

CHESTER ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

INITIAL COMMENTS ON CHESTER GREEN BELT CONSULTATION

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. This study needs to be seen as an extension of the One City Plan, on which we commented in some detail (http://www.chesterarchaeolsoc.org.uk/CAS_PlanConsult11_ChesterOneCityPlan_RC&PC_comments_V04_00-09-11.pdf).
3. We do not accept the vision put forward in some quarters that Chester should be a no-growth area, with business and housing being diverted to Ellesmere Port and Vale Royal. We will oppose expansion that ignores or threatens to destroy the form and unique characteristics of the city, but equally we reject the view that Chester should effectively be fossilised for the benefit of tourists.
4. At issue, therefore, is Chester's social and economic future as much as its built form and size. The Nevin Leather report *Economic Growth and its Impact on the Demand for Housing in Chester*, as summarised in CWaC's internal document *Summary of Evidence relating to Green Belt Review July 2011*, foresees 1) the occupational structure of future growth in employment being in retail, health and social work, banking and finance, non-financial business services, computing services and leisure and tourism. ... result[ing] in an increase in demand for owner occupied and private rented housing of higher quality; and 2) a greater degree of polarisation in the economy leading to the creation of a larger group who will require affordable housing.
5. We suspect that it is the people in retail, health and social work who would need 'affordable housing'. Clearly an ageing population will inevitably impose its own demands for social services (although this is true across the whole of the UK), but otherwise this is an economic future that needs to be fought against. Solid prosperity for the city cannot be based on financial services or retail alone; if the British economy is to be 'rebalanced', retail will, we suspect, remain flat for many years to come and the 'boom years' of financial services are already over. The general unpleasantness, for all, of economically polarised societies has received a lot of attention in the media of late. It is already a characteristic of Britain in general in comparison with much of western Europe, and it is also true of Chester.
6. Over the past generation, a number of retail parks have sprung up around Chester (Greyhound Park, Boughton, Cheshire Oaks, plus Broughton just across the Welsh border). Many of the shops admittedly fulfil functions that could not easily be accommodated in the historical centre of a compact city like Chester, but this is not true of all of them by any means, and the result has been to suck the life out of the city centre (consider the run-down state of many shops along Foregate Street and City Road). Retail functions also encroach on the Bumpers Lane area, which has traditionally had more of a light industrial character. Conversely, formerly industrial areas in the city centre have been given over to apartments. Thus the traditional form of the city has been turned inside out. This general pattern, of course, is true of many

cities in the UK and abroad, not just of Chester.

7. These retail parks generally represent a poor quality built environment, and by their reliance on private cars for access are environmentally unfriendly, wasteful of space (through their need for large parking areas) and socially exclusive. The Wrexham Road Business Park is likewise very heavily reliant on private transport, with the associated need for parking, and the current density of buildings is very low.
8. In the light of the above, to consider relaxing the Green Belt around Chester could be viewed as 'throwing good land after bad'.
9. We therefore consider that the Council's first priority should be to seek a more rational and efficient use of land that has already been developed (eg the encouragement of more high-quality supermarkets and other shops selling everyday goods in the heart of the city's suburbs, and making it attractive for some more specialised retailers to return to the city centre), thus freeing up space on the periphery, currently used for retail, for industrial and commercial functions. To enhance the attractiveness of city-centre shopping high-frequency bus services will be necessary: the Blacon circular service, with CWaC mediating the commercial rivalry between First and Arriva, is an example of what is needed.
10. We accept that more family housing is needed, and this will have to be accommodated in the suburbs. As an aside, perhaps the construction of more quasi-three-storey houses could be encouraged (ie with attics adapted for use as bedrooms from the outset): this would result in a greater number of 'large' houses without a corresponding increase in footprint.
11. The methodology used for evaluating the Green Belt seems to be generally sound, and the outcomes of the analysis by and large bear out the soundness of the existing designations. At most, any relaxation of the existing Green Belt could only be small without risking considerable loss of amenity, and would only be acceptable if steps were taken to rectify the current inefficient use of land in and around the city and if there were convincing guarantees that any such relaxation was not the 'thin end of the wedge'.

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