

The application seeks planning permission for a proposed compound area containing an electrolyser, an electrical input container, a grid entry unit, a hydrogen storage vessel and substation adjacent to the university sports field. The compound will be fenced off by a 2m high wire fence to restrict access. The proposal is for temporary period and is to be removed and all land reinstated by June 2020.

The site lies within Grade II Registered Park and Garden and within a Landscape Maintenance Area defined on the Local Development Framework Proposals Map.

**The 8 week period for the determination of this application expired on 29<sup>th</sup> August but the applicant has agreed an extension to the statutory period until 30<sup>th</sup> September 2018.**

### **RECOMMENDATION**

**PERMIT subject to conditions relating to the following:-**

- 1. Time limit.**
- 2. Removal of the development by the end of June 2020 and the land reinstated.**

### **Reason for Recommendation**

The proposal is, in part, inappropriate development within the Green Belt. It will result in a small degree of detriment to the visual appearance of the area which is within a Grade II Registered Parkland and will affect the openness of the Green Belt to some degree. However the proposal is linked to an important research initiative of wider public environmental benefit and it is concluded that the benefits derived from the development outweigh the harm identified particularly when borne in mind that development is only required for a temporary agreed period until the end of June 2020 and will be subsequently removed from the site in its entirety. As such it is considered that the very special circumstances required to justify approval of the scheme exist in this case.

### **Statement as to how the Local Planning Authority has worked in a positive and proactive manner in dealing with the planning application**

The proposal is considered to be a sustainable form of development in compliance with the provisions of the National Planning Policy Framework and no amendments were considered necessary.

### **Key Issues**

The proposed site compound area measures a total of 20m by 20m. Within the compound area are 2 containers measuring 9.1m in length and 2m in width with an overall height of 2.9m. A third container is proposed measuring 6.1m in length and 2m in width with a height of around 3m measured from ground level and a maximum overall height of 5.7m when the vertical pipework is taken into consideration. A cylindrical hydrogen storage vessel is also proposed with a diameter of 1.6 metres and an overall height of 5 metres. The substation, which is considerably smaller than the containers, is located in the corner adjoining the access point into the compound.

Various underground pipeline connections to the compound are also to be made including water, electricity and gas supply alongside a waste outlet. These connections run from the compound in a south easterly direction behind the existing University estate buildings and toward the road junction forming part of the University estate ring road.

The site lies within the Grade II Registered Park and Garden at Keele Hall. It also lies within a Landscape Maintenance Area defined on the Local Development Framework Proposals Map. The site is presently a grassed area of open land to the north of the University Sports Hall but not considered part of a sports field which is to further to the north and north east.

As background, the University submits that the proposal is in connection with an experimental project which has been designed to investigate the potential for hydrogen gas (as a zero carbon gas) to be used as an alternative to fossil fuel use. When burned hydrogen doesn't produce carbon dioxide (CO<sup>2</sup>) but only water and heat as by-products. The initiative is linked to Central Government commitments to reduce UK CO<sup>2</sup> emissions by 2050. The University states that currently 80% of UK homes are heated by gas, and heat accounts for a third of UK CO<sup>2</sup> emissions overall. The proposal is stated to be a practical experiment into decarbonising heat where there is currently little research and seeks to establish the potential for blending hydrogen into the natural gas supply to reduce CO<sup>2</sup> emissions. It is a one year trial on the University campus private gas network and will help to determine the level of hydrogen which can be added to the gas network safely, without any changes required to consumer appliances. Industry utility providers are providing support to the proposal in collaboration with Keele University. The results of the trial could provide evidence for a trial on a public network and a wider role out.

The key issues in the determination of the development to consider are:-

1. The appropriateness of the development in Green Belt terms
2. Is the design of the development, including the impact on the special character of grade II Listed historic parkland, and on the landscape as a whole, acceptable?
3. If inappropriate development, are there any very special circumstances to justify approval?

#### 1. The appropriateness of the development in green belt terms?

The proposal includes structures brought to site which are similar to large shipping storage containers but will include fixed ground utility connections.

