

THE CITY OF DURHAM TRUST

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Belmont
Durham, DH1 1TH

18th December 2024

Mr Richard Laughton
Durham County Council Planning Development
PO BOX 274
Stanley Co Durham
DH8 1HG

Dear Mr Laughton,

DM/24/00149/FPA: Construction of purpose built student accommodation (Sui Generis) with associated car and cycle parking, pedestrian infrastructure and landscaping, land to the north west of Melbury Court, Old Dryburn Way, Durham DH1 5SE

Having reviewed the design amendments and additional information now submitted, the Trust maintains its objection to the proposed purpose built student accommodation (PBSA) at Melbury Court.

Any assessment of PBSA need is necessarily based on a mix of current statistics and future projections. The latter can only be valid if drawn from the University's own forecasts. A Needs Assessment Addendum submitted on 13 November on behalf of the applicants accepts the University's information that the number of students will remain stable at around 21,500. Whilst this means that there is no quantitative need for more student accommodation, the Addendum puts forward the assertion that there is a need for more PBSA accommodation so as to reduce the number of HMOs. The Trust recognises that there is a definite need to remove sub-standard HMOs from the market and that well-designed new PBSAs in the right location are acceptable in principle. The application for a PBSA at Melbury Court fails that test, as this letter demonstrates.

The objection therefore continues to be based on a failure to fully analyse impact on the World Heritage Site (WHS) and anticipated negative impact, failures in assessing local car parking impact, and in the transport statement.

It should be noted that the Durham County Council (DCC) Design and Conservation response in April this year requested a more robust heritage statement demonstrating impact and an ICOMOS impact assessment of the relationship with the WHS. These have not been submitted. The design amendments improve the building's relationship to the local environs, but the building remains over dominant in relation to the nearby care home. The amended proposals appear to be the same height as the original design over substantial parts of the block. The illustration of the new streetscene (Proposed Street) is confusing in that it is labelled as being 1:200 but the scale bar is 1:100. The Durham Cathedral and Castle World Heritage Site Preliminary Visibility Appraisal and Heritage Statement referenced in the Planning Statement Addendum Para 4.11. was very limited. It failed to prove that there was no impact. The DCC Design and Conservation review of cross impact from viewpoints is not available

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publicly- Notwithstanding these omissions, the Trust maintains from its own review that there will be a high likelihood of an increase in cumulative impact. The views from the hospital will be reduced and the materials chosen will unnecessarily add to prominence in cross city views.

The impact on local car parking from loss of the car park and from student parking remains to be fully assessed, the section in the revised Travel Plan is minimal and very speculative. Equally the Travel Plan still contains inaccuracies about access and city wide travel.

In order to reinforce its continuing objection, the Trust repeats key points from its original objection below.

Heritage

The immediate context is the Hospital, Ustinov College accommodation, care home, and Land Registry. All sit within the WHS inner setting, and an immediate skyline is formed from trees and the hospital buildings. When viewed across the City from the south east the hospital is particularly visible and seen against a distant skyline formed by rising ground to the north. See the photograph below – taken from below the reservoir adjacent to the University Mount Joy complex, this is one of the notable viewpoints identified in the current WHS Management Plan.



The chimney and light coloured elements of the roof and upper elevations of the hospital add to their prominence significantly. The Grade II listed obelisk (Obelisk Lane) is also caught in this view. There is therefore potential for the proposed PBSA becoming visually tangled with the hospital that has a negative impact in cross views over the City and WHS. This would represent cumulative negative impact. There is also potential for an exacerbating factor by addition to the current collection of larger buildings around the site that fail to have a positive impact on the conservation area.

There remains a need to identify whether the proposed block sits below the hospital and how it protrudes into views. The height should not exceed that of the hospital and if below it, then design measures are needed to avoid prominence. As proposed, the light coloured blockwork and reflective bronze detailing together with potentially 'reflective' windows are likely to increase visual prominence. As a general requirement the building should be required to be 'recessive' to limit cumulative impact together with the surrounding buildings and reduce negative local and viewpoint impact.

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The University Hospital of North Durham has a restaurant for the use of staff and visitors with panoramic windows designed to give a view of Durham Cathedral. Brackenbury, actually now part of St Mary's College, is visible on the left as indicated by the down arrow:



Melbury Court Care Home is highlighted in this image:



It will be seen that the care home sits in the direct line of sight of the Cathedral, but below it, and the roof (which is artificial slate) tends to merge with the trees behind, at least in winter.

The care home was approved in 2006 by the former Durham District Council, and the details are on the planning portal under reference 4/06/00877/FPA. From the plans we learn that the entrance is 101.8m above sea level, and that the main ridge of the roof rises 8.2m so it sits at 110m above sea level.

The site plan for the proposed PBSA shows a height above sea level of 104.77m at ground floor level. This is 3 metres higher than the care home. The parapet is 15.3m

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above ground floor level, so placing the top of the proposed building at a height of 120m above sea level. The applicant's *Proposed Street Scenes* illustrates this very clearly, and measurements taken from the upper drawing (Proposed Street Scene – Melbury Court Care Home) confirm the differences.

The lower drawing (Proposed Street Scene – Brackenbury, Ustinov College) shows that the proposed PBSA stands slightly higher (we measured 1.5m) than Brackenbury. As both buildings are the same distance from the viewpoint, comparisons are possible. Brackenbury is just below the skyline, so **the proposed PBSA will block the view of all of the Cathedral except the very top of the crossing tower**. The western towers and the roof would disappear from view.

