

Urban Panel

Peterborough Review Paper

1. The UP has decided that all its visits in 2006 should have a bearing on one theme – the relevance of the Garden City and New Town movements (and other associated C20 town expansions) to the Sustainable Communities agenda of the early C21, in particular, the growth areas. Peterborough was, therefore, an obvious venue, having experienced growth with the Peterborough Development Corporation (PDC) in 1970s and '80s (when population grew from c. 80k – 135k) and with further growth envisaged (from today's 150k to 200k).

Plans for Peterborough centre and for the surrounding area are to be carried forward by the City Council (PCC) and the Peterborough Urban Regeneration Company, "Opportunity Peterborough" (OP). Yet, it was not immediately evident to the Panel that either body had sufficiently analysed the successes and failures of the 1970s Greater Peterborough Plan to inform their future actions. Nor did it seem that they would be alone in that. Other proposals for the growth areas pay scant regard to the models of the C20 – an oversight which the UP hoped to some degree to correct.

2. In beginning to deepen their understanding, by close examination of Peterborough, the Panel were greatly assisted by staff and members of PCC, by colleagues from the EH regional team and CABE and by a number of extremely helpful presentations. Exceptionally, there were grounds for

specific thanks to one more body. The cathedral authorities were kind enough to allow members to climb the tower as a vantage point. The ascent was in the company of the Vice Dean and vergers for whose time and knowledge the Panel were most grateful. Not the most striking of towers, it is nevertheless deceptively high and thus offered a great viewpoint, even on a hazy day. The nature of the cathedral close, its intimate relationship with Cathedral Square and the city centre and the general disposition of the sites which were to be visited later were readily grasped. Furthermore, the relationship between the city and its prime infrastructure and the immediate resources, like the brickfields from which its C19 growth sprang, as well as to the wider fens landscape was apparent.

Passing back through the cathedral, Panel members were naturally struck by the many architectural qualities of the great church and, literally above all, by the remarkable achievement of the post fire restoration of the nave ceiling. The fact that the first day's meetings were held in Almoners' Hall offered further opportunities to appreciate the close and, at the end of presentations, the cathedral's interior once more. Five members of the Panel thus found themselves attending choral evensong and, in so doing, nearly doubled the congregation. While not immediately obvious that numbers attending evensong would be a matter of note to the Panel, this is an issue to which the Review Paper will return.

3. The splendid and remarkable isolation of this great church, standing for centuries in the heart of the fens in a small market town is noteworthy. It

might be said that Peterborough did not fulfil its potential and, whether that is fair and historically accurate or not, it is an intimation of the current test for the city. This review will, of course, present detailed reasoning for its conclusions but it seems helpful to reveal one recurring theme prematurely. Peterborough now faces a very great opportunity indeed, but standard development practice rarely delivers the inspiration, innovation and design quality required if the opportunity is to be taken. It will take very high standards, vigorously held to, to overcome the usual mediocrity and get the quality of development the city deserves.

The strategic context into which Peterborough has been formally welcomed by inclusion in the Growth Area is of undoubted national importance but, as was pointed out, it does not entail resources sufficient to transform infrastructure. Nevertheless, the city is one of the settlements most comfortable with proposed growth. Indeed, it was suggested to the Panel that a can-do attitude amongst the development and planning fraternity derived in part from the significant number of resident professionals with a background with the former Development Corporation. In terms of land assembly, political and community will and a structured, characterful historic centre, Peterborough is ahead of the game and may aim higher, but adding infrastructure such as the quality rail interchange, the new university a teaching hospital and sustainable public transport is also essential. Getting growth right is important not only for the future of Peterborough itself, but also for setting the tone for much development across the Growth Area.

In that regard, the Panel found much to commend PCC's aim to reinforce its environment city standing – as much for its global as its local dimension. Both in terms of new employment opportunities and of quality of life – both good reasons to come to live and work in Peterborough – the aspiration is welcome. However, the Panel noted that, here too, PCC would have to keep the pressure up. The potential gap between stated environmental ambition and built achievement is large. The gap must be narrowed by challenge to developers through the planning, transport and building control systems.

