

Our Big Conversation: Key Findings Report

Executive Summary

During July 2021, City of York Council engaged with residents and businesses of York as part of its “Big Conversation” to help inform the Council’s approach to climate change, transport and the economy. The key results from these surveys are discussed in this report. There is an awareness that low response rates, particularly from the business survey, with only 53 firms fully completing the survey, precludes any findings to be ultimate and that secondary engagement work will be needed.

Survey results showed that the vast majority residents and businesses support York’s ambition to become a net zero carbon city by 2030, with residents outlining that an affordable and efficient transport system should be central to achieving these ambitions. For businesses, what appears to be a main challenge is how they adapt to meet this target, with many businesses seeking assistance in reducing their carbon emissions and becoming net zero businesses.

Driving and walking are the most used forms of transport in York, but more than half of our residents reported that they will be using their car the same amount or more in 5 years’ time. There is strong appetite among residents to switch to electric vehicle however, suggesting York needs to prepare its electric-charging infrastructure to enable this transition.

York’s economy changed overnight when the COVID-19 pandemic hit the UK, and some of those changes appear to be lasting, with many businesses and more than two thirds of workers expecting to work from home more in the future compared with before the pandemic. Several businesses are also redesigning their workspace, whether it be upgrading or expanding, but the availability and/or cost of land/premises in York is being reported by businesses as the biggest weakness to operating in the area, suggesting that this places a limitation on businesses growth and expansion.

York remains a city with high employment levels and 2 in 3 workers are interested in learning new skills. Of those interested in further skills training, advanced/specialist IT skills and management/leadership skills are of most interest which largely aligns with the skills desired by our businesses.

Despite the city’s economic resilience, 1 in 5 York residents in employment feel that they are worse off financially than they were 12 months ago with just over half of these respondents being in the 25-39 age category. Underlying issues such as having a large number of people in low-paid part-time employment may explain this. Comparisons with previous engagement work and with regional economic data, along with additional engagement activity will enable these results to be of great value in shaping City of York Council’s new Economic Strategy.

Key Findings Report

Introduction

This report provides an overview of the headline findings from the City of York Council's Our Big Conversation engagement exercise with residents and businesses. Two surveys were issued, one to residents and one to businesses, during July 2021 focusing on the topics of Climate Change, Transport and the Economy.

Respondents

From the resident survey, 1934 people participated, over half of which were of working age (64% of respondents). Of those working, the highest proportion who responded were working full time (39%), followed by part-time workers (14%), and the self-employed (6%). The retired (36%), the unemployed (3%) and students (2%) also contributed to the survey. Of those in employment, respondents largely fell into the 25-59 age bracket (76% of responses), and there was a close split across genders. 66% of respondents in employment work in the York local authority area, mainly across education, local government, financial services and health sectors.

With regards to the business survey, there was a limited number of responses, with 93 participating and only 53 firms fully completing the survey. Given there are over 7,000 businesses in York it must be recognised that survey results here cannot be taken to be wholly representative of York's business community. To help validate the insights gained from this survey, this report has referred to results gathered from other engagement work such as the Council's 'My City Centre' survey and 'York Micro Grant Evaluation Report', making sure to clearly label these different findings throughout the report. From those businesses who did respond, the majority were either micro or one-person businesses with 80% of respondents having fewer than 10 employees. Respondents encompassed a wide range of sectors, although Wholesale and Retail was the largest sector represented with 19% of respondents based in that industry.

Climate Change

York residents overwhelmingly support York's ambition to become a zero carbon city by 2030, with 80% agreeing with the target. There is also clear sentiment that the onus is on government, both national and local, and large private businesses to deliver this target, with 4 out of 5 residents agreeing that it's very important for these institutions to take responsibility for the task. Yet, many do wonder if the net zero target is achievable, or at least felt it should not be achieved at any cost, particularly at the expense of more vulnerable people or other city priorities.

With regards to how City of York Council should approach the net zero challenge, 74% of York residents felt that developing an efficient and affordable transport system should form the most important part of any strategy. This coincides with residents most frequently mentioning that individuals could take action by using alternative means of transport other than driving, particularly walking or cycling wherever possible.

It appears there is strong appetite to take individual action on climate change with 84% of York residents having already reduced the amount of waste they produce, 69% having made changes to their purchasing habits and 65% having made changes to their personal travel. Cost is the main reason why some residents have not yet taken action in some areas to reduce their carbon footprint.

There is strong alignment among businesses in York for the Council's climate change ambitions with 78% of firms agreeing with the ambition for York to become net zero by 2030. Yet, businesses need

assistance around how they can play their part, with 3 in 5 businesses not having a carbon reduction strategy or official target for carbon emission reduction. More than a quarter of firms would like support in achieving net zero emissions, with calls for support in calculating carbon footprint, producing green travel plans, and writing climate action plans. Encouragingly though, 19% of firms responding to the survey are considering diversifying into goods and services that are part of the green economy over the next 12 months.

