



A ULI Advisory Services Panel Report

Chester, United Kingdom

November 2010



Urban Land
Institute

About ULI

ULI – the Urban Land Institute – is a non-profit research and education organisation supported by its members. Founded in Chicago in 1936, the institute now has over 30,000 members in 95 countries worldwide, representing the entire spectrum of land use and real estate development disciplines and working in private enterprise and public service. In Europe, we have over 2,000 members supported by a regional office in London and a small team based in Frankfurt.

ULI brings together leaders with a common commitment to improving professional standards, seeking the best use of land and following excellent practices.

We are a think tank, providing advice and best practices in a neutral setting – valuable for practical learning, involving public officials and engaging urban leaders who may not have a real estate background. By engaging experts from various disciplines we can arrive at advanced answers to problems which would be difficult to achieve independently.

ULI shares knowledge through discussion forums, research, publications and electronic media. All these activities are aimed at providing information that is practical, down to earth and useful so that on-the-ground changes can be made. By building and sustaining a diverse network of local experts, we are able to address the current and future challenges facing Europe's cities.

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For more information on ULI Advisory Panels, Research and Publications please contact Alexandra Notay, Vice President, Strategic Programmes, anotay@uli.org

Urban Land Institute

29 Gloucester Place
London
W1U 8HX
United Kingdom

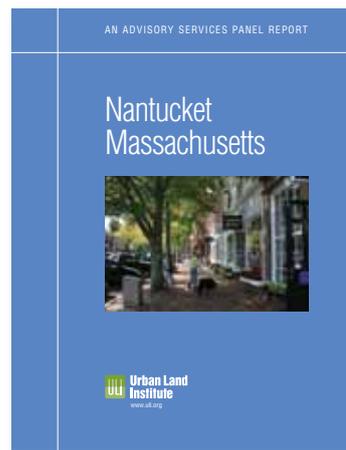
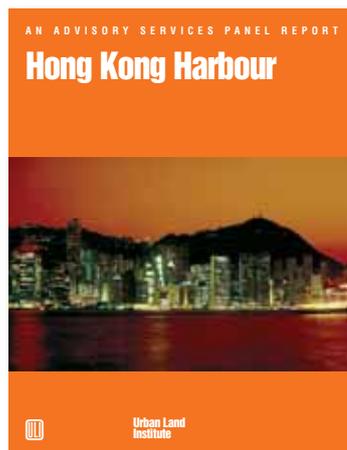
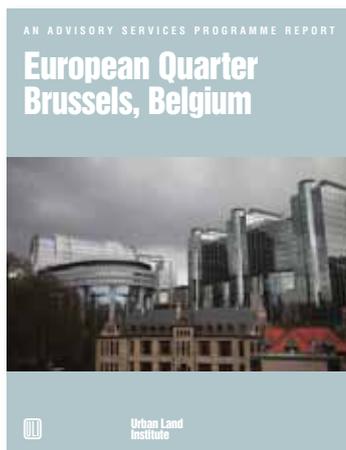
Tel: +44 (0)20 7487 9570
Fax: +44 (0)20 7486 8652
Email: ulieurope@uli.org
Web: www.uli.org

About ULI Advisory Services

ULI advisory services panels provide strategic advice to sponsors on land use and real estate development issues. Panels link developers, public agencies, and other sponsors to the knowledge and experience of ULI and its membership.

Established in 1947, this programme has completed over 600 panels, in 47 states, 12 countries, and 4 continents. Sponsors praise panels for their comprehensive, pragmatic approach to solving land use challenges. ULI's Advisory Services programme brings together experienced real estate and land use professionals to develop innovative solutions for complex land use and real estate development projects, programmes, and policies.

International advisory services teams help sponsors find creative, practical solutions for issues such as city Centre redevelopment, land management, development potential, growth management, community Revitalization, brownfields redevelopment, military base reuse, workforce and affordable housing, and asset Management. Local governments, private developers, community development corporations, and many other public, private, and nonprofit organisations sponsor advisory services assignments.



Acknowledgments

The panel would like to thank each of the stakeholders that made up the consortium of sponsors for this panel for inviting them to Chester to comment on the challenges and opportunities facing this historic city. The panel also wishes to thank Visit Chester and Cheshire for arranging the site tour and particularly Becky Jam and Carol Boynton at the Grosvenor Estate for their help and preparation of the extensive briefing book, on site logistics and sponsored events throughout the week. Without their assistance and support, the panel would not have been able to do its work.

The panel hopes that their recommendations and comments will provide new ideas and clearer direction in the future, and will assist in developing a stronger and more integrated city centre.

Thanks also go to the 200 Chester residents who gave up their time to be interviewed or prepare written comments, and those who attended the final presentation at Chester Town Hall to hear the final presentation. All these individuals contributed to the report by sharing their views, opinions, frustrations and hopes for Chester's future. The panel was overwhelmed by the diversity, enthusiasm, sincerity and commitment of the local community.

*Chester architecture,
black and white tudor*



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ULI Panel and Project Staff

Project Staff

Alexandra Notay

Vice President - Strategic Programmes ULI –
The Urban Land Institute London, United Kingdom

Louise Evans

Research Assistant ULI –
The Urban Land Institute London, United Kingdom

About the Panel

Panel Chair

Mr James M. De Francia

President
Weston Capital Corporation
Aspen, CO
USA

Panel Members

Professor Edward McMahon

Senior Resident Fellow –
Chair for Sustainable Development
ULI – the Urban Land Institute
Washington, DC
USA

Dr M. Gordon Brown,

BS, MBA, MSc(Arch),DTech, MRICS
Director of Space Analytics
Chicago, IL
USA

Mr Miguel Ruano

Director
Miguel Ruano Associates Ltd
UK/Spain

Mr Rupert Nabarro

Chairman
Investment Property Databank
UK

Mr Andrew Gould

Chief Executive – English Business
Jones Lang LaSalle
UK

Ms Gayle Berens

Senior Vice President - Education & Advisory Group
ULI – the Urban Land Institute
Washington, DC
USA

Mr Carsten Hillgruber

Director Social and Cultural Affairs
City of Bayreuth
Germany

Sponsoring Organisations



GROSVENOR ESTATE

The Grosvenor Estate is a portfolio of businesses, rural estates and other assets owned by trusts on behalf of the 6th Duke of Westminster and his family. The largest business in the portfolio is an international property company which operates in 17 countries. Within the North West there are a number of non property businesses which include the Chester Grosvenor Hotel & Spa, Grosvenor Farms Limited, the Grosvenor Garden Centre and Cogent Breeding, together with two of the five Rural Estates, Eaton Estate in Cheshire and Abbeystead Estate in Lancashire.

Of particular relevance to Chester is the Eaton Estate which extends to some 11,500 acres encompassed around 450 properties. At the heart of the estate sits Eaton Hall the principal home of the Grosvenor family. Situated 3 miles to the South of Chester, the Eaton Estate has a critical mass and scale not common on rural estates and being so close to a major city creates opportunity in relation to the urban-rural interface.



The University of Chester was founded as Chester Diocesan Training College in 1839 by a distinguished group of local leading figures in the Church of England. It is one of the oldest English higher education establishments of any kind. The University now has some 15,000 students, drawn from the United Kingdom and overseas, who study at three campuses in Chester and one in Warrington. Research degrees are now a core activity and the emphasis is on research with economic and cultural impact, with staff also providing consultancy support across a wide range of expertise.



Bank of America Europe Card Services, which operates under the MBNA brand in the UK, is the largest credit card lender in Europe. Based in Chester since 1993, their European headquarters is home to around 4,000 associates who live and work in the area, making them the largest private employer in the region. Over the last 17 years, the business has grown into one of the most successful financial organisations in the UK. In 2006 the company became a wholly owned subsidiary of Bank of America – one of the largest financial institutions in the world.



With the introduction of the new authority, and vision – Customer first, Value for Money, Best Practice - the Council's ambition is to place its stakeholders at the heart of everything it does. With a population of 327,500, the area covered by the new borough includes the major towns of Ellesmere Port, Neston, Winsford, Northwich and Frodsham and the historic city of Chester.

The new Council will be the fourth largest unitary authority in the North West giving it a powerful strategic voice in the UK and enabling it to drive forward initiatives to support developments in the area. The Council has 72 elected members, who represent 24 wards, and employs some 7,000 staff, excluding schools and 14,500 including schools.



Visit Chester and Cheshire are the destination management organisation for Cheshire and Warrington, with a visitor economy of over £1.78 billion, which provides 27,041 jobs and accounts for 15 % of all employment locally. As one of five tourism boards in the Northwest they are funded and supported by the North West Regional Development Agency, three local authorities and over 400 private sector tourism stakeholders in Cheshire.

Established in April 2004 Visit Chester and Cheshire have a clear mission: *"We will build our tourism industry to generate economic return for all, through our vision, passion, positive action and effective partnership working."*



Chester Renaissance works with key private sector investors, public sector funding bodies, and community organisations to re-energise and reshape the city while protecting Chester's past. This is achieved by improving performance for business and attracting new investment while celebrating the city's heritage and encouraging sustainable economic growth within Chester's limitations.

Chester Renaissance's role is to support the efforts of their partners to complete and accelerate the economic growth of the city, working with them to ensure delivery happens in a timely manner. Their work will contribute to the wider area of Cheshire West and Chester (CWaC) by providing a strengthened and focussed capacity to deliver change and support. The opportunities for Chester are considered limitless and therefore plans should be aspirational whilst being achievable.

The Chester Renaissance programme of new development and city centre improvements will make Chester a must see European city. The Renaissance will ensure the city is a wonderful place for people to live in, work in, learn in, invest in and visit. It will generate a new pride in Chester, improve performance for business, attract investment and shape the city for the future.



Chester Race Company Ltd is a dynamic, constantly evolving and growing organisation. The company is responsible for two racecourses and all catering and conference facilities at Bangor on Dee and Chester, along with an on course hotel and restaurant at the Chester site. The company also provides external catering services for third party events.

Chester is the oldest racecourse in the UK and possibly the world, the first recorded race was held on February 9th 1539. Over £10m has been invested in the course over recent years including the development of the Pavilion facility, Restaurant 1539 and Paddock redevelopment.

The average race day attendance for 2010 was 23,000, the highest attendance was 43,000 for the Sunday Funday event in August. Saturday race meetings bring an additional £1.2m tourism revenue for Chester in terms of hotel room bookings and spend in bars, restaurants and retail outlets. The racecourse employs approx. 85 full time staff and over 1,000 part-time on a race day.

Introduction

Location

Chester is situated on the River Dee in the rural county of Cheshire in the North West of England. It is close to the Welsh border and less than an hour from the cities of Greater Manchester and Liverpool. Manchester is the largest media hub outside of London and home to the UK's biggest single-site academic campus, and Liverpool is home to one of Europe's largest bio manufacturing clusters and one of the world's most famous waterfronts.

The North West is one of nine regions of England and administered by the North West Regional Development Agency (NWDA). The primary objective of Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) has been to spread economic prosperity and opportunity to everyone in the region. Their approach has been to adopt a business-led approach and bring vitality and expertise to the task of economic development and regeneration in the regions.

Working closely with businesses, local authorities, universities and other organisations RDAs have agreed priorities for economic development. This has combined the RDAs' technical expertise with the views of the local community, ensuring each region makes the most of opportunities for economic growth.

Following the coalition government's decision to abolish regional development agencies by April 2012, the NWDA is working closely with partners in the region to manage the transition of its responsibilities. The Government's plans include replacing RDAs with Local Economic Partnerships (LEPs). The first 24 LEPs (including Cheshire and Warrington) were announced in the government White Paper on sub-national economic growth on 28th October 2010 with the aim for LEPs to *"reflect 'sensible' collections of councils and business leaders that would reflect sub-national economic hubs more effectively than RDAs."*

The white paper outlines other government plans to promote regional and local growth through: the New Homes Bonus, involving matched Council Tax funding, paid to localities that build homes; possible moves to allow councils to keep the business rates they collect locally; a new system of Tax Increment Financing for regeneration projects – which would allow councils to borrow against projected increases in business rate income; and a localised planning regime.



