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## **Community Consultation Confirms Support for Eastgate Redevelopment** **Weardale Task Force Addresses Six Key Issues Raised by Community**

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Local support of concept plans for redevelopment of the Lafarge Cement UK works at Eastgate, Weardale, is now confirmed by the majority of respondents who took part in a public consultation exercise between July and October 2005.

The consultation asked local residents for their views about proposals for a 'renewable energy village' on the old works site and how it could be best integrated into the Weardale community. A total of 115 responses were received and over 70 people attended open meetings, facilitated independently by KSA Partnership for the Weardale Task Force, which is made up of members from One NorthEast, Wear Valley District Council, Durham County Council and Lafarge Cement UK.

Analysis of the consultation exercise, which is the third since 2002, indicates widespread enthusiasm and ongoing support within the community. Six key points about the proposals have been identified by the community, which the Task Force is addressing in detail.

1. The complexity of concept plans
2. Prioritising the benefits to local people
3. Potential traffic problems
4. Potential detrimental impact on Eastgate Village
5. Long-term viability
6. Fully exploiting opportunities and focussing on building long term skills in the Dale

Overall support means that the concept plans - based on a mix of living, working, educational, leisure and tourism elements - will be developed further by the Task Force, with the intention of submitting an outline planning application by the end of the year.

The proposal will be the first in the country to use all five forms of land-based renewable energy potentially available in the UK, in a way that meets all the energy needs of a



community that will be both a working village and visitor attraction. Included in the energy sources that will power and heat the village is geothermal energy - natural hot water from underground - the existence of which was confirmed last year.

John Hamilton, chairman of Weardale Task Force, believes the consultation results are encouraging and will help ensure that the core needs of the community remain the focus of regeneration in the Dale. He says: "We have had tremendous support from most residents in the Dale from the very start of this project, without which we wouldn't be in a position to take plans forward.

"The regeneration of the old works site offers us a unique opportunity to create a 'renewable energy village' for the benefit of Eastgate, Weardale and the region. It will be a sustainable community, renowned for its pioneering use of renewable energies, delivering business, educational and recreational opportunities for the Dale.

"Our continuing objective is to ensure that its creation will generate sustainable employment for local people and opportunities for existing businesses, which is why we will continue to invite their views, not just through official consultation, but any time queries or concerns are raised."

Local residents are requested to contact the Task Force with any queries or concerns on 01388 761571, or email [economic.regeneration@wearvalley.co.uk](mailto:economic.regeneration@wearvalley.co.uk)

Detailed below, and followed by a summary of the Task Force's response, are the six most repeated points which arose during the consultation exercise:

**1. The proposals are too complex. There needs to be a clear overall vision outlining who the scheme is intended for.**

Government policy increasingly encourages developments that contain a variety of uses - variety adds life and interest to places - and that is exactly what we want to see at Eastgate. We are dealing with an enormous site covering an area greater than 800 football pitches that has many different parts to it offering lots of different opportunities. We want to make the most of these opportunities for the benefit of the Dale. This inevitably adds to the complexity of our concept plan.

In putting forward what some might describe as a 'complex' concept plan our overall vision for the redevelopment of the old cement works and quarries might seem to have got lost or muddled. It is the case, however, that our core vision for the site remains



unchanged. It is to create a unique development, exploiting on-site renewable energy resources in a way that provides a demonstration to rest of the country of their potential and which maximises the opportunities of the site for the benefit of residents and businesses in the Dale. In future, we need to make sure that this message gets across clearly.

**2. Clear benefits to local people should be a priority.**

We agree entirely. Lafarge Cement will pass on the site free of charge to a non-profit making organisation which will be established to oversee the planning, redevelopment and subsequent management of the site. This is so that the cement works can be replaced with something that will be of lasting benefit to the people of the Dale. There is no other agenda. The redevelopment of the works and quarries has a major part to play in the regeneration of the Dale. It would seem from the consultation exercise that the majority of the Dale's people believe that the ideas represented in the concept plan can help to bring this about. The benefits will be both economic and environmental, including more local jobs, homes, recreational and educational facilities.

It is realised that this will involve an element of change for local people, and for this reason the recent consultation exercise not only asked for views on the balance of proposed uses of the concept, but also how it could best be integrated into the community. As part of the on-going evolution of the proposals, every effort will be made to ensure that the development provides the greatest possible benefits to the people of the Dale whilst minimising any adverse impacts.

