

Canterbury City Council Short Topic Scrutiny Review



Westgate Towers Final Report

April 2007

Introduction

The Scrutiny Management and Review Sub-Committee approved a short topic review into the Westgate Towers on 28th September 2006. The review panel consisted of:

- Cllr Avery – Chairman
- Cllr Ashmore
- Cllr Mrs Law
- Cllr Pepper

A small team of officers supported the review and other council officers gave their time as witnesses and provided data for the review.

As a short topic review, the Member panel was tasked with holding a series of meetings to investigate the topic, make initial recommendations and indicate where further work could be done. The terms of reference for the review are set out in the review scope at Appendix A.

The review concern was: That the Westgate Towers and surrounding area is underutilised, and their visitor potential is not fulfilled. The panel was tasked with examining the viability of utilising and protecting the Westgate Towers; its adjoining buildings; traffic flow and preservation of the area.

As a short topic review dealing with complex issues, some of which require cooperation with partner organisations, the findings and resulting recommendations will point the way to more detailed work, possibly through a further in-depth review or via existing mechanisms such as specialist officer and member groups.

The panel would like to thank the witnesses for their cooperation and insights which have ensured the review has been constructive and informative.

A very brief history of the Westgate Towers

One of Canterbury's iconic landmarks, Westgate is the largest surviving city gate in England. Built from Kentish ragstone by Henry Yevele the architect of the Cathedral nave, between 1377 and 1381. Commissioned by the Archbishop Sudbury, its twin drum towers are 60 feet high, and even now is just able to accommodate a double decker bus through it's gates¹. A wooden door, a portcullis and a drawbridge originally protected the entrance.

¹ This quirk of history could be one of the reasons why the West Gate may have remained intact whilst the other gates and sections of the city wall have disappeared, in some instances to accommodate traffic flow.

From the 15th century the Westgate became the City prison. The guardrooms were lined with timbering. The Westgate was the doorstep to the gallows for many, or the prelude to the stake in the reign of Queen Mary.

The Westgate ceased to be a prison back in the 19th century, and it became a depository for the city archives. The Westgate Towers were opened as a branch museum in 1906.

It is worth noting that as part of the City Wall and defences, there were originally seven gates into the City; Northgate, Queningate, Burgate, The Riding Gate, Worthgate, London Gate and Westgate. The Westgate is the last gate that is still in use today.

The Towers are designated as a scheduled ancient monument, meaning that the council has a duty of care to maintain the Towers. The scheduling of a monument means that permission is required for works affecting that monument. The Secretary of State in consultation with English Heritage, assesses each case individually to ensure that damage to protected sites is kept to a minimum.

The Towers are currently used as a museum that is open to the public all year Monday – Saturday, 11.00 - 12.30 and from 13.30 until 15.30 In the summer months the museum is also open on Sunday afternoons. Current admission charges are: Adults £1.20, Concessions £0.70, Family £2.80

Conduct of the Review

The panel decided to deal with the issue in three distinct meetings, the first examining the use of the Towers as an attraction, the second looking at the issue of transport, and the third a meeting with key stakeholders to gather their views.

Meeting 1 - Museum

Marco Keir, Assistant Head of Service (Museums and Communications) and Ken Reddie (Curator Museums and Galleries) gave a presentation to the panel on the past, present and future plans for the Westgate as an attraction.

