



URBAN PANEL REVIEW PAPER

NORTHAMPTON

1. Northampton's importance, derived in large part from its central location, has been long recognised; by the Saxons and then the Normans; by the traders who enabled the growth of the mediaeval market town; and by the leather manufacturers and factors who led the growth of the nationally important boot and shoe trade. The twentieth century saw the decline of that defining local industry, but the town's location continued to play a major role and twice since the second world war, government has identified the strengths of the town as fitting it for future expansion – first through the agency of the Northampton Development Corporation as part of the New Town development programme and then again in the recent definition of Northampton as a Major Housing Growth Point.

This does not mean that the journey has been easy. Indeed Northampton. has suffered very significant set backs – the C13 collapse of the market town economy, the fire of 1675 and the C20 decline of shoe manufacturing. It is impressive that the town has shown the ability to overcome such difficulties and the Urban Panel found the fact that there was clearly the will to do so again most encouraging.

2. For a town whose national reputation is modest, members also found that Northampton has a very great deal to be proud of and positive about. The town today has outstanding spaces and buildings at its core, but also a set of significant streets of quality. Most have good mixed shops and former houses, framing streets whose shape and dimensions are relatively undamaged. The Market Square remains a remarkable asset which has underpinned the identity of the town in the past and must continue to do so. Its location to the side of the cross roads not only produces a major civic space at the heart of the town, but also underlines the importance of Northampton as a meeting of the ways. The set of civic spaces around All Saints and the Guildhall is as good a piece of organic urban form as anything in Stamford or Cheltenham and the individual buildings are a good mix of the outstanding and the good ordinary.

The ring road (on which the Panel's detailed views can be found at 6 below) has undoubtedly removed fabric, left broken spaces and cut-off pedestrian routes, but it is less damaging than many and embodies the line of the lost wall in a way which could be made more of. The riverside is an asset with great potential which is just beginning to be tapped. The council's aspiration to emphasise and develop walkability is laudable. It is also eminently sensible since the scale of the town within

the former walls is manageable for most walkers and the streets and spaces are already relatively calm and attractive.

Northampton is also blessed with assets to put into the development equation. Since this is an area where best practice is only now emerging and significant opportunities exist, the Panel urged Northampton Borough Council (NBC) and West Northamptonshire Development Corporation (WNDC) along with other partners to put together a joint asset strategy which would answer the question – “How can we use our combined land assets creatively to achieve a vehicle which will also attract private capital for joint development?”. Such a vehicle would then have the benefit of a vision for the future backed up by a suite of strategies, masterplans and development frameworks.

A final asset on which it is difficult to put too great an emphasis is the fact that the University and the College are both thriving in a town where employment has held up relatively well.

3. So the Panel was clear that Northampton is a town with an enviable combination of geographical and physical assets. Furthermore, the resilient nature of the population has always served the town well and can do so again. The fact that so much of the necessary groundwork for the next phase of regeneration has already been done is further proof of that.

On the other hand, there is nothing simple about the road ahead. The forthcoming period of austerity will mean that the commencement of some long awaited development will be significantly delayed and that other projects will necessarily take far longer than originally planned. With that in mind, the Panel was grateful for the time that senior officers of both NBC and WNDC were able to give to the visit and the thoroughness of the briefing.

Members found many of the issues facing the town and its regeneration professionals familiar. Like many of the new or expanded towns¹ Northampton faces a further wave of expansion with enthusiasm tempered by understanding of the complexity of the task. It also has to find ways of mending the damage wrought by the worst developments of the 60s and 70s. Both the physical damage caused by the ring road and the loss of character resulting from anonymous retail developments and misconceived facilities like the bus station need to be rectified. Putting local distinctiveness at the heart of this generation's work is key and many of the qualities of the town are acknowledged and a cause of pride already.

4. There is, however, a new uncertainty hanging over this phase of regeneration caused by the government's response to challenging financial circumstances. Panel members sympathised with everyone committed to taking forward the Central Area Action Plan (CAAP) and the aspirations of WNDC when it was not easy to be certain about the planning framework, the public finances or, indeed the private. They took the long view that economic strength was more likely to return than not

¹ the Panel has visited Peterborough, Harlow, Letchworth, Milton Keynes

and, when it does, all the factors which make Northampton so well suited to expansion will still apply – so the question is how to prepare for that.

