



York Civic Trust

Promoting Heritage - Shaping Tomorrow

Response to Initial Consultation on York Central

Introduction

The York Central project is of immense significance to York. We welcome the opportunity to respond to this preliminary consultation. We understand that this is only the first of a series of levels of consultation that will take place and have sought to avoid getting into a level of detail that lies beyond the intent of the current exercise. We look forward to the emergence of a York Central Planning Framework and hope that we can play a constructive role in its development.

We have found that the points the Civic Trust wishes to make do not sit happily into the on-line questionnaire and we have therefore produced this free-standing document. Where possible, we have used the numbering and headings of your questionnaire.

1. Do you support redevelopment of the York Central site?

Yes. Few comparable cities possess the opportunity that York Central provides for York. A site of this size, largely unencumbered by continuing activity and complex ownerships yet close to the city centre; a site already possessing a cultural heart and linked intimately to one of the best served railway stations in the country gives York a transformational opportunity to strengthen its economic base without detriment to the existing city centre. Its redevelopment should be pursued with the utmost vigour.

2. Do you support the proposed vision for York Central?

We find the vision, as set out in the document, to be disappointing. It needs to be strengthened in three key regards.

York Central's role in the city: It is unfortunate that the document sets out no useful vision of what York Central could bring to the city as a whole. York Central is so significant for York that proposals should be grounded in the context of a vision for the city as a whole.

This should be based on what the broader cultural and economic drivers are for the health of the future city. This is the prerequisite to drawing up a brief for the site which helps meet this vision. An extension of the city centre:- it needs to be clearly asserted that the commercial and cultural area close to the station and museum are an extension of the city centre. Not to do so risks seeing this area develop with second rate architecture in a second rate public realm and this would be disastrous both for the scheme and for York.

Who is it for? Your vision says that it is “for York residents” but it also says that it will be (amongst other things) “a cultural and leisure destination”. That sounds as though it is also for visitors to the city. That’s fine but why not say so?

We have two further comments on the vision

The site itself. We confess not to understand the phrase “where city life meets beautiful landscape”. The reality of York Central is that it is a major opportunity for York but it is not about beautiful landscape, any more than it is at any of the photographic examples given in the document. Perhaps the writer meant beautiful urban streetscape – if so, we certainly share that aspiration but landscape means something rather different.

Quality of delivery: It is good to see the commitment to ‘quality’ articulated in the Vision. Better still has been the comparison made by City representatives to York Central being seen as ‘the Kings Cross of the North’. But such an aspiration will not be met without the most fundamental commitment to quality and without a very clear plan as to how that quality will be delivered. We hope that future stages in the consultation process will provide us with the opportunity to understand and comment on how the necessary quality aspiration is to be delivered. It is notable that Kings Cross is characterised by a masterplan approach, the careful enhancement and development of some existing world class architecture and a clear commitment to similar standards of design in both new public realm and new buildings. York Central will need nothing less if it is to succeed.

Objectives

3. Do you agree with the following proposed objectives for York Central?

We are not unsupportive of the objectives as set out but they seem very vague and they overlap. We would suggest that it would be better for these objectives to be sharper and to be measurable.

4. Are there any objectives missing, or do you have any other comments?

Firstly, we believe that there is insufficient emphasis on the public spaces. York Central is a rare example in York of a scheme that will create city centre streets and public realm where none has previously existed. From the point of view of how workers, residents and visitors

experience York Central, the public spaces are key. They are the basic building blocks of the scheme – or should be. There should be more emphasis within the objectives on the museum square, the squares in front of both the station entrances and the interlinking public streets and footways.

Secondly, the objectives as currently crafted are very vague and to some extent repetitive. Surely one objective should clearly focus on homes and community amenities (including a school?) and another ought separately to focus on the commercial uses and job creation, particularly around the station west entrance. It will be important for these objectives to be measurable (although we understand that at this preliminary stage, it is perhaps too early to make categorical numeric commitments.) But without clarity and the establishment of quanta, it will not be possible to monitor and measure success.

Thirdly, and specifically, we believe there is a good case to be made for an objective to increase the quantum of cultural facility in York resulting from the York Central scheme. There is vague reference to culture but this is not strong enough. We believe this is an opportunity for York to find a site and to build an aspiration for, perhaps, the top quality concert hall that it currently lacks. We fully understand that the team shaping York Central cannot be expected to also lead on the shaping of York's cultural agenda but we do believe that York Central should be seen as a site that can bring tangible benefits to the quality of life for York's citizens.

