

**CHESTER ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY****COMMENTS ON HUNTER STREET STUDENT HOUSING PROPOSAL (16/02586/FUL)****SUMMARY**

*The submission of a planning application almost identical to that recently rejected by Planning Committee on clear grounds and with widespread support from local residents, together with a simultaneous appeal against that decision, is corrosive of local democracy. The previous application was rejected by members against the officer's recommendation, and this lack of unanimity may have prompted the resubmission and appeal. Officers need to be more stringent in advising developers of what is an acceptable design standard in Chester. As regards the substance of the application, two issues are at stake: the principle of student housing, and design. As a result of previous and continuing policy failures, student housing is now probably unwelcome in any part of the city. We do not intend to express an opinion on its merits on this site, but a lot of student housing is certainly planned in the area. As regards design, in our view members were right to reject the previous application as out of scale and poorly designed.*

**KEY RECOMMENDATIONS**

To be acceptable on design grounds only we consider that ([Para 3.5](#)):

- A storey needs to be removed from the St Martins Way frontage and the corner tower, and the whole of the top storey of the Hunter Street frontage should be set back, in order to match the scale of neighbouring buildings.
- The detailed design needs to be refined to match the elegance of the neo-Georgian terrace on the opposite side of St Martins Way.

The whole of St Martins Way is currently merely a fume-filled dual carriageway in danger of being increasingly lined with high-rise buildings, which is only seen from a car and which can be literally lethal to cyclists and pedestrians. Thought needs to be given to its design from numerous angles in order to re-integrate it into the rest of the city ([Section 5.0](#)).

**DETAIL****1.0 Process**

- 1.1 An almost identical planning application to the present one (15/04014/FUL) was emphatically rejected by Planning Committee on clear grounds and with widespread support from local residents. The simultaneous resubmission of the application and an appeal against the decision is corrosive of local democracy. The objections to the previous application focussed on two areas: the principle of student housing in this location, and design. Ultimately the application was rejected by members against the officer's recommendation as not being in accordance with [Chester District Local Plan Retained Policy](#) ENV 37:

Development in conservation areas or affecting the setting of such an area will only be permitted where it will preserve or enhance its character or appearance. ... hav[ing] regard to the effect of the following criteria and the impact of any development on the immediate surroundings of the site, the broader townscape or its landscape setting:

*Inter alia*

- the height, scale and orientation of the proposed development
- the bulk, massing and density of the proposed development and its layout in relation to any building line and the surrounding plan form

We wonder whether the difference in judgement between officers and members may have encouraged the developers to appeal and resubmit their application.

## **2.0 Student Housing**

2.1 As a result of the lack of adequate policies on this subject in the past, the failure to implement such policies as existed, and the general lack of engagement by Chester University, perceived social problems have now escalated to the point where student housing in any part of the city would probably be objected to by residents. We do not intend to express an opinion on the merits of the present case. Nevertheless, in this area there is already a terrace of student housing adjacent to the City Walls (Powys Court) and planning permission has been granted for a very large block on the Linenhall Stables site. The recent SPD [Houses In Multiple Occupation and Student Accommodation](#) page 7, referring to purpose-built student accommodation, states:

Unacceptable impact on amenity will be assessed taking into account: a. the number and size of existing and planned purpose-built accommodation schemes in the surrounding area; b. the number of students living in shared housing in surrounding residential areas...

However, the maximum acceptable number of student housing schemes and individual students in a given area does not seem to be spelled out, leading to the present problem. CWaC needs to address this uncertainty and probably to identify specific areas of the city where more students can be accommodated. Chester University needs to be far more engaged than it has been in the past.