Transport

From our resident survey, driving and walking are reported as the most used forms of transport in York, with driving used most often to access services and walking the most used mode for accessing parks and open spaces. Cycling tends to be done either regularly or not at all, while bus and rail services tend to be used infrequently.

At present, more than half of residents consider congestion to be a very serious problem in York, while almost half consider local air pollution from traffic and the impact of transport on climate change to be very serious. This aligns with similar findings from the 'My City Centre' survey where less traffic/fewer cars was the most frequently mentioned way to make it easier to get around York City Centre.

With that in mind, it might be concerning that over the next 5 years 43% of residents expect to use their car the same amount as they are now and a further 16% expect to use their car more. Interestingly though, 43% of residents also plan to switch to an electric/hybrid vehicle. It is worthwhile noting then that residents are least likely to feel electric charging points meet their needs at present, and that just over half of residents considered more electric vehicle charging points to be the most effective measure in encouraging more sustainable driving behaviour.

Residents would generally prefer to walk wherever possible, unless visiting friends/relatives over a longer distance or shopping for heavy items, in which case they would rather travel by car. Indeed, needing to travel too far to walk or cycle is the main reason residents do not utilise active modes of transport more often.

Around 1 in 4 respondents also reported that no regular bus service, cost and a lack of suitable cycle routes as barriers to using sustainable transport. This corroborates the finding that more than two in three residents feel that more frequent and reliable bus services, a more extensive bus network and cheaper bus fares would be effective in encouraging greater use of public transport.

Regarding actions already taken, the expansion of the footstreets area and electrifying the bus network were most likely to have improved residents' experience of the city centre in the past year.

From our business survey, York's rail and road links are generally seen as strengths, but the cost and availability of parking is mostly seen as a weakness. 37% of businesses did also highlight local transport connections as a weakness. Micro businesses had previously informed us from our Micro Grant Evaluation Report in May 2021 that the car (79%) and walking (29%) were their most used modes of transport across York. Intriguingly though, 52% of businesses surveyed in that evaluation report do not rely on transport links into and out of York City Centre.

Work

Location & Premises:

As Covid-19 hit the UK, many residents began working from home (WFH) and in York 44% of workers have WFH since the start of the pandemic, while a further 32% have worked in a hybrid fashion. Nearly two thirds of workers are expecting to work from home more in the future.

From a business perspective, more than a quarter of firms who responded to the survey describe their premises as homeworking, and of those businesses where there is an option to work remotely, almost half expect a greater number of their employees to work remotely post-Covid.

At the same time, 2 in 5 businesses are rethinking their workspace requirements, with the majority looking to either revise their current layout or relocate to larger premises. Businesses reported that it was the overall attractiveness of York that was the biggest strength in terms of their success at their current location. But the availability and/or cost of land/premises in York was reported as the biggest weakness, suggesting that this places a limitation on businesses growth and expansion. The most likely to highlight this issue were businesses based in the Professional Services sector.

We know from our My City Centre survey that 7 in 10 residents would like to see empty spaces in the City Centre converted into retail start-ups, along with a preference to have more creative spaces. In particular, more than 9 in 10 residents wanted to see the use of ground floor space in Coney Street and Davygate operated by smaller independent retailers and 3 in 5 would also like to see makers/artists have a space in the area. This suggests, with the previous paragraph in mind, there is desire both from businesses and consumers to see existing businesses expand and new businesses set up across York.

Employment:

Survey results suggest that 93% of main adults and 77% of second adults in York households are working full-time, which corresponds with employment data showing York to have strong employment levels across both full-time and part-time work. Most workers in York tend to hold one job, but there is a sizeable minority of part-time workers with 2 or more part-time jobs.

The main reason given by York residents for working part-time is to improve their work/life balance (40%), while just over 1 in 3 are making time for caring responsibilities. Moving towards retirement or being semi-retired and disability/health were key “other” reasons for working part-time. 17% work part-time because full-time work was not available, while 15% of respondents indicated that they work part time to boost household income.

A sizeable portion of residents were interested in starting a business, with students (30%) and the unemployed (27%) the highest groups by proportion. Almost 1 in 5 workers were also interested in starting their own business and a further 13% are unsure. Lack of finance, time constraints and confidence were listed as the main barriers to starting a business, although a high proportion of students also identified a lack of knowledge as being a key barrier to entrepreneurship.

Regarding employment prospects, York residents are more likely to agree that they feel optimistic about the security of their own job or business (64%), than about the career prospects of their family (45%).

From the business survey, almost 1 in 5 businesses said that they have struggled to fill staff vacancies during the last 12-18 months. Of those that have employed new personnel over the past 18 months, 31% were recent university graduates or school leavers. With more than two-thirds of new recruits

not being graduates or school leavers, this highlights the enduring importance of job experience and lifelong learning to employers.