The National Planning Policy Framework (the Framework) represents the most up to date policy with respect to the Green Belt. The Framework advises that a local planning authority should regard the construction of new buildings as inappropriate in the Green Belt subject to a number of exceptions. It also advises that certain other forms of development are also not inappropriate in the Green Belt provided they preserve its openness and do not conflict with the purposes of including land within it, including engineering operations.

Certain elements of the proposal could be described as a type of engineering operation – particularly with respect to underground utility pipework connection. However the compound equipment and storage containers above ground would be defined as buildings and are not considered to be an appropriate form of development within the Green Belt as they do not fall into any of the exceptions identified within the Framework.

Very special circumstances are therefore required to justify the proposal and will be considered at the end of the report.

#### 2. Is the design of the development, including the impact on the special character of the setting the Grade II historic parkland, and on the landscape as a whole, acceptable?

The Framework states that good design is a key aspect of sustainable development, is indivisible from good planning, and should contribute positively to making places better for people.

Core Spatial Strategy (CSS) Policy CSP1 states that new development should be well designed to respect the character, identity and context of Newcastle and Stoke-on-Trent's unique townscape and landscape and in particular, the built heritage, its historic environment, its rural setting and the settlement pattern created by the hierarchy of centres. It states that new development should protect important and longer distance views of historic landmarks and rural vistas and contribute positively to an area's identity and heritage (both natural and built) in terms of scale, density, layout, use of appropriate vernacular materials for buildings and surfaces and access. The policy is consistent with the Framework.

Policy N19 of the Local Plan states the Council will seek to maintain the high quality and characteristic landscapes in Landscape Maintenance Areas as shown on the Proposals Map. Where development

can be permitted, it will be expected to contribute to this aim. Within these areas it will be necessary to demonstrate that development will not erode the character or harm the quality of the landscape.

When determining planning applications, local planning authorities are required to assess the significance of a heritage asset and the impact of the proposed development upon the setting of a heritage asset which include Registered Parks and Gardens.

CSS Policy CPS2 seeks to preserve and enhance the historic character and appearance of the Borough. Paragraph 192 of the Framework states that in determining applications, local planning authorities should take account of:

- a) the desirability of sustaining and enhancing the significance of heritage assets and putting them to viable uses consistent with their conservation;
- b) the positive contribution that conservation of heritage assets can make to sustainable communities including their economic vitality; and
- c) the desirability of new development making a positive contribution to local character and distinctiveness.

At paragraph 193 the Framework indicates that when considering the impact of a proposed development on the significance of a designated heritage asset, great weight should be given to the asset's conservation (and the more important the asset, the greater the weight should be). This is irrespective of whether the potential harm amounts to substantial harm, total loss or less than substantial harm to its significance.

Three of the proposed structures within the compound will have an external appearance similar to shipping containers placed around a cylindrical shaped hydrogen storage vessel. All of which, including ancillary equipment proposed within the compound area, are to be painted green.

The site is in a secluded position to the rear of the University sports hall. The applicant has indicated that they have selected this location in order to limit its impact on the most significant long distance views of the campus and to avoid listed buildings and other important buildings in order to reduce any significant detriment to the appearance of the campus.

However it is has to be acknowledged that it is located within Registered Park and Garden and the proposed development will be seen from views across the park given the slightly elevated position of the land giving rise to some harm. It is not, however, in a particularly sensitive part of the Park and Garden, being located within the sports field environs, and is relatively small in scale and as such it is considered that the harm arising would be less than substantial. In such circumstances the Framework (at paragraph 196) indicates that the less substantial harm to the significance of the designated heritage asset should be weighed against the public benefits of the proposal.

It has been suggested that the compound would be slightly less conspicuous if it was sited closer to the rear of the sports centre rather than on the further edge of the former sports field. Whilst this is accepted it would still, in that location, result in less than substantial harm and the applicant is reluctant to do this is due to engineering practicality.

Overall taking into account that the proposal is to be a recessive green colour and is of a temporary nature, and in the absence of other significantly better alternatives within the campus, the public benefits arising from the development are considered to outweigh the limited harm to heritage and the landscape and is considered to be acceptable.

