

## EXETER CITY COUNCIL

### SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – ECONOMY 21 JANUARY 2010

#### EXECUTIVE 9 FEBRUARY 2010

#### CITY CENTRE: CARBON EMISSIONS, AIR QUALITY AND TRAFFIC

##### 1.0 PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 This report reviews current conditions in the City Centre and sets out a framework for the longer term and proposes a range of short and medium term priorities.

##### 2.0 REVIEW OF PROGRESS

- 2.1 The Council's first City Centre Strategy was adopted in 1999/2000 and then reviewed and renewed in 2007 following a City centre audit, by CB Hillier Parker. Much of those two strategies and action plans have been delivered, with the transformation of the City centre during that period. The principal elements that should be highlighted are:

- o the design and delivery of the Princesshay scheme, covering around one fifth of the City centre
- o the upgrading of key City centre streets to provide a high quality public realm in Queen Street, Castle Street and High Street
- o the transformation of Cathedral Yard and Cathedral Close into a pedestrian dominated space with very limited vehicular access and the creation of a high quality public realm
- o the transformation of Southernhay from a heavily trafficked street to one that provides local access and parking for its southern two thirds and a delightful vehicle free parkland setting at its northern end, adjacent to Princesshay
- o the modernisation of the Royal Albert Memorial Museum, work on which is now two thirds complete
- o the creation of effective CCTV infrastructure which underpins the safety of the City centre
- o a very successful public and private partnership (Exeter Businesses Against Crime) which provides a highly effective mechanism for fighting business crime and dealing with its consequences quickly and effectively
- o three new City centre car parks at Princesshay, Summerland Gate and Central Station, with a further £2.5 million invested in the modernisation of the Mary Arches and Guildhall Car Parks.

- 2.2 The City has accommodated a dramatic growth in jobs in Exeter during the last decade. In 1998, the City had some 63,000 jobs and by 2004 this had risen to 86,000. This represents the third highest increase in the country at 37%.

Similarly, over the last decade the population of the City itself has risen from 107,700 to 123,500 – an increase of 15%. This scale of growth has underpinned the buoyancy of the City Centre and, in some respects, put additional pressures upon it.

- 2.3 The enhancements that the City and County Councils have delivered over the last ten years have both stabilised and strengthened the City's position in competition with others in the region, with the City currently 43<sup>rd</sup> in the nationally recognised 'Experian' rankings. Nevertheless, the City Council needs to identify a long term strategy for the City centre to deliver a range of further improvements and accommodate the growth in employment, housing and retailing which has been identified for the City. In terms of the LDF Core Strategy, the demands of the sequential test which steer development towards the City centre means that there needs to be a greater intensity of use of the remaining regeneration sites as a central part of that long term strategy. At the present moment, the two key regeneration areas in the City centre – the Grecian Quarter and the Castle Quarter – are both somewhat cut off from the rest of the City centre. This may seem a surprising conclusion, but the physical impact of traffic flows on Paris Street and Sidwell Street have been highlighted by the Chamber of Commerce, the Chair of the City Centre Management Partnership Board and by our retail consultants, DTZ.<sup>[1]</sup>
- 2.4 Advising the Council on its priorities regarding retailing, DTZ highlighted the problems of traffic severance as follows:

“In parallel with public realm improvements, we suggest that traffic management arrangements be reviewed, with the aim of reducing severance by traffic of secondary shopping streets from the prime retail area. The three main locations where this occurs are where Paris Street crosses High Street/Sidwell Street; where North/South Street crosses High Street/Fore Street; and where Market Street/Mary Arches Street crosses Fore Street. These three traffic crossings form significant barriers to easy pedestrian flows. The most important is that at Paris Street. This is because the Bus and Coach Station site is on the opposite side of Paris Street from the existing prime retail area of Princesshay and High Street. In order for a major retail development on this site to succeed as a new shopping centre, and for it to integrate with the existing prime retailing for the benefit of the City centre as a whole, it will be necessary to breach this barrier to easy pedestrian movement.”

- 2.5 In the case of the Castle Quarter, the street and building form is such that pedestrian permeability is extremely limited so that the area feels like a backwater. This mitigates against successful long term regeneration of the area. Our long term strategy for the City centre needs to address both of these key obstacles for successful regeneration.

