

CREWE

A Masterplan for the Town Centre

by URBED, TPM Landscape and Fifield Glyn



1914-1918



A report by URBED (Urbanism,
Environment and Design
together with Fifield Glyn and
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Crewe is a town of just over 60,000 people standing in the Cheshire plain. It grew up as a railway town and industrial centre and the population while comparable to the national average in terms of prosperity, is generally less affluent than other parts of Cheshire. Crewe's economy is however growing rapidly and it is identified as a town with potential for growth in the North West Regional Spatial Strategy. Because of this there is development interest in the town at the present time including the proposed shopping centre by Modus. The physical environment of the town centre is however currently poor, particularly around the periphery.

This report was commissioned to develop a masterplan to shape these development pressures in order to address the weaknesses of the town centre. The report draws on a baseline analysis of the town centre described in Parts 1 and 3 of this report and a consultation event in July 2007 described in Part 3. From this we draw a series of conclusions about the town centre in Part 4 as the basis for five regeneration themes in Part 5 and a masterplan for the town centre in Part 6.

The main areas of demand in the town centre are retailing and housing. The Cheshire Town Centre Study undertaken in 2007 suggests that there is additional retail demand beyond the Modus scheme and proposes the further expansion of the centre. The town is also seen as an affordable place to live within easy commuting distance of the Midlands and the North West making it a target for housing developers. There is less demand for office space in the town centre as opposed to edge of town locations such as the Crewe Business Park.

The urban design analysis shows that the quality of the centre is generally very poor. The core of good quality buildings and spaces along Market Street and Earle Street is very small and the centre is surrounded by a large 'shatter zone' of poor quality buildings and surface parking. The approaches to the town are poor and the impressions that it gives to people passing through by car or on the train are generally negative.

Crewe has excellent transport links by roads and rail. It owes its existence to the development of the station in the 1840s and while the railway works have largely gone, its attraction as a place to live and invest is due in large part to its unparalleled rail accessibility. However the six tracks that converge in Crewe are at-grade and so slice up the town cutting the town centre off from its surrounding neighbourhoods. The town also has excellent road links to the M6 but, because of this, suffers from high levels of through traffic and congestion as the rest of Cheshire also tries to get to the motorway. There are current proposals to redevelop the station, either on site or on a new site a mile to the south of the town. The latter would harm Crewe's prosperity and is not supported by this report. However it may be that forces beyond Crewe's control make the decision on the basis of the efficiency of the West Coast main line in which case it will be important to maintain rail links to the town centre.

We conclude that there is a mismatch between Crewe's economic performance and the quality of its town centre. The town is performing reasonably well with a healthy demand for retail and residential development which creates an opportunity to address the serious issues that it faces. The consultation results confirmed that Crewe's main challenges relate to its identity

and pride in the town. It is seen as the poor relation of the Cheshire towns, cheap and accessible but without the character and history of Nantwich or Middlesbrough. There was a real desire from the consultation for radical change and the current market interest makes this possible.

However change brings with it dangers. In Crewe's case uncoordinated development could exacerbate the current problems with the physical environment making it just another 'clone town' with the same chain retailers trading from characterless car parks and ring roads. If this were to happen the town would become increasingly congested and dominated by cars and would develop a reputation for being cheap, and down market rather than just affordable. An alternative future, supported through the consultation would see Crewe exploit the traditional historic character of the town centre by harnessing development pressures to repair the historic structure of the town centre. Crewe would continue to offer convenience and choice – so not competing head on with the likes of Nantwich – but would become more distinctive and pleasurable to use with a broader range of uses in the town centre. The report develops these ideas into five themes for the regeneration of the town centre:

- **Increasing Population:** The town centre is an under-exploited residential asset and should be seen as a growth area for housing. This will increase the number of people living within easy reach of the centre, increasing the potential number of customers for town centre businesses and leisure uses. An important element of this is 5,000 students of the Manchester Metropolitan University in the town who should be encouraged to live in the town centre.



■ **Attracting Wealth:** Crewe sits in rural Cheshire, a county with a high concentration of wealth and mobility. The aim of the regeneration strategy should be to attract some of this wealth into the town centre. It can do this by attracting people to live in the town, by bringing people in to shop and socialise in the town centre, and by attracting companies to set up or relocate to the town.

■ **Broadening Activities:** Crewe needs to broaden the attractions of its town centre by improving its shopping offer and diversifying into a range of leisure and cultural activities including independent retail, evening uses and restaurants.

