

## CHESTER ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY<sup>1</sup>

### COMMENTS ON CWAC BUS EXCHANGE CONSULTATION

#### Summary

*The Society accepts that, realistically, Gorse Stacks is the best site for a bus exchange to replace the current one at Princess Street. Nevertheless, its remoteness from much of the city centre raises problems of access, for which we do not consider a shuttle bus a panacea; local services at least should be routed so as to make stops at other, useful points around the city. The impact of the resultant loss of a major car park needs to be recognised; short-stay drop-off and collection spaces should also be incorporated in the scheme. In planning for redevelopment, the archaeological potential of the site should be recognised, as does the need to restore the negative environment created by the 'shatter zone' around the Inner Ring Road. The project calls out for high-quality architectural design and landscaping which make reference to the semi-rural past of the area and preserve important views to and from the City Walls and Cathedral. Facilities provided should strike a balance between the lavish and the sustainable.*

#### Detailed comments

##### 1.0 Introduction

1.1 The Chester Archaeological Society is responding to the present consultation on two grounds: the need for an accessible city centre, and the need for good urban design. The former is essential for economic viability, on which the survival of the city's heritage assets ultimately depends, and the latter to ensure that the setting of those assets is enhanced rather than their being engulfed in a sea of architectural mediocrity. Given that this is a corporate response we cannot answer Questions 1-6 on individual travel habits. If it goes ahead the scheme will undoubtedly impact on below-ground archaeology, and this is a matter to which we shall respond separately and in detail at the appropriate time.

##### 2.0 Background: archaeological and architectural character, potential and designations

2.1 The Gorse Stacks area, from Upper Northgate Street to Cow Lane Bridge, lies within Chester's Area of Archaeological Importance, the Primary Archaeological Zone as defined in the [Chester Archaeological Plan](#) (map page 15 and Guidance Note 2, page 16), and the Chester Conservation Area. It also features in the [Chester and Approaches Characterisation Study, Section L](#).

---

<sup>1</sup> The Chester Archaeological Society was founded in 1849, and from its inception it has campaigned for the proper care of archives, archaeology, and historic buildings and for sympathetic, high-quality new design. See <http://www.chesterarchaeolsoc.org.uk/about.html>. It currently has about 350 individual members. Just under half live in Chester and its surrounding villages, the remainder across the rest of Cheshire, north-east Wales and especially Wirral.

- 2.2 Guidance Note 2 of the Chester Archaeological Plan states that:
- Developers should be aware that an assessment (desk-based assessment and/or an evaluation) of the full archaeological impact of a development proposal in these Zones **will be** required. The assessment should include a consideration of the significance of the known heritage assets and detail the impact that the proposed development will have. This will allow the formulation of an appropriate mitigation strategy by the Planning Archaeologist, which takes into account the need to enhance the heritage assets affected by the proposal (see [Guidance Note 4: Guidance for the Consideration of Archaeological Issues as Part of the Planning Process](#)).
  - The Local Plan (Part One) recognises the national significance of the historic city of Chester and its setting. It states that proposals should enhance and preserve the area and its setting, and those developments that are likely to have a significant adverse impact on heritage assets of national and regional significance and their settings **will not be permitted** unless that impact can be avoided and the archaeological remains are preserved *in situ*.
- 2.3 Specifically, the proposed site of the bus exchange falls within [Chester Archaeological Database Character Zone 33](#). *Inter alia* this states:
- This zone has preserved archaeological remains that may influence national perspectives with the potential for further discoveries of significant archaeological remains, with particular regard to the inhumations recorded at the George Street Centre;
  - This zone is a key area within the Area of Archaeological Importance, and planning and development here should be approached with particular sensitivity to the potential for archaeological remains of at least a national level;
  - Key areas for medieval archaeology would be the Gorse Stacks common, where small-scale activity may have occurred throughout the period;
  - There is also a strong likelihood for industrial activity around the Gorse Stacks as the area gradually became developed with yards, housing and market space.
- 2.4 We regard the above characterisation as provisional rather than definitive. If/when the bus station scheme is developed in detail, we shall expect the archaeological resource to be recognised, further assessment to be carried out as necessary, and any impact to be minimised and mitigated appropriately, to the satisfaction of the Development Control Archaeologist.
- 2.5 The [Chester and Approaches Characterisation Study L](#) states:
- The urban form of this area is largely represented by the ‘shatter zone’ effect of 1960s clearance and redevelopment;
  - This is one of the areas in Chester with the highest capacity for change, and one in which development is likely to improve local character if appropriately designed;
  - The area is in urgent need of regeneration and enhancement, within a comprehensive overview that looks back to its history and the surviving character buildings and features;
  - There are a relatively high number of key detractors in the area. These include large scale buildings that are highly visible and inappropriate to local character ... Then there are the visible open spaces where there should be buildings. As well

as being unattractive in themselves these disrupt the urban form. In this category is the... the car park on the roundabout at Gorse Stacks.

