

Meeting:	Combined Executive Member Decision Session
Meeting date:	4 November 2025
Report of:	Director of City Development
Portfolio of:	Leader, Portfolio Holder Strategy, Policy and Partnerships

Decision Report: Heritage Programme

Subject of Report

1. This report invites the Leader to consider initiating a programme to develop a 10-year Heritage Strategic Delivery Plan – focused on maximising the social, economic and sustainability outcomes from York’s world-renowned heritage assets.
2. It sets out how the council proposes drawing on arguably York’s greatest strength to introduce more well-paid jobs to the city, as well as establishing opportunities for residents to develop pioneering sustainable heritage skills, build community pride and local engagement and strengthen research and innovation focused on our heritage assets and every day historical artefacts.
3. At the heart of the programme will be attracting significant investment in York’s heritage, whether through public sector grants, private sector investment or planned disposals.

4. Benefits and Challenges

5. By harnessing the opportunities from York’s heritage assets, the programme will inform local and regional ambition and national opportunity to explore new conservation, sustainability and community engagement practices that support York’s economic growth and longer-term financial resilience.
6. By setting out a clear strategic narrative and delivery plan to protect and enhance York’s heritage assets, the council will be better placed to mitigate expensive unplanned maintenance liabilities, inherent in the custodianship of heritage buildings, and

maximise occupational efficiencies and benefits, to make sites more viable and financially self-sustaining.

7. It will structure and embed how the council works in partnership with key city stewards to unlock innovation, opportunity and investment, providing a more compelling narrative to funding and investment decisions greater oversight for the administration and budget planning.
8. In the absence of council capacity to lead a strategic approach to attracting investment in the heritage estate, city partners have initiated their own programmes to attract more investment, creating a risk that partners who have the capacity to corral around a single purpose are dominating the discussion, rather than taking a city-wide perspective to make sure the highest priorities get due attention.
9. There is no guarantee that by initiating a heritage programme the council will attract the investment the city needs. However, by doing nothing there is a guarantee that nothing will change, the heritage estate will decline, and the council will continue to have increased maintenance and business liabilities with no plans to mitigate.

Policy Basis for Decision

10. *The Economic Strategy 2022-2032 and Cultural Strategy 2020-2025* both recognise York's place with global strengths. York's heritage is of global significance and York was placed on the UK's UNESCO World Heritage tentative list¹ in 2023.
11. The Council Plan, *One city for all, 2023-2027*, reflects York's heritage assets and 2,000-year history as a key strength, attracting over 9m visitors a year. In addition, the council plan sets an action to help business to thrive by repurposing vacant premises and council spaces to encourage meanwhile or alternative uses.
12. The Local Plan, adopted in February 2025, ensures future developments respect the unique historical status and heritage of York, in particular reflecting the character and setting of the city and the permanence of the Green Belt. Supplementary Planning

¹ DCMS reviews and publishes the UK tentative list roughly every 10 years.

Documents required as a result of the Local Plan include sustainability and heritage which could be informed by this approach.

13. The York Narrative reflects York's heritage. It describes York as a city where "history makes us what we are, not who we are", with city values of making history every day, pioneering with purpose and prioritising people.

Financial Strategy Implications

14. The direct financial strategy implications are that this funding has been identified from within existing resources. It is expected that the initial costs can be capitalised, on the assumption that future funding will follow. There is no immediate impact on the council's finances, and therefore no contribution to closing the forecast three-year budget gap from this investment.
15. However, York obviously has a significant heritage asset base, and it is therefore very much in our longer-term financial interest to ensure it is maintained and improved. Financial investment and economic growth should follow, and this will be of benefit to the Council's longer term financial position.
16. A £250k programme fund for a cultural asset programme over two years was approved at September's Executive – with the intention the programme attracts sufficient investment to self-fund after 24 months. The funding will need to be carefully managed to ensure that after the initial period, a clear benefit to the city is delivered.

Recommendation and Reasons

17. The Leader is invited to approve establishing the Heritage programme which is focused on making the most from and for York's heritage assets. Annex A sets out the key outcomes and programme objectives.
18. By harnessing the opportunities from York's heritage assets, the benefit will stretch far beyond York's boundaries as new conservation, sustainability and community engagement practices are shared nationally and celebrated globally.

