



CASTLEFIELD

Preserving, Improving, Living –
in the heart of our city



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Dear Julie Roscoe

**Application for Residential Apartments: 2-4 Chester Road, Castlefield Basin
(Ref 113870/FO/2016)**

The following comments on the above planning application are from the 135 Castlefield Forum members and supporters named at the end of this submission.

At the outset let us be clear that:

- all of us positively welcome new development in and near Castlefield. We strongly supported and support the Water Street, St John's and Great Jackson Street Strategic Regeneration Frameworks and the new Owen Street and Potato Wharf developments
- all of us like and some of us *love* tall buildings. We like or love the Beetham Tower and proposed Owen Street and St John's towers. We feel the need to say this in view of Sir Richard Leese's dismissive comments in his 4 October blog about those who oppose the St Michael's development: "Think some people just don't like tall buildings". *We like tall buildings*. But they need to be in the right place and to the right design for the place they're in.

In Castlefield we can support only first rate, high quality developments which take account of the very special and unique place that Castlefield is. Declared the world's first 'Urban Heritage Park' in 1982 and later included in the Government's shortlist of potential World Heritage Sites, Castlefield canal basin is where the Bridgewater Canal, the first man-made waterway in Britain not to follow existing rivers and the model for all canals to come, meets the Rochdale Canal, the first UK canal to link east and west coasts. As the Council themselves say: It has a "unique identity and

individualistic landscape” (1). As Jonathan Schofield says: It is “an area with a peculiar sort of beauty...where water and brick combine powerfully and viaduct after viaduct leap over canal and wharveside. It is one of the strongest landscapes in the UK” (2).

In our view, the 2-4 Chester Road proposals are simply not good enough for this location. They are not world-class and do not respect, preserve or enhance the character of the canal basin but rather detract massively from it. So we cannot support them.

Structure of our submission

Our submission has three parts:

1. Appraisal of the character of Castlefield canal basin which development proposals must preserve or enhance if they are to be permitted
2. Critique of 2-4 Chester Road proposals covering:
 - Height and mass
 - Shadowing
 - Shape
 - Impact on views and heritage assets
 - Spatial characteristics
 - Materials
 - Critique summary
3. Comparison with forthcoming planning application for the canal basin.

Appraisal of the character of Castlefield canal basin

In 1979 Castlefield was designated a Conservation Area which in 1980 was given the status of an ‘outstanding conservation area’ by the Department of Environment. Conservation Areas are “areas of special architectural or historic interest, *the character or appearance of which it is desirable to preserve or enhance.*” (3) (our emphasis). Local authorities have a **statutory duty** both to identify such areas and to pay special attention to the desirability of “preserving or enhancing” their “character or appearance” when making planning and development control decisions relating to them.

Against central Government and Historic England advice, and despite a request from the Forum six years ago, the Council has never carried out a Character Appraisal of this Conservation Area arguing that it “does not consider the character appraisal route to be an appropriate approach for Manchester to take” and that “as and when specific development proposals for Castlefield are brought forward, we will respond on an individual site basis.” (4).

This absence of any objective, independent appraisal of what it is that goes to make up the character of the area can make it difficult to determine whether new development proposals ‘preserve or enhance’ its ‘character or appearance’. It is not to impugn the professional integrity of heritage consultants employed by developers to say that, if they were to argue that their client’s proposals did not in fact preserve

or enhance the character or appearance of an area, they would probably not retain their briefs for long and would be replaced.

Fortunately, however, the 2008 Public Inquiry into the appeal against refusal of planning permission for an apartment block on the site of the Jackson's Wharf pub, does provide objective, independent, impartial and expert analysis of what constitutes the 'character and appearance' of the Castlefield canal basin. It does this in the evidence from the Council and other objectors at the Inquiry and in the decision letter of the Inspector (5) who had the following qualifications: BArch (Hons), Dip TP, Dip Cons, RIBA, MRTPI.

