

# DEVON BUILDINGS GROUP

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f.a.o. Howard Smith, Case Officer

31<sup>st</sup> July 2025

Dear Sir

**ECC Application 25/0781/FUL: Mary Arches Street, Exeter. Demolition of multi-storey car park and construction of a co-living development alongside public realm improvements, landscaping, cycle and car parking, servicing, refuse and recycling provision, and associated works.**

The Devon Buildings Group, founded in 1986, aims to encourage awareness of historic buildings in Devon, to promote the study and understanding of historic buildings, to advise on planning matters, and to take an active part in building preservation. We wish to object to this proposal under four main headings: the design, the impact on the wider townscape, the suitability of co-living apartments, and the impact on adjacent historic buildings and the remains of others that may survive below ground.

The proposal indicates replacing the existing multi-storey car park of four-to-six storeys with two blocks of up to six storeys (which are, of course, substantially taller than the car park decks). These will tower over the adjacent buildings, and dominate the townscape, as the various perspective views included in the application show (or the sketches on pp. 29 and 31 of the *Design and Access Statement*).

Whilst it is undeniable that the present car park blights the townscape, the proposed replacement misses an opportunity to achieve a design that complements the existing buildings in the vicinity, and could draw inspiration from the pattern of urban housing, which historically saw North Street and the adjacent Paul Street, accommodate some of Exeter's finest 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century houses. As proposed, the frontages of the new design, particularly those on North Street and Bartholomew Street East, betray an ignorance of the appearance of typical street frontages in Exeter: e.g. representing narrow burgage plots, with end-on construction, resulting in gabled elevations to the street frontage. Such an appearance survives further up North Street, despite the fact that the street was widened in the late 19<sup>th</sup>

century, and could have been acknowledged in the design. Statements to the contrary notwithstanding, we believe that this could have been much better handled in the design.

Attempts to break up the monolithic facades by the use of varied materials, and weird truncated gable-like features, cannot conceal the monolithic nature of the buildings and the monotony of the fenestration. In turn, this reflects the excessive density of the proposal. Height and density both seem inappropriate for this sensitive location within the historic intra-mural area (and Central Exeter Conservation Area), and betray the current obsession with these qualities within Exeter City Council, greatly to the detriment of civic amenity and broader conservation values. Both height and mass will ensure that the impact of the development from a distance will be considerable. A critical aspect of the townscape in this area is the natural declivity in the vicinity of the North Gate, which follows up to Carfax on the line of North Street: by building up to such a height on this site, that sense of approach will be lost, and the lower end of North Street will become more of a canyon than it is already, thanks to the cliff-like wall of the Guildhall shopping centre. The scheme, if allowed to be built in this form, will have a considerable impact on views of the Cathedral and city from the north-west.

The size of the 'apartments' is miniscule, in reality they are no more than en-suite bedsits. Standard rooms are 19m<sup>2</sup>, occasionally slightly larger (20-24m<sup>2</sup>, but this is unusual); the few large rooms are 28–34m<sup>2</sup>. We believe that this is inadequate for long term occupation with any quality of life and we find the combination of bed, sitting area kitchenette and shower room crammed into these tiny spaces oppressive in the extreme. The allocation of communal space is also very mean in relation to the number of 'units', amounting to several 'lounge' areas on the ground floor of Building A, communal kitchens on the first floor of Building A; a communal dining room on the first floor of Building B, and one roof terrace apiece (261m<sup>2</sup> for Building A; 307m<sup>2</sup> for Building B). Moreover, we doubt that there will be much appetite for such accommodation in Exeter, especially given the likely levels of rents to be levied (even the one block to be completed to date, The Gorge, is not fully occupied, and residents report conflict and frustration between occupants). There is already another co-living block which has consent in nearby Paul Street and more are in the pipeline (e.g. the emerging proposals for the Heavitree Road site of the former Police Station and Magistrate's Courts). The co-living provision is at risk of getting out of control in Exeter, and is unwanted and most certainly not the solution to the city's housing needs. Other City Councils, attentive to the potential downsides of co-living and the very limited demography it expects to attract are developing policies to control the unit numbers and quality of this new form of housing. Before approving any more co-living blocks, the City urgently needs to follow suit and draft policies informed by discussion with existing co-living tenants.

We defer to others (principally the Devon Archaeological Society) on matters relating to the archaeological impact of this scheme, but stress the archaeological sensitivity of the site, where there will be the potential for remains of historic buildings to survive, particularly on the frontage of Mary Arches Street and to the rear of the houses of North Street (among them two of Exeter's finest surviving 16<sup>th</sup>/17<sup>th</sup> century houses at nos 17–18 North Street).

In summary we consider the proposal to be too high, too monolithic, too dense, inappropriate for a conservation area, and with no acknowledgement of the local tradition of urban housing. Furthermore, we judge the proposed scheme to be unsuitable on grounds of

the inappropriateness of the accommodation offered, the demand for which has not been demonstrated. We urge the council to refuse this application.

Yours faithfully

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For and on behalf of the Committee of the Devon Buildings Group  
cc. Exeter Civic Society  
Devon Archaeological Society  
Exeter Observer