

# Anglia Square – A vision for the future

*Submission to Anglia Square consultation by Cllr Simeon Jackson 12/12/2016*

## Executive Summary

This report responds to the questions outlined in the Anglia Square: A vision for the future consultation as well as adding further backgrounds and comments where applicable. A number of new considerations are included above and beyond what has been identified by the developer:

- The opportunity to improve the setting of the St Augustines area to the West of the site by protecting views across the site, but also views from within the site looking out, largely by constraining building heights, and sensitive design.
- The prioritisation of houses for social rent.
- To consider the needs of disabled users of the site and the neighbouring area, particularly the visually impaired.

I also recommend reinforcing particular aspects of considerations that were already identified by the developer. My report principally highlights:

- The need for the retail offer to complement and enhance the offering of Magdalen Street and St Augustines street rather than compete, and to retain some of the low-cost retail provision that serves members of the local community.
- The desire for a segregated North-South cycle route (i.e. not shared space) to provide a route that cyclists really want to use and to avoid cyclists coming into conflict with pedestrians.
- The likelihood of development having a detrimental impact on traffic flows and air pollution, and reducing this by incorporating car-free residential provision, and designing to encourage the bulk of visitors to come by foot, cycle, or public transport.
- Including substantial soft landscaping within the scheme, including trees within any new public square, and taking opportunities to enhance biodiversity on site.

## The Opportunities for Anglia Square

The Anglia Square developers have identified a number of opportunities within their proposals. I have no objection to any of the opportunities identified. In particular, the opportunity to redevelop the existing open car parks (opportunity 5) comes with an additional opportunity:

Improve the setting of St Augustines Church, nearby listed buildings and the whole of the Northern City Character area of the conservation area by reflecting the townscape characteristics of the Northern City Character area in new development on Pitt Street and New Botolph Street.

I also very much welcome the opportunity to enhance North-South pedestrian and cycle links through the site, but want to stress that such benefits will only be realised if the scheme avoids bringing cyclists and pedestrians into conflict with each other and creates a route that cyclists really want to use as a much more convenient and logical route than using pavements as many do at present (whether or not they are designated as shared use paths). I shall cover this in more detail under the question on connectivity below.

## Priorities for Anglia Square

The Anglia Square consultation lists a number of priorities and asks respondents to choose all that apply. I therefore choose the following priorities:

- Create clear through routes for pedestrians and cyclists to connect to the surroundings
- Create a greener area with generous landscaping
- Remove all of the current surface car parking
- Create public squares and spaces that are attractive and useable
- Keep the amount of ground level retail/leisure commercial floorspace about the same as now
- Provide a substantial number of new homes within the site, over commercial uses

It is unclear whether the last of these priorities means prioritising homes higher than commercial uses, or that the homes will be physically on top of commercial uses. I will therefore clarify that I think that the majority of the homes within the site will be flats above retail commercial uses, and that I would only anticipate a small amount of other commercial uses (i.e. offices) – just enough to ensure that there is vibrant community of workers who will use the facilities of Anglia Square during lunch breaks.

I would like to add the following priority:

- Provide a significant number of houses for social rent to help satisfy Norwich's affordable housing need

The site must include no less than 33% affordable housing, in line with the city council's Affordable Housing SPD. This is essential, not only to ensure that this site provides a good amount of affordable housing, but also to ensure that it houses a diverse community of people, and does not become an exclusive development only for those who can afford to live there.

## Improving shopping, leisure and other facilities

**Cinema and leisure:** I don't want to say definitively one way or the other whether a new cinema is a good idea for the redevelopment of this site, and think the developers ought to do a thorough analysis of demand before going forward.

One view amongst the local community is that the Hollywood Cinema provides a valuable low-cost family cinema that is not available elsewhere in the city. This being the case, a *new* cinema, which is likely to be much higher priced, would not be serving this need. However, the only realistic way of retaining this low-cost provision and redevelop the site would be not to demolish the existing cinema, but this is likely not to be practical to achieve the other benefits of the redevelopment of the site.

