

CHESHIRE WEST AND CHESTER LOCAL PLAN REVIEW

CHESTER ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY RESPONSE

SUMMARY

The challenges of Covid-19 and climate change and the tools in the latest planning guidance present an opportunity to re-envision settlements as environmentally sustainable, healthy, attractive and historically meaningful places for people to live, work and visit.

We consider that the two parts of the CWaC *Local Plan*, neighbourhood plans (including the *Chester One City Plan*) and supporting strategies and evidence base documents should be distilled into clear, visual long-term masterplans for communities that prioritise:

- Topography/flood risk
- Travel – walking, cycling and public transport rather than private motor vehicles
- Capitalising on the qualities of historic walkable settlements and healing the wounds inflicted by adaptation for motor vehicles
- Shops and services that are easily accessible at the centres of communities
- Gradually running down car-dependent places in favour of more sustainable town-centre locations
- Attractive places and spaces that enhance historical character
- Adapting old buildings rather than demolishing them
- Adapting landscapes to encourage biodiversity, capture carbon and reduce flooding.

DETAIL

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 Part 1 of the CWaC *Local Plan* was adopted in 2015 and Part 2 in 2019. Since then, there have been two major external challenges – Covid-19 and recognition of the climate crisis. In addition, changes in planning law and guidance are foreseen in the government White Paper *Planning for the Future*, in particular prior approval in principle of blocks of land for growth or renewal and the challenge to ‘build beautiful’ (the *National Design Guide*, *National Model Design Code* and the *Guidance Notes for Design Codes*). CWaC has recently carried out five major relevant consultations: *Play your Part, Walk, Ride, Thrive*; the *High Street, Town and City Centre Commission*; the *Climate Emergency Response Plan*; and the *Chester One City Plan*. The Chester Archaeological Society has responded to all of these consultations, as well as to *Planning for the Future*.¹ Our comments here build on those responses.

¹ *Play your Part*: https://chesterarchaeolsoc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/CAS_Consult19_CWaC_PlayYourPart_PC_Comments_V01.pdf

Walk, Ride Thrive: https://chesterarchaeolsoc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/CAS_PlanConsult20_CWaC_WalkRideThrive_PC_Comments_V02.pdf

High Street, Town and City Centre Commission: https://chesterarchaeolsoc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/CAS_PlanConsult20_CWaC_HighStreetCommission_PC_Comments_V03.pdf

Climate Emergency Response Plan: https://chesterarchaeolsoc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/CAS_consult20_CWaC_ClimateEmergencyResponsePlan_PC_Comments_V03.pdf

Chester One City Plan: https://chesterarchaeolsoc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/CAS_PlanConsult20_OneCityPlan_Review_PC_Comments_V02.pdf

Planning for the Future: https://chesterarchaeolsoc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/CAS_PlanConsult20_Gov_UK_PlanningForTheFuture_PC_Comments_V04.pdf

- 1.2 Part 2 of the *Local Plan* is backed up by neighbourhood plans, other strategies and evidence base documents and two maps (<https://maps.cheshirewestandchester.gov.uk/cwac/webmapping>; <https://maps.cheshirewestandchester.gov.uk/cwac/localplan>), all necessary but totally bewildering for residents who want to know what is planned or considered acceptable for their area. Nor does the degree of detail lead to good or certain outcomes. To this extent we agree with the statement in the *Planning for the Future White Paper*, p13:

There is not enough focus on design, and little incentive for high quality new homes and places: There is insufficient incentive within the process to bring forward proposals that are beautiful and which will enhance the environment, health, and character of local areas. Local Plans do not provide enough certainty around the approved forms of development, relying on vague and verbal statements of policy rather than the popularly endorsed visual clarity that can be provided by binding design codes. This means that quality can be negotiated away too readily and the lived experience of the consumer ignored too readily

- 1.3 The *Local Plan* needs to be revised to take account of the challenges summarised above and to be made more concise, visual and specific.

2.0 Challenges

2.1 Covid-19

We perceive Covid-19 as more of a catalyst for changes already in progress than as an agent of new changes: these include: home working; more online shopping but a greater appreciation of independent shops and local produce; appreciation of the benefits of less traffic; demand for local green space; and a better understanding of the relevance of general fitness to public health. Obviously, there will be some return to the pre-Covid 'normal', but some of these changes will be here to stay.

- 2.1.1 Homeworking, leading to less time being wasted on commuting, a decline in the demand for office space and in town-centre services that support office workers, but potentially a rise in suburban services to compensate.
- 2.1.2 Increased online shopping, accelerating the decline in bricks-and-mortar town-centre retail but partly balanced by a greater appreciation of independent, local shops and produce.
- 2.1.3 Lockdowns have brought home the importance of local green space for exercise, with benefits to physical and mental health.
- 2.1.4 Less traffic during lockdowns has made it possible to imagine what that would be like long-term.

