

CHESHIRE WEST HIGH STREET, TOWN, AND CITY CENTRE COMMISSION

CHESTER ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY RESPONSE:

‘A well maintained city in a green and pleasant land; one that cares for its historic environment and is home to a museum of global standing’

This response deals only with Chester and reflects the Society’s fear that, in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, hasty action will damage the city’s unique archaeological and architectural heritage. It is important that the planning mistakes of the 1960s are not repeated. We address the issues of town centre uses, sustainability, travel and accessibility, opportunities for development and commercial investment, and destination management and town centre promotion. Our principal recommendations are two-fold: to put more effort into conserving the historic fabric of the city, and to generate further interest in Chester’s history with a ground-breaking museum of global standing. This will generate business for hotels and retail as well as enhancing the city for future generations.

1.0 Introduction

1.1 The Chester Archaeological Society welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation. The coronavirus pandemic and the ensuing lockdown have led to severe economic and social disruption and to changes in attitudes. At the moment it is difficult to judge which impacts will endure and which will prove to be temporary; at the least it seems likely that existing trends will be intensified.

2.0 Creating a ‘Green and pleasant land’

2.1 *Policies, aspirations and aims*

2.1.1 Cheshire West and Chester Council is well supplied with policies and advice to guide it: the *One City Plan*, *Local Plan Part Two*, *Chester and Environs Characterisation Study* and the *Chester Public Realm Design Guide*. The documents are still relevant and should be the starting points for future action.

2.1.2 The *One City Plan* offers some answers to what the city’s aspirations should be:

- a distinctive city that makes its mark in the world. It is somewhere that people want to live, visit, work and study because they know that it is a city with a unique historic environment. (page 7)
- Chester should focus on being a distinctive regional city with its own brand that exploits its unique heritage ... (page 27).

On page 28, it sets out a number of aims, among which:

- Place education at the heart of the city’s values, supporting its Colleges and University ...
- Be accessible, easy to travel around and welcoming.
- Strive to be a sustainable city by promoting environmental best practice ...
- Respect, reveal and celebrate the city’s rich historical heritage and architecture – improving public realm and open spaces and encouraging developments of the highest standards.
- Build local capacity in Chester residents to empower them with the skills [to] .. inform decision-making and management.

2.2 *Town centre uses and activities*

2.2.1 In Chester town centre uses have always been primarily administrative, religious, residential, retail, commercial, leisure, and, over the past 150 years, higher education and tourism. Only small industrial suburbs developed in the nineteenth century (Newtown, Boughton), replaced by mainly residential redevelopment since the 1970s. Administrative and commercial functions have declined in the past twenty years with greater centralisation of government and the growth of online banking. Mass retail is also moving rapidly online, a trend heightened by the pandemic. It remains to be seen if the demand for office accommodation will recover from enforced home working and whether the numerous cafes will survive the enforced break in socialisation.

2.2.2 These trends leave residential, leisure (heritage and other cultural activities), non-discretionary retail for residents and specialised, discretionary retail aimed at residents and visitors, higher education and some business (including spin-offs from higher education?). We discuss some of these topics further below.

2.3 *Space for communities*

2.3.1 The Storyhouse café area provides space for informal meetings. Community groups already find accommodation in a variety of buildings around the city. It is not immediately clear what else or what different is needed in terms of indoor space. Outdoor space is dealt with under Sustainability.

2.4 *Sustainability, travel and accessibility*

2.4.1 New residential areas in the city centre should be relatively high-density, low-carbon developments and should be accompanied by nearby green space (*One City Plan*, 32, 39, 56). There is a shortage of shared green spaces in the centre of Chester compared with historic cities such as York and Lincoln, and the Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the need for these. In keeping with Chester's medieval character these should be in backland areas, such as the land currently proposed for the MSCP between Princess Street and Hunter Street, in the Commonhall Street area and behind the former Quick's Garage. There needs to be enough non-discretionary and discretionary retail in the city centre to meet residents' needs. Beyond the centre, supermarkets and other shops should be built or progressively moved to central positions in the suburbs or onto suburban bus routes.

2.4.2 We have set out our views on travel in our response to the 'Walk Ride, Thrive' consultation (http://chesterarchaeolsoc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/CAS_PlanConsult20_CWaC_WalkRideThrive_PC_Comments_V02.pdf). These are aimed at 1) simplifying and reducing motor traffic in the city, in favour of pedestrians and cyclists and improving air quality; 2) removing infrastructure aimed at motor vehicles that discourages pedestrians and cyclists and damages the public realm; 3) enhancing damaged historic radial routes to minimise the fragmentation of the city centre caused by the Inner Ring Road, thus making access to it easier, more attractive and enjoyable for pedestrians and cyclists. In particular we argue for reducing the vehicle capacity of the Inner Ring Road and resurfacing the historic streets of the city centre. These ideas are foreshadowed in the *One City Plan* and details are set out in the *Public Realm Design Guide*.

To these suggestions we would now add:

- A Park and Ride terminal at the A56/M53 junction.
- An enhanced 'Shopper Hopper' service around the city, perhaps from the bus exchange anticlockwise around the Inner Ring Road, up St John Street, along Foregate Street and City Road to the railway station, returning to the bus exchange via Hoole Way. The vehicles should be low emissions – electric or hydrogen.
- Later, frequent services for Park and Ride and suburban buses.
- Cycle lanes on Parkgate Road/Liverpool between the University campus and the city centre.

