

Local Member Questions to Cabinet regarding the plans for the Snibston site 13th December 2016

Cllr Terri Eynon, County Councillor for Coalville

It is 16 months since the closure of the Snibston Main Gallery. It is nearly three years since that closure was proposed in the 2014/15 Medium Term Financial Strategy. I am pleased that Councillors are, at last, being allowed to see a rudimentary strategy for the development and ongoing use of the Snibston site and adjoining Country Park.

SUMMARY

The closure of Snibston Discovery Museum has left Coalville with a town centre blighted by buildings at risk and derelict former industrial land. This is a risk to the people who live in the town, the businesses who wish to attract visitors to the town, the District Council who need to see development in the town centre and, ultimately, a risk to the landowner, Leicestershire County Council, who are responsible for the ongoing maintenance of the Scheduled Ancient Monument.

Residents in my Division and representatives of the local heritage societies do not, on the whole, object, in principle, to the proposed development and ongoing use of the Snibston site. They are concerned that this document promises much, fails to address the risks and misses the opportunities for the site. They are concerned that this plan will fail to deliver.

As a Local Member, I am concerned that Cabinet Members, well aware that 'something must be done' about the Snibston site, may believe that this plan is 'something'. I realise that Cabinet Members have many more important issues on their agenda. I would like to suggest that this small but irritating issue is a microcosm of some greater principles.

If this Authority cannot work hand-in-hand with *one* District Council and the volunteer groups of *one* town to build an integrated strategy for *one* derelict building site, what hope is there for bigger projects such as the 'Lightbulb Project', 'Recovery Hubs' 'Help to Live at Home' and the NHS 'Sustainability and Transformation Plan'?

My comments and questions below have been informed by local residents and heritage experts. I hope Cabinet Members will recognise my comments and questions below as a genuine cross-party attempt to alert them to the risks and avert further embarrassment for this administration.

RISKS AND OPPORTUNITIES

I note and am concerned by the *known* risks that may jeopardised this so-called master-plan: -

- The financial sustainability depends on generating £1M from selling part of the site for housing, being the events arena, coach park and site of the former Gallery building.

Will the sale of the land be ring-fenced for this proposed capital development? If not, where will the £1.4M come from?

- The Snibston land has not been put forward to NWLDC Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment (SHLAA) for housing. It has been submitted as employment land. It is not in the NWLDC draft Local Plan, currently under inspection.

When will the proposal be submitted to NWLDC SHLAA as housing land?

- The land was gifted by the NCB to the people for leisure purposes and has an existing covenant in place.

Will the 'commercial view' taken by the NCB include the possibility of selling the land for housing, not ring-fencing the money for local leisure development and allowing the Authority to use the capital receipts for other priorities? What legal challenge might ensue in such a case?

- The site includes a Scheduled Ancient Monument (SAM). Leicestershire County Council has a statutory responsibility to maintain the SAM.
- Snibston is one of the five most significant sites in the UK associated with the coal mining industry. The overall site contains some extremely important individual buildings. Snibston is one of a very small number of former mining sites that stand apart because they represent complete or more or less complete collieries. See http://www.leics.gov.uk/snibston_colliery_cmpfinal.pdf p34
- The closure of the Museum was planned three years ago. Historic England has not yet been assured of the acceptability of the Plan.

This document makes scant reference to this Authority's statutory responsibility for the SAM. There is no strategy for managing this responsibility and its attendant risks. There is a complete lack of operational management or access information. What is the visitor centre? Where is it for? Who will visit it? Who will manage it?

I am even more concerned that a number of major risks, liabilities and responsibilities have not had so much as a mention:-

- A Report of the Director of Museums and Art Galleries (6 Jan 1984) held at the records office (document DE7971/37) refers to the 1984 "Development Feasibility Study into Snibston Museum" conducted by Colin Buchan and Partners. The Director refers to this Feasibility Study on pages 356-380 regarding "the principal event area on the Rexco site" (para 1.2.9). The Director notes (1.2.10) that:-
"The Rexco site is contaminated with phenols and tars from earlier processing: the consultants recommend that the site be back filled with 1.5m of clean colliery waste and surfaced. This will render the site acceptable for events, but buildings and services which would disturb the backfill and the contaminated ground should be avoided."

Has the original survey report been relocated by this Authority? If not, will the proposed housing land been re-surveyed for stability and contamination prior to sale? Does the expected income from sale take these problems into account?

