I don't know what the spend is on food by local government, but I am sure that this would run into millions. Producing food is a transferable skill and does not rely on a high level of academic ability. I do not believe there is a good enough case to take the farm land out of production to build a road on it.

The impact on the bio diversity of the Combe Haven Valley from building a road through it, cannot be underestimated. This is a fragile environment which is species rich and is unique in many ways. There has been much research done on the valley floor which is a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). Pollen grains from a cultivated crop have been retrieved and carbon dated to show that the land was being farmed over 2500 years ago. If we need a road, we do not need it to destroy the farms, the local landscape, and the fragile environment, raise the risk of flooding to the rural community. We cannot afford to take away the opportunity from Hastings, St Leonards and Bexhill, the opportunity of obtaining their food from their surroundings. Once built on, it is lost forever. If we need mobility solutions, this proposed road is not it.