

## PROPERTY CONSULTANTS

MTP Town Planning Ltd  
23 Fir Tree Avenue  
Chester  
CH4 7QY

Date: 22 August 2023

Our Ref: TJK/ kajm

Attn: P Miller Esquire

### **Report to support the planning application of the proposed conversion of number 22 Bridge Street and 20 Bridge Street Row, Chester.**

Dear Sirs

I have been asked to compile a brief report on the proposed conversion to residential on the upper parts of number 22 Bridge Street, (confusingly known as 20 Bridge Street Row).

Set in context, my practice has been active in Chester City Centre Commercial Property scene since 1995, and me personally for 8 years before that whilst a partner of Legat Owen Chartered Surveyors.

I and my practice currently act, and have acted for, freehold owners of major tracts of property in and across the City including the Quellyn Roberts Family, The Grosvenor Estate, and a number of private and corporate Investors.

In the interests of disclosure, I can advise that our current instructions along this side of Bridge Street include retained agency advice for Grosvenor Estate on their corner asset 2/4/6/8 Bridge Street. This project has been delayed by the Wildes Hotel redevelopment above being now well over 12 months behind schedule.

The scheme is in negotiation with CWaC with revisions currently with the Council for approval. These negotiations have been protracted because of the sensitivities of the scheme, but in addition to the delays of the Wildes Hotels above, the 'knock-on effect' is that ground floor shops below are being prevented from being brought forwards on permanent leases until the works above them (and the scaffolding and site issues) have been addressed and completed.

Unhelpfully, the row is also currently closed at this point, because when No. 10 Bridge Street had a soft strip removal of all modern fabric, it was found that the row walkway is crumbling into the shop. We understand that Wildes and CWaC have now agreed repairs, but the consequential impact has been to curtail pedestrian movement along the row.

I am also Chair of the Chester Great and Small CIC, who are currently working with CWaC on a number of projects including the regeneration of the Chester Rows Master 'bible', which seeks to create a 'how to' process, whereby inputs can be amalgamated into the greater good of bringing back long-term moribund buildings for modern mixed use. This entails making positive contextual decisions which will support the adaptation of unloved vacant space into occupied property across all sectors of retail, office, living, and education.

## Chester Rows : The hierarchy of Importance

As a 'scene-setting' exercise we need to understand exactly what the rows are in Chester's retail offer.

Chester is world known for its 'rows', but of course, what we see today are merely the remains of what was once a much bigger row level offer across the wider city.

### Eastgate Street Row and Bridge Street Row East

The 'best' row level in terms of value and pedestrian flow is that on Eastgate Street, (traditionally the most valuable retail location in Chester). This row connects the main entrance to the Grosvenor precinct (Newgate Mall) and wraps all the way around past the Cross to its second entrance at the fabulous St Michaels Row, and eventually into Pepper Street. This row is supported with theatrical step access from Bridge Street, and as a consequence, Bridge Street Row East is also a reasonably busy walkway. However, the connecting route through Browns Department Store was closed a few years ago, to the detriment of both the shopping centre and the row, because the main Department Store entrance was previously at this level. There remain a few longer-term voids including the old Mappin & Web and Tessuti.

Meanwhile the row level on Eastgate North runs round through a section known as the 'dark row' and into Northgate, but is a poor general trading location, although a number of hospitality uses make constructive use of larger flatter stall riser opportunities thereon.

### Watergate Row

The next most important row is Watergate Row South, where we have a full row running from the Cross westwards, almost every property has a full shopfront, but even here, the further west we go, the more secondary and quieter it becomes, and this is reflected in its value and retail demand, most occupiers are destination type tenants.

The northern row on Watergate is fractured by Goss Street, and Trinity Street and only a few parts remain in small sections, so it's impossible to walk along this its full length, and as a consequence this is a poor trading area with a number of longer term frontage voids along it.

### Bridge Street Row West

This is an unbroken row running from the Cross south, but crucially - there is no particular reason to walk along it. It simply doesn't 'go' anywhere.

