

Minutes of an Extraordinary Meeting of the Parish Council

Held on 11th April 2022 to consider a proposal by NE Concrete Ltd to develop a Quarry at Northside Farm

In attendance: Richard Thornton(RT), Chair of Parish Council

Other Parish councillors: Eileen Rogerson (ER), Mark Neale(MN), Kevin Fortune(KF), Anne Palmer(AP)

Apologies from Anne Purves, parish councillor, and Claire Miller, parish clerk

Other parishioners, no attendance register taken

Richard Thornton opened the meeting to explain its purpose, which is to hear a presentation by NEConcrete about their proposals to quarry for whinstone at a site 800m from Kirkwhelpington, at a site adjacent to Northside Farm and Three Farms.

RT explained that as he had a vested interest in the proposal, he would not be chairing the meeting, a task that Er had agreed to perform.

As the clerk was not present, AP had agreed to take minutes.

ER introduced the presentation team:

Sam Thistlethwaite,(ST) of IC Planning Ltd, planning agent for the project;

David Blakelock, (DB) Director, NEConcrete

John Bridges, (JB) Land and Resources Manager for NEConcrete (NEC)

ST explained that although they had brought a screen, it was not working, and so all slides had to be viewed on a small laptop.

ST said he would show the slides and give an overview of the project, and then take questions.

ST: NEC is a family run company with its HQ in Newburn. It supplies tarmac and aggregates around the NE. It operates a sand & gravel quarry near Wooler, Powburn and one at Castron, and has other operational quarries in Northumberland.

The recently finalised Northumberland Local Plan has identified 3 possible sites for aggregate, including the one at Northside, on which NEC has purchased an option from the landowner. (The Anderson Family)

NEC does not currently have access to whinstone, and must rely on third party suppliers. Quarrying at Northside will make their business more sustainable, and will allow it to grow.

Showed pictures of the recently restored site at Powburn

Some disgruntlement expressed within the room that the pictures on the laptop were so small, not everyone could see them.

ST: The Northumberland Local Plan was adopted in March 2022, and although some final stages are required before it is validated, it should be regarded as operational in its current form.

Northside is one of only five sites allocated for extraction, many others were discounted through the local plan process owing to environmental constraints (e.g. proximity of residential premises, landscape impact, effects on ecological or heritage assets, highway access) and access difficulties.

There was discussion about the Northumberland Local Plan, its status, and why parishioners had only just found out about any plan to quarry in the vicinity of Kirkwhelpington.

A parishioner expressed her concern that, despite living and farming only metres from the site, she had only found out about the proposal last week.

A parishioner, a planner who has recently moved into the area, confirmed that, despite his professional and local interest, this was also the first he had heard about the proposals. He urged NEC to engage more with the community, which was clearly uninformed at this stage.

ST – confirmed that NEC had been involved with this site for four years. He could not explain why the planning authority, (Northumberland County Council, NCC) and the landowner had not consulted with the community, and those most closely affected, at an earlier stage.

A parishioner added, as this is clearly a long term project, it is startling that the community that will be affected has heard nothing about it. It appears that discussions and actions to date have been conducted in a clandestine way. He asked the team how we should therefore expect that things will suddenly change, and that we can now expect the major players to be above board and transparent.

A parishioner added, you the team appear surprised at the community's lack of knowledge, which confirms the suspicion that it has been a secret project. He asked how anyone could expect the community to have any trust in the process from now on.

ST: there is nothing clandestine about this process. An application for planning permission is about to be made which will be fully open to scrutiny as with all planning applications.

ER asked people to allow the presentation to proceed, and save questions for later.

ST: The project will create 20 new jobs.

It will involve the extraction of 4million tonnes of aggregate over a 20 year period, at a rate of 200,000 per annum.

ST showed the slide presentation, which contains numbers, maps and estimates of traffic etc – presentation separately available.

ST: explained the concept of “Progressive Restoration” – whereby each of the four sections of the quarry will be worked and then restored to its previous contours by infilling with inert material.

The equipment to be used includes excavators, articulated dumptrucks, loading shovels and a crushing machine in continuous operation which are typical in a quarry plant. There will be blasting at the site to loosen the whinstone.

The application will have an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) dealing with air quality, visual impact, archaeology, noise, ecology, soil and agricultural land classification, highways, blast induced vibration, surface water drainage and ground water.

At the time of the presentation, it was intended that the planning application would be made in April 2022, and NEC hope for a resolution within 16 weeks. ST confirmed that they will be making use of a planning performance agreement.

Some parishioners expressed concern at this timeframe for a number of reasons:

AP said that she knew planning applications were generally subject to delays at NCC, she knew of applications being unacknowledged after 12 weeks, let alone determined. She asked if a planning performance agreement was a way of paying to jump the queue?

ST replied that it is a way of ensuring that particularly urgent and sensitive applications such as this receive the attention they require.

