

## **DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL**

At a Meeting of **County Planning Committee** held in Council Chamber, County Hall, Durham on **Tuesday 7 March 2023 at 9.30 am**

### **Present:**

**Councillor A Bell (Chair)**

### **Members of the Committee:**

Councillors J Higgins, C Hunt, P Jopling, C Marshall, C Martin, M McKeon, B Moist, K Shaw, S Wilson, S Zair, E Peeke (substitute for G Richardson) and I McLean (substitute for I Roberts)

### **Also Present:**

Councillor Kevin Earley, Councillor Dominic Haney and Councillor Douglas Oliver

### **1 Apologies**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors G Richardson, P Molloy, I Roberts and A Simpson.

### **2 Substitute Members**

Councillors I McClean and E Peeke were present as substitute Members for Councillors I Roberts and G Richardson respectively.

### **3 Declarations of Interest**

In relation to item no. 5a) Councillor Marshall advised that the developer was known to him and Councillor Bell had met and spoke with the Agent, however both Members advised that they had no pre-determined views regarding the application.

### **4 Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting held on 7 February 2023 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

## **5a DM/22/01769/FPA - Land East Of Edge Lane, Maiden Law**

The Committee considered a report of the Senior Planning Officer regarding an application for the installation and operation of a ground mounted photovoltaic (PV) solar energy generation system (solar farm), battery storage facility, electrical substation and associated infrastructure at Land to the East of Edge Lane, Maiden Law (for copy see file of minutes).

C Shields, Senior Planning Officer advised the Committee of an amendment to paragraph 177 of the report, which read;

*Although the development would temporarily remove a significant portion of land from arable use it would still be available for low intensity grazing.*

He confirmed that the word 'arable' should be replaced 'pastoral' to demonstrate the correct type of use.

The Senior Planning Officer gave a detailed presentation of the application which included a site location plan, aerial photographs, photographs of the site and a summary of objections received.

Local Member, M McGaun was unable to attend the meeting and a statement was read out on his behalf. He confirmed that he was pro-environmental and renewable development, however with 466 listed objections it was clear how residents felt about the development. He objected to the proposal as it was contrary to National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) and the County Durham Plan (CDP).

With regards to the CDP, there were no material considerations indicating that the application formed part of the plan or was required. It contained no mention of the development of this area and therefore the application have been rejected on these grounds alone. The application was contradictory to considerations in relation to quality of life, success of the economy and the protection offered to natural and historic assets. Councillor McGaun made reference to the NPPF planning policies which recommended that development should contribute to and enhance the natural and local environment; recognise the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside; seek to protect and enhance valued landscapes; minimise impacts on and providing net gains for biodiversity; and reduce the risks of pollution, land instability and contamination. He also referenced the Councils strategy that included the adoption of conservation areas according to character.

Councillor McGaun confirmed that planning applications were normally decided on whether or not the application promoted an effective use of the land and on this occasion it did not. This application site was nearly three times the size of Burnhope and it failed to safeguard the current wildlife and

nature walks whilst also failing to ensure safe and healthy living. If the application was granted, it would remove the only safe walking area for villagers of all ages. The application failed to encourage or promote any benefits to the community, other than some limited financial benefits.

The area which the application covered had been accessed for decades by walkers and wildlife and was one of the few safe areas for horse riders, dog walkers and families. The application would harm a local site of importance for biodiversity and the aesthetic impact would be devastating, with 6ft high metal fences impacting on the local landscape for generations to come. It would result in a direct impact on the health and wellbeing of residents who used the area.

Whilst he acknowledged that applications were considered on their individual merits, Councillor McGaun confirmed that another application of the same size from a different organisation had been submitted and the sites would only be separated by a 12ft wide road, forming the largest solar farm in the United Kingdom.

Councillor D Oliver, Local Member, acknowledged the green energy benefits, however as always the Committee were required to consider the emphasis on balance and in this case, there had not been enough consideration of local community benefits. The aesthetic impact of the application had been acknowledged and was clear from the number of objectors. He recognised that there were some benefits, however he referred to the community benefit £500,000 over forty years, whilst it may sound significant, given scale of the application and the huge amount of revenue that would be accrued, it was not significantly generous, and he and Councillor McGaun had raised this with the Applicant on a number of occasions. He advised that another site had been more generous offering £700,000 over a period of 30 years and there was a sense that policies should ensure more was done to assist local communities. He was aware that Scottish Government had recommended benefits of £5,000 per megawatt per annum and in comparison, this application would only be about £250 per meagawatt per annum. Some southern counties, such as Dorset and Cornwall had negotiated deals of £2-3k. Councillor Oliver confirmed that he could not support the application.