The NWDA is focused on ensuring that there is an orderly and structured transition to the future LEPs that are established within the region to achieve the main task of supporting economic recovery and future growth.

Governance

Cheshire West and Chester is a unitary authority with borough status in the county of Cheshire. It was established in April 2009 as part of the 2009 structural changes to local government and replaced the former boroughs of Ellesmere Port and Neston, Vale Royal, Chester District and part of the Cheshire County Council which was disaggregated between the two new unitary authorities of Cheshire East and Cheshire West and Chester.

The first elections to the authority took place on 1 May 2008 with the Conservatives gaining control with a majority of 38 councillors. There are 72 elected councillors, the Conservatives with 55, Labour 13 and 4 Liberal Democrats.

The Council area of 'Cheshire West and Chester' has a population of 327,500 and an area of 91,664 hectares. This is 5% of the North West's population and 0.6% of England and Wales' population and equates to a density of 3.57 people per hectare.

In addition to Cheshire East on the east, it is bounded on the west by the Welsh border, to the north by the Mersey Valley and to the south by the Shropshire border. It includes the historic town of Chester, the industrial towns of Ellesmere Port, Northwich and Winsford, together with Neston, Frodsham, Helsby and Malpas.

Chester was granted city status in 1541 and currently has 77,040 inhabitants. Lying on the River Dee, close to the England/Wales border, Chester is an unparished area within the unitary authority of Cheshire West and Chester as of 1 April 2009 replacing the old Chester City Council and the local ward is the City ward electing 3 councillors. A small area around Chester Castle remains a civil parish of Chester Castle. The Council was elected in May 2008 and the current councillors for the City Ward are Max E A Drury, Richard Lowe, and Tom Parry, all three representing the Conservative Party. The Member of Parliament for the City of Chester is Stephen Mosley (Conservative).

Statistical data provided by Cheshire West and Chester briefing, 2010.

History

Chester is one of the best-preserved medieval walled cities in the United Kingdom. The walls, which are Grade I listed are the most complete of any in the country. The city was founded as a Roman fort at the head of the River Dee estuary in AD 79 and was named Deva either after the goddess of the Dee, or directly from the British name for the river. Due to the city's prominent position in north-western England, Chester grew as a trading port during the Industrial Revolution through its canal and newly built railway station, until the power of the Port of Liverpool overtook it. However the city did not decline and during the Georgian and Victorian periods was seen as a place of escape from the more industrial cities of Manchester and Liverpool, and became known as the 'jewel in the crown' of the North West. Chester developed a reputation as being a smart county market town. In recent years, Manchester and Liverpool have undergone huge investment and regeneration, in order to redefine themselves, which in turn has had a huge impact on nearby Chester.



Map of Chester city centre and the greater area. 'Cheshire West and Chester'

The Panel's Assignment

The new unitary authority is just over a year old and is keen to explore new strategies to make the city of Chester even more successful. Chester has long been recognized as the 'jewel in the crown of the North West of England' thanks to its Roman heritage and many assets including the racecourse, zoo, cathedral and historic centre. However, there are concerns that Chester has 'rested on its laurels' as other cities in the region (Manchester, Liverpool) have been regenerated and reinvented themselves. Further competition comes from out-of-town retail outlets such as Cheshire Oaks. Chester has fallen fast in the Experian UK Retail Rankings from a high of 5th in 2002 to 35th in 2009. This decline actually started in the boom years so cannot be entirely attributed to the recession.

Despite the many strengths and assets Chester holds it is facing serious challenges with forecasts of rising unemployment, static retail rents, weak road infrastructure and some historic areas such as the city walls in poor repair and not best positioned to benefit fully from tourism. In addition, Chester suffers from a "night-time economy" narrowly focused on pubs and nightclubs with a notable shortage of cultural activities. The new unitary authority and Chester Renaissance are attempting to address much of this but given the current economic environment, remain challenged by limited budgets. There is no shortage of people or groups wanting to grow Chester as a successful city but they lack a consistent goal or galvanising vision and in some cases these groups may (unwittingly) work against one another.

Whilst a number of initiatives across the city have been undertaken to address the challenges described above these have largely been delivered through a piecemeal approach without forming part of an overarching strategy for addressing and prioritising the major issues and may only serve to 'paper over the cracks'.

The opportunity exists to develop a fully co-ordinated and integrated approach to drive economic success. The Strategic Development Framework 'One City Plan' recently commissioned by the Council and its partners will be instrumental in delivering this. However the key challenge will be to develop a strategy which will unite the plethora of groups and organisations across the city behind a single vision to improve Chester's position as a leading economic and cultural city.

A group of key stakeholders including Chester Renaissance have agreed that there is a need for a fresh, impartial view of Chester's situation and strategy for the future and that a ULI Advisory Services Panel presents a great opportunity to take a "big-picture look" at Chester's challenges and potential opportunities. Chester Renaissance was particularly keen to get an international perspective from the expert panel and hope to hear some new ideas. The panel commend Chester Renaissance and the unitary authority, Cheshire West and Chester, for their openness and willingness to engage throughout the process.

The Questions

The following five questions were agreed by a group of 50 key community stakeholders ahead of the panel's visit.

1. What is Chester trying to be?
2. How can Chester be a distinct City and an active part of the sub region?
3. What can be done in the near future to improve the resident experience of Chester and retain an engaged community for the longer term?
4. What should Chester's city positioning/tourism strategy/goals be for visitor experience?
5. How can Chester position itself to attract and retain the business community and encourage inward investment?

As the panel were not asked directly about specific plans for the Cathedral Quarter or the Northgate development site, there is minimal reference to either project in this report. However, it is clear that both are of significant importance to the continued success and revitalization of Chester's town centre. The panel wish to emphasise their view that no major discussions or decisions for the city centre's future should be taken without considering these two critical projects in context. The panellists also expressed some concern that the very detailed proposals already prepared for both sites were not well integrated, if at all, with any wider vision, or related plans for the city centre. This issue is highlighted as a recurring weakness in many areas. Given the challenges of the current economic situation the panellists felt that a fresh review of plans for both the Cathedral and the Northgate site, which took economic factors and a more holistic view of the city centre's future plans, would be worthwhile. Any review should engage the full range of stakeholders involved in this panel process to ensure any revised plans have the full support of the community.

The Panel Process

An initial stakeholder event on the 20th July 2010 provided an opportunity to seek the views from a wider group of community and business organisations and individuals with an interest in Chester. A set of questions were then drafted, on which the panel would be asked to focus their attention.

ULI then proceeded to select an international board of panellists from their membership, with experience and expertise in the fields required for this particular panel. Each panel is composed of highly qualified professionals who volunteer their time to ULI without remuneration. After panel briefings, a briefing book was circulated several weeks prior to study background information and become familiar with the task.

Day 1: Site tour

The panel were taken around Chester by foot, by bus, boat and by air in helicopter (CO2 emissions of this journey as well as panellists' flights were offset by ULI.) They were shown Chester's assets and tourist attractions, as well as some more challenging areas of the city. They were given the opportunity to speak to local residents working in the tourism sector and to representatives from— Visit Chester and Cheshire. The panel spoke with over 60 students from both the University of Chester and West Cheshire College to hear their views in an informal moderated workshop. A sponsored drinks reception was held in the evening at the Cathedral with 80 local residents and business leaders.

Day 2: Interviews

The panel conducted a full day of hour-long group interviews with local residents, business owners, council members and those expressing an interest in Chester, wishing to have their voices heard. 150 individuals participated and the panel were grateful for their valued comments and suggestions.

Day 3: Boardroom workday

The panel commenced their deliberations and debate, with some follow-up interviews including the local MP Stephen Mosely.

Day 4: Boardroom workday

The panel began more in depth discussion and agreed consensus on their outline responses. The presentation was rehearsed and perfected, alongside outline drafts of this report.



Day 5: Presentation

The public presentation was given at the Chester Town Hall at 10am to the sponsors and open to the public to hear the panel's final recommendations. 200 people attended a lively and positive session. The local press also attended and the presentation was followed by 80minutes of questions and answer session in which the public were free to ask questions and express their reactions to the panel's presentation.

Once the panellists returned home, they continued to work together to produce this report, outlining their recommendations in more detail before publication of the agreed text.

Engaging an already engaged community



University of Chester student discussion

The panel were hugely impressed with the diversity, enthusiasm, sincerity and commitment of the community members we spoke to:

- 60 students from the University of Chester and West Cheshire College
- 150 individual members of the community in face-to-face interviews representing:
 - The local business community
 - Corporate executives
 - Professionals and entrepreneurs
 - Artists and musicians
 - Public officials
 - Visiting shoppers
 - Cathedral representatives
 - Individual citizens
 - Cultural and civic organisations
 - Academics
 - Local MP Stephen Mosley




“Students have a vital role in / impact on the economy and community of Chester.”

Discuss....

Positive	Negative
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Community feel 2. Close proximity to larger cities 3. Good transport to London 4. Good infrastructure 5. Supportive education institutions 6. Good variety of bars and restaurants 7. Easy to walk into and around town 8. Low crime perception (except subways), generally feel safe 9. Historical background 10. Personal feel at university and teaching 11. Good police presence 12. Course availability 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Affordability of housing 2. Few job opportunities (graduate jobs/schemes) 3. Lack of variety/diversity of activities and opportunities 4. Perceptions of safety – reputation of attacks? 5. Traffic 6. Expensive public transport 7. Lack of safe cycle paths and secure parking for bikes 8. Expensive – high cost of living especially for students on low budgets 9. Perception of more offered at other universities (more on campus) 10. Focus on tourism 11. Students only catered for on two nights of the week – not at weekends 12. Lack of entertainment venues 13. Polarised retail, whole areas of the city not for students

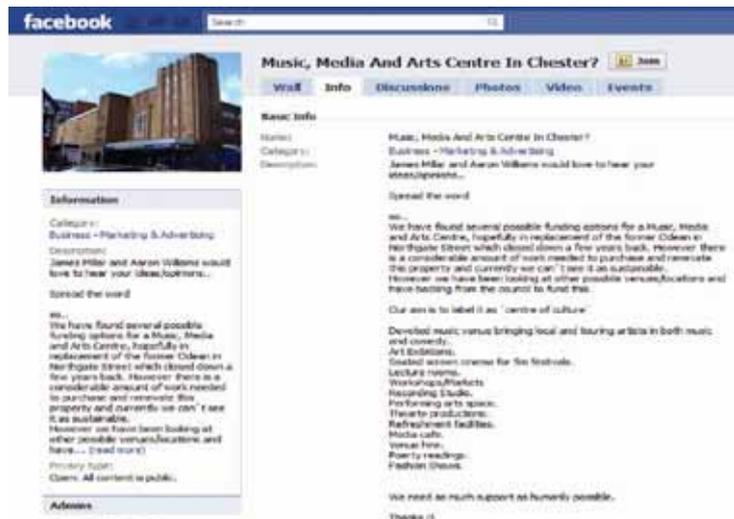


The panel received and read 116 private comments sent in advance through the Chester Renaissance website and reviewed 15 detailed individual proposals sent directly to the panel. In addition we were loaned a number of books from the Chester Civic Trust and provided with extensive briefing from the sponsoring organisations. We also read through multiple online Chester forums on Facebook, Linked-In and local Chester websites.

"I too enjoyed the opportunity to air, along with another three like-wise impassioned co-panel members, my views. I really believe this new approach can make the difference we need to make this city stand on a world stage again - and why I chose to live here 24 years ago."

