

## CHESTER ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

### COMMENTS ON CHESTER HERITAGE AND VISUAL ARTS STRATEGY (JULY 2016)

#### SUMMARY

*The Society welcomes the opportunity to comment on this strategy. Sadly, in comparison with other heritage strategies that we have examined we find it rather disappointing and lightweight. We are sceptical of the logic of combining heritage and the visual arts in one strategy, which perhaps leads to a loss of focus and depth. The vision treats the city's heritage assets as a given rather than something mutable, to be better understood, protected, presented and engaged with as a source of ongoing enjoyment, curiosity and identity. The summaries of the character and significance of Chester's heritage are poor and need to be revised to bring out its complexity and uniqueness. The strategy needs to be explicitly aligned with council policies on the historic environment, to mutual benefit. To achieve this, references to all relevant policies, internal and external, should be embedded in the strategy; they should not merely be relegated to the technical document. Despite these criticisms, we are supportive of the suggested actions, but they need to be added to; public information and opportunities for participation in particular need to be improved.*

#### KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Revise vision to refer to the nature of Chester's heritage; include improving understanding, protection, interpretation and authenticity as strategic priorities ([Section 2.0](#)).
- Refine characterisation and significance statements ([Para 3.1–2](#)).
- Link strategy to historic environment plans, advice and policies ([Para 3.3](#)).
- More joined-up working within CWaC as well as with external partners to provide professional leadership ([Para 5.2](#)).
- Spell out the theme(-s) of a new museum ([Para 5.7](#)).
- Give greater prominence to upgrading of the Historic Environment Record ([Para 5.9](#)).
- Ensure the full publication of major excavations ([Para 5.10](#)).
- Improve publicity given to new discoveries and reinstate annual Cheshire Archaeology Days ([Para 5.11](#)).
- Create more opportunities for residents to engage in research on their city ([Para 5.12](#)).
- The *Strategy* would have benefitted from input from staff of Chester University's Department of History and Archaeology, Historic England and the Council for British Archaeology ([Para 6.1](#)).

#### DETAIL

##### 1.0 Scope and Content

- 1.1 The rationale behind the scope and structure of the proposed strategy is nowhere explained. The review of similar strategies in other cities in the *Audience Report* section 15 makes it clear that, apart from World Heritage Site management plans, there is no standard pattern. This makes it vital that the scope and content of the Chester strategy should be justified (by quoting the brief for the strategy, if appropriate). It should also be noted at this stage that the compilers have overlooked the useful [Nottingham Heritage Strategy](#). There is also likely to be a difference between heritage strategies for a single historic centre and those for districts such as Bath and North-East Somerset, with the latter unlikely to provide relevant models.

- 1.2 The logic of including heritage and museums in the same strategy is immediately obvious. However, that of grouping heritage and visual arts is less so, and no major synergies emerge in the documents. We wonder if a focus on heritage alone would have produced better results, although given the acknowledged importance of traditional events such as the Mystery Plays and Midwinter- and Midsummer Watch Parades and the role of re-enactors in heritage interpretation, a 'nod' towards the performing arts would have been appropriate.
- 1.3 The first half of the strategy effectively deals with marketing; the heritage assets of the city are only addressed in the second half and are treated somewhat cursorily as a given, with an exclusive focus on their interpretation. In our view this is a shallow approach that will quickly result in the city's heritage 'offer' going stale. This critique therefore largely concentrates on other elements of the 'archaeological (or heritage) cycle' in order to redress the balance.