■ **Environment:** The first three themes are dependent on the quality of the experience when visiting the town centre which at present with a few exceptions like Municipal Square is poor. There is a need to use the developments around the town centre as a catalyst for transforming the quality of the public spaces in the town centre based on a clear network and hierarchy of streets, public spaces and signage.

■ **Image:** The Crewe brand has never been very strong and has been damaged by unsympathetic development. There is a need to create and project a much more positive image of the town so that it is seen differently by potential shoppers, residents, businesses and investors. The most important opportunity in this respect is the station.

These five themes are developed into a vision for the town centre as a growing town building on its past to create a prosperous future. The vision sees a greater intensity and diversity of activity in the town centre to draw in people, wealth and creativity. This will create a unique retail and leisure environments enabling Crewe to develop a distinct identity as an attractive town - a place to go to, rather than a town to go through.

The report develops this vision into a masterplan for the town centre developed in 4 stages:

■ **Reconnection:** The first stage is the recreation of Crewe's historic street network. This includes the improvement of the arrival points over the railways and the reinstatement of the town's street grid incorporating the town centre ring road, West Street, Vernon Street and Oak Street. This will require careful design to ensure that the capacity of these routes is not compromised but will overcome the barriers created by the ring road, turning streets like West Street into a high street unifying the centre and the neighbourhoods to the north.

■ **Reconstruction:** The second stage of the masterplanning process has been to use the development opportunities in Crewe town centre to promote a series of infill developments. This will start with the Modus Development and will be followed by development opportunities on Mill Street, and in the future development opportunities along West Street and the reconfiguration or redevelopment of the Victoria. There is also an opportunity for redevelopment in the retail area to the south east of the town centre and for a new business development on Macon Way.

■ **Revitalisation** The third stage focuses not on the buildings but the life within them by developing a strong mix of uses that is able to create a 'rounded' town centre. This includes the redevelopment of just over 30,000m² of existing retailing and the development 38,000m² of new retail space. This is well within the figures in the Cheshire Retail Study. The plan also includes around 12 hectares of residential development with scope for up to 750 new homes creating a residential community of around 1,500. Office development is concentrated on Macon Way and as part of the Mill Street redevelopment providing around 22,000m²

of accommodation as demand permits.

■ **Regrowth:** The final stage of the masterplan relates to the space between the buildings, the streets and public spaces of the town. This includes the development of a hierarchy of streets plus a legibility and signage strategy. A public realm treatment is recommended based on Municipal Square that can over time be rolled out across the town centre as opportunities arise. We also suggest that there is an opportunity to develop a major gateway feature visible to train passengers and motorists

The masterplan that emerges from these phases includes 12 major projects that are described in the final part of the report together with action plans for the key development areas.

1. **West Street Neighbourhood:** A new mixed-use neighbourhood on either side of West Street.
2. **New Victoria:** A mixed-use leisure/retail development on the northern side of Victoria Street
3. **Market Centre:** A new Asda as part of the redevelopment of the Victoria Centre
4. **Delamere Place:** The Modus shopping centre redevelopment.
5. **Municipal Square:** The extension of the public space between the Library and the Courts.
6. **New Road:** The remodelled of Vernon Way.
7. **Christchurch:** A small residential scheme with active ground floor uses.
8. **High Street:** New night time destination with cafes, bars and restaurants.
9. **Macon Way:** New office development.
10. **Linear Park:** Linking the railway station to town
11. **Mill Street:** A mixed use-quarter with office and residential components
12. **Bridge:** Enhancements to the Earle Street Bridge

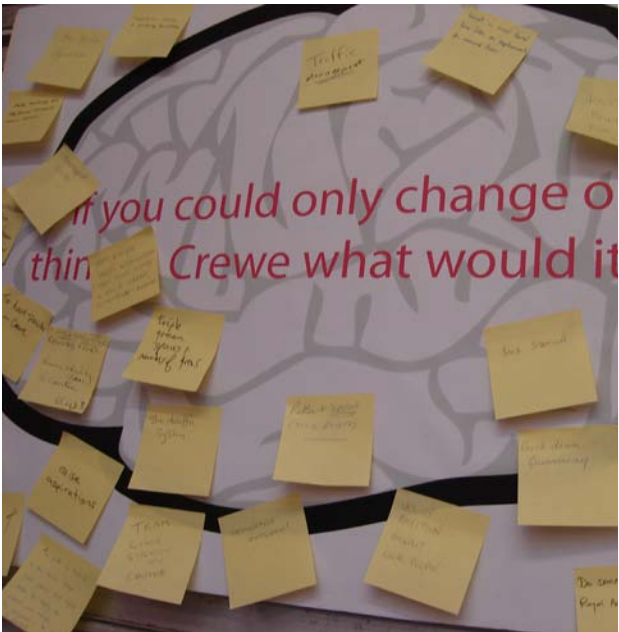
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In which we set
out the social,
economic and
broad physical
context of Crewe

