

VISION FOR CIRENCESTER 2020 BRIEFING PAPER

Ten years ago some 50 people worked with URBED to develop ideas for a Vision for Cirencester. The report focussed on three main themes: promotion, environment, and development, with proposals for action in the short, medium and longer terms. It drew on a range of studies to suggest that new traffic schemes to improve the gateways and make the centre feel more welcoming could lead on to studies to promote more housing and mixed uses in the town. This included the idea of a design competition for the Waterloo Car Park, the promotion of new visitor attractions, and Town Centre Management.

Since then, a great deal has happened generally to improve the town, and though the town still lacks some major stores, it is in a much stronger position to attract investment. In a guide published before the First World War, its appeal was *'the extraordinary mixture of the ancient and the modern, easily harmonised by dexterous arrangements'* and, to many people Cirencester, stands for what an old market town should be like. However with increasing competition, thanks to the car and the Internet, towns also have to look forward, and there are a number of opportunities the town could seize if there is a shared vision, backed up the will to make things happen.

This briefing paper is aimed at providing a background to the event on March 19th, and also includes:

- A programme for the event
- A plan identifying town centre area and key sites

In reviewing the state of the town, which will provide the starting point for the event there are on a number of strengths to build on:

Strengths and opportunities

1. **Character: a historic town, but meeting a range of contemporary needs** As a town with Roman roots, Cirencester starts with a great advantage. Its later industry is one of success in trade and handicraft. Along with other similar towns, like Beverley and Lewes, it now offers a very attractive (and increasingly expensive) place to live, making it harder and harder for local people to get on the housing ladder. Government policy, expressed in Planning Statements on both town centres and housing, is aimed at reinforcing the role of town centres and stopping sprawl. The big question for the vision is:

*What is the real niche or role for Cirencester as a 21st century
Market Town, and not just another English historic town?*

2. **Connectivity: a highly accessible place, where the car has been tamed**

Cirencester now has the advantages of being by-passed on two sides, and is within easy access of growing centres of employment, like Swindon. It also could benefit from improvements to the railway service as a result of dualing the line between Kemble and Swindon, and from new visitor attractions, such as the restoration of the old canal, which has already started in Stroud, and which could link through to the Cotswold Water Park once Sapperton Tunnel is reopened. But as towns grow, so too do the demands on space, and the most difficult challenge is how to deal with traffic and congestion. Many towns have built multi-storey car parks, sometimes concealing them behind residential blocks, as in Nottingham, for example. Some historic towns, like Bury St Edmunds and Shrewsbury, for example, have invested in giving primacy to pedestrians and have used Continental ideas, such as the Dutch concept of Shared Surfaces, to ‘tame traffic’ in the heart of the town, and residential areas. A new Transport and Movement Study has been commissioned, and a key question is:

*What should the relationship be between traffic and pedestrians
and cyclists in different parts of the centre, and how can car
parking best be fitted in?*

3. **Choice: something for everyone, with fascinating areas to live and browse in**

According to national studies, retail trade has become concentrated in the larger towns and out of town centres, and smaller towns have lost out. Cirencester is an exception, as it has absorbed both an edge of town Waitrose and an out of town Tescos while still maintaining a choice of food shops in town. Cirencester has actually seen a faster growth of retail employment than other towns in Gloucestershire, according to government statistics. This is because towns like Cirencester offer not just comparison and convenience but also leisure shopping. There is consequently developer interest in providing the larger retail units needed to attract national multiples. The challenge is how to fit new development into a historic town. There are some good examples of new yards which provide new homes, possibly with retail units below, for example in Chipping Camden or Lambs Yard in Farnham in Surrey. There are also possibilities for providing a wider choice of housing, for example through housing associations taking space for Living Over the Shop, or even co-ownership groups of Eco Housing or courtyard homes, as in some projects in neighbouring Stroud. A major issue in dealing with new development should therefore be:

*What design principles should govern the massing and look of
new developments in the town centre, and in particular the
potential for mixed uses schemes?*

