



Response from the Norwich Society Strategic Planning and Transport Committee to

**NORTHERN CITY CENTRE AREA ACTION
PLAN
(PREFERRED OPTIONS)**

Introduction

It would be tempting to accept almost any proposals for reviving the Northern City Centre Area with open arms. The consequences of ill-considered planning and development during the Sixties and Seventies – in particular the disastrous Anglia Square area and the decision to ram through the Inner Ring Road too close to the historic City Centre – are plain and painful to see.

Some areas surrounding the core (Colegate, for instance) have managed to survive and even thrive under their own impetus. But the larger part of an historic, previously vital though slightly run-down area of Norwich, has been reduced in little more than four decades to an island of dereliction, cut off from life-giving access to the centre by an impermeable four-lane highway, yet ironically choked and polluted by slow-moving traffic trying to filter into and out of the North of the City.

So why not accept the Preferred Options Report on the Northern City Centre Area Action Plan (NCCAAP) with open arms? What's not to like? We applaud the concept, we accept whole-heartedly that the area is in need of regeneration, and that anything that moves matters forward should be supported. We also recognise the huge amount of work that an already-overstrained City Council Planning Department has put in, and congratulate the officers involved on the excellent Guiding Principles drawn up (Appendix 4).

It is clear that any plan to transfigure the biggest blot on Norwich's landscape should avoid repeating the mistakes made in the Sixties and Seventies. Put simply, the buildings in the Anglia Square complex and the economic generators housed in them were too *big*. The scheme was an attempt to superimpose a monumental high-rise development on a complex, organically-grown low-rise district.

When the office blocks fell empty and the shops' tenants moved elsewhere, the area died. It was unable to renew itself through natural change and growth. The fact that the built environment created was ugly and on an inhuman scale contributed to this in no small way.



On top of this, the Inner Ring Road has acted as a kind of Berlin Wall, separating most of the NCCAAP area from the City Centre, slowly strangling its commercial life. It is no accident that Magdalen Street, the only thoroughfare with full pedestrian access to the South, is the only one where small businesses continue to develop and sometimes thrive.

Repairing this damage will be difficult. The Inner Ring Road, for instance, is seen as a given for the foreseeable future. And we are worried that, with the best will in the world, the City may be in danger of getting some things wrong again. The errors may not perhaps be on the vast scale of those made earlier, but the stakes are high and, as before, we will have to live with the consequences of these decisions for many decades.

There are, we believe, some serious flaws in the concept of the NCCAAP and some of its details. These arise, we believe, both from the way planning and consultation for the Plan have been carried out, in parallel with proposals for commercial development, and from its terms of reference, including the basic road network within which it has been conceived. Unless they are recognised and rectified these flaws may produce an unsatisfactory built environment on the ground which will fall short of the area's enormous potential, and risks a repeat performance of some of these past mistakes.

Planning and Consultation

The Stakeholder Consultations attended by Norwich Society representatives began on January 17th 2007, when 26 attended. They ended on October 11, when only four stakeholders' representatives felt worth it worth their while to go along. Considerable dissatisfaction with both the amount and quality of information available was expressed at all the meetings we attended.

This is a worrying state of affairs. Even more worrying was the conviction expressed by some stakeholders that important decisions about the size and nature of development schemes had already been taken by planners and developers and that the consultation was at least partly cosmetic.

Whatever the truth of this, it is undeniable that City planners have been in consultation with the developers and architects for the two main sites – Anglia Square (or Calvert Square as it may be renamed) and St Mary's Works – for at least eighteen



months. The detailed nature of these two schemes unveiled in December indicates a great deal of two-way dialogue between planners and developers.

This can lead to some public confusion and disillusionment. At the second Stakeholders' Forum on March 29, for instance, many questioned the value of the Forum itself, believing that the important decisions (for example, whether to anchor the new Calvert Square development on the Anglia Square site with a very large foodstore) had already been made. It was known that the owners of the site had been in discussion with the City planners, but the City's representative at the meeting refused to say who they were, or what had been discussed.

There is an obvious danger here. An overall plan like the NCCAAP developed *in conjunction* with the developers of individual sites may simply become a framework within which those site plans are accommodated. Short-term commercial benefits may come to outweigh the long-term needs of the study area and the City itself. Indeed, two highly-detailed schemes (covering by far the largest sites in the area) have already been unveiled *more than a year before the NCCAAP itself is due to be adopted*. This is surely putting the development cart before the planning horse.

