

**David Clark Representor 1169805 an active member of Skerningham Woodland Action Group formed to help try to protect one of the town's community woodlands.**

**Our concerns over the large loss of trees from Skerningham Community Woodland for the relocation of Darlington golf club under M4 - Housing Development.**

Based on two only recently uploaded documents from the developers of Skerningham and DBC myself and members of Skerningham Woodland Action Group are very concerned at the extent of community woodland trees that would be removed to accommodate the relocation of Darlington Golf Club.

I and many others have been asking for copies of such a map to show the relocation site for the golf course to allow us to see what impact this would have on North Darlington's only accessible community woodland for years now and have just been told it will all be discussed with the public at the submitted planning application stage in our view this is far too late. It seems reckless in the face of climate change and increasing awareness of unsustainable biodiversity loss that such a large area of carbon-adsorbing woodland providing habitat for biodiversity should be destroyed to relocate a golf course only a short distance when it is functional and well used where it is.

**The main issues relating to this are:**

- Disruption or loss of a badger sett on-site (Badger Protection Act 1992).
- Pesticide run-off from a golf course into the River Skerne. Potentially leading to pollution further downstream at Natura 2000 sites.
- Interference with a natural green corridor used by wildlife the River Skerne corridor is Darlington's most important biodiversity green corridor and should be fully protected against development that could cause pollution and contamination to the river Skerne.
- Interference with full body graves and protected black poplar trees on site.
- Disruption of access for walkers to a place of peace and tranquillity, great for both physical and mental health benefits, this has never be more so during the pandemic with more residents discovering the delights and accessibility of Skerningham.
- Darlington Council's own Rights of Way Improvement Plan states: 'the need to increase constantly the tree cover and hence percentage of accessible woodland around Darlington, given that the Borough has ¼ of the average national tree cover percentage, which is in itself, one of the lowest in Europe.' (Verde-Ecology Consultancy – Ecology Report).
- Possibly great crested newts (in the process of being verified)
- Rare Black Poplar trees within the accessible to public community woodland (currently the ones next to the graves have TPOs)
- Carbon capture. With the help of Professor John Bothwell (Dept of Biosciences, Durham University) it was calculated that these planted woodlands could capture up to 34,560 tons of CO2 per year during their lifetime. Clearance of scrub/trees as part of management or change of land use can negatively impact carbon store (Verde-Ecology Consultancy – Ecology Report).
- Water and chemical use to maintain the golf course.
- Existing community woodland the developer is showing as covering 34.68 hectares however the trees planted to the side of Hutton Plantation on the former landfill are NOT accessible woodland for community use and this land is fenced off and has gas-release pipes on it

- Skunny Woods and Hutton Plantation are old woods and the woodland the Client delivered is the newer section, nestled between these two woods, and was put in using grants and is called Skerningham Community Woodland which is described on DBC's website as a "large nature reserve". Its permissive paths are well used. This is the community woodland that would be affected by the golf-course relocation.
- 000's of gallons of water will be required in the summer months to maintain the greens.
- From the Rights of Way Improvement Plan: "This attractive area of open access woodland has seen a rapid increase in its use (numbers assessed through the condition survey) which is unlikely to have happened, if it were simply the case of creating a new path with no additional landscaping and biodiversity improvements to go with it."
- From 'Landscape Sensitivity of Potential Housing Sites in Darlington Borough' prepared by LUC for DBC in 2019: "Any development within site 251 should retain the green corridors along the River Skerne and the railway line, and the Skerningham Community Woodland."
- The developer had discussions with Darlington golf club many years ago but according to the club no communication since.? so no land value discussions? no registered options to purchase, nothing. The views of the club's members may have changed since these early discussions as they could now be concerned about how boggy the community woodland becomes and then the problem of tree roots and even more wildlife causing damage to the well-groomed fairways there is a very large protected Badger Sett close to where the new golf course would be located and Badgers are known to cause damage to golf courses.
- Darlington Forest Project is a community led charitable organisation who over that last couple of years have been working very hard, putting in many long hours to plant over 9,000 new trees in Darlington. They have been in regular contact with local campaign groups as they also share our concerns over the threat of thousands of healthy carbon storing being felled to make way for the relocation of a heavily water and chemical dependent golf course. They are worried their hard work over the last couple of years getting over 10,000 trees planted in a bid to increase the low tree cover of Darlington could be wasted if developers are allowed to remove parts of one of the town's accessible well used community woodlands.
- The developer did gift land for the community woodland to be planted but the communities thought the woodland with its rare black poplars had been gifted to them for the benefit of future generations and perpetuity. The trees were paid for by many forestry and landfill grants so from public money, there will have been many grants paid out over the years to help plant and develop the accessible part of Skerningham community woodland examples of a couple of these are : ref 02200611001 to NE Community Forest Dev Co for £30,919.05 on 29/04/2004 and 02200631001 to Mt and Jm Corney farming for £28,535.90 on the same date. These are Forestry commission Grant 3's come with conditions such as trees cannot be felled for at least 20 years and the woodland needs to be well maintained etc, if this is the case no trees should be felled before April 2024 we would all like to think no healthy carbon storing trees should be felled at all.
- The developers recently uploaded document link below:

<https://microsites.darlington.gov.uk/media/1853/oth3-skerningham-estates-response-to-insp-note-5.pdf>

It states the community woodland is 34.68 ha but this includes the landfill site on the right of the maps (old sand quarry land filled with waste) which is not accessible as surrounded by barbed wire fences and has many air vents in the ground to release potential harmful gases from the landfill. The same document shows the parts of the community woodland where they intend to fell (remove) the trees these showed in purple at only 7.4 ha.