4. The Panel found a very great deal in Peterborough to enjoy, to question, to learn from and to comment on. Since its focus was on growth, beginning the Review with observations on the cathedral and the close might appear inappropriately heritage centred. The Panel was, however, convinced that a positive, expanded role for the cathedral was as important for the church and its community as it was for the vitality and image of the growing town. It was concerned though to hear that thoughts were turning to increased permeability of the close and development within it.

It was, however, made clear to the Panel that thinking about the future of the close was at a formative stage. The Panel accordingly hoped that its views on the principles which should inform change would be offered at a helpful moment. Those principles were:

- a. knowledge: the close does not apparently benefit from the existence of a Conservation Plan. This is a *sine qua non* for development in so

sensitive an area and the deficiency must be corrected. The production of such a plan will necessarily cast light on the historic relationship between cathedral and city – a relationship the story of which is surprisingly poorly understood today - and the desirability or otherwise of significant change to that relationship.

- b. open space policy: the importance of open space and its management throughout the city are key considerations. Interconnectedness between all such areas and the centre must undoubtedly be improved, but the Panel did not believe that that amounted to blanket approval for many, perhaps even any, new openings for routes through the close. Only illumination by the Conservation Plan and examination against a wider open spaces policy can ensure considered conclusions.
- c. tourism: Many thousands of people who take pleasure in the historic and beautiful parts of England pass through the Fens, up and down the GNER line and along nearby roads to Stamford. That so few of them get to see the historic core of the city and the wonderful building at its heart is most regrettable. Development in the close is apparently under consideration, in part at least, because of financial need. And yet there is an untapped resource the development of which would be mutually to the benefit of the town and the Dean & Chapter. The Panel pressed the strong case for a mutually owned policy for the fuller engagement of the cathedral with the daily life of the city and as a prime attraction to the city.
- d. culture: the cultural offer of Peterborough is already significant and will play a strong part in the development of a socially fulfilling and

attractive city, if all the elements are further reinforced. It is here that the role of the cathedral, with a continuing choral tradition, should be emphasised and expanded. A function in the cultural life of the sub-region, analogous to, and with the impact of, the Three Choirs Festival in Gloucester, Worcester and Hereford could be mutually beneficial to cathedral and city.

5. If the Panel was pleased that consideration of the future of the close was at an early stage, it was delighted that the plans for North Westgate were not yet set in stone. Five years ago, the big issue facing historic city centres was the crude introduction of the modern retail offer. In responding to this and, eventually in reviewing more sensitive proposals (such as Princesshay, Exeter), the Panel repeated a basic set of principles – about proper twenty four hour streets, which relate to and enhance necessary movement around the centre – about new buildings which relate to and enhance the best existing spaces and buildings of the town in question – about the creation of vital new spaces and quality public realm – and about the construction of genuinely separate buildings, capable of changing responsively in the future. In the plans for North Westgate, it found almost none of these principles fulfilled. The Panel urged those promoting the scheme to consider the following:

- a. It is not too late for characterisation of the centre of Peterborough, which still has many excellent qualities. Nor is it too late to promote a movement policy which makes the centre more permeable,

accessible and vital. Both of these studies should be undertaken before new retail development goes ahead.

- b. The survival of the historic core immediately adjacent to the existing shopping centre is already uncertain. In the city centre plan Priestgate is rather unfortunately symbolised by a white area on a map on which exciting, future things are coloured. Much more thought should be given to the vitality of Priestgate, Cowgate and Westgate itself before remaining economic vitality is sucked from these parts of the town.
- c. The Panel found the proposed new square at the north end of Westgate unconvincing. Westgate is a street and streets have a longevity derived from usefulness which should not lightly be thrown away. The Panel noted that there was a possibility that Westgate might eventually point straight at the new station and the proposed Quarter beyond. For a thoroughly strategic reason like that, the Panel was certain Westgate could and would change. For the creation of an unconvincing attraction, aimed at mitigating an already oversized shopping centre, the Panel did not think it should. Finally, as currently proposed, the new square appeared to involve the demolition of modest but attractive houses, while doing nothing to redress the growing isolation, almost ghettoisation, of the housing to the north. The Panel noted that Peterborough's surviving fabric of quality still combines to make the experience and memory of the town attractive and offers a potent tool for high

quality, distinctive regeneration. Nothing of quality should too easily be let go.

