

Objection to Ascendant

I live in Kirkwhelpington, and I am a founder member of the protest group, Keep the Wannies Wild. I attended the initial meeting of Northumberland County Council's Strategic Planning Committee on 4th June 2019 and spoke against the first application. I had not been notified of the proposal formally, but became aware of it through word of mouth locally. I therefore placed an objection at the initial stage, which led to my invitation to speak at the meeting.

I moved to Kirkwhelpington 25 years ago, in part because I found the Wannies and the surrounding area entrancing. I walk frequently in the Wannies, I take friends and visitors there to experience its wild, remote and unique character, and in my capacity as Walk Leader for the Haltwhistle Walking Festival, I lead other walkers around the footpaths and open access land there.

I objected to the original application made in 2019, and have made representations in the course of the appeal against the refusal of planning permission that is currently before the Planning Inspectorate. Incidentally, it seems to me as a lawyer that the applicant's behaviour in submitting yet another application to the Council, when his appeal remains extant, is an abuse of the administrative and democratic process. It is very vexatious to the local population and others with an interest in the area to have to compile objections three times within a year. As a local council tax payer, I am also extremely concerned at the amount of public resources being expended on this project.

It is from this perspective that I wish to object once again to this application, now that it has been resubmitted. I object on many grounds, and will separate these for ease of reference.

Lack of Consultation with local people and local businesses – in both 2019 and 2020

I live in Kirkwhelpington, which is some 7 miles from the site at Cold Law. Although the planning application has always been described as relating to Kirkwhelpington, I was not consulted formally about the applicant's original plans, and nor was anyone else living here. The Parish Council was not notified or consulted, despite the fact that its toilets and post office are sometimes mentioned by the appellant as forming part of local amenities. I informed the Parish Council of the proposal and of the formation of the group, Keep the Wannies Wild, on 10th June and asked that they consider the matter at their next meeting. Unfortunately that did not take place until 2nd July, after the proposal had been turned down, but the minutes of the Parish Council meeting held on that day record its disappointment at not having been formally consulted or involved.

The resubmitted application is described as having 46 letters in support of the project, which apparently come from a diverse section of the population. The majority of the letters are not visible, but I did read the nine letters of support written in relation to the appeal to the Planning Inspectorate. With regard to those nine letters - most of the correspondents did not live in the immediate vicinity, nor did they have businesses here. This must raise questions about how the group was selected. One of the letters, from Mr W Browne Swinburne, gave the impression that it was sent on behalf of the Parish Council he chairs; Mr Browne Swinburne's letter is written "in my capacity as chairman of Capheaton Parish Council." The village of Capheaton is some 10 miles away from Cold Law, and so I was interested to see why this Parish Council was consulted when closer ones were not. However, the Parish Council itself was NOT informed or consulted. The clerk, Peter

Ware, has confirmed this to me, and spoke to Mr Browne Swinburne who has confirmed as follows: “Re-reading the letter he acknowledges that it implies the Parish Council may have discussed the matter, but that was not the intention and he apologises for any confusion.”

I asked Mr Browne Swinburne to withdraw the misleading letter from the appeal process, but he did not do so, and now I note that it is being effectively re-submitted in support of this new application. I regard this as malpractice and am following this up. As far as this process is concerned, though, I consider that as at least one of the letter writers acknowledges that what he has said is misleading, the remaining 45 must be scrutinised before being accorded any weight. It is also concerning that the remaining letters are not published for the public to scrutinise.

In the original application, the applicant described an informal consultation he staged in local centres, one of which was Kirkwhelpington Village Hall. I live approximately 80 metres from the village hall, I visit there frequently for a number of reasons (the Post Office is located there), and I take a keen interest in local affairs; yet I was unaware of this initiative. No publicity was given to it, no invitations sent to local people. It is not surprising to me that the exercise elicited such meagre response, as it was a covert operation, clearly designed not to attract any attention.

The applicant’s appeal to the Planning Inspectorate included no new evidence, or any suggestion of a survey.

The new application includes a “Statement of Community Engagement”, which refers (Para 5.4) to a questionnaire. That is described as a “campaign” involving 251 people; 148 from Northumberland, 100 from Tyne & Wear, one from Cardiff, one from Brighton – and one from somewhere else. There is no explanation of how the 251 were selected. Despite being termed a “campaign”, this exercise too appears to have been a covert operation, as it certainly did not formally involve people who live in Kirkwhelpington or local business owners. In any event, participants seem only to have been asked about the design of the project, not about its suitability for the area, and even on these very limited terms, it elicited only a 55% approval. Once again, the very obvious groups of interested parties have been ignored, and the real questions about whether this or any sort of monument is suitable for The Wannies omitted.

