

Penrith Town Council Neighbourhood Plan – Penrith Beacon

[REDACTED]

4 June 2021

Dear Mr Slater,

Re: Penrith Town Council Neighbourhood Plan – Penrith Beacon

I am writing on behalf of Keep Penrith Special (KPS) to support the inclusion of a policy in the Penrith Neighbourhood Plan to protect the Penrith Beacon and to suggest wording for the policy.

KPS is a non-political campaign group which was set up in September 2018 to oppose Eden District Council's proposed 'Penrith Strategic Masterplan – The Beacon Garden Villages'. The proposal was to build 5,565 houses around Penrith (including to the east of the Beacon) and to put a large housing or holiday accommodation development on Beacon Hill.

Nearly 7,000 local people vehemently opposed this plan, 2,693 of whom signed the Friends of Penrith Beacon petition about the protection of the Beacon specifically – a major issue being the loss of what they consider to be community land, which they enjoy for exercise and nature, right on their doorstep.

You can see the level of community concern about the Masterplan and the need to protect the Beacon in the attached documents.

Although the challenge to the Masterplan was ultimately successful, we still have concerns about the Beacon's future and want to see it protected for the same multiple community values that you clearly identified in your post-hearing note, prepared following the Examination hearing of the Penrith Neighbourhood Plan:

'...this area is in close proximity to the Penrith built up area and is an area which is considered demonstrably special by the community and it does hold significance, in terms of its landscape value, its use for community events, its recreational value and indeed its ecological value – I discovered that it is home to red squirrels. It is an asset that is on the doorstep of the town and is local in character.'

We would add that it also has significant historic and visual amenity value and contributes to a sense of place and Penrith's character.

We understand the reasons set out in your post-hearing note that an area the size of Beacon Hill would be unlikely to meet the National Planning Policy Framework criteria for local green space designation as it may be deemed to be too extensive a tract of land. However, in light of the overwhelming opposition to building on or around the Beacon, and the fact that the area is still under consideration for

development by the landowners, we very much welcome and support your suggestion that a policy is instead developed in the Neighbourhood Plan to protect the Beacon from inappropriate development.

We understand that Penrith Town Council are currently preparing a policy in response to your suggestion and have sought to be involved with this process but so far have had no response.

As a Neighbourhood Plan is meant to reflect the community's wishes and values, and ultimately will only come into force if it finds majority support following a referendum in the community, we had hoped that the community, including KPS and Friends of Penrith Beacon, would have been included in the development of a policy.

In any event, given our support for the suggestion of a policy, we would like to put forward a suggested policy approach and wording.

The policy would need to be rigorous and cover the whole of Beacon Hill in order to effectively protect the area from inappropriate development. Accordingly, the policy would need to be accompanied by a map clearly identifying the area to which it applies.

In this context, we suggest the following wording for your consideration:

Beacon Hill makes an important contribution to the character of Penrith and surrounding areas. It is much valued by and provides important recreational and wellbeing opportunities for local residents and visitors.

Proposals for development within the area identified on Map X below will only be permitted where the recreational value (including the extent of public access), biodiversity value, heritage and cultural value, woodland character, important views (to and from the Beacon), and contribution of the area to wider landscape character and sense of place are conserved and enhanced.

Such a policy would be welcomed by the thousands of residents who challenged the Masterplan and the development of Beacon Hill.

We would ask that the two campaign groups channelling the local community's views - Keep Penrith Special and Friends of Penrith Beacon - be included in any future discussions around the drafting and finalising of a protective policy.

We would also welcome confirmation that further consultation with the community will be undertaken should a new policy be added to the Neighbourhood Plan.

Yours sincerely,

Spokesperson - Keep Penrith Special campaign group

Enc: Letter to Penrith Town Council (Keep Penrith Special); Objection Letter (Friends of the Lake District);

Articles from The Cumberland and Westmorland Herald, Penrith

REPRESENTATION TO PENRITH TOWN COUNCIL FROM KEEP PENRITH SPECIAL FOR MEETING OF 30/3/21

We understand the planning inspector or examiner is conducting the examination of the Penrith Neighbourhood Plan and that an area of Beacon Hill might not meet the National Planning Policy Framework criteria of local green space designation as it may be deemed to be too extensive a tract of land. Instead, the examiner suggests a policy is developed in the Neighbourhood Plan which would protect the Beacon from inappropriate development.

We welcome a policy in the Neighbourhood Plan specifically for the Beacon area as an alternative mechanism for protecting it and we hope the Town Council will see that it should be straightforward to draw up policies from existing plans, coupled with the community's reasons as to why the area is important to them.

