

## **The problem with the high-rise Queensway development**

*Planning Application 21/02546/RESM Approval of reserved matters pursuant to condition 17 of planning permission 20/01479/BC4M, Queensway Development, Southend-on-Sea*

Milton Conservation Society are based in the town centre and often comment on significant building projects in the centre of town. We have commented to the Council and in the press on the proposed Queensway development and will expand on those views here.

The first thing to say is that we wouldn't have started from here. It's a bit of a cliché but true. We shouldn't be building 8-10 storey high-rise in our town centre as the sheer bulk of these buildings will make for an oppressive place to live. No doubt high density land use is important here, but we have to consider the price of such density in terms of the quality of living for residents.

However, given that high-rise is proposed this has to be as well designed as possible, improving our city centre. The first of these buildings to be put forward for detailed planning consent, most notably blocks C & D, are largely unarticulated, repetitious and plain sided hulks that will dominate the street below. The small clip-on balconies will be almost unusable in the windswept environment. We've described these in the press as referencing architecture of the former Soviet Union or GDR which is not intended to be glib (bulky monotonous blocks are actually characteristic of this architecture) but is intended to wake people up to the design proposed. Just look at the terrible proposed elevations of these buildings.

There is a problem with the proposals being presented in parts, as here. Blocks C & D are not fully representative of the whole scheme and some other parts may be better. It is possible that the whole will be greater than the sum of the parts. But this first part needs critical review.

The current proposals do not follow the earlier Council approved design codes particularly where welcome social spaces such as creches, retail, community spaces were described. Instead, flats extend to the ground floor, opening directly off the street with no proper defensible, semi-private space.

But otherwise, how can these buildings be better? This is not difficult but usually involves a modest cost premium and perhaps this demonstrates another major problem with Queensway – relatively plain, unimaginative, high-rise housing is housing on the cheap. Surely it is better in the long run, and far more cost efficient in terms of ongoing social costs, to build housing where residents are happy and develop a sense of pride in where they live, even if this increases the build cost a little. We should avoid Queensway becoming the modern equivalent of what is being demolished, once the novelty of the new build has worn off.

Architecturally, the most significant improvement that is often made in town centres is to step back the upper stories from the lower floors. This form is practised in major cities and it might happen above the fourth or fifth floor. This opens up the street to the sky but also breaks up the building scale, emphasising the lower stories directly to the street, in line and complementary with the rest of the city centre. Sometimes there are changes in the materials at the step back to further enhance the scale difference. However, the problem with stepping back is that this gives a loss of floor space at upper levels, so less flats. So the absence of step back is indicative of a low cost approach.

Then there is surface articulation to break down the scale and add visual interest, the use of texture, differing good quality materials, panel variation, shadow lines and interesting, usable balcony design. Good architecture will be evident in a well designed proposal.

The recent City status for Southend has lifted the town and given a sense of optimism. Queensway has given an opportunity to regenerate part of our town but the overall scale of this scheme is so important that it must be better designed and create the best new streets if high-rise has no alternative. The proposed design for blocks C & D does not create a good urban identity for our city centre. Milton Conservation Society have asked the Council to defer the planning application until the scheme is significantly improved.