

Application Summary

Application Number: 20/00698/FUL

Address: Land At Cold Law Kirkwhelpington Northumberland

Proposal: Construction of a publicly accessible landmark, commissioned to commemorate Queen Elizabeth II and the Commonwealth.

Case Officer: Mr Gordon Halliday (email: gordon.halliday@northumberland.gov.uk)

Customer Details

Name: Sue Underwood

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Comment Details

Commenter Type: Member of the Public

Stance: Objection

Comment Reasons:

I am disappointed to have to write a second time to OBJECT to this proposal. Having been turned down last July by the Strategic Planning Committee and with the result of the applicant's subsequent appeal not yet known, he has chosen to submit a new planning application for the same thing. This new application, even with the extra supporting documents, does nothing in my view, to address the reason for refusal of the previous planning application, which was the impact of the proposal on the character of an open, sweeping landscape. I therefore summarise again my objections to this proposal.

Setting

I am originally from Leicester and came to live in Northumberland 20 years ago when I fell in love with its wide, open spaces and unspoilt landscapes. Since moving here, I have come to regard Redesdale as my home and have become an active member in the community. In my view this structure is inappropriate for such an open, wild and beautiful area. At three times the height of the Angel of the North, it will be visible from miles around and will look alien in the open landscape. The tilting aspect of it will draw the eye away from the landscape and destroy the open view. It will also exceed the height of the wind turbines nearby, which many already consider a blot on the landscape, but at least they serve a useful purpose. Being pale in colour and grouped as they are, they do not stand out in the same way as a solitary structure in a bright rusty brown. The wind turbines will be removed after 25 years of service, whereas the 'landmark' will intrude on the landscape in perpetuity.

I would like to politely remind the Strategic Planning Committee, that it was the site visit and the view from the A68 across to the Wannies, that influenced some members who were undecided, to vote against this proposal last July. The new application does not change that view. It is the same structure in the same place.

Environment

At a time when a climate emergency has been declared, it does not seem appropriate to be considering erecting a monument that has such a large carbon footprint. This structure would, if built, require the hollowing out of natural rock to create 60-metre-deep foundations which will then be filled with tonnes of concrete in order to support its weight. Recently, The Guardian has published an article citing concrete as the most destructive material on earth, the use of which endangers the planet.

Tourism Potential

On his website the applicant suggests that this structure could be a tourist attraction to rival the Angel of the North and that it would attract visitors to the area. The applicant's own Visitor Strategy report supports my own view that there is no evidence to suggest that the Angel of the North attracts additional visitors to the area (i.e. visitors that come to the area deliberately to see it). Also a comparison to The Angel of the North is totally inappropriate, as this is sited in a built up area, it is by a world famous sculptor, it sits happily in its landscape and is easily accessible from the A1 which is used by thousands of vehicles a day as they pass by Newcastle on their way North. In the Economic Impact Assessment that accompanies this second application the applicant cites examples of other artworks in other areas of the country which have seen significant increases in visitor numbers and intimates that this is a result of their installation. Tourism fluctuates for all kinds of reasons, and there is no evidence to suggest that the new influx of visitors was due to the artworks cited. If this 'landmark' did succeed in attracting visitors in this number, then the local infrastructure would not cope. In this remote rural area, it would be impossible to expand the tourist infrastructure to sufficiently to cope with 1000s of extra visitors and the local communities would be over-run. One only has to look at the reaction in the village of Rothbury on the weekend of 21st / 22nd of March to see the possible effects of this, although I do recognise that fear of spreading COVID-19 was also a contributing factor in the villagers' backlash against being inundated with visitors on that particular weekend.

In the Visitor Strategy report the applicant attempts to sell this 'landmark' as a tourist attraction which will boost the local economy by contributing to the tourism mix in Northumberland. This report is based on pure speculation and the visitor numbers quoted cannot be backed up by sound data. There are numerous flaws hidden amongst the detail which demonstrate that it is ill thought out and there is very little substance to support the construction of this very intrusive monument.

Having studied tourism at HND level and as a traveller who enjoys visiting places with the same type of tourism mix as Northumberland, I offer just a few comments of the many I could wish to make.

- Northumberland is famous for its historic castles, Hadrian's Wall, Kielder Water, its remote open landscapes and its wildlife. Visitors may be drawn to explore the 'landmark', but it would have very little to offer to tempt them to stay an extra night, as the Visitor Strategy report suggests.
- In paragraph 3.6.1 of the report, the applicant suggests that it would make a suitable scenic stop for coaches. I have taken many coach holidays in the past and I fail to see how this could be appropriate. Not only is access via a minor C road, which has a tricky dog leg at one point and is used frequently by local farm traffic, there are no public toilets on site or nearby which could cope with a coach load of tourists. Also bearing in mind that most coach tourists are older people, I know from experience that the reaction to being taken to such a spot would be 'what have they brought us here for'. The view from the coach on the A68 would be just as satisfying to this market.
- The proposed car park is small with no facilities. I find it rather strange therefore, that in paragraph 2.2.10, the applicant proposes the possibility of hosting events at the 'landmark' throughout the year. If these were to attract any number of visitors, this would result in vehicles parking along the verges which would be dangerous and would severely impact on the open landscape with which this 'landmark' is supposed to be in sympathy.
- Tourism does provide valuable income for the rural economy if it is sustainable in the long term. Tourists are fickle and if the thing that attracts them to a place is spoiled then they will stay away. This 'landmark' in my view does not contribute to what makes Northumberland attractive and could deter the regular visitors who come to enjoy the natural beauty of the area and come back time after time. This is likely to be something that might be 'ticked off' a list and once seen, not something to return to.