They are failing to point out if the golf course were to be relocated into the well-used community woodland it would no longer be accessible to the public. It will be private property of Darlington golf club who will not want thousands of the public walking over their well-kept fairways. I believe the golf club has less than 300 members whereas the local communities who use and cherish this community woodland are in the thousands so it should be classed as an open space country park, asset for local communities and biodiversity. Also the same document states that the golf course could be relocated by 2030 and by then the newly planted trees as part of the biodiversity net gain will be mature! What in 9 years that is if they started to plant in Autumn 2021 planting season.

Image supplied by Darlington Forest Project to show the extent of loss



**Some information copied and pasted from a High Court case in August 2009 that reiterates the area is a community woodland for the benefit of communities:**

County Durham Environmental Trust Limited ('CDENT') – the Environmental Body concerned with the distribution of funds for one of the three sites – Skerningham Woods

14] CDENT is a registered distributive Environmental Body under the *Landfill Tax Regulations* 1996. It is a non-profit making organisation which receives donations from County Durham Waste Management Company amongst others.

## 3.2 The Company

[15] The Company was originally incorporated on 26 February 1997. It is a company limited by guarantee. It has had various names. Its object is described as 'the creation and management of environments within the North East **for the benefit of the Community**'. It was originally incorporated to bring together the Great North Forests and the Tees Forests.

These were community forests projects in the North East region covering some 250 km<sup>2</sup> across Tyne and Wear and North East Durham.

[16] Funding arrangements for the Company were sourced through the public private and voluntary sectors. It is an Approved Body for the purpose of the receipt of LCF funds.

## 3.3 The Contract

[17] In 2003 the Company (under its previous name) submitted to CDENT a proposal for the development and purchase of approximately 50 acres of **land at Skertingham, North Darlington**. The area was to be planted **to become community woodland**.

## 3.4 Acquisition of Skertingham Woods

[20] On 7 May 2004 the Company duly acquired title to Skertingham Woods. The purchase price was £77,719. £50,000 was provided by CDENT under the terms of the Agreement. £20,000 was provided by Thompson of Prudoe Environmental Trust ('Thompson') – another registered distributive approved body under the Regulations. The remainder of the purchase price was provided out of the Company's funds.

23] It is common ground that the £50,000 provided by CDENT was properly applied at the time for the Approved Purposes. Skertingham Woods was duly developed **as community woodland in accordance with the proposal**

[35] The letter made the point that the **three pieces of land including Skertingham Woods** had been **purchased with LCF moneys**

71] CDENT also refer me to paragraph 1 of Schedule 4 which prevents a change of use of the site without its prior written consent. There has, of course, been no breach of this clause. Any such breach will occur (if at all) after the sale of Skertingham Woodland.

Image from Defra Magic Maps showing English Woodland Grant scheme 3 allocated to Skerningham Community woodland including the part where the proposed relocation of the golf course supplied to me by Darlington Forest Project.

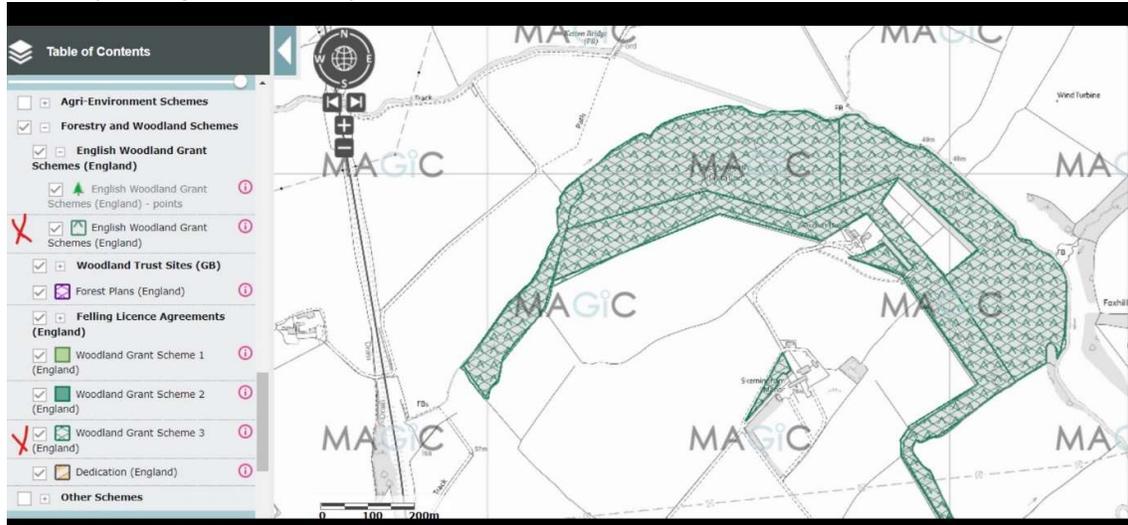


Image from the developer showing location of the new golf course.

