

Executive

18 November 2021

Report of the Corporate Director of Place
Portfolio of the Executive Member for Economy & Strategic Planning

My City Centre Strategic Vision – Adoption of Vision and Next Steps

Summary

1. This report sets out an aspirational 10 year vision for York city centre, which has been developed through extensive public engagement and stakeholder involvement. The strategy defines ‘*a long term social, environmental and economic strategic vision for a sustainable future for York city centre*’, which responds to the changing nature of the high-street, and immediate impacts of the Covid pandemic, which present both challenges and opportunities for the city centre.
2. The vision seeks to puts local residents and families at the heart of the future of the city centre, ensuring vibrant community use of the city centre throughout the day, week and year, to support businesses and drive social and cultural activity. The vision seeks to achieve this by creating a sustainable, attractive place and offer, and establishing a policy and regulatory environment within which businesses can thrive and adapt.
3. The vision proposes a range of actions which are designed to improve the centre – these actions are aspirations at this stage, as opposed to firm commitments, and a delivery strategy shared and owned by key stakeholders and setting out next steps to realising the vision will be brought back to the Executive for approval.
4. The report sets out the engagement outcomes; the strategic vision document for adoption; and the next steps for delivery of the vision. The transport and access issues relating to the city centre are set out separately in the accompanying Strategic Review of City Centre Access, which is also the product of extensive consultation, and forms a separate complementary report to this same meeting of the Executive. The vision also has important relationships with decisions on the future of the city

centre footstreets that is also being considered at the same meeting, and the upcoming economic and climate change strategies.

Recommendations

The Executive is asked to:

- 1) Approve the My City Centre Strategic Vision (as set out in Annex 1), and adopt as a guide to investment in the centre, inform policy decision and as a material consideration in planning (where relevant).

Reason: *To establish a long term social, environmental and economic strategic vision for a sustainable future for York city centre, and ensure that decisions are made in accordance with this vision.*

- 2) Instruct officers to prepare a delivery strategy for the vision, by working with partners including the project stakeholder group, which will be brought back to a future Executive

Reason: *To establish a means for delivering the vision, establish roles and responsibilities with partners, and prioritise the actions contained within the vision*

Background

5. The My City Centre project was commissioned by Executive in August 2019, with the aim:

“To engage the public and stakeholders to develop a long term social, environmental and economic strategic vision for a sustainable future for York city centre”

6. Following project scoping, procurement of consultancy support and establishment of a project Stakeholder Group of key city partners to guide the process, a first round of engagement commenced on 2 March 2020. However, in response to Covid the project and engagement was officially paused on 3 April 2020, and staff were redeployed to pandemic response activity, including developing and implementing the one year Covid-19 Transport and Place Strategy. After a year’s pause and as the city moved out of the emergency response phase, in April 2021 the

Executive Member for Economy and Strategic Planning approved the recommencement of the project, and engagement was re-launched in late May 2021.

7. Since that time, officers have engaged with communities, stakeholders and businesses to shape and develop the draft vision for the city centre. This has included using a variety of tools to broaden and deepen engagement, and deploying technical expertise and insight on key issues from within the Council, partner organisations and the Stakeholder Group, who have provided essential contributions and steer to the project. The vision has been prepared by officers on the basis of this activity, and further tested and refined through engagement. The vision focusses on creating a place where people feel safe in an attractive, sustainable and vibrant city centre environment for local residents (and families in particular) in the first instance, in order to support growth and change, provide footfall for business, and allow the city to flourish.

Consultation

8. The My City Centre project has been shaped through extensive public and stakeholder consultation throughout its lifetime. This has followed the innovative 'My' approach to engagement developed at Castle Gateway and continued at other development projects such as York Central. This approach seeks to broaden and deepen project involvement through staged activity:

1 Build a brief: *Use a variety of engagement tools to gain an understanding of a diverse range of people's needs and ideas. Make these ideas and differing perspectives visible.*

2 Explore Challenges: *Cultivate an open public debate about complex issues. Share and explain challenges, decisions and compromises throughout.*

3 Make change together: *Build ongoing networks to retain involvement, as well as long term community influence in decision-making, design and delivery*

During 2021 consultation rounds, the ongoing pandemic has challenged our ability to engage in person. However, this had led to innovation in the ways in which we engage and the reach of our engagement through new uses of online and digital platforms, as set out from paragraph 10 below.

