

Statement on Inspector's Questions re. Darlington Local Plan
Alan Hutchinson - Regulation 19 ref: DBLPPS58
Re: Matter 4 - Q4.5 - Policy H10 Skerningham Strategic Allocation

I write as an individual resident of Darlington, having previously commented under Regulation 19, ref: DBLPPS58, to assert that Policy H10 is unsound and not positively prepared and that Skerningham should be removed completely from the Local Plan, for the following reasons:

(a) The development site is not suitably located.

- * Skerningham Woods (sometimes referred to as Skerningham Country Park even by DBC) has been described by Darlington Borough Council itself in its publications as *"The Jewel In The Crown"*.
- * Darlington Borough Council's own *"Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment"* (SHLAA) from 2015, and still on their website, clearly concludes that Skerningham is not suitable for housing development, for a long list of reasons, including: it is not suitable as rural greenfield site; flooding; loss of countryside and significant visual impact; detrimental effect on the tranquillity of the area; the need to protect riparian habitat; Skerningham Plantation Site of Nature Conservation Interest falls within the site; possibility of great crested newts and bats on site; medium-high archaeological potential of the site; high risk of contamination due to Barmpton Quarry landfill; major highway network implications; access from the existing local road network would not be acceptable; no sewage or water infrastructure in the vicinity. It is inconceivable such a short time after publication of the SHLAA that DBC should ignore their own conclusions and include Skerningham as a strategic site for large scale housing development.
- * *"Landscape Sensitivity of Potential Housing Sites in Darlington Borough"* prepared by LUC for Darlington Borough Council in July 2019 stated on page 16 *"The landscape to the north around the River Skerne and woodlands offers a higher degree of sensitivity to potential development. The identification of extensive strategic green infrastructure is a positive response, though the detailed treatment of the actual development edge will be a key factor for the success of this development in landscape and visual terms. Buildings should be set well back from the valley edge to maintain its open setting, and existing woodlands must be retained"*. The developer's prospectus submitted to MHCLG for their awarded Garden Community status shows a golf course where the community woodland is, which is in clear conflict with the above statement.
- * Development will irretrievably change the character and appearance of the land for the worse and Whinfield will change from being a ward bounded by countryside to being a suburb, surrounded by large-scale housing development, with considerable loss of amenity for the residents.
- * It means the loss of most of the community woodland and public access which are highly valued, extensively used and easily reached by local residents for informal healthy recreation by walking, riding and cycling. This conflicts with the Plan's aim of improving the health and well-being of the Town's population.
- * There will be loss of wildlife, including several species of bird which are on the 'red list', especially in Skerningham Woods, which conflicts with the Plan's aim of enhancing the green infrastructure and protecting wildlife.
- * Rare Black Poplar trees present in Skerningham Woods will be under threat from the mass tree-felling required to build the new Golf Course.
- * There are several graves from the modern era in Skerningham Woods, which will be threatened with disturbance by a relocated Golf Course. There is little prospect that public access to these graves would be available if a Golf Course were constructed in Skerningham Woods.

(b) There is no reasonable prospect that the site will be available and could be viably developed at the point envisaged.

- * The developers do not own the Golf Course land, according to Land Registry searches. They have erroneously given the impression throughout the Local Plan process that they do, and since policy H10 depends upon moving the Golf Course from its present location into the woods of Skerningham Country Park, this makes this part of the Plan unsound.
- * Local information obtained strongly suggests that the Golf Club has not been consulted in recent years about the move and that they have no intention of relocating, despite Darlington Borough Council giving the impression even very recently that they have been co-operating on a move, so Policy H10 has not been positively prepared and the viability of this development ever taking place is thrown into doubt.
- * Despite Darlington Borough Council's assertion that most of the woodland will be retained, the relocation of the Golf Course will clearly necessitate the felling of hundreds, if not thousands, of trees, which will not be fully replaced elsewhere for decades.
- * It means the loss of most of the community woodland and public access, both which are highly valued, extensively used and easily reached by local residents for informal healthy recreation by walking, riding and cycling. This conflicts with the Plan's aim of improving the health and well-being of the Town's population.
- * Many of the permissive paths in Skerningham Woods will be lost, despite Darlington Borough Council's assertion that many will be retained, because they are incompatible with the construction of a new Golf Course
- * There is an abundance of wildlife in Skerningham and a consequent grave danger of a loss of wildlife if the Golf Course re-locates, including several species of bird which are on the 'red list' and under threat, which conflicts with the Plan's aim of enhancing the green infrastructure and protecting wildlife.

