

Towards a CULTURAL QUARTER Business Plan

1 Introduction

1.1

The impetus towards a Cultural Quarter in York developed through a series of open workshops held by [York@Large](#) to consider the cultural partnership's strategic contribution to the Sustainable Community Strategy (SCS). It was clear that within the area between the National Railway Museum and York Minster, and anchored around the Museum Gardens, York possessed one of the most unique cultural landscapes in Europe. It contains grade 1 and grade 2* listed buildings from every major building epochs since Roman times and provides the green heart of the city centre. But it is an underutilised resource, poorly served by through navigation routes and making an insufficient contribution to the evening economy of the city. The area in question runs from the National Railway Museum and Railway Station end of the York North West development area, across the river Ouse, through Museum Gardens (incorporating the Yorkshire Museums, Kings Manor, the Library, St Mary's Abbey and the Hospitium and Observatory, into Exhibition Square (incorporating the York Art Gallery, Theatre Royal and St Leonard's Place) and running up to the Minster and its environs, including Deans Park.

1.2

While the cultural institutions this area encompasses are nationally and internationally renowned they are also characterised by underinvestment in the estate and all of them were in the process of embarking upon major redevelopments without reference to the overall context of the city centre and its connectivity with the York North West developments. It was clear that without a more in depth look at this particular area of the city that the City would be in danger of missing opportunities to connect, improve and expand on the individually held ambitions for the area. It was also clear that without some prioritisation of the competing demands that there was a very realistic possibility that each development would be approaching funders, investors and audiences without a clear sense of overall place and purpose and thus collaborative opportunities would be missed. To this end Austin Smith Lord, previously working with the Yorkshire Museums Trust on the Yorkshire Museum HLF bid, was asked to consider the vision for a cultural quarter for York and identify the areas where investment and direction could make the most impact.

The scrutiny panel has already had the report from Austin Smith Lord but in essence it acknowledged the complex cluster of activities that are embedded in this particular geographic space and identified 5 different focus areas that would require investments in the public realm to create that physical sense of place so inherent in a Cultural Quarter concept. What the report did not do was provide us with an overwhelming vision of what the reinvestment in this part of the city could do to retain the standards of a premier European visitor destination and provide the highest quality urban cultural landscape for the everyday enjoyment of the citizens of York. In short it did not paint a picture for us of how best this area could contribute to the vibrancy and sustainability of the city as a whole.

1.3

Our research has shown us that investment in the cultural economy of a city, quite often through the designation of a Cultural Quarter, can have a major positive impact on the economic, cultural and social sustainability of a city. It is important to acknowledge the current economic, cultural and social benefits that arise from York's distinctive cultural offer. This includes the city's theatres and cinemas, as well as some 50 attractions and museums and over 1000 listed buildings, as well as conservation areas, areas of archaeological significance, the city walls, parks, gardens and rivers - and a litany of events, festivals and more informal activities that take place within and between.

This cultural economy encompasses much of the city centre, with outstanding examples on both sides of the river, and inside and outside the Bar Walls. Indeed York's cultural offer covers areas like the Yorkshire Air Museum and the Yorkshire Museum of Farming, which are beyond the Outer Ring Road. This all adds to the richness and quality of the York cultural offer.

Nonetheless the area currently designated as the 'Cultural Quarter' does have some distinctive properties:

- It forms a compact area including York's two most visited visitor attractions (the NRM and the Minster) along with three other destinations that are among the city's most popular cultural services – The York Art Gallery, Yorkshire Museum and Theatre Royal.
- Within the city centre it provides the largest area of green open space covering the riverbank walks, Museum Gardens and Deans Park, and the proposed green area for the York Northwest site
- The area encompasses in a compact area an especially high number of Grade 1 and 2* listed buildings
- The area forms a clear opportunity to link the city centre with York Northwest, one of the key development areas in the whole of the region over the next few years. The Cultural Quarter forms a pivotal node in the relationship between this major 21st century development area and the traditional city centre.
- The St Leonard's Place / Exhibition Square axis has the potential for a large civic outdoor performance space and city centre private redevelopment.

Many of the businesses and organisations in the area are producing significant investment plans at the moment – some of which (York Minster Revealed and the National Railway Museums plans) are already in the public domain. Given the level of ambition and leadership which is being demonstrated by these organisations, there is value in working with them on initiatives that will improve connectivity and the public realm within the Cultural Quarter – in particular as placemaking exemplars that can be rolled out to the public realm elsewhere in the city.

1.4

The area is identified in the City Centre Area Action Plan Issues and Options Paper as an Opportunity Area, one of five that will help the city address key themes of economic vitality, the historic environment and community life.