Others questioned whether this “fast track” system would allow enough time for proper consultation?

ST replied that it would. He added that it would go before the NCC Planning Committee, and if turned down, would potentially go to appeal.

AP asked if it would be the planning committee, or the strategic planning committee – ST thought perhaps the latter.

A parishioner asked if the planning agent was bound to go to appeal if necessary?

ST replied that he was not.

A parishioner asked, when did the Parish Council find out about this?

RT replied that although the proposal was clearly included in the draft local plan, it had not been picked up. The local plan – a huge, impenetrable document -has been 10 years in the drafting, and although it has come before the PC on many occasions, the possibility of mineral extraction here had not been specifically drawn to anybody’s attention until NEC gave their initial presentation within the last three weeks.

As a result, this publicly open meeting was called.

MN confirmed he had attended a presentation by IC Planning Ltd and NEC LTd, as a parish councillor, on 31st March 2022.

A parishioner asked if the family would still be able to farm at Three Farms?

ST said this was a matter for the landowner.

General Questions were then taken, as follows:

A parishioner: What does the green line on the map signify? How can Three Farms operate when it is within that line, which must indicate some sort of danger or disturbance?

A parishioner stated that there is good, clean air in this part of Northumberland, which is why most people live here. The quarry will put an end to that.

ST: Assessments as to impact have been carried out, as described in the presentation. Three Farms will not be adversely affected.

AP asked how such technical assessments of the effects on Three Farms could have been effectively conducted without its inhabitants being aware?

ST replied that they have been done by a highly proficient company, “the best in the business”, and were based on projections. He personally would have no compunction in trusting their findings.

Parishioners raised the issue of traffic, specifically the volume of heavy lorries that will now be using the A696 adjacent to Kirkwhelpington.

Some parishioners pointed out that it is a very dangerous, poorly maintained road – especially at the bend near Little Harle, where there have been a number of recent accidents. Questions were asked about the size of the lorries.

ST: Some will be 20 tonnes, some 30 tonnes. There will be approximately 40 lorries per day accessing the site, at times of highest use. MN pointed out there was the potential for a greater number of vehicle movements; every lorry arriving at the site could bring the inert waste infill, but that was unlikely when the site was fully operational. JB advised the worst case number of vehicle numbers allowed for this.

A parishioner – said she had only recently moved to the village, and had only recently had planning and other searches complete. This possibility did not crop up on those searches. She said her biggest worry was transportation, as it was going to have a very obvious effect on the village, and all of us who use the road.

They asked if the lorries in question would be owned and operated by NEC, and therefore under its direct control?

ST: yes in the main, but there will be vehicles operated by third parties.

They expressed concern at the way she has seen drivers of lorries going to other local quarries behave- they drive fast, and recklessly, because they are being paid by the load.

ST added that NEC drivers are paid a salary, and so do not have the incentive to drive in this way.

A parishioner explained that the A696 used to be designated trunk road, but has not been for some years, in which time its condition has deteriorated.

A parishioner asked more about the timings, and the way in which areas would be restored once worked. She asked what would happen after 20 years?

ST: The current indications are that the stone available will not last beyond that time, and that there are no current plans to expand the site eastwards or westwards as there is no recoverable material.

AP- Kirkwhelpington itself lies on the Whinsill – can we be reassured that the quarry will not ultimately expand eastwards even closer?

ST: Applications would have to be made. From what he knows, the minerals lying outside of the proposed site are not readily accessible.

Rights of way.

ST said that the footpaths that cross the site, including the St Oswalds way, will have to be diverted.

AP said that any diversion would have to be across land currently farmed, and asked if the farmer had been made aware of that, or asked for permission?

A parishioner confirmed they had not been consulted.

ST: He would have expected there to have been consultation, and had been informed by the landowner that there had been.

A parishioner – How will we be notified of the planning application?

ST: By NCC – don't know what their arrangements are. All planning applications are posted on the NCC Planning portal.

A parishioner asked, what about people who don't have the internet?

ST: I believe NCC can make documents available in printed form on request.

Further questions about traffic:

ST confirmed the operating times – 7am – 6pm weekdays, and some Saturdays.

A parishioner – asked if all 46/92 lorries will be coming from, and heading, south on the A696?

ST confirmed that most would.

A parishioner asked if all the stone quarried would be for the use of NEC – ST said he thought 75% would be.

A parishioner asked about dust, confirming that the quarry at Mootlaw has created a huge amount of dust in surrounding villages.

AP added that Little Bavington, just east of Divet Hill Quarry, is perpetually dusty, even the daffodils are dusty.

ST: said that assessments had been made and would be published during the planning process.

A parishioner asked if any benefits, financial or otherwise, would accrue to the community?

ST said that in their other sites, they have donated money to local schools and to local fetes. He didn't know whether there were any such institutions here that might benefit.

