

Morpeth Boundary Review Consultation

Response by Mitford Parish Council

Summary

The Town Council's proposal does not appear to have any evidential backing and is strongly opposed by Mitford Parish Council.

Residents of affected areas are already paying an approximate equivalent to the Morpeth Band D charge after allowing for the fees paid to residents' service companies which are typically £149 pa. These companies will not have their functions transferred to Morpeth.

Mitford Parish Council wonder if the proposal has been driven by the failure to secure the adoption of a Business Improvement District for the town centre?

The application risks the green belt status of the open fields between the A1 and Morpeth and consequent development in the green corridor of the Wansbeck valley.

The effect of the application is to severely damage the relationships between the constituent local councils for the *Morpeth Neighbourhood Plan* at a time when the *Plan* is approaching the time for review.

If the County Council decides to accede to the request, then Mitford seek provision in the order for half the local council element of the Council Tax (or its replacement) for housing development on The Site to be paid to Mitford.

Definitions

Mitford = Mitford Parish Council

Morpeth = Morpeth Town Council

MNP = The current Morpeth Neighbourhood Plan

The Site = Land to the west of Lancaster park (currently with outline consent for 150 domestic dwelling under permission reference 16/00078/OUT)

Residents = Future Residents of The Site

Background

Mitford's research shows that something in the order of 642 housing units have already been constructed within the MNP area and a further 2099 have outline consent. Of those 1533 are within Morpeth, 302 of which have been delivered.

This application has come forward from Morpeth when the application for a *Business Improvement District* failed when put to a vote of the businesses. As far as can be discerned the majority of Morpeth's discretionary expenditure is directed towards the town centre. It seems reasonable therefore to assume that the cherry-picking of new housing sites around Morpeth is to obtain the revenue from those homes. It is likely that if those homes are transferred into Morpeth's area, then the Town Council will incur almost no expenditure in those estates as the residents are required to pay annual charges into a management company.

There is then an ambiguity in Morpeth's position – on the one hand they want a boundary change to incorporate the Site because it is fair (to use Morpeth's word) that the prospective residents should be within the town (a summary of their position) yet on the other hand Morpeth consistently oppose development of the Site.

Financial Considerations - Revenue Impact

The Revenue impact of ongoing and planned housing development by council with: -

- (a) no change to boundaries
- (b) proposed changes to boundaries

is shown below

No boundary changes

In 2019/2020, Mitford's Band D charge was £33.04, and Morpeth's was £117.96.

Not all the units would pay the full amount as some may be in lower or higher bands and there would be various reliefs to be considered. Mitford asked the County Council if there was an indicative figure used in such circumstances to give estimates of future income but was advised there was no such figure.

Using a figure of 75% as an estimate then the extra income from the site for Mitford would be £3717 using 2019 data, a 45% increase in income enabling improvements within the parish.

With the requested boundary change

Again, using the 75% estimate Morpeth would receive an extra £13270 using 2019 data. The final version of Morpeth's budget for 2019/2020 does not appear to be on-line but the total income in 2018/2019 was £582328 so using that as a guide, the Site would only provide an extra 2% for Morpeth.

This small figure pales into absolute insignificance when compared to the additional revenue that Morpeth will receive from all developments within their existing boundary, using the same methodology the estimated revenue is £135,625 and represents an extra 23.3%. The tax transfer from Mitford, for that is what the proposed boundary change really means, is insignificant to Morpeth but will have a major impact on Mitford and our ongoing efforts to both address issues in the parish and improve the environment for our residents.

Representation

The figures in August 2019 show there are 389 Electors in Mitford with 6 councillors, and 11,441 in Morpeth with 15 councillors. Without considering any boundary changes, there are 65 residents per councillor in Mitford compared to 763 in Morpeth. It is clear Mitford residents enjoy considerably superior representation compared to Morpeth residents, a level of representation that residents of the Lancaster Park development will benefit from.