9. The first round of consultation, undertaken for around a month to April 2020 (prior to the pandemic pausing the project), was comprised of both online project space (questionnaire, website and social media), and physical presence at pop-up city centre locations, alongside interactive display stands in libraries and council offices. The project was also presented to and discussed at a wide range of stakeholder and interest groups. Key findings from this engagement have been incorporated and created the baseline position on which the restarted project has been based. A summary of the engagement and insight flowing from it was made publically available and is presented at Annex 2.
10. Following the project recommencing in April 2021, further engagement was undertaken over 10 weeks between May and July, re-framing the discussion through analysis of the new city centre challenges and opportunities resulting from the pandemic. This engagement was broad-based, covering a wide variety of issues by theme, with a focus on understanding (and encouraging debate around) how people used and interacted with the city centre both before and during the pandemic, and how they anticipated using the city centre post pandemic. The engagement included a strong curated social media presence, a Facebook live Q&A debate with key partners, and virtual meetings with a range of stakeholders. A summary of the approach and findings is provided in the Open Brief at Annex 3.
11. On the basis of these two preceding rounds of engagement, a draft vision was then prepared by officers with the involvement of the project Stakeholder Group. This draft vision was then tested with the public through a further three week consultation between September and October 2021, structured to secure specific feedback on the draft vision content. The vision draft presented as part of this took the form of a core vision statement, with eight thematic areas sitting beneath this – each with a suite of potential city centre actions. Quantitative and qualitative feedback on the actions was sought through online and physical questionnaire. The findings of the engagement are set out at high level at paragraph 16 below, and summarised in more detail at Annex 4.
12. Over 5,000 contributions to the vision development were made over the three rounds of engagement, including almost 1,000 questionnaire responses in the most recent stage to test the draft vision. We have engaged with the public across a wide range of platforms, from pop-up events and interactive consultation stands in early stages, through use of our city publication (received by all households) and interest group attendance, to social media videos and animations, wide press coverage

and the interactive Facebook live Q&A event more. The project stakeholder group (see Figure 1 below for composition) have been instrumental to the development of the vision.

Figure 1: My City Centre Stakeholder Group Composition



My City Centre Vision

13. The My City Centre Strategic Vision has been drafted to set out a bold and ambitious framework for the city's development over the next 10 years. The vision is designed to be a clear and easy to digest summary of how we see the centre changing over this time, and what the council and its partners can encourage, facilitate and deliver to make the centre strong, vibrant and sustainable. The actions set out in the vision are intended to be practical, measurable and achievable - capable of delivering tangible beneficial change in the city centre. However, in being bold the vision remains at this stage an aspirational one, with the support of partners and external funding required to deliver the full ambition, and important next steps are set out later in this report to translate the vision from aspiration in to reality. Given the ongoing uncertainty around the economic and societal impacts of the pandemic (such as the degree to which home-working will continue to predominate in key sectors) it is also proposed that the vision be reviewed in the near-term future, notionally set at 3 years, to ensure that the assumed trends on which it is

based have materialised. This will help to ensure it remains effective and relevant throughout the remaining 10 year period.

14. The strategic vision is framed around a Core Vision Statement (pg. 3 of Annex 1), which sets out the central premise that people are key to maintaining the success of the city centre, and that it should ultimately serve the needs of our local residents. If the city centre is a great place for our residents and communities, then the tourists that support our economy, jobs and local businesses will always follow and in turn support the services and events from which our residents benefit and enjoy. By influencing how and when the city is used, and adapting the built environment, we can create a safe, welcoming and vibrant city centre, which a wide range of people want to spend time in at all times, and create the right conditions for responsive businesses to grow and adapt; for city living to develop; and for cultural and social activity to flourish.

Beneath the Core Vision Statement, eight individual themes are identified, each with a suite of specific actions which the Council and partners could implement in order to deliver the core vision. These are set out in the graphic at figure 2 below, and discussed briefly following, with more detail contained in the Annex 1 Vision Statement itself.

Figure 2: My City Centre Vision, Summary Graphic



15. 1 Family Friendly City Centre

The first theme sets out measures to put families at the heart of a reimagined city centre, removing barriers that have been identified by residents, and creating attractions and facilities to attract local families into the centre and create a more exciting, welcoming and nurturing environment for people of all ages.

2 Events Experiences & Investment in Public Spaces

This theme seeks to focus new investment into improve existing city spaces, squares and streets whilst reinvigorating the city's events programme and broadening its appeal, and supporting and improving the market offers in the city.

3 An Attractive City Offer at All Times

This focuses on improving how attractive the centre is in the early evening during the week when it has traditionally been quieter, and encourage new home workers to visit the city after work to offset the economic impacts of the loss of office workers from the centre. This will also look to build on the popularity of outdoor café culture that has developed during the pandemic and post restrictions. We also seek to manage some of the more negative impacts on the city centre at busier times such as weekend evenings and set clear behavioural expectations of those visiting our city.