We cannot, for instance, believe that a plan which had considered the nature and needs of the Northern City Centre area dispassionately in the context of Norwich as an historic mediaeval city would have concluded that the highrise buildings now proposed for the Anglia Square/Calvert Square and St Mary's Works sites were appropriate.

The hotel on St Crispin's roundabout tops out at ten storeys, two more than the despised due-for-demolition Sovereign House across the road. And plans for a high-rise block of flats just across the Inner Ring Road show a structure of at least fifteen storeys, one of two "positive landmark" buildings indicated for the Anglia Square development [see Fig 12B]. Some recently published drawings even show twenty storeys. Shockingly, these are on the same scale as the Cathedral spire.

Whichever is finally proposed, such vanity statements should not be allowed to crudely overpower our unique Cityscape. Were they shoehorned into the otherwise excellent set of guidelines because developers wanted them? It is noticeable that the bald statement in Appendix 4 (Guiding Principles) that "taller buildings are appropriate in Anglia Square" (Principle 31, P.75) appears to be in direct conflict with other guidelines: for example, the statement in the previous sentence that "the



scale and mass of new development needs to be appropriate to its setting and historic context”, and also (TU2, P.35), “new development should be positioned to retain and enhance local and strategic views across the area”.

In any case, just why are taller buildings “appropriate in Anglia Square”? Because the failed Sovereign House was eight stories? And how does eight stories suddenly translate into ten, fifteen or twenty? The word “taller” suddenly looks deliberately and misleadingly imprecise.

As with the road pattern, the NCCAAP is failing to see the area within its wider context. Norwich already has its “landmark buildings”, its great vertical architectural statements. They include the Castle, the two Cathedrals, the City Hall, the Guildhall and 32 mediaeval churches. In such company it behoves developers and their architects to tread softly and very, very humbly.

Access, Traffic Movements and the Road Pattern

The NCCAAP’s terms of reference preclude any major change to the existing road pattern. This pattern is the elephant in the living room, the unasked question which must eventually be answered if Norwich’s Northern City Centre is ever to become a satisfactory place in which to live, work and enjoy life.

There are two major problems here. The first is that road traffic from the North trying to get in, and from the City Centre trying to get out, meets a semi-permeable (at best) street pattern. The second is that pedestrian and public transport access from and to the South, where our thriving City Centre lies, is cut off by the Inner Ring Road. This throttles the natural movement of shoppers and pedestrians into the area, and must be one of the main causes for its commercial decline in the last few decades.

Road Traffic.

As far as the first problem is concerned, only drastic action will work. The St Crispin’s Road dual-carriageway and the Magdalen Street flyover (both of which the Norwich Society opposed) are unfortunately with us for the foreseeable future, but a much more determined effort, including a major traffic study, to divert vehicles away from the area between Magdalen Street and St Augustine’s is needed.

Very little of the traffic flowing through this area at the moment stops there. It would be possible to divert vehicles Southbound down Aylsham Road by opening up the junction of Heigham Road with the Inner Ring Road, diverting traffic either



from the Outer Ring Road or from Mile Cross Road. The City should also pick up again its original concept (neglected for some years) of a Ring and Loop system, which would produce a significant drop in traffic (an estimated 30%) heading towards and through the City Centre.

But the best and most logical solution (and, we admit, the most expensive) would be to look again at a new bridge across the Wensum, bringing traffic down from Aylsham Road to the roundabout at the junction of Barn Road and St Crispin's Road. This proposal was considered and discarded for no clear reason some decades ago.

We fear that the NCCAAP proposals, including a gyratory system from Magpie Road down Edward Street, along a new road to a one-way St Augustine's and back up to Magpie Road, some extra pedestrian crossings and minor changes to existing one-way systems, will prove merely palliative, and divert vehicles onto unsuitable residential streets. Given the fact that St Augustine's is at present the main access road from the North, we are not convinced that Magpie Road and Edward Street can cope.