Here the Panel felt there lay a significant opportunity. So long as a long term programme of physical works which will support the achievement of the wider vision is agreed and set out for all to see, the works themselves can be achieved incrementally. Some very significant steps of this sort have already been taken and the Panel's general point was that long, slow and quite often small scale progress can have quite as strong an influence on the appearance and reputation of a place as major set piece interventions.

Members recalled the effectiveness of A-board and shop front improvement programmes in other places. The example of Birmingham, where Cabinet members gave impetus to an initiative to clear street clutter (i.e. to improve the public realm without a multi-million paving programme) by visiting the next chosen location and identifying works in person, was commended. At a time when bottom up local initiatives are being encouraged, there was a strong feeling that local engagement in the process of identifying opportunities of this sort could be positive and effective.

In some ways this could be seen as the other, equally positive, aspect of public art initiatives. The Panel visited while the lions were in situ and saw the potential for the additional enjoyment of place which that scheme gave being turned into a spirit of benign and active ownership.

At the same time, the probable elongated timescale for major projects presents the opportunity to reinforce detailed technical understanding of the character of the town and its spaces, while also extending such appraisal to the wider public. This can mean enhancing the degree of pre-development understanding of the archaeology of Northampton. The density of development within the line of the mediaeval walls has latterly diminished. This leaves opportunity sites, which are always welcome. They are, however, ones with rich archaeological potential and the better that is understood before indicative masterplans are generated the better. The case is still stronger where the historic town most closely approached the river. Here relatively little later development means remains may be little disrupted, while moist conditions offer the possibility of high degrees of fabric survival. This should be understood, not only in order that development of the site be made less risky and mitigation issues be resolved but also to further reinforce the understanding of how the deep history informs the distinctive character of the town, which new development must reinforce and enhance, not over-write through ignorance.

The final, timetable influencing, uncertainty which was obvious was that over future governance of local communities, services and regeneration. In more stable times, the Panel would have sympathised, perhaps with a wry smile, about the complexities offered by the current boundaries (physical and organisational) between county, town and adjoining districts. It would then have gone on to welcome the efforts of all those who devise and sustain the necessary mechanisms for joint working aimed at dealing with that issue. Finally, it would have commented that in most cases where the Panel has found a special purpose vehicle in place - and where that vehicle has been directly supported by all relevant parties - it has found it to be part of the recipe for success.

Clearly to comment in those terms in this case would look foolish without significant qualification. So in this case the Panel observed that the interdependence between Northampton and its market hinterland villages and towns will prove more durable than tangled administrative boundaries. It also notes that not all the relevant towns lie within the ambit of WNDP, or perhaps even the county. Furthermore, the tangle of powers and duties overlaid by a history of efforts at rationalisation is hardly conducive to effective close working. Despite all that, the Panel wanted to commend the good-spirited co-operation on display during the visit and urged all parties to ensure that that came to bear, particularly on central development sites.

5. In turning then to comment on specific issues and sites raised by the presentations, evening discussions and site visits, members could not resist commenting on the slightly strange fact that the striking document *Making the Market City* only came to its attention by happenstance. Panel members felt competent to understand the distinction between finalised planning drawings for fully funded schemes and indicative drawings used in promotional literature and would have welcomed the opportunity to comment on the market city concept.

Indeed the question as to whether Northampton should aim for city status, or consolidate as a county market town of excellence had arisen frequently in discussion. On balance most members felt that the reach for city status was wholly rational, if some of the most extravagant population targets for the middle of the century were in mind. However, during the approach through the rather lower foothills of the decade ahead, they felt that market and county town was nearer the mark. This is after all generally understood to imply a town of quality, distinction and one with an important civic role to bolster its other economic activities. It is also one which allows more for interim successes – one of the most vibrant and forward looking county towns - rather than apparent failure through snide metropolitan put down – not really a city yet. Finally, the market town is overtly aligned with and in a mutual relationship with its hinterland towns and villages. Resolving and firming up that relationship with its neighbours is arguably more desirable and achievable than simply taking the title of city.