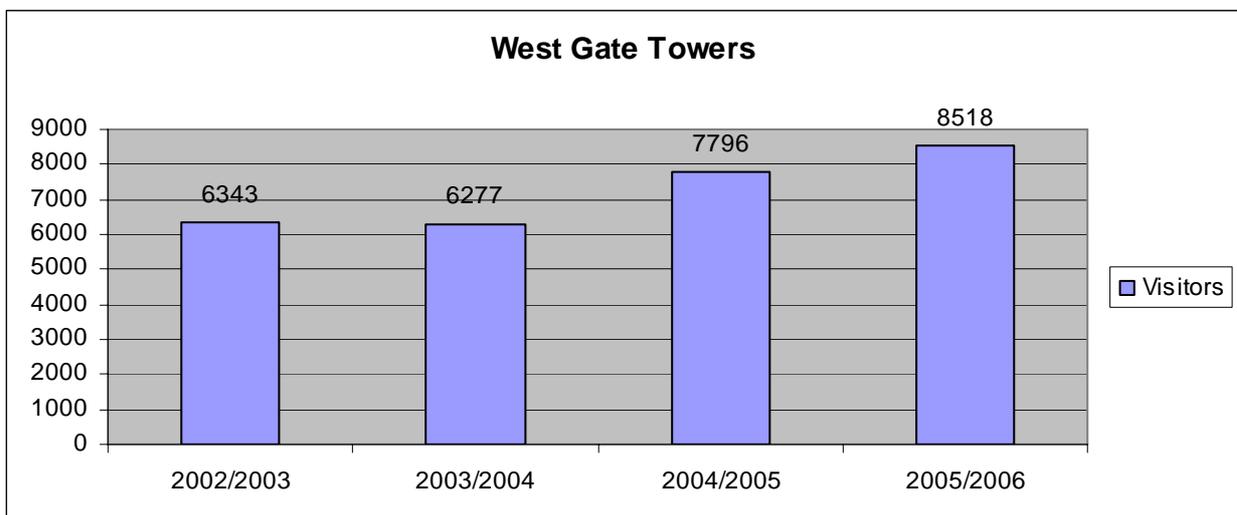
During their presentation they explained the current visitor experience at the Towers, which is based around an “authentic, memorable and different” encounter. The presentation is based around a live interpretation provided through 5-10 minute talks by museum staff, and through sensory experiences, such as trying on armour, feeling the weight of the prison chains, and among other things being able to look through the murder holes at the traffic passing beneath.

This experience is aimed at a target audience of; local adults and families visiting with friends, relatives and children, tourists (especially families with children 8-12), and school groups (as part of a visit to other museums and attractions).

Coupled with this offering is access to the top of the Towers, which give possibly the clearest views of Canterbury from the city centre.



The current visitor figures, as presented by the Curator Museums also show an increase over recent years.



However despite the success of the current offering, the Curator outlined some issues which are restricting the future Audience development plans for the Towers.

These are:

- Hidden entrance with difficult access
- Disability Discrimination Act non-compliance
- Space limitation
- Poor facilities for staff – including lack of toilet onsite
- Concerns over future of emergency exit



The presenters then outlined their hopes for future developments of the Westgate Towers, based around:

- access improvement
- space development
- integration with surrounding city assets
- themes & display development
- visitor marketing



The panel were told that the key to improving access to the building, and developing the space available would be whether it was possible to negotiate additional access from the old Police Station (Kent Music School). However the building is currently in private hands and therefore this proposition is subject to negotiation with the current owner.

The proposed themes for the Westgate towers are based around the idea of “Defenders and defences of Canterbury”, with the themes being Defence from:

- Attackers
- Invasion
- War overseas
- Criminals

These themes would incorporate links to and displays featuring; the city walls and gates, the people and units raised for defences including militia, yeomanry, rifles and city guard (including The Buffs), and defence against criminals (through the Towers role as a prison).

The panel supports the Museums service in their efforts to enhance the visitor experience, and visitor accessibility, through the use of the old police station.

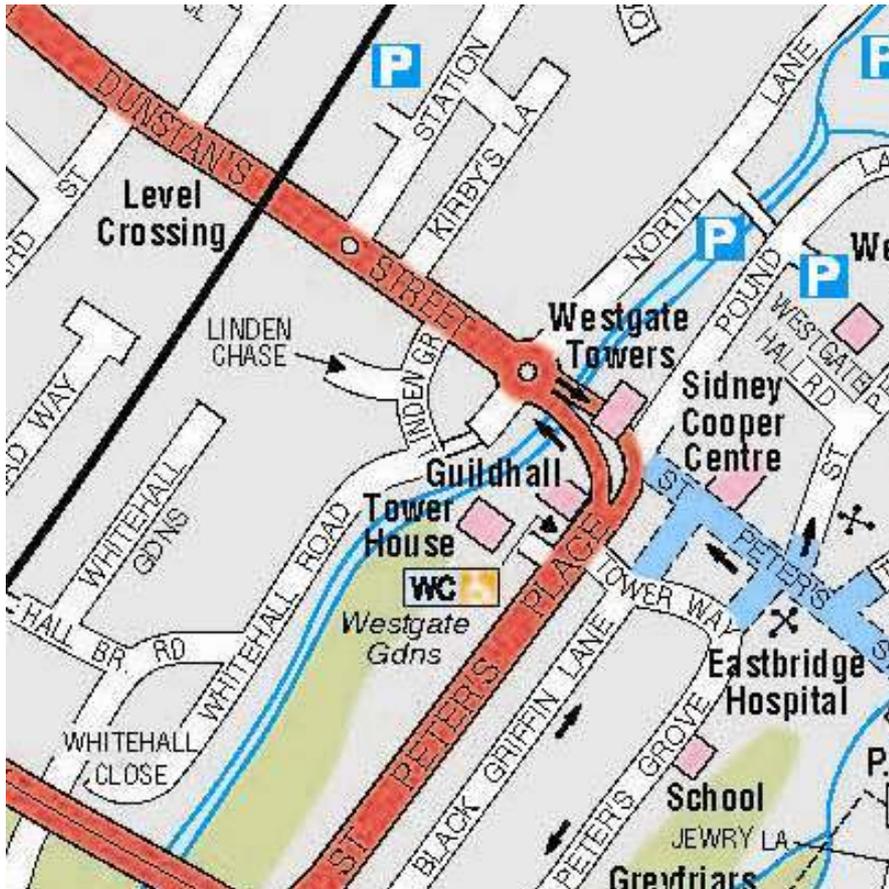
The panel would recommend that, particularly if the proposals to pedestrianise the Towers (as outlined below) are successful that the opening hours of the Towers are extended.