4 Making Tourism Work for York

Acknowledging the huge benefits that tourism brings in supporting our economy and sustaining our city centre, this section sets out measures designed to harness the positive benefits for our residents and communities and reduce, offset and mitigate any negative impacts.

5 Embracing Our Riversides

In this section set out ways in which we will make sure our rivers are part of everyday life in the city, opening up new access routes and riverside environments and exploring their use as transport corridors, whilst also focusing on river safety.

6 City Centre Community which is Welcoming for All

A focus on living in the city centre – the opportunities to create new city living and ensure the facilities and services that our city centre communities need to thrive exist. We also set out how the centre can be improved for a diverse range of communities and people to access it conveniently, and how we plan to improve safety for all in the busy city centre.

7 Thriving Businesses and No Empty Buildings

Within this section we set out measures designed to support businesses in the centre, allow them to grow and adapt, whilst also promoting more temporary uses and making better use of vacant buildings.

8 Celebrating Heritage and Making Modern History

Acknowledging how the city has always adapted and changed over time, here we consider how we balance our heritage environment with the needs of a successful 21st century city that supports the modern lifestyles of our communities, and how we can better use the city's history to support an exciting and culturally rich experience.

The individual measures across these eight themes set out aspirational actions which the council could take, working with partners, to realise the core vision. These actions will need further work and commitment to translate them into reality.

Feedback on the draft vision

16. The most recent round of engagement in September 2021 was structured to allow direct feedback on the core vision statement, the themes, and each specific action. The draft vision had almost unanimous approval across the 983 questionnaire returns, with 82% of people agreeing with the vision statement (of which, 51% strongly agreed), and 66% agreeing that the vision reflects the city centre which people want York to become. All of the 39 proposed actions set out in the vision were supported by a majority of respondents, and most had very high levels of support - the average proportion supporting or strongly supporting the actions was 78%, and median 81%. Across the individual actions, only four had fewer than 60% of respondents in support or strong support, and even here the approval ratings were between 55-58%. The full consultation outcomes and findings are summarised at Annex 4
17. As well as quantitative feedback, respondents were invited to suggest any improvements or omissions from the vision. These suggestions have been reviewed by the project team and a suite of changes made to the updated vision document at Annex 1. Many of these changes are a reworking of existing content, incorporated into detailed wording, though some are more significant. The more significant changes are summarised below:
 - Creation of green space in city centre, including publicly accessible green rooves – (new action 2B)

- Strengthened narrative on responding to the negative impacts of the evening economy and expected behaviours of those visiting the city (updated action 3D)
- Affordability for residents of parking, businesses, city attractions – (new action 4D and updated action 2F)
- Include references to environmental quality improvements in rivers, and community ownership/ volunteering associated with riversides (updated action 5D).
- Strengthen the promotion of housing in the city centre at (updated action 6A)
- Include approach to providing ‘Safe Spaces’ and improving personal safety in city spaces (new action 6C)
- Support to allow businesses to operate more sustainably (new action 7B)
- Further support for the Independent business sectors (new action 7C)

18. The final document including these changes and presented at Annex 1 represents an ambitious and bold tangible vision for the city centre’s future. The vision has strong support and is shared with key city partners, shaped by extensive community and stakeholder involvement, and based on collaboration throughout the delivery stages of the project and beyond. The vision provides a strong basis for the co-ordination of activity, direction of resources, and preparation of bids for competitive funding programmes. The vision is both broad and ambitious in scope, and whilst the full ambition will require significant additional external resources to deliver in full, it provides a blueprint, framework and narrative to leave the city and its partners best placed to secure that funding. Following the adoption of the vision, it is proposed that a delivery strategy be prepared and brought back to Executive for approval.

Delivery Strategy

19. It is essential that the vision remains a live document, adapted as trends change, reviewed to measure progress and success, and crucially with a clear delivery plan to ensure the vision is translated in to tangible outcomes to support the success of the city centre. The vision is not a council document, it is owned by the city as a whole – its partners, business and communities. Many of the measures, particularly regulatory changes to create the right environment for success, sit with the council, but there are significant strands which will need to be delivered in

partnership or directly with other key stakeholder. To focus this activity and ensure the vision becomes a reality it is proposed to develop a shared delivery strategy with partners which will be brought back to Executive for approval at a future meeting.