Other merits of *Making the Market City* are that it concentrates on the centre, as does this report and it presents the core elements of the strategy for Northampton in a straightforward order which this report is happy to adopt:

5a. Vision. Read together with the CAAP, this offers a clear statement what the vision for Northampton is. The Panel's thoughts about the Market City are set out above. The rest of the vision might be said to be good so far as it goes. This is not meant to be damning with faint praise, but rather to urge that the particular nature of the town's high quality built environment be given due weight. It is also a challenge to all involved in the process of allocating expansion to pause and think. It is surely not enough for the argument to run - there will be a lot more housing need, preferably within reach of the economically active south east - Northampton fits the bill, as does the rest of the MKSM area – so it can go there. Places need to define their particular role. For Northampton this is a challenge – because it will surely not supplant MK as a retail destination and will not replace its lost shoe industry with another of similar scale. But it is also an opportunity for

differentiation. Becoming a great market town with a wider civic role is not just an end in itself – it can and should lead to attracting small businesses which support the expanding market and its associated requirements. Furthermore, the aspiration to become a walking town, which is welcomed by the Panel, relates well to Northampton's past and a small part of its future – shoes. As enough of these things come together to create a powerful positive modern image for the beautiful old place, others will bring their businesses and business ideas to Northampton because they want them to thrive there, rather than because it's the first place outside London they can afford to live.

Making the Market City helpfully spells out prioritisation. The scale and number of the potential development sites within the CAAP is staggering. It is clear that, even by 2026, not all will have been exploited. So it is helpful that public documents lay clear emphasis on those sites and areas which were also the focus of presentations to the Panel. Even these few constitute a very significant amount of work, as those charged with their delivery are no doubt acutely aware. The Panel felt that, at every stage, aspiration needed to be carefully measured against available resources. Where that resulted in longer timescales for development, the panel urged that more of the consolidation work referred to in this report be carried out and consolation be taken from the fact that all major change takes decades.

5b. The Market Square and the Grosvenor Centre. The Panel agrees that the market place needs to continue to be at the heart of the town physically and metaphorically and understands why NBC have made such a significant investment recently. It also wholly acknowledges that the relationship between modern retail and the market place needs to be physically improved and mutually supportive.

To put in context the Panel's comments it is necessary to go back a step and to state, without reservation, that the destruction of two sides of the Market Square was one of the worst urban planning mistakes of the 1960s and 1970s. Nor is this, of course, just a matter of the loss of an urban set piece of European scale and quality. That is only the most publicly visible element of the removal of acres of complex townscape and its replacement by two nondescript malls. So the opportunity to repair the damage must be taken.

At the same time, an imaginative take on their role as landowners would offer Legal and General (L&G) the opportunity to not only provide retail facilities which meet current market requirements, (and no surprise that yet another retail health check showed that there is plenty of leakage to be retained and, therefore, standard retail offer to be built) but also to tie the success of the market and other activities in the Market Square to the vitality of their centre while significantly increasing the value of their holding. The Panel urged Councillors and officers to visit Exeter and to see the redevelopment of Princesshay. Here developers were encouraged to turn away from the simplest option – just another mall – and to make a longer term and far more imaginative intervention in the city. It is not easy to convince large commercial boards that such investment is necessary, nor that innovation is necessary when much success has been achieved unimaginatively. But Panel members thought it would be very worthwhile in this case. The effort to get (senior members of the L&G board) to come to Northampton and to understand the full potential of the town, their place in it, the need for experienced developer skills and the very good

reasons for more thoughtful and long term investment in it could be very well rewarded and Panel members would be very happy to play a part should that happen.

As for what has been done in the square already, the Panel felt that still far more needed to be done. The merit of the current scheme is its flexibility. The lighting scheme responds to changing conditions and can equally respond to changing fabric and patterns of use. The market stalls can move. The Panel visited and passed through several times. At night, the marvellous space is almost empty and clearly this needs to change. Apparently immovable objects, like interpretations of law about the highway, are rarely what they seem and there is no real reason not to use the edge of the square for sitting out. Even market traders relocate when their clear financial interest says they should. Both of these may need to happen if the ground floors facing the market place are to be occupied and animated by cafes, restaurants and associated small businesses.

This is, of course, hugely in L&G's interests as well. Rather than visiting Northampton simply because there is another improved mall, people can start to enjoy shopping there because they can sit in a square as grand and animated as the Friday Market in Ghent, fulfil their specialist and food shopping requirements in and around the market place, enjoy entertainers (the provision of which is another burden which might pass to L&G, whose appointed managers would be specialists) and go to Jigsaw. The luckiest amongst them will be residents who have walked in.

