

CHESTER ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

COMMENTS ON PLANNING APPLICATIONS FOR NORTHGATE DEVELOPMENT (19/02187/FUL and 19/02222/S73)

Summary

The Chester Archaeological Society regrettably opposes these applications. The abandoned bus station is a wasteland and the 1960s Forum complex is decaying. In principle we welcome the regeneration of the area. However, it would be a grave mistake to approve the current proposal simply out of desperation born of long delays to 'get something – anything – done', only to regret it a decade or so later, as happened with the 1960s development.

The Northgate site lies in the middle of the city centre conservation area. If the redevelopment of the whole site goes ahead it will be the largest scheme in the centre of Chester since the 1960s, encompassing one-fourteenth of the walled city and one-seventh of its busiest area; it will be highly visible and will have a major impact on the city's architectural character. For this reason, and as a Council-backed scheme, it ought to be exemplary.

- Instead, the current proposal is profoundly unimaginative in that it fails to take advantage of the freedom given for fresh thinking by the failure of the 2015 scheme.*
- It flagrantly ignores Council design policies, advice and previous decisions, and in consequence is unsympathetic to its surroundings, ignores the character of the city centre and is environmentally unfriendly. Specifically:*
- It ignores the topography and thus does significant harm to the city's tiered skyline.*
- It imposes out-of-scale buildings (including an outmoded massive car park) that are no more than bland, superimposed cuboids with large horizontal roofscapes that could be found anywhere across the globe.*
- It totally destroys the character of the historic Princess Street.*
- It turns its back on the surrounding area rather than integrating into it and reinforcing its aesthetic and historical characteristics.*
- It ignores the importance of the 'archaeological cycle' of preservation, understanding and public appreciation.*

The Council should therefore reject this proposal as contrary to Local Plan Part Two Policies CH5 and CH6 (details in Section 3.0 below) and, in genuine dialogue with local stakeholders, devise a scheme that is compliant and makes the city centre stronger in historical and aesthetic terms and livelier and more attractive for everyday living in the future: 'Another Northgate is possible'.

If, in spite of all, CWaC is determined to approve the proposal, it should:

- Site the market/cinema at as low a level as possible subject to not intruding on archaeological remains*
- Remove the steps from Princess Street to maintain easy access.*
- Rethink the bleak back wall of the market that faces the Hunter Street villas.*
- Postpone the construction of the car park until Phase 2 of the development and the need for car parking has become clear and in any case reduce its size.*
- As well as safeguarding the surviving archaeological remains on the site, bring to full publication the remains of even greater, international, significance already excavated.*

Detail

1.0 Summary evaluation of proposal

- 1.1 Officers and members of the Chester Archaeological Society have spent weeks from 2013 onwards considering and responding in detail and in good faith to consultations on three iterations of this proposed development. The Society's comments have consistently been ignored, despite their being firmly based on Council policies, advice and previous decisions. The faults of successive schemes remain, and we therefore make no apology for repeating previous arguments.
- 1.2 The collapse of the retail-led 2015 scheme, necessitating a complete rethinking of the Northgate Phase 2 area, has allowed us to focus more attention on the Phase 0 and Phase 1 proposal, even though in fundamental ways (levels and streets) all three phases are inevitably intertwined.
- 1.3 This proposal is profoundly unimaginative and unsympathetic to its context. It is unimaginative in that, despite being freed from the pressures of the 2015 scheme, which tried to 'squeeze a quart into a pint pot', it mechanically repeats the existing plans for an arcade on the site of the former library, a square and market/cinema, with the principle of the car park revived from the 2013 scheme.
- 1.4 It is unsympathetic in that, fighting the topography, it imposes large buildings with a level floorplate and service parking in an undercroft on a sloping site deemed unsuitable for large-scale development and where archaeological remains are close to surface. This results in excessive building heights that damage the city's tiered skyline and the destruction of the surviving character of the medieval Princess Street in terms of its alignment and levels. The buildings themselves are bland superimposed cuboids that create large, almost horizontal roofscapes. The proposal does not integrate into its surroundings or reinforce their aesthetic and historical characteristics: it does not adequately address Town Hall Square, which has arguably been Chester's prime public space for a thousand years, preferring to devote the little flat land that is available for large buildings to create a new square in competition with it; the steps on Princess Street weaken links with St Martin's Way and areas to the west, which ought to be strengthened; and the market turns its back on the Hunter street villas and reduces that street to a bleak service road. The proposed car park is completely out of scale with the surrounding townscape and, along with the Crowne Plaza hotel and Hunter Street student accommodation, creates a 'fortress wall' around the western side of the city centre, impeding views in and out. In addition, to build a large city-centre car park when other, progressive, European cities are reducing parking capacity is to follow an obsolete agenda, while to clad this building in green walls to disguise its size is environmental tokenism. All of these negative impacts could have been avoided if, instead of conspicuously ignoring them, notice had been taken of relevant design policies and advice, quoted below in section 3.0, as private-sector developers are expected to do.
- 1.5 In terms of the 'archaeological cycle' of preservation, understanding and public appreciation and of 'heritage values' as enunciated by Historic England (evidential, historical, aesthetic, communal), the proposal shows silo thinking. Officers have gone to extraordinary lengths to minimise damage to well preserved but vulnerable archaeological remains, for which they are to be commended. However, remains of even greater – international – significance were excavated across all parts of the site

