

## NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY COUNCIL

### STRATEGIC PLANNING COMMITTEE

At the meeting of the **Strategic Planning Committee** held at Council Chamber - County Hall on Tuesday, 1 August 2023 at 4.00 pm.

#### PRESENT

T Thorne (Chair) (in the Chair)

#### MEMBERS

C Ball	L Darwin
R Dodd	B Flux
G Hill	Jl Hutchinson
J Lang	J Reid
G Stewart	M Swinbank
A Wallace	

#### OFFICERS

T Crowe	Solicitor
G Halliday	Consultant Planner
L Little	Senior Democratic Services Officer
E Sinnamon	Planning Manager

Around 13 members of the press and public were present.

#### 18     **PROCEDURE AT PLANNING COMMITTEES**

The Chair outlined the procedure to be followed at the meeting.

#### 19     **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies had been received from Councillors Foster, Renner-Thompson, Robinson and Watson.

#### 20     **MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETINGS**

The Minutes of the Strategic Planning Committee held on 4 July 2023, as circulated, were agreed as a true record and were signed by the Chair.

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## 21 DETERMINATION OF PLANNING APPLICATIONS

The report requested the Committee to decide the planning applications attached to the report using the powers delegated to it. Members were reminded of the principles which should govern their consideration of the applications, the procedure for handling representations, the requirement of conditions and the need for justifiable reasons for the granting of permission or refusal of planning applications.

### 22 **23/01070/CCD** **Demolition of the former Bedlington Station Building (South) to accommodate works to construct the new railway station approved under 21/01106/CCD** **Bedlington Railway Station, Station Street, Bedlington, Northumberland NE22 5UZ**

G Halliday, Planning Consultant provided a comprehensive introduction to the application with the aid of a power point presentation. He advised that an additional representation had been received late the previous day from the Victorian Society. This raised similar points as already outlined in the report from other objectors including that as a non-designated heritage asset a balanced judgement was required and demolition should not be allowed due to the heritage significance of the building.

A Hogg, addressed the Committee speaking on behalf of West Bedlington Town Council in objection to the application. His comments included the following:-

- West Bedlington Town Council objected to this planning application for the demolition of the southern building at Bedlington Station and supported East Bedlington Parish Council, objectors and those who had signed the petition to keep the building.
- The building played a major part in the whole Bedlington area history having been built in the early 1900's and had survived the Beaching cuts of the 1960's which closed the route to passengers. It was the only original group of station buildings left on the whole of the Blyth and Tyne railway route that would be opened to the public.
- East Bedlington Parish Council had submitted interest in the buildings over a number of years for them to be used for the community, most recently highlighting the point in the Borderlands Place Programme with a lot of work having been undertaken to submit a bid for turning both buildings into a community hub and heritage centre.
- East Bedlington Parish Council had a proven track record of undertaking major works to bring derelict buildings and land into community use as seen with East Bedlington Community Centre and other local projects.
- The original application for this site highlighted both buildings would stay and a recent Northumberland County Council design showed the building could stay with works undertaken around it, with different designs showing the platform would not reach where the building stood and a grassed bank replacing the platform edge.
- Whilst East Bedlington was not covered by the West Bedlington Neighbourhood Plan area, local residents in the West Bedlington area had

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highlighted the importance of historical/heritage assets within the area during the Neighbourhood Plan process. As a consequence, West Bedlington Town Council felt that they must object to the demolition of any of the station buildings and support calls for both buildings to be repaired for use by the local community and commuters. The Committee were asked to support East Bedlington Parish Council and refuse the application in order to allow both buildings to be brought back into use for future generations to enjoy.

K Grimes, addressed the Committee speaking as Chair of East Bedlington Parish Council in objection to the application. His comments included the following:-

