

County Planning Committee: 6 February 2018

I'm speaking on behalf of the Durham City Neighbourhood Planning Forum and also the City of Durham Trust.

It is common ground between the applicants, the officer and ourselves that this is inappropriate development in the Green Belt.

The development is therefore only acceptable where very special circumstances exist. Such circumstances will not exist unless the potential harm to the Green Belt is **clearly outweighed** by other considerations. This is more than "balance of probabilities" – it has to be a clear difference.

The University's case here is a consequence of its unilateral decision to expand the number of students in Durham from around 15,500 last year to 16,500 this year and growing to 21,500 by 2027. This has not been the subject of any proper scrutiny. The University's Estate Masterplan is a one-sided document. It has not been considered by any Council Committee and has absolutely no planning status at all.

If, eventually, it reaches the County Durham Plan it will need to be subject to a Strategic Environmental Assessment, which must take into account the very detrimental effect on the City of this expansion – not only the conversion of family homes to student lets and the monopolising of prime sites for Purpose Built Student Accommodation, but also the effect on the economic life of the City, which is empty for half the year when the students aren't here.

The University has about six applicants for each undergraduate place and quite simply does not need these sports facilities to attract applicants.

Regarding possible alternative sites, only those not in the University's estate have been considered. There is land at Hild/Bede and at the various colleges that could and should have been assessed. We note the University in fact plans to decommission existing gym facilities at Hild/Bede and replace them with facilities at Maiden Castle. So the University has unilaterally excluded part of its own recreational estate from the search and is expecting the wider community to accept that the Green Belt should make up a deficit which is of its own making.

Having all the facilities on one site may be the University's ideal solution, but it has already accepted that tennis would be a step too far. In terms of national planning policy, not developing on the Green Belt is the ideal solution. You cannot have both. Given that paragraph 88 of the NPPF says that "local planning authorities should ensure that **substantial weight** is given to any harm to the Green Belt", surely this carries greater weight than an objective of putting everything on the same site which the applicant has already departed from during the development of this submission? And if facilities are split across sites, more alternatives become available, and sites that would be too small to hold everything can be considered. This would be the responsible approach for a major body such as Durham University to take, not do obvious harm to the Green Belt.

We have to look at the public benefit, which means the community use of the facilities, not student sport. The figures provided are not precise or detailed enough to allow you, or us, to assess the relative importance of the community benefit on offer. It's not clear, for example, whether the hours relate to individuals or teams, or what proportion of the facilities will be available to the community. The letters of support from the various sporting bodies are broadly very generic and do not refer at all to this proposed development. Quite a lot are for outdoor sports and support the upgraded floodlights.

One final point: there is a proposal to upgrade the riverside footpath and to light it. This runs contrary to advice given by County Council Planners to the NPF to maintain a dark corridor down the River Wear. Yet the majority of users, coming from the Palatine Centre or the Hill Colleges, would probably not use that path but stick to the grossly inadequate, indeed dangerous, route alongside the A177.¹

So we urge you to reject this planning application. Your grounds would be that the very special circumstances that NPPF paragraphs 87 and 88 require, in order to **justify** demonstrable harm to the Green Belt, have not been made out.

¹ This paragraph was omitted from the Committee address due to time constraints.