"I was in a group of six and a wide range of topics discussed some of which took me by surprise -in a good way. Looking forward to the report!"

"My meeting with ULI today was excellent. There was an amazing variety of people familiar and unfamiliar passing through the waiting area en route to interviews. I feel really proud that so many local people have taken the time to participate."



University of Chester social media

Q1 – What is Chester trying to be?

In addressing this question, the panel relied significantly on the opinions and attitudes expressed by over 200 local residents, community and business leaders in the many interview sessions.

“Chester is like a theatre, we have all the props, scenery and actors, but no plot.”

The opinion of the panel is that Chester is trying to be too many things to too many people. Chester is trying to be a tourist centre, a retail centre, and employment centre, a cultural centre, and an historical centre. Chester is also trying to be a “county town”, which served as the centre of the region for government, law, church, military, cultural and commercial activity.

In so trying to be all things, Chester becomes no one thing, and can certainly no longer be what it once was (a county town) in view of modern changes in commercial and living patterns, communication and transport. The panel heard on many occasions from the local community that they would like to see Chester follow the model of Bath or York as opposed to trying to be a smaller Manchester or Liverpool. We also heard concerns that the city was “resting on its laurels” and being overtaken by other regional centres.

“The business of this city is history and heritage. This city should not attempt to compete with Liverpool and Manchester.”

This circumstance begs the question, then, of what Chester should be, or should strive to be.

The Panel concludes that Chester should use its rich legacy as a city of history and heritage, and a city of regional distinction, as the base and framework to move forward. But Chester needs to focus on the future, and move forward, not immerse itself in its history and look back.

“A city transfixed by its past at the expense of its future.”

To this end, it should focus on what it has, and make its historical assets better and better used.

Chester should be a city moving into the future while drawing on its rich past; a city accepting and advancing change, while preserving its heritage; a city of progress that is based on a proud past.

“Chester is both physically and institutionally fragmented.”

The panel were impressed by the many exceptionally committed local citizens and community groups of Chester, many of whom had devised projects aimed at improving the present situation. However, in many unfortunate cases, the best of intentions have been hampered by fragmented leadership or disparate decision-making powers at city and regional levels, often hampered further by national policy changes.

“The hands of the City fathers have been tied together – we have no clear decision-making.”

Chester has a great many assets beyond its unique history, in particular its very engaged community. However, the panel heard repeatedly the concerns of local residents who felt there was too much talk but very little implementation. One interviewee told us that: “Chester is very fond of “pop-up” initiatives, with little coherence.” In fact we heard of more than 50 different city-centre strategies currently in operation, none of which has been properly integrated or effectively implemented. Chester is resting on its historic laurels and risks stagnation whilst others are innovating.

“Chester needs a mission statement.”

The panel are unanimous in recommending that Chester step back from the multitude of projects and plans in order to develop a longer-term vision and strategy for the success of the city in a more competitive and challenging economic environment. It is critical that this plan engages all the city's stakeholders – through genuine community engagement and not tokenistic consultation; with business-led initiatives and not dependence on reduced government funding.

This recommendation does not mean rushing blindly into action to be seen to be responsive – but rather to consider collectively the many good ideas and valuable work already in place, to better leverage the local community and organisations who are so committed to the success of the city and to act on those plans that are agreed to be the best for Chester going forward. Our recommendations follow the format of the questions posed to the panel.

Q2 – How can Chester be a distinct City and an active part of the sub region?

“Chester can’t rely on just being Chester anymore – it has to make a distinct offer.”

Cities are successful to the extent that they can exploit the opportunities that arise from their hinter-land; and can facilitate the ambitions and creativity of their population. Chester has been a very successful city in the past; and has a reputation as a “stand out” location in the North West, and as a good place both to live and do business. However, cities are also in competition with each other. The extent to which they compete is much greater than in the past with improvements in private and public transport connecting communities that were once entirely separate.

The competitive position of Chester has deteriorated in recent years with the revival of Liverpool and Manchester within the North West. This is apparent on several fronts:

- Liverpool and Manchester have done better as business locations after many years of loss of business and employment. They have benefited from intensive public policy support and have much better organised economic development policies. They make a serious offer to incoming investors of land, financial support, and a skilled workforce.

There has also been a revival in the residential amenity of inner city areas of both Liverpool and Manchester after many years of serious decline. Populations have largely been stabilised and socio-economic trends have revived a preference for urban living among many young middle-class couples. Their location choice is reinforced by concerted Government action to assure adequate housing and environmental considerations in these cities. Chester cannot rely on gaining its share of the wealthy population of the sub-region due to suburban out-migration – many of the people the panel interviewed were actually resident in North-Wales, although they still worked in and around Chester. Retaining these loyal and engaged citizens as Chester residents is a real challenge.



- Trends in retailing have led to greater concentration, in which dominant groups seek larger store sizes that are more accessible. Many modern retailers have concentrated in national chains and seek out-of-town locations. It is already clear that Chester has lost out to some of these locations in the North West and it is likely that this competition will increase.
- The leisure and cultural offer of Chester has deteriorated significantly; partly due to the revival of better quality cultural facilities in Liverpool and Manchester. An issue raised repeatedly by local residents was the night-time economy's focus on low-cost drinking and nightclubs. Whilst this is an issue affecting most UK towns and cities, Chester has become a destination of choice for 'stag and hen parties' in the UK and many residents felt this had caused a detrimental effect on the city centre and its appeal. There was a definite perception amongst interviewees of higher crime and threatening behaviour in the city centre at night, although no actual data backed this up and others acknowledged that the police do have a visible and effective presence. However, the lack of cultural or entertainment offers beyond drinking are clearly apparent and a significant challenge for Chester – particularly if the city wants to attract other types of visitor.

These aspects have become more apparent in Chester over the last few years and been the subject of much debate well before the panel. However, this coincides with a period when Government largesse is over and a number of planned projects may not be able to secure funding. The climate for future government support for urban infrastructure is now poor and Chester must pro-actively engage its business community to establish coherent and deliverable plans for inward investment in the future.

The Asset Base

Chester is undoubtedly well endowed from the past, and has a range of interesting and important assets many of which are under-used. Many of these are explored in question 4 in relation to the potential to maximise the visitor experience. The panel heard from many residents keen for their historical assets to be more proactively cared for and used to attract new visitors and also to provide better amenities for local people.

- Heritage and History: Chester has a magnificent historical offer of Roman, early Church, Medieval, and Victorian assets
- Chester is an important UK retail centre although struggling to stay competitive
- Chester has an impressive private sector led tourist trade, with the Zoo and Chester Racecourse
- Chester remains an important centre for government, church, and legal services: stemming from its history as an important regional centre.
- The Grosvenor Estate owns a significant number of properties within Chester as part of the Eaton Estate, the principal home of the 6th Duke of Westminster and his family. Importantly, the Grosvenor family has been connected with Chester since 1443 and remains committed to helping to shape the future urban landscape of Chester. A further strength is the Grosvenor property group, the largest business in the Grosvenor Estate portfolio with an international reputation for property expertise.

- Chester has benefited from the establishment of new businesses with good growth potential. Included among these are MBNA Bank of America, Barclays, HBOS and Marks and Spencers.
- Our interviews suggest that all these companies appreciate their location in or near Chester. They now have sunk capital in the area and, hearsay suggests, cut their employment less at Chester locations than elsewhere during the recent financial crisis.
- The University of Chester, which has grown quickly, has built strong links with West Cheshire College and other educational institutions which have grown strongly in recent years.
- New leadership and a willing community whose views were energetically expressed to us in the course of our work.
- Quality neighbourhoods
- Under exploited assets along the river and canal

Unrealised Potential

In this list there is a great deal of unrealised potential. It would be possible to show how each of these assets have growth prospects, and quite possibly how each has been restrained over recent years by poor planning, administrative problems, or environment and access problems. The panel believe that each of the city's assets are able to offer more than they do at present, and some a great deal more. For example:

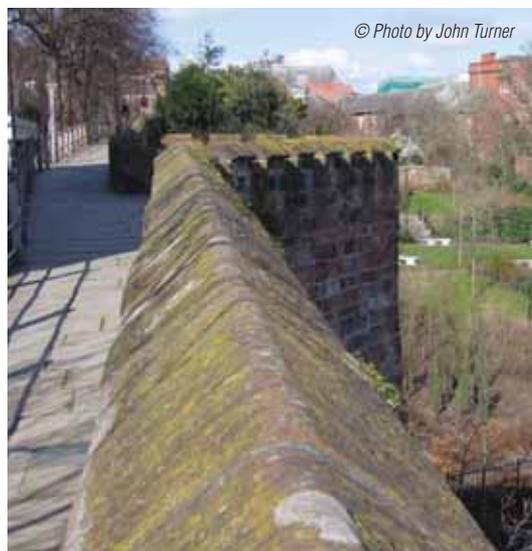
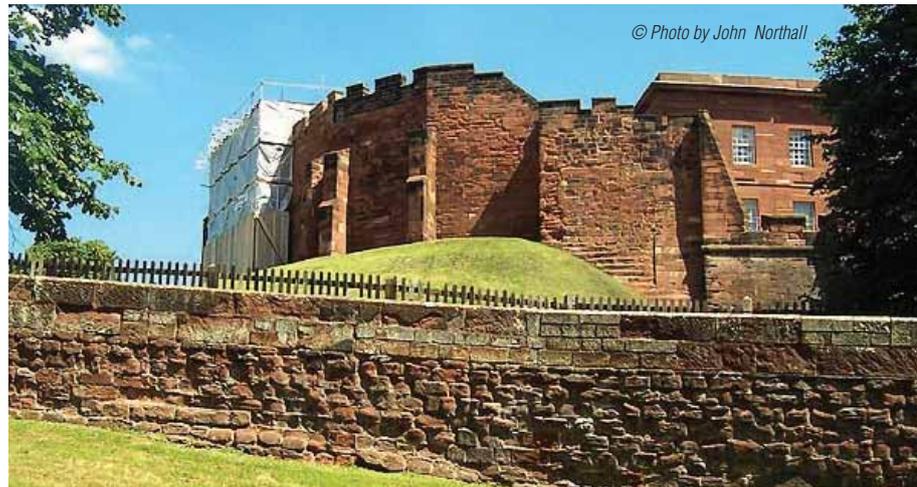
- Chester has attracted some of the "best" new investment into the North West. However, the employment created has only been loosely tied to the City, and it is not evident that there has been a great deal of benefit from the new private sector jobs that have been created. Companies have taken advantage of the fine countryside and amenity of the area, but have not tied their investment directly into the Chester economy.

“There are no ‘suits’ in the city centre at lunchtime – all those organisations are based outside and it’s perfectly possible to be employed in Chester but to never come into the heart of town, let alone spend money here.”

The City is undoubtedly trading on its reputation and faces a challenging environment on a number of fronts. If it is to push back it needs to emphasise the assets that it has and to make better use of them.

The Challenge

- There are too many organisations with overlapping agendas where the respective roles are not clear. This creates confusion, competition and inaction.
- There remain a number of vacant sites associated with the construction of the inner ringroad from as much as 50 years ago.
- Planning paralysis: there are many examples of this in Chester, in particular, difficulties surrounding the Northgate Scheme. This covers a significant part of the City and was planned many years ago yet it is unlikely to be realised in the near future. The panel did not get to visit the site or consider it in any detail but were in agreement that it was of vital importance to engage the local community more effectively in the proposals for the scheme and to ensure that the agreed plan reflects both local opinions and needs but also the reality of the economic environment, which is so different to that when the original scheme was devised. It needs to be asked whether a strong and positive intervention could not either promote this scheme in the very near future; or reassess it for alternative uses.
- Very little housing has been built in Chester post 1960s and the city gives the appearance, at one level, of being cut off from the modern world – thus, it has a fine historic layout and streetscape; and housing from the 1920/30s, 1950s and 1960s. However “greenbelt absolutism” appears to have stifled any further housing development – in circumstances where the city centre might have benefited from this; and where other



occasional breaches of the greenbelt would have been in the interests of the city and could have been developed in a way that ensured the ecological impact was minimised so new communities incorporated green spaces.