Figure 4.8.4 accordingly shows Gorse Stacks as 'negative environment'. It also draws attention to the views of the City Walls and Cathedral to be had from the area, and *vice versa*.

- 2.6 Finally, the government inspector's main modifications to the CWaC Local Plan Part 1 places emphasis on the setting of heritage assets and, *a propos* of policy ENV 5, reads: 'Development in Chester should ensure the city's unique archaeological and historic character is protected **or enhanced**....'.
- 2.7 Unfortunately, despite the advice above, recent developments in the Gorse Stacks area have been out-of-scale and overwhelmingly of poor design (eg the former Northgate Travelodge and the Delamere Street health centre (with a senior local NHS officer now echoing earlier criticisms made by this Society, the Chester Civic Trust, English Heritage and others: <http://www.chesterchronicle.co.uk/news/chester-cheshire-news/nhs-bosses-admit-delamere-street-7779546>), with the reduction of the intervening street to a 'canyon'). The construction of the bus station would offer the opportunity to erect a worthwhile building, enhance an area in full view of the City Walls, and create a worthy 'gateway' to the city.

### 3.0 The suitability of the site for a bus exchange

- 3.1 We have already set out our general views in our comments on the Chester Transport Strategy, para 5.1:

We accept that the construction of the Northgate Development will necessitate the construction of a bus exchange on another site. However, it is essential that, so far as practical, buses continue to serve the historic core of the city as well as they do at present. We suggest that serious consideration be given to the possibility of all local services (including park & ride) making a circuit of the Inner Ring Road plus the railway station (eg with stops at Upper Northgate Street, St Martin's Way/Hunter Street, Grosvenor Street, Pepper Street, Foregate Street, Railway Station and Gorse Stacks).

- 3.2 Assuming that a single bus exchange is needed, realistically Gorse Stacks seems the best available site, and it should be remembered that only a few years ago long-distance services operated from a bus station at Delamere Street. Certainly it has the attraction of giving buses direct access to and from the Inner Ring Road, rather than their having to navigate narrow streets, with inconvenience and danger to other road users and pedestrians.
- 3.3 Nevertheless, the comparative remoteness of the Gorse Stacks site from much of the city centre has to be recognised. For example, it is over 300 m further from Town Hall Square and the Cross (and thus also from Bridge Street and Watergate Street) than is the Princess Street exchange; this remoteness is important given the Council's aspirations for the Northgate Development. Only for the Foregate Street area does Gorse Stacks have the advantage of comparative proximity. Even then, the intervening journey along Frodsham Street has relatively little to offer, commercially, culturally or aesthetically, compared with Northgate Street, St Werburgh Street and Eastgate Street; the main exceptions are the Tesco and Iceland stores.

- 3.4 The differences in distance quoted above may seem small, as indeed they are in the context of other, larger cities and for fit people travelling light. However, they are significant in proportion to the size of Chester city centre, and this may well affect people's perceptions. They are also objectively significant for elderly and disabled people, those with pushchairs and those carrying a lot of shopping. Thus, while its relatively central position enables Princess Street to combine the functions of layover point and exchange with that of preferred drop-off and boarding point for probably the majority of passengers, the fact that it is peripheral suggests that it is unlikely that Gorse Stacks will fulfil the last function.
- 3.5 Chester already has a reputation for high car-parking charges; it cannot afford to acquire a reputation for inconvenient public transport as well. It is essential to remember the competition from out-of-town and edge-of-town shopping centres. For example, Cheshire Oaks offers extensive free parking with numerous shops within a radius of only approx 200 m. Although it is not strictly relevant to this consultation, it should also be recognised that the construction of the proposed bus exchange would entail the loss of a major car park, and this needs to be taken seriously. While one wishes to encourage the use of 'green' modes of transport whenever possible, there is a legitimate role for the private car. (Further, see our [Comments on the Chester Transport Strategy](#), section 6.0; also Stephen Mosley's [comments](#) on the *One City Plan*, pages 6–7). Adequate drop-off and collection points should be provided for private motorists transporting travellers to and from the bus exchange, not just for taxis.

#### **4.0 Access for pedestrians (Q 7)**

- 4.1 CWaC is therefore correct to raise the need for additional transport links around the city. However, we have considerable doubts about the idea of a shuttle bus as a panacea. While the need to change buses may seem reasonable to people who have travelled, for example, >10 miles, we believe that it would seem far less reasonable (in terms of time, cost and sheer inconvenience) to those who have merely travelled from the Chester suburbs or villages and especially, again, to the elderly, those who are disabled or who have pushchairs.
- 4.2 Given that a relatively central bus exchange is being replaced by a peripheral one situated in a part of the city with relatively little to detain people (see 3.3 above), and which may well consequently lose its primacy as a destination of choice for passengers, the routing of services (especially local ones) around the city centre and the siting of intermediate stops becomes important. We would suggest that as many local services as possible should be routed so as to stop on the western or southern sectors of the Inner Ring Road (at the junction with Hunter Street and on Pepper Street) or near the Foregate Street/Frodsham Street junction, before terminating at Gorse Stacks. The first of the stops would be immediately adjacent to the Northgate Development, and the second two adjacent to other major shopping streets and within approx 250 m of the Cross. Consideration should be given to the Hunter Street stop continuing to be accessed *via* Northgate Street (with the possibility of an additional drop-off (but not boarding) point by the Odeon), with a return to Gorse Stacks *via* the Inner Ring Road
- 4.3 Whatever operational solutions are adopted initially, they will doubtless change over the years, and the approaches to the new bus exchange should be configured to