The Issues and Options Report highlights the Cultural Quarter as a project that will:

- Provide a focus for enhancements to the public realm along a network of routeways through the Quarter
- Develop opportunities to open up the cultural attractions within this area so residents and visitors can “fully access and appreciate the quality of this area of rich cultural and historic heritage”

2 **Why do something? Strategic context** – a sense of ambition

2.1 York’s Sustainable Community Strategy.

The recently published Sustainable Community Strategy “York – A City Making History 2008 - 2020” has high ambitions for York, which includes: -

- **Building confident, creative and inclusive communities**
- **Being a leading environmentally-friendly city**
- **Being at the forefront of innovation and change with a prosperous and thriving economy**
- **Being a world class centre for education and learning for all**
- **Celebrating our historic past whilst creating a successful and thriving future**

The Cultural Quarter offers opportunities to achieve this both through the direct investment of the organisations, attractions and companies based within its boundaries, and through appropriate treatment of the public open space, link routes and channels that run to and through the Quarter. The specific theme of “York – A City of Culture” includes such strategic aims as: -

- to be recognised internationally as a cultural city
- to be a city of high quality spaces
- to be a diverse, inclusive and cosmopolitan city
- to be an active and participative city and
- to be a creative city.

Again all of these ambitions can be met in the Cultural Quarter with every chance of rolling them out into the rest of the city. The city, therefore, has high ambitions that can be met in many different ways by investment in the Cultural Quarter.

2.2 Future York Group Report

This report by senior businessmen has been very influential in helping to guide the Thriving City agenda within the Sustainable Communities Strategy. One of the specific references to tourism is especially appropriate regarding the visitor economy.

“If York is to see its market position maintained, and we regard this as essential to the health of the economy overall, then innovation and investment to enhance the visitor offer is required. City of York Council should give priority to improving the quality of the public realm across the historic city, including paving, lighting, signage and public spaces. A higher quality of interpretation is necessary if visitors are to experience the full quality and range of the heritage offer”

2.3 York Northwest and City Centre Area Action Plans

The Cultural Quarter is identified as an “Opportunity Area” in the City Centre Action Plan Issues and Options Paper. These are areas of the city centre, which have been identified as having a specific need or good opportunities in the area for development, which will address the key themes of Economic Vitality, Historic Environment and Community Life. The Quarter will address these themes:

- Economic vitality: growing the evening economy; improving York’s visitor experience and exceeding expectations; attracting overnight, higher value visitors; pedestrian and cycle routes into the city centre.
- Historic Environment: Managing the historic environment; designing in the city centre; improving pedestrian routes around the city centre; improving the appearance of public spaces; addresses green spaces and riversides; increasing opportunities for greening the city centre
- Community life: Community services and facilities, cultural activity, evening activity

2.4 Regional Tourism Strategy

The Regional Tourism Strategy is the Visitor Economy Strategy, which confirms that “Great places lie at the heart of the Regional Economic Strategy for Yorkshire and Humber” and the Strategy is keen to celebrate “exciting new opportunities both for the development of the visitor economy product and the promotion of our region in a more contemporary manner”.

The Strategy recommends that “local authorities and local businesses can help to support local identity by celebrating local history and events, using local food and drink, arts and crafts. All of these give the visitor a sense of place and lead to sustainability”.

Finally the Visitor Economy Strategy confirms that “Yorkshire Forward has clearly stated its intention to work towards modernising the regional image. This does not mean abandoning our heritage and tradition; it means representing this heritage to new audiences and in new ways”

The Cultural Quarter offers excellent scope for doing just that, through the individual proposals for the main players, and through appropriate investment in the public realm and infrastructure.

2.5 Visit York business plan

Visit York, the Single Tourism Organisation, is still finalising its business plan and ambition document. Nevertheless it is likely to commend support and endorsement for investment projects that will help York meet its 5% per annum growth target. Visit York will seek to make York's public realm the most special in England – creating a physical welcome to encourage the visitor to stay longer and return. The Cultural Quarter offers a great opportunity as a test bed for investment in public realm (e.g. planting, open space, signage (including interactive), lighting, space for events and activities and free of clutter, litter and traffic that will be able to be rolled out across the whole of the city as the investment in the public realm is secured.

3 Benefits of the 'Cultural Quarter' concept for this specific area

3.1

Through the research so far undertaken with other Cultural Quarters visited or investigated we can recognise that there are other benefits to be gained by investment in this area:-

- Refreshing the image of York and building its cultural profile nationally and internationally
- Stimulating a pride of place
- Building new confidence in the whole of the cultural estate in the City
- Developing access to the landscape in the city through a new network of leisure routes and pathways
- Reclaiming our heritage landscape through improved interpretation and access
- Improving the urban environment through investment in high quality design elements within the public realm
- Contributing to a refreshed tourism offer
- Contributing to a reduction in health inequalities by encouraging walking and cycling within the city centre
- Encouraging inward investment
- Promoting York as a desirable place to live, work and visit.

