

# **DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL**

At a Meeting of **County Planning Committee** held in Council Chamber, County Hall, Durham on **Thursday 11 January 2024 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, A Savory, K Shaw, A Simpson, S Zair, R Potts and M Simmons

## **Also Present:**

Councillors M Simmons and R Potts.

### **1 Apologies**

No apologies for absence were received.

### **2 Substitute Members**

There were no substitute Members in attendance.

### **3 Declarations of Interest**

In relation to item no. 5c) the following non-prejudicial declarations of interest were received;

- Councillor J Elmer as a Member of the Green Party who had objected to the item. He confirmed that he had not had any involvement in the formulation of their objection.
- Councillor C Martin as a former employee of New College Durham. He had not any communications with the College about the application.
- Councillor J Atkinson as a Member of Stockton and Darlington Railway

### **4 Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting held on 5 December 2023 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

**5a) DM/23/00486/FPA - Bluestone Farm, Low Lands, Cockfield, Bishop Auckland, DL13 5AW**

The Committee considered a report of the Principal Planning Officer with regards to the Construction of a solar farm with all associated works equipment and necessary infrastructure at Bluestone Farm Low Lands Cockfield Bishop Auckland (for copy see file of minutes).

C Teasdale, Principal Planning Officer gave a detailed presentation which included a site location plan, aerial photographs, site photographs from various locations, and a proposed site layout plan. Members had also been invited to attend a site visit the previous day.

Councillor R Potts was in attendance as Local Member and the Chair confirmed that Members had received his written statement prior to the meeting. Councillor Potts did not wish to add anything further at the meeting.

Mr J Selwyn, spoke on behalf of the Developer and gave an introduction on the company's investment in solar energy the UK. They wanted to establish long term relationships with the local authorities and communities in which they were investing. He confirmed that a pre application had been submitted in May 2021 followed by a full application early in 2023 and the Developer had been working closely with the Council and local community to address issues that had arisen.

Mr Selwyn advised that the site was not the best and most versatile agricultural land, it was allocated as grade 3b and used for sheep grazing which would continue after construction. The site was well screened with existing buffers and the scheme had been designed to enhance and expand existing wildlife habitats. There were no statutory designations or objections and only five public objections; three of which were from the same household. Nine supporting letters had been received.

The Developer had worked with planning officers to minimise the impact of the development. It would be situated on the lowest point of the site. No objection had been received from the Landscape Officer and the Public Right of Way would not be impacted when the scheme was operational. Following extensive engagement with the community some improvements had been made.

Mr Selwyn highlighted that a significant financial contribution was proposed which would see £400,000 distributed to local community projects to benefit the area, in addition to free energy surveys for around 60 local houses. In summary, the scheme offered significantly financial contributions to the area, animal grazing would continue and there would be an increase in biodiversity

net gain. The scheme had received no statutory objections and the substantial benefits outweighed its impact.

The Principal Planning Officer confirmed that the proposed community benefits had not been afforded any weight as it was considered that identified harm could not be mitigated by financial contributions or community benefits.

Councillor Atkinson considered the application to be sound with positive benefits for the community and climate targets. He moved the recommendation for approval.

Councillor Elmer was impressed by the application, particularly that sheep would continue to be grazed and the significant biodiversity net gain. It was important to acknowledge the community benefits despite that they were not a material planning consideration. The Landscape Officer had commented on the visual impact however this was a subjective judgement. The appearance of the landscape changed dramatically over decades or centuries according to changes in use. It was important to address the global climate emergency and he therefore seconded the recommendation to approve the application.

Councillor Jopling had attended the site visit and in her opinion the site appeared to be low lying and would not cause a great deal of impact on the view. The community benefits were welcome and the Developer had made every attempt to try and mitigate any issues.

The Chair highlighted that the scheme would last a significant period of forty years.

Councillor Higgins had attended the site visit and despite the local support, he shared a different view. He referred to the scenic views which he believed would be devastated by the scheme. He considered that countryside views were part of the County's heritage and should be protected.

Councillor McKeon suggested that the biggest threat to the countryside was climate change. She referred to recent weather changes, which had created a milder climate. Soaring temperatures impacted on grass and biodiversity and the world was suffering a mass extinction event. The countryside would be lost without this type of scheme. Local residents did not object to the scheme, there was no loss of agricultural land and it had massive benefits in renewable energy and security. The UK relied on other countries and had to start investing in home grown renewable energy.

## **Resolved**

That the application be **APPROVED** subject to conditions outlined in the report and the completion of a Section 39 Agreement.

### **5b) DM/23/00294/FPA - Belmont Church Of England Junior School, Buckinghamshire Road, Belmont, Durham, DH1 2QP**

The Committee considered a report of the Principal Planning Officer regarding the demolition of existing school buildings with the exception of the drama block at Belmont Church Of England Junior School, Buckinghamshire Road, Belmont, Durham (for copy see file of minutes).

