

Wellington Civic Quarter Consultation: Response by Wellington H2A (Heritage and Arts Alive)

1. Introduction

Wellington H2A is a voluntary group which works to encourage awareness and enjoyment of heritage and the arts in Wellington. We organise community cultural events including Sounds in The Square and the Midsummer Fayre, which aim to make better use of the town's public spaces, raise its profile and reaffirm the 'brand' of Wellington as a distinctive, interesting market town where residents and visitors want to spend time.

We are firmly committed to the regeneration of Wellington, and **support the new civic quarter development in principle**, as it will create improved library and other facilities as well as increase weekday footfall in the town. We also support some aspects of the proposed design:

- 'filling the gaps' between the civic centre and town core a dense streetscape of active frontages
- replacement of what is currently a narrow, unattractive entrance to the town

However, we also have significant concerns about the proposals as currently presented. These are outlined in this document.

2. Design: Contribution to local distinctiveness

2.1 Sense of place

We believe that the scale and aesthetic of the proposed design will do little to build 'sense of place' and reaffirm Wellington's identity as an interesting market town, distinctive from Telford Centre. We believe this current design has too little synergy with its local context to act as an effective gateway to Wellington's historic centre. This could as easily be the design for a retail park or covered shopping centre as a civic development at the entrance to Wellington's conservation area.



*'Building materials, scale, form and massing should re-enforce local architectural distinctiveness, pastiche developments should be avoided.'*¹

As the above comment suggests, achievement of the 'synergy' we refer to should not imply slavish pastiche of period buildings, but it does mean a more nuanced acknowledgement of the surrounding townscape through scale, massing and materials (as in Figures 1a & 1b). Below are examples of contemporary buildings which avoid pastiche but provide a strong sense of continuity with existing period architecture.



Fig. 1a: The Jerwood Library, Cambridge (1999) is evidently a contemporary building, yet in the angle of its roof, the use of timber and redbrick, it resonates with the older buildings it adjoins



Fig. 1b: The Cambridge Folk Museum, by the same architects, is also unmistakably contemporary whilst reminiscent of local vernacular architecture

2.2 Re-enforcing historic development

*'New development should reflect and re-enforce historic development including distinctive street patterns, orientation, plot sizes and boundaries, open spaces and boundary treatments.'*²

We support the joining up of the existing civic centre with the core of the town, creating a new street lined with buildings in a way that reflects the urban density indicative of a town centre. The description of boulevards and piazzas, however, re-affirms our concern that the design is being conceived in abstract rather than to suit its context. The creation of the new Larkin Way will certainly afford opportunities for an attractive public space with attractive public art and seating, but these, like the new buildings themselves, must fit the town and resonate with their surroundings, extending the distinctive street patterns and open spaces of the conservation area outwards rather than interrupting them by bringing indistinctiveness in. As such, the inclusion of trees and other features should be approached very carefully to ensure that this is a public space appropriate to a Shropshire market town, not a continental city.