## **2.0 Vision**

- 2.1 The vision should include a reference to the unique character and significance of Chester's heritage and to the core principles of understanding, protection, interpretation and authenticity.
- 2.2 The following should therefore be included in the strategic priorities:
  - 2.2.1 Improving understanding (as opposed to merely regurgitating existing knowledge), both to improve management and as a source of curiosity for all as well as one of pride and identity for residents.
  - 2.2.2 Protecting the city's heritage; this is admittedly already included as a priority but the ways of doing it are not addressed, even by way of reference to other policies (see para 3.3 below).
  - 2.2.3 *The Heritage Investment Framework* aim (quoted in *Technical Document 1*, section 2.2 to 'make the residents and visitors of Cheshire West and Chester more informed of their unique heritage than any other in Britain'. Strategic priorities 2 (i) and (ii) and 5 are actually objectives within this aim. The marketing analysis should be a tool to guide *how* people can be made more informed.
  - 2.2.4 Chester's heritage is the legacy of real people living real lives in a real place; the city is not a theme park. One of the main values of seeking to understand the past is that it sets our present-day city and lives in context and helps us to reflect on them. 'Dumbing down' destroys this value. Authenticity therefore needs to be fundamental to all heritage interpretation and re-enactment. On the tensions between 'academic integrity', commercial archaeology often producing dry-as-dust 'grey literature' and populism, see Peter Addyman (founder of the York Archaeological Trust), 'Was Jorvik a responsible thing to do' in *Salon* **355**, 14 December 2015 (<http://us6.campaign-archive2.com/?u=5557bc147d34993782f185bde&id=~99b8a23e61#mctoc13> accessed 21-08-2016).

## **3.0 Understanding and Protecting the City's Unique Heritage are Primary**

- 3.1 The English Heritage document *Conservation Principles, Policies and Guidance* states: 'understanding the *significance* of places is vital' (quoted in the *Technical Document 1* para 1.2.2). In fact, the 'archaeological cycle' of research/understanding-protection-interpretation has been well established for decades and can appropriately be applied across the heritage spectrum. It underlies World Heritage Site Management Plans and the [Nottingham Heritage Strategy](#) (in the latter under the

aims 'Understand', 'Capitalise', 'Celebrate'). The starting point for the *Strategy* should therefore be informed and comprehensive but concise characterisation of all aspects Chester's heritage, together with statements of their combined significance, making explicit use of the 'heritage values' set out by English Heritage. Significance statements necessarily involve setting the city in its wider geographical and political contexts. Finally, heritage is far from being permanently defined: through the passage of time and advances in research, more human creations are recognised as 'heritage' (eg World War II remains), character and significance are reappraised, and the value attached to heritage assets may sometimes be contested, even by those who claim to be interested in them (eg in the Dee House vs amphitheatre debate).

- 3.2 What we take to be summaries of character and significance in the *Strategy* (sections 6.1–4 and 6.8) are somewhat selective, simplistic and occasionally confused, limiting their usefulness. For example, we find no mention in 6.1 of pre-Roman occupation; of the Roman 'quay wall'; of the city's Saxon and medieval churches (often significantly sited at disused gateways to the Roman fortress); of the Saxon and medieval evolution of the street plan; of patterns in the reuse of urban space; or of the Castle. In 6.8 there is no mention of the city's aesthetic qualities based on its topography and plan as well as its individual buildings; of its 'intelligibility'; or of its frontier situation both geographically and politically, making it a long-term central place. These sections of the *Strategy* need to be revised with the advice of experts in local history and archaeology.
- 3.3 There is no mention in the *Strategy* or in *Technical Document 1* of relevant plans, advice and policies for heritage protection and management, such as the [Chester Archaeological Plan](#), the [Archaeological Character Zones](#), the [Chester and Approaches Characterisation Study](#) or archaeological and conservation policies in the *CWaC Local Plan Parts 1 and 2* (consultation draft). Nor is there a mention of the [Cheshire Historic Environment Record](#) maintained by the Archaeology Planning Advisory Service (APAS) and incorporating the Chester Archaeological Database. This is the primary source of information both for managing the city's archaeology and for people wanting to learn more about it. In order to ensure that these documents are properly taken account of, they should not merely be quoted or cited in appendices but should be integrated into the main body of the *Strategy*. They and the characterisation and significance statements should be consistent with one another and should be mutually supporting. The compilation of the *Strategy* should be used as an opportunity to fill any gaps left between existing policies.
- 3.4 This is not a matter of bureaucratic tidiness or academic fussiness: looking properly at the 'big picture' of Chester's past would a) encapsulate what is important about it (its 'unique selling point'); b) help in protection and the management of change; c) enhance the 'stories' that can be told about it and so enrich the 'product' that can be offered; and d) help to reinforce local identity by clarifying Chester's historical role.
- 3.5 Section 5.13 states: 'Chester should focus on telling engaging stories rather than focusing on a given era'. Given the city's long history and the significance of its complex and symbolic reuse of space, we agree. However, it has to be remembered that the development of the city can only be understood as a chronological sequence, while various themes (border position, military, port etc) endure.
- 3.6 The Society has made its own attempt to meet the challenge with its own draft heritage strategy. In an attempt to summarise the city's unique character this is

