

Leigh Powell
City Development
Exeter City Council
Civic Centre
Paris Street
Exeter EX1 1NN

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By email
Planning@exeter.gov.uk
Leigh.Powell@exeter.gov.uk

Dear Mr Powell,

Application reference: 24/0266/FUL
Proposal: Demolition of existing buildings. Proposed apartment block comprising 16 no. units plus amenity space, bin store, cycle store and all associated development.
Site: The Wonford Inn, 17 Wonford Stree, Exeter, EX2 5DL

The Planning Sub-Committee of Exeter Civic Society has considered the above application.

To begin with, we note that there is no evidence submitted to substantiate the assumption that the business was not viable prior to its closure.

In a recent (January 2024) appeal decision (3317327, Gardeners Inn, NG16 2RZ) the inspector said,

“The appellant points to a number of unpaid debts at the time the pub ceased trading, and Companies House records from 2017 showing low levels of profits, as evidence of unviability...

Whilst I understand that full details of the past trading accounts for the pub have not been obtainable, the appellant’s evidence is limited to a selection of final bills showing outstanding debts at the time the previous tenancy ended. However, the fact that some debts existed is not persuasive evidence that the business as a whole is unviable, as these may have been brought about by any number of factors specific to the operator at the time, rather than being a consequence of wider economic conditions.

Moreover, although I acknowledge the points made about the recent difficulties faced by the hospitality sector, this is not sufficient evidence to demonstrate that this specific public house is no longer viable...”

In this case there is no evidence produced to establish the business was not viable prior to its closure.

If the business was not viable prior to its closure, there is no evidence that it could not be made viable by a different operator.

In the Gardeners Inn appeal, the inspector said,

“The appellant also referred several times to industry data showing the pub was, and would be, unviable, but no actual data has been put to me. In these respects, the appellant’s evidence does not demonstrate with confidence that the pub was unviable at the time it closed and there is no subsequent trading period under a different landlord that may support the appellant’s position regarding trading difficulties.”

“Overall, there is limited evidence before me from the appellant to establish whether the Gardeners was a viable public house when it last operated, with no trading accounts or other estimates of running costs provided.”

In this case the letter from Bettsworths only gives a generalised view of the sector and the viability of the Wonford Inn. It is not “sufficient evidence to demonstrate that this specific public house is no longer viable”.

The conclusion that “it is therefore inevitable that the property’s future is likely to suit an alternative use” is not based on empirical evidence but if accepted leads to our second point.

If the Wonford Inn does not have a future as a public house, can it be put to another use?

The only alternative use which has been given any consideration appears to be residential. We do not disagree that residential use would be acceptable in principle. That is not to say that residential is the only possible alternative use.

At paragraph 4.31 of the Planning Statement it says,

“...the applicant has confirmed that retaining the existing building and putting it to an alternative use is simply not viable from a design and delivery point of view.”

That assertion is not evidence. We would expect to see a report from a suitably qualified professional including consideration of non-residential alternatives.

The proposal involves the total loss of a heritage asset and Asset of Community Value, as such it requires better justification than “the applicant has confirmed”.

If the Local Planning Authority is satisfied, on the basis of evidence produced, first, that the Wonford Inn cannot operate as a viable public house, and secondly, that the heritage asset cannot be put to an alternative use (including, but not limited to, residential) then it may conclude planning permission should be given for the total loss of this heritage asset and redevelopment of the site.

In that event we wish to object to the proposed scheme of redevelopment on the following points.

Wonford Street is a small narrow street of historic significance, with two storey houses and cottages. The narrowness is accentuated by on-street parking. A large solid block of flats would not enhance the street scene and be overbearing.

The proposed development uses the whole site and whilst parking may have to be restricted it is unrealistic to expect the development will not generate extra cars and this will exacerbate the issues raised by residents' objections.

Due to the size of the proposed built form the amenity space allocated is minimal, and a number of the proposed flats do not even have a good outlook or easy access to open space.

The solid block of building takes away any spatial relief of the narrow street currently provided by the openness of the site.

We believe the present proposal to be overdevelopment of the site.

If the Local Planning Authority is provided with evidence to substantiate the assertion the business is not viable and cannot be made so, then consideration should be given to alternative uses for the building (including but not limited to residential).

Only if the evidence shows the building cannot be used for an alternative purpose should total loss of this heritage asset be considered.

If demolition of the building is inevitable then any redevelopment proposal should be limited the footprint with the remainder of the site providing open space.

We therefore object to this application and suggest that it should be refused.

Yours sincerely

Paul Barkley
on behalf of the Planning Sub-Committee of Exeter Civic Society