

CHESTER ONE CITY PLAN

SUBMISSION BY THE CHESTER ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY August 2011

The production of a holistic plan such as this is to be warmly welcomed, as are many of the ideas it contains. However, its treatment of the subject matter is uneven in detail, and in its desire to be visionary it fails to 'grasp the nettle' in spelling out the contradictions between existing plans or the implications of new ones. What is needed at the end of the document is not so much a timeline for the delivery of projects as one for their critical appraisal, together with a 'decision tree' showing how schemes logically depend on one another.

It is almost inevitable that the majority of the comments that follow are negative; proposals of which we approve tend to be passed over. This is unfair on the compilers of the plan, whom we thank for their hard work.

1.0 First impressions

The number of simple, obvious errors detracts from a 'professional' impression

Given that this document is endorsed by the Leader of CWandC and the Chairman of Chester Renaissance, who is also a professor at Liverpool Hope University, the number of spelling mistakes, typographical errors and solecisms in it is extremely unfortunate and brings the document and the organisations behind it into disrepute. This is not a matter of academic purity: for the importance of good written English to the credibility of businesses, see: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-14130854>.

Examples of mistakes picked up by a computer spellchecker include: T/the Barrs for The Bars (numerous examples); *Deva Vitrix* for *Deva Victrix* (in fact the normal Roman name for Chester was just *Deva*); archeological for archaeological (several examples); car-bourne for car-borne (ugly expression); wellbeing for well-being; onestop for one-stop; dueled for dualled (ie having a dual carriageway: ugly neologism); instills for instils; CG4 Former St Martin's Lodge,Nuns Road (no space); Kaleyards.This (no space); Telford's Warehouse for Telford's Warehouse; Closures for closure; aloud for along; Chesters for Chester's; archeopark for archaeopark (if there is such a word!); inappropriate capitalisation, eg: 'Chester is synonymous with a rich Heritage and Culture'.

This list does not pretend to be exhaustive, and a more leisurely reading of a printed version of the document by a member of staff skilled in proof-reading (whom we know to exist within CWandC) would doubtless bring more errors to light.

2.0 Why a One City Plan?

The plan jumps from vision, to iteration of existing ideas, to delivery, without any space for critical appraisal.

'Many plans and strategies have been produced for constituent parts of Chester stretching back over a considerable time, but these have generally been done in isolation, or overlap, and by numerous organisations with different priorities. Hence confusion and a real lack of direction and prioritisation. ... The starting point for the One City Plan has been to understand where Chester is now (The City of Now), followed by the stitching and weaving of a mosaic of new and existing ideas, plans, strategies and projects into a single coherent framework. ... The One City Plan is a single clear strategy. It will co-ordinate and drive a programme of public and private investment and

development activity into Chester city centre over the next 15 years. It is action-orientated and delivery focused'. 'The starting point for the One City Plan has been to understand where Chester is now (The City of Now), followed by the stitching and weaving of a mosaic of new and existing ideas, plans, strategies and projects into a single coherent framework'. (OCP, pages 4 and 5). However, page 5 also refers to 'creating a vision'.

We are concerned that there is a tension between a document that sets out to create a vision and one that is action-orientated to the extent of setting out a timetable for implementation. The latter needs to spell out the contradictions between existing plans and the logical dependence of one decision on another. This dependence may be implicit to some extent in the delivery timeline, but it is certainly not made explicit.

3.0 City of Now - People & Communities, Business & Investment

Chester's current difficulties may be more easily appreciated with an understanding of its historical development and an application of simple geographical theory.