Community Facilities

The Site (west of Lancaster Park) will have linkage to Mitford Village via country park footpaths and cycle paths. There is a pub, church and village hall within Mitford. It is unlikely that Morpeth will provide such facilities near to the Site given the paucity of provision on the established sites within Morpeth (Stobhill, Lancaster Park and Loansdean being examples), indeed Morpeth are planning to remove a community facility at Storey Park. In contrast Mitford have invested heavily in recent years with improvements to the village hall and the environment in and around Mitford and are continuing to do so.

The development is little more than a kilometre walk from Mitford once the links with the development have been opened whereas the walking distance to Morpeth facilities is over two kilometres or three by car. It is a pleasant walk or cycle to Mitford compared to negotiating busy roads to get to Morpeth. The development is clearly part of the Mitford neighbourhood and we contend that residents are likely to make more use of the facilities in Mitford than those in Morpeth.

Fairness Argument

Morpeth say it is fairness which drives their request. It is difficult to understand just who they expect to be part of their area using this argument. Are they saying that the entire hinterland of the services located within Morpeth should be paying towards the Town Council's costs?

Like all towns, businesses in Morpeth are changing and will continue to do so. Service centres are becoming more leisure centred with the escalating effect of internet and home-shopping. What therefore does the Town Council provide at a subsidised cost?

They have produced no surveys on the usage to the park to demonstrate significant use by residents from outlying estates. Play areas on new estates will be maintained by the resident's service companies as will amenity areas. Existing amenity land is maintained by the County Council or direct by residents.

Had Morpeth identified projects of benefit to residents within say 8 kilometres of the Town Centre then it could have approached local councils and others to discuss collaborative working. No such approaches have been made.

Boundary and Green Belt Considerations

The current boundary north of the B6343 follows a deep wooded ravine which is the western edge of Scotch Gill Woods, this is a very clear, firm and long-standing boundary. To the west lie open fields, part of the green belt, to the north is the site of the housing development. The proposed boundary follows the A1 and the B6343 and encompasses both the development and the open fields, including the proposed country park. Placing this green space within Morpeth will encourage developers to challenge its green belt status and risk uncontrolled development in the Wansbeck valley. This would open the door to challenges on the status of the land to the south between High House Road and the A1 and risk Morpeth expanding all the way to the A1. Nobody wants this, not even Morpeth, but this could be the consequence of approving this boundary change. The best way to protect this green space is to keep it part of Mitford and the rural west.

MNP Considerations

The MNP is built on co-operation and trust between the five participating councils. It is correct to say that technically any boundary change will not affect the MNP. That is a very legalistic approach and ignores the cooperative work which went into the current MNP.

It is generally recognised that some aspects of the MNP have not worked as had been anticipated. If the Plan is to retain its importance as part of the overall Development Plan, then co-operation between all the local councils will be needed as the Plan comes up to its first review. It is naïve to expect such cooperation to continue if a boundary change is imposed on one or more of the constituent councils.

A key driver behind Mitford's conditional support for the development of the Site was the clear offer of housing for local families and not just some nominal "low-cost" housing priced at levels outside the ability of the less-well paid to afford.

Precedent

As far as we are aware there is only one precedent for a contested and acrimonious boundary review in Northumberland, the recent Amble / Warkworth review, with the outcome that the status quo prevails. There are numerous examples of developments that cross parish boundaries in this county and no doubt countless in the country, an example where there is a large difference in council tax is Alnwick / Denwick. Approving this boundary change will encourage other large town councils to bully their neighbouring parishes to the detriment of local democracy.

Financial Provisions should the Site be transferred into Morpeth

Notwithstanding the above, Mitford recognise that the decision on the request is for the non-conflicted Members of the County Council to make.

If the decision is to transfer the Site into Morpeth, then Mitford ask that the County Council exercises its powers under section 98 of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 to include an equitable share of future income. It is suggested that sharing the anticipated income on an equal basis for twenty years would be such a provision. Mitford would be happy to consider either a formula-based figure or an agreed defined sum.