

## Roundtable report: Exploring the future direction of the brownfield sector and its sustainability goals

Roundtable outcomes and notes, 11 May 2021



By Ian Grant, Director

### Key themes

- Opportunity for the brownfield industry to focus on sustainability goals and elevate its value
- Particular opportunities in carbon reduction, soil restoration and biodiversity net gain
- The value of brownfield land is increasing
- Social and community aspects of brownfield development rising up the agenda
- Increased need for partnerships and collaboration, particularly with regulators to meet the challenges

### Recommendations for the brownfield industry:

- **Standards.** Strive to improve standards and professionalism to enhance industry image
- **Partnerships.** Foster partnerships and collaborative working wherever possible
- **Define sustainability goals.** Work towards defining sustainability goals for brownfield
- **Alignment with sustainable development goals.** Align brownfield activities with the UN SDGs
- **Checklist.** Create a checklist that helps align the various activities on a brownfield site from the planning and design stage through to construction
- **Demonstrate brownfield credentials.** To the wider construction industry and public
- **Carbon assessment tool.** Work towards a centralised carbon assessment tool that the brownfield industry can use
- **Objectors\*.** Understand objectors to brownfield development and their motives.

## Opportunities

**Sustainability.** Wider sustainability, net zero, climate crisis and general biodiversity.

**Innovation.** Innovation beckons, as per when landfill tax came in. How to use a brownfield asset – carbon capture, biodiversity net gain – and then move it on.

**Land use.** Beneficial use of brownfield land that goes beyond traditional development – in terms of biodiversity, renewables, and other natural capital benefits.

**Decommissioning** of fossil fuel energy plants and redeveloping brownfield sites for renewable energy production.

**Environment elevated.** The environment in corporate consciousness and remediation and sustainability is valued more – with increased spend beyond mere compliance. Shareholders want to see measurables. Market is driving higher cost remediation.

**Carbon capture.** On brownfield sites and in the development process.

**Competing land uses.** Population growth in urban extensions leading to competing land uses between residential and logistics (becoming more attractive financially, with last mile etc).

**Viability.** Sites that were not viable 10-15 years ago are becoming viable.

**Benefits of soils.** Work on microbial benefits of soils when remediating a site; develop soil analysis tools.

**Emerging contaminants.** PFAS is up there, but others are important too.

**Climate change and remediation.** Revisiting previously remediated sites to make them 'climate change secure'.

**Social value.** Emphasise social and community benefits of bringing derelict sites back into use, including jobs and skills – a communication challenge.

**Open space.** Creation of open spaces with access (valued more post-Covid by public and clients).

**Clustering.** Cluster small sites – wherever possible for economies of scale to make remediation possible.

## Sustainability

**Integration.** Engaging people with it, possibly re-educating them and integrating sustainability better into the work the industry is already doing.

**Perception shift.** Working on biodiversity, soils, and climate – in that we are greening architecture, managing construction materials, assessing the carbon of our developments; and aligning with sustainable development goals.

**Beneficial land use.** We are bringing land back into beneficial use – and should advertise that to the development industry.

## Challenges

**Voluntary work.** The industry relies too much on voluntary work for guidance and industry initiatives.

**Competition for staff.** The industry has lost people recently to the financial sector.

**Land availability.** The availability of brownfield land in the right place is a big challenge for developers.

**Collaboration.** The technical challenges are of such a magnitude that we need everyone's best ideas to identify best solutions.

**Time.** No time to think about sustainability and how that affects the welfare and safety of the clients.

**Value.** Clients don't understand the true value of brownfield remediation. Sector seen as 'not a great deal of worth'.

**Public perception.** Remediation is a small factor in a large environmental agenda – the public doesn't see its true value.

**Late engagement.** Brownfield professionals are not involved early enough (but some change here with direct contact with financiers).

