

Report on the Local Area Planning Meeting, 2023-03-23, by Julian Smart

Objectors present: Eileen Convey, John Convey, Sarah Coxon, John Cridland, Clare Raybould, Mark Pearson, Harriet Smart, Julian Smart

Planning committee members: Councillor Gordon Castle (Chair), Councillor Steven Christopher Bridgett (absent), Councillor Trevor Norman Thorne, Councillor Terry Clark (absent), Councillor Georgina Emma Rowley Hill, Councillor Wendy Pattison (absent), Councillor Guy Renner-Thompson, Councillor Catherine Seymour, Councillor Jeff Watson (absent), Councillor Colin Richard Hardy (Vice-Chair), Councillor Isabel Hunter, Councillor Mark George Mather, Martin Philip Swinbank

After a presentation by the police, to whom I was tempted to report an imminent heritage crime, the County Planning Officer Jon Sharp gave a presentation summarising the situation, why the decision had come back to committee again (our solicitor's letter and the lack of provision for NPPF paragraph 204), and the conditions to be applied. There will be a phasing condition meaning that no new build development can take place until the first resident is installed in the renovated building, and the huts can't be demolished until the contract for back yard builds has been signed.

I gave my five-minute speech, arguing on heritage grounds for the application to be turned down and replaced by a better one that would save the huts, the conservation area, and the views from the Town Walls.

John Bell then gave his speech, accusing objectors of being self-appointed guardians of Berwick's heritage as if the town couldn't look after its own heritage. He referenced three houses on Ness Street as being the main instigators, and referenced me by name. Responding to an admittedly speculative comment I made in the town council planning meeting the previous week that he's unlikely to simply sell the site if forced to resubmit an application, he effectively blackmailed the committee by threatening to do just that if he didn't get his way.

He complained about our 'Berwick's Smashing Heritage Facebook' page, even quoting a post from it: "What's Regeneration? Regeneration is when you clear a site of anything old and interesting and build something that makes everyone want to self-harm." He also objected to our contention that he was bulldozing heritage buildings on the grounds that he's trying to offload the huts, which to us is simply a face-saving exercise when much of the value of the huts is their context in this site.

He was bullish about progress, saying that his architect has designed the kitchen and that he should be able to put the work out to tender by Easter, implying April. He also asked for conditions to be lifted (subsequently denied by the committee) so he could get started on everything at once. He spoke of bringing together operations on the site, although it's not clear how much if anything would be moved from the existing Beehive site.

There was then some debate amongst the councillors. Catherine reiterated that it was a very sensitive area, and asked whether the committee would have accepted a 15-storey building in the back yard as a kind of thought experiment. The Chair responded that they were only considering the plan in front of them.

There was very little sympathy for the heritage aspect apart from Catherine's remarks and a little from Georgina Hill, and Councillor Thorne was enthusiastic about the prospect for new workshops. Catherine regretted the weakness of protection for heritage and that there should have been a site visit.

A councillor asked to what extent the new builds fed into the main building restoration and the Planning Officer said only to the extent that consolidating operations encouraged development of the whole site.

Councillor Renner-Thompson pointed out that the work couldn't really be done all at once because the renovation contractor would need to have specialist skills and be vetted by the planning department, and therefore two contractors would probably be needed.

A councillor wondered whether the buildings would soon need to be added to the Buildings At Risk Register, and how long they had been sitting empty for. After some debate, the figure of eight years was arrived at.

After describing the development as a curate's egg, Georgina Hill proposed the motion to accept the application, it was seconded, and it passed, with all voting for it except Catherine who abstained. Georgina Hill expressed the hope that the opposing parties would 'come together.'

In the lobby, we bumped into the Planning Officer, Jon Sharp, who was the unfortunate recipient of the solicitor's letter. Following our apologies for making his life difficult, he was sanguine about it – he gets paid well, he said! – and we talked about conditions, the number of which here is unusual.