- The Scheduled Ancient Monument is on Historic England's 'buildings at risk' register. On its website, Historic England note that "Leicestershire County Council has completed a major scheme of repairs under Scheduled Monument Consent. However, further repairs are necessary and the future management of the colliery is uncertain."

How does this Authority intend to budget for these 'further repairs'? What repairs are still required?

- The Heritage zone includes the Scheduled Ancient Monument, Sheepy Magna Wheelwrights Shop and the Century Theatre. It arbitrarily excludes the mineral line, museum stores, workshops, offices and buildings adjacent to Ashby Road including the control room, medical centre and lamp room. These buildings are integral to the historic mine. There is no mention of the Coalville Signal box at all.

Will these contextual buildings be retained as part of the Colliery Heritage Area? Are the costs of maintaining these buildings included in the budget? How and when will these buildings be accessed by visitors?

- The Heritage Zone includes the Century Theatre.

What future does this Authority envisage for the Century Theatre? Will it continue to be developed as a living, breathing arts venue? What is the potential income? What future liabilities might need to be anticipated?

- The strategy forecasts an income of £160,000 from the car-park and visitor centre. This is a net income of £438 a day. The former Museum café did not bring in such sums. The strategy does not include any reference to access into the historic buildings, even on a special event basis. Coalville Park already includes a free-to-use exercise area with outdoor fitness equipment. Coalville Urban Forest Park provides free-to-use adult adventure play equipment. The Country Park is already crossed by cycle trails and, for visitors arriving by car, is not far from Hick's Lodge, also in the National Forest.

What is the unique selling point of this attraction? How will this Authority market the SAM as a visitor attraction? Why else will visitors come and how much will they be willing to pay? Will visitors, currently using the park, fishing lake, golf-range and theatre, now be expected to pay to park? How much of this income will be ring-fenced for the maintenance and development of the 'Heritage zone/country park'?

Who will be the operator of this site? LCC Property, LCC Museums or an external operator?

- The "Play Area" is referenced on the Plan.

Do the Council intend reinstating the Snibston Discovery Museum play equipment?

- The proposed access through the SAM from Ashby Road may cause congestion and safety issues by conflicting with the existing road calming features. Public safety of traffic running through the site was a concern in 1987 – 1991. There is a risk of anti-social behaviour on the SAM/heritage zone if these gates weren't be open at night for Century Theatre use. Highways have not been consulted regarding the proposed access via the SAM but only regarding the residential access.

There appear to be two accesses - the existing and the new Ashby Road access across the SAM. What are the risks, benefits and costs of adding the new Ashby Road access compared with retaining the existing access (Chiswell Drive) as the sole access?

- The access along the mineral line is something the local community have wanted to see for a long time. Security issues have not been addressed in relation to this (or any other) access.

The mineral line access is marked as 'potential'. How could this popular town-centre improvement be made more likely?

- This document includes no reference to engagement with local stakeholders.

Will the County Council be working with local heritage organisations including the Coalville Heritage Society and the volunteer Snibston Mine and Park Guardians (formerly Friends of Snibston) to develop the heritage trails and interpretation displays?

How will these heritage trails connect with the work being done by the NWLDC 'Choose Coalville' team to promote town centre heritage?

- NWLDC is currently engaging with residents on a plan to relocate the Hermitage Leisure Centre to Coalville town centre.

Has this Authority considered offering to relocate the NWLDC Hermitage Leisure Centre in Coalville on the Snibston site as a means of increasing footfall and creating heritage, leisure and cultural zone close to the town centre?

- The grassed cricket/football area at Coalville Town Football Club lies adjacent to the Snibston site but is only accessible via Owen Street.

Has this Authority considered connecting the Snibston site to the Coalville Town football ground? This would provide easier access for visiting team fans, retain the land for recreation purposes and provide regular customers for the car-park. What institutional barriers stand in the way of such a plan?

- The Scheduled Ancient Monument, a Building at Risk, blights the physical development of Coalville Town Centre. NWLDC are currently working to improve its townscape heritage.

If officers seriously believe this is a sustainable master plan, could this administration go forward with the Visitor Centre, interpretation work and Heritage Area first? This would make the housing land more attractive and could even increase its value for sale.

What institutional barriers prevent LCC and NWLDC from working together on a fresh bid for heritage lottery funding for this scheme?

I thank Members of the Cabinet for being prepared to answer these questions.

Terri Eynon CC