20. The delivery strategy will be co-designed with key partners and establish clear realistic routes to realising the vision actions and will:

- Provide additional detail on the vision actions where relevant
- Define a delivery route for individual actions, including quantifying resource requirements at high level, setting out potential funding sources, identifying approvals and consents, and establishing future engagement approach.
- Set out the priority actions within the suite as a whole, establish broad timescales for delivery, sequencing of activity where relevant, and relationships with wider strategies and projects.
- Outline the roles and responsibilities of the council and existing partners across the suite of actions, identify potential additional partners where appropriate.
- Articulate outline governance structures for projects related to individual actions, and for the programme as a whole.
- Establish an approach to the marketing and dissemination for vision as whole to the public, stakeholders and potential city investors/ occupiers.

21. The delivery strategy will be prepared by officers, working with the project's stakeholder group and other partners. The delivery strategy will also include monitoring and evaluation approach, defining measurable outcomes for the actions, means and frequency of monitoring, and establishing in more detail the overall vision review mechanism (nominally envisaged to be undertaken around 3 years from inception).

22. As already noted, the comprehensive vision represents a bold ambition with significant resource requirement and a need for co-ordinated efforts with partners to deliver. Given the scope of the vision, external funding will be essential to deliver the full ambition. Whilst the recent application through the Levelling Up Fund was unsuccessful in the first round of allocations, we will continue to explore funding opportunities for specific elements of the vision, including submitting in future Levelling Up funding rounds and in the region's devolution discussions. Following adoption of the delivery strategy, and where individual projects flowing from the vision actions are council led, they will be incepted through the standard

corporate project management approach, and have resources allocated to them, through further Executive approvals.

Options

23. Option 1 – to accept the recommendations in the report, adopt the vision and instruct the additional work to produce a delivery strategy.
24. Option 2 – to request further work from officers on the vision document (to include or not include additional engagement activity) and receive a future report on a revised vision and delivery approach.
25. Option 3 – to adopt the vision but not instruct officers to prepare the associated delivery strategy.

Analysis

26. Option 1 is the preferred option – the vision has been prepared through extensive engagement, is strongly supported by the public, and is considered to represent the best approach to ensuring the ongoing vibrancy and vitality of the city centre. The proposed delivery strategy is an essential step in ensuring that we are able to realise the actions within the vision.
27. Option 2 – the current draft vision has been informed by extensive engagement and shaped by a strong stakeholder group, with the technical expertise of council officers. It is considered unlikely that the vision would significantly benefit from further work. There is a pressing need to implement the recommendations of the vision given the ongoing changes to our highstreets and communities, and the vision will ensure we are well placed in forthcoming funding opportunities and programmes. Additionally, there is a review mechanism built into the vision approach, to deal with future change and circumstances.
28. Option 3 – the draft vision sets out a complex and extensive suite of actions designed to improve the city centre, and requiring the input and involvement of a wide range of partners. It is considered unlikely that key elements of the vision content would be realised without the coordinating influence of a delivery strategy, and therefore this option would ultimately result in a reduction in overall project benefits, and undermine the resource already committed to the project to date.

Council Plan

29. The proposed vision has a very strong relationship with the Council Plan as amended May 2021:

Well Paid Jobs and an Inclusive Economy: The vision seeks to provide a vibrant city centre with good footfall at all times, which will help businesses to thrive and adapt, supporting employment. The vision seeks to maintain a sustainable tourism draw, which also supports employment – particularly in lower wage sectors which are an integral part of an inclusive economy. The vision also seeks to improve pay and conditions in this sector. The vision seeks to create a supportive regulatory environment for businesses to grow, and create a more nurturing environment for temporary uses, whilst making better use of existing buildings for commercial purposes.

Greener & Cleaner City: The vision proposes the greening of city centre public spaces and environmental improvements to our rivers, as well as setting out an approach to sustainable technologies and historic buildings to give clarity and encourage improvement. By facilitating a diverse range of activity into the city centre, the vision will promote sustainable living patterns, with less need for longer journeys. Transport related components of the vision are dealt with separately in the Strategic Reviews of Access & Parking, which also deals with the Getting Around Sustainably aspects of the vision.

Good Health & Wellbeing: As well as proposing green spaces in the centre, which improve physical and mental health, the vision encourages a wide range of uses into the city centre, to complement the retail and leisure uses which predominate, through a range of planning and business rates based measures. These uses could include more community and health based facilities. The vision also proposes specific actions to make the city centre more accessible, and more usable for those older members of our communities and those with dementia.

Safe Communities & Culture for All: The vision proposes specific measures including the creation of 'safe spaces' and improving personal safety in the city centre for the benefit of all. The vision proposes the cultural activation of key city centre spaces and improvement of our cultural events offer, encourages new cultural attractions in the centre, and recommends we explore a 'live heritage' app to enrich people's experience of visiting the centre and appreciate of the city.

