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## Urban Panel Review Paper - Hereford 28 February and 1 March 2007

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- 1.0 At the close of 2006, deeming the year of themed visits (to New Towns) a success, the Panel determined to adopt a similar theme for 2007. The chosen theme was that of the sustainability of smaller town centres. Towns often lack the ability to attract resources which are available to large cities, while having to address some similar - and some different - but equally challenging issues. It was, therefore, particularly appropriate to accept the invitation to visit Hereford and to hear about the proposals for the Edgar Street Grid (ESG).
- 2.0 Beginning the visit in the Watershed, on the south bank of the swollen Wye, underlined the great environmental advantages of Hereford as did visiting, dining and meeting in the Cathedral. On the other hand, the delayed opening of the meeting, caused by late running trains was evidence of a countervailing infrastructural deficit. That was noted, as was the fact that relative isolation from the great motors of development had, particularly during the 1960s, yielded some advantages, as the surviving fabric of Hereford clearly attests. The Watershed is an excellent modern architectural contribution to Hereford and, therefore, a wholly appropriate venue to take note of Hereford's considerable achievement in that field.
- 3.0 Throughout the Panel's visit, the enthusiastic support for the event, the attendance of Edgar Street Grid Hereford (ESGH) Directors and of members and staff of Herefordshire Council (HC), as well as the involvement and hospitality of the Dean, all stressed the importance of the proposals. The Panel felt able to grasp and respond to those proposals because of the depth and quality of all briefing material, both in the pack provided by staff and in the range of presentations. The background material immediately revealed one thing Panel members found encouraging. The master planning process is necessarily an iterative one and the fact that ESGH had begun by learning from the first exercise – but clearly seeing the need to commission a new team to take the study forward – was seen as bold and clear sighted. Jonathan Bretherton's (JB) detailed exegesis of the thoroughness of the process and of the high standards the company had set itself, was an exemplary introduction to the masterplan presentation.
- 4.0 Before hearing that, however, the Panel benefited from other scene setting presentations. HC's Chief Executive, Neil Pringle, made the point, to which the Panel readily assented, about the wider importance of smaller town centres – exemplified here by HC investing in the future of Hereford centre – specifically because a flourishing centre is essential for a flourishing Herefordshire. Together, HC believe that Rotherwas Futures, the Hereford Learning Village, ESGH and even the controversial flood defence works, will ensure a thriving market city to support the rural county and its subsidiary market towns.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Such as Leominster and Bromyard

The 100 acres of the Edgar Street area constitute a significant opportunity to deliver appropriate and effective development to that end, even though the constraints of the site will need to be confronted head on if quality is to be achieved. The Panel was heartened to learn from Andrew Ashcroft that the current and emerging planning framework entirely embraced the principle of ESG development. Better still was the stated list of aspirations for the site. Clearly any development must reinforce the town centre, have high design standards for both buildings and public spaces, be based on a coherent and convincing urban design and address the needs of the community of Herefordshire – on the nature and quantum of which the Panel would comment later. Having a Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) which sets all that out will strongly reinforce the process and the co-ordination of SPD and masterplan consultation was a welcome strategy.

- 5.0 Further presentations served to emphasise the fact that the depth, quality and variety of Hereford's historic fabric eloquently expresses its history, while the C20 and C21 continue to make generally worthwhile and occasionally exceptional contributions to that story. The achievement of so much recent architecture of quality, which is always thoughtfully contextual whatever the chosen language, is an achievement of which the city may be rightfully proud. It is also a hugely encouraging context for the consideration of forthcoming major development – many places the Panel has visited have no more than the aspiration. Hereford can point to the relevant achievement and demand the same or better. This ambition was clearly embraced by the master planning team.
- 6.0 As stated previously, the Panel welcomed the change of master planning team, because it indicated a wish to examine further and more closely and because fresh eyes can often aid that process. JB has also made sure that ESGH benefited from aspects of all the interviewed teams' perceptions. The chosen team's approach addressed weaknesses of the earlier scheme in obvious ways, a number of which the Panel welcomed. The presentation and walk around the area greatly aided understanding of the new proposition and the Panel thought it helpful to group the comments which flowed from that and from extensive discussions over dinner and at the plenary sessions under the following headings: retail development; urban design principles and historic environment information; site complexity/deliverability; sustainability.
- 6.1 **Retail Development**