Chester's economic difficulties (OCP, pages 9 and 10) are perhaps more simply explained using Central Place Theory as used by economic geographers. Historically the city's importance has derived from its role as a centre of government (national, local and ecclesiastical); as a centre of communications (port and railways); as a fashionable social centre; and as a regional centre for luxury trades. However, it has never been a gateway for trade between wealthy regions and has never had a strong entrepreneurial culture or much of an economy that requires a large, skilled workforce (except, perhaps, in administrative and legal matters). Over the past generation governmental functions have been steadily removed (culminating, of course, in the imposition of CWandC, which leaves Chester merely as a 'geographical expression' governed from Winsford). As commerce has moved in ever-larger circles, the city has lost its place in the urban hierarchy. Knowledge- and skill-based, exporting companies such as Brookhirst Switchgear died out fifty years ago. A once-distinctive high-quality store is now merely a small branch of a nationwide chain. Successive councils, city and county, have allowed the creation of out-of-town shopping centres, at the Greyhound Park, Boughton and Cheshire Oaks, and a ring of suburban supermarkets; there is also the Broughton retail park just over the Welsh border. Consequently former manufacturing sites are now given over to housing, the numerous vacant offices in the Northgate quarter reflect the withdrawal of government, and a resident of 'greater Chester' can now live perfectly satisfactorily without having to visit the city centre to transact any business at all!

Of course, many of these problems are not unique to Chester: they can be found across Europe and the United States. However, they are hitting Chester particularly hard.

4.0 City of Now - Living City

Chester's failings as a cultural mirror its decline as a centre of government, wealth-creation and distribution.

Given the prominence given to heritage throughout the document, it is disappointing that the weaknesses of the Council's heritage services are not spelt out. The Grosvenor Museum is small and cannot display more than a fraction of its archaeological collections, and the opening hours of Chester History and Heritage are being reduced. In addition CWandC runs a Historic Environment Team, the Cheshire Historic

Environment Record, the Cheshire Archives and Local Studies Service and a small local history collection in Chester library. These organisations operate with the minimum of synergy, to the detriment of professional archaeologist and historians, residents in general and visitors.

5.0 City of Now - Access & Movement

The capacity needs to be retained for residents to park their cars in the city centre at hours when public transport is infrequent. There is absolutely no discussion of connections with local airports. Much work is still desirable at Chester railway station, which now gives the impression of a well maintained ruin rather than a crumbling one.

We largely agree with the analysis of roads, parking and transport in and around the city (OCP pages 13 and 14). However, it is arguable that at the railway station too much space has been given over to taxis at the expense of short-stay parking for private cars. It needs to be remembered that taxis are an expensive method of transport, and it is impractical to provide frequent bus services to all local destinations at all hours.

Rail transport to Liverpool airport is basic and requires changing trains at Liverpool Central. A long-term aspiration might be the creation of a triangular service: Chester–Liverpool–(Liverpool airport)–Runcorn –Chester. Rail transport to Manchester is also poor and involves travel via Crewe. Has use of the Delamere line been considered?

Despite the very valuable recent improvements, Chester station is still spoilt by redundant structural elements (brick arcades, iron girders) that used to support parts of a more extensive overall roof. In addition, the overall roof of the Manchester bay is separate from the rest. Thus, to an arriving traveller, the station still looks fragmented, even ruinous. These elements should be demolished or incorporated into new structures.

6.0 City of the Future - Vision and Strategic Objectives

These are unobjectionable. However, with the exception of the emphasis on heritage, they could be applied to almost any town in the country.

Re: Objective 1: Although it is certainly not to be discouraged, the continued reliance on inward investment is disappointing. The city, county and country have been doing this for a generation: the result is branch factories and branch offices of enterprises based in large cities in the UK or, more often, abroad. Consequently they are particularly vulnerable to decisions made by managers whose interests and sympathies lie elsewhere. The emphasis, certainly over the longer term, for the city as for the country, has to be on a locally embedded entrepreneurial community and culture. Has CWandC examined the case for a regional stock exchange or would this merely benefit one of the larger cities (probably Manchester)?

CWandC needs to set a lead by purchasing local goods and services wherever reasonably practical, and where the capacity does not exist at the moment, encouraging local businesses to fill those gaps in the future.

