

NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY COUNCIL

STRATEGIC PLANNING COMMITTEE

At the meeting of the **Strategic Planning Committee** held at Council Chamber - County Hall on Tuesday, 3 October 2023 at 4.00 pm.

PRESENT

T Thorne (Chair) (in the Chair)

MEMBERS

L Darwin
J Foster
JI Hutchinson
J Reid
G Stewart
A Wallace

B Flux
G Hill
J Lang
G Renner-Thompson
M Swinbank
A Watson

OFFICERS

L Little
D Love
N Masson

R Murfin

Senior Democratic Services Officer
Senior Planning Officer
Head of Legal Services and Deputy
Monitoring Officer
Director of Housing & Planning

There was 1 member of the press and public present.

25 **PROCEDURE AT PLANNING COMMITTEES**

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

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

26 **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies had been received from Councillors Ball, Dodd and Robinson.

27 **MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETINGS**

The Minutes of the Strategic Planning Committee held on 1 August 2023, as circulated, were agreed as a true record and were signed by the Chair.

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28 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.

29 23/00545/RENE

Erection of ground-mounted solar farm with associated ancillary equipment Land North East Of Wooperton Station, Wooperton, Northumberland

D Love, Senior Planning Officer introduced the report with the aid of a power point presentation. He reminded Members that an addendum report had been circulated the previous week which had provided information on an additional objection to the application in respect of the disused Cornhill rail line and updated conditions to be attached to any permission granted.

R Scott, Managing Director and owner of A&J Scott, the applicant, addressed the Committee speaking in support of the application. His comments included the following:-

- The proposal was for a ground-mounted solar farm with associated ancillary equipment on land adjacent to Station Sawmills, near Wooperton. The PV panels would be sited across just over 2ha of land and would generate a much needed, sustainable source of electricity for the sawmill business.
- The business was family owned and run and had been established in 1960 supplying high-performance sawn timber nationwide for a wide variety of uses, sourced from sustainably managed forests. Over 150 people were directly employed in a range of skilled roles, and the business indirectly supported over 100 more jobs in the supply chain.
- Regular investment into the business had been undertaken to ensure it continued to have state of the art production facilities enabling it to meet the demands of an increasingly diverse customer base.
- The proposed development would enable the business to generate its own electricity from a renewable source, reducing the dependency on the national grid and energy generated from fossil fuel sources. No electricity would be exported or sold back to the national grid as it would all be used to meet the demands of the sawmill.
- The sawmill business had significant electricity demands with energy bills a large cost and it had been vital to explore ways to reduce this cost burden and ensure the business was protected. This economic context was why the application was part retrospective as a decision had been made, in the face of the ever increasing energy costs, to start the construction of the development in the hope of being able to make best use of the increased daylight levels through the summer and reduce the bills accordingly. It was appreciated that this was not the correct process to follow, and when raised by the planning officer, works on site ceased.
- As was typical for renewable energy proposals, the planning application

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sought consent for a 40 year period. Conditions proposed would require details of decommissioning at the appropriate future time.

- Whilst the site was covered by a mineral safeguarding allocation, it was set out in the application that the proposal would not permanently sterilise the potential supply beneath the site and that notwithstanding, there was a strong supply of existing reserves for sand and gravel extraction in Northumberland. Furthermore, there was no interest in the site from local mineral extraction companies including the adjacent Wooperton Quarry operator. The conclusion that the significant need and sustainability benefits of the proposed scheme outweighed the temporary loss of access to the potential mineral supply at the site was agreed by the Council's officers.
- The proposal was not in a particularly visually sensitive location. There were no landscape designations covering the site, and the site was relatively well-screened by boundary vegetation. There were no dwellings or flight paths in close proximity which could be impacted by potential glint or glare.
- An ecology assessment had been undertaken which did not identify any adverse impacts to habitats or protected species. Various biodiversity enhancements were proposed to ensure just more than 10% biodiversity net gain was to be achieved, including enhanced grassland underneath the solar panels.
- The site was not at a high risk of flooding, and the proposed drainage scheme would ensure that there was no adverse impact from surface water run-off either to the sawmill business or adjoining land.
- There had been significant engagement with the Council's highways officers to respond to their comments, and the additional information requested had been provided. There would be very little traffic generated by the development through the remainder of the construction period.
- All comments from officers and consultees had been positively responded to during determination and there were no technical objections.
- The conclusion in the report was that the development would provide a range of benefits and the proposal was acceptable in planning terms. It was respectfully requested that Members supported the application.

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

- The drainage arrangements had not changed and there had been no need to reconsult Northumbrian Water. The run off rates from the site had been agreed by the Local Lead Flood Authority.
- Clarification was provided that it would only be the part of the allocated site for mineral extraction in the NLP covered in this application which would be removed and the rest of the allocated site would remain available for mineral extraction. There was no mechanism to formally review the NLP and therefore any application coming forward would be contrary to MIN8.
- The requirement to provide 10% biodiversity net gain was not yet mandatory. There was a net gain achieved on this site. It was thought that the extant permission for the site achieved 10%, however the proposals for that scheme could not be achieved due to the ground coverage of the solar panels and therefore an amended scheme had been submitted, which still provided possibly 6% which was above and beyond what was required in

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the current policy.

Councillor Renner-Thompson proposed acceptance of the recommendation as outlined in the addendum report, which was seconded by Councillor Stewart. A vote was taken and it was unanimously:

RESOLVED that the application be **GRANTED** as a departure to policy MIN 8 subject to the conditions as outlined in the addendum report.

30

23/01958/VARCCM

Variation of Condition 1 (Time Limit) pursuant to planning permission 15/01643/VARCCM to allow for a 10-year time extension for restoration operations

Shadfen Park Drift, Shadfen, Northumberland

D Love, Senior Planning Officer provided an introduction to the report with the aid of a power point presentation. He advised that there was an update regarding the rewording of condition 1 to make this more precise and would read as follows:

“Timescale

The importation of material hereby approved and subject to this application shall cease and the site be fully restored in accordance with the approved restoration scheme ***no later than 31 October 2033***.

Reason: To ensure that the development is carried out within a reasonable period of time. “

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

- Officers were not aware of any complaints regarding the site with monitoring visits undertaken three times per year and nothing received from the Environment Agency (EA) in respect of water on or the materials on site. The slow completion of the site showed how successful recycling was within the County.
- The site plan showed the finish expected on the site with clay retaining the waterbody with a steep sided gully. Any run off from the gully would be monitored by the EA and clay would prevent any flooding out with the site. The bulk of the site was already completed and could be seen to be very green.

Councillor Flux proposed acceptance of the recommendation to approve the application as outlined in the report with the amended condition 1 which was seconded by Councillor Swinbank. A vote was taken and it was unanimously:

RESOLVED that the application be **GRANTED** for the reasons and with conditions as outlined in the report with the above amendment to condition 1.

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APPEALS UPDATE

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

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32 **S106 AGREEMENTS UPDATE REPORT**

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

CHAIR.....

DATE.....

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