

THE CITY OF DURHAM TRUST

Phone (0191) 386 2595
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Web site:<http://www.DurhamCity.org>

c/o Blakett, Hart & Pratt, LLP
Aire House
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8 November 2020

Mr Stuart Timmiss
Head of Development and Housing
Durham County Council
County Hall
Durham City
County Durham DH1 5UL

Dear Stuart

Masterplans for Sniperley Park and Sherburn Road/Bent House Lane

The City of Durham Trust welcomes that the County Durham Plan 2016 - 2035 is now formally Adopted and that the Durham City Neighbourhood Plan has been passed for referendum. The principles and proposals in both plans now need to be taken forward.

At the same time, the Government has endorsed the report of the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission to promote and increase the use of high-quality design for new build homes and neighbourhoods.

The two 'sustainable urban extensions' at Sniperley Park and at Sherburn Road will now be the subject of development proposals to bring both into reality. This is therefore a critical moment to establish the true principles of sustainability, design and other key policies to ensure satisfactory development.

The Trust, the City of Durham Parish Council and the Friends of the Durham Green Belt have jointly agreed that a positive approach should be taken to seek major involvement with your department in the drawing up of comprehensive masterplans/design briefs for both these sites.

The Sherburn Road/Bent House Lane project is the most pressing at the moment; Trustees have had a very helpful meeting with representatives of the Banks Group who emphasised that their outline planning application will be submitted within weeks rather than months and that they have had extensive discussions with your ecology, sustainable travel, landscape and traffic officers. We therefore ask for Trustees to meet very soon with the appropriate officers to understand the masterplan requirements that have been put to Banks and to advance some further thoughts, for example on sustainable transport, footpath connectivity, industrial heritage, and compliance with County Plan Policy 45 (we have alerted Banks to the fact that the WHS Inner Setting Boundary is a zone not a line and that a significant part of their site lies within the Zone). Could you very kindly respond to this request urgently?

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By way of background, we consider that the key to a successful and sustainable development is for a masterplan or design brief that genuinely incorporates and applies the principles of sustainability and high quality design, together with phasing and possible timing of each sub-division of the site. Each of these two major sites is a precious resource to be carefully released for development over a number of years rather than an opportunity to roll out an old-style, standard housing layout. The masterplans must identify and deliver packages of land to meet the short, medium and long term demands as anticipated by the County Plan population and housing forecasts. This will ensure that development is phased in smaller and distinctive units avoiding a continuous building site appearance, and in a timely fashion where progressive improvements in housing style and function are possible

The Inspector's report on the County Plan makes some telling points about the nature of the development on the two major housing sites in respect of connectivity at Sniperley and the containment of the site at Sherburn Road. In his required Main Modifications, now implemented, the County Plan EiP Inspector in his Final Report says for Sniperley Park:

"89. The site is well served by buses to and from the city centre and elsewhere. Part (j) of policy 5 requires an expansion to the adjoining park and ride site, along with the provision of attractive and safe links from the proposed housing. Part (i) requires the provision of suitable, convenient, safe and attractive cycleways and footpaths to the existing development to the east of the A167. These proposals, along with other policies in the Plan relating to sustainable transport, should ensure that future residents are not dependent on the use of private motor vehicles."

For Sherburn Road he said:

"96. Because of the site's location and relationship with heritage assets, development needs to be sensitively designed and landscaped. This can be ensured by the requirements of parts n, o, s and t of policy 5, although a number of modifications are required to the detailed wording and the reasoned justification to ensure that they are effective in preventing any harm to the setting of heritage assets and safeguarding the character and appearance of the area."

"97. The motorway and its wooded embankment would represent a readily recognisable physical feature to provide a permanent Green Belt boundary to the east. The southern boundary is currently weakly defined by a fence and recent planting at the point where the land starts to fall more steeply. Part t of policy 5 (subject to MM53) refers to a 20 metre wide landscaped area which should be effective in creating a recognisable and permanent Green Belt boundary in this location. A hedge along the proposed Green Belt boundary and existing buildings at Bent House Farm would separate the development from the open countryside to the west, and part n of policy 5 should ensure that the character of the farm is protected."

"98. Part s of policy 5 would ensure that the proposal delivers compensatory improvements to the environmental quality and accessibility of remaining Green Belt land in the Old Durham Beck valley."