The Statement of Public Engagement points out that “The applicant is not required by law to undertake any specific public or community engagement for this application.” Whilst that may be strictly true, this proposal is out of the ordinary; it is not a proposal to build houses or factories, but a monument designed specifically to be prominent, seen by many and from a wide area, to attract attention and, perhaps, to attract visitors and tourists. I find it insensitive and arrogant of anyone who describes their project in this way, not to consult or even inform the people who might be confronted with it most frequently, and the people whose business may be boosted or harmed, about their plans. As I can attest from my work for Keep the Wannies Wild, the most common response to this application is revulsion, horror and indignation. The growth in members of the group both initially, at the time the County Council considered the application, and latterly, now that both an appeal has been lodged, and a new application made, is a very clear indication of the response of anybody with an interest in, or love for, this place.

The “Statement of Community Engagement” also describes the dedicated website, set up in 2018. Whilst the applicant highlights the “nearly 6,000 unique visitors”, he does not say that many of those

visitors have used it to inform their objections, nor has he explained that negative comments on the proposal have been systematically removed from the site, and the comment facility eventually disabled – presumably, because negative comments easily outweighed positive.

The “Statement of Community Engagement” also refers to a Press campaign conducted in January. This led to one local newspaper, The Hexham Courant, conducting an online poll, which in turn found 86% objected to the proposal while only 14% approved. The Statement fails to mention this; it concludes that the articles had a reach of 1,983,225, but the Courant’s poll, which was designed to actually garner opinion rather than to set out the designs, suggests that 1,665,888 of those readers would be against the application.

Had any meaningful consultation been carried out before the original plans were submitted, the appeal lodged, or the design resubmitted, the applicant would have discovered its unpopularity. The lack of any genuine or meaningful consultation of local people or their democratically elected institutions either at initial application, appeal or on resubmission is an insult to the whole of the local population. An insult compounded by the frequency with which the matter is being raised.

Tourism

In his statement of case to the Planning Inspectorate, the applicant stated that “Providing an additional attraction for existing visitors and attracting additional visitors will facilitate higher expenditure by the tourists in the local and regional economy”. In this latest application, he says (Visitor Strategy, 2.7.5) “Elizabeth Monument creates potential for the local economy to benefit and grow”.

However, no detail is provided in any of the documents about *how* the monument would do this, or whether existing visitors to the area would be attracted or deterred by it. The applicant appears to have conducted no research about who visits the area currently, and what they would wish to see here. Our group of protesters, Keep the Wannies Wild, has asked its 1800+members about this, and it has found that overwhelmingly, tourists come to this part of Northumberland to enjoy the countryside in its natural state. Neither the appeal nor the current application conceive of the fact that existing visitors may be deterred by it, but that is what walkers, photographers, artists, climbers and cyclists have told us will happen. New visitors may be attracted, but in my view that would be at the expense of existing ones.

The new application includes a “Visitor Strategy” and a Statement of Economic Impact. From this it appears the applicant hopes that 25,000 visitors might come to the site in the next three years and spend an average of £50 each. I think 25,000 is a very ambitious number, and I note it is sometimes reduced to 15,000. Even if visitors come in such numbers, I cannot see how their £50 will find its way into the local economy, for the following reasons:

- It seems to me very unlikely that people would stay at the guesthouses in the area because they are paying a fleeting visit to a monument, although the applicant’s estimate is that 40% of them will. People driving to see a monument are more likely to drive on to another one, and as the applicant’s report shows, they are all between 9 and 43 miles away.
- The Visitor Strategy (3.2.3 – 3.2.4.) suggests that a proportion of the expected visitors will be from walking groups. I am a keen walker, and a Director of the Haltwhistle Walking Festival. I

have canvassed opinion informally among my group, which also includes people belonging to the various Ramblers groups the applicant refers to. They are – I would say exclusively – against it. Walkers like to walk in unspoilt areas. Were the Wannies to be marred by Ascendant, they would go elsewhere.

