



Historic England

URBAN PANEL – Review Paper Grantham

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1. Introduction

1.1 Grantham is an historic market town, with a high quality historic environment notably associated with Isaac Newton and, more recently, Margaret Thatcher. The Urban Panel's visit comes at a time when the town is on the cusp of significant growth; growth that is being welcomed in the belief that it will be the catalyst for the regeneration of the historic town centre.

1.2 This may be regarded as a once-in-a-generation opportunity for Grantham; a fact recognised by both South Kesteven District Council (SKDC) and the local team at Historic England (HE). The District Council's commitment to both nurture and better reveal the town's historic distinctiveness is recognised both in the Grantham Townscape Character Assessment and their contribution to a heritage-led area regeneration scheme now underway in the town centre.

1.3 However, both the District Council and HE local team recognise that much more will be needed in order to successfully absorb the planned levels of growth. A very significant increase in population will bring with it additional traffic movements that could potentially counteract, at least in part, the benefits it delivers. Furthermore, when large scale growth is to be delivered in a short timescale then there is a high risk that the opportunity for, and achievement of, high quality place making may be lost.

2 Executive Summary and Recommendations

2.1 The Panel welcomed the collaborative involvement in their visit both from representatives of the Buckminster Estate and SKDC, the latter including the involvement of the Chief Executive and a number of senior officers. The authority's enthusiasm to enable Grantham to achieve its full potential was clearly evident, but the route by which that goal might be attained has yet to be fully developed.

Summary Recommendations

- The Panel supports the ambitions for the growth of Grantham and accepted the need for the construction of a Southern Relief Road (SRR) to remove the A52 from the town, acknowledging that in the current climate this would need to be funded locally, with the County Council partially recovering its costs from housing completions within the southern urban extension.
- However, resolution of the traffic congestion within Grantham should not wait for completion of the SRR. There are a number of traffic issues in the old town that could be addressed independently from the removal of the A52 through the town, and the Panel strongly recommend that traffic management in the old town is undertaken in a phased programme with an early commencement.
- A clear vision, supported by robust but flexible masterplans with the encouragement of good quality design, is required for both the old town and the southern urban extension.
- Issues of topography and distance/separation may require the southern urban extension to be given its own clear and distinct identity as a place in its own right; similar to the relationship established between Dorchester and Poundbury.
- In order to help strengthen local leadership and shape the vision for the future of the town, the Panel recommended the creation of a wide ranging partnership. This might comprise representatives of local businesses, local landowners/estates, the National Trust, police, health services, education (primary, secondary and tertiary) and others Grantham's connectivity, and in particular being one hour from King's Cross, must be a key component of the town's USP.

3 Panel Visit – Walking Tour

3.1 High Street: Walking up the High Street the impact of traffic in the town was clearly evident, along with high levels of retail vacancy, and no doubt the two issues are related. The Panel were informed that overall occupancy rates in Grantham are at 88%, broadly in line with the national average of 87%, but significantly lower than the 99% attained in Stamford. Having walked the length of the High Street it was apparent that the town centre is dispersed over a relatively large area (that also encompasses the Market Place and Westgate) and a more tightly focused retail core, with high quality public realm, would enable the town to better face the challenges from internet and out-of-town shopping.

3.2 Watergate: The Panel discussed an open surface car park site on the east side of Watergate which is in SKDC's ownership.. The Panel strongly felt that retail provision in the town should not be stretched any further north (even though there is a new Lidl store nearing completion on the opposite side of the road), and that this site might lend itself for residential development, possibly employing single aspect /controlled aspect housing facing the street with two decks of parking behind. A more comprehensive redevelopment scheme, incorporating the slightly tired post-war development immediately south of the car park, might also provide the opportunity to reduce the road carriageway width back to its pre-war alignment, thereby helping to define the town centre and create a more intimate feel to the street, with enhanced public realm for pedestrians.

