

Northumberland and Newcastle Society (N&N) – February 2022

Planning Inspectorate ref:	APP/M4510/W/21/3283989
Newcastle City Council ref:	2020/0506/01/DET
Location	Plot 12, East Quayside, Newcastle upon Tyne
Proposal	Erection of 289 apartments (revised October 2020)
N&N Comment	The Northumberland and Newcastle Society <u>objects</u> to the grant of planning permission for this development.

Northumberland and Newcastle Society

The Northumberland and Newcastle Society (N&N) is a volunteer based civic society dating from 1924 to protect and enhance the landscape, culture and built environment of Northumberland and Newcastle for the enjoyment of this and future generations. To fulfil its objectives, the N&N has established committees made up of society members whom have extensive professional experience and or great passion in respect of the built and natural heritage of the area. N&N activities are detailed at: www.nandnsociety.org.uk

The N&N's Tyneside Committee sits monthly to consider planning applications relating to Conservation Areas and listed building consents within the City of Newcastle upon Tyne and North Tyneside. It is our fundamental belief that Newcastle's historic architecture is a profound and visible representation of the City's pride in its cultural identity which is the envy of many other cities not only in the UK but internationally too.

As a key guardian of Newcastle's heritage, the N&N regularly reviews planning proposals affecting the city's historic heart. The Society is not opposed to new development, as demonstrated by its support for well over half of the more than one hundred planning applications it has commented upon in detail since January 2021. Our approach is guided by developments achieving sustainability joining up the key elements of economy, society and environment through our 'empathy architecture' concept.

Context for Plot 12, Newcastle Quayside

We apply pragmatism to review of planning applications based on our empathy architecture concept and in that context we have carefully scrutinised the plans for Plot 12, Quayside, Newcastle. On this basis **we strongly believe this application in its current form should be refused**. We would again welcome revised plans being brought forward for this site that demonstrate greater empathy with its surroundings and a reduction in the scale of the proposed development. As in our previous submission we have included a summary of suggested amendments.

The Northumberland and Newcastle Society (N&N) acknowledges the revisions made to the original plans submitted in respect of this application (2020/0506/01/DET). We believe the breadth of objections to the initial submission together with the comments on suggested amendments offered constructive and obvious cues to the promoters of this scheme on what is expected of this iconic riverside site.

We are profoundly disappointed the promoters appear to have made only token amendments to the original design rather than seek to meaningfully resolve justifiable concerns. As a consequence the Northumberland and Newcastle Society continues to object to the grant of approval for this development.

In considering the revised proposals we have revisited our original comments (included below) and we believe with the exception of some revised elevational treatment all our original comments are still valid. We have also carefully reconsidered the following comments within the promoters initial submission:

'Design Brief Considerations' – Page 42, Design and Access statement (March 2020)

'Large monolithic blocks will not be considered acceptable in this location. Development proposals will be expected to break up the massing in a way which responds appropriately to the surrounding built form. Proposals are encouraged to work with the topography of the area and use stepping as a means to accentuate the change in levels.

Development should not look to maximise all scale parameters contained within this guidance. Careful articulation of height, scale and massing will be needed in such a visually prominent and sensitive location.

Setbacks at upper floors can potentially help reduce a building's impact at street level by allowing one or more upper storeys to be less visible from the quayside as demonstrated by St Ann's Quay.

Upper storey setback should be dealt with sensitively and should not exceed the ridge height of St Ann's Quay. Development fronting the lower plateau should not surpass the eaves of St. Ann's Quay.

Development along City Road should sit comfortably alongside High Quay working with the rhythm and symmetry established on the upper plateau taking into consideration the setting of St. Ann's Church. Any increase in the recommended height parameters will need to be fully justified and supported with evidence'.

N&N Response to Design Brief Compliance

In our assessment, by any reasonable judgement this application fails to respond effectively to these design brief considerations. The promoters' interpretation of the specific considerations appears highly subjective, seemingly based on a determination to construct as large a building as possible on this site, irrespective of the nature of the site or the quality of life for prospective residents.