- The Parish Council had voted unanimously to object to this proposal. In addition a parish assembly of local electors voted, with only one abstention and no objections, to object to the proposal and a petition by the Northumberland Line Community Heritage Group gathered over 1000 signatures over two weekends.
- Bedlington had a proud 200 year history of railway innovation that was echoed around the world and which the Parish Council wished to preserve.
- The heritage assessment addendum stated that the significance of Bedlington Station lay in its architectural and historic interest as one of only five former stations on the Blyth and Tyne line that had standing buildings. Their location was considered to give them landmark quality and their architectural styling was also readily understandable as railway architecture providing the buildings with architectural and aesthetic value. The report also stated that the two buildings formed a pair with each contributing to the setting of the other.
- The two buildings were two of the oldest buildings, if not the oldest, in the Parish, pre-dating even the construction of St. John's Church.
- The Parish Council had for many years attempted to engage with Network Rail with a view to developing, with grant funding, the buildings as a heritage and innovation centre to provide a community asset that celebrated the important railway heritage of the town. Network Rail had ignored all attempts at dialogue and meanwhile the buildings had continued to degenerate due to lack of maintenance.
- In 2020 the Parish Council was invited by Northumberland County Council to submit an expression of interest in both these buildings and a detailed proposal was forwarded to the County Council. The vision was a development that formed a centrepiece of the town redevelopment providing first class facilities that might be expected in more high profile stations; create a heritage and innovation centre which recognised the achievements of our forebears; restoring civic pride and creating job and business opportunities. The development would provide office space, exhibition space, waiting room, toilet and a café with an atrium area connecting the two buildings allowing for pop up local shops, tourist information and other local services. The Parish Council had earmarked £40,000 to meet its contribution to the scheme and were confident that grant funding would be available. After submission of this scheme no response had been received from the County Council apart from an email acknowledging receipt.
- In March this year, the same proposal was accepted by the Bedlington Innovation Team as one of the proposals to go forward for Borderlands

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funding as part of the Bedlington Place Plan. This was as a result of almost 18 months of discussions with local Councillors and officers from the County Council's regeneration team. Should the demolition of the south building be allowed then this development could not happen.

- The original planning application for the station clearly showed both buildings as retained on the platform and the Parish Council would like to understand what had changed since that time.
- The material planning considerations were that the proposed demolition would result in a characterless station, not discernibly different from any other; the character of these buildings, unique and original to the historic Blyth and Tyne line would be lost; restoration and repurposing of the buildings would contribute greatly to the restoration of civic pride and give the town a centrepiece to be proud of; development of the buildings would create employment, both paid and voluntary, and attract footfall to the town and become a destination rather than just a stop on the line; and planning proposal 21/01106/CCD, which was the planning document for the station clearly showed both buildings on the platform and it was on that basis that East Bedlington Parish Council had supported that application.
- The Parish Council urged the County Council, Network Rail and Northern Rail to work with the community to find a way of retaining and repurposing both station buildings rather than taking the cheapest and simplest option of demolition.

A Healey, agent for the applicant, addressed the Committee speaking in support of the application. Her comments included the following:-

- The application to approve a new railway station at Bedlington was approved in November 2021, since that time further work had been undertaken to review the constructability of the approved station scheme. This had resulted in the application before the Committee today.
- The submitted application provided a reasoned justification for the proposed demolition and included consideration of the structural integrity of the existing building; the costs of any restoration and commercial viability of re-use along with accessibility.
- A public engagement exercise had been undertaken to demonstrate the public realm improvements which would result from the removal of the building. If the application was approved then engagement would continue to ensure that the landscaping scheme responded to the needs of the local area.
- Discussions regarding the re-use of the northern building continued to advance which was evidenced by Network Rail's offer of a 99 year lease as referenced in the report.
- The proposed demolition was associated with the long awaited reopening of the Ashington, Blyth and Tyne Line which would re-establish Bedlington's relationship on the historic line. However, if the proposed station was implemented in accordance with the previously approved plans the presence of the dilapidated south building would detract from the appearance of the new station and would forego opportunities to improve accessibility and the public realm.
- It was recognised that the south building at Bedlington was a non-designated heritage asset, however National and Local Planning policies required that a balanced judgement be reached when considering the loss

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of such an asset. The applicant acknowledged the route value of the buildings and associated historic railway structures, however this application provided the opportunity for comprehensive place making by providing improved accessibility and public realm of the station as well as complementing any future use of the north building. It would encourage use of railway services by residents and provide a more welcoming gateway.

- The application had been thoroughly assessed by Planning and other Officers and was in accordance with relevant planning policies. In particular it had been concluded that the balanced judgement and overall planning judgement was weighed in favour of granting of permission subject to the relevant planning conditions and the Committee were urged to support the application.