between 1963 and 1981 but are unpublished in detail and thus cannot make their full contribution to our understanding of the city's history. Despite the fact that road signs still advertise Chester as an 'International Heritage City' and despite the millions of pounds already spent on the Northgate project with no tangible benefit, we see no sign that CWaC is willing to include the relatively small sums needed to publish these 'backlog' excavations or the more recent ones. We consider it time that CWaC met the professional obligations bequeathed to it by predecessor authorities in this respect. Without publication, archaeology is merely a form of contaminated land remediation. There also seems to be a divide between the treatment of archaeological remains on the one hand, which are carefully protected, and surviving above-ground historical features (street plan and neighbouring buildings) on the other, which are destroyed, devalued or ignored rather than enhanced.

- 1.6 To be consistent with its previous decisions, Planning Committee should reject this proposal on the grounds that its design, scale and massing fail to take account of the wider townscape and do significant harm to historical streets, key views and skyline. The proposal is, therefore, contrary to the provisions of Policies CH5 and CH6 of the Cheshire West and Chester *Local Plan Part 2*. In genuine dialogue with stakeholders, CWaC should then set about devising a scheme that is compliant.

2.0 Minimal remedial actions

- 2.1 We do not consider that the proposal can be amended to produce a 'good' design. However, if despite all its faults CWaC is determined to approve the proposal, the following actions are the minimum needed:

- Protect nationally important archaeological remains, especially the well preserved Roman barracks under the 'pocket park' at the western end of the site.
- Bring the archaeological discoveries made across all parts of the site (Phases 0 to 2) from 1963 onwards to full publication, starting with those in the Phase 0 and 1 areas.
- In the interests of the skyline of the city, situate the floor level of the proposed market/cinema as low as possible without damage to archaeological remains. Therefore disaggregate elements of the market/cinema, eg leaving the north-east wing at c 29.50m AOD, lowering the main floor of the market to c 28.50m AOD, and putting service parking at the west end of the building rather than in an undercroft.
- Respect the character of Princess Street (formerly Parson's Lane) as one of the historical streets of the city. Therefore replace the proposed steps by an even gradient, with a retaining wall or terrace at the western end of the proposed market if necessary; ensure that building lines are 'back of pavement' and respect its historical width and curved alignment.
- Rethink the bleak back wall of the market that faces the Hunter Street villas.
- Postpone the construction of car park until Phase 2 and re-evaluate the capacity needed. At all events its height as proposed is completely unacceptable.

3.0 'Another Northgate is possible': Considerations

- 3.1 Much of Chester's distinctive character and attractiveness is based on the survival of its historical street plan and hierarchy, the harmonious mixture and location of buildings of varying periods and styles, all of which attest the city's long history, and the views and skyline afforded by its topography. These factors are covered by the Council's design

policies and advice, backed up by previous Planning Committee decisions and by officer advice on other, recent applications. The current proposal completely ignores this background and treats the Northgate Phase 1 area as a context- and policy-free greenfield site. However, another, contextually sensitive, informed development proposal that reinforces the aesthetic and historical characteristics of the area would be possible if the political will existed.

