

DURHAM CITY NEIGHBOURHOOD PLANNING FORUM



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Response to University Master Plan Consultation

The Neighbourhood Planning Forum welcomes the current presentations of the University Master Plan and the frank answers to questions from local residents. The NPF has identified a number of issues with the University's plans for St Mary's Field and the Maiden Castle Sports Centre which are set out below. The Forum hopes that the comments below are viewed by the University as a positive contribution to those plans and that these comments will lead to a reconsideration of certain aspects of the plans.

1. St. Mary's Field.

1. It clearly makes sense to increase teaching and learning provision and this site is well-located in relation to the majority of University Colleges. However the proposed building will certainly dominate this site.
2. Plans to fell and remove significant numbers of mature trees are regrettable for a number of reasons. If left in place, these trees would provide a welcome screening from the main road and, given the problem of air quality in the City, would help to absorb pollution in this area. Trees are also an important asset to help mitigate climate change. There appears to be no provision to replace these trees with new plantings of equal number and of equal, or greater, environmental value elsewhere on the site or the adjacent University property. This will therefore lead to a net loss of green assets within the City:
3. The main road (A) divides this site from the Bill Bryson Library. This road is the main access to the City from the South-West. Movements of students between these two sites will be problematic. We welcome the limiting of cars on this site but several hundred students are also a form of traffic. The pavements of Church Street and South Road are already congested by student movements. How this additional burden is to be managed should be referred for expert advice and might require a total rethink of access to the site.
4. The proposed height of the building is overbearing. This could be reduced by adjusting the level of the foundations and by sinking the ground floor.

2. Maiden Castle.

1. This site is within the Durham City Green Belt. Renovation of the existing buildings are welcomed but further buildings designed for indoor sports are excluded by Green Belt policies unless there are "exceptional circumstances". These proposed buildings will triple

the amount of buildings on this site. Despite repeated requests, the nature of these exceptional circumstances has not been revealed to the NPF or the public. This undermines the whole concept of consultation. The public deserves a full and frank disclosure of the University's plans which is not currently available.

2. This site is located on the South-East approach to the city and for people using this route is the first sight they will have of University buildings. The proposed buildings have no architectural merit.
3. The NPF is perplexed by the decision to use Maiden Castle, not only as the main but as the only sports facility despite a more than doubling of student numbers since the facility was first built. The NPF was also told that the new buildings would allow international events to be held there but this raises the issue of access to the site. One extra car park is proposed – on Green Belt land (the area is currently a field) and again requiring “exceptional circumstances” which are not revealed. It would make sense to decentralise sports facilities. This could be done in cooperation with the Local Authority who owns suitable sites at Meadowfield and Belmont, and would also advantage local residents. Ushaw College could be another location. Was this option considered and if not why not?

General Considerations

1. Durham University has based its excellent reputation on being a Collegiate University. Now that fewer than 50% of Durham students can live in College or college-like buildings, this part of its reputation is at threat. There were plans to use Ushaw College as an out of city extension to the University but this is not referred to in the Master Plan.
2. At present, all, accommodation for “living out” students is being built/built by private providers. Some of these, such as Sheraton Park, are described as University affiliated.. Private landlords continue to provide or extend HMOs. Student accommodation currently available will do no more than absorb the additional students already planned (including those from Queen's Campus Stockton) and will not address the University's stated wish to increase the percentage of “living in” students; nor will it help the shortage of family houses in the City.
3. If and when this Master Plan is implemented, significant infrastructure will be needed to support it. To service proposed buildings, the crumbling roads and pavements of Durham will need repairs and upgrades. Is the University planning to make a contribution to this?

In conclusion, the Neighbourhood Planning Forum asks the University to re-consider the Master Plan and especially to take account of the issues outlined above.