

City of Durham Trust Response

Durham County Council

City of Durham Bus Station Proposals

January/February 2020 Public Consultation

1. Introduction

The Trust warmly welcomes Durham County Council's (DCC's) decision to reflect earlier consultation responses by abandoning its previous proposals for commercial redevelopment of the existing bus station site, which entailed the relocation of the bus station beyond the listed North Road Methodist chapel.

The renewed initiative to deliver both an improved bus station and perhaps move towards regenerating this part of North Road is very positive.

The Trust agrees that redevelopment of the bus station on its present site is the correct way forward, and shares the Council's view that this could contribute both to the regeneration of North Road itself and to a significant improvement in the facilities available to bus users in the city.

This response deals with what the Trust considers to be the important context for the project, its benefits and where it sees design issues. While there are very demonstrable benefits from rebuilding the Bus Station, the Trust also sees issues in the function and design approach to the building.

2. Context

This part of North Road is dominated by a mixture of 20thC buildings that has never contributed in a positive way to the streetscape, the historic environment or views of the World Heritage Site (WHS). The existing Bus Station is one of these and cumulatively they have become increasingly tired, offering relatively little to the vibrancy of this former shopping street as retail patterns change. However, the retail units mostly remain in use as supplementary retail uses – charity shops and other service points. It has long been recognised that collectively these buildings and the North Road roundabout offer substantial opportunities for positive regeneration. Despite its sometimes poor reputation, the rest of North Road remains an attractive assemblage of buildings contributing substantially to the historic city.

The current Bus Station sits prominently in views of the WHS and from within and across the conservation area. It is on view at the rear, the frontage and across its roofscape. It is also part of the iconic view of the City from the train. It has a negative impact, blocking part of the WHS view by being built out across the pavement at 1st/2nd storey height. The facades, however, do reflect the street as it starts to climb the hill, breaking the façade lines and creating a more appropriate partly pitched roofscape. This is marred by the flat roof extension over the pavement that breaks the otherwise beneficial visual impact of the roof from higher viewpoints.



There is destructive severance caused by the roundabout and road link down to Milburngate Bridge that disassociates upper and lower North Road, placing the Bus Station and adjacent Methodist Church and its Manse as the key entry point buildings. The positioning of the three adjacent listed buildings (Avenue House also) causes restrictions on realignment.

Pedestrian access into the existing bus station is poor and linkage with the Rail Station is an issue but remains an opportunity. Vehicle access and peak time stacking have also proved problematic on this constrained site.

The redesign has two key requirements to resolve, its functionality and, equally, its positive response and sensitivity to the historic environment. It also needs to act as a key attractant into North Road and help set the design standard for further regeneration of the 20thC buildings that surround it. It is appreciated that balancing these is a difficult design task.

3. Transport Function, Access and Circulation

It is of course understood that the consultation proposals focus on the bus station itself and its immediate setting. Nevertheless, the scheme as it stands does nothing to address the need for improved linkages between the bus and railway stations as the city's two public transport hubs. There is a failure to create a travel centre with better physical and information links with the railway station.

We are concerned that the design and visualisations circulated to consultees do not fully match some of the specific objectives detailed in the Council's own accompanying statement: <https://www.durham.gov.uk/media/31975/Redevelopment-proposals-for-Durham-City-Bus-Station/pdf/ProposalsDurhamCityBusStation.pdf?m=637152947435370000> .

Safety and Security: The first objective is "Improved safety and security", and the removal of the existing "tunnel" entrance is noted under this heading. However, the proposed additional entrance next to 27 North Road is set back from the main frontage to respect the

context of the neighbouring building, but therefore replicates some of the undesirable aspects of the present entrance by creating a set-back, partially hidden space. The door design may lead to wind blow through the building. In addition, because of the difference in levels, it opens immediately onto steps. Besides not being DDA compliant, it seems probable that these steps will become an informal seating and gathering area at certain times of the day, particularly when school pupils use the bus station for their return journeys.

Under the same heading, reference is next made to the “partial glass frontages” allowing visibility from North Road. But it appears from the online “3D Tour” that the design would not deliver significant visibility from North Road, except at the entrances – most of the North Road frontage is depicted in cladding, with limited intermediate fenestration.