(c) The requirements of policy H10, will not be effective in achieving sustainable development on the site.

- * In its response to the Regulation 19 objections, Darlington Borough Council stated that relocating the Golf Course would enable new properties to be located closer to the Town centre and be a more logical layout. However, the distance gained would be a few hundred metres at most, the width of the present Golf Course, and in the context of the distance of Skerningham from the Town centre this is minimal. To move a perfectly satisfactory Golf Course into community woodland used extensively and happily for recreation by a large number of people completely defies logic and common sense. A new Golf Course will take up to 10 years to be established, and it is unclear what golfers are expected to do to pursue their sport for that length of time. The aim would appear to be to build more houses, which is only of benefit to the developer.
- * The proposal to move Darlington Golf Course into Skerningham Countryside Park cannot be justified on any grounds, since this is the only publicly accessible community woodland to the north of Darlington. The Plan proposal to produce a net increase in community woodland is unrealistic and unachievable during the life of the Plan, since newly planted woodland to replace that taken away will take 20-30 years to establish. It also negates Darlington Borough Council's own policies on protection of trees and green spaces. The existing Darlington Golf Course is perfectly serviceable, long-established, and well-used, and no valid reasons have been given for the supposed necessity for it to be relocated.
- * The grossly inflated housing requirement figures used to justify the need for this allocation mean that in reality it is not required in order to meet housing targets.
- * It represents a large unnecessary increase in development limits into the countryside.

- * The existing road infrastructure is totally inadequate to support sustainable development and there is little prospect of suitable access roads to the site being available to cope with the increased traffic associated with such a large increase in houses in the area.
- * During the consultation on the Draft Local Plan, Darlington Borough Council received by far the largest number of objections to the inclusion of Skerningham as a zone for development, but they have chosen to ignore the results of that consultation. I suggest that this is not in the spirit of meaningful consultation or Duty to Co-operate, the policy has not been positively prepared to meet the needs of the residents of Darlington, and is not justified.
- * The developers are constantly referring to the Skerningham Strategic Allocation as a “Garden Village”, but this terminology does not appear anywhere in the Deposited Plan in relation to Skerningham. Darlington Borough Council now appear to be seeking to use the term “Garden Community” instead. As proposed, development at Skerningham would be urban sprawl, since it meets none of the criteria for a genuine and sustainable Garden Village. This is confusing and misleading for the public, and not sustainable.

(d) The designation of a northern link road on the key diagram (map 1) and the Skerningham masterplan framework (figure 6.1) is not justified.

- * The road infrastructure in the north of the Town is already very busy, especially at peak times, and will not be able to cope with the consequent huge increase in traffic from the development, making it unsustainable. There will be an increase in pollution from noise, vehicles and light.
- * Existing estate roads are unsuitable as access roads to new development at Skerningham.
- * There is currently little prospect of a Northern Link Road being constructed, on the grounds of excessive cost, and if it never comes to fruition this must place the viability of development at Skerningham in severe doubt.
- * Darlington Borough Council has stated that the Skerningham development is not dependent on the provision of a Northern Link Road, but it is difficult to see how the increased traffic that would be generated in the north of Darlington can be managed without it.
- * Should a Northern Link Road ever come to pass, or an additional link road from the A167 also proposed by the developer, they would sever ancient rights of way, such as Salters Lane packhorse track for the first time in its centuries-old history. This cannot be acceptable in the context of preserving the historical heritage of Darlington and its surroundings.

I submit that the evidence shows that the Skerningham Strategic Allocation should be withdrawn completely from the Local Plan. Should, however, a smaller development be allowed in that area I further submit that at the very least Skerningham Woods and the existing Darlington Golf Course should be excluded from the development area.

May I request that the Inspector views a short YouTube video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e12GY0dkYYg&t=45s>, entitled “*Skerningham: Jewel In The Crown*”, which covers many of the issues considered above.

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