Access

Access for road traffic would be via the C road that runs between Knowesgate on the A696 to emerge on a bend just north of Ridsdale on the A68. This has many bends and is narrow in places. It is used by farm vehicles and for the movement of livestock, and in my view is not suitable for use by large volumes of traffic, especially coaches and motor homes which the applicant appears to want to attract. Both the crossroads at Knowesgate and the A68 near Ridsdale are renowned black spots and accidents can close a road for hours, causing inconvenience for locals trying to go about their daily business. Any increase to the risk of this happening is most unwelcome.

In the Visitor Strategy document, the applicant claims that the site is well served by Public Rights of Way Footpaths and Bridleways, which will enable walkers to easily add the Elizabeth Landmark as a final or en-route destination. As a walker who has tried to use these paths over the years, I can say that they are not in a good state of repair and are difficult to follow. One of the worst I have walked recently is actually on the Ray Estate, where there was no waymarking and even without much rain, you needed to balance and pick your way over the grassy tussocks to avoid going ankle deep in bog. Looking at the map, walking from any of the villages nearby requires amounts to a challenge and to my knowledge, this area is not covered by any of the walking holiday providers mentioned in the applicant's Visitor Strategy. I do not believe that this 'landmark' will attract any additional walkers to this immediate area, .

Consultation

The applicant has now provided a Statement of Community Engagement, presumably to try and counter the argument that the consultation process was inadequate, and that there was no engagement with local people. Having read this report, I make the following comments:-

- Despite the applicant stating that there were 34 days in 2018, only 45 people responded. In my view this is because the consultations were poorly advertised in the local community and people did not understand what it was all about. Of these responses to the local consultation, two thirds of the general comments made in response to the final question were negative.
- The applicant states that the consultation at Cheeseburn Grange generated favourable comments. Given that this venue specialises in modern art and draws in enthusiasts who specifically come for that reason, this is no surprise, but this does not mean that these same people would come out into the wilds deliberately to see the Elizabeth 'landmark'..
- The applicant claims to have 130 letters of support, some from as far away as the US. I cannot see the relevance of this, and would like to point out that 130 letters of support are not evident on the planning portal and pale into insignificance given that Keep The Wannies Wild has now nearly 2000 members both local and from further afield who object to The Wannies being spoiled by this so called 'landmark'. These objectors include local businesspeople, crafts people, walkers and climbers as well as residents who so not want to see their local area spoiled. A poll conducted by the Hexham Courant when the applicant put in his appeal against the first decision found only 15% of respondents were in favour against 85% who were against the proposal.
- One of the guiding principals of sustainable tourism is that tourism should not alienate the local communities. They need to engage with it rather than have it forced upon them. The applicant claims that The Elizabeth Landmark will "bring together communities from across the region to experience a new destination for art and heritage in Northumberland." It has certainly united the local communities – in opposition to the project. It is my view that this will never be something that the locals can feel a pride in or a wish to celebrate.

A fitting monument to The Queen ?

The applicant claims that his monument is “named in honour of Queen Elizabeth II, a manifestation of Lord Devonport's personal admiration for her as the longest-reigning British monarch and her anchoring of The Commonwealth around shared values of tolerance, respect and understanding.” It is my understanding that the Queen does not want this type of monument erected in her honour and this came over quite clearly in a TV programme which showed her majesty's lasting wish to unite the Commonwealth with a green canopy of trees. Neither do I think that he has displayed any of these shared values with his lack of engagement with the local communities leading up to the submission of the first planning application. The days of the local aristocracy disregarding local opinion in pursuit of projects to bolster their own standing are gone. This project has nothing to do with the Queen, it is a blatant self-indulging vanity project.

Setting a precedent.

As far as I am aware, the granting of planning permission for the windfarms set no precedent for additional large structures to be built in the vicinity. Being quite involved with the Northumberland and Newcastle Society at the time, I seem to remember that there was concern at the cumulative impact on the landscape if too many were built next to each other. This sculpture is not sited near the wind farm and therefore would be an additional blot on the landscape. It is of no use to the community and will be there until it falls down or rusts away. I must question why Lord Devonport is so keen to push this project through. I can only think of it as vanity on his part as on the face of it, he does not appear to be making any money from it, apart from thinking it will help attract visitors to his own exclusive holiday park, which is detailed in paragraph 4.3 of the Visitor Strategy document. My fear is, that if this project was to go ahead, and intense and aggressive marketing campaigns such as those suggested in the Economic Impact and Visitor Strategy reports result in thousands of visitors coming to this isolated spot, then this will open the floodgates for more visitor facilities to cope with the additional numbers and we could end up with the equivalent of an Elizabeth Landmark Theme Park that will ruin a precious open landscape for ever.

I hope you will consider these objections and those of the other objectors once again when determining this application. I do not believe that the new application or any of the new supporting documents add anything to the argument that this project should be accepted. The supporting documents offer no evidence that the risk of damaging what is now one of the last unspoiled areas of England, with a view to trying to attract a few extra tourists. I ask you to vote again to REJECT this application for the same reason as before –the wrong development in the wrong place.