The Council argued that:

- *“The character of the canal basin is determined by the positioning of independent, robust buildings ‘sitting’ in their own space....The apparent ‘haphazard’ alignment of such buildings and the clear gaps between them is a characteristic....quite different from the back-of-pavement buildings in the grid-dominated street pattern characteristic of the commercial heart of the City Centre,”* and
- *“The character of this area (is) determined by the relationship of buildings to the open spaces in which they were built. The scale and massing of the proposed building (for Jackson's Wharf) will change this relationship as the balance between built form and open space will be weighted towards built form. Buildings will predominate”.*

The Manchester Conservation Areas and Historic Buildings Panel, commenting on the L-shaped floor-plan of the Jackson's Wharf proposal, said that:

- *“The historic forms adjacent to the canal tend to be simple linear footprints, but this proposal is not.... A simple linear plan form...would be..more appropriate”.*

The Inspector considered that the proposed development, even though no higher than Middle Warehouse next door, would be over-dominant and damage the character of the Conservation Area as a whole, concluding that:

- *“the proposed building would dominate the adjacent listed Middle Warehouse through its different design and apparent height and that when viewed from Merchant's Warehouse the building would appear to have an apparent volume far in excess of anything around it,”* and
- *“the proposed building would become one of the principal elements of this part of the conservation area and would contrast markedly with the existing structures.....the use of glazing and lightweight construction on the scale proposed would in my opinion erode one of the defining features of this part of the conservation area – the solid and powerful construction of the warehouses.....this change in character would have detrimental consequences for an important part of the conservation area that would impact on the quality of the area as a whole.”*

The Inspector also made a distinction between the immediate canal basin area and the taller City Gate blocks which he considered formed a “*visual backdrop...at a higher level and in my opinion should be regarded as being outside the immediate basin area*”.

We consider this distinction between the Jackson’s Wharf site ‘within the immediate basin area’ and adjacent modern developments ‘outside it’ should be applied equally to the site of 2-4 Chester Road (within) and the Tower House and Owen Street proposals (nearby but outside).

In addition, **the Council**, in its seven page description of the Castlefield on its website, says:

- “*The height and scale, the colour, form, massing and materials of new buildings should relate to the existing high-quality structures and complement them. This policy still leaves scope for innovation, **provided that new proposals enhance the area***” (our emphasis).

And you don’t really have to be a qualified architect, town planner, Inspector or Council Officer to recognise, even from a cursory glance, what some of the other essential characteristics are that give the canal basin its distinctive ‘character and appearance’. Stand in front of The Wharf pub, look around you and you see that all the buildings around the basin:

- have great strength and simplicity of form and design
- face and embrace the canal basin
- predominantly use brick, sandstone or red cladding materials
- are similar in mass and height (4 to 8 storeys), and
- are ‘easily readable’ - that is to say, at a glance in front of any elevation you can take in, ‘read’ and understand the full shape of the whole building.

The 2-4 Chester Road proposals should be assessed in relation to the above character appraisal.

Critique of the 2-4 Chester Road proposals

Height and mass

We consider the sheer scale of the proposed building makes it overly dominant and intrusive in a highly sensitive and distinctive part of the canal basin. They seem to be more keen on being a ‘Gateway’ building into the city centre than respecting their immediate environment. They seem to be designed with more regard to Chester Road and the Tower House and Owen Street developments than to the canal basin. But the boundary of the Conservation Area is not the canal towpath to the west of the site, much as the developers might like it to be, but is Chester Road to the east so as to deliberately include all sites immediately surrounding the basin.

While planning permission was granted in 2003 for two blocks of apartments ranging from 9 – 12 storeys above Chester Road level, the current proposals are of much greater height, the tallest 21 storeys. Despite claims to the contrary in the *Design and Access Statement*, there is in fact no precedent for this scale of development in

this location; the 2009 scheme referred to in the application never progressed past pre-application discussions so should not be afforded any weight.

Shadowing

As the *Design & Access Statement* shows, shadowing from the development will be significant for most of the morning over Castlegate, the towpath and the canal basin making it a much less enjoyable environment for residents, boaters and visitors in what is an area which clearly attracts a large number of visitors.

Shape

The development is certainly not linear in form, rectangular or 'easily readable' from any viewpoint. It is curiously shaped, fussy and lacking in simplicity.