3.2 Economic benefits

Excluding the city council jobs based at St Leonard's Place and De Grey House (which would move out as part of the development by Rushbonds of St Leonard's Place and the Conservation Trust at De Grey House) the key cultural institutions provide many of the jobs based in this area - the Theatre Royal, York Museums Trust, NRM, Kings Manor and York Minster/Minster Close. If you were to include the Campus at St John's University this would total some 1,500 jobs. So while respectable, this isn't currently a large employment node in the city. However, its contribution to the tourism is of major economic benefit:-

Value of tourism to York - £364mn and 10,600 jobs (2007-08 figures).

Visitor numbers at attractions in the Quarter 2007 figures:

843,311	NRM
779,825	York Minster
160,988	City Art Gallery
51,425	Yorkshire Museum

The City Walls (at least 1 mn users a year altogether – but most will go along the stretch within the Cultural Quarter).

In addition we also have

160,000	Theatre Royal customers
330,000	York Central Library

Users of all these services are a mix of tourists from outside the region and local residents. Improvements would also reap economic benefit from the one million people passing through the Quarter as rail passengers each year. There is clearly an opportunity, to open this area in the evening – especially riverfronts and Museum Gardens (lighting) creating a more ‘family friendly’ city centre atmosphere contributing more significantly to the evening economy of the city. The new (visitor) Information Centre on the corner of Museum Street and Blake Street could be charged as a gateway opportunity to the Quarter – and to the rest of the cultural highlights in the city.

If we are to consider including the York St John Campus within the Cultural Quarter then consideration must also be given to the substantial economic benefits from the investment already occurring and planned within that site (see addition to the appendices.)

The relationship of York Northwest (the swathe of land to the west of the traditional city centre which incorporates York Central (the site which includes the National Railway Museum and existing and former railway land), and the site of the former British Sugar works) is a crucial consideration if there is ever any intention of encouraging visitors to move between the city centre and the York Northwest site. Given that the great proportion of York’s visitors are coming for the history/heritage experience and appreciate the compactness of York as a walking city, then physical linkage between York Northwest and the city centre is going to be an important issue. The Cultural Quarter’s suggested improvements in navigation routes offers a great opportunity to address this, linking together some of the strongest features of the city’s cultural offers.

3.3 Cultural and social, health and well-being benefits

The area evidently has a very strong cultural offer – not just the famous attractions but also

- Explore at York Library
- City Archives
- Minster Archives
- Search Engine at NRM

Investment in these facilities will enable school groups and residents to find out more about their city's history, their own social history with a special strength on discovering aspects of personal genealogy. In looking at these establishments in an integrated way there is an opportunity to bring such a great social history offer closer to the local community.

A key feature of the landscape of the area is just how green the space is. By opening up these areas to greater access at different times of the day, by providing better routes through and around the areas, by encouraging better interpretation we will generate increased use by residents and visitors alike. We have already stated the wish that the pedestrian is at the top of the transport hierarchy throughout the area, with the cyclist, through preferential treatment on the roadways, a close second. All of this will support a more active populace.

4 What is needed to get the most from the establishment of a Cultural Quarter?

It is evident that the key cultural businesses in the Cultural Quarter have tremendous and exciting investment plans. They have provided detailed information on their plans to the Scrutiny Panel and this and additional information is included in the Appendices collated by CYC EDU. But we should also be taking into account the private enterprises, e.g. retail units, cafes, bars etc in High Petergate, hotels, Museum Street and in the newly formed Minster Quarter (northern end of the Cultural Quarter) when we agree on our recommendations.

City of York Council has a key role to play in the investment and revitalisation of the Library and City Archives, as well as with our "arms length" organisations, the York Museums Trust and the Theatre Royal. However much of the rest of the Cultural Quarter is also public realm:-

The River
 Riverside footpaths
 Other footpaths though out the area
 The Memorial Gardens
 Roads (e.g. St Leonard's Place, Museum Street, Leeman Road)
 The City Walls
 Exhibition Square
 Duncombe Place
 Street furniture – lighting, signs, litterbins, general services.

This would suggest that the production of a design masterplan for the public realm is of key importance moving forwards.

The public realm is important:

- i) in its own right – as a means of making the most of the Cultural Quarter's individual projects by given them the right setting and connecting them
- ii) as a means of connecting these projects to the rest of the city

- iii) as a means of following on from activities already carried out in the city centre from 2003 onwards, such as Illuminating York (the York: Light masterplan for city centre lighting which included permanent architectural lighting schemes, and more recently a lighting-oriented festival programme at the end of October each year) and the York Renaissance Project (creative lighting and interpretation in churches and on the city walls)

Within the current LDF proposals and transport master planning for the city consideration has been given to pedestrianisation and traffic calming measures in St Leonard's Place/ Exhibition Square. This would make a considerable contribution to the success of developing this area as part of a Cultural Quarter. We would also need to re-examine the narrow footpath in Museum Street and how this is addressed from Exhibition Square.

