**WOODLAND PARISH COUNCIL**

**Minutes of Extraordinary Meeting**

**held on**

**Thursday 5 December 2024**

**at**

**Woodland Village Hall**

**1. Present**

Cllr Peckett (Chair), Cllr Timms (Vice Chair), Cllr Teasdale, Cllr Brydon, Cllr Gardner, Cllr Rutter, David Buckee (Parish Clerk)

15 members of the public also present, including 2 from Marwood Parish Council, 2 from Etherley Parish Council and 4 from Hamsterley Forest Action Group

**2. Apologies**

None

**3. Declaration of Interest**

None

**4. Public Discussion regarding planning application for Hamsterley Forest development**

Cllr Peckett welcomed everyone to the meeting, which was the opportunity for those present to discuss their views on the proposed development of Hamsterley Forest by Forestry Commission, Forest Holidays and Go Ape.

Views and concerns expressed are summarised as follows:

* Firstly, there are a number of key documents missing from the planning application.
* The application in the form that it has been submitted has to be accepted or refused in totality, there is not the option to accept parts of it and decline others. Believed to have been a deliberate ploy by the applicant as if rejected by DCC, appeal will need to involve a Planning Inspector with significant cost to the council through barristers, etc
* Deadline for individuals to submit an objection is 5 December, although the planning authority will still consider comments up to the committee meeting. Better to get any objections in sooner rather than later to make sure they are taken in to account. PCC’s have been given longer to object and make comments
* There have been around 300 objections raised on the portal so far, but there is backlog for uploading them, so number is expected to be higher than currently recorded. These levels are unprecedented
* View that possibly the applicant is ‘testing the water’ with the application

**Traffic (Policy 21)**

* Volume of traffic
* Speed of vehicles, with some local residents choosing not to walk round the triangle weekends and holidays due to danger posed through speed
* State of the roads is substandard – mainly B, C & unclassified roads not built for volume of traffic anticipated, in poor repair, requiring maintenance and upgrade. Not suitable for lorries and vans. Verges in poor state, roads prone to flooding
* Danger to horse riders who regularly use the roads, with traffic speeding past them and insufficient space to allow minimum passing distance required by Highway Code. Also danger to walkers who regularly walk the roads around Woodland
* As the development is targeting visitors from Teesdale, increased traffic from Middleton, Barnard Castle, and those leaving the M6 and A66 etc which will be brought through Woodland by sat nav, increasing traffic on C31 road, with many being directed to unclassified road down to Blackling Hole where no access to forest, and also dangerous in ice/snow. C31 road prone to drifting snow
* Increased pressure on Kinninvie crossroads which is already an accident blackspot, likelihood of increased accidents there
* Junction modelling is not fit for modern day traffic, with poor lines of sight in most places
* Traffic assessment undertaken does not take in to account the increased traffic which will be experienced locally, as any traffic from Teesdale will come through Woodland, either using C31 road or unclassified one past Tilesheds Farm
* Traffic numbers do not take in to account day visitors

**Visitor attraction (Policy 7**)

* No infrastructure is in place
* No mains water – will come from a new borehole. Requirement is 60,000 cubic litres of water a day to serve the development. Residents in forest already experience periods where water supply runs dry, increased demand will be unsustainable, will have impact on the existing water table over a wide area, and will affect the field adjacent which is rich habitat for ground nesting birds which require wetland
* No mains sewerage – potential for discharge in to the becks and waterways of contaminated and polluted water/sewerage which will affect fish/mammals etc locally and further downstream
* Power requirement – existing supply to the forest comes from Weardale, only 3 phase supply available at present. In Woodland residents experience power outages regularly and if the development taps in to this supply it will only add to these incidents of no power. Cost to install new supply suitable to cope with car charging points, hot tubs, lighting etc will be very high, who will pay?

**Visitor accommodation (Policy 8)**

* Development will destroy the character of the area

**Development in the countryside (Policy 10)**

* No sustainable modes of transport to the forest as there is no public transport – no buses come through Hamsterley, so people will travel by car, possibly taxi. Will increase level of traffic, mainly petrol and diesel which will increase noise and pollution, causing harm to the biodiversity of the area.
* Site for development is one of few remaining areas left for tranquillity and peace and quiet for wildlife/humans

**Amenity and pollution (Policy 31)**

* The forest is a designated a ‘Dark Skies’ area. Light pollution from the lodges plus traffic moving at night, most with bright LED lights, will have a detrimental effect and disturb wildlife and local residents

**Water Management (Policy 35)**

* Impact on water quality through treated water. No details given about how waste water/effluent will be treated so no idea effect from any chemicals used
* Potential for release of untreated sewerage to be released in to waterway. Pointed out that it is expected tight controls will be in place, but no clear details have been provided by applicant