As a reminder to the council, we list some of the reasons why Beacon Hill should be left free of any building development. It makes an important contribution to the character of Penrith; it is much valued by the community for its essential recreational and wellbeing opportunities; also, its biodiversity, woodland character and rarer flora and fauna should be conserved.

If the policy is not rigorous, we have concerns this could leave Beacon Hill open to development, especially given the examiner's words in his Post Hearing Notes: "The owners were candid that they did not have major development aspirations but did point to the potential for small scale tourist development such as forest lodges, pods or glamping facilities, which it was stated would be policy compliant were the land not designated local green space, which may be prejudiced by a LGS designation." This suggests that if there were no local green space or equivalent protection to the site, it would be the thin end of the wedge regarding the future development of a holiday resort and possible housing.

The examiner also says the landowners had a concern such a designation could affect future felling licences. According to a chartered forester, this would not be the case – the designation wouldn't preclude good forest management, even if the forest itself were the designated area.

We would like to remind Penrith Town Council of the overwhelming opposition to the landowners' last attempt to put a holiday resort and houses on and behind the Beacon via the Masterplan. There were nearly 7,000 objections to the Masterplan, which for a small population is a considerable number.

The message is clear that the protected status of this area of Beacon Hill is essential and non-negotiable. Indeed, we would go further and urge the Town Council to consider ways to protect the entirety of Beacon Hill. That way, we won't have to keep coming back to the table to have the same conversation over and over again.

Your ref:

Our ref: LW/EdenMasterplan

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09 November 2018

Dear Planning Policy Team

PENRITH STRATEGIC MASTERPLAN VISION TO 2050 – BEACON VILLAGES CONSULTATION

Friends of the Lake District is the only charity wholly dedicated to protecting the landscape and natural environment of Cumbria and the Lake District, representing the Campaign to Protect Rural England in Cumbria. We welcome the opportunity to comment on the Penrith Strategic Masterplan: A Vision to 2050 - Beacon Villages: A New Vision for Eden. Our comments can be found on the following pages.

We would like to be kept informed at every stage of the evolution of these proposals and would welcome opportunities to contribute informally well as being able to respond to public consultations. As more details come to light about the proposal, we will be developing our position on it further.

We understand that proposals for development on the Beacon itself have now been withdrawn.

Yours sincerely,

Lorayne Woodend Wall MRTPI
Planning Officer – Friends of the Lake District



Process and status

We are confused as to the process adopted to propose and progress the Masterplan and its relationship with other documents.

It is understood that Eden District Council (EDC) is seeking to look ahead beyond the timeframes of the Local Plan in order to develop future strategies for the town. We understand that consultation took place on a Draft Vision document in 2016/2017 and that the masterplan is an evolution of that. However, it is not clear:

- how the step from the Draft Vision document to this Masterplan document has been made;
- how, when and why other strategic and site options were put forward, considered, assessed and discounted; or
- how the document relates to the fact that Eden has a very recently adopted Local Plan and has accepted the need for its prompt review.

There is concern that the consultation undertaken up to 2nd November 2018 has not readily provided respondents with the opportunity to comment on options other than the Preferred Option. Whilst information was provided in the Masterplan document about three other options that had been assessed, these were all very similar in nature, each proposing significant development in either 3 or 4 new villages to the east of the Beacon. There is no evidence that the assessment and discounting of these options was undertaken with any public or stakeholder input. Neither is there any evidence that there has been adequate opportunity for the public or other stakeholders to put forward alternative strategies for or approaches to the future of the District.

There is a lack of clarity on the intended mechanism for preparation and status of the Masterplan. The document does not indicate whether the intention is to incorporate it into the review of the Local Plan; whether it will become a Supplementary Planning Document or separate Development Plan Document or whether it will sit outside of the statutory development plan altogether. Further adding to the confusion, EDC had intended to apply for Garden City funding but has apparently stepped back from doing so through the current round of bidding, whilst not ruling out future bids.

It is important that all these factors are made clear so that everyone understands the process being employed and future opportunities to influence the plans as well as the status of the document at any given time and how it fits in to the wider context.

Principles

Whilst we have some specific concerns about the landscape and environmental impacts of the proposals, which are covered under 'Impacts' below, we have several concerns about the principle of the proposals, including the need for this scale of development; cumulative impacts with other major development; precedent setting and future strategy implications as well as the perpetuation of reliance on roads.

