



ENGLISH HERITAGE

**URBAN PANEL  
REVIEW PAPER**

**LUTON MAY 2009**

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- 1.0 On first acquaintance with the suite of issues described in the papers prepared for the visit to Luton, members could see important links to earlier visits. Since its inception in 2000 the Urban Panel has visited and considered the impact (real or potential) of many shopping malls – for example those in Peterborough, Norwich and Exeter – of which more below. The Panel has also seen a number of towns which had in the past dealt with or are currently dealing with very significant growth.
  
- 2.0 Before feeling able to comment in any detail on those and other issues in Luton, however, orientation was required and the Panel were most grateful for the introductory presentation and

carefully designed tour of the town. Immediate impressions arising from this introduction included:

- the importance of the landscape setting of Luton, with the associated constraints
- the remarkable impact of the ground-breaking Mall (formerly the Arndale) shopping centre and its continuing presence in the town
- the quality and significance of the remaining hat industry buildings and areas in the town
- the well managed and impressive High Town
- the memorable visual impact of a number of buildings around the town, particularly St Mary's
- the difficult balance between the physical constraints on the town centre and the aspiration to expand it to serve a much bigger town

3.0 The Panel was also extremely grateful for the opportunity to meet and talk to senior officers, members and representatives of

relevant local and sub-regional organisations over dinner. It was the more remarkable event for taking place in Luton Hoo. The astonishing house, with its great Edwardian interior intact and once more in a viable use, has never been a formative neighbour for Luton. However, it may stand as a symbol of the potential for the achievement of excellence in the area while also serving as a salutary reminder that large investments may offer little to Luton unless they are woven into and responsive to the place and thus reinforce its character.

4.0 The Panel's dominant impression of Luton was that of a robust and vital place which had risen to challenges in the past and fully intended to do so again. As a first step, the Panel welcomed the work that had been carried out in 2004 and which had resulted in a highly competent and thoughtful Town Centre Development Framework (TCDF), based on the widely consulted study by David Lock Associates (DLA). This framework will be further commented upon later in this text. However, noting that the date of the study was giving rise to its reconsideration, the

Panel observed that its underlying principles seemed still to be robust.

If the Panel had any concern about the Development Framework it was that it lacked a compelling vision for the future of the town. The massive proposed expansion surely requires such a vision, one which must be entirely rooted in the strengths and qualities of the town and sufficiently convincing to provide a touchstone which would help address the issues to which this paper will return which include:

- polycentricity
- infrastructure
- the scope for expansion of the town centre(s)
- development mechanisms
- quality assurance

5.0 First however, the Panel could not resist commenting on the obtuse and difficult local government arrangements facing Luton

and on the excellent response by Luton Council (LC) and Central Bedfordshire Council (CBC). This part of the Milton Keynes & South Midlands (MKSM) Growth Area is so administratively subdivided as to provide extreme difficulties for growth management. The response of the two Councils in co-operating over the production of a joint Core Strategy is highly to be commended. Indeed the Panel felt that this was an essential step and one which the Government Office should look at closely when determining whether it will be helpful for the examination of the North Hertfordshire (NH) Core Strategy to go ahead in a way which offers LC and CBC no alternative other than to be represented as objectors. The Panel sees a strong case for some effort being made to ensure that final decisions are made in the best interests of the Growth Area and Luton and its neighbouring towns.

6.0 The Panel was happy to be able to commend these efforts by the Council to achieve proper planning, while noting that this put very considerable burdens on an authority with many other

issues to address. Because the development framework puts such encouraging emphasis on quality, the Panel urged the Council to consider how its planning staff could be ensured sufficient support from specialists, in particular from urban designers. It is not for the Panel to prescribe but the possibility of sharing relevant personnel with CBC looked worthy of consideration.

Panel members felt strongly that the quality of master planning, of new public realm and spaces and of new buildings would depend on strong urban design advice which should be applied not only to applications by others but also to developments led by the Council. The issues and opportunities facing Luton will be best resolved by the use of design teams of excellence and due consideration should be given to procurement routes – such as design and/or developer competitions – which ensure that.

Excellent urban design, however, cannot operate in a vacuum and the complementary suite of skills which can ensure the best understanding of the significance, as well as the mutability, of

the historic environment is equally important. Noting that conservation area appraisals and characterisation of wider areas was not entirely in place, the Panel urged that this deficit be met. Panel members noted that the outcome of many such studies was not a further extension of constraint mapping, but rather a deeper understanding of how existing fabric should be understood and best used, coupled with a clearer definition of the potential for change and enhancement.

