

Leeds Civic Trust Influences Building Design

Leeds Civic Trust is a charity which has campaigned in the areas of development, heritage and public amenity for more than 50 years.

In the area of development, we are interested in high quality architecture and design and how it can enhance our built environment.

This includes the scrutiny of policies at a national, regional and local level insofar as they impinge on this agenda. We engage with officers and Councillors from the local authority, local MPs and national bodies as appropriate to facilitate this process.

We also from time to time focus on particular areas of Leeds and assemble interested parties to produce reports, design briefs and the like.

At a local level, Leeds Civic Trust engages with individual development schemes in a number of ways:

- At a very early stage (i.e. long before a planning application has been submitted – typically very preliminary ideas about what a scheme might entail) we engage with developers and architects on proposal ideas and aim to offer constructive suggestions to improve those schemes
- At pre-application stage (i.e. prior to submission but where a scheme is well advanced) we offer to look at proposals and provide comments and feedback
- Application stage: we will consider applications and may choose to submit comments (object, support, comment) into the formal application process

How do we work

Leeds does not have a formal design review panel, and so the service we provide replicates this; Leeds City Council encourages developers to approach Leeds Civic Trust as part of the planning consultation process. The Trust has a formal planning committee that meets twice a month to consider planning applications and development schemes from across the metropolitan district. With over 500 planning applications submitted to Leeds City Council in a typical month, we are selective in those we choose to consider. We may look at major city centre schemes (those with a significant volume or those which are likely to have a significant impact on the area), sensitive schemes (Listed Building alterations, “iconic” or important buildings in the Leeds area, some volume housebuilding schemes and major developments which ask key policy questions (building on the greenbelt, using land for a purpose other than that which is designated etc.)

Schemes at a very early stage

Our approach here will often be to assemble a sub-group of our planning committee to look at the proposal. This may include a site visit, a round table or series of round tables to look at early design ideas. We provide feedback during the course of the discussion and afterwards in the form of a letter. This may be copied to the officer dealing with the application (or the Chief Planning Officer where none has been assigned), but for these very early stage consultations we are prepared to act on a confidential basis. For the sake of transparency, we will record that the sessions have taken place, but may not reveal the detail of what was discussed unless the developers are happy for us to do this.

Pre-application stage

For schemes falling into this category, these are often undertaken at our full committee and take the form of a presentation and discussion (thus replicating the format used by the Leeds

City Plans Panel, albeit with more time for discussion in our case.) We receive a presentation on a scheme which is often near to being submitted (or which has been submitted), but nonetheless seek to influence and change the scheme at this stage. We will offer comments whilst the developer are present at the meeting and then have further private discussion with our membership. A summary of both parts of the discussion are provided to the developer after the meeting.

Application Stage

Here, our approach is to ask a member of our planning committee to look at the planning application and to present it to the full committee with initial views (support, object, comment). Following discussion with the committee a formal representation is submitted into the planning process. Where the scheme has been considered at an earlier stage (as a pre-application presentation or earlier) we will compare our feedback given at that stage and may repeat/underline issues that we feel have not been addressed.

Our expertise

Our planning committee is a mixture of professional and amateur enthusiasts. We have retired (and active) developers, architects, transport planners, surveyors and property lawyers, a retired Chief Planning Officer, Conservation Officers and retired academics with interests in planning and development. We also have a number of lay people with an interest in design and development. A number of our members recently took part in training in design at a workshop organised

Community engagement

Leeds Civic Trust represents residents who live in the second largest local authority area in the country. This means that there are many schemes and initiatives that we cannot get involved in. We rely on a network of around 40 affiliated societies to inform us about particular issues in their own parts of Leeds. If a planning application or development is flagged up by them, we undertake to consider it.

Our work also encompasses consideration of spatial issues. This includes area planning, local listing and supporting conservation areas. In these cases, a different approach is taken; we aim to bring together interested parties (local residents, businesses, developers, owners) as appropriate to the project.

Is there a quid pro quo in what we do?

Since promoting good design (and improving public amenity) is at the core of what the Trust is about, we see these activities as supporting these overall objectives. We do not charge developers for our advice and feedback, nor would this be in any way appropriate. In the best cases, we feel that our expertise is genuinely appreciated and respected by developers and the process is seen as a collaborative one that results in better developments. A win-win for developers and residents.