

# York Central Historic Core

# Conservation Area Appraisal

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Alan Baxter

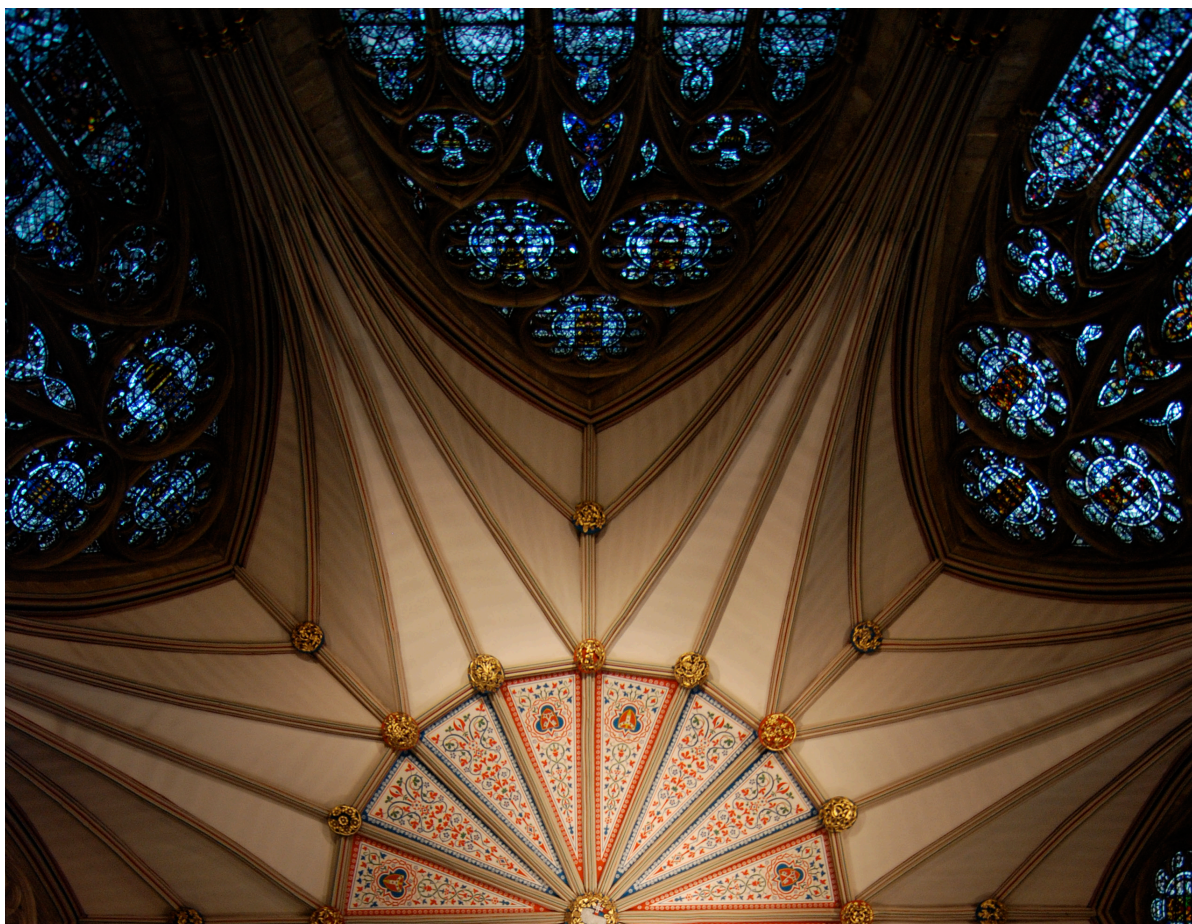
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Cllr Dave Merrett

Cabinet Member for City Strategy

# TO FOLLOW



# Executive Summary

## Aims & Objectives

City of York Council, in association with English Heritage, appointed Alan Baxter & Associates to prepare an appraisal of the city's Central Historic Core Conservation Area. This is the first in-depth study of the Conservation Area – which encompasses the medieval walled city and the early suburbs – to be undertaken since the Area was designated in 1968.

The Appraisal will help the Council to fulfil a statutory duty to draw up and publish proposals to preserve and enhance conservation areas. It does this by defining the unique characteristics which make the historic core of York so special and by identifying the threats and opportunities to its conservation and enhancement. These are the foundations for developing practical policies and proposals for the management of the Conservation Area which will enable it to play a positive role in shaping an economically and socially successful city.