With specific reference to the design brief we have the following observations:

- i. The proposed development does indeed consist of large monolithic blocks, fundamentally it is still too big and the revisions fail to address this bulk in size and scale. It is nonsensical to imply the scheme responds appropriately to the surrounding built

- form. Both the original and revised designs make minimal use of stepping to accentuate change in levels.
- ii. This visually prominent and sensitive location demands true adherence to ‘careful articulation of height, scale and massing’, in both the original and revised schemes these concepts are far from evident. Furthermore, we note the promoters’ reference to the previous scheme for this site, withdrawn in 2017, which sought approval for 124 dwelling units in stark contrast to the 289 subject of this revised application. By any sustainable benchmark, this proposal amounts to overdevelopment with narrow corridors serving dwelling units of insufficient floor space. This uninspiring design represents a lost opportunity and it appears the promoters are fixated on cramming in the absolute maximum number of dwelling units with little consideration for the people who will live in them.
 - iii. We agree that setbacks of upper floors can potentially reduce this building’s impact at street level with upper storeys being less visible from the quayside as demonstrated by St Ann’s Quay. In the revised plans we have noted some improvements in elevational treatment including removal of low pitched roofs and less impact from staggered windows. Notwithstanding elevational / material improvements, the design of the upper storeys requires much more careful consideration to improve its relationship not only to the immediately adjacent buildings, but also the broader Riverside vista as a whole. We make further recommendations as to how this relationship can be achieved in our comments below.
 - iv. Again, we agree the upper storeys setback should be dealt with sensitively and should not exceed the ridge height of St Ann’s Quay, likewise development fronting the lower plateau should not surpass the eaves of St. Ann’s Quay. We recognise the design parameters of this scheme are influenced by the scale and height of the adjacent St Ann’s Quay building and as a consequence we believe the western elevations should be reduced in height by 3 storeys.
 - v. A critical requirement of this development is it must sit comfortably with the setting of St. Ann’s Church on City Road, in addition to generically working with the rhythm and symmetry established on the upper plateau. Once again we endorse the design brief in that any increase in the recommended height parameters will need to be fully justified and supported with evidence. Even with the proposed revisions the design still fails to achieve synergy with its surroundings and local heritage architecture. It is noted in the scheme withdrawn in 2017 that the design stepped up from the east with much less impact on the setting of St Ann’s Church. Our view is that a stepped design reduced in 5 storeys to the east would achieve the synergy demanded by this visually prominent and sensitive location.

Context (updated in response to design revisions)

The River Tyne Gorge is rightfully acknowledged to be a visual jewel in the crown of Newcastle and Gateshead, with the Quayside being the focus of innovative renovation of many important historic buildings complemented by the construction of renowned landmark developments. The transformation of this area into an immense cultural and heritage asset demonstrates the breadth of the North East’s creative talent. The River Tyne scene is universally recognised as an iconic and profound visual representation of the spirit of endeavour in this region.

As a matter of general principle the N&N supports residential development of appropriate 'brownfield' sites and in that context we acknowledge the rationale for completing the infill of the East Quayside Masterplan. We believe it is reasonable for the owners of this important vacant Quayside site to create a high quality development that achieves empathy with the Quayside's unique built and natural environment.

We note this site has been the subject of previous development proposals, most recently in 2016, and it is effectively the last vacant development plot on this section of Newcastle's Quayside.

Scale

The N&N echoes others' feelings and comments on the excessive height of the proposed building and its impact on the surrounding existing built and public space environment.

Whilst there is logic to the building's height lines rising slightly to the East as City Road rises, the proposal is too high, creating a giant linked C shaped block of such bulk and scale to be visually overwhelming. The proposed building is simply too large and the layout provides minimal visual or physical permeability to the site. The October 2020 revisions have made some concessions to improve the views through the site from St Ann's Church to river and vice versa however they still fall well short of achieving the required synergy.

Although it is evident the developers revised plans have responded to the depth of concern expressed in respect of their original scheme, it remains the case that emphasis on scale seems to be the decisive influence, accommodating a planned 289 apartments within the building. The end result is a building at least two storeys too high on the City Road elevation where pursuit of scale overrides achieving synergy with neighbouring structures.

Empathy with its environment and Impact on heritage assets

The building's scale is overwhelming for the site footprint and it is this scale that has such a negative effect on the setting of adjacent buildings, particularly St Ann's Church. This grade 1 listed building dating from 1768 is an important heritage asset and its setting will be devastated by the construction of the proposed building in its current form.

St. Ann's Church has been an integral historical feature of Newcastle's riverscape for more than 250 years and it is intrinsically part of the Quayside environment. The skill, ingenuity and style of those who designed and built St Ann's represent the very best of Newcastle and they were at the forefront of making this one of the greatest cities of the United Kingdom.

Even with the revisions the proposed building design will result in irretrievable loss of an effective visual connection between St Ann's and the River Tyne at great harm generally to the Quayside and City environment.

As we have commented above, the River Tyne Gorge is rightfully acknowledged to be a visual jewel in the crown of Newcastle and Gateshead. This status has been the catalyst for substantial

investment in renovating some of the area's most iconic historic buildings and the construction of new developments that have positively transformed this immense asset over many years.

