
Darlington Local Plan Examination

Hearing statement prepared on behalf of Low Coniscliffe and Merrybent Parish Council

Matter 4 Statement – Housing development May 2021

1. Introduction and context

- 1.1 This statement has been prepared by Jo-Anne Garrick Ltd on behalf of Low Coniscliffe and Merrybent Parish Council (LC&MPC). The parish council has made detailed representations at each stage of the preparation of the Darlington Local Plan (DLP). Furthermore, LC&MPC engages fully in development management process, providing detailed comments on planning applications within and potentially impacting on the parish.
- 1.2 LC&MPC was the first parish in the Darlington Borough Council area to successfully prepare a neighbourhood development plan. The plan was subject to referendum in May 2019, where there was a 46.23% turnout, it was supported by 94.7% of those who voted. The Low Coniscliffe and Merrybent Neighbourhood Plan was adopted in June 2019.
- 1.3 The parish council is therefore an important stakeholder in the plan making process and welcome the opportunity to participate in the examination process.

2. Response to the Inspector's Matters, Issues and Questions

Commitments (Q4.1 and Q4.2)

- 2.1 LC&MPC does not have any specific comments to make in response to questions Q4.1 and Q4.2 but wishes to reserve the right to make further representations regarding these issues in so far as they may impact on the parish.
- 2.2 LC&MPC fully supports the statements submitted by the Darlington Green Party and CPRE with regards to housing commitments.

Methodology for selecting housing sites

Q4.3:

- 2.3 PPG (ID: 3-007-20190722) is clear that the process of the identification of sites should include parish council preparing neighbourhood plans. Whilst page 10 of the HELAA refers to parish councils, as described in the matter 1 hearing statement, no meaningful engagement was undertaken with LC&MPC on the identification of housing sites. Therefore, LC&MPC consider that the approach for selecting housing allocations in the plan was not justified or consistent with national policy and guidance.

- 2.4 Section 11 of the NPPF is clear that planning policies should promote effective use of land in meeting the need for homes. Paragraph 117 states that strategic policies should accommodate objectively assessed needs in a way that makes as much use as possible of previously developed land. It is unclear from the site assessment process how this requirement was considered.
- 2.5 Furthermore, as the strategic flood risk assessment work was undertaken in 2019, it is unclear how this informed the process. LC&MPC has particular concerns regarding the Coniscliffe Park sites extending into areas included within flood zones 2 and 3.
- 2.6 LC&MPC fully supports the statements submitted by the Darlington Green Party and CPRE with regards to the failings of the methodology for selecting housing sites.

Strategic and non-strategic housing allocations (Q4.4)

- 2.7 LC&MPC does not have any specific comments to make in response to Q4.4 but wishes to reserve the right to make further representations regarding this issue in so far as it may impact on the parish.

Skerningham strategic site allocation - policy H10 (Q4.5 and Q4.6), Greater Faverdale strategic site allocation – policy H11 (Q4.7 and Q4.8), Elm Tree Farm housing site – ref 392 (Q4.9)

- 2.8 LC&MPC does not have any specific comments to make in response to questions Q4.5 to Q4.9 but wishes to reserve the right to make further representations regarding these issues in so far as it may impact on the parish.

Coniscliffe Park South and Coniscliffe Park North housing allocations – refs 41 and 249 (Q4.10)

- 2.9 LC&MPC submit that the proposed Coniscliffe Park north and south allocations are not justified within the local plan or its supporting evidence base. As explained in the matter 3 hearing statement, Low Coniscliffe and Merrybent are classified within policy SH1 as rural villages and new development should protect and where possible enhance the character of these villages, including their relationship and setting with the surrounding countryside. A strategic allocation is clearly contrary to the settlement hierarchy and not appropriate within a rural parish.
- 2.10 Furthermore, LC&MPC believe that Coniscliffe Park has not been justified as the most appropriate location for housing development. Coniscliffe Park lies in the open countryside and is physically detached from the urban area. The development of the site would result in the coalescence of Darlington and Low Coniscliffe. In addition, the development would remove the delineation between Low Coniscliffe and Merrybent, effectively merging both settlements. This clearly conflicts with the vision, aims and objectives of the local plan and policy SH1. As well as being contrary to the vision and

policies of the LC&M Neighbourhood Plan, including the established settlement boundaries. The overarching approach of the neighbourhood plan is that the parish will remain the gateway to Darlington but will be visually distinct and separate from the conurbation, also, that new development will respect the rural setting of the parish.