**3. The proposals have the potential to cause traffic problems.**

There is no doubt that there will be more cars on the road than there is today (although almost certainly a lot less lorries than when the cement works was in operation). The key question is whether there will be so many vehicles as to cause unacceptable traffic problems in relation to the wider benefits the proposals will bring to the Dale.

We won't know for sure the answer to this until a detailed Transport Assessment is undertaken as part of the preparation of the planning application. Preliminary advice we have received from transport experts is that if there are to be any traffic problems these are only likely to arise during peak spring/summer weekends in a few of the villages in the Dale, but that excessive delays are unlikely to result even then. As part of the Transport Assessment ways of improving traffic flow through the villages that do



not involve anything other than minor road improvements will be investigated as a way of avoiding or reducing any future problems.

Of course, what we hope to do is encourage as many people to use the railway to reach Eastgate. This includes encouraging car users to use new park and ride facilities before they even reach the Dale.

Our intention is not to cause unacceptable traffic problems in the Dale: that would be contrary to our overall vision. If more detailed assessment of likely traffic impacts shows that traffic impacts are unacceptable we would need to think again, although we don't believe that this will be the case.

**4. The scale and scope of the proposals could impact detrimentally on Eastgate Village.**

It is understandable that those living closest to the site have the greatest concerns. Residents of Eastgate village have had a cement works as their neighbour for the best part of 40 years. Now there is the prospect of what might quite reasonably be described as an 'unknown quantity' on their doorstep.

We believe there will be no unacceptable impacts when viewed in the context of the wider benefits that the proposal will bring. If there are, these will be revealed by the detailed Environmental Assessment that is also to be undertaken as part of the preparation of the planning application and we would have to review our proposals.

Our hope is that the village of Eastgate would also adopt the 'sustainability' theme that underpins our proposals for the old works site; that we would work with residents to look at ways, for example, of using 'deep green' energy and heating in their homes.

More than that, we would hope that the residents of Eastgate village might be represented on the new organisation that is to be set up to take forward the redevelopment of the old works site (as could representatives from other parts of the Weardale community).



**5. This needs to be a long-term solution which will attract funding and visitors.**

Our plans may be unique, imaginative and pioneering, but there would be no point in putting them forward if we did not believe that they were realistic in terms of attracting interest from investors, developers and operators. Members of the Task Force have been speaking to potential operators and developers for some time. Indeed, some of the proposed uses shown in the concept plan are based upon actual expressions of interest from commercial operators.

In relation to the proposed geothermal hot springs - a key attraction within the concept plan - an independent report commissioned by the Task Force from a leading leisure consultancy has confirmed the positive outlook for spa-type developments and associated hotels. Other elements of the concept plan will be subject to the same independent scrutiny if this is thought necessary. Detailed business plans will in any event be required for all elements of the proposed development prior to any construction works taking place.

We are still in the early stages but interest from the business community is noticeably increasing as word spreads of that which we are trying to achieve at Eastgate.

As for sustaining visitor interest, potential investors and operators will have to satisfy themselves of this. Our view is that the geothermal energy and the hot springs will mean that Eastgate will always remain 'somewhere special'. Unlike places with only one attraction, the variety of leisure, recreational and educational uses envisaged at Eastgate is much more likely to encourage return visitors.

**6. Some opportunities have been missed or not fully exploited. There should be a focus on building long term skills in the Dale.**

The concept plan is not set in stone. It has been gradually evolving since work started on it several years ago and will undoubtedly continue to do so as new interests emerge (as well as in response to consultation comments). Indeed, a proposal for an outdoor and sustainability education centre has recently emerged which is now being reflected upon.

As for jobs and skills, our aim is to bring about a development that will create a range of skilled, well-paid, full and part-time work of which residents of the Dale can take advantage. The Task Force is currently in discussion with the Learning & Skills Council to assess the future skills needed for the people of the Dale. The results of this will



guide work with other agencies and education establishments to ensure that people will have access to training that will equip them for future jobs at Eastgate. It is interesting to recall that Blue Circle, when establishing the cement works in the mid-1960s, was faced with the need to develop a skilled workforce, many of whom, as we know, were subsequently to come from the Dale.

**ENDS**

**Issued by Robson Brown Public Relations on behalf of Weardale Task Force**

**Notes to Editors**

An artist's impression of the 'renewable energy village' is available. For further information please contact:

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