The Panel noted and welcomed the fact that the complex mix of development types proposed are much more than just retail-led regeneration. It nevertheless noted that the proposal is regeneration which is going to be temporarily led by retail. This raised some concerns.
- 6.1.1 The first is the impact on the nature and viability of Hereford's historic and attractive existing retail centre. The demands of retailers are, by any standard other than their own, unreasonably inflexible. A good example is the minimum expected car parking provision. The Panel was concerned about the impact which proposed parking would have on the urban design and sustainability aspirations of the wider development. Demands of this sort

deserve robust examination. In the same vein, the standard retail development package can be unimaginative, unresponsive and unable to fund design excellence. The Panel was heartened that ESGH and the local authority were keen to address these issues and to achieve an appropriately high standard, contextually distinctive, development. The Panel hoped that its strong encouragement to achieve these ends would help stiffen the necessary sinews.

6.1.2 A *sine qua non* of the success of the retail expansion is the calming of Newmarket Street and Blueschool Street . However, the Panel was very clear that the progress which has been made so far has a great deal further to go. Only if it is clear to developers, and highway engineers alike, that the success or failure of the whole proposal depends on an environment through which pedestrians will pass with ease *and pleasure*, will the necessary excellence be achieved. The Panel was happy to support all efforts to convince the relevant parties that this was the case and urged ESGH and HC not to concede an inch (or a guard rail). Kensington High Street, with similarly high traffic volumes, sets the right example of simple elegance – of the highway subdued. The remains of the city wall present an opportunity to make this a distinctive street and place of arrival for bus passengers. The Panel observed that at Worcester new development rising from the remains of the city walls was successfully reinstating a comprehensible image of the walled city – an example which might helpfully be borne in mind in Hereford.

6.1.3 The Panel was impressed by the startling figure of 71% comparison retail leakage and noted that retail rental value had been and remained in steep decline. Combined with growth area status (1,000 homes in the ESG itself), there is evidently a prima facie case for retail expansion. It was only partly relieved to hear that retail capacity was being studied by consultants, however, for it had rarely, if ever, come across such a report which concluded that there was no (or even limited) scope for expansion. The Panel was impressed that developers would be obliged to sustain the existing centre by, for example, buying the leases of those relocating to new premises, refurbishing the buildings and procuring new tenants. There remained, however, grounds for the Panel expressing concern about the potential for the retail centre of gravity being drawn north.

## 6.2 **Urban Design Principles and Historic Environment Information**

The Panel was pleased to hear that significant steps had already been taken to gather together available archaeological information and, where necessary, to commission further investigation. It felt there was a strong case for additional work including a thorough appraisal of surviving buildings. The ambition should be that the level of archaeological understanding becomes so high that it is a predictive tool rather than a responsive one. With this as a core element, an expanded characterisation study should be available to all developers and should stimulate creative responses.

6.2.1 Much that the Panel heard and saw about urban design was heartening. The reduction in status of the northern link road is consistent with its proposed treatment as a ‘boulevard’, with a fluid and unusually powerful set of spaces.

