

# **Chester-le-Street Masterplan Update**



**Durham County Council**

**November 2016**

## Context for Masterplan Update

Masterplans are being developed for the majority of the largest towns in County Durham. This masterplan for Chester-le-Street is an update to the 2012 masterplan. It provides an update on what has been delivered across Council services in the recent past and sets out key activities for the future in and around the town centre.

Key priorities:

- Developing Chester-le-Street's offer as a leisure destination;
- Developing a wider programme of events (particularly in the Market Place);
- Improving the quality of the market;
- Working with landlords and agents to tackle vacant premises and poor quality premises;
- Updating the Destination Development Plan and promoting the town better to attract more visitors;
- Supporting Drum Business Community;
- Lobbying for additional train services to / from Chester-le-Street station;
- Providing support to businesses in Chester-le-Street;
- Supporting the development of new housing and more jobs; and,
- Improving cycle paths.

## **Profile**

### **Geography**

Chester-le-Street is one of three main towns in the north of County Durham with convenient access to Durham, Newcastle, Washington, Gateshead, and Sunderland. The town is adjacent to the A1 and has a station on the East Coast Main Line, which give it good regional and national connectivity, and the town is bounded by the A167; one of the main local routes through County Durham to Darlington.

The good connectivity of the town is one of a number of attractions for residents as well as the close access to the countryside, the large town centre, Riverside Park, and its Roman, Christian and built heritage (e.g. castles, viaduct, and listed buildings)

### **Economic Profile**

There are around 53,500 residents in the Chester-le-Street and District Area Action Partnership (AAP) area. The town centre is the third largest in County Durham, after Durham City and Bishop Auckland and has an 11% vacancy rate, which is in the mid-range compared to other towns in County Durham.

Chester-le-Street has a strong economy; with an employment rate of around 78% in 2015 – significantly higher than the averages for County Durham, the North East of England and also higher than the average for Great Britain (73.9%). Similarly, unemployment is lower than the County and North East averages but above the national average (5.3%).

A key challenge for the town is retaining and attracting more employers and jobs to the area. Whilst there are approximately 27,000 residents in employment, there are only 10,500 jobs in the area. Commuting patterns show that large numbers of workers travel to Durham City as well as surrounding areas of Tyneside and Wearside. However, despite high employment rates data suggests that more than 5,000 jobs have been lost from Chester-le-Street since 2006. This highlights the need to generate and retain more jobs in the Chester-le-Street area.

### **Business Profile**

There are around 1,175 businesses that are registered in Chester-le-Street and around 1,500 workplaces. Business premises are generally of good quality, with the majority concentrated in Drum Business Park, Stella Gill Industrial Estate, as well as Bowes Business Park within the Lambton Estate, and the town centre. Alongside the connectivity of the town, the availability, reliability and speed of broadband in Chester-le-Street means it a good location for home workers and home-based businesses.

At 8.7%, self-employment levels are higher in Chester-le-Street than the County Durham and North East averages but below the national average (10.4%). Self-employed people

tend to work close to (or increasingly within) their homes so there are opportunities to promote and support more self-employment and small businesses as a means of increasing employment within the town. However, with the loss of employers such as Chester-le-Street District Council the town needs more medium-sized or large employers and the jobs they would provide to stem the out-flow of workers. Having more jobs in and around the town centre is highly likely to lead to more footfall, higher levels of spending, and more investment in the town centre.

Some 36% of residents (10,000) work in the public sector (including healthcare and education). This may, in part, relate to the legacy of Chester-le-Street District Council, but also due to the ease of access to Durham and Newcastle – which are centres for public services, and the good education and healthcare services in the area. The second highest proportion (16%) work in retail, wholesale, hotels and restaurants which reflects the strong retail, leisure and tourism offer in Chester-le-Street and surrounding areas.

A high proportion of residents also work in the manufacturing and transport industries, which reflects the growth of these activities at Drum industrial estate as well as in Birtley and Washington. There are comparatively few residents who work in the construction industry or energy and water industries or agriculture.

