

Anger as Scottish Government backs development of hillside war memorial site

People in a West Lothian town have vowed to stand up to plans to build homes on a memorial field where dozens of old soldiers had their ashes scattered.

The Scottish Government backed plans to develop the hillside site which was once home to Bathgate's war memorial – despite widespread objections including from the community council.

And Labour Councillor Harry Cartmill, who led the opposition to the plan to desecrate what is considered as a hill of heroes, told the Local Democracy Reporting Service: “I stand with my constituents as we fight this outrage tooth and nail – we won't give up without our voices being listened to – this is not North Korea!”.

Until 1995, the land off Napier Avenue was home to Bathgate's 1925 built war memorial. Beech trees were planted on the site at the time and many who had served in the First and Second World Wars had their ashes scattered around the trees.

The memorial also commemorates those lost in the Korean war in the early 1950s.

The original memorial site was built to include six semi-detached cottages – Veterans' Cottages – for badly disabled veterans and their wives and families.

TM Land Purchases won their appeal earlier this year and this week the Council's Development Management committee will be given official notification that the firm has planning permission in principle to build homes on the site.

Quite apart from the emotional upset caused by the plan being granted permission, neighbours of the site have long argued that the steep hills, narrow streets and access points make it impractical and dangerous to build more homes on the site.

There are fears that up to fifty homes could be crammed onto the hill.

Following two public meetings in the town the community council now has a twin track strategy.

It aims to establish once and for all that the land was gifted to the town as Common Good and should never have been sold by West Lothian Council.

It will also reinvestigate an earlier rejection of development on the site by the Scottish Government because of the unsuitability of access.

Councillor Cartmill said that a recent meeting in the town had been "filled with anger" at the plans.

The latest meeting Councillor Cartmill said was to: "to focus on what could be done to fight the Scottish Government Reporter's dreadful snub to democracy and his gross disregard to the memory of the greatest generation and to the natural environment of this site – all now sanctioned by Scottish Government Ministers."

The community council is now combing parish records to establish proof that the land was gifted to the town in the 1920s as the site of the war memorial.

A Freedom of Information request has also been sent to West Lothian Council requesting details of an initial plan to build

on the site which was rejected by a Reporter of the Scottish Government's Division of Environmental and Planning Appeals (DPEA).

Councillor Cartmill said that the first DPEA decision had branded the site as unsuitable for housing.

The town's war memorial was moved down into town to a new site next to St John's Church in May 1995 as part of the BBC's Challenge Anneka programme after it was realised that the steep hillside, and narrow roads were making it increasingly difficult for visitors to access the site.

The same logic should now be applied to the housing plans, say objectors.

Councillor Cartmill said there was anger in town that the council rushed to secure a Section 75 agreement with developers, a guarantee that money will flow into council coffers for each home built on the site.

"The feeling was it was underhand and again grossly undemocratic – another FOI will be sent to the council for all details" , he said.

The initial TM Land Purchases plan was refused by the council in January before that decision was overturned a few months later by a DPEA Reporter.

The councillor added: "We were all angered that West Lothian Council's Highways Engineer who attended the Development Management Meeting admitted (as per the minute of the meeting) that he hadn't even personally visited the site – the Reporter used his flawed judgement to somehow say the entrance / exit was suitable, which it's clear to all who take time to visit, is grossly inadequate in width and crucially location."

By Stuart Sommerville, Local Democracy Reporter