

AGENDA 16, Enc xiv) JOINT LETTER WITH LONGHIRST PC

SUBMIT TO NCC [CMLAC? Countryside? Planning Enforcement?]

Public rights of way across the former open cast site at Potland (15/01530/VARCCM and 21/01149/VARCCM)

Both Longhirst Parish Council and Ashington Town Council are writing to request that Northumberland County Council reinstates the Public Rights of Way and Bridleways at Potland Park, including reopening the entrances, as intended.

Application 21/01149/VARCCM stated,

“There would be no impact on the public rights of way which have been reinstated as part of the restoration of the site and the move towards a more nature conservation focussed after-use of the site could have potential positive impacts on the attractiveness of the area for walkers and cyclists through the provision of additional paths through the site.”

Prior to its use as an opencast site by UK Coal, the land was countryside/farmland with public footpaths and bridleways crossing it. As part of the planning approval given in 2015 for the opencast site a condition was placed that the land and rights of ways must be reinstated once the mining ceased. This was later varied in 2021 to allow for habitat / environmental improvements to be made to the site, with slightly diverted PROWs and Bridleways.

Both councils supported the opencast site, recognising the continued employment that the extraction of coal and brick shale would offer; we also welcomed the subsequent variation allowing for improved habitat creation on the site; nor are we opposed to altering the route of the PROWs/Bridleways.

The site closed in 2017 and restoration was originally meant to be completed that same year. However no work has been done to carry out the planning condition to reopen these routes or to restore the site, neither against the original plans, nor the revised plans of 2021:

The 2021 Restoration Plan submitted as part of the application that was agreed set out the following:

- A network of public footpaths and bridleways will be constructed in and around the restored site as part of the rehabilitation scheme. Two footpaths will be upgraded to bridleway within the restored site and all other footpaths and bridleways will be additional to those existing prior to the site working.
- A variety of shorter and longer circular routes will be capable of being used by walkers, while two longer bridleways will pass around each part of the restored site.
- Where appropriate, bridleways will be constructed using re-cycled aggregates, as available with 150mm – 225mm of consolidated sub-base material. Should a topping layer be required, the bridleways will be surfaced with crushed limestone, crushed concrete or road planings to give a usable surface of 3 metres in width.
- Public footpaths will be a grass surface or mown strip within fields and woodland and, for the most part, will coincide with the maintenance access routes.
- Culverts of appropriate sizes will be installed where watercourses or drainage ditches have to be crossed.
- Where these are necessary, the boundaries will have stiles or bridle gates installed, depending upon whether they are footpaths or bridleways.

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Despite numerous contact with the County Council officers, no progress has been made to have these re-opened nor any definitive date been given when these will re-open. The situation remains that:

- PROWs are blocked by fencing
- bridleways have been left overgrown and therefore unusable
- entrances are blocked by hay bales

Both councils contend that blocking the entrance in the current manner and preventing access to the bridleways this long after the closure of the opencast site is not acceptable.