- It is important that the historic quality of the City is maintained and enhanced: this should be an absolute value behind all decisions about change of the urban environment. Some unfortunate developments in the last fifty years have destroyed valuable historic monuments. However, conservation politics and the difficulty of resolving conflict situations have led to paralysis of decision-making around key sites that should be major attractions such as Dee House and the amphitheatre, the Castle or the City Walls. Conservation would be enhanced and better handled within a simpler administrative structure and clear guidelines.



Respect for Chester's heritage should not mean leaving it to decay before a decision can be reached.

- Traffic congestion in the City appears to be severe, and traffic is handled less well than in some other cathedral towns. Although the Greenway cycle routes are universally popular, the city centre environment for bicycles (and pedestrians in some places) is poor. Many interviewees expressed a wish to commute by bicycle but feared for their own safety. The panel were shocked to hear that in a university town only one of the 60 students we met used a bicycle for travelling to college!
- Poor presentation at the entry points of the city – i.e. the arrival map at the station is unintelligible, lacking even basic fundamental arrow marking the station's location!
- Poor administration in many areas, often exacerbated by lack of coherent roles or decision-making responsibilities between the multitude of local bodies. The challenges facing the Cathedral estate exemplify this problem.



Panic, Plans and Paralysis

As a result of these factors there are:

- many signs of stress!
- good but also bad neighbourhoods
- some very poor modern buildings where only the best quality of design should be allowed
- quite extensive land vacancy, dereliction, and land abandonment redolent of much poorer towns than Chester.
- The retail offer of the town is reducing in scale and quality.
- Some historic assets are run down. Many physical areas of the town (and services to it) appear fragmented.
- Too many activities are closing, including in recent years the theatre, cinema, and cathedral choir
- and plenty of anxiety, particularly around the dependence on low-cost drinking as the basis of the 'night-time economy'
- There have been plenty of plans and no action: There is a kind of "effective paralysis", where it is very difficult to get anything done! There is an over-reliance on recreating the past and there is an assumption that if only this could happen, all would be well.
- and genuine concern that unless Chester can counter the real threats to its shopping and residential amenities it is likely to be caught in a downward spiral where its brand could be severely devalued; and where it would be extremely difficult to achieve an effective revival.

Areas of Focus

To counter these challenges the panel recommends the following key areas of focus to ensure that Chester remains a distinct but effective regional city:

- marketing;
- enhancement of the urban environment;
- The local economy
- city management
- and active participation in new government policies towards localism.

Marketing

The reputation of Chester as a shopping centre, historic town, and a pleasant place to live is changing and is perceived by many to be going “down market”.

“People haven’t heard of Chester – we just assume they know we are here.”

- The city should be more ambitious to get itself back to the top and set measurable and specific targets. For instance, it might aim to have a better urban profile and more visitors than York! Thought needs to be given as to how this should be done and then plans generated to get there; with projects then judged against this objective. Thinking of Chester’s brand would need to be combined with effective and single-minded marketing campaigns. These would target those visitors who you would wish to attract. Again, see question four for more detail.

Urban Environment

The panel felt that the urban environment fell short of what was desirable or would be expected in similar towns.

This goes for the quality of some new buildings; the levels of planning blight in some parts of the city; the quality of street cleaning; the extent of congestion and parking; poor signage and poor access for bicycles. A necessary condition of attracting new activities and growth for Chester is sorting out these questions.

Local Economy

Chester is far from the bottom of the table in terms of UK economic performance and is still clearly one of the most favoured parts of the North West, and even the UK.

Significant business start-ups have appeared locally in recent years, notably the online business moneysupermarket.com as well as city centre jewellers and solicitors; and there are reports from the Eaton Estate that a significant number of small buoyant businesses are locating in their converted premises.

There has been a significant expansion of local leisure operators, largely utilising their own resources. This includes the Zoo and the Chester Racecourse, both of which are among the leading facilities in their sector in the UK. Major companies have also been investing on Chester Business Park and their Chester operations have particularly resilient in the recent recession.

This is a formidable level of economic activity. There is less of a problem of shortage of demand than a poor response to demand that exists. The panel recommends that the city consider:

- The removal of unnecessary restrictions on the availability of land and labour;
- Greater consideration of the needs of local entrepreneurs! In particular, there is significant youth enterprise potential in the city that remains untapped and will be lost to Liverpool and Manchester if greater support is not provided. See question five for further detail.
- Clarity of decision-making, particularly around proposals that have been in ‘limbo’ for long periods of time.
- Civic leaders should be more aware of the requirements of established local companies, forging clearer links with respected and successful private sector representatives. New activity should be tied more closely into the city centre and there should be concerted efforts to find appropriate locations for different types of activity – see question four on tourism.

A Distinct City

Policy makers should be particularly aware that:

- Chester needs to build on its distinctive and particular nature. It is a truism that everywhere nowadays wants to be “locally distinctive”. However, Chester has the opportunity: it can build on its location at the centre of a sub-region supporting hinterland services. It can recreate a city centre economy that enhances visitor experience and is different to that of the surrounding competing centres. It can ensure that the city is a pleasant place to visit by controlling adverse activities.
- Local entrepreneurs should be supported. They are only likely to be accommodated in the city centre when they are small. New businesses are likely to emerge from the existing business community – thus the existing small traders; the retail community; new firms coming out of the university. Conscious programmes should be developed around these prospects.
- The city should attempt to remove barriers to expansion from existing important firms in the regional economy.
- The city should attempt to capture regional demand: in other words, to get more of the financial services and the companies that it seeks, ideally offering future locations closer to the city centre and more closely tied in with it.

City Management

To succeed Chester needs clear and accountable leadership.

Our stay in the city was not long enough to come to grips with the many local agencies who work on service delivery, marketing and promotion, and economic development. However, there were many critics of the way in which the city is run and many signs of poor levels of service delivery, with overlapping responsibilities and un-met environmental needs. Others did acknowledge the steps already taken by the new unitary authority and Chester Renaissance but wanted more proactive engagement.

Whilst everyone is clear the Chester should not try to replicate Liverpool and Manchester,” then lower case ‘o’ for ‘on the economic front. On the economic front, we would strongly recommend that the city gives serious consideration to learning from format employed by Liverpool and Manchester to spearhead their regeneration efforts. This involves a partnership between public and private sector, with a real level of resource commitment and power to achieve results. Such a body would be led by an effective business leader, bringing in local authorities, utilities, and charitable bodies. Chester Renaissance does not provide this model at present and is not set up in a way to achieve this objective given its limited financing and powers.

Discussion needs to be held among elected authorities and representative business and community organisations as to how better leadership for this can be achieved.

Chester also needs proper measurement

How could a business succeed without proper figures?

Chester has described itself to us poorly. It needs clear and well-presented statistics covering:

- key variables, including population structure;
- clear information about employment and unemployment trends;
- statistics on local incomes;
- local authority budgets showing areas of expenditure by service and element of the capital budget;
- accurate and detailed visitor data;
- property market statistics showing property trends in new housing conditions; and in the supply and demand for commercial property.

The statistics that were given to us contained little trend data. They had different special bases, sometimes being from Chester alone and sometimes from the wider local authority district. They were jumbled and were clearly the statistics that were available, rather than those that are needed to guide sensible policy making in the city.

We would suggest that providing a clear statistical base for the city is seen as a project akin to that with which a business would seek to develop clear management accounts. Very little, if any, new survey work is needed: just thought to the best form of presentation! An obvious way to get this work done would be to draw in the university and then to monitor the results – although the work would need to be done at professorial and not student level!

Furthermore, statistics are only valuable if clearly presented, widely distributed, and discussed and acted upon. The panel recommends that:

- Chester seeks to define a way of describing its social, economic, and political state with an annual report with quarterly back-ups.
- Arrangements are made for discussion of this report among key decision-makers and civic leaders.
- The report should also be discussed with the public: we were impressed by the turnout at public presentation when over 200 people attended to hear the results of a very brief study. It may be that this kind of open meeting could be replicated on an annual basis?
- Proper arrangements should be made with the local press to carry full information about the study.

International Experience

Chester is not alone in suffering difficulties while having a strong historical legacy. Various cities in recent years have significantly improved their offer and have achieved enhanced status and prosperity as a result. We would recommend that some of this knowledge is brought to bear on Chester, where a detailed comparative look might be made at Charleston, South Carolina; Aix-en-Provence; or at larger cities like Munich or Barcelona. ULI has an extensive library of case studies that can be used in the first step of this kind of research.

Land Problems

Many problems appear to result from poorly functioning local land markets: these are witnessed by the levels of vacant land; dereliction; blighted sites, and now some concern about the levels of vacancy in the city centre. It is clear also that there are inadequate levels of house building outside the rather limited area of 2 bedroom flats. Again, this is a problem for many UK cities but a focus on more diverse types of housing would allow more Chester residents to stay within the city as their families expand.

We would recommend that a property panel, with real expertise at understanding why these problems are occurring, is put in place and attempts to provide solutions to some of these problems.

The UK Localism Agenda

The new government wants local authorities to be more responsible. It wants you to generate your own resources and solve your own problems. Given that resources should exist within the local economy this should provide the means to facilitate getting to grips with land and environmental problems, long term planning issues, and provision of facilities to enhance the local environment. These are all elements of a programme from which Chester should benefit.

Q3 – What can be done in the near future to improve the resident experience of Chester and retain an engaged community for the longer term?

The panel's answer is in three parts.

i) Resident Experience: The City Centre

The panel agreed that the city centre is the heart and soul of Chester, and is key to the future of Chester's success. A city without a healthy city centre is not a healthy town. The city centre needs to be a good place to live, work and visit. But that is not fully the case today.

The panel were surprised that there appear to be no guidelines for building design, and unsatisfactory quality of such data. To ensure new buildings complement the city centre's heritage assets, building design guidelines, along with a review entity and review process are needed. The site by site reactions of the past indicates development alternatives are not understood. This requires a city centre strategic plan that considers housing, retail, offices, parking, public transport and boutique assets. It does not need piecemeal site-by-site reactions. Oversight focused on the city centre is lacking. There is an immediate need for a city centre asset/estate management function to:

- Identify and remove barriers to vehicle flow into and through the city centre.
- Create and manage a weekend marketplace in the centre (farmers market/arts and crafts/antiques etc)

Award winning Haverfordwest Farmers Market, West Wales."



- Enhance access to and use of the River and Canal. The key access points need to be identified.
- Enhance police presence at key places in the evenings to create a greater sense of social order.
- Address the perceived fear of violence in the evening and the state of the current night-time economy.

This oversight function needs to be carefully developed with a strong strategic understanding of the current links between land use patterns and human use patterns. It could be organised as a business improvement district, known as a .BID.

ii) Resident Experience: Citywide

A good place to live can also be a good place to visit, but good places to visit are not always good places to live. There are a number of small, inexpensive ways to improve the public ways for those living and those visiting Chester. Most of these involve intelligibility of the places of movement. These should be implemented in a gradual, step-by-step process so the results can be monitored as the improvements are made. The panel recommends a focus on:

- Improving management of public spaces throughout the city. This includes better signs and connections making it easier for visitors to get around Chester.
- Identifying and creating useable cycle ways that make it safe to ride into the city centre, as well as commute across the centre, with consultation of the student community.
- Restricting on-street parking in key locations to improve traffic flow. Parking in certain locations forces streets to be alternately one-way and then the other slowing movement and frustrating drivers.