The Panel welcomed the fact that the Council had promoted the creation of a single purpose vehicle – Luton Gateway – because it has often found that such bodies can hold on to and promote a vision over the necessary longer term and with a degree of insulation from the variability of political circumstances.

Members noted that the standards by which this body operated would be critical. That LC had once turned down an application on the critical site at Power Court on the grounds of quality was a striking achievement, particularly in a place where the need for inward investment is so strongly felt. Equally strong minded

decision making, with quality always the goal, will be required by Luton Gateway as well as by the Council and the Panel will do everything it can to support that.

7.0 Panel members were struck by the complexity of the task ahead of the Council when faced by such a combination of constraints and opportunities. While the opportunity for growth must be grasped at a time when existing employment providers continue to come under pressure, the constraints provided by the physical extent of the town centre and by the high quality, often protected, landscape surrounding it on most sides, present an obvious challenge. The question of whether proposed growth can be serviced by one town centre alone or whether Dunstable, Houghton Regis and/or even a third additional centre will be required must be resolved. The Panel acknowledged that polycentricity is difficult to handle but felt that the strength of the proposed east-west connections combined with the quantum of northerly growth offered an opportunity to allow the other centres renewed vitality of their own as well as their

chance to relieve pressure on the centre of Luton which might prove too small to service a population of 400,000. This point will be thought arguable, the Panel acknowledged. However, it must be addressed and the way to do this is to carry out a study of the potential for expansion of Luton centre – that is of the eventual size of the centre and the number of people it can then service.

At the same time the opportunity should be taken to consider the other centres as assets to be utilised as well as reinforced in their own right. The Panel could not resist making a connection between the location of Marsh Farm and the fact of its proposed major refurbishment. There surely exists the possibility that the refurbishment might be the more transformatory and successful if a major new role within the northern extension were found for Marsh Farm. Nor could members fail to note the irony of comments that residents of Dunstable feared the busway would simply take retail vitality away to Luton. That cannot be the intention and a clear role for Dunstable in the new conurbation

must be agreed. In particular the Panel felt that the investment in cultural offer in Dunstable must be tested and found to be the right solution for the expanded settlement. If it is, then one part of the role for Dunstable is defined – with the consequence that the connections between these two centres must be reinforced, even more than by just the busway.

8.0 At the time of the Panel’s visit there were a number of live planning cases which were directly related to the points of principle set out above. In the paragraphs which follow, this paper will address:

- the nature of the Mall Shopping Centre (MSC), the current proposals for its extension and mechanisms for its future further change.
- the nature and quality of the Plaiters Lea Conservation Area (PLCA)
- the potential extent of the retail centre of Luton
- the particular role of Power Court in the new centre

- the railway station refurbishment and its connection to the busway
- the connections across the station and between the centre and High Town
- the proposed Urban Village adjoining High Town

9.0 The impact of the Mall shopping centre cannot easily be exaggerated. We have come to understand the drawbacks of such centres over the years since Luton was blessed with Europe's first mall, but it is worth pausing for a moment to imagine the bustling 60s town filled with workers, some building the great symbol of England's post war transformation – the private motor car – and spending their leisure time and money in this exciting American style palace to commerce. Few then would imagine that the great employers would dwindle, that the owners MSC would milk the centre without investing in it, or that the remainder of the town centre would be blighted by the centre. It is quite understandable, therefore, that people look forward to a time when Luton will be equally vital and

welcome proposed growth as a result. The Panel accepted that a revitalised retail role for the town centre as a whole is essential. It also accepted that the Mall is a massive fixed asset which must play a part in that future. It was encouraging, therefore, to see the progress which has been made with the extension towards George Square. Not only has the Council now got a partner willing to invest in the town, it also has the wit and ability to direct public realm investment to the very point where it will reap the maximum benefit side by side with the new retail investment. The Panel welcomed this happy juxtaposition

However, the Panel were less convinced that the only way to deal with the long term future of the Mall was to accept more extensions and internal refits as the only way ahead. The new owners are in the business of running (largely closed) malls, as their name suggests. The existing centre constitutes a massive, single building imposed across the historic fabric of Luton, cutting George Street off from the station, as well as the centre to the north and High Town. Its servicing requirements are

taken as given. Its economic strength offers little to the town, as George Street attests. It is hard to believe that truly convincing connections from north to south will ever be achieved without radical steps, such as the reopening of Bute Street. Indeed Panel members did not accept that the MSC could ever be an acceptable long term component of Luton's retail centre unless the whole footprint is opened up to provide a pattern of footprints which can provide permeability and more flexibility in future.

