

Planning permission granted for Bangour site

The major redevelopment of Bangour Hospital site to create almost 1000 new homes has been given the green light by a meeting of West Lothian Council's Planning Committee.

Planning permission in principle was voted through by 12 to 6.

It begins a lengthy process which will bring the builders back to council for each phase of major redevelopment of the site. The backing also comes with a lengthy set of conditions on detail of the work that must be done, traffic calming and elements of the proposed development, including retail.

It also raises big questions about the potential knock-on effects on the surrounding transport and roads and rail infrastructure.

It condemned some of the listed buildings on the site but will also preserve the most important including the church and the recreation hall which will be incorporated into a new primary school for the area.

All at the meeting were left in no doubt the change that the full implementation of plans by Ambassador Group will bring to what remains a largely under-developed and rural hinterland north of Livingston.

Planners questioned the developers proposals to build 998 units on the site- only around 90 would be incorporated into existing listed buildings . The Local Development Plan details

the site should take no more than 550 housing units and argues that to almost double the development size will mean the loss of 7000 trees.

Describing details of the proposal Bob Evans for the developers, said there are around 36,000 trees on the site but only one third are original the remainder are later "plantation" style growth. For all trees removed new would be replanted on the site.







L-R Cllr Charles Kennedy, Cllr Harry Cartmill and Cllr William Boyle

David Gaffney of the Ambassador Group described the application as a milestone for the masterplan and hailed the potential economic input into the county from its development.

The developers contend that development is financially unviable unless a lot of homes are built.

At the meeting with the planning committee they were less rigid, pointing to a flexible approach that would be governed by existing conditions as each of the phases of the development move on.

But it was the numbers and the extent to which the plan outstripped the Local Development Plan which brought most comment on the site itself.

It was clear too the weight of the decision on the committee as several councillors raised family and emotional connections to the site. It was clear there was a sense of making the right decision for the long term.

Councillor Harry Cartmill, one of Bathgate's Labour councillors, whose mother worked as a wartime nurse in the hospital said he had very deep concerns about the proposals.

He said: "Parking in the town is a constant issue for myself and the other councilors in Bathgate. We are going to be inundated if we are seen to approve this knowing its knock-on effects. I don't think we are doing our job."

He added that he had already questioned the value of Local Development Plan and whether it was worth the paper it was written on. "Yet again we are ripping it up," he added.

Councillor Willie Boyle, (SNP) also Bathgate said the developers had got it right to see site developed and buildings saved.

But he added: "At 998 units it's a real challenge given what's in the local plan. I don't blame the developer for having a

go. He's got a bottom line to look after. It's a big ask from us as a committee to take a decision. We either have to write a blank cheque or take a great leap of faith and I'm not sure we are best placed to do that at this point."

Councillor Bruce Fairbairn said: "I think this is a great opportunity for this council to bring West Lothian further into the 21st century. Nothing this size comes without challenges so we should rise to this challenge. "

Bathgate Conservative councillor, Charles Kennedy, said he had great concerns about giving carte blanche to the proposal adding that serious consideration had to be given to the Local Development Plan: "otherwise there was no point in doing it."

He reserved more scorn for roads officers who had offered no advice other than what he described as "suck it and see" about potential traffic problems. He said he had serious concerns about traffic and parking and suggested: " If we are not going to manage that by enforcement and changing law then we have to consider our residents. "

Councillor Kennedy said he welcomed the development and the saving of listed buildings but wondered "if the cost was too high."

Council leader, Lawrence Fitzpatrick, moved an amendment against the proposal on the grounds of its size as per the Local Development Plan, the effect of tree removal and significant impact on traffic and rail infrastructure.

It was seconded by Councillor Stuart Borrowman who aired concerns about the "low bar" set on the demolition of valuable listed buildings, compared to previous a situation in Armadale where a very much higher bar had been set by planners.

After the meeting local Conservative councillor, Chris Horne, said: " The development gets the first significant hurdle out

of the way to be able to save listed buildings on a well-loved site, whilst seeing a meaningful development. There are major pressures that could come with traffic and infrastructure, but I believe we have enough safeguards in place to proceed with caution.”

Speaking after the meeting Gordon Coster, managing director of Ambassador Group’s Developments Division said: “We are very pleased by the decision made by the planning committee, it has been many years in the making to reach this point. We are incredibly excited to progress to detailed plans to bring this landmark development to fruition and give new life to such a prominent piece of West Lothian’s history.

“Preserving and honouring the history of Bangour Village is of upmost importance to us, and will continue to be a key consideration as we move forward. As we transform the site from its derelict and decaying state, we are committed to ensuring that we are sympathetic to its origins and maintain the character of the village – not to mention remembering some of the great people who have made it such a cherished and iconic location.

“We will continue to work with our partners and West Lothian Council over the coming months as we progress with detailed plans for the different phases of the development.”

by Stuart Somerville Local Democracy Reporter. The Local Democracy Reporting Service (LDRS) is a public service news agency : funded by the BBC, provided by the local news sector, and used by qualifying partners. Local Democracy Reporters cover top-tier local authorities and other public service organisations.