

PLANNING COMMITTEE

Monday 4 August 2025

Present:-

Councillor Knott (Chair)

Councillors Rolstone, Asvachin, Atkinson, Harding, Hughes, Hussain, Ketchin, Mitchell, M and Pole

Apologies

Councillors Banyard, Bennett and Williams, M

Also Present

Strategic Director for Place, Head of Legal and Democratic Services & Monitoring Officer, Democratic Services Officer, Democratic Services Officer and Principal Project Manager (Development) (HS)

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MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 28 April 2025 were taken as read, approved and signed by the Chair as correct.

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DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were made by Members.

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PLANNING APPLICATION NO. 24/1536/OUT - LAND ADJACENT MARSH BARTON TRAIN STATION, CLAPPERBROOK LANE EAST, EXETER, EX2 8QE

The Chair invited Mr Keith Lewis, Exeter Civic Society, to speak for five minutes. Mr Lewis spoke against the application, making the following points:

- he was addressing the committee on behalf of Exeter Civic Society, and had worked together with Mr Chris Pope;
- he was opposed to the location, and that the site would occupy half of Grace Road Field;
- he highlighted the submission of Councillor Diana Moore, who was unable to attend the meeting;
- there were to be 1800 new homes built at Water lane, with an expected 20,000 more people living in Exeter by 2040;
- he believed that the electrical grid lacked capacity, and that 25% of the energy produced would be powered by gas;
- the applicant, 1Energy, had carried out sequential tests for water, but it was important for them to revisit this and carry out testing for air and gas;
- the site would be large, 118 meters long and 19 meters high;
- he asked if the benefit of this would truly outweigh the harm caused;
- an alternative site would be better, such as a traffic free area of the canal;
- would trees be planted to hide this from the Valley Park; and
- he encouraged Members of the Committee to refuse this application, and urged to defer the matter for a full disclosure of the Carbon Descent plan, mandatory reporting of carbon savings, flood mitigation measures, and missing views of the plant from Clapperbrook Lane.

Mr Lewis responded to questions from Members as follows:

- the 25% for gas was an average across the year and was due to lack of electrical supply;

- the Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) suggested that the electrical grid was not sufficient;
- he had not been able to identify an alternative suitable plot of land available for sale and technically appropriate;
- this combined with the energy from waste plant (EFWP) was the first impression that people got when visiting the Valley Park; and
- there were no short-term issues and once built this would be around for 50 to 70 years which was a huge investment. The screen between the canal and the building would be lost and it would not be possible to hide it with a few trees.

The Chair invited Mr Paul Barker of 1Energy, to speak for five minutes. Mr Barker spoke for the application, making the following points:

- Mr Barker thanked the Chair and the Committee for allowing him to speak;
- this development was a response to the climate crisis, and Exeter's aim of being carbon neutral by 2030;
- this development was for both public sector and non-public sector buildings;
- it would reduce gas use, and improve air quality;
- this was future proofed to add further low carbon heat sources;
- 1Energy were contractually committed to provide low carbon heat for the Royal Devon and Exeter Hospital, the University of Exeter, and Exeter College;
- there were 15 potential sites across Exeter, but this site was the most appropriate due to its proximity to low carbon heat sources, such as the EFWP and the canal. It was also close to Water Lane and was ideally located to supply the houses with low carbon heat;
- this would provide a major boost for the economy, generating £150 million, and a number of apprenticeships at Exeter College;
- this was currently a low biodiversity value site, and this application would provide more than minimum requirements to move towards eco diversity;
- there was a £30 million grant which needed to be used;
- Exeter Energy Network could provide low and zero carbon heat, as well as a platform for meaningful climate action; and
- this was a project that Exeter could be proud of.