3.3 Church Street and Castlegate: The earlier stone heritage of Grantham was revealed when the Panel visited the large and impressive parish Church of St Wulfram, which is soon to be designated a Minster. Here the Panel heard from the newly installed Rector Fr Stuart Craddock, who enthusiastically expressed his vision for the church and its role in the town, including creating space that others might use. The Panel also heard from Andrew Barber of the National Trust, who own Grantham House on the east side of Castlegate, opposite the church. Grantham House is medieval in origin, but with an 18th century front and gardens that form an important part of the River Witham corridor. On the far (east) bank of the river the Trust control the Sedgwick Meadows, historic grazing land that is now within the boundaries of the town. When the current grazier retires there may be a need to rethink how this land is managed, and this in turn might provide an opportunity for improved public access.

3.4 The Panel were impressed by the quality of buildings within the vicinity of the church and with the benefit from some enhancements to the open spaces and public realm the area could make a highly attractive 'Minster Quarter'

3.5 Market Place: The Panel were shown recently completed enhancements to the Market Square comprising improvements to the public realm and new shop fronts (the latter partially funded through an English Heritage partnership scheme), but the negative impact of four night clubs and the lack of enclosure on the west side of the Market Place were also noted. The Buckminster Estate also outlined their approach to identifying appropriate tenants for their shop units that might encourage 'dwell-time' in the town, whilst avoiding Bookmakers and low grade fast food outlets etc.

3.6 Greyfriars: This area lies southwest of the Market Place and on the west side of the road is an area of post-war council housing comprising 87 one and two bedroomed units. On the east side of the road are the back-parts of the historic burgage plots that front onto Westgate, but which are now largely under-used. The Panel noted the close proximity of this site to both the town centre and the railway station and the potential that this area offered for high density, low-rise residential development that responded to the historic grain of the area, possibly along the lines of the Mill Gate development in Newark.

3.7 A52 (Wharf Street) and Station Approach: Having walked south along Westgate the Panel were able to observe at first hand the impact on the town of traffic using the A52, and the resulting severance of pedestrian and cycle routes to the station and southern part of the town. Paul Thomas of SKDC outlined the Council's proposal to make the station more visible through providing an improved station approach from Wharf Street and incorporating commercial office premises, but the Compulsory Purchase Order for the land failed, primarily due to the lack of a private sector partner. The Panel encouraged SKDC to identify a suitable private sector partner and to then revisit the proposal.

3.8 At the eastern end of Wharf Street the Panel were shown the Post Office Sorting Office, which occupies an important corner site in the town, but the current land use requires a defensive treatment of the site and the building is of poor architectural quality. There have been discussions with the Post Office regarding alternative sites within the town, but at this stage there is no interest in a relocation.

3.9 St Catharine's Road and St Peter's Hill: The Panel also saw a council owned surface car park site which is to be developed for a 6-screen multiplex cinema (replacing an existing 2-screen cinema adjacent to the car park). This is intended to form part of a new 'Cultural Quarter' for the town that includes the Museum and Library on St Peter's Hill and the 'Gravity Fields' festival, which also takes place on St Peter's Hill. Once again the impact of traffic on St Peter's Hill was very apparent with 5 lanes of traffic, but the Council are

able to close the road for the Gravity Fields festival, which suggests that a permanent reduction in traffic through the area could be attainable. The opportunity for an improved pedestrian link from St Peter's Hill to the new cinema site, via the existing Council offices, was also pointed out.

- 3.10 **The George Shopping Centre:** The walking tour ended at the George Shopping Centre, which was developed in the latter part of the 20th century and incorporates a grade II* listed former coaching inn. The centre is now suffering high levels of vacancy and the Panel noted closing down sales being advertised in two units. The Panel were advised that the centre has constantly struggled to find tenants for the units on the upper floor and the medium-term future for the centre may lie in a change away from retail to business units.