- Creating more park & ride facilities. A few key locations need to be identified.
- Installing more public toilets in key locations.

These five measures can be undertaken mostly by governmental authorities.

iii) Economic Development

The economies of most real cities develop from within. Opportunities often come from perceiving connections that without the connections might not be apparent. The panel suggests that Chester:

- Create a formal institutional linkage between the city, higher education institutions and the Zoo. Such a linkage can allow stakeholders to access information about markets, funding sources and other potentials to agglomerate key economic activities that would be nationally and internationally competitive.
- Provide internships for students and create a business incubator for local retail, property management, heritage restoration and other fields. Resources for this initiative are widely available. This point will be expanded upon in question 5, which will focus on Chester's business community and inward investment.

What can Chester do to retain an engaged community for the long run?

Chester should establish a city wide forum for dialogue about the past and future of Chester. Chester has many strong organisations and individuals but many of these organisations have their own agenda and points of view. To foster a more inclusive and participatory approach to community decision-making, Chester should create a forum for on-going dialogue about the future of the city, to listen to the local residents. The quality of consultation is key, as experience shows that public hearings are not a good forum for dialogue. In the typical public hearing, people come with their minds already made up about an issue. They rarely listen to each other, instead they argue for or against a particular proposal or idea.

In his book, the *Seven Habits of Highly Effective Individuals*, 2004, Stephen Covey says that highly effective individuals "seek first to understand and then to be understood.", so too it is with highly effective communities. A Chester Forum for Dialogue would put the emphasis on

cooperative community spirit and would help all the various interest groups in Chester to work toward common goals and focus on long-term, positive results.

The panel highlighted the particular success of the London borough of Croydon's recent community engagement strategy. In 2008/09, Croydon's Strategic Partnership agreed to develop a new long-term vision for Croydon through Imagine Croydon - one of the largest public engagement exercises ever undertaken in the borough. What followed was an intensive 8 month programme which saw some 20,000 local people, representing all sections of Croydon's communities, engaging with and contributing to the vision development process. *"The outcome is an ambitious, compelling vision that paints a clear picture of the type of place Croydon has the potential to become."*

The borough of Croydon stated that:

"Croydon's new vision will now inform all other strategies and plans in the borough, and will also help provide a focus for immediate action. Overall, the vision will help engage everyone in helping to create a successful and enterprising Croydon - a place that offers huge opportunity and a place where everyone can feel they can belong."

Chester has the building blocks already in place for an equally successful initiative.



Imagine Croydon website.

Entrepreneurship

- Chester should develop an entrepreneurial and innovative environment in the city, built on formal links between its heritage assets, the university and college, the zoo and the financial services sector.

Chester has a number of world class assets, but it needs to consider how to leverage these assets to create more synergy among them. Cities and metropolitan regions are in a far more competitive environment than ever before. Whereas diverse employment opportunities and quality of life issues have always been two imperatives for successful cities, today the key to economic success is leveraging a city's assets and creating marketplace synergies and corporate enterprise offshoots.

Many cities have universities and business assets and/or heritage assets but the most successful cities will figure out ways to make the whole greater than the sum of its parts. Given the presence of a large financial services sector in Chester, the city should explore new ways of financing innovation in the region.

In many ways the ability of a community to nurture a diverse economy and not be dominated by one sector (such as tourism) has become the challenge. While real estate development and economic activity are typically initiated by the private sector, increasingly there is an expectation that public officials will be more entrepreneurial. Communities, like Chester will succeed when the civic and public leadership come together to share a common vision in the creation of a competitive economy and a vibrant community.



BIDs

- Chester should encourage the creation of Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) to enhance the public realm in Chester. The panel were encouraged to hear after their visit that the unitary authority and Chester Renaissance have put in a proposal to form a city centre BID.

A business improvement district (BID) is a defined commercial area within which businesses pay an additional tax or fee to fund improvements within the district's boundaries. BIDs provide services such as cleaning streets, park maintenance, providing security, making capital improvements, and marketing the area. The services provided by BIDs are supplements to those already provided by the municipality. In England, BIDs were authorized by legislation (the Local Government Act of 2003) and subsequent regulation in 2004. There are currently more than 35 BIDs across Greater London and a number of others elsewhere in England.

BIDs would be a particularly effective tool during this time of fiscal austerity and could focus on those services and improvements most desired by the local business community. BIDs are able to help improve the public realm in good times and bad. The panel recommends that Chester look to ULI's work on BIDs and also to British BIDs, a membership organisation chaired by Greg Clark, ULI Senior fellow in Europe, for advice. www.britishbids.info

Q4 – What should Chester’s city positioning/tourism strategy/goals be for visitor experience?

Chester city positioning

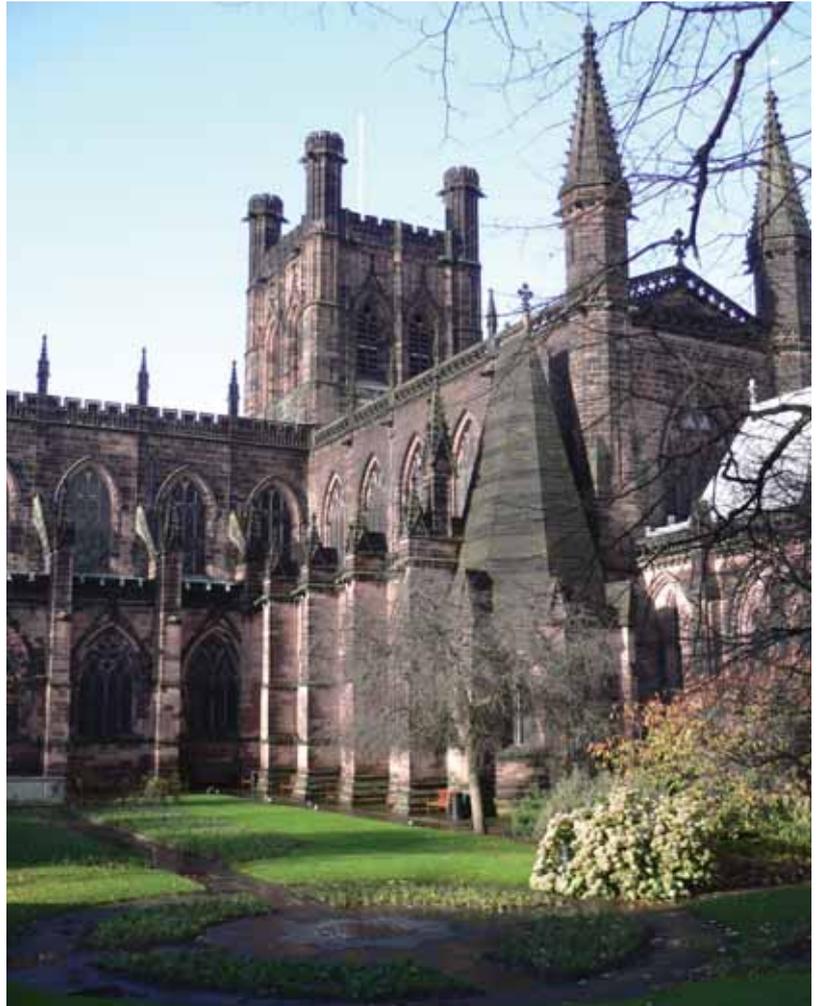
Having discussed this question at great depth with stakeholders, tourism professionals, and Chester residents, the panel recommends that Chester should focus on “boutique”¹ tourism, striving to become “best in class”, while carefully supplementing its boutique tourist appeal with a focus on added corporate employment and expansion of its educational sector.

In order to achieve this goal, Chester should focus on value added, as opposed to the sheer number of tourists. A strategy building on quality instead of quantity will mean lower impact and higher yield. In other words: “Less is more, quality, not quantity.” A focus solely on visitor numbers does not enable understanding of what really works for a city centre regarding retail and historic attractions. For example, whilst Chester’s visitor numbers at first glance appear strong, the visitor profiles are polarised, leaving the city centre close to empty after 5pm until the evening entertainment at pubs and nightclubs starts, which is when many long-term residents now choose to avoid the centre altogether.

“A vibrant city attracts a variety of visitors all through the day and night.”

The panel recommends focusing on more discerning and sophisticated visitors with a higher disposable income. Therefore, Chester should provide integrated short-break experiences (hotel, dining, heritage, cultural activities, shopping, spa, golf, etc.) and high-end meeting facilities for the senior corporate segment (executive retreats, special board meetings, coaching and managerial training, etc.).

The panel has approached this by considering Chester’s assets and liabilities. This approach will help to maximise the benefits of tourism while minimising its drawbacks.



© Photo by John Turner

¹ **boutique** A business that serves a sophisticated or specialized clientele.



Assets

Chester is a city with many assets from a tourist attraction perspective:

Assets	Liabilities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engaged community • The city walls • The Cathedral • The Rows • The historic centre • The River Dee • The canal and the docks • The amphitheatre • The Castle • Museum • (Apparently) good plans (lots of them) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visitors nowadays want to 'experience', not just to 'listen' or 'read' • Some attractions disappoint or are not open to the public (Amphitheatre, castle) • Some attractions could be presented in a better way (city walls, rows) • The few attractions can be seen in a few hours, thus do not encourage higher-spend overnight stays and repeat visitors. • Too many and sometimes inconsistent development / tourist plans • A lack of financial resources • No clear tourism strategy for the city centre itself. • Unclear leadership • Insufficient public private partnership / coordination • Disparate and incompatible opinions and views e.g., concerning Dee House or the Northgate site • A lack of quality hotel accommodation • A limited number of restaurants and cafes, particularly at the higher end of the market • A lack of quality shops with unique and diverse offer • Potential to improve marketing

The challenge with many of these assets is that they do not live up to tourists' expectations. Although efforts have been made to improve them, there is little to see at the amphitheatre site, and the Castle does not look like a castle as one would imagine, but more like a faded mansion. The few remains of the old fortification are not currently accessible - thus disillusioning visitors further.

An example of an already existing site seeing trail.

Action points

In response to these findings, the panel recommends a number of shorter-term actions which require relatively low financial outlays and ten 'Big Ideas' which are longer term and higher investment proposals.

Shorter Term – Lower Investment

- The panel strongly recommends improving the arrival information at the train station. The signage and guidance on arrival are poor, and there are too few persons who can provide information to visitors who have just arrived. The panel also fervently recommends upgrading the 'arrival experience', in particular the pedestrian link from the train station to the city centre, which at the moment does not provide a positive or inviting first impression of the city. While the challenges are not insignificant (ring road, potential costs), the benefits of greatly improving the visitors' first (and last) impression of Chester are enormous.
- Chester should improve the *public realm lighting and its cleanliness* and the streets should be *animated* (vegetation, seating, comfy meeting points, banners, public art, entertainers, markets, fountains etc.) The positive response to Chester Renaissance programmes such as 'Rhinomania' show the positive impact these artistic projects can have but they should not stand alone as 'skin-deep improvements.' Rather, they should be integrated with improvements of the fundamentals."
- The panel thinks that touristic *way-finding and signage* should be improved (for orientation as well as for interpretation). Visitor itineraries and tourist trails are important ways of guiding people through the city. There should be more specific routes (e.g., Roman trail, shopping trail, etc.) with plans, signage and milestones. The existing tour on the city walls is a good example that can be built upon and should be better publicised. There also should be more historic *guided tours*, which need to be engaging, informative, and entertaining. The panel were impressed by the Chester Millennium festival trail and were enthusiastic about it being marketed and used. Chester has a number of local citizens volunteering as guides already, many of whom are keen to do more.



