



24/0820/FUL Change of use from vacant restaurant and takeaway (Sui Generis Use Class) to 24/7 Adult Gaming Centre (Sui Generis Use Class). 47-48 Sidwell Street Exeter EX4 6NS

OBJECTION on behalf of Exeter St James Community Trust

Exeter St James Community Trust was set up as a community benefit society focused on the well-being of local residents of St James and 47-48 Sidwell Street is located within our neighbourhood. We have very serious concerns about this proposal which in our view is completely inappropriate and unacceptable, particularly in this location. We object in the strongest terms to this use.

1. The proposed use will do nothing to help the regeneration of Sidwell Street as a thriving and attractive secondary retail area adjacent to the High Street.

It will be a matter of regret for the LPA as it is for the Trust and indeed for many Exeter citizens, that Sidwell Street has deteriorated so devastatingly over recent years, far from becoming the attractive secondary shopping centre, with a great variety of independent retailers, as envisaged by the planning authority when it was thus designated in the Local Plan First Review.

Where planning control is able to influence development it is vital that decisions should look at the wider picture of the much needed regeneration here, and start to make decisions whenever possible, small as each may seem, that will ensure that development gradually leads towards the positive regeneration that would be good, not just for the local neighbourhood, but for the City as a whole.

The Planning Statement argues that the changes regarding flexibility of use with the demise of use class A distinctions and replacement with use class E, mean that the proposed use should be acceptable. However it states:

Whilst the proposed AGC is a sui generis use, which does not fall within Use Class E, the new Order is clearly material to this matter in respect of how local policy can protect retail uses, as a variety of uses can now occupy retail units without the need for planning permission.

We believe this argument is flawed; even though the LPA now has much less control regarding distinction between uses which came under the class A umbrella, national policy ensures that as 'sui generis' AGC usage is not one that enjoys the freedom of this new flexibility. If it had been considered appropriate by the lawmakers for a property approved for any use now under E, to be changed to AGC without planning consent, it would not have been ascribed to a 'sui generis' class. We cannot therefore see why the new class order is material to this application.

As an adult gaming centre (AGC) presumably the windows would be of obscured glass, giving a dead feel to this substantial frontage, failing to contribute a sense of vitality, but instead adding to a sense of 'seediness' of mysterious activity that needs to be hidden from view.

2. The widely-accepted danger (see, for example, the references within Cllr. Tammy Palmer's response) of such offerings luring individuals into the dangerous, self-destructive world of gambling addiction, should ring alarm bells in any location; the danger to the many vulnerable people living in close vicinity, or attracted already to the area because of the cluster of support facilities, make the use of the proposed site even more dangerous.

As well as the proximity to St Sidwell's Primary School, the residential flats above the retail units in Sidwell Street and the many PBSA blocks in the vicinity, we would like the planning officers to give specific consideration to Sidwell Studios, between St Sidwell's Community Centre and the proposed development site, and Bethany House in nearby St Sidwell's Avenue.

Sidwell Studios is a development of affordable flats for 26 young people taking the next step from supported housing to complete independence.

It was formally opened by Cllr. Bialyk in the summer of 2022 and described in ECC News 5 Aug 2022 as a joint venture which:

YMCA Exeter completed ... thanks to the significant investment from both Homes England and Exeter City Council, as well as donations from many charitable trusts and local supportive individuals and businesses...

The unique housing initiative is based on a model that will help young people to feel embedded in their community, but also be financially safe for them...

The self-contained studio flats are a fantastic and much-needed facility in the city centre...

Every year YMCA Exeter provides supported accommodation for over 100 young people coming out of homelessness and needing the support of a loving community to move forward.

In our view, the presence of a 24 hr AGC a stone's throw from this much-needed and lauded initiative, would seriously threaten the successful progression of these young people, in their late teens and twenties, and all at a particularly vulnerable stage in their already challenged lives, having been assessed as ready to move on from more fully supported accommodation.

An AGC would quite simply be incompatible. We believe it is likely that the LPA will have consulted YMCA and the partners involved in the funding, including the relevant ECC officers / portfolio holder, regarding this application, but as there is no evidence of this, we would ask that such consultation is undertaken now, if this has been overlooked.

Similarly, Bethany House in nearby St Sidwell's Avenue provides support for 16-21 year old female care leavers with many aims of which Westward Housing Group states the most important is ensuring these vulnerable young women live 'a full and active life in the local community' as they prepare to find and move on to independent accommodation.

An AGC clearly would present an unacceptable risk to any of these vulnerable young people at the uniquely critical period of their development of financial management skill on which the success or failure of their future lives would largely depend.

3. The safety of the users of the proposed AGC in this location would be high risk because of the existing prevalence of antisocial activity.

According to the Planning Statement the potential users of the proposed 'gaming centre', are expected to be individuals or couples, with 48% female. The prospect of such individuals or couples approaching or leaving the venue at any time, particularly at night, is frightening.

Whatever the time of day, anyone walking along Sidwell Street, a primary route adjoining the City's High Street, would be very unlikely not to meet individuals and groups whose lives have been blighted through substance misuse and who, as a result, make it a miserable and often frightening experience for all passing through. It is bad enough that well-adjusted adults have to witness shouting and swearing matches and the regular, overt drug dealing, but quite wrong that children are being subjected to such behaviour. The murder of a homeless man outside a betting shop in Sidwell Street last year must still be fresh in the minds of those familiar with this location.

There can be no doubt that the level and prevalence of antisocial behaviour in Sidwell Street has worsened over recent years, as Exeter Community Safety Partnership will confirm. ECC's website lists itself as one of some 20 named organisations who comprise this partnership, who '*work together to ensure Exeter remains a safe city with low levels of crime and antisocial behaviour*'.

However, we note that on this final day of the public consultation, only one consultee response has been uploaded – that of ECC's Environmental Health Department. It is surprising that the comments in this response are limited to noise and demolition / construction hours, especially as the department is led by Simon Lane as part of his role as Service Lead Environmental Health and Community Safety.

We wonder whether he has personally been alerted to this proposal and asked to submit comments? Similarly, as there appears no response so far from Devon and Cornwall Constabulary we are concerned that it is vital that the input of an appropriate representative, maybe Exeter's Neighbourhood Policing Team's Insp. Dave Turner and / or Insp. Nathan Johnson, should inform the determination process of this application.

Conclusion

We believe that the approval of an AGC would be a retrograde step, jeopardising the endeavours of so many to make Sidwell Street a safer environment for all, and completely unsuitable in this location. We trust that, should by any chance the LPA be minded to approve, officers will ensure, if they haven't already, that they consult with all the relevant bodies mentioned above.

Robyn Connett

Chair Exeter St James Community Trust

25 August 2024