2.2 Climate Change

All the above issues relate to the climate agenda as well. While the impacts of climate change are becoming clearer, there is still debate on the nature and scale of the changes need to mitigate and adapt to them. Here we list some measures relevant to the built environment and heritage.

- 2.2.1 An end to building on floodplains, which may need elaborate infrastructure to be secure and may simply divert flooding elsewhere. Future plans should be made on the assumption that flooding will get worse.
- 2.2.2 Active travel to reduce the impact of greenhouse gases, noise, accidents, the need for massive road infrastructure and to promote health.

- 2.2.3 Online shopping, which, it is argued, can be as environmentally friendly as bricks-and-mortar retail; the difference may lie in the 'last mile', ie how customers reach shops (by public transport, bicycle, on foot or by car) and how many purchases they make in one trip. If they are to sustain the town centres that we value, shops need to offer a comprehensive range of goods and a pleasant atmosphere.
- 2.2.4 The need to adapt and reuse buildings rather than demolish and rebuild, to reduce the embedded carbon footprint of construction.
- 2.2.5 Urban trees to reduce temperatures.
- 2.2.6 Rural landscape adaptation and restoration, eg woodland, hedges and wetlands to encourage biodiversity, capture carbon, reduce the risk of flooding and mitigate the impact of heavy rainfall.

2.3 *Planning Law and Guidance*

- 2.3.1 If blocks of land are to receive agreement in principle for growth or renewal, there needs to be a lot of preparatory work by the local authority to establish the parameters; see [our response](#) to the *Planning for the Future* White Paper, paras 4.4.4 and 5.6.
- 2.3.2 There needs to be a greater focus on design, to take account of context and local character, as set out in the [National Model Design Code](#) and [National Design Guide](#).

3.0 The Place of Heritage in Planning

- 3.1 The wide-ranging value of heritage has recently been summarised by the Society of Antiquaries of London:

Understanding the past is key to understanding our place in the world. Its practical implications are wide-ranging, delivering heritage-led regeneration and tourism, the public health benefits of informed planning and placemaking, critically informing public policy on social justice and cohesion, and contributing through long-term understanding to modelling and developing responses to climate change. (*Statement regarding the threatened closure of University Departments* May 20th, 2021. <https://www.sal.org.uk/2021/05/statement-regarding-the-threatened-closure-of-university-departments/>)

- 3.2 It has been argued that we live in the 'Anthropocene' epoch, where the supposedly natural environment has in fact been fundamentally shaped by human activity. Thus, the climate crisis can be seen as part of our 'dark heritage', as much, for example, as the continuing social impacts of transatlantic slavery or wars, and heritage practitioners should concern themselves with this environment, just as they do with built heritage and material culture. Anthropogenic climate change is a 'wicked issue', complex in its science, its impacts and in the technical, political/ideological and social factors that gave rise to it and sustain it. The study of past societies and their interaction with the environment helps us to understand the interlocking issues, confront them and to sometimes suggest specific measures for mitigation and adaptation (H Morel & J Oud Ammerveld, *From Climate Crisis to Climate Action: Exploring the Entanglement of Changing Heritage in the Anthropocene*: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17567505.2021.1957261>).
- 3.3. Heritage assets can be damaged or lost as a result of climate change and may be threatened by insensitive attempts at mitigation and adaptation. Conversely, they may suggest solutions. There may be value in considering the future of monuments to the drivers of that change (eg urban motorways) from a historical point of view, as

happens with other aspects of 'dark heritage', ie removal, adaptation or preservation as exemplars (as has been done, for example, with the Berlin Wall).