- The panel recommends increasing and strengthening the city's pedestrianisation and to extend bicycle paths throughout the city centre. At present, there are still too many concessions to cars. The city might wish to consider an on-street bicycle rental scheme, which, as demonstrated elsewhere (London, Paris, Barcelona), can pay for itself via advertising revenues.



Cycle-hire schemes in Hamburg and Paris





© Photo by Sarah Cartwright

*Chester town Hall and
Tudor Architecture in Chester*



- The 'Free after 3pm' incentive has clearly been positive. Chester should consider extending other retail-led parking schemes. For instance, a purchaser at a shop or a customer at a restaurant would get 2 hours free parking. Visitors who do not actually spend pay the full parking fare.
- The Rows, which are truly unique and very important for Chester as an attractive tourism destination, need to be presented in a better way. The panel suggests managing them in an integrated and holistic manner as an open-air shopping centre, with a clear focus on the high-end visitors described above.
- In order to strengthen Chester's cultural character (especially in the city centre), Chester should consider refurbishing the *Odeon Cinema*, a handsome 1936 art-deco building located right in the city centre, as a means to reenergize the surrounding urban environment. The cinema could potentially become the seat of a 'filmotheque', focusing on specific non-block-buster, cinematographic programming, perhaps including film-related lectures and other events. Challenges such as ownership, investment and operational costs, venue management, attendance, access and parking will, of course need to be carefully considered.
- Chester Festivals should *bring culture into unique spaces* and make further use of the many interesting, attractive venues in the city (town hall, churches, squares, etc.).
- The panel regards as very important to improve the *connection between the zoo and the city centre* – not only by means of transport, but also psychologically. Weekend packages (1 day city + 1 day zoo) are strongly recommended.
- Finally, the panel suggests to *integrate the university and college curricula with the city experience* (in fields such as heritage management, hospitality, museology, preservation, zoo management, etc.) to create a 'centre of excellence', synergies, training for students and jobs for graduates. An entrepreneurship and innovation incubator for these industries is also recommended.

Q4b – Ten Big Ideas



The panel were asked to think creatively about 'big ideas' for Chester's future, particularly where international examples could be offered. The following are ideas that the panel strongly recommends Chester should carefully *consider* in order to sustain and improve its competitive positioning in the tourism market. They should be part of an integrated, comprehensive, long-term tourist and urban revitalization strategy and should be phased into the city's fabric to drive and feed momentum for change and improvement. These will be the *'anchors'* and the *'seeds'* of revitalisation. In no particular order:

- Further improve Chester's public realm
- The River Dee and the Canal
- Reintroducing a cultural centre in Chester's city centre
- Conference/performing art/exhibition facility
- Biodome (Zoo extension)
- Chester History Experience Centre
- Chester Port
- Hotel at The Rows
- Underground Car-Parks
- Redevelop Chester Castle

1. Further improve Chester's public realm

The opportunity is to provide an enhanced *'sense of place'* focused around the most attractive urban assets of the city, i.e., the Rows and the Cathedral Quarter: This would provide a framing for the city centre, and have key markers to clearly define the city centre and its borders.

This would be done by creating attractive urban spaces such as squares and terraces for various activities, such as open-air cafes, street performances, etc. Examples of such spaces abound in the UK and elsewhere in Continental Europe:



Images of pedestrianised areas in Rastatt, Fuessen and Ochsenfurt

Vital to the success of this idea is to *focus investment* on the key, most attractive urban spaces so the beneficial impact *gradually* irradiates into surrounding areas. Conversely, spreading the actions too soon would probably lead to weaker, probably disappointing results.

Subject to a required in-depth study, a number of *challenges* to deploy this 'Big Idea' are already identifiable, such as investment costs and sources of funds; how and by whom will street activities be programmed and controlled; and the political risk of being seen as privileging some areas of the city over others. Again, there are multiple examples of similar situations elsewhere where such challenges (and others) were successfully overcome.

Area for targeted development of the River Dee



Newcastle Millennium Bridge



Historic photos of the successful Henley Regatta



Prague City Bridge, Munich

2. The River Dee and the Canal

Chester should consider using the Dee River bank(s) to refresh and reinvigorate the current leisure experience, thus making better use of the available assets, especially the river itself, and creating a vibrant focus of activity at the southeast of the City centre.

The basic idea is to make Chester “the Henley of the North” by organizing in this area a wide range of river-based activities and events.

The Dee River embankments could also be a potential location for a state-of-the-art conference facility (see ‘Big Idea’ no. 4 below), except that the scarcity of available land on the city-side embankment would probably make it necessary to develop this facility on the southern embankment, which would probably require a new pedestrian bridge to provide a link with Chester’s city centre. This bridge, however, can in itself become an attraction, like other such bridges elsewhere.

The main identifiable challenges for this ‘Big Idea’ are the investment costs, the operational costs, the scarcity of available land on the river embankments, the need to develop a viable integrated experience concept, the programming of temporary activities (self-production and/or externally generated), the operation and management of ancillary facilities (such as cafés, restaurants, shops, etc.), the public attendance and patronage, visitor access and parking. All these challenges and others which may be identified during the feasibility studies will need to be addressed by a comprehensive development plan, which should contemplate public/private partnership opportunities.

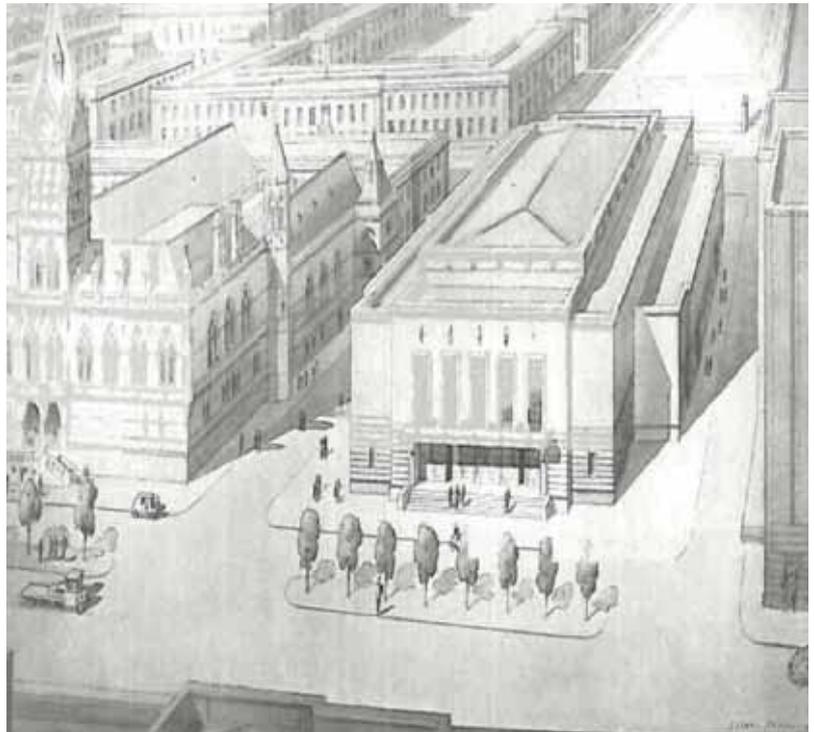
3. Reintroducing a cultural centre in Chester's city centre

To re-establish itself as a centre of cultural tourism, Chester should seriously consider the need to reinstate a theatre or cultural centre in its city centre. There have been plans to develop a theatre in Chester's city centre going back to at least 1945 and, since the closing of The Gateway Theatre in 2007 (and the Odeon Cinema in 2006), Chester lacks a venue for the performing arts – a likely 'must-have' to secure the recommended positioning as a cultural destination.

The panel heard repeatedly from the community, interviewees and student population that the lack of this facility was a serious concern and a causal factor in the night-time economy becoming dependent on pubs and nightclubs. A theatre was high on the list of many people's priorities, but the panel perceived this was not likely to be viable. Several major centres are already struggling in Liverpool, and Chester would be in direct competition with them, therefore the panel recommends instead the consideration of a multi-functional and sustainable centre for arts and culture, including a workshop, innovation hub etc.

The new Chester cultural centre could be part of a redevelopment of derelict or unsightly buildings in the city centre (see 'Big Idea' No. 9 below), or perhaps the Odeon Cinema could be refurbished into a small theatre venue. There are examples of successful smaller speciality theatres in the UK, such as The Almeida, a 325-seat theatre in the heart of Islington, North London. A potential partnership with one such theatre could perhaps be envisioned to generate shared productions and itinerant shows.

The challenges to bring this 'Big Idea' into fruition are the investment and operational costs, performance programming (self-production and/or externally generated?), securing enough attendance in competition with other offerings elsewhere (and with pervasive digital media substitutes), public access and car parking (a significant issue in Chester – see 'Big Idea' No. 9). All these challenges, and others yet to be identified, should be carefully addressed by an independent feasibility study prepared by specialised, qualified experts.



1945 proposal for a new concert hall in Chester, from "A Plan for Redevelopment, by Charles Greenwood, with P.H. Lawson, Gordon Hemm and Stewart Bale.", 1945. This drawing is accompanied by text emphasising the 'urgent need' for a decision on this proposal! Loaned by Chester Civic Trust



Almeida Theatre, London N1, www.almeida.co.uk

4. Conference/performing art/exhibition facility

As outlined before, to secure Chester's position as a 'boutique' tourist destination with a specialization in culture, appropriate venues are required. In this regard, the panel recommends exploring the creation of a multi-purpose conference/performing art/exhibition facility. Such facility would be used for business, entertainment, cultural activities, exhibitions and performances, thus optimizing investment and operating costs, and increasing the potential to attract private investment. Potential city centre locations should be contemplated, so this new activity centre can contribute to re-energize Chester's urban environment. One such option would be to use the Castle for this purpose (see 'Big Idea' No. 10 below).

Examples of such facilities already exist elsewhere, ie: Kings Place in London, a venue that successfully brings together under one roof a creative hub, a dining venue, a conference and events centre, and an office complex, including the HQ of the Guardian newspaper, and that has spearheaded an urban renewal momentum in its vicinity.



Kings Place , London

*ULI Europe Trends
Conference,
12 May 2009 held at
www.kingsplace.co.uk*



Apart from the predictable challenges, such as ownership (private/public/mixed), investment and operational costs, programming of events and performances (self-production and/or externally generated?), sufficient attendance, public access and car parking, other specific issues will need to be addressed by an in-depth feasibility study, such as the operation and management of the conference facility, hotel accommodation required by conference users, coach parking, etc.



King's Place Conference facilities



5. Biodome (Zoo extension)

The Chester Zoo has been planning for a long time to create a new extension which the panel believes could become a new attractor à la Eden Project in Cornwall, a superb gardens and eco visitor attraction and educational charity with a rainforest biotope, visited by one million people every year who come from all over the planet to enjoy and learn about nature and to get inspiration about the world around them:

Aside from becoming a phenomenal new tourism attraction, likely to generate huge visitation, the Biodome could host temporary exhibitions, which will attract repeat visitation – as opposed to just ‘one-off’ visitors. This, combined with the actions mentioned earlier to enhance the functional and psychological links between Chester and its Zoo (which could include something like a ‘mini-Biodome’ located in Chester’s centre), would help support Chester’s image and reputation as a cultural, educational and fun destination. Additionally, the Biodome would help build local innovation capability related to environmental sciences, zoo management, etc., in connection with Chester University and College curricula.

The panel understands that the Biodome is proposed to be built on green belt designated land, and that any development on the green belt is not to be taken lightly. Yet the panel believes that the Biodome would be a great contribution to Chester’s (and the wider UK’s) common good, and its ethos is actually quite compatible with the ideas that inspired the green belt to begin with. Therefore, the panel strongly recommends this development, which



Chester’s Zoo Biodome Proposal



The Eden Project, Cornwall

would be privately owned and operated, to be wholeheartedly sponsored by the public authorities. Aside from the planning challenges, other issues such as access, traffic, parking will need to be carefully addressed to make sure any potential negative impacts are minimised. Local residents should feel the benefit as much as visitors.