Re: Objective 5: 'Be safe, clean, vibrant, healthy and pleasurable'. As we have pointed out before, despite the efforts of CWandC street cleaners, Chester is not clean by the standards of other British tourist destinations, let alone the standards to be found widely across western Europe. The cleanliness of the city centre, within the Walls, is fair, but poor on Saturday afternoons; outside the Walls and in the suburbs it is poor. Cleanliness needs to be judged not just on public areas, but also on the state of private

grounds visible from public rights of way (eg from the City Walls). The problem arises, of course, from the current fashion for take-away food, which results in large numbers of discarded cans, bottles, cups, food trays and wrappers of all sorts. Again, this is a national, not just a local problem, and has been highlighted recently by Jeremy Paxman (eg <http://www.keepbritaintidy.org/News/Default.aspx?newsID=1030>). In the lack of apparent central government interest in the matter, or even publicity, we look to CWandC for imaginative and effective action.

Re Action 2: The need for easy cycle access across the Inner Ring Road to the city centre and for secure and free cycle parking at locations around the centre needs to be emphasised.

Re: Action 6: In the past local authorities have often supported local organisations through the expertise of their staff and help in kind, eg free use of facilities and premises. As over the past few years authorities have had to ‘tighten their belts’, this support has decreased. Thus, contrary to the political aspiration for voluntary bodies to replace public expenditure, it is to some extent under the umbrella of public expenditure that voluntary bodies flourish.

7.0 City of the Future - People & Communities

Re: Action 7: Surely there is enough high-density city-centre housing (ie apartments) in Chester already? Surely what families need are traditional houses? The idea of providing ‘family housing’, at least in significant quantity, in the proposed ‘Artisans’ Quarter (ie around Commonhall Street) seems bizarre. The City’s MP has already made similar observations.

8.0 City of the Future - Business and Investment

Re: Action 7: ‘The existing retail offer will become further *specialised* to support niche, high value, local and independent retailers....Chester will become a nationally competitive, *comprehensive* shopping “experience” providing for its residents and enticing visitors’ (*Our italics*). These statements appear to be contradictory, if ‘comprehensive’ refers to the range of goods available. Does ‘Chester’ refer to the city centre or does it include the suburban retail parks? The thinking needs to be spelled out.

9.0 City of the Future - Living City

Again, the objectives are generally laudable. However, implementing them will require considerable hard thinking and in some cases the aspirations run counter to CWandC’s recent actions.

Re: Action 2: We welcome the CWandC’s apparent commitment to high-quality architectural design, as symbolised by the appointment of a Design Champion. We have seen, *via* CAAC, a draft of the Manifesto for Contemporary Design. We have broadly welcomed this, although in some places its understanding of the existing townscape and its evolution is weak. However, we are wary of the idea of an independent review panel, which could be interpreted an attempt to bypass the Conservation Area Advisory Committee. This would sit ill with the aspirations for community engagement expressed elsewhere in the OCP. Ultimately the test of CWandC’s credibility in this matter lies in which development schemes are approved and which are rejected, and whether those approved are built according to the plans submitted.

A glance at the maps in the volumes of the Chester Characterisation Study shows just how much of the city is now classed as 'negative environment'. Overwhelmingly this is large-scale post-war development, and in much of it the former City Council played a leading role (eg the Northgate area; social housing in Newtown). Many of the buildings in question would doubtless have been classed as 'cutting edge' (to use the fashionable expression) when they were built. We look to CWandC to learn the appropriate lessons: the dangers of uniform, large-scale development in a small town like Chester; the need to take a long-term, sceptical view of architectural fashions; and also the need to avoid accepting poor-quality buildings just to give the impression of 'getting things done' and appearing 'pro-business', 'pro-development'.

It is very noticeable that, for instance in County Durham and Lincolnshire, many new buildings (especially houses and apartments) make use of traditional building materials and styles (eg brick and roof tile colours and forms; roof pitches). Has any effort been made to identify and encourage the use of such materials and styles in Chester? It is easy to decry such efforts as 'pastiche', but the results are more satisfying and interesting than the bland 'national' styles that are usually the alternative.

It is important that the requirement for high-quality design and construction is extended from the city centre to inner-city residential areas, the proposed Central Business Quarter and to the suburbs. Architects must not be allowed to think that once outside the city centre they can default to building featureless rectangular boxes.

