

## Response to Landscape and Visual Comments Dated 1<sup>st</sup> March 2021

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### Introduction

This document has been produced to respond to the comments provided to the Case Officer by way of Landscape Advice produced by the Durham County Council Landscape Officer [Mr. David Gray] in relation to the proposed energy from waste development on land within Hownskill Industrial Park, Templetown [Ref. DM/20/03267/WAS].

### Effects on Landscape Character

There is no difference between the parties in respect to the published landscape character assessments and designations. However, what Mr Gray neglects to identify within his advice document is the fact that the site allocated in the 'County Durham Plan Proposals Map' as an industrial estate on land that was formerly in use as a steel works and as such constitutes previously developed, brownfield land [PDL].

The Planning Statement identifies [at paras. 4.8.1 to 4.8.6] that the Project Genesis Trust have been active in seeking to ensure that future plans for the former Consett steel works site are incorporated into the adopted plan and have submitted a comprehensive masterplan for the area. The masterplan is now referenced within the adopted plan and confirms that offices, general industrial, storage, distribution and **energy plants** are all **intended appropriate uses** for this part of the wider regeneration site [*our emphasis*].

There are also other existing and proposed land uses within the immediate vicinity of the site, which are identified in the Planning Statement [see paras. 2.71 to 2.76] that have distinct bearing on the current and future baseline character of the local and wider landscape. These developments are not identified in, or discussed, in the advice provided by Mr Gray, and include but are not limited to:

- Three existing wind turbines within 2km of the site, including:
  1. Hownskill Farm 45m tip height approximately 460 m south of proposed development;
  2. High Knitsley Farm 46m tip height approximately 1.03km south of proposed development; and
  3. Middles Head Farm, Rowley 74m tip height approximately 1.96km south-west of proposed development.
- The consented Solar Array south of the site [ref. DM/15/02364/FPA].
- The consented development of 14 units for business and general Industry use [ref. DM/19/01834/VOC].
- The consented for an outline application for a mixed use scheme including hospital, pharmacy, sheltered care, residential care unit, a gym and wellbeing centre, a hotel, public house, micro-brewery and vets practice on land to the South of Puddlers Corner Roundabout [Ref. DM/19/01987/OUT].
- The Go-Ahead Bus Depot and Maintenance Development.
- JT Dove Building Merchant Development.

The existing and proposed site allocations, adjacent land uses and other detracting elements within the local landscape have a significant bearing on the character of site and its landscape value and quality. For these reasons we are entirely satisfied that the significance of effects identified within

Chapter 7 of the Environmental Statement [ES – LVIA] on both the local and wider landscape character are an accurate and reasonable basis to consider this application.

Other matters discussed in Mr Gray’s advice under landscape character such as form, mass and height and the ‘setting’ of the Area of High Landscape Value [AHLV] are dealt with elsewhere by other consultants and in the visual effects response below.

### **Landscape Value**

Mr Gray suggest, under ‘landscape value’, that the County Durham Landscape Value Assessment [LVA] “*confirms that the landscape within and surrounding the site is a valued landscape*”. The LVA was produced in order to meet the requirement of paragraph 170 that its policies protect and enhance valued landscapes, and paragraph 171 that it should allocate land with the least environment quality, it will be necessary for the [County Durham] Plan to identify landscapes of local value [para 1.2.3].

The assertion that that the LVA **confirms** [*our emphasis*] that the landscape is valued in terms of the NPPF, is erroneous. The purpose of the assessment was to provide “*information on the value of local landscapes across County Durham to inform policies and allocations*” not to **confirm** whether it was valued or not [see para. 1.1.1].

Notwithstanding the validity of the landscape officers advice the development site is, as identified above:

- located on previously developed land that is allocated within the County Durham Plan for industrial development, appropriate for an energy plant;
- the surrounding landscape is subject to consented developments complementary to the proposed use; and
- lies outside any national, regional or locally designated areas.

These facts clearly indicate that the landscape within and immediately surrounding the site cannot be considered to be valued in terms of paragraph 171 of the NPPF and is well capable of accommodating this form of development.

