

# THE CITY OF DURHAM TRUST

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Mr S. Timmiss  
County Durham Plan  
Durham County Council  
Civic Centre  
Chester-le-Street, DH3 3UT

6th July 2011

Dear Mr Timmiss,

## **County Durham Plan: Consultation Paper Core Strategy Policy Directions**

Trustees would wish to make some key general comments before turning briefly to those Questions directly of concern to this society. I apologise if this is not the most convenient method of response from your point of view, but it is difficult to convey accurately or meaningfully Trustees' views given (1) the apparent reasonableness but generality of the text compared with the specificity of the questions, (2) the acknowledged unfortunate absence from the document of Green Belt consideration and transport modelling.

The core of the County Plan hinges on boosting Durham City, where there is to be "a step change in [its] role and function" to become the economic driver for the whole County (paras 3.10, 3.13, 4.4, 4.41, 4.51). The mechanism for this was summarised as Option A in *Core Strategy: Issues and Options* (June 2010). As a result of responses to that document, the Authority is now recommending "that a combination of spatial options A and B should be taken forward" (4.61). The decision and intent deserve further comment.

The crucial aspect which needs to be known, of course, is what mix or proportion of each Option is to be included. Here, several comments are relevant. (1) Thus, the discussion of the pros and cons of A and B (4.60) does not indicate how much of each might be included or excluded. (2) The summary of responses to the choice of Options in *Issues and Options* is misleading or vague, thus: "There is broad support .... this should be done in addition to supporting development opportunities elsewhere" (3.9, also 3.12). In fact, only 40% of all responses supported A – especially consultants, landowners, developers – while as many as four-fifths of all Town and Parish Councils did not opt for it (*Feedback Report to Core Strategy Issues and Options Paper*).

However, despite the more favourable description of several towns and locations – more so than in the earlier document – the few quantitative measures included indicate that Option A is still very much to the fore. Thus (1) Durham City's housing total has only been lowered by 15%, with two-thirds still to be located in the Green Belt. (2) The County Authority intends to overcome the position stated by higher authority. Thus, the Regional Spatial Strategy laid down that "the City's outward expansion will continue to be constrained by the Green Belt" (quoted in this document, 4.46). The Inspector's Report into the Local District Plan (2002) came to the same conclusion, and recommended that "Development outside such a comparatively narrow

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GB could still be located so as to minimise travel distance for work and leisure.” The Authority in this document, in contrast, “is seeking to address these constraints” (4.47). Its listing of five Green Belt sites on which to locate 3550 houses indicates the nature of its ‘addressing.’

## QUESTIONS

**Q1.** No. In summary, much less of Option A, more of B, is required in the mix. In the City, Aykley Heads should be treated with great sensitivity. The Green Belt should be avoided. (See above)

**Q2.** Yes in general to the high number of objectives, but with a lowering of emphasis on the City. The “key elements” of the Preferred Spatial Strategy (4.4) repeats the omission in earlier documents of any reference to the influence of settlements which are far larger than Durham City but immediately beyond the County’s boundary. Here, the first three of the five bullet points of 4.4 relate to Durham City, then “the other eleven main towns”, finally to “other settlements, outside of the main towns” .

**Q3.** *[Replaced with a [later submission](#)]*

**Q4.** No. See answer to Q1 and general discussion above.

**Q5.** No. The City is small, physically constrained, surrounded by green approaches as well as Green Belt, with a centripetal, heavily-loaded road system. If there were several Durhams, a ‘step change’ might cause no problem, but there is but one precious city – a city for which we are but stewards. Durham is such a special city that even well-intentioned development could easily undermine the very features that make it an attractive location.

Detailed suggestions, if such are relevant at this time, might be: housing - to look just beyond the Green Belt; rezone extensive Dragonville site, currently scheduled for retail but long neglected; offices - take cognisance of the waterside area (Millburngate and the former ice rink), the former County Hospital and Mount Oswald (north part, as scheduled in Local Plan), but allow only a minimum of development at Aykley Heads (for a genuinely international concern, if one could really be attracted); retailing – revitalise by attaching footbridge to Millburngate Bridge linking the Gates to St Nics to provide round walk, persuade Tesco, or at least its juggernauts, to move out.

Trustees find ominous the comment on possible funds from the Community Infrastructure Levy based on the jump in land values that result from the granting of planning permission (5.7). Given that the Levy promises to be lucrative almost in proportion to the previous environmental protection of the land being exploited, the onus of proof is very much on the Council to prove that its rezoning of large areas of Durham’s Green Belt meets genuine planning needs and is not primarily a revenue-raising scheme.

**Q10.** This is an example where answers to a yes/no question can be misconstrued. Only a small part should be so-classified. “Durham does not have a Central Business District, and this would go some way towards achieving this” (6.15). This is not ‘Durham’, never has been and the City can surely capitalise on its uniqueness without one - which is not to say that no expansion of

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offices is possible. CBD is an American term, and relates to a complex of inter-acting companies, many in the financial sector, and where face-to-face contacts may be a crucial part of the inter-action. Is this really what is being sought in this small historic university and market town?

Durham does have an established city centre in British terms – a concentration of retail, cultural, financial and other professional services in the area centred on the Market Place. A “CBD” based on Aykley Heads will simply dilute still further the pull of the existing city centre. It is to be questioned, also, whether an oblique view of the cathedral and castle will make it a world class attractor which would compensate for the disruption it would cause to the economic functioning of the City.

Aykley Heads in locational terms is actually relatively inaccessible as a result of the severance caused by the river valley and railway. Although relatively close as the crow flies, circuitous routes and extra traffic over Millburngate Bridge would be inevitable. (The railway station was given as a locating factor in the siting of Millburngate House in the 1960s, but, unsurprisingly, rail commuting has played no part in employees’ journey to work.) Consequently, Aykley Heads will hardly pass the major test of sustainability.

**Q15.** Yes.

Yours sincerely,

D.C.D.Pocock (Dr)  
(Hon Sec)