

AN OPEN LETTER TO OUR OBJECTORS

Dear All,

With the next meeting of the town council fast approaching I would like to make sure those objectors planning to attend are free of some of the prejudices and misunderstandings that may have inspired their reaction so far. The One Planet Development planning policy is new and detailed and it would be easy, as many have already proved, to misinterpret or misunderstand both our application and the planning policy should the outcome of our application be more important than the criteria on which it should be based. I have therefore summarised a few of the recurring objections/accusations and explained why they are wrong or irrelevant or both:

“YOU JUST WANT TO LIVE ON THE MOUNTAIN”

We can legitimately be accused of wanting to live on the side of the mountain, absolutely, but that's an accusation that can be levelled at anyone who wants to live anywhere. Specifying a location is an unavoidable part of choosing a site and not, in itself, a fatal characteristic of a planning application. It is self-evident and, beyond landscape considerations that should be dealt with separately, irrelevant. If the planning law applies to the application site then, quite logically, the site's location cannot be used to object to the planning application. Indeed, neophobic sentiment would be able to kill the One Planet Development policy instantly if it could selectively apply planning laws because One Planet Developments are typically based in open countryside, typically near people who don't want One Planet Developments in open countryside and typically involve applicants who want to live in the open countryside site they've chosen. In fact, those objecting to us because we want to build an OPD in open countryside, in the exact way the policy allows, should probably be campaigning against the policy rather than those trying to adhere to it.

“YOU DON'T NEED TO LIVE ON THE MOUNTAIN”

We aren't applying for a Rural Enterprise Dwelling; we're applying for a One Planet Development. This is a fundamental point because the need to live on site is critical to both but in completely different ways. According to TAN 6, Rural Enterprise Dwellings must satisfy something called the “functional test” to qualify. This means they must prove “it is essential, for the proper functioning of the enterprise, for one or more workers to be readily available at most times. It should relate to unexpected situations that might arise, for which workers are needed to be on hand outside of normal working hours”. Having started and expanded our business without living on site it would be easy to dismiss our application on these grounds, but apart from the fact that we do pass the functional test because unexpected situations do arise when we're not there that do compromise the proper functioning of the enterprise, it should be noted that One Planet Development proposals do not need to pass the same “functional test”. They just need to prove that living on site makes them a one planet development, as explained in the planning guidance:

“That One Planet Developments in the open countryside can support the minimum food and income needs of their occupants is the main reason that justifies, in planning terms, such developments.”

“Food and income have to be derived from the land based resources of the site. This is the basis of the need to live on site.”

Thus, by already proving our land based business and food production targets are viable (even though there are times when the enterprise isn't functioning properly because we're not there) we have, according to the correct planning policy, confirmed that we qualify to live there. Which is nice.

“EVERYBODY WANTS TO LIVE ON THE MOUNTAIN”

Perhaps they should just get on with it then. We bought the land on the open market and have applied to live on it under a national planning policy. We haven't lobbied or bribed anyone. We haven't done

anything that couldn't have been done by anybody else with the will and determination to chase a better future for themselves and their children and it would be unedifying at best for us to be held back by what is, let's face it, nothing more than jealousy.