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In addition, the relevant policies of the County Durham Local Plan such as those on affordable housing provision, meeting the needs of older people and people with disabilities, and delivering sustainable transport will all be engaged. The notion of 'lifetime housing' should be 'in the mix'. Also, local cycling and walking infrastructure as referenced in Policy 22 should be addressed. A circular distributed in August suggested that the LCWIP for Durham City would be published in October this year. The Trust seeks reassurance that the LCWIP will be in place prior to determination of any planning applications relating to the green belt release sites, and requests that the current draft be made available to Trustees and other stakeholders to help inform the preparation of the masterplans.

The above quotes set an indisputable set of requirements that a masterplan or design brief would need to embody. Here is the big opportunity for a very sustainable development, but past experience is that some developers will 'dumb down' the product and produce standard car-dependent estates with only token provision for sustainable travel for work, shopping, education and recreation. To avoid this, a wide-ranging exercise is proposed in which the County Council, the City of Durham Trust, the Parish Council, and the Friends of the Durham Green Belt are partners and not just consultees in the production of a jointly agreed masterplan or design brief.

Sniperley Park

The County Council issued a Draft Supplementary Planning Document on Sniperley Park in July 2012 but much has happened since and a new masterplan/design brief is needed to meet all of the Inspector's requirements as embodied in the Adopted County Durham Plan 2016-2035, and the pressing factors of the climate change emergency, well-being post COVID, and the lessons of the behaviour of the local housing market in producing unimaginative high-end 'executive housing'. It will of course be essential to include Framwellgate Moor Parish Council in the proposed joint work, and also the Western Relief Road Action Group who have interests in the associated infrastructure works.

Sherburn Road/Bent House Lane

The Banks Group has consulted on an outline masterplan in a leaflet issued on 9 October. The Trust has made initial comments to Banks, as you will know from the copy sent to you, and it is clear that much needs to change to meet the terms set by the Inspector and embodied in County Durham Plan Policy 5:

- The consultation leaflet promises "*housing with a good sustainability rating*". This is a case when good is not good enough. York is an example of a Council with a project for 600 zero-carbon homes in "*car-free cycling paradises full of fruit trees and allotments.*" The highest levels are clearly not achievable with a traditional medium density layout with road access dominating despite green flourishes.
- The main failure in the layout is that there is a nearly complete spine road where a pedestrian, cycle, ecological, social and play environment should be. It is a layout that looks dated and compromised.

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- “A contribution towards affordable housing” seems to be less than a full commitment to the provision for local people. Does this imply the affordable housing is to be built elsewhere in possibly less satisfactory locations? If that is the case then claims to be providing a sustainable product fail on the grounds of social equity.
- There is no mention at all of the sources of energy and indeed how much energy can be generated from the site by studying the applicability of a district heating scheme from for example a small heat and power plant, the provision of solar power, air or ground source heating. It is a key metric for the sustainability of the housing to avoid the provision of housing that in a few years will suffer an energy deficit as gas is phased out.
- The use of public transport is dismissed in a line. This is clearly a car dependent development and almost completely unsustainable without some accommodation of greatly enhanced public transport within the site remembering that a generation of electric buses is close now. As a minimum, greatly improved bus stands with traffic calming and comfortable waiting facilities should be provided.

The meeting of some Trustees with Banks Group representatives on 4 November was most helpful in elucidating the scope of the proposed outline planning application. Many matters will be left to detailed applications, but it is good to know that the outline application will be accompanied by a masterplan that will be much more informative than the illustrative sketch included in the consultation leaflet; that there will be traffic, landscape, ecology and other technical assessment reports; and that the principal purpose of the outline application will be to confirm the allocation and to indicate means of access.

We understand that the Parish Council agrees with the Trust’s above initial points and considers that, although the site lies beyond the Parish Council boundary, it has a proper interest because of the potential consequences in terms of traffic into and out of the Parish and on views to and from the World Heritage Site that lies at the core of the Parish area. Furthermore, the new residents of this development will look to the Parish area for much of their retail, social and professional services. The Friends of the Durham Green Belt also agree with the Trust’s initial points. Furthermore, Belmont Parish Council is keen to participate in a positive partnership approach.

We look forward to your response and to working collaboratively on achieving exemplary developments of both sites in accordance with the principles so well set out in Policy 5 and other policies of the County Durham Plan. To repeat, the urgent request is for Trustees to meet your ecology, sustainable travel, landscape, heritage and traffic officers who have provided pre-application advice to the Banks team, thereby to be able to contribute more effectively to progress of these important sites from the master planning stage onwards.

Yours sincerely

John Lowe
Chair, City of Durham Trust