

## David Clark Representor 1169805, Statement Matters 4

### M4 Housing Development

Dear Mr Fieldhouse, during your examinations of local authorities' Local Plans you must get to see many professionally-written reports from expensive-to-hire corporate town planners and consultants that land developers and new home builders have hired to tell you how important their paying client's site is to that local authority's LP housing needs, how sustainable the site will be and how their sites will offer net biodiversity gains.

Well based on this, I have the daunting task of trying to inform you how wrong Skerningham Garden Community is in around 3,000 words.

There is a very true saying that a picture paints a thousand words. Well, let's say the documentary (link below) will paint millions.

So if you do not read any more of this statement, I would be extremely grateful if you could take some time out from reading so many documents to watch this short, heartfelt YouTube video.

The generous local community crowd-funded to have it made:

<https://youtu.be/e12GY0dkYYg>

**H10** Site 251 is the largest site within DBC's DLP. It's a land-locked site with the East Coast railway to the West of it, the River Skerne to the North and Green Lane bridleway and existing urban housing along its Southern border.

The site is around 500 hectares of tranquil, accessible open countryside and includes Darlington Golf Club, a large community woodland with over 12,000 trees (mainly funded from forestry and landfill tax grants), a number of listed buildings, a landfill site, ancient Salters Lane packhorse route (this public right of way is thought to be one of the oldest packhorse routes in the North East) and a deserted medieval village (Keys to the Past, site Ref D306, dates it to be medieval between 1066 to 1540, and it has ridge and furrow on its Western side).

The site is well used by walkers, cyclists and horse riders, it's home to an extensive array of biodiversity, including many protected species, such as badgers, bats and great crested newts, and many veteran trees.

The concerned, caring local community's crowd-funder paid for an independent ecologist to carry out a Phase 1 habitat survey, link below:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/14c9xWGN9FlvbCejxD7wjdyHCEB1-R7P6/view>

The River Skerne corridor, Darlington's most important biodiversity green corridor, runs through Skerningham. Development here would also result in increased pressure on Natura 2000 sites further downstream. Parts of Site 251 are within Flood Zone 3 (more likely to flood). This was mentioned in the 2015 SHLAA as one of the reasons Skerningham is not suitable for housing development. In fact, DBC did not carry out their Strategic Flood Risk Assessment until 2019, so well after Skerningham, that includes areas of Flood Zone 3, was allocated in the DLP.

I read in one of the uploaded to the DLP portal that houses would not be built in these flood zones areas but the developers have most of the housing allocated for Darlington Golf Club site that floods on a regular basis, please see Appendix 1.1 & youtube video below.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YicPnSNFSjg>

**Also, the 2015 Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment (SHLAA) said the following, then suddenly DBC changed their tune about Skerningham becoming suitable for housing in their amended 2017 SHLAA:**

In the 2015 SHLAA Skerningham was mentioned on page 7 and reasons are given why it's not suitable and what constraints there are.

### ***Suitability***

- Not suitable as a rural greenfield site.
- Part of the site is within Flood Zone 3 (more likely to flood), most in Flood Zone 1 (least likely to flood).
- There would be a loss of countryside and significant visual impact.
- Would have a detrimental effect on the tranquillity of the area - CPRE have identified the area as "significantly tranquil".

### ***Constraints***

- Protect riparian habitat.
- Skerningham Plantation SNCI (Site of Nature Conservation Interest) falls within site.
- May be great crested newts and bats on site.
- Archaeological potential of this site could be classified as medium-high.
- High risk of contamination of part due to Barmpton landfill.
- Highways: There would be major network implications that could probably only be resolved by the construction of a northern by-pass, linking the A66(T) or A1150 to the A167.
- Access from the existing local road network (Glebe Road) would not be acceptable. There is an 18T weight limit on the existing single-lane rail bridge.
- No sewage or water infrastructure in the vicinity.
- Amendment to supply of housing policies required.

