

New Works Committee. Report to Chester Civic Trust Council 4th March 2014

Since the last Council meeting on 3rd December, the New Works Committee has met on 12th, 19th Dec, 9th, 16th, 30th Jan, 13th and 27th Feb.

Notable developments we have commented on are as follows:

We objected to the design of new school buildings at Bishops High but unfortunately this planning application has been approved.

A scheme for an outdoor eating area at Bell Tower Walk has been proposed for Sergio restaurant. We have commented on pre application designs as being of poor quality and a lost opportunity for the imaginative use of the pedestrian area around the bell tower.

Andrew Pannell also attended the CWAC Planning Committee on 23rd Jan and 4th Feb to speak on behalf of the Civic Trust against the officer's recommendations of approval for two schemes. These were both refused planning permission by the committee against officer's recommendation. The schemes were as follows:

Tower wharf student accommodation scheme

As you may know the Tower Wharf student accommodation scheme (13/03922/Ful) was refused planning permission on 24th January on an 8 to 1 vote.

The other speakers against the scheme were:

Roy Hughes. Resident.

Gwynth Buss. Chester Canal Heritage Trust

Peter Emery. Planning consultant on behalf of Morris Homes.

Councillor Rudd

Andrew Sutherland, M.D at Miller Homes said that the land is owned by CTP on a 999 lease from the Canal and River Trust. He said that Tim Wheeler of the University estimates that 3000 new accommodation units are needed for students.

The Canal and River Trust now support the scheme. Miller Homes was planning to introduce a new public slipway.

In response to my points planning officer Steve Lewis stated that as English Heritage and the council's conservation officer supported the scheme then that outweighed local amenity bodies' views. Councillor Clayton disagreed and said that more weight should be given to the views of local bodies (like the Civic Trust) on conservation issues, as they know the local area.

She also called for planning policies so that 'we know where student accommodation can be built'.

The highways officer dismissed concerns about the lack of spaces parking for the development and the wider area.

Councillor Clayton moved that the application be refused. All councillors voted to refuse except Councillor Tate who seemed to be undecided although she did say that the proposal was too big and should be reduced by half.

The reasons for refusal were.

Policy EC3 that allocates the site for employment purposes, including cultural and tourism uses.

Policy EC6 Protection of existing employment land and buildings.

Policy EC14. Sites allocated for heritage related tourism attractions.

Policy GE3 Impact on residential amenity.

The area-planning officer, did not consider that any of the urban design, listed buildings or conservation policies should be used for refusal as they had 'little weight' and the officer's report had stated that the scheme accords with these policies.

This is surprising given the strong concerns raised by us and other local conservation bodies, but shows how low these concerns are in the minds of planning officers.

However, if the scheme goes to appeal then the local conservation bodies can make a submission to raise these policies at inquiry or in written submissions.

Queen's Park Road residential scheme.

On 4th February, the Planning Committee voted unanimously to refuse planning permission for the Queens Park Road residential development overlooking the River Dee (ref 13/04048/FUL), primarily on design and conservation grounds.

At this meeting and the Civic Trust views together with those of English Heritage were much quoted by the councillors in speaking against the scheme.

Cllr Sam Dixon moved to refuse the scheme and this was seconded by Cllr Moore Dutton.

The officer's view was that the benefits of the scheme outweighed the harm done to conservation interests.

However the members were deeply concerned about the visual impact and poor design quality of the three proposed apartment blocks overlooking the river.

So I am very pleased that despite the officer's recommendations the councillors have held design and conservation in higher regard than the officers and developers for both this scheme and the Tower Wharf student scheme.

Hopefully next time developers begin work on the next big scheme they will realise that the bar of acceptable design has been raised and officers' response in negotiation with developers will also toughen up.

So altogether a good result for Chester's heritage but a revealing and disturbing one for the lack of support shown by officers for urban design and heritage. The lesson for CCT may be to engage directly with officers more on these matters and also with English Heritage whose views seem to carry more weight in officers' minds than all other's opinions.

Andrew Pannell

27th February 2014