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**From:** Common Land  
**Subject:** Deregistration of common land at the Sands in Durham City

## **DEREGISTRATION OF COMMON LAND AT THE SANDS AT DURHAM CITY**

Reference:

- A. Application by Durham County Council - COM/3236108.
- B. Durham County Council Flood Resilience Guide.
- C. Minutes of a meeting of the County Planning Committee - 5 March 2019.
- D. Evidence by Gerard Lawson on behalf of Durham County Council - Para 2.10.
- E. Durham County Council - Climate Emergency Update Report - July 2019.

### **INTRODUCTION**

1. My name is James Anthony Cowan. I've lived at 6 Buckinghamshire Road, Belmont, Durham, DH1 2BD for 20 years. I'm a retired Royal Air Force senior officer. My interest and objection to the application by Durham County Council, to deregister the common land at the Sands in the centre of the city (Ref A), is in recognition of the importance to maintain open spaces, with trees, to counter and to minimise the harm to human health caused by traffic pollution, particularly in city centres.
2. Durham County Council, which became a unitary authority on the 1 April 2009, has proved itself to be very good at many things, but has also gained a reputation for ignoring advice from outside its inner circle. Many will agree that, on occasion, it mistakingly acts against the interests of the residents of Durham City, together with the interests of visitors to our heritage city. For example, the only museum which explored a small, but significant part of County Durham's rich heritage, the Durham Light Infantry Museum at Aykley Heads, now lies empty, the art gallery has been closed and we now have a heritage city without a tourist information office. All closed by Durham County Council.

### **THE DANGER OF FLOODING**

3. More recently, after ignoring advice from the City of Durham Parish Council and from members of the public, together with its own warning of the danger of flooding the County Council is now building a new Council HQ in the middle of Durham City, with a consequent and significant reduction in 'green space' in the city centre. This new Brutalist style, multi-story building is being built on a known flood plain; an area adjacent to the River Wear, identified by the Environment Agency and highlighted by Durham County Council as at risk, *"Any properties built on historical flood plains or low lying land adjacent to rivers are at risk from river flooding, for example properties that line the banks of the River Wear in Durham City. River flooding can extend over large areas, cause widespread damage and is often slow to drain away."* (Ref B). Moreover the new building is totally out of character in the middle of a heritage city.

**A. The current County Hall at Aykley Heads, designed by Sir Bail Spence in the Brutalist style and opened in 1963. It is surrounded by large car parks and open ground and was recommended by the City of Durham Parish Council, and others, as the preferred location for the new Council HQ. It's close to, within walking distance, of the city centre and on the bus route to the 'park and ride' at Sniperley.**



4. This is a Council that, during a period of austerity, has willingly incurred additional expenses, from the public purse, by building its new HQ on a flood plain with additional, mandatory flood defences, and then supported a retrospective planning application to add a 300 square metre roof terrace, again, at public expense. Now it wishes to ignore the public view and deregister common land in favour of yet another, some would say an unnecessary, car park.

#### **A NEW COUNCIL HEADQUARTERS**

5. The new Council HQ is shoehorned onto the former Sands car park, a former area of tranquility, full of trees and a haven for wildlife, a green oasis in the middle of the city. Also, immediately across the road from the new Council HQ, a new multi-story car park is being built, next door to the Durham Sixth Form Centre. So, with complete disregard for the health and well being of the staff and students of the sixth form college, together with local residents, particularly those living in Providence Row, Durham County Council will now 'parachute' one thousand local government employees into the centre of Durham City, together with a multi-story car park with a capacity for 277 vehicles.

**B. The former Sands car park, between the River Wear and the Durham Sixth Form Centre. An an area full of trees, a haven for wildlife, a green oasis in the middle of the city, but also an area prone to flooding.**



6. With the prospect of climate change and a determination, by governments, to 'go green', one would have hoped that Durham County Council would have led from the front, fought 'tooth and nail', to maintain green spaces and to protect every tree in the City of Durham. Instead it has cut down trees to build a new HQ, together with an adjoining multi-story car park, and now shows a determination to take yet more green space, common land, adjacent to the building, to build yet another, 'executive' car park with parking spaces for 56 vehicles.

7. In this respect Durham County Council is out of step with the neighbouring Newcastle City Council which has a vision to transform the centre of the city into a traffic free zone with green spaces and trees added. Moreover, other cities, including London, Bath and Bristol have, or are, introducing 'clean air zones' in city centres. As recently

as the 17 March 2021 a student at Durham University, Romy Dawson wrote to the local, regional newspaper, 'The Northern Echo' with the observation, "Durham is such a beautiful city that must be protected from the emissions and damage done by excess car use".

**C. The new Council HQ under construction. Shoehorned onto the former Sands car park, between the River Wear and the Durham Sixth Form Centre.**



8. Any concerns about traffic congestion and an increase in levels of pollution, next door to a school, have been brushed aside. Moreover, the recommendation by the Parish Council, to locate the new Council HQ in a more suitable area, on council owned land at Aykley Heads, adjacent to the existing County Hall (Ref. C) has been ignored.