Meeting 2 – Transport and Public Realm

The second meeting looked at the area surrounding the Towers, including the flow of traffic, the appearance of the area, and the image presented to visitors. The witnesses who appeared at this meeting were Ruth Goudie (Senior Transportation Engineer, Kent County Council), and City Council officer, Ian Brown (Head of Regeneration and Economic Development), Viv Pritchard (Head of Transportation and Engineering), and David Kincaid (Principal Conservation Officer).

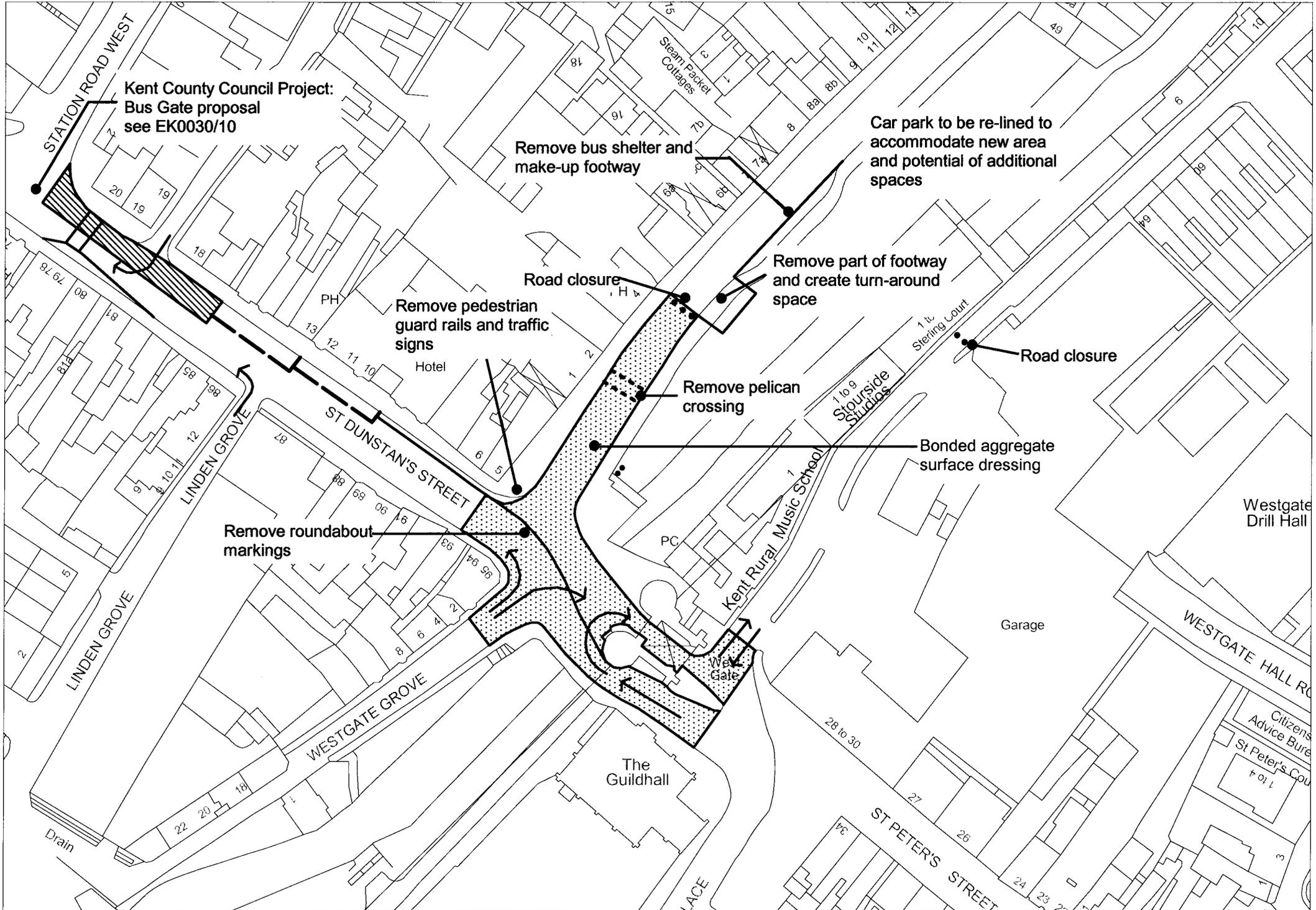
The panel were informed about a proposal from Kent County Council Highways Services to create a bus gate in the St Dunstons area. The proposal would see a bus gate inserted at the junction between Station Road West and St Dunstons Street, with only buses and taxis allowed to move down St Dunstons Street in the direction of the Towers, with other traffic being directed down Station Rd West. The Senior Transportation Engineer (KCC) presented some traffic flow data to the panel from 1999 that showed that in the morning peak hour 580 vehicles moved along St Dunstons Street in the direction of the Towers, with 440 vehicles moving in the opposite direction, she also explained that KCC would be conducting traffic counts to assess the current level of traffic, and that these results should be available in the spring.