### ***Definition of an SNCI:***

"Site of Nature Conservation Interest (SNCI) is a designation given to sites that have substantive local nature conservation and geological value. SNCIs tend to be selected because of particular wildlife habitats or if they support scarce or rare species outside their natural habitats."

On their website, DBC have Skerningham Community Woodland described as:

*"Many people come to this **large nature reserve** to go on walks. It is in Harrowgate Hill, at Ketton Hall Farms. You can park at the top of Glebe Road to reach Skerningham but there is a one-mile walk to the woods. There is a pond and amphitheatre to find."*

In their Rights of Way Improvement Plan on page 73 (link below), DBC describe Skerningham:

*"This area has the potential to be the jewel in the crown of Darlington's countryside provision, having most of the elements necessary to fulfil a majority of the aims central to the vision of this ROWIP."*

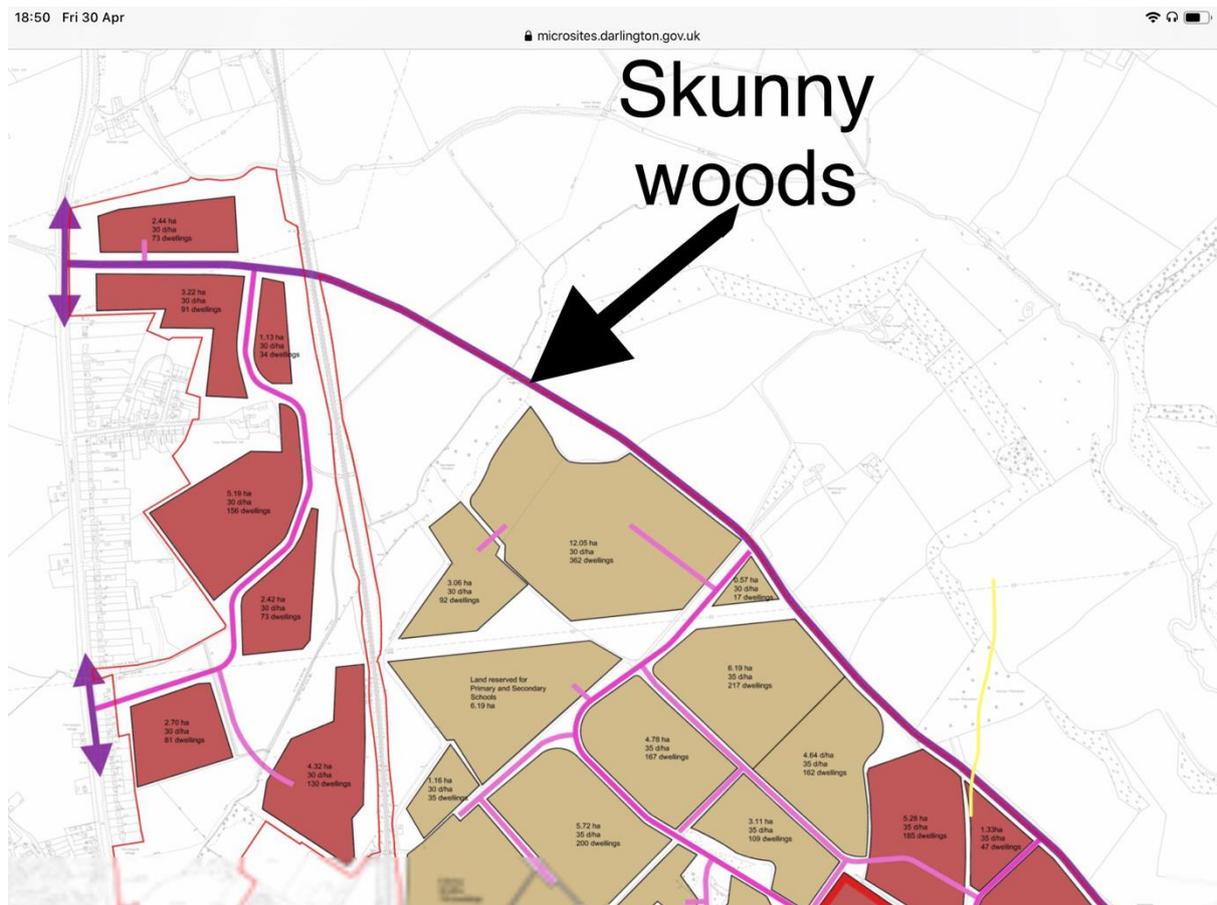
<https://www.darlington.gov.uk/media/2386/rowip-v14-with-charts.pdf>