All this, of course, implies that the current indicative drawings need to be seen as no more than an indication of a willingness to invest. NBC and NDWC are urged by the Panel to start a vigorous negotiation about just how good for the town and L&G an imaginative solution could be. This is equally important beyond the square and its immediate environs, of course. The urban damage of the Grosvenor continues all the way north to and in some senses is trumped by Greyfriars bus station. Only when this has been replaced by something more suited to the location can the project of returning open, legible, human and enjoyable townscape to this whole quarter of Northampton be taken seriously. The Panel were agnostic about whether a bus station was even required, but acknowledged that the decision on that would be taken based on local operational and communal knowledge. However, it did consider that a barely minimal requirement of any redevelopment of the Grosvenor and Greyfriars would be the reinstatement of Newland Street which could once more provide a public and hugely attractive connection between the north and the centre, while at the same time making the connection between de Senlis's remarkable Holy Sepulchre and the market place.

Such a demand should be no more than one more example of the Council refusing to settle for the ordinary. The ordinary is what Northampton can have. Generally, the last decades have depressingly proved that. The special - development up to a high standard - is what Northampton deserves. When insistent on quality the town ends up with buildings, like the Guildhall, which inspire pride.

5c Castle Station The Panel agrees with the proposition that the station is currently a most unfortunate way to arrive in Northampton. The town is amongst a sad majority of towns where later infrastructure provision – i.e. the ring road – has

shattered a legible relationship between centre and main railway station. The development model proposed will, nevertheless, have to be rigorously examined. New employment opportunities around the station are welcome – but their beneficial effect on the local economy can be much undermined by inwards commuting, made easy by the location. Similarly, the scale of development required to fund the infrastructure improvements needs to be considered carefully. The historic occupation of the site and the relationship of the lost castle to the town - and critically to Marefair and St Peter's - can be enhanced, or it can be completely and finally effaced. A detailed and well-informed masterplan covering not only the site, but all its interfaces with the town is essential.

5d St. John's and Bridge Street. This key site near the heart of the town is a great opportunity and the Panel strongly welcomed the fact that there might be returned to the centre some 3000 jobs. The removal of major councils to urban fringe sites has only rarely enhanced the towns in question and the later it happened the more likely it was to have had a damaging effect on the civic image and economic activity of the centre. The chance to reverse this is welcome. Similarly the aspiration to make the site much more public and diverse than an office campus of the past is a significant improvement on past practice.

The Panel did, however, have a number of concerns about the proposal as it was outlined. First there is the question of how much accommodation the site should and could accommodate. This relates in some degree to the Tall Buildings Study about which the Panel was uncomfortable. Members thought it better to make explicit that, with a very few exceptions, Northampton cannot accommodate tall buildings and struggles to accommodate buildings of inappropriate scale, even if they, by some definition or other, are not tall. This is eloquently exemplified by the lumpy and outlandish effect of Sol Central at the junction of Gold and Horseshoe Streets with Marefair. The Panel feared that forcing all the accommodation implied by this scheme onto the St John's site might well result in development of a similarly inappropriate scale. An unfortunate indication that this might be the case was the proposal that it might be necessary to force the connections to George Row through the buildings of quality like the Sessions House at the north of the site.

For these reasons the Panel believed that what was required was a careful reconsideration not of the broad concept, which it welcomed, but of the standard development model by which it was to be procured. A lower key, gentler approach could bring all the proposed uses back into this quarter of town, to the town's great benefit, without imposing large out of scale blocks which then require, it was suggested, newly crafted routes through.

These points also applied, so far as the Panel could see, to the wider proposals down to Bridge Street. Block plans are only that and should not have undue weight put upon them, but the Panel thought that the same tendency to take the scale and grain of the historic town and replace it with very much larger units was displayed. Were the Tall Building Strategy to be re-named the Large Scale Strategy that would help. What would help more would be if it were not a strategy which sought to work out where and how many large-scale blocks could be accommodated, but rather how the successful recreation of a viable mixed townscape might accommodate some such blocks.

5e. The Waterfront. It is not possible to see enough of a town, even in 24 hours, and Panel members did not formally get down to the river, canal and park areas to the south. The emerging marina and its relationship to Beckett's Park were only seen later by a minority. However, the relatively low key nature of that quietly successful area seemed to set the example for future success. The Waterside site is another very large asset and the current developer taste for such sites will give it a market led priority once there is a market again. These are the sites referred to above where archaeological sensitivities must be taken into account. They are also the kind of places where anonymous developments have squandered potential elsewhere. The Panel urged that these sites be approached with thoughtful caution so that their character may be understood and used to create places which contribute fully to green, sustainable and walkable Northampton.