R Davies, addressed the Committee in objection to the application. He estimated that the proposal would move straight into top ten largest solar farms in the UK. Despite living 1.5km away, residents in Lanchester had not been notified of the scheme and if they had, he suggested there would have been twice the number of objections. The report incorrectly stated that there were no landscape designations within 3km of the site, despite there being two conservation areas, one in Annfield Plain and one Lanchester.

Edge Lane was also the Lanchester Parish Council boundary which fell within the Neighbourhood Plan. The site opposite would breach the local objective covering green spaces which was to protect the rural setting area. This application would destroy the rural setting of both Burnhope and Lanchester.

The installation of solar panels on agricultural land could not be classed as sustainable, the panels were likely to be manufactured in China and travel the world, only to potentially end up in a landfill site in County Durham after a lifespan of only 25 years.

Mr Davies added that the CDP stated that development in the countryside would not be permitted unless it met a list of specified exceptions, however this development did not meet the criteria. There was also protection offered for development that would cause landscape harm. The mitigation offered from the hedgerows that would be planted would take longer than five years to grow.

Local residents did not want the scheme to be located in this area and he urged the Committee to reject the application.

I Galloway, Trustee and Treasurer of Burnhope Community Centres spoke in objection to the application. He asked the Committee to refuse it on the grounds that it was contrary to both local and national policy. It was also similar to almost identical applications that were refused at Hett and Murton. The impact on Burnhope would not be outweighed by the benefits of the scheme.

This industrial scale development was 2.5 times the size of the village and would destroy the area. After enduring decades of mining, so much had been done to make Burnhope a healthy place to live. Studies in social prescribing showed that regular walks in nature had massive health benefits. Burnhope was at the top of a steep hill and the roads from the village had no footpaths so it was impossible for residents to walk safely for their health other than through the fields that would be taken out by this development. There was nowhere else to walk from the village for the elderly, those with young children, or those with mobility problems. The application condemned people to walk on narrow paths surrounded by 2m high fences. Despite mitigation to plant some hedges, they would take many years to establish.

Mr Galloway confirmed that the work to make the community a thriving and successful place to live would be compromised and destroyed. In addition to the effect on our health, there will be a serious impact on food production. The fields in the proposed site were grade 3b and 4, which the Government classed as suitable for cereals and grass that could be grazed or harvested over most of the year. The CPRE had objected to this application, stating

that there were 250,000 hectares of south-facing commercial roof space, not to mention domestic roofs and surface car parks that could be harnessed with little impact on landscape.

The application would have a devastating impact on wildlife. The biodiversity index would increase through planting more grasses and hedges but they would lose curlews, lapwings, skylarks, migrating geese and deer. Many were classified by the RSPB as near threatened species which was the reason they had objected to the application. The developer was promising some mitigation areas, but they wouldn't work as they were nowhere near the nature ponds.

There were significant safety issues regarding the use of lithium-ion batteries which were being used as battery storage. The proposed battery storage unit would be built next to Nature's Edge Nature Reserve and there was risk of serious fire which could not be managed by the Fire Service. With regards to efficiency, the application would produce less electricity than would be generated by one Wind Turbine in the North Sea. Mr Galloway asked the Committee to refuse the application.

I Wilkinson, objected to the application, he lived to the north east section of the site, and his house was over the fence. The area had already been devastated by industrial activity in the past and transformed to well managed farmland, which was crucial to food production needs and was supported by subsidies due to its importance. Areas were set aside to allow wildlife to flourish and protect them. There was also a network of public rights of way with stunning views and usable pathways, used for recreation which was essential to wellbeing. The Council promoted the local natural environment.

The comments and opinions of consultees were clear that they didn't want the area altered in any way. Organisations had highlighted how it went against both local and national policies. Fellow speakers had highlighted major material considerations for refusal. It went against the Government's Environmental Development Plan and he asked the Committee to reject the application.

C Atkinson, Principal Environmental Planner at Lightsource bp addressed the Committee on behalf of the Applicant. He referred to the Government published Net Zero Strategy, which sought to provide a fully decarbonised energy system by 2035 and the Councils declaration of a Climate Emergency in 2019. This application was an opportunity for Members to support this development and make a significant contribution towards achieving the goals set out within the Council's Climate Emergency Action Plan which was adopted in 2020.