- d. The view down King Street sums up all that is antithetical to true urbanism about C20 shopping centres. It was the strong view of the Panel That, rather than repeating the design mistakes of that era, the city should be seeking a radically new, context responsive design for extended shopping – one which would then encourage the next improvement of Queensgate to attempt to correct its closed, “ignore the town”, monolithic nature.

6. The nature of the retail redevelopment cannot, of course, be divorced from the problems of access to the west. The Panel endorsed the intention of PCC to confront Bourges Boulevard and to improve its environment. It welcomed the fact that there were a significant number of new crossings proposed. However, it was not clear that the primary objective of linking the station and the new quarter around it to the town would succeed unless even more radical and challenging steps were taken. The depressing and difficult route to the station typifies the unfortunate results of post-war transport based planning around the country. Replacing big car parks with bigger ones and creating a vehicle based new quarter will not resolve that. The Panel stressed that the potential existed for a spectacular, attractive and functional new quarter, connected to the town in a meaningful manner which would create new business and living possibilities and contribute to the aspiration for Peterborough to move up a rung of the ladder. Greater ambition, which would create greater challenges, was needed.

7. For example, the Panel believed that the aspiration of the city to create a new university with its own coherent campus as part of a new vital mixed use sector of the town might well be fulfilled on Station West. This would depend, in turn, on the creation of the great station Peterborough deserves. The Panel noted that the entire image of some towns had been changed by genuine purposeful transformations of infrastructure. This was not a call for an iconic building, (a casual concept which the panel has rarely found fulfilled). Rather a statement that a brand new station of the highest architectural standing would instil new pride in the town, unlock development opportunities around it and catch the attention of the thousands of train travellers who see no reason to break their journey at present. Conversely, some low grade new office development which releases only just enough value to build new car parks and modestly revamp the station will fail by underachievement, and leave the city with an unwelcoming arrival point for another half century. The Panel was entirely sympathetic about the organisational and ownership hurdles which stood in the way of this aspiration, but felt that the matter was of such importance it should be drawn to the attention of relevant transport and planning ministers, as a good case for joined up government.

8. The Panel thought Hampton, as the latest of Peterborough's townships and a harbinger of things to come, to be one of the most informative worked examples of modern urban expansion that it had visited. It was very aware of how far the agenda has moved since the early 1990s and was struck by the, at times uncomfortable, fit between the voiced aspiration of PCC about the future and the current achievement at Hampton.

Acknowledging that the council was significantly disadvantaged by existing consents, it urged that the opportunity represented by the remaining phases of Hampton be grasped as a drawing board on which achievements for the present and tactics for the future could be worked out. In particular the Panel noted that:

- a. The Serpentine Green shopping centre already looked like something from an entirely other generation. The efforts to change the way it functions were welcome. However, the aspiration for a new Civic Centre, to turn around the impact and nature of the shopping centre, would only be achieved if that centre was constructed as early as possible.
- b. It appeared that there was relatively little knowledge about how the lives of the residents of Hampton contributed, if at all, to Peterborough. It was possible to envisage Hampton residents who worked away from home, not necessarily in Peterborough, shopped in one part of their township, drove to another for a health club, another for a restaurant and visited Peterborough rarely. The Panel felt there was a strong case for a developed understanding of the market for these houses and the ways in which that market may be either catered for, or modified, in order to attract economic activity to the centre, or make more sustainable communities in their own right of the townships. In this respect, the Panel were greatly concerned by the monotony of the land use and the lack of basic facilities such as corner shops and pubs.