19. Initiating the programme now is to enable the council to put in place the partnership and governance arrangements that would ensure a city response based on shared and approved priorities – providing Executive with greater oversight.
20. Once approved, this programme would then act as the governance arrangements for all subsequent heritage-related projects which involve the council, including those led by partners such as the York Museum Trust or World Heritage Steering Group.
21. The Executive is invited to appoint a Heritage Champion for the Council who will be responsible for taking this forward.

Background

22. York's heritage is highly valued and economically important with a Gross Value Added (GVA) of £2.1bn, and incredible range of distinctive assets, the proportion of people employed in "libraries, archives, museums and other cultural activities" nearly 3x England's average, with c8% of the workforce in creative industries.
23. York's heritage is globally renowned. It has the largest number of heritage assets per square mile outside of London, key strengths such as the Minster's Centre of Excellence Heritage Craft, York Civic Trust, a nationally recognised events programme including Jorvik Viking Week, Open York and Georgian Week, an engaged and active community, and leading conservation and heritage bodies based in York.
24. York is the outstanding example of urbanisation in north-western and northern Europe initiated by the Romans developing and changing up to the present day. The quality of its surviving buildings and townscape, augmented by well-preserved archaeological deposits below ground, provides an unparalleled physical record of successive cultures and expresses how the city has, and continues to, successfully change.
25. The city is currently on the UK's tentative list for UNESCO World Heritage designation, with a pre-application submitted by York's

World Heritage Steering Group, which is independent of the council.

26. In addition to the heritage buildings, the city is fortunate in being custodians of a nationally significant collection of historical artefacts representing different periods of everyday history. The collections are either owned by the council or partner organisations and are stored in separate warehousing facilities across the city. None of the warehousing is purpose built, and all the collections are at risk of degradation from rising temperatures and humidity. There is a need for twenty-first-century storage that can conserve and showcase the city's nationally important archival material.
27. Historic buildings and archaeology can bring additional challenges in terms of maintenance and adaptation, often with additional costs; these can be exacerbated by inappropriate uses, under-use or total vacancy. Proactive management of the city's historic assets, including securing new uses and sensitive adaptation, will improve social, economic and sustainability outcomes in the city.

York Museum Trust

28. CYC has reduced the funding to York Museum Trust (YMT) from £1.1m to £300k, whilst the Trust has also diversified its income stream. There are space constraints and repairs required to continue to attract visitors which are currently 80% of what they were pre-pandemic.² York Museum Trust have diversified their offer with live events on the Museum Gardens, and successful temporary exhibitions at the Art Gallery and Yorkshire Museum including the Hoard. In addition, Kirkgate continues to perform well.
29. At October's Executive, the council approved the continuation of a letter of credit to cover York Museum Trust's revenue pressures, partially as a result of diminished reserves, and partially due to outstanding liabilities.
30. As part of their contract, YMT were tasked with developing a long-term capital development plan to inform the Council's

² Although recovering, nationally, overseas visitor numbers remain lower than pre-pandemic, while cost of living means UK-based visitors are choosing trips carefully.

consideration of its support of YMT's capital development programme. YMT have successful bid for National Heritage Lottery Funding to support the development of both mid- and long-term options which will be presented to Executive for consideration in December 2025.

UNESCO World Heritage designation

31. The independent World Heritage Steering Group (WHSG) are progressing a proposed designation for York, as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. This bid is independent of the council who made clear there is no funding available to support a bid. The Steering Group believe they can raise the necessary funding themselves, however, at this stage, it is not known if or what additional support would be required from the council should the designation be successful.
32. In April 2022, Executive approved the progression of the UNESCO World Heritage bid by the WHSG. Then in 2023, York was placed on the UK's tentative list of world heritage sites, recognising York's heritage of national and international significance. There were five sites identified by DCMS and added to the UK's tentative list including: York, Birkenhead the People's Park, The Zenith of the Iron Age Shetland, East Atlantic Flyway (East Coast Wetlands) and Little Cayman Marin Parks and Protected Areas.
33. York's bid has been successfully selected by DCMS to request a preliminary assessment of a potential nomination direct from the UNESCO World Heritage Committee with a formal response, including a report, is expected in October 2025. It is anticipated that UNESCO will invite further clarification, with the final nomination then be submitted for a decision by the UNESCO World Heritage Committee in 2030. WHSG anticipate providing a more detailed view of next steps to Executive in January 2026.