4 Panel Visit – Exploring the Challenges

- 4.1 Following an introduction by the Chief Executive the Panel was given a joint presentation from Steve Ingram (Strategic Director SKDC) and Paul Thomas (Executive Manager, Development and Growth SKDC) which outlined the issues facing Grantham and placed the town in the context of South Kesteven. The local economy is heavily reliant on small business, with 80% of business in the area employing less than 10 people. Typically these businesses are able to react more quickly to changes in the economy, and Grantham is already feeling the benefit of the economic upturn. The need to fund the Southern Relief Road in order to remove the A52 from passing through the town was set out in some detail, along with the proposal to build the southern urban extension of 4,000 dwellings in a location that has been supported through the Core Strategy for the District. This includes the opportunity for business development in association with the new junction that is to be constructed on the A1 (referred to as 'King 31'). The Council is keen to explore options as to how the uses on King 31 can best-support the town.
- 4.2 Removal of the A52 from the town would also alleviate the problem of 'bridge strikes' on the railway bridge immediately north of Grantham station. Currently this bridge receives an average of 24 strikes per annum, each of which results in significant costs and disruptions; though a new bridge taking the SRR over the railway is also a substantial component in the cost of the new road.
- 4.3 The Council's proposals for new housing allocations, which in addition to the southern urban extension includes a further 3,500 dwellings to be built at Poplar Farm to the northwest of the town, has been subject to a number of challenges from a local developer who is keen to promote an alternative site to the north of the town. This alternative site is in close proximity to Belton

Park (Grade I Registered Park and Garden) and planning appeals and court decisions have supported the notion that inappropriate development in this location would result in harm to the historic environment.

- 4.4 Part of the attraction of the town lies in the education provision, with the private school having a wide rural catchment. However a significant number of parents of these school children are not using other services within the town, although their cars undertaking the 'school run' contribute to the traffic congestion at peak times.
- 4.5 SKDC has commissioned a Capacity Study for Grantham jointly from AECOM (who will provide, amongst other technical competencies, the planning and environmental input) and Savills (who will act as commercial advisers), with the aim of identifying the boundaries for development of the town, and incorporating a proper understanding of the constraints such as topography and heritage (including Belton House and Park).
- 4.6 Grantham lies within a very large LEP that extends from the Humber to the edge of Peterborough and SKDC are exploring what options there might be for a local 'team' to focus on strategies for growth in a more localised area of southern Lincolnshire.
- 4.7 The Panel were interested to hear the County Council's views on Grantham's future from Richard Wills, Director of Environment, Economy and Communities at Lincolnshire County Council. Richard Wills outlined that he was more optimistic now than at any time over the last 15 years. When making large scale plans it is preferable to deal with only a few, larger, players and this is the case at Grantham. The County are keen to be partners in the process, but do not wish to be seen as 'big brother'.
- 4.8 The County has now confirmed that the funding package is in place to enable the Southern Relief Road to be built. The new road will bring benefits, but it will be important to make the southern urban extension highly accessible on foot, bike and by bus, together with gateways to control cars, in order that the benefits are retained over the longer term.
- 4.9 Richard Willis also felt that Grantham had sufficient mass to be able to accommodate the growth, but just because housing and employment are provided in parallel, this does not mean that people will necessarily live where they work. What more often influences where people live is the quality of school provision, since parents are reluctant to move children once they are in schooling. Some of the growth will come from retirees - since there is a clear trend of people selling in Essex and moving to Lincolnshire in order to release capital tied up in their homes.