Re: Actions 3 and 5: 'Safeguard and invest in Chester's rich history'; 'Enhance the contemporary cultural and civic offer'. Over the past four years (approximately), the strength of CWandC's Historic Environment Team has been reduced by one third, and it seems likely that further posts will be lost as existing staff retire. At the moment, in terms of the (very welcome) historical interpretation being led by Chester Renaissance, CWandC is reaping the harvest of local knowledge gained by staff of the former City Council over four decades. In another decade this in-house expertise will no longer be available. It will be bought in from external sources with extreme difficulty, and future historical interpretation can be expected to be mediocre to poor.

At the moment CWandC's heritage services are fragmented: in addition to the Historic Environment Team there is the Cheshire Historic Environment Record (currently at Backford Hall), the Grosvenor Museum, Chester History and Heritage (with declining opening hours), Chester and Cheshire Archives and Local Studies, and a small local history collection in Chester library. These services operate along traditional organisational lines with little synergy. There is surely scope for some unification of these services (without sacrificing specialist expertise) for the benefit of both professional and general users, preferably in suitable, attractive and accessible premises. Page 50 envisages an 'arch[a]eopark' in Dee House. What is this? Arguably Chester needs a smaller number of high-quality heritage venues, not an increased number of small ones.

Re: Action 4: 'It will be important to enhance biodiversity in the city centre. This will be achieved through the use of green and brown roofs and walls in new and refurbished buildings, the delivery of new shared green spaces, and an increase in tree planting - providing valuable wildlife habitats, natural shade, and reducing water run-off'. These aspirations, while theoretically laudable from many points of view, ignore the essentially medieval, densely packed character of the street frontages of the historic core of the city. The introduction of green spaces without very careful thought could easily fragment the city centre into a number of 'villages' (*cf* Constantinople after 1204). Historically, green spaces were found in the backlands behind the major street frontages

(essentially back gardens before they were gradually built up in the post-medieval period), and it is in such locations that they could profitably be reintroduced. Locations that suggest themselves for small green spaces are the car park on derelict land off Volunteer Street, behind Commonhall Street, within the confines of the proposed Northgate development, and off Queen Street. It is ironic that CWandC is supporting the paving-over of the existing green space south of the Cathedral.

10.0 City of the Future - Movement & Accessibility

In principle we approve of these aspirations. However, 'the devil will be in the detail'.

Re: Action 5: Consideration needs to be given to where people will leave their bicycles once they reach the city centre. Convenient and free or cheap secure storage is needed if it is to be worthwhile for residents to cycle into the city center rather than use buses.

Re: Action 6: We strongly support this idea in principle. However, detailed study of traffic flows will be needed to allow informed decisions to be made, and, as suggested, it may well be necessary to revive the idea of a Western Relief Road. We have previously commented on the blighted nature of Lower Watergate Street, caused by its being a major feeder into the Inner Ring Road. A relief road would hopefully reduce this flow and allow the recreation of Lower Watergate Street as a positive environment.

Re: Action 7: The interdependence of ideas on transport infrastructure and large development schemes needs to be emphasised. To anticipate, a bus station is suggested more or less on its present site, behind the Town Hall, but we understood that a bus station had been specifically excluded from the Northgate scheme (along with a public market) to make it commercially viable. While Chester obviously needs to be commercially viable if it is to have a future, a long-term view needs to be taken of the basic shape of the city, rather than the latter being determined by *ad hoc* decisions based on transient financial circumstances.

Re: 1 - Current Ring Road. Reformatting the Hoole Way roundabout might give the opportunity to heal part of the 'shatter zone' around that section of the Ring Road and particularly restore some continuity to the Frodsham Street –Brook Street axis. It is worth noting that, visually, the Grosvenor roundabout is far more attractive than the other two because of the scale and quality of the surrounding buildings and the trees in the middle. It is important for drivers to be able to change direction on the ring road: on Lindum Hill/Broadgate in Lincoln the visitor can easily drive over a mile before finding somewhere to turn around!