**Fragmented industry.** Need for funding for proper partnerships with the Environment Agency

## Regulation

**Wider focus.** Regulation needs to consider the bigger picture in terms of sustainability. Currently, it has a rather narrow focus on issues like waste.

**Regulator development.** Refocus and develop our regulators realistically overall improving the value and the worth of the sector.

**Not valued.** Regulators themselves feel undervalued – resources cut and staff criticised.

**Quality and consistency.** Need quality and consistent regulation. Clients don't like inconsistency of regulators – individually and collectively among the EA and local authorities. 'If we get that it would improve our industry'.

**Early engagement.** Early engagement with EA would offset some of the issues with planning.

**More carrots.** Agency needs 'more carrot less stick'.

## Materials management

**Honesty and misdemeanours.** Problems with materials management and misdemeanours of hauliers; dishonest declarations.

**Electronic tracking.** Introduce electronic tracking?

**Self-regulation and definition.** Improve self-regulation, for example clear definition of waste practice.

**Guidance.** On materials management – push through guidance.

**Practice.** Contractors won't spend a couple of extra weeks on site to recycle materials but specify export and import.

## Soils

**Sequestration.** Focus on the carbon sequestration benefits of soils.

**Soil value.** Assess the proper value and content of soils – and not see it as waste.

**Storage facilities.** There is a lack of facilities in the UK where materials can be stored and reused.

**Uses.** Need some materials, clays for example, to build up flood defences, rather than it going to landfill.

**Soil hospitals.** Changes to the planning system and incentives needed for soil hospitals.

**Resource.** Soil should be seen as a resource. How do we make soil a commodity of great value?

**Soil carbon.** We need to understand soil carbon and impacts developments have on it.

## Carbon

**Carbon calculators.** Some developments have sustainability and carbon calculators for the lifetime of the building – but are not looking at the enabling phase.

**Project lifetime.** We need a carbon tool for the lifetime of the project.

**Sustainability.** We need to add up carbon and look at carbon footprinting in our remediation practices to demonstrate our sustainability.

**Marginal gains.** Look at the benefit of marginal gains re contamination against the amount of carbon used to achieve them.

**Soil carbon tool.** Need a soil/carbon remediation tool. The structural engineering industry has achieved centralised tools.

**Soil research.** To date the research behind carbon capture and soil is probably way behind where we need to be for us to get the best benefit from it.

**Bonuses.** Some large clients are linking carbon reduction to bonuses.

## Roundtable participants

|                   |   |  |
|-------------------|---|--|
| Jo Strange        | Technical Director  | CGL                                      |
| Tom Henman        | Director  | RSK Geosciences and RSK Environment, RSK |
| George Evans      | Managing Director   | Soilfix                                  |
| Ian Evans         | Technical Director  | Wood Group                               |
| Jonathan Atkinson | Technical Specialist Ground Water & Contaminated Land           | Environment Agency                       |
| Daymion Jenkins   | Director, UK Head of Ground and Water                           | WSP                                      |
| Neil Williams     | Senior Director   | St Modwen                                |
| John McAuliffe    | Group Managing Director   | McAuliffe Group                          |
| Simon Cole        | Technical Director & UKI Practice Lead for Remediation Services | AECOM                                    |
| Steve Edgar       | Managing Director   | VertaseFLI                               |
| Ian Grant         | Director  | Environment Analyst                      |
| Julian Rose       | Cofounder   | Environment Analyst                      |

## Credits

This roundtable was organised by Environment Analyst's [Brownfield Intelligence Network](#). With thanks to EA team members Ian Grant, Amanda Rafferty, and Julian Rose for their work on the roundtable. Contact Lisa Turner or Julian Rose for more information on this meeting and on the Brownfield Intelligence Network: [lisa.turner@environment-analyst.com](mailto:lisa.turner@environment-analyst.com)

\* See Grassroots Campaigns website: [grassrootscampaigns.weebly.com/](http://grassrootscampaigns.weebly.com/) and map: [shorturl.at/qw129](http://shorturl.at/qw129)