Panel members believe that a new contract between MSC's owners and the Council is required – and this is the time to negotiate one because the current scheme for the Northern Gateway extension is unacceptably flawed and the balance of benefit goes to the owners rather than the town. To see a way out of this, the Panel urged the Council to reconsider Plaiters Lea Conservation Area.

10.0 This area currently looks run down, untidy and unprepossessing – which is hardly surprising given the very long period during which it has been (literally and figuratively) in the shadow of the shopping centre. It is hard to imagine why anyone would invest in an area where the footfall is restricted to brave individuals trying to get home around the Mall or lost while trying to get into it. And yet there was no doubt in the Panel’s minds that it justified its Conservation Area status. To repeat the point made above – it is not yet possible to have a constructive and informed basis for policy making while full character appraisal work is still to be published. However, there can be little doubt that it will show that the area reflects the important hatmaking industrial past of Luton, has buildings of quality (some listed and many not, but still of significance) **and** that it has many weak and damaged areas where the scope for improvement through new development is possible. But this should be through a process of integrating the new with the old, rather than wholesale redevelopment. Having earlier praised David Lock Associates’ work, the Panel noted that the proposal for this

area in that Development Framework seemed entirely in line with the Panel's views. A "...new *Hat Factory District*.....with its own vibrant mix of shops, new homes, cafes and bars as well as significantly improved links to the bus and rail stations" is just what Luton needs. A conventional, albeit shiny and modern, extension to the shopping centre is not.

This is not to argue that the legitimate aspirations of the Mall's owners for modern retail units should not be met, but rather that the ambition should be to use the need for such spaces as the lever which will lead to the breaking up of the massive monolith into separate contributory parts of the emerging new retail centre. The right place to begin to explore this process is at the interface between the existing centre and PLCA. There is no doubt this is a harder design task than the brief given to the current team – but as the widely praised scheme in Exeter's Princesshay has shown, accommodating and taking a lead from existing fabric produces a scheme which is distinctive and interesting. Such a scheme in Luton would be far more likely to

boost the town's self-image and would make a place not only for residents to shop but also for visitors to explore.

In summary, the Panel believed that the next extension of the Mall need not be made at the expense of a perfectly good conservation area, the fabric of which holds the key to creating something special for Luton. Furthermore, the Panel believed that with the right brief and a shared will to enhance both the town and the shopping experience, a good design team could balance modification of the Mall, retention of much of the fabric of the PLCA and some clearance and new build in the conservation area in such a way as to produce a far more attractive and unique place, while also bringing the cut off northern area back to life.

11.0 One critical element of success in this area about which there is consensus is that connections from the town centre to the station and bus station and beyond must be improved. Here the Panel had nought but praise for the main public transport

infrastructure projects. The creation of the busway, the improvement of the bus / train interchange, the enhancement and expansion of the footbridge connection north and south, all these were welcomed. The Panel noted that, while the infrastructural bonus of such strong connections was being grasped and improved upon, the reinforcement of the east west barrier was a clear and present danger – well known to all local staff and residents – which must be mitigated. In that context the commitment to enhancement of the footbridge was welcomed – indeed there the question arose as to whether even more could be done to ensure that a truly convincing connection to High Town was made and visible.

The Panel recognised that the completion of the inner ring road could provide the opportunity to better integrate parts of the town, but were concerned that this might be at the expense of isolating other parts. On balance the Panel accepted that this project could be justified so long as it enables the Power Court site to be re-integrated with the town centre through the down

grading of St Mary's road, but the detailed design of the scheme would also need to deliver appropriate mitigation to address the issues arising from the severance of Midland Road from the existing highway network.

12.0 The other set of issues which the Panel was shown all relate in some way to the question of the extent of the expanded town centre and the impact which its various elements, existing and proposed, will have on the character of Luton. The Panel agreed wholeheartedly that the critical site here was Power Court. The fact that the Council has previously resisted one inappropriate scheme on this site had already been welcomed by the Panel, but the point bears repetition. Making the vital, convincing, much larger town centre will require not only the nerve to refuse sub-standard proposals; it will also ideally require control. The risk of this site being brought forward for a standard purpose, such as a superstore is great. Such a scheme could undermine the potential for delivering the Town Centre Development

Framework in a sustainable manner – indeed it may very well be argued that control over the site is essential for the purposes of good planning. For those reasons, the Panel strongly advised that the Council considered the purchase (by agreement or by CPO if necessary) of Power Court.