BASELINE SUMMARY





PEOPLE

The population of Crewe is slightly less affluent than other parts of Cheshire but the prospects of local people are improving:

- The largest source of work for people in the town is health & social Work (21% of workers), followed by retailing (20.9%). Bentley are the larger industrial employer.
- House price to earnings ratio in the town is 7.6 - in other words house prices are 7.6 x average salaries. The national average for this figure is 3.5.
- At its peak unemployment in Crewe rose to 28% in, it has now fallen to 2% and Crewe is amongst the fastest growing economies in the UK.

- The average age of the population is 35, three years younger than the national average.

The Local Futures Group completed an Economic, Social and Environmental audit of Crewe and Nantwich in 2005. their key findings were:

- Crewe and Nantwich is ranked 200th out of 408 districts in the country for prosperity. In 2002-03 the average was £18,700 compared to a regional average of £19,164. Only Newcastle-under-Lyme and Stoke-on-Trent had lower average incomes.
- House prices were low by national standards, £150,912 compared to a UK average of £190,646.

- Crewe and Nantwich has a low proportion of employment in knowledge-driven sectors, ranking 288th out of 408 districts in the country.

- Crewe and Nantwich performs well in terms of skills and qualifications being ranked 114th out of 408 districts in the country.

- The average household size in Crewe and Nantwich is ranked 162nd out of 408 districts in the country (where 1st has the largest household size).





THE CREWE MARKET

Demand and Growth

Initial analysis of the commercial market in Crewe has highlighted the following headlines:

- Crewe and Nantwich had one of the highest rates of growth in the uptake of commercial and industrial floorspace, ranking 42nd out of 354 districts in England.
- It performs reasonably well in terms of business and enterprise, ranked 183rd out of 408 districts in the UK.
- It ranks as the 155th best performing district out of 354 in terms of the quality of its services, and the 312th nationally out of 408 for the quality of the local amenities.

Crewe is highlighted in the Regional Spatial Strategy for the North West as a gateway to the region, and a priority for regeneration and development. This means that there is the potential in policy terms to expand the town centre.

Retail

The greatest potential for expansion lies in the retail sector. Analysis by Fifield Glyn as part of this study shows that demand is still strong with 30 retailers with specific requirements for new shops units in Crewe and possibly as many as 70 who might also be interested. In addition to this retail demand, there are a number of leisure and restaurateurs looking to locate into Crewe. Much of this demand will be taken up by the new Modus development. The Cheshire Town Centre Study undertaken in 2007 suggests that there is limited additional retail demand beyond the Modus scheme. However as part of a regeneration-driven strategy there may be additional retail demand that could be tapped into to further develop Crewe as a sub-regional shopping centre.

Commercial

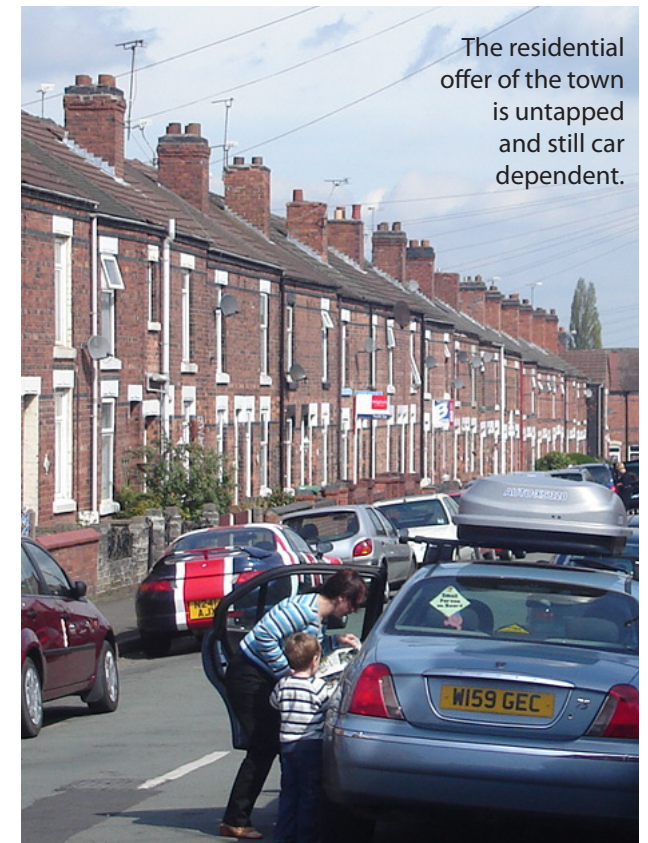
Despite positive growth figures for the borough as a whole the demand for office space in the town centre is weak. There is a limited supply of existing office accommodation and office occupiers are dominated by the public sector.