The Principal Planning Officer gave a detailed presentation which included a site location plan, aerial photographs, site photographs before construction and of the existing school buildings, the approved site layout plan and visualisation.

Ms J Patterson spoke on behalf of the Applicant to confirm that the approval of this application would enable the delivery of the full masterplan for this site. The demolition of existing buildings would free up the space to deliver the playing fields which would facilitate the enhancement of education and community facilities and allow the final stages of the scheme to be implemented.

Councillor C Martin moved the recommendation for approval which was seconded by Councillor Atkinson.

## **Resolved**

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

### **5c) DM/23/02201/FPA - New College Durham, Framwellgate Moor, Durham, DH1 5ES**

The Committee considered a report of the Senior Planning Officer with regards to a full planning application for the construction of a new all-weather playing pitch with associated lighting and the repositioning of the car park at New College Durham, Framwellgate Moor, Durham (for copy see file of minutes).

The Principal Planning Officer gave a detailed presentation which included a site location plan, aerial photographs, site photographs of the existing car park, grass pitch and location of the new access, the existing access and

planting on site, and a proposed site layout plan. Members had been invited to attend a site visit the previous day.

The Principal Planning Officer advised that the report had incorrectly referred to Camsell Court as a care home when it was in fact private accommodation for over 60's.

Councillor Simmons, Local Member, spoke on behalf of residents and advised that her views were also supported by other Local Members Councillors A Hopgood and M Wilkes. Whilst they supported New College and wanted to ensure they had the best facilities, there were a number of measures which residents considered were unable to be addressed. She acknowledged that there had been some welcome changes to the application but the field had been used by the community for decades as open space for walking and recreation and some of the open space had already been fenced off by the college.

There were concerns from residents about the visual impact from properties adjacent to the site and about the impact of lighting from the football pitch. There were also properties abutting the proposed car park, that feared the lighting interfere with residential amenity. Views of open field and hedgerows would be replaced by a car park with floodlights.

Councillor Simmons advised that the site had been prone to flooding in the past and there were concerns that the concrete car park would increase the flood risk, especially during extreme weather. She asked Members to take into account the concerns raised by residents and specifically whether the application could be refused on loss of public open space and public amenity. She suggested that the application was contrary to planning policies 26 and 39, and relevant parts of the NPPF regarding sustainable development and adverse impact on residential amenity.

Mr A Smith addressed the Committee and confirmed that his rear garden abutted the playing fields where the proposed car park would be situated. He objected to the scheme due to lighting, noise and increased traffic, all impacting on residential amenity. This was a major development which would destroy the existing green open space. The existing car park had been well landscaped and the green space enhanced the College and was used free of charge by local people. The scheme would have a detrimental impact on wildlife, increase flooding to gardens and locals would have to pay to use the facility. In addition, a temporary car park which had been situated on the field during construction several years prior, had caused flooding. The proposed facility would generate noise all year. Lockable gates had been included so the car park could not be used in the evening, however there was no security fencing. There were other areas which could be used for this facility.

M Philips spoke on behalf of the City of Durham Trust and confirmed that whilst the Trust did not have any issue with the improvement to sports facilities, the car park should have been smaller to encourage the use of public transport.

The transport statement which had been referred to in the report contained survey data from other sites to show that community use of the pitches would not cause congestion. The college had submitted previous applications highlighting a huge number of surplus parking spaces and the most recent approval for an extension to the sports hall justified the removal of spaces. There was no justification for the slight increase.

Mr Philips believed that a recent transport plan submitted by the hospital had not been accepted on the basis that a reduction in car parking spaces was needed to achieve transport goals. He criticised the travel plan which contained errors in the cycle path maps. The Councils Climate Emergency Response Plan envisaged fewer car trips. If the Applicant wanted to provide further evidence regarding use of the car park, he would request the application be deferred to allow further public representations. He suggested that if reduced car parking would lead to parking in the streets, controlled parking zones could be implemented.

The Chair reminded the Committee that the proposal included an additional 13 parking spaces.

Mr P Bradley addressed the Committee and confirmed that the proposal was critical to curriculum delivery and would enhance community engagement by offering a community resource for physical activity which would be extended to the use of other sports facilities on site. Facilities at other schools and colleges were of a better standard and there had been signs of decline in sport related studies at New College as students were choosing to study elsewhere. He noted that the current pitch was on private land and not public open space.

The college provided a football development centre in partnership with external football clubs and during winter students were transported to facilities at Spennymoor or Consett, which came at a considerable financial and environmental cost. The provision of an artificial grass pitch would enhance the timetable options and be used all year. Use had been limited to the sports hall was also used for other activities including examinations.

New College hoped that the proposal would attract students across the whole curriculum. All students would have the ability to access the development centre and there were opportunities for community use. There was a lack of all-weather pitches in the County and this scheme would

provide much needed facilities for local football teams at both junior and senior level.