entitled [Two Thousand Years of an English frontier City](#). We do not make any special claim for this attempt, but consider that the Council's strategy needs to do better.

#### **4.0 SWOT Analysis**

4.1 The following should be added:

4.1.1 *Weaknesses*: Poor publicity given to new discoveries; lack of sufficient opportunities for active engagement.

4.1.2 *Opportunities*: 1) Use the city's historical role as a central place to encourage its use as a base for exploration of related heritage sites (eg hillforts of the Mid-Cheshire Ridge and Clwydian range, Neston Viking sculpture, Eliseg's Pillar, Beeston Castle, castles of North Wales, the Parkgate 'outport', Pontcysyllte aqueduct, salt towns of mid-Cheshire); 2) Give higher profile to finds reported to the Portable Antiquities Scheme from rural areas. (This is done well in the refurbished Cirencester Museum).

4.1.3 *Threats*: 1) Inappropriate modern development; the ongoing decline of detailed knowledge of the city's past within CWaC, which is not being compensated for elsewhere, resulting in a lack of leadership; 2) 'People at present believe that the city provides limited reasons to come back and that the offer is not refreshed often enough'. We agree. In addition to measures already proposed (improvements to the totality of the historic environment; a museum that tells the city's story), information should be refreshed through the regular presentation of ongoing research.

#### **5.0 Proposed Actions**

5.1 We do not disagree with any of the proposed actions (*Strategy* section 3.2 and Action Plan). However, they do need to be strengthened and added to.

5.2 *Re*: 3.2.i and Action Plan 1, there is a need for more joined-up working between CWaC's heritage and other services (eg APAS, Conservation, Development Control, Historic Environment Team, Museums and Archives) as well as with outside bodies. (This is perhaps partly implicit in the *Culture Strategy* summarised in *Technical Document 1*, section 2.2, page 10, last paragraph and in the proposal for a new museum in the Castle but needs to be more far-reaching). Chester is a living city, and the demands of past and present will sometimes be in conflict. Managing change should be an explicit item in the Action Plan. To achieve relevant parties need to work closely together with a clear idea of what is important about the city's heritage.

The diminution in local archaeological expertise through redundancy/retirement within CWaC without matching compensation elsewhere needs to be addressed. The consequent lack of capacity and leadership results in a lack of sound information (contrary to the aim of the *Heritage Investment Framework*; see 2.2.3 above) and consequently to misconceptions and 'fringe' ideas gaining ground.

5.3 *Re*: 3.2.ii and Action Plan 2.ii: 'Continue to deliver the Heritage Interpretation Masterplan'. Relevant contents of the Masterplan need to be summarised.

5.4 *Re*: 3.2.iv and Action Plan 2.iv: 'Increase and ease access to historic spaces'. This action fails to address the major barrier to exploration of the western side of the historic city constituted by the Inner Ring Road. Final resolution of this problem will take a long time and is largely dependent on construction of the Western Relief Road (which should also remove much traffic from Lower Watergate Street). Nevertheless it is important that a start is made on integrating Nicholas Street and St Martins Way into the rest of the city, making them friendlier to pedestrians and ensuring that the

buildings that line them respect local scale. (Cf the need to improve Maid Marian Way referred to in the [Nottingham Heritage Strategy](#), 23–4).