4.0 Suggested Revisions to the *Local Plan*

- 4.1 To deal with the challenges that we face, the current *Local Plan* needs to be revised to provide a much clearer vision and stronger lead. The measures that we suggest would create more pleasant, distinctive places to live, protect and enhance local heritage, improve health and mitigate the impact of climate change. Whether local authorities have the powers to implement such a programme, safe from challenge by developers or from being overturned by government inspectors, is a different matter.
- 4.1.1 There needs to be long-term (eg 20-year) masterplanning based on the [National Model Design Code](#), setting out visually and specifically how settlements work and should develop in terms of topography, travel and the location of local facilities (eg shops, supermarkets, schools, healthcare, space for employment, green space). Essentially this would be a modern version of, for example, the post-war Greenwood Plan for Chester.
- 4.1.2 As the floods of January 2021 made obvious, there should be no further development on high-risk floodplains, eg Blacon Meadows, and the future of existing developments in these areas may have to be considered. Attempts to protect new developments against flooding by engineering measures may simply divert the problem elsewhere. We should work with nature, not against it.
- 4.1.3 Travel should prioritise walking, cycling and public transport rather than private motor vehicles, and this should be reflected in the transport infrastructure. However, restrictions on car access to town centres for urban and suburban populations must be matched by improvements in public transport and cycle lanes, and for the rural population cars will continue to be important. Cycle lanes should be safe, direct and attractive and form a coherent network ([Cycle Infrastructure Design](#), especially p 8). We have already put forward suggestions for such a cycle network for Chester city centre; see [our response](#) to the *Walk, Ride, Thrive* consultation.
- 4.1.4 Masterplans should capitalise on the inherited walkability of historic settlements such as Chester and Northwich and restore and extend these qualities. The wounds inflicted by adaptation for motor vehicles in tearing settlements apart – eg the Inner Ring Road and the widening of Boughton in Chester, High Street in Winsford and Chester Way in Northwich – need to be healed, eg by tree-planting and, where appropriate, the creation of cycle lanes. In this light, replacing the Princess Street pocket park by a multi-storey car park as part of the Northgate development, when there is already an underground car park adjacent that could be modernised (cf [National Model Design Code](#), p17) is indicative of completely outmoded thinking.
- 4.1.5 There needs to be a hierarchy of facilities, situated so far as possible in the hearts of suburbs/villages and in town centres, where they can be easily reached on foot or bicycle or by public transport. Different parts of settlements should be well linked to one another. This is a reinforcement of the town-centre first principle.
- 4.1.6 Over the past half-century, towns such as Chester have to some extent been turned inside out, with retail and employment increasingly located in a number out-of-town parks designed to be reached by car. In the case of Chester at least, retail has also displaced housing in the city centre (eg in the Northgate area and along Pepper Street). Given that the total number of shops is likely to continue to fall, in principle some reversion to town-centre residential would not be ahistorical or undesirable, although, as pointed out in the May 2021 Chester Civic Trust [News](#), p 5, this can be

problematical. Where possible, car-dependent retail parks should be phased out in favour of more sustainable locations, either in suburbs (for everyday food retailing) or town centres, as argued above, 4.1.5. For example, there is underused retail space along Foregate Street in Chester, easily serviced from the Inner Ring Road.

- 4.1.7 Local design codes and coordinating codes need to be developed, based on the [National Model Design Code](#) and [National Design Guide](#), not only for growth and renewal areas but for Conservation Areas, to create and maintain sustainable and attractive places and spaces that respect and enhance local historical character. For this purpose, the policies of the existing *Local Plan* have been shown to be completely inadequate; for example, views of the north-western part of Chester city centre from Sealand Road (*Local Plan Part 2*, 23, 2.42, key view 11) have now been destroyed by a wall of new large buildings, from the former Northgate Travelodge to the Northgate MSCP, and unambiguous visual guidance needs to be given. Design and use parameters should be prioritised for sensitive sites, eg the former Quicks Garage on Lower Bridge Street, the former cinema (now Mecca Bingo) by Cow Lane Bridge, and the Linenhall site and Centurion Point in Chester.
- 4.1.8 Old buildings should be adapted rather than demolished to minimise the embedded carbon footprint of construction. There is an opportunity to make mediocre buildings of the 1960s and 1970s more attractive; see, for example, [our comments](#) on Royal House, Upper Northgate Street, Chester, para 4.2.
- 4.1.9 If discretionary, town-centre retail is to compete with online shopping, there needs to be a comprehensive range of specialist shops to make customers' trips worthwhile. In the case of Chester, they should capitalise on trading from heritage premises.
- 4.1.10 The countryside is the product of human action over millennia, as is the built environment. It is home to archaeological sites but also to historic environmental features, eg ancient woodland and fieldscapes, that have a variety of heritage values; they may also have practical value in greater carbon sequestration and water retention than modern farming landscapes. Heritage assets may be at risk through insensitive landscape adaptation, but this can be addressed by careful management. We have addressed these matters in [our response](#) to the draft *Climate Emergency Response Plan*.

5.0 Settlement Differentiation

- 5.1 Revision of the *Local Plan* provides an opportunity to reconsider not only individual policies but also the roles of settlements in the borough. We presented our vision for Chester in [our response](#) to the *High Street, Town and City Centre Commission*: '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'. Chester's location at the head of a constantly changing estuary and the pioneering work of Dr John Haygarth at the Infirmary in studying and controlling infectious diseases only add topicality to the wide-ranging significance of many other aspects of its long history. If the former Basque industrial city of Bilbao can reinvent itself on the strength of the Guggenheim Museum, why should Chester not do likewise?

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