

GFN PERSPECTIVE EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

GFN Chester

JULY 2021

2021

Executive Summary

2020 saw people and communities reconnecting with their neighbourhoods and cities. The way we worked, lived, and played became localised in an unprecedented manner.

Given these extraordinary circumstances, it was the ideal time for Chester and Cheshire West Council to commission a review and impact evaluation of the One City Plan via Good for Nothing Chester (GFN) and Ludicology.

Since the inception of the original One City Plan the economic and political landscapes have experienced a major shift. Sustainability, growing inequality, and lack of opportunity in Chester have become increasing priorities for city users.

The original One City Plan focussed on top level issues, with major stakeholders consulted. But this time, it was all about the people and what they need from their city - who owns the plan, who is accountable, and what should the plan contain?

City plans have historically been about bricks and mortar - focused on city design and the built environment. Yet the impact of Covid-19 will have a lasting effect on how our city operates, as will the increased focus on Net Zero targets by 2050. We also need to reflect on the impact and the transformative effect Covid-19 has had on Chester's users and communities, to inform any future iterations of the plan.

Now more than ever, we need a Council that will listen to the people and the experts across our city, taking on board what they want in order to create a truly participatory community for all Cestrians.

Approach

We devised four distinctive approaches that were adapted in response to the ongoing UK pandemic restrictions. These comprised an online survey, workshops and focus groups, a creative mapping exercise and organisational responses.

Participation included:

- 13 Zoom workshops and focus groups
- Calls with individual city-wide leaders
- 26 Organisational Responses completed
- 30 participants across the creative mapping task
- 1012 responses to the online survey

Participants ranged from 5 year-olds to over 75-year-olds. They came from across Chester, Cheshire, and beyond.

Many participants offered expertise and insights on topics from Chester's residential offer, to sustainability, inequalities in education and healthcare, the importance of play, and connecting people with places. They also highlighted frustrations relating to access and failures to meet the needs of all city users.

Participants recognised that Chester is a great place to live, work and play, but needs to do more if it is to thrive and innovate in the post-Covid world.

Everyone we spoke to expressed a need to protect what is already working and desire to make positive change now.

Themes

In setting out participants' vision for the future One City Plan the following major themes emerged:

Sustainability | Play | City experience | Residential offer |
Business-friendly

Within these themes, priorities and challenges were identified, including accessibility, inequality, health and wellbeing, safety, the local economy, and business opportunities. These need to be embraced and addressed in order for Chester to be an attractive city for current and future generations.

SUSTAINABILITY

Three pillars: social, economic,
environmental
Net Zero 2050

PLAY

Playing anywhere, anytime
An affective and effective
environment
A web of opportunities for play
'Safe enough' routes and ease of
access
Play is living

CITY EXPERIENCE

Cultural and heritage offer
Reimagining the retail offer
Accessibility
Travel and movement
Evening economy
Placemaking and serving all

RESIDENTIAL OFFER

Diversify city offering
Increasing housing stock
Community placemaking
Health, education and wellbeing

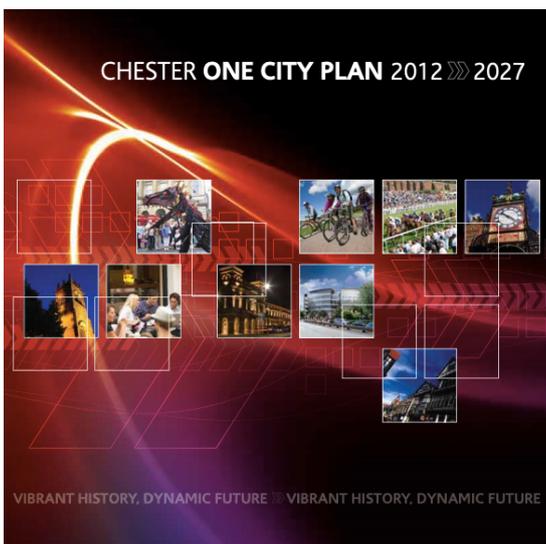
BUSINESS-FRIENDLY

A University city
Infrastructure
Remote working
Developing a local workforce
Innovation

OCP Critique

“In principle I agree...
but the language
could be punchier,
more inclusive and
less ‘local
government speak’.”

