



York Civic Trust

Comparator Case Studies for York's 2024 Local Transport Strategy Chester May 2024

Introductory note

This is one of nine case studies originally produced in draft in May 2021 at the request of the City of York Council. At the time the Council intended to publish a new Local Transport Plan in December 2021, and had invited York Civic Trust, through its Transport Advisory Group, to offer advice on content. The nine case studies, of cities chosen in discussion with the Council, were developed sufficiently fully to allow the Council to decide which it wished to incorporate in its Local Transport Plan. That decision was never taken, and the 2021 Local Transport Plan was never completed. In February 2022 York Civic Trust collated its advice into *A Transport Strategy for York*, Section 6 of which summarises the key messages from the nine case studies. In February 2023 the Council produced a first draft of a Local Transport Strategy. In March 2023 the Council's Scrutiny Committee on Economy and Place reviewed the nine case studies and recommended that "the Executive Member for Transport work with York Civic Trust and relevant officers on taking the report forward with two or three case studies and focus on building public buy in into medium and long term traffic strategies".

In March 2024 the Council's new administration agreed to publish a Local Transport Strategy for the city in June 2024, based on a consultation on key principles launched in November 2023. The Trust was invited to update the nine case studies, within the limited resources available to it, and to produce brief summaries of key messages for York's Local Transport Strategy. While these summaries and updated strategies are now being published on the Trust's website, it is important to stress that they have not been fully researched, and thus may not be wholly up to date.

Summary

Chester is in many ways similar to York. It is a historic walled city which attracts many tourists. However, its urban area is around half the size of York by population, and it is part of the larger unitary authority of Cheshire West and Chester, 30% of whose population lives in rural areas. Like York, all of its councillors are elected once every four years, but there has perhaps been greater stability, with Labour having a single seat majority from 2015 to 2019 and since 2023.

Its council has been more proactive in updating its Local Transport Plan, with a consultation in 2011 following LTP3, a further one in 2016 and an LTP update in 2017. Despite this, it has accepted the need for a major change in direction, prompted by its declaration of climate and poverty emergencies. Like York it consulted on a new strategy in November 2023, but unlike York it provided a structured consultation document, which offers a useful model for how York's Local

Transport Strategy might be drafted.

Specific aspects in the consultation document which York could usefully consider are the first building block on the role of digital and spatial planning in providing connectivity for all, the final building block on ensuring financial sustainability and value for money, and the final section on implementation.

Chester was crowned the most accessible city in Europe in 2017, and it continues to design well for disabled people. HVM bollards were introduced in the city centre in 2020, but blue badge holders were allowed access from the outset, though blue badge parking was initially haphazard. York has now drawn on Chester's experience in modifying its own provision for blue badge access.

Context

Background

Chester (a walled city) is now part of the unitary authority of Cheshire West and Chester ('the Council'). In 2021 the city's population was 89,000, representing 25% of the Council's population of 358,000. The population had increased by 8.4% since 2011, as compared with a 2.4% increase in York. Further growth of 7.5% is anticipated by 2040, which is lower than that forecast for York. Like York, Cheshire West and Chester has around 20% of residents over 65, and little ethnic diversity, with 95% stating that they are white. Unlike York, the Council has extensive rural areas, representing 30% of the population. Like York, Chester has a historic core which attracts many tourists, a large university (c 15,000 students compared with over 20,000 in York) and a racecourse.

Governance

The Council is a unitary authority, established in 2009. Like York, all of its councillors are elected together, once every four years. In 2015 there were 75 seats, with a Labour majority of one. In 2019 this was reduced to 70 seats, of which Labour won 35, resulting in no overall control. In 2023 Labour won 36 seats, giving a majority of one, as in York. While there are proposals for a Mayoral Combined Authority for the two Cheshire councils and Warrington, no firm commitments have been made.

