

Chester Archaeological Society

Comments on Proposed Health Centre and Student Housing, George Street/ Delamere Street, Chester

1. As the Society has pointed out in its response to the One City Plan, *re* the functions to be located on this site - or any other - these decisions need to be informed by a long-term view of the City's needs rather than being driven by individual planning proposals. In particular, the Council needs to think ahead about the location of student accommodation in cooperation with the University rather than adopt a *laissez faire* position or react to proposals from speculative developers.
2. On matters of design we note the unanimity of the criticisms voiced by the various objectors, including the Ward Member, and strongly support the succinct and cogent objections put forward by the Chester Civic Trust. The development would be massive and unsympathetic both to the topography and neighbouring buildings. The only building it would be sympathetic to is the Travelodge, itself a wholly inappropriate building on a high-profile site.
3. The Council itself has set out the standards by which it wishes to be judged in terms of the architectural quality of new developments, in the One City Plan, p 20: 'New developments must be of a quality standard to sit proudly and comfortably within the city's sensitive archeological and architectural environment'. One should also be able to infer from its appointment of one of its members as a Design Champion that it takes the subject seriously. *A propos* of the Gorse Stacks The Chester Characterisation Study, page 200 says: 'There should also be variety and interest in the elevations. Two to three storeys is appropriate'. In no way does the proposed development achieve the standard set out in the One City Plan or respond to the recommendations of the Characterisation Study. The test of the Council's credibility in these matters will lie not in fine aspirations or commissioning architectural studies, but in only approving schemes that are up to standard, rather than accepting poor-quality buildings just to give the impression of 'getting things done' and appearing 'pro-business', or 'pro-development': it certainly does need to 'get things done', but to a good standard, and new construction in other towns shows that this can be done. It is to be hoped that the Council's interest in this development, as a potential occupant, will not prejudice them in favour of the construction of a further patently unsatisfactory building.
4. According to the Design Manifesto, section 4.4: 'Whilst this is in no way unique to Chester the preponderance of press and public comment tends to have a negative slant. This may be well deserved in some instances but the tendency to negativity has a demoralising effect on those promoting and producing new development, reducing risk taking and increasing the tendency to prefer what has been shown to be publicly acceptable in the past'. The current design well exemplifies why this is the case.
5. There is no visual distinction between the public and residential parts of the development. The latter should be built in a domestic style, to an appropriate scale, and match the houses lower down Gorse Stacks: see Design Manifesto, section 3.8: 'As a characteristic design principle it is desirable that large volume (and hence large roof-span) buildings are reserved for spaces with public or civic functions. Domestic scale buildings should, in their roofscape, reflect their internal volumes, similarly this principle should be followed for retail buildings'.

6. The building should reflect the falling gradient of George Street; construction of the student accommodation on a more domestic scale would make it easier to do this.
7. In addition to being insensitive to the topography, the building is also wholly unsympathetic to the appearance of established surrounding buildings, some of which are very delicately and finely detailed, eg the 'Bull and Stirrup', the former Northgate Bakery, the George Street Centre and chapel (see Characterisation Study, pages 190-2, 196). The building is at least one storey too high and would overawe existing buildings, especially those downhill of it, to the east. The monopitched roofs are extremely crude and insensitive to the very fine roofscapes of neighbouring buildings. The canopy over one of the entrances is also extremely massive-looking and crude.
8. A glance at the maps in the volumes of the Chester Characterisation Study shows just how much of the city is now classed as 'negative environment'. Overwhelmingly this is large-scale post-war development, and in much of it the former City Council played a leading role (eg the Northgate area; social housing in Newtown). Many of the buildings in question would doubtless have been classed as 'cutting edge' (to use the fashionable expression) when they were built. We look to CWaC to put its aspirations into action, beginning with the present development.