If we look at the frontages on this part of the street they are in the vast majority, connected with ground floor uses, and so play 'second fiddle' to the main street level entrances, but its problems in trading terms lie considerably deeper.

In order to consider this in greater detail we have undertaken a brief occupier audit :

Of all the trading and open rows, this section is the poorest in trading and retailing terms, and this statement can be easily supported with a simple coloured plan attached.

The orange units are closed and shut, and the pink coloured frontages are domestic, office or simply bricked up, and aren't what one could consider 'retail frontages'.

It may be a useful exercise to consider these in greater detail, because my comments need to be set in context of this particular row, not just the generality of a Citywide policy.



### 8 Bridge Street Row

This is a full height brick wall with inset doorway (two steps up) that forms part of Wildes Hotels development – to be left as is in the current scheme.

The windows to the right of it form the more active parts of Wildes Hotels scheme, but are themselves the last vestiges of a former office use that closed over 10 years ago.



### 10 Bridge Street Row

Quite simply – this currently presents as a wall, although the current proposed Wildes scheme will introduce elements of glazing in between the timber framing to animate The Rows, - this will provide an improved animated frontage but No. 10 still won't be accessed from the Rows.



12a / 12 b Bridge Street Row  
The residential entrance to two apartments



14/14a Bridge Street Row  
Ditto.



16/16a Bridge Street Row  
Offices use.



20 Bridge Street Row (subject property)  
The subject property; longstanding unused doorway leading to dere



### 22 Bridge Street Row (Sallys Secret Garden)

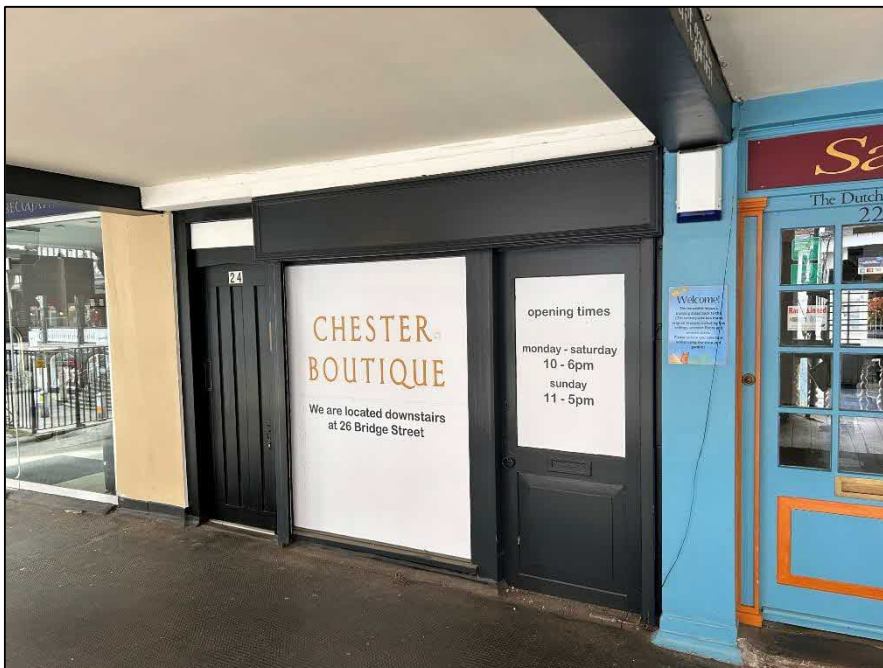
Shown here for completeness as the sign displayed blames the row closure for decline in trade and the uncommerciality of trying to open an active frontage on the row (with all that entails in stock loss and staffing levels).



### 24 Bridge Street Row

Chester Boutique has a 'technical frontage' but as you can see it's not used at row level, again for practical commercial reasons.

So an example of a technical architectural offering, but closed. It actually contributes less for being unused than if it were just better branded or used as a display window. It has zero active use.



### 26 Bridge Street Row

A lovely full height modern window but a pre-booked health offering means that its opening hours are very limited.



### 32 Bridge Street Row (Tattoo Studio)

They never open the shutters.





