



an independent force for a better Bristol

23rd August 2017

The Society's response to the 3rd August consultation 2017 - Bristol University – Tyndalls Avenue Public Realm Project – 17/00540/PREAPP

1 Principles and summary

- 1.1** The Society supports the principles behind the scheme and agrees that there is the potential to create an interesting space that the public can share with the University. We welcome the improved connection to Royal Fort Gardens, and the pedestrianising of Tyndall Avenue.
- 1.2** These physical changes, along with the forthcoming changes around the Hawthorns site, will help to provide an identifiable centre for the university. However, physical changes are not enough: how the physical space is used will determine its success as a living heart of the university, for use by both students and the public equally.
- 1.3** Whilst we support the changes in principle, we are not convinced that the proposals yet provide a coherent vision, demonstrating how physical design and a place for people and activities come together. For instance:
- The aim is to convert a road with buildings on both sides, and turn it into a series of 'event' and other spaces, a 'destination' rather than a route. This is not easy to achieve, and in the current design the street continues to feel more a conduit for movements, not a place to linger.
 - The relationship between the buildings and the space is important. The design is constrained by the existing buildings, especially the raised ground-floor heights, which inhibits an open relationship with the public realm. This problem has not been fully addressed.
 - The graphic pattern on Tyndall Avenue seems too strong. It jars against the rectangularity of the street, and seems to drive some of the design decisions rather than being sub-servient.

1.4 Since the first round of consultation in February, the physical design has been confirmed, and the second round of consultation took place a shortly before the planning application is to be submitted. This limited period reduces the chances of influencing the outcome, but the Society makes the following comments in the hope that they can be given proper consideration.

2 Physical design

2.1 Graphic pattern

The graphic pattern on Tyndall Avenue seems too strong. It jars against the rectangularity of the street. It seems designed to be seen from the air, as the published 'fly-throughs' suggest. Only those looking out of the upper floor windows of existing buildings will see the clever paving patterning.

The pattern seems to drive some of the design decisions rather being sub-servient. The spaces, disabled access and existing trees appear secondary to the graphic pattern. If the road is to be pedestrianised, a much simpler treatment might have worked better, with existing trees retained (except the cherries) and augmented by new 'avenue' tree planting, creating a dignified setting for the large buildings.

2.2 Relationship with buildings

The relationship between the buildings and the space is important. The design is constrained by the existing buildings, especially the raised ground-floor heights, which inhibits an open relationship with the public realm. The disabled access to the computer building has been addressed, but in other respects the hard edge of the enclosing buildings continues to exclude intercourse with the public realm.

2.3 Trees

Some 15 trees are required to be felled in the Avenue. Some of these are in poor condition or otherwise not important. However, the group of 4 directly in front of the Sports centre are in good condition and have a significant impact – partly concealing the poor Sports Centre architecture. These trees appear to be replaced with new specimens, planted within a metre or so of the felled trees. A less doctrinaire design approach could retain existing trees, which provide a substantial amount of canopy cover, with all the visual and environmental benefits of city trees. It would be many years before the replacement trees provided equivalent canopy. Similarly, two existing trees are lost in front of the Computer centre due to the adoption of the curvy geometry.

It is regretted that in St Michaels Park, some 15 trees are inevitably lost to widen the road, and there will be virtually no space to plant replacements. This in a street which will take considerably more polluting traffic with closure of Tyndall Avenue. The present extensive tree cover, in addition to its environmental benefits, civilises this road. The new treeless appearance will be visually damaging.

2.4 Movement and place

The aim is to convert a road with buildings on both sides, and turn it into a series of 'event' and other spaces, a 'destination' rather than a route. This is not easy to achieve, and in the current design the street continues to feel more a conduit for movements, not a place to linger. Some public seating seems the only sign of place-making.

The design could do more to make the space in front of the sports centre feel like the principal destination space. If not here, does the university have an ambition elsewhere for a single large gathering space?