4. **Commerce: providing space for enterprise and innovation** Cirencester has long been a place to visit, and back in 1938 a guide to Gloucestershire remarked that ‘One of

our most captivating towns, Cirencester has a chain of interest running through the centuries'. One of Cirencester's strengths is the opportunities it provides for working close to home, and it is going to be important to enable new enterprises to get started as well as space for knowledge based businesses to grow. As well as space for new shops, the secondary or fringe areas could also develop distinct roles, as for example Tetbury has done with antiques. There may be opportunities to make the market more of an attraction, as has been proposed, and to add to the numbers of tourist attractions, which was a strong theme of the previous event. One of the most successful new tourist attractions is the Cotswold Water Park only a few miles away, and the canal restoration could well widen the area's appeal. The expansion of town centre hotels is just one of the opportunities for creating new work and wealth, as are the town's colleges. A big question therefore is:

What kinds of businesses should the town be attracting, and what role should it be playing within the sub-region?

5. **Culture: engaging all in making the best better** The District Council is committed to making Cirencester *'one of the best small market towns in the UK'*. The town already has some notable cultural facilities, such as Brewery Arts, one of the first craft centres in the UK, and the superb museum, and appeals to creative and educated people. If the town is already doing reasonably well on many dimensions, then it is going to be vital to use inspiration from other comparable towns in the UK and abroad to improve the quality of the offer, and not just the quantity. As well as nearby examples like Cheltenham and Bath, which are known for their rich cultural offers, there are other models, such as Ludlow in the Marches, which has taken up the Italian concept of Slow Towns, and won an award from the Academy of Urbanism for being the best small town on the basis of the quality of life the town offers and its superb restaurants. However it is important that the town centre is seen as offering places for all groups. This includes not just residents or visitors, many of whom are elderly, but also college students and those working in businesses around the town. A major issue is therefore:

What can the town do to cater for young people, and appeal to the growing market for cultural tourism?

Aims of the event

The new vision for Cirencester has to meet a number of objectives if it is to be more than just another document that gathers dust. Specifically it has to:

- Raise aspirations without becoming unrealistic
- Provide leadership without being bland and creating another 'clone town'
- Tap private investment and produce benefits for the public realm without scaring off developers

- Fit within the new Local Development Framework so it has some policy weight, without conflicting with the Community Strategy.

We have therefore set three objectives for the event on March 19th:

1. Take stock of progress since *Vision for Cirencester* 1996
2. Identify the main opportunities for development over the next 15 years
3. Come up with some over-riding principles, which could add up to ‘charter’ that different stakeholders could sign up to, under the theme of *Towards a Vision for Cirencester Town Centre*.

Workshop Programme

16:00 – 19:00 Monday 19th March 2007
Bingham Gallery, 1 Dyer Street, Cirencester

- 16:00 **Welcome and introduction to the Vision process**
Councillor Mark Tufnell, Portfolio Holder Development Services
- Aims of this event
 - Other opportunities for engagement
 - Timescale
- 16:10 **The state of the town**
Jonathan Davis, Cirencester Chamber of Commerce
- Improving attractions
 - Changing competitors
 - Cirencester in context
- 16:25 **Opportunities for the future**
Andrea Pellegram, Director of Development Services, Cotswold District Council
- Studies under way
 - Challenges and opportunities
- 16:40 **Key issues for smaller towns in the 21st century**
Dr Nicholas Falk, Founder Director URBED
- Making going to town more fun
 - Taming the car
 - Creating work for all
 - Providing housing ladders
 - Avoiding ‘clone towns’
- 17:00 **Workshops**
Participants will work in small facilitated groups on different themes (full list below) to identify:
- a. Strengths and weaknesses
 - b. Easy wins
 - c. Flagship projects
 - d. Design principles

Workshop themes (convenors)