And apathy, of course. We have spent the last three and a half years building a business from scratch. We have been on the mountain every day there have been livestock there, including our wedding day and the day our daughter was born (although we did go away for a few days for our honeymoon). We have done it in all weathers and all seasons, regardless of sickness or injury. We have researched, developed, built and adapted all the poultry arks and beehives ourselves, specifically for the prevailing conditions on the farm. We go up there at night during storms to check these poultry arks and beehives. We have spent entire winters carrying thousands of kilos of livestock feed up in a rucksack to avoid damaging the land. We have been shouted at and threatened with enforced eviction by local vigilantes. We have been called tree-hugging hippies to our face and heaven only knows what behind our backs. We have been under military-grade surveillance since buying the land in 2011. We've been reported to almost every local government department you can imagine (none of whom have found any problems that warranted further action as far as we can tell). We have been visited numerous times by planning enforcement officers for numerous reasons (from getting our marriage blessed on the farm to recycling tractor tyres to storing straw) and complied with all their demands for information and action (including the enforcement notice served on our small toilet). We have even been reported to the police (for having a BBQ and a rounders match with our friends and family?!). We are conspicuously despised by our neighbours and their chums and have been repeatedly threatened with legal proceedings for publicly defending ourselves in the face of overt threats. We've even survived a particularly sinister attempt to cut off our main route of access (CORRECTION: we have recently been informed that our main route of access has already been purchased by a prominent objector and that objector has now threatened to use this to try and restrict our access to the site should we be granted planning permission). We smile and wave at all scowlers and prowlers but it makes no difference. They still scowl and prowl. Anyone who didn't know we were trying to build a small farm could easily be forgiven for concluding that we're trying to build a hostel for axe murderers and paedophiles, such are the levels of bitter resistance some people are capable of.

And still we keep going. We have poured time, energy and money into our business and ever since Nikki and Keith Davies suggested living on site we have poured even more time, energy and money into researching and developing a planning application that would justify this goal; because that's what it takes. That's what it takes to prove you can build and sustain a one planet lifestyle in a society that openly despises such efforts. And everybody who wants to live on the mountain in the same way has the same opportunity. If you're prepared to work like a packhorse chasing an unorthodox but simple dream (to become peasant farmers with a sea view) in the face of extreme local prejudice and extremely long odds then you might be able to live on the mountain too, but if you're not prepared to do these things it's probably time to stop getting upset about our attempt to do so.

“YOU CAN'T GROW ANYTHING ON THE MOUNTAIN”

As George Bernard Shaw once said: “People who say it cannot be done should not interrupt those who are doing it.” Truth is we have already grown everything we have said we're going to grow. Yes, we're still being told we can't grow pumpkins up there, even while they're sitting there happily growing away, but surely there must be some sort of limit to the amount of evidence that can be ignored. We've grown them successfully for three years, without the help of any biocidal chemicals, but still people tell us we can't do it. We plant them in Spring and sell them in Autumn, yet the assertions keep coming. They'd swear on the Bible that night was day if they thought it would help them stop us, even while struggling to find a copy in the dark. It's hilarious. Well, apart from the fact that some people might actually be listening to them, some of whom might be capable of influencing our future.

“THERE'S NO ACCESS UP THE MOUNTAIN”

As well as thanking them for originally suggesting that we live on the farm, we also need to thank Nikki and Keith Davies for applying for a major two-storey extension to their holiday home (Bryneithin), because that will, obviously, generate construction traffic along the same road we will use and thus

support the conclusion that the access is fine. On site access will not be a problem either once the grass reinforcement mesh has been laid as the product we have chosen is designed to get heavy traffic in and out of bogs and swamps.

“YOU'VE GOT CARAVANS ON THE MOUNTAIN”

Which are there as a last resort and will all go when we've built the house.

“THE FARM IS AN EYSORE”

We sincerely apologise for any offence our poultry arks, beehives and other business related developments have caused. We *will* disappear into the landscape completely in time, but we can't do it instantly. We can do it in summer quite quickly, and even intend to use ivy to make sure nothing is visible in winter eventually, but it will take a few years.

“SOMETHING ABOUT FLOODING”

Apart from the fact that it is the ubiquity of more-than-one-planet lifestyles in the UK and beyond (including those of most if not all of our objectors) that may well be responsible for the extreme weather events that are becoming more and more common, there is clear evidence that planting trees in upland areas, as we have already done, greatly decreases the amount of water flashing off land during extreme rainfall:

“On average, post-treatment runoff volumes were reduced by 48% and 78% in ungrazed and tree-planted plots relative to the control, although all results varied greatly over the sites. Five years following treatment application, near-surface soil bulk density was reduced and median soil **infiltration rates were 67 times greater in plots planted with trees compared to grazed pasture**. The results illustrate the potential use of upland land management for ameliorating local-scale flood generation...” Marshall *et al.* The impact of rural land management changes on soil hydraulic properties and runoff processes: results from experimental plots in upland UK
<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/hyp.9826/abstract>

Accusations that we are going to make flooding more likely by developing this site as a One Planet Development are therefore as wrong as it's possible to get.