**D. The new Council HQ is another Brutalist style, multi-story building. One that is totally out of character in the middle of a heritage city.**



9. The fact that the former Sands car park is an area that's known to flood is also well documented. Indeed, the County Council has added additional flood defences to the new building, all at additional public expense. These

flood defences include an underground void, to collect flood water, a bund, or barrier between the River Wear and the building and waterproof doors and windows on the ground floor. The building site flooded most recently in February 2020. Once the new construction, together with its flood defences are complete, then the most likely outcome is that flood water will be directed to the opposite bank of the river, the location of the Radisson Blu Hotel.

**E. The new building site, at the former Sands car park, flooded in February 2020.**



## **DO WE NEED ANOTHER CAR PARK?**

10. Durham County Council has now applied to deregister common land to build a new, executive car park adjacent to the new Council HQ. The proposed new car park, which is in addition to the 277 place multi-story car park opposite the new Council HQ, is on common land, an area that includes trees, trees that absorb pollution from passing motor vehicles and, at the same time, provide a habitat for wildlife.

**F. The new multi-story car park at the corner of Freeman's Place and Providence Row and opposite private housing in Providence Row. Between the new Council HQ and Providence Row and adjacent to the Durham Sixth Form Centre.**



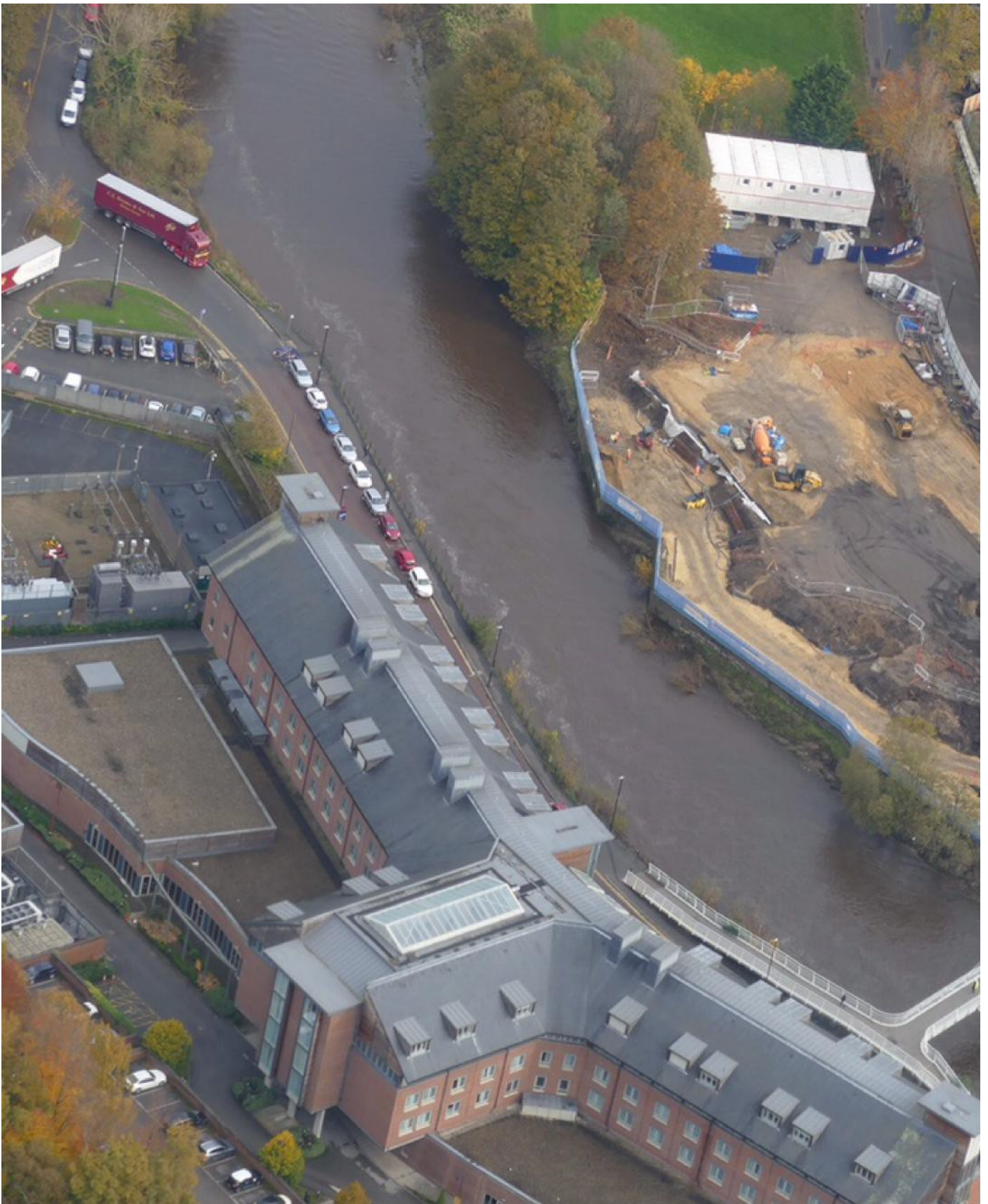


11. Moreover, there are six existing car parks at Walkergate (500)\*; at Sidegate (107)\*; at the Prince Bishops (400)\*; at Rivergate 1 and 2 (735)\*; at Durham Station (470)\* and at Providence Row (19)\*. A further 60 car parking spaces