## Policy Framework

The Appraisal was commissioned as one of a suite of documents forming the evidence base for the Local Development Framework. It interfaces with other evidence base documents, notably the *Heritage Topic Paper*, the *City Centre Movement and Accessibility Framework* and the *New City Beautiful Economic Vision*.

The recommendations and ideas it contains will inform the policies and proposals of the City Centre Area Action Plan and other Development Plan Documents and Supplementary Planning Documents.

The Appraisal is also intended to aid rational and consistent planning decisions by clearly and publicly articulating the special interest of the Conservation Area. Legislation and government policy, such as *Planning Policy Statement 5: Planning and the Historic Environment*, require all decisions on planning applications in the conservation area to be founded on such understanding.

Finally, the Appraisal is conceived as one of the documents that will form the basis for a World Heritage Site Management Plan if a future bid is successful.

## Methodology and Structure

The methodology and structure of the report follow best practice as set out in English Heritage guidance, adapted to the particular demands of a conservation area as exceptionally large and complex as this.

The main body of the report is divided into two parts:

- *Part One: Understanding the City* Here the Area's development and character is analysed first at the level of the city and then by dividing it into two dozen character areas. These character areas allow more detailed analysis to be undertaken.

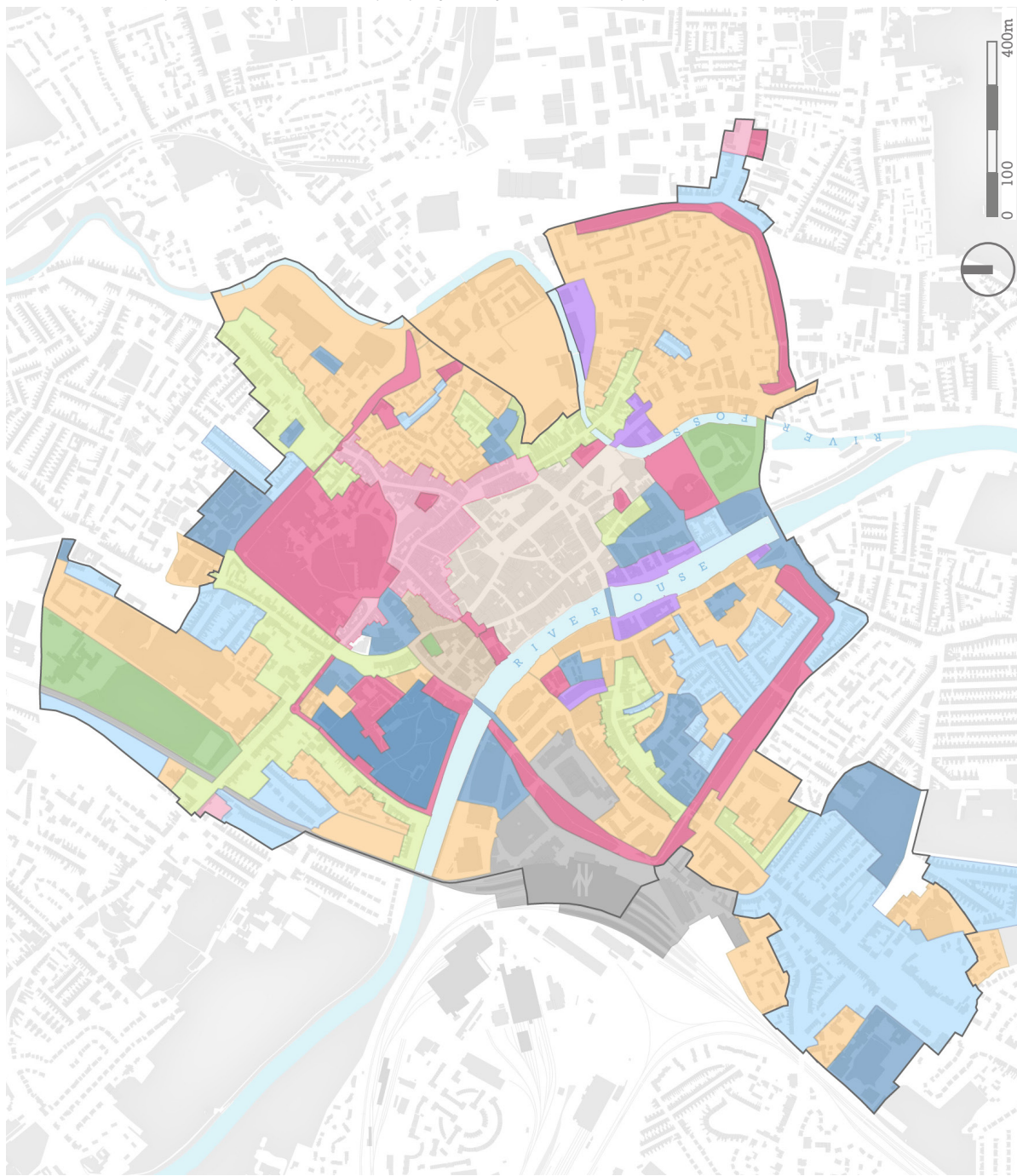
The purpose of this section is to identify, first, the Conservation Area's special interest, second, those issues that threaten to harm this interest and, third, the opportunities that exist for enhancing its appearance and character.