### **Summary of Landscape Effects**

The development site is located within an established industrial estate which includes approved development proposals for other industrial and commercial land uses in close proximity to and adjacent to the site. For this reason Mr Gray’s suggestion that the development “*would create a permanent increase in urban and industrial character*” is at odds with the development objectives of the County Plan and Project Genesis masterplan for the former Consett steel works.

### **Visual Environment**

Mr Gray’s advice in respect to visual effects identifies a number of locations where his assessment differs from ours, albeit he has not provided a methodology as to how he has reached his conclusions.

As the methodology set out Appendix 7.12 of the Environmental Statement has not been queried we will now look at the judgements set out in Mr Gray’s advice against this defined and approved methodology.

The methodology sets out that significance of effects on both the landscape and visual receptors within the study area were ascertained by cross-referencing the **sensitivity** of the baseline landscape or visual receptor and the **magnitude of change** as a result of the development.

**Consett Heritage Trail** [*Representative Viewpoints 1, 3 and 12*]

Mr Gray suggest that the visual effects from this recreational route would be “*substantial adverse and permanent and therefore significant*”.

The visual sensitivity of the users Consett and Sunderland Railway Path [Heritage Trail] was considered to be **medium**, because for much of its length views of the development were restricted by adjacent vegetation and the viewers distance from the site. For the limited length of trail where there are potential views these would be seen in the context of existing [and in this case consented] urban development through which it travels [see Table 3 of Appendix 7.1, ES Volume 2].

The magnitude of effect for the users of this trail was considered to be **low** from all three of the approved viewpoints that represented users of this route. That is to say that whilst the upper parts of the development would be visible above the intervening vegetation this would not be incongruous given the existing [and consented] industrial estate land uses such that the change in view would be limited [see Table 4 of Appendix 7.1, ES Volume 2].

This assessment suggested a significance of effect of **Minor Adverse**. In order to experience a substantial adverse effect, as suggested by Mr Gray, the user sensitivity and magnitude of change would both need to be **high**. The route in question is an ‘industrial heritage trail’ which is approximately 5km long and travels through and along the edge of an urban area, where views are predominantly screened by vegetation and built form in a landscape which contains a significant number of other detractors but does not contain any recognised vistas or viewpoints. With this in mind it is unclear how the sensitivity could be described as high. In terms of magnitude of change, a high change would constitute “a significant deterioration or improvement in the existing view” which is not borne out when one considers the three approved views that represent this route.

**Residences to the North East and East** [*Representative Viewpoints 1 and 12 and Photomontage 2*]

Mr Gray suggest that the visual effects from residential properties at The Chequers north-east of the site and Knitsley Lane to the East would be “*substantial, adverse and permanent visual effects due to the large size and industrial nature of the development*”.

The visual sensitivity of the residences on The Chequers and Knitsley Road are considered to be **medium** because views of the development are restricted by the intervening vegetation along Ovington Crescent and Knitsley Lane and would be seen in the context of existing urban development associated with the industrial estate and the consented schemes to the south [see Table 3 of Appendix 7.1, ES Volume 2].

Whilst the taller parts of proposed development such as the stack and upper parts of the buildings would be visible above and between the existing vegetation and intervening buildings [see Photomontage 2, Figure 7.7] the magnitude of effect is considered to be **low**. This is because views would be heavily filtered by intervening vegetation and seen in context with the existing and consented developments including the hospital, solar farm, and other industrial developments, [see Table 4 of Appendix 7.1, ES Volume 2].

The resulting significance of effect was therefore considered to be **Minor Adverse**. Not unlike the views from the Industrial Heritage Trail, discussed above, the substantial adverse effect suggested by Mr Gray, would require the user sensitivity and magnitude of change to be **high**. For residential properties to have a high sensitivity to change they would need to have “*predominantly open rural views from the curtilage, ground floor and upper floors directly towards the scheme*”. Views from these properties are neither rural nor open. In terms of magnitude of change, a high change would

require “a significant deterioration or improvement in the existing view” which for the reasons identified above cannot be said of views from these locations.

**Views from the South and East [Representative Viewpoints 6, 7, 8 and 19]**

Mr Gray suggest that the visual effects from public rights of way [PRoW] and residential properties to the south and east beyond 1km East and within the Area of High Landscape Value would be “*moderate, adverse and permanent*”, although it is not clear as to how he has come to this conclusion, other than his assertion that views would be “*unimpeded*”.