Roman Amphitheatre, Chester

6. Chester History Experience Centre

This would not be a museum in the conventional meaning of the term, but a true 'experience' where visitors would enjoy learning about Chester and its history in an entertaining and interactive manner, but without falling for the trappings of 'themed attractions'. The experience would be focused on a specific period of Chester's history, such as the Romans, or perhaps the history of Chester since Prehistory to the 21st Century.

The panel sees this as a centre that generates activities in and around it, as well as related business and employment opportunities.

The panel suggests to use the Roman Amphitheatre and the Dee House as the 'containers' for this Experience Centre, combining outdoor and indoor spaces, and thus resolving the stalemate between English Heritage's desire to preserve Dee House and those who favour demolishing it to give prevalence to the scant remains of the amphitheatre. The panel proposes a compromise solution, which consists of digging under Dee House to expose additional Roman remains and using the resulting 'undercroft' space as part of the facility, thus creating a unique spatial experience. Dee House would in turn be 'recycled' as a key component of the Experience Centre, and consequently rescuing it from

its current state of abandonment and continuous decay. Although this proposal may sound extreme, there are precedents of similar interventions that have been successful elsewhere in Europe. A good example is Barcelona's City Museum, where excavations were conducted under historic Gothic buildings dating back to the 13th and 14th centuries to reveal the remains of "Colonia Julia Augusta Faventia Paterna Barcino", the ancient Roman city dating back to year 15 BC. The result is an amazing experience, which takes the visitors under the medieval fabric of the city to explore the 2000-year old Roman houses, streets, shops and temples still visible underground.

This 'Big Idea' is not without its challenges, though. Issues such as investment and operational costs, exhibition contents, temporary exhibitions programming (self-production and/or externally generated?), operation and management of ancillary facilities (food and beverage, shop, etc.), promotion, attendance, access and parking will need to be considered in an independent feasibility study to be prepared by qualified expert(s).



Temple Romà d'Augusti, and Plaça del Rei at night, Barcelona, Spain



7. Chester Port

The panel heard from a number of interviewees about the missed opportunities around Chester's waterways. The panel recommends considering the use of the canal and what is left of the Chester's old harbour infrastructure to create a new leisure experience at the northwest side of the city centre, thus bringing into value assets currently neglected.

Similar successful interventions can be seen elsewhere, such as in St. Katherine's Dock and Regent's Canal, both in London:

Bristol and Cardiff are equally good examples of how efforts to revitalize the port have had a positive effect on the rest of the city centre and provided a new and attractive feature to the city, including new residential developments alongside leisure, retail and community facilities.

Aside from creating a new centre of activity at the northwest of Chester's city centre, this intervention will also generate activity between the centre and the port, pulling pedestrian traffic that will eventually result in the development of additional tourist and commercial facilities in the adjacent streets:

The challenges confronting this 'Big Idea' are mainly the investment costs and operational costs (which may be offset or fully absorbed by creating selected opportunities for canal-front real estate development), the scarcity of available land, the need to create and integrated 'inland port' experience concept, the programming temporary activities, the operation and management of ancillary facilities (food and beverage outlets, shops, etc.), public attendance, access and parking.



Regent's Canal

St. Katherine's Dock





Historic Inns of Annapolis, Maryland, USA
www.annapolismarriott.com



Ayasofya Konaklari Hotel, Istanbul, Turkey
www.ayasofyapensions.com

8. Hotel at The Rows

The panel proposes to use the currently underutilized and mostly vacant upper floors of the Rows for a high-end, 'boutique' city-centre hotel. Furthermore, the panel also recommends exploring the potential for other uses at the upper floors of the Rows such as residential, office incubators, artists' studios, etc.

The objective of these proposals is to re-create the vibrant mixed-use fabric that the Rows used to be not so long ago, revitalizing Chester's city centre beyond its current lifespan of 9:00 to 17:00 by bringing into play underrated and unexploited assets.

Examples of similar strategies have been used elsewhere, for instance, in Annapolis and Istanbul, where old buildings have been grouped together to create unique 'boutique' urban hotel experiences. As a guest you may arrive at one building to check in but actually stay in another building a few doors' down – but each will be unique in its heritage, story and ambience.

The challenges that this 'Big Idea' presents are significant, but not insurmountable with ingenuity and long-term vision. They include the usual issues related to investment and operational costs, and also other more specific such as

*Underground parking,
 Parkhaus Rheinauhafen*



actual floor-space availability, a fragmented ownership structure, structural and building services constraints, operation and management (of the hotel component in particular, but also of the other proposed uses), marketability, and access and parking.

9. Underground Car-Parks.

The panel believes that extensive underground parking will eventually become essential to pedestrianize the city core to the extent required the proposed positioning strategy. This facility should be within the city walls and be able to accommodate a minimum of about 2000 cars (probably in 2 or 3 levels), with at least two entrances/exits outside the walls. Multiple stairs, lifts and escalators will take vehicle occupants to the pedestrian surface at various locations. If enough underground parking is provided, it will be possible to eliminate the several intrusive and unsightly current car parks and replace them with better buildings, such as the public venues (theatre, conference facility) proposed above.

Underground car-park facilities are frequently found in historic cities in continental Europe, where urban space is most precious. Barcelona and Paris, for instance, are successful long-term case studies.

The main challenges of this 'Big Idea' are obviously the significant investment and operational costs, but experience has demonstrated that these can be addressed by creative public/private partnerships, concessions, etc. Another set of challenges are on the technical side and relate to soil conditions, foundations of nearby buildings, existing utility infrastructures, and the general disruption caused during their construction. Notwithstanding all this, when properly executed, the results of such operations have typically been extremely positive and enduring.



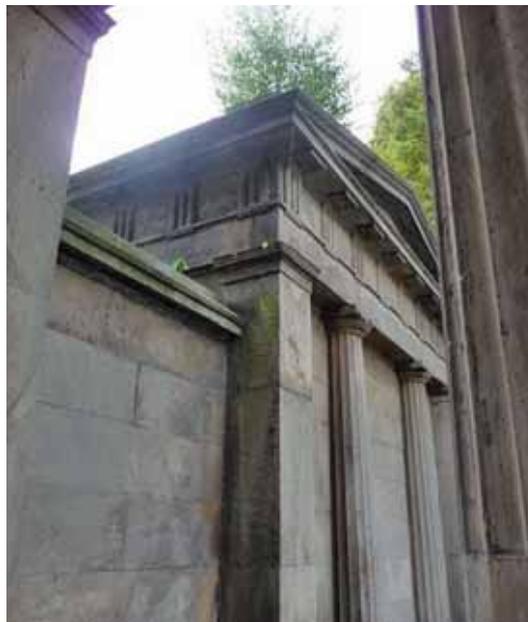
10. Redevelop Chester Castle

The panel recommends redeveloping Chester Castle into a multi-use facility that could accommodate some of the uses suggested above, such as hotel, arts centre, exhibition space, Chester Experience, etc. The complexity of the building (including the presence of historically and architecturally significant pieces) will require a careful assessment of the existing fabric and its potential reutilisation, but the panel firmly believes that the currently neglected state of the property not only fails to take advantage of a valuable urban and historic asset – it is also detrimental to Chester’s desired positioning in the tourism sector.

The refurbishment of Chester Castle and its restoration to a prominent public role in the city will also contribute to the revitalization of the southwest corner on the centre:

Examples of reutilizations of old, historical buildings for other uses abound in Europe. Hotels are a typical use and some Relais & Châteaux, the Pousadas in Portugal and the Paradores in Spain provide good reference case-studies.

The challenges of this ‘Big Idea’ are not dissimilar to those presented by ‘Big Idea’ No. 8. The most significant are the ownership of the property, the significant investment and operational costs, the constraints presented by the existing architectural scheme, with the corresponding structural and building services limitations, etc. Also important are the operational and management issues (of the hotel component in particular, but also of the other chosen uses), the marketability of the various components of the venue, and access and parking.





The 'Big Ideas' working together

The 10 'Big Ideas' suggested by the panel are not only designed to re-establish and sustain Chester's proposed strategic position in the 'boutique' tourism sector by creating new high-quality attractors which will become, in their own right, reasons to visit the city. They are also proposed as 'triggers', 'catalysts' and 'precipitators' of further change, renovation and revitalisation within the fabric of the city, hence their strategic locations in and around the historic centre.

Experience in other cities that have followed this 'Urban Acupuncture Strategy' demonstrates that the benefits of carefully chosen interventions, at strategically chosen locations, and phased according to an overall Strategic Development plan, irradiate their beneficial effects far beyond their immediate vicinities.



If the locations selected and the type of interventions chosen are correct, there will be a 'pull' effect between the various new facilities which will gradually 'fill in' the interstitial urban fabric with additional support facilities such as cafés and restaurants, speciality shops, small hotels, etc.

The desired and expected result is that an entire city centre becomes, as a whole, an attraction for tourists and, in particular, for repeat visitors, as there is always something 'new' to explore and experience. If this occurs, the sum becomes much more than just the addition of the parts – the synergies (and derived economic and employment benefits) are enormous.

However, for such a strategy to be successful, it needs to be carefully and intelligently devised and developed, within a consensus approach by which every agent that will be involved shares the vision and understands and accepts what needs to be done by whom and when. An excellent, comprehensive Strategic Tourism Development Plan will therefore be a key requisite to Chester's success in the tourism sector.

Even the best plan will probably fail if there is a lack of a well-understood and shared vision, a clear and widely accepted leadership, and reliability and accountability during implementation and execution.

Excellence does not happen by accident, but results from ingenuity, thorough planning and coordination, and lots of hard work.

Q5 – How can Chester position itself to attract and retain the business community and encourage inward investment?

This question was well chosen by the sponsor group: the issue of business success is fundamental to Chester's future. The panel were tremendously encouraged by the lead role played in the commissioning and execution of this study by prominent members of the local business community who in doing so have demonstrated strong civic leadership. There have clearly been positive steps made by the local authorities and Chester Renaissance towards improving business and investment in Chester.

The panel were also struck that the strength of the Chester "narrative" was around culture, heritage and tourism. As the other sections of this report have identified, there is immense potential for this to be developed further. There is also a potential negative consequence though in that the importance of a strong and diverse business base – and a supportive business environment – could become down-played. The panel considers it essential for Chester's future health and vitality that there is appropriate balance.

In our view it is important for the wider regional economy too: Chester has great potential to help drive the regional economy by providing an environment for business start-up, growth and inward investment that is different from, yet highly complementary to, the two main centres of Liverpool and Manchester. To that extent, it could be a far more prominent feature in the regional "portfolio" of economic drivers that can be developed and harnessed to the greater regional economic good.