- *Part Two: Management Strategy* sets out a series of practical management recommendations to enable the Council, its partners and the local community to address the threats and opportunities identified in Part One. Its Conclusion identifies the over-arching Principles for future management and the Priorities for action.

Key characteristics of the project have been:

- *Partnership* with council and English Heritage officers
- *Consultation* with a Key Stakeholder Group and the public, and:
- *Accessibility*, with the intention of producing a readable and engaging document designed for web access that will hopefully neither bore the professional or alienate the general public.

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Prevailing townscape and building character

Executive Summary

- Medieval and Tudor shops and houses
- Medieval and Tudor civic and religious
- Georgian shops and houses
- Georgian civic and religious
- Victorian and Edwardian housing
- Victorian and Edwardian civic and religious
- 18<sup>th</sup>/19<sup>th</sup> century quayside and commercial
- 19<sup>th</sup> century railway development
- 19<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> century shopping area
- 20<sup>th</sup>/21<sup>st</sup> century development
- Existing Conservation Area boundary

## What Makes the Historic Core of York Special?

The necessary precursor to effective management of any conservation area is the identification and definition of the special character which it is the purpose of designation to conserve and enhance.

York's historic core is an inherently complex place whose character and appearance is the unique outcome of a subtle fusion of many factors: historical development and change, architectural style and materials, topography, spaces and landscape, landownership and uses. The Local Development Framework's Core Strategy *Heritage Topic Paper* has identified six Principle Characteristics which define the qualities, interest and cultural significance of York which sets it apart from other English cathedral cities. As they explain the special interest of the historic core they are:

**Strong Urban Form.** There are few places in the British Isles where a two thousand year legacy of urbanism can be appreciated in such detail as York. Today's street pattern combines the principal roads of the Roman settlement with Anglo-Scandinavian and medieval streets and building plots and Georgian and Victorian highway improvement. It is relatively little scarred by postwar redevelopment and engineering. The results is a rich townscape of intimate streets, small irregular public spaces and above all contrast and surprises, twists and turns, juxtapositions of forms and materials and sequences of ever-changing vistas and panoramas.

**Compactness.** York retains a very compact, densely-populated historic core. The City Walls play a significant role in the survival and the perception of this. The centre is therefore a highly walkable place.

**Landmark Monuments.** The Conservation Area contains historic buildings and structures of the highest architectural and historic interest: in the Minster, one of the greatest Gothic buildings of Europe; in the City Walls and Clifford's Tower, the most extensive medieval wall circuit in England, and one of the best preserved in Europe; in the guildhalls and churches the greatest concentration of medieval civic and religious buildings in the country; and in the Eye of York the grandest group of 18<sup>th</sup> century public buildings outside London.

**Architectural Character.** Tremendous architectural variety – from medieval houses and tenements to Georgian terraces, the monuments of the Railway Age, the legacy of industrialisation and redevelopment in the 20<sup>th</sup> century – creates endless juxtapositions of style and form. Yet there is an overriding harmony of materials – plaster/timber, brick and Magnesian Limestone – roofscape, continuous street frontages and a very humane scale.