The proposed solar farm would provide enough energy to power nearly 14,000 homes with green energy, something which had been a particular issue as gas prices were at an all-time high due to the UK's reliance on imported energy and the impact on energy bills. The development of solar farms would increase energy independence and he confirmed that solar had the advantage of being the cheapest form of energy, as well as the quickest to deploy.

Solar farms had to be located in proximity of a grid connection with sufficient capacity for the energy generated. A connection to Annfield substation to the north of the site had been secured and a key reason for choosing this location was the extensive woodlands which provided screening and negated long and medium distance views of the proposed development. There was likely to be some localised impact of the development which had been identified early in the design process and mitigation had been provided by new tree and hedgerow planting. The Council's landscape officer had deemed this strategy to be acceptable.

Mr Atkinson confirmed that the land within the application site was used for pasture and defined as poorer quality agricultural land, grade 3b and 4. The design and layout of the solar farm would enable sheep to continue grazing on the land, thus not impacting on food security.

The local community were invited to a consultation event in April 2022 and initial design proposals were amended following feedback from residents. After submission, the application was further revised removing a significant number of panels from the southern eastern field and all households in Burnhope had been notified of the proposed changes.

Mr Atkinson confirmed that the Applicant had partnered with the County Durham Community Foundation to set up a Community Fund in which £450,000 would be available for locally based organisations to apply for. The fund would also be available to individuals to assist with the current cost of living crisis. In addition, a fund of £50,000 for Burnhope Parish Council would be set up to bring forward initiatives and improve facilities in the village and the development would contribute over £6 million in business rates over its lifetime.

In summary Mr Atkinson advise that the Applicant had worked with the planning officers, consultees and local stakeholders to ensure that the development complied with all national and local planning policy, and this was reflected by the fact that no objections had been raised by technical consultees and the recommendation was for approval.

R Eggleston, Landowner, confirmed that the land was only capable of short term low density grazing for cattle. He also confirmed that there were many

unacceptable welfare issues with sheep being left and also boundary fence damage.

J Gray, Landowner, confirmed that in ten years there had been 125 recorded examples of sheep worrying or gates left open, 25 lambs had been killed and 9 sheep had been put to sleep. This scheme provided an opportunity for the provision of renewable energy, whilst the security fencing would allow farmers to graze ewes and lambs safely for the first time, without the risk from dogs. This would lead to increased food production. The footpaths would continue to be maintained and locals would no longer worry about dogs. There had been no curlew chicks reared on the land in the past ten years. She also confirmed that the application would bring employment benefits, with the provision of 30 local jobs at Broom House Farm.

The Senior Planning Officer responded to some of the issues raised by speakers. He confirmed that 788 properties had received notification of the application via letter and site notices had been erected in the area. The site was also located outside of the Lanchester Neighbourhood Plan boundary. Internal buffers identified in the report ensured there would be no harm to the conservation areas.

With regards to the inclusion of a Community Benefit Fund, N Carter, Planning and Development Lawyer, advised the Committee that this was not included as mitigation to make the development acceptable. As summarised in the report, the fund had been offered outside the planning system and not to mitigate impact. The Planning Officer had determined that there was no impact to be mitigated in this case and therefore no weight should be afforded to the fund when determining the application.

In response to a question from Councillor Jopling, the Senior Planning Officer advised that a desk based archaeological assessment was based on information from historical environmental records. Most of the site had been opencast and an assessment had concluded that there the site was unlikely to contain remains.

Councillor Marshall queried how the scheme compared to the original application submitted. He also referred to the comments regarding the Community Development fund and asked for clarification that it was not a legal requirement.

The Senior Planning Officer advised that when the application was submitted, there had been solar panels in the south east area, however there were objections with regards to the impact on wildlife and an objection from the Councils Ecology Department. The application included improved mitigation measures for birds and a larger area designated for habitat

creation and management, which Ecology had deemed to be acceptable. The change had also resulted in the site being drawn back from properties.

The Senior Planning Officer advised that the information provided with regards to community fund was for awareness only and was not something the Committee should take into consideration. The Planning and Development Lawyer confirmed that there was no legal requirement to make funding available to the community and reiterated that there was no impact that the Council felt appropriate to mitigate with financial contributions.