- Facilities here are very limited. Although people who come here to walk, cycle, or enjoy the outdoors may spend time, and nights, in the area so that they can do the same the following day, people who come for a short, one off visit would have little else to amuse them. There is a Post Office in Kirkwhelpington, which does not sell items other than stationery and cards, and one public toilet. It seems to me unlikely that a visitor to a monument would typically plan to combine their trip with a visit to a Post Office, meaning there are unlikely to be any immediate benefits to this community, which would nevertheless be providing the closest public toilet, and its maintenance.
- People who come to see a monument may wish to stop for a drink or a meal, meaning the pub facilities in the area are likely to benefit most. However, all of them currently limit their opening hours to save costs – this was the case even before social distancing was advocated in the light of the Corona Virus. It maybe that if they could in future count on a regular influx of a significant number of customers on any given day or days, they may be able to open more frequently or even take on more staff. However, the proposal is not for a venue that would be open at consistent times or cater for regular numbers. People would come and go at all times of day and all times of year, and they may or may not go to one of the pubs. None of the relevant businesses could confidently take on extra staff to cater for the possibility of tourists coming to them from Ascendant. Would it really be worthwhile for a pub to open on, say, a Tuesday afternoon in February, on the off chance that one or more visitors will be viewing the monument on that day and then want a meal? A landlord would have to open and heat the pub, lay on a menu, purchase the food, and pay staff – someone to cook, someone to serve. Would any profit be made on one or even ten people coming in for a meal? Probably not, and if nobody chose to visit the monument, or to go to that particular pub, that is a nett loss.
- One of the applicant's key marketing strategies appears to be that local cafes might offer a discount to anyone showing a "selfie" with Ascendant, but there is no explanation about how he would incentivise such a scheme. On the face of it therefore, such a scheme would also lead to reduced, rather than enhanced, profits.

The County Council's policies, which are liberally quoted by the appellant, refer to the desirability of promoting tourism. For example, the Strategic Economic Plan aims to promote "opportunities for job and productivity growth... in our culture and tourist hubs and in the rural economy"

The appeal simply states that "This proposal would help deliver this". *It does not explain how*. It seems to me obvious that it would not, for all the reasons set out above.

The County Council's Tourism Officer Paul Nichol produced a one and a half page report dated 13th June 2019, which, disappointingly, he considered needed no updating for the appeal or for this new application. It contains no description or analysis of the businesses in the area, and provides no more than the appellant in terms of stating how the monument might actually attract tourists to the area. Similarly, it fails to ask who currently does visit the area, or consider what effect a structure of this sort might have on their willingness to return. Mr Nichol asserts that the structure will

“contribute directly to ambitions for sustained growth in our economy”, because, he says “it is believed the structure will be a sensitive asset in relation to the landscape and the environment”, - not saying who believes that to be the case. Given the evidence from our Group, Keep the Wannies Wild, very few people believe the structure might be a sensitive asset.

In summary:

- No local business could confidently expand on the strength of what is envisaged, as visitor numbers and times are very unpredictable.
- Existing tourists, and the tourism that the area currently has, will be diminished by this encroachment onto the magnificent existing landscape.

The Strategic Planning Committee Decision of 2nd July should be respected

By appealing against the decision of Northumberland County Council, the applicant believed that members of its Strategic Planning Committee were wrong. However, it seems to me (a former local authority solicitor) that their decision was perfectly correct, should be upheld by the Planning Inspectorate, and endorsed by the Strategic Planning Committee this time.

The fact that the Planning Officer recommended the original application for approval should not influence the Committee on this occasion. It is for the elected members to make the final decision on the matter, they bring to bear their experience and knowledge of the area and the people they represent, and make decisions about Northumberland on behalf of the people who live here.

The 16 members of the Strategic Planning Committee who met on 4th June 2019 expressed their grave concern at the original proposal, and determined that they had insufficient information on which to base a decision. Our local councillor, John Riddle, spoke eloquently against the proposal, giving many reasons why the monument would not be welcome in his ward. Very sensibly the councillors decided to adjourn – to allow them to see the site for themselves, and to obtain more information from the council’s tourism department.

On re-convening, the council had much more information available to them. They had the report of the tourism officer, referred to above; they had seen the site for themselves; they had a great deal more information from our group, Keep the Wannies Wild, which had formed in between the two meetings.