Christian Matheson,
MP for City of Chester,
Organisational Response



GFN Chester

It is clear the One City Plan plays an important part in achieving the needs of city users and driving Chester towards the future vision of the city.

Participants discussed at length the importance of the One City Plan being a living, breathing document, regularly reviewed, constantly evolving, and understood by everyone who cares about Chester. "It will grow and evolve with us – just as our city did in the past and will in the future." Professor Steven Broomhead, One City Plan Foreword, pg. 96, 2012.

Many participants felt the One City Plan's vision is too vague and could be about anywhere. It is more of a marketing statement than a tangible visualisation of what Chester wants to be in the future.

The refreshed One City Plan must be more clear and accessible, so that anyone can understand what the plan is aiming to achieve, and how it will support Chester in achieving its vision.

Researchers identified excellent examples of citizen-led city plans supporting local authorities in achieving measurable positive impact for all – including One City Plans for Bristol and New York.

Moving Forward

“The articulation and consistent communication of a vision will facilitate and enhance positive perceptions of Chester for residents, visitors and investors.”

CRAG, Organisational Response

The vision of any future city should be bold, unique, exciting, achievable and specific to the city itself. And every aim, objective and action in the One City Plan should support the city in achieving the vision. Decision-making should always be driven by whether each decision will help achieve the city’s vision.

For the One City Plan to have a lasting impact and legacy, participants emphasised the importance of it being not only visionary and meeting the needs of the city, but also owned, evaluated, and driven forwards by all. Those leading the drive should all be aligned in their understanding of the One City Plan and how it is to be delivered.

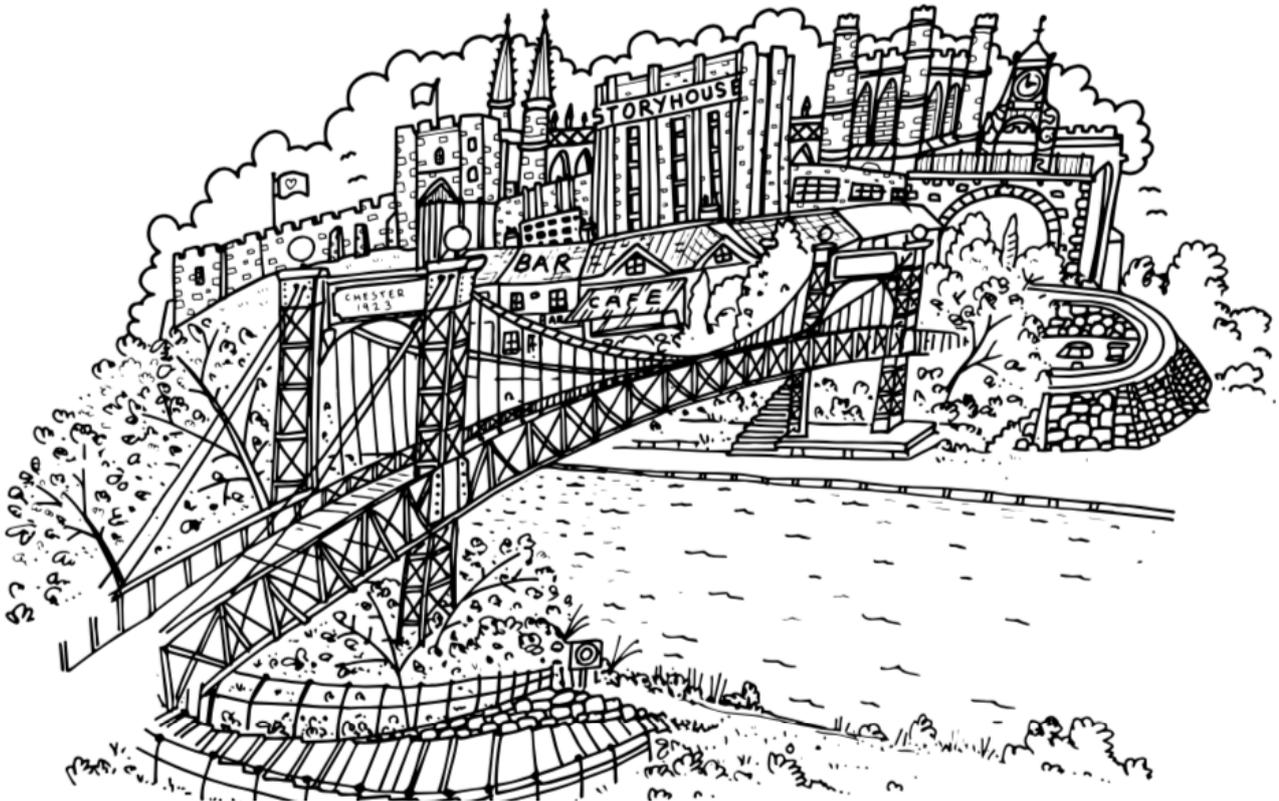
The plan should be mapped out to support Chester in attaining the Net Zero targets of 2050. It should contain specific actions for both the short and long-term, be visionary and responsive.

