

## **David White Transcript**

### **Museums, Sustainability and Growth Conference 23 October 2008**

#### **Introduction**

I'm delighted to open this conference; first of all I extend a warmest of welcomes to this fabulous county and this fabulous city particularly to our friends from across the water. This is actually a fitting venue in what is one of Europe's great cities; Norwich as you may or may not know was the second city in the country in medieval times and into the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. Now it's one of the great heritage cities of Europe, having I believe the most preserved medieval churches in western Europe, and last year was submitted to a small but select band of world heritage cities and that's down to people like Mike Loveday in the audience from the excellent HEART project.

So being in this fine city, great county we're now in this fabulous castle a real iconic building for the city and the county. Dominating the skyline for the last 900 years it's one of the best Norman preserved castles in the whole of the country. I think just in terms of the conference lecture theatre that we're in and walking around if you don't know the city and the castle already you must agree with me it is a remarkable example of sustainability and indeed adaptability over many, many centuries. Originally built as a royal palace it then served as a prison for 500 years having public executions on the green outside, until finally becoming a public museum in the 1890s and later incorporating an excellent and worthwhile art gallery.

It's now a flagship for a highly successful joint museums service which we run in partnership between the county, city and districts, a truly great example of partnership working. We at the county council are extremely proud of our museum and archaeology service and indeed proud to be the lead Renaissance hub for the East of England, working closely with some partners here to day, museums in Colchester, Ipswich, Cambridge and Luton.

Over the next two days the conference will explore the unique role that museums in particular, heritage and the arts can play in supporting and developing sustainable communities. A couple of thoughts really then from me. In this present economic climate you might think it strange that we talk about growth but actually government is absolutely right to have a target for housing and indeed for jobs. You can't have houses without jobs this has to be an economically driven agenda. There's a current target of over 3 million new homes by 2020 because there is a significant housing shortage in this country, which we must address. Within the east of England what does that mean? Well at the moment around half a million new homes are planned and within the county of Norfolk nearly eighty thousand. Those targets are likely to be revised upwards and it will be a real challenge to achieve them, but we have to agree what the right numbers are and everyone pull together to achieve the jobs and the houses.

But our collective challenge and why we're here today is really to learn from the planned growth programmes of building in the past, learn the lessons to ensure we do create true communities of tomorrow. Where people live needs to be 'somewhere' rather than 'anywhere' the unique heritage and history of an area can and indeed must be reflected in planned developments. It's absolutely right that in policy terms we focus upon what's called 'place shaping' real living communities actually reflecting the heritage of an area avoiding bland nondescript developments having a soulless feel.

What we really need to see is heritage-led development, which for me is the only show in town, I had experience in that I spent my formative working career on Tyneside and saw that the transformation that took place there required courage, leadership and long term vision. But we need to look at development in the round, because heritage is not just about conserving old wonderful buildings it's about the broader cultural offer. It's actually about heritage playing a role in economic development; increasing the vibrancy of a place, of making places attractive for new businesses for inward investment and actually really creating a sense of place understanding where we've come from. Our legacies need therefore to be preserved, loved and celebrated but the real challenge for us here to day is for cultural and heritage projects to be relevant, supported and well and truly rooted in their local communities.

As a former community worker social inclusion is very much at the top of my agenda and it's very important that our cultural offer reaches down and embraces rather than excludes serving merely our site visitors, that's very, very important. Specifically we'll look at the role of museums, what have we in this country nearly 2,000 or so I guess, many longstanding but many actually located in our urban areas which require regeneration. It's very important that if those cultural institutions are housed in decaying buildings they are not seen as unwelcome and unable to meet the needs of our communities. It's for this reason that I am personally a great supporter of the Renaissance in the regions programme. So the challenge really is to increase the awareness of opportunities for museums to actively contribute to our growing, environmental, economic and social sustainability agendas.

As you'll hear over the next couple of days there are many contributions as to the role museums can play from practical onsite action through to serving as facilitators for interpretation and debate. All this requires strong leadership and vision coupled with a commitment to partnership across all sectors and interests and communities. Here in Norfolk at the County Council, we do take our community leadership role extremely seriously, and we are indeed shaping our own services to meet these challenging opportunities by increasingly looking at a more integrated holistic approach to service planning and development as we strive to meet our overarching ambitions for Norfolk - which is really Norfolk being an inspirational place with a clear sense of identity, celebrating and really understanding it's past, promoting a vibrant and strong and sustainable economy. Last but certainly not least having aspirational people who feel as though they belong and who are averaging high levels of achievement.

I hope you enjoy your time at the conference and for those visitors to the county and the city your time with us. I hope that this conference inspires debate around the contribution the whole cultural offer can make to the way that we plan our communities and live our lives. Thank you.