6. A number of other sites or issues were raised during the Panel's visits and discussions. One was the **ring road**. Up to this point this report has not made any reference to the presence, for much of the visit, of a representative from the County's Transport department. But the fact that discussion about traffic and the ring road were so much better informed as a result was gratefully acknowledged. Compared to their experiences of many other similar size places, the panel considered that Northampton has already taken many successful steps to deal with central and through traffic. That is one of the reasons that the walkable town aspiration seems so feasible. Praise is deserved.

In as much as the solution has been transferring traffic movements to the ring road, the answer has been the standard one. However, the levels of traffic do not seem insufferable. The cost of radically altering the system (and thereby in any case only relocating traffic elsewhere) will not be within reach, whereas calming and improving the pedestrian experience probably will. The fact that the road broadly follows and, as a result, reveals the line of the mediaeval wall offers a significant opportunity, which the Panel was keen to promote. Without ever directing massive (and therefore implausible) budgets to the ring road, members believed that it could, over time, be turned into a general urban asset, a tree filled linear green space – a boulevard around the town – which happened also to distribute traffic and minimise cross centre movement. Such an incremental approach to greening roads has had success in Copenhagen. In a similar incremental manner, the adoption of urban design principles can ensure that new development reinforces lost corners and makes the walkable town increasingly legible.

7. Finally the Panel noted that most of the references to the boot and shoe industry had, for obvious reasons, been backward looking. This might explain why the large and impressive area of the town where the mixed character of shoe factories and housing cheek by jowl is statutorily ignored. It is remarkable that an area whose essence was spelled out ten years ago in EH's *Built to Last* still does not have the status of Conservation Area. Asked the question as to whether that should be changed, the Panel answered unanimously and promptly, yes. The area is, members were told, improving further from the centre than the walk took us. It provides a very significant amount of affordable housing near the town in fabric which, in towns already better off, would be very desirable and its character can readily be maintained by a decent suite of CA policies.

Should this mean that some housing resource needed to be directed to the area, the Panel could not see that there was any meaningful choice. There exists already a large stock of occupied housing. Small investments of the sort carried out in the General Improvement Areas of the 1970s would be all that would be required to provide this housing with a viable future. There can be no question of walking away from these assets and the benefits are obvious and relatively affordable – as will the housing be. The Panel saw merit in a post-Conservation Area designation approach to the HLF for a very significant THI.

Summary

The Urban Panel:

- a) made and renewed its acquaintance with Northampton and was struck by the very high quality of the spaces and buildings at the heart of a great mediaeval town;
- b) noted that, although current financial circumstances may delay the process, the town's strategic situation makes expansion inevitable;
- c) saw no reason to demand anything but the best for Northampton while using any delay in major development to carry out low key improvements;
- d) thought that the asset of development pressure would be best exploited only if the existing character of the town were fully understood and made central to all plans;
- e) encouraged NBC, WDNC and other partners to be as creative as possible with their landholdings to get best value;
- f) felt that a wider and more inspiring vision than simply accommodating external development pressure was required but that the characteristics of the town could successfully inform such an enhanced vision;
- g) found the full range of opportunities identified daunting over twenty five years let alone five or ten and urged the most rigorous prioritisation;
- h) accepted that the current priority sites were clear and agreed that it was common ground for all that the Market Square must remain the heart of the town:
- i) challenged L&G and NBC to put together a redevelopment package for the Grosvenor which repaired the great damage done as well as providing a wholly new, mutually supportive business for retail centre and market together;
- j) agreed that the isolated and run down little station needed a radical overhaul and better connection, but sought very careful thought to avoid a new, shiny, but indistinctive new quarter;
- k) welcomed the proposal that many new jobs could come back to town in St. John's but hoped that careful, low key schemes would avoid the threat of new, alien oversized block repeating recent mistakes;
- l) considered the areas around the Nene to be a great asset to be approached with care in order that a distinctive new quarter of Northampton be created rather than just some more apartments by a marina;
- m) was impressed by the degree to which traffic is already managed in the centre and thought that the ring road which copes well could be improved as a human space to the mutual benefit of pedestrians and car users; and

- n) urged NBC to acknowledge the continuing importance of the boot and shoe industry's legacy to the utility, appearance and character of the town by designating a Conservation Area and enabling its improvement.

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