### **Education, Occupations and Income**

Education levels are broadly consistent with County Durham and North East averages – with around 30% of workers having a degree-level qualification, although there are slightly fewer residents with no qualifications (8%) compared to the national average (9%) – which is also below the County (13%) and North East (10%) averages. Since 2014, some 82 Chester-le-Street residents have been supported into apprenticeships.

Chester-le-Street has many more people employed in administrative and secretarial positions (18%) compared to the County, regional, and national averages (a range of 8% to 11%). In contrast there are comparatively few residents working in managerial and director positions, caring and leisure, and elementary (e.g. routine and unskilled) occupations.

Average household income in Chester-le-Street is above the County Durham and North East averages meaning that residents are relatively wealthy. However, this is not necessarily reflected by the range of shops and facilities in Chester-le-Street town centre – suggesting shoppers may predominantly shop elsewhere. Indeed, this is highlighted in Durham County Council's 2013 Retail and Town Centre Use study – whereby only 43% of resident spend on food shopping was within the town. The retention of spend for other goods such as clothing, CDs and books, and electrical appliances is even lower, with the Metro Centre, Newcastle, Team Valley and Washington being the main destinations.

## **Town Centre**

There are opportunities to support improvements to the 'offer' of the town centre. Development in and around the town in recent years suggests a degree of confidence in the town for investors. Some notable recent developments include:

- the opening of ScrewFix in the rear of the former Magnet kitchens warehouse
- the redevelopment of the petrol filling station on A167 including M&S Simply Food
- the purpose-built Bright Star nursery
- the extension of Aldi
- the opening of Costa coffee shop on Front Street

There is a relatively good turnover of shops and numerous independent shops. Although some premises have been vacant for a number of years, few have been vacant for more than two years. Properties that are vacant for the longest periods of time tend to be large, or in poor condition, or the most expensive (e.g. St Cuthbert's Walk) – perhaps too expensive for people who want to test business ideas.

There is a potential mismatch in the town centre between the types of premises that businesses want and those that are available. Given the difficult retail conditions, it may also be that there are simply too many premises in the town centre – perhaps that the town centre is too big for its current needs and that owners could consider alternative uses.

## **Leisure & Tourism**

Chester-le-Street has a good range of particularly good range of recreational facilities. Riverside Park includes several play areas for children, a skate and BMX park, lawn bowling greens, and formal gardens. The park is well used by walkers, joggers, and cyclists and well connected by footpaths, cycle paths, and road crossings and under-passes to the town and surrounding communities including



Durham City. The park also hosts a growing events programme including music festivals, car rallies, and park runs.

In addition to county and international cricket matches, the Emirates Riverside cricket ground also hosts a range of public concerts, conferences, and events. There are also a range of sports and fitness facilities are located adjacent to the Emirates Riverside including football pitches, athletics facilities, a rowing club, and a private gym.

Lumley Castle is an established luxury hotel between the River Wear and A1 providing a high quality venue for weddings and events and has Chester-le-Street Golf Club on its doorstep. On the opposite side of the A1, Lambton Castle and Estate is establishing itself as a filming location and developing its offer for events and weddings.

Chester-le-Street town centre has a good mix of leisure facilities with a mix of cafes, pubs, nightclubs, restaurants, bakeries and hot food takeaways. The evening economy of the town centre attracts residents from nearby towns and villages, and the town's other facilities such as its library, sports centre, community centres and numerous churches support surrounding communities as well as Chester-le-Street residents.

### **Housing**

The town also has a strong housing market with a wide range of houses from large executive homes and gardens, a mix of traditional terraced and stone-built homes, modern houses, retirement homes, and social housing. The relative buoyancy of the housing market may partly relate to the shortage of sites for new housing across the town - although there are ongoing developments and opportunities in surrounding communities such as Pelton, Newfield, and Sacriston.

