

# A new vision for York

**A new vision for York explores what the future holds, or could hold, for the City. Following a proposal from York Civic Trust, a report was commissioned by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation on behalf of Without Walls, York's Local Strategic Partnership. Based on consultation with York residents and organisations, the consultancy firm URBED produced the report to stimulate debate on a new 'vision' for the city. This summary outlines its main conclusions.**

- With its rich historical past, York is mainly known today as a destination for tourism and shopping. But the last decade has seen unemployment fall and an expansion of service industries, with the highly successful University planning major growth, and new opportunities for York's 'Science City'.
- When measured against comparable British historic cities, York comes out as a 'good average' with a strong economy, but with concerns about potential social divisions, and further to go in achieving excellence in meeting environmental challenges.
- York has enough natural and historical assets to 'move up a league'. It has untapped potential and could draw inspiration from best practice on the continent. But it will not move forward without tackling some difficult underlying issues, in particular:
  - traffic congestion and pollution;
  - a lack of affordable housing; and
  - a widening gap between those with secure jobs or transferable skills and those (including some who have been in York for generations) who are in marginal jobs or out of work and who are not benefiting from the City's increased prosperity.
- In contrast to other places experiencing economic growth, York has substantial opportunities for development both on brownfield central sites - such as 'York Central' beside the rail station - and through urban extension.
- In the view of the consultants, York needs to adopt a strategy of 'SMART' growth. This would mean some expansion - which generates extra revenues - but with attention being given to fundamental principles of 'sustainability' and 'accessibility' for all.

The consultants set out **six strategic themes**, and **twenty-five tangible outcomes**, to generate widespread discussion between all those interested in the future of York.

## Introduction

Not since the influential Esher Report in 1968 which studied York city centre has anyone attempted to set out a comprehensive future 'vision' for the City. Many individual plans and strategies exist, including a draft Local Plan, but there has been only limited work to draw these together and to think on a 10- to 20-year timescale. Such work had become overdue and York Civic Trust called for a review on the future directions for the City.

'I came here this morning to make as strong a plea as I can for a bus station in York and for it to be by the railway station to form an interchange.'

A contributor to the over-50s drop-in day

Meanwhile, the Government has been urging all localities to set up broad-based partnerships to arrive at a consensus about what areas should look like in the medium to long term.

In response, York City Council set up an inclusive Local Strategic Partnership called Without Walls to consider York's future and provide the basis for a Community Strategy and action plan. To assist, *A new vision for York* was commissioned by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. It represents six months' intensive work between the consultants URBED and a variety of organisations, partnerships and citizens.

*A new vision for York* is a discussion document intended to provoke debate: the views expressed do not necessarily represent those of the Without Walls partners. This summary outlines the main proposals and ideas.

## Benchmarking York

York has a rich and distinguished history: at certain times it could justifiably claim to have been England's second city. It has an unparalleled architectural heritage, and a more recent tradition of philanthropy and social justice. It is perhaps best known now as a tourism and shopping destination, but it has an emerging reputation as a 'Science City', and its outstanding University is planning a major extension of its campus at Heslington.

The consensus is that York has 'taken off' in recent years, despite the closure of its railway carriageworks in 1995. Signs of prosperity are very evident – but there is growing concern about the emergence of a 'twin track' city in which wealthy 'incomers' enjoy a quality of life which is far beyond the means of most of the indigenous population, four-fifths of whom now live outside the city walls.

URBED has analysed information from a variety of sources to expand on this snapshot. In particular, the consultants have compared York with four other historic English cities. Quite a complex picture emerges.

York is undoubtedly in good *economic health*, with the University and the Science City initiative providing economic drivers to replace the loss of manufacturing jobs. But some indicators suggest it could do more in terms of overall 'competitiveness' and as a tourism 'gateway'. And by no means all of York's citizens have benefited from this prosperity – more

than a fifth of the population is still classified as living in poverty, a century on from the Seebohm Rowntree study which drew the same conclusion. Rising house prices are seen as a major problem for those not yet on the property ladder.

In other measures of *social wellbeing*, including health indicators, York comes out as close to the average – although it has relatively few residents from different ethnic groups.

York has a justified reputation as a pioneer in certain aspects of *environmental responsibility*, particularly pedestrianisation and park and ride facilities. But overall density is not sustainable by today's criteria; public transport is seen as unreliable; and the standard of modern buildings is disappointing.