“YOU ARE INCOMPETENT”

I know, I know, none of us have a PhD in mountain horticulture or a degree in one planet living so we can't possibly do it. The same criticism could be levelled at sports stars without degrees in sports science or musicians without music GCSEs but either way we would suggest that anyone who can read our management plan and conclude that we're incompetent probably has a few competency issues of their own. Indeed, as the only people who have spent the last four and a half years exploring every quirk and nuance of this site there is nobody more qualified than us to run it as a one planet development.

“THE ONE PLANET DEVELOPMENT POLICY ISN'T WATERTIGHT”

Again, if people don't agree with the planning policy there's no point blaming us. The planning policy is live and valid and if our application satisfies the extant criteria then objecting to it because you don't like the policy isn't going to get you very far. In the words of the Hausa: “If you do not agree with the phases of the moon, get a ladder and repair it.”

“YOU HAVEN'T CONSULTED THE COMMUNITY”

Aside from the fact that this perceived fault, that refers to just one sentence in one paragraph of a 77 page guidance document, can't actually be defined (the guidance does not define what counts as “consulting the community”), we'd like to point out that we have tried to consult the community (although, we must admit, we did not see this requirement until after we had submitted the planning application - sorry). We'd also like to point out that the “community” does not need to be 100% happy

with everything when “it” is consulted. And we'd finally like to point out that this is a criticism that can only be used once, because, should it be judged fatal for the first application, it could easily be remedied before a second. In fact, all that's really been achieved with this objection is a delay, at best. It's as far from a fatal objection as it's possible to get. Either way the community and the town council have all now been invited to view and comment on our proposals and even to visit the farm for an explanatory tour and we see little point trying to object to our proposal on the same grounds, particularly in light of the fact that it will only work once.

THE OBJECTION PETITION(S)

We can't compete with the tactics being used to get people to sign the petition(s) objecting to our proposal. As Mark Twain once observed: “A lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is still putting on its shoes”. Some people have been told that we're building a normal house rather than an OPD, some that we're building a massive chicken farm that will permanently house 60 adult cockerels, others that Matthew was struck off the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons register and is a blac bloc style anarchist who likes bullying people. Whatever it takes to get them to sign the petition and we can't compete with that. We've offered to put any petitions on our website to present the other side's case, even though some of what they're saying is patently untrue (60 adult cockerels, really?!), but we've not been allowed to have a copy or even take a photograph of the petition text. We're not even allowed to know who organised it. This is just the way some of Newport's “community” behave, of course, but will the Town Council choose to support this behaviour by allowing the petition to mean something?

THE VOTE

The community is clearly divided on our application and I think that would be the fairest conclusion to draw. Which just leaves the planning policy as the deciding factor. We would like the council vote to be about whether our proposal satisfies the planning policy therefore, rather than about whether Newport wants a one planet development? The difference may seem small, but we think it's significant.

In conclusion, we never intended to get involved in a PR war with our objectors, hoping instead that our application would be accurately evaluated against the planning policy to which it relates and supported or rejected accordingly. In retrospect this was foolish, but even though there's no way we can cover every possible wilful or accidental misinterpretation that might be used against our application, we have now addressed some of the most obvious ways and can only hope that's enough to stop them being employed to any effect at the meeting. We'd also like to make it quite clear that we are not going away. As discussed in our previous letter, we are prepared to dedicate the rest of our lives to Newport and we would like to work with the whole town while doing it, but, after all we've been through, we're certainly not going to give up if this offer is rejected. We'll just keep trying to find a way to do it anyway.

Yours faithfully,

Matthew, Charis and Elsa Watkinson