

CHESTER ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

'RETHINKING NORTHGATE': CHESTER ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY COMMENTS RESUBMITTED AFTER CWaC CABINET, 14 MAY 2020

1.0 Introduction

1.1 In the light of the alternative proposals for Northgate Phase I put forward by public speakers to CWaC Cabinet on 14 May 2020 and the response that 'comments do not fall on deaf ears' (<https://www.cheshire-live.co.uk/news/chester-cheshire-news/council-pressing-ahead-70m-chester-18250791>), the Chester Archaeological Society is taking the opportunity to restate its concerns regarding this development. It has been voicing these consistently since 2012 and they seem ever more relevant:

2.0 Comments

- 2.1 Concerns about the financial feasibility of a good-quality scheme and the desirability of making best use of existing buildings;
- 2.2 The need to respect buried archaeology and the unique historic street pattern and to enhance the built environment of a large part of the City Centre Conservation Area, in accordance with the Conservation Area and Development Management policies of the *Local Plan Part 2*;
- 2.3 The inappropriateness of a bland, inward-looking retail park-style development in the Conservation Area.
- 2.4 Specifically we have argued for:
 - 2.4.1 Making best use of the frontage of the former library as the entrance to a new market, reinforcing the attractiveness of Town Hall Square, Chester's prime public space for 1000 years;
 - 2.4.2 Retaining the alignment of Princess Street, part of Chester's unique historic street pattern;
 - 2.4.3 The desirability of retaining the 'pocket park' west of the former bus exchange, as an element of the historic townscape;
 - 2.4.4 The need to make best use of the existing underground car parking that was constructed at the expense of world-class archaeology in the 1960s, rather than follow the obsolete concept of building a new and unsightly multi-storey car park;
 - 2.4.5 The desirability of reducing traffic on the Inner Ring Road to allow the reintegration of the western side of the walled city with the centre, in accordance with the One City Plan.
- 3.0 The Society's scepticism about earlier versions of the scheme chasing trends in retailing proved to be justified with the collapse of high-street retail, and this element of the development has now been abandoned. Our other concerns have also proved to be prescient, with continuing austerity, realisation of the carbon footprint of new buildings, increased emphasis on walking and cycling rather than car travel, and an appreciation of the benefits of green space. Elsewhere, it is now planned to eliminate through traffic in York within the city walls and even in Birmingham, while a new residential quarter serviced by underground car parks with limited capacity is planned at Utrecht. While the Society's arguments are based on its prime concern with the city's archaeology and built heritage, many aspects of them are shared by a variety of organisations and individuals, who consider the proposed development from different standpoints.

- 4.0 The coronavirus pandemic has reinforced concerns about the financial viability of the scheme, and there no longer seem to be any revenue forecasts. It has also given a foretaste of what a 'greener' city could be like. It is essential that the Council's investment should be carefully targeted, benefit the whole of the city centre and look to the future. The development should offer new facilities and support existing businesses (eg cafes, restaurants, music venues), not duplicate or compete with them. In this light, the present Northgate Phase I development appears the residue of an over-elaborate scheme designed for another age, that is expensive, offers nothing special or locally distinctive in its architecture or function, and fails to integrate into the rest of the city.
- 5.0 We therefore argue that:
- 5.1 Relocation of the market to the former library would integrate it into Town Hall Square and Northgate Street with their existing businesses, to mutual benefit;
- 5.2 Maintaining the historic alignment of Princess Street (without steps) would create a service loop with Hunter Street for the market, facilitating the pedestrianisation of Northgate Street and Town Hall Square and improve the 'walkability' of this area of the city centre;
- 5.3 While a cinema and associated restaurants might well be popular, they might also be risky given rapidly changing business models and competition nearby from Broughton Retail Park and Cheshire Oaks. They should be architecturally separate from the market in case of failure and be dependent on commercial funding. Chester already has plenty of restaurants in the area; the Council should not be funding new ones;
- 5.4 To build a new, larger, car park would be bizarre given current environmental trends and the fact that an underground car park already exists, for which there is no other obvious use and which can be improved and modified in the light of changing needs;
- 5.5 Retention of green public space rather than the construction of a new car park is all the more important given the clear public health benefits and the envisaged use of much of the Northgate Phase II area for housing.
- 5.6 Given the rapidly changing circumstances, we consider that CWaC has much to gain by abandoning the inherited scheme and, in genuine consultation with residents, devising one that is sympathetic to its setting and genuinely innovative and forward-looking. If it wishes to make a long-term investment in the cultural life of the city, it could do worse than direct money to the repair of the City Walls and a better museum.

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For Chester Archaeological Society
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