The overall impression, confirmed by the Audit Commission's recent *Comprehensive Performance Assessment* of the local authority, is that York is a 'good average', with pockets of excellence in some areas, but room for improvement in others. York's citizens would probably place better public transport - with a bus station - as their top priority, along with affordable homes for local people.



*Local centres also need investment*

## Opportunities and trends

York sometimes takes for granted its outstanding assets. These include: unique historic and natural environments; good connections to London and elsewhere; a very good quality of life; a top ten University; a major brownfield development site (York Central); and an overall sense of cohesiveness.

The City is well placed to encourage the 'creative classes' which are now seen as essential to future economic success in the Western world.

But York will also need to adapt to a number of inevitable social trends: an increasingly older population who will demand new forms of housing and leisure facilities; economic competition from Eastern Europe and Asia; and growing environmental concerns.

It could draw inspiration from best practice on the continent, where cities such as Montpellier, in France, and Freiburg, in Germany, have pioneered new forms of housing and public transport, and where waste recycling is well ahead of UK standards.

URBED has suggested three areas in particular where there appear to be gaps in existing thinking within the City,

and where additional contributions have been sought from experts (whose full papers appear as appendices in the report):

- creating a city of social justice by attacking the root causes of poverty, using some of the ideas suggested by Professor Gary Craig;
- enhancing the city's cultural life and vitality, particularly its nightlife and the early evening economy, as recommended by Phil Wood;
- developing housing policies which avoid major incursions into the greenbelt but which maximise the supply of affordable homes, as suggested by Lord Best and Professor Roger Burrows.

York therefore has untapped potential, and the capacity to aspire to the best continental standards in a whole range of areas. But moving forward will require imagination and sustained leadership.

## Practicalities and constraints

Any new vision for York will also have to take account of the strategies already in existence, and in particular the draft Local Plan which is currently the subject of separate consultation. York also needs to acknowledge the harsh realities which could impede its progress, including limited management capacity, competing locations, lack of quality sites, failure of the property market to deliver sufficient affordable homes, and limited public resources.

But this is not an argument for inaction because (URBED suggests) the consequences of not tackling some of the issues could be even worse. They include loss of confidence, environmental decay, gridlock and social conflict. There is a need for positive action.

**'More businesses and more people mean more rates and better community facilities.'**

A contributor to the Guildhall 'Open Morning'

## The way forward

URBED's recommended way forward has a number of components.

First, the consultants argue the case for adopting a policy of 'SMART growth'. This term comes from the USA and does not mean growth in the conventional sense; rather, it involves the principle of developing communities in a sensitive and sustainable way. In URBED's view, growth beyond current planned levels is needed in order to:

- enable York to retain sufficient critical mass to continue to enjoy a wide range of facilities including specialised higher education and hospital facilities;
- tackle the issues of social exclusion which the exercise has identified;
- support a richer cultural offering, particularly nightlife;
- generate the revenues needed to run a historic city.

They suggest that by planning higher housing densities, most of the growth can be accommodated within the outer ring road. Some growth could come about simply through an enlargement of York's administrative boundaries to include Selby.

'SMART' has other useful connotations which could be relevant to the vision, including 'smart cards' (which could be used to provide discounts for those in greatest need) and 'smart' in the sense of being better educated through a strategy of lifelong learning.

But growth in any form will only be acceptable in a sensitive environment such as York if it is guided by two fundamental principles: those of 'sustainability' and 'accessibility'.

Sustainability needs to be built into all future developments from the outset, and the recommendations of the Local Agenda 21 Steering Committee need to be reinforced and 'joined up' with the work of other partnerships and agencies.

Accessibility is equally important: at present York's facilities are by no means equally accessible to all of its residents – particularly older people, disabled people and those on low incomes. URBED suggests an 'accessibility audit' is needed in order to map existing needs, followed by concerted multi-agency action to tackle them. Affordable and reliable public transport is the key to almost everything else.

Having argued for SMART growth guided by the principles of sustainability and accessibility, URBED goes on to suggest six strategic themes, and twenty-five tangible outcomes, which could be used as the basis for a new vision for York. These are set out below.

'York is a jewel – it needs to keep its human scale.'