¹ Draft Wellington Conservation Area Management Plan, p.24

² Ibid, p.24



Fig. 2: Station and rear of Market Square, from railway bridge



Fig. 3: Upper part of New Street from the rear

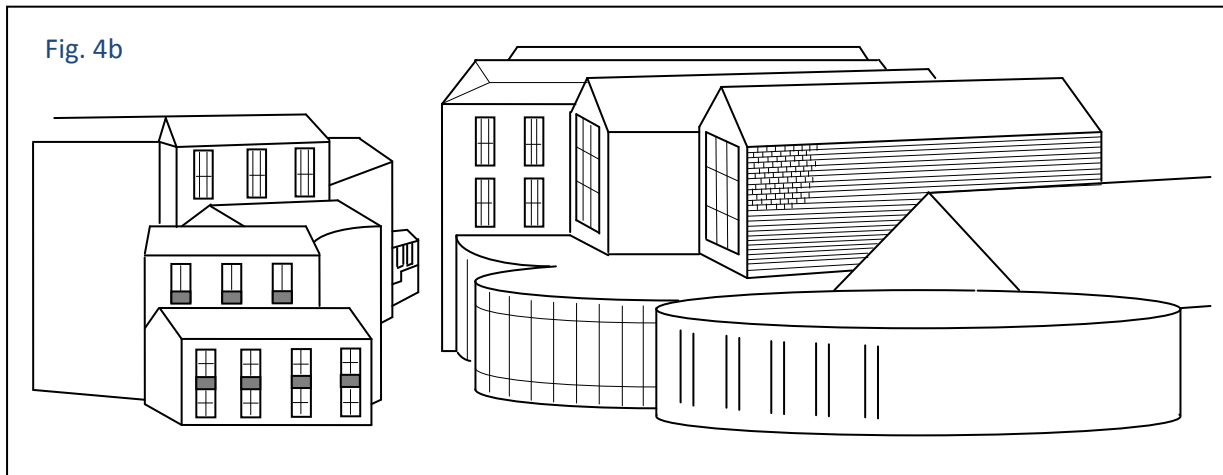


Fig. 4: Offices, Gateshead

The current civic quarter design suggests a large expanse of flat roof space. The majority of the town's buildings have pitched rooves, creating an angular skyline that reinforces the market town vernacular and the sense of layers of development over time (Figs 2 & 3).

We would like the new development to take more account of its place in this skyline, re-enforcing this aspect of the town's historic development. The Gateshead office block (Fig. 4) is fronted in glass, but in their brick colour and window proportions, the side walls make it a 'good fit' with the large period mill buildings nearby.

Below: Civic Quarter from the south, shown with pitched rooves



2.3 What does 'distinctiveness' mean in the context of this site in Wellington?

Plot size is also relevant here, the nature of development in the town being relatively small scale and piecemeal in contrast to the buildings that characterise Telford Centre and other large urban centres. Distinctiveness is, then, related to the scale, shapes and materials of existing buildings in the town. The civic quarter development will be much larger than most if not all of those existing buildings, so it is to the town's larger period structures that is should look for inspiration.

Figures 5, 6 and 7 are examples of larger buildings near to the new development which could provide such an architectural reference point:



Fig. 5: , Former chapel and factory, Wellington



Fig. 6: Williams and Lamb, Wellington



Fig. 7: Former chapel, Wellington

Amongst the distinctive features of the three large Wellington buildings shown here are the long arched windows and the shallow roof line. These are elements that could be echoed in the design of the civic quarter development to give it some subtle connectivity to its surroundings. Figures 8 and 9 illustrate how new developments elsewhere have sought to reflect similar features of surrounding buildings. See **Appendix 3** for further examples.

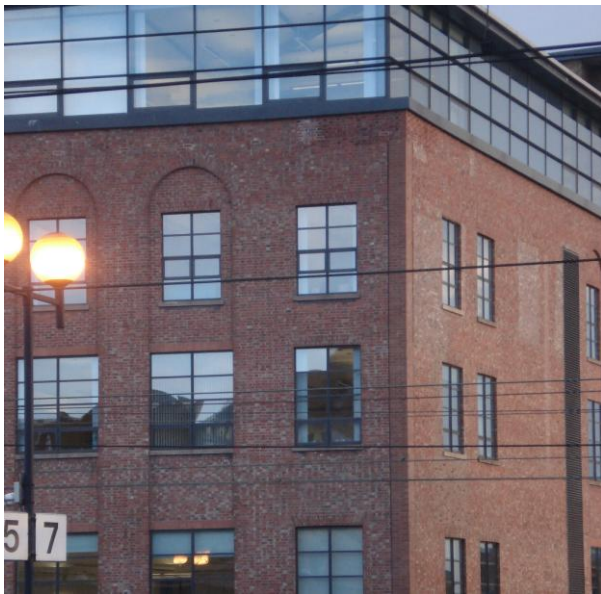


Fig. 8: Offices, Newcastle



Fig. 9: Offices & Studios, Leeds

3. Demolition of Edgbaston House and development in Walker Street

*'New development...should not adversely affect vistas into or out of the Conservation Area. This is of particular consideration to so called gateway sites such as the library site which forms an entrance to the Conservation Area along Walker Street.'*³

The civic centre car park provides something of a blank canvas for development. At its intersection with Walker Street, however, the development must be able to dovetail with existing buildings and the town's Conservation Area, and take account both of vistas into the Conservation Area and vistas out.