So why did they change their views in 2017 and decide to allocate Skerningham, the Jewel in the Crown of Darlington's countryside provision, with its Plantation SNCI/large nature reserve, in their Local Plan?

The town's true housing needs? Or to crow-bar money in to help fund several new environmentally-damaging roads to support car-dependent urban sprawl, while brownfield sites already within the town's planning boundary stand idle? Some describe this as council-tax farming - bigger, more expensive properties means a higher council-tax yield.

DEFRA's Magic Map has parts of Skerningham woodlands listed as Priority Habitat - Deciduous Woodland, so why would the developers, with support from DBC and the TVCA, be looking to replace the woodland with a chemical-dependent golf course? The Skerningham link road would also cut through part of the plantation known affectionately locally as Skunny Woods, please see Appendix 1.1 below:

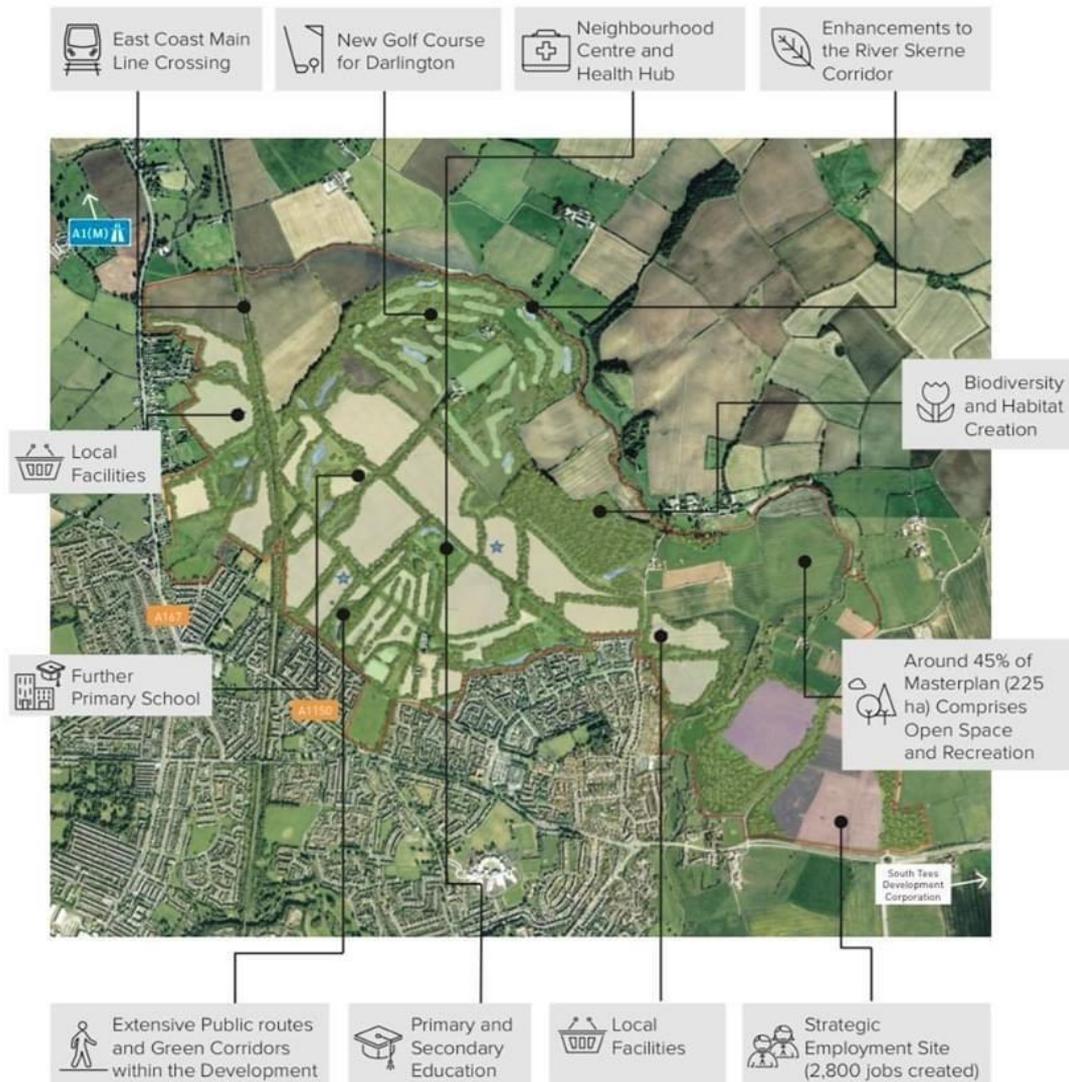
### Appendix 1.1



Darlington Golf Club is planned to be relocated into Skerningham Community Woodland what if they do not want to relocate now?.

Please see below an overview of the Garden Community plans, being supported by DBC and the TVM, and please note the location of the new golf course (Appendix 1.2).

## Appendix 1.2



The relocated golf course, currently a large community woodland, would result in thousands of healthy carbon-storing maturing trees being felled to make way for the fairways. The pesticides and chemicals that would be sprayed onto the fairways would run off the new golf course and be washed straight downhill into the River Skerne, affecting its aquatic life.

How can the felling of thousands of trees in our community woodland, paid for from public money, fit within the Climate Change Emergency the UK declared in May 2019? Also, the Government's 25 Year Environment Plan (link below) sets out a comprehensive and long-term approach to protecting and enhancing accessible local environments. It also states we need to protect and enhance our community woodlands for the current and next generations. So why are we facing the cherished and accessible Skertingham Community Woodland being replaced with a new golf course which will not be accessible to the public?