Thumbnail of current transport provision

Bus transport in the city is provided by Stagecoach Merseyside & South Lancashire and Arriva Buses Wales. (The council ran its own bus service until 2007). Commuter trips by bus and rail are low, apart from trips to Merseyside (22% by rail) and Manchester (8%). The highest level of inbound rail commuting is from Merseyside (16%). With the exception of the strategic highway network, all other transport is managed by the Council.

Transport planning

Local Transport Plans

The Council published its LTP3 in 2011, with a 15 year time frame, updated it in 2017 and extended it by four years to 2030 so that it runs concurrently with the Council's Local Plan (Part One) which was adopted in 2015. The 2017 revision, which was based on an extensive consultation in 2016, included a vision for the area, and the following six goals:

1. Provide and develop reliable and efficient transport networks that support sustainable economic growth in West Cheshire and the surrounding area.
2. Reduce carbon emissions from transport and take steps to adapt our transport networks to the effects of climate change.
3. Manage a well maintained transport network
4. Contribute to safer and secure transport in West Cheshire and to promote types of transport which are beneficial to health.
5. Improve accessibility to jobs and key services which help support greater equality of opportunity.

6. Ensure that transport helps improve quality of life and enhances the local environment in West Cheshire.

In November 2023 the Council consulted on a revised transport strategy, with the aim of producing a final vision, priorities and approach in summer 2024, a strategy and implementation plan in autumn 2024 and a consultation on a full Local Transport Plan in late 2024. This timetable is very similar to that now being adopted in York, but the consultation approach has been very different. While York's was predominantly online, focusing on the ten proposed policy focus areas, Cheshire West and Chester Council produced a 36 page summary document, and then sought views on it.

The document stressed that LTP3 and its 2017 update were out of step with the current situation and, in particular, the Council's declaration of climate and poverty emergencies. It included a ten page summary of current problems and challenges, supported by a "robust evidence base" which was published alongside it. The problems listed included statements that:

- 7% lived in areas which are among the 10% most deprived in England and Wales
- 30% of job seekers identify poor transport as the principal impediment to seeking a job
- 285 premature deaths per year are linked to poor air quality
- Employment had grown by only 1% between 2015 and 2021, as compared with 6% for England and Wales
- Traffic levels had increased by 8% over the decade to 2019, and were predicted to grow by 19% by 2040
- 71% of the population did not have at least a half-hourly bus service within five minutes' walk.

Strategic approach

The consultation document proposes a new vision for the Council area, and five priorities (equivalent to York's ten objectives):

1. Tackling our climate emergency by achieving transport net zero and adapting to our rapidly changing environment.
2. Creating a fairer society, and ensuring everyone can access jobs, education and other opportunities.
3. Improving the health and wellbeing of communities by increasing physical activity levels, improving safety and improving air quality.
4. Boosting our local economy by making it easier to recruit talent and supporting efficient, sustainable movement of goods.
5. Creating great places to live with safe streets and more attractive, greener neighbourhoods.

These compare fairly closely to the first six of York's proposed objectives, though they are not as clearly focused on improving access for disabled people. They do not directly reflect York's other objectives of reliability, heritage, accommodating growth and future-proofing.

Principal policy measures

The consultation document identifies nine "building blocks" (equivalent to York's ten policy focus areas):

1. The role of digital and spatial planning in providing connectivity for all.
2. Making walking, wheeling and cycling the best choices for local journeys.
3. Delivering a viable, affordable and accessible public transport network.
4. Decarbonisation of the vehicles which transport people and goods.
5. Managing demand for short, solo car trips.
6. Creating healthier and greener streets and places.
7. Targeting an end to deaths and serious injuries on our road network.
8. Delivering well maintained and resilient networks.
9. Ensuring financial sustainability and value for money.

Again, these are reasonably similar to York's ten policy focus areas, but there are some marked differences. They do not identify accessibility as a building block; instead this is treated as an objective. They do not focus directly on managing the road network or improving freight. Conversely, their first building block says much more about the role of digital connectivity and land use planning in reducing the need to travel, while their ninth one is much more explicit on targeted funding and ensuring value for money. It would make sense for York to consider both of these in its final document.

