

CITY OF DURHAM TRUST

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ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The lingering pandemic makes plans for the next Trust AGM uncertain. Trustees have decided to bide their time for now, in the hope of being able to hold the event in real space in the late summer. Details of the AGM will be published beforehand in the Annual Review for 2020-21.

DURHAM CITY NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAN: PROTECTING AND ENHANCING THE CITY'S HERITAGE

If you are registered to vote in the City of Durham Parish you will have a chance to participate in a unique event on Thursday May 6 2021. A local referendum will be held to determine whether the Durham City Neighbourhood Plan will be adopted. This is a Plan developed by volunteers for the Parish Council area to deal with matters of concern in the City in finer detail than was possible in the County Plan. It is a genuinely local plan by local people.

Although awaiting the forthcoming referendum, the Plan has already been approved by an independent examiner and certified by the County Council as suitable to go forward to a referendum. This means that it already carries weight when planning decisions are made. In particular Policy H2 requires developments to sustain and enhance the Durham City Conservation Area and this has been used to prevent the conversion of a traditional dwelling on Gilesgate into flats, badly designed extensions to the rear of one of the Market Place shops, and unsightly parking places near Flass Vale.

Within areas containing town or parish councils, they are the only body that can prepare a neighbourhood plan. Where there is no town or parish council a neighbourhood forum consisting of local volunteers can be created to prepare a neighbourhood plan. In this case, the Durham City Neighbourhood Planning Forum was formed in January 2014 and began work on the Durham City Neighbourhood Plan. This was taken over by the Parish Council when it was created in April 2018.

The development of the Plan has been of interest to the Trust throughout. The scrutiny of planning applications is at the heart of the Trust's activity. This is essential to preserve the integrity of the City's natural and built heritage. The kernel of scrutinising planning applications lies in assessing whether they meet the requirements of planning policies. Until last year the policies that mattered were those contained in the former City of Durham District Council's local plan. These were replaced by the policies in the new County Durham Plan that was adopted in October 2020.

Those policies apply across the whole County. The new element in the mix is truly local plans that were introduced by the Localism Act of 2011. Their aim is to help local communities play a direct role in planning the areas in which they live and work. Local communities prepare neighbourhood plans which are created to show how the community wants land to be used and developed in its area. When a neighbourhood plan passes a local referendum, it becomes part of the development plan for that neighbourhood area and must be used to help in making decisions on planning applications in that area.

The main work of developing the Neighbourhood Plan was done by a working group of about a dozen local people meeting almost weekly over a period of six years. They had to overcome bureaucratic and technical difficulties and satisfy strict Government criteria and close scrutiny by Historic England because

of concerns about the World Heritage Site. The working group included five Trustees. This close link between the Trust and the Plan is indicative of the importance of the Plan for the work of the Trust in preserving and enhancing the City's heritage.

The approach taken by the working group was to ensure that the Plan reflected the views of the people who live in the Parish area. The whole process started by asking people "What is good about Durham City?", "What is bad about Durham City?" and "What needs to change?". Three formal consultation exercises were then carried out at roughly two-year intervals to check with people how the Plan was progressing.

The overall vision of the Plan that resulted from these extensive consultations is that "Durham City's potential as a beautiful historic City will be realised through policy and action to improve and protect its qualities and by creating a diverse and resilient economy with attractive, healthy and affordable places to live. It will be supported by modern infrastructure, protected by adaptation to climate change and enriched by community engagement in its future."

To achieve this vision the Plan contains 26 policies organised in six themes: Sustainability, Heritage, Economy, Housing, Transport and Community. The theme of Sustainability underpins the whole Plan while the Heritage theme is the one most directly of concern to the Trust and it is the longest part of the Plan. It is divided into two sections, the built environment and the natural environment.

The City's built environment is particularly rich so the Plan includes policies to protect and enhance the World Heritage Site and the Durham City and Burn Hall Conservation Areas. These policies ensure that developments are sensitive to the precious heritage that we enjoy in this beautiful and historic City.



We are also fortunate in the amount of green areas within the City, so the Plan contains policies to protect these, designating some areas such as Observatory Hill and St Margaret's Cemetery and Allotments as Local Green Spaces. This gives them added protection against inappropriate development.

One of the most ambitious policies in the Plan is to create the Emerald Network. This comprises 17 sites of wildlife interest within the Parish that are linked by public rights of way or pavements. The sites are designated wildlife sites, key green sites and the River Wear and the riverbanks.

While the Plan itself is restricted to matters that are planning considerations, during the consultations people came forward with many other good ideas that it was important not to lose. These have been preserved in a companion document called "Looking Forwards" that contains 22 initiatives that would enrich the life of the City. And one of these contains the practical steps required to set up the Emerald Network.

It obviously isn't possible in the space of this short article to share the full richness of the Plan itself and "Looking Forwards". These can be found at <http://npf.durhamcity.org.uk/the-plan/>

The local referendum to be held on May 6 will ask the simple question: "Do you want Durham County Council to use the Neighbourhood Plan for Durham City to help it decide planning applications in the neighbourhood area?" Those entitled to vote are those registered in the City of Durham Parish area. If a simple majority of those who do vote support the Plan then it will come into effect and help to influence the planning decisions made by the County Council. The Trust is looking forward to this new local element in the planning process.