- 5.5 *Re:* 3.2.v and Action Plan 2.v: ‘Improve quality in historic environments’ (*sic*). We strongly support this initiative but some of the sites in question need to be identified more specifically than they are in *Technical Document 1*, Appendix 2. They should include lanes and alleys to the backlands behind the Rows, which the [Chester and Approaches Characterisation Study A-L](#) page 76 notes are often unattractive.
- 5.6 *Re:* Action Plan section 2: This mentions a council heritage asset working group. The role of this group is not otherwise referred to in the *Strategy* or the supporting documents. In the context of the current furore over the proposed lease of Dee House it is important that its existence and deliberations are given greater prominence.
- 5.7 *Re:* 3.2.vii and Action Plan 3.vii: ‘Develop an improved museum offer which does justice to Chester’s significant heritage’. We strongly support this proposal, and its potential benefits are clear from the Opportunities Map in *Technical Document 1*, Appendix 3. However, the *West Cheshire Museums Development Plan 2015-18*, summarised in *Technical Document 1*, section 2.4, is largely generic, and it is noteworthy that the main theme/story that the museum has to tell is not spelled out there or in the *Strategy*. This Society has put forward suggestions on this subject in its [draft heritage strategy](#), para 7.3.3 and elsewhere. The option of relocating the city’s museum to the Castle is an attractive one, as it should offer enough space and would bring an interesting and important group of buildings back into use in an appropriate way. Alternatively, we have suggested that Dee House could appropriately form part of a museum but, as is recognised in the Building Analysis Table (*Technical Document 1*, Appendix 2), by itself it is too small and would require the acquisition of Trident House as well (see our [Comments on the Proposed Lease of Dee House](#), section 5.0). Despite the attraction of a ‘dispersed museum’ making use of a variety of historic buildings, there are dangers in such an approach, such as additional expense, loss of links between the ‘stories’ to be told, and loss of impact.
- 5.8 *Re:* 3.2.xii and Action Plan 7: ‘Reveal Chester’s rich history and heritage through its archive for the investigation, involvement, understanding and enjoyment of the public’. (Note that throughout ‘Archive’ is used in the singular for the more common ‘Archives’ and risks causing confusion with the archaeological archive). There is no discussion of the potential for synergy with the museum in using documents to help to tell Chester’s story. The use of documents from Cheshire Archives and Local Studies in the current [‘In Good Humour’](#) exhibition in the Grosvenor Museum is an example of what we have in mind.
- 5.9 The Action Plan contains no mention of the upgrading of the Historic Environment Record (HER) (*Technical Document 1*, section 2.2). So far as practical the sources (reports, photographs, maps and plans) behind the Historic Environment Record should be put online (*cf* the [Know Your Place](#) map-based database at Bristol) as a community resource.
- 5.10 Paragraph 6.2.3 of the *Strategy* states *re:* the Historic Environment team: ‘After completion of the [accessible archives] project, they [the finds] will be transferred to the Grosvenor Museum, which will ensure a sustainable future for the finds and the information that the archaeology has revealed’. In fact, what we shall have is merely data, not information in the form of a story, which would require analysis and

publication. As we have pointed out numerous times, such publication would greatly improve our understanding of the city's past.

- 5.11 Much more effort needs to be put into publicising new discoveries and the results of recent research online (see 5.9 on upgrading the HER) , through local newspapers, museum displays and also through the reinstatement of the hugely successful annual Cheshire Archaeology Day meetings.
- 5.12 There is a need for continued focussed archaeological and historical research, not only to improve protection and management, but also so that the city's character and significance are progressively better understood as a source of public interest and local pride and identity and This should involve Council services and Chester University and offer the chance of engagement for local societies and individuals.

## **6.0 Consultation**

- 6.1 Given the long-standing partnership between the Historic Environment Team and Chester University's Department of History and Archaeology, and the fact that the University is seen as a partner in delivering the *Strategy*, we wonder why no members of that department are listed in *Technical Document 1* Appendix 5 among the consultees. It might also have been beneficial to have input from Historic England, as is the case with the Lincoln Heritage Strategy (*Audience Report* v1, para 15.5) and the Local Heritage Engagement team of the Council for British Archaeology.

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