PLANNING LEICESTER

Early Planning

Long before the modern conception of town planning was developed, Leicester was subject to planned development. The earliest phase we have meaningful evidence of is the Roman town of Ratae Corieltavorum, with its ordered street network linking key civic buildings.

Following the end of the Roman Empire, Leicester continued to be inhabited and was subject to further phases of development. With relatively low population growth, change was less dramatic than what was to come later. Much of the strategic planning related to ecclesiastical developments or the need to make the settlement secure from military attack.

Typical Residential Development Characteristics:
- Generically single storey buildings
- Fairly tight urban grain
- Varied plot sizes within regular block structure
- Varied building lines
- Brick/stone/concrete as dominant materials
- Modest, functional landscaping
In the late 18th century the town started to grow dramatically. Following the development of a strategic toll road through the town, Leicester was connected to the canal network in 1793.

Elsewhere, in 1785, a promenade was laid out linking the racetrack to the town core. New Walk, which remains a traffic free promenade to this day, was designed by the Corporation to encourage the expansion to the southeast.

In 1801 the population of Leicester was around 17,000; by 1901 it had ballooned to over 211,000. The Corporation was unprepared for the scale of growth, with much of it in the form of crowded ‘slums’.
Following a cholera epidemic in 1847, the Public Health Act of 1848 helped set more of the foundations for town planning, not least in encouraging public open space. Leicester was one of only two places outside London to appoint a Medical Officer of Health in the years that followed.

The Corporation was increasingly active in developing infrastructure for civic development, such as public parks, and in developing by laws that set minimum standards for new housing. More generally, some locals, such as Arthur Wakerley in Evington, began developing land in a much more comprehensively planned way.
The early 20th century saw the first development of town planning legislation nationally and attempts at adopting a strategic plan for Leicester locally. Much development was still uncoordinated as urbanisation continued apace.

Influenced by the likes of Ebenezer Howard and emerging pressure groups, such as the Garden Cities Association, various linked developments occurred in Leicester. A cooperative housing venture from Anchor Tenants Ltd developed land to the east of the old village of Humberstone between 1907-1915, while the Corporation bought land in Braunstone to develop holistically from 1927, supplementing housing with new shops, schools, churches and public transport.
Although World War II significantly curtailed development activity in the city, the success of strategic planning during the conflict and a commitment to domestic renewal post-war had significant impacts on planning in Leicester. A new national development control regime that required developers to acquire planning permission for an extensive range of works was introduced.

There was a revival of the pre-war house building programme by the Corporation with the development of estates in areas such as New Parks, Thurnby Lodge and Stocking Farm. Slum clearance programmes continued apace, whilst private development of housing in the suburbs resumed.
The 1960s has been characterised by some historians as the ‘golden age of planning’. This reflects the confidence of the age where bold town planning schemes were seen as the solution to wider challenges in society. In 1962 the city set up its first dedicated planning department and created the post of its first Chief Planning Officer: Konrad Smigielski.

Ambitious plans were developed in the city in response to a paradigm shift in urban mobility, with exponential growth in car use threatening the viability of traditional street patterns. A new monorail network was planned, which would have linked a new town at Beaumont Leys with the city.

Typical Residential Development Characteristics:

- Generally two-four storey buildings, with some bungalows and some high rise towers
- Loose urban grain
- Irregular block structure characterised by blocks of flats set back away from road network. Large plots for blocks of flats
- Varied building lines behind gardens and communal landscaped spaces
- Light coloured brick, concrete, composite panels as dominant material
- Large areas of intermediate landscaped space, with some formal parks and private gardens, more extensive parking provision
Alongside dramatic changes to the highway network, extensive investment was planned in new housing, commercial development and further slum clearance. Many of the plans were never realised, but some were – including the controversial development of the ring road in the historic western side of the city centre and the slum clearance that facilitated the building of the St Matthew’s and St Mark’s Estates.

Alongside some of the more futuristic design styles, the period also saw the development of national legislation to better protect heritage. In 1969 the first three conservation areas were designated in the city at New Walk, Castle Gardens and Greyfriars.
As the city continued to expand in this period some of the orthodoxies of modernist town planning were found wanting and urban renewal was increasingly focussed on enhancing existing assets, rather than comprehensively replacing them. Following the passing of the Housing Act in 1969, the Leicester Housing Committee created plans for various General Improvement Areas, such as upgrading the housing stock in Clarendon Park.

Innovative new approaches to streets included pedestrianisation schemes in the city centre and home zones in Highfields. Some of this was related to enhancing the retail offer of the city centre to combat the threat of peripheral retail development by the M1.
In this period, Leicester came to the forefront for developing protection and proactive enhancement plans for the natural environment. One of the first Council’s to employ a full time ecologist, ground-breaking work in managing flood risk, allocating land for community buildings and inclusive design also took place.

In 1989 the multi-award winning Leicester Ecology Strategy was published. One aspect of this was the creation of the Riverside Park, which won the prestigious Europa Nostra Award in 1989. Much of this work helped contribute to the city being designated Britain's first Environment City in 1990.

Leicester set the standard for embedding inclusive design into the planning system in the 1980s. The Council were the first in the UK to employ a Disabled People’s Access officer in 1981 and one of the first to establish a Disabled People’s Access Group.
In the new millennium town planning remains fundamental to both driving and managing sustainable development in the city. There is a significant amount of continuity between planning now and the activities that have taken place in the previous century, with continuing efforts to regenerate areas of the city that have seen their former uses change and new urban extensions planned.

The ‘Connecting Leicester’ programme is stitching together disparate elements of the city centre through enhanced streets and spaces, while award winning approaches to reducing flood risk continue to create attractive new public spaces in the city. Planned over several decades, a major urban extension at Ashton Green continues to be progressed with innovative use of masterplanning, while the city continues to develop best practise in a wide range of areas.