

Greens attack Newcastle Council over destructive Woolsington Plan

It is a bad day for Newcastle, for ordinary citizens of the city and for critical wildlife habitat when a Labour-dominated council and its planning committee back what is actually a speculative business development in Green Belt land at Woolsington Hall.ⁱ It is a scheme by tycoon Sir John Hall that will only cater for a very small number of fellow super-rich individuals. Revealingly, the Chief Executive from Cameron Hall, when proposing the scheme at committee hearing, called the new hotel and associated facilities a "high-end extravagant (sic) experience" and "opulent". This speaker identified the target market as people such as "corporate super-stars" (sic). The 72 new houses are super-mansions, way beyond the means of the vast majority of Newcastle citizens.

Sir John Hall bought Woolsington Hall in 1994. Since then, it has continued to fall into disrepair. Section 50 of the Listed Buildings Act states that developers are not permitted to allow a building they own to fall into disrepair so as to enable future development. If this happens, the local council can acquire the building, with minimum compensation. However, Newcastle City Council has failed to apply section 50, though it did propose positive cooperation between the City and Sir John's company, Cameron Hall, to restore the building. This was suggested in the council's 12th Jan 2007 report. This opportunity was not pursued, but instead, several years later in December 2014, Cameron Hall put in an enabling planning application.

This new grab of Green Belt land for development (this designation confirmed by the new Core Strategy) makes inappropriate use of the 'enabling' device. Critical to 'enabling development' (ie clearance of woodland and its sale for housing to fund the conservation of a recognised historical asset) is the requirement to minimise harm during restoration and refurbishment, in this case, Woolsington Hall and its historical setting. In reality, there would be substantial damage to the parkland while the character of the built component would change significantly.

Sir John Hall's previous application related to his then control of Newcastle United in the 1990s. He sought to build a football training academy. This plan was approved, though things subsequently fell through when a training facility was opened at Benton instead. Relevant now, however is the fact it was made clear at the time that, 'all existing woodland areas around the edge of the park and small groupings of trees within the park would be retained and enhanced in keeping with the Park's historic layout and status as an Historic Park and Garden on the English Heritage register'.

Things are very different now. In the new plan, large area of mature woodland, with its complex web of long-established flora and fauna, including red squirrels, will be obliterated. [The threat is exacerbated by other developments in the pipeline including that on land next to Havannah Nature Reserve, not far to the East] As the city ecologist's report documented, it is "impossible to mitigate or compensate for this loss". [Strangely, he was not invited to the meeting while his paper only entered the public domain late in the day] The losses will be immediate, large-scale and will last a long time. The impact on local hydrology remains uncertain too, given the big area of new non-porous surfaces. The planting of new saplings is certainly no replacement for the destruction of mature trees.

These losses and risks far outweigh alleged benefits, many of which lie in the realm of wishful thinking, not established fact. Indeed given the volatility of the world economy, likely hikes in the price of oil, and rises in interest rate, the "visitor economy" proclaimed by the scheme's supporters could easily implode: so much for conservation in perpetuity and what was called "long-term viable use". Much of the other "benefits" that was promised also lay in the realm of future proposals and negotiations, where past promises might never materialise.

Crocodile tears flowed in abundance at the Planning Committee as various councillors expressed their sorrow at what would happen to the existing woodland. Apparently, we simply have to destroy it to save it (just like the Americans in Vietnam). Some councillors simply fed favourably loaded questions to the developer and to the lead planner ("can you confirm that...?" ie "please let me give you another chance to repeat the claims you have made").

The lead planner himself bent over backwards to attack objectors. Thus he dangled the red herring that objectors simply did not understand that the land would remain Green Belt, implying that, if the silly so-and-sos understood that point, they would withdraw their objections. Yet there

was and is no such confusion. All objectors have clearly focussed on the threat to mature woodland and the inappropriateness of that destruction. The fact that it is on Green Belt land only makes it all the more inappropriate.

In the developer's presentation at the Planning Committee, there was plenty of big talk about Newcastle "needing" a five star hotel (it was not clear why a current four star one couldn't be upgraded if that is the case). There would be "new events" and "more conferences" (hurrah!). Even better, it would "provide somewhere special to have afternoon tea". Indeed the new hotel would be a "wellness retreat" (for whom was not explained since, clearly, these wonders would not be coming at prices most people can afford). The development, it was further asserted with no hard evidence, would stimulate lots and lots of "inward investment". "Everyone", we were told, was "excited" about the proposed development.