Mr Barker responded to questions from Members as follows:

- this was the only site that provided the opportunity for future proofed carbon heating;
- it was likely that there would be some congestion and this was being discussed with Devon Highways;
- the site needed to be future proofed and in the next few years they would be using energy from the waste plant and water from the canal;
- the 25% provided by gas would be an average over the whole year, and would likely be caused by huge spikes in the winter;
- the Environment Agency did not want the site too close to the railway line as it would provide a higher risk of flooding;
- there would be no need to shut down the heat pumps and a large thermal store could serve for weeks during the summer;
- landowners weren't approached but a land agent had looked at what was for sale; and
- Marsh Barton was on the wrong side of the railway and would have required large pipes underneath the canal.

The Principal Project Manager (Development) presented the application for the construction of Energy Centre for the Exeter Energy Network. He provided the following information:

- post construction access to the site would be via Clapperbrook Lane, and would not require large vehicles;
- there was a resolution to grant planning for housing to the north between the canal and the railway line;
- there was a substantial tree belt along the boundary with the canal;
- the entrance to the site would be adjacent to Marsh Barton railway station, and there would continue to be priority for cyclists and pedestrians across the entrance;
- the trees were 29 metres tall and would provide cover for the site;
- the Energy Centre would not be harmful to views from long distances;
- the site was close to the solar farm;
- uses and priorities for the site included enhancing nature and biodiversity, and improving recreational opportunities;
- one of the key issues for this application was flooding, and the site was a zone 3 flood zone which had been deemed acceptable given there was no sequentially preferable site;
- the building had been designed to be raised to allow water to pass through;
- a large thermal store (heat battery) would enable the storing of heat and allow for shutdown without disruption to output;
- a visitor centre and section for education and the community had been incorporated into the design;
- heat pumps would be on the roof due required air flow and to reduce the footprint;
- trees would be planted and could help to fill in the gap in the boundary;
- three trees would need to be removed to enable construction access, these trees had no protection order, and 30 trees would be planted to replace them;
- the remaining area of the site has been designed to improve biodiversity and recreation;
- regarding planning balance, there were more public benefits than identified harms; and
- the sequential and exception tests had been passed, and officers were satisfied that no better sites were available.

In response to questions from Members, the Strategic Director for Place and the Principal Project Manager (Development) clarified that:

- the trees needed to be removed due to the size of the equipment;
- officers had consulted Dorset CC ecologists and were happy that the bat and reptile surveys were adequate;
- the ponds were designed for public use, not fishing and the site didn't need to be floodlit so it would not cause issues for wildlife at night;
- the developer had designed the building not to cause a flood risk for other sites, as well as to be resilient to flooding. The Environment Agency (EA) were satisfied;
- there was potential for plumbing from heat pumps during cold weather, but as they were on roof, condensation would run off into drainage;
- landscaping detail was a reserved matter and was not for discussion at this meeting;
- there was no loss of sports pitches as the site had not been used for sport in over a decade, and therefore this didn't require consideration;
- the tree belt remained as a space for wildlife;
- it was common for applicants to consider land outside their redline and to show how other parts of the land could be used;
- it was difficult to say how long officers had spent on validating the sequential test, but a long time had been spent on the application;

- the building was roughly the equivalent of a four-storey building plus roof plant;
- the fire service had been consulted and would be involved at the building regulations stage;
- there would be 57% biodiversity net gain within the red line; and
- further landscaping could be secured with the s106 being voted on today.

During debate, Members expressed the following views:

Councillor Hughes –

- the loss of greenspace was not ideal but liaison with the EA suggested that there was no alternative;
- this was a gain for carbon reduction;
- it was not up to the planning committee to consider long term use; and
- they raised concerns about flooding but recognised that this issue had been mitigated by the developer.

Councillor Pole –

- there were lots of reports that ticked boxes, and lots of positives with the application.

Councillor Harding –

- 13 thousand tonnes of carbon could be saved a year and a 75% reduction in gas;
- the air quality across the city would improve;
- the biodiversity gains were significant; and
- there was a 95% chance that in three years the river and the incinerator would be used as a heat source.

Councillor Rolstone –

- believed condition 29 (restoration of site following cessation of use) of the report would be beneficial;
- this was a great opportunity; and
- the gains did outweigh the risks for this site.

