

CHESTER ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

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

Summary

The revised planning application offers little improvement on the original. 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 northern end of the City Centre Conservation Area, which is already under threat. We restate our view that the application should be rejected. However, a carefully designed one-storey extension could improve the building.

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

1.1 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 on Upper Northgate Street are varied in form and style but rise to a maximum of three storeys, with an irregular roofscape. Buildings north of the roundabout are again varied in style and generally of three storeys, although the new blocks of student accommodation rise to four. Delamere Street is totally different in character, with the recent Sumner House and the Fountains Health Centre rising to five to six storeys. These are large cuboids, the health centre building being divided into three blocks with heavy detailing and monopitch roofs.

1.2 The *Chester Characterisation Study* (written before the completion of the health centre), p 237, states:

There are significant large development sites in this area, providing an opportunity to restore a more appropriate development form. There has also been recent completed development, notably the new Travelodge (Sumner House) and new office and residential buildings. These have mixed success in interpreting Chester traditional vernacular with contemporary materials and stylings.

It also states (page 247):

North of George Street there [are] probably insufficient buildings of merit to warrant Conservation Area status as the urban form here has been irrevocably altered. Consequently, George Street may make a more appropriate boundary than St. Oswald's Way. Upper Northgate Street south of the Inner Ring Road, however, should remain wholly within the Conservation Area.

This is therefore an area where the Conservation Area is under threat of erosion, and the application site occupies a crucial position.

2.0 The Proposal

2.1 The revised application continues to foresee a two-storey extension, the first replicating the style of the existing second and third storeys and the second being a more lightweight construction. In comparison with the first iteration of the scheme, there is now a rather great setback of this storey from the frontage.

3.0 Evaluation

3.1 The present building is unremarkable, and the recent addition of utilitarian handrails around the edge of the roof has not improved it. However, in height, scale and massing 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 to three storeys higher and with long, straight rooflines highly visible from the north-west (eg Sealand Road). The proposed extension brings this difference in height, form and style brutally to the Upper Northgate Street frontage. The revisions to the design fall far short of satisfactorily mitigating the visual harm thereby caused.

3.2 In our response to the original application we set out the relevant policies in the Cheshire West and Chester *Local Plan Part Two*; there is no need to restate them here.

3.3 The revised application is accompanied by a heritage assessment. However, having been compiled retrospectively, inevitably it merely justifies the proposed development rather than helps to shape it. It fails to present a coherent analysis of street scene (as done summarily here in paras 1.1 and 3.1 above), especially of Upper Northgate Street; it just refers to the variety of building heights in the area in general and reviews the impact on the neighbouring Listed Buildings individually. In our view it underestimates the difference in scale between the proposed extension and the existing buildings on Upper Northgate Street. In para 5.60 it is stated that the modified building would provide a transition between those on Upper Northgate Street and Delamere Street. We disagree; as previously stated, at five storeys it would bring the scale of the modern buildings on Delamere Street to the Upper Northgate Street frontage. Ultimately, the authors seem not to have convinced even themselves; in para 5.63 they allow that the development may still be judged harmful and are reduced to arguing that any harm would be minor.

3.4 Clearly the proposal does not meet the criteria set out in section I1 of the *National Design Guide* (2019), page 15, 'Understand and relate well to the site, its local and wider context', let alone relevant policies in the *Local Plan*. The *National Planning Policy Framework* (2018), page 39, para 130 states:

Permission should be refused for development of poor design that fails to take the opportunities available for improving the character and quality of an area and the way it functions, taking into account any local design standards or style guides in plans or supplementary planning documents.

4.0 Conclusion

4.1 Developments between St Oswald's Way and Delamere Street, especially the former Travelodge/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 distant views of the city centre, and have led to the suggestion that the

northern boundary of the City Centre Conservation Area should be drawn back so as to just include Upper Northgate Street. If the latter is not also to suffer erosion, then a development that even its promoters concede may be judged to cause harm (even if minor) should be emphatically rejected, and, in accordance with the *National Planning Policy*, one that improves the building and the Conservation Area should be required.

- 4.2 As we argued previously, a more modest, single-storey addition to Royal House might be acceptable and give it the greater 'presence' that its corner situation warrants. In terms of height this would also provide a real transition from Upper Northgate Street to the buildings on Delamere Street (compare the student accommodation on the former bus depot site to the north, with four-storey blocks on the street frontage rising to five behind). It should also be considered whether a more broken outline to the topmost story, matching the articulation of the storeys below, might not fit more comfortably with the Upper Northgate Street roofscape.

P Carrington
For Chester Archaeological Society
5 October 2020