Similar arguments were used years ago to justify that low density splodge Darras Hall to the NW of the city, the first major grab of Green Belt land. We were told it was necessary to attract, yes, "inward investment" and bring 'job creators" (ie business executives) to the city. Well, the former green spaces certainly went, covered by lots of tarmac, bricks and manicured lawns, but few of the promised benefits ever came. We are back there again.

It is impossible to assess the claims made by the developers regarding the financial gains for the city. The figure was put at £8.9 million a year. That depends on an adequate and continuous income stream. According to the calculations by the Save Gosforth Wildlife campaign group In practical terms, such a figure would imply that each of the thirty-four rooms in the hotel would be associated with generating an average income of over £700 per room, assuming that they were fully occupied 365 days a year. No figures have been provided for the estimated occupancy rate of such a hotel (assuming that it actually will be built and not left on 'hold' after the woodland is cut down and the 'MacMansions' thrown up). Even the housing element is not secure. A Development Control Committee document dated 20 July 2007 stated that residential proposals for this site were considered a high-risk strategy.

Historic England's guidance says: "confidentiality cannot outweigh the need for proper financial information where the financial case is at the heart of the applicant's submission." Furthermore they state: "if applicants are unwilling to supply the very information that is the foundation of their case for over-riding normal planning policies, refusal becomes all but inevitable". The public has not been given sufficient information to judge what are the real costs of the refurbishment of Woosington Hall and what, plausibly, is the total income stream to fund all the promises made by Cameron Hall.

The materials that have come with this application are all very glossy and make big claims about "significant betterment". But this is all cosmetic to sell a scheme by Cameron Hall for the sake of Cameron Hall. On the plans new plantings are shown. There is no absolute certainty that they will happen and in any case, most look more like the thin 'beauty strips' created to disguise clear-cutting of forest in North America. The developers have also made big claims about the areas would be available for public enjoyment. However, they have confirmed that there will be NO public rights of way or dedicated cycle routes through the site. A recreational pedestrian route would be privately managed. What is thus given could easily be taken away.

Sir John Hall bought Woosington Hall knowing its condition and the responsibilities that came with it. The building was in a reasonable state in the early 1990s yet it seems to have deteriorated badly during the term of Hall's ownership. Council correspondence clearly evidences this. Thus one letter in 207 stated: "the City Council remains extremely concerned about your client's sporadic, almost verging on lack of interest in properly engaging with the City." It is reasonable for the public to expect that Cameron Hall should have done its duty and looked after the property and, failing that, the Council should have stepped in.

Now, the Labour council has bought a bad pig in a poke. We could easily end up with the worst of all worlds: a rash of urban sprawl, degraded landscape, lost habitat, and no certainty that the building restoration will actually deliver what has been promised. It is almost laughable that the land will remain technically 'Green Belt', even though new buildings, new roadway, car parks and golf lawns are being carved out of one of city's most beautiful landscapes. George Orwell would have relished such abuse of language.

Particularly shameful was the role of statutory agencies. They are truly paper tigers. Tickle their tummies and they simply roll over. Thus, Historic England (formerly English Heritage) voiced no serious objections. Their job is to "champion" England's 'heritage'. It is an empty term (our 'heritage' includes all sorts of nasty and unworthy things including, in Newcastle, a surprisingly big share of the Slave Trade). In Historic England's case, it means little more than 'appearance', not ecological substance. The same is true of National Park authorities that often champion the current 'look' of the land, ignoring the state of intense ecological degradation of much of the land they 'protect'.ⁱⁱ

Nearly 9,000 people have signed the on-line petition against the plan. They have seen beyond the slick PR and refused to be stampeded. We now need letters to the Secretary of State calling for rejection this application on the grounds of the intolerable harm it will do and the absence of genuine "exceptional grounds" for a breach of the Green Belt. We also need a public inquiry into how Woolsington Hall has gone from a quite habitable building when first bought by Cameron Hall (there are photographs to prove this) to its present bad condition. We also need letters to local MPs asking them to make due representations to the minister.ⁱⁱⁱ

To be fair, a couple of Labour councillors did speak against this sell-out of the city's real long-term interests. Otherwise, the whole affair has been but more evidence of Labour's terminal decline as a force for worthwhile change. In the light of the election of a new national Liberal Democrat Party leader and talk of a fresh start for the LibDems, it is worth noting that two LDs on the above committee voted FOR the plan and two against. The local Liberal leader gave no lead. Those who practice a politics of sitting on fences often get sore backsides and often fall off onto the wrong side.

ⁱ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Woolsington_Hall

ⁱⁱ <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jun/30/scotland-land-reform-national-parks>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/departments-for-communities-and-local-government> and
<https://www.writetothem.com/>