Creating Homes & World Class Infrastructure

The vision seeks to facilitate more city living, as well as the provision of those services and amenities which those residents of the city centre are most in need of. The vision proposes major investment in our existing city centre public spaces in order to create a world class setting for the city, and improve accessibility, functionality and amenity.

A Better Start for Children & Young People

The vision proposes the creation of a more family friendly city centre, where the attractions, amenities and experiences are improved for all. The provision of play equipment in the centre is a core part of the vision, alongside actions such as improving events and exploring a live heritage app, which are designed to improve and enrich young people's interactions with the centre. Looking at 'safe spaces' is another important element of the vision, and something which flowed out of direct engagement with the Youth Council.

An Open and Effective Council: The My City Centre project was formulated partly in response to the specific concerns of residents around issues such as tourism and evening economy impacts, and has been developed through an open, transparent, wide-ranging and inclusive engagement approach following the 'My' principles set out in the report. Delivering this shared community vision will help to overcome those challenges and capitalise on those opportunities which have been identified by residents and stakeholders as most important to them.

Implications

30. All relevant implications of the proposals have been considered.

- **Financial**

The adoption of the My City Centre Strategic Vision in itself has no direct financial implications. There are however a number of improvements to the city centre attached to the vision. Whilst it is not necessarily the council's responsibility to deliver all these improvements there will be an expectation that the council takes the lead on a number of the improvements.

There are a number of budgets that can support these improvements both internally and externally funded e.g. Highways, Active Travel and across public realm services. The action plans that are proposed

to come forward will need to be fully costed considering the levels of budget available.

- **Human Resources (HR)**
No significant implications
- **One Planet Council / Equality & Diversity**
An Equality Impact Assessment of the vision is included at Annex 5. In line with the Equalities Act 2010 requirements, an Equality Impact Assessment will also be required for individual projects flowing from the vision to determine potential impacts and mitigation where individuals or groups with protected characteristics are identified. This will ensure that equality and diversity impacts are addressed through specific projects and programmes of work.
- **Legal**
This report is eligible for call-in. There are no specific legal implications arising from this report
- **Crime and Disorder**
No significant implications
- **Information Technology (IT)**
No significant implications
- **Property**
We will utilise our property assets to support the delivery of the Vision and further engage and work with other city centre property stakeholders to further the delivery of such.
- **Other**
No other significant implications

Risk Management

31. The principal risks associate with the project at this stage are reputational and 'non-delivery' or 'opportunity cost' related, given the project stage, which is the adoption of a high level vision.
32. There is a risk that having engaged extensively and raised expectations amongst the public, the vision is not ultimately realised. This would also result in the decline of the city centre as a hub for commercial social and cultural activity. The risk of not delivering the vision is mitigated by the strong partnerships and relationships formed throughout the project's development, and the detailed and robust delivery strategy which is proposed to be brought back to the Executive.
33. Delivery of the vision is contingent in part on the securing of external funding. The first associated bid to the first round of the government's

Levelling Up fund was unsuccessful. However, there are future funding rounds to follow, and discussions on devolution priorities are ongoing and will be framed around the vision. Ultimately having a clear and approved vision with public and stakeholder buy in represents the best opportunity to secure external funding and leverage private sector investment.

34. There is a risk that in the immediate aftermath of the pandemic's most severe impacts, we have not anticipated the longer term behavioural and economic impacts, and the 10 year vision therefore becomes less effective than hoped. These risks are mitigated through the review mechanism built into the project, and currently notionally set at year 3 of the vision.
35. Finally there is also a risk that the any vision misreads public opinion. Given the extensive and protracted engagement, using the 'My' principles set out in the report, this risk is considered highly unlikely, though we propose that individual projects flowing from the vision are further tested and refined through public consultation as part of our corporate approach to project management – giving further opportunities for influence and insight at delivery stage.

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Background Papers:

29.08.2019 Executive Committee. Agenda Item 29: My City Centre Project - Establishing a Strategic Vision for York City Centre

27.4.21 Decision Session of the Executive Member for Economy & Strategic Planning. Agenda Item 44: Engagement Strategy - Economic Strategy, Skills Plan and My City Centre

Annexes

Annex 1: My City Centre Vision
Annex 2: 2020 Consultation Insight Report
Annex 3: My City Centre Open Brief 2021
Annex 4: My City Centre Sep 2021 Draft Vision Consultation Summary
Annex 5: Equalities Impact Assessment

List of Abbreviations Used in this Report

Q&A: Question and Answer