As reassurance is not fully given within the submission and the materials proposals work against creating a recessive building, they fail to meet the requirements of the CDP. The specific failures are – **CDP Policy 29** Sustainable Design- section **a**. fails to provide positive contribution to the area's heritage significance, and **Policy 44** Conservation Areas - section **f** understanding and respect for setting and **h** reinforcing positive characteristics, height. The site is within the area covered by the **City of Durham Neighbourhood Plan** and the proposals also fail against **Policy HI WHS** – section **c** materials appropriate to setting **e and f** setting and views, **Policy H2 Durham City Conservation Area** section **g** protecting views, **j** materials, **l** cumulative impact.

Car Parking

The Trust is supportive of efforts to reduce student car use: the limited car parking to be provided for PBSA residents is welcomed in principle. The Trust considers this is in line with the Parking and Accessibility SPD because neighbouring streets are either in the Controlled Parking Zone (e.g. Old Dryburn Way, Dryburn Hill) or have on-street parking prohibited through double-yellow lines (Dryburn Road, High Carr Road). Nevertheless, some students are known to keep cars in Durham, even when there is no provision for parking at their accommodation, and this is more likely with a site which is further from the University than most other student accommodation.

Coupled with the loss of the privately-run car parking, which helps to serve the Hospital and other local employment sites, there will undoubtedly be an increased pressure on the on-street parking within North End and Old Dryburn Way especially. The previous application for a three-year extension of the use of the land as a temporary car park, approved in 2017, noted that “significant over-demand for parking spaces has caused traffic safety problems in the past in this location” and the application sought to alleviate this. The Transport Statement of the current application, para. 3.5.2, anticipates that current users of the car park are likely to make use of the Sniperley/Belmont Park and Ride bus service in future, but this is speculation.

The Trust considers that more analysis of the impact of removing the existing car park is required. This could take into account any changes in management of the other car park facilities, and the Hospital travel plan. It should be noted that this private car park remains identified in current information distributed to patients. Avoiding harm to amenity will depend on good enforcement of the parking controls, and according to evidence from local residents this appears already to be inadequate.

Moreover, the introduction of a large body of students into this area has the potential for increasing traffic through term time deliveries to students living in the PBSA, taxi trips, and move in/out timing. While the Transport Statement Appendix D includes

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trip generation estimates, the Trust notes that, in two of the four survey sites selected, any servicing vehicles were excluded from the count. Assessment of this potential impact is needed along with identification of any control measures required.

Cycle Parking

Providing the storage within the basement, with internal stair and lift access to the other floors is a good approach and takes advantage of the topography.

Paragraph 3.13 of the Parking and Accessibility SPD requires 5% of cycle spaces to be “suitable for use by people with 3-wheel or adapted cycles”. The Trust suggests that an area of double-height cycle racks near the external door should be removed, and that stands suitable for non-standard cycles be provided there.

Providing some visitor cycle parking near the pedestrian entrances would be ideal. Unfortunately, the requirement in the 2019 Parking and Accessibility Standards appears to have been dropped from the latest SPD.

There should be more direct access from the storage area via a path to Southfield Way, allowing cyclists to avoid negotiating the two roundabouts.

Transport Statement

The Transport Statement remains superficial in its assessment of cycling and walking accessibility and is misleading by what it leaves unsaid. For example, para. 3.2.3 states that “the majority of Durham city centre” can be accessed within a 2km catchment of the site. In fact, Durham city centre is just within a 2km walk, and the statement neglects to mention that the majority of Durham University's academic buildings lie outside the 2km range, with the Bill Bryson Library, for example, being 3.1km distant.

The Trust particularly takes issue with the statement that “the local cycle environment is considered to be accessible by all users regardless of age or disabilities” (para. 3.9.1). In fact, there is very little local cycle infrastructure which would match this description.

While these sustainable transport deficiencies would also apply were the site to be proposed for apartments or other non-student dwellings, by comparison with the PBSA sites allocated in Policy 16, this proposal is poorly connected to the university and unlikely to compete well with existing accommodation.

The Transport Statement has not really addressed the basic levels of accessibility. DCNP Policy T1 requires that “approach routes to the site ... should be accessible to all, giving the highest priority to walking, then cycling and public transport, and should meet the travel needs of people with mobility impairments”, and that to mitigate adverse impacts “proposals should improve access by walking, cycling and public transport in the area around the development”. The Trust would wish to see at a minimum, a demonstration of the accessibility of walking routes to the main roads and bus stops, and an assessment of compliance with LTN 1/20 of the cycle routes approaching the site. For example:

- Is the nearest bus stop to the city, on the far side of the B6532, accessible by wheelchair, and with a suitable crossing point with dropped kerbs? (It is not.)
- How far do the junctions and routes which a cyclist would use to approach the development conform with LTN 1/20? (They are very far from conforming.)

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Measures to address these could include funding footway and crossing improvements on the B6532 and creating better path connections from the pedestrian entrances and cycle storage to Southfield Way and Old Dryburn Way.

From the Design and Access Statement, sections 4.1 to 4.3, it is clear that the main pedestrian access will be from an entrance close to the A691 roundabout. It is not clear why the main pedestrian access is on the west side of the building, with a path turning north, heading away from the city centre and University, to join the highway by the roundabout. Surely the majority of students would be heading east towards the B6532 bus stops via Old Dryburn Way and the footpath link north of Boste Crescent? Yet the courtyard access which faces this way will be locked after 6pm (DAS para. 4.3).

Overall, the accessibility of the site both in local terms and in the wider relation to the city and University, has not been adequately considered or demonstrated, and several aspects of the design could be improved.

Conclusion

The Trust therefore maintains its objection on the basis of these identified policy failures.

Yours sincerely

Sue Childs
Vice Chair, City of Durham Trust