

## LEADER'S REPORT TO COUNCIL

### The UK Economy

The economic situation both nationally and in York continues to show strong growth, confounding the widespread pessimism that Brexit would seriously weaken the British economy. The latest figures for the UK show that it continues to grow the fastest of all the G7 countries with low inflation and rising average real earnings. Manufacturing output, retail sales and GDP all continue to exhibit strong growth and are returning to the levels prevailing before the 2008 Recession.

### The York City Economy

Sterling's present weakness is a great boon for York as a destination for international tourism and although we do not yet have the figures, the anecdotal message from Make it York is that tourism in the city is heading for a record year. York's vibrant and strong city economy is also illustrated by the city's low jobseeker numbers. I also notice that a number of planning applications are coming through for business space for the future and this shows that our local businesses are still confident for the future. A tremendous record, but we must not be complacent.

### York City Centre

With tourism and leisure such an important element of our city's economy, we must ensure that we take all measures to ensure that both residents and visitors alike find a clean, welcoming and safe city. To that end, I address the topics of public realm and anti-social behaviour (ASB):

### Public Realm

It goes without saying that York city centre has an unrivalled charm and interest. It is rightly on a 'must-see' list for many, as well as a being a service centre for the region's residents. However that visitor experience can be quickly diminished if the basics are not right; if the streets are not as clean as they should be, if graffiti is not removed quickly, if drains are blocked, if signage is poor or non-existent, if there are too few litter bins or if they're always full and so on. After the neglect of these basic but vital tasks under the last administration, particularly regarding drains and gullies where underinvestment has in many cases led to their collapse which now requires replacement rather than simple repairs, we are committing more resources to these activities and

working closely with the board and management of the Business Improvement District (BID) to ensure the city centre will appear smarter and cleaner.

The number of empty retail premises in the city centre is a cause for concern. The latest figure is believed to be around 7% of retail floorspace which now lies vacant, with the latest high profile closure being that of British Home Stores. This has little if anything to do with any individual characteristic of York. It is a national, if not global phenomenon, as retailing migrates online and it is a trend which can only accelerate. It is important that where retail premises are vacant, their shop windows should at least contain something of interest to avoid the impression of dereliction that blank frontages on important streets can make. We have asked Make it York and the BID to come up with ideas on this with retail property owners and tenants.

However, these changes in retailing can be an opportunity for innovative urban renewal. I welcome the expansion of city-centre living and we are seeing some excellent initiatives from the private sector in wanting to invest in areas of the city centre such as The Stonebow, and the former Reynard's Garage area. I believe the Council should do all it can to facilitate and promote this renaissance. Many former retail premises do, of course, become converted to licensed cafes and bars, and the consequences of this often call for more specific measures.

### Anti-Social Behaviour

One of the consequences of the proliferation of licensed premises in the city centre is alcohol-related ASB. There is a significant element of 'perception crime' to ASB; one person's high jinx can be another person's intimidation. Also, ASB is a problem in nearly every city in the UK, and in fact, the level of ASB in York city centre is significantly lower than in many comparable cities.

However, I believe ASB is more noticeable in York because the centre is compact and there is no obvious specific 'drinking quarter'. In addition, York is one of the few cities where families will be out in the city centre in greater numbers and for longer periods. The contrast between the perpetrators and the wider population can therefore be more marked, and this higher profile often results in press attention, and resident and visitor comment.

An analysis of ASB in the city centre suggests there are four broad categories, although there can be some significant overlap between them:

1. Rough-sleepers. This is a handful of unfortunate homeless individuals, many of whom suffer from addiction and mental health problems and whose number hovers around 15. All are known to Council services and other agencies who offer significant support although this is not always accepted.
2. Street drinkers. This group has settled accommodation but engages in street drinking, intimidation, and criminal behaviour often involving shoplifting and drug-taking/dealing.
3. 'Professional' beggars. These also have settled accommodation and often come into York from elsewhere viewing the tourist economy as rich pickings.
4. Hen and stag parties/reveller groups. These may be either visitors or residents who come into the city-centre usually at weekends for celebration, often involving high levels of alcohol consumption. Many travel from elsewhere into York by train already intoxicated and without paying the fare. To address this, Operation Erase has been set up by North Yorkshire Police, the Council, British Transport Police, Network Rail, and the Train Operating Companies, and this is having a marked effect in reducing this type of ASB.

The Council's Community Safety Unit works closely with North Yorkshire Police, licensees, charities and others in a very effective partnership to tackle ASB and we are now beginning to see a downwards trend in the level of this type of behaviour in the city centre.

### A-Boards

My final point regarding the city centre is our administration plans after years of talk and delay to finally implement a year long trial to ban A-boards within designated areas of the city centre beginning early next year. We have listened to all sides of this debate, from disabled groups to small traders. We have extended the preparation time for the lead-up to the ban and the council will work with shops located on the smaller lanes and snickets to do all we can to ensure there is appropriate signage as exists in other historic cities. What all sides of the debate agree on however is that A-boards have reached saturation level in York and are now detracting from our street scene and pedestrian safety rather than providing the service they were originally designed for.

## Devolution

Turning to York's place in the region, the Deputy Leader and I continue to engage with our colleagues across the region. We are taking a leading role in these talks, acknowledging our position in both the Leeds City Region, and the North Yorkshire and East Riding economic geographies.

There remain many areas of concern, not least in relation to the Government's indicated desire for directly elected mayors, and there is no doubt that compromise will be required on all sides if a deal is to be done.

Our position remains that any deal must address York's interests and priorities, including the provision of additional infrastructure investment so that we can deliver our ambitions for sustainable growth as set out in the draft Local Plan. As we have already made clear, we will seek the views of York's businesses and residents on the terms of any deal.

## York Central

We continue to progress the development of York Central which will play a pivotal role in securing more higher-paid jobs in York, providing inter alia much-needed employment land in a highly sustainable location. The project now has the attention and financial support of Government across all departments. It is absolutely vital that the Council, as its chief enabler, maintains the momentum in bringing it to fruition.

Whilst there is much yet to do, we are making significant progress. For example, the site now has both Housing Zone and Enterprise Zone status, a Memorandum of Understanding has been signed by all the partners, third party land is being secured, Network Rail are clearing rail uses off the site, technical advisors are investigating access options, and a Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) is being developed to support the Local Plan.

We want to engage residents and businesses in reshaping this new part of our city and have therefore established a Community Forum which will be chaired by the Very Reverend Vivienne Faull, Dean of York Minster, and which will form the focus for consultation on the SPD and on the ensuing masterplan and planning applications.

Councillor David Carr

Council Leader