**Water Infrastructure (Policy 36)**

* No mains water, with concerns raised as mentioned above in policy 7).
* Forest residents have had to resort to taking water from the beck when springs run dry, so possible impact on human health if the waterways are polluted by discharge of water (treated or otherwise) from the development

**Trees, Woodland & Hedgerows (Policy 40)**

* Destruction of deciduous trees and habitat for new access road and lodges,
* Will take many years to recover the habitat, uncertainty if current wildlife would return to the area
* Uncertain what effect removal of trees will have on root systems and the stability of surrounding trees

**Biodiversity (Policy 41)**

* Significant harm to area biodiversity

**Protected Species (Policy 44)**

* Development will have direct, negative impact on protected species and habitats – bats (8 species resident in the forest, Hamsterley is one of only a few areas in County Durham to have 8 species), otters, great crested newts, adders, grass snakes, water voles, natterjack toads, plus many species of birds.

**Other points**

* Need to identify any local farmers who have had planning applications refused over the last 5/6 years on their farms, as some applications locally are known to have been refused as they are too near to Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty. These can then be used to put to DCC as examples, Buffer zone for proximity to AONB is 2km, the proposed development is 500m
* Effect on local businesses with holiday cottages/lets. Development will take away some of their business, which will have a huge impact on these local businesses that are already quiet
* Anti-Social behaviour – access to forest will be required 24/7 for the lodges. Forestry Commission previously wanted the existing gates to be installed to prevent this behaviour, so their removal to allow full access at any time will attract unwelcome ASB. Huge impact on Forest residents
* Go Ape open until 9pm in the summer, with booking in blocks of time, increasing traffic congestion on regular basis, destroying peace and tranquillity for everyone, particularly existing residents for long periods of time
* Feeling that Go Ape will have a greater impact on traffic than the lodges. Why is the new Go Ape required as there is already one within 45 minutes drive
* Forest Holidays/Go Ape primarily aiming employment opportunities at students. Will need either bussing in or taking by car as probably many won’t be able to drive, again increasing traffic levels/emission pollution
* Impact on NHS – there is regularly accidents in the forest requiring air ambulance. These will increase due to (a) Go Ape (heart attacks) and (b) more people using new and existing cycle tracks that they are unfamiliar with and having accidents
* There is an area of Ancient Woodland within the forest. This will be impacted by the new Go Ape development
* Natural England report previously used wrong assumption provided by the applicant that there was mains sewers. Now rewritten, but raises issues/concerns
* Ecology reports missing
* Wildlife surveys are questionable. Durham Bat Group has indicated non-compliance with various policies to provide properly informed report decisions. Removal of bat boxes as part of the development will be contrary to biodiversity convention. Maternity and hibernation places for bats are to be demolished
* Forest Holidays has very poor track record with job employment, high turnover of staff, poor wages both for staff and trades people required
* Likely that 70 lodges is only the start, and if planning permission is granted, further development will take place at a later stage to mark an eco-village equivalent to Center Parcs
* Hamsterley Forest is a Crown asset. Planted over 100 years ago. Forest Enterprise stated that they own the land which is untrue. 125 year lease granted and proposed development will be a money making enterprise for ultimate beneficial owners Vitruvian Partners, a global private equity firm, solely interested in profit, who have a track record in building up asset and on-selling.
* No reparation plans. What plans are in place to decommission the site at the end of the lease period if not renewed, or failure of the venture? Who will be responsible, who will pay, and what will be the lasting impact on the environment?
* Cllr Rutter is in contact with RSPB and Durham Wildlife Trust
* Section 106 agreement – nothing is mentioned about this in the application
* Aquatic report – this specifically states that the construction building work run off will damage the beck and the fish living in it
* County Councillors Potts and Cosslett have already submitted objections
* Local MP is sitting on the fence

It was pointed out that if a decision is made by Woodland Parish Council to make an objection to DCC, the PCC will need to concentrate on and prioritise the impact the development will have on Woodland itself.

Objections need to be specific to planning policies.

In summary, locally the PC needs to look at how it will affect the parish locally. Consideration needs to be given to traffic Policy 21 (bad junctions, poor sight lines, bad weather, flooding, verges, bends in the road) amenity and pollution, increased CO2 emission levels, light pollution, noise, effect on the character of the village, potential constant traffic flow, danger on roads during poor weather. This will carry more weight. Another could then be put in about how it will affect the Forest generally.

**It was unanimously agreed by all individuals present that they were against the development proposals, with not one single person in favour of it.**

The PCC resolved that it would raise an objection. Councillors will make a decision on the areas to focus upon over the next few weeks and then submit a formal objection to DCC.

**5. Date of next meeting**

Provisionally set for 9th January 2025 at Woodland Village Hall, with anything urgent in the meantime being communicated by email

*These are true and accurate minutes of the meeting as agreed by the council*

**Date ………………………………………..**

**Signed ……………………………………..**

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