The Chair asked for information regarding the management of the fund and how a commitment could be made for forty years without a legal requirement. Mr Atkinson confirmed that the developer was working with Durham Community Foundation, to provide an endowment payment to be managed by them for investment in local projects.

In response to a further question from Councillor Wilson, the Planning and Development lawyer confirmed that the funding could not be secured by a condition and therefore no legal requirement would be established, even if the application was approved.

Councillor Wilson queried the quality of the farmland and the approximate time for the hedgerow to mature. The Senior Planning Officer confirmed that it was grade 3b and 4 land used for grass and grazing. There had been mention of some arable land in the eastern corner, however it had been grassland since the opencast. IT would take approximately 10-15 years for the proposed tree planting to fully establish and match the existing hedgerow on Edge Lane as shown in the site photographs.

Councillor Moist asked for comments on the information from Councillor McGaun regarding a second application in close proximity to the site. The Senior Planning Officer advised that there was not another application, however a public consultation was underway for another site. Until an application was submitted, cumulative impact could not be considered.

Councillor Moist advised that when the applications for nearby sites at Hett and Murton were refused, the Committee asked whether it was possible to provide a list of suitable sites and he wondered if there had been any progress. S Reed, Planning and Development Manager advised that Spatial Policy were working on a supplementary planning document on solar and renewable energy, which would be attached to the CDP, however the consultation had not started and therefore could not be given any weight when determining the application.

Councillor Jopling concluded that the application breached many policies. One example was the loss of public rights of way despite the issue with



health and wellbeing and obesity. She also had concerns about the impact on water management. The scheme would result in the loss of amenity for forty years and nothing could mitigate that. The Council were promoting County Durham as a place for visitors to enjoy the countryside, but they were happy for the installation of solar farms. It was not fair on residents, some of whom would suffer badly.

Councillor Jopling considered that the proposal would be detrimental to protected species and with planting taking years to establish, it would have no benefit. The amount of money that would be generated for renewable energy did not outweigh the damage to the environment and to residents. The application regarded the loss of land to be temporary, despite the scheme lasting forty years and she urged the Committee to think seriously before approving it.

Councillor Jopling moved refusal of the application as it was contrary to CDP Policies 10, 26, 41 and 56.

Councillor Hunt noted that there had been 466 objections in response to 788 letters of consultation.

Councillor Marshall confirmed that regardless of the location, there would always be objections as they were limited to specific locations. He noted that the scheme would secure the supply of energy to the local area and enable nearly 14000 homes to be powered by green energy, the equivalent of taking 8000 family cars off the road. He noted that there would be no footpath closures and the land could still be used for grazing. This was an attractive proposition and the Planning Committee had to make decisions based on planning policy. He was pleased that Spatial Policy were considering a supplementary planning document but in the absence of a policy, the Council had to determine the application on current policy. He also recognised the need to protect the Council from successful appeals.

With regards to a second application, if submitted the cumulative impact would be considered. He moved the recommendation for approval as outlined in the report.

Councillor Wilson concluded that this type of scheme had to be on a large scale otherwise they did not work. They were still rare and would stand out initially, but more so when walking as when travelling in a vehicle, the visual impact would be time limited. He recognised that there may be some breaches of policy however on balance, he did not think the application caused more harm than benefits and he seconded the proposal to approve the application.

Councillor Hunt advised that she was pro renewable energy, however using arable land and destroying landscape could not be outweighed by the benefits of this scheme.

Councillor McKeon accepted that there would be some landscape impact however referred to the climate emergency and generational changes. Planning applications should be determined on their own merits and a blanket approach in objection to this type of development was not sustainable. This type of location was the only place that schemes like this could be located. The land was not arable land but grazing land and it could still be used as such. It was essential that the public were consulted regarding the creation of a strategy as these applications were becoming more frequent, particularly from this developer.

Councillor Jopling advised that the applications coming through were sited in inappropriate places, and despite the benefits of the scheme, this would have a significant visual impact and would impact on local amenity. The applications that had been brought to Committee affected residents and were contentious. She suggested that companies should look at better sites.

Councillor Peeke agreed that this huge development would have a significant impact and that alternative places should be considered such as rooftops or sides of buildings before using green space.

The Chair had attended the site visit the previous day and noted the enormous footprint of the scheme. In his opinion it was one of the hardest applications that the Committee had been asked to determine. It was a beautiful area, but the application had come at a time of a global energy crisis.

