



Dean Natural Alliance

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Dean Natural Alliance Open Public Meeting

Dean Natural Alliance hosted an open public meeting at 7.45pm on Wednesday 11th June at the Church Hall, Holy Trinity Church, Harrow Hill (The Forest Church).

Over 60 people attended the event, many ordinary individuals and others representing a number of groups, some aligned with the aims of DNA, members of several Councils, others perhaps opposing, but all with an interest in the events taking place and proposed to take place on and around the Cinderford Northern Quarter and Steam Mills.

Background Information – The CNQ Site:

The particular features of the CNQ site are influenced by the poor soil quality and lack of base nutrients which have held back much regeneration of tree and shrub growth that would otherwise have occurred, leaving the natural thin grassland to dominate large areas, thus providing a special and scarce habitat for plants and invertebrates. In turn, this grassland supports a large and diverse variety of invertebrates which support the higher animals, reptiles, amphibians, and birds etc. that depend upon them. It is home to populations of a number of species that are scarce, threatened, declining and in some cases specially protected against disturbance and damage by the rule of law, both national and European.

Habitats across the Forest of Dean have changed much since the Second World War in particular, most have declined or degenerated; by contrast, the CNQ site between the A4136, A4151 and at the northern end of the Cinderford Linear Park has actually improved both in quality and diversity during the same period. There has been some loss of species, notably Woodlark and Red Backed Shrike (per R J B & N J Christian) but the decline of these species was a national phenomenon and not confined to the Forest of Dean. Other species have gained ground on this site and currently have healthy or stable populations in direct contrast to other areas of the Forest and County, notably amphibians, reptiles, certain species of butterfly, moth, other invertebrates and some species of birds.

The habitats range from areas of old and mature deciduous woodland, mixed varieties of conifers and related species, a succession of lakes and ponds at different stages in their regeneration, some bare soil areas, poor grassland, some gorse and bramble scrub, blocks of riparian woodland (Alders & Willows), ditches and streams amounting to some 200 acres (80 Hectares). The ages of the habitats similarly varies from the Oak woodland at over 200 years through the Conifers, some of which dates from planting in 1927, the grassland and scrub which is up to 30 years old and the latest scrape ponds that are less than 10 years old.

This unique mix and diversity of the habitats gives support to a significant number of species from the bottom to the top of the food chain which is a stable and balanced eco-system, each part of which bears upon and is related to the others that is not viewed in its entirety by the

Bio-diversity strategy and proposed mitigation measures proposed as part of the development methodology.

The development proposals are for a spine road bisecting the site, a mix of “light” industrial and employment units around the Northern United Colliery site and in other areas, a Hotel, a College building together with accesses and parking for both and a number of residential homes. The sections that pose the greatest threat are the spine road, the Hotel and College buildings and the residential units, all of which will effectively obliterate the most valuable habitats; secondary threats are from the other areas of development, and ironically from some of the proposed mitigation measures. All of the documentation relating to the development proposals and the Hybrid Planning application are available to view on the Forest of Dean District Council web-site (go to Planning, simple search for Northern United or search for application reference P0663/14/OUT).

The Meeting:

The meeting was opened by Simon Glover, Chairman of DNA and West Gloucestershire representative of Butterfly Conservation. Simon briefly described the genesis and aims of DNA, that is to say the conservation, preservation and where possible the improvement of the diverse wildlife and habitats in the Forest of Dean, many of which are threatened or deteriorating for a variety of reasons. DNA consists of and is supported by a variety of like-minded groups and organisations and a large number of individual members of the public.

DNA’s first project is the Cinderford Northern Quarter development site which has evolved into a complex and diverse mosaic of habitats over several decades since the cessation of the industrial exploitation of the site. The land is in a variety of ownerships but has been thus far largely undisturbed and benefits the public as open access land, much used by naturalists in particular, by fishermen and by the general public.