The proposition that the space around the handsome station had suffered at the hands of C19 infrastructural pragmatism was accepted, and the proposed new Station Square enthusiastically welcomed as an early manifestation of a new high quality public realm. The Panel endorsed the stratagem of investing up front in such public quality as a way of creating market confidence, while setting high standards. On balance the Panel agreed that there was a strong case for connecting the station to Widemarsh Street and making this central, new alignment a fundamental element of the design. There were two caveats. The first was that the existing connections via Canal Road should not be undervalued. The second was raised by the response that Canal Road would be needed at night when the new space around, and route through, Blackfriars/Coningsby Hospital was closed. The Panel felt that the design handling and subsequent management of these very considerable assets and the laudable (indeed essential) aspirations to make more of them was far from resolved. Much more thought was yet needed to achieve satisfactory integration of this site and, until that was demonstrated, the Panel noted that the central feature of the new route could not be delivered. Reimagining the museum and the monuments, with their strong rectilinearity, as a diagonal route will require accurate understanding of the buildings and archaeology – a creative skill displayed by only a few practitioners. Careful appointments will be essential.

- 6.2.2 The panel was not certain that the case for the body of water, to be called canal and basin, had been wholly made. This expensive feature could undoubtedly deliver some spaces of excellence, as the proposed straight edge/soft edge proposal showed. However, the area around the basin was not yet convincing and the Panel believed that this feature should be reconsidered. The design team had mentioned concerns about overloading the site. This was one area where the burden might be reduced.
- 6.2.3 Piers Gough felt that the rich texture of the existing city, where development clusters around the cathedral, should set the tone and ambition for the site. He also convincingly put the case that there was a false dichotomy proposed – between wholly modern design and pastiche – which could be resolved by the adoption of a new vernacular. The Panel was comfortable with all this. The proposed method for ensuring the quality of this new vernacular (to be built by commercial housebuilders) was to depend on design coding supported by retained land ownership. The Panel felt that this was a good way ahead but one that would require fierce and continual focus, as well as choosiness about its development partners. Just as the procurement of retail development partners is to stress quality, so must housing. In particular, the initial development must be built to the highest architectural standards established in recent years in Hereford. Accordingly, it urged ESGH to stick to their guns, whatever the commercial pressures.
- 6.2.4 The commitment to public art was one which the Panel would naturally embrace and it did so here. However, the Panel noted that there were a great many buildings and spaces of quality, not to mention the underlying archaeology, which could make a truly distinctive contribution to the character of the new development. Enjoying Piers Gough's observation that

artists were free to provoke and, therefore, stimulate in a way not open to designers and developers, the Panel looked forward to the eventual public art contribution. It strongly urged all involved to imbue themselves with the existing character of the town and of the most characterful elements of the Edgar Street area as the essential preface to their creation.

### 6.3 **Site complexity / deliverability.**

The Panel urged on the development team the realisation that the complexities of this site were quite as great as that of many larger city centre sites, where greater land value and/or greater public subsidies could carry some of the cost of site resolution.

6.3.1 In particular, the Panel felt that there was still a pressing need for an open-eyed consideration of the true value available. Members felt strongly that the very isolation which had ensured Hereford's physical survival remained a defining characteristic. It was no surprise, therefore, that the office market has yet to achieve its potential. The Panel underlined the need to manage Growth Area pressures carefully. If the Urban Village delivers the first critical high quality elements of growth, it can lead to a class achievement throughout Hereford. If pressure for growth off site is met by humdrum development, that could undermine the wider aims for the city.

6.3.2 That site assembly was supported by a well managed CPO procedure was a strong portent of the developed political and managerial will to succeed. It was also a reminder of the costs the development must bear. Affordable housing is desirable but, if so, the deal with a registered social landlord will have to be extremely robust and thoroughly negotiated. Similarly, the degree of subsidy offered to incoming developers must always be considered with mean caution. Development of the sort and size proposed will only succeed, as the design team clearly knows, if the public realm is of the highest quality. That quality does not come cheap and the Panel could not exaggerate the need for a package which could bear such costs.

6.3.3 The Panel was impressed and convinced by the analysis of movement which underpinned the traffic and pedestrian permeability proposals (although see comments above about necessary quality again). However, it was self evident that the necessary first phase provision of the new northern link was another heavy burden, the achievement of which would only be undermined by penny pinching. Up front funding is in place and that is a creditable achievement which must be protected.

