

## **DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL**

At a Meeting of **County Planning Committee** held in Council Chamber, County Hall, Durham on **Tuesday 4 July 2023 at 9.30 am**

### **Present:**

**Councillor G Richardson (Chair)**

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

Councillors J Atkinson, A Bell (Vice-Chair), M Currah, J Elmer, J Higgins, P Jopling, C Martin, M McKeon, I Roberts, A Savory, S Wilson, S Zair, D Hall and B Kellett

#### **1 Apologies**

There were no apologies for absence.

#### **2 Substitute Members**

There were no substitute Members in attendance.

#### **3 Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

#### **4 Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting held on 6 June 2023 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

#### **5 DM/21/01404/FPA - Leamside Equestrian Limited, Stud And Equestrian Centre, White House Farm, Pit House Lane, Leamside, Houghton-le-Spring**

The Committee considered a report of the Senior Planning Officer regarding an application for engineering operations to create a football centre incorporating the creation of 20 No grass pitches (Use Class F2), demolition of existing stable block, creation of new building to provide changing facilities, creation of car parking and widening of existing access track at

Whitehouse Farm, Pit House Lane, Leamside, Houghton-le-Spring (for copy see file of Minutes).

S France, Senior Planning Officer gave a detailed presentation of the application which included a site location plan, aerial photograph, site layout, site photographs and in-site photographs. Members had attended a site visit the previous day.

Speaking against the proposals, the Vice Chair of West Rainton Parish Council, Councillor I Diggory presented a slideshow which had been provided in advance of the meeting. The Applicant had confirmed that visitors to the Newbottle site travelled from as far away as Morpeth and Middlesbrough. To access the new site at Leamside users would have to use the A690 and exit into West Rainton village which was used as a rat run. The alternative would be to arrive at the newly installed traffic signals and whilst a welcome safety measure, they would not decrease the number of vehicles accessing the site via Station Road and Pithouse Lane.

Councillor Diggory described the existing facility at Newbottle and confirmed that it continued to have a negative impact on residents, mainly due to parking in residential streets - despite the provision of 350 parking spaces. He referred to a newspaper article in which the scheme had been described as ambitious, however only 12 out of 20 pitches would be in use, there would be less parking, and the site would only cater for players under 12. Unless there was another motive for closing, the only significant gain would be indoor training facility.

The application provided exactly the same number of pitches as the existing facility at Newbottle and 20 pitches would be constructed with only 12 in use at one time. It was reasonable to assume that if permission was granted, an extension could be sought, which had been the case at Newbottle when the number of pitches in use doubled from 6 to 12. It was also likely that the age limit on players could be extended to include 12 to 17 year olds.

Councillor Diggory suggested there would be a high number of vehicles traveling to the greenbelt site every weekend during the football season. There had been a range of responses received from various organisations, but not a single comment in support of the development. The Applicant had commissioned transport consultants who had confirmed that with no public transport provision, all access and egress would be by private vehicles. The subsequent transport plan was unreliable as it was a voluntary commitment which and could not be enforced. This had been demonstrated by the continuing issues at Newbottle.

Councillor Diggory advised that noise from the site would adversely affect residents on Carr Row. During the consultation he had suggested that the

Applicant record noise at the Newbottle site and use this as a comparison however this suggestion had not been acknowledged.

In Summary, there were material planning concerns and the Applicant had failed to respond to the local MP to investigate possible other sites. Compliance with CDP and NPPF policies had not been demonstrated.

Councillor Kellett, Local Member, agreed that the application was an intrusion on green belt. There was a lack of sustainable transport and the proposal would result in an influx of cars on match days. It would have an unacceptable impact on local residents and he fully endorsed the recommendation to refuse.

Councillor Hall, Local Member, objected to the application and remained unclear of the benefits of the scheme for the Applicant. This was a commercial development on greenbelt land with no public transport. The Parish Council had set out the issues, there was an insufficient road network with regular accidents and there were over 100 new houses being built in the local area. There was no reason why the development needed to be at this location.

Mr S Cave addressed the Committee on behalf of residents, with a slideshow which had been provided in advance of the meeting. He was pleased with the recommendation for refusal on the two grounds which had been set out in the report however he gave some insight on road safety issues which differed from that in the report. The overwhelming number of objections from local residents were due to knowledge of the road network.

Station Road and Pithouse Lane formed a busy route through the communities between the A690, the Newton Hall side of Durham and destinations to the North of Leamside. Work had started on a housing development in West Rainton with the addition of 150 new homes accessible only from Station Road. Large volumes of traffic used the route if there was a problem in the centre of Durham and thousands of extra journeys caused by this scheme would make queues and congestion more common.

There was unavoidable on-street parking on Station Road and Pithouse Lane and passing the parked vehicles requires traffic in the opposing direction to stop. The same thing occurred in Woodstone Village at the northern end of Pithouse Lane where there were also speed bumps. All other main routes to the site had bottlenecks where the road reduced to single-track and therefore it was impossible to reach the site with guaranteed free-flowing two-way traffic. There had been more accidents on Station Road and Cocken Road since the report was collated, including injuries. Two of them had resulted in each road being impassable. Parked vehicles had been damaged but were not reported or recorded in any statistics.

Mr Cave presented the Committee with an image from dashcam footage of a stationary bus on the bridge at Leamside Lane that was being passed by two large vans who had mounted the footpath. This was not a safe or adequate road. Leamside was a small village in a rural setting with agriculture, equestrianism, walking and cycling routes, set within an area of greenbelt, with no local facilities. With no public transport, access would require private vehicles. The scheme would increase traffic and cause issues similar to those reported at Newbottle. On match days noise would increase and impact on the local riding school and other riders that used the highway adjacent to the site. The roads were already busy and traffic would increase with the new housing development.