**Archaeological Complexity.** The peculiar sub-surface conditions of York have ensured that archaeological evidence for 2,000 years of occupation and activity survives in a remarkable state of anaerobic preservation which is only matched by a small handful of sites worldwide. The archaeology of the city centre is therefore of outstanding international importance.

**Landscape and Setting.** A settlement was founded and prospered because this is a good crossing point on the River Ouse and a natural centre for regional communications. The Ouse and the Foss not only play a significant part in defining the character of the townscape, but as a thriving international port were fundamental to the past prosperity and growth of York. Because the Vale of York is a low-lying bowl surrounded on three sides by higher ground, long distance and close quarters views of the Minster are numerous and treasured. Through these views the relationship between the city and its landscape setting is illustrated, and the city reaches into the consciousness of people many miles away.

These six characteristics combine to create a conservation area of extraordinary and perhaps **unparalleled variety and richness**. This is what makes it unique. Moreover, this variety is not limited to built form; it is inextricably linked to the **diversity and the vitality of use** – residential communities, businesses, educational and cultural life – which are as fundamental to the special character of the Conservation Area as its archaeological deposits or medieval monuments.



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Executive Summary

Character Areas

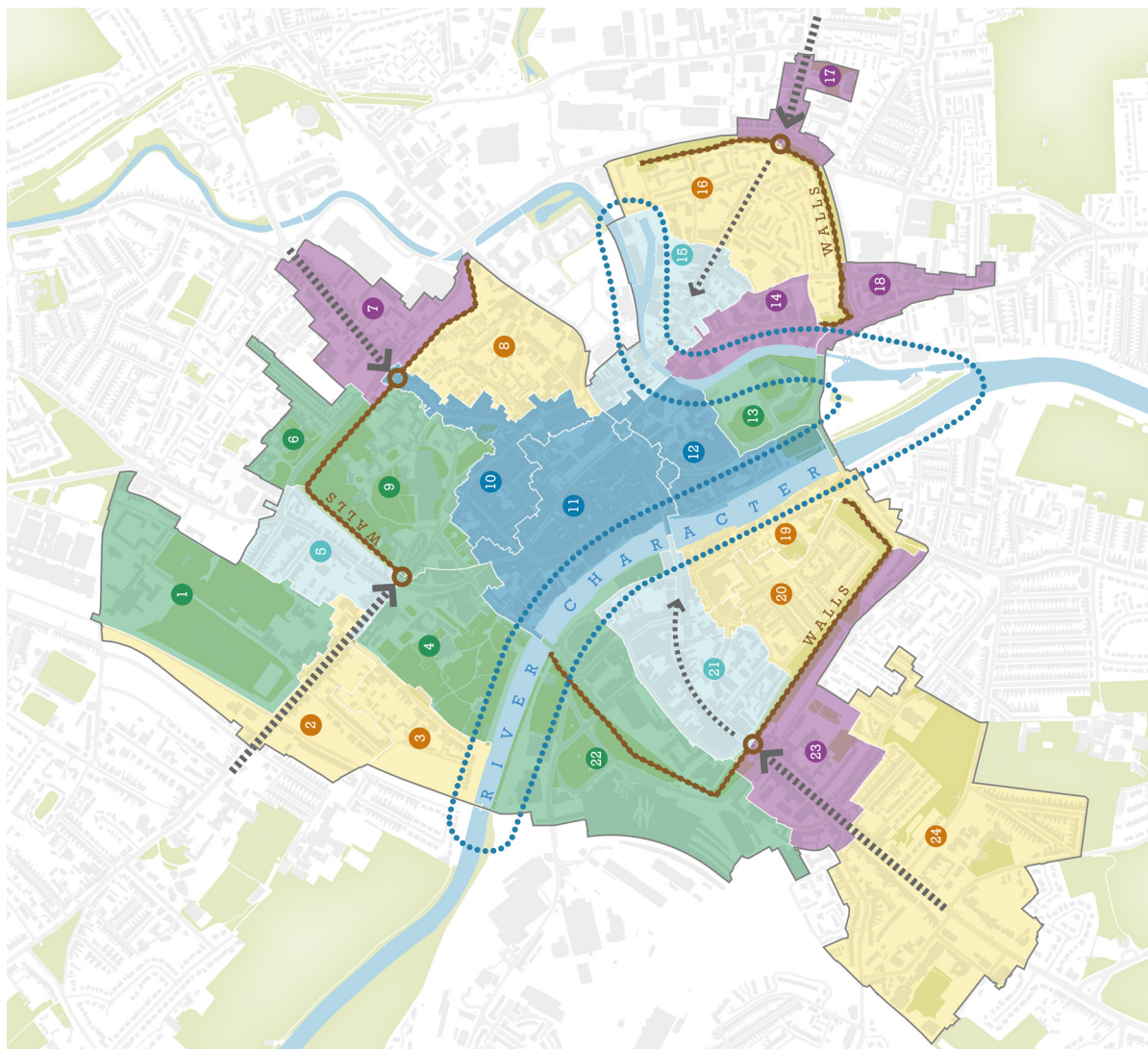
- 1 Bootham Park Hospital
- 2 Bootham
- 3 Marygate
- 4 Museum Gardens & Exhibition Square
- 5 Gillygate
- 6 Lord Mayor's Walk
- 7 Monkgate
- 8 Aldwark
- 9 Minster Precinct
- 10 The Medieval Streets
- 11 Central Shopping Area
- 12 King's Staith & Coppergate Centre
- 13 Castle
- 14 Piccadilly
- 15 Fossgate & Walmgate
- 16 Outer Walmgate
- 17 Walmgate Bar
- 18 Fishergate
- 19 Queen's Staith & Skeldergate
- 20 Bishophill
- 21 Micklegate
- 22 Railway Area
- 23 Blossom Street & Nunnery Lane
- 24 The Mount