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/693158/25-year-environment-plan.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/693158/25-year-environment-plan.pdf)

There are over 12,000 trees planted in the community woodland in Skerningham, funded by public money from both the Forestry Commission and landfill tax grants.

There are many rare black poplars within the woodland, grown from cuttings and planted with the help of local schoolchildren in a project helped by the late David Bellamy, in the hope they would be enjoyed by future generations.

We also have local people buried within the community woodland. How disrespectful and insensitive would it be for their families to have their lost love one's final resting place being surrounded or disturbed by a new non-accessible private golf course?

Woodlands are under threat and below is an interesting recent news story:

<https://news.sky.com/story/uks-woodlands-pushed-to-crisis-point-by-a-barrage-of-threats-says-woodland-trust-12274984>

Skerningham woodlands are important habitat for many species. We are living through a biodiversity crisis. One study showed that for the best-studied species of land mammals, birds and amphibians some 20-30% of species will be committed to extinction by 2050 on current trends.

## **Flooding**

The River Skerne runs through Site 251. Skerningham has natural flood plains and the river often bursts its banks in the autumn and winter. The site also floods in other areas away from the river. In fact, there is a natural underground lake under Darlington Golf Club's current site from which the club draws some of its water. If they relocated from this site so housing can be built on it and the drawing of this water ceased, this would see the underground water table rise, causing more flooding on both Skerningham Garden Community and the surrounding existing housing developments.

DBC did not produce a Strategic Flood Risk Assessment until 2019, so well after Site 251, with its Flood Zone 3 on site, had been allocated in the DLP.