### 3. Are there any very special circumstances to justify approval of the development?

Paragraph's 143 and 144 of the Framework state that inappropriate development is, by definition, harmful to the Green Belt and should not be approved except in very special circumstances. When considering any planning application, local planning authorities should ensure that substantial weight is given to any harm to the Green Belt. 'Very special circumstances' will not exist unless the potential harm to the Green Belt by reason of inappropriateness, and any other harm resulting from the proposal, is clearly outweighed by other considerations.

The Framework also advises Planning Authorities that when located in the Green Belt, elements of many renewable energy projects will often comprise inappropriate development. In such cases developers will need to demonstrate very special circumstances if projects are to proceed. Such very special circumstances may include the wider environmental benefits associated with increased production of energy from renewable sources.

Paragraph 148 of the Framework goes on to say that the planning system should support the transition to a low carbon future in a changing climate. It should help to: shape places in ways that contribute to radical reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, minimise vulnerability and improve resilience; encourage the reuse of existing resources, including the conversion of existing buildings; and support renewable and low carbon energy and associated infrastructure.

In terms of identifiable harm, the development does result in some impact on the openness of the Green Belt by virtue of its size and position relative to what is presently a large area of open land within the campus as well as less than substantial harm to a heritage asset. However the development proposed is only required for a temporary period to allow an experimental research project to take place which aims to produce green energy.

Taking into account advice contained within the Framework, the proposal, although constituting inappropriate development within the Green Belt is linked to an initiative of wider public environmental benefit. Overall these are considered to be very special circumstances that justify approval of the scheme having regard to the overriding public benefit identified set against the harm to openness of the Green Belt and the impact on the heritage asset whilst bearing in mind that the development is required for temporary agreed period only.

## **APPENDIX**

### **Policies and proposals in the approved development plan relevant to this decision:-**

[Newcastle-under-Lyme and Stoke-on-Trent Core Spatial Strategy \(CSS\) 2006 – 2026](#)

Policy ASP6: Rural Area Spatial Policy  
Policy CSP1: Design Quality  
Policy CSP2: Historic Environment  
Policy CSP3: Sustainability and Climate Change

[Newcastle-under-Lyme Local Plan \(NLP\) 2011](#)

Policy S3: Development within the Green Belt  
Policy N17: Landscape Character – General Considerations  
Policy N19: Landscape Maintenance Areas

### **Other Material Considerations include:**

[National Planning Policy Framework](#) (July 2018)  
[Planning Practice Guidance](#) (PPG) (March 2014)

Supplementary Planning Guidance/Documents

[Newcastle-under-Lyme and Stoke-on-Trent Urban Design Guidance Supplementary Planning Document \(2010\)](#)

Relevant Planning History

None relevant.

Views of Consultees

The **Conservation Area Working Party** has no objections but ask if the proposal can be located closer to the sports hall away from the edge of the site and views from Boggs Cottages as well as querying how temporary the proposal is.

The **Conservation and Urban Design Service** comment that the development is acceptable given the temporary nature and the fact that it is around the sports centre and fields, which is not a significant part of the listed parkland setting. However it is still within the parkland and the proposed development will be seen from views across the park given the slightly elevated land. It is suggested compound would be less conspicuous if it was sited closer to the rear of the sports centre rather than on the further edge of the former sports field.

The **Gardens Trust** acknowledges the proposal but do not wish to comment.

The views of **Keele Parish Council, Staffordshire Gardens Parks Trust** and **Historic England** have been sought, but they have not provided comment by the due date of the 31<sup>st</sup> July. As such it is assumed that they have no comments to make.

Representations

None received

Applicant's/Agent's submission

Application forms and indicative plans have been submitted along with a Planning/Heritage Statement. The application documents are available for inspection at the Guildhall and via the following link <http://publicaccess.newcastle-staffs.gov.uk/online-applications/plan/18/00456/FUL>

Background papers

Planning files referred to  
Planning Documents referred to

Date report prepared

29<sup>th</sup> August 2018.