The main opportunities for housing development in Chester-le-Street will be the redevelopment of sites as there is a limited supply of vacant housing sites. The largest sites with planning permission (some of which are under construction) include:

- **Lambton Estate:** 400 homes and new offices
- **Land to Rear of Newfield Terrace,** Newfield Farm, Newfield: 104 homes
- **Pelton Fell Regeneration Site,** Pelton Fell: 37 homes
- **5-16 Vicarage Close and 1-24 The Garth,** Pelton: 37 homes
- **Mendip House,** Mendip Avenue, Chester-le-Street: 22 homes
- **Volunteer Centre,** Clarence Terrace, Chester-le-Street: 14 homes
- **Whitehill Farm,** Pelton Fell: 14 homes

### **Transport**

Chester-le-Street is a well-connected town and offers a range of transport options for residents, workers and visitors. However, due to its location adjacent to the A1, there are heavy flows of traffic around the town – particularly on the A167 and A693. There have been several road improvement schemes around Chester-le-Street in recent years including two National Pinch Point Fund projects at Junction 63 on the A1(M) and A167.

Two further improvements were brought forward under the County Durham Local Transport Plan at A693 Drum Industrial Estate roundabout, and A167 / A693 Northlands Roundabout. All schemes were designed to improve the flows of traffic at these junctions and reduce congestion – with the added benefit of reducing air pollution from static vehicles.

Chester-le-Street station is relatively well used with approximately 200,000 customers each year. The station is on the East Coast Main Line which operates regular services between Edinburgh and London and has Trans Pennine services to Newcastle and Liverpool. These services broadly operate on a two-hourly basis, although they are more frequent during rush-hour.

There are also very limited Cross Country services to Southampton and limited Northern services to Tees Valley. Durham and Newcastle stations offer more frequent services and are both less than 15 minutes from Chester-le-Street by train; however, there is a desire from local residents in Chester-le-Street to increase the number services to these stations in particular because they are key service centres and employment destinations for local residents.

Chester-le-Street is well served by bus services - particularly those running north-to-south and between Newcastle and Durham and those serving the town. As part of the Transit 15 project, Durham County Council is working with Arriva and Go North East to ensure buses run at 15 minute intervals between the town and Durham and includes some of the junction improvements outlined above.

Chester-le-Street is well-connected by footpaths, but because Front Street is around ½ mile long and vehicle access is restricted it inadvertently promotes car use and may dissuade some of the town's residents from shopping here. The distance between Riverside Park and the town centre and its separation by the A167 dual carriageway also promotes car use. Residents tend make specific trips to one or the other rather than visiting both in the same trip.

The car parks in the town are operated by Durham County Council and private operators and free parking is limited – particularly on Front Street. Whilst the car parking charges are low, it discourages some residents from making short trips to the town centre. The tickets are also not transferrable between car parks and the charges in the town centre and Riverside Park are priced differently. Overall this – and the hilly nature of the town - is likely to mean that, except for residents living close to the town centre, many residents will only visit the town for specific shops, goods or services – particularly food and convenience shopping (e.g. toiletries, batteries, etc).

The town is popular with cyclists and connected to national cycling routes 7 (C2C; Sunderland to Whitehaven and Inverness) and 725 (to Newcastle) as well as local networks.

The forthcoming upgrade to route 725 will help to take some cyclists off the A167 dual carriageway – which is not cycle friendly – onto the adjacent path which is currently poor.

## **Health**

Within the town there is provision of:

- Crees (based on the Australian “men’s sheds “model) are available within the area.
- The Social Prescribing Programme which is available across the County and there is a particular centre in the town.
- Targeted Health Trainer and Health Visitor support onsite for members of the GRT community.
- Trained volunteers through the Community Parenting Programme.
- Contraception and Sexual Health Services.

The following countywide provision is also being delivered within the town:

- Wellbeing for Life, which targets the most deprived areas in County Durham and does work in some MSOAs in/around the town e.g. the Avenues in Chester-le Street. This geographically targeted work is supported by the programme via outreach and work with particular groups of people such as the LGBT community.
- If U Care Share, based in Great Lumley provides support for people affected by suicide.

## What has been delivered?

### Housing

- Cestria Homes opened The Elms in late 2015. The development, close to the southern edge of the town centre, includes an extra care development comprising 51 apartments and 6 bungalows for rent, shared ownership and outright sale.
- The Civic Centre on Newcastle Road has been demolished and has potential to be redeveloped for new homes by Chapter Homes – a subsidiary of Durham County Council.