### **3.0 LONG TERM VISION FOR THE CITY CENTRE**

- 3.1 The City Centre performs a complex set of roles, some of which are complementary and several of which are conflicting. The key roles can be summarised as:

*Economic Role* – the City Centre is the economic motor of the City providing 1.4 million sq.ft. of shopping floor space and 3 million sq.ft. of office floor space, which between them provide 20,000 jobs.

*Social Role* – the City Centre is the social hub of the City, providing a range of formal and informal opportunities for leisure, recreation and informal contact

*Residential Quarter* – the City Centre has some 5,000 dwellings with the number having increased significantly in the last decade.

*Transport Hub* – the City and County bus services focus on High Street/Sidwell Street/the Bus Station which brings an estimated 2.5 million passengers a year into the City. The City's 20 car parks located inside or on the inner ring road are used by over 2.5 million motorists a year on a daily basis. Many vehicles use the City Centre streets to get as near as possible to their destination or simply as the quickest route across the City. As the pressure on the City Centre is intense, and over the next 15 years it will need to accommodate some 8,000 new dwellings and 4,000 jobs in the City Centre. Based on recent forecasts from DTZ, the City could accommodate a further 530,000 sq.ft. of shopping floor space. The City will also need to accommodate some 1,500 additional bedspaces for students for which space on campus is limited as it is primarily devoted to teaching space, if we are to avoid unacceptable pressure on the local housing markets. Any further investment of the commercial sector in leisure is also going to be steered to the City Centre, given the longstanding planning policy.

3.2 If we are to accommodate the various pressures to create a satisfactory environment, the following key elements need to be delivered:

- o sites for new jobs, housing and retail uses
- o significantly intensified use of the Bus Station and Bus Garage sites through comprehensive re-development
- o effective opening up and investment in the Castle Quarter for cultural purposes
- o further rationalisation and modernisation of the parking stock
- o major enhancement of the twin gateways for passengers at Central and St David's Stations
- o elimination of City Centre vehicular movement in all the principal shopping streets, except for public transport vehicles
- o the creation of a series of new pedestrian spaces in the City Centre

3.3 The following section outlines the key projects that would help to deliver these aspirations and the steps that need to be taken.

#### **4.0 KEY PROJECTS**

4.1 *(i) The Grecian Quarter, in particular the Bus Station re-development*  
The City Council has already put in place a planning and urban design framework for the area in the form of the Grecian Quarter Urban Design Analysis. This sets out the constraints and opportunities for re-development of the Bus Station/Garage site, the re-development of the area between Summerland Street, Western Way and Sidwell Street and the potential for long term re-development of King William Street Car Park area. The first of these needs to be driven by the City Council as freeholder, given the complexities of the site. The second will be steered by the planning framework provided by the City Council but delivered

incrementally by the private sector. The third is a very long term opportunity and, given the scale of costs involved, the King William Street Car Park will have a minimum of a 10 year life and maybe considerably longer.

- 4.2 Progress with the Bus Station project is slower than advised to Members a year ago but all the key technical work has now been completed: a Retail Study has been completed; a Height and Massing Study has been carried out by consultants; the Transportation Study has been completed in conjunction with Devon County Council; the Parking Study has been completed by external consultants; and an Archaeological Evaluation will be completed shortly. Preparation of a Master Plan for the area will begin this Spring and Members will need to determine who the development partner is to be so that a scheme can be prepared. A paper will be submitted to Executive later this Spring and will set out the recommended way forward. In order to meet the many demands on limited City Centre space, the scheme is likely to comprise significant retail content, cafés and restaurants, additional commercial floor space, significant residential accommodation, a new bus interchange and a significant sized, purpose built car park. Given the requirement to meet the City's aspirations for affordable housing and a new bus interchange, funded by planning gain, this means that it is vital that the value of the scheme is sufficiently high to justify the investment risk. Thus the need to tackle the problem of Paris Street which still represents a barrier to pedestrian movement and the evident drag effect this will have on the scheme's viability if this is not achieved.

