

CHESTER ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

COMMENTS ON PROPOSALS FOR REVISED NORTHGATE DEVELOPMENT AND DISPLACEMENT OF MARKET

1.0 Introduction

1.1 The Chester Archaeological Society was founded in 1849. Among its objects is 'the preservation of archaeological sites, ancient monuments, historic buildings and other antiquities located/discovered in or connected with Chester, Cheshire and North Wales', and from its inception it has campaigned not only for the proper care of archives, archaeology, and historic buildings but for sympathetic, high-quality modern design.

2.0 Background to comments

2.1 Although formal public consultation on the scheme as a whole is not expected until the middle of 2011, the subject has received considerable publicity in the local media, especially the proposal to move the market to the Kaleyards. It was not possible to attend a brief consultation event on the latter in January 2011 because the dates were incorrectly advertised. Nevertheless, the Society wishes to put on record a few fundamental points.

3.0 The Proposals

We understand that the footprint of the revised development will be similar to that of the original. However, it will be more 'commercial', ie there will be no new public buildings or facilities: there will be no provision for a bus exchange; the city library will remain on its existing site; and it is proposed to displace the market, possible to a site on the Kaleyards.

4.0 Comments

4.1 The Northgate scheme will occupy a site at the heart of the historic centre of the city. In doing so it will play a large part in defining Chester for at least the next generation. The current cold economic climate is a very hostile environment in which to develop such a scheme and may very easily result in the creation of a poor built environment that does long-term damage to the city. As already indicated the 'commercial' focus of the scheme has ramifications in the form of the relocation of public facilities to the periphery of the historic core of the city, so its impact will extend well beyond the confines of the footprint of the site. If these facilities are to be relocated, it should be because that is desirable on more general grounds, not just to make one particular scheme commercially viable. Indeed, there is a grave danger that the scheme could accentuate the 'hollowing out' of the city centre.

4.2 At the moment, with the exception of the market, much of the footprint of the site is devoted to offices rather than to retail. Given that the British retail sector is likely to remain subdued for some considerable time to come, the question arises: can Chester sustain a new shopping quarter, at a time when many shops are vacant and, arguably, existing retail areas such as parts of Foregate Street would benefit from redevelopment? We hope that this fundamental economic issue is being thoroughly considered.

- 4.3 The Chester One City Plan emphasises the themes of heritage, localism and distinctiveness. However, it seems inevitable that much of the Northgate scheme will be given over to chain stores that can be found anywhere in Europe, indeed the world. In other historic cities, such stores are found outside the walled centre, local businesses inside. The suggested relocation of the market highlights this conflict between stated ambition and detailed proposal.
- 4.4 Ideally, the Northgate quarter should be developed as a high-quality, mixed use, essentially public, area (as it has been for 2000 years), rather than just a dedicated retail area. Accomplishing this would include finding a suitable use for the Town Hall, retaining the capacity to extend the library (as was envisaged in 1979) and re-opening the Odeon as specialised cinema/arts centre.
- 4.5 Within the footprint of the site, we would make the following comments:
- 4.5.1 Goss Street, Crook Street, Trinity Street and Princess Street are historic streets and should be retained. Indeed, until the 1960s Crook Street continued north to join Princess Street; ideally this link would be restored.
- 4.5.2 The scheme should do minimal damage to buried archaeological remains; where this is unavoidable, a proper scheme of recording should be put in place. A rediscovered Roman Strongroom could be a focal point of the new development.
- 4.5.3 At the moment there are good views of the Welsh hills from Princess Street and Hunter Street; these enable people to locate Chester within the wider landscape and every effort should be made to retain them.
- 4.5.4 The historic core of Chester is very small and fine-grained. Large buildings, uniform developments and flat roofs detract from its character. We would hope to see small-looking buildings, front and back, in a variety of sympathetic constructional styles and a varied roofscape.
- 4.6 With regard to the market we are wholly opposed to the suggested relocation to the Kaleyards:
- 4.6.1 As argued above, such a move would symbolise the marginalisation of local distinctiveness in favour of international blandness, contrary to the Council's stated vision.
- 4.6.2 It would be merely an *ad-hoc* response to the difficulties of making the Northgate scheme viable at the present moment in time; the relationship of Frodsham Street to the intramural area should be considered as a whole.
- 4.6.3 Building on the Kaleyards car park site would damage important Roman archaeological remains and disrupt a centuries-old pattern of land use. It would adversely affect the view of the City Walls and the City Walls (cf the ill-fated Mercia Square development of the late 1960s')