### Business

- Business Durham recently helped to establish a business community for Drum Industrial Park which allows businesses on the park to network with one another as well as enabling a forum to discuss strategic issues relating to the infrastructure of the estate and other challenges.
- In recent years, Business Durham has refurbished its own small business premises at Stella Gill and Sacriston. The refurbishments included new roofing, roller shutters and security doors in occupied premises and premises that were vacant at that time were redecorated and rewired. This refurbishment improved the marketability of the premises, providing a competitive standard compared to private premises in the area.
- One of the most significant new businesses in Chester-le-Street is Coveris who recently moved into a 200,000 sq ft unit at Drum Industrial Estate with support from Business Durham and DCC. Coveris invested £10m to prepare the new manufacturing and distribution centre, creating around 50 jobs.

### Town Centre

- The Market place has traditionally been a key part of the town centre and was redeveloped in 2007 by Chester-le-Street District Council. More recently many of the surrounding buildings on South Burns and North have been improved or redeveloped privately which has led to new business opportunities and improved environmental quality.
- In partnership with the AAP, DCC has also undertaken various shop frontage improvements as part of the Targeted Business Improvement (TBI) scheme which has helped to improve the overall appearance of the town. The AAP has encouraged the landlords of poor quality premises in the town centre to improve their appearance and promote the TBI scheme; which also offers a range of business support services.

- In 2014 a new War Memorial was unveiled in the town centre which remembers all of the people of Chester-le-Street and district, who lost their lives in the First and Second World Wars and other conflicts.

### **Tourism, Leisure & Recreation**

- Following flooding damage, the library has recently been refurbished and upgraded. A new customer access point was also opened in the town, which is shared with Cestria Housing.
- The council has also invested in Riverside Park to replace the paddling pool with a modern 'splash pad' as well as improving signage between the park and the town centre.

### **Infrastructure**

- Two National Pinch Point Fund projects at Junction 63 on the A1(M) and A167. Two further improvements were brought forward under the County Durham Local Transport Plan at A693 Drum Industrial Estate roundabout, and A167 / A693 Northlands Roundabout. All schemes were designed to improve the flows of traffic at these junctions and reduce congestion – with the added benefit of reducing air pollution from static vehicles.
- Between Chester-le-Street railway station and the high street, Front Street, the footpaths and public realm have recently been improved. This has improved the environmental quality of the station and adjacent business premises, and improved the legibility between the station and town centre for visitors.
- As a result of the recent flooding events DCC, in partnership with the Environment Agency and other partners has undertaken a number of improvements to Cong Burn. These have reduced pollution and litter to improve habitats and general environmental conditions and also included measures to reduce flooding incidents. Northumbrian Water has also introduced a range of improvements across the town and beyond to reduce the risks of flooding in Chester-le-Street town centre and surrounding residential streets.

## What will be delivered?

There are a number of larger projects that will be completed in 2016/17, including:

- A167 resurfacing (£354,320)
- Targeted business improvements (£34,160)
- Northlands roundabout (£20,307)

There are also number of additional projects which do not have a specific budget but which DCC will work towards in the foreseeable future, including:

- Supporting Drum Business Community
- Lobbying for additional train services to / from Chester-le-Street station
- Providing support to businesses in Chester-le-Street
- Updating the town centre masterplan
- Updating the Destination Development Plan

### **Chester-le-Street and District Area Action Partnership**

The AAP has agreed six headline priorities with the local community, which are:

- Development of the town centre
- Opportunities for children and young people
- Environment
- Health and wellbeing
- Employability and welfare reform
- Crime and community safety

The 2016/17 area budget has £76,000 revenue and £24,000 capital with an extra £10,000 for Welfare Reform related activity (already used for an Apprenticeship Programme). In addition to this, £11,071 of capital funds was still available to allocate from 2015/16. The agreed projects (summer 2016) include:

- Sacriston Mutual Gain Project - Participatory Budgeting Pot – (£6,000) (capital)
- Chester-le-Street in Bloom 2016/17 (£5,509)
- Summer Holiday Activity Programme (£5,665)
- Mini Police (£5,180)
- Young Fire Fighters (£3,039)
- Community Energy Proposal (£7,500)

Each DCC Councillor in the Chester-le-Street (as in other areas) also has a budget for a range of small-scale activities.