



an independent force for a better Bristol

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### **Proposed redevelopment of 7-29 Wilder St. 1-3 Backfields - 7/06270/PREAPP**

The Society's response to the proposal to demolish all the standing structures on the site bounded by Backfields, Upper York Street and Wilder Street except for the Grade II listed 25 Wilder Street, to develop a managed student accommodation block.

#### **Introduction**

The Society is grateful to the Watkin Jones Group (WJG) for the invitation to the presentation by their architects, AWW to explain their proposal. Public consultation is effective when it occurs early enough in the planning process to affect the final form of development. The Society welcomes the regeneration of this dilapidated site which is a negative feature in the conservation area. The Society is aware of active redevelopment interest of the owners of other local sites. These include the Coroner's Court/Lakota site and Nos. 2 – 12 on the south side of Stokes Croft and Nos. 1 – 9 and 11 – 17 on the north side. The redevelopment of these sites may bring forward the redevelopment of other local low grade commercial buildings. The developer and the local planning authority must consider this development in the context of extensive local redevelopment. Multiple developments give the opportunity to invest in the improvement of the public realm.

#### **Change of use**

The Society agrees that there is evidence of an unmet demand for student accommodation in Bristol and that the site would be highly sustainable for that purpose. However, there is understandable local resistance to the increase in student numbers in the area, which residents consider would undermine the principle of a balanced community of permanent residents. There is another planning permission for 285 student bedrooms at 13 / 17 Dean Street. Studies, produced as part of the St Paul's Neighbourhood. Renewal Programme identify local housing issues. A development of this size should contribute to the local housing needs as part of a mixed development. Emerging Council policy supports the inclusion of residential space within large student accommodation developments.

Loss of employment space also concerns the Society. We suggest that it would improve the scheme to include some employment space at street level. Employment space would increase street level activity during the day and create the opportunity to introduce a

hierarchy into the street elevations. The Society suggests that WJG discusses with owners of other local sites a cooperative approach to the provision of commercial/employment space. The St. Paul's Planning Group have evidence that the market demand for small, flexible workspaces in the area exceeds the supply.

### **Height and mass**

The close-grained layout of the original 18<sup>th</sup> century estate is a development constraint. The inadequate, narrow pavements were probably a 19<sup>th</sup> century introduction. Building a single large block to the back of the pavement on three sides will result in a much higher street to building height ratio than these narrow streets have ever accommodated. Redevelopment of the Coroner's Court/Lakota site may erect a building on the north side of Backfields. In the Society's view this development would create unacceptable shadow, overbear and harm the surrounding streets if it exceeds the height of the unbuilt permission for Nos. 7/11 Backfields - 14/03981/P. The narrowness of the streets and minimal pavement widths would accentuate the building's impact. To align the building height with the nicely detailed St. James House to the west would enhance the streetscape in Backfields and Wilder Street and the conservation area. The block should step down at Upper York Place to reflect the character of the local domestic scale and to avoid overwhelming the listed 25 Wilder Street.

### **Design**

The Society offers these suggestions at this stage in the design process. Student accommodation creates the problem, how to design interesting elevations for standard units. AWW's look book contains several options. The option to divide the long elevations into separate blocks could be a possible choice. It would be attractive to use the window ratios and proportions of the neighbouring vernacular buildings. At street level the introduction of other uses offers the opportunity to avoid the constraint of the dimensions of the standard living unit. The Society is anxious to avoid the negative feature of obscured windows of ground floor accommodation. The student accommodation at Nos. 27 – 31 Colston Street is an example to avoid. We are pleased that the plant will be not be at roof level. We agree that this large building requires an architectural feature to signal the main entrance. It would be an added attraction if the entrance gave a view of the interior courtyard. The Society does not believe that the narrow court yard set between buildings of up to seven floors would create a pleasant amenity space for the future occupants. The Society expects bespoke student development to be adaptable to other uses, both outside of terms dates and should there be a fall in demand for student accommodation in this location. To ensure that purpose-built student housing can be easily converted into residential accommodation in the event of a fall in the student accommodation market it necessary for the rooms in student flats to comply with the Council's residential space standards. The Society would welcome the opportunity to comment the design and choice of materials as development evolves.

### **Public realm**

The Society suggests that WJG and the Council undertake a study to select improvement opportunities in the surrounding streets. Apart from upgrading the surviving setts and pavements, the open space at the junction of Backfields with Moon Street offers an opportunity to create an attractive public place. The Society does not support machining the setts to produce a smooth road surface in this area. The construction of a building that exceeds the height of St. James House and the permitted scheme creates a strong concern of

potential harm to the setting of the former Coroners Court and the opportunity to make Backfields a pedestrian friendly space.