

## CHESTER ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

### COMMENTS ON PLANNING APPLICATION FOR ROYAL HOUSE, UPPER NORTHGATE STREET (20/01363/FUL)

#### Summary

*The proposed extension is a crude one that takes its cue from the modern out-of-scale buildings on Delamere Street rather than its neighbours on Upper Northgate Street. It fits ill with the listed buildings on that street, harms their setting and the northern end of the City Centre Conservation Area more generally. The application should therefore be rejected. However, a carefully designed one-storey extension could be acceptable*

*Note that these comments relate only to design and visual impact; they do not consider the suitability of the building for residential accommodation or any other aspects of the proposed development.*

#### Detail

##### 1.0 The Site

1.0 This three-storey office building, constructed in the early 1960s, occupies a prominent site at the junction of Upper Northgate Street and Delamere Street, near the northern edge of the City Centre Conservation Area. It is highly visible on entering the city centre from the Northgate roundabout – a key gateway to the city. The neighbouring buildings in Upper Northgate Street are varied in style but all rise to three stories; six are listed: nos 3, 5, 7, 11A and B and 13, plus no 10 and the 'Bull and Stirrup'. The more recent Sumner House and the Fountains Health Centre on Delamere Street rise to five stories. These are large cuboids, the health centre building being divided into three blocks with monopitch roofs.

##### 2.0 The Application

2.1 The application foresees a flat-roofed, slab-sided two-storey addition to Royal House with minimal set-back, increasing the residential accommodation already consented for the existing upper floors. The increase in height is justified in the Design and Access Statement by reference to Summer House and the Fountains Health Centre. There is scant reference to the neighbouring listed buildings, and none to the visual impact on them or on the Conservation Area more widely.

##### 3.0 Evaluation

3.1 The present building is unremarkable in appearance, and the recent addition of utilitarian handrails around the edge of the roof has not improved it. However, in height, scale, massing and articulation it respects the older buildings on Upper Northgate Street. This Sumner House and the Fountains Health Centre fail to do, being much larger in scale, two storeys higher and with long rooflines. The proposed extension brings this difference in height, form and style brutally to the Upper Northgate Street frontage.

3.2 The proposal fails to comply with the following policies in the Cheshire West and Chester *Local Plan Part Two*:

CH5

Development proposals will be supported where:

- 1 it can be demonstrated that they have been sensitively designed, to have regard to their location;
- 2 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;
- 3 they show careful attention to spaces between buildings, scale, height, mass and architectural detail, respecting the building lines, building hierarchy and urban grain;
- 8 Proposals for roof extensions to existing buildings ...should be carefully designed so that they do not ... be visually intrusive or unsightly when seen in longer public or private views from ground or upper levels [sic].

#### DM 46

Where applicable, development proposals should take into consideration:

- 2 existing townscapes, local landmarks, views and skylines;
- 7 the scale, height, bulk and massing of adjacent townscape;

Development proposals which will not be supported include the following:

- 14 alterations and extensions which are unsympathetic in design, scale, mass and use of materials;

#### DM 47

Development proposals or works within or affecting the setting of listed buildings will be expected to achieve a high quality of design, making a positive relationship between the proposed and existing context by taking account of:

- 4 existing townscapes, local landmarks, views and skyline;
- 9 the scale, height, bulk and massing of adjacent townscape;

- 3.3 The key question is which 'existing townscape' the proposed extension should respect: that of Sumner House and the Fountains Health Centre or the buildings on Northgate Street? Policy DM 47 is explicit that the scale of neighbouring listed buildings needs to be respected and that a high standard of design is required. As seen above, the extension is justified by reference to the newer buildings. However, the latter do not in fact comply with the criteria set out in policy CH6:

... development proposals within Chester, which are higher than the general prevailing height of the surrounding townscape will only be supported where they:

- 1 are of an appropriate design which will have a positive and contextual relationship with the city's key gateways;
- 2 would make a positive contribution and would not intrude upon strategic views, landmark buildings and their contextual roofscapes, historic townscapes and skyline;
- 4 have regard to the surrounding townscape context in terms of scale, streetscape and built form;
- 5 enhance the skyline, and views from and to locally important views and prospects;
- 9 enhance the key approaches into Chester by their profile, aspect ratio and choice of facing and glazing materials.

The curved block of Sumner House makes some concession to its situation, responding to the adjacent roundabout, but it makes no attempt to respond to the scale

of the surrounding buildings, while the dark grey brick and white rendering give the building a bleak, 'cheap' appearance. The Fountains Health Centre is similarly 'unneighbourly' in terms of scale, imposes a level floorplate that fails to respond to the slope on George Street and has very heavy detailing; it would not be out of place in an industrial area of a much larger town.

Together these buildings create a negative impression of the city centre at a key gateway, reduce George Street to an unpleasant canyon, and seriously harm the skyline of the city with their long rooflines, which now dominate Key View 11, from Sealand Road.

Paragraph 2.48 of policy CH6 could have been written with these buildings in mind:

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.

In connection with the proposed development at Royal House it should particularly be noted that:

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

#### **4.0 Conclusion**

- 4.1 The recent developments of Sumner House and the Fountains Health Centre, consented by successive councils over the past fifteen years, have done significant harm to a key gateway to the city centre, to the northern end of the City Centre Conservation Area more generally, and to key views of the city; they are poor examples for the current proposal to follow. If permitted, this proposal would lead to further erosion of the Conservation Area and it should be emphatically rejected.
- 4.2 However, the carbon footprint of new construction is increasingly recognised, making the adaptation of existing buildings more desirable. Given its corner situation, a more modest, single-storey addition to Royal House might not be unacceptable. If, for example, rather than being slab-sided, it had mansard-style sloping sides that mirrored the hipped roof of 11-13 Upper Northgate Street (with dormer windows; *cf* the recent student accommodation on the former bus depot site), its impact would be softened, it would sit more comfortably with its neighbours, and the appearance of the whole building might be improved.

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