

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT TO MBAG AGM 21 FEB 2014

Last year I began my report by thanking a number of people for their help over the previous 12 months. This year I'm going to come to the thanks a bit later once I have outlined what we as a Group have achieved in our two campaigns.

I'll start by looking at the Belford Burn issue. This, as you know, is a proposal for 9 turbines little over a mile away on the hillside overlooking the village from the West. A year ago we had moved out of the "phoney war" phase into a series of preliminary skirmishes. This year, battle has been joined in earnest and next year I anticipate developments being decisive.

To be honest we did suffer a slight disappointment. You will remember that in July 2012 Northumberland County Council's Planning Committee took the unusual step of refusing permission for EnergieKontor to erect a wind measuring mast on the site. That decision was, sadly but not unexpectedly, overturned by a Planning Inspector when EnergieKontor appealed. You will see the result of that on the skyline if you look to the West. But that was our only real disappointment of the past year. To set against it we have a number of real successes.

In May EnergieKontor held the second of their two public exhibitions in Belford. This was held in Bell View on four days, a Thursday evening, when the exhibition was staffed by EnergieKontor and the following Friday, Monday and Tuesday during the day, when EnergieKontor clearly could not be bothered to provide anyone to answer local

residents' questions. Although there was an attempt to exclude us from the exhibition, we were able to maintain a presence throughout - in Bell View's car park on the first day, and in the building's lobby on the other days. Our exit poll conducted on that occasion indicated 99% opposition to the scheme amongst the 346 people who voted, and even EnergieKontor's own survey – much less rigorous, since the box for completed forms was unattended for five days and may well have contained votes from their staff – showed 96% opposition.

In June EnergieKontor applied formally for planning permission for their scheme. We have submitted a detailed response to what appears to us to be a thoroughly inadequate application. More importantly, hundreds of other people have taken the time and trouble to write to the County Council opposing the scheme and this opposition is overwhelming. At the latest count there were *** letters of objection which had been submitted and only *** letters of support, principally from people who stand to benefit financially from involvement with the project.

In August we held our first (and my first) public demonstration. We had hoped for around 40 or 50 people to march from Cragmill Lane down North Bank and along West St to the Community Club simulating a turbine blade delivery vehicle. Over 250 people joined that protest and many more supported from the pavements and the Market Place as the march passed. This was, in my view, a very clear demonstration of public opposition to the scheme.

Last Summer we carried out a survey of holidaymakers and other visitors to the village. That survey showed convincingly that, for a large majority of responders (79.6%), the presence of wind turbines would, “adversely affect their choice of North Northumberland as their holiday destination” . This was an even better result for us than the previous year, and I am sure that was a consequence of visitors seeing the turbines at Middlemoor and Wandylaw and realising starkly the horror that could befall Belford.

And then, in November, the First School Hall was packed when the County Council held a public meeting to discuss the Belford Burn proposal. No-one at that meeting could have been in any doubt as to the views of the village, despite the developer increasing the bribe on offer. And following that, the Parish Council wrote a strongly-worded comprehensive and effective letter of objection to the County Council.

So we have landed a number of telling blows on EnergieKontor. The next event is likely to be the Planning Committee meeting at which the County Council will make its decision. Although that should be in April, it depends upon submission of further information by EnergieKontor to the County Council and on a couple of responses to that information from consultees. Whenever the meeting takes place, we will be there to make our case to Councillors. I am hopeful that planning permission will be refused, but you should be aware that it's not a foregone conclusion.

What happens after that? Well, if planning permission is refused, EnergieKontor may well appeal to the Planning Inspectorate. If they do, we will take an active part in the

Public Enquiry which would be held. We would need to engage a barrister to represent us and perhaps expert witnesses, and that would cost us serious money. It is for that reason that we have been seeking support in the form of pledges from a number of people outside the immediate area. You will, I hope, understand that it would be wrong of me to make details of this effort public, but suffice it to say that we are confident that we will be in a position to do what we need to do if an appeal is made. But of course, asking for support from people outside the village is much easier if we can show that MBAG is as self-supporting as possible. Unlike other groups, we deliberately don't have a membership fee and we are careful with what, after all, is your money. So we're in good shape financially. But because strict timetables apply to the planning process, we need to be able to react quickly to developments, knowing that we have the resources we need. The people we may need to employ are expensive and, if we have to fight an appeal, we will need to have funds in place. And that is why I make no apology for asking you to put your hands in your pockets once more, as generously as you can afford, to ensure that we can take the Belford Burn Campaign forward. For the Committee's part, we will continue to spend your money only on things we believe to be essential to make our campaign as effective as it can be.