### 36-39 Bridge Street Row (former Diane Harbridge wedding gowns)

Theatrical space above Carluccios, but unused for years, and again it has a 'domestic' frontage.



### 44 Bridge Street Row

'Hiding in plain sight', this former Slater Menswear property has been vacant for over 10 years.

It has been constantly marketed by agents, but its location is so poor, that they have been unable to generate any interest.

The apartments above however are understood to be fully occupied.



So in summary:

It can be very easily seen that this western row is the most challenged of all the rows in terms of commercial vitality.

Retailing requires passing trade and this western row has very limited destination orientated passing trade.

So the occupiers along it either need to be destination traders in their own rights (eg Breakout Zone and Tattoo) or are the upper floors of street level uses, using the row as an overspill (eg Cote and Tessuti).

I think we need to be aware that two traders (Susie's Garden and Chester Boutique) aren't presently opening up their shopfronts to trade at the row.

There is, quite simply, no demand for general shop uses along here, because shops need passing trade, and so we have to look for more varied and appropriate uses for these spaces. To do this.... we have to be led by market demand.

Right now, the lack of a Community that lives, works and plays in the City has been strongly identified, and the conversion of the upper floors above the rows is the catalyst to driving that conversation. Indeed there have been a number of similar re-conversion projects on the opposite side of Bridge Street over the last few years that have all been very successful.

The following has been brought to my attention:

**DM 14 - City and town centres**  
**Policy DM 14**

.....**.Chester**

***Within the historic Rows, as identified on the policies map, new development must encourage footfall and provide interest through active frontages, with the retention of historic frontages as a priority. The provision of A1, A3 and A4 uses will be supported and the loss of these uses resisted. Other uses that contribute to the visitor economy will be supported.***

***Residential, office and other main town centre use development on upper floors of the Rows will be supported, providing there is no harm to the character of the historic buildings. Where a proposed use occupies both ground floor and Row level, access and an active frontage must be included at both ground floor and Row level to promote footfall on each level.***

This is a very general policy which as drafted makes perfect sense.

Any policy that seeks to drive activity, life, retailing, dwell time, and customer attraction is to be applauded; however what makes less sense is its implementation without interpretation.

What we have in the current property is a long standing inactive poor-quality retail presented frontage behind which is a derelict vacant building.

The only way to bring this building back to life is by considerable expenditure as mixed-use scheme, part of which involves the restoration of the fabulous upper floors above it. The staircases, exposed beams, fireplaces and other original features are superb, but to make these 'commercial' the frontage at row level has to be used as the residential foyer entrance.

Unlike some other formerly residential properties, this subject unit does not have the benefit of being one that contains the remains of old passageways through to the land areas at the rear. There are a number of such examples along both sides of Bridge Street, where these old passageways and walkways have been used to access upper floors, and it's a perfect use of them, but sadly no 20 does not have this architectural attraction.

The proposed scheme will 'reactivate' this dead frontage, and as far as I can see, this is surely the fundamental DNA of what sits behind the wording of the policy above?

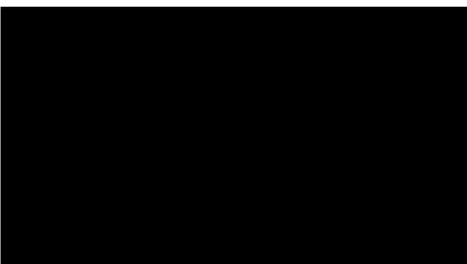
In short this seems to be a binary choice. Surely it would be the most short-sighted decision to refuse the entire application on a literal interpretation of a general policy, particularly in the public context of the Re-imagining the rows initiative currently being publicly promoted by the same Council.

<https://www.chesterstandard.co.uk/news/23686643.chester-council-work-rows-re>

To do so simply confines this building to more years of disuse and decay.

I trust these comments are useful in the consideration of the wider context of the proposal. The accompanying planning statement and heritage impact assessment will further elaborate on the policy in support of the scheme.

Yours faithfully



Timothy J Kenney BSc FRICS  
Partner