The visual sensitivity of receptors from the PRoW network to the south east [including Humber Hill Vp 8] was assessed as being **high** because viewers were located on routes that traversed open countryside with potentially open views towards the development.

Whilst the stack and tallest elements of the development would be visible beyond and above the intervening vegetation and topography it would form an almost imperceptible element [decreasing with distance] of the wider panorama not unlike other visible detractors such as Hownskill Farm Wind Turbine resulting in a **negligible** magnitude of change. This resulted in an adverse significance of effect of **Neutral**.

A moderate adverse significance of effect, assuming high sensitivity, would require the magnitude of change to be between medium and low. However, views of the development are not unimpeded as suggested, but would largely be screened by the intervening topography and would be difficult to discern such that there would be no discernible deterioration in the view.

Mr Gray also suggest that “*the development would be visible at a distance, from the settlement of Cornsay*” which lies approximately 7.4km south-west of the development site. Whilst no viewpoint was taken from [or requested from] this location Cornsay is at a similar elevation [circa 170m AOD] and direction [South-West] to Humber Hill [Vp8 at 269m AOD] albeit Humber Hill is 2.5km closer to the development site. Whilst we accept that the development would be potentially visible from Cornsay settlement it does not form a significant or prominent part of the view and would be seen in the context of Consett and other industrial developments and detracting elements such as the wind farm and telecommunications masts on the horizon.

**Views from the South-West [Representative Viewpoints 3, 10, 11, 16 and 17]**

Mr Gray suggest that the visual effects from views from the south-west including the Area of High Landscape Value [AHLV] would be “*adverse and permanent*”. However, it is not clear whether he believes the adverse effects are minor, moderate or substantial.

Views from sensitive receptors to the south-west were assessed as being both **high** and **moderate** depending on their location, because they were users of PRoW's that either had restricted views [Vp 3] or traversed open countryside with potentially open views towards the development [Vp10, 11, 16 and 17].

The magnitude of change also varied depending on the receptor, viewpoints 3 and 11 were considered to be **low** because visibility of the development would be predominantly screened by intervening topography and vegetation. Glimpsed and distant views of the upper part of the stack would be visible on the skyline within the context of the wider panorama and other existing and consented development in the surroundings. The magnitude of change from viewpoints 10, 16 and 17 is considered to be **negligible** as views of the development site are either completely screened [Vp17] or would take up such a small percentage of the panoramic view as to be virtually imperceptible within their setting [Vp 10 and 16].

This **minor adverse** and **neutral** significance of effect from locations to the south-west including the AHLV are consistent with the methodology.

**Views from the West** [Representative Viewpoints 13 and 14]

Mr Gray states that "there are locations to the west of the study area on the higher ground, where it would be possible for receptors to experience the development as a skyline feature, above the existing line of trees with some views in combination with the listed viaduct at Hownes Gill". However, he does not specify what locations he refers to.

Representative viewpoints 13 and 14 were selected following a request to do so by the local authority on the 14<sup>th</sup> of August 2020. Both viewpoints are from distant [3.5 and 3.98km] and elevated locations [191m and 213m AOD]. The development site would not be visible from Vp14 and views from Vp13 would be predominantly screened with only the upper part of the stack visible above the tree line. In both instances the significance of effect is considered conservatively to be **neutral** given. Both views encompass large areas of Consett but neither would experience in-combination views of the viaduct.

**Summary of Visual Effects**

Having reviewed the landscape officers assessment against the approved methodology it is clear that the **substantial and moderate adverse** effects he has attributed to views have been overstated. Whilst it is accepted that the development would result in some adverse effects, in terms of EIA any effects are not so significant that the development should be refused.

**Conclusion**

The landscape character and visual amenity of the site and the surrounding area is well capable of accommodating this form of development. The judgements set out in the landscape advice note are unfounded and cannot be supported when reviewed against the methodology, the validity of which has not been questioned. Furthermore the advice appears to have neglected to consider the development in context with other consented schemes within the vicinity which would be either constructed prior to, or soon after, this development if successful.