2.5 *Opportunities for development and commercial investment*

2.5.1 Opportunities for development are constrained by the topography of the city, in particular the river, Roodee and Meadows, the Welsh border, and the Green Belt separating Chester from Ellesmere Port. In many parts of the city centre, opportunities for development are also constrained by the large number of Listed Buildings. Opportunities for development within the Conservation Areas are set out in the *Chester Characterisation Study*.

2.5.2 Several areas are already envisaged for residential development: Commonhall Street, the former Quick's Garage and the Linenhall site (*One City Plan*, 56 and 58, H5, H8 and H13 respectively), also Northgate Phase 2 (Princess Street–Hamilton Place).

2.5.3 As mentioned above, former industrial areas free for redevelopment are few. Those that exist are set out in the *One City Plan*, 58–60, especially BQ 1 and BQ 4, east and west of the railway station respectively. Given the shrinkage of the retail sector, to these could possibly be added Centurion Point.

3.0 *Destination management and town centre promotion*

3.1 This is the issue that should provide the touchstone for judging answers to the other questions. The past few years have seen an upsurge in hotel construction, which presupposes that Chester is a desirable place to visit. However, this begs the question: what are people coming to see?

3.2 *Chester's heritage as its unique selling point*

3.2.1 *The One City Plan* makes it clear that it is the city's heritage that is its unique selling point. 'Heritage' we take to mean its built historic environment, archaeological remains and documentary archives and the constantly refreshed insights into the past that we can gain from them. A cinema may be patronised by residents of the centre of the city and some suburbs, and people within a 20-mile radius may make use of a theatre, but so far as we can see it will be the city's heritage that attracts visitors from further afield. We no longer see Chester as a major shopping destination, although people who come for other reasons may also do discretionary shopping if the ranges of goods are right.

3.3 *The need for high-quality development and the skills required*

3.3.1 Fresh emphasis therefore needs to be given to repairing and maintaining the city's monuments. We acknowledge the recent repairs to the Watergate and those now in

progress at the Northgate steps, but over the past five years progress has been slow and there has been a degree of neglect: witness the collapse of part of the Walls after a poor planning decision; similar criticisms were voiced eight years ago in the *One City Plan* (page 19).

3.3.2 The English Heritage document *Power of Place* highlighted that people see the historic environment in its totality, rather than as a series of individual sites and buildings. This means that the quality of the public realm, especially historic streets, needs to be enhanced, and new development needs to be of the highest standard to give a 'quality feel'. In recent years the appearance of the City Centre Conservation Area has been harmed by out-of-scale, inappropriately designed buildings, for instance Sumner House, the Delamere Street Health Centre and the Hunter Street student accommodation, while further harm is planned by CWaC in the form of the multi-storey car park on the Northgate site; a slab-sided seven-storey hotel has recently been approved on Black Diamond Street, adjacent to the conservation area, without regard to the reasonable criticisms raised by the Chester Civic Trust; and a planning application has been submitted for a crude two-storey addition to Royal House on the corner of Upper Northgate Street and Delamere Street. The placing of the new anti-terrorism bollards also shows a degree of insensitivity as well as prejudicing possible changes to traffic flows. That it is possible to do better is attested, for example, by the bus exchange, the George Street pocket park, Hotel Indigo and the consented hotel at 109-11 Foregate Street. (See also the Chester Civic Trust 'Good, Bad and Ugly' awards for 2020 (<https://chestercivictrust.org.uk/winners-of-2020-good-bad-and-ugly-awards/>)).

3.3.3 The skills required of members, officers and developers to achieve this are set out in the *Local Plan Part Two*, CH5, para 2.33:

A knowledge and understanding of the local context is necessary in order to achieve high quality new development. This requires a thorough understanding of the city's physical form; its key approaches; its topography, morphological and historical development; its key unique elements and urban form that gives Chester its character and strong sense of place; its uses; its overall character, architectural quality, materials and detailing and building heights; its buildings of townscape merit and shopfront quality; the nature and quality of its landscape character and public realm.

3.4 *A new museum*

3.4.1 Chester will not reap the potential benefit of its heritage – in terms of tourism or public education – without a new museum. The need for this was recognised in the *Chester Interpretation Masterplan* of 2009:

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.

A museum should not be, as may be imagined, a 'cabinet of curiosities' or a place that just regurgitates familiar but outworn stories, but a place where the history and development of Chester and its neighbourhood at a 'crossroads of Britain' – between

the English Midlands and South, the upland areas of Wales and the North, and the Irish Sea coastlands, all with different resources, cultures and politics – can be explored in all their complexity: a vital ingredient in education for citizenship. The Agricola Tower of Chester Castle has recently been repaired, but that investment will not be repaid without making the Upper Bailey of the castle a specific destination. We understand that the possibility of creating a museum and possibly an art gallery in the castle has been studied and that there are indicative costs for an outline scheme – in the region of one-third of the cost of the Northgate development. This option should be further investigated without delay.

4.0 Conclusions

4.1 The recommendations here:

- Are based on policies and guidance that have already been publicly consulted on and discussed.
- Play to the city's strengths: its distinctive architecture, sense of place and border location.
- Benefit all parts of the city: the suggested actions are dispersed around the city, help to bind it together again and make it more attractive for everybody.
- Look to the future: they represent good environmental practice.
- Promote an open approach to the past that is an essential foundation of a better present and a better future.

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