

Ray Estate Appeal

Statement of support

M Clark: Development Director

I would like to submit my support for the appeal by the Ray Estate against the refusal by Northumberland CC to accept the Estate's application to erect a monument to commemorate the reign of Queen Elizabeth II and the Commonwealth.

I currently live in Co Durham on the border with Northumberland, prior to which I lived in Corbridge, and I am familiar with Northumberland generally as well as the development site specifically. I enjoy cycling and walking in Northumberland often using the prominent old and new developments as landmarks and destinations. It is a landscape that has changed over time as it should and ironically we now often celebrate the industrial heritage landmarks, chimneys etc., which figure prominently in the landscape but I guess which if suggested now would find a significant amount of opposition.

I speak as a former public servant, having worked in local government for 28 years, including time at the Regional Assembly and ANEC as lead manager for the Regional Housing Strategy and one of the team who established the Draft Regional Spatial Strategy in 2010. I am a former Local Authority CEO, Ex Chair of a top 10 Housing Association and with a current leadership roles in two of the regions regeneration companies, both of which are partnerships with regional local authorities in Newcastle and Durham. I have assisted in the establishment of several regionally based companies and am active in support of a number of charities.

In all of these roles I and my organisations have endeavoured to 'put the region on the map', whether that be through social, economic or cultural investment, with the purpose of attracting people and investment to the North East. A theme that the present government in Westminster is keen to pursue at present. However, a one which unfortunately has not always been followed with public investment in the areas of culture, public art and visitor attractions.

The north east has as we know suffered from the ravages of economic decline and disinvestment, lost population to other more prosperous areas and for many years suffered a negative image frustrating the regions attempts to open up the area to investment and visitor spend. Historically the industrial image of the north east has overwhelmed the beauty of the area and its cultural and visitor attractions, making the task of taking advantage of the tourist dollar particularly difficult. We have focused on trying to recreate the industrial landscape of the past with investment in industry but missed the focus on the largest area of economic growth with regard to the visitor and tourist economy. In 2019 for example Research Northumberland estimated that tourism spend in the county has exceeded £1bn. Hopefully, post Covid this initiatives and others will help to bring tourism spend back to that sort of level.

It has and still is an uphill struggle to bring money into the region, and it's more deprived communities, and in most of the roles I have undertaken, and projects I've had an involvement in we have struggled to attract investment into cultural and public goods that both celebrate the area and its heritage as well as providing a destination for visitors. Especially without the benefit of either public funding or grant support. Indeed we have occasionally railed against the creation of public art. The Angel of the North, which is now an iconic part of the north east landscape being a prime example of a 'blot on the landscape' a 'danger to motorists' and a 'waste of public money' when first conceived!

This project is no exception. In Consett the Terris Novalis sculpture is now a destination and adorns the front of the areas OS map, but originally could not find a home and ended up in it's current unplanned location due to the forward thinking of the council and others.

We are getting better with recent installations on the coast in Northumberland and Durham receiving positive public attention and celebration. However, the area needs more public celebratory installation and art work to raise it's profile, raise it's spirits, celebrate it's culture and create attractions which tap the regeneration and economic benefits of tourism.

It would seem that the Ray Estate is an exceptional organisation in this regard wishing to invest in a public good to celebrate the region, it's cultural heritage and links. Which in my view can only be to the benefit of Northumberland and the region generally. This position appears to have been taken by the council's officers, consultants and consultees but for some unknown, possibly political reason, the planning committee has chosen to reject the application. Hopefully, this appeal will result in a positive outcome for the installation, rebutting the spurious arguments about negative visual impact and the rural landscape, and celebrate the fact that public art should have a big visual impact, that's what it's all about.

It would appear to me that the planning committee has made a perverse decision which cannot be supported by either the facts or the validity of the application. In my view the Ray Estate appeal should be supported by the inspector and a strong message sent to the council's planning committee that their original refusal had no factual, objective, rational or policy basis.

M Clark

Former CEO Derwentside District Council.

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