Character Area grouping

- Grand institutions and monuments set in green space
- The dense historic commercial core – the pedestrian realm
- Edge of centre - independent retail/commercial streets on through routes
- Mixed-use approach roads - often dominated by road infrastructure
- Residential areas - compact neighbourhoods within the city walls and grander suburbs on the city approaches

Over-arching influences

- The celebrated city walls and landscaped ramparts enclose and define the city's core and limit cross-movement
- The Ouse and Foss rivers influence land use and activity, shape public space and access, and further define the central core
- Approaches to the core along the ancient routes into the city, defined by views to the Bars, City Walls, Minster and increasing commercial activity



Character Area summary

## Threats & Opportunities

Having defined the unique character of the Conservation Area, the appraisal considers the threats to its conservation and opportunities for its enhancement. These form the basis for the study's management recommendations.

Overall, the Conservation Area is a vibrant place in good material condition. Nevertheless, there are a number of challenges for the City of York Council and its partners to address if the Area is to play its fullest role in the future economic and social prosperity of the city:

### Defining the Special Interest of the Conservation Area

- broadly speaking the existing boundary of the Conservation Area, last reviewed in the 1970s, corresponds to the historic core of the City, but developments since then mean some of minor changes are required (see Priorities plan, below)
- the appraisal identifies buildings which detract from the character and appearance of the Area and unlisted buildings of merit which make a special positive contribution and could be added to the proposed Local List

### Conserving its Special Interest

The appraisal identifies a number of threats to the built character of the conservation area, as well as management tools to address them:

- buildings at risk and underused upper floors where concerted action is required
- unlisted residential streets whose character is being eroded by piecemeal change such as replacement doors and windows; Article 4 Directions could be used to control this
- unsympathetic shopfronts and associated signage and uncontrolled sale and letting advertising
- the need for policy direction to regulate the retrofitting of existing buildings to reduce their carbon emissions

### Views and Building Heights

- views across and into the Conservation Area and the city's little-altered skyline are some of its most precious but fragile qualities; development could harm them if not carefully managed

- this appraisal identifies 26 Key Views which define the character and image of the core, as well as numerous other views of local significance (see plan on following page)

### Development and Design

- there are few large development sites in the Conservation Area, but those and others on its periphery could have a significant impact on its character and appearance
  - new architecture should be of a standard befitting the qualities of York's townscape. This requires encouragement, education and co-operation
- ### Streets and Spaces
- public spaces are few in number, mostly small (compared to other cities) and often cluttered, detracting from the functionality of the spaces and setting of buildings
  - footstreet surfacing, signage and management is inconsistent and confusing
  - parks and gardens are under-utilised and remain unexplored by many visitors; some are not well linked to neighbouring spaces

