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Spatial Policy

Durham County Council

12th February 2020

St Nicholas Community Forum wholeheartedly supports the City of Durham Parish Council Neighbourhood Plan Proposal 2019.

We are delighted to see a plan that demonstrates deep knowledge and understanding, specifically of Durham City itself, also clear understanding of the range of issues that impact upon it, plus offering workable, sensible strategies to mitigate these issues. The document has clearly been written by people with long-standing appreciation of, and care for, this City.

St Nicholas Community Forum(SNCF) is a residents association covering the Peninsular and much of the town centre including the Market Place, Millennium Place and Walkergate, Claypath, lower Gilesgate and the roads leading off them and all the housing along the Sands. Our aims and objectives are essentially to promote community awareness and improve the quality of life in our area.

We urge serious and open consideration of the content of this Plan, and very much hope that Durham County Council will adopt it without change, as it truly reflects the views and wishes of the community that lives here. SNCF is well able to offer a large body of evidence demonstrating the many calls, over a long period, for help from Durham County Council for Durham City. The City of Durham Parish Council Plan addresses those calls. It is important to note the section "What is good and bad about the City" and heartening to see that this Neighbourhood Plan does its best to really address what has been highlighted by local people. Our main concerns come under the two following headings.

Housing and the Expansion of Durham University

SNCF cannot stress enough the need of effective control of the expansion of Durham University because of the negative impact on the life, health and well-being of the permanent residents. There is no balance now between the number of residents and the numbers of students living in or near the city centre, whether in HMOs which result in the loss of family homes or in PBSAs, which also generate thoughtless income while damaging the local retail trade because the students are only in Durham for less than two thirds of the year. Not only are the permanent residents at crisis point in their feelings for their lovely city, but students are also expressing similar opinions.

SNCF hopes the policies offered in this Neighbourhood Plan are adopted and would be happy if even stricter controls were put in place, such as no further conversions of any existing property (be it one, two, three or more beds) to student accommodation, no extensions of existing student accommodation, and full support of returning student properties to the permanent population. The university is able to supply sufficient student accommodation through its new developments within its own estate.

We fear the Durham County Council's current and proposed planning policies are too weak as they do not protect any house where the student density is less than 10% (according to the rather inaccurate County Council assessment that is based only on student council tax exemption), which means the loss of another potential family home. In contrast we would support proposals for more affordable housing and consideration of the needs of an increasing elderly population. SNCF would also appreciate steps to reduce the cost of University-supplied accommodation, so that such buildings are fully occupied, and to ensure the growth of such accommodation so that more undergraduate students do not affect the already crammed City.

The Environment, Climate Change and Transport

SNCF fully supports protection for all the Green areas in and around the City. Some have been encroached upon to a worrying extent. The protection of World Heritage views is also important to us, and we have seen the gradual creep upwards of less attractive modern buildings blocking the once spectacular views to be had from various locations.

We support the Neighbourhood Plan's proposals regarding sustainability and resilience to climate change and would welcome the speedy adoption of the suggestions offered, and (we hope) implemented well before the zero-carbon date of 2050 offered by Durham County Council. We would happily support a ban on any more felling of mature trees and destruction of wildlife habitat in and around the City. We most certainly support proposals by the Durham City Parish Council to protect the environment and improve air quality. Ideally, we would like greater emphasis on more affordable and wisely available public transport, increasing electric buses and discouraging diesel vehicles in the City.

Yours faithfully

Janet George
St Nicholas Community Forum