Fourthly, we believe that the 'green infrastructure' objective should be strengthened to deal more directly with the interaction between the site and neighbouring parts of York. In particular objectives should be set to:

- enhance connectivity between the site and the city centre, given the intention to treat the site as an extension of the city centre economic zone (see 19 below).
- improve the life of residents in the Salisbury Terrace area by eliminating through traffic (see 17 below).
- avoid undue environmental impact on the other approach routes, and particularly on Holgate Rd and Poppleton Rd.

Finally, we are confused by the treatment of the former Carriage Works site in the document. On the one hand, this is included within the site boundary and in the quoted size of the site. On the other, its role as a site for continued Network Rail maintenance activities is excluded from the objectives. If it is the aspiration that this area should continue unchanged as an industrial site, either it should be excluded from the York Central site, or it should be included and its proposed continued industrial use should be clearly embraced. Our observation is that the current use of this site is very low density. If Network Rail intends to locate more work here then this should be encouraged. If not, the allocated area

on Page30 should be reduced and land so released should be zoned for constructive reuse within the scheme, eg for housing or offices facing Poppleton Road.

Heritage

We believe that, even at this early stage, generic statements relating to heritage like “The character of York Central is defined by its history as a major rail yard of national importance” offer little assistance. A zoned approach would provide a clearer statement of significance, intentions and opportunities.

West of the station, the National Railway Museum buildings and the Carriage Works building have merit and their demolition is not proposed. But there is little architectural ‘heritage’ to speak of, **west** of these buildings. A virtue of the scheme is that there is more or less a *tabula rasa* within the ‘teardrop’ apart from the Museum. On the other hand, the railway museum, the railway station and the area of York Central **east** of the railway contain many structures of historic interest. A Conservation Plan is required in order to determine the significance of each of these and their combined value. We agree with the City’s Conservation Advisory Panel that careful consideration of the heritage estate will be crucial to achieving a high quality, distinctive and successful York Central development.

5. **Do you agree with the proposed classification of buildings?**
6. **Are there any buildings which should be retained?**

It is difficult to understand what question (5) means. If it simply refers to the proposal that listed buildings should be retained, it is scarcely a classification. We believe a more in-depth assessment of buildings for retention or disposal is required through the medium of a Conservation Plan.

7. **Are there any buildings which should be removed?**

We believe there are strong grounds for aspiring to the removal of the Post Office sorting office within the context of the scheme as a whole. It generates very significant road traffic, both commercial and private, in a confined part of Leeman Road. It occupies a key site, overlooking the river and controlling desire lines for pedestrian traffic between York Central and the city centre. Yet the sorting office has lost its historical connection with the railway and it may well be that Royal Mail/Post Office would be not uninterested in a move to a more convenient location. We return to this issue later (see 30 below).

Landscape and Public Realm

8. Do you support the proposal to create a linear park through York Central?

Yes, but we believe that the beneficial impact of this park is at risk of being minimal if some of the highest densities of development set out in Q26 are adopted.

9. Do you have any comments on the landscape principles?

We are concerned that there is a lack of recognition that the ‘landscape’ or – as we prefer - the **public realm and the streetscape** should lie absolutely at the heart of the vision for York Central. It is this that everyone who lives or works in, who passes through or visits York Central will experience. This will set the tone of the whole development, both aesthetically and from a quality point of view. It is fundamental that this is got right.

We see the three public squares as perhaps the primary building blocks of the entire scheme. Station Square West should be far more than “a new arrival space” it has the potential to be a major public space for the City as a whole. If York Central is “the Kings Cross of the North”, this space must display the very best of contemporary planning and architecture to bring people from across York and across the UK to enjoy the new development. On page 17 it is suggested that this square “could be delivered”. We are concerned that such wording suggests only a limited commitment to the concept of the square, let alone to a vision for how good it must be.

York Railway Station

10. Do you support the creation of a new public square on the west side (the rear) of the station?

Yes – see 9

11. Do you support the creation of a new public square on the east side (the front) of the station by reorganising buses and taxis?

Yes. We hope that proposed improvements to the Tea Room Square traffic system will not have to await full scale implementation of the York Central scheme.