### Transport and Movement

- the pressure of road traffic is a major threat to the character and quality of the Area
- it is particularly bad along the inner ring road and the approaches; gateway streets and Bars are especially compromised
- it has an environmental impact (e.g. in Gillygate), a physical impact (e.g. damage to Bars) and a visual impact (e.g. Exhibition Square and Bootham Bar)

### The Rivers

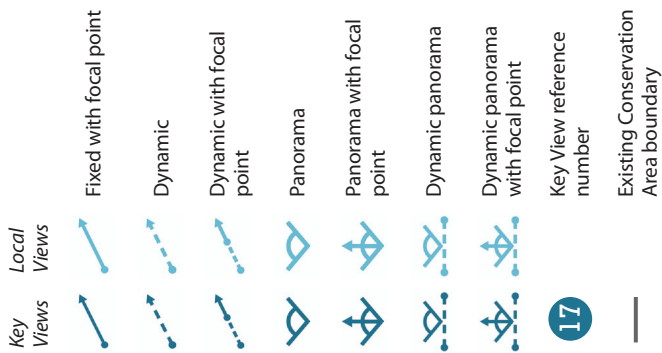
- are an underutilised asset; more could be done to extend access to their banks and improve the quality of public spaces along them

### The City Walls

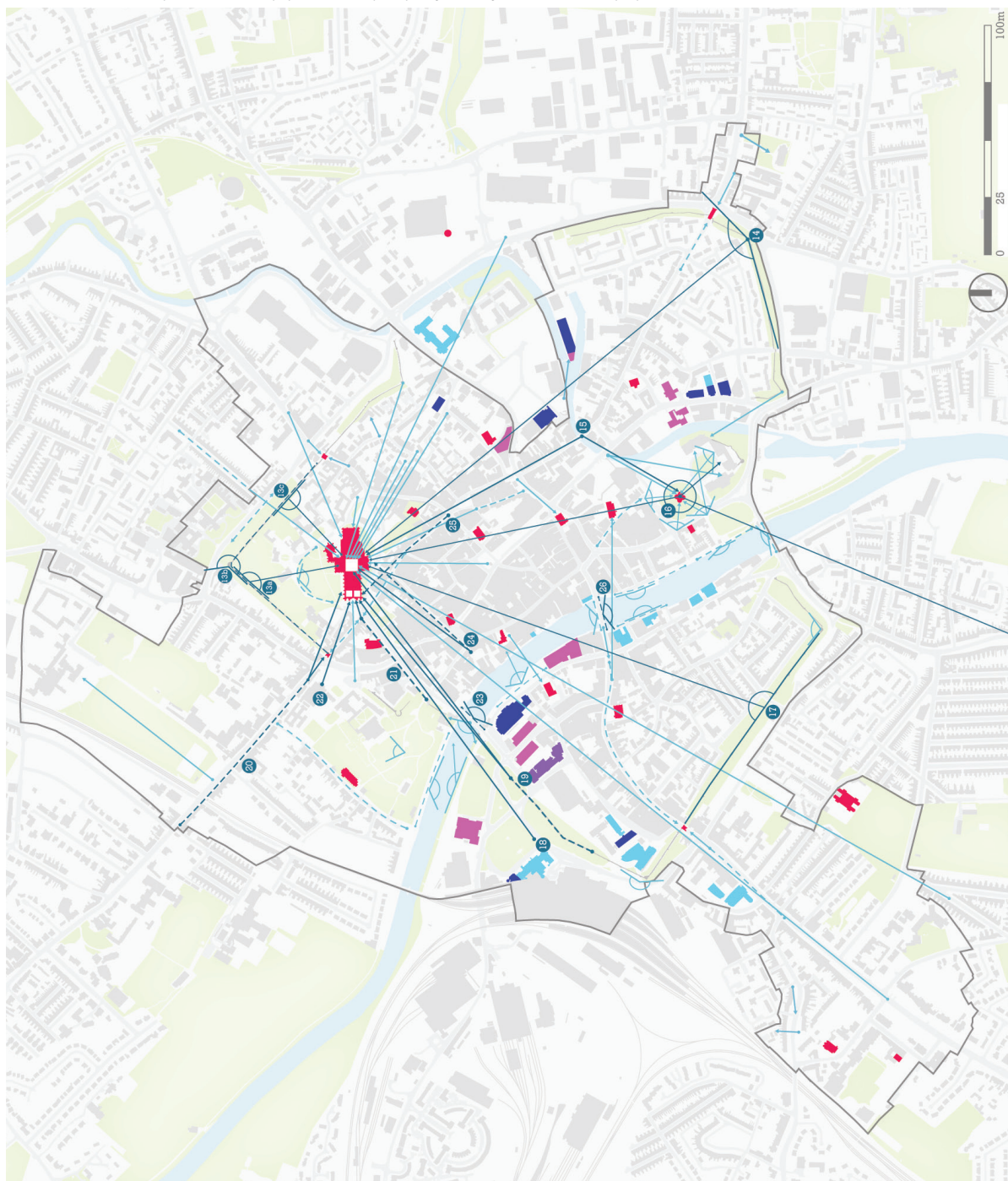
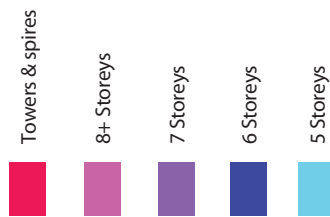
- the setting of these defining elements of the townscape is scarred by the inner ring road and faces further pressure from development
- the full potential of the walls and ramparts as a linear public park is not currently realised