The panel heard that the City and County Councils would be working together to bring about a more ambitious scheme for the area. This would look to provide a counterbalance to Whitefriars, and a robust strategy to manage and promote the whole of the retail area, increase footfall in the St Peters St/St Dunstons area and improve the link between Canterbury West and the city. This could, in conjunction with the proposed bus gate, involve the closure of North Lane at the end closest to the Towers, and removal of markings and street furniture, and the creation of an open space adjacent to the Towers, to give the area a more cohesive feel. (see diagram on next page)



This proposal had been accepted as a capital bid. It was hoped that a project of this nature would completely overhaul the public realm in this area.

Further points that were made during this meeting, were over the increased number of visitors that were likely with the arrival of the CTRL, and that these visitors to the city would arrive at Canterbury West, and approach the city from the Westgate. It was felt that at present this approach presented a poor image to first time visitors to the city.



Meeting 3 - Stakeholders

At their third meeting the panel held individual interviews with three stakeholders, to hear their views on the Westgate Towers.

The first stakeholder was Paul Southgate, East Kent Managing Director for Stagecoach. The panel heard that the St Dunstan's bus stops were particularly popular, and were widely used by people travelling to and from the coastal areas, and the University. Eighteen buses per hour travelled through Westgate on weekdays.

Mr Southgate highlighted the fact that new buses were becoming longer and wider to accommodate increased passenger numbers and the access requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act, buses of this size would find it difficult to navigate through the Towers and the tight turns immediately afterwards.

However, this would not be an issue for a number of years for Stagecoach as the buses operating the Canterbury routes were not scheduled to be replaced in the near future. The point was also made that Stagecoach drivers had experience of driving through the Towers, and the buses were equipped with retractable wing mirrors.

This, however, would not be the case for coaches visiting the city for day trips, whose drivers were unlikely to face an obstacle such as the Towers on a regular basis, and whose coach may be of a larger size than the buses operated by Stagecoach.

Mr Southgate suggested that, in conjunction with the bus gate, he could envisage a scenario in which traffic lights were installed at the junction of St Dunstons Street and North Lane which would allow buses to pass by the side of the Westgate Towers, rather than passing through them. He also felt that a 10mph speed limit for buses in St Dunstons Street would allow buses and pedestrians to share the road, similar schemes in Winchester, Nottingham, Leeds and Kensington were said to operate successfully.

The second stakeholder was Winston Feather, a small trader in St Dunstons Street, who had petitioned the council to look at the traffic in Westgate. During this session the panel heard that the traders in this area found that trading conditions were difficult and that the large majority of traffic was merely passing through, and did not bring any benefits to the area. He felt that local people should be encouraged to visit the area in general, and that at present the area was not inviting to visitors or residents due to the quantity of traffic and the lack of signage.