The existing buildings encompass various periods of architecture, but the western end of the library, the Mid Counties Brokers building and nearby cottages, along with Edgbaston House, give the street a predominantly Georgian character. We feel that future development in Walker Street should capitalise on this existing architectural character. As such, the proposed demolition of Edgbaston House and adjoining buildings would be **highly detrimental**, and would represent a conflict with:

- The **Wellington Strategic Development Framework**, produced by the Urban Design team at Telford and Wrekin Council (**see Appendix 2**)
- The site's location within a designated **Conservation Area**, and the management plan adopted to frame development within its boundaries
- The work of the **Townscape Heritage Initiative (THI)**, funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund and promoted by Telford and Wrekin Council



Fig. 10: Existing library, Wellington



Fig. 11: Edgbaston House, Wellington – all three sections of which are earmarked for demolition under the current plans

At present, Walker Street is a fractured street, the building line broken by the recessed and ill-fitting former tax office building on the southern side of the road and the blank wall of the Royal Mail depot on the other. The redevelopment of the tax office and Royal Mail sites at some future date would create an opportunity to restore cohesion to the street, filling the gaps and linking the existing period buildings. We envisage a 'completed' Walker Street to have an overall appearance similar to the illustration below in its tightness of form and architectural cohesiveness:



³ Draft Wellington Conservation Area Management Plan, p24

We appreciate that preservation of Edgbaston House will have implications for the Larkin Way development, and will require either

1. retention of the current Larkin Way route between the existing library and Edgbaston House, with the new structure enclosed behind the existing buildings
2. re-routing of Larkin Way as planned, so as to open up a new public space at the corner of Walker Street, but with the front portions of Edgbaston House integrated into the new development



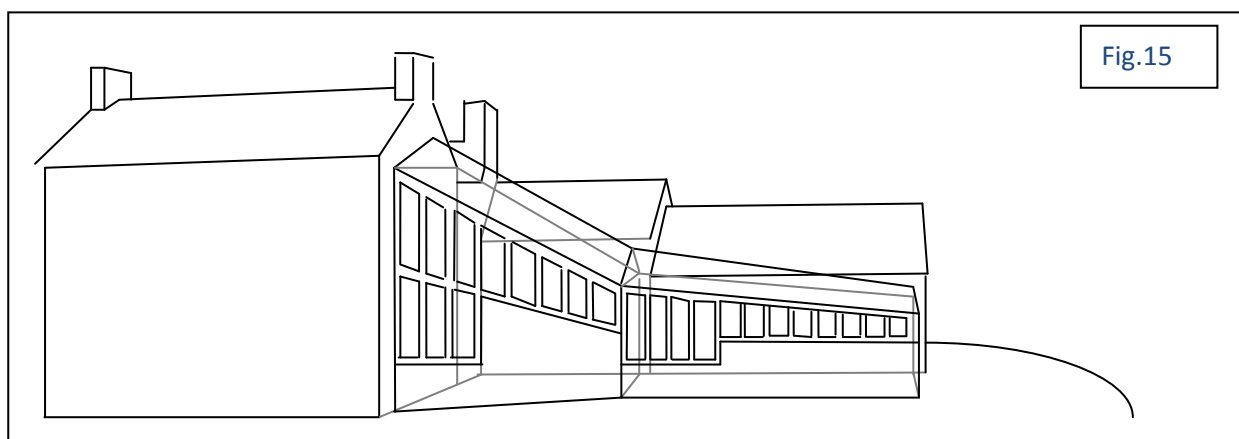
Under Option 2, the modern rear extensions to Edgbaston House (A) could be demolished, along with the single story former Cottage Care building to the side.

The larger period building at the back of Edgbaston House (B) could be restored, forming a frontage onto the re-routed Larkin Way, the new development created either side.