Impact on views and heritage assets

While the *Heritage Statement – Initial Appraisal* and *Environmental Statement* assesses views of the proposed development from several viewpoints, astonishingly - or deliberately? - there is no assessment of views from the canal basin immediately adjacent to the site. As result the impact of the sandstone plinth along the canal towpath is not assessed. It seems to us that the development seems to 'face' Chester Road and 'back onto' the canal basin. It will present boaters and those who use and enjoy the towpath and basin with a 5 metre high sandstone wall pierced with grills into a car park. This will create a 'dead' feel and misses an opportunity to meaningfully enhance and animate the public realm and embrace the canal, something which has been key to the successful regeneration of Castlefield over recent decades.

When recommending planning permission for the 13 storey Tower House apartment block on the opposite side of Chester Road in December 2015 (7), Council Officers recognised the building would be seen from key views within the canal basin but argued that it "*would not adversely affect the visual understanding and coherence of the basin area as it would form a part of the varying townscape in this location.*" They said that "*there will be some minor harm to the setting of the Conservation Area and a number of Listed Buildings as a result of the development*" but argued that "*these primarily relate, however, to long distance views and the setting of the Listed Buildings and therefore do not affect the understanding or significance of the buildings in the overall context of the Castlefield area.*" They concluded that harm to the Conservation Area was "*less than substantial*" and would not outweigh the benefits of redeveloping the vacant gateway site.

Similarly when recommending approval of the four tall residential blocks on the Owen Street site (8) - the highest being 64 storeys, taller than the Beetham Tower - Officers agreed there were two viewpoints where the scale of the development would affect the ability to understand and appreciate the historic environment. These were the views looking east from within Castlefield basin towards the site and looking south down Deansgate from near the Beetham Tower. But Officers concluded that harm to heritage assets would be outweighed by the public benefits of the scheme (including bringing back into use a major vacant the city centre site, providing new high quality public space and establishing a strong sense of place).

We can accept both these judgements while noting that these developments are near but *outside* the canal basin and the Castlefield Conservation Area and so affect its setting rather than the area itself. The same cannot be reasonably said of the 2-4 Chester Road proposals, particularly the 21 storey block, which are within the basin and will cause substantial damage to views in and out of the area and to the setting of the Grade II listed Congregation Chapel (Artingstalls Auctioneers) and Grade II listed viaduct which are both central to the character of Castlefield.

Spatial characteristics

The very narrow public footpath only a few metres wide from Chester Road down to the towpath between the proposal and Castlegate is wholly unacceptable. It means the lower block and Castlegate will create an almost continuous 'wall' along the edge of the basin totally at odds with its character which, as described earlier, is "*determined by the positioning of independent, robust buildings 'sitting' in their own space*". The Council required nearly 20m separation between Castlegate Gate and Middle Warehouse. At least the same 'gap' should be required between Castlegate and the 2-4 Chester Road development in order to maintain the character of the basin and reflect the rhythm of the Chester Road frontage.

Materials

It is difficult to see how the proposed light grey stone cladding can be regarded as sympathetic to the materials of all other buildings in the basin. It is simply incongruous. The application arrogantly celebrates the scheme as 'establishing a new strong sense of place'. But this area of the city already has its own very strong sense of place which Conservation Area status is specifically intended to 'preserve or enhance' not transform or erode.

Critique summary

In view of the above critique, we consider the proposals conflict with Policy CC9 (Design and Heritage) of the *Manchester Core Strategy* which states that development in the city centre should preserve or enhance the heritage assets that have been identified, including listed buildings, conservation areas and scheduled ancient monuments. We argue that the development does not respond appropriately to the canal basin and therefore is not in line with this policy.

Comparison with forthcoming planning application for Plot G

It is telling to compare the 2-4 Chester Road proposals with a pending planning application (currently with the Council for validation before being formally submitted), for Plot G, the small triangular site between Merchants Bridge and The Wharf pub (formerly Jacksons Wharf).