Councillor Shaw confirmed that there were strong views from the community and local members, with concerns regarding the impact on the landscape but having one of the largest solar developments in the Country could be exactly what County Durham needed. There had been some suggestions made to alternatives such as the provision of solar panels on buildings however there had also been concerns raised regarding fire risk. The obvious conclusion was that the equipment had to be isolated and the reason they were located where they were was to access the grid. In conclusion he supported the recommendation.

Councillor McKeon referred to the biggest threat to wildlife as the rise in global temperatures due to the use of fossil fuels. There were broader climate change issues that impacted on local biodiversity.

Councillor Zair referred to the concerns of the Public Rights of Way Officer regarding vehicle maintenance access and was advised by the Senior

Planning Officer that this related to conflict of users on routes, however maintenance vehicles would use the route less than once a week which was not dissimilar to the existing farm traffic.

Councillor Moist noted that there was a motion to approve the application which had been seconded however he wanted Members to consider deferring the application until confirmation was received regarding the second application. He was concerned that the decision could be used as precedent and the impact of another scheme in the same area would be enormous.

The Planning and Development Lawyer cautioned Members in affording weight to another application which had not been received. If an application did come forward, it would have to be considered on its own merits and therefore a deferment would not serve any benefit. With regards to the Community Fund, he reiterated that it was a voluntary offer by the developer.

The Senior Planning Officer responded to suggestions that alternative sites should be considered, however this site had been chosen due to its positive characteristics. It had no designations and was close to grid connection. With regards to alternative brownfield sites, these were often already allocated for other types of development such as industry or housing and to erect solar panels would be a conflict in policy. The RSPB, CPRE and Durham Wildlife Trust had originally objected however the application had been redesigned to include the mitigation area in the south east and no further comments had been received.

## **Resolved**

That the application be APPROVED subject to the conditions outlined in the report and the completion of an agreement under Section 39 of The Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 to secure biodiversity management for the life of the development.

Carl Marshall left the meeting and did not return.

## **5b DM/22/03248/FPA - Belmont Church Of England Junior School, Buckinghamshire Road, Belmont**

The Committee considered a report of the Principal Planning Officer regarding an application for the construction of a new two-storey primary school building, a three-storey secondary school building, and a one-storey, double-height sports hall building and playing fields with associated landscaping, access and parking and demolition of the drama block (Amended description) at Belmont Church Of England Junior School, Buckinghamshire Road, Belmont (for copy see file of minutes).

C Teasdale, Principal Planning Officer gave a detailed presentation of the application which included a site location plan, aerial photographs, photographs of the site and a summary of objections received.

The Committee were provided with an update to the report to confirm that the references in paragraphs 109 and 127 to the carpark being behind 10, 21, 14 and 16 of The Links should read 2a, 2, 4, 6 and 8.

The following recommendations were also to be amended as follows:

- Condition 5 to allow construction of the new access to a standard suitable for construction traffic and then completed to full standard prior to first occupation, and
- Condition 15 to also include the lighting for the 3 court MUGA which would also be floodlit.

S Wilmot, local resident, addressed the Committee. He lived next to school and accepted that noise during school hours was expected however the noise would increase with this application and impact on his ability to use his garden.

The noise impact assessment confirmed that a pitch in this location should be avoided. The noise levels had been measured at a point within his garden and whilst it was average at present, guidance suggested it would be increased by the application and there would be even louder elements, such as shouting and swearing.

Mr Wilmot confirmed that bushes would do little to stop the level of noise and he suggested that thought should have been given to the installation of acoustic barriers around the pitch, especially given that four dwellings would have above acceptable limits of noise according to the assessment. There would be some impact from light pollution, although not as intrusive as the noise. The application would impact on residential amenity and whilst it would be controlled in school hours, he was concerned about how it would be managed on evenings and he asked that if additional conditions could not be added, the application be declined.

J Patterson – Associate Director DPP addressed the Committee on behalf of the Applicant. A replacement school in Belmont was needed to ensure that children would receive the highest standard of education within appropriate facilities. The current building was outdated and not fit for purpose. The development would provide enhanced education provision for two schools as well as facilities for community use, supported by both National and Local Planning Policies.

The existing site provided facilities which met DfE and Sport England requirements and the new layout had been designed to enable staff and pupils to remain in buildings on site during construction. Once complete the children would move into their new buildings and the demolition phase would begin before final completion of the sports field, landscaping and car parking. The Applicant had sought to address the principal issues raised, including design and scale, highways, residential amenity and sustainability.