5 Panel's Analysis

- 5.1 Traffic and traffic management:** From the walking tour it was clear to the Panel that traffic is strangling the town. This is not just the traffic on the A52 but elsewhere too; the High Street is not a place to linger. It is important for SKDC to work with the County Council to develop a traffic management masterplan for Grantham that can be implemented in phases. Commencement of traffic management cannot wait for the construction of the Southern Relief Road, but must commence as soon as possible, starting with the town centre. If some roads can be closed one day/week, the Panel could see no reason why these closures could not be extended to 5 days per week; SKDC and the County should be prepared to experiment and undertake a number of trials to help inform the final plan, such as for instance a pilot linked to the Gravity Fields Festival. Any traffic management proposals should be associated with radical improvements to the public realm, in order to maximise the attractiveness of the historic environment.
- 5.2 Parking:** The Panel noted two separate, but related, parking issues; town centre parking and commuter parking at the station. The provision and location of town centre parking needs to be considered as part of the traffic management strategy, while the demand for commuter car parking near the station appears to be driving land use in the area, and to the detriment of place making (the Panel were informed that 1% of the population of the area currently commute to London, though it was unclear how many live in the town and how many commute from nearby villages). The Panel noted that at Banbury, Chiltern Railways have recently a built multi-storey car park with direct access to their station, and while not everyone needs to go to London every day, a lot of business will wish to locate near stations that provide good access to London.
- 5.3 The Railway Station:** The station and its easy access to King's Cross is part of Grantham's USP and therefore Virgin Trains should be brought in to discussions on the town's future. The Panel considered the CPO project for the Station Approach to be on the right lines in attempting to create a more positive approach to the town from the station (and vice-versa). Achieving this goal, either through re-visiting the CPO project or by other means, should be a priority – thereby creating a seamless walk from the train to the town and from the town to King's Cross. The Panel also noted that a significant part of Grantham cannot easily access the station, since the recent housing to the west of the railway is only linked via a poor quality pedestrian underpass, which many would find potentially unsafe to use.

5.4 Town Centre Living: Associated with the Station and the town's link to King's Cross is the need for some well-designed town centre housing, located within walking distance of the station. This would help stimulate demand-led growth, driven by creating somewhere desirable to live, somewhere that was more than just affordable. During the walking tour the Panel noted the potential of the east side of Greyfriars as a site for town centre living, which might be modelled on the Mill gate development in Newark. The car park on the east side of Watergate also had the potential for town centre housing, though this would be a bit further from the station, whilst the establishment of a 'Minster Quarter' would result in a highly desirable location for town centre living. Ideally town centre housing should minimise the need for private cars.

5.5 Design: The Panel were concerned that a greater focus on design and place shaping did not feature on the visit agenda. While welcoming the Council's decision to take the lead on providing the new town centre cinema, a design and build solution was seen to represent something of a lost opportunity. Every generation should leave a contribution to the story of evolution of place; quality architecture that is not flashy, but really good 'backdrop' architecture. Unfortunately in Grantham, like many other market towns, the last 50 years have added little of real quality. And where there are no examples of good contemporary architecture there is a need to look at every application as an opportunity to add positively to the town.

5.6 Good architecture also requires a good urban design framework that builds on the historic grain of the town, and a vision, backed by a robust masterplan, is required to shape the future of Grantham's town centre. In order to achieve this, the Capacity Study (commissioned from AECOM) will need to be taken on to a further stage involving design and masterplanning, and this in turn will need to make full use of the commendable *Grantham Townscape Characterisation Assessment* that has already been completed. This further stage might also be informed by an elevational study of the town centre streets to help identify what should happen in the gap sites, or where there are negative buildings, outlining the scale and massing for infill structures (e.g. how to enclose the west side of the Market Square). Reintroducing lost townscape coherence by such means will be a key to reinforcing the identity of the proposed "quarters".

5.7 Other design opportunities include design competitions which could be used for key redevelopment sites in the town and to help shape the new southern urban extension.

5.8 Consideration should also be given to identifying suitable sites that are currently vacant or under-utilised for the creation of short-life 'pocket parks'. This work might be done in collaboration with the Woodland Trust (thereby

reinforcing their links with the town), and some of the parks might be retained over the longer term to create a network of green spaces and wildlife corridors.