- c. The Panel believed that this was a case for matching ambition with vision which must be supported by necessary resources such as relevantly skilled staff, political confidence and resolute capacity. With Hampton as a worked example, from which lessons, both positive and negative may be learnt, the Panel believed Peterborough could develop an extraordinarily high set of firm aspirations for the future townships, for the construction of which there are so many candidates.
- d. Aspiring development consortia might well be told that the City / developer relationship will be extremely demanding. These communities and the nature of their relationship to the city (and to each other) will make or break the admirable aspiration to become an environment city. New townships will need to be constructed by developers willing to go beyond new Part L (and they will presumably only do so in a bidding process, as PCC staff encouragingly intimated). Genuine vigorous and developer supported policies will have to drive down conventional car usage and conversely encourage pedestrian and cycle activity – one of Peterborough's assets for this purpose being relatively modest topography.
- e. The Panel noted and admired the significant achievement in Hampton of the amount, nature and imaginative handling of much of the open space. However, it found that offset by the routine, off the peg and seemingly randomly mixed design solutions offered by the developers. Noting once more, the hill that must be climbed, the panel stressed that the achievement of excellent, ground breaking, truly sustainable design on the remainder of Hampton and within the other townships will be

hard, but can be the one distinguishing factor which will most catch the attention and justify the claims that Peterborough is building the new environment city for the future.

9. Finally the Panel noted that the extension / development of Peterborough had always been a relatively unreflective process. Elsewhere in the country – for example Hatfield Garden City in one generation, Harlow and Stevenage in another – there had been a philosophical background, as part of a New Town movement. Peterborough joined that movement, played a major part in the post-war round and is about to do so again, but there does not appear to have been a pause for reflection, which might have promoted a deeper understanding of the process and its successes and failures from which a set of principles for management might have arisen. (One example the Panel noted was that there was some reluctance to value the trees which had been planted as part of a programmed landscape structure for which the Development Corporation had been widely regarded at the time). Once more rapid delivery is a key requirement of growth and yet the required pace must be an impediment to considered change.

There is little time for a pause now, but there is undoubtedly a great need for publicly understood, politically endorsed principles about the way in which Peterborough's great qualities can inform its future. Research, evaluation, characterisation and negotiations in search of the highest standards all take time and must not be overlooked. The Panel believed that the city stands at a cross roads. One sign points, beguilingly, to early achievement of significant

change and expansion. Driven by the development market in standard mode, that threatens to be bright and shiny, but ephemeral, undistinctive and ultimately damaging, as much to the current qualities of the city as to its admirable aspirations. The other sign points to a much steeper way, up which lies the possibility of high quality development, wrung initially from a more reluctant development community, who would eventually have to acknowledge that the quality of the place they were contributing to was driving up value far more sustainably than their standard product might. The Panel hopes that its notes will be understood to be intended to support the city, OP and the development community as it faces that difficult decision and to help it turn the right way.

Summary

The Urban Panel:

- a) judged the opportunity facing Peterborough to be critical for the city and potentially widely influential throughout the Growth Area;**
- b) admired the historic core of the city and the visually dominant role the cathedral plays in that;**
- c) acknowledged the ambition set out in the Plan for Peterborough City Centre and for the new townships and noted the very significant resources required to achieve that ambition;**

- d) hearing that Growth Area status did little to fund new infrastructure, nevertheless found elements such as the new station, university etc. essential;**
- e) admired the environmental prospectus and urged that it remain the focus of professional and political will, notwithstanding the standard development product;**
- f) thought that the relationship between the cathedral, Cathedral square, the wider city, its economy and its cultural life should be reinforced and developed;**
- g) considered that neither significantly increased permeability through the close nor development therein were in any way shown to be necessary and that any proposed change must be informed by a Conservation Plan;**
- h) welcomed the fact that the plans for North Westgate could still be refined and urged that principles of permeability, contextual responsiveness, flexibility and sustainability (as set out in detail in the review) inform that refinement;**
- i) believing the reconfiguration of the relationship between the city and station to be critical, urged the adoption of the highest and most challenging standards for the whole redevelopment of the area;**

- j) supported the view that the importance of the new station was so great that ministers should be urged to cooperate on its achievement;**
- k) while understanding the inevitable impact of existing planning permissions at Hampton, emphasised that every effort must be made to meet early C21 needs and aspirations to create a convincing urban entity;**
- l) considered better understanding of the functional relationship between township residents and the city centre to be key to ensuring a viable expanded city;**
- m) expressed the strongest support for the City Council and URC in setting demanding standards to be met, or even exceeded, by consortia competing to develop the next townships; and**
- n) stressed that pressure for rapid delivery should not be allowed to deflect all parties from considering and learning lessons from the wider New Town movement and the particular experience of the former Development Corporation.**