It should not be driven by bricks and mortar. It should not usurp existing policies that support the sense of identity and connection with the city. It should not be a bureaucratic barrier, or be owned solely by the council.



Recommendations

A series of recommendations have been developed that cover both the major themes that emerged throughout the consultation and the implementation of a future One City Plan, based on the researchers' findings collating feedback from participants across all approaches.



Recommendations - Sustainability

“It would be a very smart move for Chester to prioritise sustainability as this is only going to grow in the future”

Joe Manning,
LEP, Zoom call

Sustainability emerged as an overarching theme, and should permeate any future One City Plan.

Cheshire West and Chester Council should prioritise the three pillars of sustainability – social, economic and environmental – in all future decisions. This should include an urgent review of how current plans support the Council’s ability to meet Net Zero 2050.

It has been included in the strategic plans of all major city stakeholders, including the University, the Countess of Chester Hospital and Chester Cathedral.

Participants across all approaches, from community leaders to significant landowners and developers including the Grosvenor Estate, identified sustainability as a key priority.

It is vital that any future plan harnesses available expertise to develop tangible and actionable plans that examine the research to address all areas of sustainability for Chester citizens.

Researchers believe that by addressing sustainability, each of the emerging major themes can be tackled in meaningful and connected ways to reimagine Chester as a truly participatory city for all.



Recommendations - Major Themes

Play

Cheshire West and Chester Council must make a high-level and cross cutting commitment to the principle of play sufficiency, conducting a thorough assessment of children's opportunities for play across the city and using this evidence to protect and improve conditions for play throughout the public realm.

City Experience

Chester should develop 'The Chester Test' to define the guiding principles that enhance users' experience of the city. A user's experience of transport, parking and the city centre offering must be front and centre, alongside a thorough examination of Chester's unique assets to ensure these are accessible, safe and consider city user needs at different times of the day.

Business-friendly

Cheshire West and Chester Council should investigate the viability of creating a meaningful framework to support the development of business opportunities in Chester. The framework will allow individuals to access the opportunities that have been exemplified in our case studies. It should support businesses of all sizes – from SMEs to national chains – and embrace the sustainability agenda in the creation of green jobs. Achieving 'Action 6: Invest in the city's business infrastructure' is of paramount importance to supporting this framework.

Residential offer

Chester should develop a clear strategy to increase the number of city centre residents. This should include a review of current housing stock and redevelopment of existing sites to create a residential offer that is both sustainable and diverse. The process should consider the needs of all age groups; prioritising the provision of health, education and wellbeing. It should also encourage consultation and collaboration with citizens through community placemaking.

Accountability

A renewed commitment to ensuring the plan and actions are embedded across all areas of Council activity.

Recommendations - Accountability

“Start with a vision...
and then be very
specific about how
you get there.

Give some authority,
vision, adrenaline
and we'll do it! So...
who's leading the
charge?”

