

MINUTES OF THE EXTRAORDINARY MEETING

OF THE DISTRICT COUNCIL OF EASINGTON

HELD ON FRIDAY 9 MAY 2008

Present: Councillor R. Taylor (Chair)

Councillors Mrs. M. Baird, S. Bishop,
B. Burn, A. Burnip, R. Burnip, A. Collinson,
R. Crute, R. Davison, Mrs. J. Freak, H.
High, Mrs. E. Huntington, Mrs. A.E. Laing,
T. Longstaff, Mrs. J. Maitland, K. McGonnell,
A. Napier, G. Pinkney, D. Raine, M. Routledge,
F. Shaw, R.J. Todd and P.G. Ward.

Also Present: S.Cudlip - Clerk to Seaham Town Council
A. Johnson - British Horse Society
R. Smith - Coolmore Estates Limited
M. Drain - Coolmore Estates Limited
J. Wood - Coolmore Estates Limited
S. Harris - Creative Writers Forum

1. **HAWTHORN (EASINGTON VILLAGE AND SOUTH HETTON) - CENTRE OF CREATIVE EXCELLENCE COMPRISING FILM STUDIOS AND ANCILLARY FACILITIES, EDUCATION, STUDENT ACCOMMODATION, HOTEL AND LEISURE USES AND PUBLIC BUILDINGS AT LAND SOUTH OF A.182 DAWDON LINK ROAD, SEAHAM FOR COOLMORE ESTATES LIMITED**

Consideration was given to the report of the Head of Planning and Building Control Services in relation to the abovementioned application, a copy of which had been circulated to each Member.

A Dobie, Principal Planning Services Officer briefed Members on the application site which related to 72 hectares of land located to the east of the A.19 and south of the A.182 Dawdon Link Road, Seaham. He explained that access to the Centre would be achieved via the A.182 from the Foxcover Industrial Estate roundabout.

A limited number of properties were sited close to the site, as specified in the report, the site was in arable agricultural use and with the exception of a small group of elm trees located along a field boundary to the centre of the site there were no other mature trees present, nor were there any other notable landscape features. There were a number of footpaths and bridleways in the immediate area of the site, including one that ran eastwards from East Farm across the northern part of the site parallel with the A.182 link road.

He explained that the application sought outline planning permission for the erection of a Centre of Creative Excellence comprising film studios and ancillary facilities, educational buildings, student accommodation, hotel and leisure uses and public buildings. Details of access, scale of development and landscaping had been submitted with the application. Details of the layout of the site, appearance of buildings and landscaping were to be reserved matters and would be subject to a further application if planning permission was granted.

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A Dobie outlined to Members the details of each element of the development as set out in the report.

In relation to consultation and publicity he advised that the application had been advertised in the local press and by site notices. Neighbouring properties had also been consulted with public exhibitions in Seaham and Murton to allow members of the public to comment on the proposals. The report detailed all the responses to the consultations, including those of the major consultees. Twelve letters of representation had been received, six in support of the application and six against. Since the report had been prepared two further letters had been submitted, expressing concern to the proposed development. A Dobie advised that the comments raised in these letters had already been covered within the report as part of the responses to other representations received.

G Folley, Senior Planning Services Officer outlined to Members the planning considerations arising from the application. He stated that from a careful analysis of the supporting studies, the following issues were considered relevant in assessing the application:-

- relevant planning policy;
- assessment of alternative sites;
- economic impact;
- environmental impact;
- transport and access.

G Folley briefed Members on each of these issues. He referred to Section 7 of the report which outlined the relevant planning policies and how the proposal could be considered against the relevant national, regional and local planning guidance. The site was allocated in the approved Development Plan as a strategic reserve industrial site and it was considered that in principle the proposal was in accord with the relevant policies listed.

Section 8 of the report dealt with the assessment of alternative sites, which concluded that there were none either available or suitable for the type of development proposed.

In terms of the economic impact of the development discussed in Section 9, G Folley explained that the proposals would require an initial investment of £192m, and had the potential to create 2,406 on-site jobs. It was anticipated that the proposal would contribute £6.7m to the regional economy.

A Business Plan and Economic Impact Assessment had been submitted with the application, the contents of which were summarised in the report. It was accepted that the proposed cluster development of associated uses would offer significant benefits for Easington. The Centre would be a major employer in the film studio but would also provide opportunities for small and medium sized businesses through workshop space and links to higher education.

The Regional Development Agency was supportive of the proposal and had suggested that the phasing of the development should be controlled to ensure that the core elements of the scheme were delivered prior to the ancillary development such as the hotel and leisure facilities.