Between 1996 and 2000 the Council gave permission to *4 planning applications* for this site including a *56 bed hotel and 45 apartments*. The hotel & apartments *filled the complete site right up to the footpath to Merchants Bridge and close to The Wharf* and as a result were totally inappropriate to the 'character and appearance' of the Conservation Area as analysed above. But in the current proposals, assuming they are the same as or similar to those that went out for pre-application public consultation last June:

- the number of apartments has been reduced to 24
- development sits at the back of the site leaving about 33% of it on the canal side as open space
- the height is no higher than its neighbours Ship Canal House and The Wharf
- vertical glass elements reflect and echo the vertical loading slots of Merchants & Middle Warehouses
- existing views of Middle Warehouse when walking over Merchants Bridge towards Plot G and of the railway viaducts from outside Bar Eight and The Wharf are deliberately retained, and
- the gaps between the new building, The Wharf and Ship Canal House - nearly 15m and nearly 10m - ensure the new building is seen as 'independent' and 'sitting in its own space.'

While the vast majority of Forum members do not wish to see any development on Plot G at all but would like the Council or a benefactor to purchase and landscape it so as to preserve the heart of one of the city centre's few major pieces of parkland to benefit local residents, all Mancunians and visitors to the city, the Forum also accepts that, if this is not to happen, then the current proposal is a thoughtful solution to developing a challenging site.

And we know from talking to the architects that they have very much *taken the Jackson's Wharf Public Inquiry Inspector's findings into account*, not only the comments quoted above but also those he made in relation to important views into, out of and across the site.

As a result of producing proposals suitable in shape and scale to the spatial character of the Conservation Area, the Plot G developers are accepting a more than 50% reduction in yield compared to what they might have achieved with 45 apartments in 2000. Contrast this with 2-4 Chester Road where the developers are now proposing to *increase* the scale and size of the development and the number of apartments compared to previous proposals – and on a site which we know they purchased for only £700k.

Conclusion

Ultimately, of course, whether new development 'preserves or enhances the character or appearance of an area' must be a matter of judgement although that judgement should always be based on evidence. There is certainly no requirement that in an area where most buildings are built in brick or of 4 to 8 storeys, all new buildings must be so too. On this site you could design something which in shape, size, materials, style and detailing is completely different from and in deliberate but complementary contrast to the nearby former warehouses and apartments.

But this would probably only work if the building were significantly smaller in footprint than it is. We are thinking of something like Quay Bar by Stephenson Bell built on this site only 18 years ago and sadly demolished about 9 years ago. This won the 1998 RIBA Award for Architecture and a Civic Trust Award and was shortlisted for the RIBA Stirling Prize in 1999. With its double height glass frontage, its use of metal and stainless steel and its light and airy interior, it came across as a lightweight structure like a pavilion, in direct contrast to the heavier brick warehouses nearby. As

John Parkinson Bailey says, the “*materials and shapes reflect the canals, bridges and viaducts, paying heed to the nineteenth century but not copying it (9)*”.

Something like that had great confidence in itself just like the superb warehouses and viaducts in Castlefield rather than not being sure what it's relating to – Castlegate, the Beetham Tower, Owen Street, Chester Road or the canal. It had great strength and simplicity of design and form rather than being fussy, was easily readable in shape rather than confusing, elegant and light in appearance rather than heavy and stodgy, free standing on the ground rather than on a plinth, and had lots of space floating around it rather than being squashed up against Castlegate and the canal towpath.

We urge you to reject the current proposals as simply not being of sufficiently high quality for this uniquely distinctive and ‘outstanding conservation area’ and former potential World Heritage site. We would be more than happy to work with the developers to produce proposals more fitting to the site.

- (1) MCC *Strategic Plan for Manchester City Centre: 2015 – 2018*
- (2) Jonathan Schofield *My Guide to Manchester. 2015*
- (3) Section 72, *Planning (Listed Building and Conservation Areas) Act 1990*.
- (4) Letter from Sir Howard Bernstein to the Castlefield Forum Secretary May 2010
- (5) Appeal decision letter 8 January 2009 Ref: APP/B4215/A/08/2070864/NWF
- (6) Ref: 069206/FO/2003/C3.
- (7) Ref:110730/FO/2015/C1
- (8) Ref: 111719/FO/2016/C1
- (9) John Parkinson Bailey *Manchester: An architectural history. 2000*

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