It is not clear from the masterplan or associated technical documents that there is a genuine need for this scale of development, or indeed, that there a genuine need for this scale of development **at this location**. The Masterplan itself states that without it, based on current trends, it is expected that the District would grow by about 2,200 houses by 2050. It is unclear why it is "vitaly important that Penrith and Eden ...grow the local population". Whilst there are undeniably many issues to be addressed, there is no evidence that other methods of doing so – which could be lower impact, more sustainable and more beneficial to existing and future residents - have been explored. In many respects, the Masterplan suggests that development that is not needed by the current population (or based on population projections) is being justified as necessary in order to resolve various issues

that Penrith and surrounding areas currently face. In fact many of the issues mentioned, such as traffic congestion, could be improved through other measures and could potentially be exacerbated by significant new development.

These concerns are compounded by the fact that there is no aspiration in the Masterplan to achieve a greater percentage than the 30% affordable housing currently required through planning policy in Eden. There is a risk that significant amounts of new housing will be built with very little of it actually contributing to meeting genuine local needs as the remaining 70% are likely to be properties of a type, size and tenure that secure the greatest profit rather than suiting the needs and being within the financial reach of local people.

There is no explanation of how the Masterplan relates to other significant development proposed in north Cumbria (Eden Local Plan; Carlisle 'Garden Village'; Lake District National Park Local Plan; A66 upgrades). Similarly, there is no evidence that proper consideration has been given to the cumulative impacts and potential implications of these developments all taking place in similar time frames, for example, cumulative impacts on landscape; biodiversity; flood risk management; demand for water and other resources and utilities; traffic flows; and infrastructure, as well as on the experience, feel and character of this part of Cumbria.

We have some concerns over precedent setting and future expansion. The Beacon currently forms a natural and defining eastern boundary to Penrith. The question has to be asked – where, and at what point in time, will development stop? Greenfield land is one of many finite resources utilised without replacement when new development takes place and at some point, an alternative strategy will become essential. There is no evidence that consideration has been given to the likelihood of future expansion of the new villages or the knock-on effects of taking this strategy now over alternatives. No measures are proposed to prevent the potential merging of the new settlements or the creation of a 'Penrith doughnut' with development surrounding the Beacon.

Related to this, although the document presents proposals for three new villages, references in the Masterplan such as 'The new housing in Penrith will involve three new Beacon Villages', 'Our vision is for Penrith to grow' and 'strong local identity will be a defining feature of the new settlements' make it unclear whether these are to be considered part of Penrith or separate from. These points need to be clarified to enable people to properly understand exactly what is being proposed and what the intentions are in terms of further expansion in the future. Somewhere that is a village in its own right and is to remain so might be expected to look, feel and work quite different to somewhere that is, or is going to become, part of a significantly expanding town.

We are also concerned about the level of reliance on new roads and road upgrading and the landscape and wider environmental impacts of these, including the proposal for a flyover at Kemplay Roundabout. New road building has been shown to simply encourage and increase car-based travel, for example in the study report '[The end of the road? Challenging the road-building consensus](#)' commissioned by CPRE and carried out by consultants Transport for Quality of Life (TfQL)¹. It is difficult to see how, through the strategy proposed, significant increases in sustainable transport and active travel will be achieved or supported.

¹ The new TfQL research shows that road schemes: induce traffic, that is, they generate an increase in traffic—often far above previous levels (background trends) over the longer term; lead to permanent and significant environmental and landscape damage; and show little evidence of economic benefit to local economies.

Friends of the Lake District are unable to support a strategy based so heavily on further road development or on an assumption that increased capacity for motorised transport is what people are or should be aspiring to. A modal shift can only be supported through new development if schemes of this scale lead the way and make sustainability their true driver by prioritising genuinely attractive and accessible sustainable transport options rather than treating them as a novel sub-strategy that may or may not materialise in the final scheme. Building new roads and flyovers will not support ambitions for more sustainable transport or a safe network of active travel routes and will actively damage the environment and landscape of Penrith's hinterlands.

The three new villages would be split off from Penrith's services and facilities and potentially more accessible to Langwathby Railway Station than to Penrith's. Proposed cycling/walking routes link the new settlements but no such routes connecting the new settlements with Penrith are indicated in the Masterplan other than indirect routes requiring steep ascent and descent over the Beacon. On distance alone, it seems unlikely that the majority of people would find it easy to leave their cars at home and instead walk or cycle to visit Penrith or connect to mainline rail services.

Any development on this scale should be taken as an opportunity to innovate and do things very differently. The design and layout should be underpinned by green and blue infrastructure (GBI) networks and active, innovative, sustainable transport measures, including the improvement of existing routes in order to create highly accessible and permeable places to live that are well connected to where people need to be by means that are more convenient than the private car. It will be crucial to avoid the new settlements becoming little more than dormitory villages rather than becoming communities in their own right.

