

THE CITY OF DURHAM TRUST

Response to the Sustainability Appraisal Report for the County Plan

1. The Trust is not convinced that the current plan is positively prepared in always being based on “balanced evidence.” Some issues in the Sustainability Appraisal report of October 2013 are being presented in a slanted format. Local Government Association guidance on procedures for sustainability appraisal¹ cautions Councils against overlooking important elements, among them 'where mitigation is proposed, whether or not there will be any residual effects.' The Council appears to have totally disregarded this advice in preparing the current SA.
2. The Sustainability Appraisal of August 2013 for Newcastle/Gateshead² is an example of the recommended procedure. A section entitled “a description of any mitigation measures” is followed directly by “consideration of any important residual effects”. In contrast, Durham County Council's SA Rept of Oct 2013 fails to treat important residual effects explicitly or fully. Section 3.12 setting out the methodology of the appraisal, omits all mention of referring to residual effects.
3. Despite these omissions in the current SA, the Council has previously clearly shown its understanding of the requirement to identify residual effects. In December 2010 it published the *Durham City Green Belt Assessment Phase 2* on its website. Though this document was subsequently withdrawn from the website and replaced by an amended version without any explanation, the Council had placed this report in the public domain, and a copy is attached for reference³. This first draft of the Green Belt scoping document offered recommendations each with subsections on “mitigation” and on “residual impacts.” The latter, however, were excised from the second version.
4. A similar process seems to have been applied to the 2013 Sustainability Appraisal. Looking at some of the final SA recommendations for the new housing at Sniperley (section 7.8), Newton Grange (7.11) and Sherburn Grange (7.37), we find that the sub-sections there on mitigation follow, usually word for word, those for these sites already given in the original 2010 document, except that the “Residual Impacts” sections and their material have been removed. What may be residual impacts for these sites are not now given specific treatment under that heading but are covered far less directly and only in general elsewhere in the document (see “Environmental Effects in section 8.11, Policy 3: Quantity of New Development”).
5. In another place possible residual impacts are listed by some perverse logic as a benefit. (The appraisal of the housing proposed for North of the Arnison Centre includes a series of bullet points headed by the statement: “7.10 SA of the above site North of Arnison as a potential housing site identified the following likely positive implications:”. In fact ALL the impacts then listed are negative). While this may be just a slip, it is symptomatic of the lack of a clear and explicit distinction

1 http://www.local.gov.uk/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=ccde5903-79b8-49ad-a245-0896a8cd92b1&groupId=332612 on page 11

2 3. <http://oncorestrategyng.limehouse.co.uk/file/2614597>

3 Durham City Green Belt Site Assessment Phase 2.pdf

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throughout the Sustainability Appraisal Report between what is mitigable and residual impacts after mitigation. With the crucial Policies 2, 4 and 7 (“Spatial Approach,” “Distribution of New Development” and “Durham City Strategic Housing Sites”) the issue of residual effects is effectively finessed: that is, any “adverse effects” of the elements of the policies are listed as what that would ensue “*without adequate mitigation*” (p. 333, 343, 362). The impression is projected that any mitigation measures later listed could be sufficient, leaving the issue of their adequacy and any residual impacts to pass unappraised. The phrase “without adequate mitigation” effectively muddies the water compared to the earlier and very specific Green Belt scoping report.

6. An issue pivotal to the plan is not appraised but rather asserted in the Sustainability Appraisal when it claims “The impact of congestion has knock on effects on Durham City's ability to accommodate new business as the current problems restrict the numbers of new jobs that can be created within the city due to the additional pressure on highway capacity (6.120)”. This is not accompanied by the necessary evidence of would-be employers actually being put off by current or feared levels of peak-hour congestion in Durham. In fact since levels of congestion for Durham City are not at all striking on the national scale, specific evidence of perceptions of congestion damaging possible investment must be expected if the plan to build new roads and to boost the population to achieve some supposed “critical mass” is to be sound and justified.
7. A significant element of the plan remains at odds with a finding in the Sustainability Appraisal. SA asserts of the proposed Western Relief that “the route of the road runs through the Bearpark mediaeval park. More importantly, it cuts through Club Lane, which is the route which the monks used to use from Durham to Beaurepaire – the road would sever Beaurepaire from Durham and thus destroy its context. It also runs past the Neville’s Cross Battlefield; therefore its development would hamper its interpretation (6.129)” To destroy two important parts of the setting of the World Heritage Site is contrary to an unconditional statement in Policy 45 of the Draft Plan (“Proposals will also need to demonstrate that the development will cause no harm to the significance of the WHS (including cumulative or consequential harm) either through impacts on its appearance, fabric, character or setting.” While the Sustainability document argues that the term “setting” in relation to the Cathedral and World Heritage site is in need of clarification, its own account of the relation of Beaurepaire to the Cathedral is already an answer in this case.
8. The purpose of a Sustainability Appraisal is to identify the potential impacts of the proposed County Plan against a range of economic, social, and environmental considerations, so that the value of the plan can be gauged. However, significant elements of the Council's Appraisal, seemingly distorted by prejudice in favour of the Council's own agenda, are evading recommended procedure on the method and presentation of an SAR.