In response to questions from Members of the Committee, the following information was provided:-

- Whilst it did not specifically mention the frequency of any grass cutting, Condition 5 required a scheme to be submitted and all landscaping provided to be maintained for the lifetime of the development, and therefore it could be discussed with the applicant as part of that scheme.
- It was clarified that paragraph 5.5 should read "... the southern building lacks the architectural character of the *northern* building...". In the view of the Railway Heritage Trust it was the northern building which had the greater architectural heritage and potential to be developed for beneficial uses. Network Rail had agreed to provide a 99 year lease at a peppercorn rent of £1 per year for the northern building, however there had been no agreement of how any future use would be funded.
- The report estimated that it would be a cost of £375k for the underpinning of the south building, however due to the extensive work required in the removal of the existing platform there was a risk that it could cost an additional £100K to £200K in structural repairs depending on the amount of damage it sustained. An additional sum of £325K - £375K was estimated to be required to be able to bring the existing south building back to a usable standard.
- It was Northumberland County Council that were in charge of the project to provide the Northumberland Line and would be heavily involved in the future of the scheme. There was no proposal to remove the north building which stood further back from the platform than the south building. As far as officers were aware, there was no funding in place, apart from the £40,000 which was referenced by East Bedlington Parish Council, for the repair and restoration required to bring either of the buildings into use. The future use of the buildings was not part of the original approved scheme only that they be retained. Whilst there was some discussion during the first application on future uses of the buildings, it was something that was considered could not be conditioned.
- There was no 100% guarantee on the future of the north building, however all the discussions which had taken place so far were aimed at enabling that building to be brought back into beneficial use. One of the relevant planning considerations to take into account was that spreading any available funding between the two buildings could make it less likely for the buildings to be brought back into beneficial use. If there were any proposal

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to remove the north building in the future then that would need to be brought to Committee for a decision at that time.

- The Victorian Society were a National Organisation who had been made aware of the application and submitted an objection late the day before the Committee outlining similar reasons as the Parish Council.
- There were cost pressures on the whole of the opening of the Northumberland Line project due to the increased construction costs following the pandemic with the County Council continually being challenged by Government on the costs. The project team were required to demonstrate that any works were required to serve the railway. It was understood that discussions had taken place regarding the restoration of the buildings, however Government did not consider that to be an essential part of the scheme.
- The south building did not add as much value as the north building to the character of the area and its contribution to the appearance of the station was a lot less than the north building. It's demolition would allow a more attractive public realm.
- It was considered that the inclusion of a condition for the building to be taken down and rebuilt in a different location would not meet the test of reasonableness that any condition attached to a permission must be relevant and necessary for the applicant to undertake in order to allow permission to be granted. The heritage value of the building was as part of the group in its current location and it was not thought that moving it would satisfy any party.
- There were costs associated with condition 3 in relation to the recording scheme and condition 4 regarding the removal of materials for re-use but it was considered that these were justifiable and met the test of reasonableness.

Councillor Hutchinson proposed acceptance of the recommendation to approve the application as outlined in the report which was seconded by Councillor Flux.

The majority of Members expressed their support for the approval of the application citing reasons such as the improved accessibility to the station platform, widening of the cycle track and improved look of the station; the neglected condition of the building and the level of funding that would be required just to provide the under-pinning work required without any guarantee that additional funding would be forthcoming for any restoration work; the lack of any architectural heritage and comments from the Railway Heritage Trust that the focus of restoration should be concentrated on the northern building; and that there was no reasonable argument for the retention of the building.

Members who advised that they would not support the proposal to approve cited their reasons as no consideration had been taken of the community asset that the building could be and alternative uses for which it could be used; the shameful way it had been allowed to deteriorate; the significant rail heritage in Bedlington and the fact that restoration of the building would allow this to be retained for future generations.

A vote was taken on the proposal to accept the recommendation to approve the application as outlined in the report as follows: FOR 10; AGAINST 2; ABSTENTION 0.

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**RESOLVED** that the application be **GRANTED** for the reasons and with the conditions as outlined in the report.

23 **APPEALS UPDATE**

**RESOLVED** that the information be noted.

24 **S106 AGREEMENTS UPDATE REPORT**

**RESOLVED** that the information be noted.

**CHAIR**.....

**DATE**.....

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