A parishioner asked if there would be a community fund similar to that attached to the Ray Wind Farm?

ST: We are not on that scale, this is a small family business compared to Vattenfall.

A parishioner asked why the landowners were not in attendance to answer some of these questions?

ST: Don't know.

AP asked about the likely status of the existing road to be used for access, which forms part of the St Oswald's Way and is well used by locals for walking, dog walking, running and cycling?

ST: there are plans to widen that road and include passing places, to allow it to be safely used by pedestrians.

Mark Neale said that the site had been allocated in the Local Plan for mineral extraction to meet the demand of the county for aggregates, for construction, in respect of projected economic growth.

A parishioner added that the local plan includes extraction permissions for another 49 years, without this quarry.

ST: The plan is very heavily reliant on Barrasford Quarry, which is huge, but it would be dangerous for the industry to "put all its eggs in one basket".

He added that there is a tendency for larger companies to buy up quarries and to "mothball" them until demand reaches such a level that they can make huge amounts of money from them. Opening Northside would prevent that, and allow NEC to operate in a market dominated by bigger, more unscrupulous operators.

A parishioner – We in Kirkwhelpington use this area for recreation – walking, cycling, running, in a wild area with good clean air. Quarrying here will end all that.

What mitigation are you going to put in, to preserve the benefits of the place?

ST: There will be a dust management plan – we must keep the dust damp.

A parishioner asked what is NEC's interest in the land?

DB confirmed that they have an option on it, to be leased from the landowner should the planning approval for a quarry be forthcoming.

AP asked, how does that sit with the farmer's right under their lease, to farm the land?

ST: Don't know, not really a matter for NEC.

A parishioner asked, this is a very major development, very close to the community of Kirkwhelpington. How will we benefit from it?

No response.

A parishioner pointed out that already, there is guidance about consultation that hasn't been followed by anyone hitherto involved. There is concern not only about what is currently proposed, but about intensification and

expansion. That has been seen at other nearby quarrying sites, and although there would have to be new plans etc, the quality of consultation to date suggests that, too, will be inadequate. What are we letting ourselves in for?

A parishioner- what would be the criteria for any expansion?

ST: Is there any stone? If so is it readily accessible?

A parishioner – nothing about any nearby communities?

No reply.

A parishioner asked, how deep would the quarry be?

ST: 11 metres.

They asked if NEC were looking at other sites, ST confirmed they are looking at one near Alnwick, but the access is not as good as here.

A parishioner asked, what about Three Farms and the people who live there?

ST: A dust assessment has been carried out, and apparently, meets all guidelines.

A parishioner asked about the vibration that would be caused by blasting, pointing out that Three Farms itself is built directly onto the Whinsill with no foundations.

ST: The survey says it will not affect the stability of the house.

A parishioner: Will there be any further seismic effect? Can you guarantee that Three Farms and other nearby properties will not feel any vibration?

ST: The surveys say not.

AP: How could meaningful surveys have been carried out without the occupants of Three Farms knowing?

ST: They were carried out to our satisfaction. This is a highly regulated industry, and regulation means there will be no unsafe practises.

A parishioner – We have understood very well from tonight how this project will be good for you, NEC – and we can readily understand the ways in which you will benefit. But how will anybody else here tonight benefit? This is wholly bad for every one of us. What there is on the site now is – quiet, nature and wildlife, clean air. There will be none of that.

A parishioner: Will there be any compensation to us for that loss?

No reply.

A parishioner – will the planning application that is about to be put in reflect any of what has been said here?

You must understand the strength of feeling.

No reply.

A parishioner – The quarry will be on raised land. You have stressed that it is “in a valley”, but the site, and the access road, is uphill from Kirkwhelpington itself.

A parishioner – will the crushing machine be a permanent feature of the operation?

ST: Yes, but it will be underground. Any noise will therefore be limited.

AP – we can all hear the machinery at Divet Hill Quarry, which is further away.

ST: If you can't see the machinery, you can't hear it.

AP – that is not the case, we cannot see Divet Hill from here, but we can certainly hear it.

ST – The concerns you have expressed will be addressed in the EIA – which will include dust, noise, impact on nature, rights of way, and how the site will work.

A parishioner – when do you hope to start quarrying?

ST: NCC say the process takes 16 weeks, so by autumn 2022.

A parishioner – if you are refused permission, will you appeal?

ST/DB: Not sure.

AP – said that anyone concerned about the proposal or the process by which it had been, and will be dealt with by NCC should be addressed to our local councillor. He is John Riddle, and he is on the Strategic Planning Committee.

His e-mail address is: john.riddle@northumberland.gov.uk

Post meeting note: NEC have booked the Memorial Hall from 2pm – 7p on 28th April, to hold a drop in session where members of the public can attend and scrutinise the application in more detail, and ask questions of the NEC team.

Anne Palmer, Parish Councillor