

## DURHAM CITY NEIGHBOURHOOD PLANNING FORUM



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Dear Spatial Policy Team

### **Stakeholder Consultation: Draft Sustainable Transport Strategy**

We are pleased to have the opportunity to contribute to the formation of this key strategy. We welcome the general thrust of the document, not least the fact that it recognises the significance of the Neighbourhood Plan alongside the County Plan. In view of the short timescale for this consultation, our comments will mainly concern general principles. We shall submit a more detailed, technical response at the time of the subsequent public consultation.

We welcome in particular the following broad aspects of the strategy:

- The support for the Sustainable Community Strategy for County Durham.
- The ambition for Durham City described on page 5.
- The recognition that Durham is a compact, walk-able city.
- That the economic future of Durham City will be built on the quality of its environment.
- The need to improve air quality in the city centre
- That the car cannot meet the growing demand for travel and that walking, cycling and public transport need to be prioritised: the place and movement hierarchy (page 16).
- The identification of the difficulties faced by pedestrians (pages 7-8), buses (pages 8-9) and cyclists (pages 9-10).
- The need to restrict the space currently used by cars, including parking, and to free space for walking, cycling and bus usage.
- The emphasis placed on the value of investment in sustainable transport, “not simply investment in traditional highways infrastructure solutions” (page 11) and the value of high quality streets and spaces in the city centre.
- The recognition of the health benefits of walking and cycling activity.
- The admission that there is “a tendency to over-estimate the importance of customers arriving by car to the retail economy” (page 13), whereas public transport is essential for retail and employment in the city centre.
- The recognition that public transport is good for social as well as physical mobility, enabling the less well off to engage in the community.
- The adoption of the “Smarter Choices” strategy to encourage sustainable travel behaviour with travel plans based on employers, schools and residential developments.
- The identification of three key corridors that require significant improvements to promote walking and cycling connectivity (pages 35-37).

- The adoption of supporting measures such as car clubs and low emission vehicles.

There are a number of measures that we think will strengthen the strategy and indeed will be essential to its success:

- The priority given to sustainable transport modes over the car **must** be reflected in investment priorities. For example, money should be spent on improving cycling and walking routes immediately rather than on traffic modelling surveys. The installation of the new SCOOT system, which is not mentioned in the report, still prioritises the car over pedestrians and cyclists, despite this clearly stated hierarchy.
- The “Smarter Choices” strategy has its place in changing travel behaviour, but it is unlikely to be successful unless the infrastructure improvements required for safe walking and cycling and efficient bus travel are put in place early in the plan : create them and they will be used! People will not be enticed out of their cars unless they can see a better alternative.
- Active restraint of the car and HGVs (the stick) will be required in addition to the carrot of better alternatives. Congestion charging, parking restrictions, particularly at large employers, and bans on through-traffic HGVs all need serious consideration.
- Similarly, greater and swifter pedestrianisation should be implemented. In particular, the proposals for North Road and lower Claypath (pages 30-31) should be brought forward in the plan, not seen as long-term proposals.
- The evaluation section on page 51 contains no targets, whereas many examples of what has been achieved elsewhere are given on pages 49-50 and in Appendix B. Similar targets need incorporating in the evaluation programme for this strategy if it is to have bite.

The central weakness in the strategy is the reliance on the construction of a Northern Relief Road to resolve the perceived problems of traffic congestion in the city centre. This proposal was obviously the subject of detailed debate at the Examination in Public of the County Plan in 2014. We do not intend to rehearse those arguments here. Suffice it to say that while the Inspector's Interim Report might have been quashed on procedural grounds, we fully support the conclusions he reached in paragraphs 94-101.

We do wish to add a number of comments:

- Page 10 states that the baseline data from traffic modelling dates from 2006 and goes on to say that “it is likely that this proportion is similar today”. This is an unfounded assertion.
- Page 10 also, quite rightly, points to the importance of reducing the current harmful levels of air pollution in the city centre. However, **this is an immediate problem** and we cannot afford to wait 15 years to tackle it. All the measures to promote sustainable transport contained in this strategy must be pursued urgently and effectively to improve air quality much sooner.
- These measures themselves will reduce traffic congestion and improve air quality so that the argument for a Northern Relief Road will be diminished as time goes by. Technological innovations will also assist this process. Any evidence for the Northern Relief Road can then be re-assessed nearer the time.

- The prospect of building the relief roads will itself compromise future transport investment decisions. The sustainable transport investments will be achieved more readily if the Northern Relief Road is put beyond the Plan period.
- Consistency between planning and transport policies is essential in this Strategy and Action Plan which makes its completion before the Local Plan problematic. The essence of a sustainable transport plan is that it serves both existing and future developments and that must be demonstrated that it will provide better travel choices for the future housing, employment and service distributions than road building.

In conclusion, we reaffirm that in general, apart from the relief road, the suggestions contained in the report are positive and welcome, though much of the detail about how to achieve the vision are lacking. We look forward to continuing to work with you to promote this essential work.

Yours faithfully

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Chair, Durham City Neighbourhood Planning Forum