Tim Kenney, KenneyMoore
Properties,
Business Workshop

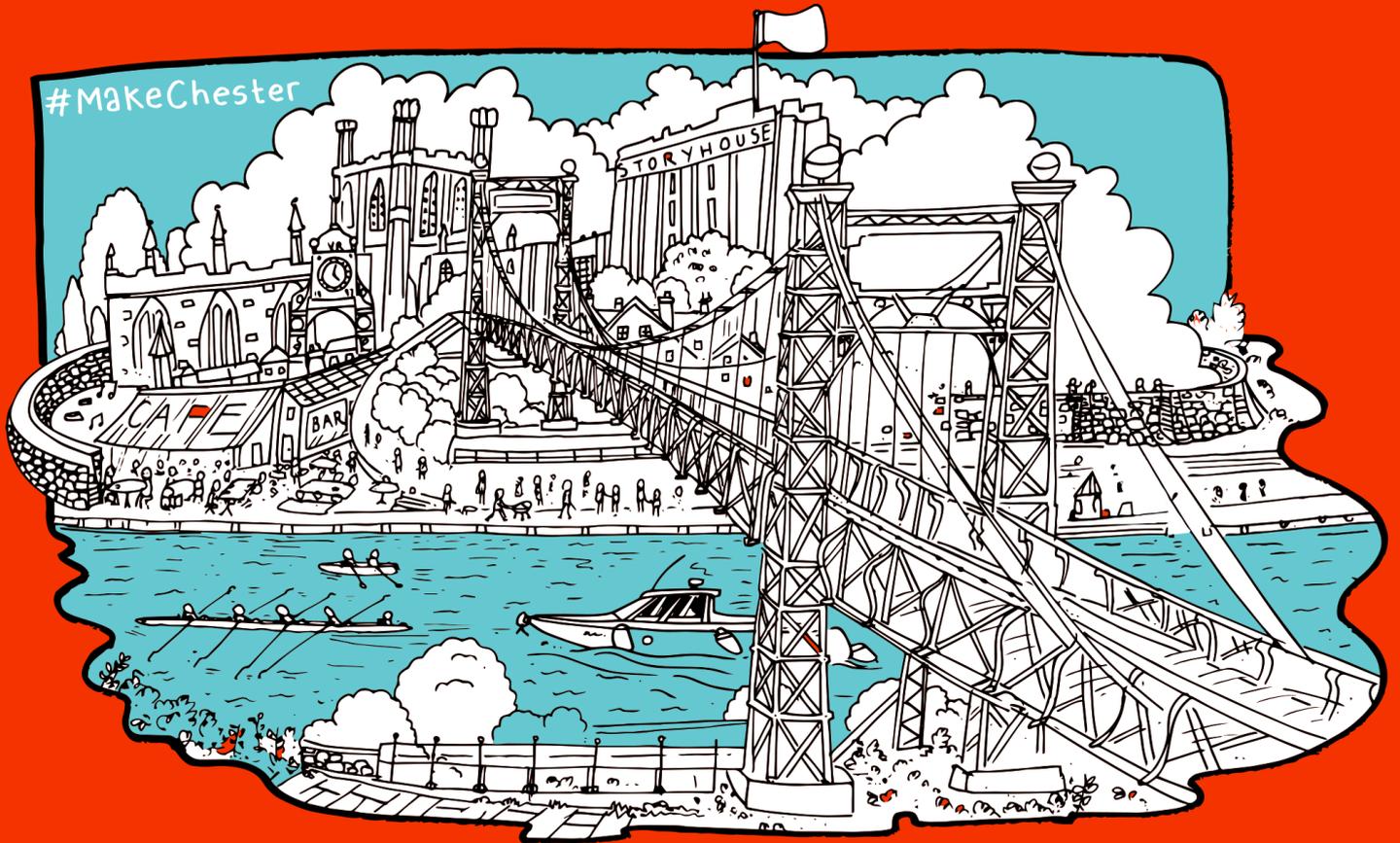
Accountability and awareness are
key to the success of the future
One City Plan.

The general sense from
participants was that although the
One City Plan is a well-regarded
and important plan, the
implementation of it is failing
because the accountability
structure within it is flawed.

“[The One City Plan has] only been
partially successful and all far too
slow, 'less talk & more action'
required. The One City Plan and its
objectives remain sound (with a
few amendments and updating)...
it's the delivery that has been the
problem” Chester Racecourse

The leadership team must drive
meaningful engagement between
the One City Plan and city users.
They must inspire both their teams,
and the people of Chester, to
affect positive change, through
robust reporting measures and
alignment with other change-
makers in Chester.

A refreshed commitment is
required regarding One City Plan
governance, ownership and
accountability.



GOOD FOR NOTHING

canteen
CREATIVE PRODUCTIONS



doodlePlanet