Whether a new cinema at this site is desirable would be dependent on what type of cinema it is, and the level of demand. Cinema City already provides for art house as well as mainstream cinema demand for the North City; and Vue, especially after the refurbishment of this part of the Castle Mall, has latent capacity to pick up demand for mainstream and family cinema provision. This then means that a cinema at Anglia Square would need a different unique selling point to attract enough customers to be viable. This could be by it being an IMAX, and therefore having a much larger catchment area for a more niche market of films. However, this may cause traffic to worsen as it becomes a significant destination for the wide catchment area. Or its unique selling point could be based on its location only, and therefore it would need to be a cinema showing a wide range of films for a very varied local demographic.

Whichever way, a destination leisure offer needs to be provided at Anglia Square to establish an early evening vitality that is currently not present there. Although restaurants and cafes could contribute to this, there needs to be a focal attraction that makes this a strong competitor to other similar areas of the city. Some ideas I can think of as potential destinations here are: a swimming pool, sports halls, a dance hall (for dance classes, social dances and dance performances – not a nightclub!), board-gaming centre (like Athena Games), a gym and a children's centre/play venue. Some people have suggested a concert hall for the site, but I fear that this would be difficult to service, and would be seen as gentrification of the area.

**Retail:** Developing on priority 5 above, I think there is a risk of saturating this area with more retail space than the local area can support. The current retail offer includes a number of very large stores, many of which sell very similar goods to each other. Therefore, in terms of total retail floorspace, the level of provision should be similar to it is now, but this would be best spread over a greater number of smaller units, leading to a more diverse and vibrant centre. I feel that too much of an increase in retail provision here may lead to too much competition with the historic shopping streets of Magdalen Street and St Augustines, which need complementary retail offers, not competition.

The Anglia Square local shopping centre is an important resource for local people, who rely on the low-cost provision at this location. They want to be reassured that the new shopping centre will not be reserved for high-end retailers, pushing out the needs of local people for low-cost goods and services.

There is desire for a small-scale convenience store, such as a co-op, within the square.

**Services:** Some people have raised the concern that such an increase in population at this location will put pressure on local services, such as health, schools, and community buildings etc. We would therefore like to

be reassured that this has been assessed, and that such capacity exists in the local area. If it doesn't, then this needs to ideally be provided on site.

A shopping area of this size should have toilets and other facilities for public use, particularly for the benefit of elderly residents, some of whom see this as being a current weakness of Anglia Square as a shopping centre. Depending on the method of management, this need not necessarily be a public toilet independently of shops, but shops and cafes allowing use of their facilities for public use, not just for customers. This ought to include disabled access toilets and baby changing facilities.

## Priorities for improving connectivity

There are two major routes across Anglia Square for pedestrians, North-South between New Botolph St and St Georges Street, and East-West between St Augustine's Street and Magdalen Street. There are also people who travel from the North to Magdalen Street, and from St George's Street towards St Augustines Street.

In terms of cycling, the main route that needs to be served is North-South, along the route of the Yellow pedalway. However it must be acknowledged that cyclists use the most logical route from their location to their destination, whether or not it is a designated cycle route (or even legal). Therefore, consideration should be given for cyclists coming up Magdalen Street who wish to get onto St Augustines Street, for example.

I consider that the cycle improvements considerations are:

- Any cycle route through Anglia Square needs to be something that cyclists want to use, indeed ideally should be the most logical route for anyone cycling between the city centre and the north of the city.
- Shared use footpaths are NOT ideal as they bring cycles into conflict with pedestrians, particularly vulnerable pedestrians such as children and the visually impaired. It would be best if the cycle route North-South is segregated from pedestrian paths for as much of the cycle path as possible. This could be by defining it as an access road with a tarmac surface and an informal pedestrian crossing where it crosses the East-West pedestrian route. To be distinguishable to the visually impaired, it should also have a strong kerb line.
- Access onto and off the cycle path to key other routes or destinations needs to be considered, for those who are coming from, or going to, locations off the cycle network.
- Signage should be provided to promote the cycle route at locations where cyclists may be tempted to cycle illegally on footpaths (e.g. top of St Augustines Street). Although this may be outside of the Anglia Square area, signage would promote traffic towards Anglia Square, and therefore should be considered as something Anglia Square ought to provide as part of developer obligations.

