

'Focus on... managing rapid growth in historic towns'

Ely Conference Report 8/9 December 2004



To welcome delegates to Ely on Wednesday evening a civic reception was held at the Stained Glass Museum at the Cathedral, hosted by Cllr Jeremy Friend-Smith and Mayor, Cllr Derek Crawley with an interesting talk and tour, after which they enjoyed supper at Pizza Express in the High Street.

On Thursday, an audience made up of local authority officers, elected members and representatives of civic societies and the private sector came together at the Maltings – central to one of Ely's regeneration projects

– to hear the local, regional and national speakers who were involved in the rapid growth currently being experienced by Ely and many other small towns.

Ian Poole, Chair of EHTF, had recently attended the launch of the Regional Spatial Strategy and was concerned about the effect on historic towns of the pressure for new housing in the south and east of England. He questioned the capacity to cope with this scale and speed of growth and urged everyone involved to think ahead, in order that whilst delivering the housing, we retain local identity. The same accusations about 'clone towns' could easily start to be made about housing as they have recently been made about retail areas.

He thanked East Cambridgeshire for hosting the event and introduced David Archer, Executive Director of Development Services at East Cambridgeshire District Council. David explained the strategy of the recent past and the continuing plans for regeneration using Ely's historic assets. Out of the Market Towns Initiative, Ely Perspectives had been created and continues to have a significant influence on the renaissance of the town. Partnerships, he said, and the appointment of a Design Champion, have been crucial to maintaining the character of the place and achieving a sustainable community. There are problems still to be addressed, including congestion, out-commuting, and providing enough 'affordable' housing. He said that Ely is a "work in progress" and he welcomed delegates' comments and ideas.

Together, the former and current Chairs of Ely Perspectives, Nick Abbey and Philip Eden gave an overview of the work of the partnership. Nick explained the structure and the aims, which were improvements to the visitor numbers and spend, the appearance and promotion of the City Centre, and the business base. Philip went on to illustrate some of the projects and schemes undertaken. These included the Three Cups Walk, encouraging businesses to sponsor improvements to the local community environment, improvements to the city centre to encourage more visitors, improving the shopping experience, the Eel Trail, the City Public Transport Scheme, the Park & Ride, production of a shopper's guide and a City Guide, outreach and involvement in other city centre partnerships and the development of the Riverside Area

Gwyn Jones, Regional Design Manager, EEDA and CABA explained her role and the importance of "Championing Excellence in the East of England". She said that research has shown a clear, demonstrable link between the quality of the built environment and economic and social well-being... and given the high level of new development in the East of England, it is particularly important that it is implemented in a high-quality and sustainable manner. A strategic approach was also important, developing exemplars, sharing best practice and putting in place appropriate training, networks and support. She identified the Key Quality Principles of Good Design:

- Character and distinctiveness
- Diversity and mixed use
- Space and enclosure
- Legibility / ease of movement

- Long term sustainability
- Inclusivity
- Inspiration

She also explained the design quality measures which had been developed and the methods for setting and maintaining high standards.

Juliet Bidgood, Senior Enabling Advisor, explained why CABI is championing the use of good design in buildings and public spaces. She said that it makes good economic sense and has social benefits. Well designed buildings are healthier to live and work in, are safer and can improve the quality of life in a neighbourhood. CABI is able to influence Government, offer free design advice, help develop skills, carry out research and lead national campaigns. Juliet went on to discuss the issues surrounding high density building, offering national and international examples of good practice. She also listed the factors which were important to consider and offered a series of resources available via training courses, websites and publications.

After coffee, delegates were guided on a tour of regeneration projects in Ely, and following lunch, speakers presented some of the projects in more detail.

The Ely transport study carried out by Martin Higgitt, Principle Transport Planner at Steer Davies Greaves had asked “–how do we tackle congestion?” Issues considered were managing parking demand, environmental and economic impacts, access to all modes of transport, social inclusion and the ingredients required for change to take place. He concluded that it was important to set clear objectives which are related to the broader aims for the town; identify the role of parking in the broader strategy; anticipate the main points of opposition; involve elected members early on the process and have a clear message and a public relations strategy to get it across.

Robert Tregay, Senior Partner at LDA Design, looked at the criteria to achieve “Appropriate Housing Developments in Historic Settings”. He emphasised the importance of strategic planning and the sustainable communities plan; the growth emphasis on larger settlements with good transport infrastructure and protecting the character of historic towns. He considered that “Controlled development can sustain their economic viability and social infrastructure.” Historic towns remain attractive for development but there were special challenges which had to be faced. Robert looked in some detail at case studies in Ely, Winchester, Oakham and Cambridge.

He concluded that key points which should always be considered are:

- Identify what gives the town its special character
- The significance of scale, grain and compactness
- The landscape setting and approaches
- The need for creative solutions for peripheral developments
- The need for special design approaches – including contemporary ones
- Public art, street patterns and open spaces are just as important as the buildings
- Don’t compromise on good design, there *is* planning policy to support it and – fine houses sell better!

David Wright, Director of Commissions East, presented the “Two Artists Projects” which included the Eel Trail and the lighting strategy. The first celebrated the town’s association with eels and was an aid to orientation without the use of more obtrusive signage. The lighting scheme along the Riverside involved different approaches and contributed to tourism and the strategic development of Ely, beyond just the Cathedral. David stressed the importance of the contribution made by the artists to the economic and social well being of the City and the importance of considering these elements early in a redevelopment project.

Having explored the issues and some of the projects, delegates were asked to consider “The Way Forward” with presentations from Dr Marion Wells, an independent consultant and member of the East of England Market Town Resource Team and Greg Luton, Regional Director of English Heritage.

Marion considered the “Market Towns Resources” at our disposal:

- The Romans gave us places to meet not places to park!
- People’s passion – we can encourage involvement

Places can be used for many purposes and heritage is our most important asset, but people are our most important resource. If funding is a problem she recommended:

- A plan
- A partnership
- A real need
- Section 1006 agreements
- Funding streams (use the market towns learning network)
- Think big and brave!

Greg explained the “Streets for All” campaign which encouraged consideration of many aspects of the town including ground surfaces and other materials, street signs, traffic signals, crossings and barriers, lighting, bollards, seating, street cabinets and other clutter. The design of all of these should be carefully considered, he said. A great deal of attention has been paid to historic buildings but very little to their surroundings. English Heritage is working with many other organisations, as well as local and national government departments, to identify and encourage good practice and cross disciplinary working. It is no good blaming the traffic engineers, he said, we must engage with them early in development processes.



Ian invited questions and comments from the floor to the speakers. These included:

- The need to encourage families and older people to use public places.
- Use developers with experience of a range of types of development.
- The importance of the role and function of a place – both day & night.
- Economic assessments: English Heritage are embarking on this and EEDA has a

grant for a project to measure heritage regeneration. Ian announced that EHTF and UWE are bidding for a project to monitor and measure the economic benefits of the heritage environment. CABE Space also carry out research on the public realm and land values.

- Linking new towns and housing developments with the old town.

Ian closed the conference with thanks to everyone involved in the organisation of the event and delegates for their participation.

Copies of speakers’ presentations can be obtained from ehhf@uwe.ac.uk or 0117 975 0459.