

Appeal against refusal of planning permission for Construction of a publicly accessible landmark, commissioned to commemorate Queen Elizabeth II and the Commonwealth (Ref: 19/00247/FUL)

Statement of Support

Good morning,

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to make this statement to the enquiry. I am reading from notes and would be pleased to supply a hard copy if you so wish.

My name is John Swanson.

Briefly, by way of background, from my early professional life in architectural design I moved to specialise in planning and house design. Then to construction production management with overall responsibility for planning, financing and delivery of residential production - managing companies throughout the UK, in the USA, France and Spain. Latterly I was Chief executive and Chairman of Barratt Developments plc. Where in addition to running a FTSE 100 company I had frequent dialogue with central government ministers and their advisors on planning and design matters. Since then, in addition to Chairing my own companies, I have held directorships in housing associations, been a member of district and parish councils in Northumberland and been Chairman and trustee of HospiceCare and other local charities.

I have lived in North Northumberland since 1978. For the last 33 years at Glanton Pyke in the east Cheviot foothills. As the crow flies about 20 miles north east of Cold Law. So, I know North Northumberland well and fully appreciate and admire its stunning and varied landscapes. I have for many years been acquainted too with the area immediately surrounding the appeal site. - I stood atop Cold Law only a couple of weeks ago.

In January last year I wrote to the inspectorate to state my support for the proposed landmark on Ray Estate.

Since that letter of 2nd January 2020, I have had the opportunity to read many of the letters of support and objection which have been posted to the LPA web site.

As an individual who has had considerable experience in design and planning matters for many years in the UK and abroad, I understand the controversial issues that may, and frequently do, arise from planning applications. Given the bespoke nature of this application it is hardly surprising that it has attracted so much individual comment. Indeed, as a matter of common sense, I would expect that a key objective of any piece of public art – such as here – is to generate opinion and response from those people who come to see it. In planning terms, of course, it is irrelevant whether a person likes or dislikes the specific design of the piece of art.

I understand the key dispute between the LPA and the appellant relates to landscape and visual impact matters. On such matters I would defer to the experts. However, I do note that as part of their assessment of the application, the LPA commissioned their own expert review of the LVIA report which had been submitted by the appellant. This review supported the appellant's LVIA. It doubtless provided great weight toward the officers' recommendation for approval of 4th June 2019.

I would invite you to attach significant weight to this endorsement as well as the officers' original recommendation that planning permission should be granted and his conclusion that "The application is in accordance with both the Local Plan and the requirements of the NPPF."

Given such a ringing endorsement after thorough scrutiny, it is surprising therefore at a subsequent planning committee meeting held on 2nd July 2019, members did not accept the recommendation and agreed, by a majority, that the Director of Planning be given authority to provide "wording for a refusal".

The members' instruction and subsequent decision notice does beg the question as to how they came to reject the officer's well researched and advised view of the planning merits of the application which was clearly assessed against the relevant policy framework.

It is a great pity that the committee members failed to support their professional officers' detailed recommendation for approval. Whilst they are of course entitled to overturn that recommendation, sadly, in my view, their decision was not based on reasoned policy argument or a full assessment of the concept, its design, or an examination of its acceptability within the landscape. They failed to understand the policy rationale for a positive recommendation by their officers and consultants as set out in the report to committee.

One wonders how the committee would have dealt with the now iconic Angel of the North whose planning application attracted considerable objection at the time but has since generated an enormous sense of civic pride. Or if they had the opportunity, would they have refused an application for the Glenfinnan Monument, the Waterloo Monument at Ancrum, or Penshaw?

Landmarks form an intrinsic part of our British psyche. We build them in celebration of who we are and what we as individuals and as a nation have achieved. Invariably we site them prominently – they should be seen - and in time of course they become accepted as an integral and interesting part of our landscape.

The Elizabeth Landmark can be one such. Its concept in celebration of the long reign of our Queen and her remarkable contribution to our nation and the Commonwealth is beyond argument. Its proposed design and siting within the landscape has been thoroughly assessed and supported by expert opinion from the appellant and endorsed by consultants commissioned by the LPA.

I can add little to the documentation or commentary submitted in support of the application save to emphasise that there is a weight of evidence in favour of approval which I fully support.

Thank you for listening to me. I urge you to uphold this appeal.

John S R Swanson