



an independent force for a **better Bristol**

Bristol Civic Society, July 2024

THE GALLERIES SHOPPING CENTRE, BROADMEAD, BRISTOL, BS1 3XA  
Application No. 24/01850/P

The society reiterates our earlier comments made in 2022 regarding the overall development, especially its objection to the scale and height of the new proposals. Bristol City Council's own city centre development and delivery plan clearly indicates that *'developments should be of an appropriate scale of buildings responding to the existing character and sensitivity of the surrounding townscape, providing appropriate enclosure of the public realm, and with consideration to overshadowing of neighbours.'* There is also provision for *taller buildings in appropriate locations, where taller buildings contribute positively to views and vistas, and where impact on microclimate has been carefully considered.* This is an important part of the city centre and one experienced by many in the city as well as visitors. It needs a correspondingly high-quality attractive development that underpins the city centre revival. We do not see these requirements being met by these proposals.

#### Masterplan and Elevations – Design Codes

We note in the proposals that it is suggested the various blocks may well be sold off (if planning is approved) to several different developers. As such, we feel the design codes are not sufficiently detailed or prescriptive enough, especially in the elevational built form and identity sections, to ensure what is built will be delivered, and we quote from the masterplan principles submitted with the application, *'high quality schemes that align with the aspirations established through the consultation process with Bristol City Council, the local community and different stakeholders' or a 'scale, built form and design of all buildings will contribute towards a positive sense of place for the development, that will be sensitive to its immediate neighbourhood, to key local views and to surrounding heritage assets'*. What has been submitted in our view will not deliver a distinctive, high quality and enjoyable place in the city. The design codes should provide better guidance on the architecture, referencing the local character and distinctiveness of Bristol. The present proposal in its disregard for quality elevations is a very introverted scheme and does not contribute to the city; it provides a lost opportunity and one that should be corrected.

There are a great number of potential benefits to this mixed-use scheme not just in the increased housing, commercial and leisure uses on the site but also bringing green spaces into the city and a more permeable approach to Castle Park from Broadmead. If the proposed phasing is adopted, then we would hope that Bristol City planners will condition the phasing to ensure the public realm is completed adjacent to the blocks before each building block is completed and occupied.

We welcome the permeability of the proposals and the establishment of connections to the city centre. Although this moves away from the tight urban grain of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and earlier medieval plans, it does create the opportunity to reimagine this part of the city centre. The proposed opening up of the site for the public, creating a better street pattern and connection to Castle Park, are good. The orientation of the blocks does help sun penetration in the new city block although only for a limited period of the day. The individual blocks could step back further to help provide more daylight into the new streets. Perhaps breaking back the corners of the site, in a way similar to the original Galleries buildings would help open up the scheme and provide better accessibility and place making.

## Height

Tall buildings need space around them, both for evacuation of inhabitants and to ensure the microclimate allows for a comfortable environment avoiding both overshadowing and down draughts. We are unclear as to why the tallest part of the development, block A is on the highest part of the site. This seems to be misplaced. Historic analysis of the site by previous planners and architects indicated the tallest part of the development would be better at the Merchant Street end of the site adjacent to the historic Newgate and outside the old city walls.

If the proposed buildings are to be taller than those existing on the site, they should be of a standard that equates to the intellectual pulse of this beautiful city, providing and enhancing the quality of life that attracts people to Bristol. We do not see this in the proposals and specifically in the taller elements of the proposals. The proposals in both block and illustrative form are poor, unimaginative and lacking in any elegance. We do not wish to see a repetition of the universally condemned design of Castle View and its damage to Bristol's skyline. As such these proposals could be located anywhere as they show no local character or the distinctiveness of Bristol.

## Design Quality

We whole heartily agree with HE's comments regarding the design quality of the proposals. Block A, especially as it is on the high point of the site, will affect Bristol's skyline for the worse: both its appearance and its ability to block views will disrupt the existing legibility and navigation of the city. The frippery extending the height is entirely pointless and damaging. We would suggest further modelling / articulation of the form must take place including greater stepping of elements of the design plus a review of the layouts. Slenderness is key to well-designed tall buildings as suggested by HE as is the appropriateness of the proposed siting.

The uses and layouts are very basic which may cause the above problems. The footprints and floor plans show a lack of imagination. Why are there no larger flats for an older generation and a mix of types, such as duplexes and flats for later living? Where is the Bristol City Council's city centre apartment family housing design and tall buildings design codes to support delivery of high-quality new homes in the city centre?

The green spaces and landscape proposals give some reference back to the history of the site and its connection to the medieval castle and its environment. Planting proposals should be rigorously tested to ensure fitness and longevity in a changing climate and the microclimate being created by the development. The reference to the castle keep, although clear on the landscape plans, is lost within the building design and no recognition or reference is made in the elevational or building plans. There is an intent within the proposals to reference St Peter's Church and the Castle Keep in the public realm and buildings on Newgate although we cannot see this in the proposals. The medieval St Peters Church edges the city's proposed new civic square and thus should have an influence on the design of the proposals opposite. Some recognition of this heritage asset, its architecture and its perpendicular style should translate into the new proposed designs.