Residents supported grassroots sporting opportunities and acknowledged all that the organisation had done however, in his opinion the proposal would have a significant impact on the community and the greenbelt, with no benefits offered in return.

D Waugh, Planning Consultant, addressed the Committee on behalf of the applicant with frustration that a leisure facility that was no expense to the taxpayer was not beneficial enough to outweigh minor impact on the greenbelt or the view that people would use private vehicles to use the facility.

The minor impact on the greenbelt needed to be weighed against the benefits of the scheme. There would be an extension to a stable block to create changing facilities and increased activity caused by children aged 13 and under playing football. He referred to national issues with regards to childhood obesity and advised that the development would provide indoor pitches to help ensure games were not missed due to poor weather.

Sport England had acknowledged the value of the proposed indoor facility. There were no flood lights proposed and the noise that would be generated was by children under 13 on a Saturday and Sunday. When the benefits were weighed against the impact on the greenbelt, it was minor.

The other reason for refusal was with regards to sustainable transport. Mr Waugh confirmed that the application site was almost 35 acres and to deliver the benefits of the scheme, the site could not be disaggregated. Sites of this size were almost impossible to come by. A travel plan had been submitted and the development was 300m from the Leamside Line which had cross Parliamentary support for reopening. He struggled to see how the substantial sports and leisure benefits for County Durham, did not outweigh the minor harm of the proposed development.

Mr D Armstrong addressed the Committee as a Trustee of the Russell Foster Charitable Sports Foundation and a resident of County Durham. His children and grandchildren had benefitted from the Russell Foster leagues and he supported the proposed relocation to Leamside which would benefit future generations. He also failed to see how a leisure facility which would have no impact on the public purse was not enough of a benefit to be approved. Instead of horses, there would be boys and girls age 5 -13 and when weather was poor they would play indoors. To create an indoor facility of this size would be unaffordable otherwise. The proposal would bring a failed riding school back to life and provide much needed facilities for children. The Applicant would allow wider community use and were happy to enter into a community use agreement.

Councillor McKeon responded to the statements offered on behalf of the Applicant. She agreed with the statement that obesity was a strategic priority for the County however it was not a material planning consideration. She did not agree with the reference made to the Leamside Line. In her opinion the planning grounds made out in the report had been thoroughly considered and she was convinced by the greenbelt issue and the determination on sustainability. She had relatives who had relied on public transport to attend youth football. She also questioned why there was a proposal for 20 pitches if they would not all be in use and moved the recommendation for refusal.

Councillor Elmer had attended the site visit and experienced the local road network. This scheme would have a significant impact on the openness of greenbelt. Protection of greenbelt was important to preserve heritage and ensure that development did not impact the city. There was a risk of losing the feeling of openness and this was a significant issue, which no special circumstances would override. Overall, the scheme would have a neutral impact on provision in the area, the nearest bus stop was some way from the site and the scheme would create car dependency. He agreed that the location was not a sustainable location and that the noise and lighting associated would impact residential amenity. He seconded the proposal to refuse the application.

Councillor Atkinson confirmed that whilst he was supportive of the health benefits this scheme would bring to the County, he was curious as to how the layout of the scheme would work. He also queried whether there would be any economic benefits. Mr Waugh responded that the layout and orientation was defined by Sport England, with minimum standards. With regards to the operational aspect, the pitches were not all in use at one time and were rotated to protect the pitch from the effects of overuse. This was the reason for limiting the use to 12 at any given time.

Mr Armstrong advised that there would be a commercial element with the provision of a canteen facility to provide refreshments before, during and after games and offices would be located on the first floor. Parents paid to be Members of their local football club and the clubs paid affiliation fees for the facilities, which ensured the organisation was self-sufficient. To construct an indoor facility as large as the building on site was unaffordable for football leagues. The building on site had enough room to provide three small pitches which could be used during bad weather. The smaller outbuildings would be converted to provide other facilities. The Chair added that the cost of a similar new building of that size would be in the region of 150-200k.

Councillor Wilson noted that Sport England had not offered formal support which concerned him. Whilst he was aware of the Applicants good work, there had to be extraordinary reasons to approve an application on this site. A huge issue was the lack of bus services which would ensure that customers relied on private vehicles and there was no safe walking route.

Councillor Jopling was concerned about the level of traffic that would result from the scheme which was evident due to the amount of parking provision. There would be a lot of movement, noise and light from a development of this size and it was not a sustainable location. It would bring no economic benefit to area and only disturb local residents. The greenbelt was protected for a reason and whilst she was keen to see children playing football, this scheme would only have negative impacts, therefore she supported the recommendation.

P Harrison, Highway Development Manager confirmed that a refusal on highway safety grounds could not be sustained.

Councillor Roberts confirmed that the Applicant provided a good service, however most people had to travel by car and despite the number of parking spaces, there would always be overflow. She was not against the proposal, but she supported residents on this occasion.

Councillor Bell was also familiar with the brilliant work of the Applicant however with significant local and Parish Council objections, he could not support the case. There were road safety concerns that he could not ignore and he urged the Council to assist in finding a suitable site.

In response to a question from Councillor Zair, Mr Waugh advised that despite having their own facility in Newbottle, they also used a number of other sites which would facilitate 14-17 year olds. Mr Armstrong added that the site was simply moving from one place to another and would be able to accommodate other users such as disabled.

Councillor Savory recognised the importance of sport however the site was in wrong location and would have a significant impact on residents.

**Resolved**

That the application be REFUSED for the reasons outlined in the report.