Amenities

It is our belief the brief to provide as many accommodation units as possible results in a reduction in the quality of communal relationship of the units and a lack of open amenity space including landscaping. The apparent focus on sheer volume of units detracts greatly from creating a building that has humanity, a sense of belonging and most importantly the feeling of being a desirable place to live. We see little evidence of the promoters having concern for potential future residents in either the original or revised plans for this building.

Amenity and community sharing spaces have been provided but they are restricted to designated areas on the first and eleventh floors, rather than on each floor. We would emphasise the importance of such spaces not least in their value in mitigating the effect of narrow corridors, noting it is just as important to achieve good design for such spaces as should be applied to the entire development.

We feel the provision of commercial space is disproportionately high in comparison to that given over to amenity space for the building's residents. The building's key aspects are its relationship and juxtaposition to the River Tyne, these characteristics should be a source of enjoyment and inspiration for its residents and commercial space should be an ancillary consideration.

Narrow corridors

The N&N has previously commented on planning applications elsewhere in Newcastle where we have noted an apparent developers' preference for narrow corridors in proposals for multiple storey residential buildings. It is disappointing to note this preference has been followed in this proposal and the revised plans fail to make any appropriate compromise. We understand commercial pressures are powerful influences on developers, often translating into a preoccupation with quantity rather than quality in order to generate an immediate financial return for investors. In the case of Plot 12, Newcastle Quayside it is our continued belief this translates into a very basic plan form which is uninspiring, uninteresting, and unsociable.

This development proposes unrelieved long narrow internal corridors that offer no view of the world outside or any resonance with what is the most significant positive characteristic of this building i.e. its riverside location.

As noted, all main communication and access to residential units is via a narrow internal corridor. We consider this is a poor design feature likely to result in problems of accessibility, invasive noise, maintenance, fire safety and possible anti-social behaviour. We are particularly concerned on how this form of access affects the well-being of vulnerable people or those with more advanced mobility needs.

Treatment of elevations

We acknowledge the revisions to external elevational treatment are an improvement on what was originally proposed, given the lack of interest, ingenuity, proportion or quality expressed in what felt like a “ pattern book “ developers’ standard. Notwithstanding these improvements we would expect much greater imagination applied to the elevations for such a visually important and sensitive site.

An innovative approach to elevational treatment offers the opportunity to depart from the very basic plan form which is uninteresting and seems to be the core concept of this development. We would encourage the applicants to revisit their own “ mood board “ comparisons to illustrate how inferior is the proposed elevational treatment.

Accessibility

As referred to above the N&N believes this site cries out for a landmark design that reflects the outstanding opportunities offered by this unique River Tyne Gorge location. The steep slope should be the design cue for a scheme which steps down the hill to the riverside , allows a pedestrian flow through it, providing occupants with river views and passers-by with views up to the church and down to the water.

Suggested Amendments (in response to the October 2020 revisions)

The Quayside is of great importance to both Newcastle and Gateshead and we believe the proposed building should be redesigned in a way that derives from the contours and context of the site. Plot 12, Newcastle Quayside offers the prospect to deliver a stand out building that complements heritage assets and reflects the high standards of innovative design that are so evident nearby.

We continue to believe what is proposed seems like a desire to simply insert as large a structure as the plot can physically accommodate, it is a colossal missed opportunity and if approved we believe it would blight this environment for generations.

As we have commented previously, in principle we support development of this brownfield site for residential accommodation. It is the scale and the unimaginative design of the proposed building that we object to, with seemingly little thought given to the well-being of its future occupants or those of its neighbours.

We do believe an overall design that takes account of the following amendments would ameliorate the scale and size issues and result in a building that achieves empathy with this site:

1. Reducing the overall height of the development by 3 storeys on the west elevation and 5 storeys on the east elevation;
2. An overall reduction of around 40 to 50 flats, with a greater emphasis on delivering the quality homes this site demands;
3. Removing, or lowering the central block;
4. Reduction in the space given over to commercial activity;

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5. Redesign of access corridors to make them spaces that emphasise safety, security and well-being;
6. Provision of more amenity open space would provide an environment and a way of life for residents that stimulates communal life and interface with their neighbours;
7. Providing access through a landscaped area;
8. The revised elevational treatment in the October 2020 revisions are an improvement on the original plans, we would again highlight the importance of innovative design to give appropriate articulation to the elevations, emphasise verticality and achieve symmetry with its surroundings.

We remain concerned at the lack of specific affordable housing in the development and would expect to see an unambiguous strategy for the provision of such accommodation.

The Northumberland and Newcastle Society objects to the grant of planning permission for this development.

Tyneside Committee
Northumberland and Newcastle Society
21st February, 2022