With regard to the A.19/A.182 link road from which the Centre would be accessed, he stated that this road had already enabled significant investment in

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Seaham. It was accepted that the Centre would contribute significantly to the long term regeneration strategy and build on previous investment in the area.

G Folley continued that Section 10 in the report examined the environmental impact of the proposals. He stated that a visual and landscape impact assessment had been carried out which found that the main impact would be on those viewpoints closest to the site as well as from the public rights of way, residential properties and the golf club. To mitigate this a programme of measures would be implemented to reduce the impact. However there would still be an impact on certain locations which could be dealt with at the reserved matters stage.

A full ecological survey had been undertaken which established that the overall complex of habitats and species were of low value. There would be a loss of habitats but the landscaping proposed would create significant new habitats. The concerns raised regarding the effect on wildlife were in contradiction to the response from Natural England, the Council's Countryside Officer and local wildlife groups who had not raised any objections and who considered that the proposal would enhance the biodiversity of the area and benefit local wildlife.

In terms of transport and access, a TRANSYT analysis of traffic flow impacts on key highway junctions had been undertaken by the applicant. Mitigation measures had been discussed and agreed including a Travel Plan, highway improvement works and a traffic light system.

A financial contribution by way of a Section 106 agreement would be attached to any grant of planning permission for these off site works. DCC highways and the Highways Agency had made no objection to the proposal. The concerns relating to the bridleway referred to in the consultations and publicity section of the report could be dealt with at the reserved matters stage when the exact layout of the scheme had been agreed. If the layout meant a closure or diversion of the bridleway this would have to be made as a separate application.

To conclude G Reed, Head of Planning and Building Control Services stated that the report recommended approval of the application. This was an exceptional development, not only because of its size and scale, but also because of the nature of the proposals, the positive effect it would have on the regional economy and the related regeneration benefits it would bring to the locality and region as a whole. Planning Officers had examined each of the planning considerations and these had been fully addressed within the report. The application was in accordance with Development Plan policies and guidance, and national and regional planning guidance, as outlined. All major statutory consultees were in agreement with the application and responses had been provided to objections raised.

A Johnson, an objector, from the British Horse Society explained that she worked on a voluntary basis to improve and look after the rights of way for horse riders. She stated that there was only one bridleway in this area running westwards across the site to Hesleden East House. East Durham had very few bridleways and this was the longest in the region with excellent views. The area had a lot of horse riders and increasingly former agricultural fields had been taken over to keep horses. She considered that the increase in number of horses and riders contributed to the economy of the District. Because of the limited number of bridleways, riders were forced to use footpaths and main roads which was dangerous for both horse riders and other road users. She made reference to the District's Heritage Coast Status and the recently

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produced Durham County Rights of Way Improvement Plan which sought to enhance and protect the rights of way network.

S Cudlip, spoke on behalf of Seaham Town Council in support of the application, stating that the proposal involved a cluster of creative industry and other land uses. The Town Council believed the application provided immense diversity and employment opportunities. The plans would have a lasting legacy and a very positive impact in supporting economic regeneration of the area. The plans were funded by the private sector and were not dependent in any way on public sector funding.

The facilities would also provide much needed university amenities involving a specialist centre of higher education and places for between 1,500 and 2,000 students in a purpose built campus linked to the film studios. There would be two much needed hotels which would provide considerable benefits in sustaining the economy. The hotels also had spin-off leisure facilities associated with them which could be used by the public.

Seaham Town Council believed the proposal to be of immense importance in that it would provide a significant boost to the whole area. It was on land which was already identified as a strategic reserve site. Seaham Town Council could think of no better way of utilising this area. It would provide over 2,400 jobs, make very good use of the land, the development involved high standards of architecture, layout and building design. It would be attractive and have very good access arrangements. The Town Council believed that this development would have the most positive impact and effect on the local economy in both job creation and regeneration benefits.

The planning policies which were in place at the District Council supported the regeneration and development of Seaham and Seaham Town Council saw this particular application as significantly enhancing the whole regeneration process.

One of the most important factors to highlight was that the sheer scale of this development and the proposals meant that they would not just benefit Seaham, its residents and adjoining settlements, but would also be of enormous economic importance to the whole region.