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## Executive Summary



## Building Heights



Key and local views and taller buildings in the Conservation Area

## Conclusion: Principles & Priorities

This Appraisal has found the York Central Historic Core Conservation Area to be a place of outstanding quality and, arguably, of unparalleled richness and variety. No other British city can boast such extraordinary evidence of settlement over 2000 years combined with such a range of outstanding important buildings, structures and streets. Whilst the appraisal has also found the Conservation Area to be in generally good health and robust condition, the study has identified numerous ways in which its conservation could be improved and its character and appearance enhanced. These improvements would not only benefit the historic environment, but as this heritage is the foundation of York's present vitality, they would also sustain the city's long-term economic and social prosperity.

There are many recommendations. All have been carefully considered with stakeholders, and all of them would bring important benefits. Nevertheless, at the end of such an exercise it is necessary to stand back and identify the outstanding themes and the key priorities in order to focus energy and scarce resources on the most important management issues facing the City and its partners:

### Principles for Management

- 1) Recognise in policy and in action that the future economic prosperity and growth of the city centre is founded on conserving, enhancing and celebrating the significance of the Conservation Area and York's six Principal Characteristics, and work in partnership with stakeholders and the public to achieve this.
- 2) Communicate the remarkable interest and importance of the historic core and the principles and priorities for its conservation and enhancement to all in the Council and to residents, workers, developers, businesses and visitors.
- 3) Maintain and foster the remarkably rich mix of uses and the continued presence of substantial residential communities, which are fundamental to the historic core's social and economic strength and as essential to its special character as the medieval walls and Georgian buildings.
- 4) Rebalance the movement needs of the City in order to reduce the impact of traffic on the character, condition and human experience of the Conservation Area, whilst supporting its economic growth: this should be a city centre first and last for pedestrians.









- 5) In recognition of all of the above, City of York Council should identify conservation as a 'first tier' consideration, maximising the potential of the historic environment by using existing resources more intelligently, better co-ordinating its activities, and seeking new sources of funding and partnerships wherever possible.