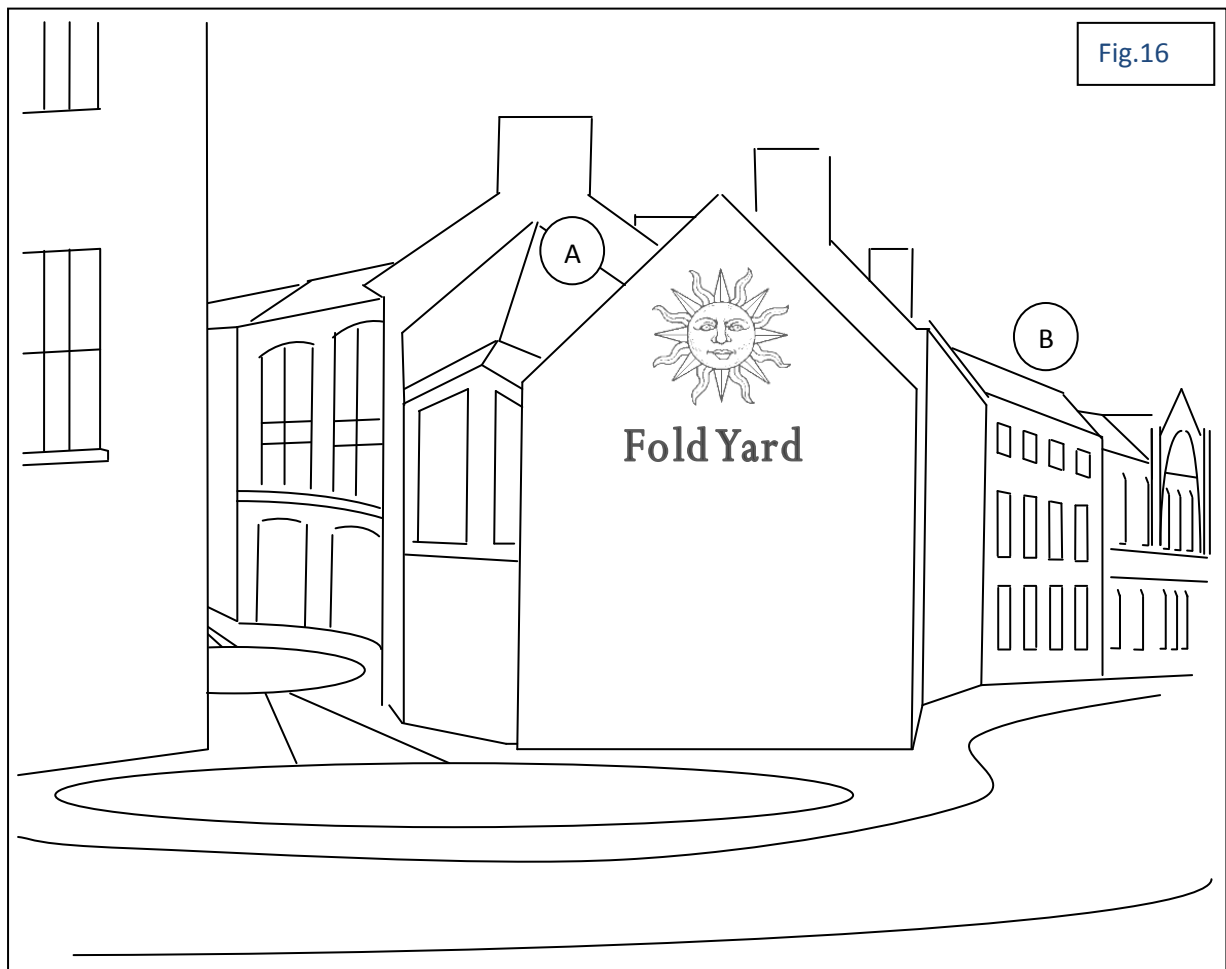
We agree that the 1960s library extension (C) should be demolished, and suggest this be replaced with a building appropriate to the proportions, materials and architecture of the existing streetscape, and in line with the guidelines set out in the Wellington Strategic Development Framework.



Below: proposal for Edgbaston House from the rear. The two storey sections could be extended to the same depth as the main three storey section, creating a consistent line to front the new Larkin Way. These extensions could mirror the existing buildings in a Georgian style or, as shown below, could take a contemporary but 'fitting' form in brick, with timber and glass panelling above.