Mr Bradley recognised the community concerns and the college had sought to engage during the process, extending the consultation process and holding a public meeting at Camsell Court. Various issues had been refined and were addressed in the report.

The lighting, noise and traffic impact had been deemed acceptable by officers and statutory consultees and there would be an increase in biodiversity net gain. There would be environmental savings as the college would no longer need to transport students offsite. Mr Bradley asked the Committee to approve the application.

The Principal Planning Officer confirmed that the ownership and educational use of the land had been addressed in full in the report and advised that it was not allocated land. The loss of private views had been considered and balanced against the need for a new artificial grass pitch. There was a condition to ensure use of the car park was limited and whilst this was a large car park, it would only increase by thirteen spaces. EHCP's would be provided in an accessible location. The submission of a drainage scheme was required as a condition and there would be additional landscaping.

In response to a question from Councillor McKeon, Mr Bradley advised that detailed drainage strategy had been submitted and deemed acceptable by independent experts and drainage officers. In addition to a further question regarding the loss of public amenity and extent of community use, Mr Bradley confirmed that it would be available to all of the community to use and the financial plan was to recover costs only.

Councillor Jopling queried the effects on parking if the college reduced car parking spaces on site and Mr Bradley confirmed that it was likely that vehicles would park on residential streets.

Councillor McKeon acknowledged the benefits of another artificial grass pitch in the County however she was concerned at the lack of drainage detail considering residents had experienced flooding. In relation to the comments about the number of parking spaces, she referred to various issues with public transport. Some children on the outskirts of the city were unable to get buses as they were full by the time they arrived at their stop. Many people had been affected by recent strikes and the national shortage of drivers. This facility would generate traffic from education but also football teams and she would be concerned having a pitch without adequate parking. She welcomed the installation of EVCP's and disabled bays and accepted the risk of using private land for amenity. Whilst not a material planning

consideration, she suggested that there was an opportunity to reach out to local people with confirmation of the offer and costs for use of the facilities.

Councillor Bell approved of the scheme and suggested that refusal would put the college at a huge disadvantage. Without this facility they could not attract students and he therefore moved the recommendation for approval. Councillor Atkinson supported the comments made by Councillor Bell.

Councillor Higgins had attended the site visit. He had experience of a pitch in his own local community and was aware that they attracted a lot of community use. The college had put forward what he considered to be a well thought out proposal and he seconded the motion to approve the application.

Councillor Elmer considered that selective policy extracts had been used in the presentation. Policy 21 advised that car parking should be limited to encourage sustainable transport. This was a policy to encourage people to stop using cars and encourage other means of transport such as walking and cycling. It was important for organisations to have a travel plan but this application promoted vehicles and in his opinion Policy 21 pushed against that.

He was also concerned about the loss of open green space, which would be replaced with concrete and plastic. There was no information to confirm what happened to microplastics and he was concerned that they would end up in the suds attenuation pond. He wanted to see condition 11 expanded to screen microplastics and condition 9 extended to provide for the future recycling of all plastic that was going to be used.

Councillor Martin acknowledged the impact on local residents. He appreciated concerns regarding lighting but advised that modern units had the ability for directional lighting. With regard to the loss of open space, the land was owned by the college and could be closed off at any time. He did not share the view that this was a rural setting and considered harm to be low with planting and screening included as mitigation. He believed that inhibiting parking would not encourage alternative transport, but lead to increased parking on residential streets. The County needed more artificial pitches as it allowed people to exercise all year. The scheme would bring economic benefits to the college and enhance skills. He appreciated that grassland would be lost but grass that was cut on regular basis did not include much biodiversity whereas this application would increase it.

Councillor Jopling did not consider it appropriate to reduce parking as this would impact residents. It was a viable site in a good location. She had attended the site visit and this was an educational facility, not a rural setting.



She welcomed the design improvements but agreed that it would have been better to see a drainage plan to ensure there would no impact on properties.

Councillor McKeon advised that if the Committee were considering a local secondary or primary school she would support the comments made about encouraging sustainable travel however this was a college which attracted students from across the County, some of whom were traveling from rural areas that were difficult to travel from and there were safety issues for young people cycling through the city centre. Restricting the car park would create an issue for residents and be detrimental for those on the outskirts of the city who could not get on a bus due to it being too full.

Councillor McKeon acknowledged and agreed with the point made about recycling microplastics. S Reed, Planning and Development Manager responded that the application had been thoroughly considered by consultees and no issues with microplastics had been identified. There was a scheme in principle which had been agreed with the Drainage Manager and Planning Officers would ensure that any approved scheme would accurately filter and contain microplastics.

Councillor Elmer accepted that the increase in parking spaces was marginal however a previous application which had been submitted by the college had argued that there was a massive over provision which was inconsistent with this application. In his opinion there was little being done to incentivise alternative transport uses and there could have been more included to assist cyclists and promote active travel.

### **Resolved**

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