The extra traffic generated by hundreds of new homes, offices and a major foodstore and lesser shops in the Anglia Square/Calvert Square redevelopment must make things even worse. It is not clear, for instance, whether the NCCAAP study, when it states that existing car park spaces will only be *replaced* and therefore implies that parking proposals are traffic-neutral, takes into account the fact that the huge Anglia Square multi-storey car park as it stands serves a largely moribund area, and is usually half-empty. Bringing life back in the form of busy shops and family homes *must* generate more traffic movements and therefore more congestion and greater pollution. This makes diverting through-traffic all the more essential.

Pedestrians and Public Transport.

Only Magdalen Street provides a direct (at level) pedestrian access to the area North of the Inner Ring Road. Yet the Plan ignores the need to improve this thoroughfare, one of the oldest in our ancient City, in terms of commercial use, visual improvement and perceived importance. Apart from some interesting proposals to slow down the increasing conversion of retail premises to housing, the potential of the three remaining major historic pedestrian streets (Magdalen Street, St Augustine's



and Colegate) to act as economic drivers in restoring the vibrancy of the area is almost completely overlooked.

The Plan accurately describes the land underneath the Magdalen Street flyover as “a gravel and tarmac wasteland”, and we welcome the suggestion of partially reinstating the continuous frontage along Magdalen Street by building a shop under the structure. But why stop there? Rebuilding along the old street line at pavement level on *both* sides of the road up to, under and through the bridge would be a much better solution, one which has been seen working successfully under the many railway bridges in South London, and one which would draw pedestrians towards and into the retail development proposed for Anglia Square/Calvert Square.

The proposal to replace the noisome subway under the Inner Ring Road at the end of Calvert Street with a new surface level crossing will do nothing to improve pedestrian access to the new development, and, given existing traffic levels, may even be unworkable. Would a better alternative be to bridge the dual carriageway with decking at the same level as the first floor supermarket across the road? Certainly more consideration needs to be given to how shoppers will access the attractor of the new Anglia Square/Calvert Square from the extensive new housing/office/hotel construction across the busy road and roundabout on the St Mary’s Works site.

Proposals for rerouting buses through the area and new bus interchanges are workable and generally welcome. But we have two practical queries: will buses be physically able to take the sharp left turn from Magdalen Street into Edward Street? And what will be the long-term effect of the extra vibration accompanying a new bus-route on the venerable but structurally fragile buildings of St Augustine’s?

We also welcome the pavement-widening and “environmental enhancement” - presumably some trees and plantbeds – suggested for St Augustine’s, but we doubt whether making that historic street one-way will substantially reduce the level of traffic-fume pollution, already reckoned to be above safe limits on a regular basis. Traffic, including the added buses (which generally push out more pollution than cars), will still queue with engines running at pedestrian crossings and lights.

The suggestion that Pitt Street should be widened and made an avenue with trees would be utterly alien to the historic character of the area. The aim should be to recreate the enclosed nature of this street which was lost in the Seventies when both



sides of the thoroughfare were demolished. It should be lined with two and three storey buildings. The ones to the North should pay heed to what was there before and to St Augustine's, while the buildings on the roundabout could be more contemporary. As one comes down St Augustine's, one should still be able to see Norwich as an historic City.

Commercial/Retail Development and Housing

The prosperity of the area North of the Inner Ring Road took a big hit when the two main office blocks (Sovereign and Gildengate Houses) were abandoned. About a thousand jobs disappeared, undermining retail activity and the service sector in the area. It is vital, in the NCCAAP's words, that "the area should retain its important employment function relating to the City Centre", including the replacement of these (for Norwich) relatively well-paid jobs.

The need to attract a large employer to the area seems self-evident. The Plan accepts the need for high-quality office space, but seems to envisage distributing it in small packets. This may not work: building office space "on spec" is risky, and although a study is in train, no evidence has yet been produced of an overwhelming need for more office space, particularly in this part of the City.

Emphasis is also placed on housing, shopping and vaguely-defined culture and arts activities plus "new creative and media businesses" as the drivers for revitalisation. We would advise caution on the latter: media businesses tend to be small, highly-mobile and are increasingly centred on London - witness the continuing decline of Anglia TV as a local employer. They also increasingly tend to employ people on low-paid, short-term contracts.

Under the heading of Culture and the Arts, the clear and unequivocal decision to reject siting a new concert hall in the area, while retaining the Hollywood Cinema, may seem a contradiction in terms. The two may not be mutually exclusive. The sheer size and bulk of this specialised and expensive building, with its raked floors, makes its conversion into a major performance centre very feasible. The added emphasis on the expansion of the Norwich School of Art and Design into the area could also be linked to the provision of some residential accommodation for students.