A. Character: Design and living in town (**Dan Judges**, Gloucestershire Market Town Forum)

B. Connectivity: Traffic and movement (**Richard Waters**, Hyder Consulting)

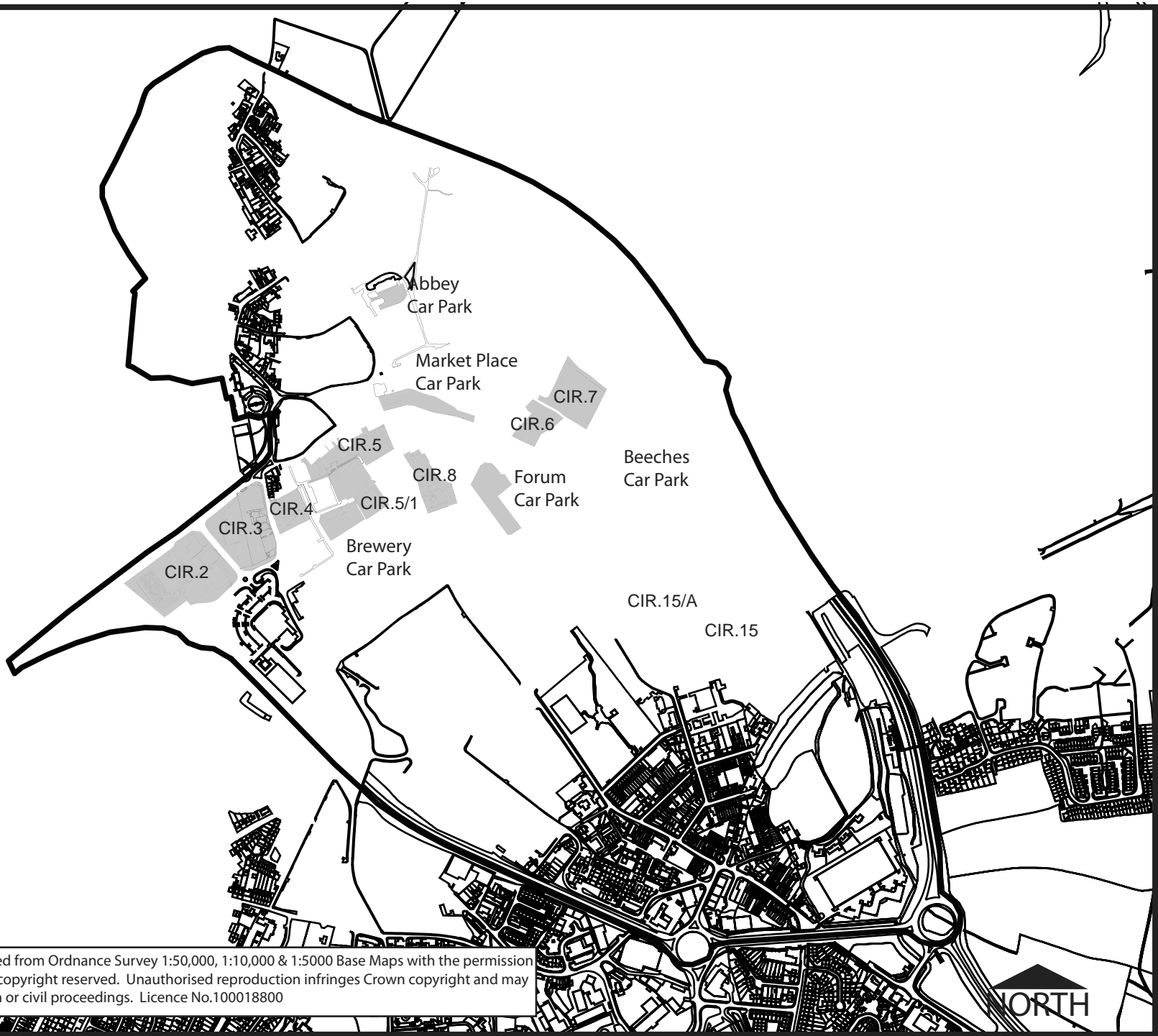
C. Commerce: Economy and jobs (**Catherine Farrell**, Gloucestershire First)

D. Choice: Shopping and leisure (**Madlen Bray**, GVA Grimley)

E. Culture: Youth, arts and tourism (**Nicholas Falk**, URBED)

18:30 **Feedback and summing up**
Nicholas Falk

19:00 **Close and light refreshments**



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