

Planning application 23/0949/FUL

Demolition of existing buildings and dwelling and redevelopment of site to provide 101-bed co-living accommodation with associated accesses/egresses, landscaping and other external works. Repair Garage And 81 Victoria Street Exeter Devon EX4 6JG

What is co-living and where has it been successfully put to the test in Exeter?

The applicant states:

Co-living is a residential community living model, that includes the provision for residents to have their own studio, with access to communal amenity. The co-living standard focuses on professionals that enjoy a sense of community whilst having their own private space. Seeking to provide affordable homes for professionals catering for a mobile generation.

The sole focus on ‘professionals’ is misleading, however. There is nothing to stop students from renting a room, and apart from the fact that non-students may also apply, the provision is virtually identical to the Purpose Built Student Accommodation that has sprung up all around the area adjacent to the University. The emphasis on the ‘*mobile generation*’ confirms that whether student or non-student the anticipated tenants will be young, transient residents.

Co-living hadn’t existed when the Neighbourhood Plan (NP) and, indeed, the other components of Exeter’s Development Plan, were prepared, having emerged in London only five or so years ago, hence there are no policies that specifically reference co-living.

The Council has granted consent for two co-living developments in Exeter: Harlequins and The Gorge opposite Waitrose in Gladstone Road, and a further 167 bed development in Summerland Street is currently awaiting determination by the Local Planning Authority. Construction of the former has not commenced and development of The Gorge has been beset by problems and is still unfinished, so there is no available evidence on which to assess the pros and cons in use.

Nevertheless, the Council Leadership claims this new type of tenure is just what is needed in Exeter and is to be encouraged. The newly approved revised Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) charging strategy (that you will recall was opened to public consultation just before Christmas last year) reflected this; whereas the current preferential rate charged for PBSA will increase significantly next year, co-living is being introduced at a rate 60% lower! We can expect to see many more co-living applications in the future (and far fewer PBSA).

But is this co-living development just what is needed in St James?

Even the Council’s consultants confirmed that PBSA and co-living are becoming increasingly identical as the former moves away from providing cluster flats to studios, so just as a PBSA proposal would clearly be non-compliant with the Neighbourhood Plan’s Community Policy C2, so does co-living fail to comply with its overarching aim.

The Trust Board is in no doubt that such a proposal is completely at odds with the community’s vision for a sustainable community and the overarching aim of the NP to restore community balance through planning decisions that tilt away from the current and worsening dominance by one demographic group, 19-25 year olds. In addition we share a number of additional concerns with Prospect Park Residents’ Association, whose residents will be most impacted.

The NP necessarily was the product of residents across the whole of St James, who came together with a shared aim, and it is in the interest of our entire neighbourhood area that each of us continues to make our individual views count, in addition to submissions on behalf of resident associations

and the Trust. We must not leave the decision-makers in any doubt of the ongoing strength of desire of local residents to see them make planning decisions that respect the NP and halt the drift into unsustainability.

We would urge all Members to submit their objection to this application, so that it will form part of the considerations by planning officers as they decide whether to recommend approval or refusal to Planning Committee Members.

The deadline is Sunday 17 September, and you may make your views known online through the Planning Portal (click on the 'comments' tab of the application and follow the link either to register, if first time, or log in) or by emailing the case officer, Christopher Cummings at christopher.cummings@exeter.gov.uk and making sure you make it clear that you wish to object.

Only those matters which are deemed relevant to planning decisions should be included in your comments. The Trust has been liaising with Prospect Park, Devonshire Place and Powderham Crescent RAs and the following observations, concerns and objections have been raised. Feel free to focus on one or more that resonate with you, turning it into your objection.

Objection Pointers:

Community imbalance and sustainable development

- the proposed development is not in keeping with the St James Neighbourhood plan on the basis of not achieving community balance
- the equivalent of building 15 large HMOs of 7 students per house
- over the last 10 years student numbers have increased from just under 15,000 to nearly 25,000 who have to live somewhere
- threat of a significant imbalance between permanent and non-permanent residents within St James
- loss of traditional terraced homes to student accommodation
- need for affordable family homes
- community balance requires a community that is invested in St James for the long term
- co-living spaces only create transient communities
- none of the residents' associations have been approached for consultation.

Proposed scale of development is intrusive and not appropriate for the site

- development is five storeys high
- the planning statement draws attention to the concerns raised by officers previously around the size of the development
- not a site that we believe is suitable for the proposed large scale developed of 101 units
- design of the proposed development is not in keeping with the existing properties which are all Victorian and in no way complements the style of the houses on Prospect Park
- proposed building is too close to existing properties.
- the proposed communal spaces are not big enough to accommodate over 100 people and there would potentially be many more than 101 people on site at any one time

- the development has also said that it will host social events for residents; we assume these will not be silent events. Therefore, serious concerns around additional noise issues for residents closest to the proposed development
- the rooms are essentially hotel rooms, they are not designed for long term living
- conclusion- that these properties are only designed to house students- essentially a PBSA under a different name.

Ecological

- the area within and around the development, including the railway, is a thriving area for biodiversity – bats, badgers, birds such as nightingales, owls and swifts are seen regularly by residents
- internationally, nationally, and locally it is now widely recognised that we are facing a catastrophic climate crisis and trees are key to tackling this.

Site access- both during construction and after completion

- the site is accessed and surrounded by very narrow roads which, during term time, are very busy due to the volume of additional cars from student lets
- frequent access issues for large vehicles
- the area is already at capacity in terms of parking and loss of parking bays would be very challenging during term time.

Parking and deliveries

- although the developers state that this is car free development there would in reality be no powers available to stop them from owning a car
- how would visitors be stopped from driving to the development outside of parking permit hours? This could lead to extensive parking problems in the evening and weekends. The area already has serious parking problems due to student cars- it cannot cope with further parking requirements
- how will deliveries be managed? 100 residents will mean frequent deliveries – food shopping, Amazon etc. Large courier vans clogging narrow streets.

Heritage

- the proposal will also demolish an existing detached Victorian Villa – the only one of its kind in the area
- important to protect the integrity, heritage and interest in the streets surrounding Victoria Street, in particular Prospect Park, Devonshire Place and Powderham Crescent.