Presentation by Simon Glover:

Simon gave a presentation illustrating the habitats, some of the Bell Pit evidence and other features of the site and described the destruction of the habitats that would take place under the development, some of which are specially protected because of their national and European importance. There were then illustrations of the recent investigation works that took place, which in spite of reassurances to the members of CREF and others, were effectively turned into quagmires in some areas and resulted in fatalities to a number of animals.

One of the major concerns is that the development of this site, in spite of its natural environmental value is that it could set a precedent for other development proposals across the UK.

Simon made the point that is equally believed by other experts, that the mitigation measures proposed are incapable of replacing lost habitats and will in fact have a negative impact on other areas of the site, not already directly threatened by the development proposals themselves. In spite of the opinions expressed by the HCA and FoDDC, it does not really appear that there is to be any net gain for wildlife.

Another matter of concern is the sale/exchange of Forestry Commission owned land that on the face of it appears to be illegal, or at least is contrary to the general understanding of the

status of these parcels of land. There is concern that this proposal will lead to the loss of public access and the loss of Cinderford Linear Park land that is understood to be protected by other arrangements.

The effect of constructing the Hotel, College and residential units on the site will actually move the land on which they will be built from public ownership to private ownership with all of the consequences of that action.

Development of the CNQ site that is decidedly not in Cinderford, could actually divert potential focus and investment away from the town's regeneration and the existing vacant and under-used sites around the town.

Simon concluded his presentation and handed over to Paul Morgan for the next Presentation.

Presentation "The Underground Issues" by Paul Morgan:

Paul Morgan gave a presentation based upon the concerns that arise from the former use and workings on and under the site by the mining interests and by the other opencast excavations carried out there.

Paul was the last officially appointed mining surveyor at the Northern United Colliery, after its closure he went on to work in Building Control and held other, more senior construction related posts in both the West Dean and Forest of Dean District Councils. He has both a deep and overall knowledge of the coal related geology and workings in the Forest and of construction in general.

The report written by Paul was originally done at the request of the Forest of Dean Keepers and Verderers and whilst it was written rather quickly, it is accurate and based upon the in-depth knowledge Paul has of the site and the workings and was very much based on the records he still holds or has access to. The overall conclusion was that in his view of the issues and potential threats posed by the geology, hydrology and workings, this was perhaps the worst possible site in the Forest to propose for development.

The coal workings and the measures below the Forest of Dean are flooded in their totality forming a significant aquifer; the depth of water at the Northern United Colliery is a minimum of 200ft (62 metres) and overall there is a 600ft (185 metres) head of water within. This is sufficient water pressure to crush the structure of a WW2 submarine; in other areas where the head of water is greater, a modern nuclear submarine would meet a similar fate.

In Paul's opinion, the Forest of Dean District Council should have commissioned a fully detailed and wide ranging mining surveyors report but have not done so.

Regarding the opencast excavation, this is known to have reached a depth of 172 feet (53 metres) below the original ground level of the site, the excavation was believed to subsequently have been back-filled with domestic and other waste which has the potential to generate Methane gas as it rots down (hence the installation of gas sampling points on the site). It is also alleged that Rank Xerox were disposing of large quantities of waste liquids and oils from the Mitcheldean plant into the excavation, this could have represented a quantity of over well over 10,000 gallons (44,500 litres) per day.

The presentation then illustrated the Northern United Colliery in its heyday, both above and below ground with the aid of photographs, the extent of mine workings, the seams and

outcrops with the aid of maps and drawings. Paul commented that the coal seam across parts of the site were pitched at a gradient of 1:2¹/₂ (40%) from north to south so that water percolating into the workings flowed towards the south of the site.

One of the mine-workings drawings illustrated a large area of surface fill that is unconsolidated and is potentially mobile when saturated. The marking of this feature on the workings drawings was a mandatory requirement of the National Coal Board because of the threat it posed to their operations. Similarly, it was pointed out that the existing slag heap at the northern edge of the site resulting from the Hawkwell shaft and workings was deposited on an outcrop and has little or no mechanical attachment to the substrate and again, if flooded by overspill from the workings or surface run-off, could become mobile. Both of these issues could lead to a slip, similar to, though on a much smaller scale than, the Aberfan incident in South Wales in 1966. The general profile of the site is of a slope down from north to south, towards the development area.

