

# THE CITY OF DURHAM TRUST

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## **News Release – Trust’s response to County Hospital decision**

The Inspector’s decision to allow the appeal by Peveril Securities to build student flats at the County Hospital is a disaster for Durham City. This is a site that has great potential, with a historic nineteenth century building at its core, and a superb sustainable location near both bus and rail stations, and close to the city centre shops. To let it go to for unwanted and unneeded student accommodation is a waste, and will blight this area.

The City of Durham Trust and local residents’ group the Crossgate Community Partnership (CCP) made a joint 19-page written submission to Planning Inspector Mrs Yvonne Wright , urging her to refuse the appeal. Both parties and local residents turned up in person at the appeal on 8 December last year to back up the case. But on the day the Council seemed ill-prepared and put forward a very weak case. They failed to challenge manifest errors and misrepresentations in the developer’s case, and were unable to answer straightforward questions of fact from the Inspector. A reading of the Inspector’s report shows many places where the Council could have advanced evidence to support the refusal but did not. As the Inspector makes clear, she could only reach her decision on the basis of the evidence before her.

The Trust and the CCP supported the Council’s case that the new student blocks would, by their height, form and massing, be harmful to the Conservation Area and to the original County Hospital building. We also agreed with the Council that there would be an adverse effect on the residential amenity of properties on neighbouring Waddington Street.

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But we went further, making the case that the Planning Committee and the Council should themselves have made, that there is no need for further student accommodation in Durham City at the present time, given that there are 530 beds available currently in four developments, with another 939 at four more sites where construction is under way, and a further 2,381 with planning permission but not yet started. The University's published plans are for a very modest growth, fewer than 500, between now and 2020.

We argued that the purpose of the planning system to make sure that '*sufficient land of the right type is available in the right places and at the right time to support growth and innovation*'. Given that Durham is surrounded by a Green Belt, the availability of land in the city is constrained and if land is allocated for one use, it is unavailable for another. Even without the green belt, there are town centre uses that cannot be satisfied by edge-of-town developments. If every brownfield site that comes up in the City Centre goes to student halls, this will frustrate the Council's own aim that, to quote Councillor Foster, "*Durham City [is] the economic powerhouse for the county*"<sup>1</sup>.

We also argued that the development was contrary to the Interim Student Accommodation Policy, a draft of which was agreed by the Cabinet last summer and consulted on in September and October. The stated plan was to finalise this in November or December, which would have meant it would carry weight when considering this application. However, it has been delayed and is not now expected until later this month. The Inspector's report says "This emerging policy can therefore carry no weight in my decision." This Policy lays out the foundations for balanced communities in the city.

To date most of the decisions made by the Council over the past five years have sabotaged this central aim of making Durham the economic powerhouse of the County and have led to an extremely unbalanced community.

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1 Press release, 15 January 2016, see <http://www.durham.gov.uk/article/7168/Work-to-start-on-improved-station-access> )