Impacts

Whilst the Masterplan documentation includes obligatory references to proposals being 'sustainable', minimising impacts on the environment, protecting ecologically and historically sensitive sites, 'not spoil[ing] the views', and a repeated insistence that the proposals will be 'integrated into the landscape', it fails to properly assess the impacts or to recognise the inevitability that even if 'minimised', the least possible impact of a proposal of this nature and scale will be significant.

It is unclear how the proposals reflect the Cumbria Landscape Character Guidance and Toolkit, which identifies the area as Landscape Type 10 Sandstone Ridge and describes it as a "visually prominent landscape". Of Type 10, the document also advises "ensure that farming-related and other development is **discretely located and designed to complement the landscape character**"; "areas of heathland and the geometric mosaic of fields are **sensitive to changes in land management and large scale infrastructure**" "[v]ernacular settlements are sensitive to **unsympathetic expansion**"; "retain the **rural character**"; "ensure development **respects the ridgeline**"; "**remaining areas of open ridge will be conserved**";. The Vision for Type 10 is "to create a more natural character".

Para. 4.6.5 of the Eden Local Plan explicitly lists the Cumbria Landscape Character Guidance and Toolkit as one of "several sources of design and landscape guidance available, which [sic] the Council will expect new development to comply with". Policy ENV2 states that development "will be assessed against the criteria in the Toolkit" and that "[n]ew development will only be permitted where it **conserves and enhances** distinctive elements of landscape character and function". ENV2 also requires that development **takes account of and complements** the distribution and form of settlements within their landscape setting; visually sensitive valley sides; natural elements such as hedgerows and woodland; and the tranquillity of the open countryside.

The Masterplan documents list some of the characteristics and guidelines set out in the Toolkit, and state in broad terms where the villages might be visible from and how they will be 'set in a strong woodland framework in order to mitigate the visual impact'. They fail however to explain how the proposals reflect, reinforce or indeed, impact upon the character of the landscape as proposed, or indeed, if the villages were to expand as they inevitably will in the future. It is difficult to see how the Toolkit guidelines or the requirements of ENV2 can be complied with through development at the scale and location proposed, and therefore how the character of the valued Eden valley landscape can be conserved, enhanced and complemented as required.

The documents acknowledge that development will be visible from the Lake District National Park, English Lake District World Heritage Site and the North Pennines AONB but does not provide a proper assessment of the impacts.

In terms of assessing the impacts, there is no evidence that a Sustainability Appraisal, Habitats Regulations Assessment or Environmental Impact Assessment of options has been undertaken in order to identify this option as the most sustainable or appropriate. There is no information on if or when these will be carried out. Wan Fell SSSI, which is closer to the sites of proposed development than others that are mentioned, does not appear to be mentioned in the documentation and none of the designated habitats are mentioned in the Masterplan itself, which could lead some to believe that the environmental impacts will be less significant.

The Masterplan documents offer very little in the way of a description of the existing GBI, biodiversity or habitats. Similarly there is very little assessment of impacts on or provision for enhancement of these. For example, no consideration appears to have been given to the functions and value of existing GBI or the fact that biodiversity net gains are now required by the NPPF and the Government's 25-year Environment Plan. The existing GBI that is marked on plans in the documents omits features such as hedgerows, woodlands and many other elements. Greenfield land is all part of an area's GBI and all GBI has ecosystem service functionality e.g. drainage, food production, clean air etc etc, which will be impacted upon if developed. Blue infrastructure is also omitted.

The proposals should identify how they reflect the Government's 25 year environment plan, the NPPF requirements for enhancement and net gains for the natural environment and natural capital and ecosystems services approaches. Masterplanning or any development of significant scale should start with a comprehensive GBI strategy and framework, identifying all the existing elements of GBI, their quality and functionality and then establishing where the qualitative and quantitative gaps are and where additional GBI functionality is needed. Only then can it be determined whether that quality and functionality can be maintained if certain elements of it are developed and, if development takes place, what enhancements to existing GBI are needed and where and what new GBI is required to deliver the functionality and connectivity required e.g. landscape character enhancement, flood risk management, habitat, active travel networks, health and well-being, habitat network creation and how it can be best delivered (including through what type of GBI).

For the proposed strategy for Penrith's future to be labelled sustainable, the required assessments and a proper consideration of strategic alternatives needs to be made, within a process and timeframe within which local people and others with an interest in the area can properly participate and have a say from the outset.

Controversial masterplan consigned to bin

THE controversial Penrith masterplan produced by Eden District Council was kicked into the long grass on Tuesday as the authority's new-look executive unanimously agreed that no further work on it will be undertaken.