Re: 3 - Pepper Street and Bridge Street. We drew attention to the damage done to the axis of Bridge Street–Lower Bridge Street in an earlier submission and are pleased that this point has been recognised.

Re - Car parking strategy. A problem with many of the present car parks is that entry and particularly exit can be difficult, especially from the New Crane Street and Little Roodee car parks. Thought needs to be given to how these might operate more efficiently. Again, the Little Roodee is under consideration as a potential site for a theatre/conference centre. We are not inclined to support this choice, but, if it were made, would alternative parking spaces be found and, if so, where? This brings us back to the interdependence of schemes. The parking envisaged at the railway station seems to be on the present site, on the city side of the tracks. This has limited capacity,

and it is difficult to build a multi-storey car park on the site that is visually acceptable. Consideration should be given to a car park on the far side of the tracks.

11.0 City of the Future - Development Opportunities: Historic Core

It is impossible to generalise about the ideas put forward here. All need detailed critical appraisal, both of their own merits and regarding the way they dovetail with other schemes

'However some of these incredible assets and parts of the historic city centre are in need of attention'. We endorse this comment. Some of John Douglas's fine half-timbered buildings on St Werburgh Street are in need to a coat of paint, and the facade of Brown's is crumbling. Collectively these faults create an air of neglect. CWandC and Chester Renaissance have recently shown a lead in the refurbishment of the St John's area: private property owners needed to be encourage to do the same.

Re: H1 Northgate development: It seems self-evident that there should be a bus station, or at least drop-off point, in what is supposed to be the heart of the city, which should be served by most local bus routes. We have already expressed our opposition to the marginalisation of the market on the Kaleyards site: this stands a good chance of ruining the market and would certainly ruin the Kaleyards.

Re: H3 Chester Cathedral.' ... ' a new public realm scheme to reconnect the Cathedral with the city centre'. Surely the point about English cathedrals is that they are often secluded from the cities in which they are built? By relatively simple resurfacing of the streets it is possible to tie the west door of the Cathedral more closely to the Town Hall Square and create a 'civic axis'. However, St Werburgh Street is and always has been a distinct area, and rather than try to create a new civic square, consideration should be given to making it greener and more secluded.

Re: Former ODEON cinema and Northgate Street: We strongly support efforts to return the Odeon building to public cultural use (not a bar!). The poor quality of some of the 1970s buildings on the east side of Northgate Street should be recognised. These should be targeted for redevelopment.

Re: H5 Commonhall Street area: This area clearly needs rejuvenation, and the idea of an 'artisan quarter' is appealing. It is also an obvious candidate for the introduction of a small 'green space'. However, we are very sceptical of the idea of creating 'family housing' there: surely it is an area for 'living above the shop'? Any development ideas need to take account of the fact that the area contains largely unexplored archaeology of undetermined but almost certainly important character and probably in a good state of preservation.

Re: H8 Chester Town Hall: 'Enhanced cultural offer'. As we have said about cultural services, there is a need for detailed, joined-up thinking about what cultural facilities are viable in the city and what sort of buildings they would require.

Re: H9 Former Quick's Garage: Again, we are sceptical of this idea of 'family living' on upper floors in the city centre. On the other hand, new build for retail or offices on the Lower Bridge Street frontage and some town houses to the rear (cf those on Nicholas Street Mews) overlooking green space off Volunteer Street might be worth considering.

Re: H10 Bridge Street–Pepper Street junction: We welcome ideas to improve this junction for pedestrians and to restore some visual continuity to Bridge Street and Lower Bridge Street. Perhaps the south gate of the Roman fortress could be marked here?

Re: H11 St Martin's Way: The junction with Watergate Street needs to be made more pedestrian friendly, and the west gate of the Roman fortress could be marked in some way. This road would benefit from 'greening', although there is probably not room for tree-planting.

It is noteworthy that no mention is made of the vacant Linenhall Stables site.