In addressing this question, we focused on four aspects in particular:

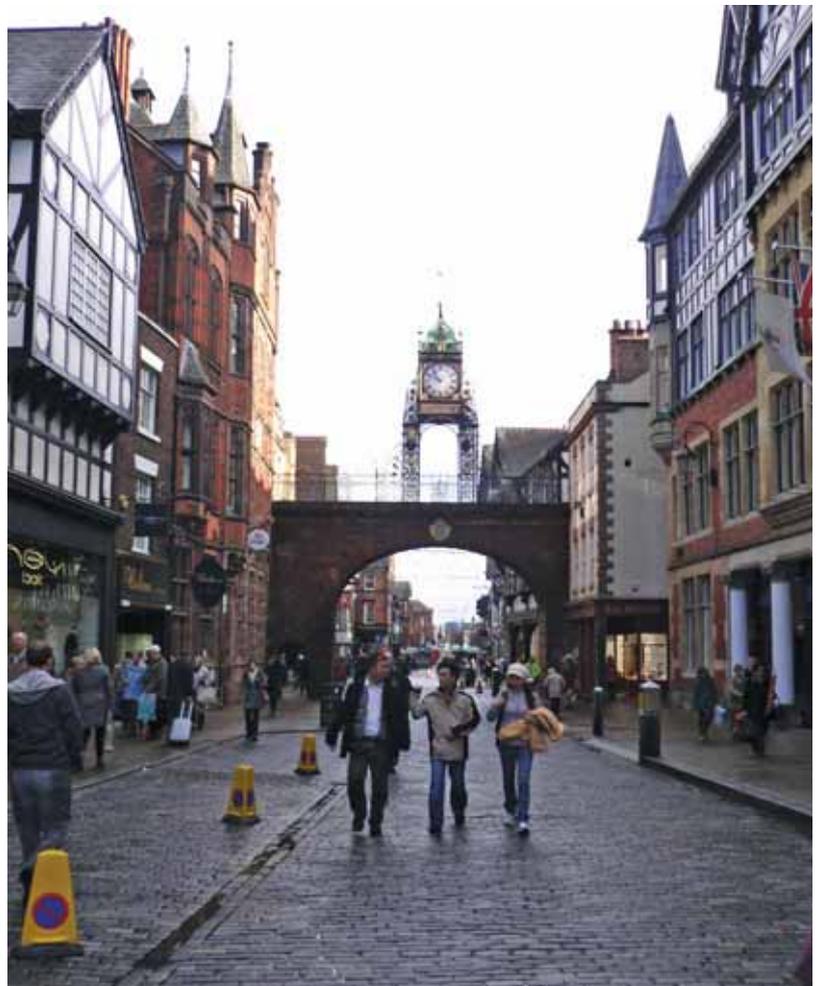
- Chester's performance in attracting inward investment
- Its role as a Regional Business Centre
- New business start-up and growth
- Business and innovation

Inward Investment

"A vibrant community and city is good for business."

Historically, Chester has a reasonably good track record in attracting inward investment, particularly in financial services back-offices: Moneysupermarket.com, MBNA Bank of America, Marks & Spencer Money and HBOS have all established operations of international significance. In the case of MBNA it is their European headquarters with around 4,000 staff. These operations make a major contribution to the local and regional economy.

Eastgate, Chester



In our consultations, we noted that there were a number of counterbalancing concerns:

- that there has not been a continuing flow of new inward investment projects and Chester has increasingly been losing out to the major regional business centres over the last 10-15 years;
- that over-reliance on financial services activity might limit the range and diversity of employment opportunities and at the same time created risk of a “branch plant” economy where as people rise through their organisation they are drawn away from the local area;
- there is also a sense that the focal point for major businesses in the local economy is out of town rather than Chester itself. We too would concur that the city centre does not have the feel of a business centre.

Our assessment is that the “market” for inward investment is becoming ever more competitive: many cities are becoming far more sophisticated in their efforts to attract mobile companies and mobile talent. Cities, like businesses, are establishing brands and clear marketing strategies; they are projecting their brands internationally. Whenever mobile businesses are polled on the factors determining their choice of business location it comes down to a combination of:

- transport and accessibility;
- the quality and size of the local talent pool;
- the quality and efficiency of the business environment including business premises.

Chester needs to address aspects in relation to each of these:

- as we point out elsewhere, rail transport connections are not as good as they might be; the network is in place but the service pattern is under-developed: for example there is no direct train service to Manchester airport along the lines of the Stansted express or the Heathrow-Paddington link.

- If arriving by train, the sense of arrival and the quality of linkage to the city centre is very poor. (See Q4 Action Points)
- The range of business property in the city itself is very limited – in quality and scale. The proposals for the in the city business quarter around the station may address this, but at the moment there is insufficient demand to support development and investment.

The panel therefore arrived at a series of specific recommendations that have the objective of improving Chester’s ability to attract businesses from elsewhere in the UK and from overseas:

- There needs to be greater clarity and focus over who is promoting Chester to international business;
- The “case” for Chester needs to be clearer: what is its unique offer?
- What sort of activity and what types of companies are being targeted?

There is a good success story to build on and there may be an important advocacy and ambassadorial role to be played by those who have successfully moved businesses to the city.

The panel was also struck by the energy of the university students we met and wonder whether the city could support the university to engage in a review of the City’s standing in the inward investment market: which cities does it compete with? What can be learned from the competitors? Which companies should be targeted and what is established best-practice in that regard? We heard only 1 out of the 60 students we spoke to who planned to stay in Chester, due to a perceived lack of graduate opportunities and affordable housing etc.

We also heard from the President of the Student Union at the public meeting who emphasised how keen the student body were to be involved in the discussions and planning for Chester’s future. This is a vital resource that should not be overlooked.

Regional Business Centre

Chester's relative decline over the last 10-15 years has been accompanied by urban renewal and the greater confidence of Manchester and Liverpool. Manchester in particular has re-established itself as a city of international standing.

Chester has businesses of national and international standing too. We were struck by the impressive performance of Chester Racecourse over the last few years in which time it has moved strongly into profit and diversified its business model. Chester Zoo without doubt is a business of major significance based on its ability to draw customers from all over the country to a distinctive and high quality experience.

Notwithstanding these examples though, there is a sense that Chester may have lost ground. Regional offices - both administrative and in professional and business services - have become increasingly concentrated in the two higher order cities.

The panel believes it is important to arrest that trend. To do so will require a combination of the sorts of specific actions to improve Chester as a business location that we identify elsewhere in this report and a strong narrative about Chester's business focus and culture. The panel suggests that this will require:

- Greater engagement of the business community in determining city strategy and delivering key projects;
- Cities that perform well as business centres are characterised by vibrant business networks and business support infrastructure. That is not a prominent feature of the local scene.
- One specific opportunity appears to be scope for a business conference centre of reasonable size. The largest currently is the banqueting suite at the Racecourse. The panel has not tested market potential ourselves but we understand that there may be capacity to establish or extend a facility that would attract larger events and more frequently.



The Chester Racecourse

Business start-up and growth

We have not had scope to deliver an empirical study on this issue. Nonetheless our consultations left us with a strong impression that business start-up and growth is not a strong feature of the local economy: there are few examples of new businesses being established: the two of three we learned of were the few exceptions that seemed to underscore this point. We sought examples of small local businesses growing to positions of regional or national significance and the same few outstanding cases were pointed out to us.

Overall we came to the view the small and medium sized enterprise (SME) sector is weak compared with other sub-regions of this scale. It is our experience that very often the issue is a legacy of entrepreneurial tradition that becomes ingrained to the locality: Silicon Valley, Route 128 and Cambridge in the UK spawn many new enterprises partly because there is a deep tradition of new enterprise formation. Small new companies tend to spawn more small new companies. Enterprise training itself is rarely sufficient on its own: one of the most powerful factors is the highly visible profile of successful enterprise.



There are things that can be done here:

- Business education and internship opportunities for students with local and regional businesses;
- Business support for SMEs
- Greater prominence and visibility to new and small businesses by creating opportunities to cluster in a business and innovation quarter.

A strongly related point we suggest is that of graduate retention in the City. Most of the students we spoke to planned to seek careers elsewhere on graduation because of limited local opportunity combined with a perception that

“Chester would be a nice place to come back to when you’re old”.

Strong, vibrant local economies attract and retain talent, they do not dissipate it.

“Young people have nowhere to go to start a business – there’s no support for local entrepreneurship.”

Business and Innovation

Chester needs to create the right sort of environment in the centre for businesses to come in. There is a great deal of office space that is not the right sort of space for premium tenants but that could still be put to good use. A number of cities offer examples of using city centre buildings as innovation hubs, offering lower rents to entrepreneurs, young people and community groups. The Citilab project in Barcelona run by the local authority won a ULI award for exactly this type of initiative and AWOL studios in Manchester is another example worth looking at.

The SME point is closely related to the capacity of the local economy to innovate – to launch new products and services and to make the most of its intellectual property.

The panel asked themselves where in the local economy is the potential to innovate? Generally it lies in:

- Higher educational and research institutions;
- The SME sector;
- Large companies and corporate R&D facilities.

What intrigued us was the potential of the local economy to build and commercialise its innovation potential around the themes of heritage, culture and the performing arts. Tourism and leisure is a sector with enormous business potential and the opportunity to harness new technologies to create new visitor experiences.

The theme of the arts was constantly brought to our attention – generally around the sense that Chester has “dumbed-down” over the years by lowering the quality of its offer to the lowest common denominator. As we point out elsewhere, this is seen starkly in its evening entertainment offer. We would point to the impact that developments such as Kings Place in London (mentioned earlier in Q4b, point 4) – which is a culture and business centre housing a theatre/convention centre and the offices of Guardian newspapers – in London can have on a run-down urban area.



Aerial view of Chester

“Chester is not a place where people think they can make money.”

The panel concluded that Chester has a very great opportunity for a turnaround strategy based on business and innovation in the sectors of culture, arts and heritage. This conjunction is potentially unique: heritage alone will not fulfil the potential Chester has to re-establish as a vibrant business centre. A bland business offer that replicates every other second tier city in the UK offers no differentiation. But a business and enterprise approach to culture, tourism, entertainment and heritage could be a very strong proposition indeed.

The panel believe that proposition needs to be created and shaped by the business community rather than the public sector and that it should engage and bring together all the strands of enterprise and creative potential that we saw in the local business and educational community.

Conclusion

This is not a conclusion to the report, but rather a starting point for building a consensus vision which can galvanise action amongst the many stakeholder groups. Do what's right, not who's right."

To achieve this Chester must address its fragmentation issues. The panel saw and heard about this at many levels: physical and institutional fragmentation, confusion over accountability and decision-making, quality of data and reporting and some division among community organisations that should rise above competing agendas to be collaborate for the same cause.

The panel emphasises the necessity for a clear, comprehensive strategy based on firm foundations of environmental sustainability. This should be reinforced and managed by clear, integrated and accountable leadership. Any developments and improvements made should be goal-focused and regularly monitored to evaluate progress. Chester can learn from examples from around the world, as suggested in the panel's 10 big ideas, and through the help of ULI case studies.

The panel strongly believes that Chester has immense unrealised potential, but has been caught between over-confidence in the appeal of its formidable but fading assets and a form of conservation paralysis that has seen the city walls crumbling whilst endless strategies and plans are developed without any over-arching vision to bring them all together effectively. It is critical for whatever leadership and decision-making structures are put in place, that they should not be overwhelmed by a rush to deliver every plan on the table. Rather they should be phased to allow a considered (but not slow) analysis and, if approved, a pro-active approach to delivery. Chester needs to remember the maxim on which its retail heyday was based: "quality not quantity."

Chester should focus on being a distinctive regional city with its own brand that exploits its unique heritage but is not afraid to look forward. Local entrepreneurs, the student community and existing local businesses should all be engaged around creative innovation so Chester can remain a city with a strong business hub, regardless of the continued resurgence of Liverpool or Manchester. This in turn should support the positioning strategy of Chester as a boutique destination, in order to attract different types of visitor who are more likely to stay and spend than leave by 5pm or stay only to go to the pubs and nightclubs!

The genuinely broad engagement of this panel process for Chester has proved that a positive consensus can be reached. The panel fervently hope that these recommendations will allow the communities of Chester to work together to drive forward together to create a new vision for the city centre and deliver it successfully.

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For more information on ULI Research and Publications, please contact Alexandra Notay, Vice President, Strategic Programmes, anotay@uli.org

Urban Land Institute

29 Gloucester Place
London
W1U 8HX
United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0)20 7487 9570
Fax: +44 (0)20 7486 8652
Email: ulieurope@uli.org
Web: www.uli.org