So Skerningham floods a lot in its current state of farmland, hedgerows and a large woodland. These features are all flood friendly but take these away and pour concrete and Tarmac on the site and build up to 4,500 new homes and there will be a lot more run-off water moving through the site, straight into the river and then downstream, causing even more flooding problems there.

## **Elm Tree Farm Site 392**

Initially, this site formed part of the Skerningham Strategic Allocation. In a Cabinet meeting on 12<sup>th</sup> September 2017, DBC discusses the acquisition of 1.38 acres of land on Elm Tree Farm to secure a potential future strategic access road into Skerningham and the sale of 2.66 acres of land to Bellway Homes. In the same meeting, they discussed the submission of an application via the TVCA to the Forward Funding strand of the Housing Infrastructure Fund with an ask for £250m. This would have been for a Skerningham link road with a rail and river crossing. The bid was unsuccessful.

Some questions were asked regarding the two pieces of land that were discussed in this Cabinet meeting (pages 6-7):

<https://www.darlington.gov.uk/PublicMinutes/Cabinet%5COctober%2010%202017%5CItem%20No%20.%203%20-%20Minutes%20-%202012%20September%202017.pdf>

Via a FOI-EIR request, initially DBC refused to release some of the information requested. This is another example of the local community not being positively engaged with from an early stage and the DLP not being positively or truthfully prepared, with local communities having a meaningful say about its site allocations. The refusal of this information was reported to the ICO, please see the link and photo below:

<https://ico.org.uk/media/action-weve-taken/decision-notices/2020/2617189/fs50861177.pdf>

The map is a detailed site plan for Sparrow Hall Drive in Darlington. It shows a residential development with several streets including Sparrow Hall Drive, Sparrow Hall Lane, and Sparrow Hall Close. Key features include a pond, Houghton Grange, a tank, Elm Tree House, a playground, and a golf course. A yellow arrow points to a specific area on the western edge of the development. The map is titled 'APPENDIX 1 170912 EG Disposal of Land at Sparrowhall Drive' and includes a north arrow. Below the map, there is a metadata section with the following information:

DARLINGTON BOROUGH COUNCIL DEPARTMENT OF CORPORATE SERVICES	Title: SPARROW HALL DRIVE Creator:	Scale: 1:2500 Date: 01/05/17
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Done R - Confidential Appendix.PDF

- Bellway Homes Ltd have an option to acquire Elm Tree Farm subject to the grant Planning Permission for residential development but the only suitable access for development is either via the Council's land or via another plot owned by Northumbrian Land Ltd.
- A route is required along the western edge of Elm Tree Farm to tie in with existing Council land at Green Lane in order to safeguard a strategic access route to potential future development land to the north of Elm Tree Farm.
- Bellway Homes have provisionally agreed to acquire the Council's land at Sparrow Hall Drive for development and access to Elm Tree Farm and to transfer to the Council the land required for the strategic access route.

The developers of Skerningham had plans for a link road running over Springfield Park without any public consultations, Appendix 1.3:

### Appendix 1.3



Springfield Park is a well-used community park since the 1930s. This link road then runs over the Western side of Elm Tree Farm site, so the 1.38 acres of land DBC were to purchase, BUT there is no mention of this strategic link road running through this development within Bellway Homes' submitted application, ref **18/00988/FUL**.

This road-shaped strip of land is showing as green space for biodiversity. At a Cabinet meeting that was recorded, David Hand was asked by a member of the public, John Atkinson, about this strip of land and, once again, it was confirmed it was not reserved for the Springfield Park link road, it was for biodiversity.

In fact, Mr Hand has been asked on a number of occasions by other members of Whinfield Residents Association if Elm Tree Farm forms part of the Skerningham Strategic Allocation and they have received a number of conflicting answers but not a definitive answer. DBC and Bellway Homes are wanting to class Site 392 as a stand-alone site and not part of Skerningham Strategic Allocation, just like the Banks Group are requesting for land at Beaumont Hill to be classed as a stand-alone site, but both of these sites were in the Skerningham Allocation Site 251 and both show on the application Skerningham Estates Ltd submitted to MHCLG for their Garden Community bid in 2018 which was awarded Garden Village status in June 2019.

