



EXETER CIVIC SOCIETY COMMENTS ON ST LUKE'S CAMPUS REDEVELOPMENT MASTER PLAN

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the proposed masterplan for the redevelopment of St Luke's campus. Exeter Civic Society takes a keen interest in all significant developments in and around Exeter. The Society's charitable objectives include seeking the highest standards in planning and architecture.

The aim of creating a world leading centre for research and education in health and well-being is a very attractive one which we support. Our comments are therefore about the detail of the masterplan, not the aims for the campus.

We can see that the planners have wrestled with competing priorities and concerns and we feel that the draft masterplan benefited from the earlier round of engagement. We hope that this latest round will lead to further improvement.

Respect for the surrounding area.

We recognise that significant effort has gone into considering the impact of the development on Baring Crescent. However, we consider that further thought needs to be given to the height and massing of the taller 5 and 6 storey buildings and the appearance of all of them. The masterplan fails to recognise that the campus is an island in a largely suburban area with domestic architecture and should respect and blend with it, not dominate it.

The site includes a conservation area and is adjacent to another as well as the listed buildings in Baring Crescent. The National Planning Policy Framework expects that particular attention is paid to the setting of such heritage assets (including conservation areas) which we consider the current plans fail to do appropriately.

Height and mass of buildings.

The current campus buildings are generally three storeys. The 5 and 6 storey buildings will be very much higher – the 6 storeys being nearly twice the height of the current library on the quad for example. The storeys at 4 metres each are also significantly higher than for the domestic buildings surrounding the site. For comparison, the 6 storey block would be more like 8 domestic storeys. The 5 and 6 storey blocks currently planned will be completely out of character with the surrounding area.

The consultation boards say that the tallest buildings are at the centre of the campus with lower ones at the edge. This is not true. The new block on Magdalen Road ranges from 5 to 6 storeys – the same as that proposed for the very centre. This again will be out of keeping with the surrounding area. Moreover, it will be brought forward from the current building line of College House, so making it even more dominant. We see no reason for the building line to be brought forward in such a way

– a reason given at the engagement event was that it was a ‘gateway’ building but that does not seem to us sufficient reason to bring it forward of the current building line or to make it one of the two highest buildings in the campus.

The opposite side of Magdalen Road is part of the St Leonard’s conservation area. A 5-6 storey building will be overbearing and completely at odds with the conservation area. It would be higher than the proposed building on the police station site on Heavitree Road which the Planning Inspector rejected as overbearing.

The proposed replacement of the library by a 5 to 6 storey building will also be out of keeping with the buildings surrounding the quad. A new build should be on the same scale and not dwarf the other buildings. The older building on the north side of the quad facing Heavitree Road is itself part of a conservation area so its height and setting should be respected not dominated.

Building Design.

There is also an issue about the building materials used. The current quad buildings are nearly all brick and stone. Importing a block of glass and concrete would jar with the rest.

We recognise that the masterplan is intended to show the position and mass of the buildings. However, they come across in the plan and the model as anonymous rectangular blocks most likely of concrete, insensitive to the architecture around them – particularly Baring Crescent but also elsewhere. Thought should be given to how the new buildings could blend in more – for example by using brick. Reusing the existing brick of the library and College House would also surely be a more sustainable approach than casting new concrete.

The current depiction of the buildings also suggests a lack of imagination. If the aim is to have a world leading centre, the architecture should match it and show great flair. The current plans show nothing comparable with the roofline of the Forum and adjacent buildings on the Streatham Campus. Greening facades, for example, could also be an environmentally interesting option. We would like to think that new campus buildings would challenge for a prestigious architectural award.

The National Planning Policy Framework expects that the design of buildings will reflect the local community’s aspirations for their area so we would hope to see further thought be given to the design of the campus and its buildings in consultation with local residents.

Tree cover.

We welcome the fact that most or all of the mature trees have been retained and that additional trees will be planted. We also welcome the different landscaping through the site. The University has an excellent horticultural reputation for its grounds and is rightly proud of them. We hope that will continue with the St Luke’s campus.

Other points.

We also welcome the suggestion of a pedestrian crossing for Heavitree Road opposite the campus and the further traffic calming measures proposed for Magdalen Road to encourage cycling and walking.

We noted that the earlier engagement event stressed the possibility of improved sports facilities which local residents could use. This was not immediately obvious from the masterplan but we hope that will be designed in.

We also noted the overall reduction in parking spaces. If the campus is to have more people using it, many of whom may live outside Exeter, the reduction in spaces will only be credible if the University and County Council take significant steps to improve public transport from surrounding areas.