BELMONT VIADUCT

A campaign has been gathering pace to reopen the unused Belmont Viaduct in Kepier Gorge as a bridleway (footpath, cycle way, and equestrian). The neglected viaduct rises over the wooded seclusion of Kepier Gorge and seems almost an exercise in the picturesque, with its 8 expansive arches spanning the River Wear at a surprising height. Palatinat has celebrated the viaduct's "lost temple" quality, <https://www.palatinat.org.uk/durhams-forgotten-viaduct/>. It is a Grade II listed building, owned by the County Council. Trustees have added their warm support to the campaign to repair and reuse the viaduct to that of local parish councils, Durham Greenpeace, Durham Green Party and many local people. It would preserve a valuable part of our mining and Victorian architectural heritage.

The campaign is led by Michael Watson, a councillor for Belmont Parish. He oversees the Facebook site "The Friends of Kepier Woods" (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/253130032221851>), where the latest news on the project can be found. Michael Watson envisages a bridleway linking Kepier Gorge to the path that runs past Brasside Ponds to Frankland Lane, first passing through an area of new woodland to be planted by Living Woods North East this December.

The viaduct was originally built for the Auckland branch of the North Eastern Railway that opened in



1857, later forming a short side-spur of the old Leamside railway line, running to what became the main line at Low Newton, now a nature reserve. This spur became defunct years before the rest of the Leamside line was mothballed in 1992. The spur is not part of the current thinking on that line's possible reinstatement. Speculatively, and in accordance with its submissions on both the County Durham Plan and the North East Transport Plan, the Trust would urge that sight not be fully lost of the longer-term possibility of extending T&W Metro services over the viaduct at least as far as Newton Hall. Comparable cases suggest a shared use should be feasible, especially if the Metro became a single line over the viaduct.

Some members may remember a plan to reopen the viaduct as part of a proposed "Necklace Park" around 2010, a scheme that came to nothing because of resistance from a landowner. Since then, however, the land on both sides of the viaduct has passed into the ownership of the Council, which bought it in planning for the now shelved northern relief road. A walk and cycle way linking the Brasside and Belmont areas would make its own more enlightened contribution to Durham's transport network, vastly cheaper than a £53 million road.

This is a project which clearly invites some public lobbying. Officers of Durham County Council are known to support the proposal, if only in idea at present, as significant funds would be needed for repairs (estimated at c. £ 1.225 million a decade ago). The sides of the viaduct would need barriers of some kind if it is to be safe, and care would be needed with their design. The forbidding metal "cages" that run along the top of the reused, much narrower Hownsgill Viaduct near Consett were built after a series of suicides there, and better solutions would be urged for Kepier Gorge.



“AIR QUALITY MANAGEMENT AREA”

In 2011 measures on air pollution led to an AQMA being established for the centre of Durham City. It was slightly extended in 2014. This February the Trust was consulted by the County Council on a plan to expand that AQMA a little more, “to incorporate a further short section of Church Street”. Monitoring of air quality in 2018 had shown thresholds of nitrogen dioxide being exceeded nearby. Trustees of course supported the Council’s plan, though expressing surprise that the consultation was taking place so long after the proposal to amend the AQMA first made in October 2018. The Trust also expressed its own thoughts on the problem of air pollution in Durham.

During the past year various developments have underlined just how dreadful a killer air pollution is, with the landmark court ruling in December that poor air quality linked to traffic helped kill a nine-year old girl. An online article of February 9 in *New Scientist* concludes that new studies “suggest there are around three times as many deaths from dirty air in the UK as listed in official figures.” A study in the US last year links air pollution with an increased risk of dying from Covid 19.

Trustees also noted that the current AQMA in Durham City has an extremely minimalist look. It simply traces the narrow line of several main roads through the built-up centre of the City, though currently including neither North Road nor Millburngate, despite their relatively high bus traffic. It is interesting to compare the map of Durham’s AQMA with those elsewhere. In Oxford and Dundee, for example, they cover a comprehensive area of the city, including some green spaces. The reasoning behind these differing choices is unclear and it would be helpful to know whether there might be advantages if Durham were to adopt the same strategy.

What is an AQMA actually for? The need for an extension to the AQMA must suggest the insufficiency of the County Council’s *Air Quality Action Plan for Durham City* approved in June 2016, nearly five years ago. It would be helpful to know what initiatives have been undertaken since and if they have actually affected air quality, which seems clearly unimproved in 2018 at least. Was there too much reliance on the impact of proposed relief roads, thrown out by a planning inspector in 2020, as opposed to measures for sustainable transport?



It remains to be seen what effect the new central location of the County Council headquarters will have on air quality. The photograph shows the multi-storey carpark with 277 parking spaces currently being erected near the bottom of Providence Row at the back of the sixth form centre there, with another 60 spaces nearby. It was hard not to wonder about this when reading in February that anxieties about air quality had led to Manchester City Council being forced in court to abandon plans to build a 440-space car park next to a city-centre primary school.

The Trust’s consultation response repeated its long-held view on the need for measures supporting “an overall reduction in the volume of motor traffic, particularly diesel vehicles, though it should be noted that electric vehicles cannot provide a complete solution because of recent findings that brake dust and tyre particles are significant air-borne pollutants.”

NEW WEBSITE REMINDER

Finally, just a reminder that the new and enhanced Trust website has been active since earlier in the year, at the usual address, <https://durhamcity.org/>. *Members are invited to add their own thoughts on items highlighted in the News section.* Get in touch also if you want to raise other issues for open discussion with a “guest post” (contact website@durhamcity.org).

Part of the forthcoming Annual Review for 2020-21 will concern again the issue of the impact of the pandemic on Durham City, and thoughts and observations on this would be particularly welcome. *The Trustees*

Erratum. An error crept into the final version of the last bulletin. The medieval estate of Beaufrepaire comprised 1,300 acres, not “13,000”. Apologies.