Linkage to York Northwest is essential, especially as, with the National Railway Museum being such a prominent feature of this development area, it is important to lock this firmly into the city centre visitor experience. But this also needs to be included as part of the redevelopment of Railway Station access and new entrance plans for the NRM and the through flow for the public both to and from the city centre. We will need to open up new ways of access to avoid the car if we are to achieve our aims of substantial increases in healthy walking and cycling. We also have to address the issue of Leeman Road access and improvements to Marble Arch. The York North West Development brief gives consideration to a bridge from the NRM into Museum Gardens as an alternative, safe way into the city and we should be promoting and supporting this.

Quote from Visit York re: the York North West AAP Issues and Options Paper:

"This is considered a major priority by the York Tourism Partnership, as this will make the most of links to the city centre, and will really integrate the cultural area around the NRM with the cultural area contained within the Museum Gardens (and beyond) – providing a safer and more imaginative link to the city than Marble Arch. Furthermore the link will benefit the whole of York Northwest – not just visitor elements – as it will help lock the new development with the rest of the city, rather than the risk of it being stand-alone and impermeable.

Consideration should be given to the opportunity of redeveloping Scarborough Bridge itself, thereby making closer, direct link with the railway station. Whilst work on the bridge itself might well be expensive (as per the listed disadvantage in the Issues and Options Report) there are surely commercial opportunities as well in the vicinity of such a prominent location."

Wherever such a link is provided, the opportunity should be considered to review lighting and pedestrian facilities on either side of the River Ouse between Scarborough Bridge and Lendal Bridge, enhancing opportunities for riverside activity in the daytime and in the evening.

We should also be making best use of the Museum Gardens – our green breathing space in the city centre. Currently Museums Gardens is a superb historical park but if we were to

reinforce linkages across Museum Street , along the riverside walkways and through up to Exhibition Square and St Leonard's Place it would open up the to the rest of the city.

This would suggest that seeking to agree a new river crossing as part of the York Northwest development plans will be key in realising the potential of this area.

Yorkshire Forward's Major Events Strategy (draft) highlights the growing demand for cultural activities to take place in well facilitated, well resourced and pleasant outdoor public spaces. Despite the lack of good outdoor electricity supplies, convenient, pleasant public conveniences and a favourable traffic restriction regime significant numbers of outdoor events are currently held in the following places within the Cultural Quarter: -

- Museum Gardens (Illuminating York, Yorkshire Forward Enterprise Day, Mystery Plays, Shakespeare performances)
- Duncombe Place (Illuminating York, Military parades, cycle racing, Christmas lights switch on)
- Deans Park (Mystery Plays on Waggon, Shakespeare Project)
- River and river banks (Dragon boat races, Festival of the Rivers)

With an investment into good public facilities to improve this offer throughout the Cultural Quarter there may also be other possibilities: -

- In front of the NRM - requiring the long term plans to include closure of Leeman Road and improvements to Railway station access
- Exhibition Square – subject to St Leonard's Place being closed to traffic and the removal of railings in the vicinity
- Along the walls – a linear event – possibly in the evening requiring improvements in lighting
- Library Square/ St Leonard's Hospital -if no traffic/cars outside the Library and railings removed

This would suggest that funding should be sought for a major investment in the public realm of the city to realise the opportunities available in improving our public, civic space.

5 Funding

Within the appendices drawn up the Economic Development Unit each stakeholder has indicated.

- the activity at each individual stakeholder in the Quarter
- the financial cost of planned developments
- the potential or likely source of that finance
- an overall thumbnail view of the developing Quarter

In addition the individual sheets for each stakeholder gives textual information on their plans and notes some potential sources of funding to be explored for their particular development. Already identified within the documents are:

- Commercial sources
- Yorkshire Forward – various – not just Tourism and the Major Events Fund
- Arts Council – including funds for activities and events
- Private Trust Funds
- S106 agreements
- Local Transport Plan funding for some improvements
- Heritage Lottery Fund

An approach that has a greater strategic context and a phased development plan will, most likely, increase the stakeholders' chances of success. It could also seek to secure additional public funds that cannot be realised through the Council's current capital programme. There is still a substantial amount of feasibility work to be done to provide a clear and cast iron business plan for such an investment; however the Scrutiny Panel may wish to give consideration to just such a recommendation. This should be considered alongside the recommendations suggested in Section 4 above.

This would suggest the commissioning of an in depth Business Plan feasibility document for the agreed Cultural Quarter area.

October 2008

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