12. Do you agree with either of the following options to reorganise Queen Street?

Option 2 Remove Queen Street bridge.

Yes – this development is much awaited and has the potential to unblock a host of improvements to transport interchange at and around York Station.

13. Do you have any comments on the proposals for the station or thoughts on how the front of the station could be improved?

We agree entirely with remarks in the document concerning the future-proofing of York Station, including provision for new Harrogate platforms.

We believe the York Central project should include a commitment to resolve York's lamentable lack of a bus station. Whilst the scheme creates several possible sites, our initial preference is for this facility to be provided east of the Railway Station, assisted by the removal of Queen Street Bridge.

National Railway Museum

14. Do you support the creation of a new public square and events space outside the National Railway Museum?

We agree entirely with the proposal to close Leeman Road, the creation of Museum Square and the realisation of the resulting scope for future development of the NRM.

15. Do you support the re-routing of Leeman Road to allow the expansion of the National Railway Museum?

We agree that closure of Leeman Road should take place through the Museum site. It is not only desirable, it is essential because it:

- integrates the museum
- creates a new public square
- creates a new highway spine to open up the southern part of the site

Of the various options, it is not clear to us why the Leeman Road diversion needs to be seen as hugging the NRM perimeter. It is surely better to think of the highway system within the new development in an integrated way. An improved highway system would provide alternative access from Leeman Road tunnel to the western part of the site, bypassing the museum and in so doing provide highway access to the southern and western parts of the site.

16. Do you have any comments regarding how the National Railway Museum is incorporated into York Central?

Although it is a matter for NRM management, we would point out that the retention by the NRM of two separate links to the national rail system will mean that management of the museum will continue to be dependent on Network Rail for the transfer of vehicles between the two halves of the site. Better surely to have one access and an internal link as proposed in earlier schemes? This releases more land for redevelopment and ensures that operation of the Museum is independent of any restrictions on access to the national railway system for 'obsolescent' heritage rolling stock.

17. Do you support the proposed approach to sustainable travel?

We believe this is currently a major weakness of the scheme.

It seems unthinkable that the York Central scheme might move to completion without excluding through-traffic from the housing at Salisbury Terrace. Indeed, we understand that some models suggest that traffic through this area could actually increase. We suggest that this would be totally unacceptable. This area is crying out to be relieved of through-traffic. Ideally there should be a bridge to Water End but, failing that, any highway arrangement should allow the bridge from Leeman Road to Salisbury Road to be closed to all except buses, cyclists and pedestrians, thus transforming life for residents of this area.

In terms of proposals for limitations on car parking for businesses and residents we are supportive of the proposed policies outlined in the document.

18. Have the right pedestrian and cycle routes been identified?

19. Do you have any comments on the pedestrian and cycle routes identified?

We believe there to be a second major (and potentially fatal) weakness of the proposals here.

York Central will stand or fall on the perception of how it links to the city centre. All the current options envisage continuing dependence on the existing Marble Arch tunnels for road vehicles and for pedestrians, together with their narrow footpaths leading towards Lendal Bridge. Some envisage a new cycle/pedestrian bridge over the railway to the north east but this bridge offers only indirect access to the city centre. We submit that no amount of tinkering with the tunnels will create the perception that York Central is an integrated and 'vibrant' part of the city centre. There is no way that the vision can be met when the connection between the area and the city centre is via the Leeman Road tunnels.

The scheme **MUST** include more than a tweak to the existing provision. A new tunnel, a footbridge, or the 2006/7 scheme concept of a living bridge over the Scarborough Junction at the Newcastle end of the station is necessary if York Central is to establish credibility as, to quote Cllr Steward, "world class" and "vibrant" public squares "linking to ... the city centre". Any footbridge has to be generous in its proportions and serve to break the perception that York Central is 'at the back of the railway station'. Something like the Wilton Rise bridge would be totally inadequate. Something of the quality of Arup's Millennium Bridge across the Thames might do the trick - particularly if it crossed the river as well as the railway. (In this connection, it is perhaps worth saying that if a Garden Bridge is good enough for London and the Thames, then it is good enough for York and the Ouse.)

The more radical suggestion has been made of a cable car analogous to the Emirates Air Line which crosses the Thames between Greenwich Peninsula and the Royal Docks. Such ideas should be explored in more depth in a search for the link that the scheme needs.