Meanwhile, the threat from Middleton Burn has not gone away. In November they held their second public exhibition in the Ferguson Hall. And a pretty uninspiring event it was. Very little information was provided, there was nothing written to take away, and my impression was that the developer's people seemed rather despondent. Again, there was an attempt to exclude us from the building, but we were prepared and had

already sought permission from the URC to be there. Once again we conducted an exit poll, and again, a large majority (95%) oppose the wind turbine proposal. We were told that Middleton Burn would be applying for planning permission “early in the new year” and still await that development. When it comes we need the same scale of effort in writing letters of objection as you so admirably have produced regarding Belford Burn. Your letters of objection really do count for a lot – it was the strength of objection that persuaded the Council to hold the Belford Burn Public Meeting. Your letters do not need to be long – all you need to do is to pick out the two or three most important reasons you object. And please, encourage your friends and neighbours who may not be members of MBAG to do the same. We will tell you when to write, once the Middleton Burn application is in – and remember, it was the Middleton Burn scheme that caused us to set up MBAG and Middleton Burn was the reason that most of you joined in the first place.

What else is effective? Well, I'd suggest that you should also write to Belford Parish Council. They are guided in their discussions by local opinion and what better way of showing them what we feel than telling them direct when registering your objections with the County Council? I was also going to suggest that you write to your County Councillor, but John Woodman's here tonight and well aware of your views and he may not want an avalanche of mail! However, those of you who live outside the Bamburgh ward may well feel that your County Councillor needs to know how you feel.

There is one more thing you may be able to help with. Wind turbine developers are

notorious for indulging in dirty tricks. For instance, it has been suggested that they employ people to collect and dispose of bird carcasses in and around wind farms to remove evidence of damage to wildlife. If you become aware of any activity by wind turbine developers or operators which could be seen as unfair or underhand, let one of your committee know so that we can investigate. Photos which provide evidence would be particularly welcome!

As for MBAG itself. We go from strength to strength. Membership is up (we now have over 500 members). It is clear that the developers recognise that we represent effective opposition to their plans, since neither appeared to want us at their public exhibitions. I believe that Northumberland County Council clearly take us seriously and so do others in the County who, like us, oppose wind turbines.

And now for the thanks. Firstly to the Committee for all their hard work over the past year and for putting up with me as Chairman for a second year. The Blue Bell, for their assistance in providing us with a room to hold committee meetings, with little reward in terms of bar sales, and for keeping the flag flying by displaying our campaign sign board so prominently. Belford Community Trust, who also have provided us with a place to hold meetings. John Woodman, for his support and encouragement. The Community Club for, once more, allowing us to hold the AGM here. And you, our Members, for your enthusiastic participation in the campaign – letter writing, participation in the march, taking the trouble to attend exhibitions (and particularly the Public Meeting), for the encouragement you give us when we meet in the village, and your generosity in

enabling us to enjoy secure funding to continue our work.

So what does the future hold for us? Well, I think we've still got a way to go. I hope that the fate of the Belford Burn proposal will be settled once and for all one way or another in the next year, although if there is to be an appeal it may not be settled for a while. As for Middleton Burn, I sense that the tide is turning with regard to onshore wind. Even the EU is talking about the end of subsidies for onshore turbines. If Middleton Burn don't get moving on an application soon they may find that they have missed the boat, or do I mean the Gravy Train. So I would expect an application from them in the near future. That may take several months to reach the Planning Committee (Belford Burn will have taken at least 10 months from application to County Council decision) and if Middleton Burn has to go to appeal that could add another 6 or 9 months. So I'm afraid that we may find ourselves here again next year with the struggle not yet over. However, we will not waver, we will continue to fight the good fight and oppose with vigour the desecration of our village and its surrounds.