The scope for overlooking by the internal office is probably overestimated. There would not appear to be accommodation for security and bus company staff and that the offices are to be provided for businesses that are completely unconnected to the use of the bus station. It seems unlikely that these could provide enhanced security.

Reducing Bus Queuing: Later in the Council’s document, under “Reduce bus queuing”, it is stated that “there is potential to add ‘straight drive in and out’ stands as well as a drive through lane.” In view of the Council’s planning objective of improving the modal share of sustainable transport, it is essential that a redeveloped bus station has the capacity to accommodate future demand. However, it is not clear from the layout plan included in the consultation how or where these “drive in and out” stands could be accommodated (see below).

Vehicle Concourse: As already noted, the Trust considers that the existing site is the right location for redeveloped bus station facilities for the city, noting that it is constrained by topography and the adjoining ownerships. Operationally, the neighbouring buildings, the retaining wall to the rear, and the approach road to the former bus company office behind the site, now in use as a nursery are constraints. That imposes limitations on bus movements within and on exiting the site.

The proposed design appears to provide the same number of main departure stands as in the existing layout, which is 11. This provision is already insufficient to avoid instances of congestion at peak travel times and during periods of traffic disruption, and in view of the Council’s aspirations to increase the use of sustainable travel modes it is important that the eventual layout is future-proofed by incorporating provision for extra capacity. This is suggested in the Council’s documentation, which refers to the possibility of additional drive-through stands, but the visualisations and floor plan which accompany the consultation do not indicate how these could feasibly be accommodated within the presently-proposed operational layout and building design. If the intention is to place such stands to the rear of the Methodist Chapel, this would be remote from the circulating area, and would make passenger interchange between services less convenient.

Part of this limitation is a result of perpetuating the essentially rectangular layout of the present bus station. It might be possible to increase the number of stands to 12 if the southerly wall of the concourse was not parallel with North Road but angled away from it to increase the depth of the concourse at the Neville Street end. Angling the concourse in that

way would also increase the length of the easterly wall, making it possible to provide at least one, and possibly two, drive-through stands which could be directly accessed from that part of the concourse.

It is important to establish whether some of these limitations could be mitigated by negotiation, for example to modify the boundary line between the bus station and the Methodist Chapel car park slightly in order to improve buses' line of approach to Stand A. It may be the case that this has already been reviewed, if so an update on wider considerations would be useful.

More aspirational opportunities are dealt with in section 7.

Future Transport developments: As the implications of the climate emergency for transport emerge, will this design approach prove flexible enough to deal with change? Is there longer term sustainability in respect of stated Government aims to encourage a petrol/diesel-free environment, and need for greater use of public transport? Future proofing for technological change would be advisable, the final layout should also be capable of accommodating passive provision for rapid electric charging of buses.

Pedestrian Circulation: The new westerly entrance, although not DDA compliant, would slightly shorten the pedestrian route between the bus and rail stations, but it is important that interchange requirements are fully embedded into the design of the bus station and its passenger information provision, and that effective waymarking is provided for visitors to the city who are unfamiliar with the walking routes or who need to rely on the Cathedral bus service to make connections between trains and local buses. It is important that the redevelopment of the bus station is accompanied by positive planning to reduce the effects of rail and bus station severance, initially by signposting.

Internal access is improved other than that the street slope necessitates steps at the upper end. Integration with pedestrian circulation locally and up to the Railway Station is not demonstrated nor is a convincing link between train and bus use.

While the space for passenger circulation within the concourse seems adequate, the free-standing information boards shown in the visualisations appear to restrict circulation and perhaps visibility. The Trust has concerns about the proposed steps at the new westerly entrance. These result from the proposed excavation of the site at that end. Although a level concourse might be desirable, it must be questioned whether the advantages of this would outweigh both the costs of excavation and the disadvantage of making this entrance non-DDA compliant. Other adverse design impacts have been noted under "Safety and Security" above.

The slight chamfering of the east end of the building that appears to be provided in the visualisations, together with the additional footway width, may help to mitigate another of the weaknesses of the present layout, the potential for pedestrian/vehicle conflict where buses exit the station. There is concern that this remains potentially dangerous.

The front of the Manse is also an issue for pedestrians and use – the low stone kerb at what is presumably the boundary narrows the footway, and people have been seen trip over it – others treat it as an informal seat. As a more aspirational approach, a wider public footway could be created taking into consideration access into the front of the Manse.