Ms Patterson summarised the design and layout which included a buffer between residential properties. The distance from the three storey building to the nearest residential property would ensure that there would be no impact on lighting or privacy. The retention of existing trees and vegetation would ensure screening and a natural buffer between the residential properties and the site. The use of external flood lighting would be controlled with the lighting turned off at agreed times to minimise impact on neighbouring properties. The Nuisance Action Team had no objection in relation to noise. A transport assessment and travel plan had been prepared in consultation with the school and highways and were deemed acceptable. Buildings had also been designed to achieve net zero carbon.

P Marsden, Head Teacher addressed the Committee to advise that a new school was essential and long overdue, after years of delivering education in a substandard building. The new school would provide world class teaching and community facilities. The school already had agreements with the Community Association to open up facilities on evenings. He agreed that there was a need for buffering and planting but he had taken on the concerns of residents and wanted to maintain a good relationship with neighbours. Noise would be monitored during day and the school would work with the Community Association to ensure that it was monitored at night.

The Principal Planning Officer appreciated the comments made by residents with regards to noise, however comments from Environmental Health Officers and Technical experts and the report confirmed that they were satisfied. The hours of use had originally been longer but had been reduced in response to concerns by residents and would also be secured by a condition. Another condition included the requirement for a community use agreement which included provision for player etiquette on the pitch. She referred the Committee to an image in the presentation and confirmed there was a 23m distance from the edge of the artificial pitch to the mature hedgerow adjacent to the neighbouring gardens, which varied in length, with some up to 19m. She appreciated the concerns raised however the Applicant had sought to address and minimise them as far as possible.

Councillor Zair queried the increased hours on Friday and Saturday evenings. Mr Marsden replied to confirm that when the school closed, the

Community Association took possession from 5pm. He understood the hours would remain the same as the current hours.

Councillor Zair appreciated investment in schools and if there were issues he was reassured that the school would work with residents to resolve them. He moved the recommendation to approve the application subject the conditions outlined in the report, including the two amendments.

Councillor Hunt was also reassured that the school were willing to work with the community. She noted that of the 152 parking bays provided there were only 8 Electric Charging Vehicle Points. P Harrison, Highway Development Manager, advised that the scheme met current parking standards and although there was an intention to increase standards in future, it was policy compliant.

Councillor Jopling supported the well needed scheme and seconded the motion to approve the application.

Councillor Higgins added that this was a good investment for young people which he would like to see in all towns and villages however he shared the concerns of residents and would have preferred the pitch hours to be reduced. In response to a question regarding the outdoor facilities, the Principal Planning Officer confirmed that the scheme included both toilet and changing facilities. She advised that the proposed hours had been reduced from 22:00 hours on weekday evenings to 21:05.

Ms Patterson confirmed that the hours were based on current community use and highlighted that the scheme was subject to funding from the FA which required a certain amount of community use.

## **Resolved**

That the application be **APPROVED** subject to the conditions outlined in the report and amended conditions as follows;

- Condition 5, to allow construction of the new access to a standard suitable for construction traffic and then completed to full standard prior to first occupation, and
- Condition 15, to also include the lighting for the 3 court MUGA which would also be floodlit.

Councillor Martin left the meeting and did not return.

## **5c DM/22/03374/RM - Land to the south of Puddlers Corner Roundabout, Genesis Way, Consett**

The Committee considered a report of the Senior Planning Officer regarding an application for the submission of reserved matters (layout, scale, appearance and landscaping) in relation to the construction of new Community Hospital and associated energy centre of DM/22/01630/VOC (mixed use scheme) and submission of details pursuant to conditions 5,7,9,10,11 and 12 of DM/22/01630/VOC relating to Construction management plan, site investigations, drainage details, noise, and engineering details of internal roads on Land to the south of Puddlers Corner Roundabout, Genesis Way, Consett (for copy see file of minutes).

L Ollivere, Senior Planning Office gave a detailed presentation of the application which included a site location plan, aerial photographs, photographs of the site and a summary of objections received.

Councillor D Haney, Local Member, advised Members of the importance of the application despite the responses received to the planning application. The future of the hospital had been in doubt for decades so he was pleased that a firm plan was in place. Whilst some people agreed with the proposal, others believed the existing facility was in need of refurbishment. On balance he acknowledged that the application was an improvement.