They turned the application down, for the very good reason that:

“The proposal results in development in the open countryside which fails to recognise the intrinsic character and nature of the countryside in this location”

This new application includes more information – including what I would say is a limited covert public consultation, and some very ambitious estimates of visitor numbers and visitor spend which cannot be substantiated. I do not think these provide any reason for the Council to overturn its decision of July 2019.

Environmental Harm

In preparing the original application and the appeal, the appellant commissioned an environmental impact assessment. Our group has analysed and commented on this, and has also commented on the likely effect of the construction process. This critique should be taken into account as the Committee considers the application anew. I want to add to this my own personal incredulity that, now we are all so much more aware of the effect our industry and habits are having on the environment, anyone could be proposing such an environmentally damaging project that will have no practical benefit. The building process would involve sacrificing a huge slice of what is now moorland and replacing it with tonnes of concrete. Upland moors are being increasingly recognised as our bastion against climate change and flooding. They act as a sponge to the water that would otherwise behave as we have seen so frequently in recent weeks, surging into valleys and swamping communities. Remember Storms Ciara and Dennis. We must be serious in our efforts to reverse the effect of global warming, not go all out to accelerate it. This project represents the double whammy of desecrating moorland and involving the production, transport and application of concrete – which creates one tonne of greenhouse gases per tonne poured. On June 11th last year, Northumberland County Council declared a climate emergency, expressing its wish to become carbon neutral by 2030. The Committee can further this aim by not allowing this harmful structure or setting any sort of precedent for such a useless development.

Aesthetics

In my view as a local resident, walker and amateur photographer, it is impossible for any structure on Cold Law to improve on what is already there. I say this not as a Philistine, who cannot appreciate art, but as someone who spends much of my free time seeking out beautiful things, whether that is art or the landscape. I visit art galleries and other installations everywhere I go. I have made special journeys to see sculptures such as The Angel of the North, or Another Place at Crosby. I have visited “Stone Gathering”, the Andy Goldsworthy sculpture near Hawick Farm. I walk all around Northumberland and Scotland, as well as other parts of the country and the world. I have seen some lovely and thought provoking artworks, and some breathtaking views. In my view, the beauty of the Wannies is obvious, and must be preserved. I do not think I need any part of it to be paved over, or any interpretation boards, to enhance my appreciation of what I already have.

I have also read and watched (the promotional video) with great interest what the appellant is trying to achieve with “Ascendant”. Despite poring over the application and the promotional literature, I cannot work out whether his main motivation is to emphasise the beauty of the position, make some sort of complicated claim about the dimensions of surrounding features, celebrate the Queen, or the Commonwealth, or the industrial pioneers who lived or worked in this landscape, or provide some sort of sundial. There seems to me to be no clear purpose, and I cannot see from the photographs and mock-ups how this shape/structure will call to mind any of these things. Cold Law has no connection with the Queen and no significance for the Commonwealth, even if the applicant has connections to the royal family as he asserts. Claims about its dimensions or direction seem to me to be spurious – for example, pointing south to the capitals of the Commonwealth ignores the fact that Edinburgh lies to the north. I find the explanations of purpose and motivation utterly baffling, and cannot imagine how anyone less well informed about the landscape of the place (as visitors would typically be) would derive any sort of understanding from its erection. I think the monument will be ugly and elicit only bafflement and ridicule. I recognise that this is a subjective view.

I also think that claims that it will have an effect similar to other well known artworks are entirely spurious. It has been mainly compared with the Angel of the North, which was famously built on a reclaimed pit heap. Unlike that area of Gateshead, the Wannies need no enhancement or repair. The appellant has also likened it to the travelling "Poppies" installation. This is also misinformed, as the Poppies, which I went to see at Woodhorn Colliery Museum, were designed as a transient and moveable tribute to those killed in war. The symbol of poppies is a well known one, whereas a slice of hill is not, to my knowledge, often associated with the Queen or any of the other things the monument claims to reflect or celebrate. The Poppies were placed in an existing museum, with well established visitor facilities.

Summary

The process leading to the initial application and the appeal has been flawed, and has trampled on local opinion and sensitivities. The applicant has made no effort to discover or reflect local opinion, but seems determined to fly in its face. The project cannot demonstrate any tangible benefits to the local economy, making any claim that it is in tune with Northumberland County Council's tourism objectives entirely spurious. The sculpture itself is ugly and without any clear meaning. Ascendant represents a wholly unwarranted and unwanted invasion into the beauty of the landscape, the enjoyment of the area by locals and existing visitors, and will cause shameful environmental harm.