

City of Durham Trust: Consultation Response to the “Durham City Neighbourhood Plan”

The City of Durham Trust is warmly supportive of this document. The Plan sets out considered and lucid aims and principles for the future development of the central area of Durham City, rightly sensitive to its heritage, social make-up and natural environment.

The Trust has had first-hand experience of the various pressures faced by the City since the abolition of the City Council in 2009. Many of the large-scale developments in the City since that time, and some before, have been damaging to its unique character, and the Neighbourhood Plan gives hope for mitigation and improvement in the future, even though the final say on planning applications still belongs to the unitary County Council.

The saved policies from the City of Durham Local Plan 2004 will be superseded by the forthcoming County Durham Plan. These contained useful detail for dealing with development in Durham City that would otherwise be lost. The detail found in the Neighbourhood Plan, especially **Policies H2, H3, H4, E3, E4 and D3**, will prove valuable in helping to conserve Durham’s distinctiveness when assessing new development. The Trust would welcome the expansion of these to form a design guide for the City.

Also very helpful is the support for the World Heritage Site (WHS). This will help in reviewing the impact of change upon the WHS (especially **Policy H1**). Identifying and referencing the WHS Management Plan reinforces this valuable document.

The Trust particularly welcomes several elements of the Plan. Its **Policies G1-G4** relating to “Local Green Spaces” and an “Emerald Network” must help protect the distinctly green character of much of Durham, along with those for the beneficial use of the Green Belt, whilst protecting its openness.

The Trust welcomes **Policy S2** and the proposal that, in accordance with NPPF 4.25, “major” planning developments should submit a “master plan” outlining the overall scope and final impact of a project, such that large scale change cannot occur by piecemeal development, as was recently the case with the damage wrought to the Green Belt by the large sports facilities near Maiden Castle.

Studentification has greatly affected Durham City this century, often to the detriment of its character. The Trust welcomes the overdue element in **Policy D3** that people living in PBSAs should be part of any count when determining the percentage of students inhabiting the area within 100 metres of a proposed HMO, with the aim of maintaining a more balanced mix of residents. Likewise, the Trust is glad to see that **Policy D3** restricts extensions to existing HMOs, as an extension is just as much an issue as a new HMO in tipping the community balance. The Trust warmly supports **Policy D5** that, in new housing sites of more than 10 units, at least 25% should fall in the category of “affordable housing”. **Policy D4**, “Housing for Older People and People with Disabilities”, is a welcome recognition of the need to safeguard housing for these groups in the face of other development pressures.

The Trust applauds **Policies C1-3** and the way the Plan seeks to address the significant gaps in provision for arts and culture in central Durham. A central art gallery seems a particular desideratum, and the proposal for a City Centre community hub is very welcome. It remains strange that a city such as Durham has no tourist information office, despite the work of Visit Durham.

The important topic of highways seems mostly beyond the remit of the plan. Nevertheless, the Trust welcomes the proposals made under the headings of “Sustainable Transport, accessibility and design” (Policy T1). The Trust acknowledges and welcomes a recent modification to the policy (Policy T2) on residents’ parking, which now makes it clear that a favouring of the provision of designated parking bays applies only to new streets. This revision to the earlier draft goes some way towards meeting our anxiety that residential areas of Durham often have green spaces whose appearance has been gradually damaged over the years by small parking bays eating into them, while applications for more such bays are common. The Plan aims to minimise “[a]dverse transport impacts, including additional circulation and parking space for private motor vehicles.” Might more be done specifically to save these small but valuable parts of the green infrastructure from further encroachment by cars – after all, if someone buys a shed or huge piece of equipment too big for their own property, there is no assumption of a right to encroach upon public space?

Finally, as several Trustees are also members of the Parish Council, it should be stated that, although they are aware of the Trust’s endorsement of the Plan, they took no part in the appraisal itself, the content of which was unanimously agreed by those Trustees, the majority of the Board, who had no connection with either the Parish Council and/or the Neighbourhood Planning Forum.

Trustees of the City of Durham Trust