Apprenticeships:

From those firms that have employed new staff over the past 18 months, just 5% were apprentices. This trend looks set to continue with just 12% of businesses planning to take on apprentice in the future, the vast majority of which intend to do so within the next 6 months.

Skills

From our resident survey, over 80% of workers agree that they have enough opportunity to use their skills and knowledge in their current workplace. However, when asked about whether the skills needed in their current job will change in the future, opinion was divided. Only 6% gave a score of 9 or 10, (i.e. they expect the required skills to change a lot), while 18% only gave a score of 1 or 2 (i.e. they don't expect the required skills to change a lot). The average response was 5 out of 10, suggesting a degree of uncertainty about how the economy might look or operate in the future.

Over the past year, 3 in 5 workers say they have undertaken some form of work-related training, and 2 in 3 are still interested in learning new skills. Of those interested in further skills training, advanced/specialist IT skills and management/leadership skills are of most interest, followed by foreign languages. These were also the top three responses from student respondents. It's also worth noting that the most frequently occurring "other" response was an interest in learning skills for the green economy.

Just over 20% of the unemployed had also undertaken some form of work-related training in the past year. Yet for those that had not undertaken any training since leaving education, the unemployed had the highest representation (8%). In terms of what skills the unemployed ranked as most helpful in adapting to the future labour market, advanced/specialist IT skills (27%) was highest followed by administration and organisation skills (25%), business/financial planning (21%) and communication skills (21%).

From the business survey, the skills that businesses felt required improving within their workforce so they can meet their needs over the next 2 years were sales and marketing skills (41%), advanced/specialist IT skills (22%) and business/financial planning skills (19%). Over 2 in 5 firms intend to fill these skill gaps by upskilling/reskilling existing employees.

With regards to business support, 3 in 10 businesses felt that support around marketing (including social media) would benefit them, while around a quarter would benefit from access to finance and sales/accessing new customers. This corroborates our findings from the Micro Grant Evaluation Report where the exact same areas of business support were highlighted as the most useful to improving business competitiveness. From this same report, we also know that while there is strong awareness of City of York Council, Make it York and York's universities, engaging with the business support on offer from these bodies is significantly lower, suggesting there is need for greater promotion of business support across York.

Intriguingly, 21% of firms stated that no skills needed improving within their business, with most of these based in the Education and Wholesale and Retail sectors. In addition, only 7% of all businesses said they needed support to develop or review their training and development plan.

Financial Wellbeing

Among residents, financial confidence is relatively high with almost 2 in 3 residents saying they could handle a major unexpected expense. However, 1 in 5 feel they are worse off financially than they were 12 months ago with 52% of these respondents being in the 25-39 age category, and 44% of them in full-time employment.

Regarding personal consumption, 68% of workers reported that they are shopping online more compared to before the pandemic. This trend of increased online shopping ties in with findings from the 'My City Centre' survey where it was found that 18% of respondents now visit the city centre less than once a month compared to only 5% before the Covid-19 and that 40% of respondents intend to spend less time shopping in the city centre in the next 12 months.

However, businesses have adapted in the face of these changing spending habits. From our Micro Grant Evaluation Report, it was found that 57% of business respondents had diversified or adapted as a result of the pandemic, with 42.3% (269 businesses) digitising some or all of their products and services, highlighting the continued resilience of York businesses in the face of a challenging trading environment.

As a result of Covid-19, 2 in 3 businesses said their turnover over the last 12-18 months had decreased. All businesses in the Food Services and Arts, Entertainment and Recreation sectors that responded to this survey question said their turnover had decreased, along with the majority of businesses in the Professional Services, Education, Wholesale and Retail and Creative sectors. This downward turn in finances across York businesses is a message that also came through our Micro Grant Evaluation Report, where 26% of the grant recipients (294 businesses) were at risk of permanently ceasing trade over the past year, and 64% of businesses had seen their customer base shrink. Actions taken by the City of York Council, such as the Micro Grant Scheme, have supported businesses to handle this financial hardship, with many businesses using grant assistance to help stay afloat, and to diversify and invest in their businesses.

Broadband

For residents, there is positive feedback regarding broadband coverage, with 99% of workers able to access the internet at home and 73% reporting that their broadband speeds meets their needs.

There is mixed feedback from businesses regarding their broadband provision. From the business survey 52% of businesses said their current broadband service/speed completely or largely meets their needs, and a further 32% said it adequately or somewhat meets their needs. 9% of firms did report that their broadband service/speed doesn't meet their needs. Interestingly, findings from the York Micro Grant Evaluation Report saw 42% of businesses note that their internet connectivity had placed limits on their business. This suggests that further engagement is required in order to understand which businesses require better connectivity, and in which locations.