5.9 Southern Urban Extension: Whilst the Panel accepted that the proposed southern urban extension might be needed in order to allow the removal of the A52 from the town, it should not be looked upon as a panacea for the problems that currently beset the town centre. It was pointed out to the Panel during the course of their visit that Grantham sits at the centre of a bowl, with land rising on all sides, and the site for the southern urban extension is no exception. Topography and distance will therefore make it difficult (if not impossible) to deliver this urban extension as a seamless adjunct to the town centre. It may be preferable to consider the southern urban extension as a place in its own right with its own clear identity, but also with an integral relationship to Grantham and the town centre, somewhat similar to the relationship that has been established between Dorchester and Poundbury. Achieving this will again require a clear vision and a robust masterplan that is capable of evolving in response to changing circumstances that arise during the course of the build-out. Key to its success will be the pedestrian, cycle and bus links from the southern urban extension to both the station and the town centre. Failure to get these right would risk losing the benefits of traffic reduction delivered by the Southern Relief Road as residents in the new urban extension will resort to their cars to access the town. The Panel also identified a real concern that, in the hands of volume house builders, the southern extension would become an 'anywhere-place'; an estate where people wanted to live only because they could get a competitively priced house and a mortgage.

5.10 A further concern of the Panel was that the growth of Grantham appeared to focus almost solely on the delivery of new housing, with little assurance that there will be a parallel provision of sufficient and appropriate local jobs. There is no certainty that new jobs will follow new housing and, while some expansion potential had been identified amongst local employers (especially those currently constrained by inappropriate sites) more needed to be done to ensure Grantham's growth will be truly sustainable. The Panel also saw a need for additional support for local employment to come from the tertiary education providers, helping to reinforce a distinctive local offer that might focus on engineering and food processing, sectors which are already well-established in the locality.

5.11 **Local Leadership:** The Panel was informed that there is no Town Council and, indeed, a referendum had rejected the idea of creating one. There is also no Town Centre Manager, and the Panel perceived an opportunity for strengthening local leadership needed to help shape the vision

for the future of the town. To fill this void the Panel recommended the creation of a wide ranging partnership. This might comprise representatives of local businesses, local landowners/estates, the National Trust, police, health services, education (primary, secondary and tertiary) and others, including Fr Stuart Craddock (the new Rector at St Wulfram's), who the Panel noted had skills and vision that might be helpful to the Town Team.

5.12 This might then be a suitable body to organise a series of design charettes, commissioning skilled facilitators to work with the local community, and thereby ensure community buy-in to the regeneration of their town centre.

5.13 **Partners:** It was clear to the Panel that in order to deliver a successful outcome at Grantham it will be necessary for SKDC to work closely with a range of partners. As noted above, these will include the County Council (in the resolution of traffic management), Network Rail and Virgin Trains (in works associated with the station) and the Town Team. The Council will also need to identify a range of local, smaller, developers to buy in to a vision. An alternative would be a single partner who understands how to break up a large scale redevelopment project – i.e. the market town equivalent of what the developer Argent has done at King's Cross. The Panel noted that the Buckminster Estate is here for the longer term and it will be important to continue to work with the estate, and also the Woodland Trust, to develop a unique vision for Grantham that will create a successful place for future generations. Identifying and developing this vision will be the key first step, and good developers will only be attracted to the town if there is a 'climate of comfort' that other developers of similar standing will also be attracted in.

5.14 **Transition Towns:** The successful transition of towns to vibrant and sustainable urban centres need not be only about growth and development. There are examples of towns that have successfully turned themselves around without resorting to growth and the Panel made reference to Belper in Derbyshire. Belper has worked successfully with the Transition Towns movement (www.transitionnetwork.org), to create a thriving food market that sells produce from within a 5 mile radius of the town, and this in turn enabled the town to be awarded 'High Street of the Year'. In parallel with this an annual arts festival attracts thousands of people to the town and last year the festival programme covered 294 events.

