

Urban Panel Review Paper

Great Yarmouth and Lowestoft

1. Great Yarmouth's long history has entailed periods of national significance, during which its herring wealth attracted the interest of the Exchequer and funded great periods of development in the middle ages, the seventeenth and the nineteenth centuries. It has also suffered very great setbacks, with its *raison d'être* in question and associated periods of under investment and decline.

Latterly it has suffered another of the fallow periods as the wealth from the sea has diminished and mass seaside tourism has undergone a national decline from which complete escape proved impossible. This period was preceded by the very significant damage inflicted in the second world war – damage to a town of such quality that, had it survived unscathed, would have a reputation as a complete architectural and historical gem and a stream of visitors to match.

Throughout that history there has run an undercurrent of competition with its near neighbour, Lowestoft.

2. Lowestoft's history is markedly different; its rise from relative obscurity to the point where it eclipsed Great Yarmouth as a herring port and presented it with very stiff competition on tourism was the result of a programme of imaginative entrepreneurial investment by one individual. So effective was Sir Morton Peto's

intervention that Lowestoft became an established major tourist venue with a modern efficient port and railway connections.

What the two towns have very much in common is the isolation of their easterly position. The water dominated east coast of East Anglia has proved a difficult place to modify for human use and, as a result, infrastructure has struggled to connect the towns of the far east coast to the more prosperous centre. The slow modification of the great estuary has continued since the Roman era and over time two major towns have grown up. They have remained, however, distant – with historically poor lines of communication to the rest of country - and that is still partly reflected in their current perception and condition.

3. It was, therefore, no surprise for members of the Urban Panel to discover that there are currently such signs of market failure afflicting the two towns that there is an agreed need for regeneration. What the Panel was impressed to learn was that the two communities had agreed that historical administrative boundaries should be crossed, traditional antipathy and competition be forgotten and the common regenerative cause be embodied in an urban regeneration company – 1st East.

The Panel's visit was hosted by both local authorities and by 1st East and, between them, their officers gave detailed presentations which made very clear to the Panel how the two Area Action Plans and the projects embodied within them aim to address the failings of the market. Visits to both towns which followed helped to point up the similarities (such as the use of rows and scores for access from street to quayside) and the differences which define the two towns.

4. In both places, Panel members saw much to impress. The very east coast location which presents economic challenges also creates a distinct land and seascape of which the two towns take benefit in different ways. Lowestoft's great terraces facing the sea have a grandeur and an absence of kiss-me quick attractions which distinguishes them very clearly from Great Yarmouth's seafront. Its old town is a modest and attractive asset which urgently needs to be re-connected to the activity of the town.

Great Yarmouth created its historic townscape by facing away from the sea and even now its quayside houses are of a quality easily to match that of any other English quay and of a nature which hints very strongly at the Dutch examples a mere hundred miles away. Its seafront development flourished for years and was graced with great late Victorian and Edwardian theatres and cinemas, whose current condition gives ground for concern but which may thrive once more.

5. A strong similarity is that the harbours of both towns are physically quite separate from the seafront. In Lowestoft the massive, purpose built harbour feels indeed like a separate place. In Great Yarmouth there survives, for now, the vitality of harbour side activity facing the quay on the river. But here too, as the new EastPort UK emerges from the North Sea two miles south of the town, a distant and distinct harbour is being created. .

Another similarity between the towns which emphasises the degree to which their easterly location makes them kindred was the fact that both were attacked in both world wars, presumably with the joint intention of closing two ports to British naval

activity and shipping and also of damaging a major supply of food and other resources to England. The degree and extent of the damage was undoubtedly exacerbated by post war clearance and redevelopment which may, however, be seen as offering opportunities for another generation of (more successful and constructive) change.

The one post war creation of a (relatively) tall building in Great Yarmouth – Haven Bridge House – emphasises that the classic Broads landscape sets off towns perfectly where they retain generally low rise and allow the very few tall buildings to function as landmarks in the same way the windmills and wind pumps do. So in Great Yarmouth, the St. Nicholas' Church (even without its spire), the Town Hall and Nelson's Pillar have a primal and beautiful presence on the big sky. The ridges on which Lowestoft rise from the sea make for quite different relationships, emphasised by the fact that the OrbisEnergy building and Gulliver are remarkable townscape additions rather than intrusions.

6. The Panel always learns much from informal discussions over dinner as well as from detailed questioning during the meetings on the two days. In this case members were particularly grateful to Philip Watkins for the time he gave to the meeting on the second day during which he and colleagues from Great Yarmouth Borough Council, Peter Hardy and Tim Howard, gave considerable substance to all the proposals which the Panel needed to understand before making comment. What became absolutely clear was that the enthusiasm, drive, perceptive analysis and dogged endurance, all of which are necessary requisites for such schemes, is in place. Would that that was enough, but it never is and the Panel's comments are intended to test proposals but always in the spirit of helpful, constructive criticism

In both the detailed examination of issues with the host authorities present and in subsequent private discussion, members found it helpful to brigade their comments under the headings which follow.

