



York Civic Trust

Promoting Heritage - Shaping Tomorrow

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Cllr. James Alexander and Kersten England
City of York Council
The Guildhall
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Dear James and Kersten

News of the consultation on proposals for re-configuring the Planning Department has reached the Civic Trust. We had fears that the government's relentless downward pressure on public spending would eventually result in a fierce round of cuts and we have every sympathy with the position you find yourselves in. But we must counsel you against cutting an artery.

'The challenge for York is to improve its economy without eroding the city as a place to live' (European Comparator Report: York; Centre for Cities 2012). In coming to this conclusion, the Centre for Cities team found data in two areas of evidence to suggest the economic importance of the built fabric and buried archaeology of the historic city:

- 1) Its importance in drawing in visitors, from the locality, the region, the rest of the country, Europe and the wider world. With 7 million visitors a year, this may be a seasonal source of income and generator of employment, but it is one that York can ill afford to squander.
- 2) Its attractiveness as a place to live. In noting that York has the third highest proportion of well-qualified residents, and has a strong ratio of high earners, the Centre for Cities comments that 'As York offers high quality of place, its role in attracting residents is also a legitimate element of its economy'.

These two highly instrumental arguments surely underpin the international position of York as a world-class heritage city – it is not coincidental that Kersten was included in the delegation of British heritage managers who visited China last year to talk about the economic contribution of historically and archaeologically rich town centres.

At a deeper level of abstraction, but equally important in our view, is the part that the townscape plays in achieving social cohesion. In his analysis of Cultural Value, written in 2004, John Holden of Demos highlighted the difference between 'a 'strong' culture, confident in its own worth, instead of a 'weak' culture dedicated to the production of ancillary benefits'. But he notes that his 'strong' culture does not rest its case on the assertion that culture has 'intrinsic value'. Rather it 'adopts broad and unchanging concepts

of public goods such as equity and fairness, enhancing trust in the public realm, health and prosperity, thereby placing goals such as social inclusion and diversity in a context that can be easily understood.' I won't elaborate further – you are both familiar enough with this literature to know how well supported these formulations of public and cultural value are and how far reaching the benefits in terms of the health and well-being of the population.

If, then, York's challenge is indeed to signal that it is open for business, it cannot do so by blighting the cherished and familiar townscape that its hundreds of thousands of residents and millions of visitors value. You have exceptional teams in your conservation, development control and LDP sections (we desperately need a well-constructed Local Plan) and now more than ever, their skills and accumulated knowledge of the city are needed. This need is recognised by other similar unitary authorities like Herefordshire, Chichester and Worcester who each operate with around ten full time dedicated Archaeological and Conservation staff.

Some trimming is undoubtedly inevitable, but to cut the conservation team in York so disproportionately will render the survivors non-functional – they simply will not be able to fulfil the statutory requirements placed upon the Council in a city boundary with 1500 listed buildings, 30+ conservation areas and arguably the most spectacular water-logged archaeological deposits in the country (whose presence have undoubtedly materially improved the economic performance of the city since the opening of the Jorvik Centre in 1984). It seems from recent consultations that the government has some radical ideas with regard to the delivery of heritage protection, and we would welcome the opportunity to talk through with you the potential for change in the future. But whatever happens, we will need the expertise of the already skeletal team – please do think again so that we remain in a position, as a city, to look after our townscape, to identify and facilitate the very best development opportunities in the old town and on brownfield sites and to face the challenges of the future with confidence.

Yours sincerely



Jane Grenville
Chair, YCT Planning Committee

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