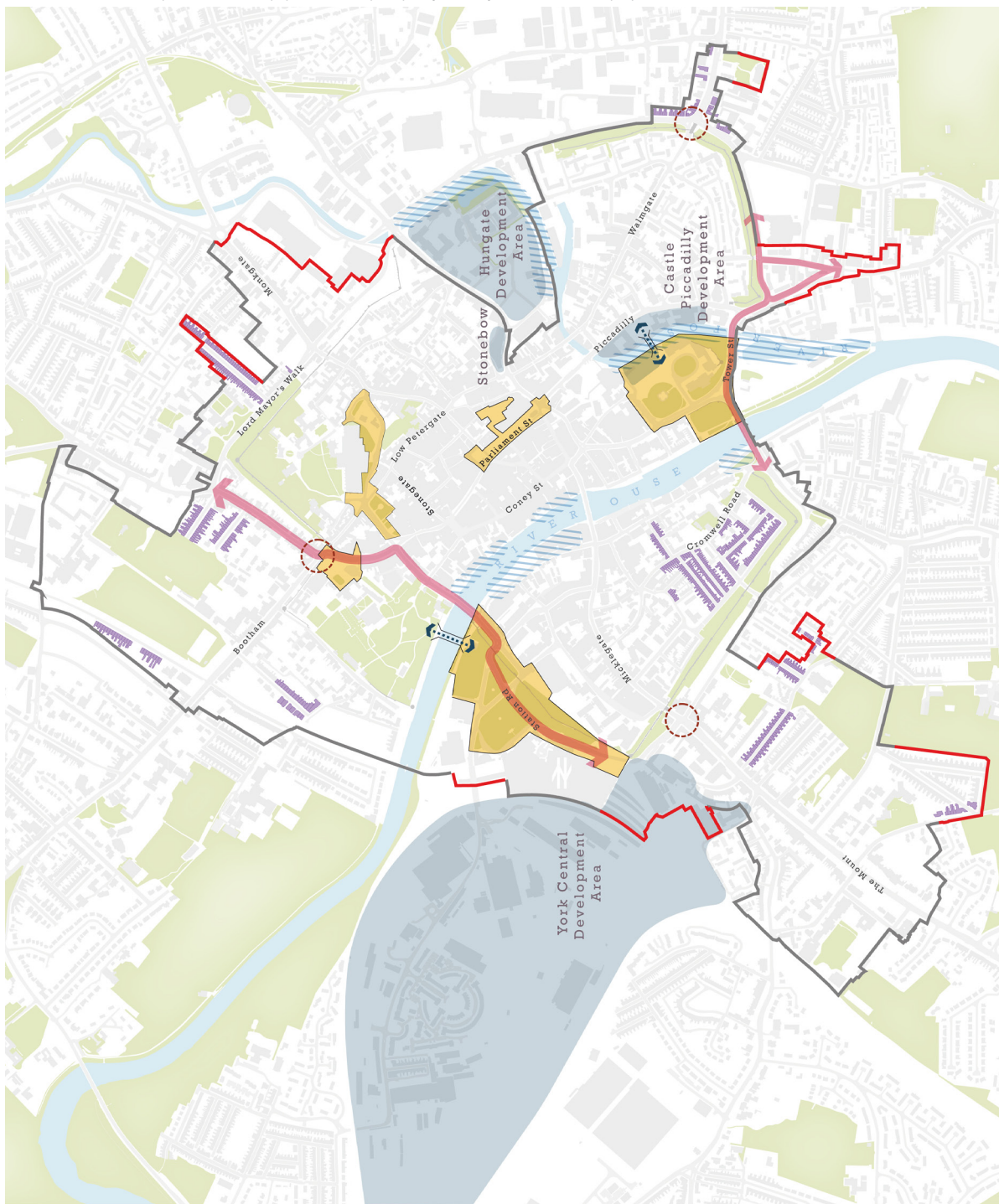
### Priorities for Action

- 1) Develop a strategy for communicating the remarkable values of the Conservation Area and the recommendations of this study to all relevant parts of the Council, and to the residents, businesses, institutions and landowners of York.
- 2) Develop a strategy and working practices to better co-ordinate council activity in order to use its resources more intelligently, make better use of existing partnerships and develop new ones with the people of York.
- 3) Develop a public realm strategy incorporating a streetscape manual to sit alongside the City Centre Area Action Plan, in order to declutter and improve streets for pedestrians, transform signage and wayfinding and enhance the quality and extent of public access to the rivers.
- 4) Commission and implement public realm masterplans for the key civic spaces of Parliament Street and surrounds, the Station approaches, the Minster Precinct, Exhibition Square and the Castle.
- 5) Implement a Views and Building Heights Policy to conserve and enhance key views and the core's fragile roofscape and skyline.
- 6) Reduce the impact of traffic on the most sensitive sections of the inner ring road and the Bar junctions identified on the accompanying plan.
- 7) Adjust the boundary of the Conservation Area to better reflect its special character and apply Article 4 Directions to certain residential streets, as identified on the accompanying plan.

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-  Priority for public realm improvements
-  Reduce vehicle traffic on sections of the inner ring road which have a significant negative impact on the Conservation Area
-  Priorities for Bar junction improvement and decluttering
-  Potential for new or improved riverside public space
-  Proposed Article 4 Directions
-  Existing Conservation Area boundary
-  Proposed changes to the Conservation Area boundary
-  Significant development sites



Priorities for action