A contributor to the Guildhall 'Open Morning'



*The research involved several sessions of consultation with York residents.*

## Six strategic themes

### **A modern historic city:**

- preserving the past but looking forward
- improved visitor facilities
- iconic modern architecture
- 'keep York special'

### **A city of creativity and knowledge:**

- expanded facilities for the University and the Colleges
- 'Science City' broadened in scope
- other sectoral training initiatives
- a city which fosters innovation

### **A welcoming and inclusive city:**

- more welcoming to minority communities
- new facilities for older and younger citizens
- acknowledging the importance of students and visitors
- a positive strategy for inclusion

### **A significant European city:**

- a central role in the region
- the hub of the local region
- links with comparable European cities

### **A city of villages and neighbourhoods:**

- fostering pride of place
- sustainable local neighbourhoods
- new models for delivering health and education
- better mapping to identify needs

### **A city for health and wellbeing:**

- addressing the root causes of ill health which lie outside the health service
- a strategy for tackling poverty
- positive strategies to encourage walking and cycling

## 25 tangible outcomes

### Five essential physical developments

(Reference is made to these in the main report.)

- A significantly upgraded transport system including a bus station.
- Expanded university facilities.
- New college facilities on a new model, with more provision based in the community.
- New hospital facilities, likewise on a new model.
- Iconic modern architecture at York Central.

### Five essential social/cultural developments

(Reference is made to these in the main report.)

- A more inclusive and cosmopolitan city, measured through indices of deprivation and satisfaction.
- A more sustainable city, ahead of the national average in terms of its eco-footprint.
- Smart cards (a 'passport to York') to encourage equality of access.
- An expanded evening economy and better nightlife.
- A broader cultural offering, perhaps leading to a credible bid to become a European Capital of Culture.

### Five other desirable developments

(These have been mentioned in passing but require further refinement and debate to determine whether they are necessarily part of the vision.)

- Controlled growth in population, within the ring road, beyond that which is currently assumed.
- A new visitor attraction, possibly science-based, acting as a linked Conference Centre.
- A 5-star hotel.
- A new medium-sized venue for the performing arts.
- Better use of York's rivers through improved access and possibly 'riverboats'.

### Five more contentious issues

(These have all been raised in the course of this exercise but have provoked a mixed reaction. Greater consensus will be needed if any of these is to feature in the vision.)

- World Heritage Status for the walled city.
- A bid to become the centre of Regional Government in Yorkshire.
- Enlarged administrative boundaries to include Selby.
- Congestion charging and more pedestrianisation within the inner ring road.
- Promoting commercial air traffic at Elvington.

### Five 'off-the-wall' ideas

(Some who contributed to this exercise were not afraid to raise radical or seemingly impractical suggestions. Although they were not analysed in the main report, the best five ideas are presented here in case any merits further debate.)

- Free buses and/or trams within the ring road.
- An aggressive policy of zero net waste.
- A new 'York Parkway' rail/road interchange near the A64.
- Re-opening rail routes to Whitby and Wensleydale to enhance York's 'gateway' status for visitors.
- Glazing over part of central York to provide an all weather 'outdoor' environment like the Victoria Quarter in Leeds.



## What happens next?

The issues raised by URBED need to be the subject of widespread debate, particularly in the more contentious areas, although it will not necessarily be possible to reach consensus over every detail.

The key questions are:

- is URBED right in its analysis of York as 'good average', but with under-exploited assets and a danger of complacency?
- what can we learn from other models on the continent and elsewhere?
- is the concept of 'SMART growth' helpful in suggesting a sensible and balanced approach to development?
- are the principles of 'sustainability' and 'accessibility' important for York?
- which elements within the six strategic themes, and twenty-five tangible outcomes should feature in York's vision? Can we reach any consensus in the more contentious areas?
- how can the work of York's various other partnerships feed into the creation of a vision for York?
- what are the most important actions to be taken now?

The City is proposing to mount a 'Festival of Ideas' over the summer of 2003 in order to enable all of York's citizens to contribute their views. The intention is to produce a first Community Plan, incorporating a new vision for York, by the Autumn.

You can keep up-to-date by visiting [www.yorkwow.org.uk](http://www.yorkwow.org.uk) or by writing to Without Walls, c/o 2 Blake Street, York YO1 8QG.

The full report, *A new vision for York*, by Nicholas Falk and Francesca King, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation on behalf of the Without Walls partnership.