

## CHESTER ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

### COMMENTS ON CWaC 'PLAY YOUR PART' CONSULTATION, OCTOBER 2019

1.0 The Chester Archaeological Society welcomes this wide-ranging consultation and many of the ideas in it. However, it is not entirely clear what projects and expenditure are already committed and what is actually open for debate. For instance, does the £66m for the Northgate project just relate to Phase 1 and does it in fact include the £40m already spent on site assembly and professional fees? Of the £22.7m for culture and heritage, how much comes from the government's High Streets initiative and is earmarked for the Rows? In these circumstances all we can offer are general recommendations and an un-prioritised wish list.

2.0 The areas of the consultation that are immediately relevant to the Society's remit are:

- **How can we tackle the climate emergency?** Especially (1.4) Moving to a lower carbon transport system and (1.8) Using our planning powers to address climate change.
- **How can we support our local economy to grow and deliver good jobs with fair wages for our residents?** Especially (2.6) Enhancing local transport and (2.7) Revitalising our town centres.
- **How can we make our neighbourhoods even better places to call home?** Especially (5.9) Putting culture and heritage at the heart of our communities.
- **How can we deliver modern and efficient services?** Especially Proposed Revenue Savings and Investment 2020-24 (5d) Reviewing cultural services (£230,000).

The Council's proposed solutions overlap the challenges as defined.

### 3.0 Climate emergency

3.1 Chester's small-scale, tightly knit urban form of medieval origin, which is a major factor in its heritage value, is at risk from inappropriate development aimed at accommodating motor vehicles. Measures to tackle climate change, by promoting the use of public transport (1.4; 2.6) and making future developments more 'walkable', would have the welcome side-effect of strengthening the city's historic character. Specifically:

3.1.1 Personal motor vehicle use in and through the city needs to be reduced. It leads to ever-increasing demands for road-widening and extra parking capacity, which destroy the urban grain as well as causing congestion, air pollution, noise and danger to other road users. Electric vehicles are not a panacea; ultimately the number of vehicles on the road needs to be reduced (House of Commons Science and technology Select Committee Report 22-08-19).

- The Western Relief Road (2.6) needs to be brought forward to reduce traffic on Lower Watergate Street, the Inner Ring Road and the Grosvenor Bridge.
- We note that there is no mention of a new car park in the summary of the Northgate scheme (2.7). We hope that this omission is deliberate, that plans for this unnecessary and out-of-scale building have been scrapped, and that the existing underground parking will be refurbished.

3.1.2 Buildings should be reused whenever possible rather than replaced. New ones should be designed to last; this reduces the embedded carbon footprint of new construction.

#### **4.0 Supporting the local economy**

4.1 Both phases of the Northgate development (2.7) need to comply with the Conservation Area design policies in the adopted Local Plan Part 2 and the criteria set out in the *Chester Characterisation Study* in respect of scale and preservation of historic streets. The Historic England document *Power of Place* (2000) highlighted that people place a high value on the historic environment and see it in its totality, rather than as a series of individual sites and buildings.

#### **5.0 Making neighbourhoods better places**

5.1 The argument for a borough-wide heritage strategy (5.9) is weak: Chester-Ellesmere Port and the Weaver valley towns have different histories, and separate strategies for each town would be more meaningful. Notice should be taken of the criticism of the current *Chester Heritage and Visual Arts Strategy* by the Council for British Archaeology (16-01-17) as too 'performative' and lacking in detail on core heritage issues; the Imagemakers' *Interpretation Masterplan* (2008) is in some respects much better. A new strategy is needed for Chester, founded on a deep understanding of the city's built heritage, museum collections and documentary records - what they tell us about the history of the city, its hinterland and the British Isles and what a rational approach to that history can contribute to education, citizenship and a sense of local identity and pride. Such a strategy should:

- serve as the intellectual foundation for a new museum.
- set out a way to 'maximise the use of our heritage ...assets' (2.7).
- find a use for Chester Castle (5.9) [most obviously as the base for a museum]
- show how the Council would invest in 'key heritage assets such as Dee House and the City Walls in Chester' (5.i).