Investment in the council's heritage estate and collections

34. The council has over 100 grade 1, 2, and 2* heritage assets: some leased, some directly managed. Some of these have large unfunded repair and maintenance liabilities that constrain development opportunities. CYC does not have the budget to

protect this nationally significant asset without external investment. It requires a very different approach to ensure the city's globally renowned heritage is future fit for the decades ahead.

35. CYC are aware of capital investments being required at the Yorkshire Museum £7m, which includes the new roof to prevent further water ingress and damage to collections. The Castle Museum was the subject of an unsuccessful 2019 £70m National Lottery Heritage Fund bid to transform the site and the site offer to meet the needs of a 21st Century visitor experience. The Female prison roof needs replacing within a 10-year time horizon at a likely cost of around £15m. There is currently a temporary roof in place.
36. Different tactical investment options are being explored across the city, including voluntary donations at the city walls. Although these can contribute to maintenance liabilities, they won't provide sufficient funding to make a sustained difference.
37. If no action is taken, and no investment sought more strategically, it is likely that the council will be left with significant liabilities, both from heritage assets and as custodians of artefacts of national importance.

The programme

38. The proposed Heritage Programme (Annex A) aims to incorporate several different heritage-related issues across the city, including oversight and governance of the emerging capital plan from York Museum Trust, and the UNESCO World Heritage bid.
39. The programme would provide a single voice for heritage assets in the city to lobby for national support and engage potential funders.
40. The programme recognises the complex and complementary role York's unique heritage plays in our economic prosperity and will harness the commitment residents and partners have to the city.
41. When considering the city's heritage, it will also be mindful of both Local Plan and Local Growth Plan to ensure the city is a modern vibrant and resilient space, able to respond to emerging and new issues, such as the impact of climate change, population growth

and tourism whilst conserving and curating historical artefacts and heritage assets.

42. Through partnership co-design workshops, the programme will develop a 10-year heritage estate strategic delivery plan aiming to attract investment, leverage the economic opportunity from the city's unique heritage assets and develop in partnership the strategic narrative that sets York's incredible heritage apart from other heritage cities – as an attractor, a destination and for inward investment.

Consultation Analysis

43. YMT are engaging officers across the council, their neighbouring institutions (York Explore, University of York, the Theatre) together with the York Civic Trust in their capital proposal. It has been approved by their Trustees and, with more information, will be presented to Executive in December.
44. The UNESCO World Heritage steering group have engaged different heritage and conservation organisations both locally and nationally. DCMS have supported the preliminary bid which is now with UNESCO for review.
45. The proposed Programme (Annex A) has been refined by an expert officer group including the city's archaeologist, conservationist, community assets lead officer, ancient monuments manager, strategic planning, strategy, and regeneration and economy.
46. It has been shared with YMT and YCT for their initial thoughts to help steer the programme and garner partnership support.
47. On approval by the Leader, the proposed Strategic Partnership will be convened and the programme outcomes and actions further refined.

Options Analysis and Evidential Basis

There are three options

1. Initiate the programme as set out in Annex A

2. Initiate a programme, with a different vision
3. Do not initiate the programme

Rationale

1. The recommended option is 1. Initiate the programme as set out in Annex A.
2. This is because the outcomes set out in Annex A will mean the council is best placed to benefit from harnessing the investment and economic and social outcomes that can be derived from the heritage estate, together with conserving and curating the city's historical collections.