Mr Feather also felt that the lack of signage meant that visitors could easily miss the entrance to the museum.

When questioned on the previous experimental pedestrianisation scheme, he felt that the scheme had not worked as well as it could have, and that it may have worked more effectively had Stagecoach been able to continue to operate at the same time. He reiterated that the good bus service in the area helped to improve trade for local businesses.

The third witnesses to give evidence to the panel was Paul Bennett from the Canterbury Archaeological Trust (CAT), who gave the panel an in depth history of the Towers and of the surrounding area.

He felt that the Towers were a very important civic building and that they could provide a most impressive entrance to the city centre. He described St Dunstons Street as containing 30 important vernacular buildings, and that the area used to provide a great deal of taverns and hostelries throughout the history of the city, as the city walls used to be closed to visitors after dark, many of whom would frequent such hostelries.

It was felt that the traffic in the area prevented the Westgate Towers from being a popular attraction, and that the area would benefit from the Old Goal being opened to the public., also that the heritage of the area would benefit from greater promotion and publicity.

He felt that ultimately the area should be closed to all traffic. However, restricted access would be a positive step forward.

Discussion

It is clear that the Westgate Towers are a major asset for the city, and indeed if the city were not blessed with its other heritage assets they would more than likely be held in greater esteem.

“The Westgate is perhaps Canterbury’s most striking and recognisable building after the Cathedral, and it is surrounded by a cluster of important and attractive buildings: the Guildhall, Tower House, Westgate Gardens, Sidney Cooper Gallery and the old police station. Despite this the Westgate area is a sad disappointment, dominated by the noise and smell of traffic, and further diminished by barriers, signs and poor quality surfaces.”

(Taken from “Canterbury:City of Imagination” Yellow Book consultants report)

As was heard by most witnesses, in an ideal scenario the Towers would not be subjected to the constant flow of traffic that they currently face. However as the main routes into and out of the city have changed so little throughout the past thousand years the Towers have remained at the centre of traffic flow, and it is surely only due to the fact that they accommodate modern traffic that they have survived for so long. However, as we heard, the time may be approaching when the Towers will no longer accommodate the largest of

vehicles, and therefore it is feasible to envisage a time in the future where at least some vehicle types will need to be restricted from passing through the Towers.

Even if the size of vehicles was not a concern, it does appear to be the commonly held view that the current situation of traffic flow through the Towers does not present the best image of the city for visitors and residents alike.

It is encouraging therefore that the two schemes that were presented to the panel regarding the proposed introduction of a bus gate, and the suggested improvements to the public realm, were aimed at reducing the amount of traffic in the area. However neither of the schemes went as far as suggesting an alternative to traffic passing through the Towers themselves, which is the key to not only protecting the Towers, but enhancing the Westgate end of the city, along with increasing the appeal of the Towers as an attraction.

This is something that would seem to be in line with the scenario of “the Canterbury Experience” which was developed during the ongoing Local Futures work, and which builds on the heritage and history of the city. If “the Canterbury experience” is to form any part of the upcoming Community Strategy/Corporate Plan it would seem reasonable to aim for the pedestrianisation of the Towers to be included in these plans. This would indeed enhance the Canterbury experience, and bring great benefits to the area in terms of benefit to the local businesses, and by freeing up space around the Towers for possible cultural opportunities, as included in the plans presented by Ian Brown and Viv Pritchard.

The suggestion that the panel would recommend, is that, in addition to the bus gate at the junction of St Dunstons Street and Station Road West, and the closure of North Lane at the Towers end, that St Peters Place should also be closed at the Towers end, and that only buses be allowed to pass by the side of the Towers, by use of a further bus gate. This suggestion would free the Towers from traffic, and create a pedestrian flow down St Dunstons Street, through the Towers, and would effectively link the Towers to both St Dunstons, and to the main high street.

The panel are aware of the difficulties involved in bringing about changes of this size and complexity, and are aware that removing traffic from this area could have adverse consequences for traffic flow in surrounding areas. These consequences would need to be examined through extensive traffic modelling and extensive consultation would need to occur. However, as similar studies would need to occur for both the KCC proposed bus gate, and the proposal to close North Lane, it would seem sensible to model for removal of traffic from the Towers.

The panel feel that the opportunity of reconnecting the Westgate Towers to their surroundings is one that should not be ignored.