Other access issues are:

- Good pedestrian access between Magdalen Street and the new square is very important, particularly for bus users. Many of these users will be elderly, and therefore may regret moving the "centre" of Anglia Square away from the bus hub.
- The design must consider the needs of the disabled within the design, particularly the blind, who may want a shopping precinct that they can access independently from the NNAB centre and its accommodation which is immediately to the North of Anglia Square.
- With vehicular access to the car park being taken off Edward Street, particular attention needs to be paid to the impact that this will have on traffic flows on Edward Street, Pitt Street and New Botolph Street, and the air pollution risk this could pose. I therefore advocate car-free development as much as possible,

and would encourage the catchment area of the new shopping and leisure area to be such that most of its users will come by public transport, cycle, or on foot.

## The features of a new public space

The public square must be a practical public space that can be used for cultural events and leisure, and not a frequently dead space as the current Anglia Square has regrettably become. This means that the square should not be one open expanse, but nor should it be so broken up as to be unusable.

The landscaping should develop from the context, but consideration should be made to opportunities such as space for outside dining, an “amphitheatre” type space for performance, stalls, and an open space for public dancing or entertainment. This may mean that this area could start to perform a role as a cultural destination during the Norfolk and Norwich Festival and the like.

The development must take opportunities to incorporate planting into the scheme, particularly including a few large trees in the public square(s), and other soft landscaping.

## Key view points and design

The character of St Augustines as a “village within the city” must be retained. It is therefore inappropriate to have tall buildings along the frontage of Pitt Street. Equally, the view out of the site in this direction must also appreciate the feel of the area, and welcome people up the historic St Augustines Street, rather than turn its back to it.

In addition to views towards the site, the design should also respect the need for positive views out of the site from the public realm.

The character of Magdalen Street as a multicultural and diverse shopping street must be retained. Opportunities to enhance the area under the flyover should be taken (this is not Anglia Square land, but its relationship with Anglia Square could be enhanced through landscaping improvements and building massing).

I have no objections to the site including tall buildings. There is a precedent set on the site through the existing tall buildings which are to be demolished, and there is also an argument that having a high-density scheme, bringing in more residents will make the area feel more vibrant, and provide natural overlooking security to the area. However, there is a balance to be struck between achieving a high-density, vibrant development, and impinging on the character of the area. Views across the site from both short and long distance should be considered, so as to ensure that key views of prominent landmarks are retained and enhanced, and that buildings are not “fighting” with existing buildings, particularly any of heritage value (The most obvious to me nearby being the mediaeval alms houses at Gildencroft, St Augustines Church, and on the other side, St Saviours Church and neighbouring buildings.)

The entrance from Magdalen Street into the development could be enhanced within a new development by setting the building line back from the road (i.e. widening the public realm opposite Roy’s) so that the development is more open to the north part of Magdalen Street, an area which is currently slightly cut off as a result of narrow pavements and poor access from the bus stops at the flyover.

Anglia Square was, in its time, at the cutting edge of architectural form. But it is clear that taking this approach at the time has meant that the area now looks dated, and suffers from being inflexible, of poor quality, and difficult to adapt. The new design should therefore not fall into the same trap, and risk becoming a run-down area in another twenty years time. The design must therefore be flexible and adaptable to meet the changing needs of the community.

## Phasing of development

The phasing set out by the developer makes sense – if the surface car parks can't be developed until a replacement multi-story car park is built to provide for the parking provision, then that must come first. However, it is important that this is seen as an enablement of the development of Phase 2, and not as a potential end of development, should the rest of the site become unviable. I would therefore expect that the cessation of use of the surface car parks upon the opening of the multi-story car park should be a condition of planning permission. It may also be appropriate that the demolition of Sovereign House should be a condition of Phase 1 of the development, to ensure that the development can continue.

In general, I would like to be reassured that the development will not create long and drawn-out inconvenience for existing users and neighbours, and therefore would advocate any phasing scheme that will reduce the chance for disruption.

## About the author

This submission is written by Councillor Simeon Jackson. Councillor Jackson has been a Green Party councillor for Mancroft Ward on Norwich City Council since 2013, and is currently the Green Party city council group spokesperson for planning and regeneration issues, informed by his degree in Architectural Engineering and experience as an architectural professional.

Simeon Jackson also lives near Anglia Square, and has an in-depth knowledge of Anglia Square and the surrounding area as a resident, and as an active councillor and community campaigner.

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