3.1.1 *Take account of the topography, views and skyline*

To state the obvious, the centre of Chester is situated on a hill in a bend of the River Dee, with consequent slopes to the west and south; these slopes permit views in and out of the city centre and result in a tiered effect in building facades and roofscape that forms an important part of its distinctive visual character. On the western side of the city the greatest fall between the Northgate Street–Bridge Street axis and the Inner Ring Road is to be found in the Northgate area. The area is domed, with flatter land towards Northgate Street/Town Hall Square, and this topography is reflected in the fact that historically all the largest buildings were situated on the east side (Odeon, Town Hall, Market, Taylor’s Garage); further west smaller buildings stepped down the slope.

The CWaC *Local Plan Part 2*, policy CH5, 2 states:

Development proposals within the city centre and its approaches will be supported where it can be demonstrated that Chester's key views, landmarks, gateways and historic skyline will not be adversely affected in line with Local Plan (Part Two) policy CH 6.

The recently revised Racecourse Masterplan (19/02298/OUT) now incorporates an open area adjacent to New Crane Street that permits views from the City Walls across the Roodee, in accordance with the *Chester City Centre and Approaches Characterisation Study* and as urged by this Society and the Chester Civic Trust. If a private developer can substantially modify schemes to conform to Council design policies and advice, so can CWaC.

Policy CH 6, 2.43 states:

The roofscape is an important factor in defining the skyline of the historic city *due to the topography of the settlement* [our italics]. The roofscape reflects the historic fabric and provides a wealth of interest and should be a key element in the design of any new development.

Cf Policies DM 46, 1 and 47, 6.

This principle has recently been restated in the comments of the CWaC Conservation Officer on the proposed replacement for Quicks Garage on an analogous site in Lower Bridge Street (18/04893/FUL), eg:

The grain, massing, scale, bulk, height, eaves lines and design detail of the building has not been designed with regard to its context and setting. The proposed building does not respond at all to the topography. In fact it does the opposite.

This view is reinforced by the Historic England comments on the same development: ‘...buildings ...step down the road emphasising its change of level.’

The consequence of these topographical factors for the Northgate area is baldly stated in the *Chester City Centre and Approaches Characterisation Study*, page 68:

A8. Market: ... Large scale uses out of scale with the townscape within the Walls.

Understanding this simple principle is fundamental to a contextually sympathetic development.

3.1.2 *Recognise the importance of appropriate scale and height*

CWaC *Local Plan Part 2*, Policy CH5 3 refers to:

show[ing] careful attention to spaces between buildings, scale, height, mass and architectural detail.

Cf in particular Policy DM 46, 8, which refers to the need to take into account the scale, height, bulk and massing of adjacent townscape.

Policy CH1, 5 refers to:

creating strong and active frontages, appropriate in scale and height to the wider townscape, along the inner ring road

In accordance with these policies, Planning Committee rejected the Hunter Street proposal for student accommodation (15/04014/FUL) on the grounds that:

The proposed development, by virtue of its design, scale and massing, is not considered to respect the existing local character and fails to preserve or enhance the Conservation Area as a heritage asset. The proposal is, therefore, contrary to the provisions of Policies ENV5 and ENV6 of the Cheshire West and Chester Local Plan (Part One), the retained Policy ENV37 of the Chester District Local Plan and the provisions of the National Planning Policy Framework.

Unfortunately the scheme was later allowed by the Government Inspector on appeal.

3.1.3 *Existing out-of-scale buildings should not be cited as a precedent for the current proposal*

CWaC *Local Plan Part 2*, Policy CH6 states:

Existing tall buildings in Chester do not set a policy precedent for similar development on adjacent sites, unless they are contextually appropriate in that locality or townscape setting and sit comfortably within the topography of the area.

Policy CH6 2.44 states

Taller buildings should be contextually appropriate in that locality or townscape setting, and sit comfortably within the topography of the area.

Policy 2.47 states:

Consideration will be given to the removal of tall buildings that do not make a positive contribution and to their replacement by buildings that are lower in scale, height and higher quality design. This is especially the case where buildings adversely impact on key views into the city or key gateways, or on the setting of conservation areas or listed buildings.