allow this to happen without the need for expensive modifications. It is also important that road layout changes resulting from other, separate, redevelopment schemes in the city, especially the Northgate Development and theatre/library, are designed with an eye to the consequences of relocating the bus exchange and are similarly 'future-proofed'.

4.4 We recognise that the details of bus service provision are not within the control of CWaC, but they are fundamental to the success or failure of this scheme, and we call on CWaC and the bus operating companies to work together to provide the best possible service for travellers.

4.5 Likewise CWaC is correct to recognise the need to improve pavements and lighting on key routes into the city centre from Gorse Stacks. In particular, the obvious route from Frodsham Street to the Town Hall Square, *via* the Kaleyards and Abbey Street, needs to be made far more suitable for wheelchairs and pushchairs (without, we hasten to add, getting rid of the cobbles). However, the improvements needed to this new 'gateway' to the city centre are far more radical and go beyond the utilitarian: the whole public realm needs to be upgraded, eg street furniture and the approaches to the Kaleyards from Frodsham Street, as does the quality of shop frontages and signage.

## 5.0 Design (Q8)

5.1 We consider that agreement with the suggestions made in the questionnaire should be self-evident.

5.2 Bus stations are frequently unimaginative, utilitarian, depressing buildings, even intimidating in the evening, situated in bleak surroundings. However, one only has to think of other transport-related buildings, for example nineteenth-century railway stations, to realise that this need not be the case. We wonder if the semi-rural history of the area referred to above could provide some inspiration for the design and/or decoration of the building (*cf* the café on the Little Roodee with its 'green' roof). As much as possible of the surroundings should also be 'greened', linking visually with the grassed areas around the St Anne Street flats and extending the green areas adjacent to many other sectors of the City Walls (eg the Roman Gardens, the area west of the Northgate, the Queen's School playing fields, the Roodee, and potentially the Kaleyards). The Council's Record Office, Historic Environment and Landscape teams should be asked to advise. Views to and from the City Walls and Cathedral should be preserved and enhanced.

5.3 In fact, the concept drawings presented at a public consultation meeting on 15 October seem to go a long way to meeting our criteria, although we should wish to study detailed plans at leisure before passing a final judgement. As an aside, perhaps the glass wall panels shown in the concept drawings could be etched with scenes referring to the history of the area. Given that concept drawings and images exist, we are surprised and disappointed that no reference was made to them in the consultation questionnaire, and instead the questions posed under design were so vague as to be meaningless (so as to give the architects a free hand?).

## **6.0 Facilities (Q9)**

6.1 The most important facilities are surely:

- Adequate covered waiting area with seats (not the minimalist shelters to be found at Princess Street, but neither a wholly covered station, which might well be gloomy, claustrophobic and fume-laden);
- Facilities for disabled people;
- Essential information, including that needed to enable strangers to the city to orientate themselves, eg real-time bus timetable, together with route displays (AV information *on* buses serving what claims to be a tourist city would also be immensely helpful and should be standard), location map and clearly marked routes to the city centre and railway station. Real-time information should also be provided at the other major stops around the city that we propose in para 4.2.
- Automatic ticket dispensing machines can also be useful (again they would need to be easily intelligible by strangers), and ultimately speed up journeys, but would surely be part of a larger scheme.

6.2 Other facilities such as toilets/baby change, luggage lockers and an ATM are to varying degrees desirable, but are liable to anti-social behaviour, vandalism and even acts of terrorism. A coffee shop (as opposed to vending machine) or other human presence, especially in the evening, might mitigate these problems. Drinks should be served in ceramic cups, not paper ones, to minimise litter.

## **7.0 Likelihood of use**

7.1 To encourage people to use buses to come to Chester, services need first of all to be convenient (in terms of frequency, location of stops, accessibility of vehicles, clear information), clean, fast and good value. If these basic requirements are not met, people will seek to come to Chester by car or, if parking is too expensive or inadequate, they will go elsewhere, and the city will continue to decline. A well designed bus exchange may help to turn a necessary journey into a pleasurable experience and so increase customer loyalty, but it is not a substitute for the basics. Ultimately, new buildings in Chester should be well designed because there is no legitimate reason for doing otherwise, in order to enhance the city rather than degrade it and – bureaucratically – in this case specifically to comply with the policies and advice quoted in Section 2 above.

Dr P Carrington FSA  
*For Chester Archaeological Society*  
16 October 2014