5.15 At Grantham this might involve developing a 'Cultural Quarter' (focussed on the cinema, museum and library, along with the Gravity Fields festival) and a 'Minster Quarter' that utilises the river corridor to establish links out into the countryside and in particular to Belton Park. Panel recognised that Grantham is, in effect, in competition with places such as Newark, Melton

Mowbray and Stamford, and it will only be able to hold its own if it delivers a unique sense of place that sets it apart.

6 Conclusions

6.1 The Panel recognised the enthusiasm and commitment that SKDC has for Grantham, but there needs to be a clear, strong and coherent vision for the town, one that will deliver a unique sense of place. Grantham is, indeed, on a cusp and to ensure it moves forward in the right direction will require careful planning, underpinned by well-considered masterplans for both the town centre and the southern urban extension. The role of good design in delivering good places cannot be over emphasised. Good design need not be expensive, but would ensure Grantham maintains for the future an identity as a special and distinctive place.

6.2 Recommendations:

- Traffic Management – The Panel saw at first hand that traffic is strangling the historic town centre and it is clear that a comprehensive traffic management scheme needs to be developed in conjunction with Lincolnshire County Council. The scheme needs to be capable of being delivered incrementally, commencing as soon as possible; it cannot wait on delivery of the Southern Relief Road – an early start is essential.
- In order to deliver successful place making, the District Council will need to be ready to grasp the opportunities that traffic management will provide to ‘stitch’ the townscape back together (most notably in the Market Place, and Watergate), through appropriate development and an improved public realm.
- The southern urban extension and the town centre are related but separate issues. Both require robust and excellent masterplans and quality design solutions. These masterplans will need to be sufficiently flexible to accommodate change during the life of the plans. Changing circumstances (such as an economic downturn suppressing the demand for new housing) may result in the build-out of the southern urban extension taking longer than currently planned.
- The town centre masterplan will need to identify a more focused geographic spread for retail premises in the town and identify appropriate new uses for existing peripheral retail premises.

- Due to topography and distance, the southern urban extension may need to be regarded as a place in its own right, though one that is easily accessed from both the town centre and the railway station.
- The Panel recognise the merit of undertaking the capacity study, but to be of real value it will require a design component that can inform both the vision and masterplan for the town centre, and build on the commendable *Grantham Townscape Character Assessment*.
- The town centre masterplan will need to include provision for new urban scale housing, an enhance station approach and car parking provision for the station.
- Grantham's connectivity, and in particular the accessibility to London by rail is key to the town's USP. It is therefore important to involve Virgin Trains and Network Rail in contributing to developing the vision for the town's future. The station needs to be central to the future of the town, and given an improved presence, including an enhanced station approach and improved linkages to the housing on the west side of the railway line.
- SKDC cannot do everything on their own and they will need to strengthen existing partnerships and build new partnerships with key players. These include the County Council, the Buckminster Estate, Network Rail and Virgin Trains, but will also need to include smaller scale local developers and developing a *Town Team* to ensure buy-in from the local community and capture the skills and enthusiasm of key individuals within it.
- Design excellence will be central to successful place making and the Council should give careful consideration to well-managed design/developer competitions for key sites in both the town centre and the southern urban extension.
- Consideration should be given to creating a 'Cultural Quarter' focused on the museum, library, new cinema and Gravity Fields Festival, and a 'Minster Quarter', with an improved landscaped setting for the church and enhanced links along the river corridor towards Belton Park.
- Views in and views out of town are important and must be understood and incorporated into the masterplan, along with both temporary and permanent pocket parks to create a network of green spaces and wildlife corridors.

- Great care will be required to ensure the new housing delivers a proper sense of place. Smaller, local developers are more likely to buy into a vision for the town and the southern urban extension, while with national volume house-builders there is a greater risk of an 'anywhere' solution.
- It is important to celebrate the inherent qualities of Grantham's heritage and to acknowledge and build on the work that has been undertaken to establish Grantham on the national stage as a truly important historic town.
- Ensure that all stakeholders subscribe to the sentiment: "Be proud of what we have and build on it."

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