The *Chester City Centre and Approaches Characterisation Study* page 61 specifically mentions:

The Crowne Plaza Hotel and car park ... highly visible because of its size and bulk. ... Its design pays no heed to the grain of the city.

Judged by these criteria the seven-storey car park is wholly unacceptable in terms of design. The demolition of the Crowne Plaza hotel ought to be planned for, and the feasibility of reducing the height of the Hunter Street student accommodation by one storey should be examined.

3.1.4 *Recognise that the historical framework of the area survives in the form of its streets*

These are Princess Street, Hamilton Place, Goss Street, Crook Street (including its missing northern half) and Trinity Street. (Hunter Street is late nineteenth century). These streets lost some of their character in the 1960s through widening and straightening but are still significant.

CWaC *Local Plan Part 2* policy CH5, 6 states:

Development proposals within the city centre and its approaches will be supported where ...6. they will not result in the loss of any historic routes. Where possible, historic routes should maintain their existing widths and alignments unless historic evidence suggests otherwise. Proposals which would result in the reinstatement of any historic routes will be supported.

Cf Policy DM 46.6

The proposal to level out Princess Street and insert steps at the western end parallels the destruction of the Saxon-period Newgate Street in the early 1960s. Of the latter, the *Chester Characterisation Study* page 65 comments: 'Fragmented street remnant amongst Grosvenor Centre'.

As it stands, Princess Street has not only evidential but aesthetic value as a result of its curved alignment, as also found in King Street and Lower Bridge Street. Again, on the Lower Bridge Street Quick's Garage site, the CWaC Conservation Officer writes: 'the street's slightly curved alignment present[s] a succession of ... frontages This creates important sequential views and a staggered built form'. The potential for Princess Street ought to be exploited, not destroyed.

3.1.5 *Recognise the landscape character*

The area south of Princess Street has been historically densely built up but that to the north has been more open (until recently in part the site of a bowling green); note the 'suburban' character of the Hunter Street villas.

4.0 **'Another Northgate is possible': Suggestions**

4.1 Therefore, to enhance local distinctiveness by reinforcing the aesthetic and historical characteristics of the surroundings, and help to create a city that is more attractive for everyday life in the future:

4.2 Historical streets should be left as they are or restored to their historical alignments where practical, and in Phase 2 the northern part of Crook Street should be reinstated. New buildings should be 'back of pavement' to re-establish a tight urban grain, except in the Hunter Street area, which has traditionally been more open.

- 4.3 The market and cinema should be sited, possibly separately, at the more level, east end of the area and should open directly onto the Town Hall Square, making best use of the old library façade and/or the site of the nineteenth-century market (the current market was built before the old one was demolished, so the reverse should be possible). Doing this would add to the liveliness of the square and complement the open-air markets and events already held there. There is plenty of F&B already available around the square, so any space for this in the new developments needs to be justified.
- 4.4 Reconsider the need for a square behind the old library if the consequence is displacing large buildings onto more sloping ground further west. Perhaps recreate the broad nineteenth-century Market Street behind the Town Hall as a small public space instead. Refurbish Town Hall Square, removing clutter, as consulted on by CWaC in 2018. This has been Chester's prime public space for a thousand years; there is no need to create another large square in competition with it.
- 4.5 The lower part of Princess Street could be occupied by contemporary town houses stepping down it and reflecting its curvature, as seen on King Street. The part of the present 'pocket park' facing the Hunter Street villas should be retained. If it were decided to build a (small) car park adjoining the Inner Ring Road, this park could include a level pathway between the top of a lift and public buildings at the east end of the site.
- 4.6 To respect local landmarks and preserve key views, building heights should not exceed c 45 m AOD adjacent to the Town Hall and c 34m AOD adjacent to the Inner Ring Road (lower than the ridge of the Guildhall, a local landmark, as well as matching the height of the housing on the Infirmary Field site opposite), falling to c 28 m AOD adjacent to Hunter Street to allow views from the pocket park to the Welsh hills *via* the gap provided by Sens Close. It is essential that the Inner Ring Road is humanised and made more attractive to residents, as well as to encourage visitors to explore and enjoy the Georgian architecture on the western side of the city.

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