The centre struggles to compete with places like Hanley and Chester. Existing commercial space has been built on the edge of town or at Crewe Business Park, a mile to the east of the town centre. However our demand assessment suggests that there is potential to increase the stock of office accommodation on town centre sites with good highway access.

Residential

In recent years there has been a substantial increase in the amount of housing constructed close to the town centre. However many of the recent schemes have been scattered and small-scale so have failed to change the image of the centre. Market testing by Fifield Glyn suggests that there is significant untapped residential potential within Crewe town centre and a number of developers actively seeking sites. An increased residential population could have a positive effect on business and the image of the town centre fringes. A major attraction for residential developers is the commuting potential of the station. Developers are however concerned about the poor linkages between the town centre and Crewe Station.

Grand Junction Retail Park





TRANSPORT

Transport Links

Crewe has both benefited and suffered from its proximity to significant transport links. The town owes its importance to the development of the railway junction and station in the 1840's and it remains a vital rail link. It also sits at a strategic point on the road network, a gateway for much of Cheshire to the motorway system. These links bring potential customers to the town but they also create barriers to local movement and significant congestion.

The railway is a major node on the West Coast Main Line with connections to London, the Midlands, the Northwest, Wales and Scotland. The accessibility of Crewe by train is hugely greater than most towns of its size. The towns role will increase further when the upgrades to the West Coast Main Line are completed and the new timetable is introduced in December 2008. This will improve journey times with the introduction of the Class 390 Pendolino train service putting London within less than two hours.

As part of these proposals there are discussions about the redevelopment of Crewe Station on a site about a mile to the south of the town.

This would relieve congestion on the line and reduce journey times for Intercity Trains. The positive aspect of this is the potential for a new state of the art station that could project a more positive image for the town. This is particularly important to local employers such as Bentley. The danger is that it further disconnects the station from the town so that it fails to benefit from the accessibility that it provides.

The town is also very accessible by road. The M6 runs to the east of the town and it has good access to junctions 16 and 17. However its location means that much of the traffic from Cheshire heading to the motorway passes through the town. The A500 passes to the south of the town but a lot of traffic also uses the A534 Nantwich Rd route which forms part of the town centre's ring road. There are plans for a new link road from the A500 to the A534 that will take traffic to Junction 16 without passing through the town centre.

Before the 19th century Crewe was one of a number of villages in Cheshire, such as Winsford and Nantwich. It grew because of the railway rather than its natural accessibility. It could be argued that it still relies on a rural road network inherited from the pre-railway era that is more

suited to a Cheshire village than a large town. The grid of the town centre was laid out by the railway company. However as the town has expanded beyond this core it has been blocked by the six rail lines that radiate out from the station. These lines mostly run at-grade so that they have been difficult to bridge. This means that the town centre is cut off by railway lines, mostly at grade, to its east, south and partly to the west, which have sliced through the town to create significant barriers to movement as well as bottlenecks on the small number of bridges that cross the lines. This severance is a particular problem for pedestrians, cyclists and other vulnerable users wishing to travel to and from the town centre.

The gateway role of Crewe means that a lot of traffic in the town centre is passing through on its way to or from the motorway. This causes congestion with little benefit to the town and, because the traffic skirts around the edge of the town centre it also means that people passing through are left with a negative image of Crewe. These people instead could be a potential opportunity if they could be given a more positive image of the town and be persuaded to stop and spend time and money in the centre.