Below: Civic Quarter from the corner of Walker Street, showing a retained Edgbaston House and the glass/ timber rear extension outlined above (A). Also shown is part of the new development fronting the street between Edgbaston House and the old library (B).



4. Naming of new public spaces

This development will open up new, attractive public spaces. These provide a key opportunity to reaffirm some of the historical distinctiveness referred to above, either in acknowledging important individuals in the town's history or, in particular, reclaiming lost place names related to this specific site.

The three 'piazzas': If these spaces are to be individually named, we would propose that the title 'piazza' is avoided, as it has no resonance with the local context. 'Square' would be too grand for spaces this size, and 'Court' has residential connotations – both historically and in modern day Wellington. We feel that the most historically appropriate and the most distinctive title would be 'Yard', particularly when named after something previously on or near the site, or 'place' when named for a person. Possible names could be:

- **Sun Inn Yard or Fold Yard:** for the newly created space on the corner of Walker Street, which will sit to the side of the former Sun Inn, and the area behind which was called Fold Yard historically

- **Foundry Yard:** for the space at the opposite entrance to the development at the current car park, named after Foundry Road which once ran along this site
- **Houlston Place:** for the space outside the new library (and thus with a literary connection in mind) named after the Houlston family, Wellington's first publishers in the early 19th century, who funded a nearby chapel on Tan Bank and became major publishers in London.

5. Naming of the new facilities

We believe the legibility of the new development – the ease with which people are able to ‘read’ it and connect with it – will come through the titles it gives itself as well as the physical form it takes. As such, we would urge Telford and Wrekin Council to ‘keep it simple’ when it comes to naming the various components of the new development. This is a less important point than those made in the previous sections of this document, but we hope is worth consideration nonetheless.

Too often, UK regeneration projects seek to reinvent the simple, familiar terms we have for public buildings, with learning villages replacing schools, resource centres and ideas stores replacing libraries and civic hubs replacing town halls. Whilst the intentions are good – to appear dynamic and embrace new audiences – these labels can be unwieldy and faddish, and far from bringing services closer to communities, can serve to confuse their purpose. Buildings are successful, well used and well loved by their communities if they are good buildings with clear functions, run well. Zeitgeist names cannot make up for that, and will do little to create a strong sense of place and purpose. Will the extended title of ‘Wellington Library and Community Resource Centre’ add to anyone’s understanding of what the building does? Will those words really mean anything tangible to most people?

If this is an effective, inviting, state-of-the-art library, people will know and recognise it as a resource for the community in any case.

6. The opportunity to create a Museum of The Wrekin

A year ago, the Wrekin Museum Partnership was formed to work towards the foundation of a Museum of The Wrekin in Wellington. It is felt that the civic quarter redevelopment offers the best opportunity to pursuing this. We would urge the Borough Council to look seriously at this proposal, and consider the possibility of establishing a museum either within the new development itself, or in one of the existing buildings to be vacated by council staff moving onto the civic quarter site.



Illustrations above, left to right: miniature by artist Andrew Plimer of Wellington, c.1790; portrait of Patrick Bronte, curate of Wellington, c.1810; coin minted to commemorate Charles I's ‘Wellington Declaration’ at the outset of the Civil War, 1642; portrait of William Withering, Wellington-born scientist, c.1780.

Locating a museum within the new facility would appear to be the most sustainable option, although if accessibility issues could be addressed and long term funding could be secured, use of an existing period building would also be appropriate. In this scenario, we would propose that the **existing library buildings**, in appearance, size, and proximity to the town centre and to the new civic development would be one of the best possible locations. This would also serve to keep the existing library buildings in public ownership.