will soon be available at Milburngate on the opposite bank of the river, with access via the footbridge at the new Council. HQ. All these car parks are within an easy walking distance of the new Council HQ which, together with the new multi-story car park, also in Providence Row (277)\*, will provide a total of 2,568 parking spaces. In addition there are three 'park and ride' sites at Belmont, at Howlands Farm and at Sniperley, each with a regular bus service into the centre of the city; these provide an additional 1,225 car parking spaces. A grand total of 3,793 car park spaces that provide ready access to the new Council HQ.

Note: \* indicates the number of car parking spaces.

**G. After clearing the former Sands car park of mature trees, see Photo A, Durham County Council proposes the sequestration of yet more green space, common land, to make way for yet another car park adjacent to the new Council HQ. This photograph shows the building site between the River Wear and Freeman's Place. The common land is the wooded area top centre occupied by the contractors site office. Durham Sixth Form Centre is upper right.**



## REDUCING POLLUTION BY EXPANDING THE 'PARK AND RIDE'

12. How can Durham County Council justify spending yet more public money to build yet another car park, for 56 vehicles, on registered common land when there is an abundance of car parking in the immediate vicinity of the new Council HQ? Moreover, there is no guarantee on how this common land will be used in future years, *“De-registration could affect future decisions about how the land is managed or developed, and those decisions could affect its character.”* (Ref D).

13. Surely it would be better to reduce the number of vehicles entering the city centre and thereby reduce the danger to the public created by harmful pollution caused by motor vehicles. Durham County Council would serve its citizens, particularly those in Durham City, better, and gain more credit for itself if it expanded the 'park and ride' into Durham City with bigger, or a greater number of 'park and ride' car parks served by eco-friendly, clean, pollution free vehicles powered by either electricity or hydrogen. This would permit a welcome reduction, rather than an expansion in congestion, together with harmful pollution caused by vehicles powered by carbon fuels.

## **CONCLUSION**

14. After building a new Council HQ on the former Sands car park, an area in the centre of Durham City which is known to flood, at an estimated cost of in excess of £50M, Durham County Council has now applied to deregister adjacent common land, to build yet another car park which will attract more vehicles into the city centre and, as a consequence, create yet more pollution. A simple mathematical calculation shows that a further car park, in addition to those that already exist, is unnecessary. There are 2,568 car parking spaces in the immediate vicinity, within walking distance of the new Council HQ. With, in addition, a further 1,225 car parking spaces at three 'park and ride' car parks served by a regular bus service into the centre of the city.

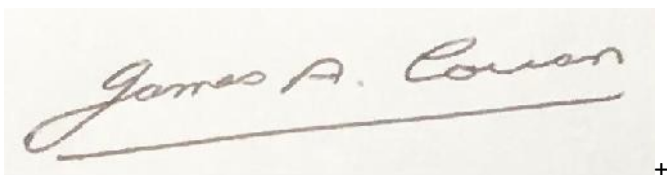
15. Additional car parking in the centre of Durham City will simply increase traffic congestion and increase pollution caused by motor vehicles. On this occasion Durham County Council is out of step with public opinion, out of step with genuine concerns for the environment and out of step with its own declared 'climate emergency' with a pledge to reduce carbon emissions (Ref E). Building more car parks on common land, on 'green spaces', in the centre of a city, as opposed to promoting 'park and ride', isn't the best way to reduce traffic congestion and, inter alia, to reduce carbon emissions, we may all agree. Durham County Council has, in the same year that the UK is hosting the UN Climate Change Conference (COP26) in Glasgow, definitely lost sight of the 'big picture', to reduce carbon emissions, particularly in city centres, we may also agree.

**H. With a new Council HQ, together with a new multi-story car park in the centre of Durham City, together with an application to turn common land into yet another car park, the message, at the building site, *'Promoting sustainable green travel to the city'* has a very hollow ring to it!**



## RECOMMENDATION

16. It is recommended that the application, by Durham County Council, to deregister common land at the Sands in Durham City, to build yet another car park, is rejected.



James A. Cowan

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17 March 2021

## LIST OF PHOTOGRAPHS

- A. County Hall in the City of Durham.
- B. The former Sands car park before closure.
- C. The new Durham County Council HQ under construction.
- D. The new Durham County Council HQ in March 2021.
- E. The building site for the new Council HQ flooded in February 2020.
- F. The new multi-story car park.
- G. The building site on the former Sands car park, adjacent to the River Wear.
- H. A message from Durham County Council.