There is then a useful final section on the Council's proposed approach, which emphasises:

- A targeted approach informed by data and monitoring
- A flexible approach reflecting the changing context
- Using transport to shape the future
- Ensuring a real choice of modes
- A behaviour change mindset
- Joint working with communities.

This section does not have an obvious parallel in York's documentation to date; it would be worth reviewing it.

Modal shares

In 2019, 76% of residents travelled by car, compared to 5% by public transport and 19% who walk or cycle. It is not clear whether these relate simply to the journey to work, but it is noted separately that in 2021 around a third of employees worked from home. These modal shares suggest a much less sustainable base than York for its new strategy, though in part this reflects the much higher percentage living in rural areas. Cycling levels in Chester are noticeably lower than in York.

Key performance measures

The consultation document does not propose targets, but it does helpfully suggest the indicators which might be used for each of the "building blocks".

Provision for disabled travellers

Chester was crowned the most accessible city in Europe in 2017. There are also tour guides, city centre access guides, signs and online help via <https://www.accessable.co.uk> All of the city's public buses are fully accessible. Council policy requires all its licensed taxis to be suitable for wheelchairs. They must also include additional features, such as induction loops and colour-contrasted grab handles. The city has seven Changing Places toilets, which include hoists and a changing bench for disabled people who cannot use standard accessible toilets. And there is a council commitment to include one in any future renovation throughout the city.

Of perhaps most relevance for York is the approach to blue badge access in Chester city centre's pedestrian areas. The overall area is slightly smaller than York's footstreets, and includes three potential through routes:

- Watergate Street/Bridge Street
- Northgate Street/Eastgate Street/St John's Street
- Frodsham Street/Foregate Street.

The whole area had HVM bollards introduced in 2020, with bollards closed from 1030 to 1630 Monday to Saturday. But blue badge holders, together with emergency services and other permit holders, are allowed to access these streets. Initially blue badge users were able to park throughout these streets, but blue badge parking bays are now designated, which has improved conditions in the pedestrian area. Chester's approach largely reflects the changes made in York in 2024. The Council consulted in 2022 on extending the

controlled hours to 2000, and on Sundays, but the consultation was unclear on whether there would be any changes for blue badge access, and it is not clear that any final decision has been taken.

Relevance to York

Useful lessons and pointers

Chester is in many ways similar to York, but much smaller in size. Its economy is highly dependent on visitors. The city walls alone – two miles of Roman, Saxon and medieval fortifications that surround the city centre - have seen an annual investment of £500,000 since 2009. Its November 2023 consultation document is similar in content to York's online consultation of the same date. However, it offers a coherent explanation, from problems to vision, objectives, strategy and implementation, which was missing in York. Indeed, its consultation document offers a useful model for what might be included in York's Local Transport Strategy document.

Specific aspects which York could usefully consider are the first building block on the role of digital and spatial planning in providing connectivity for all, the final building block on ensuring financial sustainability and value for money, and the final section on implementation.

As noted, the approach adopted to city centre blue badge access in 2020 offered a useful lesson for York when it developed its scheme from 2021 onwards. York has now drawn on Chester's experience in modifying its own provision for blue badge access.

Any aspects which make it less relevant to York

Chester is part of a larger Unitary Authority, 30% of which by population is rural, whereas York is predominantly urban, with over double the urban population. York is now part of a mayoral combined authority, while Cheshire West and Chester remains a free-standing unitary authority. The Council's rural emphasis means that it has a much lower share of sustainable travel than York, and the smaller urban area may make it harder to support commercial services.

Best practice in engagement and consultation

The Council offers a "digital engagement platform" ('Participate Now') for any resident to provide feedback on their current consultations and an online citizens' panel ('Participate Panel'). This panel is made up of "a cross section of local people, who volunteer to take part in regular research and engagement activities, to help us understand residents' views and ideas about a range of important issues." There has been an effective programme of engagement on transport strategy, in 2011 following the publication of LTP3, in 2016 and again in 2023.

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