Eden development portfolio holder Mark Rudhall (Lib Dem, Penrith North) put forward the recommendation after presenting the results of a public engagement which revealed that 69.4 per cent of respondents disagreed with the location of proposed new settlements.

Deputy leader Mary Robinson (Ind, Kirkoswald), chairing the meeting in the absence of leader Virginia Taylor (Lib Dem, Penrith West), said the information would instead be used in any future district-wide local plan review.

A total of 8,969 responses were received in the engagement process which involved 25 pop-up events. The masterplan, which cost £45,000 to produce, was paid for from a £250,000 grant from the Government to support multi-agency working on reviewing infrastructure and associated issues in relation to the future

growth of Penrith. The 89-page document was drawn up by Land Use Consultants Ltd over four months.

An independent review of the engagement was carried out by Lancaster and Cumbria universities. Dr Chris Ford, of Lancaster University, who is a Penrith resident, and Dr Ian Convery, professor of environment and society at the University of Cumbria, found in their joint analysis that there was a "real depth of concern for the environment".

Dr Convery said: "This engagement exercise has shown us just how precious the natural environment is to residents, whether simply as a green frame to their view of Penrith, as a place of wildness and discovery, or calm thought that improves their sense of well-being.

"This is not just about enjoyment, it is also a strong driver of place attachment, and if we want to solve our demographic issues and the impact of a rapidly ageing population, then this has to be a piece in that puzzle."

Only 3.4 per cent of respondents were in favour of a "small amount of housing" in the Beacon Hill area, yet a central aspect of the proposed plan was the creation of 5,560 new homes in three new Beacon villages over a 30-year period.

The report highlighted a high level of concern about the new villages and other potential Beacon developments.

The most favoured area for new houses was land west of the M6 between Junction 41 and the B5708 near Newton Rigg College and Newton Reigny, with 21.1 per cent in favour. Land north west of Junction 41 in the Catterlen area was the second most popular at 20.2 per cent. A need for "more parks and green public spaces" was highlighted, especially among young people aged up to 24, while all age groups from 25 to 65+ found the Beacon to be not just an essential green space but also of "historic and cultural significance".

Ms Taylor (Lib Dem, Penrith West) said later: "The executive's decision to cease any

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Controversial masterplan consigned to bin

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further work on the Penrith masterplan draws a line under pursuing the concept put forward in 2018. It is clear from reviewing the analysis of the engagement results that a far wider range of issues and options need to be considered when developing such a long-term vision for the area.

"The most useful way of creating a shared vision will be with significant input from residents and businesses from across the district and the council will consider options for formally reviewing the current local plan in the autumn."

The joint university study found "very significant concerns" that the experience offered by Penrith town centre needed to be enhanced both in the interest of residents and potential tourists.

Revitalising the farmers' markets and developing a cultural centre through events were seen as key.

The most noted concern was the empty shop fronts in the town and New Squares in particular.

Pedestrianising the town centre and having a better bus service across the district alongside free long-term car parking were put forward as ways of helping to

provide an improved experience for the public. The responses contained widespread scepticism over how 5,000-plus new homes would boost Penrith's economy in the long term.

One respondent is quoted as stating: "You cannot just build new housing and expect that to reinvigorate the local economy — it makes no economic or planning sense. Where are 7,000 jobs going to come from?"

"The number of empty shops is a big concern. If business rates were reduced for all businesses then it would attract companies and regenerate the town centre."

Planning for the future

FEW tears will be shed now that the controversial Penrith masterplan has been consigned to the rubbish bin.

Many thousands of pounds — along with thousands of hours of council officers' time — were spent on the production of a blueprint for which there was very little support among the town's residents, particularly as they saw it as a threat to the historic and cultural status of the Beacon.

The results of the public engagement carried out by Eden Council show that almost 70 per cent of respondents disagreed with the proposed location of three new villages on land behind the Beacon, which would have contained more than 5,000 new homes. Another key element of the masterplan, a Penrith north bypass, was rejected by Highways England because of its high cost and impact on the environment.

Not only that, the unpopularity of the masterplan in all probability resulted in the Conservatives losing overall control of the council in the May elections. It has been an exercise in how not to produce a vision of how the town should develop over the next decades, attempting to force something on the public rather than giving them a meaningful say.

There still needs to be a plan of how Penrith will progress, however, and that is one of the biggest tasks facing the council's new-look executive. The difference this time is that leader Virginia Taylor accepts that a far wider range of issues and options should be considered, and the best way forward will be with significant input from residents and businesses from across the district.

In that way, a plan which stands the test of time will be produced rather than one which has been discarded in little over a year.