

DURHAM CITY NEIGHBOURHOOD PLANNING FORUM



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Annual Report 2016-17

Our Vision:

“Durham City’s potential as a beautiful and historic City will be realised through policy and action to improve and protect its qualities and by creating a diverse and resilient economy with attractive and affordable places to live. It will be supported by modern infrastructure, protected by adaptation to climate change and enriched by community engagement in its future. “

Who we are:

The Forum was officially constituted by Durham County Council in January 2014. The 33 members of the Forum are volunteers who live and work in Durham City. The Forum held meetings in March and October 2016 and the minutes are on the website. In order to make further progress developing the neighbourhood Plan, a working group has been meeting at least monthly. In fact it has met 18 times since the AGM on 18 March 2016. It is open to all Forum members to participate and minutes of all its meetings are also published on the website.

The officers of the Forum were appointed at the AGM in March 2016:

Chair:	Roger Cornwell
Vice chair and Secretary:	John Lowe
Treasurer:	Sue Childs
Engagement Officer:	Pippa Bell

What Durham City wants for itself:

The Vision stated at the head of this report has been formulated through widespread consultation.

As a result of all the consultation we identified six themes:

Theme 1: A City with a sustainable future

Theme 2: A beautiful and historic City

(a) Heritage

(b) Green infrastructure

Theme 3: A City with a diverse and resilient economy

Theme 4: A City with attractive and affordable places to live

Theme 5: A City with a modern and sustainable transport infrastructure

Theme 6: A City with and enriched community life

How we work:

Our key principle is that our planning must be based on clear evidence of what the residents and businesses of Durham City have identified as priorities. We also have to work within the parameters of national and local planning policies. We work transparently and publish all our documents on our website. We seek dialogue with groups and individuals in the city and we hold meetings with as many interested parties as possible. We also engage with the County Council officers who have a duty to co-operate with us and who have been helpful.

Latest developments:

We have prepared a draft Plan and the broad outlines of this were approved by the Forum on 20 October 2016. Shortly before Christmas we submitted the draft policies for a “health check” by Durham County Council. Their strong advice was that we needed to reduce the scope of a small number of policies in order to comply with national planning policies and procedures. We met with them on 18 January and agreed the changes that we believed would produce a robust Plan that would stand up to scrutiny by an inspector. No new policies were added, and indications at that stage were that this met all the necessary legal requirements, and that in particular with some relatively minor amendments it would not need a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA).

We updated Forum members by email on 25 January, and sought your approval of the revised policies. There were no adverse comments and we set about detailed planning for the public consultation during the six weeks from 1 March to 13 April.

In addition, we received detailed textual suggestions from Historic England, as part of the required statutory consultations we have to undertake, and addressed these as well. However, they have now advised both the County Council and ourselves that in their opinion a Strategic Environmental Assessment **is** required. Their reasoning is that Durham City is the most highly significant historic environment in the north east. Therefore the Neighbourhood Plan, which will be the development plan for Durham City until the Durham Local Plan is approved, must be prepared to the highest standards so that it cannot be challenged. It must set out policies for development that can be shown to have been properly appraised through the SEA.

What we will do next:

We are still working out a way forward, in conjunction with the County Council, and will verbally update the AGM. But it seems likely that the consultation will have to be put on hold until an SEA has been produced, the Plan updated if necessary, and recirculated to the statutory consultees. We will also have to return the funding we obtained to carry out the consultation, because it all has to be spent by 31 March. We would seek further funding but this is not assured.

Much preparation work has been done for the consultation, including a leaflet ready to go to the printers, rooms booked for four consultation events, and publicity material designed. Consequently when the consultation is rescheduled we should be able to pick up the pieces. This consultation will be widely publicised, including to neighbouring parish councils and others, as Durham City is of significance to those who live outside it as well as to residents. All homes, businesses and major institutions in the Plan area, “Our Neighbourhood”, will receive a leaflet informing them of the consultation which refers to the website where they can read and comment on the draft Plan.

After the consultation period we shall analyse the comments and revise the Plan accordingly. The ultimate aim of the consultation process is to improve the Plan, not to approve it at this stage. It will then have to be submitted to the County Council as the local planning authority who will decide whether it is ready to submit to independent examination by an inspector. If the Plan passes these stringent tests it will be subject to a local referendum.

12 February 2017