7. The **first** related set of issues concern the existence of **1st East**. The Panel has generally come to value special purpose vehicles and believes that the strengths of an Urban Regeneration Company (URC) are well suited to the circumstances of the two towns. Problems of the magnitude to be addressed here demand long programmes which must continue through several political cycles and prove durable at times of organisational change. The URC can offer such persistence. Similarly, the commitment of partners to the governance of the URC and the informed presence of Board members within their constituent bodies provides consistency.

In the specific case of 1st East, the Panel was impressed by the alliance across traditional geographical boundaries and by the commitment of Board members, signalled by their presence for the visit. Clearly, robustness at times of organisational change will be a real issue for 1st East as Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) takes effect (see paragraph 8 below). It is interesting to note, however, that both supporters and opponents of new unitary bodies pray the URC in support. On the one hand, 1stEast is seen as a precursor of a new unitary, on the other hand as proof that none is needed.

The panel was relieved to see a genuine willingness to prioritise and the ability to choose between the many potential projects. Particularly welcome was the focus on

removing generic obstacles to development. Since this was already bearing fruit – for example in the promising negotiations with the Environment Agency (EA) about development around Lake Lothing – it is clearly to be commended and reinforced. If the Panel had concerns, they were about the URC boundaries, which perversely militate against development in the towns themselves – not only in that investment in the towns is disallowed but also in that the extremely large areas of land identified for development might readily draw investment from the towns rather than attracting further investment to them. This difficulty was exacerbated by the fact that waterfront brownfield sites attract formulaic solutions from the standard tool boxes used by developers rather than the local and site specific solutions essential here.

8. The **second**, which is necessarily related, concerned the essentially local and democratic matter of **Local Government Reorganisation (LGR)**. It is not for the Panel to comment prescriptively or proscriptively on matters which are for discussion and determination within the democratic processes of local and central government. However, the Panel did think that it could reasonably highlight some matters which should be taken into account by eventual decision makers.

The Panel commented specifically on two such issues. The first was the obvious concern that essential energy and drive would be lost while existing authorities, officers and members were concentrating on the future of their organisations rather than on the future of the area. In practice the Panel saw many individuals who were to be admired for their willingness to keep going in spite of new difficulties. (For example, the Waveney Campus in Lowestoft might no longer come within the boundaries of Suffolk County, currently a prime project mover; this factor was potentially very damaging). The reorganisation process will now run its course and

all the Panel can do is urge the parties to agree the way ahead as expeditiously as possible.

The second was the one specific proposal about which the Panel felt it was appropriate to comment. The problems facing Lowestoft and Great Yarmouth are of such a scale that they would challenge many much bigger authorities. The Panel could not see any way in which the conflation of only Waveney and Great Yarmouth councils could help. Two small under-resourced bodies would be replaced with one new one, with proportionately the same problems and no more resources. For this reason, the Panel felt that there was a strong case for Government ensuring that the eventual resolution of the LGR process takes full account of the complexity and demanding nature of the issues facing the two easternmost parts of the new administration(s).

9. The **third** set of interrelated issues the Panel chose to address concerned **infrastructure**. Members expressed great relief that the two new bridges foreseen in the master plan are being planned on such different timescales. Notwithstanding the strength of either case, the achievement of two such major projects at the same time by the one organisation would be extremely demanding. In any case, the need for the bridge which will serve EastPortUK is pressing and immediate. Indeed it is hard to understand how the port project was committed to without the future of the bridge being already guaranteed.

Similarly – and perhaps more provocatively – the Panel pressed for compelling arguments for the continued survival of two ports. Members expected the strong

emotional responses which followed but insisted that attachment to a glorious past alone was not sufficient. After debate they accepted the argument that the two ports were going to have different characters and purposes. The Panel accepted this line, with the strong rider that the distinction needs to be very clear and the overlap minimised, in order that resources be not wasted by duplication and that old rivalries be not revived. Members accepted that emerging differences were encouraging and felt that as much as possible should be done to emphasise the divergent offer.

Lowestoft seemed well placed to concentrate on the leisure market allied to the Energy Park and a dynamic new relationship to the new North Sea economy. Great Yarmouth appeared to be building its future at EastPortUK by accommodating far larger vessels while maintaining vitality on the Yare riverfront through North Sea servicing.