#### Block B – PBSA above retail

The inclusion of well managed student accommodation helps the mix of uses here provided the amount of PBSA in the broader area when aggregated does not drown out the existing and emerging communities. Care should be taken to avoid ghost areas outside of term time. We would also hope the design can easily be converted to residential flats as and when the student numbers decline. The scale of Block B is appropriate as it faces Broadmead but requires alteration along Union Street where the height dominates and should be reduced to align with its neighbours on Union Street. The elevation treatment again is bland even though the proposals are trying to add colour with its use in creating a vertical emphasis. The vertical emphasis should have a better relationship to the historic urban grain and the old burgauge plots thus helping to create a Bristol feel.

#### Block C – Retail

We welcome the designs for the Old Greyhound pub in Block C and the new arcade opening up to the area of the old courtyard and onto the new performance and art space behind the almshouses. However, the Broadmead street is overpowered by the dominance of the bland elevational treatment of the development behind. There is a lack of thought in the skylines of the buildings, they are very simple square flat roofs of no quality. A better design would have a different design to the top and a reduction in scale as the buildings rise towards the sky.

#### Block D – Offices/Hotel above retail

The commercial Block D is of a more acceptable scale but needs alteration particularly adjacent to the almshouses. The view from Broadmead has a better balance with its post war shopping centre architecture and breaks the sky line in an interesting way, although again with no reduction or even change of material to lighten the higher parts of the buildings.

#### Block E – Almshouse

The removal of the block mass of the shopping centre to the SW of the almshouses, Block E is

welcomed, but we suggest the enclosure created by the new proposals to the NW and SE over dominates the scale of the almshouses. A more coherent and softer approach should be encouraged by further setting back the upper floors of blocks F and D and lowering the nearest façade to align with the roof height of the almshouses. This would help to enhance the setting better. However, its historic setting is one of tight built forms, terrace like and domestic in scale, cheek by jowl with its neighbours. Therefore, would it not be more appropriate to tighten its surroundings and lower its immediate neighbour buildings? We also hope the phasing doesn't relegate securing the future of the almshouses to a postscript to the redevelopment.

#### Block F – Offices above retail

The commercial office Block F provides a good contrast in design to the other blocks however we believe there is an opportunity to establish a better relationship with its historic context and its relationship to the river Frome and Castle Park. The overshadowing of the almshouses is a concern especially as the proposals are intimating a wide sunny and bright external arts space behind which it will not be.

#### Block G – Flats above retail

It is good to see dual aspects flats and the residential mix from studios to 2 bed flats in Block G although again the elevational treatment is bland with no reference to the local character and the distinctiveness of Bristol. Opportunities to provide colour in the design to help articulate and create a vertical emphasis would improve the design and align with the history of the site and its historic built forms.

#### Texture and Colour

All the images of the proposals show subtle colour shades to the blocks whereas the tones and materials palettes in the documents relating to the blocks do not show this and in fact show no colour. Which is it?

#### Skyline

All the building forms should address the skyline better and this should be in the design codes. Just relying on the simplest form of a flat roof is an easy get out and one Bristol doesn't need so let us have some imagination and create a better place for us all to live in.

#### Conclusion

We had a presentation to our members from the developer which was welcome, not least because this is a complicated scheme supported by a dense array of supporting documents. It is not an easy package for development professionals to access never mind members of the public. But this is a

hugely significant development for the future of central Bristol. It is a once in a generation opportunity and demands careful consideration.

In doing so, it is important to appreciate what is being sought through this 'hybrid' planning application. It is not a simple redline outline application establishing the principle of uses. Full permission is being sought for the demolition of the existing buildings to ground floor level; a detailed highways layout to provide access to the site; change of use of the existing basement to provide flexible leisure space (sui generis nightclub / cinema / live music venue, Class E(d) indoor sport or recreation, Class F1(e) exhibition hall) and ancillary uses (Class C1, Class C3, Class E, sui generis purpose built student accommodation), car parking, cycle hub and servicing; change of use of Merchant Taylors' Almshouses to provide flexible Class E/ F1/ F2 use; all other items, including the parameter plans are seeking outline permission.

This means that if the planning permission is approved, the height, scale, block locations and mass of the outline scheme together with the amount of proposed floorspace will be established and more than likely is what would be built. Leaving the consideration of such matters to when the detailing of the scheme is seen would be too late. Now is the time to get it right.'

Unfortunately, the society cannot support the application in its present form until substantial alterations are made to the fundamental issue of creating an appropriate scale of buildings responding to the existing character and sensitivity of the surrounding townscape of Bristol.