5.2 Dee House has been in Council ownership since 1993. It is in the first place CWaC's responsibility to remedy the 'conservation deficit' to open the way for private-sector investment. It is important that restoration of the building should be a model of its kind, not an example of cynical facadism.

5.3 A dedicated fund should be set up to pay for ongoing repairs to the City Walls.

5.4 CWaC should carry out a feasibility study of the Castle as the site of a new museum. 'Chester clearly lacks a signature all-weather heritage attraction, and would arguably benefit from a single indoor focus for the telling of its story. Any such development would have a major impact on the destination management of the city' (Imagemakers *Interpretation Masterplan* (2008), 32; see also 58). Chester's long history as a 'central place' at a crossroads of Britain offers outstanding potential for a museum that encompasses the city's sub-region and its connections through the ages and sheds light on a wide range of subjects, including topical ones such as sources of historical knowledge, environmental change, regionality, colonialism and ethnicity, communications and urban change. It should aim to attract loans/touring exhibitions that contribute to an understanding of the history of the city and region. Such a museum could be a major selling point in attracting visitors to the city but should also showcase the research carried out by local heritage groups.

- 5.5 Further suggestions *re* improving neighbourhoods and revitalising town centres (which would also make the city more attractive to visitors) are:
- 5.5.1 Include alleyways leading to/from the Rows in improvements under the High Streets Action Zone, in accordance with the *Chester Characterisation Study*, page 76.
  - 5.5.2 Adopt a standardised palette of sympathetic, durable materials for the city's historic streets; at the moment a hotchpotch of materials is in use. Chester's comprehensive network of historic streets (major and minor) and open spaces is of national significance; more should be made of it.
  - 5.5.3 Enhance the presentation of the Roman 'Quay Wall' and of minor monuments, eg Roman remains under the former baked potato shop in Bridge Street, under *Pret a Manger* in Northgate Street and at the back of Watergate Street Row South, working with occupiers and private property owners as necessary. Consider a 'Quay Wall' project to better understand this monument.
  - 5.5.4 Re-excavate and display a pair of Roman barracks in Deanery Field.
  - 5.5.5 Stabilise the revetment wall to St Olave's Church and seek to bring the building back into use (currently blighted by the increasingly derelict adjoining Quick's Garage; a sympathetic redevelopment of that site is needed).
  - 5.5.6 Devise a comprehensive interpretation scheme embracing the amphitheatre (now in need of updating), Dee House and St John's Church.
  - 5.5.7 Develop CGI images of historical buildings – especially those currently vacant - for public display (*cf* that by Take 27 of the Roman bathhouse superimposed on modern Bridge Street buildings, displayed in Storyhouse in 2018).
  - 5.5.8 Complete the programme of signage set out in the *Imagemakers' Interpretation Masterplan* (2008), updated as appropriate.
  - 5.5.9 Initiate laser scanning of ancient sculptures in the Grosvenor Museum and elsewhere in the borough and where relevant in Wirral to permit the manufacture and display of replicas and images as desired.
  - 5.5.10 Initiate a programme for the publication of city-centre backlog excavations undertaken from the 1960s onwards. These are crucial for our understanding of Chester's role and development, especially in the Roman period. In comparison with other proposed expenditure, the cost would be small.
- 6.0 Delivering modern and efficient services**
- 6.1 Although we understand the need for CWaC to continue to make revenue savings, we are concerned as to where those proposed for cultural and heritage services (5d) will come from. Staffing and historical/archaeological expertise in museum services are at rock-bottom. If the Council is to have any hope of exploiting the borough's heritage in a responsible way, expertise needs to be increased, not decreased.

P Carrington

For Chester Archaeological Society, 24 October 2019