*(ii) Development of the Castle Quarter*

- 4.3 The City Council's investment in the underpinning and modernisation of RAMM will lead to a very high quality facility in the heart of the City which will be a regional cultural attraction of note. The effective regeneration of the Castle itself is a key project which has made only limited progress because of the Recession. The position of the County Council with regard to its long term intention towards the library remains ambiguous but this is a key element in devising an effective strategy for this area to work coherently. Further work needs to be carried out to establish ways of improving pedestrian permeability to deal with the perception that this area is blocked off by the buildings along the High Street and Queen Street. In the medium term, a more detailed strategy needs to be prepared for this area.

*(iii) Further City Centre Enhancements*

- 4.4 The rolling programme of enhancements funded by the City and County Councils has slowed down, following the completion of work in Summer 2007. Further priorities that Members have agreed are the enhancement to the High Street end of Gandy Street, enhancement to the entrance to Northernhay Gardens and a phased series of enhancements to Fore Street. The long term role of High Street has been a point of difference between the two authorities, with the City expressing its desire for the eventual removal of buses from High Street but the County opposed to this. It is evident that the High Quality Public Transport (HQPT) system will in all likelihood need to run between Sidwell Street, High Street and Fore Street and in many senses this is consistent with systems in other European cities, where trams are retained in otherwise pedestrianised streets. Nevertheless, in conceding this prospect, Members may wish to consider that the compromise position should be that HQPT will use lower High Street whilst other bus services should use Queen Street, Fore Street, Mary Arches/North Street in order to dramatically reduce the volume of vehicles in the most sensitive part of the High Street. Studies have illustrated that the diversion impact in terms of journey time and potential loss of patronage is significantly

less than 5% whereas the removal of buses in upper High Street is likely to result in an impact of closer to 20%.

*(iv) Creating New Pedestrian Spaces*

- 4.5 Exeter has three significant spaces at its heart in the form of Cathedral Green, Rougemont Gardens and Northernhay Gardens. There are, however, few quality formal spaces for events, activities or markets. The existing spaces tend to be linear and often compromised by traffic – Cathedral Yard is completely vehicle free, whereas Fore Street/South Street accommodates the Farmers' Market in a constrained space compromised by significant vehicular traffic movements. There is scope for delivering a series of additional public spaces if both Councils are prepared to be visionary in their thinking. When the future of the library is known, there is scope to deal with dead space in front of it on Musgrave Row, along with the upper level next to the telephone exchange which could provide the potential for a quality space in the heart of the City. As part of the Bus Station re-development, a new space leading onto London Inn Square is also a likely prospect. The greatest prize would be the creation of a new open space between Waterstones and the former Debenhams, eliminating traffic from this space altogether and simply leaving High Street/Sidwell Street as the major public transport access link (see illustration at Appendix 1).

*(v) City Centre Traffic Management*

- 4.6 Work undertaken as part of the Bus Station Study does illustrate that the elimination of through traffic in Paris Street and between Waterstones and the former Debenhams is feasible, but may require significant capital investment in the adjacent network. Current economic conditions means there is no prospect of this being developer funded, but it would have significant environmental and air quality benefits that would derive from the construction of a such a facility meaning that it could attract DfT funding as part of a wider package of measures.
- 4.7 The accompanying paper on Transportation Strategy sets out the broader concerns about air quality in the City Centre and recommends that proposals for a CLEAR Zone be prepared which would reduce/eliminate traffic in a range of key City Centre streets and introduce demanding standards that would permit only low emission buses, vans and HGVs to use the City Centre. By putting in place such a comprehensive package, not only would air quality be improved, but the effects of traffic severance on pedestrian activity would be markedly reduced.

*(vi) Parking Provision*

- 4.8 Studies on parking use which have been undertaken by consultants needs now to be dovetailed with work on the LDF Core Strategy. The likely outcome is the provision of a significant sized car park as part of the Bus Station re-development scheme which may provide the opportunity to release one or two car park sites for re-development. Progress needs to be made with the remaining stock to bring it up to the standards of Mary Arches and Guildhall Car Parks with the quality of finishes and the provision, where possible, of pay on foot systems.