Members had been assured that most services would be maintained however there would be an inadequate number of beds. The plans were originally for 24 beds and this should have been the minimum, however it had subsequently been reduced to 16. If there was any scope to expand the site in future, it should be supported; the planning statement acknowledged that this area had the highest population growth in North Durham and potentially the North East. After the hospital had been downgraded to a community hospital on completion of the new University Hospital of North Durham, there was already a deficit of beds in the County. Whilst the Committee couldn't consider bed numbers and facilities there were planning considerations, such as the proximity to an incinerator, but this was yet to be determined by the Secretary of State.

Councillor Haney confirmed that the main issue was due to highway safety however improvements recommended as part of the scheme would assist to improve some of the issues in the area. He saw no reason why the application should not be approved and supported the recommendation.

Councillor K Earley attended as Local Member from the neighbouring ward' which was where the current site was located. He was also Secretary of the Shotley Bridge Hospital Support Group and whilst the hospital was a loss to his community, they had proposed the site after acknowledging the issues in

redeveloping the existing hospital. It had to be located on this site due to a number of reasons, mainly accessibility. He had initially believed that a bus turning circle would be included in the site and queried whether this could be facilitated. The Travel Plan had failed to note that half of Consett was situated on a hill. It would be a struggle for unwell or elderly people to walk 300m uphill to hospital so people would rely on travelling by car, unless there was a bus service which travelled to the site.

The Senior Planning Officer confirmed that it had not been deemed necessary to secure Section 106 funding to secure bus services at the outline application, however as part of the highway improvement works, two bus stops outside of site had been secured and as part of the wider site, there were plans for a turning circle as the site was being developed. This would be subject to a separate reserved matters application.

The Highway Development Manager suggested that a commercial bus service would not normally do the manoeuvre required due to cost and time implications, therefore if there were no plans for the NHS to provide a bus service, it was unlikely that a commercial service would deviate from their route.

R Morris, NHS County Durham and Darlington Foundation Trust, addressed the Committee. The application provided details of the proposed community hospital relating to layout, scale and appearance, access and landscaping, and followed from the outline consent granted for the wider site in February 2020, which was later amended to allow it to be phased in June 2022.

The outline consent permitted a range of uses including a community hospital and pharmacy; a sheltered care unit; a residential care unit; a gym and wellbeing centre; a hotel; a public house; a microbrewery; and a vets practice.

The replacement hospital in Consett would replace the ageing healthcare facility at Shotley Bridge with a high quality, fit for purpose new facility that would meet the needs of the local population in North Durham. Government funding had been allocated to the development of this new hospital as part of the Government's levelling up agenda for the North.

The new hospital fulfilled National Planning Policy Framework with regards to health and wellbeing and he noted Councillor Haney's concerns regarding highways and access, however, the principle of the new junction onto the A692 and the capacity and safety of the junction was established at the outline planning application stage.

Mr Morris confirmed that the reserved matters application had assessed the layout and access arrangements of the proposed hospital development. The



Transport Statement had concluded that there would be no unacceptable or severe impacts and as such, the development was acceptable in highway terms. The Highway Development Management Team also had no objections to the proposals.

The proposals would result in a number of benefits to the local community which included current and future provision of clinical services.

North West Durham had seen the highest rate of population growth in the North East and poor health and disease indicators were worse in North West Durham than the rest of England. The clinical strategy had been developed following a review of existing clinical services at Shotley Bridge Community Hospital.

There was significant public interest in maintaining local services which aligned with national policy drivers to deliver integrated services. The clinical model had been entirely clinically led and determined by individual service forward plans based on activity demands, technology and innovation, commissioning landscape and patient/health need demographic. All existing commissioned services would transfer and offer improved access but also increased provision.

The development of the site would also have direct employment benefits during the construction period. The application included on-site biodiversity net gains delivered through the proposed landscaping scheme and would create a high-quality sustainable building in terms of energy efficiency with a focus on net zero carbon.

In summary, it was considered that the proposed development would result in substantial public benefits and as outlined in the planning submission documents, the proposals were compliant with relevant Local and National planning policies.

Councillor Jopling acknowledged the length of time this scheme had taken to develop and it was wonderful to see it almost come to fruition. She wanted to see it built for the people of North Durham and moved approval of the recommendation, seconded by Councillor Hunt.

## **Resolved**

That the application be **APPROVED** subject to the conditions outlined in the report.