

Dear Sir/Madam

I am writing as Secretary of Castlefield Forum in Manchester which is a voluntary, community group which aims to make Castlefield an even better place than it is now for local residents, businesses, workers, all Mancunians, visitors and tourists. Over the last 5 months we have been working closely with Castlefield Estates to try to ensure the above planning application is not approved and we understand you are now considering their request to 'call in' the application.

In view of this we would ask you to consider this email and the three attached documents as germane to your decision. The attachments are:

- our letter of objection signed by 135 Forum members and supporters. We do not think the closely argued reasoning of this objection was sufficiently covered in either the Officer's written report to the City Council Planning Committee or in his verbal presentation at the meeting on 9 February.
- an email we sent to all Planning Committee members prior to their January meeting asking them to defer decision until they had made a site visit, a request which was agreed. At the site visit itself on the morning of the 9 February Committee meeting, we were struck by the seemingly limited knowledge of several members of the Planning Committee, one member asking "will the buildings be in red brick?" when the Officer's report clearly showed that the finish was white coloured stone. It would seem that this member had not even read the papers by the morning of the Planning Committee meeting.
- an email sent to all the Committee Councillors prior to their February meeting. This submitted to them - and gave a link to - images of an alternative type of development for the site which in our view would "*preserve or enhance the character or appearance of the area*" in a way in which the applicant's proposals emphatically would not. These images were never referred to at their meeting by Officers or members. It was as if they did not exist.

At the meeting itself which can be seen on webcam here [http://manchester.public-i.tv/core/portal/webcast\\_interactive/269658](http://manchester.public-i.tv/core/portal/webcast_interactive/269658) you will see that at no stage did the Officer attempt to summarise the arguments for or against the fundamental policy issue which any Committee needs to weigh up when determining any application within a Conservation Area, i.e. will it "preserve or enhance the character of appearance of the Conversation Area." Nor did Committee members address this issue in any meaningful or coherent way. Only one of the many issues raised in our submissions – the colour of the proposed cladding material – was touched upon by members and was then anyway delegated to Planning Officers for decision.

So a highly contested application for a major Conservation Area was given the same time and treatment as an application for a restaurant in Levenshulme, an inner suburb of the city. Issues of some complexity were simply not explained or properly considered.

We are second to none in our admiration of the City Council's work over the last 15 years or so to regenerate Manchester and it's city centre. The achievements have been very substantial. We also positively support modern developments and emphatically do not welcome pastiche of older buildings in Conservation Areas. But recently the Council has seemed to ride roughshod over the democratically expressed and well-informed views of the public over a number of key city centre developments.

By no stretch of the imagination can these proposals for Castlefield be said to "*preserve*" the character or appearance of the area. It beggars belief that the developers, the Council planning and regeneration officers or the Committee members can seriously believe they do since they are completely different in height, mass, shape, colour, spatial characteristics and relationship to the canal basin than any other nearby buildings and since they also have a major impact on nearby heritage assets and views in and out of the area.

So the only question that remains is do they "*enhance*" the character or appearance of the area? To "enhance" means "to Intensify, increase, or further improve the quality, value, or extent of" something (OED). The proposals cannot be said to do this either since they will clear radically *transform* the character and appearance of the area. Some people may like this transformation but that is not the

point. The Council designated the Conservation Area in the first place and now has a duty in law to "preserve or enhance its character or appearance".

We are asking you to call in this application because we think the application itself and the way the Council has dealt with it raise issues of national importance:

- the Conservation Area is highly significant. To quote *Visit Manchester*, the Official Tourist Board for Greater Manchester & Manchester: "If one part of Manchester could document the city's history it would be Castlefield". It is the site of the city's first Roman settlement, the world's first cut canal, the world's first passenger railway station and birthplace of the Industrial Revolution. It was given the status of an 'outstanding Conservation Area' by the Department of Environment (1980), declared the world's first 'Urban Heritage Park' (1982), included in the Government's shortlist of potential World Heritage Sites, and has been described by Jonathan Schofield in *My Guide to Manchester, 2015* as "one of the strongest landscapes in the UK." There can be no doubt that Castlefield is a heritage asset of national and international importance
- the application in its present form and the Council's somewhat cavalier approach to approving it, both flout and make a mockery of the letter and spirit of national conservation legislation in a year which happens to be the 40th anniversary of its introduction by the *Civic Amenities Act 1967*. As Simon Jenkins wrote in *The Guardian* only last week (7th February), there's no point in having Conservation Areas if they are not conserved. The decision on this application is not only a defining moment for Castlefield but also for national conservation policy
- for the issue of the cladding materials for two major buildings of 12 and 21 storeys respectively to be delegated to Officers and therefore not brought to the public for consultation or members for decision - despite obvious local concern - seems highly inappropriate
- as pointed out in the submission to you from Castlefield Estates, the application appears to be in breach of several policies of the *National Planning Policy Framework* and the Council's own *Manchester Core Strategy*.

For all these reasons we ask you to 'call in' the application so that the arguments for and against it can be fully, properly and professionally considered in a thorough, measured and informed manner.

I am copying this to our three City Centre Ward Councillors (who have supported our objection), our MP Lucy Powell, our Chair Carol Middleton, Sarah Ramsbottom (Castlefield Estates).

I would be grateful if you could confirm receipt of this.

Yours sincerely

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