The panel would therefore recommend that:

Recommendation 1

Support for the pedestrianisation of the Westgate Towers is included as an action in the upcoming Community Strategy/Corporate plan.

Recommendation 2

The traffic flow suggestion that the panel would recommend, is that, in addition to the bus gate at the junction of St Dunstons Street and Station Road West, and the closure of North Lane at the Towers end, that St Peters Place should be closed at the Towers end along with Pound Lane (at the junction with St Peters Place), and that only buses be allowed to pass by the side of the Towers, by use of a further bus gate. (as illustrated overleaf)

This suggestion would free the Towers from traffic, and create a pedestrian flow down St Dunstons Street, through the Towers, and would effectively link the Towers to both St Dunstons, and to the main high street.

Of course the panel understand that these suggestions would be reliant on partnership working with Kent County Council (as the highways authority), and would need to be thoroughly researched (including visits to other cities operating bus gates), costed, and consulted on.

Recommendation 3

The panel would recommend that particularly if the proposals to pedestrianise the Towers (as outlined above) are successful that the opening hours of the Towers are extended.

Recommendation 4

The panel would recommend that the city centre group suggested by the City Centre Development review should coordinate efforts to bring together the relevant stakeholders in the Westgate area, including Canterbury Archaeological Trust, the Guild of Guides, local groups and businesses, to ensure that the area is effectively publicised.

Recommendation 5

The panel would recommend that the Westgate Towers museum be included in the consultation outlined in Recommendation 3 of the City Centre Development review (That City Centre Management consult city centre retailers, coffe bars and museums, regarding the possibility of later opening hours during the week and at weekends).

Recommendation 6

The panel would recommend that the Westgate Towers be considered as part of a wider Westgate experience that includes the Westgate Gardens, Tower

House, the Guildhall, the Towers and the riverside, and that projects affecting any of these areas should consider the Towers in their work.

Appendix A**Member Led Project Scope**

Project Title:	Westgate Towers Short Topic Review
Project Category:	Short Topic Scrutiny Review
Project Sponsor:	Scrutiny Management & Review Sub-Committee
Lead Member: (Project Champion)	Cllr Avery
Lead Officer: (Project Manager)	Wayne Gough
Member Scrutiny Review Panel: (Project team-core)	Cllrs Pepper, Ashmore and Mrs Law
Officer Group:	Officers as required
Project concern:	That the Westgate Towers and surrounding area is underutilised, and their visitor potential is not fulfilled
Project task:	To examine the viability of utilising and protecting the Westgate Towers; its adjoining buildings; traffic flow and preservation of the area. (As outlined by the Overview & Scrutiny Committee at their meeting of 15 th February 2006)
Project purpose:	To suggest possible solutions for the enhancement of the Westgate Towers and surrounding area. To consider possibilities for protecting the Towers from traffic, and identify whether there is a need to do this.
Customer:	Scrutiny Management & Review Sub-committee
End Users:	Members of the public, transport stakeholders, officer of the council

End result:	The Westgate Towers and surrounding area are utilised to their full potential, and to the benefit of the local economy, and as far as feasible the Towers are protected against deterioration.
Success criteria:	Increase in visitor numbers to the Towers. Towers viewed as an integral part of the Canterbury visitor offer. Realistic schemes for securing the long term viability of Towers are identified.
Project Information:	<p>The protection of the Westgate Towers have become the centre of a public debate, with regular column space in the Canterbury Gazette. This review should be utilised to show that the council understands the importance of the Towers and is willing to look again at the issues.</p> <p>Following discussion with the Head of Regeneration and Economic Development, it is suggested that the relevant agencies that need to be included in the review are KCC Highways (they are considering inserting a bus gate in St. Dunstons), Marco Keir (in his museums capacity), CITA and St Dunstons traders, Charles Lanby (CAT chairman).</p> <p>The review where possible should make best use of any current work being carried out on the City Centre and its environs.</p> <p>Suggested witnesses:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local Traders • CAT (Paul Bennett) • KCC (Highways) • Stagecoach • Charles Lanby (Chairman of CAT) • Local residents • Ian Brown (Yellow Book work/Westgate Gardens project) • Viv Pritchard (transport issues) • Marco Keir & Ken Reddie (Museums aspect) <p>Background information to be ascertained</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Museums & Galleries Review • Corporate Plan • Licensing policy • Info around North Lane Car Park & old prison
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