Is it coincidental that both of these sites would have parts of the Skerningham Garden Community link roads running through them? Land at Beaumont Hill, the Banks Group site, to secure the part from a roundabout on the A167 across the site to the railway bridge, costing £20m, over into Skerningham. Elm Tree Farm Site 392 to secure the 1.38-acre road-shaped strip of land for the Springfield Park link road that DBC were going to acquire from Bellway Homes if planning permission for their site was approved. Residents in the local community think not.

The Springfield Park link road was removed in early 2020 from the DLP. For now! A larger roundabout that this road would come off is still to be built, funded from two S.106 agreements - £177,105.68 signed February 2020 from approved planning application 15/00804/OUT Berrymead Farm Burtree Lane and £191,395 from approved 15/01050/OUT, this is the same developer of Skerningham, signed August 2020. Now that the Springfield Park link road has been removed from the DLP, the local community has asked the Council for a Deed of Dedication to be granted on the park to protect it from road development. At a full council meeting, all attending councillors voted in favour of granting this but in the following decision-making Cabinet meeting, on recommendations from the Council's planning officers, they refused the Deed of Dedication to be granted.

Following the removal of the Springfield Park link road, the planning officers have said alternative access routes for Skerningham GC may be needed. These are to be **Whitebridge Drive** and **Beaully Drive** on Ashbrooke Estate. These two access points would go over Green Lane which is an ancient packhorse route. It forms part of Salters Lane and is a well-used bridleway. I use it a lot and see a lot of horse-riders using it on a regular basis. DBC have stated pelican crossings would be in place for both access roads into these two roads on Ashbrooke.

A traffic-modelling report in the summer of 2019 stated that, if built, the Springfield Park link road could have over 5,000 vehicles using it, so they are looking to put this amount of vehicles through an existing residential estate that has traffic calming on these two narrow roads and lots of parked cars, plus the bends at the top of the estate before it meets the A1150 are only wide enough for one vehicle at a time.

The other potential access points for thousands of additional vehicles are **Sparrow Hall Drive** coming out of Site 392, **Whinbush Way** and **Barmpton Lane**. The public have pointed out to DBC on a number of occasions that all of these potential access routes are totally unacceptable as all are on narrow already busy residential roads leading onto the slow moving A1150, only to be told all access points will only be discussed with the public when a full masterplan application comes in for Skerningham GC. However, NPPF, section 9, paragraph 102 states otherwise. Another example of members of the public not being positively engaged with or allowed to have a meaningful say in the Skerningham Garden Community development.

The developer, supported by DBC and the TVM, has a new Skerningham link road coming from the A167 Beaumont Hill, with a high-rise railway-bridge crossing (cost circa £20m), through into Skerningham.

This large rail bridge would totally change the natural landscape views for many existing residents and would be visible for miles around as it would have to be high to clear the overhead electric cables and still give maintenance access to these cables. Please see below a photo of the natural landscape as it is today:



In DBC's Infrastructure Delivery Plan (IDP), the cost of this new link road is showing that it could be up to £50m, with developers saying it could be started as soon as 2025. In the developers' submitted Garden Community application, they state after 2030.

A recent uploaded appendix from the developers has the cost for this bridge at £20m. I have spoken to a senior Network Rail bridge engineer and he states it would have to meet their strict specifications and they would not close the line while the bridge was being constructed. The remaining cost of the rest of the Skerningham link road is listed in the same document at £18.11m, Appendix 1.4:

#### Appendix 1.4



Also in this appendix, the developers' consultant states up to 600 new homes would be built first before any of this expensive link road would be constructed, with access onto narrow Barmpton Lane that has no footpath on most of it. Pedestrians and horse-riders have to use this narrow lane to make their way to Barmpton Village to access the public footpaths and bridleways leading from the village.