Paul finally pointed out that the general outflow of water from the Forest coal measures occurs at the Norchard Colliery site, close to the Forest Railway Heritage centre and is a more or less constant 5,000 gallons per minute (Over 22,200 litres per minute), 24 hours per day year round. Paul believes there is a limiting factor that prevents the flow from increasing at this point so that the water levels and pressure must be varying within the geological strata, workings and shafts across the coalfield in tandem with the changes in water ingress over the seasons.

(During a subsequent conversation, one individual pointed out that the overflow from the Severn Trent reservoir on Wigpool was piped down to the NU site and effectively discharged into the underground aquifer. Councillor Andrew Gardiner similarly commented that the outflow from the Nofold Green Lake was significantly greater than the apparent inflow to the lake).

The meeting then broke for a period of approximately half-an-hour for refreshments, during which time a number of private discussions and meetings took place between the attendees.

After the break it was noted that a number of attendees had left the meeting, among them it was believed were some councillors from various authorities.

Presentation “Amphibians and Reptiles” by David Dewsbury:

David Dewsbury, a naturalist and licensed expert who acts as the official county recorder for Amphibians and Reptiles in Gloucestershire gave a presentation with photographs and maps illustrating the variety of species (and their life and requirements) that inhabit the CNQ site.

The reptiles are Adder, Grass Snake, Viviparous Lizard and Slow Worm (Legless Lizard), all of which inhabit primarily the grassland around the site. The amphibians are Great Crested Newt, Palmate Newt, Common Frog and Common Toad. The Great Crested Newt is a schedule 1 species and is specially protected in law, it is an offence to handle, interfere with, injure or kill the animals and to damage the habitat in which they live.

All of these animals are at the top of the food chain and have healthy, viable and stable populations indicating that there is a complex, diverse and eminently suitable ecosystem of plants and invertebrates supporting them. There will be widespread and significant destruction of the habitats in which these species occur and the proposed mitigation measures are both inadequate and incapable of recreating the lost habitats in the timescale necessary to

support them if as is proposed, they are trans-located prior to construction beginning. The existing habitat has evolved to its current state over a period greater than 30 years, it is not possible to match this in the timescale offered through the construction phase of the project. Similarly, trans-locating captured animals to other existing habitats is not feasible, those habitats are certain to be supporting the maximum possible numbers of any given species already.

David pointed out that there were a number of roofing felt squares across the site, these had been utilised as sampling points by the ecologists for measuring the likely occurrence and numbers of reptiles but it was noted that this is a crude and inadequate means of doing so. The ecologists had not been aware of all of the ponds utilised by the Newts and in one case they didn't manage to locate one pond at all and had to be shown it.

The grassland is the most important and critical habitat for the reptiles offering shelter, food, basking, the means for foraging for food and mates on the site. The indications are that there are stable populations of these species with a reasonably deep gene pool and the facility for the animals to move and range across a wide area compared with other habitat locations in the Forest. This stable population is contrary to the national trend where most reptiles are declining, some seriously, due to habitat destruction and just as importantly, fragmentation.

Another issue is the introduction of domestic animals to the site after completion of the domestic dwellings, some 26% of British households have a cat; domestic Cats are likely to have a significant impact on any remaining reptiles and other wildlife.

Presentation “Bats on the CNQ site” by David Priddis:

David Priddis is another of the official county recorders, again, a licensed and acknowledged expert in the field of Bats.

David gave a presentation with illustrations of the Bat species and maps indicating their roosts, flight lines, feeding areas etc. which clearly defined the issues that arise and the difficulties this will pose for these most enigmatic of mammals.

