

Speech given by Dr Julian Smart, North Northumberland Local Area Planning Meeting, 2023-03-23

Good afternoon. Thank you for letting me speak. My name is Julian Smart and today I represent 30 or more Berwick residents with similar views. I wish to talk about the applications relating to the old Grammar School, and in particular its back yard.

Councillors: today, three matters of significance hang in the balance.

Firstly, the fate of a much-loved view from a scheduled monument: a visual delight for those walking the newly signposted England Coast Path.

Secondly, serious harm to a conservation area.

Thirdly, the demolition of two rare early 20th Century buildings, unique in Berwick. The Speirs hut is one of just a handful of corrugated iron schoolrooms surviving in England. Their destruction has been condemned by three of our national amenity societies.

Today you have the opportunity to save all three of these things: a stunning view from the walls; an important conservation area; two heritage buildings.

So why does the Youth Project want to demolish these buildings? It seems to be merely a preference to build new, rather than reuse, and the scheme hinges entirely on a business case that has never seen the light of day and whose unquestioned validity has been used to prop up the public benefit argument.

Contrary to what you may have been told, the new builds are *not* necessary for the main building renovation. Indeed, the distraction and extra complexity of the new builds, together with difficult market conditions, may pose a grave risk to what is already a very challenging project. A far more practical reuse plan has never been properly considered.

What are councils up and down the country increasingly banging on about, and quite rightly? Reducing carbon emissions. Increasing sustainability. Promoting adaptive reuse. Conserving heritage. Keeping a satisfying sense of place.

And yet the applicant is trying to persuade each one of you to go against all these aspirations and good instincts, by exploiting a false balance of harms and benefits distorted by the combined nature of this application.

However, there is another way – turn this application down. Let another, more respectful one be submitted. Let's not be panicked into committing a wilful act of self harm. We will not be forgiven by those who rely on the Town Walls for their peace of mind and inspiration: whether locals or our many guests who come here specifically for Berwick's beauty, and for the sheer delight of stumbling upon an unspoilt, historic townscape. This area is the epitome of what Berwick means to such a visitor.

You may hear a catalogue of scorn today from those inconvenienced by the huts, including that curtilage listing doesn't count. But Historic Buildings and Places have explicitly contradicted this, and have emphasised the importance of these huts to the history of the site – *regardless* of a prior military connection.

This new build project is also a tangible threat to the vulnerable old buildings nearby, of which we had a small taste last week when our houses shook during exploratory drilling. By the time the nearby Governor's Gardens development was finished, there were massive cracks in the Governor's House. The same calamity could well repeat itself, affecting not only our homes but the old Grammar School building itself. The current invasive plan with this potential harm, and other inevitable harms, is a long way from what the County originally envisaged when it gave the site away in good faith.

And remember too, the vital economic benefits that heritage brings to Berwick. How will we replace Berwick's income from tourism, when the town's essential appeal – its very soul – has been eroded by short-term thinking?

To conclude: are we to be known as the town that spurns heritage wisdom, ignores sustainability, and bulldozes its rare buildings? Or are we to be praised for recognising and caring for our heritage and adapting it to our changing needs, thereby saving money *and* our environment?

Please, if you appreciate Berwick's fragile beauty, I implore you to consider the many harms of this application, and think again.

Thank you very much for listening.