We believe that a museum could act as an important driver in the town’s regeneration and would ask that the Borough Council to take this opportunity to examine the concept further, with the support of the Museum Partnership and the Wellington Town Partnership more widely. The Museum group’s aims, objectives and ideas can be viewed at Wellington H2A’s website, www.wellingtunderthewrekin.co.uk

Appendix 1: Summary of Design issues

ASPECT OF DESIGN	POSITIVE	NEGATIVE
Density of form	Currently the civic and leisure centre sits apart from the main part of the town, separated by ill defined planting. The development will plug the existing gaps to create a dense streetscape appropriate to a town centre core	
Creating a new gateway	The current walkway from the Civic Centre car park to Walker Street is dark, unattractive and uninviting. This development will open up that entrance, creating an attractive walkway, widening and narrowing to create ‘lingering spaces’ along the way.	This development will create a bold gateway into the town, but not an appropriate gateway. The best gateways reflect something of what lies behind them, but this design has little connectivity with the town it fronts.
Scale and massing	<p>1. The staggered vertical line of the office suites above the library helps to make the building less of a single monolith. It also leads the eye down the new Larkin Way towards the town.</p> <p>2. The stepping of the roof line on the office suite block facing the leisure centre also leads the eye into the development, rather than presenting the onlooker with a full-height sheer face on approach from the car park.</p>	The size of the development is unprecedented in Wellington. That in itself is not necessarily a problem – it has to be this large to accommodate its various functions – but it does make it a greater challenge to create it in a scale appropriate to its context. This set of buildings is too great in its scale compared to the streets surrounding it, as the bird’s eye graphic shows.
Contribution to local		At a time when Wellington is

<p>distinctiveness and place-shaping</p>		<p>working to reassert its identity as a historic market town, distinctive from Telford Centre, this building in its proposed form make insufficient contribution to that process.</p>
<p>Sensitivity to site context</p>	<p>The circular reception area, library and opposing office block are located on what is currently car parking space. As such, this area is more of a 'blank canvas' with less to be sensitive to</p>	<p>Phases 3 and 4 (as marked on the consultation material), at their intersection with Walker Street, threaten to damage the integrity of a historic town centre street, and would represent a major conflict with the Strategic Development Framework for the town, as well as the site's location within the Conservation Area, and the aims of the Townscape Heritage Initiative (THI) to restore period buildings in the centre of Wellington</p>
<p>Replacement of existing buildings</p>	<p>The Walker Street toilet block, former Hospice Charity Shop and 1960s library extension contribute little in terms of quality, character or sense of place, and this development provides a good opportunity to replace those buildings.</p>	<p>The demolition of three Georgian buildings in Walker Street (Edgbaston House and adjoining) will be detrimental to the streetscape. In a town which has suffered the loss of so many of its older buildings in the last 50 years, we cannot afford to lose this segment of Walker Street.</p> <p>The buildings in question are not exceptional, but nor are many of the buildings that make up the streets of traditional town centres, yet they are integral to their character. The more buildings such as these we demolish and the more modern replacements we erect in their place, the more difficult it will be to regenerate the town.</p> <p>On these grounds, we strongly oppose this aspect of the development.</p>

Appendix 2: Further relevant sections from the Wellington Strategic Framework (2008)

A NEW VISION FOR WELLINGTON (p.54)

Objective 2: To capitalise on the town's environmental qualities by:

- Capitalising on the market town branding
- Maximising the town's history, heritage and townscape
- Maximising the town's natural qualities and its proximity to natural features i.e. The Wrekin

PLACES WHICH MAXIMISE 'SYNERGY' (p.51)

It is not enough that individual things happen in a place – they must combine in such a way that in their combination more is achieved.

A HEALTHY AND APPROPRIATE LOCAL IDENTITY (p.51)

For many [Wellington] continues to be described as a 'Market Town' and this remains a valuable 'branding' as it conveys :

- An association with an attractive physical image
- An association as a small town

Both of these qualities are beneficial to the welfare and prosperity of Wellington and any vision for Wellington should seek ways in which these associations can be exploited – the most obvious being ***the enhancement and development of its historic qualities.***

AIMS OF THE STRATEGY (p.68):

No.4: Enriching the existing: New development must ***enrich the best existing qualities*** of Wellington – creating ***a distinctive response that arises from and compliments its setting.***

Appendix 3: design elements

Further examples of recent developments that sit well in their surroundings, and which, in their use of brick, their fenestrations and proportions, could be used as models for aspects of the Civic Quarter development (particularly the office block phase)

