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Dear Neighbourhood Planning Forum,

NHS Property Services Letter of Representations on Durham City Neighbourhood Plan Submission Draft 2019

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the above document. The following comments are submitted by NHS Property Services (NHSPS).

Foreword

NHSPS manages, maintains and improves NHS properties and facilities, working in partnership with NHS organisations to create safe, efficient, sustainable and modern healthcare and working environments. NHSPS has a clear mandate to provide a quality service to its tenants and minimise the cost of the NHS estate to those organisations using it. Any savings made are passed back to the NHS.

Policy C3 – Protection of an Existing Community Facility

Policy C3 – Protection of an Existing Community Facility of the Draft Neighbourhood Plan manages the loss or change of existing ‘community facilities’.

At present the policy reads:

Development proposals which would result in the loss of an existing community facility will not be permitted unless it has been demonstrated that:

- a) the facility is no longer financially viable; or*
- b) there is no significant demand for the facility within that locality.*

In the first case the applicant must also demonstrate that an equivalent alternative facility is available nearby to satisfy the needs of the local community.

An essential element of supporting the wider transformation of NHS services and the health estate is to ensure that NHS sites are not strategically constrained by restrictive local planning policies.

Where such restrictive policies are in place, the reorganisation of underutilised facilities can be delayed. In turn, there are direct implications for the provision of quality healthcare facilities and services, as the reinvestment of capital in modern and fit-for-purpose facilities is prevented or delayed, with ongoing revenue spent on maintaining inefficient parts of the estate.

Where NHS commissioners can demonstrate that healthcare facilities are in need of reorganisation, which might include the disposal or development of a facility, there should be a presumption that such sites are suitable for other uses and should not be subject to restrictive policies.

To ensure Policy C3 is sufficiently flexible and supports the ongoing needs of the NHS, we have included the following proposed amendments:

Development proposals which would result in the loss of an existing community facility will not be permitted unless it has been demonstrated that:

- a) the facility is no longer financially viable; or*
- b) there is no significant demand for the facility within that locality; or*
- c) **The loss or change of use of existing facilities is part of a wider public service estate reorganisation***

NHSPS also seek clarity on the final point of Policy C3:

In the first case the applicant must also demonstrate that an equivalent alternative facility is available nearby to satisfy the needs of the local community.

This requirement appears to apply only to proposals seeking to demonstrate that a facility is no longer financially viable. However, the wording is not currently clear. NHSPS suggests that the wording be altered to improve the clarity of Policy C3:

***In the case of proposals demonstrating point a**, it should also be demonstrated that an equivalent, alternative facility is available nearby to satisfy the needs of the local community.*

Summary

Within the NHS property portfolio, a number of sites are, or may become outdated and no longer suitable for modern healthcare without significant investment. In those cases, and where NHS commissioners can demonstrate that healthcare facilities are no longer required for the provision of services in that particular location, a more flexible approach for public service providers should be applied when considering a change of use to non-community uses.

This should include a presumption that those sites are suitable for other uses and should not be subject to overly restrictive planning policies.

NHSPS thanks the Neighbourhood Planning Forum for the opportunity to comment on the Draft Plan and hopes the proposed amendments to Policy C3 are considered constructive and helpful. We look forward to reviewing future iterations of the plan and receiving confirmation that these representations have been received. Should you have any queries or require any further information on the enclosed, please don't hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely,

Rowan Gilbert
Town Planner