The development will result in the loss of large areas of agricultural land that could have an impact on migratory birds and other endangered wildlife under the NPPF and policy, ENV 7 sites will be expected to deliver a net gain in biodiversity as a result of development not sure how this would be achievable with Skerningham it's a large natural nature reserve.

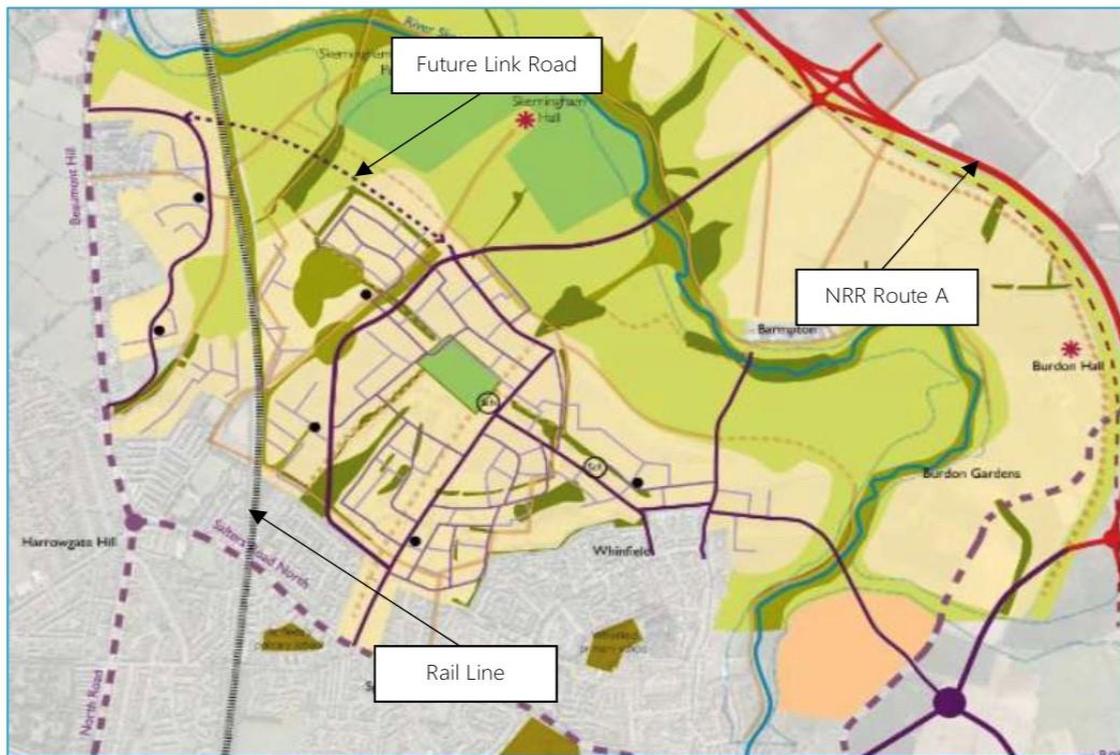
By allocating large swathes of farmland and accessible green fields, while brownfield sites in the town's planning boundary stand neglected, the plan fails to make efficient use of land.

There is a Skerningham Masterplan (Appendix 1.5) that shows new housing over the other side of the River Skerne right up to the Northern Bypass if funded and built. In the developers application to MHCLG :

Skerningham Garden Community has the potential to expand northwards beyond the River Skerne. Dependent upon the outcome of the North Darlington Relief Road a further significant phase of development could be delivered subject to statutory planning decisions.

### Appendix 1.5

Figure 2 Skerningham Masterplan



### HIF Funding Bid

As part of DBC's funding bid to the Housing Infrastructure Fund, the proposed NRR route was included with the impact of this on the surrounding housing sites. Figure 4 presents an extract of a plan pre bid that covers the areas immediately around the Berrymead Farm site and notes key items shown

Figure 4 HIF Funding Bid Plan

## Appendix 1.6

The developers land ownership is questionable the Golf Club have not sold their land yet?