Councillor Atkinson –

- this was a public and private sector partnership;
- even objectors agreed that this facility was a necessity for the city, the only objections were based on the site location;
- satisfied that other sites had been considered throughout this process;
- the site hadn't been used for 12 years as a public recreation facility, and there was still lots of open space around it; and
- she was satisfied that there was not going to be a loss of leisure and other facilities, and that the conditions included cycle parking on site.

Councillor Knott –

- was satisfied that the trees would screen the site appropriately;
- all planning matters caused harm, and as a committee it was necessary to create balance;
- this was a catalyst driving us towards net-zero; and
- he thought that this application should be supported.

Councillor Ketchin –

- a key balancing figure was the sequential test;
- no one was in disagreement that we needed this energy hub;
- it was unclear what depth ECC had been involved in to scrutinise this;
- he hadn't heard a compelling reason to choose this site and the public had not been consulted;
- some parts of Marsh Barton could be amenable for harvesting waste

stream and not all options for the site of the energy hub in Marsh Barton had been explored;

- this was a great project but was in the wrong place;
- would like to see the sequential test scrutinised;
- biodiversity was not a material consideration for this site, it would easily be done but building an industrial site in the middle of the area would hinder this;
- the original plan for the hub was 2.5 acres and the new site has expanded over threefold; and
- the remainder of the Grace Roads playing fields being outside of the red line boundary, should have been clarified as neither a material consideration and not consulted on with the public.

The Strategic Director for Place made the following concluding points:

- this was a strategic piece of infrastructure and would strengthen Exeter's role in climate action;
- no one was arguing against the public benefit of the scheme;
- the Energy Centre was a critical component, the heat network would supply heat to the hospital, and educational campuses, decarbonising their heat;
- 1Energy have chosen this site, not Exeter City Council;
- over 20 sites had been considered, and there were no sites more preferable than this one;
- it was clear that this site had passed the sequential test;
- the loss of open space was a major concern for Members, however, the site was last used as a compound for the construction of the railway station and had not been used as a playing field in over a decade;
- the proposed enhancements to quality and accessibility of the open space and biodiversity were significantly exceeding statutory requirements;
- the Energy Centre was only one third of the application site, with the majority being used for biodiversity net gain; and
- the officer assessment was that the proposal had been mitigated sufficiently and the benefits outweighed the harm. It met requirements for future proofing and was a unique opportunity to meet net zero.

The Chair moved, and Councillor Atkinson seconded the recommendation, which was voted upon and CARRIED.

RESOLVED to DELEGATE to officers to GRANT permission subject to completion of a S106 Agreement relating to the matters identified and subject to conditions as set out in report, but with secondary recommendation to REFUSE permission in the event the S106 Agreement is not completed within the requisite timeframe.

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LIST OF DECISIONS MADE AND WITHDRAWN APPLICATIONS

The Strategic Director for Place responded to Member questions in the following terms:

- Article 4 set out that planning permission was needed for houses of multiple occupancy (HMO);
- there was a supplementary planning document (SPD) setting out detailed criteria for HMOs;
- tree protection orders (TPO) mean that any works required consent;
- Exmouth junction gateway was a major development therefore subject to conditions; and
- a split decision allows approval for certain parts of application but not all.

The report of the Strategic Director for Place was noted.

APPEALS REPORT

Councillor M Mitchell acknowledged that the 'Learning for Future Decisions' section of the report was helpful in showing what could be considered and asked whether this came from officers or inspectors.

The Strategic Director for Place responded to Councillor M Mitchell, clarifying that this provided a summary of what went into the decision the inspectorate made, and provided a summary of what learning was gained from this decision.

Councillor Knott noted how many appeals were dismissed and felt that officers and the Committee were moving in the right direction.

The report of the Strategic Director for Place was noted.

Councillor Ketchin felt that the meeting in this new format went well and commended the Chair on his use of discretionary powers.

(The meeting commenced at 5.35 pm and closed at 7.40 pm)

Chair