

Beyond Nimbyism

Case Study: Merevale & Blyth Estates Biomass Plant, Warwickshire, England

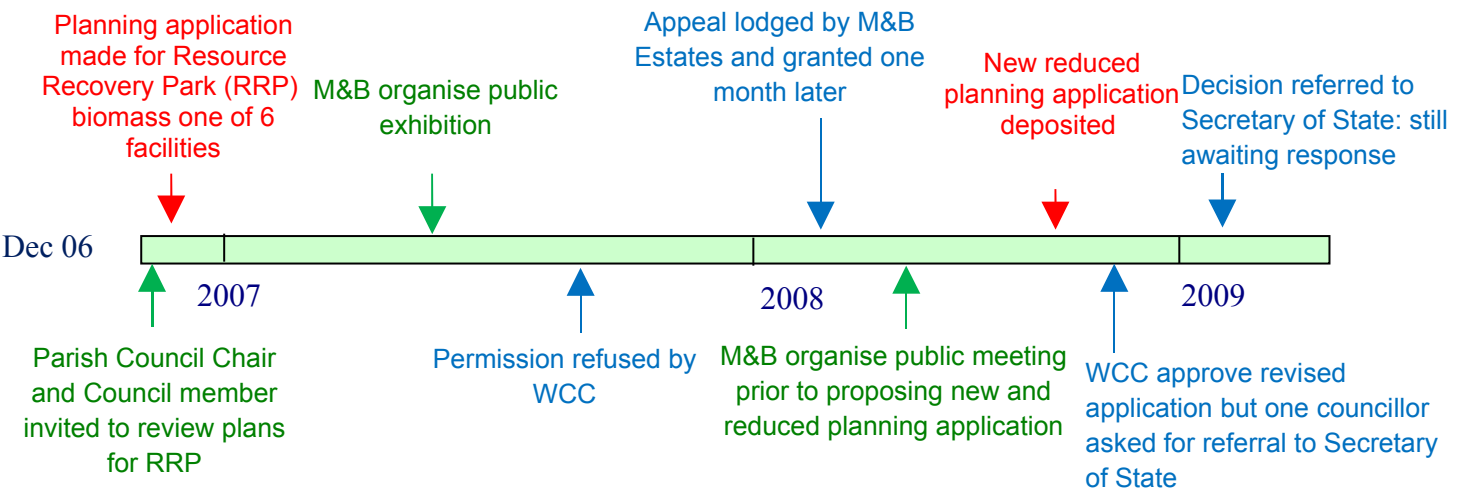
This proposal is for a small biomass plant close to the village of Baxterley. It was initially proposed as part of an extensive Resource Recovery Park (6 facilities). A revised planning application is reduced to two facilities, biomass and anaerobic digestion. The developer is a local landowner and well known to residents. The status of the site is disputed. The developer describes it as brownfield but local residents perceive it as a greenfield site. The qualitative data collected illustrate the way in which people associate biomass with incinerators and provides a unique perspective on how a longstanding relationship with the developer affected views of the acceptability of the proposal. This case study is also notable for the ongoing involvement of the local action group: Baxterley Action Committee (BAC).

Developer: Merevale & Blyth Estates (M&B) is owned by the Dugdale family. The site of the proposed scheme forms a small part of their country estate. In addition to the local redundant colliery the estate also owns part of Baxterley village.

Sector: Biomass **Scale:** Biomass power plant (2.3 MW).

Location: Planning Application describes site as 'former colliery spoil' close to Baxterley.

Decision Process: Application for planning permission to Warwickshire County Council (WCC) as County Planning Authority.



Engagement: The developer met with representatives of the Parish Council to seek their approval for their plans before depositing the first planning application with Warwickshire County Council. Later, when the full implications of the application became clear, those members resigned and new members who were part of the Baxterley Action Committee (BAC) were elected. A public exhibition was organised by M&B Estates after submitting the first planning application and a further public meeting was held in advance of the submission of the revised application. The developer subsequently invited the spokesperson of the BAC to a meeting; both parties reported a disappointing outcome. Members of BAC were extremely active in opposing the plant.

Data collection: *Interviews:* Chief Planner & local Councillor; spokesperson for BAC; Chair of Parish Council and BAC; Secretary of local Civic Society; Developer; Manager for M&B Estates (interviews conducted April 08). *Focus groups:* Baxterley, Baddersley Ensor, Hurley, Wood End (27 participants). (Focus groups conducted September 2008). Total number of participants: 35. A survey was not conducted in Baxterley because of the small number of local residents.

Results:

1. How much do local residents support the project?

The overall picture from the focus groups (FG) and the in-depth interviews was of local opposition to the scheme and support for the position of BAC. In the groups close to Baxterley there was no support for the project although participants reported some local support by some tenants of the Estate. Opposition was more muted in the villages further away since residents knew less about the development.

“I think what is going to be significant is that one of the Borough Council’s priorities for 2008/9 is to protect our countryside and our environment and that contravenes it absolutely, it’s the opposite” FG1

2. What were the main reasons for support or opposition?

Local Impacts: There were two main sets of concerns about the biomass plant which were largely expressed in the context of its location within a broader suite of recycling and recovery processes.

a. The proposed scheme is seen as diverting from the local plan which focuses on tourism and enhancing the local environment. Local residents are concerned about the loss of ‘countryside feel’ and more particularly that a site that they consider to be greenfield is being developed. Biomass is not perceived as green.

b. Concerns about pollution were expressed primarily in relation to heavy traffic associated with the operation of the anaerobic digester rather than from the biomass plant itself. There were also safety concerns associated with the traffic. To a lesser extent there were health concerns linked to incineration. It was considered unfair that such a rural location should be subject to the costs of

incinerating rubbish from much further afield.

Developer engagement

People, especially in the closest villages, expressed discontent that there had been little information and some felt that the project was deliberately being hidden from them. The developer’s perceived unwillingness to communicate was understood by some as a continuation of the longstanding paternalistic relationship between the estate and tenants.

Planning procedures

The planning process was not seen to be fair. The council were seen as having a duty of care and thus people felt aggrieved by a perceived lack of transparency in planning procedures that was seen to favour the developer. Lack of communication led some to suspect that information was deliberately being kept from local people.

“They should have come with any common decency and said, well look chaps, I’m thinking of doing this, have you got any objections, and he might have had a bit better response off people if he’d done it that way. But just to bang it down..”. FG1

Trust

The developer was not trusted. The project was viewed as being carried out primarily for the developer’s economic gain, with green credentials simply being used to gain local acceptance and governmental support. Lack of trust in the developer was warranted not only by the way in which previous projects were seen to have been managed but also by observations about the management of the estate and relationships with its tenants. Additionally participants expressed concern that once the developer had a ‘foot in the door’ that subsequent expansion of the site was inevitable.

“M&B cannot be trusted, they have given us assurances in the past and a month after he got permission there was a new application” FG1

Conclusions: In Baxterley and surrounding villages views on the proposed biomass plant were strongly influenced by participants’ assessments of the developer. These in turn were based in part on villagers’ evaluations of how previous development projects had been conducted. In addition participants felt that the planning process is unfair and undemocratic with an emphasis on helping the developer rather than protecting the local people. The Local Authority is thus seen as failing in their duty of care to local residents. The data also suggest that people did not perceive biomass as green, but saw it as an industrial process and land use.