The site is particularly important for the Lesser Horseshoe Bats which occupy the former colliery buildings that remain on the Northern United site. David explained in clear terms the differences that distinguish this species from most other bats and the challenges that the development proposals will put in their way. They are very careful in their choice of roosting and breeding sites, their needs are quite specific and the variations they will tolerate are very limited. Their behaviour is such that they will avoid any unwarranted exposure to open spaces. They use and travel along very narrow corridors and will not deviate from the paths that are established; light in itself places a barrier in their way so that lit roads in particular are effectively as obstructive to them as a brick wall to most other animals. It was noted that a lit motorway affects bats to such a degree that their activity significantly reduced for 2 miles or more either side of it.

The Lesser Horseshoe Bats have the highest level of protection of any species on the CNQ site which itself forms part of the Special Area of Conservation as a consequence of their presence. There are some 350-400 Lesser Horseshoe Bats on the site which is a very significant number both in a national and in a European context. The Wye Valley and Forest of Dean holds approximately 20% of the British population.

One particular map was used to illustrate the existing buildings used by the L H Bats, the “new” roost building constructed some years ago, the proposed sites of two additional new buildings, the flight lines and feeding areas used by the bats. The flight paths in particular are long established, very narrow and cannot be changed in a timescale that will match the timescale of the development. Also, the existing “new” roost building was not occupied at all for some 5 years after construction, in part because of the failure to switch on the artificial heating in the unit, and it was not fully occupied for 8 years. The two proposed new units, if occupied at the same rate, will not then be significantly utilised until at least 2019 assuming that the construction is complete before the end of this year. Use for breeding could take a lot longer, if at all. Until this occurs ‘development’ of the North end of the Spine Road and the Northern United site cannot take place.

The position of L H Bats in the food chain, as for other species, illustrates again the importance of the mixture and maturity of habitats and the invertebrates contained within the ecosystem across the CNQ site.

Within the proposed development, the introduction of the spine and service roads and the associated lighting will form barriers across the flyways to and from the feeding areas. The mitigation measures of two new buildings (three were advised) and the culverts under the spine road are not considered feasible, firstly because even in the best case, the buildings will not be used quickly, if at all. The culverts are not properly aligned with the existing flyways, one is actually between two flyways; this compromise suggests that it may simply not be used.

David gave a brief resume of the other species of Bats on the site, Greater Horseshoe, Bechstein’s, Barbastelle, Daubenton’s, Serotine, Brown Long Eared, two species of pipistrelle, Leisler’s and Noctule Bats. Each of these have their own needs and requirements, are variously rare, scarce or threatened and whilst some are more likely to adapt to new conditions than the Lesser Horseshoes, will each be negatively affected as a result of the development.

Two final points were made, firstly, that overall light pollution will increase and affect all species, and secondly that the mitigation measure of clear-felling as a pre-cursor to creating replacement grassland for reptiles and amphibians will in itself reduce the feeding area currently used by the Lesser Horseshoe Bats and cut right across a main flight line.

Presentation “Butterflies on the CNQ site” by Simon Glover:

Simon Glover then gave a presentation on his own speciality, that of the Butterflies on the CNQ site and the surrounding area, especially the Linear Park to the south of the development site.

There are 4 BAP (Biodiversity Action Plan) species of Butterfly on the site, namely Wood White, Small Pear Bordered Fritillary, Grizzled and Dingy Skipper, all of which are scarce and declining in the Forest (and the wider county).

Alongside the Butterflies, the BC Moth trapping group set up a number of Moth traps in August 2012 and recorded over 2300 individual specimens and 170 species in a single night. More than any other site in the Dean. The day flying Forester Moth is also present within the Linear Park on it’s only Gloucestershire site. There are 23 species of Dragonfly and Damselfly recorded on the CNQ site and 29 in the surrounding 10 kilometre square (of 32

potential English species), the highest density of odonata species anywhere in the Gloucestershire recording area.