Seaham Town Council believed the new development would result in a dynamic acceleration of the economy of Seaham and the adjoining area. Paragraph 9.4 of the Planning Officer's report highlighted a very important factor. The proposals on this site just outside Seaham would send a defining signal and act as a beacon for economic, educational and cultural opportunities the likes of which this area and the north east region had never seen before. In doing so, Seaham Town Council believed these proposals would help to stimulate and attract further inward investment, draw new businesses into the area and attract a greater number of tourists.

S Harris, supporter, from the Creative Writers Forum stated that the Group he represented were in full support of the plans. It would generate jobs and support the creative writing industry. They considered that the film studio would be able to compete on a global scale which would benefit writers, people in the drama industry, and theatre students across the region. This was an industry that was traditionally difficult to enter because of the high level of competition. The Forum's only concern was that it hoped that the Centre's owners would employ local people wherever possible.

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R Smith, on behalf of the applicants, stated that this proposal was unique not only in the north east region but in the UK as a whole. It brought together a range of uses in the creative, commercial, education and leisure sectors, representing an innovative form of new 'cluster' development that would stimulate massive inward investment and job creation in Easington.

A key feature was that the nature of the development was such that a very wide range of employment opportunities would be provided encompassing all types of jobs including professional, managerial, creative, technical, educational and skilled manual sectors. As a result, a high proportion of future employment opportunities would be directly available to local people. The provision of 2,400 new jobs would represent just under 50% of the target of 5,000 net new jobs sought in the District by 2021.

Sunderland University intended to develop film related media courses on the site which were complementary to those currently offered in Sunderland. East Durham and Houghall Community College would offer a range of courses for all age groups from 14 to 16 through to higher education and the potential for the establishment of working links with a range of employers on the site had been a key factor which had underpinned the involvement of both institutions in the Learning and Skills Council.

In relation to site specific issues he referred to discussions with Durham County Council and the Highways Agency which had concluded that the development was accessible in highways and access terms subject to improvements to the A.19/A.182 junction to be undertaken in part, at the expense of the developer.

In terms of landscape, the character of the development did lend itself to breaking up the built elements to a greater extent than would probably have been possible if the previous approach of a large single user been implemented. The Heritage Coast was unaffected and whilst some residential properties would have views of the site, these were limited in number and were all at some distance from the development. The site would also be visible from Seaham Golf Course but only from the two most southerly holes.

The applicants were aware of the concerns over the effect of the development on the bridleway which ran through the site as explained by Angela Johnson. It would need to be diverted to facilitate the development but at no stage had the applicants contemplated or proposed its removal without replacement. Details would need to be resolved at the reserved matters stage and the applicants would work with the British Horse Society, all relevant groups and individuals in order to identify a solution which would meet the needs of all concerned.

At this point he made reference to Sections 9.10 and 10.16 in the report, relating to energy and carbon emissions and the condition that 10% of energy should be provided through on-site renewables. He stated that the Company were committed to this but had asked that 10% of energy be provided from renewable sources rather than on-site. A. Dobie acknowledged that this had been an issue and that there would not be a requirement for on-site provision, however, the developers would be required to enter into an agreement that 10% of energy would be obtained from renewable sources.

To conclude, he stated that the application was unique, there was a high degree of compliance with policy and the range of employment, social, education and community benefits were clear.

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In response to a question from a Member, R Smith reiterated that there would be opportunities to develop the range of skills that this cluster development would require through links with the University and College.

A Member asked what the timeframe would be for completion of the development and M. Drain, Coolmore Estates, stated that from detailed consent being granted, it would take approximately five years to complete.

The Leader of the Council thanked Officers for the succinct, comprehensive appraisal and the contributions from objectors, supporters and applicants. He reiterated that this was the largest development the District was ever likely to see and was good news not only for Easington District, but also for the County, the region and nationally. In addition to the employment opportunities associated with the completed facilities, many jobs would be available as the Centre was in development. Links with Sunderland University and East Durham and Houghall Community College were important to developing the local skills base for the wide range of employment opportunities.

RESOLVED that:-

- (a) the application be approved subject to referral to the Government Office for the North East and that delegated authority be granted to the Head of Planning and Building Control Services to finalise conditions to include the following:-

Reserved Matters, Scale of Buildings, Layout of Site, Highways Improvements, Travel Plan, Access Arrangements, Protected Species Mitigation, SUDS, Pollution Control, Archaeology, Contaminated Land; and agree Section 106 Legal Agreements in relation to phasing of development, and financial contribution to be made with regard to highway improvement works;

- (b) in the event of the application being referred back to the Council for determination, delegated authority be granted to the Head of Planning and Building Control Services to issue the planning permission.

JE/CB/COM/DIST/080500
12.5.08