## **3.0 Design**

3.1 The main facade of the proposed building on the St Martins Way frontage rises to c 33m AOD, roughly in line with the eaves of Kings Buildings to the north and the ridge of the neo-Georgian development opposite on Infirmary Field. The Hunter Street façade rises to just under 36m AOD, roughly in line with the ridge of the adjacent villa. This seems reasonable. However, the two attic storeys along St Martins Way and on the north wing rise to c 38.5m, while the corner tower would rise to c 42 m. The former height is clearly using that of the consented student housing on the Linenhall Stables site as a precedent, while the latter is presumably intended to lead into the envisaged hotel south of Hunter Street (almost 46m AOD). Given that existing ridge heights along Nicholas Street and St Martins Way are predominantly in the range c 34-35.5m, the Linenhall building should be recognised as being one storey higher than is desirable and the proposed hotel grossly out of scale (cf [Chester District Plan Retained Policy](#) Section C Urban Design para 3.33 re the height of the existing Crowne Plaza hotel). Thus the topmost storeys and corner tower of the proposed Hunter Street building would be out of scale not only with adjacent buildings but existing satisfactory buildings on the street as a whole.

3.2 The objection raised by the Chester Civic Trust to the earlier application seems still be valid:

If approved, the proposed scheme is likely to set a most unfortunate precedent for future tall buildings surrounding the city core and in close proximity to the Walls. ... If this gradually increasing height of buildings surrounding the historic city core is allowed to continue then a new city 'wall' of buildings will obscure the older core and erode its nationally important historic character. ... To justify the height of a new student accommodation building by reference to the precedent of those that are already ... out of scale with the local townscape, is totally inconsistent with good design.

The same fears were voiced by the former Conservation Officer, John Healey, in his initial comments on the Linenhall development ([13/03210/FUL](#)).

- 3.3 The excessive scale of the building is made worse by its shape – crude rectangular blocks juxtaposed and piled on top of one another – which compares poorly with the variety of forms and delicacy witnessed in the adjacent buildings, new and old. One redeeming feature of the original design was the introduction of two entrances from St Martins Way, which would have brought some pedestrian activity to the street. However, we understand that these are now only intended to serve as emergency exits and that students would normally enter and leave via Hunter Street, to discourage them from traversing King Street.
- 3.4 Given these faults it is unfortunate that this scheme was recommended for approval. We consider that planning officers should demand much higher design standards from developers.
- 3.5 To reduce the building to a satisfactory scale, Level 5 needs to be removed as does the top storey of the tower. The latter would cease to offer meaningless competition with other buildings as a landmark and would instead be an appropriate strong corner feature. The top storey of the Hunter Street frontage should be set back along the whole of its length to mirror the pitched roof the adjacent villa. However, this is only a start in setting the broad parameters for a satisfactory development. The small, widely spaced windows need to be revised to be more sympathetic to neighbouring buildings and numerous other details will also need to be refined.

#### **4.0 Archaeology**

- 4.1 The building would be constructed over the western rampart of the Roman legionary fortress. However, assuming that the groundworks of the latest iteration would be the same as for the rejected application, we are content to accept that minimal damage would be caused.

#### **5.0 St Martins Way and Urban Design**

- 5.1 Chester's Inner Ring Road has now been in existence for 45-50 years. Some of the 'shatter zone' around it has still to be healed and it constitutes a barrier to pedestrian movement across the city. These problems are particularly acute with St Martins Way. Although constructed on the line of pre-existing streets, it now divides the western part of the historic city into two. It is time that it ceased to be merely a fume-laden canyon – a hostile environment preferably to be avoided and sometimes lethal to cyclists and pedestrians – and was re-integrated into the rest of the city. A comprehensive, informed vision for the street is needed. The dual carriageway should not be used as an excuse for the construction of buildings on a scale more suitable to a much bigger city than Chester. Buildings of appropriate size and style to blend into their surroundings and that have active frontages are essential. Advantage should be taken of the views that have been opened up to increase the sense of historical place, especially from the site of the north-west angle tower of the Roman fortress (by St Martins Gate) to the Guildhall, on the site of the Roman west gate. A radical re-think of lighting, junctions, refuges and crossing points is required.

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*For Chester Archaeological Society*  
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