- 2.11 There are substantial constraints to the development of Coniscliffe Park which were identified as part of the process of preparing the LC&M Neighbourhood Plan. Particularly that the site has high agricultural value and provides public amenity, the loss of this rural landscape was considered to be highly detrimental to the people of Darlington. Issues were also identified regarding highway capacity and road safety.
- 2.12 With regard to the issue of the amenity value of the site, in the consideration of an appeal decision¹ for 14 dwellings on land at Gate Lane, Low Coniscliffe, which is opposite to Coniscliffe Park, the inspector concluded that due to the prominent location of the site, it “makes an important contribution to the countryside setting of the village as well as its distinctly separate character from the A67 and built development adjacent to it” (paragraph 15). The Inspector went on to say that “the residential development of the site would be apparent as the intrusion of built development onto this field, with subsequent harm to the rural setting of the village... the proposal would also be likely to affect the rural character of the field boundary adjacent to the road due to the need to provide access and visibility splays, which would further detract from the green countryside character of the route into the village” (paragraph 16).
- 2.13 LC&MPC submit that the important landscape character and distinctiveness of the area is further highlighted in existing Core Strategy policy CS14, which specifically refers to the need to protect and improve the distinctive character of Darlington, including the approaches to the urban area, such as along Grange Road, Coniscliffe Road and Staindrop/ Woodland Road.
- 2.14 LC&MPC has concerns that parts of the site lie within flood zones 2 and 3 and that this does not appear to have informed the site allocation process. Furthermore, from the information available, LC&MPC are concerned that full consideration has not been given to the biodiversity value of the site, particularly as a result of the proximity of Merrybent Woodland and the Baydale Beck, where there are Great Crested Newts, otters and water voles.
- 2.15 LC&MPC remain concerned that the local plan does not contain a clear policy approach to guide the future strategic development at Coniscliffe Park, particularly the relationship between the two sites. In addition, it is essential that the infrastructure required for the development, including highway improvements must be in place to support the phased development of housing. It is therefore questioned how the proposal can be effective.

¹ APP/N1350/W/18/3207197 – decision date 22 November 2018

- 2.16 In order to make the plan sound, LC&MPC submit that the Coniscliffe Park sites should be removed from the local plan. If it is determined through the examination process that the allocations are necessary and justified, then the local plan should provide detailed policy guidance to ensure effective and managed delivery of the strategic allocations.

Great Burdon housing allocation – ref 20 (Q4.11) and Maxgate Farm, Middleton St George housing allocation – ref 99 (Q4.12), Blackwell Grange East housing allocation – ref 403 (Q4.13)

- 2.17 LC&MPC does not have any specific comments to make in response to questions Q4.11 to Q4.13 but wishes to reserve the right to make further representations regarding these issues in so far as it may impact on the parish.

Total supply from housing allocations – policy 2 (Q4.14 and Q4.15), windfalls (Q4.16), overall housing supply for the plan period – appendix A (Q4.17), five year housing land requirement and supply – policy H1 (Q4.18, Q4.19 and Q4.20), policy H1: if a five year supply cannot be demonstrated (Q4.21), small sites, custom and self-build housing (Q4.22 and Q4.23)

- 2.18 LC&MPC does not have any specific comments to make in response to questions Q4.14 to Q4.23 but wishes to reserve the right to make further representations regarding these issues in so far as they may impact on the parish. It should also be noted that LC&MPC support the submissions of Darlington Green Party and CPRE in respect of these matters.