10. The **fourth** set of comments has already been hinted at and they are about the **relationship, or lack of it, between the URC's master plan and the needs of the two towns** themselves. Great Yarmouth exemplifies eloquently the gulf that may exist between industriously and imaginatively developed conservation initiatives and deep rooted, successful comprehensive regeneration. The URC needs to be the agency which aims and manages to draw these two worlds together. So it was encouraging to hear that 1stEast is supporting the approach to Sea Change as part of the bid to DCMS and CABE for funding for the re-use of the former St. George's chapel and regeneration of the King's Street area. It was much less encouraging to note that the URC boundaries prevented investment by 1stEast in that project, or indeed any other within the historic town centre.

Similarly, the need for creative and thoughtful re-use of the empty town centre car parks still scarring central Yarmouth sixty five years after the war, combined with the necessary re-investment in the (often quite well conceived) post war housing nearby is obvious to any regeneration professional. What is much less clear is the logic of the URC boundaries which render it unable to play a part in this work.

The Panel made three specific comments. The first was that the current boundaries of the URC are an administrative proposal accepted by Government which should be reviewed. The original rationale of deliberately and exclusively concentrating on the brownfield waterfront sites was not one the Panel accepted. The second was that, unless and until the boundaries are loosened or occasionally crossed, the URC should actively seek S106 or similar links between developments in their areas and those parts of the two towns in particular need. Where no such cross subsidy is available, the URC should work with local authorities and funding bodies to create an environment which will foster contemporary development on sites both within and outside the URC boundaries. The third was that the very large supply of development land (more suited to a core city than to two relatively small towns and regrettably aligned north south when the reinforcement of east west links might be more productive) must be meted out with extreme care. The fact that beautiful properties, which would command a high premium in more fortunate towns and offer opportunities for accommodation and offices of the quality which would convince the higher skilled to reside in the towns, have been restored with grant aid and can still not achieve values that justify that restoration is startling proof that Great Yarmouth and Lowestoft do not lack investment opportunities, they lack investment. The Panel

urged the URC to establish a more robust connection between development within its boundaries and the economic health of the towns.

The Panel was taken with the frequency with which the historic qualities of the two towns were referenced in the vision of 1stEast. However, members felt that more work was required to make this commitment more than just warm words. In particular the Panel felt that there was still a long way to go on translating the master plan into detailed sub-area master plans which were subtle and responsive to place - specifically to the historic character of the two town centres. This would remain a difficult hurdle to clear so long as there was a lack of historic environment appraisals - a critical asset not presented to the Panel.

11. **Finally**, all of these points may be construed as having clear implications for various actual proposals and, although it is not the role of the Panel to advise at length on particulars, something which both CABE and EH do through statutory process, it felt that there was scope to comment briefly on the following:

a) The negotiations which were reported between 1stEast and the Environment Agency (EA) were, the Panel felt, of potentially national importance. The issues which EA are addressing are real and important but their forceful imposition of the principles set out in PPS 25 has resulted around the country in more angry and unproductive stand offs than productive negotiations. If the outcome at Lake Lothing proves to be as equitable as described, the Panel felt that two things followed. The first was commendation of all involved in those negotiations, the second was that the process and its outcome deserved wider promulgation.

b) Nothing exemplifies better the mismatch between the master plan and the theoretically valued historic qualities of the towns than the emerging plans for Breydon Reach. Haven Bridge House is one of very few skyline features in Great Yarmouth. Most are historic and play a part in the archetypal interplay between the big East Anglian sky, the flat land and the prominent towns. The church and Nelson's Pillar serve to point up the achievement of towns of comfortable scale and character within this remarkable landscape. Even those more recent features, such as the power station chimney and the occasional, impermanent off-shore rig, are thin and tall and, thus, less obtrusive. Haven Bridge House, on the other hand, is lumpen, misplaced and unfortunate. The Panel acknowledged that the proposal for this site is lower than Haven Bridge House but also felt that the scale relates more to the office block than to that of the rest of the town. It is for that reason that the Panel, making no apology for repetition, felt that the biggest specific challenge is going to be, on this site as elsewhere, scale. 1stEast is strongly urged to support the completion of all relevant characterisation and historic environment assessments, to ponder deeply on their implications and then to turn a questioning eye on the standard product which the development market brings. Only by being the most demanding and difficult of clients while, at the same time, creating imaginative new development solutions will more skyline disasters like the Breydon Reach proposals be avoided.

c) There are similar, if a little less prominent, issues in Lowestoft. There is a welcome and clear understanding that the byplay between the relatively low key historic town on the ridge and the very different port below is important and offers opportunities for enhancement. The relevance of the scores to this process has been highlighted not only by public art and other interpretative schemes but also in the stated intention to make more of the connections along the scores. However, schemes

which are indicated on the master plan seem to be placed directly across the scores. It is self evident that a route which descends from the high street, only to end in the blank elevation of a large modern industrial structure will become a quaint and irrelevant fossil. The Panel felt that a more rigorous analysis and set of strong proposals about how to use the scores is required.