Once owned, what goes on the site can be decided as part of the eventual resolution of the question of the right size for the new centre. The right uses on Power Court will demand that the issues at the eastern end of MSC and the market are resolved in a way that ensures connectivity. Similarly the achievement of east / west routes through PLCA, forging connections between the station, George Square and the Library and Power Court, taking full advantage of the redevelopment of the multi-story car park, all the way, can and should be another of the design requirements for the Hat Factory District. Appropriate redevelopment of Power Court can guarantee that, together with the reworking of the University, a great new space – centred on St. Mary's – can come to grace the town. This would require

courageous action – to remove traffic, to transform the public realm and to carry out a further radical change to the MSC, but the prize of a major new city space would be worth it.

13.0 The Panel were firmly convinced that the Council was already in possession of excellent advice on the new centre for Luton in the Town Centre Development Framework it had wisely commissioned. Should control over Power Court be taken, should the Northern Gateway be modified in such a way that the MSC started to be both used and vital, but also distinctively of Luton, and should informed decisions be taken about the amount of development the centre can carry, then Luton centre can fulfil the aspirations for it. Once the centre is fixed, the importance of connections to all the adjacent residential areas becomes self-evident. The one that the Panel was shown was High Town and once more the Panel praised the Council for valuing this quality area, using relevant grant schemes to maintain it and coming forward with a proposal for its economic re-use as the retail spine serving the new Urban Village.

This was a proposal which the Panel welcomed. The fabric of High Town is attractive, its survival a real boon. Its closeness to the station and thus to London, made its current level of economic activity look like an opportunity waiting to be taken. The fact that the Council were heading in that direction was welcomed. This was, as a result, one place where the Development Framework was criticised. Both it and the station refurbishment drawings miss out High Town and, while this may be no more than the practical result of scheme and study area boundaries, the Panel felt this should be corrected and the reason for this advice was pragmatic. The achievement of the Urban Village, with a place as good as High Town at its core, can do a lot for the image of Luton and should therefore be given the highest possible profile.

14.0 Finally there is much about the wider environmental future which Luton Council has its sights on that should be commended. Panel members acknowledged that the aspirations

which had lead to Butterfield being developed to such a high level of sustainability set the right tone. The growing use of bicycles in the town is excellent and the Panel noted that the town centre, even when expanded, will be of scale to encourage that and walking further. All these sustainability measures need to be built into future development and the Panel commended the Council on paying such close attention to them.

## **Summary**

### **The Urban Panel:**

- a) found Luton to be a place with great character which had dealt with great change in the past and was clearly going to do so again;

- b) admired the vigour with which the opportunity of growth was being grasped and the thoughtful professional approach which was being adopted;
- c) particularly commended the Council on joining with South Bedfordshire to craft a joint Core Strategy
- d) urged the Government Office(s) to do everything possible to create a framework for planning growth around the southern end of MKSM which overcame the historic but no longer useful administrative boundaries;
- e) counted three significant deficits, each of which should be corrected before final plans are laid – to wit the lack of a compelling vision for the expanded town, the uncertainty about how much of the new conurbation's needs can be centrally serviced in Luton itself and the lack of published character appraisal of existing fabric;
- f) acknowledged that the a polycentric conurbation will be complex to create but, since Dunstable and Houghton Regis are assets which must be accommodated and revitalised, felt that

Marsh Farm might also come to play a similar role to its and the area's benefit;

- g) thought the Development Framework (DF) produced on the Council's behalf in 2004 to be a perceptive, helpful and still very relevant document
- h) thought the achievement, in line with that Framework, of George Square and the new retail addressing it to be an excellent step;
- i) was quite unconvinced that further extension of the Mall Shopping Centre (MSC) in a conventional fashion was desirable;
- j) felt that the qualities of the Plaiters Lea Conservation Area could be used to be the grit in the oyster which could produce development of great distinctiveness to the north of MSC – (also in line with the DF);
- k) hoped that the a new approach to the next phase of MSC would also lead to the slow but thoroughgoing transformation of the centre and its relationship to the whole centre;
- l) admired the commitment to public transport infrastructure and the understanding of the need to reinforce connectivity;

- m) considered the completion of the east west inner ring road to be justified by its enabling impact on Power Court;
- n) saw Power Court as the dominant and most important site for the future of the centre and one which the Council should very seriously considering taking into its ownership;
- o) appreciated the very considerable quality of St Mary's and saw it as the core feature around which Power Court and the University developments could, with care, come to create a great new space;
- p) advised that the proposed strengthened connections across the refurbished station to the north should be given still further prominence, in order to emphasise the route to and importance of High Town;
- q) considered High Town to be a great asset, well managed to date but in need of a new economic role; and
- r) welcomed the proposal to fill that need through the new Urban Village

s) recommended that redevelopment of the Library Multi-storey carpark is used as the catalyst for developing a new pedestrian route from the station to the Library and George Square

Chris Smith

August 09