4. Other Building Functions

As noted above transport related needs should come first but there is also loss involved in reducing the retail space. This is obviously necessary to create space for better user accommodation but how clear is it that there will not be retail casualties? The loss of Recycle y'Bike would be particularly regrettable.

5. Design Benefits

Dealing first with the more positive aspects of the scheme, there is much in its function that offers an improvement for bus users. The Trust agrees that redevelopment of the bus station on its present site is the correct way forward, and shares the Council's view that this could contribute both to the regeneration of North Road itself and to a significant improvement in the facilities available to bus users in the city.

Despite some reservations, it offers greater security through visibility and adequate circulation space and better access to buses.

Some novel aspects of the scheme – including the “green wall” and the use of photovoltaic cells to generate electricity combined in public art – are to be applauded.

6. Design Issues

It should be possible to achieve a 21st-century landmark frontage to this site to complement both the Methodist building to the immediate west and the former Miners' Hall further down North Road. While appreciating budgetary constraints, the Trust is disappointed that this building doesn't manage to raise design expectations and become an exceptional design. It needs to lead the future design quality of the area.

The issues for the Trust arise from the way in which the design has evolved. Excavating down into the site to create a flat platform and taking up the street level change with a decrease in lower storey cladding magnifies the design impact of both rear and façade. Capping this with a flat roof, stone cladding and glass treatments creates a monolithic, large building out of scale with its neighbours and of a serious negative impact on the WHS view, the streetscape and across the Conservation Area. The rear is dominated by a prominent portal outlining and exaggerating the building. Detailing reinforces the vertical emphasis, helping to increase its negative impact. How essential is the reduction in gradient to the function as a Bus Station?

The impact is to lose any sense of the rising ground and the scope that this has for an interesting roofscape. Valuable as green roofs are, the flat roof suggested does not create an appropriate roofscape as it is conspicuously on view. It clashes with much of the surrounding roofscape

The abrupt junction between the proposed building and the Manse does not offer a suitable connection with a listed building. The signage exacerbates this. The existing arrangement with its canopy is poor but the set-back gains a degree of separation to reveal the form of the Manse building.

The use of stone cladding perhaps has the opposite effect to that hoped for. Durham's better stone buildings are solid masonry as distinct from cladding and their character stems

from this. This area is predominately brick and using this would help create a much less monolithic and strident building without stifling contemporary creativity.

7. Wider Aspirations

While respecting its heritage and visual significance, the Trust raises the question of whether the former Manse at 27 North Road and at least some of its curtilage could be brought within scope of a wider project. Could there be adaption of the interior for passenger facilities on the ground floor, and using the upper floor for bus staff space?

Is it possible that the former electricity offices at the corner of Neville Street could be acquired for redevelopment in a manner which would complement the new bus station? It might unlock the reduction of the present bottleneck at the bus exit created by the present alignment of the access road to the nursery.

The present disjunction between the two stations (railway and bus) is long-standing, and dates back to the physical severance that was caused when the A690 was realigned into a deep cutting. Under modern guidance, such severance would be regarded as unacceptable. Is it possible to adapt the existing footbridge over the A690 from beside the Alishaan restaurant in order to make it more accessible as the shortest existing link between these two transport hubs? An ultimate aim could be to supplement it with a more direct pedestrian bridge to restore the severed pedestrian route from and to the railway station via Tenter Terrace and Station Bank, immediately opposite the bus station entrance. (An example of a similar but much longer structure to overcome severance created by road construction can be found at Quorn in Leicestershire, where a footbridge was provided over the realigned A6 in order to maintain direct pedestrian access to the local railway station at Barrow-in-Soar)

8. Summary

The Trust remains very supportive of the Council's initiative and would wish to encourage it further. Before the Council commits to a final architectural scheme and operational layout for the existing footprint of the bus station, the Trust suggests establishing the feasibility of easing design and function issues by exploring:

- Improving the functional aspects of the scheme for vehicle and pedestrian circulation.
- Questioning the need to create a level platform to base the building upon
- Paying much greater respect to the historic environment impacts, especially the view to the WHS, down North Road and across to its roofscape.
- Ensuring sustainability through flexibility of use
- Consideration of its flagship role in the regeneration of the immediate area – it needs to lead by the quality and sensitivity of its design.