d) In Lowestoft as in Great Yarmouth this, once again, pointed to a critical problem. Both towns have had the privilege of enlightened policies, associated with real investment, which has ensured that very many of the historic buildings at risk have been brought back into use despite testing economic circumstances. Both have also benefited from public art and public realm programmes which have achieved much. None of these alone can drive regeneration and it is critical that policies are developed to ensure the closest link between these programmes, the assets which they have retained and the wider aspirations of 1stEast

e) The qualities of the two towns are not widely known. Traditional visitors know some parts of the picture, but beyond that little. The Panel felt strongly that the quality of the two towns, their exciting relationship with sea, inland water and land and their distinct sense of place should be better captured and used as a core element of the brand.

f) Panel members were impressed by the alert will to remain involved in North Sea business as it gradually broadens in emphasis from the extraction of carbon fuels to the exploitation of wind, wave and tidal energy and endorsed efforts to ensure that these industries played their part in the economic durability of places too dependent, for too long, on seasonal tourist related work. They felt that there was the possibility that a creative relationship with the University of East Anglia, the region's lead on

environmental matters, could be developed and sustained, with working experimentation being based in the two towns.

g) Another case where scale threatened to damage the town in the name of economic revival was that of the casino. The case was not presented to the Panel in detail. Nevertheless, a major, blocky building near Nelson's Pillar could have exactly the same damaging impact as those proposed for Breydon Reach. The Panel welcomed the fact that other locations were under investigation and felt that one alternative proposal, that the casino should be located in the Town Hall, was worth exploration. Not only would the environs of Nelson's Pillar be relieved of more damaging development (after all it requires improvement not more of the same) but the casino would be in a building whose qualities would add to the experience and enjoyment of the clients, who would also spread their enjoyment and spending deeper into the town.

h) The Panel noted that resisting the initial stated demands of highly prized development partners is very difficult in towns where investment has been missing and sorely wanted for a long time. In the case of the two towns this problem is undoubtedly exacerbated by extremely low end development value, which makes it even harder to stick to demands for quality of development. Nevertheless, the Panel had no doubt that every occasion on which the battle for quality was won would greatly enhance the regeneration of the two towns, while every case where lower standards were accepted would damage it.

i) One investment opportunity facing both towns is the opportunity to improve the experience of arrival, particularly that at the train stations. As for Great Yarmouth, this merely needs to be addressed, whether by bringing rail lines across the Vauxhall Bridge or, at least, improving the station and its connections to town. At Lowestoft,

the Panel remained to be convinced that the scheme to foreshorten the railway track and provide a new retail venue would much enhance arrival. Members believed that more thought about the arrival experience and the connection between this site and the bottom of the High Street was still required.

Summary:

The Urban Panel:

- a) **strongly endorsed the imaginative decision of all the partners to establish a URC for Great Yarmouth and Lowestoft and wished 1stEast well:**
- b) **noted that Local Government Reorganisation was bound to have an impact and urged rapid and professional resolution with the minimum loss of impetus:**
- c) **felt debarred from expressing a view about the outcome of that democratic process but did feel able to comment that a “Yartoft” solution would bring none of the obviously necessary new resources to bear on the two towns:**
- d) **considered the two towns to have very strong character, high quality existing environment and a good co-operation between communities (this latter to be particularly commended because it resulted from the burying of historic hatchets);**
- e) **felt that 1stEast’s broad master plan had much substance which the Panel endorsed and noted that the ability of the URC to make clear decisions about priority was important and welcome:**

- f) welcomed the decision to pace the programme of major infrastructure steadily and noted that this use of the long time scale available to them was a typical benefit of single purpose vehicles;**
- g) nevertheless felt that the appropriate degree of connection between the overarching plans and detailed sub area master plans, as well as between those plans and a deeply integrated understanding of the historic environment, were yet to be made;**
- h) found the rigid adherence to the current boundaries of the URC to be perverse, since it inhibited investment in many of those areas in most need;**
- i) thought those boundary constraints should be overcome, either by reassessment or by imaginative cross-subsidy;**
- j) considered the ability to bring investment into the heart of the two towns to be a key need, without which the excellent achievements of traditional conservation policies would be left high and dry; and**
- k) sympathised with the difficulty facing all parties arising from the unsuitability of many standard development models, but felt that eventual success would derive precisely from challenging those models – and noted that Breydon Reach and the casino in Great Yarmouth and large development at the base of the scores in Lowestoft were critical cases in point.**