The decision to anchor the biggest development at Anglia Square/Calvert Street with a major foodstore (we note that only 60% of the establishment is likely to sell food) may have been unavoidable, though we wonder whether this is another



example of a developer's requirement driving the Plan. Certainly, as we argue above, this kind of a retail outlet (where customers require their cars to carry away bulk purchases) will act as a major traffic-generator in an area already choked with vehicles.

Encouraging small specialist shops on Magdalen Street and St Augustine's is a worthy aim, but a major supermarket selling clothes, electrical goods and other wares as well as food may undercut such development from the beginning. We wonder how long the existing small retailers (including the specialist cluster of exotic groceries that has sprung up on and around Magdalen Street) will survive.

The theory behind the decision to make the supermarket the core of a "wraparound development", with flats on the outside, is sound – witness the success of Duke Street car park and the Chapelfield Mall. But it is noticeable that housing in these latter developments does not face onto traffic. The supermarket wraparound in fact faces onto St Crispin's Road and Pitt Street, the two busiest roads in the area – as does the proposed hotel on the St Mary's Works site. This may not encourage occupancy of either.

Green Space and the Public Realm

In general the plans for pedestrians and enhancing green space in the public realm are excellent, particularly the green pedestrian route between Whitefriars and Oak Street: East-West pedestrian movement is as difficult as North-South at the moment. We do note, however, the ominous statement that they have neither been costed nor assessed for feasibility "in terms of the ability of developers to afford them".

If developers do not see it as being in their interest to provide for such routes, then "external funding", i.e. taxpayers money, will have to be found, or the list trimmed "to reflect what is practicable".

Surely in such a major revitalisation of a rundown area the quality of public spaces is central to success. Short-term penny-pinching on greenery and pleasant public spaces will increase the likelihood of long-term failure for the entire project. We would hope that Norwich City Council will make proper contribution to the public realm a pre-condition for granting planning permission within the NCCAAP area.

There is already a notable absence of new green space within the Anglia Square/Calvert Square development. As before, the central plaza is hemmed in by



monolithic blocks, with narrow passage-like exits to surrounding streets. The proposed roof garden for residents on the top of the foodstore may enhance their *private* amenity, but adds little to the public realm.

We would, however, commend the imaginative layout of the St Mary's Works site, creating a visual and physical link between the churches of St Martin at Oak and St Mary Coslany and their large green churchyards, with a new opportunity to see St Martin's from the South. But this will only work properly if the proposed replacement buildings for the existing factory are pulled further back from the fine open space of the graveyard and their height restricted to the South.

There is an even greater opportunity to open up a major Green Space to the West of Oak Street, leading down to the river - probably the only one feasible in this part of the City. The site slopes down to the Wensum, offering a unique chance to create a stunning parkland between the riverside walk proposed and Wensum Park, instead of the blocks of flats shown on the Plan at present. The low-grade light industrial buildings on the site at present are a blot on the landscape, with only the early 15th Century Great Hall worth saving. New development should be confined to the street line. The new pedestrian/cycle bridge proposed would extend this new amenity area to the other side of the river.

Conclusion

The Northern City Centre Area Action Plan Preferred Options Report has grappled bravely with problems and preconditions set by a past history of major planning mistakes. The fact that it is only a partial success may be put down to the fact that it fails to go deeply enough into the cause of those earlier failures.

To the fact that the area's road network is not fit for use, and the danger of future planning blight caused by over-reliance on big solutions, we may add a third cause for concern. The Plan contains little reference to the fact that the area between the River Wensum and the City Wall (essentially that of this study), is just one geographical part of a changing, organic community that served as England's Second City for many centuries. That aspect could now contribute to an important heritage element in assisting regeneration.

This is no normal city centre development site. Norwich is not Reading, Slough or Birmingham. Failure to see this area in its historical context, and an



equivalent failure to comprehend and foster the informal connections between it and the rest of the City Centre, are at the root of most of the weaknesses in the NCCAAP.

We offer these observations to the City Council and its hard-working planners in the hope that they will be taken as they were intended - as a basically constructive contribution to a massively complicated problem. Our great and historic City deserves only the best efforts of us all.