Organisational Impact and Implications

Financial

48. The initial capital investment of £250k is made using the capital contingency budget. Should further funding be identified, this should be used instead. This will use the capital contingency set aside for 2025/26 and therefore there is a significant risk that, should other urgent capital issues be identified, there will be insufficient funding available. That said, the Capital Programme often has underspends and slippage and it is expected that this relatively small investment can be managed within the overall programme.

Human Resources (HR)

49. The programme will be led by City Development with input from existing specialist officers within the council. As such there are not implications at this stage.

Legal

50. There are no implications specific to this report and the development of the overall delivery strategy at this stage. As individual activities develop – such as any lease negotiations or funding bids – the legal implications will be considered and handled separately by the relevant team.

Procurement

51. There are no implications at this stage. Projects requiring the procurement of services (consultancy) may be an outcome of the delivery plan at a later stage. Any services identified as being required will be procured in accordance with the Procurement Act 2023 and the Council's Contract Procedure Rules. Further advice will be sought at that point from the Commercial Procurement team.

Health and Wellbeing

52. Projects that are developed from the delivery plan have the potential for positive impacts on health and wellbeing, through volunteering and community engagement.

Environment and Climate action

53. There are no implications at this stage. If projects are developed as a result of the delivery strategy that maintain, reuse assets and reduce vacancy there are likely to be positive environmental outcomes.

Affordability

54. A key aspect of the programme delivery will be the application of the four core commitments (EACH) of which Affordability is one. Providing free access to our unique heritage across the city, as well as free opportunities to engage in the conservation and preservation will help build community pride. In addition, by supporting people into skills pathways that respond to our heritage will help bring more well paid jobs for residents.

Equalities and Human Rights

55. An equalities impact assessment has been completed and will be regularly reviewed as the programme develops. Representation will be sought for the steering. As work progresses a key aspect will be the application of the Social Model of Disability to ensure our unique heritage is accessible to all. The programme will result

in opportunities to improve equitable access, not least through digital innovation.

Data Protection and Privacy

56. The data protection impact assessment (DPIAs) screening questions were completed for the recommendations and options in this report and as there is no personal, special categories or criminal offence data being processed to set these out, there is no requirement to complete a DPIA at this time. However, this will be reviewed following the approved recommendations and options from this report and a DPIA completed if required.

Communications

57. A key aspect of the programme is to connect residents to our heritage as well as promote its global significant, this will require a concerted co-ordinated communications campaign throughout the duration of the programme with resourcing and funding this communications – including that of partners – an issue for the programme to develop.

Economy

58. York has significant strengths in its thriving heritage and conservation sector. With a strategic focus on making the most from our heritage assets, the city will be well placed to introduce more well-paid jobs in conservation, heritage, curation, archeology and related industries into the city.

Risks and Mitigations

Financial – conserving the city's heritage estate is costly, and without a commercial benefit, often unfunded or difficult to secure investment, in addition, existing income generation levels are jeopardised by lack of investment. This programme will mitigate the cost of maintaining and managing York's heritage estate by securing investment from external sources.

Reputational – by identifying issues with the heritage estate, there is a risk that we inadvertently deter visitors. Communications and

engagement will need to inspire and encourage support for proposals from the outset.

Sustainability – heritage buildings can be difficult to retrofit or install renewable energy technologies. To align with the city's net zero ambition will require sensitive conservation management whilst exploring new technologies and learning from others.

Partnerships – there is a huge and valuable commitment to the heritage assets in the city. Partners, and residents, are rightly proud of the city and its beautiful built architecture. Understanding different perspectives to reach a shared compromise will be critical to identify priorities for investment and a solution for to protect the collections for future generations to continue to benefit from the city's unique heritage

Wards Impacted

3. All

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Background papers

[Decision - York Museums Trust Funding 2017-20](#)

[Decision - York as a World Heritage Site](#)

Executive [Agenda for Executive on Tuesday, 2 September 2025, 4.30 pm](#) item 135 (v)

Annexes

Annex A – The Heritage Programme proposal

Annex B – Equalities Impact Assessment

Annex C – Data Protection Impact Assessment Screening

Abbreviations

DCMS – Department for Culture, Media and Sport

WHSG – World Heritage Steering Group

YMT – York Museum Trust

YCT – York Civic Trust