12.0 City of the Future - Development Opportunities: Castle Gateway

Re: CG1/5: We refer to our earlier comments on the need for an assessment of the number and type of cultural facilities that Chester can support and type of accommodation they require. As the document states, the Little Roodee is important for the amount of parking that it offers. We welcome the recognition of the 'knock on' effect of any development on this site on the rest of Chester: this is the sort of hard thinking that should permeate the whole document.

Re: CG2/3. 'A key strategy is to relocate some of the surface parking from within the castle walls'. Where would it be relocated to?

13.0 City of the Future - Development Opportunities: The Groves, Riverfont and Amphitheatre

Re: G2: '... a more appropriate and permanent solution can be established with arena seating expressing the grandeur of the lost amphitheatre'. This implies some form of permanent seating on the amphitheatre site. The Scheduled status of the site may well prevent this. In addition it would render impossible the appreciation of what little does survive of the Roman amphitheatre. There are numerous examples on the continent of where this has happened. Is a permanent outdoor theatre required? If so, why not put it in the Grosvenor Park? Again, we would argue that an assessment is needed of the number of cultural facilities that Chester can support.

14.0 City of the Future - Development Opportunities: Business Quarter

Re: BQ 4. City Centre North Gateway: Without opposing the ideas put forward, is this not a suitable site for a 'gateway car park' rather than trying to shoehorn one into the existing site south of the station? The idea of a separate footbridge alongside Hoole Road bridge is attractive (perhaps even giving direct access from the car park to the station).

Re: BQ 5. Transport Interchange: This sounds like a sensible use of the existing car park site. It would give the opportunity to clear away the present clutter and leave the elegant brick ramped approaches to the bridge visible.

15.0 City of the Future - Development Opportunities: The Bars (*note correct spelling*)

Re: TB1: We do not fully understand the proposals for the gyratory. However, we should like to see changes that restore visual continuity to Foregate Street–Boughton. See also the comments above on the need to maintain places where drivers can reverse direction on the Inner Ring Road

16.0 City of the Future - Development Opportunities: Gorse Stacks

The redevelopment of this area offers an opportunity to make good some of the damage caused by the building of the Inner Ring Road. Although a 'peripheral' site, the decisions about its development tie in closely with those regarding the centre of Chester.

Re: GS1: We agree that the redevelopment of the Gorse Stacks area needs to be considered as a whole, and ideas about a bus station there need to be resolved at an early stage as they are fundamental to how Chester 'works'.

Re: GS 2: We are strongly opposed to the relocation of the market to the Kaleyards, or to any significant building on it: it is one of Chester's historic open spaces and offers magnificent views of the Cathedral. Nevertheless, its present condition leaves considerable room for improvement.

Re: GS3: Northgate Arena and car park. 'Northgate Arena sits at the northern tip of the Gorse Stacks area and CWandC aims to relocate this leisure facility to better suited locations in the city. This will free up this area of land and help with the relocation of some of the facilities that will need to be replaced from other project areas within Gorse Stacks'. If CWandC wants to relocate the Northgate Arena, we need to know the sites being considered, as they may well impinge on other parts of this plan; if they do not so impinge, the locations will probably be very inconvenient ones for users! What are the facilities that might be displaced by redevelopment of Gorse Stacks?

Re: GS 4: We support the reorganisation of the St Oswald's Way/Brook Street junction.

17.0 City of the Future - Development Opportunities: Chester Port & Wharfs

Re: CP1: We are concerned about the size (especially height) of some of the buildings proposed, and indeed already under construction, in this area. New buildings ought to respect the height of the existing and should also reflect the downhill slope, as seen from the flyover on the Inner Ring Road.

18.0 City of the Future - Development Opportunities: Chester Racecourse

Re: RC1: This again is a classic case where joined-up thinking is required, because of the 'knock-on' effect of decisions. No consideration seems to have been given to access to the putative conference centre by public transport. The New Crane Street car park is difficult to get out of at peak times.

19.0 Delivery timeline

As stated earlier, we consider this premature. What would have been more useful would have been a summary of the alternatives and contradictions contained in existing plans and the order in which they need to be resolved. No comments are therefore offered on this section