The Wood White butterfly is declining nationally and is reduced to a very limited number of locations in the Forest of Dean, Dingy and Grizzled Skippers are again scarce and limited to a very few sites in the Forest and county that provide the habitat they require. The Small Pearl Bordered Fritillary have been reduced to two sites in the Forest of Dean (Moseley Green and Cinderford Linear Park) with Moseley Green being the only meta-population. Considerable effort and resource is being expended on attempting to keep these species in the Forest and to link together the sites they do remain in so that the populations have a chance of stabilising if not improving. To lose this major link site in the face of that effort and relying on poorly thought out mitigation proposals as replacement flight paths through felled conifer rides would be a disaster.

Simon closed his presentation by again, mentioning the importance of the complex and varied habitats and eco-system as a whole.

Comment:

Whilst no presentations were given for these taxa, it should be noted that the CNQ site is critically important for a number of species of Birds, many of which are Amber or Red listed reflecting the level of decline and the threat they face. Similarly, there are many hundreds of species of Invertebrates of all descriptions, Fungi, Mosses & Bryophytes, grasses, Flowering Plants and other botanicals that all form part of the overall eco-system. It is important to recognise that an eco-system is just that, a system, and in any system, the failure of any one part damages and sickens the whole.

Questions and Comments:

Following the presentations the attendees were given the opportunity to raise questions and or make comments on what they had seen, heard and thought; a number of key points arising from this are noted below:

- The Infrastructure Bill – currently in the House of Lords poses a threat to much of the land in this country, it allows a single minister to transfer land to the HCA in order to facilitate infrastructure development that could have consequences in many areas.
- There is a herd of Deer utilising the CNQ site, there is much evidence of their presence – they could potentially come into conflict with traffic on the spine road and elsewhere. (NB – the spine road is a “main road” standard carriageway, and not a small access road to the site. It could become a “rat-run” cutting off the restriction to traffic of the Nailbridge junction).
- Q – “Is there an alternative to the proposed CNQ development site?” – answered by Simon Glover, in a nutshell, yes, there are a number of other sites and spaces closer to Cinderford town that would appear to be suitable, notably such as the former Englehard’s site and other similar locations.
- Money – the Coalfield regeneration money being used to support the CNQ development is for the benefit of the entire coalfield area and appears to be grabbed by Cinderford for its own benefit without consideration for the greater Forest.

- Councillors – may well be well-intentioned but appear to be misguided and ignorant in choosing this site. The planning process appears to be a “stitch-up”.
- The Land – belongs to the people and the wildlife and not to the councillors, trust in the council has been lost, the council’s motives are questionable, the college is not a public facility but a profit centre.
- Cllr. Andrew Gardiner:
 - Mentioned the imbalance between inflow and outflow of water at the Nofold Green Lake (see above)
 - There are implications for the current unrestricted access to the site, the right to roam will be lost and the possible imposition of conditions under the CROW Act will have further effects
 - The precedents being set are important to the whole of the Forest of Dean
 - It was suggested that a presentation should be made to the District Councillors, a vote was taken and this suggestion was unanimously supported
- Councillors – it was commented that councillors are behaving badly and showing a hostile attitude to those they deem to be outsiders. Many of those opposed to the CNQ development are born Foresters, those that do not have this pedigree never-the-less have a love and passion for the Forest and its wildlife and care deeply not that the development is unwanted, but that it is simply wrongly sited.
- It was suggested that contrary to council suggestions, the housing development will ultimately benefit incomers and not the currently resident / native population
- It was suggested that:
 - The development is illegal
 - There are many existing empty facilities
 - There is no real desire or need for the college
 - The Forest media appears to be unequivocally pro-development
 - The F of Dean MP should be lobbied and made to understand the objections
- Q - The Existing College Building – is there actually anything wrong with it? Does it need replacing?
- The Media – are not printing letters that are not pro-development

The meeting was closed at 10.00pm with thanks to the presenters and all attendees.