Nantwich Road has a large volume of traffic as do many other routes in and around the town centre.



URBAN FORM

Urban Form

Because of its history and the influence of the railway, Crewe has a patchy and uneven urban form. There is little left of the small town that preceded the arrival of the railways. The railway town was laid out as a grid but this has been distorted by the development of the shopping centres and other modern schemes.

The eastern part of the centre retains elements of the Victorian town, including the Town Hall and the buildings on the eastern side of Market Street. The central area around Market Place and Queensway is a redevelopment dating from the 1950s characterised by the clocktower. Beyond this very limited core, the centre is dominated by larger developments, often surrounded by surface parking. Together with the road and rail infrastructure this creates a 'shatter zone' of poor quality space around the town centre. It is this area that provides the first impression of the town for visitors and a barrier for people in the towns suburbs coming into the town centre. Beyond the shatter zone these surrounding areas are generally solid Victorian and Edwardian streets. The exception is the area to the south

leading to the station around Mill Street that is much more fragmented.

Scale:

Much of the town centre is 2 - 4 storeys in height and the town therefore has a human scale similar to nearby Cheshire market towns. Three massing zones can be identified:

Domestic Scale:

The residential streets around the edge of the town centre tend to contain buildings of an intimate scale, usually two stories in height. Architectural form is usually a variation on the classic terraced house, or 20th century infill of various forms but of similar scale.

Civic Scale:

The core of the town centre is mostly made up of buildings of two to four storeys but with generous floor to ceiling heights. They exhibit a wide variety of architectural styles from the mid 19th century onwards, including some good examples of Victorian architecture such as the Market Hall and the Lyceum Theatre.

Commercial-Industrial Scale:

Scattered around the core is an array of larger floor-plate buildings which give a different feel and scale. These are not necessarily taller, indeed some are only single storey sheds, but their impact on the streetscape is quite different. Most of the recent buildings retail and commercial fall into this category.

While Crewe largely managed to avoid high-rise development, there are a small number of taller structures in the town such as Rail House on Nantwich Road. Because of the domestic scale of the centre these are all the more prominent.

There are a number of smaller but important 'local landmarks', which have a particularly strong role in a street-scene such as forming the termination of a vista. These include the clock tower on Market Square and a number of church towers such as Christchurch.

Because the landscape of the town is flat there are no long views or vistas of the town on its approaches. However there is a good view over the town from the existing station although this is currently obscured by the bridge parapet.





PUBLIC REALM

The public realm of Crewe retains elements of a Cheshire Market Town but the quality of the space has been degraded in recent years.

Crewe stands within the Cheshire countryside of fields and hedgerows with occasional copses and small woodlands preventing long views. The town has a range of good quality green spaces that link to this surrounding countryside. These spaces are however poorly linked to the town centre.

The town centre retains part of the grid of streets and squares laid out by Joseph Locke for the railway. However the quality of the public realm of the town is patchy:

- The main squares are Municipal Square, Market Square and Victoria Square within the Victoria Centre. The first of these has been recently landscaped and provides a good gateway to the town and a setting for the adjacent civic buildings. The two

other squares are looking slightly tired but are likely to be improved as part of retail developments in the town.

- The core of the town centre is based on a series of pedestrianised streets that provide a pleasant shopping environment. These spaces link to the shopping centres that provide partially covered streetscape for shoppers. Overall the quality of these spaces is reasonable but does not compare particularly well with the quality of pedestrianised streets being achieved in other centres like Chester.
- These pedestrianised streets do not link particularly well to the surrounding areas. The grid breaks down on the periphery of the town centre and the barriers caused by the railway lines mean that the town centre lacks legibility (its not easy to find your way around). This is particularly true for people arriving by train.

- Many of the important routes into the town such as Vernon Way and Mill Street lack visual markers and fail to create gateways to the town centre.

The public realm around the town centre is dominated by surface parking and roads which create a poor quality environment for pedestrians and cyclists and cuts the centre off from the surrounding residential areas. This poor quality environment dominates the approaches and gateways to the centre. This is not helped by the retail units that turn their back on this area such as Asda, Wilkinsons and the land opposite Topps Tiles on Oak St.

A number of initiatives are proposed to improve the public realm of the periphery of the town. These include the introduction of a landmark building close to the Weston Rd/Macon Way roundabout as part of major improvements to Crewe Railway station and the roundabout itself.



Municipal Square.