20. Do you agree with any of the highway management options on the west side (the rear) of the station?

Leeman Road tunnel traffic control: Whilst Option 3 seems superficially the most appropriate means of controlling traffic, it is difficult to be prescriptive in the absence of a much fuller understanding of development and highway proposals for the area and, indeed, elsewhere in York, not least Lendal Bridge.

We note that the option diagrams on pp 25-26 ignore commercial traffic flows to and from businesses and the cultural quarter.

21. Do you have any comments on the highway options presented?

It would appear that a decision has been taken that the opportunity presented by the emergence of a developable corridor from Station Road to the outer ring road is not to be pursued. Whilst there may be good reasons for such a decision, such a corridor could give considerable relief to Holgate/Poppleton Road and to Bootham/Clifton. Although we are not necessarily in disagreement with such a decision, it would be helpful for it to be spelt out more clearly, rather than for it to be merely a consequence of the current plans set out for the York Central site.

Development Parameters

22. Do you agree with the proposed uses for York Central?

Yes but we would like to see a stronger vision and more weight being given to the use of the York Central site for the strengthening of York's cultural offer.

23. Are there any other uses that should be considered for York Central?

24. Are there any uses that you feel should not be considered for York Central?

25. Do you support the proposed approach to maximum building heights?

The consultation suggests a maximum height for office blocks of 10 storeys and for apartments of 8 storeys. However, it also indicates that taller buildings still might be permitted in exceptional cases. City Council staff have suggested that 10 storeys was broadly equivalent to the Royal York Hotel, which seems a little unlikely. A crucial element in York's character is its generally low building heights, the lack of competition with the height of the Minster and the maintenance of long-distance views, particularly of the

Minster. There is no getting away from the fact that it would change the character of York in an essential way if tall buildings were to be introduced. Such a decision should not take place without the fullest possible consultation and the creation of the clearest guidelines in the context of the planning framework. At this stage the Civic Trust reserves its position on the principle of the acceptability of such tall buildings in York.

26. Do you agree with any of the following development options?

Too little information is available to the Civic Trust to allow a meaningful choice to be made from these options. York's lack of a Local Plan means that we have no consensus on housing needs and consequently, it is difficult to form a view on how York Central can contribute to meeting those needs. It is to be hoped that the City Council will resolve this situation in the near future.

We would observe that the connectivity available from York railway station might be expected to make high quality office space very attractive but the market should be allowed to decide, supported by encouragement from the City, as has been so successfully demonstrated recently in the case of Hiscox.

The objectives refer to "a vibrant new community", yet the plans appear to suggest separate residential and office developments, with few other land uses. We understand that in practice more mixed developments are envisaged and this will be important, as will a level of retail and restaurant development, along with services for the new residents.

27. Are there any other issues that you feel should be considered when setting development parameters for York Central?

Phasing and Temporary Uses

28. Do you agree with the proposed temporary uses for York Central?

Phasing: We agree that access to the site from Holgate Road is the key to unlocking future development and that this should progress at the earliest stage. However, we do not agree with the implication that this is the only investment in significant access infrastructure that will be needed for the complete scheme. We have mentioned the need to bypass Salisbury Terrace and the need to address directly the need for improved (non-vehicular) links to and from the city centre during the course of the scheme. A phasing plan should include for these works as an integral part of the scheme.

29. Are there any other temporary uses that should be considered for York Central?

30. Are there any temporary uses that should not be considered for York Central?

31. Are there any other comments you would like to make regarding proposed development at York Central?

The '**Waterworks**' site, ie the site south of the River Ouse in the 'V' of the Newcastle and Scarborough railways is of some size but is difficult to access. It is within the York Central site but is ignored. There should be an aspiration for this area. It could, for instance, be the site for gardens and a monumental piece of public sculpture with public pedestrian access from the riverside path.

The **Sorting Office site** is a crucial gateway to York Central from the city centre. Simply labelling it as "Commercial Use" is to throw away a site of the utmost importance and which is perhaps the key to the success of the whole scheme. This site can provide much of the answer to the current totally inadequate pedestrian routes linking York Central to the city centre. Perhaps redevelopment could be partially commercial but the layout could be different, providing new and more generous pedestrian routes from York Central towards the existing city centre. More radically, perhaps York should raise its game and explore the scope for a major concert hall which could perhaps go on this wonderful riverside site. Think Sage or Sydney Opera House.

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