

Comments on planning application 16/002282/OUT. The Northgate Redevelopment Scheme, by the Chester Civic Trust

The Civic Trust welcome the opportunity of the proposed Northgate scheme to regenerate Chester city centre and reverse the retail decline of the centre. However there are a number of issues, particularly with the impact on the existing historic and architectural fabric of the centre and its interface with St Martin's Way and Watergate Street that need to be addressed. Some potential design solutions to these concerns are offered.

Phases 0 and 1.

Comments on the detailed part of the planning application for new hotel, market, cinema, market square and redevelopment of library building.

Effect on skyline.

The height and massing of the scheme as seen from the racecourse and the northern section of the city's walls obscures some of the views of the city's skyline and obscures the views of some of its prominent buildings. There is a lack of articulation of the roofscape of new buildings on the skyline.

Problems with the design and massing of the hotel and market/cinema buildings.

The height and massing of the proposed hotel creates an overbearing effect on St Martin's Way. The hotel could be set back further from the street by increasing the set back from the proposed plinth or 'wall' feature on St Martin's Way. This could create more space on top of the plinth, allowing public access along a possible high level pedestrian route above the street.

The height and massing of the market and cinema as seen from the cathedral is potentially intrusive.

The design of the new hotel is over complex and fussy with a mix of styles, shapes and materials. On the corner with Princess Street the overhang of the plinth creates an unbalanced effect.

The design of the set back top storey of the hotel is unsympathetic to the rest of the building.

The cladding of the cinema in folded aluminium is potentially unattractive because of doubts about its quality of durability and appearance in the long term

We are unconvinced about the choice of design of the market canopy in the market square. It is an alien design with no reference to the historical architectural styles in Chester.

Phase 2

There are problems with the height and siting of the proposed department store. The building line for the department store is too far forward and has an obtrusive and overbearing effect on St. Martin's Way. There is no sound reason in urban design terms why it cannot be set back on a plinth in the same way as the proposed hotel and block of shops on Princess Street. The setback on a plinth would allow for some public access along the top of the plinth

allowing for an alternative pedestrian route along and above St Martin's Way allowing greater access to the department store, shops and hotel.

Although the design of the plinth in phase 2 on St Martin's Way is not for determination at this stage we have concerns about the design shown in the illustrative plans. This could be a defining feature of the Northgate scheme giving it identity and character but current illustrative designs do not realise its potential as an integrating and attractive feature. It should be integrated with the buildings on which it sits to create a more accessible and active frontage on St. Martin's Way. Public access along the top of the plinth would afford views out across the city and beyond, give better access to buildings adjoining it, and allow a high level route along St. Martin's Way, well connected to the Northgate scheme. Also the plinth could be softened with planting. The proposed overhanging sections are unbalanced and a stepped design would be preferable.

Back of Watergate Street

The existing pedestrian routes into the scheme from Watergate Street are a very important part of linking the scheme into the existing town centre and creating more footfall on Watergate Street. However the design of the proposed Edwards Street at the rear of Watergate Street does not help to achieve this objective. This is because the rear of the new buildings facing onto the back of Watergate Street contributes to this 'backyard' effect creating an unwelcoming and forgotten element in the scheme. The road is designed as a service road rather than as an attractive pedestrian route.

This could be remedied by allowing more businesses in the new buildings and by encouraging Watergate Street businesses to also actively address Edwards Street in the use of their rear premises, thereby creating a more active frontage and street life. A new pedestrian square could be created at the existing Merchants Chandlers House (that is to be retained in the scheme), providing a focus and destination from the route through from Watergate Street.

Edwards Street should be more than just a service road and should have a high quality public realm so it does not become an unwelcoming backyard.

Parameter plans

The limits of deviation shown have the potential to make the new streets through the development too narrow given the heights of the buildings proposed. A wider limit should be shown.

The building line for the proposed new department store should be further set back from St. Martin's Way in line with the other buildings.

Public transport

Bus access to the scheme appears to be inadequate. There seems very little attempt to make the scheme easily and attractively accessible to bus users. This could be improved by allowing bus access direct to the entrance to the market on Hunter Street from Northgate Street perhaps in the form of a frequent and free 'hopper' bus link from the new bus station at Gorse Stacks and the railway station into the heart of the Northgate scheme.

Heritage interpretation

Although the Roman strong room is to be integrated into the scheme there is greater potential for a heritage trail of historic references to be integrated throughout the new streets given its location on layers of Roman and Medieval archaeology.

Impact on the existing town centre.

The impact of this development on the existing primary shopping street in the town centre is not properly addressed in the town centre uses assessment. In particular, paragraph 7.95 makes a reference to the White Young Green study that looks at the impact on Foregate Street that is not addressed. Before planning permission is granted a set of mitigation measures should be put in place to ensure that this adverse impact is minimised, particularly with regard to more direct public transport access into the scheme.

AP 9/7/2016