It is planned to develop Senate House as a student hub, but this will not add activity to Tyndall Avenue, which would help it perform its hoped-for place-making function.

3 Activity

3.1 Principle

We support the principle to the proposal for 12-month activity. However, the viability of activities outside term-time is questionable, and we suspect activities in vacations will be no more than occasional one-off well-publicised performance events. We do not believe that open-air retail offerings like markets will attract much footfall outside term-time.

3.2 A cafe to provide street activity

A cafe which spills out on to the street seems an obvious objective. As a comparison, the newly opened Business School at UWE has a ground floor cafe that spills out on to the public realm.

The cafe would have to be in the central half of Tyndall Avenue, both to activate a significant proportion of the street, and because the ends of the road are sloped. In the central half, there are 4 candidate buildings for a cafe:

- Physics Building - this has no active frontage and there are steps up to the front entrance
- Centre for Nano Science - as for physics building
- Computer Centre - this has an active frontage, but is on a raised plinth with little space for spilling out, and with steps up, and a new ramp to give disabled access
- Centre for Sports - this has a deli at ground floor level, which we understand will be closing.

Of the 4 buildings, it is the sports centre that seems to have most scope for a cafe, and this would align with the stated desire to locate an events space outside the Sports Centre.

It is Senate House (opposite Hawthorns Hotel) where it is planned to have a cafe. Senate House is to be a student hub, like the ex-Habitat building, so a cafe makes sense. But Senate House too is raised above the surrounding ground level; and does not give scope for a cafe spilling out on to the public realm.

The design is constrained by the existing buildings, especially the raised ground-floor heights, and the only solution we can see is to base the cafe in the sports centre, and to make use of the back entrance from Senate House to give covered access to it from the student hub in Senate House.

The University plans a café in the lodge at the end of the Tyndall House drive, and a café in Senate House. There is of course a limit to the number of cafes the area can support, so choices must be made.

4 Transport access

4.1 Motor vehicles

Control of access by motor vehicles needs to be considered. The public realm will be harmed if there are always parked vehicles on it. We have recently seen examples of this: there are parked vehicles by the newish public realm behind the Physics building, accessed from Tyndall Avenue through an arch under the Physics building.

It is proposed to allow access to Tyndall Avenue in early morning and early evening time windows, as for pedestrianised space elsewhere, with movable bollards controlling access. However, the enforcement by university staff of parking restrictions is critical: there needs to be someone with authority and specific responsibility.

4.2 Bikes

Looking at the plan, the amount of bike parking seems to have reduced, but we are told it has increased. As a principle, bike parking needs to be conveniently placed, not tucked away in a dark or unoverlooked corner. It needs to be spread around for easy access to the different buildings.

5 Public access

5.1 We are told that the University will put up a sign at the western approach welcoming public use and showing where public access is. We strongly welcome this. It responds to a comment the Society made in the last round of consultation. Will there be a similar notice at the eastern approach?

5.2 The Society will suggest a planning condition appended to the consent to address the physical barriers at Woodland Road and St. Michael's Hill. The physical barriers (to control delivery vehicles etc) must be unobtrusive to ensure that the public feel that they have unfettered access. The Society suggests 'collapsible/drop-down' bollards.

Signs that say, 'CCTV in operation' or 'UoB security patrols present' will inevitably make some members of the public uneasy about using the space. The transfer from the public realm to Tyndall Avenue must be seamless.

5.3 Legal issues

The Society accepts the assurances that the University and the Council give that the transfer will involve the creation of a perpetual public right of way, excluding motor vehicles. However, there remains an active public concern about adequate compensation to the public for the loss of an adopted highway. It would help to allay that concern if the University and the Council would specify the intended legal instrument. For example, simultaneously with the transfer of the land that constitutes the public highway will the University execute a grant of a perpetual right of way that will be registered at HM Land Registry and in the Council's register of public rights of way?