6.3.4 The Panel raised all these issues neither to demoralise, nor to pre-judge the outcome of financial analysis, but to emphasise the critical weight it put on the ESGH's aspirations being genuinely affordable. The Panel felt that the chances of success would be much enhanced by ESGH and the local authority keeping always in mind the desirable quality of adaptability, while also acknowledging that it may be easier for the market to deliver the necessary finances over time and that true urban regeneration does take time, something politicians may have to convince the citizens about. The process also provides exceptional learning opportunities for young people,

and the Panel urged ESGH to make every effort to involve the young people of Hereford in this venture.

#### 6.4 **Sustainability**

One aspect of sustainable development follows logically from the reference above to adaptability. Some of the proposed developments are relatively large: there are pressures for major retail development to be, in effect, one large building, suited to only one purpose. The Panel believed that the future of the city would be better guaranteed by seeking flexible, adaptable building forms, whatever the immediate occupancy. The fate of the department store, which never happened in the previous round of development, was a warning.

- 6.4.1 The Panel acknowledged that pressing the case for the development and also dealing with the new century's low carbon economy requirements was a hard task. However, it felt that there was a strong case for sustainability contributing to the character of, and successful future, for Edgar Street. Being at the centre of a true agricultural economy affords Hereford the opportunity to seek locally sourced, sustainably produced materials and to build employment through the development of craft skills and local production. Often such a process also encourages innovative business patterns and associated employment. The Panel strongly presented the case that sustainable development could play an important part in creating a marker amongst those who aspire to living in an excellent place, of high quality, while also making a contribution to and leading the way in sustainability. The development of ESG can add low carbon, low car use, high pedestrian and cycle connectivity to design quality and the established character of the existing town, and thus create a distinctive product which will generate specific demand. The residents who buy into this vision will, by their nature, reverse much retail leakage as well.

## **Summary:**

### **The Urban Panel:**

- a) considered Hereford to have a great many of the attributes of a successful market city and thought the combination of historic fabric of quality and recent architecture of like quality a positive basis for further development;
- b) commended the recent architectural achievement and considered its use as a benchmark for the future essential;
- c) wholeheartedly welcomed the clear sighted decision to reconsider the master plan and to appoint a design team of proven excellence;
- d) admired the willingness of ESGH to draw wider conclusions from the process of procuring new professional advice and direction;
- e) found the re-assessment of the master plan by the new team to have resolved issues which had formerly been the subject of unsatisfactory proposals;
- f) thought the close connection between the master plan and the wider planning process to be entirely appropriate;
- g) welcomed the close connection between the Council, ESGH and the wider community as well as the commitment to true consultation;
- h) enjoyed the committed expertise of the historic environment professionals in informing the development process and urged that this be further embedded in the design process;
- i) noted the success to date of the town centre and welcomed policies to ensure the survival of existing retail while developing more;
- j) felt that the quality of development required would put great demands on available resources and encouraged all involved to stick by the quality aspirations;
- k) found the likeliest source of value to be an imaginatively developed and indissoluble link between the ESC and the Growth Area;
- l) considered the quality of the calming of Newmarket Street and Blueschool Street and of the new retail on the other side to be critical;
- m) endorsed many of the principles of the new urban design framework while noting that the management of the historic features at the core of the new route was not yet satisfactorily resolved;
- n) welcomed the commitment to public art and complex new features of quality and stressed the need for primacy to be given to quality public realm;
- o) believed that the case for a new vernacular for the development was well-made, welcome and capable of being delivered by the local architectural fraternity but would depend on quality control through design codes and land ownership;
- p) while acknowledging that the demands of sustainable development looked like a another burden on the development, encouraged the alternative view that truly local sustainable development could be

another of the convincing reasons for people to want to live work and buy in the Edgar Street area; and  
q) urged ESGH to make every effort to involve the young people of Hereford in this venture.

**Chris Smith**

**April 2007**