*(vii) Gateways at St David's and Central Stations*

- 4.9 After a decade of nil progress at Central Station there now appears to be the prospect that Network Rail could undertake a comprehensive re-planning of the station forecourt area in conjunction with the many interested parties. The ability to provide a proper station facility rather than the current apology for a gateway would be welcomed by the 1.5 million users that go through Central Station every year. It would also mean that instead of appearing to arrive in a car park, people would feel that they were arriving at the heart of an exciting and vibrant City. Due

to the recent change of heart by Network Rail, it is proposed that officers continue to work closely on this project and that the City Council makes a substantial contribution to the enhancement works from its City Centre enhancements budget, with a further paper to be provided to Members, as and when a detailed scheme is prepared.

- 4.10 At St David's Station, the difficulty remains the challenge of finding a viable scheme, which was the case even when the market was at its height. It would be an ideal site for student or office accommodation but the viability challenge of re-providing the lost parking at the front of the station in the form of a multi-storey car park to the north side is considerable. For the time being, the drab environment, as one walks out of the station, will unfortunately continue.

*(viii) Provision for Pedestrians and Cyclists*

- 4.11 If the above programme of projects is adopted, there will be very substantial enhancements for provision for pedestrians through a range of interlinked projects. In recent years, provision for cyclists has improved with access allowed at all times through High Street, cycling still permitted in Cathedral Yard and a key spine route provided through the Princesshay scheme, linking the east and west sides of the City. There are still a number of key links that are missing which the Cycling Demonstration Town project needs to address. Furthermore, there is a need still to enhance cycle parking provision so that it is convenient and enjoys good surveillance.

*(ix) Business Improvement District (BID)*

- 4.12 There are a range of strategic planning and transport issues and associated delivery projects which will dramatically enhance the City Centre over the next decade or more. The day to day management of the City Centre remains a key priority. The City Council has agreed to support the Chamber of Commerce in preparing the case for the designation of the City Centre as a Business Improvement District and work on this is now under way. The intention is that business will advise on a range of actions that will enhance the attractiveness of the City Centre. These may include: significantly enhanced marketing effort; improvements to security; enhanced park and ride and bus service provision; public realm enhancement projects; high levels of cleansing; and so forth. Consultants have been appointed to assist with the preparation of the case and it is likely that the ballot on the designation of a BID will be held in the Autumn of this year. If the BID proposal is approved following a vote of all businesses, this will generate upwards of £500,000 additional income per year to deliver those enhancements.

## **5.0 NEXT STEPS**

- 5.1 Given the implications of these projects for a wide range of stakeholders, it is important that there is stakeholder involvement before any strategy is finalised. There is also additional technical work that needs to be undertaken before key elements of this can be finalised. Nevertheless, there are a number of elements which need to be reflected in any submissions to Devon County Council of these draft ideas so that they can be incorporated into the County Council's Local Transport Plan, preparation of which is currently underway. Various key actions are, therefore:

- (1) discussions of these draft proposals with Devon County Council

- (2) agreement with Devon County Council to undertake a joint City Centre traffic management and Low Emission Zone study and leading to the adoption of a joint long term strategy
- (3) the continuation of the work on the Bus Station Study, already agreed by Members, with the shape of the development deal to be considered by Executive later this Spring and a draft Master Plan to be considered by Planning Member Working Group later this year
- (4) prepare a Strategy for the City Centre in the form of a City Centre Area Action Plan (which is part of the City Council's Local Development Scheme)
- (5) continue use of the Council's capital programme for a rolling programme of public realm enhancements
- (6) continue joint working with Network Rail and other stakeholders to deliver a quality scheme for Central Station, with a significant capital contribution from the City Council
- (7) negotiations with developers as opportunities arise to implement these proposals incrementally

## **6.0 RECOMMENDATIONS**

6.1 It is recommended that Members:

- (i) comment on the approach and actions outlined in this paper;
- (ii) agree to submit the transportation element of these proposals to Devon County Council as input to the LTP3; and
- (iii) agree that work proceeds on the draft strategy and key projects with a view to its incorporation into the City Centre Area Action Plan to be prepared later this year.

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**Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1972 (as amended)**

***Background papers used in compiling this report:-***

1. Exeter Retail Study. DTZ. 2009.